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Committing to the Waves: Emerson's Moving Assignments

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COMMITTING TO THE WAVES: EMERSON'S MOVING ASSIGNMENTS

by

KARINNE KEITHLEY SYERS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

COMMITTING TO THE WAVES: EMERSON'S MOVING ASSIGNMENTS
by
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Committing to the Waves: Emerson's Moving Assignments reads Ralph Waldo Emerson as a writer of assignments for living and working whose senses can be taken up across a wide array of creative and exploratory fields. Shifting between an interdisciplinary array of contexts ranging from philosophy and poetics to dance, performance, and somatic movement experiments, I join the practical sense of creative inquiry embodied in these fields to the abstract images of Emerson's assignments. I argue that Emerson's descriptions of intelligence and power, and so his approaches to navigating skepticism and loss, as well as the non-possessive sense of what “self” actually means to this thinker of “self-reliance” can be illuminated by reading from the non-dualist perspective that embodied inquiry offers.

The dissertation also enacts the self-reliance that Emerson calls for by taking up my response to Emerson through my sense of his assignments. The first half of this study uses this embodied work as a resource for reading Emerson, situating his sense in relation to extra-literary and extra-philosophical research. The second half of the dissertation makes a pivot, taking Emerson as a resource for performance assignments, first in the form of a chapter written with poetic constraints, which approaches the question of how philosophical commitments might animate theater and actual performance, and finally by following Emerson's instruction to the scholar to dive into her “privatist presentiments” to find where that privacy meets a public intelligence and intelligibility. The dissertation concludes with the documentation of Another Tree Dance, an original performance generated from that Emersonian private dive.
Acknowledgements

The three members of my committee have modeled and encouraged a relationship to scholarship based in delight, in pleasure, in life, and taught me to find critical energies there.

This dissertation grew directly out of the rich environment of Joan Richardson's *American Aesthetics* seminar. I owe Joan my profound gratitude for the illuminations of that room, as well as her mentorship through this process, in which she gave me both the room to pursue idiosyncratic pathways, and challenged me to account for those navigations with precision.

Wayne Koestenbaum taught me a great deal about the pleasure of sentences and the tiny attractions and forces of their parts and possibilities. I learned the virtue of economy while writing essays of exactly two pages in his *Lyric Essay* seminar. The third chapter of this dissertation calls directly on the energies and animations he teased out of that room.

The energies and animations of Ammiel Alcalay's seminars have from the first day of my graduate study reminded me that an impassioned thinking traverses many disciplines and demands the freedom both to call upon the authority of work that may not be recognized, as well as to recognize the imaginative limitations of all forms of authority. He reminds me to ask what a discipline might be and to attend to those who bring poetic and imaginative thinking beyond their assigned corners and into basic ways of living in the world.

Professor Nancy K. Miller has also been a significant, generative, and generous teacher of the process of understanding what forms, sounds, and areas scholarship can approach.

Three friends in this program have rendered scholarship a form of conversation, and I wouldn't have wanted to do it without their community: Stefania Heim, Matthew Burgess, Sara Jane Stoner. My dear friends and collaborators Sara Smith and Gina Siepel have always helped me locate this project in the larger circles of my life.

Thanks to my mentors from earlier scenes of education who welcomed me into generative spaces and pushed me beyond any easy consolidation of charm or identity as an artist or teacher: Donna Faye Burchfield, Mac Wellman, and Wendy Woodson.

Thanks to the people of the downtown dance community, and the dance artists who introduced me to the living body and in whose presence I first found pathways into the sun-bright Mecca of embodied intelligence, in particular Wendell Beavers, Melanie Rios Glaser, K.J. Holmes, Bebe Miller, and Gwen Welliver.

Thanks to my parents who taught me to read and sent me to school alive with curiosity.

And at home, always, Phil Syers and our beautiful, sensitive creature of a son, Harvey.
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Abbreviations

Texts by Ralph Waldo Emerson are abbreviated as follows:

*Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte — EL

*Natural History of Intellect* — NHI

Texts by Stanley Cavell are abbreviated as follows:

*Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* — ETE

*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* — CHU

Texts by Joan Richardson are abbreviated as follows:

*A Natural History of Pragmatism* — NHP
INTRODUCTION

I put some amount of my being into this picture.

ONE. Backgrounds

I did not mean to spend all this time reading Emerson. I set out to write a dissertation on a life commitment to experimenting read through a series of American writers for whom Emerson forms a philosophical background. I set out to write this dissertation because I have made a life commitment to experimenting, and I wanted to keep the company of these writers. The texts I wanted to spend time with all produced an imaginative space of intense quiet, disorientation, and delight, something I once tried to describe as a form of serenity-bewilderment (imagine it as German compound: Fassungslosigkeitruhe) that conditions one's thinking by stimulating an aesthetic appetite for this feeling, which could also be described as “wonder,” the sensation wherein philosophy is said to begin. This is overlay of serenity and bewilderment is something I continually attempt in my own creative work, which is set in the interdisciplinary spaces between text, speech, sound, singing, movement, and projection. The intervals between each of these modalities lend room for disorientation; the serenity results from finding the pleasing harmonics of those intervals, as if discovering a previously unheard overtone of a note. I meant to write a dissertation that would give a literary and intellectual background to this project.

“A series of accidents led you to this book,” writes the Matthew Goulish, an artist-scholar and member of the important performance group Goat Island, in the opening of 39 Microlectures in proximity of performance (Routledge, 2000), a book that gives one of the better
statements of my performance world's ways and experiences of thinking. “We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual,” writes Emerson in his essay, “Experience” (EL 483). These sentences uncover the fact that it is not plot but chance that reveals the pathways we take into what might become significant. But what intensity must traverse those casual experiences to transform them from accidental to chief, becoming structural points around which a life organizes? In reading, I experience this intensity as an attraction—to an idea, a phrase, an image—which reveals itself by a sudden, intense, associative memory. The newly encountered sentence now seems to carry the grounding of association with it, and an analogical enlargement of meaning moves in both directions. Emerson instructs students to read by collecting the passages that prompt this feeling, to read “actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text and the books the commentary” (EL 239). This is how to read Spinoza, Newton, Stein. This is how to read Emerson. This is how to read. To take this charge seriously is not as wildly hubristic as it seems. Rather Emerson is suggesting that reading is a commons: an area of exchange to which all are entitled, in which each is her own center: “The world exists for the education of each man” (emphasis added 239). The texts in this reading commons carry value not for their own sake, but because they might add to the practical store of images or ideas through which one or several readers come to lead a more empowered life—by offering practical commentary on the life of the reader through the process Emerson calls “domestication.” The monuments of the commons are the texts that speak most widely, that take root in the greatest number of lives. Emerson's active reader experiences this speech not as command or instruction but as recognition—not tuition but intuition.

Before I ever read Emerson I read this way, and even the discipline of graduate study did
not do much to shake this habit of reading as a collector on my own behalf. That experience of recognition, which makes a book seem to comment on or echo the commitments or experiences of my own life, has always figured in the texts I choose to linger on, to own. I have not found that this pre-determines what I read, or even consolidates what I think, because these recognitions or attractions often commit me to strange places, and I have found that my sense of what is happening in the analogies I make—what commonalities form recognition's basis—has been mutable. That sense remains open to revision, willing to undergo mutation, precisely because of the feeling that I am somehow called to take this text personally, into the private space of my thinking and feeling. It seems to lay a claim on me and demands my honest response. This has been the case with my reading of Emerson, and is how I accidentally came to write a dissertation about him.

My impulse to stay with Emerson had to do specifically with the recognitions I had in his essays of certain scenes from my thinking life outside of the discipline of English—of improvising in dance studios, of engaging in somatic research into embodied patterns of intelligence, of building or participating in the building of performance works, of creating sound or image pieces. Those scenes are all marked with the experience of finding myself making or doing something strange and maybe wonderful: something I had no idea was coming, something that might even be alien to my habitual temperament, but which landed with a feeling of clarity and ease that I can only describe as a kind of felicitous self-possession. I would feel perfectly at home in a place I had not anticipated finding, and this feeling of being at home gave me what Emerson might describe as a compensation for the undercurrent of darkness or loss or just weirdness in the place (image, sentence, action) I found myself describing. I offer as an
illustration of this mood two examples from *The Ghost Host Pigeon Post*, a series of cutups I made in the year before I began my doctoral studies as a kind of morning ritual. It happened to collect many images whose consonance I would later find in Emerson's writing. (See figs. 1 and 2.)

Fig. 1. “Everything Worthy” from *The Ghost Host Pigeon Post* (2007)
The only language I have found to describe this experience of being at home on a shifting ground of loss or indirection is “first person strangeness,” the fruit of a mode of exploration that treats the I—who speaks, who makes, who thinks—as a moving position that can be taken up in a semi-virtual ludic environment (the imaginative register, the arbitrary material and rules from which it is made, the real context of private recognitions). There is, in this ludic relationship to the first person position of making, an analogy to gaming's avatars, which allow a player to take a game experience personally (with physical excitement, with glee or frustration) despite the differences of biography between the player and the avatar. Entertaining in the imagination a self not tethered to my own biography, sounding the experience of that strange me against my body's register of all my private experience, I find myself composing experiences in which the strange
me invites the biographical me to feel at home in a new space. In the Pilot storyboard of *Another Tree Dance* (the performance text that concludes this dissertation), I record this same invitation: “I put some amount of my being into this picture. I put some amount of this picture into my being.” In my experience, getting underway with this invitation involves cultivating an attention to the material at hand (“this picture”) that responds empathetically to its possibilities (of entry, of combination, of transformation, of significance), following the tracks of these changes without trying to calculate their directions in advance. This experimental and empathetic way of moving with a flow of thought is, in Emersonian terms, thinking naturally.

Although I don’t tend to improvise in performance, I think of myself as an improvisor in the way that I work, which is to find somewhere (often arbitrary) to start, pay attention to what is happening, and then keep following that happening until the piece seems to be done. I was educated in this way of working by years of movement improvisations in empty studios. What I learned from my practice of dance improvisation is how to listen deeply to my body to discover something already happening, how to follow that happening with my wit or cleverness or rational mind as much out of the way as possible, often by persisting with the improvisation until my wit or cleverness or rational mind has tired. This can take place over the course of, say, a 30-minute movement session, or it can take place over the course of the season it takes me to complete a piece of writing. I have found that I cannot live happily in the world without being inside an improvisation, but that inside of a process I am not just *not* unhappy: I am enlivened by the world, attracted to it, attuned to it. Although I have a professional relationship to performance, the terms in which I understand my commitment to it have to do, more so every year, with performance-making as a vehicle for finding that blending of compensation, surprise,
strangeness, attraction, and ongoingness.

These key-words are also present in Emerson’s essays, and figure strongly in the readings of Emerson that most draw me, like those of Stanley Cavell, Branka Arsić, and Joan Richardson, whose seminar and thinking is the “radiant and productive atmosphere” in which my encounter with Emerson is rooted (the line is from Wallace Stevens, and forms one of the seminar's refrains). These images also crop up in many other places, not insignificantly in accounts of creative process. Deborah Hay, a choreographer whose presence as a teacher, maker, and thinker in the dance community over the course of the last 50 years makes her something of a local guru (I like to say a presiding genie), is one of the field's most effective communicators of the strange explorations it undertakes as well as a thinker who has committed to developing methodologies of practice to sustain those explorations over time. In My Body, The Buddhist (Wesleyan University Press, 2000), she describes the same kind of blending, approached through a rigorous daily improvisatory practice of listening to the body understood as her “teacher.” She writes:

My body, dancing, is formed and sustained imaginatively. I reconfigure the three-dimensional body into an immeasurable fifty-three trillion cells perceived perceiving, all of them, at once. Impossibly whole and ridiculous to presume, I remain, in attendance to the feedback. At such times Deborah Hay assumes the devotion of a dog to its master; reading the simplest signs of life, lapping up whatever nuance my teacher produces. (emphasis added, xxiv)

*Remain in attendance to the feedback* could be a paraphrase of one of Emerson's tuitions to

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1 The “dance community” I refer to is one that is centered in “downtown” New York and comes out of the modern dance tradition, but is particularly identified with the renewal of modern dance by Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Ann Halprin (based on the West Coast but an influential teacher), Judson Dance Theater, and the “release techniques” that grew out of that generation's work. Many strands of thought and influence connect here, and downtown New York is only one of its scenes though it is historically an important place of convening. A community-based organization that presently acts as a hub for this scene is Movement Research.
rethink *knowing* as *reception*, one of the moving assignments I hear in his essays, both in his direct exhortations and his descriptions of the world.

In Emerson I find a “commentary” that elucidates the relationship between the practices of the dance and performance world where I have situated myself, the inheritance of dancing's habits and experiments, and the inheritance of philosophical literature bearing on the question of how to live an engaged, fulfilling life. The language of “inheritance” of philosophy comes to me from Cavell, by which he means something like allowing the philosophical text, which addresses a generality called “the human,” to address the human in me. I should add that, with Cavell, I take the question of how to live as a philosophical question, take Emerson as a philosopher, and take his writing in terms of that project.

I began taking dance seriously around the same time I began taking philosophy seriously (around my first year of college), and intuited almost from the beginning the consonance of what I think of very generally as “choreographic thinking” (a particular variety of openness to the spatial sense of ideas, and to the pleasure of sequencing them in complex and unfamiliar relations) with the passages of philosophy that I had collected, and would have recorded in my commonplace book were I a reader of another century. The first philosophical text of choreographic importance to me was Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), especially its chapters “On the Refrain,” “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal” and “The Smooth and the Striated,” which describe in various ways the energetic and logical attributes of a lived space (a “territory”) coming into and out of relative stability, visibility, or affective force. This text was joined by movement-oriented thinkers I found through Deleuze, like Henri Bergson, and through Bergson, T.E. Hulme, as well as by the
philosophically committed literature of Italo Calvino whose *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *Cosmicomics* (1965) each distill anatomical or structural analysis of the elements of moving systems (cities, planets) into contemplative miniatures, tiny animations. It is not insignificant that *A Thousand Plateaus*, my philosophical primer, opens with an invitation to the reader to read as a collector rather than a student, to read the book as one might play a record, repeating some tracks and skipping others.

While that intuition of the complementary sense of choreographic and philosophical thinking has long been privately fruitful, it is only through the work of this dissertation that I have learned to articulate it as bearing on non-dualistic thinking, and to understand dance as offering philosophy a much-needed experience of thinking within a project of giving ongoing, primary attention to embodied intelligence. In the course of this writing, I have located the intellectual historical context of this joining of dance and philosophy in the commitment of process philosophy and pragmatism to education as an unending process of growth. In this way my private pairing has come to be a vehicle for understanding the values that animate very public, social commitments.

The argument of this dissertation then, is that embodied creative process offers something fundamental to what Emerson calls “the conduct of life,” using the electrical imagery of conduction to signal the flow of intelligence and power through any individual “conductor.” The assertion I carry forward from this research is that creative process deserves to be considered pedagogically not as a form of “enrichment” on top of more essential skills, but as a practicum for the most essential fluencies of thinking.
TWO. Methods

Join the form to the processes of the mind and body.
Call this join Sense.
How then do we inhabit the music?

— Matthew Goulish, “A Transparent Lecture”

My method in this study has been one of joining. I have been concerned in particular with joining Emerson's descriptions of the strange ongoingness inherent in thinking with practical occupations within which it is possible to take up a moving way of being or doing or working. As Robert Richardson describes in First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process (University of Iowa Press, 2009), Emerson was also concerned with this joining, but took pains to remove specific references. Richardson's study of Emerson's writing methods, the short complement to his much longer intellectual biography, demonstrates the “enormously practical” side of Emerson, both in his interests and in his methods of reading and writing. Richardson describes, for example, the image sense underlying Emerson's seemingly fluffy sentence, “hitch your wagon to a star”: the operations of the tide mills built in the Massachusetts bay, which, through the lunar regulation of the tides, harnessed a practical instrument (a waterwheel grinding corn) to a heavenly body, an observation which highlights the critical importance of commonplace, ordinary, and practical experience in Emerson's appeals to the laws of nature (23). Emerson's customary elision of reference leaves his sentences suggestive of cosmic-scaled degrees of import, blending with his extraordinary enthusiasm to give his writing its urgent and often prophetic cadence. But his finest readers redirect his abstractions toward daily experiences. This is possible because these sentences are grounded in observed things, things that work—his words are, in Emerson's phrase, “fasten[ed] … to visible things” (EL 23).
My method has been to coax practical senses out of the abstract patterns of Emerson's figures by reading his sentences in the light of the particular practices that figure in my "recognitions" of his ideas. These practices include somatic movement investigations, choreography, and the writing or devising of energetically-oriented theater. This joining accomplishes two things. First, it offers new resources for understanding Emerson and for sounding his essays for their calls to action. I have continually tried to ask of his abstract formulations, what does this look like in action? What is a case where this happening? Given Emerson's constant query about what it means to participate in nature, I found it fruitful to ask these questions in terms of physical, bodily practices, taking our bodily life as a natural condition never made obsolete by cultural development, technological interventions and augmentations notwithstanding. These extra-literary, extra-philosophical, materially-oriented disciplines bring to the discussion much needed testimony of the embodied patterns of thinking as they relate to natural history and the nonhuman world. This is especially the case in my discussion of Emersonian "impersonality," marked as a necessary region for any contemporary study of Emerson by Sharon Cameron's work. Her Impersonality: Seven Essays (University of Chicago Press, 2007) devotes two of its seven chapters to Emerson, and in its sharp criticism of the ethical implications of his impersonal announces itself as a text to which anyone must respond who argues that Emerson offers valuable input to ethical thinking. One of the projects of this dissertation is a response to Cameron from the standpoint of what I understand as impersonal, embodied experience. Embodied sensibilities as conditions of ordinary experience are implied in the readings of Cavell and Arsić, and explored with special respect to findings in neuroscience and the materiality of thought in the scholarship of Joan Richardson, but my study offers a direct
link to research into thought's embodiment through the specific, experiential practices of somatic exploration, and so, I hope, enlarges our understanding of the natural intelligence which Emerson advances.

The use of creative disciplines as resources for expanding upon Emerson's sense is the explicit method of my first two chapters. I do this by appealing to the experiments and findings of the somatic disciplines of Body-Mind Centering and Ideokinesis, as well as to artist accounts of creating literary and performance work. Performance as an area of thought and skill also acts as an imaginative resource in the sense that my immersion in the varieties of attention that belong to performance-making has made me unusually sensitive to the patterns of physical intelligence that exceed the work of reflective thinking (concentrated in the brain), leading me to what we could call a proprioceptive registration of Emerson's figures. Proprioception is the sense that tells us where and how our bodies are positioned in space, and I mean to suggest quite literally that with a heightened attention to proprioceptive feedback, Emerson's figures and images of thinking take on striking physical sensations. This registration led me to give special attention to the spatial features of Emerson's descriptions of intelligence, especially with respect to the thinking that goes on at the edge, beyond, or behind what we can see.

In the third and fourth chapters I allow images that arose in joining Emerson with my own fields of creative work to guide the questions and structures of the chapters themselves, directing them toward the compositional processes of creative work and especially to the least legible and most disoriented parts of those processes. In other words, whereas in the long first half of the dissertation, I introduce performance disciplines as a resource for Emerson scholarship, in the second half I pivot so that I might introduce Emerson to artists as a resource
for making or thinking about performance. The dissertation ends with the documentation of a performance I generated in the course of writing this study, prompted by Emerson to publish this experience, to rewrite his texts in my own idiom.

This encapsulation, that we must “rewrite the sacred texts in our own idiom,” comes from Joan Richardson's *American Aesthetics* seminar. It is her distillation of one of Emerson's moving assignments—an assignment because he demands that reading, absorbing, learning as the merely dutiful student, is not enough; a *moving* assignment because every new generation must take up the transmissions it preserves in the sound and cadence that strikes its ear, and furthermore must actively discover that sound in order to do this. Meeting Emerson in the environment of Joan's seminar initiated this sense that to read Emerson is to be provoked to answer him in my own idiom and with my own figures. What comes forward and what is new? What does a literary (or any other) inheritance *do*? Considered in this way, Emerson becomes not just a figure from literature and philosophy's history, but a relative, a forgotten Uncle, part of a long relay. I take up Emerson, adding my own scenes and contexts, with the license that Joan's seminar practices: to understand the transmission that takes place in an intellectual genealogy as a kind of light that can bounce both forward and back, not only creating lines of influence but amplifying itself in the array of affinities described by family resemblance, as if intellectual history is a body of water whose waves break in all directions. This is an approach to history and to the body of texts preserved from the past that is not concerned with describing a unidirectional progress, but rather with a series of present-tense experiences. Reading this way, the still-resonating figures of the recorded past can be understood not only as backgrounds but also as present presences.²

² One of the ghosts within this dissertation is Henry James's story *The Jolly Corner* (1908), which dramatizes this
Taken as a whole, this series of chapters attempts to read and respond to Emerson as a writer of *assignments*, moving assignments whose shapes continue to shift each time they are answered. These assignments offer a second sense of what it means to “read actively”: to hear in the cadences of his description a call to attention, to action. Sometimes the assignments are generated as ways of experientially testing the essay's statements. Sometimes they are responses to direct exhortations. This feeling of responding to assignments, instead of responding as a traditional critic or historian, will be apparent in my prose, and accounts for the ongoing refrain throughout this dissertation of asking what it might actually look like to take Emerson seriously in the present, to take him personally. I don't mean to make a straw man out of the figure of the historian or critic, but I do think that criticism habitually concentrates around the idea that it is possible to find a distance from the affect of the things it studies. The critique levied against this habit—by feminism, by post-colonial criticism, by auto-ethnography—brings perspective and a healthy friction to critical practices. Still, I find that the frankly earnest and personal admission that I make in relation to my investment in reading and writing positions me outside the critical project.

Responsiveness to reading as a way of locating assignments is something that I link to my experience making things, which forms the longer-term commitment of my own working life, and therefore the larger environment in which my doctoral study sits. This responsive way of reading is to look for suggestions and implicit tasks in any description of any portion of life, and is, I think, typical of makers of what is these days called “devised” performance, which
refers to the construction of a performance event, often by groups instead of individuals, without a pre-existing single text, usually drawing from a wide constellation of sources, and often generative of unique propositions for what exactly goes on in a piece of theater. Devised work can be created by building material in response to tasks, challenges, or questions. For example Pina Bausch, the great German choreographer and one of the founding artists of the hybrid genre known as *tanztheatre* (or dance theater, an important cousin and background to devised performance), would begin a new work by asking each company member to respond (in movement, song, skit, speech) to a question, building the piece by directing and compiling these responses into a complex structure in a fantastic environment (one piece famously has a mountain of carnations onstage). Goat Island, the Chicago-based performance group active from 1987 to 2007 to which Matthew Goulish belonged, worked with a similar process, but with a greater emphasis on using texts as potential sources for generative tasks. This sourcing approach is a variety of active reading, a constant registration of the images and structures of a text as suggestive of an etude or exercise, a “commentary,” to recall the opening phrase, on something to be done.  

Goat Island's compositional methods can be also felt in the architecture of Goulish's essay writing in general, which he describes in one subtitle as “in proximity of performance” and which could be characterized as concerned with compensation, surprise, strangeness, attraction, and ongoingness, the Emersonian key words described above. A member of a fine arts faculty (at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago), his writing, though often orbiting around an art object, traverses many thinkers and regions of thought that are dear to the critical or theoretical

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3 See director Lin Hixon's comments throughout *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology, and Goat Island* (Routledge, 2007), for specific examples of such sourcing.
exponents of the humanities. But as an artist-scholar he takes an idiosyncratic freedom with respect to the shape of his essays, and they do not come across as works of “theory,” but rather something more like intelligent events. That is, their theoretical interests are not so much given as statements or arguments, but rather animate the ways the essays unfold in time, the kinds of attention they demonstrate, and the perceptions they record. In “A Transparent Lecture,” a work that considers the composer Morton Feldman, catastrophe, and notation, he indicates the logic of his strangely-shaped structure:

Join the form to the processes of the mind and body.

Call this join Sense.

How then do we inhabit the music? (179)

Goulish is describing an approach to talking about Feldman, as well as to talking about the notation and realization (or inhabitation) of music (a question to which Feldman brings new strategies by abandoning certain music-historical forms of control). But these lines also strike me as an assignment to be taken up more generally: join compositional form to the patterns we can discover by giving attention to thinking and moving, to growing and/or dying. Build something from the structural logic of those intelligent material processes. (Goulish elsewhere describes this as an ecological approach to composing.) In calling this join “Sense,” Goulish suggests that form, or structure, carries sense—carries meaning, value—by virtue of its enmeshed joining with sensory attention, physical processes.

If their senses are understood as being grounded in these bodied, intuitive processes, how then do we inhabit the music of Emerson's essays? That is, how might an enlarged capacity to sense and an enlarged comfort with what even constitutes sense, lead us to read in a new way?
I cite Goulish alongside these questions to bolster the license I take in joining Emerson's preservation of forms—his condensations of natural law into suggestive sentences, his recurrent images—with processes of mind and body that in my particular experience have been accessible through the work of making dance and performance. Since the processes I bring to bear are not simply objective phenomena I have studied, but are articulated registers of my embodied experience, this joining allows Emerson's tuitions to appeal to my intuitions, which is what I think Emerson wants of his readers. My method, the assignment I heard and took, has been to inhabit the music of Emerson's essays by allowing them to rest in the intelligence of these other disciplines, to register that music there, and try to move with it.

THREE. Chapters

CHAPTER ONE.

“Where do We Find Ourselves?” Thinking and Locating in Emerson's “Experience.”

In this chapter I explore intelligence as the experience of the incursion of nature's patterns into a moving attention, and the idea that those patterns are not registered first as visible, rational concepts, but rather come through us from behind, which is to say, come from pathways we cannot see or predict in advance. I open this exploration with a reading of “Experience” (1844), an essay notable for its pragmatic grounding in what Emerson calls “the temperate zone,” even as it attests to the continual unsettling of knowledge and habit produced by the co-presence
of loss to growth. Widely acknowledged as one of his most important, if most unsettling essays, it seemed a necessary starting point for my own pursuit. Although many studies of Emerson concentrate on his opening salvo, *Nature*, published in 1836, and although I find strains in that book that continue into “Experience” and the other essays I rely on, my impulse is to situate my study in the less enthusiastically transcendentalist Emerson. Stanley Cavell articulates the difference between *Nature* and Emerson's later writing (separated only by four or five years), as between a feeling that skepticism was solvable and a feeling that it was not: that doubt is not ever to be solved but only to be lived with. “Experience” suggests that living in these conditions is not necessarily demoralizing or alienating, but rather that creative response, acquiescence to transition, and a healthy revision of anthropocentric concepts offer ways to find ourselves at home in the always-moving world. In this home, there is both growth and death. “Experience” says we must identify with both.

Though I had read other essays of his before I came to “Experience,” I count this as the first essay that struck me with the surprise and delight that underwrites my making such a long commitment to Emerson. Much of this had to do, at first, with reading it alongside Cavell's “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson's 'Experience'” (collected in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*) which gave me my first lesson in the fruitfulness of turning Emerson's words over, like rocks in my palm, for their weight and their multiple senses. Inspired by Cavell to linger on Emerson's formulations, and frankly astonished by the discovery of the simultaneously tender and bracing mood of this thinker whom I had previously thought of as merely an inspirational speaker of a bygone era, I made a sound recording of actor Scott

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4 What transcendentalism signals is a complex discussion, and I take up a range of its senses throughout this dissertation. Here, I refer to the popular image of transcendentalism as a kind of head-in-the-clouds romanticism that predicts the great success available to the thinker.
Shepherd reading the essay, abridged to about half its length, which I then used as a sound score for an animation I was working on called “American Studies.” In the course of editing that animation I listened to the essay over and over, picking it up out of order, repetitively replaying small passages, and in the process committing many of its passages to memory. This relationship to a text, of having it in ear, creates an intimacy that lends itself to a slowly deepening registry of its sense, and seems retrospectively to have determined this essay as my starting point. As Cavell reminds, “in philosophy, it is the sound which makes all the difference” ("Must We Mean What We Say?" 36n31).

Cavell reads Emerson's description of “the evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest” (EL 473) as Emerson's notation of the signal condition of both knowing and having. He finds in the essay Emerson's “response” to the skepticism that recognizes the evanescence of all things, including of the life of Emerson's son Waldo, whose death is referred to in the essay's opening pages, a reference Cavell reads as initiating a set of images of both death and birth. In my reading, I lean toward a different emphasis, seeing the essay as recording Emerson's grief and recovery from the loss of a Platonic worldview that cannot survive the event of Waldo's death. The essay moves on from this opening event to address the question of how to live in a world of evanescent objects, one in which “all things swim and glitter” (471).

My chapter follows Emerson in his project of skating on surfaces, which he decides is “the true art of life” (478). Emerson asks questions about a life understood without idealism to undergird it: how do thinking and understanding occur in the material, vital life actually experienced, within its currents and surprises? How do I locate my own thinking, and how much
of it is really my own? Does ownership even pertain to thinking, or is it more a question of how I find myself experiencing thought? Where does power come from, and what happens when I get the sense of participating in it? I follow these questions, interrogating the images with which he describes moments of illumination and power for their rhetorical as well as their bodied, spatial, and rhythmic senses. I find that Emerson threads images of humility and accident into his descriptions of power and illumination in order to assign cautions against calculation, against feeling settled in any truth. These cautions reveal, in relief, the kind of thinker that Emerson proposes as a wise respondent to the evanescence of life: the wanderer. The wanderer, I argue, could be emblematic of an artist in the family array of John Cage, working back to Thoreau or Stein, or forward to contemporary choreographers like Deborah Hay or Susan Rethorst who describes making dances as a process of seeking out a stranger, of interviewing the body and responding to unanticipated prompts (a figure that also arises in Nietzsche). What joins these artists is a sensibility educated by availing themselves to the environment in which they find themselves, as well as a strong aversion to overly pre-determined structures or forms. To articulate the distinction between this open process of structural discovery and the determinations or calculations associated with the artist as designer of well-made objects, I draw upon experiential anatomy, a somatic approach to learning, which offers an alternative model for accessing structural knowledge about life's patterning. I build from this somatic framework a new look at Emerson's descriptions of intelligence and illumination.

I link this appetite for experiencing intelligence to what I call the “participatory practices” of artists working with chance, receptivity, and surprise in daily forms, and who value art-making for its process as much as or more than its products. These participatory practices can
be understood as projects of what Emerson describes as “husband[ing]” moments of being (EL 479), which he names the object of philosophy. For the chapter's conclusion, I turn to Gertrude Stein's process-oriented writing practice, examining “Rooms” from *Tender Buttons* (1914) as an example of the philosophical work of navigating ordinary life with a receptive attention to felicitous moments. With the lightness and pleasure of Stein's domestic perceptions, I invoke the uncertain condition of skepticism not as a cause for despair, but as a shifting ground of delight.

CHAPTER TWO
It thinks, I move: An Embodied Approach to Impersonality

Emerson is identified by historians and philosophers both as a transcendentalist and as a forerunner of pragmatism. These two terms seem at the outset to suggest very different images of the man: one, the ecstatic prophet of elevation, the other the skeptical thinker who knows he cannot get at any one true reality. In the many slopes and leaps of his writing, which speaks from a panoramic variety of moods and confidences, it is possible to construct an Emerson of either emphasis. But taken together, which is what an honest appraisal of Emerson must do, these two relationships to thinking, as ebb and flow, revise each other. In particular they revise the implied elevation of “transcendence,” and the implied sobriety of “pragmatism.” The impersonal is one of Emerson's names for the transcendent. It is also the larger context through which power flows, and so a critical field of pragmatic action. In this chapter, I enter into the discussion by wagering that a non-dualistic approach allows for a resolution of the apparent opposition between person (the pragmatist who does) and the impersonal (person-transcending life).
This chapter was formed from a seed of discontent provoked by Cameron's reading of Emerson's impersonal, which hinges on an assessment of Emerson as seeking ownership over impersonal intelligence. This discontent was grounded in my recognition of Emerson's descriptions of impersonal intelligence as what in somatic research is thought of as patterning, and so something that is accessible to all persons, but uncontrollable by them. Responding to what I felt was a dualistic reading of Emerson's terms, this chapter lays out a rationale for thinking about the impersonal through the intelligent instrument of our persons: our bodies. Thinking from this perspective, I attempt to offer an evaluation of what it means to “own” impersonal intelligence, not along the lines of ownership as private property, but rather, ownership as a recognition of kinship and belonging.

With help from Herwig Friedl's excellent elaboration on Emerson's description of life as “circular power returning to itself,” which Friedl aligns with ongoing natural history, I argue in this chapter that the astonishingly complex patterns and systems of the human body, understood as the still-changing inheritance of our natural history, give us a venue to explore our “impersonal” intelligence that does not leap over or away from our individual selves, but rather explores physical selfhood as an instrument to experience more generally distributed material patterns of organization. I argue my point by pursuing the remarkable consonance between Emerson's descriptions of the flow of impersonal thought (observed in the course of his efforts to give attention to “the mode of our illumination”) and the descriptions of pattern and intelligence that arise in somatic work, represented here particularly by the work of Mabel Todd (in what came to be called Ideokinesis) and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (in Body-Mind Centering (BMC), which develops the Ideokinetic practice in combination with several other modalities). I argue
that thinking through and with the body is a critical element of understanding what Emerson is writing about.

I bring the concrete activities of somatic work to bear on the question so beautifully articulated by Friedl, that of power depending on the continuous recuperation of the “it-self” or the natural history of any being. Friedl's description is enormously persuasive, but it is situated in the ontological terms of the philosophical vocabulary. Somatics is a field of highly refined investigations into embodied intelligence, one that in its experiential vantage (open to anyone with a floor to lie on and time to spend listening to their body) is much closer to Emerson's methods of giving attention to thinking through the journaling process than either the technical vocabulary of philosophy or the methods of neuroscience which study the brain as an object, even though these studies too are helpful. (I do not mean to suggest an exclusionary opposition between these methods, but rather to suggest that Emerson's reading in science supported his experiential findings, which he gives more authority to. Likewise in BMC, objective medical study augments the practitioner's instruments, but the experiential work remains the primary scene of discovery or therapy.) Using a somatic framework to draw philosophical questions toward venues of actual practice, I locate approachable situations in which to ask the questions that Emerson assigns. Drawing the impersonal—as the intelligent and always-changing natural history of the body—to meet the practice of a person moving, I find a non-opposition between transcendent and pragmatic knowing. I locate the Emersonian appetite for transcendence as the hope for an experience of participation in the active patterns of intelligence and the flows of power that belong to nature, and belong also to me insofar as my body is natural.

The background concern of this chapter, then, is the question of what nature and natural
might mean to a person in the twenty-first century. Somatic work, its field of exploration in the moving, sensing body, can be taken up as easily in the city as the country, and so stands to offer the contemporary urban person a venue for the recuperation of nature, not figured as a return to nature or off-the-grid abandonment of civilization, but as a recuperation of mental and physical health. The pioneers of the field understood it as a response to the anxiety and dis-ease of the industrial, technological world, and so in many ways somatic work addresses itself particularly to the city dweller.

CHAPTER THREE

Fragment Assignments: Eight Approaches to the Sound of Philosophy

“To work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing, the centre rather than the sphere.” —Lydia Davis, “Form as a Response to Doubt”

This chapter, which unfolds in eight parts, germinated in the space opened up by Cavell's idea that Emerson calls for philosophy by suppressing his own authority in order to make room for that philosophy. One of the questions that arises for Cavell is what philosophy sounds like and where we might find it outside of the texts which announce themselves in their form, vocabulary, or intertextual elements, as part of the discipline of philosophy. This question

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5 See “Thinking of Emerson,” collected in Emerson's Transcendental Etudes, for an extended discussion of this question.
jumped out at me immediately, given my own ongoing combination of philosophy with choreographic thinking, and my continual attraction to philosophical literature as a source from which to begin creative work. Cavell suggests that philosophy could be thought of not as a body of literature *per se*, but as a commitment one finds (or does not find) in one's own thinking. This shifted criterion—asking simply whether there are philosophical commitments present in a text or work—allows for a relaxing of the internal criteria of philosophy as a genre or discipline. My chapter begins by signaling its philosophical commitments, and proceeds by orbiting the question of what philosophically committed writing looks or sounds like, when written outside of the protocols of disciplinary philosophy.

Emboldened by a negatively capable comfort with the possibility of traversing the interval between two widely separated things that both evidence philosophical commitments (Emerson's essays, my theater), I composed the chapter as an eight-part etude whose sections are constrained by the addition of a third “separated thing”: a set of fragments from Emily Dickinson. My method was to take the language from Dickinson, and use it as a sounding line in two directions: into the pool of Emerson's philosophically committed language, and into the body of theater and poetics practices that form my own education as an artist. Toward the end of the chapter, I allowed this sounding line to drop into the pond of my own work directly, as a means of introducing both the license I took and the commitments I held while making *Another Tree Dance*, the Emersonian performance piece documented in my fourth chapter.

The chapter calls on Cavell to articulate what he calls “the arrogation” of the voice of philosophy that must be taken up when writing it. From there, it glides without conclusion through the rest of its series (of stairs? of islands? of pools?), picking up interlocutors for brief
duets, including Antonin Artaud and the performance work made in the wake of his influence, Goat Island, John Cage, Mac Wellman, Big Dance Theater, Susan Howe, Joan Retallack, Anne Carson, and of course Dickinson herself. Framed as a set of approaches into the neighborhood of the question, *how does an artist write philosophy?*, the chapter advances its argument, we could say, atmospherically. Certain preoccupations recur: what happens to the structure of an argument when it is free to take a non-expository form? How does the experience of thinking in non-illuminated regions (in sleep, in trance, in weird, wild spaces) hover behind or around our rational daylight thinking?

Aside from turning to face theater more directly, this chapter takes on strategies of addressing and creating significance that belong to the strand of theater I practice. Goat Island represents these strategies as ecological: the significance varies according to the member of the audience because each member brings a very different set of backgrounds to the work. In allowing the chapter to ring its separated elements as a set of bells, looking for sonorities, dissonances, sound-wave cancellations even, it opens itself up to new elements of association from its readers in turn. Thus the space between chapters two and three is not simply one of moving to a new question or area of investigation, but a span over which the linearity of traditional academic argumentation crosses a point of inflection (in the algebraic sense of a change in a line's curvature). The line moves off into a curve, away from the writer-responsible prose of the American academic and into a reader-responsible prose that begins to bear resemblance to something more like a choreographic relationship to making sense.

It is worth noting here that the designation “reader-responsible” comes out of the Composition and Rhetoric strand of English, and refers to prose cultures that value ambiguity,
suggestion, and the primary role of the reader in making sense, in distinction to writer-responsible prose cultures that expect the writer to lay out an argument and its explication in a hierarchical arrangement. I first met the distinction in a pedagogy class I was taking to prepare for teaching English 1 at Brooklyn College, where the student body includes many for whom English is their second language. It was introduced to us as a way of understanding and responding to the kinds of prose we were likely to encounter from students of some non-Western cultural backgrounds. As I learned the designation, I recognized my preference for these non-Western rhetorical modes. The longing to follow a curving path from writer-responsible to reader-responsible that has been present for me during the entire process of dissertating could be thought of in relation to what Cavell describes as Emerson's "eastern longings" that led him to the texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. As I briefly explore in my second chapter, the subculture of dance and art practice where I locate myself is influenced by its affinities with Buddhist approaches to living. Transitioning into reader-responsible prose, then, is also evidence of my desire to domesticate my scholarship, to bring it fully into the place where I find myself.

The text itself is not purposefully obscure, although it does practice economy; rather, the relationship between the scenes or approaches is not explicated. The interval is embraced as a productive space. This embrace understands the suggestiveness of the fragment that Emerson also practiced in his paragraphs composed of sentences each of which could be the center of its own orbit, none subordinate to the argument of another. The islands of sense that give the reader orientation in this chapter are the Dickinson refrains: the words of each refrain become the corresponding scene's assignment and the language becomes more concrete in the light of that close focus. The scene is not finished until those words have been "fastened" to both Emerson
and the scene's visiting artist. As soon as that linkage is effected, the scene is over. The chapter declines to offer a conclusion; rather it ends in transition.

One of the effects of this chapter, I hope, is to recast Emerson within a different family array: to rethink the relations we assign to him in scholarship; to welcome him into the bibliographic pantheon of the contemporary artist. The implicit argument I mean to make, is that in calling for philosophy, Emerson calls for a way of living and making that has been taken up, among other places, in art.
CHAPTER FOUR

Another Tree Dance: An Essay in the Form of a Room

The fourth and final chapter of this study is the documentation and text of a solo performance piece, Another Tree Dance, that I developed and performed in October 2013. Originally conceived of as an alternative form of publication for the dissertation itself, it only slowly announced itself as central to the work of this study, progressing with that realization from the status of side project, to epilogue, to chapter. The chapter begins with a ten-page account of the creation of the show, which provides a basic dramaturgy for its organizational structures and situates the work of making it in terms of the Emersonian commitments, and the commitments to Emerson, that animate the dissertation. So I will not repeat that background
narrative here, but rather try to indicate where I found the license and support for taking my scholarship down this very strange avenue. I want to invoke a small pantheon of heroes from whom I derive my encouragement, and for them to appear here as a sudden crowd. (This puts me in mind of the opening of *A Thousand Plateaus* where Deleuze and Guattari write that already they were several.) I list them here in the order that they come to mind.

1.

Emerson names the task of the scholar as taking of a “dive” into his “privatest presentiments” at the bottom of which he hopes to find something “universally true.” This hinge between the private and the universal (or human) is where Cavell derives his notion of the “arrogation” of the voice of philosophy (the act that enables an individual person to speak philosophically on behalf of the human), as well as the locus of a text's potential to act as “commentary” on a life. In Joan Richardson's account of her experience reading Cavell's autobiography, she cites a restatement of this idea from Cavell: “a certain strain of philosophy inescapably takes on autobiography … I speak philosophically for others when they recognize what I say as what they would say … As in Emerson, and in Thoreau, this turns out to mean that the philosopher entrusts himself or herself to write, however limitedly, the autobiography of a species; if not of humanity as a whole, then representative of anyone who finds himself or herself in it” (qtd. in Richardson “It's About Time” 123.) Richardson writes of this process that it “redirect[s] philosophy back to its therapeutic power,” continuing: “We, his readers, are led back home to recover our own mother tongues in order to get what he is talking about; translating his idiom into our own ordinary language, we catch his pitch. His provocations yield our self-
reliance” (137). The act of translating Emerson's idiom into my mother tongue of performance has been a ceremonial process of marking my own passage from reader to writer, yielding, we could say, my own self-reliance. Emerson declares that scholarship is tied to diving into one's own ordinary experience. Reading scholarship is tied to finding oneself prompted to recuperate oneself (in Cavell's articulation, to recuperate the “unthought known” that psychoanalysis seeks) through the recognitions of something representative in the private dives of others.

I found license in this circling exchange of speaking and recognizing to do the work of scholarship-as-diving until I located the private imaginative space from where I recognized Emerson. It is important to note here that Another Tree Dance was composed of the stuff of my own creative past, not as a fictional or speculative construction but as a kind of revisiting and replaying of the images that animate my creative work—it really was a private dive and did not attempt to present or dramatize Emerson's essays. Whether or not that dive made it as far as even a limited “autobiography of a species,” it did, by virtue of taking place in the room of performance and with attention to the exchange of identification that happens in performing and witnessing, generate some kind of meeting place between the private and the public.

2.

The writing of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray helped me understand and articulate my orientation to literary studies, to thinking ethically about elemental parts of speech. I read them in the early stages of my doctoral work, and their thinking around what it means to take a speaking position (to say I, to say you, to say we) has grounded my own thinking and has underwritten my ability to understand one of the consonances between what I do as an artist and
what I think that I hear in Emerson. Cixous and Irigaray have different names for the relational interchanges that form the ways we can think through language's first person pronouns. If given only surface attention they can seem to be speaking in opposition to Emerson insofar as the feminism of which Cixous and Irigaray are exponents is involved in explicitly critiquing the “universal” position, a word to which Emerson assigns the highest value. However they are not speaking of the same “universal”; Emerson does not invoke something normative so much as something vast, ever-changing, and pluralistic.

I recently came across some old notes on Cixous's essay on theater, “Aller à la Mer,” from which I had transcribed this long passage:

It will be a text, a body decoding and naming itself in one long, slow push; the song of women being brought into the world … All it requires is one woman who stays beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be, moving ever more slowly, more quickly than herself, anticipating herself. It is coming to pass, this arrival of Woman into the world; I hear it from so far away, and no other stage/scene but this space with a hundred simultaneous scenes/stages where she moves, several women, unchecked in this place expended by her look, her listening. And if this scene/stage is movement, if it extends to where everything happens and Woman is Whole, where instead of being acted out, life is lived, women will be able to go there and feel themselves loving and being loved, listening and being heard, happy as when they go to the sea, the womb of the mother. (547)

In my notes under this passage I wrote: Where everything happens: where life is lived, not acted.
Proposal for theater as a space of presence—how does this relate to script? A technique of performance based in the room. New dance answers this. What does the script demand? This is the transition into script as manifesto itself, as requiring a convergence of performance and living. This “convergence of performance and living” has something to do with the permission I gave myself to respond to Emerson from a highly unstable, oceanic position Cixous describes, writing by staying “beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing [myself] as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be, moving ever more slowly, more quickly than [myself], anticipating [myself].”

3.

William James describes thinking as a stream, and notes our intellectual predilection for the rests, the substantives, the perches. He reminds there is a feeling of if, of why, of and. These transitional spaces in which thought flows in the course of making arguments: what are they? How might they be addressed? How might they be the scene of writing? Emerson too names life as taking place in transition. Can writing persist in transition without landing in a stopping place? Performance, especially non-narrative performance can offer a space to foreground the feeling of transitioning, of staying alongside a moving thought. This could be true of any discipline, but the special element of performance that, to my mind, makes this possible, is the way that the experience of a performance is always moving in an energetic feedback loop between performer and audience, heightening the feeling of moving alongside that which is changing. This is especially true of working in a small room, where presence can be taken in physically without the subordination to vision of a larger proscenium hall.6 (In the same way,

6 It takes a truly magnificent performer to accomplish this in a large hall; the technology of projection is its vehicle.
working non-linearly or non-narratively declines to subordinate present events to narrative architectures, so that the audience cannot “see” where a story is heading.) I chose to write about (or better, inhabit and move alongside) the Emersonian material on transition by taking up the most transitional and ephemeral medium at hand. So I made an essay in the form of a (delicately and continuously changing) room.

4.

I had the good fortune to take a class with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick before she died. The class was called *How to do things with words and other materials* and was organized around making artist books. We met in two small sections of six students each, at Eve's house, where she set up tables with bowls of chips and we cut, glued, drew, sewed, or pasted, making free use of her wall of ephemera and crafting supplies. Eve was a great scholar, a brilliant critic, an incredible teacher. She presented this course in bookmaking and bookthinking as an equally valid form of inquiry or training to the more standard reading and writing seminar. What is a tactile exploration of this thinking we do in literary studies? What is the material object we work with and tussle over? Eve never asked us to articulate our assemblages in the form of a rationale, never suggested that we owed a critical formulation of what we were doing. We worked with material.

One week was devoted to the altered book: a thing made out of a book but not necessarily remaining in that form. That week I began to make objects that became the elements of the

One season I was an extra in the Met Opera's dance company, for a specially commissioned *Rite of Spring*. I remember the ridiculous feeling (having only ever performed in intimate theaters before that) of looking out at the audience—just a sea of dots and reflective glasses. I felt nearer to my dog, who I knew was at home listening to the live Saturday afternoon broadcast of the opera, than I did to those 4000 people. As a result, the performance work was almost entirely focused on executing the choreography, relying on the large spatial pattern of the spectacle to do what, in smaller venues, we do with the play of energy and attention.
animation I made of Emerson's "Experience": first books turned into little stages, with hollow
spaces and contraptions for rolling transparencies, then finely shredded dictionary pages to
accumulate into a small hill in the animation, then a puppet auditorium with chairs made out of
glued-together and reshaped pages of Emerson's essays (see fig. 4). This is one approach to
reading, to citing, to publishing.

Fig. 4. Still from "American Studies" (2008)
My point is, if as remarkable a scholar as Eve Sedgwick felt there was value in making material objects without theoretical elaborations, that is a form of permission.

5.

Before I started doctoral studies, I went through an MFA program at Brooklyn College, studying playwriting with Mac Wellman. The program happened to be situated in the English department as part of creative writing, rather than in theater (a departmental reassignment I maintained in doctoral work). In addition to workshop and tutorials, we were to take an elective each semester. One semester I decided to take a class through the Anthropology department at Columbia. It was taught by Michael Taussig, and was centered around Walter Benjamin's
Arcades Project. I found it on the recommendation of a friend who thought I would like Taussig. The course was called Profane Illumination, and its questions were about how do scholarship in a vital, excited, illuminated vein. In the essay on Surrealism from which the course title comes, Benjamin writes, “In the world's structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed [the surrealists] to step outside the domain of intoxication. …the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson” (179).

The Continuing Studies Dean, whose permission I needed to register, told me with a mildly condescending tone that Taussig was “sui generis.” I found myself perfectly at home in the environment of the class, which was conversational, open-form, and openly in search of profane illuminations. This was my introduction to doctoral studies, the first time I was in a room with doctoral students, and the first time I estimated that I was capable of the undertaking. Perhaps if I had taken a more traditional academic course, I wouldn't have felt comfortable or performed as well. Taussig's response to my writing was perhaps the most important encouragement that I should pursue doctoral studies. He encouraged us to dive into images in our writing, in a way, now that I think of it, that resembles Erik Ehn's image-activated playwriting pedagogy. It was assumed in that class that the position from which to speak critically and the sound of that speech was a wide open question—something I now understand in the larger context of anthropology's self-criticism of the ethnographic genre and its conventions. In that class, I wrote as myself: as a person seriously committed to thinking who wanted to script
wandering experiences of thinking and illumination. I experienced the process as full of profane delight. It called me. This environment was what I was thinking of when I decided to get a Ph.D. The image was, from the beginning, imbued with freedom to entertain the full range of contexts in which we found ourselves thinking (which always, for me, includes performance). The first essay we read was Benjamin's “Unpacking My Library, a Talk About Book Collecting.” In its final passage, which I remember Taussig returning to over and over again as an exemplary image of the scholar, it reads:

O bliss of the collector. … For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a collector—and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be—ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not only that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them. So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting. (67)

Disappearing inside the dwelling built from my collection of Emersonian images, I made *Another Tree Dance.*
FOUR. Committing to the Waves

I think I have offered an account here of how I came to feel committed to Emerson, and of the impulses that guided me in trying to join my reading of his essays to the thinking that comes out of a life in performance, but it remains to be said why it matters that I have done this, beyond my own sense of reconciliation or the novelty of the linkage. To answer this question let me explain why I named this study “Committing to the Waves.” I became sensitive to the suggestive richness of wave images from reading Joan's chapter on William James in *A Natural History of Pragmatism*. In that chapter she notes that James played on the link between vagueness, in English, and the French “la vague,” meaning wave. James gives an image of the self as a “storm-center” in a sea of thought without definite edges where we can say that one thing (I) ends and another thing (it) begins. The regions likely to produce surprise (for better or worse) are these margins of being—the vague outer district that haloes the familiar habits of character. These margins, vague in the sense of having indistinct location, are also vague in an oceanic sense: open to incursion and excursion, crossed by traveling waves and atmospheric advances. In a following chapter on William's brother Henry James, Richardson notes Henry's repeated use of the word “vague” in describing the speculative and intense process of thinking that is the scene of character transformation in his stories, culling the image of thinking as *navigating* from both James brothers. Emerson's writing too is replete with wave imagery, not only watery, but electric. The movement of electricity stands behind his naming “polarity” one of the primal conditions of being.

A commitment to the waves stands for a commitment both to the fact of this vagueness at
the edge of every I and it, and for a commitment to navigating the wave space where we find ourselves. The wave as pathway occupies a dual register in this study's name: both a material description of the way energy travels through matter, and as a figure for the movement of thinking. Taken in a philosophical pitch, *the waves*, as name for a field of thought, a field of sound, or field of material energy, stand for what is active and what might change in nature, in the material world.

The image of committing to the waves is not supposed to be morbid. There is a navigational vessel implied in the Jamesian image, dramatized as an “I,” a thinking self. The burial at sea that “committed to the waves” invokes can be thought of as the small and continuous burial of the present self in an unfolding life. This is not only a figure of loss, but also of gaining unforeseen capacities. In Thoreau it is the relationship between mourning and morning. In Emerson's images, committing to the waves paraphrases his speaking for the necessity of suffering the process of transformation by undergoing unsettlement. Just as the navigator steers by working within the larger pulses of the waves and tides, the thinking, transforming person undergoes unsettlement in Emerson's images by opening herself to the transit of power through and beyond her person, via “subterranean turnpikes” not mappable by the will. In the vocabulary of John Dewey, committing to the waves is a commitment to education as a process of growth, not limited to early years, but synonymous with the full term of life.

It matters greatly today to avail ourselves of Emerson's words—*nature, power*. A close reading of Emerson rescues those words from their fate as fixed symbols in an outdated and

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suspect order of thinking and demands that they be renewed, considered as the welcome inheritance of all living things. It can be hard for a contemporary ear to hear these words in this valence, given the sustained critique of power that has taken place over the last half century along with the suspicion of the designation of the “natural.” In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes the “naturalization” of concepts as a way of taking them outside the domain of critique, a process by which things come to be understood as just “how it always was.” Nature here stands for the malignant retrospective rationalization of the status quo, for a refusal to dismantle the political and cultural investments, contingencies, and inequities concretized by the naturalized concept. *Nature* in this sense becomes a cultural shorthand for something that does not change, for a dead-end for critical opposition. Likewise, *power* became a malignant word in the domain of critical theory, standing for a power that surveils, represses, that orders, a power identifies with the State or with capital, and with the effort on the part of the powerful to retain power against the upsurging plurality, variety, and difference of life. But if we will hear him, Emerson argues that nature is a process of unrelenting change, and power is the “sharing” of this natural pulse or force over which no body may retain dominance in the longer term. Emersonian power is neither malignant nor beneficent even though its energy is always to some degree violent. Emerson's vision of experiencing power is of participating in a natural intelligence that includes but exceeds all human constructions. Through the receptive, responsive activity of the individual self as *instrument*, Emerson envisions participating in nature's force by moving alongside its never-arrested oscillations between building and dismantling.

Taking this picture of power, the world is not ruled by an opposition between a powerful normative center and a disempowered queer margin, though a temporally and intellectually
limited politics might try to reinforce such an opposition and bar the incursion of the outsider (deny the vagueness of its edges). Emerson suggests that if we would try to look from the deep-historical perspective that knows no political consolidation is permanent, then we would see that the main stream of life is process, is unsettlement. (This does not mean, as some read in Emerson, that we can simply be complacent with the problems of our politics. We must speak and act against such reactionary reinforcement where it degrades life, using violence to block change or stifle mobility.⁸) To belong to the world, in Emerson, is not to belong safely to a normative center, but rather to experience the embrace of the world in our moving through it, to experience belonging as an accompaniment by the stream of nature's unpredictable and unsettling process: “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (EL 413).

Sanity, says Emerson, consists in circulation, not consolidation—a security found only in transition. It is my frank understanding that it matters to avail ourselves of Emerson's descriptions of nature and power—to understand these not as fixed entitlements but as descriptions of a process of growth undergone by all living things, unhealthy when stifled—in order to recuperate a health and sanity which is imbalanced or thwarted by the technological, industrial, social world in which we find ourselves. Pioneers of somatic work like F.M. Alexander and Mabel Todd described what they were doing in such high-stakes terms, not merely physical therapy for bodily injury, but a way of adjusting the instrument of the intelligent body to the strains of twentieth-century life, to rising anxiety. I do not think these problems have gone away in our century. I count myself among those who diagnose part of this imbalance as produced by dualism's long underestimation of embodied intelligence and the concomitant

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⁸ Laurence Buell's discussion of Emerson's relationship to abolitionism, in his excellent monograph *Emerson* offers a tempered analysis of how and where Emerson felt drawn into political work, as well as an account of different takes on Emerson's commitments to this cause and conflict.
malformation of its therapeutic tools. The advocacy that grows from attending to embodied intelligence as an instrument of natural power points me toward scenes of education which create space for the exploration of all the weird intelligences we can experience.

The therapy Emerson proposes is a commitment to experience ordinary life as natural process, one productive of strangeness and wonder, loss and gain, leading to new identifications of where or how we belong in the world. What this dissertation advances is an argument that Emerson's circulatory images can be translated into specific activities of physical exploration and creative process, in and through which individuals can entertain images and “share” in nature of those images by following their transfigurations. Instead of taking “individuality” as indicating a possessive form of originality, these activities instead approach originality in the temporal sense of liveness and present-tense sensing that Emerson evokes when he asks, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (EL 7). These activities frame a space and time to experience ourselves as instruments of sense, and to experience the sense that patterns the space in which we move.
CHAPTER ONE

“Where do we find ourselves?” Thinking and locating in Emerson’s “Experience”

1. FROM “REALITY” TO EXPERIENCE

I’ve been reading Emerson closely now for six years. Often this has meant traveling and re-traveling the same essays, and in fact in all that time I still have not finished reading through his entire catalog. The essay that I come back to, and whose sentences have taken root in my mind, that ring out on occasions in my life when I am trying to make sense of both abundance and loss, is “Experience” (1844). Perhaps it was an accident that this became Emerson’s primary essay for me. I began turning over its phrases as a reader of Stanley Cavell, assigned when I was a new participant in Joan Richardson’s *American Aesthetics* seminar, which I joined in 2007 by a kind of homing instinct because the course description mentioned both Jonathan Edwards and Susan Howe, two writers my mentor Mac Wellman had directed me toward as I was beginning to think about doctoral study. In the years leading up to this present project, I have given a great deal of attention to the family resemblance between all those sentences, images, and remembered scenes of experience that have rooted themselves into my thinking, and become references, containers, koans really, that are amplified annually by the way their persistence in my memory makes them attractors, or sorters: ways to file impressions, convictions, and illuminations in my mind. In the way that so much allegiance comes from an accidental encounter that strikes chords of deep affinity, I have taken this to essay.

As Lawrence Buell notes in his monograph on Emerson, tracing the widely variant
affinities with and images of Emerson that his contemporaries and his critics drew, there is no single reading to be drawn from Emerson. Emerson himself acknowledges the degree to which one’s thinking is not systematic, nor without inconsistencies or even logical oppositions. Thinking comes in moods, and “our moods do not believe one another” (EL 406). Although there are many returning temperaments that emerge and retreat over the course of Emerson’s essays, upon which one could sustain claims to “Emersonian” ideas—of self, of nature, of intelligence—different readers draw very different emblems from his texts. Within the shifting tonal plane of his essays, the ideas that seem a grounding melody to one reader strike another as a secondary harmony. It has occurred to me that I like the mood of “Experience” more than Emerson’s other moods; it strikes me as familiar and offers frameworks for recognizing and deepening the patience required to live through a sustained process, be that creative, critical, or private. I would characterize its mood as tending toward the low and the quiet. Its optimism takes its sea level from a position of loss, of finding oneself a beginner again, in the mid-stream of life. It is marked by a reflective relationship to the passage of time, not meaning that it has no present-tense, but simply that its improvisations play against a field of retrospection, whereas elsewhere (for example in the agitating and exalting “Circles” or his 1836 Nature) he enacts the ecstasy of illumination as if finding his words for the first time.

Although there is an obvious critical voice that doctoral study steers me toward, the adoption of which is part of the credential of a junior scholar, as an artist-scholar, I find myself compelled to admit the more personal stakes of my interest in reading. I read to find out, in the title of Wallace Stevens’s poem (which rephrases Emerson), “How to live. What to do,” specifically what to do within the course of a creative process, which is how I have chosen, for
the most part, to live. Most of what I have invested time in as a scholar have been texts that resonate with my experience of creative process or the navigation of private crises (both processes seem to share a set of cautions and methods for going on). Because both art-making and examined living are projects of growth, the third term of my personal commitment to texts is pedagogical. “Experience” is also a project of growth: it describes process, addresses how and where “we find ourselves,” and how one moves, *in medias res*, in play. But there are other reasons to propose “Experience” as the turf on which to think through Emerson in this dissertation. Composing for experience instead of theme or “aboutness” is basic to the kinds of performance and literature that I am trying to join with Emerson's body of thought. Inquiring into varieties of experience instead of privileging one type is basic to the kinds of philosophy those literary and performance projects practice.

Consonant with the emergent dominance of scientific method that characterizes later nineteenth-century thinking across many disciplines and continues to shape contemporary paradigms of verification, Emerson’s essay on experience is more an account of observations than a logical argument. Inquiring into the things that seem to structure his experience, he makes a sequential report. Identifying the grains, or “lords,” of life, he writes: “I dare not assume to give their order, but I name them as I find them in my way” (EL 491). “Experience” is an exemplary essay in the word’s sense of an attempt, or foray: beginning somewhere, moving through other places, ending on a new prospect, it nowhere stands outside of itself, has no thesis. There are arguments to be found distributed across the essay, but it is not structured as an argument and explication, and in fact explicitly rejects claims to completeness (and so conclusion). What generalizations, what tenacious and perennially applicable sentences are here,
have arisen as fruits of attention, from occasions within Emerson’s train of questions. These arguments, when they occur, are not usually found in the leading positions of thesis or conclusion. Rather, one happens upon them in the middle of a paragraph, as if rounding the bend to discover a striking scene.

The essay opens with the image of human being as a condition of gliding, initiating, with the question “Where do we find ourselves?”, a project of attempting to locate oneself as a moving point in a continually moving flow. Although Emerson refers early on to the death of his son, I do not read the essay itself as about this private mourning, as many others have, including Barbara Packer and Sharon Cameron, but rather about the loss that marks any transfiguration (and the transfiguration that marks any loss). Cavell, too, brings forward Waldo’s death in his reading of “Experience,” noting a series of “phantasmic experiences of pregnancy” in the essay’s images which weave together, in their invocation of early childhood, with a number of buried references to Waldo’s death—buried by Emerson’s resistance to explicitly naming Waldo, thereby joining Waldo to Being which also “refuses to be named.” Converting Waldo’s proper name to the more vague “it,” Emerson writes of both his grief and the “lost estate” of his son: “I cannot get it nearer to me” (EL 473). Cavell finds in this sentence one of the essay's origins of the “indirection” that Emerson practices, joining it to another critical scene where getting fails. Emerson's naming of that failure as the condition of thinking signals a reversal of Kant: “All I know is reception. I am and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied that I have gotten anything, I found I did not” (EL 491). Reception instead of getting, attraction instead of grasping, characterize Cavell's figure of indirection. These things are tied in the essay's images to the death of Waldo and the anticipated birth of something nameless, which is the onward assertion of being
I do not think Cavell is wrong to tie these figures together, but still they do not figure as strongly in my own understanding of the essay, which I take to have something to do with Emerson’s description, in “Self-Reliance,” of the experience of reading and recognizing one’s “genius” appear with “alienated majesty” in the writing of others, invoking the action of recognition as an animating element of reading. This particular recognition is generally taken as an admonishment against waiting, against the caution or deference that leads a person to avoid the engagement with and publication of their proper work. Cavell derives from this admonishment the license for what he calls the “arrogation” of the voice of philosophy. It is hard today to read about one's alienated genius without automatically applying the contemporary idea of “genius” as a wildly exceptional property cultivated as a product of private will. Indeed a critical task for the contemporary reader of Emerson is to listen for his deconstruction of that more exceptional notion, and recognize that when he discusses genius, he means a capacity that belongs to everyone insofar as they are receptive to it, something he explicitly addresses in his essay on Shakespeare: “Great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind” (EL 711). But the return, as a kind of echo, of one’s alienated genius—understood in its older and more modest sense as one’s household spirit—could also simply be an occasion to recognize the set of interests that animate one’s mind, one's attractions.

Sounding “Experience” against my own interest in composing performances built of a

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9 See the first chapter of *The Pitch of Philosophy*, for an elaboration of arrogation. I also address arrogation here, in my third chapter.
subtle emergence and recession of landscapes of sense or feeling, and particularly my interest in creating performances that direct attention to the lapping transitions from one experience of clarity to the next, I catch in the essay the echoes not of buried sons but of descriptions of the deliquescence of ideas or things that had seemed to be stable, and in turn, continuing to ask “how to live, what to do,” cull from the essay prompts for creating and valuing ceremonies of that deliquescence. These prompts I think of as Emerson's assignments, not transcendental etudes (in Cavell's title), but movement etudes.

“Experience” is an essay of wonderful vagueness. I am thinking of “vague” in the sense attended to by Joan Richardson in her discussion of William James's use of the word, where the English sense of “indefinite” joins with the image of a wave, which is the meaning of vague in French (NHP 128-131). The wave suggests both images of a power or law moving matter, as well as a field of moving currents without fixed borders that put everything within them into continuously shifting relationships of visibility (crest) and recession (trough). Emerson's vagueness mirrors the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects” (EL 473) on several registers as a slipping away from centers, topics, or theses: in his names (the “it” that replaces “Waldo”); in his shifting key-words (their status as key-words submerged in constellations of terms whose family resemblance contain the hints toward their lesson or tuition\(^{10}\)); and his continuous movement (never lingering in a scene or a reference, even one so momentous as the death of his son or wife).

The vagueness of “Experience,” which allows a multiplicity of readings to resonate, not only suggests to me that there is no effort on Emerson’s part to create and then bury some key to

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\(^{10}\) Cavell's excellence as a reader of Emerson is in his attention to these constellations, not only of relation between words (that hand that clutches as the hand within “unhandsome”) but also of relations between different sense of words (success and succession, lasting as enduring and the last as a shoemaker's form).
the text (as with a more riddling author like James Joyce whose *Finnegan's Wake* yields its pleasure through cracked codes of HCE’s). It also suggests that by decoupling the essay’s significance from the strict reference to particular experience—for instance the death of Waldo—it is pitched into a more pluralistic arena, allowing it to become open to the approaches of new readers with unanticipated echoes of alienated genius, inviting new associations with its figures and images. This is autobiography committed to the waves, life experience refracted and reflected to become the material of something more plural. In this opening up it gains the potential to strike a wider array of readers with a sense of surprised familiarity. The variety of ways that Emerson’s essays provoke that experience of familiarity—reading the essay as about dead sons or making dances—is a testament to his success in taking private experience so far that it becomes public. This public, like all publics, is pluralistic, inconsistent, multivocal.

I sense that when Emerson points in the essay to the death of his son, he is marking the occasion of a different process of grieving for the loss of a concept which seems to have failed when put to the test of that intense experience. This lost concept, and not Waldo, seems to me the first subject of the essay. The lost concept is a belief in the possibility of permanence, an endpoint called, in the Platonic tradition, “reality.” “Experience” records Emerson’s disappointment in the discovery that “reality” (so imagined within an idealist tradition as truth, *eidos*, essence, form, perfection) is not a final destination but a “romance,” an illusion. Even the most costly purchase—the death of a son—does not introduce him into that heaven. It is in this sense that he can say that “grief can teach [him] nothing” (EL 473), for clearly grief is teaching him something—just something different than he expected.

The loss that is felt through the opening pages of “Experience” is one that had troubled
Emerson since he encountered Hume, whose “sweeping negations,” writes Emerson's biographer Richard Richardson, lead “to a completely disconnected world, without energy or cause to create” (45). This loss concentrates in the figure of Waldo's death through the discovery that no necessary binding exists between father and son, that young Waldo's death leaves the older Waldo intact, numb. His description holds an emotional analogy for the Humean unbinding of cause from effect. He writes, “some thing which I fancied was 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 … I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature” (EL 473). Cavell reads “Experience” as a statement in Emerson's response to Hume, not a direct refutation of Hume's basic shaking-apart of the human ability to know the “real nature” of cause, but a living, pragmatic strategy for the “recovery from skepticism” (ETE 58), a recovery which must begin from loss.

“Experience” moves on from this lost romance of the ideal to imagine a new “true romance” of “practical power” found and understood experientially as an uninhibited capacity to move and to act (EL 492). In this sense the essay uses the occasion of loss to initiate a turn toward the world for experience of renewal or recuperation. The turn invites reconsideration of the ways to understand the world. Thinking through experience instead of ideals, principals of movement arise: “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of the body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association” (476). It trades a vision of a fixed form for a one of a moving system. This revision of expectation for where we will find beacons we might use to guide ourselves marks Emerson's “Experience” as not just an account of personal renewal, but of the massive shift within the history of philosophy of which he
(among others) is emblematic: the wrenching away from idealism and toward process. Waldo is only one “beautiful estate” that has been or will be lost around the middle of Emerson’s century. Darwin’s findings herald the loss of the concept of a divinely perfected humankind; historical materialism rebels against the alienation of labor from its fruits; the American Civil War puts contradicting ideals into violent opposition, laying waste to a generation and taxing the certainty of ideology on all sides.

Herwig Friedl places Emerson and Nietzsche at the beginning of this major shift in an entire way of thinking. He names Cavell as the first within philosophy to recognize Emerson’s role in this shift of thinking away from ideals and toward “a way or methodos of thinking that we have come to understand as the slow erosion … of metaphysical systems” (Friedl 269). This overturning results not from the generation of new ideas about being, but from shifts in “the way Being addresses thinkers” (270). Realizing and becoming available to this directionality—of thinking as the reception of an address as opposed to a penetration—is one of the keys of Emerson’s renewal in “Experience.” Methods for hearing this address, or at least cautions on how not to miss hearing the address, are Emerson’s primary tuitions.

To illustrate the new way of thinking, Friedl points to Emerson’s description of life as process in “The American Scholar”: there is no beginning or end, only “circular power returning into itself.” This denial of the timeline, says Friedl, is a radical shift, and the emblem of what will unfold, through various thinkers, into “process philosophy.” “Experience” enacts this circularity, starting with the falling apart of one romance, circling around to envision a new romance in an ending note that is yet—to use Emerson’s language from “Circles” —“initial.” “Experience” is a document in the history of philosophy “charactered” (a favorite Emersonian verb) by changing
flows of thought: we feel a new “dispensation of Being” (Heidegger’s term, brought by Friedl) in the way it hangs together.

And yet the essay also moves along something like a train switch, for here Emerson wrangles philosophical inheritances away from philosophy and into new practical directions: toward work and away from philosophy as such. This trans-disciplinarity, let’s call it, perhaps accounts for part of what Cavell describes as the “repression” of Emerson in the discipline of philosophy. Cavell looks at this repression in terms of ordinary language (the non-philosophical sound of Emerson's writing, its buried puns and inverted sense, the refusal to propose coherent systems in structures of thesis and proof), as well as in terms of Emerson's self-repression of his own authority in his calls for the reader to arrogate philosophy for themselves.\(^\text{11}\) Buell also writes about this self-repression, labeling Emerson an “anti-mentor” who essentially says to his reader, “don't take it from me! Find out for yourself,” thereby directing the reader away from the author's own authority.\(^\text{12}\) The sense I am interested in is the way Emerson situates philosophical thinking in the project of “liv[ing] the greatest number of good hours” and “doing your work” (EL 479, 310). Relocating the scene of philosophy's questions into the scene of work, he doesn't ask to be read in the context of philosophical literature, but rather as a public intellectual, a pragmatist whose sense is relevant to a wide variety of ways to live and work.

Another way in which the philosophical value of Emerson can be missed is that his essays are experiential rather than classically argumentative. He writes in a vague first person: he engages the “I” but not always in reference to himself. Rather it feels more like a seat, or a window, left open as an invitation to experience the essay’s thinking, to take it personally. This is

\(^{11}\) See Cavell's essay “Thinking of Emerson” for an extended discussion of these themes.

\(^{12}\) See Chapter Seven of Buell's intellectual biography, *Emerson.*
neither a rationalist nor empirical kind of rhetoric, but a performative one, offering an immersion in a path or train of thought as it submits itself to the weather of thinking, reaching for intuitions of pattern, or what Emerson calls “law.” Instead of defining a model of thinking (for if eternal ideals are gone then it makes no sense to describe fixed systems), Emerson builds moving pathways in which to give attention to “the mode of our illumination”—the intensity of insight in the formation of the grooves and tracks of our thought, the yielding of those tracks as they are overflowed by new ideas, producing new channels, re-charactering the mind.

In “Experience,” Emerson asks, how do thinking and understanding occur in the material, vital life actually experienced, within its currents and surprises? Where does power come from, and what happens when I get the sense of participating in it? Observing his sequence of moods and ideas, he finds that there is no escape from subjectivity, that “Man thinking” (as he termed the mindful explorer in “The American Scholar”) will always exist in a fabric he cannot transcend. Abandoning the rationalist dream that reason can calculate and penetrate, his own accounts of the experience of both power and illumination reveal attitudes of reception, and not deliberateness. He points the philosophical mood away from fixity and toward process, although he does not use that word. Belief keeps expanding, he says (echoing the earlier essay “Circles”); what is true enlarges, and we only have hope insofar as we acquiesce to such unsettlement ourselves.

As a work of epistemology, “Experience” points to our inescapable contingency, and relativity of perspective, but it balances empiricism and rationalism through the retention of his hopes for participation in an expansive experience that shares a sense of intensity with the old vision of a penetrating rational acuity, revising it to an experiential, participatory sense of clarity.
grounded in an intuition of the way the partial is characterized by patterns or laws that exceed it. For Emerson this expansive experience is a form of natural divinity, but here as in other essays, particularly “The Over-Soul,” he turns God out of the old figurative container, tossing out a multiplicity of names and images that transition toward secular forms of awe. Referring to “that within us which changes not,” he gives a list of the “quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance”: “First Cause … Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost,” the symbols of air, water, thought, fire, love, the term from “The Chinese Mencius,” “vast-flowing vigor,” as well as “Being” (EL 485). This power we are invited to imagine in moving images as a series of circles opening outward, or a bird moving from perch to perch.

“Experience” ends by imagining a perfect reception of that expansiveness, man as a vehicle for “practical power” (492). In its circling action it does not promise attainment of that power; the circling path will not be arrested. But it retains a desire for a feeling of participation as union, participation as a kind of continuousness with God, or nature, or the “not-me,” the unnamed “it.” He cannot get it nearer, but maybe, in his “passage into new worlds,” it will draw him close (492).

**BY WHAT KIND OF LIGHT?**

Emerson’s early writings suggest the probability of euphoric success for the thinking man within the world, a becoming figured in his first book, *Nature* (1836), as a “transparent eye-ball” that dissolves “all mean egotism” and rises up into a knowledge unified with natural law (EL 10). “Experience,” published in 1844 in his second essay series, seems to recast that prediction.
Transparency, a broad daylight piercing through the operations of nature, is not ours to get and keep, and by correlation, transcendence to any kind of pure plane of mind is not ours to expect. Emerson’s essays continuously track, as “polarity,” the oscillation between “mean egotism” and a dissolved ego, but over the course of his writing, the teleological aura of an endpoint in dissolution gives way to a vision of living in that oscillation. The development of Emerson’s essays can be seen, in part, as an accounting for the pull between that old vision of purity and the subjectively bound record of Emerson’s experience as “Man thinking,” documenting success as only one among many moods, an occasional triumph caught in hints and glances.

The image of a realm of pure mind as an approachable space has circulated at least since Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” and with it the correlation of that space to a full and ever-replenished light. In Plato, the realm of ideas is “the true day of being” (Book VII). Light here is converted from a mere physical phenomenon to the light of virtue: form, or eidos, is not just notation but law itself, immaterially bodied like some holy ghost. The “ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy” (Book VII), proceeds via the transmutation of the organ of vision, from the perception of shadows in the realm of the senses, to the sight of the mind’s eye, visualized in sensory terms as a pathway taken from a dark cave below into the upper reaches of sunlit air, whether by a kind of magic, or a disunion of a soul from its material body. This bright space is the home of all law, and comes forward in the history of philosophy with the name “reality,” denoting not our current, casual sense of “reality” as a synonym for “actual,” but derived from “res,” things: Platonic reality (the “reality” Emerson will refer to) is the home of the laws that govern things, more permanent than the world of the senses. (Although Plato confirms the rarity of access to this region, the “best minds” are supposed to be capable of the
trip. Those who reach the region, however, must be compelled to return, and bring the superiority of their perception to the world of senses, where they will act as ministers of the State.) The belief in the actual existence of this realm configures the ideal as a kind of heaven, and seems to underwrite the ongoing philosophical anxiety that the world of experience is somehow quarantined from another, truer reality, an anxiety that culminates in Kant’s description of mind and requires God as a solution.\textsuperscript{13}

Like Plato’s allegory, Emerson’s “Experience” also takes up the image of an ascent. “Where do we find ourselves?” he begins, continuing, “We wake and find ourselves on a stair. There are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight” (EL 471). The painful acquiescence of the essay is the relinquishment of the expectation that these stairs lead to an end. Even those drastic losses which rend our lives—the death of sons and lovers—are nothing but further stairs. “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature,” he writes. “We look to [death] with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us” (473). “Reality,” as either height or depth, is not, in the contemporary sense, real: not even the most intense experiences introduce us to it, and our only remaining hope for reaching this reality lies in the event of death, or after it—either way, a zone of which the living cannot benefit from any accounting. Our lives take place on surfaces, and in series. If we have craved the ideal as an

\textsuperscript{13} The \textit{a priori} categories of thinking, as divinely created elements of thinking, settle that anxiety by a kind of gift from God: a sense of belonging that eases the irritant of skepticism regarding our ability to know anything “truly.” One of the reasons I say this culminates in Kant’s description of mind, is that historically these empirical questions transferred after Kant to the emergent sciences, and particularly the kind of experimental, observational psychology that became neurobiology, which has completely redirected the terms of our exploration of the relationship of perception to matter, effectively delegitimatizing the binary opposition and undermining the sense that perception is either on the one hand transparent and passive, or on the other, uncoupled to what we would commonly call “the world.” Emerson’s “Experience” is right there with this change, with its clear acknowledgement that there is no transcendence of perception, no kind of knowledge that exists separately from the subjective act of thinking.
eternal, and hoped that access to it would allow us to map our place in nature, we have been mistaken, he seems to say. It is for us only to “glide through nature” (471). Nothing is definite; our awakening is partial, and we cannot fix our surroundings: “All things swim and glitter” (471).

How to live in this glittering, slippery world is the project of Emerson’s communications, and the concepts which imply a deferral or reward—most notably heaven, eternity, and the time-keeping figure of a personal, deliberate god—are absent from his images. But if “Experience” begins by mourning the loss of faith in these images, it does not rest in that grief. Instead he engages the failure of profound loss to “carry” him into “the reality” as an occasion to unhitch himself from the habit of awaiting such an awakening into perfection. Unhitched, he is free to turn away from this vision, to wonder at the condition of a more daily awakening to the world where we find ourselves, resting in the “train of moods” that is the continuing condition of our capacity to perceive and to experience (473). Indeed, our tools of vision, now turned from idealistic sites and committed to the waves of mediated experience, must be able to operate functionally within this ceaseless flow. “We live amid surfaces,” he writes, “and the true art of life is to skate well on them” (479).

Process, or “Succession,” is one of the “lords of life,” and wisdom is not attained by Platonic ascent to a realm of forms, but is a capability to fruit and flower within Succession’s series of stairs. “To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom,” he writes (478-9). This sense of wisdom as a practice of daily life, and that practice as an experimental form of lived virtue, is a large part of what Thoreau will take up as he translates Emerson’s essays into what is arguably an instance of
what has come to be called “process art,” and what we might also call “experiential philosophy.” Emerson suggests that the ministerial office is not a project reserved for a clerisy, but one that belongs to everyone, an office of self-culture. Echoing Matthew’s verse, “by their fruits you shall know them,” Emerson situates wisdom in a domestic context. “Since our office is with moments, let us husband them,” he writes (479). His philosophic images trade the retreated scholar for the mindful participant, suggest a modest, democratic, and daily project that is quite different from Plato’s “ascent from below.”

In this redirection of philosophy’s fruits, from ahistorical knowledge or definitions of being to practices of living good quotidian hours, Emerson participates in the larger transition of his religious and philosophical traditions toward terms and values that resonate with what I will call “participatory practices”—forms of dailiness and ceremony that aim to participate in a sense of the larger world’s intelligence and bounty, displacing religious doctrine without displacing one of its basic aims of locating one’s place in the world and receiving some share of grace. Since his opening question in *Nature*, he has been continuing the project of the Protestant reformation, placing a mandate on the individual to discover and maintain “an original relation to the universe” (7). Anticipating the dissolution of the necessary vehicle of religion as a means to contemplate immanence, he ushers in a focus on presence, and in doing so refigures the directional appetite of “man thinking” away from an attainment conceived of vertically, as an ascendance or elevation, and toward the lateral plenitude of the experiential world. Furthermore, if wisdom is bound up not with atemporal truths, but with felicitous husbanding of moments, then wisdom and its concepts of truth and value also stand to change with changing conditions: a key axiom of pragmatism.
In Nature Emerson criticized his era for its retrospection, for deference to the articulations of the past for our codes of conduct. Now in “Experience,” after two series of essays wherein he has worked as an “experimenter” to locate that “original relation” as a moving target, he has also relinquished the traditional deferral to the rewards of heaven. “Five minutes of today are worth as much as five in the next millennium,” he writes, continuing, “Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today.” Justice and virtue are not ahistorical ideals, but ways of working substantially in the present: “Men live in their fancy, like drunkards whose hands are too soft and tremulous for successful labor. It is a tempest of fancies, and the only ballast I know, is a respect to the present hour” (479). To respect the present hour we must “do broad justice” to the “actual companions and circumstances” in which we find ourselves, “as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us.” The implication of this tuition is the radical equivalence of contexts, the sufficiency of the ordinary: “A day is a sound and solid good” (479).

2. SURPRISE AND ILLUMINATION

WANDERING, CHANCE, EXCELLENT REGIONS

In affirming the sufficiency of the ordinary, Emerson rejects the vision of a deliberate and steady progress toward a realm of light, but he does not deny the possibility of experiencing illumination within the series of days that make up a lifetime. Indeed the craving for this euphoric experience could be designated the primary motor of his essays, and his primary tuition that this arrival into the light is not an endpoint but a transitive, ongoing possibility. Since
Nature, his descriptions of illumination have hinged on the surprise that comes from an attitude not of deliberateness but of receptivity toward nature, an attitude exemplified by childhood. Childhood here is a capacity to receive illumination not only in an analytical sense, but, notably, affectively. His description of illumination recalls Jonathan Edwards’s embrace of illumination as “delight,” and delight as activating “the sense of the heart” as a necessary animation of a true understanding. Edwards, drawing on his reading of Newton’s Opticks, found in the working of light a perfect metaphor for grace. In particular, the event of light striking and so exciting a surface, reproduced the process that words could have on the receptive listener.  

Emerson translates the image of affectiveness from the action of light, to the reaction of the child. “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man,” he writes, “but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.” This spirit of infancy is a capacity to be “in the presence of nature.” In that presence, “a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows” (10). Presence, Emerson suggests, is a kind of openness, a capacity to be struck, and its test might be that openness is maintained alongside adult giefs that might otherwise harden or distance a person. The sun striking the eye but not the heart is a rational condition, offering analytical understanding that stands outside of the reciprocity of moving and being moved that an attitude of reception structures. This sense that thinking is a dynamic participation in something more fleshy, shared, and vital than strictly mental pictures anticipates contemporary descriptions of embodied cognition given by Andy Clark, among others. It also anticipates the emerging theories of the role of mirror neurons in our

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14 See Joan Richardson’s The Natural History of Pragmatism for an elaboration of this equivalence and a detailed discussion of Edwards’s “Sense of the Heart” and its relation to his readings in natural science.
thinking, as well as our attention to what Theresa Brennan calls “the transmission of affect,” as a condition of intelligent experience. In her readings of Emerson, Branka Arsić explicitly ties this condition of being open to incursion, though transmissions of affect, to Emerson’s riddles of unpossessed subjectivity.

It is key that the heart of the “lover of nature” is open to all varieties of experience, not just gladness. Emerson is often reductively caricatured as a giddy champion of optimistic individualism, but his descriptions of exhilaration most often conjoin delight and sorrow, meanness and plenitude, power and insignificance. In “Circles,” he describes a “vast ebb of a vast flow,” transitions through moods that “do not believe each other”: “I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall” (EL 406). In Nature he offers as a first occasion for the accelerating expansion of illumination, a seemingly plain and dim context: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts an occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear” (10). Gladness and fear are necessary partners, for the very participation in exhilaration is a function of the loss of one’s contained, individual being. To become a “transparent eyeball” is to yield oneself: “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (10).

What this “I” signifies is quite different from our normal sense of the first person. This other “I” is not a discrete entity, but a moving point between two waves that threaten to cancel each other, a circuit that may be ridden but not controlled, experienced but not possessed. It is an experimental “I,” and its success (“I see all”) is a rare occasion. To take seriously the experimental nature of this “I” has strong implications for what is meant by Emersonian “self-
reliance.” The excited and focused duration of the essay form is one of Emerson's venues for entertaining these experiments. If it manages to act upon us, that excitement feeds back into our daily lives. But we can also think of this experiment as lived over a longer duration than a reading session: the continuing condition of our changing selfhood, measuring our present self against the relief of lifespan, multigenerational epoch, or even geological time. Experiments offer no permanency, even as they might expand our sense of possibility. Without permanency, we cannot make claims to either authority or property. Rather, we must admit that “I am a fragment and this [thought] is a fragment of me” (491). Though we feel ourselves to be heavy and substantial, our lives are only “a flitting state, a tent for a night” (481). The transparent eyeball is not a figure for mastery, for even in “[seeing] all,” there is no transformation of this experience into a possession, no reliable repetition of access. From his image of the transparent eyeball, Emerson moves his chapter to a melancholy close, admitting that the effects of delight cannot be reproduced either by will or by a return to the same prospect. The snow puddle was an occasion, but not a technology, for that surprising gladness. The power to generate that delight may be a function of a “harmony” between man (specifically man thinking) and nature, but the harmony is anything but automatic: neither “man thinking” nor “nature” is contained or consistent, and so we cannot rationally predict the moving point where they meet.

In “Experience,” Emerson explicitly cautions the reader to relinquish a concept of deliberateness in getting at that harmony, as well as any certainty in the power to reform the world according to thought in order to make it more productive of harmonic occasions. How, then, does he suggest we should live, if as he describes in “The Over-Soul,” these harmonic experiences of thinking are moments of intensity that structure our faith (385), and so calibrate
our relation to the universe, which is to say, our ethical stance? “Experience” suggests that the way to go forward is by wandering. This can be taken as something that happens in the process of writing, as Cavell says when he culls from this essay a description of writing as a “process of indirection” (ETE 140) by which Emerson avails himself of the world and invites it to come near. It can also be taken as an assignment to go out on foot, exemplified by Thoreau's self-employment as a saunterer, in its twentieth-century echo in the surrealist “flâneur,” as well as methodologies of art-making that grow from a responsiveness to chance events rather than projects of expression. But already this pedestrian, open to surprise, seeking by not seeking, is present in Emerson’s images.

One of the crests of “Experience” is a description of thinking as an accidental arrival in an “excellent region.” “Do but observe our mode of illumination,” he begins. “When I converse with a profound mind, or if at any time being alone I have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water, or go to the fire, being cold: no! but I am at first appraised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life” (EL 484). Illumination, here felt as neighboring quarter, involves presence in or to a landscape more than penetration of its laws. Furthermore, the landscape seems to control its own revelation. “By persisting to read or think,” he continues, “this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of profound beauty and repose, as if the clouds that covered it parted at intervals, and showed the approaching traveller the inland mountains” (484-5). This description, aligning luminous visions with uncontrollable processes like the parting of clouds, recalls the Heraclitean aphorism that “nature loves to hide,” and anticipates Martin Heidegger’s feeding forward of that aphorism into reflections on presence as a gathering force between hiding and
revealing, or disclosure.

Arrival into this region dissolves any idea of this illuminating thought as constructed or willed, and even the vision is “felt as initial,” instead of heralding completion. Where formerly Emerson described illumination as a capacity, a transparent eyeball, here he gives a different image of the delighted thinker as a wandering child: “I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert” (485). Even with the dissociation of the transparent eyeball from the self-possessed individual, its allegiance with “the Universal Being” effecting a momentary reduction of individual to “nothing” even as the individual is swept, as particle, into “all,” the figure remains one of seeing and penetration. By contrast, the “approaching traveler” of the second description enjoys the “august magnificence” from the ground, experiencing vastness all around him without also becoming vast. The scale of the human body is retained. I find in this a subtle shift, from the thinker as agent, a maker of law or reformer of the world, to the thinker as actor, or better, dancer: a traveler in space. This shift heralds a transition of American philosophy from traditional projects of definition and systematization, toward practices of living, the husbanding of moments, which might also be a description of the practice of process-based performance. The spaces through which Emerson travels are his literary inheritance, fields of language. As he wanders he overturns and renews the literary history of reckoning man's relations in nature. He persists in an occupation of the essay as a form of agitation, continually suggesting the out of doors and off the page. Get up, he seems to say to his reader, go do something. “The great gifts are not got by
analysis,” after all (480). Our nourishment instead will be found in the action of thought as a form of co-presence to the world, and the history of literature might be taken as a record of successes, failures, and sifted lessons in the efforts of co-presence.

The passage on illumination concludes with a riddle, one which suggests the figure of the wanderer and differentiates Emerson’s sun-bright Mecca from more idealistic visions of Platonic realms of law. There at Mecca, Emerson finds not a conclusion or a key, but a future. “I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” (485). What is meant by “this new yet unapproachable America”? How is it possible to arrive somewhere without approaching it, and hasn’t Emerson just described illumination as clouds parting before an approaching traveler? Cavell answers that this new America is “unapproachable by a process of continuity,” making “discontinuity” or “aversion” a necessary element of the journey (ETE 121). What is needed is an alternate sense of the word “approach” to that of an intentional progress toward a known point of arrival. Emerson has described the approach as a form of persistence, persistence at a task, to read or think, or converse. Joining the puzzle of the “new yet unapproachable America” with sentences from the essay's opening (“Where do we find ourselves?”) and closing (“Patience and patience and we shall win at the last”), Cavell reads Emerson as saying that thinking is “knowing how to go on” (ETE 139), how to persist. He brings the walking figure forward by giving attention to Emerson's many invocations of stepping, from the stairs on which we find ourselves, to the “journey's end” found in “every step of the road” (EL 479), to the shoemaker's last which glimmers behind the sense of “win[ning] at the last.” “An American might see this as taking the open road,” writes Cavell. “The philosopher as the
hobo of thought” (ETE 139). The philosopher's task is to keep walking.

Persistence at a task that has no goal but to remain open is a description of what many artists refer to as “practice.” The choice of the word “practice” for an ongoing project that either does not conclude in “product” or under which “products” are subsumed as “pieces,” fragments, not final objects, is used to signify a commitment to a way of working, and not just the work created. The term comes from Buddhism and in that meditative context it is a more obviously “empty” or non-productive project. In this study I will generally restrict myself to the contemporary, art-based meaning of “practice” as a way of working that encompasses and subsumes the products of that practice, but the Buddhist resonances are not out of place in an Emersonian reading, given his interest in and incorporation of Eastern texts.

Practice requires patience, and a capacity to let go of what John Keats memorably describes as an “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” The negative approach described by Emerson is cousin to what Keats phrases “negative capability,” and is I believe the same relinquishing patience of what Emerson elsewhere calls “abandonment”: “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why … The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment” (EL 414).

The practices that leave us open to illumination, these ideas suggest, involve emptiness,

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15 The term “practice” is so common now in art circles that it has become an occasional object of derision for its potential emptiness or arrogance. See Alix Rule and David Levine's essay “International Art English” in Triple Canopy 16 for a skewering of the language of art—Emerson might have said the words are being employed as an unbacked paper currency. Like most things in our culture, the idea of practice is also vulnerable to the logic of consumerism. (Need special pants for your Yoga practice?) The impulse to point everything toward productivity makes even meditation practice a potential tool, see for example “The Power of Concentration” (The New York Times, 15 Dec. 2012) about the value of daily meditation or concentration for productivity, emblematizing as its representative man, Sherlock Holmes. Despite these shortcomings, the term still signals within various art fields a project whose products are incidental to an ongoing commitment to spend time and energy in a certain way.
involve release, and in particular release of calculations and intentional endpoints. Our commitment to them is fortified by their occasional gifts, profound enough to sustain us even in their usual absence. In “The Over-Soul,” Emerson writes: “Our faith comes in moments…. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences” (385). This sense of “reality,” taken in a pragmatist sense of truth as a belief that forms our willingness to act, is signaled in Emerson’s description of the faith that comes from the moment of illumination: “I am willing to die out of nature and be born again in this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West,” this land not of final reward but of work, future, and certainly in Emerson’s day, symbolic of unwritten potentiality.

The paradox of the non-approaching approach is resolved in the empty practice of wandering—whether through a field of language, in Emerson’s practice, on foot, in Thoreau’s daily walking practice, or in, say, a studio process of improvisation or devising performance. A practice may be structured according to concepts or principles, but in its daily manifestation, must be allowed a freedom from both the imposition of ideas, and any necessary schedule of progress or attainment. In the twentieth century, John Cage is the most famous advocate of this kind of practice, which he tried to free from intentionality, devising his “chance methodologies” in order to bypass ego as a unifying will, but also, we could say, the “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Such practices of non-intentionality inform the contemporary conceptual artists like Kenneth Goldsmith, who advocates “uncreative writing,” wherein parameters are decided upon in advance, and then simply executed, as in his monumental work Day, which is a transcription of the entirety of text in a single day’s New York Times. For Cage, the bounty of chance, as the hand of nature, far exceeds in complexity and beauty that which can be rationally devised.
There is a family of artists, for whom Cage becomes a shorthand reference, as presiding
genie and well-known champion, who approach art as a simple, daily structure of receiving or
recording some amount of life, with a minimum amount of grasping. Works like *Day* can be seen
in this light, as can, for example, the writing of Gertrude Stein. Ulla Dydo’s study of Stein’s
process, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, provides insight into the dailiness that
structures her writing methods, as her landscape observations were recorded in small notebooks,
with lengths determined by the size of the notebook, and then transcribed and sifted through a
series of notebooks until the piece was done. There is something necessarily arbitrary in it,
something contingent. Why one day’s *Times* and not the next? Why a 3x5 inch page and not a
4x6? Why the environs of Concord and not Hartford? Why 4:33 minutes of listening and not
4:52? As Thoreau wrote in his 1851 journal, the difference is not “what you look at, but how you
look & whether you see” (146), a sentiment echoed by Stein in “Composition as Explanation,”
seventy-five years later. This difference in seeing hinges on receptiveness to any part of the
world at hand, and as such lets go of a sense that bounty—as, say, literary content or
philosophical illumination—can be predicted.

Emerson too notes a poverty in our ability to calculate. “Power keeps quite another road
than the turnpikes of choice and will,” he writes (482). Our hopes of experiencing power, or
creativity, will be thwarted by our calculations; participation will come as a surprise. “Nature
hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive,” he continues, in the images of
electricity. Instead of trying to “make,” we would do better to ask, “Where do we find
ourselves?” One’s practice, then, is way of directing oneself so as to release habits of calculation
(and composition), release the pre-Copernican image of man at the center of his events. The
parameters of the practice (tasks or constraints) give the form within which the artist can be empty of habit, receptive. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson describes this as a submission to “Whim.” In “Experience,” he emphasizes the importance of being open to being taken by surprise. “Man lives by pulses … the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual” (483). Attunement to surprise runs through an array of artists of awakening or dailiness, from Emerson and Thoreau through Duchamp, Cage, Stein, and Surrealism. Surrealist André Breton gives a similar account in his novel of surprise, *Nadja*, which concludes, “Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.”

In relinquishing calculation, Emerson is not abandoning intelligence, but understanding it as something vaster than human reason. As with many of his essays, “Experience” first attacks our confidence in any form of self-possessed control, before rebuilding the prospect of a humbler confidence in a dynamic and participatory relationship with natural processes. Ultimately he does not advocate a repression of rational concepts, but rather advocates an approach to concepts as *tools*—navigational aids and balancing poles—useful within the “subterranean and invisible channels of life” along which power flows. But we cannot begin to find this balance without first admitting the poverty of human intelligence if taken in isolation from this environment, admit the nature of thought as a form of co-presence to it (as opposed to a penetration or mastery of it), a co-presence described in *Nature* as the “luminous image” that rises up when we give attention to our own perception. The arising of images entails a kind of exposure (in a photographic sense) of thought's objects to the spontaneous presence of “the Original Cause”: in *Nature* he describes this as “the blending of experience with the present action of the mind” (23); in “Intellect” the blending becomes a “conversion”: the “spontaneous” thought of “genius” converted into a
(communicable) picture through “a mixture of will” with that incoming illumination (423). In this mixture, Emerson does not grant primacy to will. Just as Jonathan Edwards, in “Freedom of the Will,” acknowledges an apparent freedom of will while noting that we cannot examine our choices all the way to their origin (because choices are nested in other choices), and so what seems to be free will may yet be conditioned by another will we neither see nor control (in early 20th century psycho-biological terms this becomes “the reflex arc”), Emerson backs away from the triumph of this mixture of will, continuing: “yet the imaginative vocabulary seems to be spontaneous [i.e. uncalculated and so from without] also” (423).

In other words, thinking occurs in a kind of company, although it is not the company of other men, but our own company with and as nature. I have been describing this as a form of co-presence. To think about what co-presence might mean, I want to introduce a discipline of somatic study, known as “experiential anatomy.” The term was coined by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of the influential somatic and therapeutic practice Body-Mind Centering (BMC), which seeks to understand mind as a directed form of exploration manifested as a moving body, and to generate an “alignment,” or dynamic balance, between sensing and action. As the term implies, experiential anatomy is a form of study in action. Although BMC benefits from the integration of medical knowledge achieved through dissection and other forms of external observation, its principal modalities are the use of movement, touch, and a generous, mobile attention, used to discover human anatomy as expressed in a living body through movement. Seeking knowledge of patterning, and curious about vastly distributed forms of physical organization (for example the ways in which human embryos and infants share movement patterning with other nonhuman organisms\textsuperscript{16}), BMC and its practice of experiential anatomy

\textsuperscript{16} These have to do with successive stages of development through different kinds of limb coordination,
generates concepts—language, patterns, analysis—through physical investigation. In the same way as John Dewey’s pragmatism, BMC is oriented toward growth, in particular by un-inhibiting growth patterns that have become compromised in the cases of developmental impairment. As a discipline that has had a strong influence on the physical research into movement potential in the experimental dance community, this growth has also been felt within many artist's creative processes.\footnote{Bainbridge Cohen founded BMC in 1973, coming out of a movement therapy training that was already integrated with other somatic disciplines that overlapped with dance, among them yoga and Idiokinesis (discussed at length in my second chapter). Over time, BMC became one of the influential somatic modalities that was incorporated into the teaching of many different dance artists. It is common for a contemporary dance class to integrate a great number of somatic disciplines into class (unlike earlier eras of modern dance that kept up the difference between techniques more strictly). In my own dance education, for example, I encountered BMC work both directly in BMC classes, as well as indirectly, as elements of a warm-up or a way of talking about the body's articulation, and I continue to incorporate my studies in developmental movement and experiential anatomy into my own technique classes.}

The glossary of concepts generated by BMC are never removed from their environment of the body. Bainbridge Cohen employs the terms “body” and “mind” outside of a dualistic paradigm. Extrapolating from her work, in thinking about the vocabulary of concepts that form language (our major instrument of thinking), I find it useful to propose a moving anatomy as an equivalent set of ideas to a moving set of concepts. As an image, a moving anatomy is perhaps easier to grasp: we can visualize, say, the capacity of a joint to hinge or rotate, while it is difficult to visualize the pattern-completing circuit of a thought reaching conclusion.

Experiential Anatomy is a discipline of discovering pattern and organization through action, an activity in which pattern and action are in continuous, inseparable feedback. BMC practice makes it possible to sense body patterns that are shared across a vast organic universe, to sense the way human bodies include reptilian architectures, or share bone structures with whales,
or are composed of the same materials as algae. By giving attention to the shared patterning that informs the body’s moving coordinations—the *thinking* of the body, in other words—the BMC practitioner is moved well beyond a sense of embodiment as essential individual identity, to experience embodiment as the condition of thought, while simultaneously experiencing the particular instrument that is her particular body. This same experiential attention to thinking describes the method of William James in *The Principles of Psychology*. James’s conclusion that thought is an activity which cannot be strictly claimed as interior, that we might more safely say “it thinks” than “I think,” grows from this same sense that “thought” cannot be removed from what Emerson calls “nature,” or the “it” of which the individual human is a more or less continuous element.

What connects these commitments to non-dualistically imagined thought is, as Emerson foregrounded, the medium of *experience*, and the sense that what is known arises from experience, is provisionally verified by, and potentially transformed by it. Bainbridge Cohen describes BMC as a project of “alignment” between mind and body that creates a “state of knowing” (*Exploring* 4), suggesting that thinking or knowing goes on as a kind of continual balance and growth. This recalls John Dewey's description of the goal of thinking as continuous growth. Taking up James’s “it” as the wider field in which the individual exists and moves (and leaving aside for now the non-opposition between the it and the individual), I propose that the usefulness of these articulations is the sense that ideas, and so meanings, are only ever generated experientially—*while moving*—as a form of active reflection. Reflection on past events still could be understood as reflective moving, as we travel the mind’s eye back through a field of recollected activity, sensing its patterns perhaps in new ways. Not only does this account for a
sense of literature as a form of experiential philosophy, allowing readers to engage virtual
movement with maximum receptivity to thought as those luminous images arising during the
traversal of the image, but also it signals to me the importance of Emerson’s insistence that we
can never really get a distanced, objective look at the patterns that we experience in thinking but
only “name them as [we] find them in [our] way.” We can only measure them proprioceptively—
experience a moving anatomy. In what follows, I will try to show how Emerson engages the
“anatomy” of thinking within these moving currents.

KNOWING FROM BEHIND

Emerson frequently signals the way that ideas come through us from behind. “Intellect
lies behind genius,” he writes. “Intellect is the simple power anterior to all action or
construction” (emphasis added, EL 417). Elsewhere this anteriority is implied through images of
rest or repose. “We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its
truth and organs of its activity,” he writes in “Self-Reliance,” going on to describe the
discernment of ideas of truth or justice as only allowing “passage to [that intelligence’s] beams”
(269). In “The Over-Soul,” he describes that “intelligence,” as “that great nature in which we
rest,” again describing its flow into us, and its conversion, in that passage, into thought (386).
But if thought builds things—is “intellect constructive,” or “genius”—intellect, considered as a
power, dissolves them.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^\text{18}\) Emerson does not venture beyond the question of human intelligence here, although it is implied that
construction is not an action reserved for man—that nature is constructive. The argument for the application of
things we tend to think of as human, abstract attributes, like intelligence or intellect, to the larger realm of matter, is
taken up by Gregory Bateson in *Mind and Nature* (Hampton, 2002) (and before him by Charles Saunders Pierce),
where he shows that actions like computation and calculation are performed by plants, and thus that thinking per se
does not require reflexive self-consciousness.
Even the dissolving agents of nature's the fluid polarity ("water dissolves wood ... air dissolves water...") are subject to this further dissolution by intellect. In its capacity to dissolve, Emerson's intellect undoes separateness and enclosure. It abides by neither person nor thing, treats person as a fact no different from other facts. Furthermore these facts lose their individuality. If the world is apparently made up of discrete things, "formed and bound," intellect "pierces the form." It does this through analogy, detecting what is "hidden" in nature: the "intrinsic likeness between remote things" (417). Thought's basic action, Emerson discovers, is analogical, an insight upheld in contemporary cognitive science. The action of analogy is to unsettle all things in the light of thought, even while uniting them: the vision of intellect is "not like the vision of the eye, but is union with the things known" (417). This intelligence, as a power of dissolving insight unlike (anterior to) regular sight, is another of Emerson's names for God. As he notes in his essay on Swedenborg, the English word "mystic" originates in the Greek word meaning "the closing of the eyes" (663).

But what does Emerson mean by figuring intellect, or the law of analogy, as behind us, when he has also described it as transparent, and united through laws of similitude with all things known, therefore everywhere? I see these two different spatial descriptions not as contradictory, but as operating on two different registers, one in reference to the material world, the other to the figurative habits of epistemological commonplaces, for example our expression of understanding in terms of vision: I see. On one register, he addresses the distribution of intelligence as something that does not abide by the containers of individual persons, a Jamesian "it" that moves

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19 See Douglas Hofstadter's lecture, "Analogy as the core of cognition" (Stanford Presidential Lecture, 2006) for an enjoyable description of how analogizing forms the basic action of thought. Hofstadter is careful to note that analogical thinking is not limited to 1:1 ratios but rather is a basic, isomorphic, multi-scalar action of finding relationship between things so as to be able to do or move. In another articulation of analogy as the basic action of thought, V.S. Ramachandran describes human mind as involved in constant model-making, which he elaborates in his book A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness (Pi Press, 2004).
through us when we feel we think. But on the second register, he addresses our sense of controlling or containing our knowledge by imagining that we can place the thing known as an object, metaphorically in front of us. We cannot give a history of mind because no one can “mark the steps and boundaries of that transparent essence” (417). We do not see intellect well enough to “mark” its movements not only because it is “transparent,” but because it is behind us. It is “not like the vision of the eye,” therefore unavailable to our visual sense. In my second chapter I will develop a proposition for what this other kind of vision that arises outside of the eye might be. Here, I want to explore what it is not.

Recall Emerson’s statement in “Experience,” that “nature hates calculators,” and his continual dressing-down of anyone’s expectation of being able fully to possess and control their own thought, or lay claim to their own actions. To calculate, in the context of that sentence, is to see ahead, to know already what variables are at play and the pathways along which things will unfold. Calculation implies a full understanding of the object at issue, the capacity to explain it, and to predict its movements. (The word “explanation” itself invokes this visual metaphor: to ex-plane is to lay the component parts of a thing out alongside each other, to separate in order to see. The clarity of seeing the component parts comes at the cost of their working assembly.) But insight—the sudden understanding of laws through the faculty of analogy—does not arrive on a predicted timetable. It is “spontaneous in every expansion.” Emerson declares the “hardest task in the world” is “to think” precisely because of this lack of control. We cannot make the thought come; if it will come, it will come flitting, “unannounced” (EL 418). Education will not be forced. This is why Emerson must write “Whim” on the lintel when he hears the call of “his genius” which might signal nearness to an “excellent region” of thought. “The mind that grows
could not predict the times, the means, the mode of that spontaneity. God enters by a private door into every individual” (418). Thus our calculated actions are not likely to be imbued with extra-personal intelligence (as God, as nature, as vast-flowing vigor), but rather to be as limited as our persons, and our registers of what we have already learned. Participation in process, in new intelligence, comes, for Emerson, when our persons experience the surprise influx of intelligence from without. “Our spontaneous action is always the best,” and that action provides not explaining sight, but rather “hints” and “glances.” Spontaneous action is like being picked up by a wave. The less fearful and the more receptive we are, the better we will be able to ride it. The distance we would require to see the wave would remove us from its flows. In the effort to understand it objectively, we would relinquish its benefit.

It strikes me that Emerson’s description of spontaneity harbors more than just a caution against efforts to control thought. If spontaneity is the experience of “God enter[ing] by a private door,” then this flitting, contingent, and unpredictable moment of thought is the venue for religious experience. Directed away from what he describes in “The Divinity School Address” as “historical Christianity,” Emerson now seems to be pointing to presence as divinity, and thinking as the medium of presence: “Our thinking is a pious reception” (EL 419).

Yet if we believe we are always thinking, Emerson reminds us that we are mostly not. As early as Nature he was working this talking point: that it is possible to drain the power from the tools of thought (leaving a currency with no value), and that the return of power will take us by surprise only if we acknowledge this poverty. The subtle, counter-balancing navigation by which our discourse can be “inflamed” and we ourselves can commandeer, if only briefly, the “fire of thought,” is the “hardest task in the world.” Emerson cautions that we should not expect to gain
much by thinking (at least not according to our own timetables). And yet clearly thinking is Emerson’s primary task and primary assignment.

Just as the illumination of “Experience” is first felt as a nearby space, the experience of power—as the capacity to steer our vessels within “that great nature”—is felt as a joining up with something that comes through, comes into us. Frequently he describes the delight of this sense of simultaneously being dwarfed by the greatness and tenant within its flows of power. In optimistic moments he proposes that the “fire of thought” (958) is the means of transforming a submission to the reception of those flows into a capacity to act, or what he calls “practical power” (492).

But it is not always a joy. “It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped,” he writes in “Experience,” “the discovery we have made, that we exist. This discovery is called The Fall of Man” (487). This unhappy discovery is a fall, a fall out of an Eden or heaven or perhaps, luminous realm of the Real, and into the ongoing, ever-changing oceanic context of life, which we may only navigate by our instruments, which for Emerson means the instruments of language. And so although we do experience “more or less luminous image[s],” a penetration that allows wise men to “pierce … rotten diction” and “fasten words … to things” (23), we cannot ever attain a position of objective certainty, we cannot rest. We will remain “experimenters” (412). We will always “suspect our instruments” (487). This suspicion, I think, underlies Emerson’s habit of sending forth a profusion of non-synonymous images when trying to get the feeling of any critical abstraction into his essays, along with his observation of nature’s abundant reiteration and variation. The condition of our thinking will always be in the midst of our “more or less luminous” images. Caution, then, and flexibility, are called for in moving
forward. Instead of rushing into over-confident “manipular attempts to realize our world” (492), epitomized by the many utopian experiments and reform movements of Emerson’s time, we would do best to learn how to be simultaneously receptive to nature’s ingress, and capable of participating in its course. “Life is a series of surprises,” he writes, “and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not” (483). Thus a basic necessity of “man thinking,” which we could rephrase “man navigating,” (recalling Joan Richardson's study of Henry James's navigational imagery, discussed in the introduction), is a willingness to improvise: to allow a new image to supersede the last, and spontaneously follow its navigational implications.

Where can we find examples of a thinking that does not calculate, that does not expect to possess, and yet that persists at its task? A cultivated receptivity that is not simply passive? A kind of thinking that acquiesces to a certain poverty? One venue is the two-headed literary form that Emerson himself uses, and that Thoreau will use: the journal and the essay. But I also recognize the kind of thinking Emerson describes in the practice of improvisation, which has been an ongoing part of my own engagement in dancing.\(^\text{20}\) To improvise is to compose—say engage “intellect constructive”—in the moment, we might even say “casually.” Etymologically, *improvisation* means “not foreseen.” Emerson’s sense of thought coming through us from behind hinges on this sense of seeing as foreseeing or foreshadowing (since certainly one variety of reception is visual, and he does not intend us literally to shut our eyes, just as he does not intend we should actually go silent when he champions silence over speech). The “private door” by

\(^{20}\) Improvisation exists across most dance and music forms. I am thinking here particularly of the improvisational forms that grew out of Anna Halprin's work and her influence on the Grand Union (a group originally formed to perform Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, then becoming a collective practicing improvisational performance for many years), and out of Contact Improvisation (a form developed by Steve Paxton, a member of the Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union). Three contemporary dance figures who exemplify improvisation as a receptive, navigational process, are K.J. Holmes, Deborah Hay, Jennifer Monson. See Melinda Buckwalter's *Composing While Dancing: An Improvisor's Companion* (University of Wisconsin, 2010) for a document of a wide array of performance improvisation approaches related to this scene.
which God enters a person is known only by God, in this image, and cannot be located by even the person in whom the “door” figuratively exists. Because visuality dominates our models of thinking, we can describe this not-foreseeing sight as a form of voluntary blindness. The image comes forward in these terms in this poem by Emily Dickinson:

From Blank to Blank —
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet —
To stop—or perish—or advance —
Alike indifferent —

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed —
I shut my eyes—and groped as well
’Twas lighter—to be Blind— (F 484)

Mechanic feet move in ways already described; machines are our calculators. The landscape accessible by these feet is blank and “threadless”: without what Emerson describes as the “subterranean channels” of power that yield the “sunbright Mecca[s]” of illumination. What end I can gain in this advance is not the end that it arrives at—a vague end, an end in the waves (Emerson might call that end “the shores of interminable seas”). And so the best there is, is to go blindly: to go without foreseeing. The success that Dickinson describes in this poem is not an
attainment, but an experience of getting lighter. We can read that light both as a paradoxical illumination having submitted to the darkness of closing the eyes against mechanic foreseeing, as well as a lighter feeling in the body and in the stepping: a physical relief, a greater ease of movement. Eyes closed, off the mechanic grid, Dickinson's poem leaves off by *improvising*, groping along, finding an unforeseen way.

The vague beyond where Dickinson's end is gained (if it is gained) helpfully recasts the beyond-as-transcendent realm which Kenneth Burke reads in Emerson's *Nature* in his 1966 essay on Emerson's “machinery of transcendence.” Burke assigns Emerson a “pontificating” function, defining transcendence as a bridge built by which one context is read in terms of another, manifested most dramatically by Burke through an image from Dante, of the living's love for “the farther shore” of death. Dickinson's beyond, in its vagueness, offers no further term in which to interpret the present stepping. All it leaves is stepping itself: “Onward and onward!” (EL 486).

“From Blank to Blank—” resonates with Emerson’s images because it speaks to undergoing a submission to non-control, but leaves off still moving, still on the series of stairs. There is neither settlement as success, or settlement as failure. When we find ourselves receiving intellect, we will find ourselves unsettled. Emerson says we have a choice: we can not receive. “God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please,— you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. … He in whom love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat” (EL 426). So to combine the two vocabularies, we are instructed to stay afloat by acquiescing to a kind of blindness in our walking: a light-footed but never resting wandering, we could say.

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The charge to stay afloat and the inquiry into how to live in this state is understood by Cavell as Emerson's response to skepticism. Cavell describes the problem of skepticism as one of the “master tones” of Emerson’s writing. (I take this in a musical sense, as grounding chord played throughout what he calls “Emerson's transcendental etudes.”) Looking for the point of inflection in the trajectory of Emerson’s thought as it moves away from idealism, Cavell points to a departure from the voice of Nature in the trio of essays “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address,” and “Self-Reliance.” “I would characterize the difference,” writes Cavell, “by saying that in Nature Emerson is taking the issue of skepticism as solvable or controllable, whereas thereafter he takes its unsolvability to be the heart of his thinking” (ETE 112). Unsolvability is thus part of the movement vocabulary of Cavell’s Emerson. Elsewhere he picks up on Emerson’s description of the impossibility of final rest (of ideas, of categories, of persons, of objects) within a processual universe as “onwardness.” He cites Emerson’s quotation of Galileo's descriptive comment concerning the earth’s movement—pero si muove, and yet it moves—as an argument with Kant. In the passage from “Experience,” Emerson writes: “The secret of the illusoriness [of life] is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us. Pero si muove” (EL 476). Emerson’s argument here, says Cavell, is with the ground itself of Kant’s distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, which the “onward trick of nature” unmoors. For both the inner (moods) and the outer (objects) are subject to this necessary and relentless succession. Instead of a distinction between the two, we experience a both/and relationship: “We are in a state of ‘romance’ with the universe,” writes Cavell. “We do not possess it, but our life is to return to it, to respond to its contesting for my attention in ever-
widening circles, ‘onward and onward,’” (ETE 13). “The act of seeing and the thing seen … are one,” says Emerson (EL 386). There is not an objective universe in-itself out there; the universe is what “answers to our conceptions,” it is the incoming return to our attention (and attention itself part of that answering) (ETE 13). Because of nature’s onwardness, if we love truth, we will not allow ourselves to imagine our conceptions as anchored, or as assuming a different and longer lasting existence in an immaterial world of forms, as a priori.

What interests me in this is not the difficult and dense navigation of thinking through Emerson as responding to Kant, so much as what Cavell draws out of this response as a charge to take up the moving assignment he calls the “task of onwardness,” which is what emerges when the binaries (empiricism/rationalism, subjective/objective, private/public) yield their ground. Emerson’s “onwardness” is not characterized by speed; it is more the tempo of a shifting of weight taken to remain standing on unsteady ground. It seems to call for two kinds of knowledge, which in turn offer two kinds of tools for approaching the composition of texts which call to and are answered by the world. The first is a perceptual capacity to take our bearings: where do we find ourselves, and now where do we find ourselves, and now... The tempo established by his opening image of our climbing a series of stairs suggests that we take stock of the world in an unfinished series of still-lives, retrospects, perches. We delight, or relax, or feel settled in these pictures. And yet we discover that they are not fixed: pero si muove. I like to imagine this discovery is the same one that Emerson is talking about when he describes the “very unhappy … discovery we have made, that we exist … called the Fall of Man.” We can think of this fall, which is not into sin but away from some kind of unmoving Eden, in other terms than into language, though it is that also. This is also a fall into movement. Because of it,
we “suspect our instruments,” those instruments we use to take our bearings. Reading “the Fall of Man” with the license to discover its counter-intuitive associations, I think of the very basic fact that we are, whether standing, walking, or sitting, falling bodies, subject to gravity, as Emerson also notes (“The circuit of the waters is mere falling. The walking of man and all animals is a falling forward” (EL 308)). Constantly being moved by forces in the world, we find what we call stillness only by virtue of enacting or receiving a counter-pressure. Giving attention to the way that walking is falling\(^\text{22}\) produces an experience in which we can begin to discover the invisible, the “infinitesimal attractions” or tiny displacements that we rarely register consciously, given the fitness of our anatomies to navigate gravity. Falling and resisting our way through the world, we rely on proprioceptive intelligence. Along with a capacity to take our bearings, we need a way to understand ourselves moving through space. We take pictures and moving pictures. Yielding the picture to the movement and the movement to the picture, we come up with a moving intelligence.

In an Emersonian mood, which is to say in a mood that craves an experience of extension into vastness, the onward confluence of these two forms of mapping—of the space around us, taken in snap-shots, and of ourselves moving through space, seen as pattern and pathway—points toward a poetics of cosmic location. This mapping requires two different instruments for the provision of intelligence, in the military sense of intelligence as actionable, useful information. On the one hand there is the intelligence of looking around, asking “where ... we find ourselves,” with each “passage into [a] new world,” whether a grand new world of an

\(^\text{22}\) See Erin Manning’s *Relationscapes* (MIT Press, 2009) for a fractional analysis of walking and falling in the vocabulary of process philosophy. Also relevant is Steve Paxton’s “Small Dance,” (discussed by Sally Banes in *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Wesleyan UP, 1987)) a dance score that begins with giving attention to stillness, which in turn discloses the impossibility of actual stillness. Paxton’s score directs the dancer to tune in to the minute sensations of movement that are part of our regular equilibrium. Undirected by a conscious intelligence, the small dance is an instance of how we can experience the way “it” thinks.
illuminated new America, or simply the new world of each successive stair. And then there is the receptive intelligence of proprioception that comes from behind: signals of where we are in space and what is acting on us as we move through it.

Can we reframe these senses as prompts toward composition? How do these intelligences create instruments with which we can source material, and with which we can build that material into sequences? How does an attention to series guard against a settling into concepts? Can we tease the sound of these instruments out of literature which seems to engage a poetics of cosmic location? Will the question “where do we find ourselves,” called out and answered within a condition of onwardness, yield unity, if only glancingly, with a kind of perfection?

3. TAKING READINGS, KNOWING OUR POSITION

LOCAL PERFECTIONS, COSMIC LOCATIONS

What, then, is the perfect thing with which Emerson craves unity, if it cannot be expressed as a permanence or finality? In the same way as the Augustinian concept of god as the extent of the world, Emerson’s perfect is a completeness from which incompleteness is not necessarily excluded. The fold of the particular, the ordinary, the daily, within the expanse, is our means of participation, and if we would follow our genius, allowing the most partial, private investigations to yield to the most public, we would see that there is no contradiction. Emerson goes so far as to suggest an identity between the part and the perfect: “And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in
every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the
object, are one,” he writes in “The Over-Soul,” continuing, “We see the world piece by piece, as
the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the
soul” (EL 386). As much as he gestures toward totality, however, Emerson’s perfect is not perfect
in the sense of a finished whole. To reconcile this sense of encompassing fullness with his
equally strong impulse that everything is initial leads to a picture of a universe in process that
accords with the twentieth-century descriptions of Alfred North Whitehead: an everything that is
continually added to by the new.

A project of Emersonian perfection, then, would be the location of the moving point
within the moving, evolving whole. Joan Richardson writes that Emerson, in discovering “that it
is the imperfect that is our paradise … allowed his thinking appetite to nourish him as it needed
from the squirming facts disturbing sleep and the dream of reason, thus revealing religion to be
as it was in the beginning, an expression of spiritual location: a vector indicting the latitude,
longitude, and moment of being on a sphere reeling through the universe, the mind of God”
(NHP 70). Richardson’s Natural History tracks the incursion of scientific information—
particularly the awareness of the wave-nature of light, and the Darwinian information of the
world’s unending process—into theological thinking, and links the resulting varieties of
comprehension to a family of American aesthetic projects, embracing Henry James, Gertrude
Stein, Wallace Stevens, and Susan Howe, among others, all of whom produce a sense of testing
location in the affect of their work, variously trying both the avenues and fringes of lived spaces
for their openings, mapping expansions of individual arenas. How, these artists could be seen as
asking, do we understand our place in a universe in process?
This project of locating oneself comes forward into process art as a pedestrian aesthetic. Although there is a romance to this work, to speak very broadly, it is not the idealism that the literary designation “romantic” implies, but rather a love of the ordinary that in its recent manifestations, for example, has embraced junk, failure, and accident. Thoreau, working and walking quite literally as a surveyor, and claiming a radical equality of all landscapes, makes a clear link from Emerson to this aesthetic commitment. The commitment to making sense of (and delighting in) one’s relations in space and place (a network emphasis as opposed to a temporal emphasis on chains of cause and effect) as fundamental to our intellectual health becomes apparent in many of the genres that emerged in the twentieth century, including in theater, the landscape play, which is generally associated with Gertrude Stein as its founding theorist. The phrase comes from her essay “Plays” which describes *Four Saints* as “ma[king] a landscape.”

Landscape plays are understood to be concerned with developing a picture of relations, rather than following a plotted sequence of revelations. Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town,” one of the most-performed plays in American theatrical history (a mainstay of amateur theater as well as a recurring great text in professional theater), can be read as a landscape play, and perhaps has the advantage over his friend Gertrude Stein’s plays of being significantly more legible and accessible, unfolding landscapes not at the level of sentences and paragraphs, but narratively by a series of perches and flights throughout a small town. Mostly caught up in household details, the first act of the play ends by taking a great sweeping step back, like a cosmos-scaled zoom out:

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23 The word *pedestrian* comes to me from my dance context. The renewal of dance, both within and following the influence of Cunningham and Cage, that is associated with Judson Dance Theater involved the incorporation of “pedestrian movement,” the everyday movement of ordinary bodies. As far as I know, the word’s aesthetic currency comes out of the scene at large. Sally Banes's history of Judson Dance Theater, *Democracy’s Body* (Michigan, 1993), offers a detailed survey of this interest in ordinary movement and the way the Judson artists took it up.

24 Bonnie Marranca's writing on Stein is an invaluable elaboration of how plays make landscapes. Eleanor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri's edited volume *Land/Scape/Theater* follows with the identification of a broad array of landscape concerns in post-Stein theater.
REBECCA: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this. It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE: What’s funny about that?

REBECCA: But listen, it’s not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.

GEORGE: What do you know!

REBECCA: And the postman brought it just the same.

GEORGE: What do you know!

STAGE MANAGER: That’s the end of the first act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke. (46)

This cosmic location, which begins in “our town,” a place of deep familiarity, and extends far beyond it into the most other, the most radically distant, is a critical element of interest in pedestrian aesthetics. The local becomes a vehicle for discovering radical strangeness, and for an encounter that necessarily undoes some amount of self-knowing and self-possession. The seeming paradox within this transit accounts for much of what can strike the reader of Emerson as frustrating contradiction, the reader of Thoreau as an almost perverse commitment to punning oppositions. Go ahead and smoke during the intermission; you will still be hurtling through space, in the mind of God.

Wilder’s cosmic zoom-out is effective because the play has, up to this point, been so
strictly limited to the minor domestic vicissitudes of the people in this small town. Suddenly in this gesture the scale and rootedness of our identification with the story’s characters is transposed. If our habits of reading character arcs and life stories has led us to think that this sweet look at our town is heading toward a traditional dramatic conclusion—revelation of backstory, navigation of crisis, marriage, or death—suddenly we are forced to view Grover’s Corners as a tiny point within the mind of God. And then we are cast out of the invisibleness of the darkened space of the audience and told to go smoke, if we do smoke: the play abandons us narratively, and then the play abandons our theatrical conventions. When we return to the second act, we make a fragmented landing just before the marriage, and the third act goes right to Emily’s early death—not the movement of the narrative arc we thought we were on. Not only are we suddenly in the land of the dead; the dead don’t really feel all that worried or attached to Grover’s Corners anymore.

This lurching forward in time (and then back, when Emily revisits a living morning) bears a resemblance to the surprising leaps within ordinary windows into consciousness that Virginia Woolf makes, for instance in her elision of narrative between the first and second parts of To The Lighthouse, or in the gentler but just as impersonal generational hopscotch of The Years. The way these two scales yield to each other produces in each instance a sense of time that far exceeds the usual narrative metrics that correspond to the standard plots, whether of growth, marriage, crisis and resolution, or even the multigenerational inclusiveness of the biographical move of tracing a life from the parents’ birth. We find ourselves narratively in places “unapproachable by a process of continuity” (ETE 121), to appropriate Cavell’s description of Emersonian illumination. Thus denied the predictable track, we are prompted as readers to ask
where we find ourselves. Our scale expands to the cosmos in which it happens. Cosmic location involves doing something to our sense of time, by flinging the individual life (perceiving the stair in which it finds itself) into an impersonal meter, whether that is geologic time (the move that Charles Olson makes in his *Maximus Poems*), or the time metered by clouds passing or planets turning.

*Our Town* dramatizes the question of cosmic location by yanking the domestic story out of its usual measurements. Other landscape works—many of Stein's plays, or such contemporary plays as Amber Reed's *The Grand Kindness*, Mac Wellman's *Cellophane*, or Kristen Kosmas's *This From Cloudland*—reverse the scale, working in the domestic space but descending into tiny units of measure that never reach the scale of marriage plots, coming of age stories, memorials, or other person-sized narrative tropes. Instead of dwarfing the individual in cosmic time, these landscapes assert a continuity or identity with matter. In one sense this is a way of finding ourselves less than human, but approached without grasping the container of individual life-span, or human-sized plots, these new measurements or findings offer a sense of continuity with the vaster world: contact with X.

**MAKING CONTACT WITH THE OTHER ME**

Within these fictions—*Our Town, To The Lighthouse, The Years*—we see narrative practices that provoke a sense of vaster location through relationships to historical, generational, planetary time. These are tracked in part by the persistence of location—the town, the house—with changing inhabitants, so that the role of the protagonist yields to not just a group of
protagonists but to a space in which life passes. That space—in Woolf the houses, in Wilder the town—itself undergoes its own process, and in Our Town when Emily is given a chance actually to enact the return to the house as it was, what occurs is not a success but just a harder acquiescence to process.

We could discover an alternate form of cosmic location in participatory practices built from the data of dailiness, structured by seeking experimental, participatory relation with the expansive world. These daily practices have the potential to discover a local relation with what Emerson names “the otherest” (EL 616). As a compositional method, this involves trusting the resource of the near and the arbitrary, or in Emerson’s phrase, “the familiar, the low,” (69), without imagining that it is compassed by our understanding. Descriptions of choreographic process abound with this same notion. In A Choreographic Mind, Susan Rethorst describes the unmade dance as “that stranger,” and argues for compositional practice that proceeds by “interviewing” the body in movement, responding to it, and vigorously rejecting attempts to control or grasp what the dance is by means of theoretical constructs. Jonathan Burrows, in his Choreographer’s Handbook counsels, “the idea that you can make what you want is a fantasy. You are you, and you can only make what you can make…. The trick is to find out what you can make.” Like Rethorst, he describes a responsive process engaging bodily intelligence and impulse as something broader than self-identified intention: “Choreography is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking” (69). The body, as a resource of immense variety in excess of our conscious concepts (and yet amenable to concepts as goals or organizers of action)—we could say “an immense intelligence”—stands here for William James’s “it” of “it thinks,” and for what Emerson calls “nature,” and elsewhere, the “other me.” Choreographic work has the
potential to soothe the dissonance of this paradox, by discovering a strange intelligence, and the patterns of that intelligence in action, within the artist’s own body. Thus body-based work takes a commonplace experience of creative process—that the work guides the maker, and importantly, surprises the maker—and situates that experience of strangeness in the physical “me”—a degree closer to home than the materials of the writer, painter, sculptor, or musician. But as many artist statements and process-examinations testify, the presence of this strangeness is not so much an experience of alienation as an experience of radical continuity with intelligent patterns existing both within and without the individual body, or what I believe Emerson means by “the perfect.”

Experiencing the “other me” is a project of participatory location, an engagement with sensing and proprioception that doesn’t make any claims for completeness and doesn’t rely on the claim to objectivity that we grant habitually visual data. Thought objects—call them images, concepts, or patterns—do not simply disappear from the picture, leaving an anarchy of sensation. Thought objects comprise the apparatus that measures sensory experience and sifts it into models, but those objects are not external to the body because they are ways of recognizing and organizing bodily impressions. Thus central to the capacity to have this experience of the “other me” is the acceptance of mediated experience. An exclusive opposition of subject and object is unworkable here. Emerson spends a good deal of time in “Experience” accepting the disappointment that knowledge can never transcend the partial, that abstractions (even the most time-honored) are stochastic patterns derived from accumulations of partial knowledge. He writes of his essay: “I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me” (EL 491). But though the dream of an objective survey is lost, a different kind of survey becomes possible. In the moments of intensity—lucidity within that survey—we experience radical continuity.
This intuition of radical continuity has been with Emerson since his ecstatic statement in *Nature*: “I am part or particle of God” (10). In my reading of Emerson, this continued participatory measure, even in the most ecstatic, me-dissolving leaps, defines the transcendence of transcendentalism not as a leap outside the self into a plane of pure romance, but a leap into scales of experience that are incommensurate with human containment, and so gestures toward the immensity of material and intelligent life while delighting in one’s own garden plot of material intelligence. But outside of thought experiments, this perfect otherness is only ever something of partial glimpses, intense seasons, which is why, as I understand it, Cavell describes Emerson’s perfectionism as a gesture made at the outset of thinking, and not a literal goal. There is no heavenly kingdom, only further steps in the series of stairs. We could think of this gesture as being a small shift of weight that de-centers us and moves us from standing into walking. It is a sense that there is more.

**UNSETTLEMENT, CIRCULATION, RECEPTIVITY**

From its earliest appearance in *Nature*, Emerson’s image of participation is one of circulation. Concluding the passage quoted above, Richardson cites Emerson’s insistence on mobility: “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them” (qtd. in NHP 70). In my reading, unsettlement is a mandate not literally to keep moving through space or to disrupt one’s home and family, but to remain attentive (and so responsive) to the

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25 The question of how the call to unsettlement bears on a committed family life hung heavily on me when I first started reading Emerson. In light of that anxiety, Branka Arsić’s discussion of Emerson’s idea of marriage as a venue for focusing attention on transition and change so as to make space for growth within the relationship, is extremely helpful. (*On Leaving*, pp. 219-225.)
ways in which movement and rest are only relative terms: that circulation, exchange, falling, negotiated equilibriums, relays, and empathetic responses, are moving contexts which never cease.

Let us revisit Emerson’s statement on unsettlement in “Intellect,” as further explicating the dynamic relation between will and proprioceptive sense: “He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations, between which, as walls, his being is swung” (EL 426). Intentionality, in the form of a negative capability, first directs him to ungrasp the moorings and relinquish further intention, upon which event he proprioceptively discovers his being as in a continuous swing. Unsettlement, then, would be a practice of unblocking the limitations on one’s capacity to sense motion, which could also describe the strategy of most somatic disciplines, significantly Alexander technique, which profoundly influenced John Dewey, about which I will say more in my next chapter. That we could discover these fluidities by experimenting with the resources we think of as ourselves—our physical bodies, our store of memories, concepts, and habits—begins to explain why Cavell sees Thoreau’s Walden, an experiment in Emersonian domestication, as a form of leave-taking: the book called Walden records Thoreau’s eventual readiness and capacity to leave Walden Pond.

For Emerson, the discovery of unending circulation is made by watching the incursions that come across the border of one’s mind. His experience of “the otherest” is receptive, frequently described as an ingress. Sometimes this ingress is described in grand terms, a generalized descent of the “universal being” into the man. Where Emerson addresses actual process, however, the scale is often much smaller. In “Fate,” he writes, “the great man, that is,
the man most imbued with the spirit of the time, is the impressionable man,—of a fibre irritable and delicate, like iodine to light. He feels the infinitesimal attraction. His mind is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised” (EL 965). To feel the infinitesimal attractions, one would need to keep pictures and language concepts from imposing conclusions, in other words, to practice negative capability: “Happy is the hearing man; unhappy the speaking man…. As long as I hear truth … the waters of the great deep have ingress and egress to the soul. But if I speak, I define, I confine, and am less” (965). Receptive perception would require our humility, then, although that humility in turn allows us to participate in the magisterial: “Silence is a solvent that destroys personality, and gives us leave to be great and universal” (426).

Emerson is not proposing anything so radical as a vow of silence, however. Silence is one side of the “opposite negations” in the condition of polarity. If we would return to communication, we would need those “more or less luminous” images that rise up in that silent attention, and become communicable. The Emersonian hero—the poet—he figures in these Orphic terms, as one who could cross in and out of silence, returning from profound reception to speak not with the “rotten diction” of dogmatism or settled concepts, but with words “fastened again to visible things.” Again in “Intellect” he writes:

To genius must always go two gifts, the thought and the publication. The first is revelation, always a miracle, which no frequency of occurrence or incessant study can ever familiarize, but which must always leave the inquirer stupid with wonder…. But to make it available, it needs a vehicle or art by which it is conveyed to men. To be communicable, it must become picture or sensible object.
We must learn the language of facts. The most wonderful inspirations die with their subject, if he has no hand to paint them to the senses. The ray of light passes through invisible space, and only when it falls on an object is it seen. (EL 422)

The artifacts painted by these hands are not final, and the succession of Geniuses (not the household deities but the representative men)—poets and even prophets—are only translators of “the language of facts.” “The Bacon, the Spinoza, the Hume, Schelling, Kant, or whosoever propounds to you a philosophy of the mind, is only a more or less awkward translator of things in your consciousness, which you also have your way of seeing, perhaps of denomiating…. He has not succeeded in rendering back to you your consciousness, he has not succeeded; now let another try. If Plato cannot, perhaps Spinoza will” (426). The Bacon, the Spinoza, the Hume, have not made their pictures, but registered them. The communicable images too are in a sense received, images that have risen up by giving attention to the experience of that dissolving silence. It is in this sense that the partial makes the perfect accessible. My attention here moves toward ways of discovering and articulating those images, communicable parts, or pieces, of an experience of participation.

4. RESTLESS STILLS

“Language itself is never in a state of rest ... The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing, at which the word is shooting amiable love-arrows. Getting from the beginning to the end of a statement is simple movement; following the connotative byways ... is complex or compound movement.”

— Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure”
READING “ROOMS”

Let us return to Cavell’s description of Emerson’s perfectionism as a gesture that occurs at the beginning of thinking, a launching crucial to the mobility required for the project of “having a self,” which is a “process of moving to, and from, nexts.” (ETE 169; CHU 12). If the perfect is onwardness in general, so too is the condition we find ourselves in, described in its most abstract terms. So participating in perfection is bound up with the problem of sensing our present condition of movement, in successive moments. Framed one way, we could say we are faced with a call to sense the way that “all things swim and glitter.” It is here, in the cultivation of ways of sensing, that we can find one of the “meeting place[s],” in Muriel Rukeyser’s phrase, of literature and philosophy.

Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry*, published in 1949, offers an impassioned and persuasive rationale for the de-marginalization of poetic thinking. Her “meeting place” concerns the way that different kinds of thinking combine to help understand and operate in a complex world. She warns of the dangers of separating out discrete, technical bodies of thought from each other and, like Emerson, sees poetic thinking as a resource for thinking in general, through its analogical, pattern-seeking richness that is yet grounded in responding to actual things. Her work contributes to a discussion of the way aesthetic projects matter to our ways of navigating the world. Following Rukeyser, I want to take up as philosophically useful, works and projects which are undeniably experienced in the main as obscure and even unintelligible, and do not strike the reader who is not already, we could say, committed to the waves of those projects, as being
useful sources or instances of *ethical tuning*, a tuning of our thinking instrument that becomes ethical insofar as the process demands a sensitivity to relation and an openness to surprise, say to be surprised by things, people, or situations we encounter. Stein here represents both a creator of textual experiences of fine surprise, as well as a figure who has produced more, through her license and encouragement to those who choose to inherit her, than her proper compositions alone. (In this she is similar in influence to Cage.26) We can read Stein's works as flagships of what were very new ways of thinking about aesthetic value and the discovery of meaning, ways that have continued to feed and inform many artists's approaches to aesthetic understanding.

I want to close this chapter by looking at a work of prose poetry that exquisitely discovers things swimming and glittering: Stein’s “Rooms” from *Tender Buttons* (1914). Within the frame of a domestic still life, operating below the scale of narrative plot, this piece could be seen as performing a number of the projects I have tried to collect in this chapter as Emersonian ways of watching the world while falling through and with it. Without drama (as either crisis or dramatization), she makes the Orphic transit from silence to speech, in the rising up of language from a still life of objects she does not properly name. She “tells” objects as unfixed successions of surfaces in relation. Through assemblages of counter-habitual language images, as we will see in the examples that follow, she manages to make subjectivity and objectivity yield to one ongoing series of findings, unfastening the word from the thing in order to re-pronounce or reattach the word and the thing to each other in a field of language not ruled by 1:1 ratios. Maybe it is better to say Stein does not “fasten words to visible things,” but bounces words and things off of each other until they refract and lose their distinctness, like waves striking a surface.

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26 A valuable argument for the ethical nature of both Stein and Cage's thinking is made by Joan Retallack in *The Poethical Wager*. 
Stein's version of Emerson’s “language of facts”—the rising up of images that happens in receptive thinking—is generated by a sustained attention to the familiar, the low, the near at hand. She turns up, in her way of seeing, a sense of restlessness in the materials of domesticity.

Emerson’s ideas continually open into each other; so too do the surfaces of this poem keep following curves into a multiplicity of senses. But here I think it would be useful to take a close focus, like the moments in an old film when the camera’s iris collapses to just one remaining circle, which lingers in the frame, and then fades to black. In Emerson’s simple and beautiful formula of swimming and glittering, we find both movement pathways and small illuminations. The last event of this chapter is to ask how “Rooms” swims, how “Rooms” glitters.

**HOW TO WRITE A GLITTERING**

Let me propose that what it means to compose a glittering, as a writing assignment, is to free up the solid contours of a described surface so that it can receive the play of incoming light, and in the ensuing play of reflected light, multiply those contours into a shape-shifting series of appearing and disappearing images. Lyn Hejinian, a poet with a gift for discovering how, in a Cavellian phrase, poetry’s interests are philosophical, claims for *Tender Buttons* that it practices an *avant-garde* form of realism, calling it a “phenomenological masterpiece” (*The Language of Inquiry* 97). She cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of phenomenology as a philosophy “which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’ … all its efforts are
concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world … It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (qtd. in Inquiry 98). In order to approach this “direct and primitive contact,” Stein has to impose a silence on certain mediated forms of contact: names. “I had to feel anything and everything that was for me existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name,” wrote Stein, about Tender Buttons, continuing, “The name of a thing might be something in itself if it could come to be real enough but just as a name it was not enough something” (qtd. in Inquiry 96). She might be describing Edwards’s “sense of the heart,” without which a word is “not enough something.” Hejinian teases out the way that Stein, instead of understanding the phenomenon of the thing in itself to be an object (or we could say an unmoving thing), sees phenomena as multiplications of relations: “Seeing through, seeing with, seeing at, seeing in, and seeing beside—a fully prepositional situation” (99-100). To clarify this “prepositional situation,” Hejinian invokes William James’s description of the materiality of transitional feeling in our experience (“We ought to say a feeling of and … as readily as we say a feeling of blue”).

But the magic of Stein’s prepositional situation is that she generates this quivering transitional field around an object by using object language—nouns—that suggest to Stein a relation to what she is seeing and writing as she is seeing it. Generating liveliness by using words to “make what [she] looked at be itself,” Stein describes her excitement that those words “very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what my words would do that described that thing” (qtd. in Inquiry 98). In Steven Meyer’s study of Stein’s experimental method, he persuasively marks a shift between The Making of Americans and the work that followed next, Tender Buttons, as an
abandonment of an inventory-style descriptive project, and a renewal of description through a project of portraiture. Stein’s portraiture here is an effort to make the object or person described in writing, by allowing the writing to arise while looking. With this in mind we can make a bit more sense of Stein’s description of words that make what she looked at be itself. It is the words that are relating themselves to the thing seen, and doing very different things than “what [her] words would do that described that thing.” The difference between using existing descriptive language and learning to scan her own attention for arising language, is the difference between empiricism (we could say, following Emerson, a “paltry empiricism”) and radical empiricism. Meyer claims for Stein that she was able to pursue radical empiricism even more radically than William James. Furthermore he links the project, or we could say, the way of radical empiricism, with Emerson’s formulation, from “Fate,” of taking “irresistible dictation”—the words relating themselves to the thing seen as she receives and records. *Tender Buttons* becomes Stein’s first project where the writing is the medium of this way.

These words, relating themselves to things, are recorded by Stein in a cascade of copulas that offer relations and equivalences of varying, we could say, graspability, or solidity. Coming in this cascade they are not presented as fixed realities of the object, but as the shape of the phenomenon now, and now, and now. *Tender Buttons* has been described as “cubist” for this reason, but this description is inadequate, for she does not just take in multiple perspectives at once. Her shapes shift across many dimensions of relation. Take, for example, “A PAPER,” from the first section of *Tender Buttons*: “A courteous occasion makes a paper show no such occasion and this makes readiness and eyesight and likeness and a stool.” If this is a cubist rendering of all available surfaces simultaneously visible to the audience, there are many more than three
dimensions in which a paper is available.

Let me return to the idea that to write a glittering is to bounce light—and so record or produce images—off a series of surfaces discovered against, above, or around the settled contours of an object, or perhaps the settled contours of an object’s essence as defined (and delimited) by its name. Stein’s prose glitters by allowing the objects of her still lives to shape-shift: continuously, lightly, and relentlessly. And yet they shift, not only through words of transition or yielding, but through a series of statements that require the reader continually to ground and re-ground herself in the picture that is being made. That is to say, Stein works a significant amount of time in making statements of being. This creates a weirdly stolid effect, even as every statement is restless, followed by a new statement of more or less immediately sensible relation. The paper that “shows no such occasion” makes “readiness and eyesight and likeness and a stool.” I do not believe there is a secret order behind this series, and I think that looking for the secret order is part of what makes Stein so frustrating for most readers. Stein does expect a kind of understanding to be possible, but this understanding is not the “getting” of a hidden key so much as an ability to enjoy the prose.\(^{27}\) If we think about pleasure from a neuro-physical point of view, we can describe it as the completion of a circuit. Only by yielding the desire for the key can the keyless circuit of, for example, “A PAPER,” be enjoyed. And this enjoyment can only occur if a reader is ready to be delighted by words, recognizing that, in Emerson’s phrase, “Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new world” (EL 454).

To complete a circuit is to sense an arrival, perhaps into a new world, or just a new light.

The glittering that goes on as a paper makes a readiness and eyesight and likeness and a

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\(^{27}\) Stein makes this claim in several places. See, for example, Pennsound’s archival clip of an interview she gave in 1934, probably at the Algonquin hotel, where she states, “I mean by understanding enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it. And lots of people have enjoyed it so lots of people have understood it.”
stool may seem inconsequentially random and insignificant, but the mind that can take pleasure in “the infinitesimal attractions” of those words, discover its existence in falling through the small slopes and eddies as the sentence transitions from one to the next and the next, experiencing the series as a circuit and not a fractured set of unconnected objects, is a mind that has silenced calculation, discovered Emerson’s “spirit of infancy” which, we may remember, is the capacity to be present to the place where we find ourselves.

**GONE SWIMMING**

*Tender Buttons* is divided into three sections: objects, food, and rooms. As a sequence in sensing, these meta-categories move the reader’s idea of her primary sense reception from eye, to gut, to movement in space. Whereas the first two sections are composed of many smaller pieces, suggesting objects, buttons, we could say, or focal points, “Rooms” is one long block of prose, a cascade of paragraphs, producing a typographical implication of ongoingness which, taken together with the plural of the title, and coming after so many objects that belong in a domestic setting, sets up a mood of wandering through a house. Because the field of each encountered thing contains multiple shifting surfaces—the shape-shifting proliferation of relations that arise from seeing the house’s objects (cuts of roast beef, carafes) as glittering refractions of images that make the things be themselves—to wander this house is not simply a project of walking through it, but of swimming.

Stein begins “Rooms” with an assignment of displacing: “Act so that there is no use in a centre” (63). What follows is threaded with reminders to keep moving: negation of centers,
prompts toward open channels, and the simple, gentle unsettler “more”: “The instance of there being more is an instance of more” (63); “This is so nice and sweet and yet there comes the change, there comes the time to press more air. This does not mean the same as disappearance” (64); “Is there pleasure when there is a passage, there is when every room was open” (65); “Is there. That was a question” (67); “It is not very likely that there is a centre, a hill is a hill and no hill is contained in a pink tender descender” (68). These could be gathered into a description of pulsation (a term Emerson also uses), the small pushes of renewal that keep a circulatory system going. An “instance of more” will “press more air.” It is not a “disappearance” but a displacement: the pressure keeps the moving system in equilibrium, or health, creating “pleasure when there is a passage.” There seem to be few doors connecting these rooms, or perhaps swinging doors; nothing is contained.

Following this thread further suggests more of this gentle pulsing into circulation by way of swinging from affirmative statements to negation: “Giving it away, not giving it away, is there any difference. Giving it away. Not giving it away” (70). The swing does not hang us in place, but yields hints of forward movement. We make a decision to take a further step. “Why is the name changed. The name is changed because in the little space there is a tree, in some space there are no trees, in every space there is a hint of more, all this causes the decision” (72); “A change is in a current and there is no habitable exercise” (73); “No change is not needed” (74); The twining together of negation with descriptive sentences, as in “no change is not needed,” creates its own shadow as its sense is sifted, a domestic condition of polarity, perhaps. No change is not needed, so a change is needed, but we understand the need for a change (or onwardness), against its counterbalancing “no.” “No change is not needed” could be understood as an analogy
for standing still. In order to stand still, we have to push the floor away as a counter to the pull of gravity. Even if we don’t engage (either consciously or unconsciously) in pushing the floor away, the floor pushes us away. Hidden in the apparent stillness of the most ordinary occasion of standing are pressures whose navigation we barely register. What this all means is that the home, a place of relative stillness, is actually a site of continuous movement: “A window and no willow, a wide place stranger, a wideness makes an active center” (77). A room we give attention to, at units of measure smaller than our normal attentions, becomes “wide,” becomes “stranger,” becomes “an active center.”

Alongside the thread of pulsing, there is also a thread of placing. In navigating these rooms, we come upon solid states. Already in the fourth paragraph, which I reproduce below in full, there is a sense of encountering relative stasis, as little eddies or traps in the stream:

To begin the placing there is no wagon. There is no change lighter. It was done.

And then the spreading, that was not accomplishing that needed standing and yet the time was not so difficult as they were not all in place. They had no change. They were not respected. They were that, they did it so much in the matter and this showed that that settlement was not condensed. It was spread there. Any change was in the ends of the centre. A heap was heavy. There was no change.

(63)

There may be no use in a center, but there are actual experiences of losing the capacity to be drawn forward, effecting an anchor, negatively instead of positively inflected. But always Stein finds a way to slip out of the resting places. She continues:

Burnt and behind and lifting a temporary stone and lifting more than a drawer.
The instance of there being more is an instance of more. (63)

The heavy heap is a “temporary stone.” Lifting and lifting, there are instances of more. Stein’s domestic scene is always renewable by these tugs and lifts, or replacements. And even without active lifting, there is the fact of the time always changing: “The question is this, is it possible to suggest more to replace that thing. This question and this perfect denial does make the time change all the time” (65). How does perfect denial make the time change? Perhaps because the absence of assertion, silence, is somehow a force of attraction: “A silence is not indicated by any motion, less is indicated by a motion, more is not indicated it is enthralled” (67). The difference between indication and enthralment is that to be enthralled is to be drawn forward, drawn to, or at least to feel the pull of attention towards something, even if momentarily still, a “temporary stone.” The oscillation, or lapping away at these two feelings as one spills into the other creates an estuarial sensation. There is no dominant current; each will yield to the other. But the counterbalance of forces achieves relative stillness only by continuing to vibrate.

Stein’s still lives, given attention, always seems to produce, in their glittering, a sense of more. Establishing facts serves to establish their ongoingness. In “Rooms” as with her other writing, she includes a present-tense evaluation of her project even as she is writing it: “There is always that disposition and in a way there is some use in not mentioning changing and in establishing the temperature, there is some use in it as establishing all that lives dimmer freer and there is no dinner in the middle of anything. There is no such thing.” (69) Establishing the disposition and temperature, not mentioning changing, still yields movement. There is no dinner, or perhaps no middle of anything (“no use in a centre”), because the settling (of anything, it seems) conjoins feelings of “dimmer” and “freer,” a dropping into stillness that turns over into a
rippling out.

Stasis, in the form of things not shape-shifting, seems always to be met with regret. Here, the regret turns over from a register of missing things (images of relation?), to one of questioned things (the names that stay put):

Why is there no necessary dull stable, why is there a single piece of any color, why is there that sensible silence. Why is there the resistance in a mixture, why is there no poster, why is there that in the window, why is there no suggester, why is there no window, why is there no oyster closer. Why is there a circular diminisher, why is there a bather, why is there no scraper, why is there a dinner, why is there a bell ringer, why is there a duster, why is there a section of similar resemblance, why is there that scissor.

South, south which is a wind is not a rain, does silence choke speech or does it not. (69-70)

As we continue to move, silence doesn’t seem to choke speech because silence gives way to “dimmer freer” activity (echoing Dickinson’s finding that it’s “lighter—to be Blind —”). Recall what Stein said about the project of Tender Buttons: “I had to feel anything and everything that was for me existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name.” It may seem that the question of whether silence chokes speech is not a question, but an “am I right or what?” kind of statement. But if “Rooms” answers that question, perhaps it answers no, that silence does not choke speech. The project of feeling things “existing so intensely” suggests an attitude of reception: Emerson’s happy “hearing man” instead of the unhappy “speaking one.” In order to feel things existing intensely, Stein has to silence the
official descriptive vocabularies that belong to them, and allow herself instead to be surprised by reception of words that “very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking.”

What makes “Rooms” seem to me a project of swimming is not just the simple implication of moving through a series of rooms, but the way that the work of description, as receptive transcription or “irresistible dictation,” seems to call for a resting into the places where energy pools, in order to pick up the onward current—to be intentionally silent in order to hear the speech of things. Frequently Stein runs into nouns—a bell ringer, a duster, a scissor. But in the larger stream of prose, these don’t block her way. Inverting the sense I took above, we could read the silence of the question “does silence choke speech” to be the silence on the part of the things described, silent when they don’t suggest words that relate themselves, leaving only the name of a thing without its relations that make it exist intensely (duster, scissor). The name alone is without enough life, “not enough something.” For Stein, names without relation are what Emerson might call a “paper currency” with “no bullion in the vault.” Stein reanimates this paper currency by pushing at the noun until it again starts to glitter in relation. This pushing is not repetition, but iteration, pulse. The passage continues:

Lying in a conundrum, lying so makes the springs restless, lying so is a reduction, not lying is so arrangeable.

Releasing the oldest auction that is the pleasing some still renewing.

Giving it away, not giving it away, is there any difference. Giving it away, not giving it away. (70)

“Lying in a conundrum” agitates the ground, making its “springs restless.” Restless springs are a
form of “still renewing.” “Still renewing” opens onto the counter-flows of giving and not giving. Something heavy and relatively still—the lying-down body—is nudged upward and onward. “Rooms” creates its navigational feeling in the way all its “temporary stones” have to be lifted, the way everything is discovered to be restless. Stein’s domestic plots are partial holdings that, given attention, give way to a ceaselessly moving and surprising world of experience. They yield pleasure.

The piece comes to its close—its conclusion in enjoyment, by arriving at an image of pleasure: the fountain. The image is not only an emblem of triumphant circulation but part of a sexual vocabulary that runs throughout Stein's writing. As Hejinian reminds, words of reference are spatial, pointing “love-arrows” at their objects. Stein’s scene closes with a kind of perfect contact, a scene of domestic and erotic bliss:

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and also a fountain. (78)

The approach to the fountain begins with zig-zags, naming solid objects (the rain, the green, the white) turned back on themselves (the green is wrong), with a lyric, even meter (or pulse). She renders bodily closeness (a chair and plenty of breathing). She declares the presence, through care, of abstractions of union and similitude (there is incredible justice and likeness), and all this—the pulsing onwardness, the nearby body, the care and the likeness—makes a fountain (a euphoria, a success). “Rooms” offers restlessness at a local scale by allowing proliferating words

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28 See Ulla Dydo, *The Language That Rises* for an exploration of the language of sexuality and pleasure in Stein’s work.
to record things existing intensely. The word *plot* referred to a patch of earth before it ever referred to dramatic series. Stein discovers facts swimming and glittering in her local plot, happy, it would seem, to have discovered that we exist.

Stein, in her work and also in her example of *how* to work, how to see, how to write, can be read as a making a daily recovery from the “unhappy … discovery” that we exist unmoored in a world of process. Her writing, along with other creative practices to be explored throughout this study, suggests that “the recovery of the world,” in Cavell's phrase, which Emerson is always seeking, the recovery of a sense of felicity through locating oneself as a moving point in nature's field of patterns, might be approached through creative work as a form of structured wandering. If there is something terrible in feeling oneself subject to “irresistible dictation,” there is also something amorous and erotic about it, something felicitous in the spontaneous images it offers. Recalling Emerson's ongoing inquiry into ways of participating in the intelligence of the world at large, Stein exemplifies the participatory practice of giving daily attention to the way intelligence moves through and delights an individual mind. Reading Stein, if I read alongside her, if I allow myself to read from the position of the moving point of her writing hand, I experience transition and impermanence as elements of the happy condition of there being more.

It is in this way that reading Emerson has come to matter to me: that his descriptions of nature's process can be reformulated as assignments, as moving assignments, as something to do. If, following Cavell, we read Emerson as writing about overcoming loss, overcoming skepticism, and that overcoming as having to do with finding “practical power” as a common inheritance that all living things can claim and participate in, then it makes sense that a response, as his
reader, is to ask how I might participate too in the practical power that helps me “husband moments.” How do I find it in the specific and modest corner of the world where I find myself? When might I have felt some alignment with this power in the past and how can that help me know how to go on?
CHAPTER TWO
IT THINKS, I MOVE: AN EMBODIED APPROACH TO IMPERSONALITY

“Motion is the only real evidence yet discovered that thinking is taking place.”
— Mabel Todd (*The Hidden You*, 61)

“The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility.”
— EL 696

“I am moved by strange sympathies.”
— Emerson (Journal, 4:200)

In my first chapter, I tried to compass the ways Emerson speaks for submitting to a non-controlled process of thinking. This process, not critical but rather ceremonial, seeks “unity,” or presence, not as an endpoint, but as a medium through which to get outside the tracts, habits and settlements that define ordinary life, to experience and to value the feeling of being unmoored in the world. The ways in which this unmooring, as a submission to a present vastness, ushers the thinker into currents of strangeness and surprise via things found and observed in the local range suggests to me a strong family resemblance between Emerson’s vision of the task of thinking, and the projects of performance that I have been involved with. These projects, which I could identify as growing out of a dual lineage of the influences of the radically democratic (with respect to source material and performance styles) movement practices of Merce Cunningham and Judson Dance Theater, and the found, assembled compositional poetics of The Wooster Group and other devised theater ensembles, also build toward surprising presence using the near at hand and specifically very near resource of physical intelligence as approached by somatic research. This feeling of family resemblance animates my attraction to Emerson, and underwrites, to use a Cavellian turn of phrase, my effort to turn Emerson readers and performance makers toward each other for a mutual expansion of sense.
In this chapter, I will pursue the avenues from unsettlement to practical power that are traversed by body-based practices that work through what in Emersonian scholarship is called “the impersonal,” most visibly in the work of Sharon Cameron whose *Impersonality: Seven Essays* brought the term forward in Emerson scholarship. My entry into to the discussion in turn brings forward somatics as a resource for making sense of Emerson's impersonal. I will look specifically at the somatic work done in Ideokinesis and Body-Mind Centering, which here represent a broader array of somatic practices. I offer these practices as an alternative context to Buddhist thought for thinking through both Emerson’s non-dualism, and his various invocations and uses of impersonality, for although impersonality originates as a Buddhist term, the concept emerges in other contexts too, and I think there is value in pursuing the sense of Emerson's impersonal from culturally closer contexts in order to ask how it might figure into non-Buddhist lives. This approach allows for the recognition of a family resemblance across cultural contexts, a “criss-crossing” that Cavell notes in the body of any literature that involves both influence, direct or invisible, as well as parallel developments of thought. Lawrence Buell contends that Emerson did not derive the concept of impersonality from his eastern readings, so much as recognize his existing affinity with it, an affinity that enriched Emerson’s evolving “materialist spirituality.” Buell echoes Emerson’s argument, in “History,” that one reads in order to sound affinities across time.

I do not mean to suggest that Buddhist sources are not important to understanding Emerson; they clearly are, and as Stanley Cavell has shown, Emerson’s “eastern longings” significantly mark his intellectual appetites (*Pitch* x). But I do not emphasize a quest for an original source for these ideas, in part because, as will be elaborated in the work of this chapter,
the impersonal is a name for something that can be discovered by giving attention to life processes, and is not a concept strictly derived from any particular mind or tradition. Reading instead for the *resonance* between Buddhist thought and Emerson’s writings helps to strengthen their articulation, and contributes to the possibility of continued cross-pollination. Even in attempting an argument about origin and influence, the amount of circulation between Eastern and Western thinking reveals a complex interplay.

Just as Emerson read deeply in Buddhist texts, Emerson was read deeply by the twentieth century’s most influential international translator and proponent of Zen Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki, who described his first experience of reading Emerson as “making acquaintance with myself,” and “digging down into the recesses of my own thought.”29 As Palmer Rampell relates, Suzuki’s account of Zen is rooted in the *shin bukkyō* reform movement, which Suzuki understood to share an affinity with the transcendentalist reformation of Unitarianism in its efforts to modernize an understanding of Zen as a global religion compatible with science.30 Suzuki actively sought to persuade a Western audience of Buddhism’s consonance with American religious thought, and grounded his understanding of that consonance in his reading of Emerson, as is shown by his 1896 essay, written in Japanese and never published in translation, “Zen Theory of Emerson,” which stresses the importance of intuitive and private religious experience, the only secondary authority of texts which record that experience, and the role of meditation in intuition's capability. He even reads Emerson as describing meditation practices in “Self-Reliance” when he writes: “Thus all concentrates; let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause” (Rampell 630-33).

Woven into the history of the Western art practices and practitioners that inform, neighbor, or populate somatic work are countless American artists who adopted Zen Buddhism, many of whom were introduced to Zen though Suzuki's writing, including John Cage and Merce Cunningham whose profoundly influential work bases its approach to composition in a Zen practice of non-attachment. While I acknowledge the rich the flow of ideas between Eastern and Western traditions, I am less interested in (and also less capable of) elaborating their exchange than in adding to the conversation the under-appreciated somatic practices which offer their own array of non-dualistic, impersonal approaches to physical intelligence and identity. These practices are American-grown countercultures to notions of individualism bound up with privacy and property, to an immaterial concept of the rational, and to notions of confessional or expressive authorship that arise from such contained ideas of the self. Developed in the “intelligence of [this] soil,” these countercultures share Emersonian impulses to build original foundations of thought, to both test and found traditions. A practice-oriented arena developed out of not religious but rather scientific traditions, the field of somatics gives an important secular, experimental venue in which to consider the impersonal.

The final passage of “Experience” names as the goal of being the capacity to act, or “practical power”:

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power. (492)

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31 Cage speaks of Zen and chance operations intermittently throughout his writing. For an economical statement of the compositional use of chance operations, see his introduction to Lecture on the Weather, a piece made with passages from Thoreau's Walden, collected in Cage's Empty Words. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1979).

The quartet of tones here could describe the chord of Emersonian impersonality. Onwardness, the getting up again; attraction, the romance that calls one forward and creates onwardness; genius, the local resource of the low and the natural; and practical power, the intelligence of the world as it works. It took me a long time to understand what Emerson meant by “practical power,” in fact it took until I understood this power as impersonal: something possible to experience in the range of the person, but not generated by person or personality. Practical power struck me at first as abrasive, part of what sometimes makes Emerson seem a precursor to such materialist positive thinking schools as “the secret,” or that weird idea that Jesus somehow licenses wealth as a sign of his favor. But taken as the greater exposure to and moving with the intelligence and force of the world, the range of this power is not restricted to forms we might describe as successful. Practical power includes also the passing of one form into another in all kinds of transformations or deaths. The compensations these stark passages offer—of unexpected growth, of new forms of experience—is the gift of the impersonal to the personal, the embrace of “the universe, which holds thee dear” (EL 481). This chapter is dedicated to discovering practical power in the disinhibiting of the body’s natural movement patterns through the modalities of somatic work and related dance practices that have been intertwined with the development of that work. It is my task to show that these explorations of embodied intelligence point toward the same non-dualistic intuitions that Emerson recorded in his locating of impersonal power in natural, embodied process.
1. SOMATIC WORK AS A CONTEXT OF NON-DUALISTIC THINKING

1.1 INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN SOMATICS AND PRAGMATISM

Shared Concerns

Although it may at first strain credibility to suggest that the accounts of twenty-first-century performers on the research fringe of their own field could have something to say to the field of Emerson scholarship, I have found in persisting with this study, that the connection is, to invoke Emerson’s phrase “better than whim, at last.” Not only are there methodological affinities in the experiential accounts of a self-culturing process that reaches for an intuition of and facility with the so-called nonhuman processes within the natural resource of a human body and mind, but also there is a little-recognized line of transmission between Emerson and contemporary dance and performance bearing directly on valuation of the practice of process, and of what constitutes a source of and immersion in intelligence. I am not a historian and it is beyond the work of my own study to establish that lineage substantially, but I will attempt a brief family tree of this line of transmission, a line on which I also locate myself.

There are many shared concerns between performance research and the philosophical work of thinking about thinking within which Emerson can be located. Joan Richardson’s work—the environment within which my own scholarly work rests—connects Emerson, in the vein of an evolving pragmatism, to William James33 along the specific project of giving attention to the processes of thinking. James’s psychological investigations, working out sentences and prompts from Emerson in experimental processes, can be considered as part of the foundational groundwork of neuroscience, a field of inquiry that provides much of the conceptual vocabulary for contemporary debates on the nature of mind, across therapeutic, criminal, and philosophical

33 See Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Edwards to Stein*. 
applications. Indeed, though Emerson did not possess the scientific tools to undertake this inquiry, he gestures toward what we now call neuroscience in his late unfinished work, *Natural History of the Intellect*, writing, “I await the insight which our advancing knowledge of material laws shall furnish” (NHI 5). Recent discoveries in neuroscience point toward movement experience as a key element of and context for cognitive understanding of the physical and social environment. The trend in cognitive science toward theories of “embodied cognition” shakes off the comet’s tail of an anthropocentric assumption that human thinking is different in kind from all other thinking and instead re-opens a groundwork for thinking about thinking from the standpoint of acting (moving) in an environment. Researchers in embodied cognitive science propose different ways that representational systems (historically associated with top-down immaterial mentality) interact with or are composed of biological systems of perception. These models, alongside the valuation of movement as a primary cognitive task, point toward a non-dualistic condition of body and mind that could lead to a fruitful coordination of neuroscience, cognitive science, and somatic research. This coordination, were it to occur, would represent not so much something new as a rejoining of several streams of inquiry that were closer to each other in the early twentieth century, before disciplinary and professional dividing lines and technical sophistication produced for them entirely separate arenas.

It is my sense that these three fields to a large degree reproduce the same findings in their

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34 Although the work is still in process, the mirror neuron system appears to identify the neurological apparatus for what a person watching sports, or dance, or a fight, intuitively knows: that we experience physical sensation when watching movement happen, without being engaged in that movement ourselves. The significance and mechanism of the mirror neurons are still being explored, but I think it is fair to draw from even the rough articulations an idea that movement perception and movement memory are integral elements of recognizing and making choices in our environment. See Christian Keyser’s *The Empathetic Brain* (Social Brain Press, 2011) for an overview of the discovery of and initial efforts to understand mirror neurons in terms of empathy and distributed mind.

35 I have realized in reflecting on my choice to focus on Emerson, which is not a choice I make out of an interest in period history but out of a sense of the relevance of his writing to contemporary questions, that the wide-ranging generalism (thinking across the newest findings in science, art, politics, etc.) afforded to nineteenth-century thinkers appeals to my anti-disciplinary, wide-ranging twenty-first-century artist-scholar energies.
different environments, with different instruments of verification but similar depths of conversation and peer review. The step from cognitive science to dance is thus smaller than it seems: somatic research has been an integral part of the practice and conceptual vocabulary of new dance since the early twentieth century, and likewise dancers have played a large investigative role within the progress of somatic research, especially in the development of the work done by early somatic experimenters, including F.M. Alexander, Ida Rolf, Mabel Todd, Moshe Feldenkrais, Rudolf Von Laban, and Irmgard Bartenieff, a first generation of experimenters who largely created their own methods, often in response to the crisis of their own injuries.\(^\text{36}\) Much of what constitutes a basic groundwork for contemporary dance, both in approaching the body as a resource for movement, and in sustaining physical health as a performer, comes from somatic practice; it is not a stretch to say that somatic work is, to recall Emerson’s phrase, a kind of “immense intelligence” in which contemporary dance exists. Certainly in my own dance training I encountered somatic work as a fundamental vocabulary and orientation to physical intelligence. Contemporary dance thus shares some foundational investigations with the fields of neuroscience and cognition, and in recent years has even begun to address itself directly to these cognitive questions.\(^\text{37}\)

\(^{36}\) For an overview of the relationship between the somatic first generation “pioneers” and the development of their practices into a field of somatic movement, education, and therapy, see Martha Eddy, “A brief history of somatic practices and dance: historical development of the field of somatic education and its relationship to dance.” *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices* Vol. 1 No. 1, 2009.

\(^{37}\) A case in point is the work of Miguel Gutierrez, who could be seen as a kind of intellectual bellwether for the experimental “downtown dance” community. Two of Gutierrez's recent works, *Last Meadow* (Dance Theater Workshop, New York NY, September 2008) and *And lose the name of action* (Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY, December 2012), have foregrounded inquiry into embodied ways of knowing and in particularly Emersonian terms, into embodied paths of abandonment of self-conscious thinking to impersonal streams of cognition. In an interview for the Walker Arts Center, Gutierrez says:

> My interest with dance has always been, in a way, its instability—the way that it proposes an area that is mysterious, not easily understood. These thoughts made their way into *Last Meadow* and I wanted to keep pushing at this interest in this intangible thing with *And lose the name of action*.

> Those thoughts dovetailed with my father’s series of neurological complications over the last several years. That led me into learning more about the brain and thinking about how we deal
Direct Exchange

Beyond these shared concerns, the field of somatic movement therapy has a historical point of intersection with pragmatism, specifically in the progressive intellectual communities of New York and Boston in the 1920's, in which direct conversation, study, and transmission went on between developers of somatic modalities and of pragmatic philosophies of organism exemplified by the work of John Dewey, who studied with Alexander and drew broadly on his experience of that work in his thinking as the scene of verification for his ideas about the “unity in action” of mind and body, recorded in the three introductions he wrote to Alexander's books, as well as in his own writing.38

Alexander Technique is based in learning to inhibit strained patterning (attributed to various socially induced patterns of physical tension or repression) in order to allow the body's intelligent patterning to re-emerge. Dewey was initially drawn to Alexander for help overcoming a debilitating stammer and what he described in his introduction to Alexander's *The Use of the Self* as his “practical backwardness” (18). Recognizing Alexander's work as deeply grounded in scientific method, which Dewey is at pains to praise in his introductions in distinction to the over-confident and narrowly-focused techniques of faddish health cures, he continued his studies over a long term, both with F.M. Alexander and his brother A.R., in his recognition that Alexander had generated a process by which the objective conditions which underlie habitual

action and perception can be investigated, something with implications for the entire spectrum of selfhood. “The technique of Mr. Alexander gives to the educator a standard of psycho-physical health—in which what we call morality is included,” writes Dewey. “It supplies also the 'means whereby' this standard may be progressively and endlessly achieved, becoming a conscious possession of the one educated” (introduction to *The Use of the Self* 19). Dewey also credits his experience of Alexander's work as creating the condition in which his theoretical ideas were verified, thereby opening them beyond theory into the critical field of action in which “the traditional barriers between mind and body break down and dissolve” (“Preoccupation with the Disconnected,” 24). “In the study [of Alexander Technique], I found the things which I had 'known'—in the sense of theoretical belief—in philosophy and psychology, changed into vital experiences which gave a new meaning to knowledge of them” (*Use* 18).

Michael Huxley has shown that along with Alexander, Mabel Elsworth Todd also participated in a community of influence and exchange with Dewey and other pragmatist thinkers and educators. Starting from the better-known relationship of Dewey to Alexander, Huxley describes an intellectual community engaged in new valuations and reconsiderations of physical intelligence, investigating the physical basis of rational intelligence and abstract cognition along multi-disciplinary lines. Huxley’s study concentrates on the usage throughout this context of the term “psycho-physical” (a fore-runner of the now-predominant “somatic”) to denote intelligent processes that cannot be analyzed with dualist paradigms.

Todd taught at Columbia and the New School after teaching in private studios, first in Boston then New York. It is at Columbia that she met Dewey and James Harvey Robinson, the influential history professor and co-founder of the New School, and who studied with both Todd
and Alexander. Like many of her peers in the first generation of somatic work, Todd developed her work in response to her own debilitating injury (after she was told she would be unable to walk), calling on extra-therapeutic resources (in Todd's case her high-school studies of physics) to devise exercises that would lead her back to health. After her recovery, Todd studied movement and voice at Emerson College of Oratory, and opened a studio in Boston where she worked with women experiencing physical strain from factory work taken up during the first World War.³⁹ When she opened a second studio in New York at the Essex House, she began to work with performers and athletes, and through this came to the notice of Jesse Feiring Williams, who integrated Todd's findings into his own work laying foundations for a progressive physical education and “education through the physical” at Columbia. Williams invited Todd to Columbia, where she earned a B.S. in 1927, and lectured until 1931. Williams cites both James and Dewey in *The Principles of Physical Education* (1927), and goes forward in 1930 to describe “the modern physical education” as “based on the biological unity of body and mind” (qtd. in Huxley 12).

This physical research was not limited, for these intersecting academics, to therapeutic applications, but was a kind of laboratory for experiencing, verifying, and developing new conceptions and practices of thinking.⁴⁰ Likewise the philosophers offered means of verifying and lending credence to the physical work. Todd calls on James as an authority in her book *The Thinking Body* (1937), and echoes his language in the marvelous and poetically urgent late book, *The Hidden You: What You Are and What to Do About It* (published posthumously in 1953), which she dedicates in the following language:

³⁹ Todd's biography is given in Pamela Matt's *A Kinesthetic Legacy*, pp. XX-XXX.
⁴⁰ For a look at the fruitful relationship between pragmatism and somatic orientations in contemporary philosophy, see the work of philosopher and Feldenkrais practitioner Richard Shusterman, particularly *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge UP, 2012).
Dedicated to the memory of Dr. James Harvey Robinson—a sincere searcher for truth and a devoted adherent to the philosophy expressed in this book—in appreciation of much good advice and academic aid.

One of Dr. Robinson's wisest observations was, “Of all human ambitions an open mind, eagerly expectant of new discoveries and ready to remould convictions to the light of added knowledge and dispelled ignorances and misapprehensions, is the noblest, the rarest and the most difficult to achieve.

With this introduction, Todd signals the trans-disciplinary reach of her and her peers' questions about the moving health of human bodies.

   Todd's work has had a lasting influence on “new dance” or “postmodern dance,” which is generally associated with movement techniques not built from idealized or expressive concerns (as in classical modern dance, although the distinction is not entirely clean), but from ongoing inquiry into body mechanics and the ranges of consciousness and articulation that attach to explorations of different body systems—nervous, circulatory, lymphatic, skeletal, and so on. Todd called her own work “Natural Posture.” Her “natural” was a corrective to the artifice of Victorian ideals of posture that deleteriously imposed moral concepts of uprightness on the otherwise curving and counterbalancing spine, rushed or foreclosed critical developmental stages of childhood movement, and exchanged the responsive balancing functions of muscles for fixed

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For a discussion of postmodern dance, see Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Wesleyan UP, 1987). Banes notes that the explorations of the “postmoderns” in dance are better compared with art historical and literary modernism than postmodernism, pointing out that the “postmodern” designation is a response to the generation of “moderns” who founded modern dance. The designation “modern dance” sits awkwardly with the types of dance about which I am writing, as it can be unclear whether this is a reference to classical modern or the contemporary dance which grew out of it. Most people in the practicing dance field forgo identifying as modern dancers, either trading “new” or “contemporary” for “modern,” or by forgoing periodic designations for geographical, and going with “downtown dance,” which, although it has spread well outside its old location in the lofts of downtown Manhattan, can be identified by relation to the downtown dance scene of the 1970's, '80's, and '90's, as well as with the hub of Movement Research, an institution that is central to the preservation of the downtown community and its ongoing inquiry.
patterns of holding. In addition to trying to free the body of this holding toward finding natural mechanical balance, she was also concerned with developmental stages of movement as critical patterns for bodies to therapeutically recuperate. Todd's work, refined and developed by her students Barbara Clark and Lulu Sweigard, continues to be known and taught in dance training programs as “Ideokinesis,” Sweigard's coinage, meaning movement guided by imagery. Todd's work also leads to the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of Body-Mind Centering (BMC), which builds on Ideokinesis, Laban Movement Analysis, and occupational therapy. BMC is one of the richest empirical fields of contemporary somatic research and has extensive crossover into the contemporary dance approach to movement training and sourcing. An influential modality among other consonant approaches in current use (Laban/Bartenieff Fundamentals, Skinner Releasing Technique, Klein Technique, and others) BMC will stand in this study as a representative of a broad way of thinking about anatomy and improvisation as a resource for movement.

What is particularly interesting in relation to Emerson is the way that somatic practice can be seen to be a form of the hybrid sensibility that Joan Richardson names “transcendentalist pragmatism.” Somatic work is an exemplary form of radical empiricism, one that is in many ways more radical than even James seemed to envision. But for many practitioners, the commitment to and use of the work is structured around appetites shared with Emerson that ring more in the transcendentalist mood: to experience the natural body outside the limitation of ego

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42 Sweigard's protégé Irene Dowd, a longtime member of the Julliard faculty as well as a master teacher in the field at large, is the contemporary exemplar of the application of Ideokinesis to dance training.

43 My description of the streams of thought and therapeutic methods that combine to form a background for BMC here is necessarily truncated, but I think it is fair to identify the stream of Todd's thinking as a major approach to bodywork incorporated in BMC.

44 This unpublished formulation comes from the name of her seminar, American Aesthetics: Transcendentalist Pragmatism, of which I was a member, at the CUNY Graduate Center in Fall 2009.
and the imposition of “unnatural” social constraints, and to free a person’s potential to act with maximum ease and power by developing a receptiveness and responsiveness to power that comes from places conceptually located below (if we follow the standard spatial assignation of mind to a generalized upwardness in the scale of things) or beyond the individual will. The experience this yields, in its intenser moments, is a kind of lowering and lateral transcendent experience within a completely material venue.

As I will show, somatic work, in the same way as Emersonian self-reliance, calls on, attends to, and goes so far as to identify with impersonal, material systems that coordinate to create a living intelligent body, an individual. Not only does this work support physical health by encouraging what Emerson broadly describes as “circulation,” but it also offers experiences of participatory clarity in the dynamic, material world. These experiences render an awareness of the individual human body as a continuous part of much vaster distributions—of cellular life, of warm-blooded animals, of a weather-like system of hormonal transmissions, for example. In these ways I see somatic practice as a contemporary venue of “transcendentalist pragmatism”: a conflux of radical empiricism, action-orientation, and an appetite for moving within an experience of what Emerson calls “unity,” or radical interconnectedness, or what a dancer might call presence. “Call it life, spirit, electricity, God—what you like!” writes Todd. “There it is, facing you” (*The Hidden You* 15).

1.2 THE TROUBLE WITH TERMS

The problem of what to call things is going to be pervasive in this chapter, since the
Western philosophical and critical vocabulary is dualistic in its conceptions. In finding language to describe somatic work, one runs almost immediately into the problem of dualism’s mascot, the mind-body divide. In her description of Body-Mind Centering, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen has a usefully instrumental definition of mind, not as an immaterial or disembodied faculty, but as a guiding, navigating attention understood to be physical in its basis and shared by all the matter of the body—not just the grey parts. If we follow Bainbridge Cohen in defining mind as attention, and acknowledge the multiple interacting registers of reflex, intent, physical apparatus and mental representation that comprise attention, the choice to say “body” or “mind” doesn’t have to signal an essential exclusion, but rather could imply varying degrees of reflection and automatism.

The term “somatic” contains an implicit argument for conjoining body and mind in our understanding. Although we now understand the early twentieth-century work of Alexander, Todd, and the other early physical intelligence researchers as belonging to the field of somatics, the term was coined retrospectively in 1970 by philosopher and somatics practitioner Thomas Hanna. The word “soma” is Greek for “the living body.” In Hanna's recuperation he translates it as “Me, the bodily being” (Bodies in Revolt, 35), emphasizing in the embodied condition of first-person identification the abandonment of any idea of separation between mind and body, spirit and flesh. He initially announced this term not in relation to the work being done in movement studios, but as a fresh description for the experience of being that comes in the wake of a persuasive dismantling of dualist thinking brought about across science and philosophy. His Bodies In Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking (1970) makes no mention of Alexander or Todd, but rather describes as “somatic thinkers” a two stranded set of “somatic scientists”—Darwin,
Freud, Piaget, Lorenz, Reich—and “somatic philosophers”—Kant, Kierkegaard, Marx, Cassirer, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche, who is given pride of place throughout his book as making the primary expressions of the new somatic thinking. Given the degree to which Nietzsche repeats many of Emerson's expressions, as will be addressed further on, Emerson too could be included in this list, as could James and Dewey. What joins Hanna's array of thinkers is they way they were able to draw from their observations an image of human being (and living being more generally, for some) as the experience of energies and responses to an evolving world, and so to see the categories that earlier religious thought liked to name as immutable (soul, truth, order, identity) as intimately linked to both inherited and mutable physical patterning interacting with an environment, and the interaction between this patterning and the language environment created by the social and cultural world any individual “soma” is born into. What makes them “somatic” thinkers in Hanna's description, is the consistency of their situating the observer position within the environment it studies, emphasizing the variable experience of response to the world from specific standpoints.

In the preface to the second edition of Bodies In Revolt published in 1985, Hanna noted that the intervening 15 years had brought increased investment in investigations of “our physiological reality,” and that “somatic” thinking had expanded to refer to the particular array of practices known as “somatic movement,” “somatic education,” and “the field of ’somatics’”. Hanna had, by this time, also become a practitioner of somatic education, developing his own methods of movement therapy. In a later definition of “somatics,” he situates it more directly in these movement practices, describing it as “a field of study dealing with somatic phenomena: i.e. the human being as experienced by himself from the inside” (“What is Somatics?” 343).
Somatic work, as a field of moving investigations, is then a radically empirical form of research that gathers information experientially from within a living body's life processes, seeking to understand that information as patterning. These processes are understood to encompass a range of interacting intelligences, only a fraction of which are familiar to the conscious mind. Two interrelated approaches characterize somatic methods of employing conscious thinking. Given the strangeness—this interior unfamiliarity—of the body's intelligence, somatic techniques tend to have a common method of allowing the body to educate (or re-educate) itself, rather than imposing deliberate ideals of form or posture onto the body. (This imposition was characteristic of the “physical culture” movement that preceded the development of somatic work, and was often explicitly rejected in the writing of the early somatic educators. In the present day, many dancers trained in classical technical disciplines experience the same opposition when encountering somatic work, having to unlearn muscular patterns that have been imposed by long practice.) Some techniques primarily seek to get out of the way of the body's intelligence. Alexander Technique, as briefly mentioned, is a technique of inhibition of controlling habits (both consciously imposed postural ideas and patterns of tension so long reinforced as to have become spastic, that is, continuously engaged and so unconsciously continued). With the inhibition of negative patterns, there is room for the body's intelligent patterning to reassert itself, and the technique pairs inhibition with simple movement tasks that act as contexts for the better patterning to occur. Likewise, the pedagogical methodology developed by Moshe Feldenkrais in his “Awareness Through Movement” technique explicitly forgoes correction (on the part of the teacher) in order to allow each student’s learning to occur from within. (The teacher guides the practice of an intricate series of physical tasks, each one
repeated in sets with minor variations, and helps instill a rhythm of stopping to “listen” to the body's small transformations as it learns to repeat the task with greater efficiency.)

Other techniques, including the two I foreground in this chapter, seek confluences of imagery brought in from exterior forms of study with emergent bodily intelligence experienced during active movement sessions. BMC practitioners, for example, take a full kinesiology course from standard medical education and often use anatomical reference books as teaching tools for the introduction of the particular organ or system to be approached in any given class; Ideokinesis lessons involve studying drawings of greater or lesser abstraction of the lines of force and balance in the body.

I find myself using the phrase “physical intelligence” to describe the coordination of things or persons in action, and using descriptions of “picturing” or “imaging” to point toward the reflective elements of that process. However I understand that picturing is not limited to reflective applications. I take the view of things articulated in the field of embodied cognition, that modeling (that is, representation) is both the basic action of mind, and a dynamic element of action, rather than a function of a segregated and immaterial representational space where computations are first made and then applied. Intelligent action always involves models, only a fraction of which are conscious or reflective, and many of which, in the stream of human thought and action, arise associatively and not deliberately. When I refer to “picturing”, “imaging,” or

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45 See Anthony Chemero’s *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science* (MIT, 2009) for a useful overview of the distinctions between various lines of thought within what is generally described as “embodied cognition.”

46 The degree to which mental representation is accidental and associative is elaborated by Douglas Hofstadter's work. His lecture “Analogy as the Core of Cognition” (Stanford 2006) focuses on this associative analogizing present in all cognitive activity. Hofstadter emphasizes the idea that analogic thought picks up on elements of consonance that do not necessarily follow the proportional consistency of ratios. Indeed he says that the bulk of analogy is taken up with strange proportions. The import of this observation is that the elegant pattern awareness that we might associate with mathematical analogy is also present in any associative movement of mind. Thus his argument that analogy is at the core of cognition.
“image work” as the chapter progresses, I mean to indicate an intentional space of doing what Todd describes as “entertaining an image” and what V.S. Ramachandran phrases “off-line” thinking, that is, reflective thinking taking place outside the immediate scene of action to which that thinking corresponds. Both describe this capacity to engage in mental work outside the scene of action as the particular distinction between humans and nonhumans. (Although by widening the aperture on what constitutes a scene of action, this distinction is not necessarily a bright line, and anyway who among us can say with certainty that only humans imagine?) Commitment to the work of entertaining images is one of the marked affinities between Todd and Emerson, who share the experiential knowledge that holding a thought can transform the flow of thought's patterns—whether those patterns flow through language or movement. Commitment to the work of entertaining images is one of the marked affinities between Todd and Emerson, who share the experiential knowledge that holding a thought can transform the flow of thought's patterns—whether those patterns flow through language or movement. Think, for example of the way Emerson entertains the titular image of “Circles,” which leads him into an almost ecstatic sequence of circular images, resulting in some of the most exciting of his articulations of the un-anticipatable channels of thinking. I will focus on the ways that Ideokinetic imaging, by asking a person to identify with an image and so invite it to inform the physical present, feeds into and transforms the conditions and possibilities of action along the same lines that Emerson’s images are meant to travel.

In advancing into the zone of impersonality, I will wrangle not only with the pair person impersonal, but also human-nonhuman. The “nonhuman” (like the related “posthuman”) is one of those terms that has taken on senses in contemporary academia that are easily lost when taken

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47 It is clear that Todd read Emerson, as she quotes him at one point in her writing, but how deeply and in what circumstance she read him is unknown to me. Although Todd's writing is preserved, there is as yet no biographical scholarship about her, except for what appears in Pamela Matt's *A Kinesthetic Legacy* (1996), which collects the work of Todd's protégé Barbara Clark, and includes Clark's oral history narrative of Todd's training and professional history, given as background to Clark's career. What I am pursuing here are the echoes between their texts that demonstrate a consonant view of human thought and action. A set of comparative selections will follow in a later section, to flesh out this affinity.
outside of that conversation, since the “human” embedded in the term refers not to the casual sense of the word as referring to people, but to a particular anthropocentric, hierarchical subject-view of the natural world where “man is measure” and the autonomous individual of classical liberalism is the central unit, segregated from the rest of nature by some critical difference. Thinking about the nonhuman when describing the human body reveals the inadequacy of the term, an inadequacy that I think is shared by the word “impersonal.” Where the word “nonhuman” surfaces here, I mean to engage a sense of an alternative scheme of material measurement that imposes on a person an acknowledgement of the many registers of our identity, only some of which are coterminous with our skin. When the choreographer Deborah Hay defines her body as her 53-trillion-celled “teacher,” for example, she is making a gesture toward what someone in the contemporary humanities might call the “nonhuman” (although I don’t think Hay would choose to segregate her humanity descriptively from her cellular existence). Ultimately for my purposes it is important that the material identifications with things not measured in precisely human units, such as the roughly 53-trillion cells that comprise a human body, are not felt to be external to or exclusive of human selves. This necessitates the abandonment of strict concepts of containment or interiority in favor of an image of overlapping registers, interacting networks, wave fields. But to acknowledge or spend time identifying with these nonhuman measures within our embodied experience does not obliterate the meaningfulness of the measure of selfhood, which is both an obvious and critical measure of human experience. To deal with Emerson’s impersonal, one has to try to defuse the either/or status of the reflexive dualisms that pervade our common language of bodies and selves, and accept that we each are composed of simultaneous, incommensurate identities and networks, one
of which is “this thought which is called I” (EL 196).

Entertaining thoughts not called I and allowing those thoughts to recondition the one which is called I is the activity of impersonal image work. Through earnest, gracious hosting, the not-I is welcomed to share with the I, making transformation possible. The discomfort this produces, of being unable to say where exactly I end and something not-I begins, and to assign to these multiple structures their relative share of agency—whether trying to circumscribe the bacteria that flourish in my body and contribute to my optimism, the actions my unencumbered skeleton is capable of, or the words with which I compose these thoughts—can be a fruitful discomfort, an unsettlement in which I am carried onward. For Emerson, this unsettlement of identification, crucial to all varieties of health, is the initiating thought of both religious experience, and self-culturing or practical power. This critical initiating role for such transformations of identification makes all experiments in such unsettlement interesting to the conversation around Emerson.

1.3 SUBSTANCE VERSUS PROCESS

Substance-centered environments

It is hard to avoid dualistic language and its concomitant malformations of the sense of non-dualistic concepts. In his book on Buddhist philosophy, which explains Buddhism to a Western audience in part through the consonant texts of Western exponents of process philosophy, Nolan Pliny Jacobson reminds his Western readers that they have been reared in a substance-centered environment of language and concepts, an idea that comes directly from
William James's chapter “The Stream of Thought.” Many Western Buddhist scholars, Jacobson claims, are unable to translate adequately certain Buddhist concepts because of the difficulty of fully stepping outside of substance orientation. Dewey, James, and Whitehead are frequently cited by Jacobson for their success at getting beyond the subject-object binary, phenomenologically returning essence to being, or ideas to things, a return that we can also find in Emerson.48 One signal of this successful exit from binary systems is in the re-evaluation of ideas of truth, specifically a rejection of a priori, immutable, universal truth, for an actionable truth of a world in flux, economically summarized in James’s argument that “truth happens to an idea” (Pragmatism 574). Jacobson cites Dewey’s argument that, with the development of natural science and its discoveries, among others, of geological time and evolutionary speciation, Western philosophy “is forced by its own development to abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually ‘universal’ is process” (qtd. in Jacobson 1).

One way in which somatic work is valuable to philosophy is the way that, as a practice of re-patterning, it offers us ways to rear ourselves all over again in a re-calibrated conceptual environment where models and matter are felt to be continuous. This new environment, structured by receptivity, attention, and patient openness to encounter, as well as an awareness of shared forms across natural bodies, could be said to give the Western-reared mind an opportunity for a re-education, making somatic practice valuable not just for therapeutic efforts to overcome physical discomfort, negative holding, or injury, but as a resource for philosophical thinking. Arguably this is precisely the resource that his work with Alexander represented for Dewey. I can attest to the intense sense of “cash value,” to invoke James, that the recurrent association of

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48 Herwig Friedl is exceptionally helpful on this point, demonstrating that Emerson achieves a completeness in this return that even Nietzsche does not. See particularly his essay “Fate, power and history in Emerson and Nietzsche” (ESQ, Vol. 43 No. 1-4. 1997), explored at length later in this chapter.
scenes of somatic exploration and choreographic thinking have given to my own reading process as have I worked my way through Emerson over the last six years. These studio verifications, which echo what Emerson describes in “The Over-Soul” as the brief, intense seasons that structure our belief, have underwritten my own capacity to read Emerson just as, when I was a philosophical and choreographic novice, they underwrote my capacity to read and make use of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, which I count as one of my first choreography teachers.\(^{49}\) It wasn’t until I read Jacobsen’s description of the Western mind as reared in an environment of “substance orientation” that I understood how to make the argument for studio work, somatic research, and a commitment to creative process as useful to a healthy pragmatic thinking in the way those practices re-educate the practitioner's conceptual orientation.

\(^{49}\) I was referred to Deleuze and Guattari's book, in an event of great felicity, by Ted Byfield, the partner of Gwen Welliver, whose influence on my own dance thinking and making is hard to overstate and whose example contributed to my understanding of translations between text and movement. I began to read it during my third year of college, about a year after I had begun to choreograph, and more significantly after encountering as a repertory student the work of Doug Varone (in whose company Welliver danced) and Bebe Miller, two enormously important choreographers in the dance scene of the 1990's in which I came of age. I count this book as the first time I heard my “genius” sing with “alienated majesty” in the pages of something else, to invoke Emerson's phrase. At the same time what I recognized in the book was something that I already intuited but couldn't yet articulate or produce. While reading, images from Varone and Miller's choreographies would come to mind. Deleuze and Guattari don't address dance in their work but they talk endlessly about space, territory, and deterritorialization, all of which I was able to grasp in dance images overlaid on an abstract stage space. In turn the book became something like my choreographic tutor, and as I developed dances over the next few formative years, I used their vocabulary of spatial concepts both as assignments and descriptions. Combining these abstract spatial markings with Welliver's articulation of dance vocabulary as a geometrical elaboration of skeletal joint mobility, I was able to develop a dance-making practice that was oriented toward patterns that emerged and regulated a space or territory, and inflections or redirections which disrupted that spatial logic in favor of a new one.

Years later when I began to read Emerson, again I found studio images accompanying my reading, this time not as prospective choreographies, but of remembered experiences in my later somatic training and engagement with improvisation as a teacher. In both cases, the sense of real trust in my physical experience associations underwrote the manner and mood in which I brought myself to these books. Most recently, in a year-long practice of Authentic Movement (a structured improvisational form in which the mover moves with eyes closed, trying not to compose or invent but rather to listen to the body's impulse and allow it to develop, while being witnessed by a partner), Emerson came to the studio with me, accompanying my movement experience with his sentences in the same way that my movement experiences had previously accompanied my reading.
The oscillating process

If I make sense of Emerson’s impersonal by thinking through somatic practices that contradict essentialist dualism, it is important to acknowledge that Emerson, while rendering unity as process, also continually employs dualistic images. Indeed, he rarely gets to a sense of process without first oscillating between the poles of a binary opposition. But Emerson’s oppositions are better understood as counterpoints, the furthest reaches of a curving wave: apogee and nadir, each turning toward the other. Sensing process is for Emerson evidence of “a love of truth,” and the person who experiences this “true romance” sees binaries as the positive and negative charges that keep a current moving. The binaries, for example the opposition of person and the impersonal, stand not for locations of being, but for limits on being:

He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations, between which, as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconvenience of suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth, as the other is not, and respects the highest law of his being. (emphasis added, EL 426)

It is quite possible to live without this recognition, but to do so is to “shut the door of truth,” to close off the avenues for the ingress of power, illumination, or surprise.

Emerson makes use of dramatic oppositions to act as a kind of propulsion, rappelling the reader, as a rock climber, off first one wall and then the next until a sensation of motion, and an appetite for continued motion, can be established. These exaggerations he takes to be a necessary part of the “electricity” without which “the air would rot.” He celebrates the “violence of
direction” that exaggerates in the person but contributes to the “sanity” of “circulation” in the greater aggregate of society—which is not a quantity but “a wave”: “Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not” (EL 281). That propulsion away from what we know ourselves to be is, in Emerson, a necessary impulse, an expansion of the feeling of “I” that constitutes both religious experience and the faith that gives wisdom “to finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road” (479). Cavell describes this propulsion away as “aversive thinking,” a basic action in Emerson of turning away from things settled or fixed. Emerson spends much of his essays’ animating energy on this aversive direction. But it should not be taken as representing for Emerson the direction of truth, but rather one of its directions. In getting unmoored, getting on the highway, getting into what Cavell calls Emerson’s “process of indirection” (ETE 121), the impulse toward the impersonal is one spatial element in a multidirectional circulatory system.

One technique Emerson uses to push his reader toward these impersonal considerations is through claims that go against the grain of anthropocentrism. The surprise, audacity, and even offense of his sentences act as small shoves. As we will see, he makes surprising claims about physical identity: that as bodies, human persons are fields of electrical activity, and also vegetable-related. This very condition, far from a debasement, marks bodies as both permeated by and accessible to natural law, which applies at all tiers of organization from the molecular to the corporeal to the conceptual. He adds a claim about intelligence that heralds Jamesian chords: that intelligence is not a faculty fully possessed by conscious minds, but a vast flow exceeding any individual, and that participation in intelligence is both receptive and navigational. To combine these claims produces a question about physical intelligence that Emerson does not
directly contemplate. Discussions of the body in action are generally missing, although he records traces of his temperament and nervous system over the course of his writings and indicates in a broad way the continual reassertion of muscular life over the intellectual alone. If “life is not intellectual or critical but sturdy” (487), if we are to learn “the conduct of life,” we must learn how to be sturdy, how we are sturdy.

Vegetable kinship

The vegetable relation is offered early in Emerson's writing. In the opening pages of Nature (1836), he records a variation of his famous revelation at the Jardin des Plantes, of the kinship that crosses not only species but kingdoms: “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (EL 11). This relation is occult not so much because it is not visible—the commonality of structures is plainly observed, as Emerson saw in the Jardin while looking at scorpions—but because it makes kinship claims that exceed the human, suggests the fern as a distant cousin. The relation “takes me by surprise and yet is not unknown,”—that is, it is known somewhere in a place I don’t usually sound for knowledge.

Electrical kinship

It is important to recognize that Emerson doesn’t just propose kinship as analogy—although he does do that, in the typological tradition—but also suggests that in our shared material condition there is finally nothing different in kind between humans and any other kinds of bodies. This he advances through his continuous use of electrical images, presented both as
fact and as figure of law. “An individual body is the momentary arrest or fixation of certain atoms, which, after performing compulsory duty to this enchanted statue, are released again to flow in the currents of the world,” he writes in his late essay “Natural History of the Intellect,” continuing, “An individual mind in like manner is a fixation or momentary eddy in which certain services and powers are taken up and minister in petty niches and localities, and then, being released, return to the unbounded soul of the world” (NHI 27-8). The electrical currents and magnetic fields that he learned about from Michael Faraday allowed Emerson to grasp the identity of a body with electricity as a primal identity of all matter—to grasp that electricity does not just offer a typological lesson, but is the condition from which bodies and minds emerge and to which they return. This shared condition is at the basis of all other shared structures. So when he writes that “man seems a higher plant” (24), we are charged not just to make use of analogies about growth, ripeness, or unfolding progress, but to consider what in us is the same as a plant. In other words, plant analogies hold true because we are in part plants, or musk rats, or atoms: “What happens here in mankind is matched by what happens out there in the history of grass and wheat”; “Musk rat is man fitted to live in a mud bank” (23, 24). And, we might say, a man is a musk rat fitted to live in a house.

Emerson’s clearest statement of our material identity comes in his essay “Nature,” published in the 1844 Second Series. Our identity as matter—the same matter that fits plants and musk rats—means also, following what Emerson learned from Faraday’s finding, in Mark Noble’s paraphrase, that materiality is a property of electricity.50 (Emerson rewrites Faraday: “The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping into the state of free

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thought.” (EL 555)) It follows that we must recognize our identities, considered both as body and mind, as temporary vehicles of nature's power. This recognition precedes access to practical power. If we can cease “identifying ourselves with the work” and instead “feel that the soul of the workman streams through us,” we can experience the “fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry” (EL 554). In this essay Emerson charges the reader to identify with two things: nature or life, which “runs through all the surprises and contrasts of the piece,” so that “the history of nature is charactered in [man’s] brain,” and rest, or the drag on that flow that produces particular channels, “enchanted statue[s],” people that live for the term of “seventy sallads” [sic] before being returned to “the divine circulations” (EL 555).

What this recognition stimulates is a receptivity to the call of all other things as cousins, who teach of an occult relation in power: “Man imprisoned, man crystallized, man vegetable, speaks to man impersonated. That power … distills its essence into every drop of rain. Every moment instructs, and every object: for wisdom is infused into every form.” He goes on to situate this power within the physical body: “It has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure; it enveloped us in dull, melancholy days, or in days of cheerful labor” (555). The proposition that we identify with vegetable life or with electrical lines of force, and that we allow that identity to flourish, not just as analogy but as embodied reality, the proposition that we identify our intelligence as having something to do with a natural history that flows through the particular precipitate of our brains, is a proposition that we embrace the impersonal and nonhuman in order to gain the compensation of getting nearer not to fixity or certainty or immortality, but to practical power: a state of health, a capacity to act.
2. FINDING NEW CONCEPTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

2.1 PROCESS-ORIENTATION IN BUDDHISM AND SCIENCE

In Buddhism, impersonality, or *anatta*, is a gesture of erosion: the denial of the fallacy of the permanent self. The idea of a permanent self rests on a bifurcating relationship of body and soul, where whatever is permanent logically inheres to an immaterial portion of self, since physical death and decomposition are undeniable eventualities. As an alternative to this substance-and-essence duality, Buddhism offers, in Jacobson’s description, a “view of the self-surpassing oneness of a world that, in each fleeting moment, with its living moment-to-moment manifestation of reality, is forever new. The world is never the same twice; the universe is alive” (x). In this view, what is “really real” is not a set of permanently fixed entities, but “the living moment.” Jacobson describes Buddhism as a practice of return to “[v]ivid, free, creative, responsive, original momentary occasions of experience” from the “thing-centered, being-oriented world in which all of us are reared” (xi). In other words, through teachings and meditative practice, Buddhism seeks to reinstate what Emerson describes as “an original relation to the universe” had within the course of the “flitting state” of an individual life.

For Jacobson, the primary practice of Buddhism is an attention to the passing present, what Emerson phrases as “a respect to the present hour” (EL 479). In letting go of the fallacy of permanence that “substance-orientation” imposes, and in recognizing that the world is “forever new,” a change in orientation occurs, one similar to the epochal change described by Herwig Friedl, cited briefly in my first chapter, that with Emerson and Nietzsche there is a shift in the way “being addresses thinkers,” as opposed to a mere reconfiguration of thoughts about being.
Jacobson echoes this with his citation of James Dye’s assessment of process philosophy’s mandate to show “that it is the great alternative to Aristotelian substantialism, not merely by presenting itself as a different way to think about the world, but as the way the world seems to present itself for thought, and for perception and feeling” (qtd. in Jacobson, xii). The impersonal is what “presents itself for thought” in this new orientation. When Emerson describes getting into a stream of thought that exceeds the personal, as with his image of being “as men in a balloon, [who] do not think so much of the point we have left, or the point we would make, as of the liberty and glory of the way” (EL 956), it is receptivity and surprise—we could say “forever new[ness]”—that characterize the experience.

Although reading in and about Eastern texts unquestionably influenced Emerson’s images of a universe in process, it is also his reading in natural science that brought him to such a perspective. Of the somatic reorientation toward process that Darwin both prompts and emblematizes, Hanna writes that the order of the universe mapped in the early work of biological classifiers was thrust by the theory of evolution into time, into process. Both Joan Richardson and Laura Dassow Walls offer recent work on Emerson’s reading in science. Walls frames Emerson the scientist in terms of what she calls “holistic empiricism” and locates his thinking within natural theology. Richardson focuses on the transformation of Emerson’s original ministerial tasks from the office of a minister to a naturalist. Taken together they demonstrate the foundational place of science in Emerson’s thought and images. Following Madame de Staël, whose work he read early in his intellectual development, Emerson saw no distinction between moral laws and scientific ones. A large portion of his writing is devoted to articulating nature as the teacher of moral law. Barbara Packer writes that Emerson, once moved to a sense of
penetrating insight by learning about the transmission and reflection of light particles in Newton’s Optics and developments that followed from Newton’s theories, created the neologism “theoptics” as an index-heading for his journals under which he collated findings in optical science as descriptions of moral laws (Fall 75).

2.2 RETHINKING WHAT IT MEANS TO OWN

If the behavior of light offers a poetic analogy for thinking or participating in divinity that seems unobjectionable, the moral conclusion that arises from the discovery that, in Dewey’s later words, “what … is actually ‘universal’ is process”—a denial of fixity—generates some dissonance when turned to questions of suffering. Whereas Buddhism enfolded suffering into its central images, teaching non-attachment with the compensation of wonder, the developing scientific understanding of continual process offers no such way to deal with the problem of suffering within an emotional or moral framework. (Indeed, the scientific approach to suffering in Western medical work is resolutely antagonistic, seeking to medicate emotional abysses, fighting the death process unless a patient actively opts out of medical treatment, segregating and sanitizing the processes of birth and death.) So it becomes awkward—for some readers to the point of real anger—to encounter Emerson’s accounts of death and loss that are not primarily accounts of grief, but of process as a kind of health that entails loss and decay.

We in the West have, in other words, a different conceptual vocabulary for suffering, and for what constitutes a healthy, moral response to death and loss. In this vocabulary, the Buddhist view is acceptable if understood pluralistically as something coming from another culture, but
suspect if found in our own. Such a response is evident in Sharon Cameron’s rejection, in her essay “Representing Grief,” of Emerson’s statements in “Experience,” and her effort to impose upon his essay the stages of melancholy and mourning that belong to the Freudian conception of the grieving process. For Cameron, Emerson’s essay belies his dissociation and denial, shows him failing to acknowledge and “work through” the grief occasioned by the death of Waldo, thereby assigning to all experience the character of grief. So Cameron experiences Emerson as “brutal”—definitely not moral—in the long view he takes in his rephrasing of the law of conservation of energy:

Thy sickness, they say, and thy puny habit, require that thou do this or avoid that, but know thy life is a flitting state, a tent for a night, and do thou, sick or well, finish that stint. Thou art sick, but shalt not be worse, and the universe, which holds thee dear, shall be the better. (EL 481)

Emerson’s seeming abandonment to the duty of proper attachments strikes Cameron as callous.

Likewise Cameron’s assessment of Emerson’s impersonal reads as underlaid by an anger provoked by the conceptual dissonance of his process-orientation, this time along the conceptual lines of property. In the second of two essays on Emerson within her collection Impersonality, Cameron levels a critique of Emerson’s impersonal images that hinges on an ethical charge folded into a failure of style. Of the voice of his essays she finds only “vacancy in the place where we might expect to find a person” (“The Way of Abandonment,” 19). She ascribes this vacancy to accumulations of clichéd images, asymmetrical identities, and sense-defying associations. This absent speaker emblematises for Cameron an abdication of responsibility for the essays’ calls to submit to the impersonal, calls that elide difference and trivialize suffering in
sight of the magisterial and impersonal unity, the experience of which Emerson so relentlessly craves. This elision of difference she ties to the banner charge against old white men, of an over-reaching possessiveness. Marshaling a phrase from the end of “Character”—that the proper response to the visitation of the impersonal is “to own it”—she makes a leap from Emerson’s articulation of expanded identity to charge him with a possessive claim of “owning what is other,” implicitly predicated on a claim over the subaltern, figured here as the right to speak for an other.

But in plucking the word “own” from the passage, Cameron herself elides the riddling way that the sentence complicates the meaning of the verb. If we back up a page, we find “owning” invoked not as possession but as kinship. Having described a great character, drawn along the same lines as other asymptotic figures like his poet, Emerson says that the recognition of character is often missed. When at last this character arrives, he says, it is a confusion to “treat such a visitant with the jabber and suspicion of the streets,” a confusion wherein “the soul no longer knows its own.” But if one person recognizes this visitor, although no one else may, the “open[ing] into a flower” of the “holy sentiment” is yet true. The essay then ends: “when that love … comes into our streets and houses,—only the pure and aspiring can know its face, and the only compliment they can pay it, is to own it” (EL 508-9). Taken in the context of the full passage, the ownership of this compliment does not strike me as our primary sense of ownership, as staking a claim of possessive control. The OED gives several variegations of the verb to own, including, “to acknowledge as an acquaintance, to recognize as familiar.” This strikes me as the more subtle sense of Emerson’s sentence: if you recognize the appearance of the impersonal in the wide character of an uncompromising person, the only response is to accept “that love” as an
one’s own. To “own” love suggests an action Emerson earlier ascribes to a force of great character: to “blend with” an other, to commit to an outpouring. This imagined blending suggests a unity not marked by possession, or grasping, but by being-with, accepting the claim of the other upon me. This owning is an intimacy, a romance, something Cavell has described as the primary tone of Emerson’s sense of contact with the world: an attraction. This owning as attraction is not part of coming to a rest (or possession), but of what draws us on “whenever another represents for us our rejected [alienated] self, our beyond” (CHU 58). Thus recognizing great character as one’s own would prompt a person out of a rigid sense of property, to accept instead a “property in the horizon” (EL 9) of something more, something beyond, a “vagabond life” (966) of a kind of voluntary poverty. Emerson suggests in “Character” that one path out of “our puny habits” is through this conceptual environment of such reciprocal owning, provoked by the charismatic presence of a person of great character.

Cameron clearly does not read the language of “owning” in this sense. Her suspicion is animated by passages in which Emerson levels the stations and lots of social life, and revels in sweeps of commonality that unfocus all markers of separation including those separations caused by violence and oppression. Although I think Cameron makes an unwarranted leap in describing Emerson’s arrogation of the voice of philosophy as “barbarous,” her charges do highlight a difficult tension between a political commitment to social justice, and a religious or cosmic intuition of the radical continuity of beings. Nonetheless, I find that this, like Emerson’s anti-associationism, must be taken in context. As Barbara Packer describes, Emerson’s insistence on aversion from society grows out of an immediate social context marked by extreme timidity and apparently self-policed stifling of non-conforming opinions. Arguing for the equality of contexts
just as Thoreau will when he writes, “I walk out into a Nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in” (“Walking,” 339), Emerson’s sweeping of all of life’s stations into common divinity is meant to be liberating, not to reinforce the status quo. A key to this liberation is that for Emerson no place or position can be settled when engaged earnestly.

Beyond these social contexts, Cameron’s critique functions by removing Emerson’s descriptions of impersonality from of the condition of polarity that envelops and contextualizes all of his images, eliding the repetitive bathos of his essays and treating his invocations of the impersonal sweep as if they were the only definitions he offers of human being, when they are rather, as I read them, descriptions of intense experiences that mark the furthest point of the polar swing. “Whilst it blooms,” he says, of the company of the holy sentiment, “I will keep the sabbath time and suspend my gloom” (EL 508). Why read in this the total suspension of gloom? Sabbath time is only possible in relation to the week of work it punctuates; it is a station in a calendar, not a continuous experience. Suspension is an aesthetic gesture. It is also an occurrence at the point where an inhalation becomes an exhalation. But this pairing is absent from Cameron’s critique, I think because she takes him as maintaining the impersonal as the higher value, the greater truth, the “real.” But I read Emerson as acknowledging the error of this youthful dream of a Platonic realm of ideas in painting a scalable pyramid of experience, reinvesting the brief sensation of impersonal expansion in a fabric less hierarchically ordered. Perhaps too, the omission of polarity is a function of Cameron’s broader investigation of impersonality, the Emersonian variety occupying only two of seven chapters that are “concerned with the uncompromising nature of writing about the precariousness of personal identity measured at the moment of its disintegration” (Impersonality ix). Impersonal experience—as
disintegration of identity—is not “uncompromising” in Emerson’s account, but part of a weather system of emergence and retreat that conditions the change in a person over time. In fact the polarity he describes continually compromises the completeness of his images of transcendent suspension. If the impersonal as a name for the “interminable oceans” that lie beyond all our categories is imagined to be uncompromising, the experience of “arrival” at those shores, in the way Emerson proposes this experience should fold into our daily life, is something else. There are different variants of impersonal experience in Emerson, belonging to both extremities and ordinary hours.

If the final disintegration of the self is not an event that ever actually occurs in Emerson’s writing, it is true that his essays do contain many visions of a complete success, declarations of the overarching unity of being—prophetic “ravishments”—as Cameron points out, drawing the language from “The Poet.” But just as Wallace Stevens’s Noble Rider does not remain on his chariot circling the sky in Plato’s images, but drops from that exciting figure back to the ground of the actual world, so too does Emerson continually find himself back in the personal. Even in the more idealistic Nature, written when, according to Cavell’s periodization, Emerson still imagined skepticism was solvable, an oscillation is presented. The sky loses its grandeur in times of loss, and the “axis of vision” loses its “coincidence” with the “axis of things” (EL 47). The interest of impersonality is not as a truth that negates the existence of personality, but its relation to personality as the place where are always finding ourselves. Emersonian impersonality then stands for the expanse beyond personality that helps keep personhood mobile, keeps the drag from becoming a full stop, as we find ourselves now, and again now, on a further stair. This mobility characterizes the conceptual shift of the environment of our thinking in self-reflection.
and self-direction. Finding that environment has everything to do with experiencing fluidity.

With Branka Arsić, I read Emerson’s image of the “owning” of impersonality as something that does not barbarously grasp what is beyond the self, or brutally dissociate from what should be properly owned (in private loss), but as a figure for thought as a kind of phreatic event: the upswelling of groundwaters in one's particular plot of land and the acceptance of this fluidity as one’s own. This can only be felt if we allow subjective interiority to decouple conceptually from property in one’s body, to appreciate that the circumference of the individual is a membrane across which the primary direction might in fact be incursion. In *On Leaving* (Harvard UP, 2010), Arsić writes, “Emerson advances an idea of impersonal thinking and … such a thinking constitutes the interiority of the ‘I’ rather than being constituted by it. Because of that, the external, the outside, and the communal assume fundamental importance in his image of thought” (59). Taken from this direction, to “own” is to recognize this thinking within one’s own interiority, which is, I think, precisely the action that Emerson repeatedly describes as the ingress, by secret door or subterranean channel, of the universe into the individual. What is at stake in this ingress, according to Arsić, is the navigation of “medial personality,” a personality always becoming, subject to transformation. This “medial” situation is not an either/or:

Emerson is not proposing a radical choice: either persons or the impersonal. Both of these concepts understood in their purity are futile and differ from what he is saying. … The point is rather that Emerson is offering a diagnosis with the precision of a phenomenologist, a diagnosis that, in fact, may affect him too … Persons are made of many impersonal influences that transform them, making them different persons. (73)
Diagnosed as a phenomenon, the incursion of impersonal influences into the relative coherence of any personal identity, a person is something like a situation of encounter. What is at stake is an “ethics of reading” the incursions (73), a “meeting-place,” to invoke Muriel Rukeyser’s key phrase, of the voluntary and the involuntary. An Emersonian practice of thinking selfhood is to be configured around a commitment to suffer that meeting, and to accept the transformation it implies: a commitment to its waves. In order to suffer that meeting, however, one has to first learn to perceive its happening or register its traces. This perception occurs for Emerson in a series of image processes: the observation of the image as it rises up, the use of the image as a vehicle through which to hold a thought, and the testing and possible transformation of the image as it runs a course through a stream of thought. It is this sequence of image work that recurs in somatic work, and through this sequence I see a relationship between the two projects, which I will now attempt to present.

3. MY LIFE AS A BODY or I WAS A HOUSE FOUNDED ON THE SEA

3.1 PICTURES OF ME

In the re-calibrated conceptual environment that Emerson asks us to navigate—an environment structured without the dualisms of owner/renter, mind/body, or subject/object—the key image is the picture of a self. This picture is never fixed, and its variations are not always commensurate. One way to read Emerson’s essays is as a series of ways to picture a self—as image work. In the varieties of self-pictures that they give, and the picture of existing in this condition of variety, his essays anticipate contemporary conversations in relational philosophy.
around the un-containedness of subjectivity. Much of the recent scholarship in the revival of Emerson since Cavell has focused on the paradoxical and challenging sense of subjectivity offered in his essays, complicating the meaning of this figure whose popular short-hand designation remains the champion of individualism. In their introduction to *The Other Emerson*, a volume of essays that in large part stakes itself on this challenge, editors Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe trace the history of scholarship on Emersonian subjectivity as moving from an account of stasis and completion (in Chapman, Whicher, and Paul), to transition, disfiguration, and transformation (in Cavell), to absence, fluctuation, or porousness (in Cameron, Goodman, and Arsić). Opening their introduction by citing the sense of vertigo entailed by the opening question of “Experience,” they describe the present approaches to Emerson as invested in a drawing out of his resistance to what is commonly connoted by individualism.

The corrective emphasis on openness and the warranted insistence upon acknowledging a vagueness at defining limits of selfhood risks the omission of the continuing presence of a self and of Emerson’s engagement in suffering openness as a means of experiencing selfhood as “part and particle” of nature. In this respect, I appreciate Barbara Packer’s sensitivity to the sequences of Emerson’s essays and the way each series forms a kind of song cycle. She takes seriously the “series” in the names of the collections, retaining a feeling for the durational aspect of reading. In

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51 I am thinking of thinking of the line of inquiry of Judith Butler, for example in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham UP, 2005) that develops her investigation of the imposition of norms into the relational nature of subjectivity, positing selfhood as comprised of relations rather than a knowable, possessed interiority. But she also develops this line of porous non-possession into relationships to the larger world, asking “who am I without you?” See “Violence, Mourning, Politics” in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2006). Although I doubt Butler would see herself as in conversation with Emerson, she does seem to be developing a line of thought from William James that individual consciousness (and so identity) is part of a transitive and continuous field: “What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and hardly begin to analyze. The collective and distributive ways of being coexist here, for each part functions distinctly, makes connexion with its own peculiar region in the still wider rest of experience” (*A Pluralistic Universe*, 761-2). Emerson’s alterity is significantly more cosmic than social, but each of these thinkers offer fertile ground for a consideration of individuality as fundamentally grounded in a state of uncontainment.
particular, within the *Second Series* she notes that the exaltations that open the series in “The Poet” are meant to be followed by not only the disappointments of “Experience” but also the emergence in that essay of “the middle way” as an approach to living through the both exalting and violent exposure to change, a workable project reiterated, as she sees it, in his later essay on Montaigne, where he offers the image of a “[house] founded on the sea” as a figure for the self.52

Approaching Emerson’s essays from the standpoint of creative education and active engagement in making things, I find myself following the circuit past his horizontal vistas of openness and exposure back to the coherence of a body or “this thought which is called I” (EL 196) that is actually doing something. That is, I find myself asking about what Emerson has to say about the role of exposed experience in the ongoing experience of embodied personhood, specifically of a person who identifies herself through work: through doing or making. Work in Emerson becomes a kind of estuarial space, the meeting of the house and the sea, a relatively defined area in which to mark both the influx of external currents of intelligence, and the outflow, or “publication” in the particular products of particular character. In work, a self is built and comes to be known: “Do your work and I shall know you” (EL 264).

3.2 BUILDING OPEN HOUSES

While the language of “construction” tends to carry a negative valence in its critical use, implicating the coercive power of socially prescribed constructions of both identity and normative values, Emerson’s tuition to the individual is to engage in the construction of a selfhood checked in confidence by the acknowledgement of limits of control and self-possession, 52 See her section on Montaigne in *Emerson's Fall*, beginning on p. 199.
but also appraised of the potential to participate actively in what is beyond those limits. Construction, or “building,” as he has it in the proto-Heideggarian language of “Fate,” involves a meeting point between two extremes: “The whole world is the flux of matter over the wires of thought to the poles or points where it would build” (EL 964-5). Emerson does not describe the constructed self prescriptively. Rather he asks his readers to identify with images at the extreme ranges of what could be considered a self—the “flux of matter” and the “wires of thought” without specifying the point at which the building happens. Owning this range—taking it as personally available—offers a security against the deadening effect of conformity which is figured as an ossified narrowness against nature’s expanse.

Within that range, which is shared, the individual remains a unique and unpredictable note, or chord in an untempered scale. So while there is something idiosyncratic and always new in the realized person, what doesn’t change, for Emerson, is the vast scale of identifications and relations that all persons can experience and from which each person’s particularity emerges as a point of building. He protests social conformity for its imaginative limitation of this range through conventions, proprieties, cheap addictions, oppressions and enslavements. The scale of possible identifications that he would have his reader imagine proceeds from the most infinitesimal and even abased materialities to identification with God or otherwise described unities—weeds to weather, from the steel filing to the principle of magnetism. His essays offer an imaginative exposure to these scales, a chance to acknowledge a continuity of which we cannot know the extremes. Exhilarated and chastened, the reader is pointed back to her work to integrate that exposure.

Emerson’s imaginative exposures, if felicitous, work dramatically on his reader’s
empathy, pulling that reader out of a person-sized, volitional sense of self. Readers discover the “occult relations between man and vegetable,” relations “ministered” by the woods and also ministered by these essays (EL 11); readers also discover “the background of our being … an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed,” which in its pouring through us, as a light, “makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all” (386-7). Or, in the memorable phrase of “Circles,” the imaginatively exposed reader can think himself into dramatic oscillations of scale, alongside Emerson: “I am God in Nature; I am a weed by the wall” (406). Skating somewhere in the middle of these two images, falling and recovering, the essays offer a reader, entertaining radically re-scaled identifications, images of a self as a vessel that can be steered through the process of work in ways that keep, as he has it in one figure, one side open, exposed (386). So it is with the image of a house founded on the sea. This guided, even ceremonial experience of exposure, is part of the work of these essays—they are Emerson’s effort at sacred texts that instruct not by argument but by intense feeling. The intensity is rendered, I think, by the expansive charge to identify with the continuity of matter, by understanding “the natural history” of the thinking self.

This intense feeling—or romance—is supposed to renew each reader’s commitment to (by a sense of belonging) and capacity for (by the discovery of new powers of action) doing her work, and the ways in which different kinds of work cultivate different kinds of exposure and receptivity is part of the logic of Emerson’s sequence of topics. Proper work is a project that Emerson repeatedly, from “The American Scholar” on, attempts to rescue from pre-existing social value judgments. Revisiting the question in “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson proposes that each

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53 I must note here that “falling and recovering” is the basic principle of movement explored by Doris Humphrey, one of the founders of American modern dance. The exploration of falling and recovering has been preserved in the lineage that extends from Humphrey into Limón Technique and Varone Technique, both of which were an important context of my own dance training.
individual offers a unique channel to the flow of universal being, and that one’s work is first determined by discovering the particular capacities of those channels, and then carried out through obedience to their potentiality. He opposes this obedience to a mere social obedience, or conformity, which chooses to perform work that has taken its valuation from a calcified and timid society. Rather, a person discovers his proper work by respecting the “identical nature” (one of Emerson’s names for the impersonal) that not only flows through his particular channels, but which cut those channels in the first place, not out of design but out of the unpredictable chance recombinations and attractions that characterize natural process.

Thus “character” is frequently a verb for Emerson, an action of the digging of channels, as well as a name for the power that comes through those channels. (This sense is present in the Greek root of the word which means to engrave or cut a mark.) “Virtue is the adherence in action to the nature of things,” he writes in a Lucretian echo, continuing, “Let us acquiesce. Let us take our bloated nothingness out of the path of the divine circuits. Let us unlearn our wisdom of the world” (320). Having unlearned the false wisdom that blocks “the divine circuits,” the person achieves a kind of transparency, and learns “to make daylight shine through him, to suffer the law to traverse his whole being without obstruction, so that, on what point soever of his doing your eye falls, it shall report truly of his character, whether it be his diet, his house, his religious forms, his society, his mirth, his opposition” (321). The result of this traversal of light as law would be not consolidation but better action, action that proceeds from the “immense intelligence” of nature and not the “paltry” one of the willful individual: “The rich mind lies in the sun and sleeps, and is Nature. To think is to act” (322).

This particular sequence—of unblocking habits in order to discover and maintain better
circuits, rendering thinking action and action thinking—is also the progression of the somatic study advanced by both Todd and Alexander. My own physical training and experiential research is grounded in Ideokinesis and BMC, so I will concentrate my reading through that work as I explore the relationship between Emerson's images and somatic work.

3.3 MEET MABEL ELSWORTH TODD

Given that Mabel Todd is an unfamiliar figure outside dance and somatic practices, it is worth offering some lengthy passages to introduce her here. In addition to a number of articles published in medical journals, Todd wrote two books addressed to a broader public: The Thinking Body (Dance Horizons), published in 1937 and offering an overview of her image work known as “natural posture,” and The Hidden You: What you are and what to do about it (Dance Horizons), written at the end of her career and published posthumously in 1953. As Barbara Clark, a protégé of Todd’s who carried her work forward, describes in her narrative history of her own studies with Todd, The Hidden You shows Todd’s turn away from a focus on the specifics of her lessons, and toward an effort to situate her work within the philosophical concerns of the age. This disappointed Clark, who preferred the detail and immediate application of the lessons. But Todd’s philosophical prose—broad, demanding, and urgent, making universal claims yet tied to beliefs derived from specific physical practice—offers an excellent transition from Emerson’s images to the image work of somatics.

The Hidden You reads like a rewriting of Emerson’s “Fate” in the psycho-physical idiom of the early twentieth century. Like Emerson, her central concern is polarity, which she describes
as a struggle for balance. Like Emerson, she wants to make her reader aware that health is a function of continuous movement, and that rigid holdings are undermined by the restless energy of matter under the play of forces that make up the living world:

Our behavior has been developed through the ages by our incessant movements toward survival in our world. This world has been changing and we with it, and you and I continue to evolve as we move with these changes.

Everything moves. Through movement the universe evolved. Through movement man evolved. The machinery of motion is life itself. To understand one would be to understand the other. Through observation of movement man has discovered nature’s laws and has learned to interpret his world.

Life is a continuous stream of energy, its forces molding and remolding the inner mechanisms of man. (15)

The observation of movement available to any individual is aggregated through scientific community to reveal natural laws. Like Emerson, Todd is comfortable with the continuous relation between individual observation, the authority of science, and identity of these discoveries with a ceaseless movement that in its fulness is what Emerson calls “unity”:

Science has now produced evidence that man is composed of impulses of energy seeking balance.

The one great eternal is motion. Call it life, spirit, electricity, God—what you like! There it is, facing you. Untiring, eternal movement—a constant search for equilibrium! There can be no fixity in a universe of such incessant motion. Movement is persistent, and balances must be struck. (15)
Images of balancing processes arising from explorations with physical balance (in the body or in other built structures) are easily analogized by Todd to psychological patterns, reiterating the intuition of continuity between physical and moral law that Emerson shares with Madame de Staël. Writing in the key of the twentieth century, Todd is particularly attuned to strain and anxiety:

New balances must be found when a change in velocity or direction of forces takes place, either within ourselves or without. One of our greatest needs is to understand our own emotional velocities and the changes they bring about in the direction of movement. Thus we may learn to inhibit less, to guide more.

All forces act in opposition to each other to hold the objective universe together. When an object seems to be still, its active forces are really in balance.

[...]

Heraclitus, as far back as 500 B.C., expressed a fundamental truth in the statement: “Everything moves.”

You think of this in terms of mechanics and physics and as having no bearing upon your individual life. But universal forces operate upon human structures as upon inanimate structures. These forces make you a different size morning and evening as your living substances seek new balances to meet the strains of the day… (16-17)

Like Emerson, Todd takes pattern or law, as evidence of divine intelligence. And so she too views science as a tool to experience better the world’s intelligence:

The orderliness of the universe is due to the interplay of forces. … Movement in
man is the proof of life. Organized movement is the proof of God’s intelligence in evolving orderly behavior in the cosmos, and orderly movement in the highest form of life: the human being.

In the science of motion lies the key to better understanding … Only through science can man acquaint himself with cosmic intelligence. (17)

And yet scientific understanding alone is not enough; there is a reciprocal imperative. We need to “change our thinking” and to “incorporate into our feelings the findings of modern science!” This incorporation synthesizes the analytical findings of science “for the purpose of more intelligent living” (19). This requires application at the most basic unit of coordination: the cell. “The orchestration of these [cellular] intelligences is the integration of the individual. The salient characteristic of living protoplasm is constant cellular activity, with its ceaseless chemical change” (22).

Here, Todd can be felt to echo Emerson’s identifications of persons with minute physical processes, especially in his continual references to magnetism and to polarity as the universal law. But Todd moves their shared cosmic images toward specific practice, because her work is actually directed toward cellular activity, not just cellular images. It will take another two generations of somatic practice to generate a technique of cellular integration, in Body-Mind Centering. But Todd’s basic insight—that there is a feedback channel between larger-scale processes that we can more easily perceive, and cellular activity—is already intact, and underwrites her choice to use imagery supplemented by touch as the vehicle of her work, which seeks to change the tissues of her students’ bodies.

Todd’s lessons were primarily conducted as what she called “table work.” During table
work, the student lies on a table, often on her side, and the teacher combines informational touch (assisting with the location of physical features) with guided imagery that the student is to embody. Although the student is lying down, the work is being done by her and not to her. The touch, not massage but something more like a tactile aid to proprioceptive mapping, is intended to help link pictures with flesh, nerves, and bone. This mapping produces pictures. Todd’s insight during her own recovery from a paralyzing accident (as a young woman she was in an accident and told she would not be able to walk again, but accomplished a full physical return by devising her own therapy) was that images, whole pictures, could function as parallels to the coordination that bodies routinely employ in any gross motor action or unconscious physical function. Noticing that picturing was a constant and unremarkable part of moving, she sought to take control of movement by beginning with healthy pictures: “That we act as a whole and in response to our sensations, feelings, thoughts, and memories makes what we entertain in our imagination important. Do we entertain constructive, forward-moving pictures of action? … Think action, and action will take place” (24). She knew from her own recovery that it was possible to project oneself, through these entertained images, toward a better-functioning body and that the body’s action is thoughtful: “We become what we think about. We are not what we think we are, but what we are thinking—what we have thought for so long a time that it has entered the unconscious realm of behavior and we are unaware of its existence” (31). The “we” that Todd refers to here is not a group of contemporary individuals or readers, but the “we” of an accumulated evolutionary history leading to (and beyond) human bodies.

“Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will, namely, the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life,” wrote Emerson (EL 482). Todd
reiterates the thought in relation to the power of the body to move: “What makes you move? The desired picture of movement in your imagination … Your intention prepares deep reflexes over which you have no direct control, except the intention to set your picture of movement in motion … These nerve reflexes … function with an intelligence far more fundamental than any direction which you could consciously make to measure a time-space movement” (31). For Todd, it is the interference of human will and little-minded propriety that wrenches the harmony between these “pictures of action” and the vast reflexive intelligence of a body in motion. In particular, mistaken imposition of rigid moral codes of behavior inhibit and drain bodily intelligence in human society, sapping energy and producing strain. If animals do not suffer this “false education,” however, neither can they use the great instrument of directed imagery, conscious use of the imagination to recondition the body, as both a renewal and a return to human natural history as collected in the astonishingly complex organism of the human body.

By converting general descriptions to a physical context, Todd offers an exemplary continuation of Emerson’s work into action. She builds insights that resonate with Emerson’s own toward projects that he envisions but does not find present at hand. We could even say that Todd begins to figure out how to make “manipular attempts to realize the world of thought”—something Emerson declares he has not seen any gain from—by reconsidering how, literally, to engage the hands in relation to the world of thought, by backing off from manipulation and instead engaging communicative touch to support the embodiment of natural patterns to achieve “natural posture.”
3.4 SOMATIC IMAGE WORK AS PRAXIS

All somatic work depends heavily upon the use of imagery that arises from the perception of body patterns in the work of deep listening (used as a metaphor for all forms of attention) to sensory information. Anyone attending to their body will become aware of the constancy of its movement across all scales, from cellular “breathing” (their exchanges across membranes) to the large muscular coordinations that produce both movement and relative stillness. Todd’s images and those developed by her inheritors are all images of moving pathways. Todd’s focus is primarily mechanical, focusing on the transfer and holding of weight through the skeletal system. She emphasizes the degree to which humans share the same responses to gravity as both other creatures and other material structures. Gravity is our condition and there is only hope for humans, she might say, if they can adequately respond to and transfer that force. Practical, action-oriented, and directed at bodily wellness as an essential resistance to what Thoreau named our “quiet desperation” and Todd describes as our “strains,” her work can be seen as taking up the same insights that guide Emerson’s natural theology, within the arena of the human body. She too seeks to “get our bloated nothingness out of the path of the divine circuits,” imaging that circuitry within a map of the body.

This project is not one of simple negation, but rather discovery of, and obedience to, powerful connective pathways that are not immediately perceptible. This discovery then leads not to nihilism but to creation. As Laura Dassow Walls describes in *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Cornell UP, 2003), in the natural theological perspective that Emerson shared with Bacon and Coleridge among others, ideas of obedience and freedom were yoked
together, a duality characteristic of modernism and central to the hope that man both receives and makes law: “The double metaphor of organicism is … modernism’s icon, holding its deep paradoxes in restless suspension. We submit as organs of the transcendent whole; we command as agents of transcendence. By folding the two into mutually exclusive sides of a single process, we can be said to discover our truths and to make them too, to construct a nature and to submit to nature’s transcendence” (123). Walls goes on to identify the instances of felicity in Emerson’s “marvelous hybrid” of agency and material obedience as ecstatic, a going out of the self to see the self (which is Emerson’s description of intellect’s making an object of itself, or the impersonal action of thought).

What makes Emerson’s descriptions of intelligence feel consonant with my experience (in a way that natural theology in general does not, with its anthropocentric rationalization of technological intelligence as law-making) is the intuition, grown from my own experience of somatic work, that if we take up physically the challenge of radical empiricism, we discover that obedience and freedom may not in fact be “mutually exclusive sides of a single process.” I don’t reject Walls’s characterization of Emerson’s science as this kind of Janus-faced binding, but rather suggest that there is latent in Emerson’s descriptions something that points beyond this “polar dualism” to a hybridity not conceptualized as a paradox, but as a both/and condition. Although the conceptual vocabulary of natural theology—of divine law patterning all nature—pervades Emerson’s work across the span of his life, there coexists in his essays a second sense of the relationship between law (that which characters) and matter (that which is characterized) which is not so neatly hierarchical.

These latencies percolate to the surface in essays like “Experience” and come to
expression as they feed forward into William James’s work. In our own time, work on cognition strengthens this non-essentialist, non-hierarchical approach to hybridity. For example, both Daniel Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter have offered descriptions of mind that deal with material and conceptual aspects of thinking as a nested series of networks that couple biological determinism (the yes/no switch of syntactical firing) with the capacity to model, abstract, reflect, and choose, that is, to exercise what we classically call “free will.” Instead of considering determinism and freedom to be mutually exclusive, and so their coexistence in the brain a paradox, both describe networks of networks, effecting each other with both upward and downward causality (to and from higher-order patterns or “laws”). Additionally, neither draws a bright line between human and nonhuman capacities for the elements that make up our self-awareness and language capabilities. In this sense they build on what Gregory Bateson set out in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*: that modeling, calculation, and other forms of thinking that we have traditionally segregated from intelligence and named “instinct,” can be seen across nature.\(^5\)

Somatics develops the pairing of obedience and freedom in ways specific to our (human) bodily experience and physical intelligence. The body is a source for knowledge of patterns, but images can be intentionally applied and embodied to remake or retune these patterns. These images are not simply applied at whim, however, but arise in the first place through the recognition of material analogy. In the feedback loop of re-education and the increase of strength and capacity that occurs in somatic work, there is a reciprocity between virtuality and physicality that becomes obvious insofar as it works: change happens. Bodies undergo therapeutic

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\(^5\) The computational nature of natural process is explored in Leslie Valiant’s *Probably Approximately Correct: Nature’s Algorithms for Learning and Prospering in a Complex World*. (Basic Books, 2013.)
renovation, and find new and surprising expressive capacities.

Critically, this reciprocity is not something that functions only in ecstatic moments of clarity; it is something that can be approached, *practiced*, worked at. Indeed, although there are therapeutic applications that might have a physical goal in mind, somatic work is generally approached as an ongoing, continually renewing practice, a “series of which we do not know the extremes.” Emerson’s exhortations sometimes seem far from this dailiness, as he charges his reader-respondents with monumentally abstract tasks. How, for example, is a reader actually supposed to go forward with the project of discovering power in the “sharing of the nature of the world,” or get “in sympathy with the course of things,” or “[p]lace [oneself] in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats” (309)? But despite the magnificence of these ambitions, calls to dailiness and examples of practice structures, like Emerson’s journaling and Thoreau’s walking, are also spread across the essays. Committing to some kind of daily practice is the only practical response to his calls.

Arsić too argues that Emerson is a philosopher of praxis, aligning his “practical power” with the kind of praxis called for by Karl Marx, in which the material and ideal combine to combat alienation and work becomes “human” again. “When contemplation traverses work,” she writes, “labor becomes a sensuous activity that sublates the distinction between subject and object” (*Leaving* 84). She goes so far as to advance Emerson as an earlier diagnostician of the problems modernity presents to human life than those continental figures traditionally assigned to the role, such as Marx, Baudelaire (in the narrative advanced by Walter Benjamin), Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. The practice that Emerson proposes, says Arsić, is exactly the encounter between the material and ideal that Marx describes as a return to sensuous, meaningful labor.
Rather than reading it as proto-pragmatic, she commits to transcendence, here not a transcendence into the ideal plane, but a transcendence as confluence of the subject-object division through a “happy romance” of genius and power. “In a happy hour,” she writes, invoking one of Emerson’s descriptions of felicitous confluence, “the material hand touches the immaterial” (84). What characterizes the newness that Emerson’s European readers recognized and responded to, she says, is “precisely this idea of attachments to the world through a new hand that restores without being appropriative, and of a thought that thinks within rather than against things, since that is what overcomes the metaphysical divide between subject and object” (85). This description strikingly recalls Hanna’s definition of somatics as the study of the body experienced from within its life processes. In fact this restorative touch and thinking-within coincides with the modalities of Todd’s Natural Posture and its evolution into Body-Mind Centering, as it combines touch and image work to receive, redirect, and transformatively embody the cognitive, objective thinking of analogy, conjoining metaphorical abstraction and tactile materiality in a new health.

4. IMPERSONALITY, NATURAL HISTORY, EMBODIMENT

4.1. NATURAL HISTORY AS THE IT-SELF

I want to think of the impersonal not as something outside the person, but as what constitutes the onwardness, the growth, of a person. Approached through the modality of somatic work, Emersonian impersonality is found in the process of embodiment. So we could say that the embodiment of an idea or image identified within somatic work is a specific realization of
impersonal power. This realization, like the one described in the end of “Experience,” is a “true romance,” a joining and blending through mutual attraction, of personal power (as consciously directed thought and action) and natural history (the resource and home of the body). Personal and impersonal power here reveal themselves as forming a loop—a “strange loop” in Hofstadter’s phrase. Before thinking more thoroughly about the process of embodiment, let me expand this figure of the loop.

In my first chapter, I introduced Herwig Friedl’s exploration of the consonance of ideas of power in Emerson and Nietzsche, and his assertion that these two thinkers, beginning with Emerson and recognized and developed in Nietzsche’s reading of Emerson, represent a moment of epochal shift in the history of philosophy that marks, at least in the West, the beginning (or really renewal, if we consider the pre-Socratics) of “process philosophy.” Like Arsić, Friedl sees Emerson’s relinquishment of traditional metaphysics (Arsić encapsulates that tradition as the idea that thought rests) in favor of an always moving way of thinking as the marker of this new epoch. In a phrase Friedl brings from Heidegger, this new epoch of thinking is not generated by a new idea but by a new “dispensation of Being.” Arsić names this new epoch as modernity. Friedl’s somewhat longer view leaves historical diagnoses aside, allowing for a reflection on epochs of thinking within ongoing “natural history.”

These “natural” shifts in thinking come not from personal power or thought, but from impersonal life: “changes in thinking that may constitute the beginning of an epoch occur because of the way the world or things reveal themselves and because of the way they are then seen before they are being questioned or answered.” The felicitous vision that Emerson and Nietzsche both possess in this telling, is a capacity to see the way the world reveals itself, not
with the existing conceptual instruments with which we carry on our questioning and answering, but within a vision that would exist more fundamentally than this language. Friedl continues, “This kind of ontological change is realized by thinkers as a new and basic intuition or vision provoked by Being rather than as fundamental assumptions or ideas simply and unaccountably generated and then held by subjects” (269). The realization being described here is what in Nature Emerson describes as the “coincidence” of the “axis of vision” with the “axis of things,” a coincidence that teaches “the language of facts” (EL 47).

Attending to this same shift in thinking as part of a “natural history of pragmatism,” Joan Richardson gives particular attention to the function of imagination within this coincidence of vision and things, and her work with Emerson’s images helps to deepen the connection between Emerson and the image-work engaged in somatic embodiment. She places Emerson in a tradition inclusive of both philosopher-theologians like Jonathan Edwards and scientists like Newton and Darwin—a tradition of examining the “attention of the mind in thinking,” in Edwards’s phrase, and attention to natural process in its working. She emphasizes Emerson’s ongoing project to discover what he describes as “the necessary and structural action of the human mind.” Through self-scrutiny, he finds that images are not devised by human minds but rather “rise up,”—producing a meeting-place of conscious language and nature through analogic images that seem to be sourced from beyond or below the deliberate intellect. In Friedl’s phrase, this rising up is “the way the world reveals itself.” In Cameron’s emphasis, this is impersonal intelligence. (To sound Todd’s refrain: “call it what you like … there it is facing you!”) Like Darwin, says Richardson, Emerson saw mind not as a metaphysical, transcendental power, but as part of natural history. Thus instead of taking up the economic thrust to convert nature into culture,
Emerson tries to “transform, reconvert, culture/language into nature” (NHP 79).

This reconversion is part of the circular loop through “fate,” “power,” and “history,” that Friedl singles out in “The American Scholar” as Emerson’s epoch-shifted intuition: “There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning to itself” (EL 55). This circular power needs no split between subject and object. Friedl interprets Emerson’s circularity: “Nature speaks and the thinker responds; Being reveals itself as both nature and mind, as and through a world of possible correspondences without origin or telos, without center or delimitation” (271). This intuition offers some relief to the tedious “problematization” of the relationship between body and language I have often encountered in thinkers who consider the body without actually engaging physical practice; being is both nature and mind—not a dualistic schism but, to recall Bateson’s phrase, “a necessary unity.”

We can assign to “person” the role of the collector and user—the entertainer of images—of the instruments fabricated from the rising up of images, the appearing and revealing of nature. We can maintain personal health by keeping in mind Emerson’s caution that we must always “suspect our instruments,” owing not to their faulty origin so much as our cultural habit of ossification, grasping and fixing. Taken in the context of this circular, looping image, the unsettlement produced by our necessary suspicion, the commitment Cavell singles out as “aversion,” we are not threatened with a devastating homelessness when seeking out our impersonal, but empowered to experience life as, in Friedl’s phrase, “a persistent, a continuous, a steady, self-grounding of [being]” (272). This circularity, a kind of relay of personality and impersonality, of vocabulary and nature’s renewing “language of facts,” is the basic movement
pattern of Emersonian self-culture—not at all that consolidation of property and identity that casual valences of “individualism” now suggest in our impoverished and vitriolic contemporary “talking America.”

Commitment to this circularity demands a commitment to our natural history, where being finds its ground. As Darwin shows, natural history is not a fixed past, but a continually evolving present that contains both inherited and modified structures and reflexes that combine to create our complex organisms. So a commitment to this natural history would also be a commitment to the unknown future of our own nature. Friedl writes:

The past of the self, what Emerson calls its ‘condition,’ may be read as fate or it may be read as acts, as a series of active participations. This implies, at the same time, that the self may be said to incorporate an alien other, an ‘it,’ which she or he may accept as a yet-to-be-acknowledged phase of self-hood. Returning into ‘it’-self, the human being may appropriate the alienated or forgotten other that usually shows itself as the natural history of the species. (emphasis added, 275)

This “it-self” is the impersonality each person can acknowledge, or “own” when it appears. Instead of “owning what is other,” the direction of the circle—the rising up of nature into patterns and the unsettling of provisional identification—suggests William James’s proposal when he says that we might say “it thinks” just as we say “it rains,” that we identify our thinking not as the created action of “I,” but as that of a vague and unpossessed “it” of which “I” is one of innumerable nodes or “hot spot[s]” (Principles 224).

In these terms, we can say that somatic work is a process of finding the “it-self” of the practitioner as one of innumerable bodies grown from a participation in elements of life that are
both alien and forgotten. The realization of somatic work, which is a therapeutically or expressively transformative embodiment of a pattern, is a realization of this ever-unfolding it-self through the grounding of the body—our natural history.

4.2 A HISTORY OF NATURAL MOVEMENT

Throughout the somatic literature from Todd to Bainbridge Cohen, we meet reference to natural processes, and find articulated the goal of recuperating the natural through activating developmental and evolutionary patterns. A practitioner of Body Mind Centering, Kate Tarlow Morgan offers a history of the idea of “the natural” in somatic work and physical education. The educational practices she cites, from Ruth Doig’s Rhythms Program developed in the 1920’s, to BMC’s Developmental Movement Patterning, grounded in Irmgard Bartenieff’s work and further explored by Bainbridge Cohen in the 1970’s, use the term “natural” to describe “what comes naturally and without direct instruction … that which we do not have to remember how to do” (“History of Rhythms,” 269). Linked to an array of progressive educational practices as broad as Dewey’s ideas for democratic education, the Physical Culture movement that equated physical and mental wellness, urban architectural reforms requiring more air and light in tenements, the loosening of Victorian restrictive clothing, the work of Todd, Alexander, as well as Dalcroze and Steiner, and the birth of Modern Dance as it left the rigid verticality of Ballet in favor of a movement developed from the natural curves of the spine and the body falling and recovering within (and not against) the condition of gravity, Morgan describes the lineage that runs between
Doing’s Rhythms and BMC as based in an effort both to remember and embody the natural stages of development in childhood movement—learning by doing what is natural. Ruth Doing was particularly inspired by Ernst Haeckel’s theory that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” and built her rhythms lessons around the idea of evolutionary recapitulation (of the fish stage, the bird stage…). Although the specific understanding of that recapitulation has shifted away from Haeckel’s genetic suppositions, BMC involves practicing a recapitulative series of evolutionary movement organizations from pre-vertebrate movement patterns of vibration, sponging and navel radiation, to vertebrate patterns of spinal articulation, homologous movement around the midline, homolateral movement of coordinated body sides, and contralateral patterns across body diagonals that underly gross coordinations like walking. These natural movement patterns are discovered by allowing bodies to show themselves learning, and arise naturally by allowing young bodies to move in an environment without intervention. Much of Bainbridge Cohen’s early work came from working with young bodies experiencing a disruption of normal development due to illness, and she eventually came to hold that missed embodiments of individual developmental patterns could underlie adult physical and emotional disabilities, or what Todd would call “our strains.” Thus part of the work in BMC is a recuperation of the experiential intelligence of the movement patterns developed in the first year of life. Todd too was actively working against developmental physical interventions, specifically the social imposition of rigid verticality and the suppression of activity and noise in the well-behaved child. And as we recall, Todd described her work as “natural posture” before the term “Ideokinesis” came to be identified with her particular method of approaching the natural by entertaining images. But consistent across all these methods is a vocabulary developed through the
Whereas Doing was structuring a classroom that allowed children to experience a kind of movement freedom that would maximize natural movement and ward off repressive “unnatural” restraints in the developing intelligence of the child, Body-Mind Centering is often practiced by adults engaging in a recuperation of childhood patterns. In this recuperation, BMC recalls what Richardson describes as Emerson’s effort to convert culture to nature. Bainbridge Cohen terms this conversion or return, “embodiment.”

4.3 THE PROCESS OF EMBODIMENT IN BMC

In Bainbridge Cohen’s descriptive lineage of BMC, which lists 32 different teachers, experiences, or studies that contributed to her particular education, she writes, “Andre Bernard and Barbara Clark, in the tradition of Mabel Elsworth Todd, taught me a system of neuromuscular reeducation. They carefully let me into my skeletal structure and brought forth great clarity and a sense of personal knowing with effortlessness and gentleness. From them I learned how to embody the Western map of the skeleton through the use of touch and anatomical imagery” (Sensing 190). This process of embodiment is extended, in BMC, beyond the skeletal system into the entire range of body systems. Bainbridge Cohen describes the work done in BMC as a process of embodying different structures in a cyclical sequence of three steps. The structures to be embodied range across different body systems: organs, tissues, nervous, circulatory, lymphatic, and so on, as well as through a set of embryological processes.

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55 Vegetable movement is anything but still, and our “occult relations” seems less distant when their movement patterns can be studied in elapsed time. Darwin himself observed plants in “eating” and “waking” processes. A recent television documentary “What Plants Talk About” (Nature, April 3, 2013) provides astonishing time-lapse footage of plant roots in movement that, viewed in this new time frame, remarkably resemble animals.
The process of embodiment, in the terms of our Emersonian discussion, is a recuperation of, and resettling in, the body’s natural history. Cohen describes the cycle through three stages, invoking in her language a movement from self-awareness to direct experience, a transition I understand as a movement through the personal (the I who thinks) into the impersonal (the body I am). (William James describes a similar sequence when he says that paying attention to the stream of thought, he realizes it consists chiefly in a stream of breath: “The “I think” which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the “I breathe” which actually does accompany them” (“Does Consciousness Exist?” 37).) The first stage is visualization, “the process by which the brain imagines aspects of the body and, in so doing, informs the body that it (the body) exists.” In visualization, she explains, the practitioner acts as her own guide: “after looking at a picture of a particular structure in the body, hold the image in mind as you search to become aware of that part of your body (inner kinesthetic vision).” The second stage is somaticization, “the process by which the kinesthetic (movement), proprioceptive (position) and tactile (touch) sensory systems inform the body that it (the body) exists.” In somaticization, there is not a guide directing the action, but instead a “witness, an inner awareness of the process.” In somaticization the practitioner becomes aware of what is happening in a part of the body, or initiates movement from that part of the body in order to become aware of it. In the third stage of the cycle, embodiment, the awareness no longer rests in the personal mind, but is released to the intelligence of the body. Having awoken, or activated a part of the body through a directed process, stepped away from a controlling role by trading direction for witnessing, embodiment is the stage where the body resource in question is recuperated, and acts on its own behalf. Bainbridge Cohen writes:
Embodiment is the cells’ awareness of themselves. *You let go of your conscious mapping.* It is a direct experience; there are no intermediary steps or translations. There is no guide, no witness. There is the fully known consciousness of the experienced moment initiated from the cells themselves. In this instance, the brain is the last to know. There is complete knowing. There is peaceful comprehension. Out of this embodiment process emerges feeling, thinking, witnessing, understanding. The source for this process is love. (190)

It is striking to me how much this description of embodied knowing recalls Emerson’s description of our being as “resting in the lap of an immense intelligence.” The immense intelligence here is not encountered as the mind of god or all of nature, but as the body’s astonishing multiplicity of cells that combine into tissues that combine into systems that combine to produce, among other things, “feeling, thinking, witnessing, understanding,” —or we could say, the things we like to take personally. Drawn onward by love (or Cavell's “attraction”) into embodiment as practical power, the transforming body of the BMC practitioner experiences medial selfhood.

5. EXPERIENCING IMMENSE INTELLIGENCE AS A PHYSICAL HERITAGE

5.1 MORE THAN LANGUAGE

In my first chapter, I discussed the connotations of Emerson’s descriptions of intelligence as something we rest in, arguing that throughout his sustained call to skepticism toward our instruments of calculation, he records recurring experiences of intelligence as an ingress from
below or behind the eyes, and describes this intelligence as an experience of fulness and belonging, the key to participation in nature. In “Self-Reliance” this intelligence is figured as a lap in which we lie, invoking a maternal image that points back to the common origin, prior to individuation of persons or even cells, that each body shares with its parental and ancestral sources. Cavell, in the vein of Heidegger’s claim that “language is the house of being,” takes this “intelligence” to mean language (ETE 140). But although I find Cavell’s etudes intimately compelling, as he works his way through Emerson’s language for its resonances, its charges, and its claim on his reader as a kind of inheritance, I find this a too-narrow circumscription of the intelligence that I, like Friedl, prefer to think of as our natural history. Language is not the only trans-historical inheritance in which our thinking is grounded, and indeed the capabilities that make our participation in language possible do not emerge out of air, or out of reason, or out of some ineffable thing that separates the human from the rest of nature, but from our bodies and our situation in an environment we must navigate in order to sustain ourselves. Studies of infant development, for example, show that our earliest capacity to model—to recognize types of things—arises in the mouth, not as speech but as tactile modeling.\(^{56}\) Thus the body underlies the representative action that is so marvelously held and shared in language, just as language needs excitement to be meaningful, moving. This tactile energy that joins with conceptual clarity is described by Emerson as “fasten[ing] words to things.” In relation to this, recall Stein's fastening of that description to pleasure, countering the claim of someone's not having “gotten” the meaning of her writing by saying, that anything \textit{enjoyed} has been understood.

Emerson recognizes that physical conditions and forces form an inescapable layer of

\(^{56}\) For an accessible account of early tactile modeling within the developing intelligence in infant minds, see \textit{What’s Going On In There? How the Brain and Mind Develop in the First Five Years of Life}, by Lise Eliot (New York: Bantam, 2000).
human experience, but tends to use those recognitions as metaphors in service of the erosion of egotistical holdings. For example in “Nominalist and Realist” he writes:

The magnetism which arranges tribes and races in one polarity, is alone to be respected; the men are steel-filings. Yet we unjustly select a particle and say, ‘O steel-filing number one! what heart-drawings I feel to thee!… Let us go for universals; for the magnetism, not for the needles. Human life and its persons are poor empirical pretensions. (EL 577)

And in The Over-Soul:

Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descended into us from we know not whence…. I am constrained at every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.

As with events, so it is with thoughts. When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come. (EL 385)

But these magnetisms and this fluid nature are not simply metaphors—as Emerson knew from his reading in science, they are actual conditions of material bodies, impersonal because they form a condition that exceed any particular “thought which is called I.” Taking seriously Emerson’s location of human life as natural and in nature, and the fruits of human artifice as natural too, I find a latent claim in Emerson that the “immense intelligence” which constitutes being and meaningful belonging extends to all parts of our material intelligence, not just the
language parts.

Practices like BMC represent a rare attempt to take material intelligence seriously. Consider for example the different assumptions in the therapeutic approaches to depression of BMC and neuro-chemical medicine. Identifying an imbalance, BMC seeks to recuperate, through stimulation of natural patterning in action, the functioning of the body that promotes that balance. Medicine seeks to inhibit or shut off particular chemical productions, or artificially add to them. While there is emergency value in these interventions, these brain drugs strike me as a calculator’s approach to mental wellness. If nature really does “hate calculators” (EL 483), wouldn’t wellness more likely be sustained by allowing the body’s intelligence to emerge?

5.2 BODY Minded

One emphasis of BMC is the experience of the different “minds” of the different body systems. The practitioner takes a tour through the “immense intelligence” of the body, by bringing different systems, tissues, or movement patterns into focus through the process of visualization, somaticization, and embodiment. In embodiment the “mind” of each system is experienced directly, without intervention from the directing mind that we commonly designate as human intelligence. BMC situates human intelligence within an impersonal, extra-“human” intelligence, and looks for approaches to the experience of that wider mind.

It is a principle of BMC that every cell has mind, that cells as they combine into specific tissues and then to body systems, have differentiated minds, and thus that one’s own body can be approached as a vast, heterogeneous intelligence. (See Fig. 1 for a capsule of the different body
systems identified in BMC, and the broad attributes of the mind of those systems.) This mindedness is not defined by the capacity to reason, but rather by a much broader description of thinking: perception, choice, responsiveness, coordination of action. Finding the mind of each system is also a way into what Emerson might call a new mood, and these moods are surprising.

Of all the minds sought out, the “baseline” practice of BMC is “cellular consciousness” approached through attention to cellular breathing, or exchange across membranes. Bainbridge Cohen describes cellular consciousness as a purely present-tense mind in distinction to nervous system consciousness, which records and repeats experience and therefore holds what we know about how to move through the world. Coming into cellular consciousness involves an abandonment of nervous system consciousness. Recalling Emerson’s watery description of man as “a source whose stream is hidden,” Bainbridge Cohen describes cellular consciousness as directly linked to our natural history, the evolutionary history of cells, a primary location of the “circular power” that is always returning to itself:

It is the first organic pattern of living cells—the exchange of gasses through the ebb and flow of fluids passing through membranes. It is initially established within the earth’s oceans and continues within each of our cells immersed in the internal sea of our bodies. Through cellular breathing, we experience life force.”

(Sensing 161)

Beginning each session with attention to cellular breathing, the practice of BMC thus moves through a gesture of aversion, turning away from the accumulated forms of knowledge in order to try to experience the body in the present—a measure of “where … we find ourselves” on a
particular day.

From this baseline, a BMC lesson might move toward any of the body systems or developmental patterns, providing experience of different moods, or different minds. These different minds are experienced through the cyclical process described above, beginning with direct visualization of and touch or sounding into a body area, and moving toward embodiment. The different moods manifest physically as moving temperaments, and it is through the movement experience that this mind is felt, through physical actions that the “vocabulary” of this mind’s potential action (its “language of facts”) is recognized and then recorded in the nervous system and memory. In my own studio experience of BMC, where teachers have led lessons of a few hours focusing on a single organ, body system, or developmental pattern, I find myself moving very differently than I might characteristically move when I go into the studio. I discover “new and excellent region[s]” (EL 484), discover unfamiliar tonalities, or capacities to carry out movements I wouldn’t have thought myself capable of and wouldn’t have known how to approach intentionally.57 Not only do I experience an appreciation of the real power of a moving

57 One of the ways I have understood this experience of finding a strange mood in my body is in the way that different body systems carry different varieties of weightedness and see different possible avenues for action and relating to space. For example, my dance education tended to stress the muscular-skeletal system, with a priority on thinking geometrically about the lines of the skeleton and on understanding muscles primarily for their capacity to articulate or stabilize joints (as opposed to, for example, dealing with them as tissue or looking at the muscular relationship to the way habitual information is stored (and changed) in the fascia). Focusing on the skeleton suggests reliance on particular plumb lines of balance and options for movement, and in addition my particular interest in the shoulder girdle led me to experience those options as relating to directional ideas that followed the line or curve of the arm's bones, leading to an architecturally light and precise mood that emphasizes the formal scale of a body in a particular space and the extension, in a graphical or design sense, of line beyond the range of my own wingspan. As a counter-mood to this, I think of a session during my BMC studies, exploring the organ system and in particular movement initiated from the heart. In such an exploration, a class usually starts by lying on the floor and directing internal attention to the organ, with some information from the teacher about what the organ does in its basic function. Next, we would try to stimulate that region through touch or sound vibration, and that might be followed into movement patterns that also send vibration, pressure, or weight into that region. One of the ways to activate the region of the heart is to take a crawling position and pump minutely up and down, pushing through the palms of the hand into the floor or taking small lifts that land the palms onto the floor without any give in the elbows. The vibration or shock travels up the arms into the chest. After those preparatory stages, we would follow into movement explorations as soon as we felt our attention was fully shifted to the region we were trying to activate (to bring forward out of automatic functioning). In those heart explorations I distinctly recall a new overall tonality of my
body, but I also experience my body as something “strange and wholly new” (271), a “house founded on the sea” (696).

That the experience is both strange and natural—a surprise to who I think I am, but also a welcome discovery of what I am—signals its appropriateness as a venue for encountering the “circular power” that Emerson describes: a power that is both always leaving and always returning to itself. The impersonality recuperated in the practice of BMC is not a giddy projection of a massive abstraction, but rather an unsettling of body and person: a loosening and widening of personality through the expressive event of movement initiated from the intelligence of body tissues that go under-stimulated in our sitting, chattering, screen-obsessed physical lives in “this our talking America.” Leading to sensing, feeling, and self-aware expressivity of action, the impersonal here is in continual loop with the person—the holding, recording, possessor of a coherent accumulation of experience.

dancing, having to do with the both protective and valiant or strong experiences that an activated chest occasions, along with a holding of my arms and shoulder girdle which followed lines of protection and support, or formed a cage for rolling or pushing, rather than my habitual architectural or linear sense of skeleton. It is very hard to put into words the real quality of this difference, but I count these occasions as the venues of the most fascinating and surprising experiences I have had, these identifications of an “I who dances” who does not resemble the one I am accustomed to.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>BODY SYSTEMS IN BMC</th>
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| Skeletal            | Basic supporting structure  
                      | Defines movement through space  
                      | Embodies offers structural organization |
| Ligamentous         | Provides boundaries and connections between bones  
                      | Directs the path of movement  
                      | Suspends the organs  
                      | Embodiment offers specificity, clarity, efficiency  
                      | Clarity of focus and concentration to detail |
| Muscular            | Tensile 3-dimensional grid for movement  
                      | Elastic support, balance, dynamic possibilities  
                      | Embody vitality, express power, engage in resistance and resolution |
| Organs              | Internal survival functions: breathing, nourishment, elimination  
                      | Sense of volume, fulness, organic authenticity  
                      | Emotional, aspirational, holds memories of internal reactions within personal history |
| Endocrine           | Major chemical governor, aligned with nervous system  
                      | Secretions pass into blood and balance or imbalance influences all cells in body  
                      | Energy: internal stillness, surges of chaos  
                      | Crystallization of energy into archetypical experiences  
                      | Underlies intuition and perception of universal mind |
| Nervous             | Major electrical system, aligned with endocrine  
                      | Receives and dispatches information to all cells in body  
                      | Coordinates information through specific relay centers  
                      | Underlies alertness and thought  
                      | Gives precision to our coordination  
                      | Perceptual basis from which we view and interact with world |
| Fluid               | Transportation system of body  
                      | Underlies presence and transformation  
                      | Mediates between rest and activity |
| Fascial             | Soft container for all the other body structures  
                      | Divides and integrates tissues, providing independence within whole  
                      | Connects internal feeling with outer expression |
| Fat                 | Potential energy  
                      | Provides heat, electrical insulation for nerves  
                      | Repressed or unacknowledged power, sense of heaviness and lethargy  
                      | When mobilized, strong primordial sense of power and sense of grace |
| Skin                | Outermost layer, defines us from exterior  
                      | Touched by outer world  
                      | Sets general tone of openness or closedness to world |

Fig. 1. Body Systems in BMC. Generalizations about the mind of different body systems, excerpted from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s “Introduction to Body Mind Centering” in Sensing, Feeling, and Action. Her descriptions combine physiological function and the temperament of thought that arises in the embodiment each system.
5.3 CONCLUSION

I have tried to speak for somatic physical practice as a resource for understanding what Emerson means when he speaks of the impersonal, and of impersonal power, as well as for actually following Emerson's prompts in thinking about how to live, how to find (and found) ourselves. Through somatic work, the identification with the nonhuman becomes a thing I can approach, a thing I can practice. The surprises that it offers through my deferral to the body's intelligence keeps that approach away from the dangers of calculation, or dry repetition, maintaining this daily work as a “process of indirection.” It becomes a method, or a way, of addressing myself to the impersonal, and to the “circulation” that Emerson acknowledges both sanity and health of the body require. Emerging from these sessions, I may find that something in me has been re-charactered, re-patterned.

To find myself re-patterned is to find I have left my habit. This outcome, this leaving, is described by both Cavell and Arsić as the meaning of Emersonian self-culturing. One manifestation of that self-culturing is Thoreau's Walden, which Cavell identifies as teaching both its author and its reader first to inhabit and then to leave. Somatic practice offers another kind of self-culturing, critically one that can be taken up in cities. While there is no city that expels nature,\(^{58}\) city life does threaten to emphasize the human (taken in Aristotle's sense of the political being) and the technological at the expense of nature (or life considered non-anthropocentrically), making us amnesiacs of our natural history. If, as Friedl reads with Emerson and Nietzsche, being finds its ground through its circular return to natural history, then

\(^{58}\) See Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1993) for an illuminating argument against an idea of nature would be opposed to culture, or urbanity, or modernity.
good health and sanity would require some way of committing to this ongoing return. It has been my argument here that the natural history we embody is a profound and direct context for discovering the ways in which we are part of nature—the ways we are both the “me” and the “not-me” that Emerson demands we come to know. In my next chapter, I will turn to creative performance practices which structure spaces and times of clearing—their own kind of retreat to Walden Pond—in which to practice that same commitment.

Emerson is a profoundly recuperative writer, building reference, citation, and rewriting (of his own phrases, of those he has read) into his essays. He understands the way that the figures of language, as transmitted and recapitulated across the history of literature and embedded in the very words we use to speak and write, form the habits and possibilities of a person's reflective thinking, and that this is an evolving process whose fossils are our texts. In the transition from this chapter's study of the physical body to the third chapter's consideration of philosophical bodies and scenes of creative work, I propose to continue to entertain the idea of philosophy as a project of recuperation of an impersonal moving intelligence.
CHAPTER THREE

Fragment Assignments: Eight Approaches to the Sound of Philosophy

“How do we understand something? We understand something by approaching it. How do we approach something? We approach it from any direction. We approach it using our eyes, our ears, our noses, our intellects, our imaginations. We approach it with silence. We approach it with childhood. We use pain or embarrassment. We use history. We take a safe route or a dangerous one. We discover our approach and follow it.”

—Matthew Goulish, 39 Microlectures in proximity of performance

“To work deliberately in the form of the fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing, the centre rather than the sphere. ... It can be seen as a response to the philosophical problem of seeing the written thing replace the subject of the writing. If we catch only a little of our subject, or only badly, clumsily, incoherently, perhaps we have not destroyed it. We have written about it, written it and allowed it to live on at the same time, allowed it to live on in our ellipses, our silences.”

—Lydia Davis, “Form as a Response to Doubt”

Prologue: The shape it takes

“A series of accidents brought you to this book,” writes Matthew Goulish. Here are the accidents that brought me to this chapter.

My son Harvey passed a restless night (he is bringing in a molar). As he finally was sleeping deeply, just before dawn, I lay in bed thinking about my friend Stefania’s archives-rich chapter on Muriel Rukeyser’s Houdini play. I wondered why I had shaped a dissertation that did not call for archival research, and then remembered my trip to the Amherst archives, when I was five months pregnant, to look at the fragments of writing Emily Dickinson left on pieces of envelope and parcel paper.

I went to look at the fragments because they sounded interesting. I learned about them during Susan Howe’s visit to our seminar a few years before. She passed around photocopies of lace work and poems written in the shape of collars on envelope parts. I had made a prospectus
for a chapter on Dickinson that revolved around virtual games, imaginative assignments, and the incompleteness of the fragments seemed potentially suggestive. I knew Amherst had a collection of Fluxus boxes that also contain virtual games and imaginative assignments, so I decided to read the fragments and the boxes side by side, to see if they spoke to each other. I didn't find anything definite to pursue in the linkage, but I left with a file of digital images of a set of fragments I thought might make a good score for a dance, if you can imagine a score being generated freely from a sentence (like, say, the dances of Deborah Hay, which treat sentences as both assignments and conditions).

My dissertation never made it to the Dickinson chapter, as the experience of reading Emerson in the months after Harvey was born became so full and rich that the opening background chapter on Emerson sprouted from one into two, swerving the original prospect of the project’s range. But this morning as I lay next to Harvey and his emerging tooth, I remembered the trip to the archives, and the fragments that suggest the atmosphere of a several-part dance, and this in turn recalled to mind an essay by Goulish, “A Transparent Lecture,” which contemplates Morton Feldman’s musical scores laid out in shapes of Turkish rugs, and has in its middle, an “essay in the shape of a bridge collapsing,” which takes as its structural constraints (on its numbers of sentences and sections) the measurements of the pieces of Tacoma bridge after it collapsed in a wind storm. The example of this essay prompted me to imagine a chapter that takes its formal structure from the Dickinson fragments, use them as constraints through which to ask this chapter’s questions about what happens when philosophical essays do not take the shape of traditional arguments, but of something else. Could I write an essay on Emerson's philosophical commitments in the form of a series of assignments from Emily Dickinson?
(Pause to listen to Erik Satie’s *Three pieces in the form of a Pear.*)

Emerson himself calls for such behavior on the part of the scholar, asks that we rewrite our sacred texts, asks that we give ourselves permission to learn the necessary measure of our own “meter-making argument” without awaiting sanction from other sources. Why should I not also entertain an original relation to this material?

In this chapter I have granted myself permission to write by neighboring, instead of by advancing an argument. (What does it mean to write by neighboring, by approaching without arriving, by persisting nearby? It seems like an architectural prompt.) What I want to think about is: what is the shape of the room that neighbors philosophy? What is the feeling of a house whose inhabitants carry philosophical commitments? What is written on the page that lingers near a long-carried question or intuition? I want to think in a choreographic mode (that is, in time and space) about essays that give themselves permission to come close to a question without necessarily facing it, that do not face forward and demonstrate their conclusions. About essays that do not always face their audience, but do welcome them into the area of their being. The writer and reader do not focus on each other, but take their seat at different positions, addressing themselves to the question at hand. (This is the kind of permission that a grounding in modern dance offers; where ballet’s rotation was developed so that a dancer might move in all directions without ever turning to face away from the royal audience, modern’s basic parallel (in its founding generation) and insistence that there is no center or front-facing (in its second generation) drops the burden of explanation and demonstration, and rethinks audience as a group of nearby witnesses of a field of action.)

I once studied dancing with Shelly Senter, a longtime member of Trisha Brown’s
company, who incorporated Alexander Technique into her teaching. We would do these very simple exercises, exercises I think of in poetics terms as experimental copulas. One was: walk forward across the room and say aloud, *I am walking backward*. Then, walk backward and say, *I am walking forward*. The statements turns out to be true somehow. What is a facing? Don’t we, like mountains, have something we could call faces on all our sides? We must be very generous with our attention to feel that the back of the performer is inviting us to neighbor, not closing us out. But once we do, we can start reading the performance in radiant dimensions. In physical presence, information that comes in otherwise than directly from the front and center is as much a part of the transmission as what sits easily in focus. How might this translate to essay form?

This chapter entertains these questions: How might philosophy sound? What does philosophical thinking feel like? How far afield might philosophy move? Can we find it on strange pages? Can we find it in strange rooms?

I spent a full half of my performance of *Another Tree Dance* with my back to the audience. I covered my back in my grandmother’s red and cream reversible silk coat, and we all looked out on all sides together through a series of scenes. This is just to say, this chapter will not face its question but, with Dickinson’s direction, persist nearby, take seven approaches to its neighborhood.
Fig. 1. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 822a

And the seasons take their harvest like grains in a

basket.
1. And the Seasons take their hushed places like figures in a Dream

“sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order...” —Anne Carson, “In Praise of Sleep”

Dislogic, intuition, revulsion, wonder. What governs the choice of how to order these things? Writing on philosophy’s sleep side can be considered a question of arrangement. The phrase “sleep side” comes from Anne Carson’s essay “In Praise of Sleep,” and I marshall it here in relation to the realm of experience that seems to take place almost wholly beside “the broad daylight of our ordinary memory,” which Proust named in contradistinction to the not-so-broad light of the memoire involuntaire which darts through the worm-hole reticulations of the deep registers of memory. This is a realm with many names. I prefer Carson’s name to most others (the uncanny, the unconscious, the irrational, the real, the natural). Mac Wellman also makes wonderful names for this other space: the condition of radiants, Hoole’s Hole, Wild Time. The freedom to make good names would seem to be a sonic necessity of artist philosophy, and one of the disappointments of academic philosophy has got to be the way technical language thwarts the shiver and pleasure of naming.

I adopted Carson’s “sleep side” into my phrase book years before I knew what use I would have for it, mostly because she introduces it while recounting a dream that bears a striking resemblance to a recurring dream that marks my own childhood, a dream of entering my grandmother’s living room at night and finding it altered, open to new dimensions. Carson describes a dream in which she enters into her living room and finds it both identical to her living room and strangely changed. The room is green-toned, like the chair from my grandmother’s living room that I took after she died, and also like the great green room of Goodnight Moon, a
spooky and lovely room, which I revisit many nights now that I have a small son who requires accompaniment into sleep. Carson’s dream came when she was three; it is an early memory of discovering the strange, and she says she explained it to herself “by saying I had caught the living room sleeping. I had entered it from the sleep side” (20). The existence of the living room’s sleep side, she goes on to say, is “supremely consoling,” despite its strangeness and its prefiguration for her of the bewilderment within her own house that marks her father’s later dementia: “it was and remains for me a consolation to think of it lying there, sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one … in a true sense something incognito at the heart of our sleeping house” (20). Sleep, she says, is to be praised because it gives us this “glimpse of something incognito.”

Throughout his writing Emerson uses language of hints, glimmers, glances, glimpses, and like Carson he suggests that the opulence that can be glimpsed is always near at hand, but hidden by our usual looking. (Carson calls it the living room’s “propaganda,” as if the daylight appearance of the world was purposefully reductive and obscuring of its real power.) In “Experience” he describes our waking life as a kind of half-sleep, invoking an old parable of entry into the world of person as crossing a threshold where we are given a cup of lethe to drink, “that we may tell no tales.” Even waking, we remain sleepy, a kind of inverse sleep to the real wakefulness of that other side, producing a confusion of light and darkness: “Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir tree. All things swim and glitter” (EL 471). Swimming and glittering is a condition of being half-wrapped in something like sleep. (This parable occurs before the essay takes a turn away from the idea of a real world of thought rendered in some inaccessible clarity, and, anticipating William James, turns toward
surfaces as the only grounds of consciousness.) Some readers (Barbara Packer, for example) take a more despairing sense from the line that all things swim and glitter, feeling it marks a condition of alienation from a real and solid world obscured from us by the haze of sleep. I find the description obvious and delightful. My pleasure with this condition of moving with tactile information on all sides (swimming has no front facing) and absent clear vision (the things glitter and cannot be seen straight), my comfort with the idea of the hovering night in the interior of the tree’s spread, I think derives from having what Susan Rethorst calls “a choreographic mind.” A choreographic mind is governed by a spatial sense instead of a narrative sense, more particularly by a spatial sense experienced as operating not in a pictorial space in front of one, but in the round, as what dancers call *kinesphere*—the area described by the reach of the body in all directions. Engaging back space, swimming rather than surveying, sounds to me like what we do when we think.

This roundness of thought’s kinesphere—the space that radiates out in all directions from the metaphorical line of linear narrative—is where theater takes place, according to Wellman, whose “Speculations” speaks for the process of finding strangeness and investigates the experience of the term in an extremely long series of aphoristic statements. The combination of strangeness and finitude, joined not by rationalism or narrative presets, but by wild connectors, creates what Wellman calls “apparence,” the theatrical event in which something new is realized. Getting our thinking into this space where apparence happens is an action with philosophical commitments; in its coinage Wellman follows Kant's “apperception” into the *theatron* as a space for showing and so appearing. Preferring mathematical imagery to invoke this space, he calls it, using Willard Gibbs’s term, “phase space.” Phase space is the representation of all possible
manifestations of a system in a multidimensional plot. Graphically it poses a way to imagine making theater outside the constraints of the “line” or “arc” of the classical plot. In Wellman's hands, phase space offers not just the fruitfulness of something new, but the vertigo of complete disorientation. If “Speculations” demonstrates a particular philosophical commitment, it is to the relative value of swimming (plunging) and glittering (appearing) in phase space, as opposed to the “already known” “clock time” of “Geezer Theatre” (note the -re ending to signal the Geezer's British fetish) with its prefabricated, moralizing circuits. If the linear plot of those circuits is so deadening to the possibility of getting into phase space (he describes that getting-out as a function of “vertical narrative” in contrast to the image of the x-axis timeline), then the question of order seems basic to the question of making theater. Given that theater always moves forward in time (though the intense theatrical experience of time's measure can make the forward movement yield elasticity), how might the order of events also create an experience of moving laterally, vertically, cross-dimensionally? How does something proceed that is “sunk in its own greenness, breathing its own order”?

It is a truism of creative work that it is possible to listen to the emergent object/play/fiction for its own direction. Call this task listening for greenness. Call this task listening for the movement of the breath. Just as with somatic work's project of listening for the intelligence of one's body scripts an approach to re-grounding the self (explored in my discussion of Friedl in Chapter 2), composing a thing by listening for its own order structures an approach to the sleep side of its sequence, which might offer our imaginations (not by theories but by consoling glimpses) new circuits of understanding the mysteries of cause and effect. Traditional plot demands a moment of crisis, but in a theater that does not concede that privileged climax,
crisis, or, to use some terms with which Cavell describes Emerson's motions, transfiguration and deformation might occur anywhere within the phase space of a system, and may occur many times over. Merce Cunningham says as much: “Now I can't see that crisis any longer means a climax, unless we are willing to grant that every breath of wind has a climax (which I am), but then that obliterates climax, being a surfeit of such.”

I translate Dickinson’s “seasons” into theatrical vocabulary as spells, durations, episodes, scenes, or events. They take their places (breathing their own order), she tells us, “like figures in a dream.” Listen to the image again: and the seasons take their hushed places like figures in a dream. It sounds like a description of a dance, or maybe of the beginning of a dance. It even reminds me of old formal dances, like the anti-masque ballet that would occur within a Renaissance Masque, or like the second act of so many story ballets, which traditionally takes place on the creatural or spectral side of the story (with the swans, the wilis, the sylphs, the shades). Figures in a dream tend to possess a compelling logic of arrangement that is also dissonant with our daylight expectations of narration. (And then X, who was also Y, somehow turned into Z… I went into the kitchen which was also my childhood living room and also the state of Montana…) A choreographic mode of composition is comfortable in these other tracks, connecting its sections by the “subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels” that contrast with the orderly turnpikes of village life (EL 482). Maybe because choreography is a temporal but generally, since modernism, not a narrative art, choreographers embody a kind of “ear” for connection that is guided by a non-explanatory sense. A sense in the round.

59 Quoted in Roger Copeland, Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance. 65
60 The unknown Wilis are the phantom women who dance men to death, the spectral posse claiming the heroine of the story ballet Giselle.
61 Obviously it is impossible to generalize on behalf all choreographers, but in my watching and reading I mark a consistent engagement of this non-explanatory approach to moving forward in performance’s time. To situate my reference to this kind of thinking within an array of choreographers whose work I have seen or participated in
Choreographic thinking offers a compositional approach to the task Thoreau called speaking a word for nature, speaking a word for what in us has more allegiance to all matter than it does to the particularly human or particularly controlling (to explaining), and so speaking a word for the human experience of swimming and glittering through the “flitting state” of our “brief encampment” in this body. Choreographic composition—of dances, of essays, of stories—begins with a sensitivity to neighboring, facing, and joining. Choreographic composition is always prepared to discover something hidden in what it began with, and to follow the path that thing points toward. Choreographic composition is comfortable with weird joinings because bodies in time and space will always make transition happen (they are always there, moving forward in time). Matthew Goulish: “Join the form to the processes of the mind and body. Call this join Sense. How then do we inhabit the music?” (“Transparent” 179).

developing, let me offer the following names as an incomplete but sufficient assignment for further viewing: Susan Rethorst, Tere O’Connor, Bebe Miller, Chris Yon, Ivy Baldwin, Ohad Naharin, Pina Bausch, William Forsythe, Adrienne Truscott, David Neumann.
Fig. 2. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 254
Incredible the lodging, but limited the guest

“I wish to speak a word for Nature.” — Thoreau, “Walking”

Emerson describes the human condition in oscillating images. In low spectrums he recalls us to our fragmentary being, one among “a million fresh particulars,” admonishing: “You are one thing, but nature is one thing, and another thing, in the same moment.” This proliferating expanse “insults the philosopher,” who generalizes without realizing his own partiality (EL 581). Elsewhere he calls from the widest expanse of this range: “I am nothing; I see all” (EL 10). These exaggerations record the “pour[ing]”, “convuls[ing]”, “slid[ing]”, envelop[ing]” influx of “[t]hat power…which makes the whole and particle its equal channel” (EL 555).

Cavell, claiming Emerson as a philosopher, though not of the generalizing kind Emerson describes, says we can think of philosophy as a voice. That voice belongs to no one person, but speaks on behalf of the human, of the living, speaks neutrally to an uncertain future. Yet philosophy is written and spoken by individuals, produced by hands and mouths. What “limited guest” can be authorized to speak or write on behalf of such “incredible lodging[s]” as the condition of life? Cavell suggests the speaker position is taken up in an “arrogation,” a claim of the right to speak on behalf of the human compelled by the discovery of “philosophical commitments” in one’s own life. Proposing philosophy and autobiography as each “a dimension of the other,” he cites Emerson’s claim in “The American Scholar” that “the deeper the scholar dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true” (Pitch vii).
This suggests a difference between generalization and speaking universally, suggests that the task of philosophy is not to describe or define being, so much as to speak on behalf of the wonder at discovering an identification with more-than-personal power and life, an identification generated in the dive that, as Cavell puts it, “takes an interest in strangeness, beginning … with the strangeness of oneself” (xv). This interest could also be called attraction. The discovery of this interest, I would suggest through Emerson’s terms, is the compensation of patience, and particularly for Emerson the compensation of persisting in the process of writing. This power or wisdom (which philosophy loves or identifies with) has slid into every form around and through which we have passed, but “we did not guess its essence, until after a long time” (EL 555). Is it possible that the term of patience, in the sense of its duration, is Emerson’s clue to what universality might be — that “universal” refers not to something that is everywhere true, but rather, to the condition of ongoingness that may be the only universally common condition? The guest’s limitation is not only spatial but temporal: “We are encamped in nature, not domesticated” (552). If we would “speak a word for Nature,” along with Thoreau, we would need to speak about the ways we take our time as well as the ways nature takes time with us.

Autobiography with philosophical commitments (philosophy), sets out to account for experiences of wonder that exceed self-possession’s “privatest” boundaries, expanding identification to the scale of the incredible lodging, the vast intelligence in whose lap we lie, the very long time. Instead of life writing as writing of person, this autobiography is life writing as writing person’s deliquescence, person’s imbrication in life as in networks of processes in motion, including the slow motion of philosophical conversation; writing motion instead of rest, this produces what Cavell calls “a philosophy of immigrancy” (xv). The guest makes an
encampment, a “tent for a night” (EL 481). Pitch your tent, and you may claim the passing right to speak on behalf of what pitches. Who is to say what that voice coming out of the tent will sound like, especially given the necessary and exhilarating “violence of direction” (549) that nature imparts to all individual things, so characterizing each with particular excesses and deficiencies?

There is a relation between the philosophical dimension of autobiography and artist essays that document first person strangeness, which is how I describe my experience both of performing and of making, and something I recognize as being spoken about (and for) in the accounts of performance process that interest me most. Just as Cavell found in Emerson and Thoreau the repression or hiding of philosophy’s foundation in America, I find philosophy hiding in some artist essays, like those of Matthew Goulish or Mac Wellman, that account for creative process. Or, because I do not take Goulish or Wellman to be actively attempting to hide philosophy, perhaps I could say something like this: the arrogation of the voice of philosophy in these process essays, in speaking on behalf of process (which is universal), manifests as a freedom to wager an idiosyncratic syntax, tempo, sonority, and situation for a voicing of process that does not sound philosophical (in a disciplinary sense), but is philosophically committed in that the syntax itself structures the dive in which a strange kind of power, a strange kind of identity, is found (a dive presumed to echo and relate to the process of generating theater, among other things).

Identifying with the incredible lodging sounds glorious, but identifying the universality of ongoingness means identifying not only with flowering but also with death. To speak on behalf of theater, which “enacts the great vanishing and perishing” (“Speculations” 295), is
philosophical not only because this calls for an account of a strangeness one can get interested in, but because it also entails a necessary accounting of failure, fragility, instability, perishing, and partiality, for taking an interest in particular and strange things, for arrogating the voices and actions of these things, and then abandoning them when the performance is over, or even abandoning them midstream, for some emergent choice, some compelling redirection through the dark space of the incredible lodge.
Fig. 3. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 778
3. To the bugle every color is red


—Annie-B Parson, from 53rd State Occasional No. 1

If transparency is the perfection to which Emerson gestures at the advent of thinking, the “due sphericity” of the spectrum that describes the universal, color, he suggests, is the daily condition of our seeing: “Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself… As I am, so I see; use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are” (EL 489). Here, our color is a limitation both on what we see and can say. But what if we embraced “our color” as the standard bearer of our interest, offering a map of attractors? What if we said “our color” is our blazon? In “History,” Emerson describes a reader discovering his colors in the lives of past heroes, and suggests that a reading which embraces and recognizes affinity will empower a reader to feel a member of a trans-historical family, joined not by blood but by homology of appetite. (Here I am thinking of Whitehead’s description of thought’s directional tendency as its “appetition.”) Emerson means it to license original action without deference to the magnitude invested in the pantheon of past greatness, but I also find in the image a promise of reading as a means of finding good company, of discovering an alternative family array. Superimposed upon the relations of blood family, this alternative family lifts a person out of the precise coordinates and conditions of her birth, and gives a new possibility of belonging, one whose reach is always still to be discovered.
I had forgotten until recently that when I applied to graduate school, I described my project as attempting a secret genealogy of my community of artists (maybe I said my posse?). But as it has grown, this dissertation has become just that: a series of attempts to account for Emerson as a figure who might be seen in relation to the commitments and practices of that extended posse, as a thinker who might be “owned” as one of my people. Emerson’s emphasis on original relation, on not losing the day in deference to the past, encourages the intuition of connection to suffice, but the protocols of scholarship frown upon ahistorical reading. So it has been a delight (and relief) to uncover slowly the historical relation which describes the family resemblance I have claimed with Emerson since my first reading of “Experience.”

The first three chapters of this dissertation can be seen as moving from Emerson toward the three intellectual communities that intersect in my own work: poetics (Emerson→ James→ Stein→ landscape plays/poet’s theater), movement (Emerson→James/Dewey→Todd/Alexander→ somatics/new dance), and theater. (The fourth is a document of the convergence itself.) It is in theater that I discovered the most surprising line of connection, moving from Emerson to Antonin Artaud, and from Artaud to the physical, incantatory, movement-and-language-theater of New York’s current downtown scene, born of the 60’s and 70’s group theaters (for example The Living Theater, The Open Theater, Mabou Mines, The Performance Group, and The Wooster Group) and still vitally alive in ensemble and “devised” work of the present (for example that of Elevator Repair Service, Big Dance Theater, Nature Theater of Oklahoma), as well as writer/director-led companies (Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, New York City Players, Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company, Half Straddle), and in the new playwriting that also circulates in that world (of Mac Wellman, Sibyl Kempson,
Erin Courtney, Kristen Kosmas, sometimes myself).  

Emerson and Artaud are an unlikely pair. When I started searching to find out if they had been read together, I found a lone reference in Cavell, spirited through the intermediary of Derrida’s writing on Artaud. Cavell describes Emerson’s “horror at the willingness of human beings to have no voice in their words,” and links this to Derrida’s reading of Artaud's writing as demonstrating a “sense of suffocation by a plagiarized world” (in Cavell's summary). But this link does not move through the manifesto texts that were so influential in theater, although of course it bears on vocalization as something fraught with the possibility of phoniness, an inherently theatrical anxiety. What delighted me about the connection I had realized was that it departed from the philosophical lineage a substantially long time ago, and in fact owes nothing to Derrida or Heidegger or process philosophy or pragmatism, and everything to the questions that come up in making theater. As far as I can tell, Emerson has never belonged to a history of theater. (I read somewhere that he disdained entertainments.) He is claimed by poets, and can

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62 The constraints of this chapter prevent me from elaborating on the Artaudian foundation to this work, but my claim in brief rests on the widely acknowledged importance of Artaud’s manifestos to the 50’s-80’s set listed (Living Theater through Mabou Mines), and the growth of a new approach to performance text out of that generation’s particular renewal of theater. For more on Artaud’s relationship to the downtown theater, see PAJ 56, an entire issue of Performing Arts Journal devoted to Artaud, and particularly Gautam Dasgupta’s “Remembering Artaud,” which forms the introduction to the issue and concisely introduces his introduction to and influence on American theater.

63 Cavell notes but does not elaborate a connection between Emerson's “Fate” and Derrida's reading of Artaud's writings in “La Parole Souffle,” and mentions his drawing of the connection in Pitch (163) and in his “cover letter” to his essay “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” where he indicates his wonder at whether the combination is productive or merely shocking. See The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between, edited by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser. (Stanford UP, 1996).

64 See The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice by Jonas Barish (University of California Press, 1985) for a long history of this anxiety.

65 I can't seem to recover the source for this and it's possible that it was drawn from a journal comment made in one of his moods that does not believe his other moods. I was trying to find out what kind of music Emerson might have listened to, as a possible reference for some songs I was writing. In his journal he wrote that he has a “tin ear” for music, and his essays bear musical references almost exclusively to natural sounds as far preferable to composed ones. His particular discussion of theater in his essay on Shakespeare is limited to an appreciation of it as a form of dramatic literature with different conventions for what we'd now think of as intellectual property, and he lauds Shakespeare not as a dramatist but as a poet. Of course the theater that I am speaking of has only partial relationship to the American theater of Emerson's day.
be claimed by association to Thoreau by the Cagean sound/dance/art array (which does intersect with and occupy part of New York’s downtown theater scene). But I may be the first to propose directly that Emerson wears the colors of our theater.

I was compelled on a hunch to return to Artaud when I decided to write a defense of theater for a recent event asking why experimental theater people still insist on making shows, and oriented towards proposals for forms theater might take “after the show.” From earlier, obligatory readings of his Theater of Cruelty manifestos (which along with Brecht’s manifestos form two poles of twentieth-century theater’s self-construction), I had taken away only an impression of temperament, and because my own work is extremely quiet, delicate, and loving—not something you’d ever describe as “cruel”—I had casually slotted Artaud away as someone to whom I exist in opposition. Artaud is anyway not a figure that people continue to make much reference to in contemporary theater, and I think I shared a general estimation of Artaud as someone in the background of the Dionysian elements of 60's performance. But in my re-reading I recognized in Artaud not only the foundational orientations of a theater-making I and many around me practice, encompassing both staging and playwriting concerns, but also I discovered what felt like restatements of Emerson. This makes plenty of sense considering Artaud’s love of Nietzsche, and Nietzsche’s love of Emerson. What happens in Artaud that makes his reiterations so important to me, is the diversion of the stream away from philosophy and into theater: he poses material questions to be materially answered. One answer to the

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66 Tom Sellar, a critic and the editor of Yale's Theater Magazine, casually dismissed Artaud as a present-tense figure in a discussion with Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper of OK Radio. In their conversation, which circled around issues of control, madness, and miracle, and the older sense of addressing the divine in theater, they agreed that contemporary theater in general had ceased to be about the divine, and become only about the human, an opposition that could be described in the difference between Artaud (seeking a sacred) and Brecht (seeking social action). Sellar and Liska agreed that “Brecht and Stanislavsky won the war. Artaud got shut out.” The conversation clearly demonstrates that Liska (one of the co-directors of Nature Theater of Oklahoma) prefers the Artaudian vision of what can happen in performance.
question of what happens when artists write philosophy is exactly this re-inscription of philosophical commitments within material problems.

Here is a brief convergence. Like Emerson, Artaud is concerned with “rotten diction” and the necessity of developing an original vocalization that allows the performing artists to, in Emerson’s words, “pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things” (EL 23). In Artaud: “If confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (Theater and Its Double 7). Like Emerson he disdains the consolidation that happens in self-definition, what Barbara Packer summarizes in her descriptions of Emerson’s four-part diagnosis of the fall of man, as “reflection.” In Artaud: “If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force” (8). Like Emerson, Artaud demands that we make an “original relation to the universe,” writing: “The library of Alexandria can be burnt down … It is right that from time to time cataclysms occur which compel us to return to nature, i.e., to rediscover life” (10). Rediscovering life does not mean a life without symbols, but rather a life in which symbols and language grow from experience (Emerson: “Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive” (EL 700)), where symbols are, like Emerson’s spirit, “matter reduced to an extreme thinness” (475) through unsettling alchemical processes that cannot be attained in repose. This theater is one of presentation, not representation, which is assigned instead to the afterlife of theater in the mind of the audience, the extremely thin transmissible matter which lodges in recurring thoughts either of intense moments (images), or common vessels (words). Artaud prefers a theater which renews the shock by which this recurrence, as
mental consolidation, happens. Artaud: “like the plague, [theater] reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature. It recovers the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory images thrust into our abruptly wakened heads … for there can be theater only from the moment when the impossible really begins and the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols” (Double 27-28).

For Artaud, theater is a venue for identifying with the magic, the violent, the onward, the natural, one which he hopes will physically affect the audience with a violence sufficient to be the total necessary purge, allowing a pacifism to arise outside the ritual space. This physically affective theater demands a total commitment to the material presence of theater (he calls it “expression in space” (italics in original 89)), rather than a subordination of theater to its representative, mimetic function. Artaud does not exile language from theater, but instead demands that the words “would bleed,” would be sonorous, effortful and incantatory before they would do what words inevitably do: settle, replay, represent, mean. The combined material, which includes but is not ruled by text, creates “dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility” (89). Artaud lived in emergency times, spent years institutionalized; his writing sounds out an urgency that is also there in Emerson, but obscured retrospectively by the cadences of period-drama that are so easy to impose on the writing of past centuries. But I hear emergency here: “Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit … People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them” (EL 413).

Artaud stands as a presiding agitator over a theater which acts as a ritual zone of
unsettlement, of intense and original relationship to symbols, ideas, language refastened to the bodies that produce them. His agitation has played out in the physical, textual, and scenic language of theater since his manifestos, translated by M.C. Richards at Cage’s suggestion while at Black Mountain College, began to circulate among the American avant garde scene, and with the Artaudian acting methodologies developed in the influential work of Jerzy Grotowski. An inheritance can be seen in the contemporary downtown theater whose events are thick with language treated as both signs and stuff, stuff with sonority, tempo, intensity, incantatory potential, with plays conceived as events happening within the condition of a magic circle that makes whatever language is put in it seem to sing with “superheat[ed]” animation. (I am thinking, for example, of Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s investment of hypertrophic life force in every “um” of their transcribed phone conversation scripts, or Sibyl Kempson’s ear for craziness, violence, and aspiration in the most mundane of doctor’s office interactions.)

Artaud’s particular demands for the overt extremity of the ritual, the “genuine enslavement of attention” (92) that conducts the audience “by means of their organisms to an apprehension of the subtlest notions” (italics in original 81), do not necessarily carry into the theater that inherits him. But the idea of a theater that acts primarily not through representational meaning, resident in and controlled by the script, but through vibration does: a theater whose insistent firstness (in Peirce’s sense of unmediated presence) recuperates “a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought” that only starts to accumulate meaning in the remainders and returns of the event. The Artaudian inheritance, then, the family colors, have to do with a commitment to the way in which this theater’s meaning is not reducible to the verbal, but mixes text with a spatial, material vocabulary, resisting language as a subjugating or
controlling medium for saying what happened and what force it held, instead enlisting words as one of many instruments of its force.

Cavell notes that Emerson’s descriptions of growth—of circles continually inscribed around circles—share the feature of being “discontinuous,” leading him to ask: “How does Emerson picture us as crossing, or rather leaping, the span from one circumference to another? What is the motive, the means of motion, of this movement? How do we go on?” (ETE 18). The early twentieth-century theater artists who form the background of my theater—the dadaists, the surrealists, Artaud — suggested that this movement was convulsive, surprising, and sometimes cruel. Emerson often names a similar quality: the incursion of wisdom which “convuls[es] us as pain” (EL 555); nature’s “saltatory and impulsive” methods (483); the “severe music” of being (82).

Artaud responds to the question of how to go on by generating a ritual space of convulsion. This convulsion persists in new theater as a kind of fine vibration, a commitment to matter, to sound, to movement, to the interruption of naturalistic narrative with strictly theater-based possibilities. Words in this theater regain their spookiness, tactility, and force, open onto occasions of incantation. I am thinking of a passage at the end of John Jesurun’s Philoctetes, an agitatingly low-light, sometimes excruciatingly slow production originally created for the legendary actor Ron Vawter who performed the piece while dying of AIDS, when Philoctetes speaks about stepping out into the day, repeating the word “day” so many times that my body actually lightened while listening. I am thinking of a passage at the still point of Mac Wellman’s Antigone, staged with proliferating image, action, and rhythm by Big Dance Theater, when Antigone slips out of a hole in the bottom of the world, and describes the place of her arrival in a
passage whose light repetitions make a kind of lapping action, as if she is speaking to us from the shores the “interminable oceans” Emerson describes as reaching beyond our word for being:

And I slipped out the back and I made myself very small and I slipped out the back way and when I awoke. I was in a different place, a thin place, as though it were the place of a compass focus. And the lines of force radiated out from my heart in all directions and I could feel these lines of force as though I were a god and not merely a nasty girl, a girl tired of being the wise one. Radiated out from my still beating heart. (Difficult 117)

In these examples it is not violence we feel but an onward impulse, the movement of what Emerson calls power. To yield to that force is what Artaud wanted for theater’s audience. His “cruelty” is not violence per se, but the reign of that force, in any of its degrees. “Everything that acts is a cruelty,” he writes (85). When I see someone flying my colors, what I see is the flag of this vibratory, dissociative composition, where text is attached to actions, to material manipulations, to moving, singing stuff. This is the flag of the theater makers for whom the material is what matters, because only matter can release the energy we need (Emerson calls it power) for the leap to the next circumference.
Fig. 4. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 790
4. A message from the Meadows

“In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too.” — Thoreau, Walden

How does nature think? Emerson’s late unfinished work, The Natural History of the Intellect, asks this question. A natural thing, the thinking mind experiences thought as pattern, or analogy (NHI 40). As Emerson represents it, analogy is not a template placed on nature from an extra-natural rationalism, but a kind of message-as-picture glimpsed through an opening: Nature “speaks no word … only this, she is careful to leave all her doors ajar … If he takes her hint and uses her goods she speaks no word; if he blunders and starves she says nothing” (28). The message is glimpsed, grasped as a picture or generalization. Nature does not speak words, but the impressionable man might, in Thoreau’s arrogation, “speak a word for nature” by speaking with words fastened to the images glimpsed in these openings. Nature thinks when an inhabitant walking one of the innumerable paths that “traverse … the gulfs of space in every direction” (42), is impressed by a picture, and marks it as significant.

Small Acts of Repair, a book on the performance group Goat Island, composed from several company voices and edited by company member Matthew Goulish and scholar Stephen Bottoms, asks the reader to think of Goat Island’s performance work as a form of ecology. To introduce ecology, Goulish cites Gregory Bateson’s last lecture, “Men are Grass: Metaphor and the World of Mental Process.” In this talk, Bateson addresses pattern and mental process as part of the biological realm. Adding to biological pattern, he introduces as a further element of mental
process, syllogism, given in two examples:

1.
Socrates is a man.
All men die.
Socrates must die.

2.
Grass dies.
Men die.
Men are grass. (qtd in Repair 20)

Bateson describes a criticism wagered of his work: that he had spent his career thinking in the syllogistic movements of the latter mode (known in logic as “affirming the consequent”), a mode that would be “very well if [he] were a poet, but … is inelegant in a biologist” (20). This second mode is discredited in logic, which classifies, orders, categorizes and nests. It is how men think (some of the time), says Bateson. But the second mode is how nature thinks, how nature builds. The message from the meadows comes in the form of metaphor. So Bateson reiterates Emerson’s sense that the poet is scientific, and the scientist poetic: they think through pictures, through homology, to account for a vast world superabundant with both homology and difference.

Goat Island embraces Bateson’s metaphor-generating ecology as an analogy for performance composition. The work of performance composition is not a project ordered under one sign (or theme, or message), but rather can be understood in the vein of Jacob Uexküll as a condition of “multiple closed systems overlaid on the earth” (paraphrase of Uexküll, Repair 8). Within each
of these systems, an animal sits at the center, dealing with the significance-bearing world around it. Ecological performance repeats this relational model. Performed outside the implied neutral point of view and crafted dramaturgical significance of proscenium conditions, the ecological performance carries (and solicits) very different significance from viewer to viewer. This complexity is achieved not only by spatially reorganizing the audience to emphasize proximity and remove a single front-facing. The ecosystem is built into the composition as a complex, overtly patterned overlay of events and texts, usually taken from a great number of sources and performed without deconstructive reference to an original text, rather treating the fragments as freestanding elements of a new closed system, as a bird might treat found a plastic ribbon while building a nest.

How, then, does the performance mean, how does it become a significance-bearing world surrounding each viewer differently? We could say that the meaning is a picture or message rising up out of a meadow, a word “fastened … to visible things” (EL 23). The responses recorded in *Small Acts of Repair* show significance arising associatively, metaphorically, rather than interpretively, for no theme sits at the center. A Goat Island piece is a composed environment in which each audience member occupies his or her own center. This isn’t a relaxing place. The work isn’t abstract or without reference to the world. It is violent, rigorous, philosophical and calls out to an audience’s ethical sensibility. But it declines to summarize its sense, trusting that significance will arise at the meeting point between the viewer’s associative resources and the images and tasks of the piece itself. The piece does not contain its own message.

Emerson describes the junction of a particular person with the intelligence of the world,
as lying “open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature” (386). Could we designate these performances also as a kind of essay with one side open, incomplete until the essay (the try, the wander, the attempt) is taken by the audience (and even then, never finalized)? “The performance becomes a kind of psychic funhouse mirror in which the participant spectator is enabled to meditate creatively on deeply felt concerns, experiences, and memories,” writes Bottoms (Repair 66). Then Goulish: “It is as if we are saying one may wander within the performance as if in a sort of neighborhood, through which we suggest a particular route, although you are free to stray from that route if you choose. The limits grant permission to stray. The straying is the act of creative response” (Repair 66).

Straying, glimpsing a particular door, a picture arises. Significance carries. For Emerson this event is saving: “I am bewildered by the immense variety of attractions and cannot take a step; but this one thread, fine as gossamer, is yet real; and I hear a whisper, which I dare trust, that it is the thread on which the earth and heaven of heavens are strung” (NH 42). Again I am reminded of the recurring sense (in Emerson, in Heidegger, in Rukeyser, in places in between and beyond) that thinking, building, and thanking, converge. Philosophy is a work of meadow-building; the philosophical commitment is what seeks and accepts the fine accident of the one thread. The voice of philosophy sings the thread.

If the message comes in a moment of repose or pause, then when writing philosophy, we must consider tempo. The accident, peculiarity and eccentricity of the impression calls into question the appropriateness of the constraints of tempered scales and measured beats. In the Cage-related art movements of the twentieth century that addressed themselves to a recuperation of the natural and the ordinary, not as a sublime condition but as a feature of all landscapes
including that of the city, the tempered scale is abandoned. Dance of this time shrugged off its marriage to music’s tempos, and asked instead, how long does it take an arm to swing? A body to fall? (Grass to die?)

Theater as a resource for composing philosophy answers by crafting occasions in which messages or images of significance might arise, through the alchemy of watching-as-wandering. If a proof is a form of preservation—an amber for the luminous idea—could we still accept as philosophy an essay with no proof, an essay which glides past but does not summarize its sense? An essay whose ideas might not survive the duration of the reading (or watching), except as a mark on our body memory, of an intense season? Does this mark of intensity, this nick of time, have something to do with an ability to sustain philosophical commitments?
Fig. 5. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 252

In this short life
that only lasts an hour
How much
little is within our power.
5. In this short life that only lasts an hour, how much, how little is within our power

“I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.” (EL 262)

In his essay on Art, Emerson describes a democratically accessible creative genius in keeping with his rejection of any socially fixed location of intellect. Art can be made by anyone, anywhere, so long as the artist is sincere, because art is “the symbol of a thought which pours itself indifferently through all” (EL 436). He charges the artist with the task of making artistic work “an outlet for his whole energy” that will in turn awaken in its viewer “the same sense of universal relations and power which the work evinced in the artist.” The effect of this awakening “is to make new artists” (437). This proliferation of artists does not adorn the world with “dazzle,” but rather makes the world more of a home—a place in which we may be “owned” by nature: “I now require this of all pictures, that they domesticate me” (436).

This idea that art functions to cheer and encourage, by engaging the viewer not as a spectator of greatness but as a fellow artist, animates a vision of artfulness as a practice of “living good moments,” which is what Emerson names as the real end of wisdom (and so philosophy) in “Experience.” There he uses the language of cultivation, the domestic garden plot: “Since our office is with moments, let us husband them” (479).

What is in our power and what is not? Emerson and Thoreau suggest, both specifically attacking the over-valuation of European sites for experience, that what is in our power is to
experience the “equal nature,” in Thoreau’s phrase, that exists for any living person as it existed for the greats of the past. This articulation resonates with the delight in pedestrian wonder of the Cage array, making art from the found, the local, the ordinary, not because the grocer’s daughter is better than say, a Madonna, but because the art is made by “find[ing] beauty and holiness in new and necessary facts, in the field and road-side, in the shop and mill” (EL 440). What is in our power is to learn how to see, to hear, “to find beauty and holiness.”

Although always leaning toward formulations that remind his readers of the limitations of their control over their access to any illuminating felicity, Emerson does suggest that there is something we can do to make ourselves receptive to the way of the “indifferent” stream of nature’s thinking. But in order to do that, we have to have some way to begin. How does one start making something? Even if all nature is equal, offering an equal chance to experience its force, we have to have some limitation, some project to pursue, some fact to look at, some place to start.

“That music is simple to make comes from one’s willingness to accept the limitations of structure,” writes John Cage (original typography removed, Silence 111). Structure is a “discipline which, accepted, in return accepts whatever, even those rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses, train us to make what we make.” Cage leaves a legacy that counters the narrative that art comes from the agonizing discovery of driving impulses, from self-expression. For Cage, we develop characters as artists not from the flows of expressivity from interior to exterior, but rather from “ecstasy”—experiences we have beside ourselves. These experiences character our appetites: create channels (structures) through which ideas “may

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67 As may be becoming clear, this is my shorthand indication for the artists for whom Cage stands as a representative beacon of affinity and one who voices an aesthetic ideology. One of Joan Retallack’s essays on Cage, “Poetics of a Complex Realism,” beautifully explores this Cagean ideology. (In The Poethical Wager.)
come along,” which we may then “enjoy” (113).

Everything depends on creating a structure along which something can pour or flow. What is within our power, suggests Cage, is to accept the discipline of structures, which are simple to make, and do not require the ego to discover them. The ego in fact gets in the way of that discovery, which is why Cage uses “chance methodology” to help him find a starting point for making things, and gives the name “structure” to things which feel far from artistically deliberate:

“Structure without life is dead. But Life without structure is un-seen. Pure life expresses itself within and through structure. Each moment is absolute, alive and significant. Blackbirds rise from a field making a sound de-licious be-yond com-pare. I heard them because I ac-cepted the limitations of an arts conference in a Virginia girls’ finishing school, which limitations allowed me quite by accident to hear the blackbirds as they flew up and overhead” (hyphens in original, 113).

My genius calls when I accept limitations which allow me, by no calculation of my own, to hear the sound of life; genius’s call sounds like whatever we find “de-licious be-yond com-pare.” What is within our power is a willingness to take notice of our delight when by chance the birds start up — our willingness to inscribe Whim on the lintel.

In the first workshop I took with Mac Wellman, he sent us out to transcribe an eavesdropped conversation in a coffee shop or bar, explaining, when we all returned with very different micro-plays, that eavesdropping would tell us about how own ears worked which in turn would tell us how to write. This suggests that playwriting is not a matter of inventing drama, but rather of accepting the discipline of one’s ear.
Cavell and Arsić’s readings of Emerson examine the conditions of ordinary life for their potential to yield to ethical being, or what Cavell calls Emerson’s “moral perfectionism” (passim). Cavell pursues ordinary language; Arsić writes about the common experiences of thinking, sleeping, and loving. I find that they produce startling and exciting readings, but when I examine my own experiences of conversion, I find that speaking, thinking, loving, and sleeping only yield those Emersonian outcomes when a structure or discipline surrounds them. For Emerson and Thoreau this structure was journaling. In my own life, this structure has come from making things (dances, plays, sounds, books).

There is an argument that creativity is an act of making something *ex nihilo* (see, for example, George Steiner’s criticism of invention in favor of creation in *Real Presences*, which argues that “real” art always has a transcendent provenance). A making that begins with chance, with accident, responding to what already exists, sees creative production as a way to live responsively, as a variety of ordinary being. From this perspective, it is not within our power to create something out of nothing, but it *is* within our power to accept daily structures that might allow us to husband moments. This is an art practice that does not imagine itself as an act of creation but rather as a structure whose limitations trace an area within which we can give our attention to the incursion of interest, the surprising resonances, the happy moment.68 It is not

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68 One of my favorite living choreographers is Ohad Naharin, director of the Batsheva Dance Company, and creator of “gaga” technique. In a short documentary he describes the studio process as being one of “turning up the volume of listening” to the body, and one that yields “many happy moments.” In part because English is not his first language, his descriptions are deceptively simple. His dances are wild, violent, intense, beautiful, strange. Happiness in his description is the felicity of finding the emergent wild form, the emergent intense moment: “There is something about the process of choreography that can take you places that I never could imagine exist. There’s not much to discover in the world any more, and here it is. The studio provides me a huge opportunity of discovery. This is a place where [the dancers] can really go on a daily basis beyond their familiar limits. In the process I have with them, they [are] also great contributors. I think we will create many happy moments. … When I’m talking about happy moments, I’m talking about moments of discovery, being really moved watching my dancers. We do it on a daily basis, we create ‘wow’ moments for ourselves. We don’t need to do much because we can turn [up] the volume on listening and very delicate stuff can become ‘wow.’"
everyone’s dailiness, but the inheritance of Cagean chance methods and values in some art practices puts making into the list of ordinary activities, rendering it a form of life. At least in my experience, it is while in the process of making things that I am most capable of embracing “the process of indirection,” of undergoing its conversions, because it is only while making things that I manage to sustain my alertness and receptivity to surprise.

I don’t mean to celebrate a facile idea of what it means to be in the process of making something, or suggest that the democratic possibility of getting into that process means that it does not require its own severity and commitment (its discipline). “Learning to Love You More,” an iconic participatory art project by Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher in the form of a website archive of responses to July and Fletcher’s artful living assignments, generates some lovely things but they fall largely into the aesthetic category of feel-good. Severe music, I think, requires a longer commitment, and maybe its own form of poverty. The people I am thinking of, whose example I find representative, are those I call the lifers. Ordinariness here does not mean simply the plain or near, but the things we have, through a commitment, made into the structure of our daily life. We must require of our making that it domesticates us.
Fig. 6. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 752

emerging from an abyss and entering il-again. That is life, is il—not?
6. Emerging from an Abyss and entering it again, that is life, is it not?

“the exquisite music of that strange procession”

—“The Gods Abandon Antony,” C.P. Cavafy

Emerson teaches me to understand domestication as an activity: an ongoing series of etudes that tie perception to marking, saying, singing, or building. My house would have a glass bottom, green sides, and its roof would be a canopy intermittently cut by light. Emerson calls what comes in at all sides, nature, or impersonal. He could also call it abyss.

In her chapter on thinking as leaving, Arsić quotes a letter from Emerson to Margaret Fuller: “Even when we have extricated ourselves [by withdrawing into solitude] from all the embarrassments of the social problem it does not please the oracle to emit any light on the mode of individual life. A thousand negatives it utters clear & strong on all sides, but the sacred affirmative it hides in the deepest abyss.” The abyss here is opposed to the individual life, to person, not as a form of darkness but as a light that cannot be gotten. Arsić encapsulates: “The affirmative remains abyssal, something like a cave into which we can enter but from which our persons will not find an exit” (166).

A cave is perhaps not the right image, unless we can imagine a cave which continually opens chamber onto new chamber, proliferating an ever-increasing outside to the mappable, lit, and organized world. This cave is a hole without walls because what it means is exactly the opposite of organization, formation, person, limit. Person does not find an escape because the “sacred affirmative” takes no shape. Person, for Emerson, is the shape we hold against the abyss;
domestication is the process of keeping that shape pliable, viable.

Yet imaginatively scouting that abyss, diving temporarily into it, is necessary to Emerson’s domestication in nature, domestication writ large as a way of identifying with nature, to own and be owned by it. Because movement, and not rest, is the identity of the world, a life not alienated (by the “quiet desperation” of settlement) is always undergoing transition. Recovery of the world, understood as a sense of belonging to it, calls for an acquiescence to continual loss, and the virtual, imaginative experience of abyss can make sense of and lend aesthetic commitment to that acquiescence.

Despair belongs to the static; it is not the character of this deep. Affirmation is the compensation of the abyss, but it does not affirm persons. Taken on the largest scale of an individual life, measured not in days but as a long interval between birth and death—the emergence into and out of person—Emerson commits to relinquishing person. Arsić writes that he commits to this quite literally, as an advocate of the Rural Cemetery Movement which encouraged the elemental return of a corpse to nature, and saw error in the sealing up of person within the marble walls of tombs. Decomposition becomes affirmative when a body, losing the organization of a person, continues into more life in new forms, as part of the soil. The landscape of the cemetery, the trees and grasses that grow out of that compost, becomes a living monument free from the “unhandsome” error of grasping at permanence. The affirmative is always moving.

Arsić argues that Emerson’s primary tuition is to aestheticize ordinary domestic life in order to gain an impersonal, objective perspective on its beauty, and a disciplined, committed way of seeing its shifts. Cavell reads in Emerson’s ordinary language an unsettling of words, so

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69 See Section 2 of her chapter, “The Art of Staying,” for her full discussion of Emerson’s involvement with the movement and his thinking about burial.
as to return periodically to his readers’ attentions the conditions of the conditions under which we speak and understand each other. I have wondered if Emerson doesn’t also give assignments for virtual exercises outside of ordinary experience, etudes for intense seasons that would mark us like Molly Bloom, with a sacred “yes.” What if we took his descriptions of felicitous experience as images we are tasked to entertain: the ravishing virtuality of becoming a transparent eyeball, the maternal comforts of lying in the lap of a great nature, the strange non-possessiveness of lying with one side open to the deeps of nature.

I have experienced certain writers as making compositions like literary bathyspheres within which I can entertain the image of a virtual dive into the affirmative abyss. Writing these dives, they return with sentences clutched in hand that signal their safe passage back from the unforming, deforming opening. These sentences are declarative arrogations; if we take them we must take them as true. Sometimes they are amulets. (Susan Howe: “Negligence of passivity Love is the interdiction of a history.”) Sometimes they are curses. (Hugo Ball: “Man is a chimera, a miracle, a divine approximation, full of malice, and deceit.”) These sentences hold together as tiny crystalline events, escaped from the waves of barely organized and nearly lost experience. In the tautness of their wagers they suggest an effort to take and hold shape against the darkness of the abyss. Speaking these sentences, saying them as if we were performing their script in order to experience their fruits (more as one might speak a scripted prayer than as one would “play a part” in a drama), I think we can license ourselves to entertain their images, virtually follow their dives, and experience them as events of our temporary person. This is what the bathysphere is: a vessel-as-body into which we can climb.

Why name the sentences events? In “Fate” Emerson writes:
The secret of the world is, the tie between person and event. Person makes event, and event person. … He thinks his fate alien, because the copula is hidden. But the soul contains the event that shall befall it, for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts; and what we pray to ourselves for is always granted. The event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin. What each does is proper to him. …

Thus events grow on the same stem with persons; are sub-persons. (EL 962-3)

Take the sentence you can grasp onto as “print of your [temporary, entertained] form.” Take its voice as your own, not for all time, but for the duration of this intense etude, this spiritual exercise. When I license myself to be the voice who declares that love is the interdiction of a history, or that man is a divine approximation, I am licensing myself to put some amount of my being into that picture, that event, by invoking the philosophical commitment of the original writer to address her own experience insofar as it bears on the neutral, the possible, the human. (Recall Cavell's “arrogation” as finding the voice that speaks on behalf of these things.)

Philosophy could be a script of amulets, curses, hidden copulas.\(^70\)

To climb into a literary bathysphere is to make a virtual excursion in which we imagine diving into something that exceeds our person. On the dark sea bottom its language draws a circle to define a territory within which the glance of the affirmative may leave its impression. In the shape of that circle we can retain some sense of person against the vastation of the impersonal. The impression prints something we might hold onto as we return to the surface (the amulet, the curse). The action of drawing the circle is Orphic. A circle is drawn at the precise moment when Orpheus, turning, sees Eurydice. Her disappearance glances, marks. Does death, like nature, leave open some doors through which we project our philosophical selves? If we

\(^70\) As it does in texts of fragment, aphorism, or koan.
could entertain this idea, then we could say the Orphic is our best shot at experiencing the fiction of an afterlife. What does it mean that this is also a story of where music comes from? Is Cavell talking about a kind of afterlife when he describes the operatic aria as a gesture of being pressed between the world we do live in, and an intervening realm of significance? Is significance here the capacity of an event to persist beyond the disintegration of person? If the Dutch interior (of Vermeer, for example) represents Emerson’s call to find beauty and significance in daily domestic space (as Arsić suggests), could the gesture of singing stand for that same finding in the longer term of our domestication within the “incredible lodge,” in our passing through the shape of a person between birth and death?

We leave behind our amulets, our sentences, our sub-persons, our “fragments of me,” as records of that domestication and that passing. We leave them behind but will they be heard? Susan Howe digs around in the relative abyss of the almost-disappeared traces of voices fallen outside institutional memory. She says archives are the only chance we have to communicate with the dead. Transcribing marginal marks into a whispering chora, she takes us on dives and returns to the surface with strange copulas. Arrogation of silence (its yes) through poetry. “A poem can prevent onrushing light going out. Narrow path in the teeth of proof. Fire of words will try us … If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices” (Birth-Mark 47).

*Euphotic, dysphotic, and aphotic* respectively name the different stratas of the ocean based on the reach of sunlight, which pierces the euphotic, becomes dim in the dysphotic, and does not penetrate the aphotic at all. Poetry (Howe’s) is the submersible that goes below the euphotic region of the history’s ocean. Archived material, not found on finding aids but still findable, lets her into the twilight or dysphotic. (Howe calls this place the margin.) Into the

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71 See *A Pitch of Philosophy* pp. 141-4
aphotic only imagination can take any of us. Howe quotes Emily Dickinson’s letter to her sister-law Susan Gilbert Dickinson: “Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness—“ (L 871 qtd. 46). Elsewhere Dickinson writes of another path without course, “a threadless way”: “I shut my eyes—and groped as well/ 'Twas lighter—to be Blind——” (F 484). Howe claims Dickinson’s poems and Melville’s stories as threads or courses in these dark spaces. “Their writing vaults the streams. They lead me in nomad spaces. They sieve cipherings, hesitations, watchings, survival of sound-meaning associations: they hound and cry, track and call. So much strangeness from God. What is saved to be said” (51). Her early Americans speak from a newly revealed and unlined soil, that condition of wilderness that makes the myth condition of our early nation. “Silence becomes a Self. Open your mouth” (50). Melville says Hawthorne’s open mouth speaks a “mystical blackness” (“Hawthorne and his Mosses”). Howe says her writing is “haunted and inspired” by “the buried ones” (45).

“Emerging from the abyss and entering it again, that is life, is it not?” Dickinson's is not a bright stay outside the abyss. She uses poetry to watch herself hover, inclosed in person, above that deep. Her poems draw faces over that depth. Like Artaud’s masks, Dickinson’s figures are animate because of what hides behind them: face over a vertiginous darkness, footfall peeling back from the ecstatic dark of “degreeless noon” (F 259). As a poet she watches the deep constantly, just as she would have watched all those burials from her childhood window.72 Her poems, in their constant interrogation of death, could be taken as practice runs for that eventual passage, entertained images of vastation, dissolution exercises. A poem is an opportunity to court that passage into the undone, to seduce it into opening on domestic space. “Emerging from the

72 The home where she lived between the ages of 10 and 25 overlooked one of Amherst's cemeteries.
abyss and entering it again, that is life, is it not?” (she writes). “Entering the abyss and emerging from it again, that is poetry, is it not?” (she could have written). What does she come back with if not the motto of the abyssal affirmative? “’Twas lighter to be blind.”

The telling is whispered during the return trip. What survives the telling? So often the aesthetic experience of diving leaves a mark of intense experience without leaving an image in mind to be explained or related. The sense dissipates the same way as a dream. This is often my experience of Howe’s writing. I have a feeling that this is also the experience of my shows. Maybe of this section too. I am sometimes told by editors and critics that my writing (of plays, of prose) is lovely as it goes along but does not “add up.” But I don't write to reach conclusions; I write tracks, dives, trips. The writing takes and then yields its shape. I am sensitive to the minute topography of the exit moment. Instead of adding up, I end by handing the experience over. The show ends in a transfer. I let you out of the bathysphere. Mostly it is a project of diving. I hope some day I will return with an amulet. Do you recall a circle was drawn, a space emerged? And did you feel its leaving? Wasn’t it singing when it left?
Fig. 7. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 865

865

Not to send errands to John Alden or one of the
instructions.

His 1621
7. Not to send errands by John Alden is one of the instructions of history

Dickinson read Longfellow’s long poem, “The Courtship of Miles Standish,” in which John Alden runs Standish’s errand to offer marriage to the maiden Priscilla. The errand fails. Alden returns to report to Standish, who has not imagined the errand’s failure. In its immediate context, the lesson is prefigured by Standish’s military motto: don’t have other people do your own work. Other questions hang over the errand. It has its own success, just not the one predicted by Standish. Whose errand is it? A deeper cause shape-shifts in Alden’s shape-shifting rationale. The poem ends happily in marriage (of Alden and Priscilla), forgiveness (by Standish), and the implied sanction of God, but this seems purely a fabrication of genre, a naive optimism written onto however much is true in this pilgrim history. Stories “based on” true stories, like Longfellow’s, are stories rewritten to fit generic conventions. Augmenting and rerouting the real, they do a kind of plastic surgery.

Joan Retallack cautions against such generic constraint, arguing instead that the failed or unpredictable errand is the type of complex reality. Borrowing a word from Epicurus, she calls her counter a “poetics of swerve” (The Poethical Wager 1), which, she says, is a tool for making “complex realist” meaning. Far from a history plotted in advance, composed of errands whose outcomes can be predicted (fetch the milk, pick up the laundry, take your brother to school), Retallack’s swerve poetics is a navigational tool meant to enable one to remain alert and responsive in an unpredictable and complex present, creating “some kind of dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity, community and alterity” (3). Following D.W. Winnicott, she says that meaning, the kind that makes life worth living, is only made in that dynamic space,
actively generated in an encounter with the real, complex, unpredictable world. Emerson wrote something similar: “We live amid surfaces, and the true art of live is to skate well on them” (EL 478). And elsewhere: “Nature hates calculators” (483). In the “new yet unapproachable America,” they fly the colors of the curve and not the line.

What would an errand whose outcome is unknown look like? How is it initiated? How much of it can be anticipated? “Errand into the wilderness,” is Perry Miller’s name, borrowed from a sermon, for the project of the Puritan colonies understood as what, for better or worse, founds this nation, or at least acts as its emblem of foundation. That errand had a script and an aspiration, but continued into a future that fell far from the script, allowing every following American to ask, “where do we find ourselves?” Not in a city on a hill, it turns out. “It is is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist,” writes Emerson a few centuries after the real John Alden married Priscilla. “Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments” (EL 487). Other people have called this existence a kind of happiness. Retallack quotes Lyn Hejinian: “Is happiness the name for our (involuntary) complicity with chance?” (qtd. in Wager 19). Chance equals existence according to Lucretius in De Rerum Natura (also incorporated by Retallack) because in a purely determined world, the first things would never swerve and nothing would have happened: “For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first-beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything” (qtd. in Wager 2).

The sense that this uncertain violence (Lucretius calls it a blow stemming from the inclination to incline “at times quite uncertain and in uncertain places”) is a kind of security is
one of the refrains of *Another Tree Dance*. It is a low refrain and I’m not sure how well it is heard, but to my mind it is something like the finding of the show. It is dramatized in the show's images as sliding briskly down a curving tunnel, an event in the recurring dream from my childhood from which I recognized Carson's “sleep side.” In the dream, I come into my grandmother’s living room at night and on the wall where the couch should be, there are three mouths of three tunnels—three holes with three lights above them, and in the dream I have to choose and enter one. Often in the dream's recurrences I am pressed to choose quickly, being pursued, but sometimes I wander into the room at leisure. Every time the dream recurs, I choose a tunnel and crawl in and slide swiftly down and away on a dropping curving pathway. Only that much ever repeats. That falling recurs throughout the *Another Tree Dance* in tunneling and sliding images. I name it security because it is a means to unpredictable transition, to happy, involuntary complicity with chance: “*There is a security in these special channels. Fantastic bridges. Tubes in space. Vegetable interstellar reticulation.*”

The security carried by this gliding image has something to do with Emerson’s description of life as “a flitting state, a tent for a night” when he advises something like considering sickness or health as equally palliative to the universe (EL 481). I think of this bracing statement as explained somewhat by this exhilarating description from “Circles”: “the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit” (413). The failure of the errand is the oncoming of something living. Life is a failed calculation, a “series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not” (483). It is in this failure to consist without swerving that we are secure in the embrace of ongoing life.
Retallack suggests that the essay form makes a space for embracing disorientation and strangeness, which would make essaying a receptive errand into the strange. Instead of argument, the essay is an “urgent and aesthetically aware thought experiment” built of a mix of “logics, dislogics, intuition, revulsion, wonder” (4). I think it is fair to say that Another Tree Dance is a performance essay built of the logics, dislogics, intuitions, revulsions, and wonder of entertaining Emerson's images. Putting it in these terms makes me see its proportions in distinction to the essays (of Cavell and Arsić) and the seminar (Joan’s) that taught me so much about Emerson and that fortified the allegiance that has sustained me through the weird, hard process of dissertating. Those essays are primarily readings, as the first two chapters of this dissertation are, making meaning by seeking out the text's logic understood as an internal consistency of imagery, vocabulary, and value set. In bolstering and enhancing these images, words, and values, Emerson actually comes to mean more—the readings are a productive collaboration. By contrast, Another Tree Dance makes its meaning for the most part by seeking out Retallack's last four terms: dislogic, intuition, revulsion, wonder. There is some logic in the script, but it is clustered in the show’s prelude, which explains the context and orientation of my reading, and in the card deck given out as the show's epilogue, which offers descriptions of the attributes of different working intelligences described in Emerson's essays. What comes between the prelude and epilogue is what I have come to understand, following Carson, as my dissertation’s “sleep side,” or, following Emerson, as its “occult relation.” That is the freedom that making an essay in the form of something else (a room, a building, a script, a dance) offers: to pursue the errand of essaying through the “more than rational” dimensions (Stevens), not just to think about and speak for the merits of the object of one’s attention (attraction, law), but to swim (and glitter) through it.
I sometimes have
almost grand
language—was
born between
as—

Dear, steep
your words, calm
softer in life
shining
the God
of which the dreum

Fig. 8. Emily Dickinson, Fragment 754
8. I sometimes almost feared language was done between us – too dear, except for breath – then words flowed softly in like a shining scene, the lode of which the miner dreams

Before this chapter ends, I want to glance backwards at the inheritance I claimed of Artaud's theater of “vibration” operating in “a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.” This theater “decontrols” language (the word is from Morton Feldman and refers to his notation) in order to recuperate both the energy of the environment in which it is spoken, and the vibratory presence of words at the moment they form their circuits of sense. The art historian Richard Kostelanetz called the 1960's variants of this work “the theatre of mixed means,” whose combining he differentiates from the traditional mixing of theatrical elements (in opera or musical theater, for example) as not being controlled primarily by language, and further by being decontrolled in general. He takes Allan Kaprow's Happenings as the template of the mixed means event, noting that Happenings are characterized by indeterminacy, insofar as each participant follows a score but has not rehearsed and set either the way that score is manifested, or the way it comes into combination with those of the other participants.

The information about ranges of theatrical experience generated by these events flowed into the performance work that followed in their wake. The indeterminacy between elements of the larger event did not necessarily remain unrehearsed, becoming instead part of the exploratory development phase in many cases. But the aesthetic openness to and value of surprising intervals between elements was sustained. If we take Kostelanetz's description in its exactitude, it signals an interest not in multiple means of performing, but in the event of their mixing. His language is plain, reflective of the tone of the artists he writes about, who talked about ordinary bodies, un-
artists, and be-ins. But this mixing is not divorced from the more intense Artaudian mood, which names the blending and generation of new relationships \textit{alchemical}.\footnote{See the chapter “Theater and Alchemy” in \textit{Theater and Its Double}. It is worth remembering that the first happening is generally acknowledged to be John Cage's \textit{Theater Piece No. 1 (Black Mountain Piece)}, which was devised at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952, influenced by the M.C. Richard's readings of Artaud's \textit{Theater and Its Double}, which she was in the process of translating at that time. The term “happening” comes from Kaprow, and so is a retrospective designation for this event.} As a writer who came of age after that scene, after the idea of the playwright as the controlling creator had passed, I am sensitive to language as a theatrical element activated by its blending with a scene. (Again to refer back to Artaud, he insists on the primacy of the \textit{mise-en-scene} in the theatrical event over the traditional centrality of the dramatic text.) I want to take this last glance at the way the sense-making power of language mixes in that scene.

Over the course of this chapter, I have listened for:

— a voice speaking as it returns from a dive into dimness confusion or vastness;
— a voice telling in a structure that couldn't predict its route in advance;
— a single voice singing on behalf of many voices from within an incredible expanse;
— a voice that attends to its own sonority;
— a voice that sounds from a specific and different position in relation to each hearer;
— a voice that takes the freedom to begin speaking from any place at all;
— a voice that operates on the sleep side of logical description.

One way of thinking about this set of voices is as designations of different spaces or rooms where language can be entertained. I see these spaces as hovering bands of frequency, wavelengths that require the audience to act as a fine a receiver, discovering the place on their own dial where the sound cuts through the noise. A theater with philosophical commitments to the process of thinking attempts to get its frequency there, half-way between gesture and thought.
This is not a project of “fasten[ing] words to things,” as Emerson describes for the poet. This is a project of registering the emergent appearance of circuits of sense, circuits of meaning, in the moments before the relationship becomes so compelling as to deserve the word “fasten.” (I think this describes Wellman's insistence on the moment of “apparence”\textsuperscript{74} as where and when theater happens.) Here we are in a room where we might almost fear that language is done between us, in the room's filling up with non-language elements, non-sensical language, or the absence of controlling sense described in their relation. At the moment we approach the possibility that no sense will arise (besides the elemental continuity of one thing happening after another), that we will remain lost, the words flood softly in, seaming the space in a silver circuit—a feeling of some kind of completion, some drawing of a circumference around our present experience. I know that this circuit of sense needn't be done in words—that there is a language of spatial pattern, for example, that also registers with the same clarifying flood of sense. But I am particularly interested here to think about what happens when it is through the sense of words that these circuits appear in the room of performance, not from above, as explanation or narrative trope, but out of vagueness, becoming discernible in a space “half-way between gesture and thought.” Think of sense as a circuit, or as a seam suddenly flooded with silver, “the lode of which the miner dreams.” Imagining sense as this suddenly defined form reminds me of Emerson's description in “The Transcendentalist” of the way “I—this thought which is called I,—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax” (EL 196). Like transcendentalism, theater as an exercise in awaiting the inflooding circuit is a reconditioning thought experiment meant to excite the experimenter into experiencing the illuminating

\textsuperscript{74} “Apparence,” as noted in an earlier section, is Wellman's coinage in “Speculations,” signaling the convergence of “apperception,” the process of making sense, and “appearance.”
alignment of the “axis of vision” with the “axis of things,” the pouring of the world into the mould (47). Recall Cage's words: “Structure without life is dead. But Life without structure is un-seen. Pure life expresses itself within and through structure.”
CHAPTER FOUR

Another Tree Dance: an essay in the form of a room

“My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects.” (EL 267)

The summer before I began doctoral study, I read the chapter on Jonathan Edwards in Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism*. I grasped little of the book then, but the word “room” and the phrase “the room of the idea” landed and stayed. Theater is a room that contains its participants, and within which three things happen: a form is wagered and followed (call it fiction, or choreography), attention is directed in more than usual quantities, and things happening are at the same time seen and felt. Its success depends on a willing submission to the event’s duration, a commitment to patience with its unfolding: a commitment to inhabit the room. What would it mean to inhabit not a drama, but the the wagers that belong to an essay’s form? In the form of a room, an essay asks about the physical experience of thinking alongside another: about nervous response, about the bodied mapping of witnessed movement. In the form of a room, an essay proceeds by furnishing, circulating, by turning on the music. Jonathan Edwards describes a furnished room of elemental relations as “the room of the idea,” a conceptual chamber of meditation upon a word or an image, a chamber in which an idea is staged, making a space in which to persist until the idea strikes the physical, nervous, hormonal, conceptual, and for him religious “sense of the heart,” which is full-bodied understanding. Theater as room recreates these conditions, in company. In chambers, *in camera*, light and sound and image and the feeling of near bodies strike sensitive matter. The room is for the developing emergence of understanding. It thrives on the audience's willingness to persist in the dimness, so
as not to ruin the exposure. The print that comes of it is not part of the room. The print is transmissible, equipped to survive in time, whereas what happens in the room always lasts for a while and then recedes. To enter this kind of theater, we gather, close the door and occupy the room together.
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PROCESS NARRATIVE OF ANOTHER TREE DANCE

CREATING IN CONVERSATION

Another Tree Dance is a seventy minute solo show that I performed in October 2013. It was originally imagined as a publication of this dissertation in the medium of performance. It was to happen after the dissertation itself was done, and to function as a productive pressure on the timeline of writing. I envisioned it as a lyric lecture-demonstration threaded with dances. In part, I made it because I wanted to re-orient myself as I approached the close of my doctoral studies and looked for a place to work. I felt clearly that I would return to working and teaching in the performance community, and so it made sense to me that the only way this dissertation process would feel complete was if I were able to communicate it to that community. But I also decided to make Another Tree Dance because every stage of my graduate work has been sifted into and through creative work, either written or performed. I experience that passage and repurposing as an “irresistible dictation,” the obedience to the impulses of my thought, experienced both as a dictation and as the way I come to know myself, that Emerson names in “Fate” (EL 943).75

I booked the show at The Chocolate Factory Theater a year and a half in advance of the performance date, thinking I would first complete the dissertation and then translate it into performance. Writing was slower than I had anticipated, however, so the process of building the

75 He continues: “By obeying each thought frankly, or by harping, if you will, pounding on each string, we learn at last its power. By the same obedience to other thoughts, we learn theirs, and then comes some reasonable hope of harmonizing them. We are sure, though we know not how, necessity does comport with liberty, the individual with the world, my polarity with the spirit of the times. The riddle of the age has for each a private solution.” (EL 943)
show ended up happening alongside that of writing the dissertation, interrupting it, informing it, and eventually being absorbed into it. In relation to the timeline of the chapters, I began scripting it as I was almost finished with my first chapter and had written a portion of the second. The performance was built while writing the second chapter. (I tend to make theater by first creating a series of texts that do not necessarily lend themselves to performance, and then attempt to build a performance structure around and through them, so the composition of the text and the composition of the show are actually separate in both process and product, unlike a traditional play which specifies its own performance structure, even if there is room for directorial interpretation.) The third chapter was conceived and written after the show was complete. Under the influence of my return to theater, I turned that chapter toward seeking out Emersonian affinities for my approach to theater generally, as well as theatrical affinities with an Emersonian commitment to philosophy. In the end, Another Tree Dance was not only a way of communicating some of this thinking to my performance community, but also a way for me to understand my dissertation's questions from oblique angles, to explore my private relationship to Emerson's thinking outside the context of scholarship, and allow that in turn explicitly to inform my scholarly writing.

From the outset it was clear that the show had to be a solo performance, not only because dissertating is such an isolating experience, but also because the imaginative space I find when making theater and performance, as strand of my life, feels to me like “the solitude to which every man is always returning” that Emerson describes in the last passage of “Experience.” I would perform alone. But performance thrives in its collaborative habits, and I did not want to go through the process of devising the performance in complete solitude for fear of being unable to
get perspective on my task, so I asked my friend and long-time collaborator Sara Smith to work with me. We described the piece as having been created “in conversation” with each other. Conversation became the medium for ideas and images to surface—conversations first about what seemed to animate or propel the questions I was asking in the dissertation and the ways I was responding to Emerson, and then conversations about the ways I had already been sensitive to some of those same animations in my past work. This meant that the show took a very different shape than it might have had I devised it alone, or devised it as a “translation” of my chapters. Through conversation, Sara and I generated assignments. I would then work by myself to answer the assignments, which would be followed by more conversations about those “answers” in terms of how they would become elements of the performance, which had to operate on its own terms and not only as a shadow or response to the dissertation.

THE GRID AND THE GALLERY

Because we lived in different states, Sara and I generated the framework and staged the piece in three short residencies – four days in May, a week in July, and the two weeks leading up to the performance in early October. During the first residency, Sara came to California, and we spent four days talking about the dissertation, which at that point was focused on Emerson's descriptions of intelligence and the different ways to participate in the intelligence of the world, or nature. We began by homing in on images or sentences (both from Emerson and from the years of seminar reading) that I felt particularly attracted to: “All things swim and glitter”; the

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76 To be both creator and performer means that I would literally never get this perspective, being unable to watch myself perform, unlike, say, a process of writing, where I can become the reader after I have been the writer.
“occult relation” between man and vegetable; “All I know is reception”; the “solitude to which every man is always returning”; the idea of illumination as an “excellent region”; the idea of aversiveness as turning away, as well as an idea of turning away that associates with the idea of onwardness or following uncalculated openings; the recognition of compensations; the conjoining of “dimmer” and “freer”; the “sleep side”; images involving waves; the image of Thoreau dropping a sounding line in Walden Pond.

We were looking for ways to think about this inventory of images theatrically, ways to participate in and work from their intelligence without having to situate them in Emersonian contexts, which would lose too much time in explanation. We taped together nine sheets of graph paper into a large rectangle and drew a grid, with columns to list theatrical images, Emersonian references, theatrical modalities (dance, song, text, projection), and any old work of mine that seemed relevant (see Appendix 2 for an image of the grid score). One of the first images that suggested itself was the figure of the radiographer (all I know is reception). The radiographer suggested companion figures: the sonographer who sounds the depths, the topiarist who knows the occult relations between man and vegetable, the projectionist who entertains (with) luminous images, the turning man who turns away, the collector who understands the infinitesimal attractions of ordinary things. They were figures defined by occupations but suggestive not of characters but of the occult emblems of a tarot deck. This quasi-tarot type of figure made sense as a way of imaging Emerson's linking of fate with work, through the “irresistible dictations” that are received individually according to the peculiar channels of each person's thought, and the linking of “doing your work” with finding and opening those channels. The convergence of the suggestion (in Nature) that there are “occult relations” to be discovered between a person and
other nonhuman things, and the mode of study as doing a *reading* also underwrote the pleasure we took in the tarot echoes of this emerging gallery of figures. We knew fairly soon that the figures would be somehow a key to the generative process of the show.

Other images in this early score came from different sources. We were trying to generate tasks without worrying about the eventual narrowing down, and pursued any ideas that seemed to have theatrical relations to the dissertation's field of inquiry. Eventually some of these sections were conceived of as non-figurative elements in the gallery of figures, which became our controlling structural device. These non-figurative cards included The Sleep Side, The Dimmer Freer, The Tree Dance, and Another Tree Dance. We experimented with movement tasks focused on moving continuously by turning over bones in socket joints (with “turning/following” as a translation of Cavell's aversiveness and onwardness, giving the gooey, lovely feeling of the movement the nickname “an excellent region” which is one of Emerson's names for delighted thought); included ideas for short audio pieces (we thought we might have an interview with my father explaining amplitude and frequency, as his work as an engineer included radio and satellite communications); thought about video and lantern projections (there was an idea to use revolving lantern templates as a kind of shadow play, building on ways we both had worked in the past); imagined slide shows (of my grandparents' slides, of Emerson's text, both of which were retained in the final version of the piece); assigned musical airs as forms of solitude (using a small Casio keyboard I had used in past shows). Finally we went through my archive of old work in text, movement, sound, video and animation, looking for ways I might already have been working with images resonating in our inventory, knowing that those Emersonian images registered with me in part because I was already interested in them (I recognized them in their
“alienated majesty” as my own.) We gathered a set of songs, videos, and images that seemed to already articulate the Emersonian interests. We named these resonating pieces the “prehensions,” using Alfred North Whitehead's term for the imaginative, aesthetic, subjective grasping that prefigures and underlies objective understanding. The “prehensions” offered us an archeological map to the show, as a kind of buried foundation below the zodiac we were creating with our new gallery of emblematic figures. These were all recorded on the grid score. Each sentence from the inventory was thus associated with theatrical imagery, possibly with old work, and given a tentative assignment (write a prose paragraph; compose a musical interlude; make a dance; create a projection or animation).

After Sara left California at the end of this first residency, I began working on the sections we had designated as prose. I started with The Topiarist, as the passage from *Nature* gave concrete images I could use as a starting point—the delight “ministered” by the woods in recognizing the relation between man and vegetable, and the waving of the vegetables to the man. Here is what I wrote:

*(Voice in the almost-dark; on mic; minimal underscoring, minimal gesture.*

*Perhaps play with lantern templates and fern/curve designs that accumulate to create a human form from plant?)*

I am out walking. I see a fern no higher than my shin. A curve unfolds a further curve. A wave. The fern waves at me. I wave back at it. We sing: *cousin, fern. cousin, plant. cousin, branch.* I am I because the abominable branch knows me. We record our kinship by the intervals in our music. The bowls are struck. The plants begin. There is no impossible place; they will go waving. I remember I
was stuck in the hot grey concrete expanse of freeway, trying to exit. Where the road divided there were birds, in a small piece of shade, a greener grey, a minutely more green grey: birds, two grey birds, and a white bird. Three of them in a small bit of shade made by a white concrete divider on the bright grey road. There is a rule of islands: where bird, then plant. A small island is fertilized. Soil in a concrete crack in the small amount of shade on the exit portion of freeway. There was another time when nature meant the woods, but who can afford that now when half of all humans live in the city? And of plants and birds too. They wave to us and we wave to them. From near places. From tiny patches. Cousin? Yes. Cousin? Yes. Cousin? I see you.

We choose The Topiarist. With his tool, a shears, he has teased a rabbit from a block. In the gardens of the municipal park he has taken his shears and cut now this way and now that until this mass of plant reveals its human form. For our rabbit of the concrete and our human of the shrubbery, we choose the topiarist, who coaxes one out of another. Coaxes the sound of a door opening out of silence. On the closed white blinds, while I was writing, I could see the shifting shadows of the trees outside waving in the way they do, nodding up on their long stems, nodding over the sidewalk and over the cars, and over the fearsome and unholy neighborhood cats. There they are up there waving while the boy is sleeping and the dog is waiting and they will still be waving when you come home.

This was an improvisation, but it gave me a form to follow: a narrative or descriptive paragraph
followed by a kind of nomination (we choose the ____ , who ____ ). It was enough to to begin moving through an otherwise vague series. That exact structure of passage and nomination didn't survive the editing process, as its tempo didn't work in performance. Instead, the prose passages were edited and set into the script by themselves, and the nominations were clustered first in the “History of Reading” section that acts as an introduction and orientation to the show, and then repeated with elaboration in the captions of the card deck handed out to the audience as they exited (See Appendix 1).

COMPOSING THE PERFORMANCE

The second residency took place at Mount Tremper Arts, and culminated in a work-in-progress showing. During that week-long residency we took each section and tried to stage it separately. I brought with me about 14 boxes of slides that I had gathered from my grandparents on both sides, as well as slide casing and transparency paper to print and construct our own text slides. In addition to me and Sara, our set designer Luke Hegel-Cantarella and my fellow seminarian Stefania Heim joined us, enlarging the conversation. By the time we arrived at Mount Tremper, I had written the entire draft of the script, made a good deal of sound for underscoring, and composed a few songs. I hadn't choreographed any dances, and was thinking about trying to draw instead on the improvisation practice I had sustained in the year leading up to the residency, challenging myself to leave portions of the performance truly unknown in advance.

A week is not long enough to stage a performance, even a draft of it, and in adding the short-term memory demands of that rush to the ongoing state of sleep deprivation new
motherhood had brought me, the in-progress showing was very shaky. (I call it the fawn-legs variation.) However it did give us a chance to experience the text off the page, and to get an initial reading on the very quiet mood of the piece. Certain sections—The Collector, The Pilot, The Sonographer—worked well, even in our very simple staging. (As we had so many sections to attempt, we left each one in an elementary state, concentrating our studio time on building movement material, and much of our other time in making slides.) One of the more successful things that happened during that residency was the illustration of each of the figures. Sara drew each image, and Luke digitally colored them so that they held together as a series. We had them converted into slides and projected them alongside the titles to each section. We built two short dances and left one as an open improvisation. My text for The Turning Man was energetically dull and unstageable, but it had written into it a slide show of pure color slides (made by inserting colored lighting gel into empty slide cases). We tossed the text but kept the slide show, accompanied by music we had used to experiment with the “following” movement score during our first residency.

The performance we gave at Mt Tremper was structurally identical to the script: a long series of discrete sections titled with their figure. Although there was something interesting in their accumulation, the shape of the event as a whole was obscure in the extreme, too obscure even for experimental dance audiences who are probably the most negatively capable people I've ever encountered. Under the pressures and problems of memory, and the generally awful feeling of performing something I was not fully prepared to show (even as “in-progress”), I had a hard time getting the sense of the material that the experience of performing usually brings, which meant that the impressions of my collaborators in thinking about the shape of the whole event
became critical. They felt a few things: that the sense was too distant from the surface, and that some kind of legible entry into the series of scenes was needed, that the projection of each card as a title to the section was more confusing than helpful, and that the piece needed more theatrical energy – there was too much unbroken text and it needed non-verbal counterpoints to make the language hover or vibrate. What worked were the visually or sonorously strong sections: a 2-channel slide show of images from my grandparents' vacation slides combined into new pairs with shared structural elements (three figures in the foreground, a body of water, aerial view of ruins; a vaulting structure) which accompanied The Collector and made it into a kind of art-talk (see figures 10-15 of Appendix 3 for some of these paired images); The Sonographer text embedded in recorded audio played in the almost-dark with only the light of four signal lanterns and my occasional live singing; The Pilot text simultaneously projected as a slide show, and read aloud on microphone; the choreographed movement material that moved quickly through spatial maps; the sung refrain and audio recording (text field recorded after dinner one night with Sara, Stefania, and Luke's wife Christine) of The Dimmer Freer text.

The final stage of working involved rethinking the order and continuity of events, and seeking out places to add energy where it was too quiet. I wrote a prologue (A History of Reading) to orient the audience before the show's descent into the less legible space of its series of figures, and turned the figure images into a card deck backed by Emersonian descriptions of each figure's intelligence. This deck was still projected during the show, but now as a concentrated slide show, with the group introduced all together during the prologue, then remaining unnamed until copies of the card deck were handed out at the end of the show, forming its epilogue as well as imposing a frame on the audience's memory of what happened. I
put a 5-minute pause in the middle (something I needed for myself as a performer, but also a useful mental space for the audience), and structured the piece into two acts with common sequences: a direct address, a slide show with music, a podium lecture, a dance, an abyssal experience (I will say more about this), and a resurfacing song.

RECUPERATION, VASTATION, TRANCE

Perspective on what exactly I am up to in the process of making something is often retrospective, but there are three things I became aware of while making and performing the piece that seem important to note here. The first is that I began to understand the project as a process of recuperation (instead of say, translation, communication, experiment, meditation), a word that came to me initially from Cavell's description of Emerson as being involved in the loss and recovery of the world but took on new meaning as I worked through my second chapter. The real illumination of that chapter, in my estimation, was taking the Cavellian interest in the recuperation of the world and Friedl's reading of Emerson's "circular power always returning to itself" as specifying the ground of being as a continuous recuperation of one's natural history, and linking them with the somatic studio process recuperative of physical health and intelligence. Developing the show, I came to recognize my creative history also formed a kind of natural history: of my own intellect, my experience of thinking and imagining. Not only did this prompt (or authorize) the inclusion in the text of images from old work (as with The Sonographer, which begins as a storyboard of several scenes from disparate plays of mine, or The Sleep Side, which passes through a long inventory of characters from my plays and writings), but also it led me to
compose the show's dances from ones I had made in the past, or impressions of the dances of my close collaborators in the formative years of my choreographic investigations, the years when I made my first tree dance, an adaptation of Hugo Ball's *Tenderenda* lodged in a fairy tale set in a living (dancing) forest (and in which my character turned into a Silver Linden). One of old those dances had been performed in front of one of my grandfather's vacation slides, which was the initial link to all the stuff of my grandparents (slides, a coat, music) that was folded into the piece.

I didn't approach this incorporation as a quotation of or commentary on past work so much as a gathering of text and movement images that gave evidence of ways of thinking, which I could join with new images animated over the course of six years spent reading. In other words, the old images didn't dominate or act as a key so much as provide a ground from which to find the figures and channels down which my imagination presently runs, channels which were figured as the several landscapes and journeys of the show. The Collector quotes an aphorism from Spinoza's *Ethics* that I like so much that I embroidered it on a flag for the museum installation component of *Montgomery Park, or Opulence* (made in response to reading William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*): “The more an image is joined with other images, the more often it flourishes.” I took this to heart.

These images flourished in the form of the three first-person storyboards which feel to me like the heart of the text: The Sonographer, which describes a descent into water (committing to the waves); The Pilot, which describes a cross-continental aerial excursion (committing to the winds); and The Sleep Side, which slides along the surfaces of a recurring dream (with only waking commitments). In the Sonographer and The Pilot, the storyboards end in a kind of
deliquescence or atomization of the first person. In this way the storyboard structure proceeds as a kind of virtual reality game, playing with the project of entertaining images of “vastation.” The Sleep Side, linked to the real details of my life (my work, my nightmares, my son), ends by delivering its first person voice back to the limited ground of the actual world but without any kind of resolution. It joins with the sections that follow it—a slide show of Emerson's sentences of patient skepticism, and The Dimmer Freer song of return and attraction—to find the return to wakefulness (to the world) as a willingness to simply go on.

These images were both old and new to me. I have been making work about deliquescence (or in Emerson's phrase, “the evanescence and lubricity of all objects”) since I started writing, and in fact I think that the best dances I made in the time before I began writing also experimented with the emergence and passing away of form. I think my choreographic mind found its home in writing because the narrative and imagistic features of our common language allowed me to approach that idea more concretely than I had in my more spatially abstract dance-making (although today I can imagine returning to dance as the medium of this same project). This new work, however, folded fluid images into its syntax, so that they did not occupy the work as its ending (metaphorical fade to black), but rather as a constant mode of movement (its onwardness). I think that has to do with the way my thinking has grown, through my reading of Emerson, to hold my attention on the dual cast of vastation and recuperation over the mood of daily living, as if they formed a kind of two-voiced music, trading off in the sense of which one might be the melody and which the harmony.

Approaching the performance, I was thinking a lot about how to get at a presence and stage space that would allow the group experience (a surface tension at the meeting of me as
performer, the form of the piece, and the audience) to take an abyssal plunge, to lose the world. In each of the show's two acts, an abyssal dive comes at the classical pressure point of the penultimate scene (visualize a story's arc). In each act making a dive was a question not strictly of textual images (although the text has its own descents in these sections), but of staging, of room tone. The Sonographer went to near-darkness, was heard in voiceover except for my intermittent singing in a thin high voice, coming from my body lying on the ground, out of range of what slivers of light there were, facing back. The Sleep Side was also heard in voiceover, also faced back, and also allowed the light (a shifting landscape of deep color designed brilliantly by Kathy Couch) to override my body, while I took a ten-minute cross directly upstage, following minute attentions to interior shifts in my posture and stepping. Each of these descents was followed by a song. In the first act, I sang: all the incommunicable things come crowding/all the indecipherable things comes rising/go around the world. In the second act: more is not indicated it is enthralled / return to me. Two dives, two recoveries.

It was not until opening night that I realized how much this performance of diving and recovery took place in a kind of trance state. After the directness and good humor of the prologue, my performance task was to sustain a simplicity and focus to render the text and the dances. Only through the intensely quiet physical experience of holding that focus for an audience – being, in body, the only thread through an obscure series of images – did I come to think of the piece as taking place almost entirely on its own sleep side. Only then did I realize that I had used the process to impersonally dive into my own sleep side, as if I could write a natural history of my own intellect, to make another tree dance. That is the task I think Emerson assigned to me.
PERFORMANCE OUTLINE OF ANOTHER TREE DANCE

Underlined items can be found in full on the following pages. Because the texts and dance scores form their own series independent of the choices we made for this performance, I have decided to present them here separately, as discrete elements of a possible event. The outline below is what we made for my recent performance. If I was to work on the show again, I might arrive at an entirely different solution.

ACT ONE

Enter.

Task: Entertain images of audience members as cousins of ferns, branches, other nonhuman things.

Song: Reading Song.

Slide Show: Meyers and Keithley Vacation Slides, followed by titles for a Vacation Slide Show.

Text: History of Reading.

Dance: Cartographer Dance; Radiographer Coda.


Text with Slide Show: The Collector with 2-channel slide show of Poinsard Vacation Slides.

Transition: Slide set from opening lines of Sonographer text. To near-darkness with only signal lanterns.

Text: The Sonographer, voiceover with live singing interspersed.
**Song:** Incommunicable Things.

PAUSE (with running audio collage, 5 minutes.)

**ACT TWO**

Enter.

*Text:* The Topiarist.

*Task:* Entertain images of audience members turning into ferns, branches, other nonhuman things.

*Slide Show:* “Sincerely” by The Moonglows plays. Project pure color slides.

*Text:* The Pilot (text simultaneously read aloud and projected).

*Dance:* Another Tree Dance.

*Text:* The Sleep Side, voiceover with movement score.

*Slide Show:* Sentences (Emerson).

*Song:* The Dimmer Freer, with simultaneous voiceover, slide projections, and live singing.

End.

*Object:* Distribute Card Deck to audience as they exit.
TEXTS

A HISTORY OF READING (PROLOGUE)

THE TOPIARIST

THE COLLECTOR

THE SONOGRAPHER (FIRST STORYBOARD)

THE PILOT (SECOND STORYBOARD)

THE SLEEP SIDE
A HISTORY OF READING

I have been reading for six years.
I have been reading the same few books for six years.
The same few parts of the same few books.
Even the same few sentences of the same few parts of the same few books.
I collected these sentences.

I think I have always read this way.
I have always read this way because some sentences possess a kind of continuous suggestion.

There are many reasons to read.
One is to find out what to do.
How to live, what to do.

Before I started reading, I only knew my totems:
the mole, who patiently goes on
the tree, who even more patiently goes on.
But when my friend came to talk to me about what I had been reading,
we discovered a circuit of figures,
figures we recognized as our own.
A gallery, a deck.
Do your work and I shall know you,
Said Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Every occupation possesses a particular intelligence.

Each kind of work a different response to the question,

*how to live, what to do?*

*What you are and what to do about it?*

I drew a hand, I chose a deck.

I do choose.

I choose *The Topiarist*, who coaxes one out of another. Who knows the occult relation between man and vegetable; I choose *The Projectionist*, who hovers a line across space, a concentration; I choose *The Collector*, who is satisfied with accidental and partial gains. Who knows the plenitude of the ordinary, the sufficiency of the day. Who gathers and reuses and relinquishes too; I choose *The Sonographer*, who signals the depths, who transmits noise and reads in its return the distances of distances; I choose *The Surveyor*, who measures in hands and feet, who knows the rules for the restoration of lost and obliterated corners; I choose *The Radiographer*, who receives the incoming and unknown, who knows the spooky, active far places; I choose *The Pilot*, who knows invisible channels, knows a violence we can travel by; I choose *The Turning Man*, who takes the way of abandonment; I choose *The Sleep Side*, for I do not possess myself; I choose *The Dimmer Freer*, for tiny attractions quietly moving; I choose *The Tree Dance*, for patience; I choose *Another Tree Dance*, because it chooses me.
I choose to read about dispossession
I choose to read about onwardness
I choose to read about opulence
I choose to read about vagueness
I choose to read about radiant atmospheres
I choose to read about how sentences carry
I choose to read about excellent regions

I choose to read about the rosy-fingered dawn, the porcelain-fingered dawn
I choose to read what points along the way
I choose to read what makes me see your face
I choose to read what delights
what abandons
what disappears

I choose to read about holes
abysses
waves
I choose to read about lasting
about sounding
about swimming and glittering
I choose to read what evanescences, what deliquesces
I choose to recall
to collect
to publish
I choose to sing
to forget
I choose patience
recuperation
tumbling
I choose vastation
I choose reticulation

I know that friendship is freer
I know our compensations
I know the light it throws
I know our early history
I know its general failure

I remember the old things
I remember the old faces
I remember the old dances
I remember the early sense of this same thought
This same thought always returning to itself

Again

Returning wholly strange and new

Again

Q: How does a spider attach a thread across a wide space?

A: A spider hangs her thread by launching –
THE TOPIARIST

I am out walking. I see a fern no higher than my shin. A curve unfolds a further curve. A wave. The fern waves at me. I wave back at it. We sing: cousin, fern. cousin, plant. cousin, branch. I am I because the abominable branch knows me. We record our kinship by the intervals in our music. The bowls are struck, and we begin. There is no impossible place.

I remember I was stuck on the hot grey concrete expanse of freeway, trying to exit. Where the road divided there were birds, in a small piece of shade, a greener grey, a minutely more green grey: birds, two grey birds, and a white bird. Three of them in a small bit of shade made by a white concrete divider on the bright grey road.

There is a rule of islands: where bird, then plant. A small island is fertilized. Soil in a concrete crack in the small amount of shade on the exit portion of freeway. There was another time when nature meant the woods, but who can afford that now when half of all humans live in the city? And of plants and birds too. They wave to us and we wave to them. From near places. From tiny patches. Cousin? Yes. Cousin? Yes. Cousin? I see you.
There are other rooms, ample times, and other sentences. I had to fund what was becoming ubiquitous and what was good to look at. Accidentally I wrote x instead of c, or c instead of x. Anxiety became “anciety” became by addition “anciency”; I wonder what it means. The sounds of voices are preserved in what we now substitute for letters, so that's something. And although in some moods we demand that there be no reflection, I do collect. Is recombination and the sounding of background reverberation in new and subtile intervals something different from holding and grasping and knowing? We have sorted the pieces into new relationships. I like to rest in the feeling. In this way the past throws its light on my face and sings. I felt that it was slow. This was a sentence. I felt that it was slow.

After all the promises we made her, we have failed the dog. She is there on the carpet, along with the local weather, the weekend-long party in the downstairs apartment, the sound of bicycles working a rail, and the opening and closing of the seven garages across the street. I place one here, one here, and one here. For my future, I have chosen a glass room to write in. I enter the room with a heap of miscellany and begin to assemble it into new arrangements. This tiny work in the face of the news and the violence – it is a kind of security. And everyday I walk out into the day, which is a shape thrown across the accretion of so many days. And in this way the day throws its light on my face. “The more an image is joined with other images, the more often it flourishes.”
Listen. The pattern of the ceiling fan. The offshore wind that leans the trees by the electric plant. The coffee machine gathering its pressure. The dog's eye is open but she lies completely still, while I lie here trying make pictures for my most fragile abstractions, to land them in pictures. Like the speed of swimming sea lions at the aquarium or the far off car race that has fly-droned all weekend through the open windows of middle spring. The quiet is full of movement.

I propose we sing all the new words in the green light of the living room I've been dreaming of since I was a child. The interruptions collect as we sing. There is a hill I cannot place, but I know it grows buttercups and we roll down it. Like logs attempting the feeling of abundance. “I visualize my way back to treehood,” says the log.

There is a security in these special channels. Other worlds, fantastic bridges, tubes in space, vegetable interstellar reticulations. In a green room I see a yellow a blue and a red light positioned above three tunnels and it is my choice to make. Choose a slide. I do choose. The dream repeats.

I choose the yellow light and the yellow light chooses the collector. I take old things and speed them up, propel them gently forward. Despite the violence, despite the fear and the hate, I continue to chant, ancienity. Ancienity is a tilted chimney in the grey mist of this morning's sky. Ancienity is the ticking of the kitchen timer. Radicalization now. Radicalization forever. Still we have food and beds and furniture. Still we have the words we hold in common. And our dogs. And the surfaces we cannot keep clear. And for that I apologize.
THE SONOGRAPHER (FIRST STORYBOARD)

One. I had myself placed into a bathysphere.

Two. I was lowered into the waves.

Three. The chains were released. I floated.

Four. I felt I was committed to the waves.

Five. There is light in the water, fishes.

Six. I descend through a canopy of jellyfish.

Seven. There are caves in the sea floor.

Eight. I swivel the beams onto the walls of the cave.

Nine. My vessel lands, the light cuts out, and I am in darkness.

Ten. There are faintly glowing seams of something.

*go floating*

*go lowering*

*go leaning*

Eleven. I crawl out of my bathysphere.

Twelve. There is a ladder going upwards.
Thirteen. I climb until I don't where I am. Total darkness.

Fourteen. I am washed ashore.

go floating

go lowering

go leaning

Fifteen. I travel overland to a cave mouth.

Sixteen. I enter into a series of caves.

Seventeen. I find an underground lake.

Eighteen. There is a further chamber filled with moles.

Nineteen. A further chamber of mice, howling.

Twenty. Beyond that a great indistinctness, a sense of disappearance.

Twenty-one. I walk very far.

going glowing

going seeming

going glowering
Twenty-two. I am still out walking.

Twenty-three. I am abroad in the land.

Twenty-four. I pass a man on horseback with scraps of paper pinned to his clothing.

go finding
go following
go following

Twenty-five. I cover my mouth. I remember him.

Twenty-six. I have light coming out of my own eyes.

Twenty-seven. I go on by floating.

Twenty-eight. I am in an oceanic condition.

Twenty-nine. I gather scraps to me as I float.

Thirty. I join them together.

Thirty-one. I attach them to the currents. Like the air man at the car wash.

Thirty-two. I have made a kind of house.

Thirty-three. I slip inside the house. The house remakes itself.

Thirty-four. The house is I and I am floating on a kind of ocean.

Thirty-five. On a kind of sea.
Thirty-six. I am a house founded on the sea.

Thirty-seven. We are houses founded on the sea.

Sing.
THE PILOT (SECOND STORYBOARD)

One. I have myself placed into a basket.

Two. I light the gas fire under the canopy of balloon.

Three. The basket is rising.

Four. I throw down the ropes.

Five. I am committed to the winds.

Six. There I am, an eye cast across the land.

Seven. I see trees spread out like fingers, trees in the shape of veins.

Eight. I see trees in thicket.

Nine. I come to the place I live.

Ten. I see myself below. I am floating over my own self below.

Eleven. I am in both places.

Twelve. For the picture to work.

Thirteen. I join a balloon gang and hover menacingly above the freeway.

Fourteen. My balloon shadows three birds sheltering in the shade of an exit ramp.

Fifteen. Cars quivering and inching. Balloons leaning out of banners.

Sixteen. I slough out of my advertising and spill onward.

Seventeen. Lights of a small city and the sea beyond it.

Eighteen. I cannot tell if I'm moving up or down.
Nineteen. I float many days.

Twenty. I come to the mouth of a river.

Twenty-one. There is my dog swimming in the safe water behind the sand bar.

Twenty-two. I put some amount of my being into this picture.

Twenty-three. I put some amount of this picture into my being.

Twenty-four. I continue north, hovering low.

Twenty-five. I find the abundant valley.

Twenty-six. There is a massive concrete chimney where a school of swallows circles at dusk.

Twenty-seven. I join the bird-watchers.

Twenty-eight. I join the birds. In the darkness of this chimney.

Twenty-nine. We cover trees whose names I do not know.

Thirty. We cross factories on the land that glow all night.

Thirty-one. Orange dots and lines in clouds of quiet smoke.

Thirty-two. Ground-lit tethered blimps wave from car lots. From mattress stores.

Thirty-three. There they are, nodding at me.

Thirty-four. My basket carries me.

Thirty-five. This sentence also carries me.

Thirty-six. This picture carries me.

Thirty-seven. In the air I escape the freeway.
Thirty-eight. In the air the grounding lines appear.

Thirty-nine. I pull the staves from my basket.

Forty. Seeing the sky from the sky. Seeing as the sky.

Forty-one. There are hovering flows. There is accidency, and life.

Forty-two. I plunge into trees cupping the fringes of subdivisions.

Forty-three. I plunge into houses blinking with screen glow.

Forty-four. I scatter and violate.

Forty-five. In a thin, high voice.

Forty-six. Without looking.

Forty-seven. [this page intentionally left blank]
THE SLEEP SIDE

I am in a house. I have been to this house many times.

I alone awake. I go down several stairs. There are more stairs below me.

I enter into wide green room. A great green room. It is empty.

It is empty but on the wall there are three holes. Three mouths of three tunnels.

Above the three holes are three lights. A red a yellow and a blue light in the green room.

It is not painted green but it feels green.

This is the color of the middle night. The color of something unaccompanied. A room rooming to itself.

I must choose a tunnel.

What recurs is feeling of crossing a swiftly dropping curve as I lose or almost lose control.

I almost lose control but never fly off.

I reveal myself as a moving line but at the point of inflection I do not fly off into the tangent, the ray, the vector. Precise words of the geometer.

I continue. I continue on a curving path. Gripping the far side of the curve. Barely bound, in a narrow security.

Imagine a freeway overpass, imagine speeding.

I choose the yellow light. I take the dropping way. I do not remember how but –

I am in a balloon. I am coasting above the city. It is a green and pink city. It is a grey and blue
city.

Red lights on a distant hotel. Lights buzz on as the dusk comes up.

Red light casts itself into the grey and blue dusk above the hotel bar.

It is the wrong city. This is the wrong house. Restart.

I am coasting now above a forest. Hand on basket.

The river that leaves the city is behind me and I am coasting above the trees.

The balloon grazes the top of the trees. It trawls. That's what I wrote many years ago. It trawls.

I should be breaking the canopy but the balloon seems to pass through it.

A kind of misalignment. A material impossibility.

I am coasting onwards. Into the flickering light that breaks the gloom.

So many of us. We are many.

We are in balloons each alone in our baskets but all together breaking the light, scraping the canopy

which moves aside in fragments and spills light, this canopy.

Light onto the forest floor.

Bloom, angle, facing. It's all there. And underfoot, softness.

There is a woman walking on the soft floor.

Pause.

There is an old but not too old woman and a dog.

Leave them.
I am walking. I cover my eyes. I cover my mouth. There is no man on horseback. There is no rabbit.

Pause.

In the silence of this house, now. In this silence. A silence you might feel spreading across your back. Might be feeling something. Might be feeling something you can't name. What will not fit a mouth. What does not fit my mouth.

In the balloon again, passing over myself still walking down there on the forest floor in the silence of this house intermittently cut by light.

If you leave the things you have always imagined, if you abandon them and you launch yourself onward,

who is to say you will not find imaginings of an older time,

a kind of pleistocene ahead of you. A green place. A soft place.

Another green world. An earlier, ancieny world.

What would it mean to possess this world?

What would it mean to possess this room?

To be dispossessed by this room?

As if it was no longer your own, but was the moon's room?

With what would you sense your loss? With what instrument would you know? What exact identification is to be made?

A tiny misalignment.
The gas flame flickers and cuts out.

Total darkness. The howling of mice again.

It turns out the images will not evacuate, but recur, recur in proliferating returns.

In nonrational variations.

The mice keep howling.

A quarter in a palm.

A very thin tree in a very high place surrounded by other very thin trees.

There are no spires of form.

There is no right direction.

There are no balloons breaking the canopy and spilling light onto the older ladies of your imagination.

There are no water moccasins skirting water slides in the Kodak light of Georgia.

And in the total darkness, which also is not there,

there are no humiliated men.

There is no Charles from Oklahoma, Tulsa, and points west.

No sleeping man has been chosen.

Wake up.

In a story you wrote once, morning kept happening.

Morning, then fires, and then dances.

An awakening, a door, and a globe.
A pigeon, a defeat, a processional, a disappearance.

A defeat, a chamber, a declamation, an apology, the howling of mice, an unmarked passing. A song.

Another song. A heap. Heapism.

A creature revolution. A building. A building on fire. Another song.

Wake up.

Take the dog out.

Your feet and hands.

My feet and hands.

For my future I have chosen to go ballooning.

I will float out over the forest

and over the concrete expanses

and above a field of port o' potties

and over the port where cranes unload schools

of new cars without plates awaiting transporters to carry them to lots

marked by tethered balloons nodding over freeways

advertising availability

advertising discounts and calling you to them,

and I will float across the dumps

and the landfills
over the landscape of this city

where there are still so many hand painted signs and stores in shacks in the corners of parking lots selling food tires haircuts,

this city of parking lots.

And I will continue over mountains and rest in the cross-continental wind until I am arrived at a new ocean;

above the land the pattern of farms

above the land the radiant blue channels of water

above the land the slow transition from west to not west

there is no more west

above the land the shape of a storm like a hat

bullying a car moving steadily across high plains

and above the land the same signs, the same impoverished choices:

what's for dinner?

what's for lunch?

If he will not wake up now, do I wake him up?

What are the figures that will recur

not every time

but many times

when he sleeps?
Will his mind also take dropping curving pathways

sudden near losses of control that never deliver the total loss

that never careen off the overpass

that never derail

that never collide,

that never consummate

the always approaching, never arriving, collision.
DANCES

THE CARTOGRAPHER

THE RADIOGRAPHER CODA

ANOTHER TREE DANCE

MOVEMENT INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SLEEP SIDE

Note: I have written these dance notations in the second person, as instructions for dancing addressed to the performer. Just as you can read this script imagining yourself as its speaker, please allow yourself, dear reader, to imagine doing these actions as you read. That is, read these as instructions for a dance yet to be made, not a notation of a dance that was done. These dances to be made would follow the architectural/spatial/image score laid out in these instructions, but they could manifest in very different movement from my original versions, and could satisfy the requirements of the score with varying degrees of compositional complexity. Where the choreography involves the recuperation of specific movement sequences from old dances, I have tried to describe the tone or type of movement in relation to historical types of dancing, and to suggest the kind of places the movement could be sourced in order to continue the choreographic project of recuperation (as against invention).
THE CARTOGRAPHER DANCE / THE RADIOGRAPHER CODA

This dance comes immediately after the History of Reading, which ends:

Q: How does a spider attach a thread across a wide space?
A: A spider hangs her thread by launching –

This question is an invitation for the audience to follow you into the interior of this performance's imaginary architectures. In THE CARTOGRAPHER DANCE, you map the key imaginative spaces, and allow yourself to experience the feeling of inhabiting those rooms. The movement for this dance comes from non-dance tasks: pace out a room, indicate the height of a piece of furniture, draw the shape of the window, stand in the shape of a lampshade, trace the curve of a tunnel. But you should not appear to be simply playing charades in the dance as you perform it. This pedestrian, task-derived source material should be put through choreographic filters, its elements then partially elided and reworked so that the action leaves pantomiming and becomes dancing (a vague threshold). As examples of “choreographic filters,” think of looking for physical interest that can be amplified (a bending over can become a falling over), for ways to condense details into layered actions involving many parts of the body at once (the feet trace one object while the upper body circles around another), or ways details could be smoothed into less definite sequences (corners become curves). Free yourself from the original scale of the room, and try condensing it into a tiny space, or alternately expanding it to the entire dancing space. Let the dance, and not the source tasks, tell you when you need to play this compression and expanse against each other. One of the results of this way of working is that as you dance,
you will feel yourself always inhabiting an imagined environment, meaning that your performance is not animated by the internal impulse or expression, but by the situation of finding yourself somewhere. Your task is to render to the audience the feeling and interest of being in that space, even if you do not need to render the details of the space itself. The audience should feel that you are surrounded.

The spaces to be mapped are:

1. a childhood living room or a living room in a house you visited often as a child, some place both familiar and also strange or intimidating;
2. a floor-plan for an adventure game you played as a child, where certain spots bring reward, and certain spots are perilous;
3. an imagined series of hallways filled with artifacts from your life
4. an abstract space—imagine it in terms of drawn animations of numbers, letters, or lines—in which you can perform a full-body semaphore of a secret code or secret name.

Your first task is to map out the childhood living room. Think of marking its significant objects, its ingress and egress, its windows, its light. Project a dream or nightmare into its space, and trace the pathways of the action. The second task is to create a repeating pattern that can be performed in an accumulation series (1, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4, etc.) that creates a safe pathway through the adventure floor plan. You should have a specific way of advancing from point to point, and physical events that happen on particular landings. In this section, increase the amount of ground you cover, allowing yourself to be propelled through the pattern with some force. The
third task is to perform a charades-like inventory of the artifacts from your life, and then to make walking or stepping patterns through the hallways. These could be reminiscent of folk dance stepping patterns that might be done in circle dances, or they could be very simple walks. Allow yourself to take the last leg of the pattern very slowly, advancing along a line that crosses the entire depth of the space. Allow yourself to lie down at the end of this pattern. Then get up and do the semaphore of your secret code as clearly and elegantly as you are able. At the end of the dance, you transition into the RADIOGRAPHER CODA (explained below).

The sound should be a collage, with series of different rhythmic spaces and room tones. Think about frequency, and in particular about using thin frequencies which carry over distance. At one point in the sound piece, just before the semaphore task, sample a piece of instrumental music with a great deal of sentimental value and a particular connection to your childhood (perhaps a recording of something you played yourself, if you played an instrument as a child).

The end of the audio is 20 seconds of elaborately pitch-shifted morse code (THE RADIOGRAPHER CODA). The pitch shifting allows the morse code to take on a melodic function. Allow the code-signaling to tease out a physical transition to something you associate with reception: a dial, a figure indicating that she is listening, an ear trumpet, a satellite dish, for example. Take the posture or shape of this thing, and hold it.
ANOTHER TREE DANCE

This is a very simple dance to be made from movement that is entirely familiar to you. The meaning of its name is that it should be a type of dancing that you have done before, many times over. If you have done no dancing, then this should be built of a sequence of actions and gestures that you make in the course of your daily life. Despite their familiarity, allow yourself to perform each action as a way of taking a measure of your body and age in the moment you are now performing. Allow yourself to be gently surprised by the mass of your body. If the CARTOGRAPHER DANCE has as its project an effort to render a superimposed spatial map, and so participates, we could say, in a fictional project, this TREE DANCE has an opposite task: to engage in nothing except the feeling of being patient in the present moment of your body moving simply through a sequence of familiar actions. Use this dance to secretly declare your affinity and commonality with all other bodies occupying space, especially with those of plants.

Whatever the original tone or tempo of the movement, in this iteration you should proceed by doing one movement task and then the next, without rush or much of an effort at making transition, beyond the simple transitional actions of shifting your weight as needed. For the first two-thirds of the dance, perform something like an inventory of discrete events. Perform this inventory in close proximity to the audience, directly on the center line, so as to strip this section of spatial interest and allow it to concentrate on your body. The final third of the dance transitions to feeling yourself a body moving through space, and should do this by recuperating movement from a folk dance you have done, or if you have done no folk dancing, a folk dance
you have seen. Instead of doing a sequence, however, just choose one or two actions at a time, actions that have a little padding or swooping or turning in them, and repeat these at length along simple, large pathways in space: first making a track around the circumference of the room, then drawing its radius, and then moving directly from the back to the front of the room, directly down the center line until you have returned yourself to close proximity to the audience. End by taking four or five discreet postures. The final one should have you standing facing upstage, with your hands out and fingers of each hand curved into a little ball, almost as if you are standing in the shape of a tree as it might be drawn or painted by a child.

The end of the dance brings up many lanterns like many stars in the sky.
MOVEMENT INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE SLEEP SIDE

Your movement in this section is extremely slow. In fact you should be so seamless in the way you unfold its changes that the audience will be unable to recall their sequence. Accomplish this not only by moving slowly, but by allowing yourself to experience continual small intervals of rest. It is the subtle information you acquire in the state of rest that will prompt you into your next action. The movement, while perhaps occupying a limited range, should not be set but remain improvised within its very strict parameters. As a theatrical event, the SLEEP SIDE should feel pictorial, not choreographic. In order to allow the audience to foreground the text (heard in voiceover) as the spine of the section, you should do very little moving for the first 45 seconds or so, maybe little more than shifting your weight. This section should be performed in a coat that lends a geometrically compelling shape, leaving visible only your wrists, hands, ankles, feet, neck, and head.

The spatial path of your action is tightly constrained: a slow cross upstage along a narrow route, facing back. You are not allowed to face forward, but you might occasionally look to the side. Pay minute attention to the shifts of weight in walking, and sometimes transfer weight forward and back before taking a further step. Articulate your feet beyond what is required by normal pedestrian stepping. Find all the bones and the surfaces they form. In your upper body, pay attention to what is already opening and turning and allow that opening and turning to happen. Try to find other faces in your body. What is the face of the palm? What is the face of the knee? The kidney? The serratus anterior? The omental bursa? The sacrum? These places may be very
internal, but remember that what is visible, what renders the shift, will be your hands and the carriage of your arms and neck, so take the time to let internal sensation travel all the way to the fingers and up to your skull. Occasionally step forward and break the spell of whatever you are attending to. Allow a new sensation to take your attention.

As you engage in THE SLEEP SIDE's subtle physical investigations, try to make yourself available to association of other fleeting images not rendered by you but by the undirected impulses of your body. That is, if you happen to find yourself doing something that suggests an image (a palm tree, a flamingo, a gothic window, a dinosaur bone), allow yourself to mark the association by becoming a little more like that image. It is important, however, that you don't try to choose any images in advance, and if none come, don't push for them.

This section should be elaborately lit with a large number of dramatically different light cues, all with intensely saturated color and overtly geometric cuts of the light frames. Take plenty of pauses, and never allow the movement to be sequenced faster than the lights. That is, the lights should, along with the voiceover and underscoring of the SLEEP SIDE text, lead the tempo of this section. Even though you are moving, remember that this is not a dance. What accretes in the body over the ten minutes of this section is rather a sense of somnambulation, of a mobility initiated by a non-willful intelligence guided by the shifting landscape of the narration.

Return to the simple walk whenever you are lost or thinking. It must take you the entire narration (about ten minutes) to move all the way upstage.
SONGS

READING SONG

INCOMMUNICABLE THINGS (THE TURNING MAN)

THE DIMMER FREER

Note: Each of these songs is intended to be sung over clapping rhythms. They need not be vigorous, but they could be.
READING SONG

I have been reading
I have been reading
reading
reading

I saw your face there
I saw your face there
face on the page
I was reading

I wrote your name there
I wrote your name there
your name
in the margin

always returning
always returning
to this room

our compensations
our compensations
THE TURNING MAN

All the incommunicable things come crowding
All the incommunicable things come crowding
Go around the world
Go around the world

All the indecipherable things come rising
All the indecipherable things come rising
Go around the world
Go around the world

What goes softening
What comes piling
What goes scattering
What comes gathering

You will find it
Rectifying
You will find it
Terrorizing

All come crowding
All come crowding
All come crowding
All come crowding
All come crowding
THE DIMMER FREER

“there is a chair and plenty of breathing”
  Return to me

“Giving it away, not giving it away.”
  Return to me

“The instance of there being more is an instance of more.”
  Return to me

“there is some use in not mentioning changing”
  Return to me

“and in establishing all that lives”
  Return to me

“dimmer freer”
  Return to me

“dimmer” “freer”
  Return to me

“and there is no dinner in the middle of anything”
  Return to me

“There is no such thing”
  Return to me

“A silence is not indicated by any motion”
  Return to me

“more is not indicated it is enthralled”

“more is not indicated it is enthralled”
  Return to me
SLIDE SHOWS

titles for a VACATION SLIDE SHOW

SENTENCES (EMERSON)
titles for a VACATION SLIDE SHOW

THE SLEEP SIDE
DIMMER FREER
ELECTRIC LIGHT
THE TURNING MAN
SINCERELY

A TREE DANCE
THE HEAP
A HEAP OF WHAT'S MINE
THE LEMON YELLOW HEAVENS
AT AN AUTOMAT
SCAFFOLD FLOATS
THE GLOBE
I WAS IN YORK
RENOUCE ALL CREATURES
THE HOLE IN THE WORLD
THE BLACK FOREST
WOOKEY HOLE
THE FIFTY-THIRD STATE OF THE UNION
THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE DAY
COUSIN FERN

LATERAL PLENITUDE
PEDESTRIAN WONDER
PAR LES ASTRES
A BATHYSHPHERE
I'M A PLANT
ON THE APRICOT
SWIMMING AND GLITTERING
STUDY OF NOTHING
GLAZ-G0-PASO
LUZERNE
ORANGE AND SAD ORANGE
RHYMES WITH GLUM
AOIRT

A GREEN AND PINK CITY
COSMOPLANE WALL
GOLDFINCH WALL
A HOUSE ON FIRE
I WILL SHINE
MILITANT B. RABBIT

VAGUENESS
DIM O
MORE IMPORTANT MAIL
ALL COME CROWDING

VERDANCY
SUPERABUNDANCE
DELIQUESCENCE
SENTENCES (EMERSON)

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none.

All things swim and glitter.

Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not.

Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive.

He thinks his fate alien because the copula is hidden.

Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity.

We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual.

Our moods do not believe each other.

Temperament puts all divinity to rout.

We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them.

Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone.

The secret of the world is, the tie between person and event. Person makes event, and event person.

Thus events grow on the same stem as persons; are sub-persons.

The mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.

Let us treat the men and women well, treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are.

Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy.
I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought.

You are one thing, but nature is one thing and the other thing, in the same moment.

I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment and this is a fragment of me.

Thy life is a flitting state, a tent for a night, and do thou, sick or well, finish that stint.

Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates.

Patience and patience, we shall win at the last.
NOTES on SOURCES and REFERENCES

“How to live. What to do.” is the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens, one frequently cited by Joan Richardson in her seminar.

“What you are and what to do about it” is the subtitle of Mabel Todd's book The Hidden You

“The more an image is joined with other images, the more often it flourishes” is an aphorism from Spinoza's Ethics.

The images of “houses founded on the sea” comes from Emerson's essay on Montaigne, in Representative Men; it came to my attention through Barbara Packer's reading of that essay in Emerson's Fall.

The man on horseback with scraps of paper pinned to his clothing is Jonathan Edwards, beautifully described in a section called “Errand” in Susan Howe's The Souls of the Labadie Tract.

The phrase “the sleep side” comes from Anne Carson's essay, “In Praise of Sleep,” in Decreation.

All of the sentences in the slide show SENTENCES (EMERSON) are from Emerson's essays, and come primarily from “Experience,” “Fate,” and “Nature.”

All the phrases in quotes in THE DIMMER FREER are from the “Rooms” section of Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons.

“I am I because the abominable branch knows me” inappropriately combines the “abominable branch” described by Perry Miller in his biography of Jonathan Edwards and represented
by Mac Wellman in his essay “Speculations,” and a sentence from Gertrude Stein, “I am I because my little dog knows me.”

The navigational image of the pilot is a response to Joan Richardson's chapter on Henry James in A Natural History of Pragmatism, in which she writes of his representation of thinking as navigating; it also waves to Sara Smith's ongoing interest in the history of hot air balloons.

All the titles and phrases in VACATION SLIDE SHOW and some of the images in THE SLEEP SIDE are section names, phrases, figures, or titles from my old plays and dances:

The Cosmoplane Wall is the speaking of an endlessly bifurcating universe in my rabbit cosmogony ASTRS, the bifurcating image of which is taken from the passages of Louis Auguste Blanqui's writing quoted in Walter Benjamin's Arcades. Blanqui appears in that play as Augustus B. Rabbit, also called Militant B. Rabbit. The Green and Pink City is also from ASTRS and is located in the 53rd State of the Union, but is also something like Baltimore as seen from a moving train, and is also something like Philadelphia.

The moon's room is an image from Walter Benjamin's Berlin Childhood Around 1900 which I adapted into a short performance called For Every Spot Appeared Wholly Occupied By What Once Had Been, some of the dance material of which is incorporated into both the Cartographer Dance and Another Tree Dance.

Glaz-Go-Paso, Luzerne, and AOIRT were the subtitles of the three dances in my Studies of Nothing series, and much of the movement from these three dances was recombined into the section here called Another Tree Dance.

Orange and Sad Orange were dances from my tragicomic skit play Four Fruits. That play also
A dance called Plum, which rhymes with glum.
The chamber of moles is from the end of my failed spooky land epic Talpidae! Talpidae! The scene is supposed to take place at Wookey Hole, which is a real cave in England.
The pigeon, defeat, and processional are from Islander my adaptation of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. The processional particularly nods to C.P. Cavafy's poem, The God Abandons Antony.
The humiliated men and howling mice are from Some Things Cease, my puppet play about four dead, very early kings of England waiting to pass into the beyond. So are the declamation, renunciation and apology.
The rabbit is held by a man in a picture in my interview play My Address is Still Walton, a play for the set of Charlie Rose. The line “for the picture to work” is also from this play, and means the felicity of fiction, but was sourced from a political analyst's comments on Hilary Clinton's public persona in the run-up to her 2008 presidential campaign.
The older lady of my imagination, the woman walking on the floor of the forest with a dog, is Linda, the heroine of a novella I wrote while gestating both my son and this dissertation.
Heapism is an attitude of reception to the innumerable senses and contexts of words that I described in a manifesto about the material experience of words called I, Heapist. But A Heap of What's Mine is a song about lying down and dying that the caretaker character Mathilde sings in my dead-king puppet play Some Things Cease.
The line “I will shine” is the lyric of a song from my building consciousness play Montgomery Park, or Opulence. The Goldfinch wall is a talking wall from this play. The building on fire also comes from Montgomery Park's interior chamber opera, Fire Story, but the house
on fire is from a song in one of my Basement Tapes, also included in the soundtrack for my video *I'm a Plant*.

Dim O is the name of the fourth section of my play *Do Not Do This Ever Again*, a section that took the form of a house tour proceeding from an outside entrance to an upstairs interior chamber with no windows, modeled on Deleuze's description, in *The Fold*, of Leibniz's image of the soul. The first section of that play was called More Important Mail.

Charles from Oklahoma, Texas, and points west, is from *Cowboy Loves His Mom*, a quartet by Chris Yon, Zach Steele, Jeff Larson and Justin Jones, and which I scored, made at Ur, a dance palace co-founded by Chris and myself (2003-5).

Morning, then fires, then dances is a sequence of events that repeats and repeats in my first tree dance, *Tenderenda*, also made at Ur. The hole in the world is a feature of the landscape of that play. Sara Smith was in that play. She danced the part of a tree.
I did not mean to spend all this time reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he arrested me. I found I recognized him from these rooms of following, waiting, making, remaking, these rooms of infinitesimal attractions. When I started reading, I meant to make a secret history of these rooms. I followed attractions that suggested subterranean kinships. And as I followed those attractions, Emerson’s sentences would recur, insist, illuminate, expand. So I spent all this time reading Emerson.
The Topiarist, who coaxes one out of another.

Emerson speaks for the relations that link us to unsuspected cousins, to the recurrence of patterns that make my pelvis like the whale’s pelvis, my eye a bird’s eye, the curve of my neck like the curve of cousin fern, my intelligence the intelligence that grows grass; for being in nature as feeling the plants waving to us, and ourselves waving back at them; for both the elevating delight and the leveling effect of these relations which at once identify us with all matter, and refuse us the illusion of possessing any particular significance.

The Projectionist, who hovers a line across space, a concentration.

Emerson speaks for giving attention to thinking, says the hardest act is to think when so much of our intelligence comes in at the edges, moves unassisted by our direction; for persisting in conversation until it introduces us into new regions and a picture rises up, a picture we hold steady, for a time, until new pictures come; for the projectors who hold the pictures long enough for us to read them, to let them strike us.

Fig. 3. “The Topiarist,” front and back.

Fig. 4. “The Projectionist,” front and back.
Emerson speaks for a wisdom that is not a total possession or transcendental success, but a capacity to find completion in the day, and then again in the next; for relinquishing the idea of some final and true way; for finding the experience of being partial to be good enough, a belonging, and so finding also enough goodness and pleasure in the parts, in the accidental vistas; for having the day, welcoming its unsuspected and unlooked-for influences.

Emerson speaks for the emergence of delight or power from the low, the familiar; against professing to know from what corner real profit comes; speaks for an art that is everywhere and that teaches others to be artists until there are no artists because no place is exempt from the patterns that build and evolve our world, no place but where our attention is lost to petty addictions and repetitions that ossify into blinders.
3. The Collector, who gathers and reuses and relinquishes too.

Emerson speaks for an acquiescence to the passing of the world, for enjoying momentary successes and delights, "the evanescence and lubricity of all objects"; speaks against holding and for a lighter touch that matches our temporary habitations; for understanding loss as characteristic of all growth, all experience, and so for the small rehearsals of release which form habits that might guide all our thinking.

4. The Sonographer, who signals the depths.

Emerson speaks for the depths of one’s being as not a primordial foundation but something more like a pool of groundwater, a space of incursion where the most private gives way to the most public, and the most public becomes a resource for the most private; for subterranean channels along which life flows, channels we might have the luck or the patience to find ourselves exposed to; for keeping one side open to these abyssal and shifting foundations.
The Sonographer, who transmits noise and reads in its return the distances of distances.

Emerson speaks for the rays of relation that connect all things to all other things, for the consonance of distant shapes with those close at hand; for the intuition that recognizes that we sit within a vast field of transmission, gathered as a temporary home for a thought called "I" that is repeated, with difference, across that field; for the knowledge that these consonances, mark the claim of the world on me, and my claim upon the world.

The Surveyor, who measures in hands and feet, who knows the rules for the restoration of lost and obliterated corners.

Emerson speaks for attending to the calls that come from near at hand and prompt their followers to discover onwardness and growth without imagining it to be a property only of some other richer place; for a suspicion of property lines and for going out walking taking a property in the horizon, along measures only discovered as they rise up into new pictures.

Fig. 9. “The Sonographer (B),” front and back.

Fig. 10. “The Surveyor,” front and back.
The Radiographer, who receives the incoming and unknown, who knows the spooky, active far places.

Emerson speaks for an awareness that what we know is a reception, an incursion, an entertainment of pictures; for a view of intelligence as visiting us, and for thinking as a work of tuning our instruments, meeting those receptions, a work of fine participation; for the possibility that these incoming pictures move through doors we cannot locate or predict; for the terror and delight of receiving these signals.

The Pilot, who knows invisible channels, knows a violence we can travel by.

Emerson speaks for the violence of direction that marks all forms of life with particular excesses and tendencies; for the possibility that the invisible tracks of coordination and force might pass under our feet, cross our village trails and send us with their salutary undertow from deep to lower deep.
The Turning Man, who takes the way of abandonment.

Emerson speaks for the health of turning away, of aversion from conformity, not just with others, but conformity with our own ideas of who we are, with the settlements that obstruct our reception of both the feeding forward of the old patterns that build, and the wholly strange and new conditions in which we find ourselves, one year to the next; speaks for onwardness as a willingness to undergo the transformation of this loss as a condition of growth.

The Sleep Side, for I do not possess myself.

Emerson speaks for a self-image that balances what we can think with what thinks through us; for the recognition of the incursion of something we can’t fully compass into any thought that seems to be our own; for the intelligences that we rest in, experience, and employ, that come from somewhere below or beyond the lit room of a conscious idea.
The Dimmer Freer, for tiny attractions quietly moving.

Emerson speaks for heeding the call of the old household genius who shows a glimmering and shifting in our settled places; for an attention and receptiveness to infinitesimal attractions; for working to increase our capacities to sense and to notice; for taking up this work here where we find ourselves, at home, amidst our most tender buttons, our tenderendas.

The Tree Dance, for patience.

Emerson speaks for patience, for beginning again, for enduring; for a winning at the last which is winning by lasting, a small success of persisting in the embrace of an ongoing process; for experiences whose value we only recognize after a long time; against the expectation that we can author our periods; for an optimism that we might some day if only for a moment, experience practical power.
Emerson speaks for the continuous re-assertion of our natural history, for the world as being in a state of return; for the commitments we can make to the things that characterize our particular temperaments; for finding out what it is that is our peculiar work, and doing it by listening for the awakening call of our genius, not that romantic possessive notion of genius but the household gods that figure the company of new with old.
Fig. 1. Grid score from Another Tree Dance.
APPENDIX 3: PERFORMANCE PHOTOGRAPHS

ANOTHER TREE DANCE

performed by Karinne Keithley
created in conversation with Sara Smith
The Chocolate Factory Theater, New York, NY
Oct. 1, 2013
photos by Brian Rogers
lighting design by Kathy Couch
set design by Luke Hegel-Cantarella
Fig. 1. READING SONG
Fig. 2. MEYERS VACATION SLIDE SHOW
Fig. 3. titles for a VACATION SLIDE SHOW
Fig. 4. A HISTORY OF READING “Do your work and I shall know you.”
Fig. 5. A HISTORY OF READING  I choose The Topiarist.
Fig. 6. A HISTORY OF READING  I choose The Collector.
Fig. 7. THE CARTOGRAPHER DANCE (beginning of a curve)
Fig. 8. THE CARTOGRAPHER DANCE (crossing pathways)
Fig. 9. THE CARTOGRAPHER DANCE (tracing a line with the head)
Fig. 10. THE COLLECTOR (vaulting structures)
Fig. 11. THE COLLECTOR (women on stairs)
Fig. 12. THE COLLECTOR (three figures in foreground)
Fig. 13. THE COLLECTOR (building and tree)
Fig. 14. THE COLLECTOR (ships in mist)
Fig. 15. THE COLLECTOR (urban waterways)
Fig. 16. THE SONOGRAPHER (The chains were released, I floated)
Fig. 17. THE SONOGRAPHER (I felt I was committed to the waves.)
Fig. 18. THE SONOGRAPHER (placing a signal lantern)
Fig. 19. INCOMMUNICABLE THINGS (singing, turning, clapping)
20. SLIDE SHOW (SINCERELY) (two-color slide)
21. SLIDE SHOW (SINCERELY) (single-color slide)
22. ANOTHER TREE DANCE (underwater plant)
23. THE SLEEP SIDE (beginning in the shape of a tree drawn by a child)
24. THE SLEEP SIDE (green and blue windows)
25. THE SLEEP SIDE (a face in the palm of the foot)
26. SENTENCES (EMERSON) ("Where do we find ourselves?")
27. THE DIMMER FREER ("Giving it away, not giving it away.")
Note: all works are print sources, except where otherwise noted.


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