

stones over Shakespeare's grave, he recalled Miss Bacon's plan to move them; and in the essay, "Quotation and Originality," *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston, 1875) he mentioned her "bold theory." If Emerson had written a criticism of Miss Bacon's book, he would have been obliged to admit her one irresistible claim on his attention: the fact that her theory concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's *Plays* was transcendental self-reliance raised to the *n*th degree.

EMERSON'S *BRAHMA*: AN INDIAN INTERPRETATION

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OLIVER Wendell Holmes, described Emerson's *Brahma*, as "the nearest approach to a Torricellian vacuum of intelligibility that language can pump out of itself." The style of the poem and the philosophical ideas packed into it are capable of mystifying even the most intelligent western reader who is not acquainted with the Indian literature which Emerson read, and the Indian philosophical concepts which he had assimilated. Today, thanks to the studies made by a number of distinguished American scholars including W. T. Harris, D. L. Maulsby, W. S. Kennedy, F. I. Carpenter, and A. E. Christy, there is a greater understanding of the poem by the average reader in America. This article is prompted by the hope that American students of Emerson might welcome an interpretation by an Indian, who has some acquaintance with the writings of Emerson along with a knowledge of the possible sources of the famous poem.

First, a word of explanation about the title. Even a scholar as well informed as F. I. Carpenter has misunderstood its significance. A note on the poem in his edition of the works of Emerson remarks: "In *Brahma* the 'I' is the impersonal creative energy of the universe."¹ This is not correct. In Hindu philosophy, God is often represented as a Trinity. The three aspects of Godhead comprising the Trinity are the creative, the preservative, and the destructive. God the Creator is termed Brahma; God the Preserver is Vishnu; and God the Destroyer is designated Siva. Carpenter obviously mistakes the "Brahma" of Emerson's poem to be God the Creator, who is one of the Trinity. The subject of the poem is not

¹ *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Selections* (New York, 1934), 451.

Brahma the Creator, but Brahman, the Absolute or the Universal Soul whom Emerson himself terms elsewhere the "Oversoul." The correct title of the poem ought to have been *Brahman* and not *Brahma*.

The "red slayer" is Siva the Destroyer. The term "red slayer" is a literal translation of "Rudra," one of the names by which Siva is known. *Rudra* is a Sanskrit word derived from *rudhira* which means *red*. The English words *red* and *ruddy* are actually cognate with Sanskrit *rudhira*. One significant fact to be noted regarding Siva the Destroyer is that, although regarded as the agent of dissolution, he is called "Siva" meaning, "the Auspicious One." This name is symbolic of the Hindu's attitude to what appears to be death or dissolution. Nothing can be really destroyed or dissolved because all that exists in the universe has proceeded from Brahman. Since Brahman is without end, everything that originates from Brahman is also deathless. What Siva, therefore, does is not to kill or dissolve, but merely to translate. "Since it is subject to the eternal power of Brahman, the universe is part of a beginningless and endless process, which alternates between the two phases of potentiality and expression. When, at the end of a time-cycle, or kalpa, the universe is dissolved, it passes into a phase of potentiality, a seed-state, and thus awaits its next creation."²

"The subtle ways I keep, and pass, and turn again" are the ways in which the Absolute Soul regulates the cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. In the ninth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna how he regulates and controls the wheel of change without getting involved Himself:

Understand that all things rest in me, as the mighty air, which passeth everywhere, resteth for ever in the aetherial space. At the end of the period *kalp* all things, O son of *Koontee*, return into my primordial source, and at the beginning of another *kalp* I create them all again.³

The central idea in the second and third stanzas of *Brahma* is not so much the unity of the universe as opposed to its apparent diversity, but the reality behind Illusion or Maya. The phenomena which the senses of man perceive are the works of Maya, but the

² *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (A Mentor Religious Classic) Appendix 1: page 132.

³ *The Bhagvat-Geeta*, translated by Charles Wilkins (London, 1785).

wise man alone realizes that behind all these phenomena there is the unchanging reality of Brahman. The *Swetaswatara Upanishad* says:

Thou art Lord and master of Maya,
 Man is her slave.
 With Maya uniting, thou hast brought forth the universe;
 The source of all scriptures thou art,
 And the source of all creeds.
 The Universe is thy Maya;
 And thou, great God, her lord,
 Wherever the eye falls
 There, within every form,
 Thou dwellest.⁴

The last stanza of Emerson's poem contains philosophical ideas which might well puzzle the western reader because of their novelty and riddle-like, epigrammatic language. The "strong gods" who pine for the abode of Brahman are the "devas" of Hindu cosmology, an order of celestial beings akin to angels, who are superior to human beings in their nature and powers and are also immortal, but are as much the creatures of Brahman as human beings are. Salvation for the gods also means reunion with Brahman, and for that reason they too pine for Brahma's abode. The "sacred seven" are the "Sapta Rishis" or seven sages celebrated in Hindu religious literature for their quest of God through austerities and penance. They are said to "pine in vain" because realization of God does not come as easily through the observance of religious rites and the mortification of the flesh as through spontaneous surrender to the Divine Will. The *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* frequently refer to the superiority of such surrender and simple piety to elaborate ritual and sacrifices. In Chapter VIII of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says:

The scriptures declare that merit can be acquired by studying the Vedas, performing ritualistic sacrifices, practising austerities and giving alms. But the yogi who has understood this teaching of mine will gain more than any who do these things. He will reach that universal source which is the uttermost abode of God.⁵

⁴ The *Upanishads*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick March, Mentor Series, 125.

⁵ *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, 78.

The last two lines of the poem contain an apparent paradox. Actually there is no paradox because salvation or repose in Brahman is not identical with heaven. The highest end of any created being is to be reunited with Brahman. Emerson carefully spells "heaven" with a small "h." The heaven mentioned by the poet is a place where there is ease and plenty and freedom from pain. This place may be attained by any person who performs good deeds. The attainment of this heaven, however, does not mean salvation or freedom from the chain of birth and rebirth. A person who has accumulated merit by good deeds without at the same time realizing Brahman, enjoys the pleasures of heaven for a period proportionate to the merit he has won, but at the end of the period he has to return to Earth and get once again entangled in the net of Maya and become subject to birth and death. The yogi, "the meek lover of the good" who realizes Brahman, is superior to the devas or the rishis who think in terms of ritual and penance, and he attains salvation more easily than they do. He can, therefore, turn his back on mere heaven which is the portion reserved for less worthy people. This idea frequently occurs in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The following passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* will serve as an illustration:

They that are versed | In the triple Veda, | Worshipping me | With
the rites appointed, | Drinking the wine | Of the gods' communion,
| Cleansed from their sinning: | These men pray | For passage to
heaven, | Thus attaining | The realm of Indra, | Home of the
happy; | There they delight | In celestial pleasures. | Pleasures more
spacious | Than any earthly | They taste awhile, | Till the merit
that won them | Is all exhausted: | Then they return | To the world
of mortals.⁶

Regarding the sources from which Emerson derived the ideas contained in the poem, Harris considered the *Bhagavad Gita* as the source; Maulsby thought that the *Laws of Menu* and the *Katha Upanishad* provided all the material; Kennedy concluded that Emerson used R er's rendering of the *Katha Upanishad* in *Bibliotheca Indica*. The main ideas embodied in Emerson's poem are as follows:

1. The slayer who thinks he slays and the slain who thinks he is slain, are both mistaken.

⁶ *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, Chapter IX, 82-83.

2. Far and near, shadow and sunlight, shame and fame, the doubter's doubt and the Brahmin's hymn, are all the same to Brahman.
3. The gods and the sages pine for Brahman's abode.
4. The meek lover of the good finds God more easily than the gods and the sages.
5. The attainment of mere heaven through the performance of rites, etc. is a contemptible reward compared with the realization of God.

There is authentic evidence to show that Emerson read English translations of the *Laws of Menu*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, and many other important books of the Hindus. Even the particular translations which he used have been ascertained. But a perusal of these editions cannot lead to any conclusive result for the simple reason that in philosophical treatises like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, ideas and images recur as frequently as in the different Gospels of the New Testament. A passage which occurs in one chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* sometimes occurs in other chapters with very little difference in style. In some cases a passage found in the *Bhagavad Gita* is an echo of another from one of the *Upanishads*. If Emerson had bodily lifted some passage from the original with little modification into his poem, it would have been easy to identify his source. But the poet has done nothing of the kind.

We have already mentioned three Hindu books which could have provided Emerson with all the material that he uses in the poem. There is hardly any passage in the *Laws of Menu* which has fairly close resemblance with any passage in *Brahma*. But there are several passages both in the *Upanishads* and in the *Bhagavad Gita* which give expression to the ideas incorporated by Emerson in his poem, in language which has the same ring as the language of the poem.

The *Katha Upanishad* could have supplied the poet with the ideas numbered 1, 2 and 4 in the list already given. Idea 1 is dealt with in the following passage in the *Katha Upanishad*:

If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain.⁷

These words are spoken by Yama, the King of Death, to Nachiketas in response to the latter's request, "Teach me, O King, I

⁷ The *Upanishads*, Mentor Series, 18.

beseech thee, whatsoever thou knowest to be beyond right and wrong, beyond cause and effect, beyond past, present, and future.”

The second idea in our list is contained in the same *Upanishad* immediately below the passage about the slayer and the slain. Here are the relevant sentences from the translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester:

Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. . . . Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. . . . Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting, he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. . . .⁸

Part of the fourth line, viz., that the “meek lover of the good” realizes God more easily than the gods and “the Sacred Seven” is embodied in the following passage which immediately follows the extracts quoted above:

The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known.

While the *Katha Upanishad* could have been the source from which Emerson derived the three ideas discussed above, the *Bhagavad Gita* could have provided all the five ideas in *Brahma*.

The delusion of the slayer and the slain is mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the second chapter, verse 19:

The man who believeth that it is the soul which killeth, and he who thinketh that the soul may be destroyed, are both alike deluded; for it neither killeth nor is it killed.⁹

The second idea, that near and far, etc., are all the same to Brahman is discussed in the ninth chapter of the *Gita*:

I am the generation and dissolution; the place where all things are repositied, and the inexhaustible seed of all nature. I am sunshine and I am rain. I now draw in, and now let forth. I am death and immortality; I am entity and non-entity.¹⁰

One passage in which the third idea occurs has already been quoted. It occurs again towards the close of Chapter XI of the *Gita*. Krishna, after exhibiting His Universal Form to Arjuna says:

⁸ The *Upanishads*, Mentor Series, 18.

⁹ Translation by Charles Wilkins, published 1785.

¹⁰ Translation by Charles Wilkins.

That Shape of mine which you have seen is very difficult to behold.
Even the devas themselves are always longing to see it.¹¹

In an earlier passage in the same chapter, Arjuna ecstatically describing the Beautiful Vision which he has just beheld, says:

Into you, the companies of devas
Enter with clasped hands, in dread and wonder.
Crying "Peace" the Rishis and the Siddhas
Sing your praise with hymns of adoration.¹²

The fourth idea, that simple piety is superior to austerities and rites is expressed in verse 46 in the sixth chapter of the *Gita*:

The *yogee* is more exalted than *Tapaswees*, those zealots who harass themselves in performing penances, respected above the learned in science, and superior to those who are attached to moral works;¹³

The verses in the *Gita* which mention the heaven attained through the study of the scriptures and the performance of rites, and stress its worthlessness as compared with the glory of realizing Brahman, have been quoted earlier in the course of this article.

Emerson could have drawn all the material used in the poem from the *Bhagavad Gita*; he could have derived three of the five ideas from the *Katha Upanishad*. As the immediate source and inspiration, the passage from the *Katha Upanishad* seems to be the more likely, partly because of the closer similarity in style and partly because all the three ideas are contained in contiguous passages. The two other ideas might then be considered as echoes from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Our preoccupation with the sources should not, however, blind us to the fact that Emerson was not a mere paraphraser. The poem *Brahma* is a perfect artistic whole, and an admirable example of thorough assimilation. If there is a poem in the English language which not only breathes the spirit of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* but reproduces the cadence, the rhythm and the terseness of the Sanskrit of these scriptures, it is Emerson's *Brahma*.

¹¹ Translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood.

¹² *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, Chapter XI, 93.

¹³ Translation by Charles Wilkins, 1785.