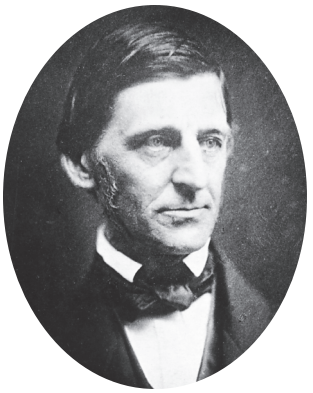

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EMERSON SOCIETY PAPERS

Distinguished Achievement Award Presented to David LaRocca

David LaRocca (www.davidlarocca.org), recipient of the 2022 Ralph Waldo Emerson Society Distinguished Achievement Award, joins a group of individuals distinguished by their formative contributions to the study of Emerson, contributions that not only put students and scholars in "a working mood," as Emerson might say, but also in many cases make work possible.

In 2009 Stanley Cavell received the award at the ALA annual meeting in Boston. When I self-consciously asked him to sign my tattered, coffee-stained, dog-eared copy of his book *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford 2003)—a book edited by LaRocca under the name David Justin Hodge—Cavell said, "I love beat-up books." My copy of LaRocca's *Estimating Emerson: Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell* (Bloomsbury 2012), is equally beat up; or put otherwise, well loved. An invaluable resource, it compiles substantive portions of texts written by poets, philosophers, artists, and critics from the nineteenth century to now, who provoked—or were provoked by—Emerson. LaRocca's concise and helpfully contextualizing introductions accompany each selection. This book in many ways embodies what distinguishes LaRocca's contribution to Emerson studies: His work, in breadth and depth alike, enables us to better see the many circles of conversation in which Emerson participates, circles that extend far beyond nineteenth-century Concord and well beyond the often-narrow parameters of specialized disciplines, methodological conventions, and academia more generally.

An overview of LaRocca's scholarship on Emerson offers a partial portrait of this achievement. His books focused on Emerson include the intellectual biography *On Emerson* (Wadsworth 2003, published under the name David Justin Hodge) and *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (Bloomsbury 2013). His edited books include *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* by Stanley Cavell (Stanford 2003), *Estimating Emerson: An Anthology of Criticism from Carlyle to Cavell* (Bloomsbury 2012), *A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture* co-edited with Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso (Dartmouth College Press 2015), and *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Transcendental Thought: From Antiquity to the Anthropocene* (Bloomsbury 2017). His articles on Emerson range from "Reforming Emerson: A Review of Recent Scholarship" (*Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society,* 2001), to "Not Following Emerson: Intelligibility and Identity in the Authorship of Literature, Science, and Philosophy" (*The Midwest Quarterly* 2013), to "Translating Carlyle: Ruminating on the Models of Metafiction at the Emergence of an Emersonian Vernacular" (Religions 2017). His book chapters highlight varieties of Emerson's reception and influence: Emerson and *The Gates* in Central Park; Emerson and film; Emerson and Nietzsche; Emerson and John Stuart Mill; Emerson and Maurice Maeterlinck. Taken as a living body of thinking, LaRocca's scholarship demonstrates, in Emerson's words, the "broad, radiating, immensely distributive action of nature and of mind."

In fact, one might say of LaRocca's scholarship what LaRocca says of the commonplace book for Emerson: it "is not a repository of finished thoughts … but an atmosphere in which to think. Possessing an idea does not come from jotting it down under some heading but from perceiving its connection to other terms and fields, concepts and features" (*Emerson's English* 149). LaRocca's *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (Bloomsbury 2013) is an exemplar of a book that provides "an atmosphere in which to think." It's a capacious, engaging, and much-needed study of Emerson's *English Traits* and of what this "uncharacteristic hybrid, [this] unique specimen" (1) in Emerson's oeuvre teaches us about Emerson's (and our own) ways of thinking. In LaRocca's account, *English Traits* is a "work about the interaction between a concept and a country—about how we know a place by name, and understand its people by their characteristics" yet it takes the form of "a kaleidoscopic, interdisciplinary account" (2). A "hybridized mode of cultural critique" (2), it occasions

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DAA to David LaRocca

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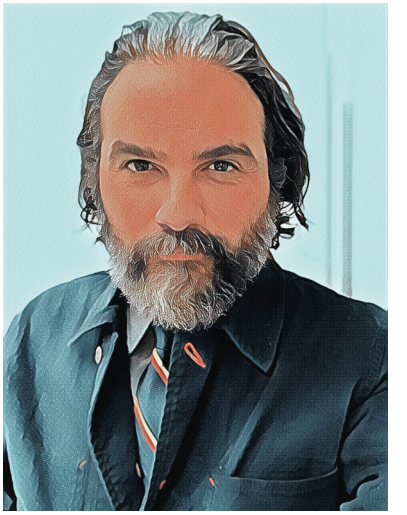
reflection on what counts as cultural critique, what we mean by it, and how we practice it. "Can the achievement of *English Traits*—its metaphors, associations, combinations and methods—transfer intelligibly and intuitively to the present—that is, become pertinent for contemporary readers?" LaRocca asks. "Can a contemporary reader take away more than just an appreciation for the novelty of [Emerson's] style, the richness of his examples and allusions, and the interdisciplinary inventiveness of his methodology?" (70). These questions prompt us to engage creatively with *English Traits* and with our own habits of reading, thinking, and writing, a provocation alive throughout LaRocca's scholarship and inheritance of Emerson.

For example, in "Not Following Emerson: Intelligibility and Identity in the Authorship of Literature, Science, and Philosophy" (*The Midwest Quarterly* 2013), he describes how "Emerson's influence on his best readers becomes invisible because in following him well, they no longer recognize him, but rather themselves" (132). In other words, "better known to themselves … such readers become unknown to the rest of us. We can't see them because instead of announcing affiliations and stipulating creeds that make them apparent they are in front of us doing their own work" ("Not Following" 132). LaRocca's body of Emerson scholarship helps to make visible these readers and their work, a contribution that enriches Emerson studies, in particular, and by extension, the way we think about and pursue intellectual inquiry more generally.

A "closer look at Emerson's writing," LaRocca suggests, "and the way it gets read, appears to provide occasion for the fresh consideration of the promise involved in accepting and exploring the permeability and coherency of intellectual inquiry, however it takes up the mantle" (117). "Part of what the inheritance of Emerson's work highlights for us," he says, "—that is, for everyone thinking about or contributing to the range of humanistic and scientific endeavors; for poets and physicists, literary critics and philosophers, technology theorists, historians, artists, and educators—is how discerning radical variability is not necessarily at odds with the continuity of inquiry" (116). Today's crises, both globally and locally within what is called higher education, require this approach to intellectual inquiry, as Emerson's writing, in LaRocca's account, makes clear.

"Emerson has long provoked scholars to explore the meanings of academic discourse and the role the academy plays in intellectual and everyday life," LaRocca writes in his introduction to *Estimating Emerson*.



Several of the most prominent academic critics of Emerson's work undertake metacritical reflections of the academic profession—including its conceptual categories, assigned titles, and accepted disciplines and fields of inquiry. In this way, Emerson's writing retains its ongoing challenge—truly a perpetual provocation—to any mode of complacency over the meaning and relevance of the academy. (19-20)

LaRocca's scholarship cheers, raises, and guides us toward seeing and taking up the perpetual challenge of Emerson's writing, writing that indeed "remains of vital significance to the ongoing evolution of thinking" ("Not Following" 134). Thank you, David, for work that opens possibilities for further reading, thinking, and writing—"with much effort and joy" ("Not Following" 134)—and for the lasting provocation that "there is yet so much left to say, to write, and to read about Emerson" (*Estimating* 21).

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