Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature*

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Samantha C. Harvey’s *Transatlantic Transcendentalism* addresses anew a key episode in the history of American literature and philosophy that has become so familiar to scholars of Transcendentalism and Transatlantic Romanticism that they tend to take it for granted: Emerson’s appropriation of Coleridge. Perry Miller’s 1950 anthology of Transcendentalist writings already made it clear: when James Marsh published the first American edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* in 1829, along with a prefatory and retrospectively momentous “Preliminary Essay,” “he put into the hands of Emerson, Parker, Alcott and their group the book that was of the greatest single importance in the formation of their minds.”1 Four years later in 1833, Frederick Henry Hedge’s review of “Coleridge’s Literary Character” in the *Christian Examiner* further confirmed the centrality of Coleridge for the Transcendentalists, especially for Emerson whose first book and manifesto, *Nature* (1836), bears the stamp of Coleridge’s thinking method, as well of his philosophical vocabulary. It is perhaps in this respect that Harvey’s contribution to the debate stands out. While taking her reader through Marsh’s and Hedge’s essays, and without contesting that *Aids to Reflection* was indeed “a pivotal text for Transatlantic Transcendentalism” (27), she demonstrates that *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend* were actually “far more congenial texts for Emerson” (67) and highlights in particular the decisive role of the “Essays on the Principles of Method” published in *The Friend*, whose reading led Emerson to appropriate
Coleridge’s intellectual method of applying “a leading idea upward and outward, driving for ever higher vantage points” (69). And Harvey subtly shows that Nature’s ascending structure, which moves from the practical “uses” nature has to offer to its spiritual “prospects,” is largely indebted to Coleridge’s processual method. Although she is not the first to take note of the specific dynamics that animates Nature (and, one may add, nature), it will now be impossible not to see that the ghost of Coleridge haunts almost every page of the book, to which she devotes her most sustained discussion in what constitutes the highpoint of her analysis (119-140). More generally, several studies already emphasized Coleridge’s role in what Barbara Packer has elegantly termed the Transcendentalists’ “assault upon Locke” and their struggle against the dominant empirical tradition in early nineteenth-century New England, but Harvey’s study substantiates and refines that reading by showing how Coleridge’s method actually “offered the hope of reconciling science and philosophy, empiricism and idealism” (72) and equipped Emerson with “a philosophical framework that was essentially idealistic, without denigrating the validity of experience derived form the natural world” (41), enabling him to mediate what she calls “the Romantic triad” of interrelated natural, spiritual, and human worlds.

As Harvey states at the opening of her introduction, Coleridge “taught Emerson to think—not what to think, but how to think” (2), a claim that she repeats at regular intervals and that allows her to complicate usefully the notion of influence, or rather to substitute for it the idea of “assimilative relationship” (119). Drawing on Patrick Keane and Thomas McFarland rather than Harold Bloom, she sees in Emerson a paradigmatic example of the “originality paradox” whereby “a profound indebtedness can enable, and even enhance, the originality of a writer” (3). Interestingly, this critical configuration owes much to Emerson himself who, as Harvey astutely recalls, once said à propos Coleridge: “Original Power is usually accompanied by assimilating power.” Or in the famous words of “The American Scholar”—a text that, curiously, Harvey does not comment or even reference—: “One must be an inventor to read well. [...] There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.” Yet Harvey provides ample evidence that Emerson was such a creative reader who appropriated, and usually “simplified and poeticized” (65), Coleridge’s categories and distinctions, most notably the couples formed by reason and the understanding—which Coleridge himself (mis)appropriated from Kant—natura naturans and natura naturata, imagination and fancy, symbol and allegory, genius and talent. Her meticulous tracking of traces of Coleridgean vocabulary in Emerson’s work enables her to illuminate what she describes as “cryptic” passages and essays that “suddenly come into focus when they are read through a Coleridgean lens” (89), although her demonstration runs the risk at times of appearing somewhat circuitous, since it essentially boils down to translating Emersonian parlance into Coleridgean lingo and to picturing one philosophy as an often less accurate duplicate of the other. In effect, such readings downplay the differences between Emerson and Coleridge that Harvey quite rightly emphasizes at other times by stressing how much appropriation was, for Emerson, synonymous with distortion and invention. For, as Danielle Follett recently argued, “Emerson, who, as it is generally agreed, was indeed a Coleridgean, was also not a Coleridgean.”

Implicit in Harvey’s narrative of appropriation is the recurring characterization of Emerson as less of a philosopher and more of a poet than Coleridge. For Harvey, Emerson’s essays “[work] much better as literature as [they do] as philosophy” (93), which paradoxically amounts to restoring the boundaries between philosophy and
literature that her own critical method purported to suspend or even collapse, true to the
original interdisciplinary impetus of Transatlantic Transcendentalism, when "the modern
boundaries between literature, philosophy, theology, and science simply did not exist"
(13). That Emerson was averse to systematic philosophy and quibbling "dialectics" is
undeniable. What may be debatable, however, is to dismiss entire passages or essays as
philosophically unsound (and therefore "poetic," as if poetry were but flawed philosophy)
because they enlarge, displace or misconstrue Coleridge’s categories, and one could
suggest instead that Emerson’s philosophy is perhaps best discernible precisely when one
does not read him “through a specifically Coleridgean lens” (19). In addition, Harvey’s
decision to focus solely on Coleridge as Emerson’s main philosophical source, if it helps
her to identify specific borrowings or echoes, thanks in particular to her meticulous
survey of Emerson’s annotated copies of Coleridge and her mining of the Princeton 16-
volume edition of Coleridge’s Collected Works, forces her to leave out of her equation
someone like Victor Cousin for example, whose importance to Emerson and
Transcendentalism Joseph Urbas recently reassessed, and to oversimplify the complex
tangle of relations that enabled Transatlantic cultural transfers.4

Eventually, Harvey accounts for Emerson’s creative misprisions by foregrounding “the
malleability of Coleridge’s thought” (140) and portraying him as a “palimpsest” figure, “a
multi-layered record of an ongoing reinterpretation of philosophical and theological
traditions in a new American context” (141). This leads her, in the final and most original
chapter of her book, to follow yet another of “Coleridge’s American afterlives” (26),
through James Marsh’s implementation of “a Coleridgean curriculum” during his tenure
as President of the University of Vermont (143-150). Although Marsh, an orthodox
Congregationalist, came from the opposite end of the religious spectrum as Emerson, who
trained as a Unitarian minister at Harvard, he advocated an innovative pedagogy, based
on “an elective system, seminar-style classes, and an individualized program of study”
inpired from “Coleridge’s vision of education as an organic, individualized, and dynamic
process of mental development” (144, 146). This pedagogical revolution had a lasting
impact on several generations of students and alumni, the most famous of whom being
John Dewey, who recognized that his pragmatist philosophy of education was very much
inspired by Coleridge, as well as by education at the University of Vermont (162). Rather
than opposing Boston and Vermont Transcendentalism, then, as is too often the case,
Harvey argues for their complementarity, even as she reveals the variety of uses—
thelogical, philosophical, literary, and pedagogical—to which Coleridge was put in
nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States.

Scrupulously researched, Samantha Harvey’s Transatlantic Transcendentalism is clearly and
cogently argued, and one cannot but admire the ease with which she takes her reader
through a maze of complex philosophical distinctions without ever losing track of her
argument, even if the flip side of her obvious talent for pedagogy is a certain
repetitiveness, as the book’s main arguments are often restated using the same phrases
and formulas. By focusing exclusively and quite deliberately on the Emerson-Coleridge
connection, which proves both an argumentative strength and, at times, an interpretive
weakness, Transatlantic Transcendentalism clarifies important philosophical stakes and
transfers and provides a welcome contribution to the now inseparable fields of
Transcendentalist and Transatlantic studies.
NOTES


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