

# *Beauty Meets Beast:* *Emerson's English Traits*

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*I* have titled this essay “Beauty Meets Beast” only because I cannot quite bring myself to call it “Emerson Meets the Werewolf.” Emerson was “Dualism ambulant,” in Mencken’s words, a phrase that tightly summarizes a common observation. Detractors and admirers alike have called Emerson “Janus-faced”; a “Plotinus-Montaigne”; a serious bi-polar advocating now for Freedom, now for Fate. In the traditional rendering of this two-sidedness, Emerson embodied a conflict between the pragmatic and the idealistic; but I would like to recast the discussion in light of the problem of nature, particularly in regard to Emersonian explorations of the relationship between what is deemed natural and what is deemed cultural. Although, in many critics’ interpretations, Emerson’s notions of nature are often reconciled by such terms as “romantic pastoralism,”<sup>1</sup> I find his varying approaches to nature indicative of a tension or struggle in Emerson’s thinking about place, force, phenomena, essence, condition – a thinking that Eric Wilson has characterized as “romantic turbulence.”<sup>2</sup> Among Emerson’s approaches to nature, there is the affirming, “going *into* nature” movement of the Divinity School Address and “The American Scholar”; there is the transcendent, “going *beyond* nature” movement of his first book (*Nature*, 1836) and poems such as “Two Rivers”; and there is a “natural ambivalence,” a movement between versions of nature (especially found in later works). To reconcile Emerson’s “natures” is to miss out on his writings’ most valuable and lasting lessons; instead, I propose suspending the drive toward a Unified Theory of Emerson. Let us rather

explore a portending tension at work in his approaches to nature, a tension that registers significantly when Emerson's dualism ambulates in England (1833 and 1847) – which, as fans of horror movies will have already guessed, is where the werewolf would enter the picture.

The American imagination has frequently been drawn to the British Isles as a fertile site for films about werewolves. In two classic examples, the creature begins as a simple, guileless American transplanted to British soil: *The Wolfman* (1941, dir. George Waggner) and *An American Werewolf in London* (1981, dir. John Landis) both present the cases of rather happy-go-lucky young men from the Colonies who have the rotten luck to be bitten by werewolves while visiting the Old Country. The victims (played by Lon Chaney, Jr. and David Naughton, respectively) transform into walking dualities themselves, spending much of their days as educated, sensitive, cultured humans, but spending too many nights as wild, hungry, lusty wolves. These metamorphing man-beasts are metaphors for the tension between nature and culture; as such, they could serve as useful figures for considering that tension – could so serve, that is, if Emerson had met an actual werewolf (instead of just Thomas Carlyle) while venturing about the English countryside. As he relates in the published account of his travels, he nevertheless did encounter the tension incarnate in another legend, that of Beauty and the Beast.

In Emerson's *English Traits* (1856), one finds a disturbing but culturally widespread separation of nature and culture, as well as a fertile troubling of that separation. The gap becomes acutely provocative in a scene from "Stonehenge," the sixteenth of nineteen chapters. Emerson recalls touring the countryside with Thomas Carlyle, clambering about the monoliths, cigar smoke, cedars, and the following moment of disconnection:

On the way to Winchester, whither our host accompanied us in the afternoon, my friends asked many questions respecting American landscape, forests, houses, – my house, for example. It is not easy to answer these queries well. There, I thought, in America, lies

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nature sleeping, overgrowing, almost conscious, too much by half for man in the picture, and so giving a certain *tristesse*, like the rank vegetation of swamps and forests seen at night, steeped in dews and rains, which it loves; and on it man seems not able to make much impression. There, in that great sloven continent, in high Alleghany pastures, in the sea-wide sky-skirted prairie, still sleeps and murmurs and hides the great mother, long since driven away from the trim hedge-rows and over-cultivated garden of England. And, in England, I am quite too sensible of this. Every one is on his good behavior, and must be dressed for dinner at six. So I put off my friends with very inadequate details, as best I could. (162)<sup>3</sup>

In this rich passage, Emerson posits a gap wider than the Atlantic between England and America, an expanse that overwhelms the speaker and debilitates the possibility of answering his friends' questions about where he resides.

Although Joel Porte has suggested that, when faced with this "fine paragraph," "the critic of Emerson may be commended most for appreciative silence," the scene's significance merits the attention of scholars interested in nature-culture relations. Porte himself believes the passage to be "the point of [Emerson's] whole book," representing the culmination of the "metaphoric confrontation between England and America."<sup>4</sup> But what interests me even more is the extent to which that confrontation of two nations bespeaks another, more fundamental confrontation, one between ideas of culture and nature. For the Emerson of this passage, nature only exists in overgrowth and swamps and forests and prairies, never in hedge-rows and gardens or hedge-trimmers or gardeners. America consists of a nature on which humans make no mark, whereas England's cultivated markings have blotted out any signs of the natural. Put simply, in England nature has been overrun by culture. Humans occupy an order of being that is unnatural or extranatural, an

order capable of chasing away nature from a specific place. In America, on the other hand, nature persists with a certain “too-muchness”; humans, again of an extranatural order, are incapable of “making an impression” on nature – a phrase that connotes various forms of culture. Culture, this excerpt from *English Traits* implies, pertains to the ability to make an impression on nature, whether it be agriculture (physically making impressions on the surface of the earth with plow or axe) or literary culture (writing, or metaphorically making an impression on nature).

Emerson’s experience of the gap between England and America is founded upon another gap – a divisive view of the world that posits a significant space between humans and our geobiotic home. In failing to describe his home turf, Emerson shows symptoms of a widespread condition: alienation from nature. While the condition usually entails a physical removal and resultant separation anxiety – not unlike eighteenth century accounts of scurvy – for Emerson it is complicated and exacerbated by a metaphysical disjunction. We are estranged from nature, not because we have “driven away” the “great mother” and no longer lie cozily in her arms, but because of our doggedness in intellectually and spiritually separating ourselves from our biotic facts of life, because of our refusal to reckon the interconnectedness of living things, the ecology even of human thinking, the often beastly unpleasant yet as often unfathomably beautiful nature of human culture. Alienated *by* nature (which is “too much by half for man in the picture”) and *from* nature (having traveled from the “great sloven continent” to the “garden”), Emerson finds himself at a loss for words.

In sum, Emerson’s problem in this passage comes from being unable to translate America into English terms, a condition caused by the inability to traverse the gap between nature and culture. Emerson, that is to say, is caught in a bind. On the one hand, he is a well-schooled, nicely cultured, articulate English descendant whose own rank and overgrowing home does not lend itself to cultivation and thus gives him “a certain *tristesse*.” On the other hand, he is a proud product of “that great sloven

continent" who now finds himself in a country where everyone must be well-behaved, impeccably mannered, punctual, and formally dressed for dinner. In America, the cultivated Emerson is a trifle trepid regarding a landscape on which humans cannot make an impression – nature's excess is too much for culture. In England, he is "quite too sensible" of the over-cultivated lay of the land, which lacks the grandeur, opportunity, immensity, messiness, and unadulterated purity of the "sea-wide sky-skirted prairie" – there, culture is too much for nature. *English Traits* explores the differences between Beauty (England, Culture) and Beast (America, Nature), as well as the points in which Beast and Beauty seem to meet and even mingle.

To judge from the book's reception history, it is indeed a book of disparate elements, of mosts and leasts. In his deservedly well-regarded book-length study of the text, Philip Nicoloff positions it, "among all the works of Emerson," as "one of the most widely read, most widely enjoyed, and least discussed."<sup>5</sup> It was, according to Merton Sealts, "the most popular book he had yet published,"<sup>6</sup> even though (or because) critics continue to deem it "Emerson's least characteristic book."<sup>7</sup> Critical neglect of *English Traits* can partially be attributed to a friendlier, more observational, and less homiletic tone than Emerson customarily employed. Carl Hovde calls it "perhaps the most ingratiating of Emerson's major works," and determines that "Its relaxed and occasionally casual tone seems to assure us that no ideological axe is being ground."<sup>8</sup> While one may question the absence of ideological bias, one must nevertheless admit that "Sales were brisk from the beginning" (Sealts 224), which cannot be said of many of the writings of those associated with American Transcendentalism. (One thinks of poor Thoreau looking over the massive pile of unsold copies of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* thankfully delivered to his doorstep.) Nicoloff has noted that *English Traits* "received the widest reception in English periodicals of any book which its author published" (Nicoloff 261), some of which was favorable. The differences between the extremes of this book's career – most popular, most widely read, most

widely enjoyed and least remembered, least characteristic, least discussed – are connected to the career of the book’s author, the work’s structure, the themes it treats, and the strategies with which it explores the gaps.

Written when Emerson was “at the height of his powers”<sup>9</sup> and his friendship with Thoreau (who was finishing *Walden*) had reached bottom (Richardson 519), *English Traits* marks a turning point in Emerson’s thinking. For many readers, the subject of England, especially considered from a perspective combining personal experience, historical questions, cultural criticism, and still-forming notions of evolution, drew forth from Emerson a different style of writing. Robert Weisbuch describes the change vividly and succinctly as a “forsaking of the Adamic and Orphic voice, naming and proclaiming, with its acrobatic leaps that force us to recreate a logic of surprising transitions and apparent contradictions, for the more reportorial and qualificatory manner of the later works.”<sup>10</sup> Reporting on English traits and qualifying his findings, Emerson was (and is) taken by readers to have “abandoned some of his old mysticism,” becoming “more practical and concrete.”<sup>11</sup> The shift in style thus was tied to a shift in thought, to a less “transcendental” and more pedestrian understanding of things. This change sold well and pleased a number of readers: finally that Emerson fellow was making some sense. But many were puzzled by this “forsaking” and wondered what had become of their ardent provocateur. As a commentator from the period (in the *Westminster Review*, October 1856) remarked, “Reading his book is like eating potted meat; it is very good, very creditable to the cook, and a little of it goes a long way, but it is not exactly the genuine beef” (Burkholder 172).

Although the “genuine beef” probably refers to the English themselves (the less genuine article being an American representation of them), the phrasing also could indicate that *English Traits* was not prime Emerson, that it should have been a little more Adamic, a little less reportorial. That it was not perceived to be the genuine beef might explain “The book’s obscure position in Emerson scholarship,” which

Nicoloff claims "has been dramatized of late by Stephen E. Whicher's almost complete neglect of it in his *Freedom and Fate* (1953). Whicher, concerned with both the evolution and content of Emerson's thought, apparently found in *English Traits* no valuable contribution to his study" (Nicoloff 3). But to situate the book, as Nicoloff does, solely as "a very important and thoroughly logical step in Emerson's philosophical development" (Nicoloff 9), or as a necessary if neglectable leg of the march from Freedom toward Fate, or as a retreat from the Orphic to the qualificatory, is to miss out on a significant tension at the heart of the project. If readers have struggled with *English Traits*, it may be due to Emerson's struggle with nature and culture as it plays out in the work's structure, theme, and strategy.

*English Traits*, in other words, is decidedly not "The American Scholar." The prospects, enthusiasm, drive, and particularly the inspiration of the American address do not surface as readily in the book on Britain. Written some twenty years before the publication of *English Traits*, "The American Scholar" ranks among Emerson's most "transcendental" offerings. Nicoloff observes that, "During what Stephen Whicher would term his 'transcendental period,' Emerson had viewed the present age of religion with a millennial excitement; but in the decade in which *English Traits* was written, he was endorsing a course in the grim, coercive forces of nature" (Nicoloff 213). There are nevertheless points of intersection between the two works. In *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Robert Richardson calls the book "an effort to make good on 'The American Scholar'" (519). While Richardson understands this to mean "isolating and describing English life" and "separating it from American life," I suggest it involves both affirming and fearing a proclamation, made in the earlier writing, of nature's firstness. "The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature," "The American Scholar" decreed.<sup>12</sup> *English Traits* attempts to make good on this declaration by giving nature its due, with culture kicking and screaming (albeit politely) the whole way. The book acknowledges nature's firstness and struggles with the consequences of that

acknowledgement against the backdrop of tension between English and American, real and ideal traits.

Perhaps because struggle and tension inform the subject matter and approach of *English Traits*, the structure charged with containing the text's dynamics has caused difficulties for readers – “reservations about its organization are still common,” notes Merton Sealts (Sealts 232). Framed by personal recollections (specifics of Emerson's two trips to England at the beginning, the “Stonehenge” account and summary chapters at the end), the book's contents run from those that “deal with the natural sources” to “the artificial institutions or products of those sources.”<sup>13</sup> For Nicoloff, “the direction of Emerson's inquiry into English character moved roughly ... from the Englishman as a geological and biological phenomenon to the Englishman in his spiritual and aesthetic life” (Nicoloff 35). The movement of the discussion, that is to say, goes roughly from nature to culture, “the climax of this dualism” being “reached in the chapter ‘Literature’ ...” (*ibid.*). Because this neatly dualistic approach is sandwiched by Emerson's personal experience with English character, critics have been better disposed toward the meat of the book than by the bun. Nicoloff observes, for example, that “Two of the last four chapters (‘Stonehenge’ and ‘Personal’) were made up of personal experiences in England, and returned the reader to the earlier atmosphere of the travelogue” (Nicoloff 34); he then omits these chapters from consideration in his otherwise thorough account. In the introduction to the 1966 Belknap Press edition, Howard Mumford Jones excuses the same two chapters from further attention: “One is glad that Emerson went to Stonehenge just as one is happy to note the author's good manners in chapter XVII [“Personal”], ... but the brilliance of the book lies in the great generalizing chapters” (Jones xvi).

Yet these “personal” chapters serve the struggle that comprises *English Traits* by foregrounding the writer's unsteady position between the natural and the cultural. If “Literature” functions as some sort of climax of dualism, it is less a dialectic synthesis than a dramatization of a gap that cannot readily be bridged, an acknowledgment of a disparity



between thesis and antithesis that may not be synthesized. The chapter, rather than capping the dualism, participates in the book's exploration of the uncertain area between established poles. "Literature" furthers the action of *English Traits*; *English Traits* presents literature as the means through which we can confront the parts of us that do not co-exist as peacefully as we may sometimes wish to believe. "Literature" eventually leads us to "Stonehenge," where Emerson articulates his experience of the gap, made manifest in his inadequate response to friends' queries. Driven by and built upon the fault between nature and culture, the book is organized around the struggle between these two conditions, between "nature's firstness" and culture-as-second-nature. In this way, as Julie Ellison has written, "*English Traits* is structured by the same ambivalent dynamics as the writings of the 1830s."<sup>14</sup> By working in the gap and wrestling with its implications for the constitution of the self, Emerson indeed was essaying something quite beyond the portrayal of "the amusing and improbable spectacle of a Yankee transcendentalist in Piccadilly" (Nicoloff 241); he was undertaking a revised version of critical and imaginative transcendence.

Nicoloff and others have adduced some of the themes coursing through *English Traits*: "man's partialness in the midst of unity" (Nicoloff 239); "Emerson's never fully suppressed doubt about the true potentialities of mankind";<sup>15</sup> "the individual's need for incarnation into the world and the danger of being engulfed or entrapped by it."<sup>16</sup> These themes contribute to the primary currents of this part travelogue, part historical study, part philosophical lesson: "the long task implied in *English Traits*, is the creation of a coherent relationship between the large natural energies found on the new continent, on the one hand, and the need for forms on the other" (Hovde 72). Within the context of an American scholar's movement – physical, scholarly, and imaginative movement – through England and its history in order to identify and make sense of the significant traits of Englishness, Emerson pursues the age-old problem of the place of humans in the order of things. Pushed along by inexorable natural forces yet compelled to see forms in those

forth-rushing forces, where do we find ourselves? What hope is there for us and our ways? By exploring the themes and the pairings through which they are articulated – England and America, culture and nature – we may become better equipped to traverse or perhaps live in the gap. The focus, as Julie Ellison claims, may be “almost exclusively on society’s dehumanizing idea of itself” (Ellison 107), but *English Traits*, in true Emersonian form, is less about focus than it is about broad, complex perspectives, ill-defined problems, and improving prospects. That is, in the narrowed scope we find society’s dehumanizing idea of itself; in the larger scope, we find the gap.



Though the gap falls on the scene in “Stonehenge” like a large rock from the sky, it hovers over Emerson throughout the text. The oceanic distance separating England from America is marked in the first two chapters (“First Visit to England,” “Voyage to England”), but there the sea stands as a crossable gap: “‘There are many advantages,’ says Saadi, ‘in sea-voyaging, but security is not one of them.’ Yet in hurrying over these abysses, whatever dangers we are running into, we are certainly running out of the risks of hundreds of miles every day, which have their own chances of squall, collision, sea-stroke, piracy, cold, and thunder” (14). In this passage, Emerson, recalling life aboard the *Washington Irving*, registers the precarious position of those who sail the sea but also denotes the human ability to surmount dangers that nature presents to us. Shortly after, he ventures that it is a wonder one sails the sea at all, considering that “this aggressive water opens mile-wide pits and chasms, and makes a mouthful of a fleet.” The great gap of the sea is itself gap- and pit-riddled, over which humans drift in “egg-shells” and alternate between “ecstasies of terror” and “cockney conceit, as the sea is rough or smooth” (15). Thus the cultural differences that trouble Emerson are prefigured in the geographic specificities of the precarious crossing. The natural barrier separating England and America is nature itself, “universal nature,” in Curtis Fukuchi’s phrasing. He argues that “Sea and sailor symbolize the confrontation between nature and man” and that

"Emerson also contrasts sea and land so as to make the former symbolic of universal nature..." (Fukuchi 199). Universal nature creates a gulf that divides two cultures; each culture also creates interior gaps that cause further divisions.

England's geophysical status as an island surrounded by "mile-wide pits and chasms" allows nature to develop there a peculiar laboratory for admixture and experimentation, especially suited to a particular form of economy: "The shopkeeping nation, to use a shop word, has a *good stand*" (21). Emerson's emphasized terminology is noteworthy for several reasons, one being that the good stand was constructed by natural forces:

It is not down in the books, – *it is written only in the geologic strata*, – that fortunate day when a wave of the German Ocean burst the old isthmus which joined Kent and Cornwall to France, and gave to this fragment of Europe its impregnable sea wall, cutting off an island of eight hundred miles in length, with an irregular breadth reaching to three hundred miles; a territory large enough for independence enriched with every seed of national power, so near, that it can see the harvests of the continent; and so far, that who would cross the strait must be an expert mariner, ready for tempests. (22, emphasis added)

Nature writes (makes an impression, produces culture), recording the creation of England's insularity. On this insular site, nature plants and raises a "race" that rears a culture that in turn cultivates an imbruting system of governance and distribution of wealth:

Nature held counsel with herself, and said, "My Romans are gone. To build my new empire, I will choose a rude race, all masculine, with brutish strength. I will not grudge a competition of the roughest males. Let buffalo gore buffalo, and the pasture to the strongest! For I have work that requires the best will and sinew. Sharp and

temperate northern breezes shall blow, to keep that will alive and alert. The sea shall disjoin the people from others, and knit them to a fierce nationality. It shall give them markets on every side. Long time I will keep them on their feet, by poverty, border-wars, seafaring, sea-risks and the stimulus of gain. An island, – but not so large, the people not so many as to glut the great markets and depress one another, but proportioned to the size of Europe and the continents.” (23)

The image of nature soliloquizing (“holding counsel with herself”), following closely that of nature writing on geological strata, indicates that nature – a linguistic force – has used England and the English to imprint or rewrite the landscape and produce a different sort of culture, which then *naturally* produces a most uncivilized system: “A natural fruit of England is the brutal political economy” (88).

Humans, that is to say, have not arrived on the scene and built a culture on a natural bedrock – an anthropocentric rendering of history that arises from and maintains a distinct gap between humans and environment. Instead, nature has produced an island and peopled it with a rude “race,” which has then flowered into a brutal political economy. That people, along with all of their seeming successes, continue a hemispheric tradition of treating nature as something apart from and threatening to human needs and activities. This attitude toward their “maker” informs all those institutions that organize English traits; as Emerson notes, “the views of nature held by any people determine all their institutions” (27). (I will spend more time below with what appears to be an unnatural stance toward nature itself, which view is not exclusively an English trait.) England’s views of nature become evident in the institutions it develops, which in turn alter the island on which they are situated. Emerson pictures the process in the epithets used to describe the motherland: England appears as “a garden” (18), “a huge phalanstery” (18), a museum (20), “from first to last ... a museum of anomalies” (52), “that strongbox and museum” (105) – “an old and exhausted island” (155), finally.

The island is exhausted not simply because it is old but because it has come to disregard or resist nature, a resistance manifest in the primary English traits of fixity, antagonistic dualism, and factitiousness. The inhabitants possess other traits, of course, and Emerson describes them sometimes with relish, sometimes with repulsion: "good sense, steadiness, wise speech, and prompt action" but "a singular turn for homicide" (32); "great vigor of body endurance" (35); "constitutional energy" (38); "a necessity ... to be logical" (44). "They have in themselves what they value in their horses, mettle and bottom," Emerson observes in the chapter called "Manners" (57). He later remarks on their "Cold, repressive manners" (62) and on "English veracity" (66); the people are "cold, quiet, and composed" (72), "full of coarse strength, rude exercise, butcher's meat, and sound sleep" (73), "constitutionally fertile and creative" (94). These and similar characteristics contribute to the composite the writer produces, but the composition returns to factitiousness, fixity, and dualism as hallmarks of Englishness, the principal constitutive elements of English nature. Or is that English *culture*? The English are, without doubt, animals; Emerson returns to this idea throughout the book: "The nation has a tough, acrid, animal nature, which centuries of churching and civilizing have not been able to sweeten" (34). This animal, this brute, this "broad-chested creature" (38), however (and this is a portentous "however"), dresses up rather nicely: "The English nature takes culture kindly" (116).

Just as the island nurtures the roots of human civilization, the human organisms produced by those roots carry the trait of culturability. As a village or city flowers on the banks of a river, so a villager or citizen flowers in the being of the Briton. The secondary stems from the primary, presenting readers with an understanding of the nature-culture pair that mitigates the gap separating them. The nature of the relation becomes less divided, more fusive. "Every thing English is a fusion of distant and antagonistic elements," Emerson writes, and this will mean that for this "country of extremes," "nothing can be praised in it without damning exceptions, and nothing denounced without salvos of cordial

praise” (27-28). England, due to a duality at its very core, warrants a complex approach that treats nature as culture and culture as nature. It is a lesson in antagonistic elements made into an evolutionarily successful compound, and this success – sometimes lovely, sometimes horrid to human sensibilities – necessitates fusive evaluation or a mode of thinking capable of reckoning disparate parts and interpreting them in their necessary complexity.

Emerson marks this compound complexity in several instances. In the people we find the union of Norman and Saxon, the aristocratic and democratic, the enjoyers and the workers (41), suggesting a marriage of competing interests. “They are contradictorily described as sour, splenetic and stubborn, – and as mild, sweet, and sensible” (72). In the first case, different peoples come together to form a productive whole; opposites combine somewhat happily, resolving themselves into “England.” In the second, the people themselves are characterized by contradictory components – the opposites combine but are not resolved. England, Emerson ascertains, “subsists by antagonisms and contradictions” (52). “English duality” (134) comprises antagonistic elements in an active admixture that does not settle into a simple unity. In other words, English duality is itself dual: sometimes a bipartite whole, sometimes disparate parts. It is, by turns, antagonistic in nature or cooperative, contradictory and conjugal, two distinctly contained parties and/or a can of mixed nuts: “Mixture is a secret of the English island...” (132). The combinatory quality of the English is, I suspect, what leads Emerson to term “Beauty and the Beast” their “national legend”:

They are rather manly than warlike. When the war is over, the mask falls from the affectionate and domestic tastes, which make them women in kindness. This union of qualities is fabled in their national legend of *Beauty and the Beast*, or, long before, in the Greek legend of *Hermaphrodite*. The two sexes are co-present in the English mind. I apply to Britannia, queen of seas and colonies, the words in which her latest novelist portrays

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his heroine: "she is as mild as she is game, and as game as she is mild." The English delight in the antagonism which combines in one person the extremes of courage and tenderness. (36-37)

Robert Burkholder, in the notes to the Harvard Belknap Press edition of *English Traits*, writes that "Emerson's reasons for dubbing 'Beauty and the Beast' the 'national legend' of Britain are unclear, but he may do so because the tale's 'union of qualities' – beastliness and nobility – clearly represents to him the essence of Britain and the British."<sup>17</sup> I think rather that the essence Emerson discovered, while having something to do with beastliness and nobility or the co-existing opposites of male and female qualities, draws on the contradictory elements at work within the Beast itself.

In the legend (a popular edition of which was published early in the nineteenth century and attributed to Charles – and sometimes Mary – Lamb<sup>18</sup>) a well-cultured being is bewitched into a bestial state but retains vestiges of civility, and the cultured part is then unleashed by love for or acceptance by another, thereby returning the being to its original princely human form. The most engaging aspect of the legend, however, is the Beast rather than the prince he was or the prince he becomes, as Betsy Hearne has convincingly argued: "The transformed or tamed (read 'humanized') prince is not nearly so memorable as the Beast, a figure of power and vulnerability combined."<sup>19</sup> In the Beast, male territoriality, brute strength, and animal form meet the "traditionally female attributes of delicate respect for ... feelings, nurturance, comfort, gentleness, and patience..." (Hearne 133). The tension between the pairings results in a complex figure that transcends the pairs themselves and the cultural categorization that distinguishes them, causing further alienation in the Beast. Whenever such a tension between two qualities occurs, we have more than a dyad: we have something that is a beast, a man, *and* a man-beast (a *tertium quid*, say, or, in Emerson's passing reference, a Hermaphrodite). That is, the *tension* itself becomes a quality every bit as salient as the two primary characteristics. The Beast is much more than a

beast, much more than a man, and too much by half for our common categories.

“The Beast,” therefore, “is unacceptable to humanity, an outcast from society, the antithesis of culture” (Hearne 135). The British national legend tames the Beast, settling it into the form of the prince it was and keeping it there, safe from further transition. It is his polytypic nature that makes Beast the antithesis of culture; in the transitional state, he embodies transition itself, is on the verge of becoming, and does not lend himself to resolution. The struggle that occurs within – between a beast that acts like a man and a man that acts like a beast – accentuates duality rather than reconciling it, and this makes him, in Hearne’s term, an “antihero. He sees through appearances. He sees what he really is, accepts it, reshapes it, unlike ‘men of society’ whom appearances deceive” (Hearne 135). But tellingly, the Beast, for the legend to become national, must return to civilized form. The English, beasts at heart, are made beautiful through the process of enculturation; once cultured, they cannot return to a full awareness of or affirmation of their nature – due in part to the English trait of *fixity*, a term I shall use to encompass intellectual insularity, narrowness, the rejection of change, and resistance to nature. Mixture may indeed be the secret of the island, where combination has been raised to an art. But once English nature has kindly taken culture, that culture will, to a detrimental extent, divorce itself from nature, refuse its nature. Henceforth, English history must start with culture, not with nature. The one duality England cannot handle is the nature-culture duality. This refusal threatens all the marriages, all the mixtures, and cannot be resolved or united. By fixing on the cultural side of the pair and allowing the natural to fall away, English culture recasts itself on a factitious bedrock.



Emerson finds *fixity* frequently in his travels among the English. It is suggested in a firmness of stance (“I find the Englishman to be him of all men who stands firmest in his shoes”) (57), in the “certain order and complete propriety [that] is found in his dress and in his belongings”



(60), and in British "childish patriotism," which "costs something, like all narrowness" (85). Firmness, order, propriety, and patriotism are not always cultural qualities over which we might fret. In the English, however, they have each been exaggerated and then amalgamated into a condition that attempts to shut the culture off from the fluidity of things, from the movements of the present, the changes of the land and sea, and especially the flux of thought itself. This condition explains the origins of England as a museum and a strongbox (105). An insistence on obtaining, categorizing, and locking up nature maintains order but precludes change, dimming human prospects: "There is a knell in the conceit and externality of their voice, which seems to say, *Leave all hope behind*. In this Gibraltar of propriety, mediocrity gets entrenched, and consolidated and founded in adamant" (62). While sometimes appropriate, propriety among the English fixes mediocrity in stone, creating a rock island of decorum that exiles enthusiasm ("except at the opera"). Mediocrity, a refusal of enthusiasm and a fear of extremes, is bad enough in Emerson's view; far worse are the means by which the English institute it (entrenching, consolidating, founding in adamant) and make it a custom impervious to natural flux.

Consider how living on this Gibraltar will affect inhabitants. It is not as if the island has been peopled by a tribe of rock-headed mediocrists. But throughout *English Traits*, Emerson refers to an intellectual incapacity, a curtailing of thought in keeping with the drive for fixity. So when we read that "There is a necessity on them to be logical" (44), we can understand that necessity to be produced by the situation of their insular unexceptionalism, the result being that "They are impatient of genius, or of minds addicted to contemplation, and cannot conceal their contempt for sallies of thought, however lawful, whose steps they cannot count by their wonted rule" (44). Anti-sally, the thought of the English turns constantly to the rule, renouncing genius and contemplation. As this habit of thought has been perpetuated for centuries, English minds have grown "drowsy" (49), the people have become "headstrong believers and defenders of their opinion" (73),

“testy and headstrong through an excess of will and bias” (77), positive “box-turtles” removing themselves from further thinking (126). English brains have been so Gibraltered that they have in turn mechanized mediocrity in the economic system, adding steel and steam to the tools by which the rock will be kept hard: “A terrible machine has possessed itself of the ground, the air, the men and women, and hardly even thought is free” (57-58).

Emerson recurs to turtle imagery to discuss the fixity of English intellect in the penultimate chapter (titled, with a certain finality, “Result”): “There is a cramp limitation in their habit of thought, sleepy routine, and a tortoise’s instinct to hold hard to the ground with his claws, lest he should be thrown on his back. There is a drag of inertia which resists reform in every shape...” (172). “Habit” and “routine” (exterior traits), “instinct” and “inertia” (interior traits) are part of what on the next page Emerson calls “English *naturel*.” “Cramp limitation” permeates English nature, manifesting itself in manners and cultural institutions. Under the former heading, discussed in the chapter called “Manners,” Emerson includes “dislike of change” and “old customs, costumes, and pomps,” remarking that “A hereditary tenure is natural to them” (61). He adds that “All their statesmen learn the irresistibility of the tide of custom, and have invented many fine phrases to cover this slowness of perception, and prehensibility of tail” (62). Once again, biological imagery combines with the cultural and the customary to yield English *naturel*. Brokers of British power, aware of these traits, evade them discursively but live them instinctively and develop their institutions accordingly. Thus

The same insular limitation pinches his foreign politics. He sticks to his traditions and usages, and, so help him God! he will force his island by-laws down the throat of great countries, like India, China, Canada, Australia, and not only so, but impose Wapping on the Congress of Vienna, and trample down all nationalities with his taxed boots. (82)

Emerson finds “the same insular limitation” in English colonialist enterprises, in their universities (“Universities are, of course, hostile to

geniuses, which seeing and using ways of their own, discredit the routine..." [119]), in their "torpidity" of religion ("Their religion is a quotation; their church is a doll; and any examination is interdicted with screams of terror" [125]), and in their literature ("the artificial succor which marks all English performance, appears in letters also" [141]). "Even in" Coleridge, he laments, "the traditional Englishman was too strong for the philosopher, and he fell into *accommodations*..." (140).

Coleridge, Emerson explains, "narrowed his mind" – accommodated his thinking to the general trait of British narrowness. In a lyrical passage, the American transcendentalist decries the state of contemporary English literature (even that produced by erstwhile idealists) as mechanistic, decorative, retrospective, and long-out-of-date: "The voice of their modern muse has a slight hint of the steam-whistle, and the poem is created as an ornament and finish of their monarchy, and by no means as the bird of a new morning which forgets the past world in the full enjoyment of that which is forming." Concluding with a cutting hyperbole, Emerson observes of the poets that "Every one of them is a thousand years old, and lives by his memory: and when you say this, they accept it as praise" (141). Saving his most lively attacks on English fixity for the chapter on "Literature," Emerson gripes that "even what is called philosophy and letters is mechanical in its structure, as if inspiration had ceased, as if no vast hope, no religion, no song of joy, no wisdom, no analogy, existed any more" (141). There is no room in the crowded island of English mechanistic thought for joy, wisdom, or hope. Narrowness, tradition, stasis, fixity are that to which their minds are best suited or accommodated, such that "A good Englishman shuts himself out of three fourths of his mind and confines himself to one fourth" (142).

In his confinement, the larger part of the good Englishman's mind (that part wherein lie the pathways to nature) falls into neglect. This confinement affects not only literature but science, life, spirit, and nature itself. The islanders are old and hopeless because their culture is cut off from nature, their science from poetry; incapable of seeing relation, they see facts in isolation, things fixed *qua* things:

I fear the same fault lies in their science, since they have known how to make it repulsive, and bereave nature of its charm; – though perhaps the complaint flies wider, and the vice attaches to many more than to British physicists. The eye of the naturalist must have a scope like nature itself, a susceptibility to all impressions, alive to the heart as well as to the logic of creation. But English science puts humanity to the door. It wants the connection which is the test of genius. The science is false by not being poetic. It isolates the reptile or mollusk it assumes to explain; whilst reptile or mollusk only exists in system, in relation. The poet only sees it as an inevitable step in the path of the Creator. But, in England, one hermit finds this fact, and another finds that, and lives and dies ignorant of its value. (142)

Because they cannot connect reptile to mollusk or reptile and mollusk and themselves to larger biosystems, because they cannot connect the critical or analytical to the imaginative, logic to the heart, or the naturalist to nature, the British cannot see very clearly who, what, or where they are. Stranded in intellectual insularity, they cannot recognize the true value (either worth or meaning) of phenomena.

The multifaceted nature of this isolation leaves little room for hope. The absence of hope indicates a lack of vision; and as Emerson reminded readers in “The Method of Nature,” “Where there is no vision the people perish.”<sup>20</sup> British vision has failed due in part to excessive materialism, which keeps them from understanding the real value of the material or natural world. To redress this condition requires a healthy dose of relational or creative or connective thinking, understood in Emerson’s terms as Imagination or good old Transcendental idealism. Without it, there appears to be no chance for improvement. Through ignorance of value and cramped thinking – through, in the terminology I have been using, narrowness or fixity – Emerson’s English cultivate hopelessness, meanness, fear, and squalid contentment:

T.S. McMillin, "Beauty Meets Beast: Emerson's English Traits"

No hope, no sublime augury cheers the student, no secure striding from experiment onward to a foreseen law, but only a casual dipping here and there, like diggers in California "prospecting for a placer" that will pay. A horizon of brass of the diameter of his umbrella shuts down around his senses. Squalid contentment with conventions, satire at the names of philosophy and religion, parochial and shop-till politics, and idolatry of usage, betray the ebb of life and spirit. As they trample on nationalities to reproduce London and Londoners in Europe and Asia, so they fear the hostility of ideas, of poetry, of religion, – ghosts which they cannot lay; and, having attempted to domesticate and dress the Blessed Soul itself in English broadcloth and gaiters, they are tormented with fear that herein lurks a force that will sweep their system away. The artists say, "Nature puts us out"; the scholars have become un-ideal. (143)

In shifting to the third key trait – factitiousness – I note again that, for the observer of *English Traits*, fixity and dualism both stem from an unnatural or anti-natural bias, but in doing so I do not wish to lose sight of the fact that nature itself has everything to do with this state of affairs. Nature, in other words, puts the English out of nature. Emerson's use of nature-made phenomena to metaphorize anti-natural stances and behaviors (Gibraltar, box-turtles, prehensile tails) emphasizes this apparent paradox. Dualism separates humans from nature, thereby delimiting nature; fixity further delimits nature by concretizing duality and imposing an unchanging order on the world's observable flux. As such, these traits would appear to be anti-nature or unnatural. But these traits, Emerson suggests, have arisen naturally. It may be English nature to take culture kindly, but English culture does not return the favor by taking nature kindly. Instead, nature is posited as something separate, something other, unpredictable and surmountable. English culture, by nature, is based on and strives to maintain factitiousness – a condition in

which artifice, propriety, and convention hold dominion over nature, spontaneity, and change.



Throughout his discussion, Emerson educes qualities of English factitiousness; such figures as art conquering nature (18), the island as museum-garden-strongbox, etc., depict England as a peculiar nursery for factitious growth. If in England art is seen to vanquish nature, and a culture's view of nature determines all of its institutions (27), it follows that English institutions are built upon artificial principles, thereby giving rise to "an artificial completeness in this nation of artificers" (22). The term "factitious" itself occupies a special status in the book, occurring in "Land" (chapter three), "Literature" (chapter fourteen), and even serving as a page-header in the fifth chapter ("Ability," 51 and 53). Nowhere else in Emerson's published writings does "factitious" enjoy such prominence, as if treating the English especially warranted its use. The word's contemporary meaning, as denoted in the Webster's of Emerson's day [*American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828-1853)] – "Made by art, in distinction from what is produced by nature; artificial" – indicates that perhaps the central problem of the English, from Emerson's perspective, is their peculiar eschewing of nature and the natural. There is a distinction between what is made by nature and what is made by human artifice, and the American – seemingly on the side of nature – condemns the British for putting their chips with the artificial.

In the hands of Emerson, of course, the picture becomes more complicated. The writer suggests, for example, that the English are artificial by nature with the terse pronouncement, "Factitious climate, factitious position" (21). Even England's terrestrial coordinates and meteorological conditions bespeak artifice. Under the FACTITIOUS header, English "Ability" appears factitious through-and-through. At the beginning of that discussion, the observer stands somewhat in awe of this quality, reminding readers that England is factitious by nature and presenting this trait as a sign of their innate vim: "A proof of the energy of the British people, is the highly artificial construction of the whole fabric.

The climate and geography, I said, were factitious, as if the hands of man had arranged the conditions. The same character pervades the whole kingdom" (51). Factitiousness runs throughout the land and the people, evidence of British force and drive, their "mettle and bottom." Heedless of duality or other divisions, factitiousness is that which fuses "distant and antagonistic elements." Confronting the power that founds this "museum of anomalies," Emerson shakes his head in wonder: "This foggy and rainy country furnishes the world with astronomical observations. Its short rivers do not afford water-power, but the land shakes under the thunder of the mills. There is no gold mine of any importance, but there is more gold in England than in all other countries. It is too far north for the culture of the vine, but the wines of all countries are in its docks" (52). Able artificers, the English recreate the world in their own image, overcoming limited natural resources by means of economy ("Artificial aids of all kinds are cheaper than the natural resources" [53]), steam ("Steam is almost an Englishman" [53]), trade, and engineering.

Emerson's initial awe, however, turns to dismay and disgust: what first appears as an "Ability" becomes a character flaw. For "The nearer we look, the more artificial is their social system. Their law is a network of fictions" (53). Originating from factitious terrestrial coordinates, the English have followed an artificial plan, whereby they have constructed their entire society. This trait surfaces in every way that the English have organized themselves socially, from the formal to the informal:

Their system of education is factitious. ... Their church is artificial. The manners and customs of society are artificial; – made up men with made up manners; – and thus the whole is Birminghamized, and we have a nation whose existence is a work of art; – a cold, barren, almost arctic isle, being made the most fruitful, luxurious and imperial land in the whole earth. (54)

A factitious system of education ensures the fabrication of factitious students and an artificial church propagates unnatural parishioners. Manners and customs – the codes by which one conducts one's life – are

equally dismissive of nature, the result being an entire culture based on the proposition that all things human are distinctly different from all things other-than-human. The wonder that a nation could be a work of art diminishes when art is contained within circles of political and fiscal economy – when art, too, is “Birminghamized.” Thus “Man in England submits to be a product of political economy. ... Man is made as a Birmingham button” (54).

In linking factitiousness to social mores, political economy, and trade, Emerson makes clear that detaching the human from the natural through accentuating the artificial denatures the human. “But it is found that the machine unmans the user” (94). A button, that is to say, is a far cry from a being. He describes a sorrowful sequence in which art and artifice yield falsehood, in which fabrication leads to deterioration of fabric, alienation from principles, and loss of hope. Under the heading “Wealth,” the writer has been marveling at British success. But after observing that humans have the capability of developing machines based on human anatomy, the writer registers his dismay:

But it is found that the machine unmans the user. What he gains in making cloth, he loses in general power. There should be temperance in making cloth, as well as in eating. A man should not be a silk-worm; nor a nation a tent of caterpillars. The robust rural Saxon degenerates in the mills to the Leicester stockinger, to the imbecile Manchester spinner, – far on the way to be spiders and needles. The incessant repetition of the same hand-work dwarfs the man, robs him of his strength, wit, and versatility, to make a pin-polisher, a buckle-maker, or any other specialty; and presently, in a change of industry, whole towns are sacrificed like ant-hills, when the fashion of shoe-strings supersedes buckles, when cotton takes the place of linen, or railways of turnpikes, or when commons are inclosed by landlords. (94)



In this first section of the passage, Emerson focuses on the ways in which humans are dehumanized by the roles they perform in producing the goods that sustain the English economy. Losing "power," stature, strength, wit, and versatility, workers are perforce "unmanned," instead becoming insects and specialized industrial operatives cut off from their larger relations in nature. The second part underscores the notion that the system of labor is bankrupt, and that a just political economy must nurture human nature:

Then society is admonished of the mischief of the division of labor, and that the best political economy is care and culture of men; for, in these crises, all are ruined except such as are proper individuals, capable of thought, and of new choice and the application of their talent to new labor. (94-95)

He next emphasizes that a factitious political economy, by nature, must produce artificial goods – goods, that is, which lose their potency due to recipes based on the belief that human manufacture can improve nature. Having set out from artificial beginnings, England pursues an artificial course, which makes everything seemingly unnatural:

Then again come in new calamities. England is aghast at the disclosure of her fraud in the adulteration of food, of drugs, and of almost every fabric in her mills and shops; finding that milk will not nourish, nor sugar sweeten, nor bread satisfy, nor pepper bite the tongue, nor glue stick.

In true England all is false and forged. (95)

Connecting this monstrous condition again to machinery, Emerson makes clear that by "machinery" he means not only the ingenious devices humans invent but also the larger systems invented by humans that necessitate increasing mechanization.

This too is the reaction of machinery, but of the larger machinery of commerce. 'Tis not, I suppose, want of probity, so much as the tyranny of trade, which necessitates a perpetual competition of underselling, and that again a perpetual deterioration of the fabric. (95)

He thus closes the paragraph by connecting the drive away from nature and toward utter factitiousness to commerce, the peculiar (but familiar) political economy of England, and the degeneration of a whole no longer wholesome.

The chapter on “Wealth” momentarily concludes the explicit treatment of artifice, although the discussion informs the ensuing chapters (“Aristocracy,” “Universities,” “Religion”) and surfaces again in “Literature.” Moving from the critique of the machinery of commerce, which he calls a “monster,” to a condemnation of “the dragon Money” (95), Emerson questions English principles or “first things.” Part of the problem depicted in “Wealth” is that “Chancellors and Boards of Trade, Pitt, Peel, and Robinson, and their Parliaments, and their whole generation, adopted false principles, and went to their graves in the belief that they were enriching the country which they were impoverishing. They congratulated each other on ruinous expedients” (95). Their principles were false because they were based on something other than nature, “that from which a thing proceeds.” The principles that underlie the monstrous (i.e., “unnatural”) British system are expedients rather than principles. As such, “English success has grown out of the very renunciation of principles, and the dedication to outsides” (96). The English economic system results from neglect of the nature principle, especially nature as an inner-working force. Having renounced principles, the British shove off with bad directions, get themselves hopelessly lost, and flounder in “the stream of fate, [becoming] one victim more in a common catastrophe” (96). The situation appears hopeless to Emerson in part because of the flow of nature or fate, in part because “the evil requires a deeper cure, which time and a simpler social organization must supply” (96). British methods of improving their lot strike the writer as entirely misguided and inadequate, precisely because that lot must be reorganized according to principles no longer accessible given England’s factitious orientation.



The deeper cure takes shape in “Literature.” Returning to things fateful and factitious, Emerson suggests those traits necessary for

redressing artificiality and its results, but questions their efficacy by surrounding them with English tendencies to the contrary. After reminding readers yet again of British insularity and commercialism – “The island is a roaring volcano of fate, of material values, of tariffs, and laws of repression, glutted markets and low prices” – he frames the situation as a struggle between the factitious and the natural:

In the absence of the highest aims, of the pure love of knowledge and the surrender to nature, there is the suppression of the imagination, the priapism of the senses and the understanding; we have the factitious instead of the natural; tasteless expense, arts of comfort, and the rewarding as an illustrious inventor whosoever will contrive one impediment more to interpose between the man and his objects. (143)

A small paragraph by Emersonian standards, the three clauses represent in fine Emerson's findings on the issue at hand (the English literary scene) and on the larger issue to which it belongs (English traits in general). It is a terse diagnosis of British disease, centered on the laconic second clause: “we have the factitious instead of the natural.”

This, again, is the heart of the matter, the primary pathology, of which the surrounding traits are symptoms. The consumption of luxuries, of goods and services to satisfy artificial desires, results from an economic system itself the product of false principles. These goods and services supply unnatural comfort that inevitably fails to provide for underlying needs (human “necessaries,” in Thoreau's terms), and instead exacerbate the condition. By valuing “arts of comfort,” the British economic system puts impediments between subjects and objects, thereby aggravating the perceived disconnection between humans and the world. Nature having been denied, artifice becomes the norm. Cut off from nature and thus the nature of things, the British indulge themselves in “tasteless expense” on artificial things, a cure that makes them worse. The lack of a connection with nature – a perceptual “naturelessness” – cannot be satisfied by the consumption of artifice. As Mick Jagger of

The Rolling Stones confessed more than a century later, he and his countrymen “can’t get no satisfaction.” The British become “priapists,” prostitutes to “what is low or base,” as the OED states, using the phrase from Emerson’s paragraph as example; but it also connotes (in Webster’s *American Dictionary* of the period) a rather beastly condition: “More or less permanent erection and rigidity of the penis, without concupiscence,” unfulfillable drives, unnatural manliness, day-in-and-day-out carnality, a constant itch never sufficiently scratched.

Linking priapism to the senses and the understanding, Emerson’s critical diagnosis explains British factitiousness as perpetually materialistic, rigidly uncreative, insatiably empirical. It is worth noting again the first clause of the passage, which implies the writer’s propositions for improved prospects: “highest aims, ... the pure love of knowledge and the surrender to nature, [and] ... imagination.” Unfortunately absent from English traits, the items acquaint or bring together philosophy, nature, and creativity, implying that the answer to many of our problems (on either side of the Atlantic) may lie in the integration of approaches. Human intellectual endeavor, especially that which pertains to the imaginative and the philosophical, often serves as the marker of our separation from nature, but Emerson allies that endeavor with “surrender to nature” in the paragraph, against sensorial priapism, experiential impediments, superfluous comforts, and the factitious. Surrender to nature becomes something of a key to overcoming factitiousness. This does not appear to mean a surrender to carnality, to the senses and the understanding, though these must have some share in the natural. Priapism – the unnaturally exaggerated excitation of these faculties – leads us astray because it is coupled neither with higher aims nor with a surrender to nature. Emerson advocates a rethinking of what is and is not natural, a rethinking principled upon nature and imagination. Philosophical and imaginative thinking *not* grounded in nature fails to go forward; doing what comes naturally, when not considered in conjunction with imaginative renderings of nature, stagnates in an artificial swamp.

"Surrender to nature" can indicate either yielding to an opposing force – as in surrendering culture to nature – or giving way to something already at work within and about one. This latter would entail first reckoning that "something," becoming aware of its existence and acknowledging its various manifestations, relations, and meanings, then allowing nature to do what it does, accepting and working with the consequences. The first version of surrender reflects the British version of nature-as-other; the second stems from the paradox with which Emerson operates throughout *English Traits*: the British treat nature as "other" due to their nature. It is natural for the English to be factitious. This paradox may explain why Emerson in "Stonehenge" recalls that he "put off my friends with very inadequate details, as best I could." Here the writer doubts his ability to vocalize the American condition, not because he's simply on the side of nature in the nature versus culture war, but rather because he understands himself to function in the gap between nature and culture, always natural, even when cultural, and even when his cultural heritage claims extra-natural status. How else but inadequately could one explain the gap and the relations it governs to those firmly bred in factitiousness? To do so adequately is to keep alive the movement between the natural and the cultural – which movement is after all natural. Advocating the natural against the cultural maintains an oceanic separation between the two, in the grandest tradition of dualism, fixity, and factitiousness. Only by surrendering to nature's too-muchness – admitting the complexity and flux and fugacity of each moment and our reckoning of it – can we "transcend" or move onward from the limited and limiting concepts of "nature" and "culture" that pervade the nature of our culture as it has evolved.

Yet it is also in our nature to resist rather than capitulate. If we do not reckon *this* fact of nature, we fall into the same old gaps. That, at least, is what I understand to be the meaning of Emerson's problem on the road to Winchester. I do not intend to suggest that Emerson solves the problem – in fact, I'd rather emphasize that the passage's placement late in *English Traits* indicates that he has not succeeded, that it is one of

those problems one doesn't fix but instead acknowledges and learns to live with, much like the problem of freedom and fate. The relations between freedom and fate or nature and culture are not such that can be treated as a war between opposites. Culture is a natural phenomenon, and it informs our approaches to nature, which approaches, in turn, condition the nature of which we are a part. We are fated to a sense of freedom, free insofar as we reckon fate. Perhaps, then, the lesson of the "Stonehenge" chapter is that the chapter itself, like the jointed rocks from which it takes its name, is a natural expression by a writer newly aware that nature is always too much by half – leaving no room for culture (or impression-making, e.g. writing, human mark-making considered as other than and not contingent upon that on which our marks are made) to originate and operate outside of nature. Emerson *writes* that he spoke inadequately; writing becomes a philosophical and imaginative act of surrender to nature that makes possible the way onward. Emerson's writing resists a cultural tendency to privilege itself in a hierarchical binary with nature; by insisting on nature's too-muchness – insisting, that is, that *nature* writes the gap between our concept of nature and our concept of culture – *English Traits* offers writing between nature and culture as onwardness, as a way of fathoming culture's inherent participation in nature. Writing becomes a peculiarly human activity through which we can acknowledge the nature that produces us, produces our thinking, produces our understanding of nature itself – a peculiar act that reveals that we are not at all peculiar. In writing, Beast and Beauty embrace.

Emerson, on the road to Winchester, positions English culture as Beauty and American nature as Beast. But in *English Traits* as a whole, England's "Beauty" is precisely its beastliness, and the American "Beast" births the possibility of true beauty. America, in Emerson's account, becomes the most promising site for the acknowledgment of a non-factitious nature, a nature that involves change, newness, too-muchness, onwardness; but he also intimates that American culture invariably bears the marks of English traits. In the concluding paragraph

of the book, he surmises that the best prospects for propagating the most congenial of those traits (e.g., courage, strength, thoughtfulness, generosity) lie in human "elasticity and hope" – that is to say, in moving beyond the least congenial of English traits (fixity, insularity, duality, etc.); in our flexible participation in the flux of things; in our ability to know nature through our *being* nature; in our surrender to nature's perpetual procession; in our "wising up" (in Loyal Rue's phrase<sup>21</sup>) to the story of evolution, which is not only material but also includes the unfolding of something like "Spirit." Spirit resembles electricity, Emerson writes in "Religion," in that it "cannot be made fast, mortared up and ended, like London Monument, or the Tower, so that you shall know where to find it, and keep it fixed, as the English do with their things, forevermore; it is passing, glancing, gesticular; it is a traveller, a newness, a surprise, a secret, which perplexes them, and puts them out" (130). Spirit (like its manifestation, nature) lives and works and plays in England, but English culture does not allow either Spirit or nature to be acknowledged. America, for Emerson, has the opportunity to exist more naturally – if Americans can learn to acknowledge nature, and if we can fashion our culture based on the principles we find in that acknowledging. Those, to be sure, are mighty big ifs.

There is a gap between what we think nature is and what nature is, between what we think Spirit is and what Spirit is. But what "we think Spirit is" may well be a manifestation of Spirit, in the same way that "what we think nature is" is a product of nature, an instance of nature thinking. Gap, in these instances, does not signify "rift"; or rather its significance does not end with "the space-between." Just as America affords the opportunity for (but does not guarantee) the acknowledgment of nature, gaps afford us the chance for connection, transition, traversal, relation. Emerson's transcendentalism in *English Traits* moves away from the more ethereal or abstract nature of *Nature* and toward a more material, scientifically informed understanding of nature. It is not a completed departure, however; the writer continues to struggle with the relationship of Spirit and nature, mind and world. This form of

Emerson's transcendentalism casts movement itself in a new light – movement between nature and culture, England and America, science and poetry, spirit (or the unnameable) and writing (the exercise of naming). *English Traits* presents transcendence as awareness of change, as surrender to nature, as the will and the ability to think the mind in nature, nature in mind – both directions, coming and going – beyond directionality, beyond nature versus culture, something other than Beauty or Beast.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In *The Machine in the Garden* (Oxford UP, 1964), Leo Marx uses the term to characterize Emerson's philosophy, adding that Emerson "easily reconciles what often seem in retrospect to have been irreconcilable tendencies..." (230-31). Marx's reading of reconciliation has influenced many later critics. In *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), for example, Richard White holds that, in our ideas of nature, Americans are Emersonians: "Emerson reconciled nature with the busy, manipulative world of American capitalism; he reconciled the practical and the spiritual. When humans acted on nature they did not defile it, they purified it" (35). I discuss Emerson's "contradictory nature," including James Russell Lowell's "Plotinus-Montaigne" epithet, in *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson & the Nature of Reading* (U of Illinois P, 2000), 87-96.

<sup>2</sup> My reading of Emerson's tension resembles other treatments of polarity in two recent works of criticism: Wilson's *Romantic Turbulence: Chaos, Ecology, and American Space* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) and Laura Dassow Walls' *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Cornell UP, 2003). For Walls, polarity lies "at the heart of Emerson's gnomic universe" (148); Wilson's Emerson operates paralogically between the poles of order and chaos (27-49).

<sup>3</sup> Parenthetical page-numbers unaccompanied by title refer to *English*



*Traits*, vol. V of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Lawrence Buell, in his *Emerson* (Harvard UP, 2003), reads this important passage as signaling Emerson's shift from "cosmographer and prophet of first principles to the cultural ethnographer of the later books..." (50). The present essay extends an interpretation of *English Traits* that I began in "The Frolic Architecture of Snow: Building on Emerson's Drift," *thresholds* 26 (Spring 2003) 8-13.

<sup>4</sup> Porte, *Consciousness & Culture: Emerson & Thoreau Reviewed* (Yale UP, 2004), 40-41. In a lengthy note, Porte admits that it's nevertheless "hard to resist" commenting on the passage, for which he provides a sexual explanation of Emerson's terminology (208-9).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Nicoloff, *Emerson on Race and History: An Examination of "English Traits"* (Columbia UP, 1961), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Merton Sealts, *Emerson on the Scholar* (U of Missouri P, 1992), 232. Buell attributes the book's popularity to a more accessible style (34).

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, (U of California P, 1995), 518.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Hovde, "English and American Traits," in *Emerson and His Legacy*, ed. Stephen Donadio *et al.* (Southern Illinois UP, 1986), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Mumford Jones, "Introduction" to Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits* (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1966), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Weisbuch, "Post-Colonial Emerson & the Erasure of Europe," in Joel Porte and Sandra Morris, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge UP, 1999), 209.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Burkholder, "The Contemporary Reception of *English Traits*," in Donadio *et al.*, *Emerson and His Legacy*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard UP, 1971), I:54.

<sup>13</sup> Curtis Fukuchi, "'The Only Firmament': 'Sea-Room' in Emerson's *English Traits*," *ATQ* Volume 1, No. 3 (September 1987), 204.

<sup>14</sup> Julie Ellison, "The Edge of Urbanity: Emerson's *English Traits*," *ESQ* Volume 32, No. 2 (1986), 107.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Bridgman, "From Greenough to 'Nowhere': Emerson's

*English Traits*,” *New England Quarterly* Volume 59, No. 4 (December 1986), 485.

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Cole, “Emerson, England, and Fate,” in David Levin, *Emerson: Prophecy, Metamorphosis, & Influence* (Columbia UP, 1975), 84.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Burkholder, notes to Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*, vol. V of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard UP, 1994), 219-20.

<sup>18</sup> William MacDonald, introduction to Charles and Mary Lamb, *Poetry for Children*, vol. VIII of *The Works of Charles Lamb* (New York: Dutton, 1903), xxiv-xxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Betsy Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (U of Chicago P, 1989), 134.

<sup>20</sup> *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Harvard UP, 1971), I:120.

<sup>21</sup> Loyal Rue, *Everybody’s Story: Wising up to the Epic of Evolution* (State University of New York Press, 2000).

