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ORIENTAL PHILOSOPHY IN EMERSON'S POETRY

A Paper

Submitted to the Council of the College of Basic Education, University of Babylon in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Education in English Language

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Dedication

To my respectful family

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to acknowledge the contribution of my supervisor Asst. Prof. **Hadeel Aziz Mohammed** and all my teachers whose guidance and support from the initial level to the final level has enabled me to develop an understanding of the subject. I must acknowledge as well the many friends and colleagues who assisted, advised and supported me to carry out my research.

ABSTRACT

The paper explores and critically examines how the Vedic thought with specific reference to Brahma, the Bhagavad Gita, and the laws of Karma have influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson's prose works. The project shows an analysis of Emerson's works in relation to the Vedic philosophy.

Therefore, criticisms and readings on his essays build up the background to illustrate the claim. The paper also demonstrates that there has been an impetus of Eastern philosophy on western writers including Ralph Waldo Emerson. The amalgam of Eastern philosophy and western vision beautifies the texture of this article. The readers will benefit from the knowledge of American transcendentalism.

Key Words: Brahma, Karma, Philosophy, Emerson, Transcendentalism

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The impetus of the Vedic literature on American transcendentalism is what the research aims to justify. The Eastern philosophy has been serving as a source of knowledge for the Western thinkers and philosophers, like Ralph Waldo Emerson. He accepts, "I owed a magnificent day to the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence . . . (Emerson, 1914). Henry David Thoreau read extensively the Vedic texts.

Besides, he also read "Shakuntalam", "Vishnupuran", "Haribansa", etc. He is said to have given "oriental wisdom an occidental shrine". Another American transcendentalist, Walt Whitman, was also greatly influenced by the Vedic thought. Emerson termed Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" a blending of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the New York Herald .

1.1 Emerson: Life and Works

Cascade Mountains, where he often climbed with friends and colleagues, the same mountains that later claimed the life of his teenage son. It was at the University of Washington that he completed his first major theoretical papers on social exchange theory, written in 1967 and later published (1972) in a volume on sociological theories in progress. While this work came to fruition at the University of Washington, the earliest seeds of the theory were evident in his PhD thesis and in two of his most influential pieces, on power-dependence relations, published in 1962 and 1964, just before he left the University of Cincinnati. The 1962 paper,

entitled "Power-Dependence Relations," became a citation classic in 981 due to its enormous influence. We trace some of the influence of this work on the social sciences in the section on the intellectual impact of his work, The tragedy of his life, which began with the death of his son, Marc, followed him throughout his life. He and Par endured the loss of friends and loved ones, most associated with the tight-knit community of mountain climbers in the Pacific Northwest or with their friends in the remote villages of Pakistan, where the deaths of sherpas were common, but never easy to accept.

In fact, during the last year of his life he was deeply engaged in planning for a return trip to Pakistan for a long sojourn in remote mountain villages with his wife. In many ways he was just reaching the peak of his career when he died suddenly on the evening before his daughter, Leslie, was to be married in their living room, with the Cascades looming in the background. Cancer surgery a year earlier had taken its toll, but his death was unexpected. For a career cut short by premature death, the impact of his work can be judged as even more impressive. His collaborative work with Karen Cook at the University of Washington was just beginning to show fruits, and the graduate students they jointly trained, including Mary Gillmore and Toshio Yamagishi, among others, were just beginning their research careers. It is clear that the impact of his work in the social sciences would have been even greater if he had not died in his late fifties.

Barbara Tetenbaum, “Collage Book #3”
1987, 11 cm x width 6.5 cm, Portland, OR: Triangular Press

One gets a clear image of the heart and soul of Richard Emerson in a pass..ge he wrote in the early stages of his career for a book entitled The New Professors, by Bowen (1960). In this chapter he writes about his love of mountains:

Some of the things I appreciate most for sheer beauty are high alpine mountains, their winding valley glaciers, and foreboding corniced ridges. I love to feel them

beneath my feet, when climbing, as well as view them as a painter might.... As I ascend the mountain, I can... read from its contours its past and its future, and my climb is placed in grand context. In fact, through the whole experience I am placed in context! And, mind you, people ask me why I climb mountains.

1.2 Influences on Emerson :

Both during his lifetime and since his death, Emerson's reputation and influence have been enormous. Unlike his contemporary and friend Thoreau, Emerson was acknowledged during his own time as a major thinker and author and as the central proponent of Transcendental philosophy. Because Emerson's efforts straddled a number of disciplines — among them literature, philosophy, theology, psychology, education, and social commentary — critics and scholars have been anything but unified in assessing the nature of his most important contributions to American thought and letters. Emerson's writings are so encompassing that they have permitted a wide variety of approaches to their study and understanding. To a large degree, particular reviewers and scholars have expressed the concerns of their own major areas of interest in examining Emerson's work. But if Emerson's importance has been widely recognized, few commentators have accepted all aspects of his work as valid, and some — even those who admit his tremendous appeal — have denied that he was a great writer of prose or poetry. Nevertheless, the vast body of literature about Emerson attests to his influence.

The first monographic treatment of Emerson, George Searle Phillips' Emerson, italics for it hles ("by January Searle") was published in London in 1855, more than twenty-five years before its subject's death. The first biography of Emerson, George Willis Cooke's Ralph Waldo Emerson, appeared in 1881. Cooke also

prepared the first separate bibliography of Emerson's writings (A Bibliography of Ralph Waldo Emerson, published in 1908).

Smith, Grover. T. S. Eliot’s Poetry and Plays. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.

Reviews of Emerson's writings, articles about him, bibliographies of his work and of secondary sources, biographies, specialized discussions of aspects of his thought, and critical articles and books number in the thousands. Moreover, Emerson is considered in every history of American literature and overall treatment of New England Transcendentalism. It is consequently difficult to discuss Emerson's reputation and influence briefly, except in the most general terms.

Throughout his life, Emerson's thought and work generated mixed reactions — sometimes entirely positive or negative, but more often a combination of the two. Many found aspects of his approach radical and unsettling, even when they were moved by his optimism about man's place in the universe. This dichotomy is found in writings by those of Emerson's contemporaries inclined to defend Transcendentalism as well as by those who had no particular sympathy with it. When Nature appeared in 1836, for example, Orestes Brownson (the only thing, editor, reviewer, and writer about it in the September 10, 1836, issue of the Boston Reformer. He opened the piece, "This is a singular book. It is the creation of a mind that lives and moves in the Beautiful, and has the power of assimilating to itself whatever it sees, hears, or touches. We cannot analyze it; whoever would form an idea of it must read it." He proclaimed the book "the forerunner of a new class of books, the harbinger of a new literature as much superior to whatever has

been, as our political institutions are superior to those of the Old World." Having defined Nature as "aesthetical rather than philosophical," Brownson went on to question the logical soundness of Emerson's denial of the existence of nature as a reality independent of spirit and the human mind: "He all but worships what his senses seem to present him, and yet is not certain that all that which his senses place out of him, is not after all the mere subjective laws of his own being, existing only to the eye, not of a necessary, but of an irresistible Faith."

The more conservative Francis Bowen, a critic of Transcendentalism, likewise admitted the power of Nature, but expressed a number of reservations. In a lengthy review ("Transcendentalism," written for the January 1837 issue of The Christian Examiner), Bowen stated, "We find beautiful writing and sound philosophy in this little work; but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer's whole course of thought." He continued:

The highest praise that can be accorded to it, is, that it is a suggestive book, for no one can read it without tasking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into fits of severe meditation.

Vanheste, Jeroen. “The Idea of Europe.” T. S. Eliot in Context. Ed. JasonHarding. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. 52-59.

But the effect of perusal is often painful, the thoughts excited are frequently bewildering, and the results to which they lead us, uncertain and obscure. The reader feels as in a disturbed dream, in which shows of surpassing beauty are around him, and he is conversant with disembodied spirits, yet all the time he is

harassed by an uneasy sort of consciousness, that the whole combination of phenomena is fantastic and unreal.

Bowen charged Emerson with offending good taste, and pointed out that there was nothing original in his ideas. He characterized Transcendentalism as "a revival of the Old Platonic school," and criticized the "self-complacency" of Romantic writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his "English adherents," who were major influences on Emerson and the Transcendentalists. Samuel Osgood, writing for The Western Messenger (January 1837), pointed to the peculiar power of Nature to stir the philosophically unsympathetic as well as devotees of Transcendentalism:

The work is a remarkable one, and it certainly will be called remarkable by those, who consider it "mere moonshine" as well as those, who look upon it with reverence, as the effusion of a prophet-like mind. Whatever may be thought of the merits, or of the extravagances of the book, no one, we are sure, can read it, without feeling himself more wide awake to the beauty and meaning of Creation.

But the generally enthusiastic Osgood could not overlook what he perceived as Emerson's lack of conclusive logic in argument. And Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, herself in many ways the consummate Transcendentalist, in a favorable review of Magazine and Democratic Review (February 1838), urged Emerson to write another book to clarify the philosophy that the reader could only understand "by glimpses" in Nature, and to expand upon certain of his religious ideas. To a greater or lesser degree, the reviews of Nature set the tone for the contemporary critical reaction to much of Emerson's later work. Commentators responded to his rhetorical prose and to his philosophical idealism with a sense of exhilaration, which was offset by reservations about the soundness of his philosophy and of his religious views, the derivation of his ideas from German and English writers, his logic, his mysticism, his perceived vagueness, and sometimes the aesthetics of his poetry and his prose. Two of the most commonly appreciated aspects of Emerson's

work were his ability to inspire others, to serve as a springboard from which others might attain heights of thought and expression, and his optimism. Respected American critic James Russell Lowell (who in his 1848 satirical poem A Fable for Critics had poked fun at Emerson as an idealistic/pragmatic "mystagogue") vigorously underscored Emerson's inspirational quality in his 1871 My Study Windows: "We look upon him as one of the few men of genius whom our age has produced, and there needs no better proof of it than his masculine faculty of fecundating other minds. Search for eloquence in his books and you will perchance miss it, but meanwhile you will find that it has kindled your thoughts." British poet and literary and social critic Matthew Arnold, who lectured on Emerson in Boston in 1883 and published his lecture in his Discourses on America (1885), denied that Emerson was a great poet, a great man of letters, or a great philosophical writer, but found him insightful, perceptive of truth, and admirable in his inspirational optimism. Arnold wrote: "the secret of his effect . . . is in his temper. It is in the hopeful, serene, beautiful temper. . . . [F]or never had man such a sense of the inexhaustibleness of nature, and such hope."

Emerson's death in 1882 generated a flurry of printed paeans attesting to his greatness. Then, beginning with Matthew Arnold's 1883 lecture, critics began to consider the man's major contributions more objectively. As during his life, posthumous opinions varied about what kind of thinker he was and about his effectiveness as a writer. Walt Whitman, whose Leaves of Grass echoed Emerson, wrote about him, as did (from various points of view) Henry James, William James, John Dewey, D. H. Lawrence, George Santayana, and many others who achieved recognition and influence through their own work. A range of important twentieth-century American scholars — Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, and Lewis Mumford among them — examined Emerson's work and assessed his significance. Religious thinkers and historians have analyzed his role in the

development of Unitarianism. Today, a number of scholars are at work on critical, intellectual, biographical, and bibliographical studies of Emerson, as well as on authoritative editions of his writings.

Asher, Kenneth. *T. S. Eliot and Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridg
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1.3 Philosophy of the East:

The ideas and philosophy of Emerson's prose Vedas are by works. Emerson writes in his essay "Nature" that "When a faithful thinker, unyielding to detach every objectfrom personal relations, and see it in the light of thought, shall, at all same time, kindlescience with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation."The Rig Veda mentions about detached and attached Karma as follows:

Like two birds of beautiful wings, there are two spirits i.e. the finite and the supreme. Andthey both are knit together in the relation of pervaded and pervader but with bonds of friendship. Like the birds, the soul and Great Soul reside on the same tree i.e. of the matter.This tree is also eternal like God. One of the twin i.e. the finite spirit or soul enjoys thesweet and ripe fruit of Karma produced by its actions, whereas the other i.e. the SupremeSpirit or God simply observes around as an omniscient without enjoying its fruitage.(Mandala I, Hymn 164, Mantra 20)Emerson states in "Nature" about the stars, the preachers of beauty, which come out everynight and "light the universe with their admonishing smile". He further writes about thenature and says, "What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences,this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? Thiszodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this four fold year?" These expressions of him about the

nature have received impacts from the Vedicdescriptions of nature. Vedic picturesque descriptions of azure oceans can be observed withconstant rhythmical reverberant waves beating against the shore, the lustrous firmamentwith illuminating stars, the snow-clad mountains with loftiest peaks gazing with utterastonishment, murmuring rivers chanting divine hymns that flow towards the ocean in questof divinity.

Luminous sun spreads bright rays of golden hues, fascinating earth consisting ofheights, slopes, and plains, bearing in her bosom the precious herbs, which possess healingpowers. It radiates dawn spreading gorgeous beams in the radiant void of the sky to awakenthe seekers of truth, birds of beauteous wings and lovely plumage, melodious music of theretreating waves, transparent drops of dews glimmering with hidden divinity, fascinating fountains bursting into sweetest melodies, soothing rhythm of the water falls, roaring cloudswith pouring rains, etc (Talreja, 1982).Emerson mentions in "The Over-Soul"," . . .great nature in which we rest, as the earthlies in the soft arms of the atmosphere: that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man'sparticular being is contained and made one with all other." The Rig Veda has similar ideas inits Mandala I, Hymn II, and Mantra I, which reads like this, "The Lord is diffused on everyside like the ocean, who is the Supreme Charioteer and master of the souls possessing thechariots in the form of bodies."

The influence of the Upanishads on Emerson's essays appears at large. Emersonexpresses in "Experience", "God says to man, 'you will not expect' . . . All writing comes bythe grace of God and all doing and having . . . I can see nothing at last, in success or failure,than more or less of vital force supplied from the Eternal.

Sardar M. Anwaruddin. "Emerson’s Passion for Indian Thought." International Journal of Literatureand Arts. Vol. 1, No. 1, 2013, pp. 1-6

The results of life are incalculatedand incalculable." The Isa Upanishad (Mantra 2) already mentioned similar ideas, "Bydoing karma, indeed, should one wish to live here for a hundred years . . . Karma may not cling to you". The Gita's famous verse (Shankhya Yoga, Verse 47) addressed to warriorArjuna by Lord Krishna had it, "Seek to perform your duty; but lay not claim to its fruits. Beyou not the producer of the fruits of karma; neither shall you lean towards inaction."Similarly, many studies have been on Emerson's works that demonstrate the impactsof the Vedic literature on his writings. Scholars view on his writings ranging from variousaspects including impetus of the Eastern philosophy. Swami B.G. Narasingha mentions inan article that an intellectual movement flourishing in the United States from 1839 to 1866known as transcendentalism was run by members of the Transcendental Club or Circle, theprominent members of which were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, JamesFreeman Clark, Amos Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller. "Their collective achievement inthe quality of style and in-depth philosophical insight has yet to be surpassed in Americanliterature. And their major influence, without exception, was the Vedic literatures of India."Emerson greatly appreciated Vedantic literatures. His (and Thoreau's) writings containmany thoughts from Vedic philosophy.

The Heart of Emerson’s Journals. Ed. Bliss Perry. Minneola, NY: Dover Press, 1995.pp.56

CHAPTER TWO: ESSAYS

2.1 "The Over Soul" :

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She mentions, "Emerson understood how the Vedic ideas influenced the Greeks and Romans and shows how Emerson used Greek and Latin sources to convey the Vedic concepts" (Kasturi, Transcendentalism). Likewise, a research with the theme of "The Voice of an Old Intelligence", which is available at the University of Hong Kong Libraries, states that Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman "set the template for American Veda.

They absorbed Vedic ideas and adapted them to their own thoughts. . . Every high school or college student who reads Emerson's essays or Thoreau's Walden or Whitman's Leaves of Grass is getting a taste of India, whether they know it or not"

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and religious thought (Riepe, 1967). Three basic concepts ofBrahma, namely, formed and formless Brahma, Atman, and Maya, exerted much influenceon Emerson's writings (1-6). However, his findings tell very little about the concordance andcontrast between the Emersonian transcendentalism and Vedic sublimity. In yet anotherarticle, Sardar compares the Emersonian and Tagorian perspectives and remarks:

Nonetheless, an intellectual correspondence between these two writers is surprisinglyidentifiable. Both of them share many common grounds. For instance, they reject blindformalism in religion and strive to reach for an original and direct relationship with God.Relying on intuition, they establish an idealistic philosophy and maintain their belief inidealism throughout their lives. In addition, both of them depend heavily on Indianphilosophical and religious thought for knowledge and inspiration. (19)American Transcendentalism Web mentions that Emerson is the Supreme Critic on theerrors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that greatnature in which we rest. The earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, thatOver-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with allother. Common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all rightaction is submission that overpowers reality which confutes our tricks and talents andconstrains everyone to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character. We live insuccession, 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; theeternal ONE. In addition, the deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude all-accessible to us is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing andthe thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see theworld piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of whichthese are the shining parts, is the soul

Mclean, Andrew M. Emerson's Brahma as an Expressionof Brahman .The New England Quarterly Vol. 42, No. 1(M ar., 1969), p p . 115-122

2.2 "Brahma":

Brahma was one of Emerson's best poems, whichwas written in the summer of 1856, and initially publishedin the first issue of the Atlantic Monthly 1 (November1857). However, at first the draft of the poem was titledSong of the Soul in one of his notebook. In 1845, Emersoncopied in his journal a source for the poem, a passage fromthe The Vishnu Purana: "What living creature slays or isslain? What living creature preserves or is preserved? Eachis his own destroyer or preserver, as he follows evil ofgood"[1]464. Very similar passages occurred in the KathaUpanishad and the Bhagavad- Gita. "It should also benoted that Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreauwere indebted to Oriental mysticism as embodied in suchHindu works as Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita and to thedoctrine and philosophy of the Chinese Confucius andMencius"[2]58 Here it was clear that Emerson must haveread some classical Hindu works, especially theUpanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, which exerted greatinfluence on him. And he also knew of Hindu Brahmanism,for he called himself the Brahmin in the poem. "This poemreveals a sympathetic understanding of Hindumythology"[3]Brahmanism was polytheistic and mysterious, andworshiped the power of nature, offering sacrifices andgiving prayers to gods in order to invite blessings andavoid disasters. Brahmins were "members of the highestHindu caste, originally also priests; responsible forofficiating at religious rites and studying and teaching the Vedas"[1]38 In Brahmanism, Brahma was the Creator of allthings in the universe, part of the trinity with Vishnu (theprotector) and Shiva(the destroyer). And Brahman wasregarded as the essence, or "soul," of the universe.Therefore, the

three words Brahmin, Brahma and Brahmanwere closely related to one another. This poem had astrong religious connotation, in which Emerson assumedthe persona of Brahma, the Creator in Brahmanism. As aTranscendentalist, Emerson firmly asserted the existenceof an ideal spiritual state that transcended the physical andempirical and is only realized through the individual'sintuition, rather than through human knowledge,experience and reason, and this ideal spiritual state hecalled the Oversoul, which best embodied Emerson’sconception of Transcendentalism. In this sense, theOversoul was in essence the same as Brahman. This paperis a tentative analysis of the poem in terms of its contentand artistic form from the perspective ofTranscendentalism.

Chandrasekharan.K. R.. Emerson's Brahma: An IndianInterpretation. The New England QuarterlyVol. 33, No. 4

CONCLUSION

When it is read in an Emersonian fashion and with self-reliance, similar difficulties inescapably present themselves. However, the close and active role that as readers of whole histories of thought in text—where the work is vivified and readers' experiences are ratified—is the key to nurturing self-reliance in ourselves and in others, for the misleading deficiencies in the external world have been made outmoded.

There are certainly hints along the way of a more naturalistic and practical, mysterious doctrine which yet speaks Emerson’s characteristic religious language. “The soul which animates Nature,” he says in “Behavior,” “is not less significantly published in the figure, movement, and gesture of animated bodies, than in its last vehicle of articulate speech.” The moral idealist is a shrewd literary viewer of manners and deportment; and the

focus on intuition arising overtly from nature is balanced by fine efforts to construe human society. Early on, Emerson's writings depended on the natural surroundings, since a reorientation and adaptation of traditional European thought was required in the new

American environment. However, in his later writings, Emerson is more concerned with culture, religion, and philosophies. After all, the article has revealed how the Indian thoughts have influenced Emerson's prose works.

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