

David LaRocca, *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 395 pp.

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In *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor*, David LaRocca realigns the conventional wisdom on the Emerson canon to foreground the philosophical sophistication and centrality of *English Traits*—an “amalgamated volume” or “multiform treatise” blending travelogue with philosophical reflection, ethnographic description, and national and biological history (1). Emerson published *English Traits* in August 1856, almost two decades after he called for a severing of ties with the courtly muses of Europe. Complicating that turn away from origins, this sustained analysis of English culture and character is everywhere shadowed by his admission that “the American is only the continuation of the English genius into new conditions, more or less propitious.” This disavowal of American originality was only one of the striking departures that the text marked from his earlier work. In *English Traits*, the speculative abstraction of earlier essays gives way to topicality, practicality, and concrete observations about life in the contemporary world. Emerson also makes no secret of the vast amount of reading and research that went into its composition; in no other volume did he adopt so fully the task of the antiquarian scholar.

For all of these reasons, *English Traits* tends to be approached as an oddity in narratives of Emerson's development—if it is approached at all. Cornel West calls it “the most overlooked text in Emerson's corpus” (32), and it stands for Robert Richardson as Emerson's “least characteristic book” (518). An early reviewer in the *New York Daily Tribune* (30 July 1856) took stock of this peculiarity shortly before *English Traits* hit the shelves: “No other work of Mr. Emerson's approaches it in constructiveness. It is a thorough analysis of English character, which is considered mostly from a highly favourable point of view, and discussed in the tone of a sensible practical man of the world, and not in that of a poet or philosopher, and still less in that of a historian or statesman. It is not in the least *transcendental*—whatever the phrase may mean” (5).

That *English Traits* discloses an especially untranscendent aspect of Emersonian thinking—Emerson as “a sensible practical man of the world”—has presided over most of the critical attention the book has received for the past two decades. Filtered through the lens of British history, its sustained meditations on race and empire broached issues that stood at the very heart of American political discourse in the decade before the Civil War. In this sense, Christopher Hanlon, Philip Nicoloff, Laura Dassow Walls, and others have all approached *English Traits* as a product of Emerson's increasing interest in contemporary science, political activism, and social reform. This line of thinking

makes *English Traits* a clear precursor to the more pragmatic social orientation of *The Conduct of Life* (1860), or at least, as David Robinson puts it in *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*, a “reflection of Emerson’s divided and changing state of mind” (113).

One of LaRocca’s central interventions lies in recognizing that a turn away from transcendence is just part of the story that *English Traits* tells. LaRocca’s Emerson is by no means insular or ahistorical, but in his account, the emphatic facts of British and American history exist in counterpoint with both natural history and a more elusive natural history of metaphor. For LaRocca, *English Traits* is a central exhibition of Emerson’s “transcendental biology,” his term for Emerson’s sense that pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory might unlock “the laws of nature and thought” (23). Although this particular terminology is quickly set aside, the book insistently weighs the broad stakes of development and process—be it evolutionary development, England’s development, or Emerson’s. For LaRocca, the explanatory power of the trope emerges out of the difficulty of delimiting its significance: “If every word, or nearly every word, is a metaphor, and language is continually in a process of being inherited and transformed through its use, then every metaphor we use seems to demand a kind of radical self-consciousness and a continual re-interpretation in the light of its application and context” (29). Taking *English Traits* as a storehouse of open-ended metaphors ranging from sin, fatherhood, and inheritance to class, blood, and nomenclature, LaRocca tracks their family resemblance to recurrent Emersonian themes by filtering *English Traits* through “the vast resources” of the philosopher’s other writing (71).

What emerges most prominently out of this enterprise is a method, not an argument. LaRocca draws new attention to the intellectual ambition and dexterity of *English Traits* by replicating Emerson’s approach. In his terms, *English Traits* advances a “series of comments” that illuminate an overarching theme rather than a “central thesis.” The book is thus marked by a great degree of “conceptual mobility,” where “the energy of the prose moves in many directions,” and insight results from apposition (136). This profusion of significance is a byproduct of Emerson’s typical composition process, in which texts like *English Traits* were assembled out of the comments, reflections, and quotations recorded in his journals. The coherence and disjunctions characterizing the collision of divergent excerpts and ideas becomes part and parcel of their significance, making interpretation dependent upon any given reader’s “interests, frames of reference, temperament and accumulated store of tropes” (67).

Rather than risk reduction by isolating a simplified generalization or artificially stable claim, LaRocca aims to match Emerson at his own game by assembling an array of provocative excerpts and reflections—fragments whose subterranean connections both illuminate and interrogate the philosophical stakes of *English Traits*. The book includes

16 chapters, each of which takes the form of a series of ordered, numbered entries, sometimes closely aligned, at other moments suggestively disjunctive. LaRocca's wide-ranging reflections sit beside generous selections from Emerson's prose and substantial, unanalyzed quotations from both typical Emersonian interlocutors and more unexpected figures. Shakespeare, Melville, Tolstoy, and Michael Ondaatje, along with Seneca, Robert Burton, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Richard Dawkins are just a few of the many thinkers whose writings find their way into LaRocca's collection of evocative fragments. At various moments, LaRocca compares the urge to assemble that he shares with Emerson to textual parataxis, "the montage technique in film" (26), an Aristotelian enthymeme, an anthology or commonplace book, and the arrangement of postcards and photographs in an album. Yet his central metaphor for order within assortment is that of the botanical florilegium or natural history cabinet, where various natural specimens are selected and ordered to make subtle affinities and relationships evident. Emerson encountered these Cabinets of Natural History at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris on his first European excursion, prompting his observation: "How much finer things are in composition than alone. 'Tis wise in man to make Cabinets" (130). This is an oft-repeated observation in *Emerson's English Traits*, and LaRocca even describes his own work as "akin to the florilegist's, who collates, combines, collects and composes according to the features, patterns and affinities that seem apparent yet can hardly be claimed as definitive" (146).

If natural history underwrites LaRocca's method, it also underscores his important, unconventional claim that *English Traits* "should be included as part of Emerson's unfolding project, the NATURAL HISTORY OF INTELLECT" (138). This sustained Emersonian odyssey started, LaRocca avers, when Emerson encountered a "bewildering series of animate forms" at that Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in 1833, an event that prompted an unequivocal resolution in his journal: "I will be a naturalist" (139). The same impulse inflected *Nature* (1836), influenced *English Traits*, and culminated in his Harvard lectures on the "Natural History of the Intellect" in 1871. Situating *English Traits* in this broad context allows LaRocca to follow Emerson as he puzzles over the origins and development of America, the shaping force of geography and environment, the fraught role of race in history, and the possibility of self-creation. This natural historical angle also allows him to raise philosophical questions about the transmission of culture and the nature of taxonomy, trade, travel, and titles. Finally, LaRocca's meditation on the role of metaphor in ethical self-understanding results in a new sense of Emerson's engagement in *English Traits*, where metaphors work openly but indirectly to address "a number of volatile and controversial topics": "parents and progeny, nationality, empire, power, race" (157).

Emerson suggests in "The American Scholar" that the final value of a book is that it is a resource. *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* is a resourceful and generative book, full of disparate insights and insinuations that future scholars will take up in reassessing the relevance of *English Traits* in an increasingly transatlantic literary field. Even so, the book is at times a victim of its own eclectic methodology, with its energetic apposition resulting in moments of obscurity and seeming irrelevance instead of clarity and connection. Indeed, the absence of a central argument makes it difficult to anticipate what kind of future work on *English Traits* the book will sustain. Rather than an oversight, this deliberate strategy falls clearly within the thematic bounds of transmission and inheritance that the book problematizes. As LaRocca puts it, "Because it is exploratory and speculative rather than deductive and definitive, this work invites the pursuit of allusive, anecdotal, and affective aspects of Emerson's prose—the way it makes possible thinking on certain topics, and renews thinking on other issues" (168). In making a new case for the philosophical sophistication of *English Traits*, LaRocca has achieved his own Emersonian feat, the creation of a new "atmosphere in which to think" (149).