Appendix

Emerson and Carlyle

Emerson does, clearly, owe many of his ideas and some of his language to Sartor, although in most cases, especially in "Nature," it is impossible to say whether the debt is to German philosophy itself or to Carlyle's interpretations. Carlyle, for example, speaks of nature as "the reflex of our own inward force"; and Emerson declares it to be "a metaphor of the human mind," but then so do Kant and Fichte. Again, Carlyle and Emerson employ the terms "Me" and "Not Me" in their conceptualizing, but seem more indebted to Fichte's "Ich" and "Nicht Ich" than to each other. In one sense, Emerson's exposition of transcendental metaphysics marks a clear advance on Carlyle's: he rearranges and relabels the categories of the German and English systems, so as to make their idealism into a graphically intelligible picture of the universe. His approach is less poetic than Carlyle's—there are no ghosts or fiery war-horses hasting from one Inane into the next—but he makes a stronger appeal to the intellect of his reader. Nature is not simply a "Shadow-system gathered round our Me," or a "revealed Force," but "all that is separate from us . . . both nature and art, all other men and my own body." Further, he introduces the term "Over-
soul" as a substitute for Kant’s "supersensible," Goethe’s "All," Fichte’s "Divine Idea of the World," and Carlyle’s "Immensities and Infinitudes." Thus its relation to the soul of man, the seat of "Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom" in the individual, is established linguistically as that of macrocosm to microcosm. And nature functions not as an "open secret" or "garment of God" but as a "transparent eyeball" linking the human to the divine mind; it is a kind of two-way glass or mirror, the "present expositor" or "projection of God" as well as a set of physical correspondences to the spiritual consciousness of every man: "The world is emblematic. . . . The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass. 'The visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible.'" The fragments of the actual have no meaning in themselves; their value is entirely symbolic, and they acquire beauty only as they are integrated, by the soul, into a coherent idealism: "A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace." It is possible from Emerson’s definitions, as it is not from Teufelsdrockh’s insights, to summon a mental image of the transcendental cosmos. In the center sits the soul, or Me, looking out upon the variety of nature, the elements of which, unified, reflect man’s own divinity and reveal, in part, the sublimities of the enclosing Oversoul. Of course, the Oversoul has alike created the hieroglyphs of Nature (in order to externalize the Divine Essence), so that the world of objects reverberates both outward toward God and inward toward the innate Reason of the individual. As Whitman, drawing on Emerson’s ideas, later puts it, "these tend in-ward to me, and I tend outward to them/ . . . . the unseen is proved by the seen,/Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn."

Emerson’s aesthetics adhere even more closely than his metaphysics to the spirit of Carlyle’s asseverations in Sartor. For Teufelsdrockh, the true work of art is a divine symbol, "the Godlike rendered visible," a synthesis of nature’s variety. For Emerson, it is "nature passed through the alembic of man. . . . The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity.
A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world.” Both men affirm that beauty is sensible truth; that it alone is the key to the reconciliation of appearances and reality. Emerson allows, first of all, that “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue. . . . The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. . . . No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty is one expression for the universe.” But, like Carlyle, he does not trust to the merely passive perception of beauty. He believes, rather, that a gift of vision or poetic intellect must be present to “excite” meaning from natural objects: “Beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid or satisfactory good.” Specifically, it is the mind of the artist that Emerson reverences: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. . . . The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other.” Carlyle attaches to art the significance of a “Church-Homiletic”; he avers that poets “first made Gods for men,” and Emerson agrees that literature contains the seeds of “new thought,” the inspiration that helps man “to break the chains” of his empirical consciousness: “The world seems always waiting for its poet. . . . Every one has some interest in the advent of the poet. . . . All that we call sacred history attest that the birth of a poet is the principle event in chronology.” The poem or novel or play, rightly conceived, has for Emerson as much as for Carlyle, a sacred quality, affirmative and revelatory: “The creation of beauty is Art. . . . In art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works.”

As they aged, Emerson and Carlyle drew farther apart on many of these issues: the former maintaining, without compromise or serious contradiction, the idealism of his early days, the latter retreating frequently, as Emerson himself deplored, into a “deification of the Practical.” Their correspondence, which continued until Emerson’s death, when not about publishing costs and royalties, deteriorated into a contest of incompatible temperaments.
Allingham describes the antagonism that many of the letters reveal: "C thot E too much in the air, and E thot C too much on the ground. You hear E calling ‘Come up!’ and C calling ‘Come down!’ C’s genius wants the poetic flavour of the feminine. . . . E holds up a mild steady lamp, like the full moon: C brandishes a huge torch." There is some justice in Carlyle’s criticism of Emerson, for the American’s essays often read like a group of brilliant but bloodless aphorisms; there is a decided want of concrete images, and one wishes for more breadth or liveliness or application of principles. His attempts at poetry seldom rise beyond the realm of pallid abstraction, and Mrs. Carlyle dismissed much of Emerson’s later writing as “affected, stilted, mystical.” Carlyle himself never went as far as his wife, although he admitted to her that “certain sides” of the man’s nature were “overlaid with mad rubbish.” Emerson seemed to Carlyle on their second encounter in 1847 to be “a pure-minded elevated man: elevated, but without breadth, as a willow is, as a reed is; no fruit at all to be gathered from him.” Jane was again more outspoken on this occasion: she confessed to Lady Ashburton that the “theoretic geniality” of “this Yankee-Seraph . . . leaves me cold.” Emerson, for his part, cooled toward the Carlyles considerably and in late years expressed his disaffection in occasional reviews and lapses of correspondence. He nonetheless understood his own limitations and realized that in his passion for ideological purity he had lost the warmth and eloquence that the transcendental aesthetic demanded. Both Carlyle and Emerson fell short of their intended goal of sustained poetry, for neither was able to adjust perfectly “his inward and outward senses.” It was left to others, particularly to Thoreau and Whitman, to achieve that balance of sensibilities which their predecessors admired but seldom struck.

1. Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 372.
2. Ibid., p. 385.
3. Ibid., p. 374.
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4. Ibid., p. 409.
5. Ibid., p. 388.
6. Ibid., p. 383.
7. From “Song of Myself” in Leaves of Grass.
10. Ibid., p. 389.
11. Ibid., pp. 373–74.
12. Ibid., I, 202–3.
13. Ibid., II, 383.
14. Although in late essays, like “Experience,” he seems a bit weary of the effort and admonishes himself, “Up again: old heart! . . . There is victory yet for all justice” (ibid., I, 246).
15. Originally published by C. E. Norton in two volumes in 1883, but recently reedited in one volume with an excellent introduction by J. Slater.
16. A Diary, p. 220.
17. Letter to Sterling, 1840, quoted in L. and E. Hanson, Necessary Evil: The Life of Jane Welsh Carlyle, p. 259. Arnold also argues that Emerson was unable to write “great poetry” (see Discourses in America, pp. 150–59).
18. L. and E. Hanson, Necessary Evil, p. 357.
19. Ibid., p. 358.
20. Ibid., p. 357.
21. Despite his reputation as a “universal cynic,” it is Carlyle who seemed most willing to forget intellectual differences for the sake of friendship. With Emerson as with Mill, Carlyle was always first to write the conciliatory letter.
22. Although R. Hertz, in an article “Victory and Consciousness of Battle: Emerson and Carlyle,” asserts that Emerson’s achievement of ideological stasis amounted to a kind of triumph. For a more detailed study of their philosophical relationship, see W. Vance, Carlyle and the American Transcendentalists.