

Journal of American Studies, 49 (2015), e15. doi:10.1017/S0021875814002308

David LaRocca, *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013, £17.99). Pp. 395. ISBN 978 1 4411 6140 6.

I imagine David LaRocca having fun composing this book – not because it is in anyway frivolous or frolicsome (chapter 1 is titled “More Prone to Melancholy”) but because it is an engaging experiment in criticism, an attempt to perform literary study in such a way as to bring its subject to life. In this case, “subject” refers more or less to the venerable Emerson; bringing *that* “to life” requires removing Emerson’s work from the sometimes rather stuffy museum in which it is kept (e.g. anthologies, college curricula, Dewey-decimalized tomes). A premise of this performance, phrased as a question in the Introduction, is that works such as *English Traits* (1856) remain relevant if given proper care (e.g. enough air): can Emerson’s writing, LaRocca asks, “transfer intelligibly and intuitively to the present – that is, become pertinent for contemporary readers? . . . Can a contemporary reader take away more than just an appreciation for the novelty of his style, the richness of his examples and allusions, and the interdisciplinary inventiveness of his methodology?” (70). LaRocca’s response is unequivocally but not uncomplicatedly yes, and the form it takes represents another premise: instead of a museum, Emerson’s work belongs in a cabinet of wonder. After quoting Emerson on the potential importance of similar cabinets, LaRocca poses another question: “And what are books, in part, if not cabinets for words, sentences, paragraphs that have been intentionally and artfully composed, gathered, sequenced and otherwise curated?” (74).

And he has inventively devised a cabinet-like structure for his own book on Emerson’s cabinet-like structures; LaRocca sets about, assiduously and artfully, composing, gathering, sequencing and otherwise curating its contents. An epigraph from Carlyle is the first exhibit, followed by “Contents of Cabinet” – a rectangular box with chambers of various sizes, each containing the name of a portion of the book. There is nothing particularly special about the title page or publication information. But next, before the dedicatory page, the reader finds an italicized explanation atop a drawing of a bee: “*A Florilegium / of Varied Specimens and Propitious Excerpts / from Transcendental Biology / and / Related Fields of Inquiry, / Selected, / Arranged and Presented / by / . . .*”. That bee is eventually glossed a couple of pages later: after the dedication, another epigraph (from Derrida, on metaphor), and then, before the more familiarly formatted page titled “Contents,” the reader encounters a detail from the apiarian frontispiece of Charles Butler’s *The Feminine Monarchie; or a Treatise Concerning Bees*, along with the lengthy subtitles from both the 1609 and 1623 editions of that work, followed by one more page of “Prefatory Notes” (being a set of epigraphs from Wittgenstein (2), D. Q. McNerny (2), Emerson (2), Nietzsche, Gertrude Stein, and Virgil (viz., “And so that we can learn from known signs about these matters . . .” (xi)). Now, reader, you are right readied for the Introduction (with its 350 footnotes).

All of this elaborately constructed front matter belongs to LaRocca’s experiment in critical method, an experiment involving metaphor, “transcendental biology,” commonplace books, and Volume V of Emerson’s collected works – *English Traits* (1856). LaRocca explains the method more directly in the Introduction: “In what I have written and assembled thus far, and in what follows, I employ what might

be described analogically as conceptual and textual parataxis, namely, the use of arrangement, juxtaposition and commentary to identify a bona fide connection or to support an implied one" (26). The purpose of this practice is to pursue a "suggestive" rather than "declarative and definitive" approach to *English Traits*, "letting the mind of the reader/observer blend or fuse according to his or her own categories of judgement; this is something I have intentionally cultivated given the complexity of the collected specimens of text here presented, arranged and commented on" (26). Extending Emerson's investigation of a "natural history of the intellect," LaRocca situates *English Traits* within a cosmos (25). Historical period is part of that cosmos, one that LaRocca explores thoughtfully, but the specific epoch that produced Emerson's book opens to earlier and later engagements with related questions: "traits," the "English," evolution, metaphor, names, causes. Darwin's "tree of life," for example, converses with the rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari amid whispers of Werner Herzog and passing Emersonian expostulations, and all of these belong to an exhibit (or chapter) on originlessness – a wandering criticism, truly, but also a thinking that turns up wonders, "an evolving perspicacity of the way things are related to one another" (125).

The book version of a cabinet of wonder, LaRocca asserts, is a "florilegium," a Latinate "literal rendering" of the Greek "anthology" (141). While florilegium "can refer, quite literally, to a 'collection of flowers', such as a botanist might compile . . . in the eighteenth century it became understood to mean a collection of the 'flowers of literature'" (141). This assertion suggests that a florilegium such as Emerson's, such as LaRocca's, emits a kind of "bouquet," "an atmosphere in which to think" (148). The patient reader, the reader willing to make "interpretive shifts" (248), a reader capable of "loyalty to the present" and of reinforcing "an openness to the complexity of emerging phenomena" (248), will find that atmosphere by turns exhilarating, confusing, enticing, and drowsy with the hum of bees. Nevertheless, the reader must grant that removing Emerson's writing from a museum and placing it in a florilegium does wonders for its constitution.

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Journal of American Studies / Volume 49 / Issue 01 / February 2015 / E15
DOI: 10.1017/S0021875814002308, Published online: 21 January 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875814002308

How to cite this article:

T. S. McMILLIN (2015). Journal of American Studies, 49, E15 doi:10.1017/S0021875814002308

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