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Plastic Intellectual Breeze: The Contribution of Ralph Cudworth to S.T. Coleridge's Early Poetics ofthe Symbol

(Peter Lang 2008)

by Cristina Flores

CHRISTINA FLORES introduces Ralph Cudworth, a lost influence of Coleridge's, not merely as a passing point of reference, but as a major contributor to the poet's thoughts on the cosmos. Furthermore, Flores wants to establish a chronology that is often neglected: 'some years before he got acquainted with the ideas defended by German philosophers and poets, Coleridge had found in British Platonic thought some of the constituents upon which he would build his concept of symbol' (19). Before she can jump into the specifics of Cudworth, Flores provides expository chapters which will especially benefit the new student of Coleridge or those unacquainted with theories surrounding the Romantic symbol.

In an attempt to summarize the Coleridge universe, Flores gives a briefing of most major books written on the poet, no matter the specific theme. For her purposes, though, only 'three academic studies [deal]…with the relationship between the Cambridge Platonists and Coleridge' (45); however, despite the title, Flores believes Douka E. Kabitoglou's 'The Cambridge Platonists: A Reading from Coleridge' (1991) 'is rather misleading' (46). Regarding the number of sources, Flores's research could have extended to Douglas Hedley's article in *The Coleridge Bulletin* 16, 'Cudworth, Coleridge and Schelling' (2000), and the relevant, although somewhat dated, C.G. Martin's 'Coleridge and Cudworth: A Source for 'The Eolian Harp" (1966). Concerning texts on the symbol, Flores cites Robert Barth's and M.J. Swiatecka's studies respectively, but 'they take *The Statesman's Manual*, and some other later works, as the source of their commentaries… little is said about the symbol in earlier works' (49). The neglect of Coleridge's early poems (in respect to defining the symbol) concerns Flores, and so sets up an explication of 'Religious Musings,' 'The Eolian Harp,' 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,' and the rest of the Conversation Poems in the latter half of this volume. Unfortunately, Flores would not have seen Nicholas Halmi's *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* before her own work went to press (she does, however, refer favorably to his earlier essays on the subject).

Flores's book does not remain within the boundaries of the Coleridge/Cudworth relationship. Early on, she takes time to define quintessential Coleridgean terms. For example, Flores examines both symbol and allegory; given Coleridge's responsibility for making the distinction an Anglophone classic, these definitions require repeated perusals within Coleridge studies and Romanticism as a whole. Despite the esoteric terms, Flores breaks down meanings into clear and digestible language; for instance, if the 'main distinctive features of the symbol, in opposition to allegory [are],

namely, tautegory and translucence,' Flores translates that into meaning that 'the symbol [points] to something else while maintaining its tangibility,' while the 'defining feature of the allegory is its arbitrary nature' (106-7). The chapter ends with Flores reasserting the significance of Coleridge's early years, 1795-98, in regards to his conceptualization of the symbol, and Cudworth's influence on that development (111-12).

The full title of Cudworth's book, the one Flores deems the greatest influence on STC, is *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: Wherein all the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted, and its Impossibility Demonstrated, with a Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, to which are added, the Notes and Works of Dr. J.L. Mosheim.*[1] Back when reading the title of a book replaced reading the inside of a book's jacket, Coleridge would have immediately recognized the relevance of Cudworth's study in relation to his lectures against atheism. Chapter five of her book, 'Direct Sources: An Analysis of 'Remarks on Atheism,' 'First Lecture on Revealed Religion,' Letters and Notes', represents Flores's most provocative work. Through Coleridge's words, passages that directly correspond with Cudworth's, Flores illustrates the atheistic foundation of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and contends that 'every time… [Coleridge] faced the necessity of shielding religiousness from the onslaught of atheism, he found in… Cudworth the appropriate material to accomplish his purpose' (267). Flores lays down some basic principles Cudworth and Coleridge fought against: 'The plastic nature of the hylozoic systems gives matter a self-active power or inherent ability to organize itself. The universe then requires no deity in order to function' (260). Coleridge, on the other hand, devotes himself to something more 'creative or at least an organizing Intelligence […] of total benevolence' (260, citing *Lect.* 1795, 104-105). The problem lies in 'plastic nature.' In Coleridge's time, atheists used 'plastic nature' to negate God's role; however, this happy medium, or an 'order of the world [that] is not immediately directed by God but by another substance, depending on but inferior to God' (148) actually helps to justify the ways of God to mankind. In other words, nature may seem imperfect, but points to a higher intelligence because it acts in a largely intelligible way. Flores unfolds the elusive nature of this conversation when she addresses the problem of evil as an example:

> Because if God did everything directly, his Goodness and Perfection would guarantee this same perfection in the created World but the world does not appear to be faultless. Plastic Nature implements God's will, but does it imperfectly, and remains subservient to 'a Higher Providence […] which presiding over it, doeth often supply the Defects of it, and sometimes overrule it' (*TIS* I. 224). (155)

In instances such as these, Flores reaches a point of clarity and directness

[1] Flores cites the 1995. It should be noted that Coburn says Coleridge checked out the Birch edition (1743) from the Bristol Library (CN II 200); the two editions do differ in text and title.

where the seemingly endless amount of bits and pieces in this 'system' finally coalesce. More importantly, atheism loses its merit if we take Cudworth's words as truth, and for Coleridge, that was part of a pressing agenda.

The heart of Flores's discussion really begins at chapter five and the most interesting elements follow from there. Flores's reading of 'Religious Musings' engenders a balanced look into STC's thoughts on plastic nature, God, and his disapproval of atheism for its unsteady base. When Flores looks at the symbol of Christ, she is able to emulsify all the ingredients leading Coleridge to this point, and extract insightful meaning:

> [T]he 'meek Saviour' is the perfect image of the supreme beauty. He has received the essence and energy of Divinity through the surpassing light. Hence, the symbol in the second version of the poem is not only the vehicle but also the secondary continent of nature's essence as well as the subsidiary source of energy. It is to me remarkable that Coleridge introduces these variations in his concept of symbol in the context provided by Cudworth's metaphysics, most specially Cudworth's 'plastic nature.' (326-7)

Flores constantly redirects us to Cudworth as a source for Coleridge's intellectual thoughts, and that is where her book succeeds. The fascinating aspect about Cudworth as an influence lies in the fact that his name and his book(s) don't need to be constantly mentioned to see their presence; by the time we reach Flores's study of the poems, the ubiquity of Cudworth becomes self-evident. When Flores begins her debate on the Conversation Poems, she argues that the 'main dialogue is between the lyrical voice and nature, or even the lyrical voice and God, because in fact, nature is the language of God, the 'transcript' of Divinity (354). In moments like this, Cudworth drops out of the scene, but the background speaks his name; Flores's demonstrations earlier in the book reveal the 'plastic intellectual breeze' that governs, not only nature, but STC's poetry.

Though Flores never forgets the plethora of influences in Coleridge's life during the 1790s, Shaftesbury, Thomas Taylor, Berkeley, and Akenside, she makes convincing arguments for including Cudworth as a more direct source. Flores's clear and concise look at Coleridge's antipathy towards atheism, his avowal of plastic nature, his skepticism towards 17th century "mechanic and materialist" views (114), and his development of the symbol all insist on the presence of Cudworth in Coleridge's studies. With such a large range of topics, we cannot discount Cudworth as merely a footnote in Coleridge's intellectual development; on the contrary, the Cambridge Platonist provides the religious justifications for Coleridge's investment in the natural world.