Transatlantic Ralph Cudworth: The Coleridge-Emerson Neoplatonic Connection

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IT IS GENERALLY ACCEPTED THAT THE SOURCES of Romanticism are to be sought in the philosophy of the German Idealists. This assumption is evident in the research related to the sources of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's thought—who is considered the intellectual father of British Romanticism. Many monographs have been devoted to the study of the reception of German idealist philosophers in Coleridge, and their influence in the construction of his thought.[1] In turn, American Transcendentalism is understood, in part, as inheritor of German philosophy via British Romanticism. Lawrence Buell, for instance, suggests that the view of nature and art proposed by American Transcendentalists was a result of the influence of German post-Kantian philosophy, chiefly as interpreted by Goethe, Carlyle, and especially Coleridge.[2] Wesley T. Mott backs up this widely accepted position and affirms that Ralph Waldo Emerson became the leading American spokesman for a new metaphysics coming from Europe, largely via such British commentators.[3]

The present work is by no means aimed at dismissing the relevance of the German Idealist component in British and American Romanticism, since it is an unquestionable fact. However, it is grounded upon the conviction that other equally important sources of Romantic thought, prior to German Idealism, need to be studied and that their contribution to the creation of the bases of Romanticism and Transcendentalism should be acknowledged as well. In the exploration of other sources of Coleridge's thought, the nature philosophy of Ralph Cudworth (1617-88) expounded in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) and *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (1731) appears to me essential to the formation of the British author's metaphysics and literary theory. Besides, the study of Emerson's thought as expressed in some of his essays such as 'Nature', 'Art', 'The Poet' and 'Over-Soul', also reveal some ideas which could also be derived from Ralph

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[1] See, for instance: Gian N. G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism. A Study in the History of Philosophy with Unpublished Materials from Coleridge's Manuscripts* (London; Amsterdam: Southern Illinois UP., 1969); Gabriel Marcel, *Coleridge et Schelling* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971); Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought 1800-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP., 1980); Gerald McNiece, *The Knowledge that Endures: Coleridge, German Philosophy and the Logic of Romantic Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Nicholas Reid, 'Coleridge and Schelling: The Missing Transcendental Deduction'. *Studies in Romanticism* (1994) 33.3., pp. 451-479; Q. S. Tong, *Reconstructing Romanticism. Organic Theory Revisited* (Salzburg: Salzburg University, 1997); Stephen Pricket, 'Coleridge, Schlegel and Schleiermacher: England, Germany and Australia'. Richard Cronin, ed. *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads.* (London: Macmillan: 1998); Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic. (*London: Continuum International, 2007).

[2] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism. Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, London: Cornell UP, 1973), p.4.

[3] Wesley T. Mott, 'The Age of the First Person Singular. Emerson and Individualism'. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Joel Myerson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP., 2000) 61-100, p. 71.

Cudworth's works, which he read when he was a student in Harvard. Thus, the triangular connection Cudworth-Coleridge-Emerson is established.[4] The pages that follow will be devoted to the analysis of this intellectual relationship.

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Ralph Cudworth was one of the leaders, together with Henry More (1614-87), of the so-called Cambridge Platonists, a group of Anglican philosophers who in the mid-seventeenth century emerged in Cambridge to contest the materialism of the age and to defend the existence of God, which was being threatened by the advances of the new science.[5] These philosophers, of a clear Neoplatonic bias, drew upon the systems of Plato and chiefly Plotinus, and adapted them to their own concerns and purposes. Then, against the mechanical view of the universe proposed by the new emergent scientific and empiricist thought, they proposed the spiritual and dynamic constitution of nature and defended universal synthesis.

As Sarah Hutton rightly notes in her introduction to *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy,*[6] the Cambridge Platonists inaugurated a trend of Neoplatonic thought that, although overshadowed by the more popular Empiricism, survived the eighteenth century in the works of, among others, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Mark Akenside, Thomas Taylor and George Berkeley. Coleridge, who according to records in his notebooks, letters and marginalia knew the works of these authors very well, can be seen as the culmination of this British idealistic movement, independently of German sources.

Coleridge's reading of Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System* in

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[4] Samantha C. Harvey 's *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), explores the connection between Coleridge and Emerson drawing attention to the influence of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend* in Emerson's Nature.

[5] Also members of this philosophical movement were Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683), John Smith (1618-1652) and Nathanael Culverwell (1615?-1650?). In order to get more information about the Cambridge Platonists in general see: M. A. Campagnac, *The Cambridge Platonists* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1901); Frederick J. Powicke, *The Cambridge Platonists* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1926); C.A. Patrides, *The Cambridge Platonists*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1969); and G. A. J, Rogers; J. M. Vienne and Y.C. Zarka eds. 1997: *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context: Politics, Metaphysics and Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997). These monographs provide the reader with long and useful introductions as well as some extracts from the works of the Cambridge philosophers. To know more about Ralph Cudworth's philosophy see the following: Gunnar Apelin, *Ralph Cudworth´s Interpretation of Greek Philosophy. A Study in the History of English Philosophical Ideas* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1943); Lidia Gysi, *Platonism and Cartesianism in the Philosophy of Ralph Cudworth.* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1962); Lidia Gysi, *Ralph Cudworth. Mystical Thinker* (Filgrave: Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Asumption, 1973); J.A. Passmore, (1951) *Ralph Cudworth. An Interpretation (*Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990). A very interesting article is Sarah Hutton's 'Ralph Cudworth, God, Mind and Nature' in Robert Crocker, ed. *Religion, Reason and Nature in Early Modern Europe*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, pp. 61-77), where the author gives an excellent summary of Cudworth's main philosophical propositions in religion, metaphysics and epistemology.

[6] D. Hedley and S. Hutton eds. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008). See also Hedley's introduction to his *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion. Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

1795 and 1796 was a turning point in his thought.[7] This is a period preceding his study of German thought—Kant around the years 1801-2 and Schelling around 1805. In the early stages of his career, he felt in an ideological quandary between his innate Platonism, and his attraction to other materialist positions such as Hartley's associationism. His lifelong purpose was to create a 'philosophy of reconciliation' (CN II 2541) in which the Cartesian separation of body and soul, and the opposite philosophies of materialism and idealism could be reconciled and unified. In Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Coleridge found a new metaphysics according to which the natural world becomes symbolic of a transcendent reality beyond appearances, thanks to the plastic nature that allows the interrelation between the corporeal and the incorporeal.

Over twenty passages from Cudworth's *Intellectual System* are either copied into or paraphrased in Coleridge's early notebooks, the 'First Lecture on Revealed Religion', 'The Destiny of Nations' and the Conversation poems, demonstrating the initial impact of Cudworth's philosophy on Coleridge's thought.[8] Two aspects of the system depicted in *The True Intellectual System* appealed to Coleridge. First, Cudworth's organicist conception of the universe, which though composed of infinite parts are simultaneously exemplifications of the Universe, giving us epistemological access to the greatest Being. The harmony of the universe is the result of the action of a mediator between the greatest Spirit and nature, which he terms plastic nature. There must be, Cudworth states, 'a general plastic nature in the macrocosm, the whole corporeal universe, that which makes all things thus to conspire every where, and agree together into one harmony' (TIS I 260, 262).[9] This plastic nature emanates from the creative deity and transmits its essence to every element in nature. It implements divine will from within nature acting as 'an inward and living soul or law in matter' (TIS I 236). Nature then is seen as a kind of incorporeal substance that extends from the divine through the material providing order and harmony to the whole universe. Therefore, in Cudworth's system, God is transcendent, but at the same time, his essence enters every single animate or inanimate being in the universe and, consequently, becomes immanent.

Second, in opposition to the empiricist impoverishment of the faculties of the human mind, the Cambridge thinkers proposed the active nature of

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[7] The Registers of the Bristol Library show that Coleridge borrowed twice Cudworth's masterpiece from that library. The first time, he borrowed it for two weeks in May- June 1795, and he withdrew it again from the library in November 1796 for a span of five weeks.

[8] A detailed analysis of Coleridge's readings of Cudworth's work and its contribution to the formation of Coleridge's early thought and poetics by means of the analysis of his notebooks, letters and his literary production of the years 1795-1798 is offered in Cristina Flores, *Plastic Intellectual Breeze. The Contribution of Ralph Cudworth to S. T. Coleridge's Early Poetics of the Symbol.* (Bern, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2008) and Cristina Flores 'Contemplant Spirits': Ralph Cudworth and Contemplation in S. T. Coleridge. *Coleridge and Contemplation*, Peter Cheney, ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2017) 211-220.

[9] Henceforward we will quote from the 1995 edition of Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press). The abbreviation TSI, followed by the number of volume and pages will appear parenthetically in the running text.

thought. Beyond sensation, Cudworth considers a higher form of knowledge.[10] He asserts that there is not only experience of the corporeal but also of the spiritual and, therefore, according to the different objects of knowledge, different mental processes must exist. He distinguishes between sense, or understanding, which is initially passive, and knowledge, or intellection, which is primarily active. To him, intellection is performed by the faculty he names Reason. Following the proverb: 'the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord' (Proverbs 20.27), the Cambridge thinkers believed that the human mind receives part of the divine intellect, of the one original mind: 'the first intellect is essentially and archetypally all rationes and verities, and all particular created intellects are but derivative participations of it, that are printed by it with the same ectypal signatures upon them'.[11] To Cudworth, human reason is a living image of God and a partaker in the essences of the Divine Mind and this is all due to the plastic nature that dwells in our souls. This is how Cudworth introduces the existence of an inward active intellectual power. He insists that 'knowledge is not a knock or thrust from without, but it consisteth in the awakening and exciting of the inward active powers of the mind' (TCEIM 566). Thus, reason connects man to God, to the Spiritual realm.

Nonetheless, Cudworth does not reject the importance of material reality; his position has been rightly defined by Darwall as 'Idealism (with Matter)'.[12] To him, knowledge starts in sense experience:

> And nature itself plainly intimates to us, that there is some such absolutely perfect Being, […] that there is some object in the world, so much bigger and vaster than our mind and thoughts, that it is the very same to them that the ocean is to narrow vessels; (TIS II 519-20)

> And this is the most natural scale by which the intellectual mind in the contemplation of corporeal things ascends to God; from the passive prints and signatures of that one art and wisdom that appears in the universe, by taking notice from thence of the exemplary or archetypal cause, one infinite and eternal mind setting his seal upon all. (TCEIM 598)

The intellect in Cudworth is a synthetic mental faculty, while sense experience remains scattered in the different little parts that compose the corporeal. '[T]he intellect', in the philosopher's words, 'rises up to that comprehensive view of

[10] Cudworth's theory of knowledge is best developed in his work *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, though the foundations of his epistemology had been well-established in the *Intellectual System*.

[11] Henceforward we will quote from the 1995 edition of Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press). The abbreviation TCEIM, followed by the number of pages will appear parenthetically in the running text. This is TCEIM 626. This idea had been previously introduced in the same terms in the *True Intellectual System* (TIS III 71).

[12] Stephen Darwall, *The British Moralists and the Internal "Ought". 1640-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 121.

natures of particular corporeal things, and the universal mundane system within itself all at once;' and then it acquires 'the entire idea of one *totum* 'whole" (TCEIM 597). And it is only conceivable 'by the unitive action and comprehensive power of the intellect' (TCEIM 595). A clear resemblance is identified between Cudworth's view of the action of the intellect, reason, and Coleridge's famous definition of imagination in *Biographia Literaria*: 'to shape into one' (BL I 170). Then, some years before he became acquainted with German philosophy, Coleridge found in the philosophy of the Cambridge Platonists, but mostly in Cudworth, a middle territory between rationalism and empiricism, religion and philosophy, they created a system in which matter and spirit, sense and reason, natural laws and God could cohabit. Therefore, Coleridge, steeped in Cudworth's philosophical propositions, was ripe for German Idealism.

If, as already said, Coleridge can be seen as the culmination in Britain of that Neoplatonic trend of thought, Emerson can be considered the conduit of these ideas to the New Continent, not only through Coleridge's works, but also directly from his own readings of Cudworth's treatises.

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In the course of his extensive learning, Emerson accumulated teachings from many different authors; nevertheless, his education at Harvard enhanced his tendency towards Platonist and Idealist positions. He was well read in Plutarch, Plato, the Stoics and the Cambridge Platonists. This background favoured his positive reception of the theories proposed by the British Romantics on nature, human mind, imagination and artistic creativity.

Emerson's friend Bronson Alcott is thought to be the second after Emerson in the creation of philosophic Transcendentalism. Even though he did not construct a coherent complete philosophical system, he is claimed to be the most complete Platonic idealist of his time in America. According to Allen, the idealistic philosophy of Plato, the seventeenth-century Cambridge (English) Neoplatonists, and Coleridge constituted his natural intellectual element.[13] The fact that Allen includes the Cambridge Platonists and Coleridge within the same group implies that he saw certain important points of contact in their thought. It is reasonable to think that Alcott transmitted this belief to Emerson in any of the long conversations which these two authors frequently maintained. These two friends shared philosophical preferences. In 'Plato, or the Philosopher', included in *Representative Men* (1950), Emerson provides a list of some Platonist thinkers including Sir Thomas More, Henry More, John Hales, John Smith, Lord Bacon, Jeremy Taylor, Ralph Cudworth, Sydenham, and Thomas Taylor. Among them, it is worth noting, three of the components of the Cambridge Platonists are mentioned: Cudworth, More, and Smith. Moreover, a paragraph above, he includes Coleridge as an intellectual debtor to Plato. It is also noticeable that the bulk of the authors he mentions are British.

[13] Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson. A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 254.

Emerson soon recognised and admired the Platonic background, veiled by the more popular Empiricism, in contemporary England. The American author devotes one chapter of *English Traits* (1856) to his impression of contemporary English literature, and most of it is employed in discussing the Platonic bias of poets.[14] He opposes the Platonic disposition of literary men to the Empiricist one of the men of science and, once more, the names of Henry More and Ralph Cudworth are included in his list of British Platonists.

> The influence of Plato tinges the British genius. Their minds loved analogy; were cognisant of resemblances, and climbers on the staircase of unity. 'Tis a very old strife between those who elect to see identity, and those who elect to see discrepancies; and it renews itself in Britain. The poets, of course, are of one part; the men of the world, of the other. But Britain had many disciples of Plato;—More, Hooker, Bacon, Sidney, Lord Brooke, Herbert Browne, Donne, Spenser, Chapman, Milton, Crashaw, Norris, Cudworth, Berkeley, Jeremy Taylor. … Locke is as surely the influx of decomposition and of prose, as Bacon and the Platonists of growth. The Platonic is the poetic tendency; the so-called scientific is the negative and poisonous. 'Tis quite certain, that Spenser, Burns, Byron, and Wordsworth will be Platonists; and that the dull men will be Lockists.[15]

Emerson already knew about Cudworth by the early 1820s, when he was a student of Harvard College. William Rossi explains that at Harvard, from which Emerson graduated in 1821, the subjects of moral philosophy and natural theology played an essential role in the curriculum.[16] Later, in 1825, he entered Harvard Divinity School to study theology. And there, the young Emerson most probably had to study Cudworth's masterpiece as part of some course. The whole title of this work is *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: Wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted, and its Impossibility Demonstrated*. In accordance with the title, Cudworth offers an in-depth study of a great number of atheist positions in order to further refute them all. Hence, the encyclopaedic nature of this massive work, nine hundred pages in length, makes it an appropriate textbook for a course on theology. At that moment, Cudworth's works were easily accessible for the American author. The library of Harvard held several editions of both *The True Intellectual System* and of *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, and Emerson owned a copy of the 1820 edition of Cudworth's *The*

[14] R. W. Emerson travelled in England and Scotland twice, first in 1833, and second fifteen years later. In *English Traits*, published in 1856, the American poet sets forth his point of view of English culture and describes his meeting with S.T. Coleridge during his first visit to England.

[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits. The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* v. 5. Philip Nicoloff et al., eds. (Cambridge, Massachussetts, London: Harvard UP, 1994), pp. 134-135.

[16] William Rossi, 'Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science'. In Joel Myerson ed., *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) pp.101-150, p.109.

True Intellectual System, which also included *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*. This volume was, in addition, available in the library of Harvard.

There is some evidence of Emerson's knowledge of Cudworth's work in this early stage of his life as a student in Harvard. There, Emerson submitted an essay for the Bowdoin Prize entitled "Dissertation on the Present State of Ethical Philosophy", where he tried to trace the history of ethical thought from the Greeks, through the Christian Fathers and the seventeenth-century thinkers of Europe, to Ralph Cudworth and Dr. Price. The essay was awarded a second prize.

The metaphysical system defended by Cudworth, as well as his active view of the mind as 'the candle of the Lord', impinged on Emerson's view of the universe and of the workings of our mind. In Holmes's account of Emerson's biography he describes an episode that deserves detailed attention since in it the American author pictures his own view of the organisation of the universe, which bears arresting points of contact with Cudworth's system. In 1833, Emerson invited two boys, A. H. Rice and Thomas R. Gould to visit him at the Allen farm, there:

> They came to a piece of woods, and, as they entered it, took their hats off. 'Boys,' said Emerson, 'here we recognize the presence of the Universal Spirit. The breeze says to us in its own language, How d'ye do? How d'ye do? And we have already taken our hats off and are answering it with our own How d'ye do? How d'ye do? And all the waving branches of the trees, and all the flowers, and the field of corn yonder, and the singing brook, and the insect and the bird,—every living thing and things we call inanimate feel the same divine impulse while they join with us, and we with them, in the greeting which is the salutation of the Universal Spirit.'[17]

Emerson draws here on Cudworth's concept of a Universal Nature that diffuses its essence through the whole universe and gives unity. Curiously enough, the American author chooses the same metaphor of the breeze that Coleridge had previously used to describe the action of the plastic nature in 'The Eolian Harp'. This can be seen in the following passage belonging to the 1797 version of the poem, entitled 'Effusion', which was written a few months after Coleridge's second borrowing of *The True Intellectual System*:

> And what if All of animated Life
> Be but as Instruments diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, while thro' them breathes
> One infinite and intellectual Breeze.
> And all in diff'rent Heights so aptly hung,

[17] Oliver W. Holmes, *American Men of Letters. Ralph Waldo Emerson.* Warner, Charles Dudley, ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), pp.68-69.

That murmurs indistinct and burst sublime,
Shrill Discords and most soothing Melodies,
Harmonious from Creation's vast consent-
Thus God would be the universal soul,
Mechaniz'd matter as th' organic harps,
And each one's Tunes be that, which each calls I.[18]

Emerson falls back on Coleridge's poem once more in his short essay 'Nature', included in *Essays: Second Series* (1844), where he writes that the action of some supernatural essence in nature 'converts the mountains into an Aeolian Harp'.[19] The essay is preceded by the following verses which anticipate the main subject-matter of the following pages, that is, the spirit that lurks in every element:

The rounded world is fair to see,
Nine times folded in mystery:
Though baffled seers cannot impart
The secret of its labouring heart,
Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast,
And all is clear from east to west.
Spirit that lurks each form within
Beckons to spirit of its kin;
Self-kindled every atom glows,
And hints the future which it owes.

(E II 161)

Similarly, Coleridge wrote again in 'Frost at Midnight' (1798) on the spirit pervading the universe:

But still the living spirit in our frame,
That loves not to behold a lifeless thing,
Transfuses into all its own delights,
Its own volition …[20]

In 'Nature' Emerson tries to establish his theoretical stand as regards the constitution of the universe and our relationship with it. In this essay, some ideas first defended by Cudworth are present; in particular his belief in that the soul derives energy from an unconscious intellectual source, which ties the soul

[18] *The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. E. H. Coleridge ed. (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp.520-521, ll.36-46. See also, Paul Cheshire, 'The Eolian Harp' in *The Coleridge Bulletin* 17, Summer 2001, pp.1-22, where all versions are collated.

[19] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 2 vols. (Boston; New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888). From now on, the abbreviation E, followed by the number of volume and pages will appear parenthetically in the running text. This is E II 168.

[20] Quarto pamphlet printed by Johnson in S. Paul's Churchyard, 1798. In *The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. E. H. Coleridge ed. (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p.249, ll.21-24.

to the body. To Emerson, every element in the material universe is intellectual because it is a derivation from the Universal Mind:

> The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind of natural objects, whether inorganic or organized. … That power which does not respect quantity, which makes the whole and the particle its equal channel, delegates its smile to the morning, and distils its essence into every drop of rain. Every moment instructs, and every object; for wisdom is infused into every form. (E II 188).

The human mind and soul are also containers of this intellect that circulates not only through the tangible: it 'runs also into the mind and character of men' (E II 179). 'There are', Emerson states, 'all degrees of natural influence, from these quarantine powers of nature, up to her dearest and gravest ministrations to the imagination and the soul' (E II 165). Then, Nature delegated to every element and to our mind gives harmony to the whole universe, he claims: 'Things are so strictly related, that according to the skill of the eye, f
orm any one object the parts and properties of any other may be predicted. […] That identity makes us all one' (E II 175).

In that essay Emerson resumes some ideas that he had previously exposed in his first published book, also entitled *Nature* (1836), in which Cudworth's strong presence is perceived from the very outset. The first edition of *Nature* had prefixed to it the following words from Plotinus: 'Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; Nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know'.[21] This epigraph was found by Emerson in his copy of *The True Intellectual System*. He selected some passages from a quotation Cudworth cites from Plotinus's *Ennead* (II, 3, 17) to support his own ideas. In a moment of the discussion when the British philosopher is defending his belief that the world is intelligible by virtue of the fact that it bears the stamp of God's wisdom thanks to the action of the plastic nature, he quotes from Plotinus: 'wisdom is the first thing, but nature the last and lowest; for nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul, which hath the lowest impress of reason shining upon it … , nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know' (TIS I 240).

In *Nature*, Emerson is most concerned with our relationship with God and the universe, and hence he chiefly discusses the effects of the Universal Being on the human being: 'Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. […] The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God'.[22] These words bear clear resemblances with the following verses from

[21] Quoted in Oliver W. Holmes, *American Men of Letters. Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Warner, Charles Dudley, ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885), p.105.

[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays. Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ziff, Larzer, ed. (London: Penguin, 1982), p.39.

'Religious Musings' (1797), a poem composed by Coleridge in the year that followed his reading the *Intellectual System*:

> 'Tis the sublime of man,
> Our noontide Majesty, to know ourselves
> Parts and proportions of one wondruous whole!
> This fraternises man, this constitutes
> Our charities and bearings. But 'tis God
> Diffused through all, that doth make all one whole;[23]

In this particular design of the universe, God is not only over his creation but he also permeates it and therefore he is at the same time transcendent and immanent. I fully agree with Mott, who acknowledges that the term 'transcendentalist' is something of a misnomer, because Emerson's God, 'is detectable by the mind as pervading the entire Creation, including the soul, and is therefore an immanent divinity, not a transcendent one, perception of whom energizes the individual'.[24]

The parcel of divine intelligence in our mind permits us a special approach to nature; it enables the human being to perceive spiritual truth intuitively. This idea is fundamental to the concept of Reason, which came to be the heart of Transcendentalism and of Coleridge's epistemology and poetics. The similarities between Emerson's and Coleridge's concepts of Reason are evident, and has been exhaustively studied by Patrick J. Keane in his work *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason* where he identifies the source of their concept of Reason in German thought.[25] However, as has been proved in the preceding pages, this distinction had already been proposed and defended by Cudworth and the rest of the Cambridge philosophers. Both Coleridge and Emerson had read in a very early stage of their careers the works by the Neoplatonist thinker.

The essay 'The Over-Soul' is the best example of Emerson's adoption of the theory of 'The Candle of the Lord'. It is important to note that Emerson introduced some verses by Henry More below the title.[26] So, again, the presence of the Cambridge Platonists is noticeable. The transmission of that particle of divine intelligence from the Greatest Being to the human mind is depicted by Emerson as follows:

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[23] *The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. E. H. Coleridge ed. (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp.113-114, ll.128-133.

[24] Mott 2000, p.73.

[25] Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 2005.

[26] The verses by Henry More that Emerson introduces are the following:
But souls that of his own good life partake,
He loves as his own self; dear as his eye
They are to Him: He'll never them forsake:
When they shall die, then God himself shall die:
They live, they live in blest eternity. (E II 249)

> Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. […] When I watch that that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.
>
> The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft hands of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other. […] We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, is one. (E II 252-53)

Emerson terms this transmission of intelligence from the Universal Being, or Over-Soul, to the human soul 'Revelation': 'We distinguish the announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term *Revelation*. These are always attended by the emotion of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind' (E II 263). The American author states twice in this essay that 'genius' is obtained when this influx of the divine mind gets into our mind: 'When it breathes through his intellect it is genius' (E II 255); 'The same Omniscience flows into the intellect and makes what we call genius' (E II 270). And then he distinguishes between two types of authors and philosophers, those who have felt that influence, and those who have not. Among the former, who 'can speak *from within'*, he mentions Herbert, Spinoza, Kant and Coleridge. And, among the latter, Pope and Locke, who speak '*from without*, as spectators merely' (E II 269). It is not unreasonable to think that Emerson is here following Coleridge's distinction between 'talent' and 'genius'. In *Biographia Literaria* the British author states that 'mere *talent*' is 'the faculty of appropriating and applying the knowledge to others", whereas the 'absolute *Genius* is the creative and self-sufficing power' (BL I 20), which is a derivation in our soul from Divine creativity.

This view of the universe determines a certain poetics. In *Nature*, Emerson claims: 'When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. […] there is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet'.[27] To both Coleridge and Emerson, the poet has the task of transmitting in words

[27] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays. Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ziff, Larzer, ed. (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 38.

the Spirit of the Universe, which they find in every material element of the universe. The required initial process of knowledge which starts in the tangible world and ends in the consciousness of Universal harmony is at the bases of their concept of Beauty and of poetry at large.

Again, the source of this theory can be traced back to Cudworth. The Cambridge thinker claims that in contemplating the mechanism of the material universe, and how it is contrived, 'not only for the beauty of the whole, but also for the good of every part in it' (TCEIM 597), the intellect recognises in the material universe the imprint of the divine Intellect, they are 'nothing else but the passive stamp, print and signature of some living art and wisdom; as the pattern, archetype and seal of it' (TCEIM 597). This imprint transforms material elements into epitomes of the higher Intellect, and so, the philosopher explains 'excites from within itself an idea of that divine art and wisdom' (TCEIM 597). Nature is then symbolical of that Universal Spirit since every element contains Its essence.

In his essay 'The Poet', Emerson defines a doctrine of symbols which is essentially the one defended by Coleridge: 'nature is a symbol, in the whole, in every part' (E II 18). The reason is that: 'there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature' (E II 22). The primal cause of this structure is the life diffused through all: 'is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life' (E II 21). This theory is not something new: Coleridge had expressed it frequently—for example: 'The power delegated to nature is all in every part: and by symbol I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents' (LS 79).

Similarly, Emerson writes in the section 'Beauty' of *Nature*:

> What is common to them all,— that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. […] the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature; […] Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful of the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace. The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point. […] Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first words.[28]

Coleridge deals with poetry and beauty in terms of part–whole from very early in his career, much earlier than his study of German philosophy, in his lectures and poems of 1795: 'a Face is beautiful because its Features are the symbols and visible signs of the inward Benevolence or Wisdom … its every Feature is the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence' (LPR 1795 158).

[28] *Ibid.*, p.47.

Later, Coleridge will maintain this definition of 'Beauty'. In 'Hints respecting Beauty' he defines it as: 'the reconciliation of "*the many*" with "*the one*"—of a *plurality with unity*'. A beautiful figure, he illustrates, is that in which every part is 'related to the other, & all the parts to one perfect Whole' (SWF I 278). This organic constitution of the universe is perfect and beautiful since it is God's creation. Cudworth stated: 'Imperfect human art imitates that perfect art of nature, which is really no other than divine art itself' (TIS I 237). Likewise, Coleridge affirmed: 'Nature itself is to a religious Observer the Art of God' (CN III 4287). This idea is the main subject-matter of Emerson's essay 'Art', where he proposes that those things which are said to be done by Nature, are indeed done by Divine Art. Moreover, he suggests that in order to create the highest art, the individual must open his mind in order to receive the influxes of Nature, of Divine creativity:

> The reference of all production at last to an aboriginal Power explains the traits common to all works of the highest art,—that they are universally intelligible; that they restore to us the simplest states of mind, and are religious. Since what skill is therein shown is the reappearance of the original soul, a jet of pure light, it should produce a similar impression to that made by natural objects. In happy hours, nature appears to us one with art: art perfected, -the work of genius. (E II 333-34)

Hence, Coleridge advises potential artists to open the soul to the influences of the Universal Spirit which pervades nature in 'The Nightingale':

> And many a poet echoes the conceit;
> Poet who hath been building up the rhyme
> When he had better far have stretched his limbs
> Beside a brook of mossy forest-dell,
> By sun or moon-light, to the influxes
> Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements
> Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song
> And of his fame forgetful! So his fame
> Should share in Nature's immortality,
> A venerable thing! And so his song
> Should make all Nature lovelier, and itself
> Be loved like Nature! [29]

Therefore, the task of the artist is, according to the British author, to acquire knowledge of this Universal Spirit and imitate it through art: 'The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses to us by symbols—the Natur-geist or spirit of nature' (CN III 4397).

[29] *The Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. E. H. Coleridge ed. (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp. 264-265, ll. 23-34.

Buell suggests that the basis of Transcendentalist thinking as to the role of nature in art is the idea of a metaphysical correspondence between nature and spirit. According to Emerson, Buell suggests, the universe is a vast network of symbols—which is the chief task of the poet to study, master, and articulate.[30] The poet is qualified for this task because he follows the method of nature herself: he is guided by inspiration rather than logic, and expresses his thoughts in the form of images, in the same way that nature expresses spirit. In the analysis performed in the pages above it has been shown that these basic principles of Transcendentalism, which are essentially the same as Coleridge's, are partly rooted in the philosophical system proposed by Ralph Cudworth. The action of the plastic nature over the whole universe, both material and spiritual, diffusing Divine creativity, goodness and beauty, transforms every material element into a symbol of this very same Divinity. Our mind, partaking of the Divine intelligence, acquires the ability to recognise the presence of Divinity in the world that surrounds us, and finally apprehends the total organic unity of the universe, the perfect communion of matter and spirit. And then, the chief role of the poet is to transmit this universal harmony intuitively found beyond the tangible realm.

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It is time to draw the final angle of the triangular relationship under study here, though it has been already amply delineated in the previous pages, namely the Emerson-Coleridge connection. Emerson's intellectual indebtedness to Coleridge has long been accepted. In the classic study *The American Renaissance*, Matthiessen signals the source of Emerson's organicism in Coleridge's thought.[31] Coleridge is, according to him, 'the most immediate force behind American transcendentalism'.[32] In turn, Keane referred to the American author as 'Coleridgean Emerson',[33] considering Coleridge the main intellectual benefactor of Emerson, 'his major thinker, critic, and aid to reflection'.[34] Keane plays here with the title of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, probably because Emerson's reading of this work and *The Friend* in about 1830 greatly enhanced his idealism. Still, before the 1830s he had already perused Coleridge's poems and his masterpiece *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

In *English Traits* (1856), Emerson draws on his travel in England and Scotland in 1833, and on his visit to S. T. Coleridge. The description of the visit ends with a conclusion that reveals Emerson's disappointment, because the old Coleridge did nothing else but repeat the commonplaces of his thought.[35] Nonetheless, his broad opinion about Coleridge shows mixed

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[30] Buell 1973, p.149.

[31] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford UP., 1968), p. 133.

[32] *Ibid*., p.6.

[33] Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason* (Columbia; London: U of Missouri P., 2005), p.3.

[34] *Ibid*., p.5.

[35] Emerson describes his impressions as follows: 'I was in his company for about an hour, but find it

feelings in judging the person and literary achievements of the Romantic author in a different section of *English Traits*, and he concludes: '[O]ne would say, that in Germany and in America is the best mind in England rightly respected'.[36]

Allen affirms that 'the only modern poet who satisfied Emerson was Coleridge, who had taught him to distinguish between reason and understanding, fancy and imagination, and the nature of poetry'.[37] The connection between these two authors results in two views of nature and art which are essentially similar. Yet, this paper shows that the British poet initially took some of these ideas from Ralph Cudworth's philosophical treatises, which had also been studied by Emerson. They both seized on the thought of the Cambridge Platonist to support their idealistic view of the world and the noetic role of the poet. Therefore, Emerson can be seen as the vehicle that transported some of Cudworth's principles, which he saw reflected in Coleridge's poems and prose writings, into American Transcendentalism. Thus, one of the strings of the intricate web that conforms the intellectual background of Romanticism on both sides of the Atlantic has been identified and briefly described here. However, further research needs to be done in order to give a more complete picture of the implications of Ralph Cudworth's philosophy in the construction of American Transcendentalism.

impossible to recall the largest part of his discourse, which was often like so many printed paragraphs in his book, - perhaps the same, - so readily did he fall into certain commonplaces. As I might have foreseen, the visit was rather a spectacle than a conversation, of no use beyond the satisfaction of my curiosity. He was old and preoccupied, and could not bend to a new companion and think with him'. R. W. Emerson, *English Traits*, p.7.

[36] Emerson 1994, p.140.

[37] Allen 1988, p.262.