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Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature
(Edinburgh University Press, 2013)
by Samantha Harvey

COLERIDGE'S CONTEMPORARY INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCE IS, by turns, elusive and profound. There is plenty of evidence for its existence: the Cambridge Apostle John Sterling declared that 'to Coleridge I owe *education*'; F.D. Maurice, the father of Christian Socialism (and another Apostle) admitted that his work *The Kingdom of Christ* was 'one among a thousand indications of the influence which your [Derwent Coleridge's] father's writings are exercising over the mind of this generation'; and it was John Stuart Mill (a friend of Maurice and Sterling) who most famously remarked that 'the existence of Coleridge will show itself by no slight or ambiguous traces in the coming history of our country; for no one has contributed more to shape the opinions of those among its younger men, who can be said to have opinions at all'.[1] Such confident professions are not without complications, however. In his seminal essay on Coleridge, F. J. A. Hort argues that 'his influence retired once more within the now more numerous band of genuine students, and henceforth manifested its workings chiefly in the increased earnestness and grasp of principles in men of the most unlike schools'.[2] According to Hort's assessment, Coleridge's influence is covert and produced contradictory results. And yet the now neglected nineteenth-century British philosopher Shadworth Hollway Hodgson was surely on to something when he claimed that 'the world too has far more to learn from Coleridge than it yet dreams of, not by way of system or theory, but by way of vivifying impulse'.[3] These well-known examples are indicative of a profound difficulty facing any scholar who seriously tries to study Coleridge's influence: *how* did it actually work? It is this question that Samantha Harvey's *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson and Nature* sets out to answer. The success with which it does so can be attributed largely to the fact that Harvey's assessment manages to be both a reader-response study and an intellectual history of ideas in America. The concentration on the intellectual affinities between Coleridge and Emerson gives the book a strong intellectual spine, but Harvey also branches out into the origins and evolution of Boston and Vermont Transcendentalism, and into education reform, as well as examining the work of Frederic Henry Hedge, James Marsh and John Dewey. Other scholarly arguments have been successfully made for Emerson's initial and formative intellectual dependency

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[1] J.C. Hare (Ed.), *Essays and Tales by John Sterling* (London: John W. Parker, 1848) Vol 1, xv; J. R. de J. Jackson, *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage: Volumes 2: 1834-1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 119 and 67

[2] F. J. A. Hort, 'Coleridge' in *Cambridge Essays, contributed by Members of the University* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1856) 293

[3] Shadworth Hollway Hodgson, *The Philosophy of Reflection* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878) 22

on Coleridge, but Harvey's account is the clearest and most detailed yet.[4] Further more, Emerson has been described as 'the American Coleridge'. For most critics, one Coleridge is enough to be getting along with, so Harvey is to be praised for successfully comparing these two profoundly productive writers in a compelling and lucid manner.

Harvey blends her dualistic methodology (intellectual history and reader-response) in her premise: Coleridge 'taught Emerson to think – not *what* to think, but *how* to think' (2), and concentrates on a decade of influence (1826-1836). The book ranges across Emerson's public work (sermons, essays, lectures, *Nature*) and private writings (especially the journals, where Coleridge is frequently referenced). As Emerson remarked, 'there are few or no books of pure literature so self-imprinting … so often remembered as Coleridge's' (1). It is this emphasis on Coleridge as a formative intellectual power that is one of the book's greatest strengths. As Harvey asserts, 'the relationship between Emerson and Coleridge serves as a lens to magnify the ways in which ideas transferred across thinkers, oceans, and time periods, on one hand forging enduring legacies while also warping, reinterpreting, and renewing those ideas in new climates' (2). Additionally, concentrating on an 'assimilative' and 'collaborative' model of influence ('Emerson did not think about Coleridge, he thought *with* Coleridge') also lends the work both depth and breadth (3). Throughout the introduction Harvey elaborates upon this 'collaborative' model of influence; it is a deft illustration of Emerson's rather resourceful use of Coleridge's ideas, adopting and sometimes even transforming aspects of them that he approved of. Harvey even argues that Emerson's disappointment upon meeting Coleridge proved advantageous: it spurred him on to become something of a Coleridgean poet-prophet. All of this builds support for a larger argument concerning what the intellectual relationship actually resulted in and centred on. This was the resolution of what Harvey terms the 'romantic triad': 'the desire to comprehend the relationship between the categories of nature, spirit and humanity' (14). Harvey argues that this was an intellectual ambition that both men shared, but neither fully satisfied. Additionally, it displaces the validity of thinking about philosophical achievement in terms of system-building (41). This contention constitutes the intellectual heart of the book.

As an initial step into how Emerson came by Coleridge, Harvey addresses Coleridge's links to Boston Transcendentalism. The detailed discussion here concentrates on the motivations for and implications of James Marsh's 'Preliminary Essay' to his 1829 edition of *Aids to Reflection* and Frederick Henry Hedge's essay on 'Coleridge's Literary Character'. Harvey attributes Coleridge's success in having provided answers to the philosophical dissatisfaction (specifically concerning Lockean philosophy) felt by many of the New England group. Marsh's purpose was to make Coleridge appeal to both liberal and

[4] Another recent example is David Greenham's *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). See also Laura Dassow Walls, 'Ralph Waldo Emerson and Coleridge's American Legacy' in James Vigus and Jane Wright (Ed.), *Coleridge's Afterlives* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) where it is argued that 'Emerson without Coleridge can scarcely be imagined, so central is the Englishman to the American's development as a writer, philosopher, and public intellectual.' 112

orthodox theological communities; whilst this failed, Harvey argues that Marsh's preface was not only perfectly timed, but also presented the transcendentalists with a philosophical vocabulary (especially the reason and the understanding), an easy access route into some of Coleridge's major ideas and 'a provisional working model of the Romantic triad'. Harvey also reads Hedge's essay in a similar light (36-7) but considers the role of his essays as preparatory for Coleridge's influence (38); Hedge's assessment was influential because he contended with Coleridge's difficulties and praised his achievements. As Harvey argues, Hedge's review is based on *The Friend* and his adherence to the 'Essays on the Principle of Method' had a profound impact upon Emerson. This, combined with the focus on process as articulated in *Aids*, provides evidence for the emphasis on intellectual methodology which is apparent throughout the book.

Emerson's intellectual methodology is indebted to Coleridge on two fronts: it concerns both the shaping of philosophical questions, and also the ambition for philosophical answers. The third chapter of the book confronts the first of these. In it, Harvey argues that Emerson took from Coleridge both a 'philosophical framework' (41) and a philosophical process. Coleridge's 'dynamic philosophy' encouraged Emerson to attempt to produce his 'first philosophy'. The account of Coleridge's philosophy provided by Harvey brilliantly condenses the complexities of Coleridge's position. Harvey asserts the central tenets are: 'a religio-philosophical notion of self' (44), the law of polarity, its reliance upon the act of knowledge (45) and its ability to 'harmonize the Romantic triad' (46). Harvey argues that Emerson 'assimilated the general thrust of the dynamic philosophy while passing over some of its philosophical particulars' (52). In this way the kinship of their respective philosophical endeavours illustrates the dynamic of their relationship: Coleridge provided Emerson with an intellectual impetus, and any ideas adopted by Emerson from Coleridge took on a distinctly Emersonian quality.

Coleridge's main aim was to educate young minds and teach them how to think. This Emerson took from Coleridge and deployed in a distinctly Coleridgean manner. Harvey concentrates on their shared allegiance to 'the cultivation of individual consciousness' (55) and examines it in relation to Coleridge's intellectual creeds of 'distinguishing without dividing' and method. Coleridge's distinctions gave Emerson two things: firstly, 'a dynamic intellectual process of thinking' because they were open-ended (56); secondly, a 'more sophisticated philosophical vocabulary' (58). The two main examples of distinctions that appealed to Emerson were those between reason and understanding, and *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. The former allowed Emerson to 'invoke intuitive modes of knowing without denying the experience as a valid source of truth' (61) and the latter gave a way of thinking about nature. In the discussion on method, Harvey makes some very compelling claims: firstly, that method is as important a component of Coleridge's influence as the distinction between reason and understanding; secondly, that *The Friend* is as equally important a text as *Aids to Reflection* for

Emerson. It is difficult to summarise Harvey's argument concerning the profound impact that Coleridge's method had on Emerson. However, two key points can be made. Firstly, Emerson saw Coleridge's method as a 'relentless intellectual and spiritual expansion' that 'implied a process of self-betterment' (69). Secondly, Harvey emphasises the importance of method for the blending of literary and philosophical intellectual strategies (74).

As a comparative discussion to the concentration on philosophy, Emerson's literary affinities and borrowings from Coleridge are discussed in the next chapter. This adds further evidence to the contention that Coleridge's ideas were a catalyst for Emerson's own intellectual endeavour. Harvey argues that Coleridge 'fundamentally shaped his emerging literary identity', but also that Emerson 'put Coleridge's ideas to work for him' (77). The discussion concentrates on the intellectual ability to 'read' nature as a book of spiritual meaning, the status and purpose of the poet-prophet, the power of the imagination and the profundity of the symbol. They are inter-connected and all apply to the Romantic triad. Emerson seized upon Coleridge's interpretation of the book of nature because 'it posited a fundamental interconnection between spirit and nature without circumscribing their exact relation' (79). But it was only the poet-prophet who could apprehend the divinity in nature. Harvey argues that this figure is rooted in Coleridge's interest in what he would call the Clerisy, an ideal encompassing 'the prophet's religious and communicative role, the artist's creative abilities, and the philosopher's intellectual capacity' (83). Harvey boldly argues that Emerson's adoption of the imagination is not just germane to his aesthetic thought; it can explain 'cryptic passages' and 'whole essays' (89). Coleridge's definition of symbols concerned their ability to connect 'the spiritual, natural, and human worlds in a sacramental view of language' (91).

Emerson's religious or spiritual thinking also relies heavily on Coleridge, but Harvey stresses the significant divergences and 'liberal adaptations' (102) that characterise this area. Harvey argues that 'Coleridge and Emerson forged a *panentheist* position, which claimed that God was *in* all things' as a way of uniting theism and pantheism. ('Panentheism' was coined by K. C. F. Krause, who studied with Fichte and Schelling, 110.) Emerson adopted from Coleridge a model of revelation which was a dynamic process and also 'disclosed a shared identity between humanity and God' (98). However, Coleridge's ideas concerning a religious foundation for the created, natural world were 'secularized' into a more 'practical outlook' by Emerson (100). For example, he transformed revelation into a 'personal epiphany' (101). Emerson extricated Coleridge's concepts from their context and remoulded them. This applies to Coleridge's model of evolution. Again, Emerson extracts it from its theological and philosophical context and applies it to the intellect, specifically 'the idea of the human mind evolving to higher modes of perception' (107), as apparent in his essay 'Circles'. This assisted in fulfilling Emerson's goal of unifying the Romantic triad: an elevated perception could 'catch a fleeting glimpse of the *possibility* of such a unity' between nature and spirit. As Harvey argues, such an

act of perception 'required seeing God *in* the world, panentheistically' (110). Additional to this is the conceptual significance of faith. Faith atones for the problematic nature of such intellectual perception: it is, Harvey argues, an 'intuitive conclusion' that 'God existed in the world and could be perceived there' (117).

The culmination of the book's argument centres on a reading of *Nature* as the 'zenith of Emerson's assimilative relation to Coleridge' (119) and the fullest presentation and implementation of the Romantic triad. Harvey argues that the text is not only replete with Coleridgean references and allusions, it also takes its intellectual impetus from Coleridge in forming its argument and achieves that which Coleridge could not: the prose articulation of the Romantic argument concerning nature (119). Furthermore, Harvey asserts that Emerson's debt to *Nature* can also be found in its similar structure to *Aids to Reflection* whereby the chapters constitute 'ascending levels' of subjects for reflection in a 'progressive method' (120). The key point here is that in *Nature*, Emerson provides an elaborate consideration of the distinction between Coleridge's model of the reason and the understanding. Harvey also convincingly argues for *Nature* as an exercise in pragmatic philosophy (123). Harvey's evidence consists of a deft, detailed and sophisticated reading of *Nature*: the work is divided in three, whereby chapters one to three concern the understanding, chapters four and five discuss the distinction between the reason and understanding directly and chapters six to eight expound the doctrine of the reason alone. The concluding note to the discussion asserts that the work is not 'about' nature at all; the focus concerns 'the engagement of all the human mind's faculties as articulated by Coleridge' (140). Coleridge provided Emerson with the intellectual lexicon by which he could formulate his epistemology.

Revelations abound in the final chapter of the book, which is an analysis of Coleridge's impact on Vermont Transcendentalism. It functions as a coda to the work as a whole and develops from the Emerson/Coleridge paradigm to concentrate on Marsh and Dewey. Whereas Boston Transcendentalism lasted for roughly 20 years, Vermont Transcendentalism is important because it illustrates the endurance of Coleridge's influence in America through to the twentieth century via the embodiment of his ideas in social institutions. As Harvey points out, whilst the two different versions of Transcendentalism are distinct, there is also shared ground—due in no small part to their interest in Coleridge (142). Harvey's focus here is education reform and her discoveries are striking. James Marsh's reforms during his presidency at the University of Vermont 'ignited a pedagogical revolution in higher education' (141). In reaction against the rote learning that was commonplace at Harvard (and one of the things which so dissatisfied the Transcendentalists) Marsh played a central role in the invention of the modern American college degree. He 'implemented an elective system, seminar-style classes, and an individualised programme of study' (144). Furthermore, the students who absorbed this creed went on to play important roles in American society. One is H.J. Raymond,

who founded *The New York Times*. Another is John Dewey. Despite his complex intellectual career, he still confessed privately that his 1934 book *A Common Faith* (published when he was 74) was indebted to Coleridge. Harvey convincingly argues that this is in no small part due to the Coleridgean-based tutelage that he received whilst at Vermont. This significantly affected both his approach to and work in philosophy as well as his pedagogy (155-60). It is a fitting concluding note: Coleridge's model for the education of young men became the template for college education in America. Harvey's erudite analysis illuminates just how significant Coleridge's ideas were for the development of both America's most distinctive thinker and for its intellectual landscape generally.