

Review Essays

Experiments and Forms

Jennifer Gurley

Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 176 + x pp., \$69.00 cloth.

Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 218 + x pp., \$120.00 cloth.

David La Rocca, *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 408 pp., \$34.95 paper, \$120.00 cloth.

These three studies make different cases for what they more or less explicitly regard as the experimental nature of thinking, roughly defined as the human mind's endless attempt to make sense of the world and its place within it. Anchored in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, they aim to demonstrate that *how* we think matters far more than *what* we think. Hence their focus on method, process, becoming, and relationality, and their rather extreme rejection of all things "fixed": truth claims, argumentative and narrative structures, philosophical systems, forms, and subsequently

formalism in general. Correspondingly, these scholars prefer a form of writing that is experimental, or always open for revision. Harvey, Grimstad, and LaRocca alike admirably put themselves to the test – in very different ways and to different degrees – as they attempt to express the dynamic movement of thinking with the written word. The paradox of the *Phaedrus* is in view here as each author attempts to subvert or at least underplay thinking's reliance on form – on being shaped into a visible object – for its written expression. American Pragmatism figures prominently, as does the Romantic human subject – an actual Person Thinking – perceiving and trying to write his or her world into being. The emphasis on the thinking subject, however, tends at times to remove the thinker almost completely from the concrete conditions of existence or from any accountability to others, especially to audience. Though these studies yield some provocative and at times truly inspiring results, one wonders if the rather free-wheeling Emerson upon which they are built is overstated at the expense of ignoring Emerson's lifelong commitment to comprehending and working within various real and perceived limits that, for him, enable any creative process.

Samantha C. Harvey's *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* is the first book-length study devoted to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson. More precisely, Harvey's

is not *just* an 'influence study' of one writer upon another, but rather the relationship between Coleridge and Emerson serves as a lens to magnify the ways in which ideas [are] transferred across thinkers, oceans, and time periods, on one hand forging enduring legacies while also warping, reinterpreting, and renewing those ideas in new climates. (2, emphasis added)

As such, it is a fitting addition to the Edinburgh Studies in Transatlantic Literatures series begun in 2005, which challenges "nation-based or exceptionalist models" of analysis and "fosters new paradigms of exchange, circulation and transformation for transatlantic literary studies" by exploring "the multiple ways in which ideas, texts, objects and bodies travel across spatial and temporal borders." Drawing on Emerson's "Quotation and

Originality" (1859), Harvey calls for a "new category of influence" that she describes as an "assimilative" process of finding in the words of another "provocations" to think (recall "Self-Reliance") rather than precise ideas and models to copy (9, 56). Demonstrating how Emerson "assimilated key aspects of Coleridge's thought and then applied those ideas in distinctive and original ways" (9), she reveals the latter's importance not only for Emerson and his circle's theological, philosophical, and literary pursuits but also for "the related but lesser-known Vermont Transcendentalism," a movement led by James Marsh, Coleridge's American editor who would serve as President of the University of Vermont from 1826 to 1833, that "profoundly affected the development of higher education, the national press, and the emergence of pragmatism" (2). The surprising and wonderful closing chapter on Vermont might have read like an odd afterthought but instead serves perfectly to show how ideas formed in transatlantic conversation can be cultivated in local soil and travel in unexpected ways. I daresay that I hope Harvey might have a book-length study of Vermont Transcendentalism in the works.

Focused and careful, Harvey's larger objective is to demonstrate that "Emerson did not think about Coleridge, but thought *with* Coleridge" (3). Rather than track every instance of Emerson's use of the British poet – an impossible task anyway given his famously negligent habits of citation – Harvey notes an "intellectual affinity" between the two, describing how each thinks according to "two dynamic strategies that Emerson appropriated from Coleridge to hone and expand the mind's perceptive powers: 'distinguishing without dividing' and 'principles of method'" (7; 55). First, thinking is the intellect's continual attempt to make sense of existence in terms of the polar opposites of unity and difference that organize the human experience. Quoting from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Harvey writes: "In order to obtain notions of any truth, we must intellectually separate its distinguishable parts [...] But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions of unity, in which they actually co-exist" (56). Second, thinking is aspirational, the work of the "human mind ascending upward through different levels of perception" (55), from "lower to higher topics," under the direction of a "leading idea" that "coherently" combines the "results" (68).

All of this thinking is done to discover correspondences between the natural and the spiritual realms in the hope of learning, finally, what it means to be a human being who necessarily partakes of both. Harvey describes this as the effort to “reconcile” the terms of what she calls “the Romantic Triad” of “nature, spirit, and humanity,” which she imagines as “a triangle in which the bottom two feet represent the natural world and the human world, and the upper point represents the realm of the spiritual”(14). Then, in “the empty space at the middle of the triangle is the figure of the poet-prophet” who, both Coleridge and Emerson claim, “mediates the Romantic triad in a dynamic and ongoing process of intellectual and creative activity that knits together the spiritual and natural, and communicates those visions to the rest of humanity” (14). This poet/artist intuitively and “synthetical[ly]” (even “magical[ly]”) rather than “systematically” reconciles the terms of the triad, “evoking in his relations with them the “spirit” – rather than the letter – of unity (85). He then produces *literature* (rather than philosophical proofs) to best express his intuitions and share them with others who perhaps lack his intuitive gifts.

The book’s eight chapters roughly parallel the terms of the Romantic triad and seem to ascend. Two chapters on Coleridge’s centrality for Boston Transcendentalism are followed by chapters on nature, humanity, and spirit; an important chapter in between (“The Landing Place”) places us on Coleridge’s spiral staircase (recall Emerson’s many moments in which he pauses on stairs) between stages of thinking in order to survey his strategies for doing so; and chapters on Coleridge’s presence in Emerson’s *Nature* and James Marsh’s Vermont complete the movement of thought upward (and also outward). That great closing chapter details how Marsh used Coleridge’s “dynamic method” at the University of Vermont to “awaken the powers of the human intellect progressively and hierarchically, beginning with the lower powers of the understanding and graduating to the higher powers of reason” (146), how he developed pedagogy and curriculum suited to build such powers, and how his work inspired John Dewey’s own “conception of education as an organically unfolding process (157).

My only criticism has to do with the larger concerns about fixity and forms with which I began this essay. Harvey repeatedly insists that Coleridge and Emerson favored "ongoing intellectual inquiry over system-building" (16), and she praises their choosing "a dynamic method over a final fixed model of the Romantic triad" (74). She seems to walk the path of certain literary critics and philosophers today who take systematic analysis and clear formulations as proof that thinking and creativity are dead. But we humans put things in place and create systems and "fixed" solutions, however temporary, as we try to solve problems and make sense of our world and our lives. And then we revise those systems and solutions when they merit revision. Harvey herself inadvertently concedes the value of formal knowledge when she submits that perhaps Coleridge and Emerson "aspir[ed] toward system-building" but perhaps found that they were not quite up to it (74). Fortunately, they discovered their own unique talents and have left us their beautiful literature. Can we not praise their successes without discounting the value of other forms of inquiry and expression?

Paul Grimstad's *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* argues for a specifically literary pragmatism that extends classical pragmatism's notion of experience as experimental, always in the process of becoming, to a sense of experience as "compositional," always in the process of being written. In short, experience is made – not had – and "experimental writers," in the very act of writing, *create* rather than report experience. They do so by composing in the manner of pragmatism's "experimental loop of perception, actions, consequences, further perception of consequences, further action, further consequences, and so on," such that, for them, experience means neither "getting inner representations to correspond with outer phenomena" nor "securing conditions of possibility for rationally justified knowledge" (1). A literary work, then – and here Grimstad draws from John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Richard Poirier's literary pragmatism, and Stanley Cavell's thinking on composition – does not represent experience but establishes its own criteria for meaning and is thereby a "source of experience," in the "sense that both artist and beholder find the conditions for the work's meaning becoming

shareable *in* the set of experiments that have led to the work” (12-13). Hence the experimental writer’s work opens up new experiences (or “conditions for having experiences,” or “conditioned experiences” – what exactly Grimstad intends is not clear) with prose that demands its readers’ unrelenting attention to the arrangement of words within particular compositions: to ““only those words said in that order”” (here he quotes from Cavell on *King Lear*) rather than to some world outside of those words (14). Hence this kind of writing “involves the wording of the world into something shareable and meaningful” (14). This way of thinking about what constitutes experience resists historicist and biographical approaches to literature and returns to a text-centric approach, but one that rejects formalism and offers in its place a “naturalist” method, drawn from Emerson, that emphasizes the subject-as-author wrapped up in a “process of composition” that “carries forward the causal series of nature” (15). Writing “merg[es] in a fluid procession” with “sentences becom[ing] nature’s own adornments” (31). The book follows the dominant critical trend of “detranscendentalizing” Emerson and other nineteenth-century authors, but Grimstad importantly demonstrates the need for philosophy, and not just history, in that endeavor. Anyone disappointed with materialist analyses of literature that obscure that literature within fortresses of empirical data about the world outside of it will find a friend in this book.

To make his case for experimental writing, Grimstad examines four nineteenth-century writers “in whose poetry and prose can be found a move from experience understood as a squaring of inner with outer matters” – or “correspondence” (120) – to “experience as a process continued in composition” (2); these are Emerson himself, Poe, Melville, and Henry James, the last in relation to his brother William (hence “Emerson to the Jameses”; 120). An interesting chapter (perhaps the book’s best) on Poe describes how he invented the “analytic detective story” in response to his encounter with Johann Maelzel’s mechanical chess-player; another reads Melville’s *Pierre* as a successful rebuke to contemporary literary expectations rather than a formal disaster; and the closing chapter on the Jameses argues that Henry’s *The Ambassadors*, built “around the multiple

ambassadorial relations between New England and Paris [...] enacts at the level of style" the fundamental claim of William's "radical empiricism: that relations are external to, and as real as, their terms" (2).

Grimstad is at his best when he attends closely to the texts that undergird his theoretical enterprise. A brilliant example is found in the book's opening chapter on Emerson. Assessing the 1832 journal entry in which Emerson describes his epiphany before Cuvier's cabinets in Paris's Jardin des Plantes and famously declares himself a "naturalist," Grimstad explains:

When Emerson writes "how much finer things are in composition than alone," he sounds as struck by the image of the cabinet as an arranging principle as by the objects it contains. The tone of amazement in the entry is then not only in response to the wild diversity of nature but of seeing an organizing principle in an object as available to perception as the specimens displayed within it. To be "moved by strange sympathies" is to have an encounter with an object that stands for a principle previously thought of as furnished by the mind alone [...] Emerson abandons both [Lockean] empiricism and [Kantian] transcendental idealism in favor of experience understood as the way the cabinets' embodiment of a general principle leads him to treat his journal as a collection of specimens to be arranged into new compositions. (22-4)

This is a fantastic account of how Emerson perceives principles in the arrangements of the objects before him, "in composition" rather than alone; things do not simply *correspond* with principles, like copies of Platonic forms. Hence objects exist neither in themselves, as brute empirical facts, nor as manifestations of rational or, to be more faithful to Emerson, spiritual realities. They are, in their arrangement, something in between, consisting of matter but suggesting principles the observer can recognize but that are not mere projections of his rational powers. Grimstad concludes from this close reading that the "condition of the impression in the *Jardin* becomes the condition of possibility for [Emerson's] move from journal to lecture [...]"

from seeing a cabinet or hearing a sermon, to recording one's impressions in a journal, returning to those sentences or passages as themselves new objects to be encountered, then putting *those* into new arrangements in lectures, addresses, and books. Experience is not the front end of this process; it is the process in its entirety" (23; 26). And it is this process that Grimstad regards as natural, for "[to] be a naturalist – to resign a pulpit that has been 'usurped by formalists' – is to continue the course of nature in a method of composition" (27). Formalism, in contrast, "was preaching insufficiently infused with experience." Writing is a more or less organic act that proceeds directly from one's own interactions with the world.

But it is not clear how, *within* Emerson's compositions themselves, one is to experience Grimstad's notion of experience as composition. And that conception does not get fleshed out in the chapters on Poe, Melville, or Henry James, each of which – interesting in its own right – focuses on the writing process as a movement among genres. This is perhaps because the book seems ironically reluctant to experience these writers' prose, to dwell in and describe how their sentences – just those words in that order – achieve their effects. I would have enjoyed following Grimstad through more textual moments in order to understand how, in the end, those words might produce for me a sense of experience as experimental, of the ways that original arrangements of words can unite writer and reader in a newly shared experience of the world. Unfortunately, much space is devoted instead to quick nods to a great many philosophers, critics, cultural moments, and critical theories in a project already ambitiously poised to evaluate four already prolific and difficult authors.

Or perhaps the texts are left a bit behind because Grimstad focuses on process *at the expense of* product. That may stem from his desire to keep naturalism and formalism mutually opposed, the former aligned (rather too loosely) with the experimental/pragmatic and the latter with the fixed/metaphysical. The book's core conviction indeed seems to lie in a remark made early on that "nothing is fixed [...] everything is always changing" (30). Writing must always be "revisable" (30), and forms are mere molds into which to set words, such that formalism implies their ossification

and hence the end of revisability. But nature itself perpetually forms, uniforms, and reforms the world. And so did Emerson and William James as they expressed and then tested their truths in relation to other truths (recall pragmatism's coherence requirement). Their point was not to do away with forms and facts altogether, but continually to reevaluate them in light of the circumstances at hand. James called for truth in action, Emerson for active formalism. Both rejected only formality *for its own sake*, which they considered *unproductive* and cold and indeed *unnatural* and, I think they would say, *inhuman*.

David LaRocca's *Emerson's English Traits and the Natural History of Metaphor* is itself a form of experimental writing. The book's unusual – and I mean *really* unusual – formal features help convey its core ideas that Emersonian thinking is essentially metaphorical – an act of seeing one thing as another – and that Emersonian writing is the act of expressing one thing as another. Correspondingly, LaRocca places things side-by-side rather than hierarchically, using "paratactic and montage techniques" that are "suggestive (rather than declarative or definitive), letting the mind of the reader/observer blend or fuse according to his or her own categories of judgement" (26). The book opens with a "Contents of Cabinet" (rather than a table of contents; recall Cuvier's cabinet), which is an image of a customized bookshelf partitioned into uneven subsections filled with various topics and ordered in roughly the line the eye makes when reading English, moving downward from left to right (2). (Emerson's insight into that cabinet seems as much the guiding light for LaRocca as it is for Grimstad). Arrangement of material within the text's 16 chapters and very long (71-page) introduction is equally surprising. Here we find not traditional arguments but numbered fragments of content – in no apparent logical or narrative order – in a variety of modes including mini-essay, isolated quotation, encyclopedia entry, diary entry, general commentary, and seemingly random thought, ranging in length from a few lines to a few pages. This makes for taxing reading, especially given the book's sheer heft: its 408 pages printed in what appears to be 9-point font make reading it feel more like a 600-page experience. The structure also makes for challenging

practical use, for one runs across inspiring moments only to be unable to find them again; an exceptionally thorough index would have been helpful.

This study is deeply learned, and I do not say that hyperbolically. On display is LaRocca's mastery of European and American literature and history (cultural and intellectual), philosophy, natural philosophy, history of science, and more. I can barely begin to note all that one discovers in this cornucopia. Heaps of knowledge are marshaled to trace, in frighteningly impressive detail, the genealogies of the metaphors in *English Traits* in order to illustrate how that Emersonian text more than any other draws analogies between the natural and the moral, between "the laws of science [and] the laws of mind" (8). Natural and spiritual matter are shown to be continuous and ever-evolving – we ourselves "are comprised of continuities that reach out in all directions" (10). The book is saturated with discussions of evolution, both as a principle of science and as the primary function of metaphor, the latter because metaphors recreate old things by renaming them and in so doing allowing us to see phenomena anew. Thus metaphor is extended to mean "naming" more generally (316). The primary example of this is found in the renaming of proper nouns, particularly of persons and places (e.g., taking a married or Americanized name, overlaying British town names on American Indian ones). Therefore, metaphors are "generative" and "constitutional" rather than merely descriptive (312), and they "can bespeak metaphysical change" (312) by bringing to light "something unknown or unseen before" (316). For LaRocca, as for other practitioners in the linguistic turn, language has an almighty power to change the world.

Emerson's *English Traits* (1856) specifically "analogizes scientific and linguistic procedures for an understanding of national and racial" traits as well as "of the existential predicates we use to describe humans" (29). An outlier in the Emerson corpus, the text is a generically unclassifiable reflection on the interrelation of racial/biological, cultural, and spiritual traits by way of an examination of the British as they had evolved by the mid-nineteenth century. Emerson's reflection begins in his first trip to Britain in 1832-33 and his encounters with Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and ends with his second visit in 1847-48. As LaRocca rightly reminds us, this is

Emerson's only work to confront issues of race in a sustained way, an especially bold move given the period (the decade leading up to the Civil War) and his own historical ambivalence on the topic, that is, his discomfort with both biological determinism (race as predictive of spiritual capacity and cultural achievement) and what we might call overly spiritualized attempts to ignore biology altogether (race in no way distinguishes human beings). *English Traits*, too, is a cabinet – a "Cabinet of Metaphors" (158) – whose "19 chapters [...] should not be treated like discrete and independent creations but as parts of an expertly curated collection of remarks that add up to a definitive – hard won, deeply informed – statement on the English" (2). LaRocca does not say what exactly that statement amounts to because, he argues, the book's importance lies not in any of its particular claims, but in its ability to model how to think through questions about the relationship between race and culture.

One might respond, however, that Emerson seems to have written *English Traits* precisely in order to define and finally excise English influence and proclaim America's cultural right to exist as a nation with its "own works and laws and worship." Using himself as the model American upstart in an opening chapter that confronts the giants of English influence – Carlyle, Coleridge, and Wordsworth – on his own definitive earlier works, Emerson then characterizes, evaluates, and finally denounces itemized racial and ethnic traits as he explains how those evolved somewhat predictably into particular culture values and practices. In other words, Emerson commits himself to some rather clear, if troubling, claims. At times LaRocca would seem to agree, but often it is *not* clear where he finally stands on the issues he raises. Philip Nicoloff's 1961 *Emerson on Race and History: An Examination of 'English Traits'* probably remains the better place to begin thinking through Emerson's thinking on race.

I have to say that I wish LaRocca had committed to some *governing* evaluative claims of his own and connected some of his many, many dots. I understand that the book's form was deliberately designed to prevent any argumentative or narrative thread from developing. I also applaud LaRocca's faith in his ideal general reader's ability to work through the material and

make his or her own judgments and his interest in writing, along with Emerson, books that “all can read” (1). But I don’t think that this book’s true reader is the Everyman to whom its author appeals and with whom he longs to identify. LaRocca insists early on that he writes not as an expert, but only “in the guise of an ‘expert’” (27) – a disavowal that subsequently rings disingenuous as one explores this treasure trove of specialized knowledge. I can imagine trained philosophers, historians, or literary scholars meandering through these fragments and enjoying finding their own ways around them. The generally educated and curious reader, however, might do better to go directly to Emerson himself.

While it is true that Emerson sought in many ways to unsettle himself and urged us not to fall sedately into forms of living, he was not all rush and abandon and he did not reject form per se. Indeed, he was thoroughly interested in forms, in both undoing and remaking them. His writings are filled with images and tales of building, inhabiting, ordering, counting, and calculating. I think he wants only to denaturalize form by constantly reminding us that *we* give forms to things. *We* have the power to form, or, as Thoreau famously put it, to live deliberately. And while Emerson – like William James after him – experimented, he did not do so in a vacuum. All of the experimenting was *for* something: namely, for discovering what might be true once and for all. Private discoveries were accountable to and indeed sensible only *within* “systems,” within the universal order (Emerson) or in relation to a set of truths that cohere or hang together (James). Things make sense, have individuated parts to play, only within larger comprehensible wholes. Hence an experiment is performed not for its own sake – like a new good-in-itself – but to comprehend both part and whole, ourselves, yes, but in terms of the world we negotiate. And then we do the best we can to communicate our discoveries precisely, in truly shareable terms, even while knowing, as Emerson submits, that the reality that surrounds and literally embodies us, the universe infused with “deity and law,” can never be accurately conveyed.

Le Moyne College

