Creativity, Self, and Communal Being in Emerson

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In an attempt to engage in the debate about Ralph Waldo Emerson's understanding of self and community, this essay seeks to explore the *ontological hermeneutics of communal being* in Emerson's philosophy. Principally opposed to all matters of social participation, institutional framing, and submission to the normative orders of a superficial individuality, Emerson's thinking nonetheless relies on a particular mode of communality and relatedness without which individual autonomy, self-understanding, and potentially "authenticating" forms of social (inter-)action are unthinkable. In fact, this essay wants to show that it is essentially in "thinking" as in an intersubjective mode of philosophizing that Emerson locates the self-affirming viability of community and creative power. The essay moves from a discussion of Emerson's critique of social reform communities such as Brook Farm via a close reading of his essays "Experience" and "Quotation and Originality" to his assumption that in order to understand the original relation of self and world we need to "treat things poetically." According to such an ontological hermeneutics of communal being, community *is* being one's self.

I. Introduction

"We think a man unable and desponding. It is only that he is misplaced. Put him with new companions, and they will find in him excellent qualities, unsuspected accomplishments, and the joy of life," Emerson states in "Social Aims" (*Letters and Social Aims* 82). To excel in one's utmost potentiality, one needs to be rightly placed:

'T is a great point in a gallery, how you hang pictures; and not less in society, how you seat your party. The circumstance of circumstance is timing and placing. When a man meets his accurate mate, society begins, and life is delicious. What happiness they give, – what ties they form! (82-83)

What may be taken as a mere call for harmony or an organicistic understanding of social formation is, in fact, an attempt to assess the complex nature of what will in the following be explored as the essential relatedness of *communal being*. "Life is delicious" when "society begins," but, as the following essay will argue, the beginning of society depends on the prereflective working of the individual's self-empowerment as always already being communal. Emerson's statement is thus exemplary for the greater objective of my essay, as he uses the image of proper placement to conflate the most paradigmatic trope of his philosophy, the self, with that of communal interconnectivity. In other words, Emerson does not put emphasis on the "delicacies" of social interaction, but rather posits a particular mutual situatedness in society. People's social being thus depends on a model of *knowing one's place*. The question Emerson herein raises is that of how one is to *think*, that is, fully grasp the essence of the conflation of self and community. Thinking, for Emerson, as will be shown, is not only philosophy's mode of being, but Emerson's mode of being in a world that is, on the one hand, prereflective of a given social embeddedness, and, on the other, a form-giving principle in the active relation of different life-worlds. After I have properly established an understanding of this thought, I will turn to Emerson's idea of creativity and his recurring vision to "treat things poetically." In short, the key issue my essay seeks to explore in its attempt to contribute to the debates abut selfhood in Emerson scholarship is thus concerned with the idea of communality in Emerson's philosophy of the self.[1] The underlying assumption is that Emerson philosophically envisions an ontological hermeneutics of the self that is essentially communal and in and of itself *unthinkable* outside a particular communal context.

So even though Emerson hardly seeks to write a theory of society, society, as will be shown, nonetheless offers him an extraordinary playspace for the ontic anchoring of his ontological premises, and it furthermore offers him a conceptual contrast foil against which he is able to formulate the philosophical positioning of the self-reliant individual as communal being. Emerson, in other words, explores community

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against the backdrop of its social reality.[2] He philosophizes community as a particular mode of self-scrutiny and self-understanding that is both prior to all sociality and ultimately intertwined with it. And even though some of Emerson's written reflections – such as "Experience" and "Quotation and Originality" – will feature more prominently in my discussion, this essay attempts to explore Emerson's mode of philosophizing community by engaging in a greater dialogue with a multitude of Emersonian writings and some of those of his most important critics.[3] For, after all, thinking community, in Emerson's work, is a paradigmatically philosophical task – an *Aufgabe* that is as much a *task* as it is a mode of *abandonment*.

II. "Where do we find ourselves?"

The mid nineteenth-century New England culture was marked by the emergence of countless reformist, utopian, and socialist communities such as the transcendentalist community of Brook Farm. Despite his philosophical assumption that the self cannot be thought in isolation, Emerson was outspokenly skeptical of the idea of institutionalized communities. As sympathetic as Emerson may have been at first – George Kateb notes that there once was a "brief[] flirt[] with the idea of living" in Brook Farm (175) – he determinedly refused to participate in the reformist mission.[4] Around the time of the inauguration of Brook

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[2] Here, I concur with Johannes Voelz who argues, if only in a footnote, that "the Emersonian self is to be conceptualized as inextricably embedded in its social surroundings" ("Dual Economy" 555 n4).

[3] In the tradition of a dominant line in Emerson scholarship – from Cavell through Friedl to Posnock – this essay seeks to think critically "through" Emerson, rather than historically "about" him.

[4] Ultimately and only after a few years of existence, Brook Farm failed as a utopian project and a pragmatic community. It stumbled over its financial instability and, maybe even more so, its overbearing desire to erect a "Modern Arcadia," as Hawthorne entitled one of the chapters in his Brook Farm satire *The Blithedale Romance*. Even so, when reading a passage from a letter Brook Farm founder George Ripley sent Emerson in 1840 against the backdrop of much of Emerson's philosophical inclinations, one can understand the intellectual and spiritual temptation on the side of Emerson. Ripley writes: "Our objects, as you know, are to ensure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom by providing all with labor adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and

Farm, he polemically states in a letter to Thomas Carlyle that Americans are "a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has the draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket" (Holmes 125). In his essay "New England Reformers," Emerson explains and, at the same time, criticizes these "men's" agenda even more explicitly: "These new associations are composed of men and women of superior talents and sentiments [. . .] but remember," he alerts his readers, "that no society can ever be so large as one man. He, in his friendship, in his natural and momentary associations, doubles or multiplies himself; but in the hour in which he mortgages himself to two or ten or twenty," as in a reform community, "he dwarfs himself below the stature of one" (*Essays and Lectures* 598).

As his thinking revolves around the communal nature of the individual self, Emerson seems to suspect an essential communality that is pre-reflective of but nonetheless feasible within the dynamics of social participation. "All association must be compromise," he writes in "Friendship" (345). And every compromise is, of course, first and foremost a self-compromise. Which is not cause for Emerson to advocate mere egotism. To the contrary, as in the "Culture" chapter of *The Conduct of Life*, he notes that "the pest of society is egotists" (1015). Emerson thus rejects excesses both in self-compromise and self-involvement. Rather, the individual has to will into the daunting task to unite by isolation: "union," i.e., community, "must be inward," he tells his audience and readers in "New England Reformers" (599), and "the union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated." As "union must be inward" and the "uniters" "isolated," community cannot primarily be a matter of social participation and submission, but it must be understood as a mode of individual self-discrepancy – as practiced and discussed most strikingly in "Experience."

How, then, does Emerson think the isolation of the uniting self? "I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*," Emerson famously writes towards the end of "Experience" (491). "I observe that difference, and shall observe it. One day, I shall know the value and law of the discrepance. But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world

cultivated persons whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions" (Frothingham 307). Based on the ideas of transcendental philosophy and Fourierian socialism, Brook Farm was thus one of the first institutionalized collectives dedicated to the individual's creative self-expression. For a closer analysis of Brook Farm as a reform community see Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's essay in this volume.

of thought" (491-92). Emerson distinguishes between the world of so-
cial interaction and another world that is both product and producer of
his thinking. Far from consenting to the Cartesian dichotomy of subjec-
tive mind and objective world, Emerson is as skeptical about the "world
of thought" as he is sure of its existential necessity. Emerson rejects the
idea of a self-sufficient, world-making mind that is confronted with a
self-constructed reality purposefully at one's disposal. At the same time,
the "world of thought" is a world that perpetually affirms its own
worldly withdrawal. Despite his sober skepticism, Emerson draws on a
discrepancy that may be accounted for as an extraordinary opening to
his thinking of self and community.

This may become even clearer when we turn to the famous opening
lines of "Experience," in which Emerson asks, "Where do we find our-
selves?", to reply: "In a series of which we do not know the extremes,
and believe that it has none" (471).[5] Against the backdrop of his afore-
mentioned incompatibility of worlds in the passage towards the end of
the essay, one may understand both the question, or, more precisely, the
performative act of it being asked, and the "series" in which we are inte-
grated, but of whose extremes (its beginning and end) we have no
knowledge, as the "world of thought" as such. Or, to be more precise,
as the place of philosophical thinking and hermeneutic self-inquiry, in
which the self is always already confronted with its being communal
(i.e., its *communal being*).[6] In *Less Legible Meanings*, Pamela Schirmeister
develops an understanding of community in Emerson's "Experience"
that is as complex as it is insightful for our purposes. To explain the
discrepancy between the solitary self (in "Experience," we encounter a
crisis-ridden self in mourning) and its other (in the sense of both an in-
ner and an outer alterity), Schirmeister identifies the workings of a
"community without a community" and of a "community without
place" (145, 149), i.e., communities whose paradoxical natures allude to

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[5] He imagines life as a series of events whose beginning and end are existentially un-
known to us, curiously anticipating Heidegger's ontology of "thrownness." In this con-
text, we should certainly not overemphasize Emerson's idea of seriality, and we should
definitely not deem it teleological. "Finding ourselves" is, to use Stanley Cavell's word,
"founding ourselves" ("Emerson, Coleridge, Kant" 60) – i.e., to emerge in the midst of
our "extremes."

[6] "Experience" may be the moment when Emerson learned to accept that nothing is
naturally one's own (and remains that way eternally) and that, equally, nothing is natu-
rally (and eternally) other. As has all too often been noted, the death of Emerson's son
Waldo and the ensuing essay "Experience" mark somewhat of a turn or, at least, a shift
in Emerson's thinking from transgressive optimism to a more sober skepticism. See for
example Packer; Voelz, "Dual Economy" 568-70.

the self's communal being as essentially evolving beyond the confining scope of social normativity and distinct place-boundedness (as for instance in clubs, churches, etc.). The "community without a community" and the "community without a place" are communities of self-inquiry.

"Where do we find ourselves?" is thus the philosophical premise of Emerson's understanding of true community; a community without a place that exists and evolves in the space of the ever-looming question. As the question asks both for the place where one will be and where one is, it is the perpetual affirmation that we cannot possibly determine our place in it. And to be placeless in such a manner can no longer be tied to the emphatically transgressive thinker who seeks the "call of Genius" ("Self-Reliance") to create a new world. Rather, worlds appear essentially in tension, existing in a rift of (one's) self-scrutiny. "The world of thought" is thus not the world of creative genius and its alternate sociality, but a world that is its own inquiry – and it is so only by the forcefulness of its recurrent opening. As Schirmeister aptly puts it in her elaboration on the aforementioned paradoxical communities, one of the underlying questions of this inquiry into the nature of our self-seeking ultimately is: "What kind of community could we ever achieve?" (140).[7] We, the isolated uniters, in our "masterfully self-conscious struggle against the haunting sense of 'Reality''s usual absence" (Buell 128). Schirmeister's question will, in one way or another, lead us through the rest of this essay.

III. "Relation and connection"

At this point, we must, first of all, think the community without a place along the lines of Emerson's idea of series. And to be in a series, for Emerson, is to be in an in-between space, i.e., to be positioned in a somewhat prereflective "place," as Johannes Voelz writes, "where we can watch the secret of the world in the making" (*Transcendental Resistance* 88). Put in that place we are both observers of the world's creative forces and, at the same time, fully inclined to be ourselves the concentration of these forces. To "find ourselves" is as much a passive as it is an active enterprise – an experience that unfolds "in a series of experiences" (Voelz, "Dual Economy" 571). And as such, "Where do we find ourselves?" is the appearance of *presence*, in which the inquiring self finds

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[7] Sacvan Bercovitch refers to this as "the paradox" in Emerson between "the exaltation of the individual and the search for a perfect community" (176).

itself in an all-pervasive relation with the world; with a "community without community," a "community without a place," or, to adopt a congenial image by Heidegger, a "'now' that bends back into itself" (20).[8] In short, the self encounters itself in relations, yet unknowing of their extremes but fully immersed in their excesses.[9]

But in the turmoil of its communal placelessness – the paradox of its communal solitude – how can the self make itself understandable and simultaneously be the noticeable appearance of its understandability? Would not such noticeability be essential for even the most paradoxical form of communal interaction? For Emerson, those are questions that turn out to be their own answers. He knows that that self can only appear in relation to the multitude of its interpretative self-interrogations. In his "Worship" chapter in *The Conduct of Life*, he fittingly writes: "relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always" (*EL* 1065). Everywhere and always are we empowered to draw connections: This dynamic marks the freedom of our (self-) interpretation. In short, to interpret oneself – to ask where to find oneself – in order to make one's self *as* self understandable is the strenuous effort of our being. (And this may be the point where Emerson's ontological hermeneutics of self appears most political, for it provokes the question of who is when and where in a position to interpret in the first place.) The self is the freedom of its interpreter – its unfolding is equiprimordial (as in the Heideggerian sense of being, in one way or another, of the same origin) with the series we always already find ourselves in. And to showcase this, to make one's self noticed, is to be one's self. In other words, to assert one's freedom of self-interpretation as being one's self is to always already be in relation to others.[10] For especially the later Emerson, as we will see shortly, understands that to be one's self is to make oneself understandable beyond oneself. Thinking

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[8] Here, Heidegger uses an image with which one could certainly embark on a greater genealogical reading of Emerson (and his idea of the circular), Nietzsche (and his idea of "eternal recurrence"), and Heidegger (who draws on Nietzsche in his remark).

[9] Emerson stresses this mode of prereflectivity in "Intellect" where he writes: "Long prior to the age of reflection is the thinking of the mind" – a thinking, we may want to add, that is not personal or social but essentially communal. "We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from fact, and suffer the intellect to see" (*EL* 418, 419).

[10] Curiously enough, John Haugeland makes a similar point in his analysis of the communal nature of Heidegger's ontological definition of *Dasein* ("Heidegger on Being a Person"). And even though Haugeland defines the communal much in a manner of a social background, a comparative analysis of Emerson and Heidegger with regards to communal being could produce fascinating results.

this in the recurrent Emersonian image of "the circular" would, in this regard, surely not intend a mode of self-revolving constriction but one of self-extending inclusion.[11] The self, for Emerson, is essentially contextual.[12]

In his philosophical attempt to situate the self in a true community without a place, Emerson seeks to withdraw the self from the dynamics of social participation and assessment, as he unfolds that community in the (allegedly authentic) realm of philosophical thought.[13] At the same time, he senses a rift – a "discrepance" – due to which the self can only bring itself forward (*ex-press* itself) in and as part of its context. The self is thus contextual and thereby always already expressive of its context. Self and community, in this mode of self-imposed *dual countering*, do not exist in opposition but in a tension-filled relationship, thus marking the essence of Emerson's hermeneutics – and also, as Voelz has convincingly shown, the essence of Emerson's theory of recognition.[14] What Voelz notes about Emerson's self-recognition can therefore easily be applied to the latter's philosophy of communal being, in that it "describes a mode of being-in-thinking which depends on the economy of social recognition without being reducible to it" ("Dual Economy" 574).

To practice, embrace and understand this requires *distance* – and it is distance Emerson seeks. He famously calls this distance "abandonment," as he describes a mode of being in which we, as he declares in "Circles," "forget ourselves" (*EL* 414) to be all the more present (to us

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[11] On Emerson's place in a hermeneutic history of circular imagery (between Kant and Gadamer) see Keiling.

[12] In the logic of his ontological hermeneutics, the self (as autonomous communal being) is not its ontic fact as merely "being there," but instead as a processual being constantly immersed in the dynamics of self-encounter and self-abandonment. In the words of Günter Figal's insightful interpretation of Heidegger's "being-with," the self, for Emerson, is "without reference to itself, but that which signifies the context of 'I' sentences. It is part of self-evidence [as one's understanding of oneself] to be in this context" (*Martin Heidegger* 147; my translation and comment). This is not to say that "context" is by definition communal, but it is essentially interrelated.

[13] In this regard, my analysis of Emerson's understanding of self as communal being could very well be situated within the larger framework of discourses on authenticity. It is, in fact, striking that leading introductory literature on the phenomenon of authenticity hardly ever mentions Emerson. A comparative analysis of Emerson and thinkers such as Rousseau, Heidegger, and even Sartre could be highly advantageous for the development of "thinking" authenticity. For an introduction to the philosophical discourse on authenticity see Golomb.

[14] *Dual countering* is a phenomenological term – as can be seen in the works of thinkers such as Heidegger or Wolfgang Iser (in his study *The Fictive and the Imaginary*). Its German equivalent is the extraordinarily figurative term *Gegenwendigkeit*.

and our others). This presence, as has been noted before, *is* the self – the self as "endless seeker with no Past at [her] back" (412). If we think this through, to forget oneself means to leave oneself behind, to bury oneself in a past that no longer exists, in short, to cut off a relation to one's self as other. Against this backdrop, Herwig Friedl reminds us that "human being *is* 'circular power returning into itself,'" quoting Emerson's famous phrase from "The American Scholar" (Friedl 279; emphasis by Friedl).[15] In this mode of self-abandonment, distance and presence become equiprimordial. They not only bring forth each other, but *are* mutually each other.

IV. Quotation and Originality

In this mode of self-abandonment, one is, first and foremost, *original*. In his inspiring Emerson reading, Ross Posnock refers to this mode of enabling one's originality through abandonment as an act and process of "the power of generative renunciation" that is "to serve as a compositional resource" (*Renunciation* 284). Abandonment by renunciation – by revoking one's place in the world in order to find it compositionally – "becomes the means of creative turning" (297). And creative turning, for Emerson, is to comport one's self to the world philosophically, asking where to find ourselves and, by asking (not answering), finding oneself in a web of relations. Creative turning means to understand one's self as a contingent expression of perpetual creative forces, as a paradigmatic "mode of the self's relation to itself," to use Stanley Cavell's terms ("Thinking of Emerson" 17): "Then whatever is required in possessing a self, will be required in thinking and reading and writing" (17). Following Cavell and Posnock, the self's abandoning self-relation in Emersonian thinking can thus not only be understood as a forthbringing power expressive of one's essential creative forcefulness. Rather, and at this point I would like to turn to my discussion of Emerson's "Quotation and Originality," "original power is usually accompanied with assimilating power" (*LSA* 181), for "truth is the property of no individual, but is the treasure of all men" (183).

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[15] See Emerson, *EL* 55.

Creativity, for Emerson, is thus the working of a universal power.[16] Only through acts of creative disengagement, of "leaving," to use Branka Arsić's image – that is, aesthetic experience as a way to abandonment and self-extension – can self-reliant being overcome and "forget" itself.[17] And it is, in turn, an obscure communal power that allows the self to abstract from itself as its self. The communal must thus be understood as a mode of self-relation that is simultaneously pre-social and always already beyond sociality. It is the ultimate mode of one's originality, which is, in turn, not only a matter of aesthetic judgment, but, as we will see below, of an ontological self-positioning as "being one's self" (*LSA* 191) in originality. Creativity, for Emerson, is not the way to turn towards one's abandoned self and thereby leave and desert one's communal ties. In other words: Even though the manner in which creativity dispenses itself is by disengagement, this disengagement is the self's attempt to cope with its world creatively. "The world," Emerson writes in "The American Scholar," "– this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. [. . .] [S]o far have I extended my being" (*EL* 60). Emerson frames this mode of disengaging self-extension, of refraining from oneself to more truthfully *be* oneself, even more powerfully in "The Poet," in which he draws on "a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns," namely that "beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled onto itself)" (459). An intellect doubled onto itself marks the recurrence of one's self as a product of creative disengagement.[18] The recognition of this difference marks the moment in which the self is not falling into the abyss of existential solitude but instead realizes that "beside [her] privacy of power as an individual [human being], there is a great public power" (459). The creative self as

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[16] In his speech on "The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies," Emerson, as vigorously as hardly anywhere else, turns this power into an ethical and radically political tool. He speaks of "the voice of the universe" that "pronounces Freedom": "The Power that builds this fabric of things affirms it in the heart" (32). This Power, in turn, is hardly anywhere more expressive and explicit than in acts of creation.

[17] See Arsić.

[18] Emerson thus uses an image that has become paradigmatic in the realm of hermeneutics and aesthetic theory. It may be promising to compare Emerson's understanding of abandonment-as-disengagement with such positions as Dewey's "[being] beyond ourselves to find ourselves" (195) or Gadamer's idea of "being outside oneself" (122). I have hinted at this discussion in my study *Dazwischen*.

communal being is, in existence and thinking, *committed* to its antecedent community.

Against this backdrop, an existential part of the discrepancy between quotation and originality that Emerson's essay revolves around is the observable discrepancy of worlds he discusses in "Experience." That discrepancy is one between inner and outer self, but also between, so to say, one's *inner* inner and outer self. We would "do well" in our understanding of Emerson, John Lysaker therefore argues, "to live in observance of that fact, that difference between primary experience – our temporal, moody, and occasionally ecstatic conversation [with self, world, texts] – and whatever reflective life puts into and draws out of it" (118; my comment). We are thus challenged by a discrepancy of experience that mutually concerns our being and our worldly relations, for how else are we to understand the receptive nature of our conversations, our thinking, reading, and writing?

In "Quotation and Originality," Emerson therefore notes, "one would say there is no pure originality. [. . .] By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote" (*LSA* 170). Human action and human thought, reading literature and philosophy, the work of the imagination and of the hands, the use of speech and writing – they are all marked by one's retreat into the placeless community of tradition, culture, genius, of the common, the near, and the distant. Christopher Newfield claims that "Quotation and Originality" falls into the phase of Emerson's philosophy in which he becomes "explicitly collective" (158), so that he turns proper quotation into a cultural practice, in which, as Newfield furthermore argues, "[t]he active agent becomes personhood as a mass" (158). Yet rather than further pursuing Newfield's critique of Emersonian liberal individualism, in which he perpetually relates Emerson's ideas of the communal back to the dynamics of "market circulation" (163), I want to expand upon the alleged "collectivity" of "mass agency" and stress its function for Emerson's *philosophizing* the communal self. I believe that the turn to the collective, for Emerson, means riding the razor's edge. On the one hand, it allows him to make tradition and intellectual affinity part of the self's unfolding of creative power; on the other hand, collective action, or, as Kateb puts it, "[s]ystematic association," always bears the risk of "disfigurement, a loss of integrity" (173). And Emerson explicitly warns his readers "that men are off their centre; that multitudes of men do not live with Nature, but behold it as exiles" (*LSA* 179). They are marked "as foreigners in the world of truth"; they "quote thoughts, and thus disown them" (179).

Emerson knows that any form of communal interaction is delicate and in and of itself always in danger of being corrupted or corrupting. "Disowning" by improper (one may even say, vulgar) quotation turns society into a masquerade ball, a play of semblances and insincerities. In his Notes to the "Courage" chapter of *Society and Solitude*, he states: "People wrap themselves up in disguises, and the sincere man is hard to reach. A man is concealed in his nation, concealed in his party, concealed in his fortune, [. . .] concealed in his body at last, and it is hard to find out his pure nature and will" (431). And not only are people wrapped up, "[t]hey speak and act in each of these relations after the use and wont of these conditions" (431). They quote and imitate according to the norms and standards of their communal interaction, and their prestige and status within it. One encounters these "men" and is unable to un-conceal their authentic being. They cannot be found, for they have already suffered their communal death. As the Emerson reader knows from "Self-Reliance," "imitation is suicide" (*EL* 259).[19] In other words, if community is merely based on the strenuous and ultimately impossible efforts of its members to reveal the true self of their fellows, self-reliant being – as "the steady effort of thinking one's thoughts and thinking them through" (Kateb 31) – is nearly impossible. In the intricate relation between quotation and originality, communality must be thought differently. Emerson, I argue, attempts to do so in an ontological hermeneutics of communal being as creative being.

So Emerson asks: "And what is Originality?" – "It is being"; it is, as I have already quoted above, "being one's self" (*LSA* 191). To *be* original is to be both independent of and marked by comparison; it means to be perpetually new and, as such, essentially by oneself. But the original is not essentially contrasted by that which is not original. Rather, in Emerson's tantamount description of being and originality, originality may either be or not be, but there is no immediate "other" to it. Hence, originality does not work against the backdrop of some obscure other that is decidedly not original. And yet, by suggesting that there is such a thing as (socially and ontologically) improper quotation – i.e., imitation – Emerson nonetheless attempts to dispense (understood in the figurative mode of the German *freistellen*) originality by way of tying it to the self. The self is original because originality is being one's self. Crucially,

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[19] In a brief passage in *Art as a Social System*, Luhmann retraces the long history of "imitation" that led into its philosophical depreciation in modernity when "originality" became the paradigm of creative action. See esp. Chapter 7.

it is only in the dynamics of this ambiguous figure that true community can emerge and exist.

This may become clearer when we return to "The Poet." Here, Emerson more emphatically presents what in "Experience" is marked by sober skepticism.[20] "Where do we find ourselves?" – "We stand before the secret of the world," "The Poet" answers, "there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety" (*EL* 453). "Appearance" is not *mere appearance*; it is neither superficial occurrence nor occurrence of superficiality. Rather, appearance is *being present*. It is *being* that makes an issue of itself through self-extension. To "stand before the secret of the world" is thus not only related to the "series of which we do not know the extremes" (cf. "Experience") but to simultaneously being in the presence of our unknowability and, hence, the extremes as such. Let us retrace this ontological occurrence: Being, for Emerson, is originality that, as soon as we engage in the marvel of where to find ourselves, passes into appearance. And appearance is always appearance for and in front of something or another. Appearance as presence, as we have learned, is to be in a "community without a place" – a community in creative flux where abandonment appears in its modes of quotation and originality, where, to come full circle, unity of creative power (tradition, culture, etc.) passes into variety.

In this regard, we may understand quotation and originality as synonymous with the aesthetic processes of appropriation and creation.[21] This means that the abandoning self relates to itself and its context of abandonment in a manner of appropriating one's self as other, thereby bringing itself forth in an unforeseen and original way.[22] But again, Emerson is hardly treating this as a matter of private pleasure or mere individual self-excitement. Appropriation and creation as essential modes of being of quotation and originality are always already tied to one's communal and social relatedness. And this is not contradicted but, in fact, underlined by the fact that "there remains the indefeasible persistency of

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[20] In "Dual Economy," Johannes Voelz engages in the same comparative reading. My own reading of the ontological efforts present in "The Poet" and "Experience" is clearly inspired by Voelz's Emerson scholarship.

[21] More precisely, I understand "appropriation" in the reception aesthetic connotation of "taking over" (*Aneignung*) of the position of an other, in which reception turns into creative (co-)production.

[22] In the dynamic of appropriation and creation we thus recognize what Julie Ellison calls "detachment and transition" – two terms Emerson uses (rather ambivalently) in "Art" – as the essence of art and the appearance of power. See Ellison, Part 3, Chapter 8.

the individual to be himself," as he notes in "Quotation and Originality" (*LSA* 191) – a persistency which serves, in the logic of my essay, as the communal's ultimate enabler. We have to "disclose our originality" (Kateb 167), and thus need to refrain from ourselves and excel against the backdrop of our communal being. To be *with* someone, for Emerson, means to be *through* someone. It means to be, at the same time, predecessor and successor of another.

In his critique of social reform activism in "New England Reformers," Emerson therefore disdainfully notes that such activism is based on the wrong premise. It puts the cart before the horse, as it tries to change society without changing the self (and its relation to it): "society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him" (*EL* 596).[23] "Renovation," in this context, exceeds "reform," for it does not hint at a more or less substantial subversion of social being but at its self-scrutinizing getting-to-the-bottom. It is a power that is, as Emerson notes in "Power," "conservative, as well as creative" (*EL* 974); it restores its authentic being and excels into the new. It is, in the words of Branka Arsić, "the joy of seeing new meaning" (89). Proper quotation thus means to surround and infuse oneself with originality.[24]

V. Poetic Treatment

Emerson knows that self and society coexist, and so he seeks to find a mode of being that is both present in the self and appears in the occurrences the self is in relation with. We have thus come to a point at which we need to understand that Emerson's ontological hermeneutics of communal being depict a particular mode of dealing with the world. Both in his early lecture on "Politics" and an 1839 journal entry, Emerson evokes a curious image. In "Politics," he writes: "every subject of human thought down to most trivial crafts and chores ought to be *located poetically*" (*Early Lectures 3* 239; my emphasis). Quoting his lecture excessively, he notes in his journal: "Every thing should be *treated poetically*" (*Journals* 329; my emphasis). Within the spectrum of his own thinking, Emerson changes the metaphor from poetically "locating" to

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[23] For a more extensive discussion of Emerson's reform criticism see Levin, esp. Chapter 1.

[24] As social relations, friendships, for Emerson, come closest to this mode of creative appropriation and mutual originality. On Emerson and friendship see Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture*, Chapter 6; Lysaker, ed., *Emerson and Thoreau*.

"treating," thereby not contradicting but expanding the image of what could be subsumed as being-in-the-world poetically. At first glance, Emerson is trying to explore an all-pervasive (and utterly Romantic) change in our relation to the world that lets the utilitarian be absorbed in the playfully "inventive," as he notes in both texts. But one realizes quickly that poetic treatment of the world and, thus, poetic being of the self expand decidedly upon the eccentricity of Romantic being. That being said, what interests me in the context of my essay is the way in which Emerson experiments with the metaphor of poetic treatment, in which he does not wish to overthrow the self's relations to its world but to reconcile authentically and ecstatically (that is, philosophically) the self with its social relations – "conservative, as well as creative."25

If for Emerson the self is the essential premise of communality and if being one's self is its mode of self-understanding, communality must be represented in the representation of the self. "Poetic treatment" must thus be deemed the processual (i.e., translatory) representation of the self as creative representation (and affirmation) of its relations. Again, in the mutual working of appropriation and creation, Emerson no longer negates one's necessary involvement in social relations. Yet, he urges his readers to "treat things poetically," which constitutes the most promising (if not existential) mode of action in which self and society, each in its turn, express their most productive mode of interrelatedness. Treating and locating things poetically allows the self to productively distance itself from itself while at the same time drawing society into a sphere of transformative self-explication – where appearance is a community without a place.

In this logic of contextual abandonment, Emerson wants to provide "things" with something more and something different, thereby turning them into ever-new sources of interpretation and, hence, poetic treatment. Only through such treatment, his argument goes, can self and world encounter and explore each other in unexpected appearances, in the equiprimordial abandonment of community without community. To rephrase, what sounds like a call for the self-extension of romantic Genius (as the most anti-conventional force of resistance), turns out to be Emerson's attempt to mark *and* reconcile the essential rift between self and society in an ontological hermeneutics of communal (and, hence,

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25 One could further try to assess whether Emerson, whenever the communal breaks into his reflection of self and experience, basically seeks to establish a philosophy of life forms, i.e., whether he looks for, in the words of Günter Figal, "that particular coherence of life in which everything owns the curious familiarity of that which is self-understanding [*das Selbstverständliche*]" ("Übersetzungsverhältnisse" 103; my translation).

creative) being. And in a logic of communal selfhood, to treat a thing poetically must necessarily be more than just emphasizing this thing's aesthetic effect and social appeasement. Rather, it *is* the mutual relatedness of one's being in new relations and, at the same time, producing them. In "Inspiration," Emerson notes: "The man's insight and power are interrupted and occasional; he can see and do this or that cheap task, at will, but it steads him not beyond" (*LSA* 257). But to leap within the "series" of one's inspirational experiences is to *be* "by lyrical facility" (257). Only in poetic treatment is one truly attentive to the "thing" and at the same time enabled to be beyond oneself (i.e., self-abandoned).[26] It is, in other words, an active power that, as John Lysaker puts it, "must bring the sallies of genius into the various activities of life, thereby giving them proper direction, our direction" (57).

For Emerson, such a state of poetic (self-)treatment of abandonment as communal being marks the premise of all philosophical thinking and worldly interaction. And even though both are ultimately incompatible, locating them poetically is one way of relating them. As Ross Posnock notes, Emerson's philosophy is characterized by "a formal resistance that mirrors its refusal to resolve the opposites it poses" (296). In and through aesthetic semblance of thinking and this thinking's formal expression is it that the essence of a greater claim – a "new circle," so to say – appears. Self-understanding is thus not primarily a result of proper public or social conduct, but a mode of communal being. This being said, Emerson perpetually tries to philosophically determine the power of the self's autonomy within the normative (and inextricable) limitations of the social. As it reminds us of his critique of reformist communities, Emerson's thinking – his being-in-a-world-of-thought – cannot possibly accept the romance of concord and harmony, of "concert," as he writes in "New England Reformers" (*EL* 598). His vision of "locating poetically" is radically opposed to all manners of idyllic longing and communal embeddedness. Instead, communal being can only be fully powerful when it is its own refusal to be pinned down, when it is the perpetual abandonment of its own relations. Community, in this sense, can never solely be its "reliance on Association" (597).

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[26] As Emerson writes in "Poetry and Imagination," to "become[] lyrical" is "the mind allowing itself range" (*LSA* 55), which, ultimately, brings us back to the equiprimordial appearance of presence and distance. As misleadingly Cartesian as Emerson's reference may sound, he is clearly not interested in the relation between mind and world, subject and object, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Quite the contrary: As has been shown, Emerson wants to understand the essence of their mutual translatability into each other. He wants to *think* communal being as self and vice versa.

Instead of deeming this a bleak outlook, we may understand it as an invitation for promising future discussions – especially in the field of American studies. In times of excited debates about recognition, identity politics, communal empowerment, cultural resistance, and questions of social participation, Emerson's philosophy of communal being – not least due to its celebration of creative philosophical disengagement and self-distancing – may, on the one hand, help us reassess the role of hermeneutic philosophy for the study of literature, culture, and society. On the other hand, we may make use of the ways in which Emerson addresses the tension between individual self-empowerment and communal interaction as a dilemma that can never be solved but may perhaps be productively dynamized within the force field of its presence. One may, for example, very well argue that the productive nature of this self-produced dilemma features quite prominently within such different power dynamics as that between artistic autonomy and creative collaboration, between individual self-fashioning and pop-cultural group affiliation. Against this backdrop, we may thus want to understand Emerson's ontological hermeneutics of communal being as a recurrent reminder that community is not a more or less stable social entity within which one flourishes as an individual actor, but that community always already is "power over and behind us, and we are the channels of its communications" (*EL* 607). At which point we are essentially determined to ask: Where do we find ourselves?

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