

Transcendentalism Reflected in Emerson's Poem *Brahma*

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Abstract— *Brahma* is one of Emerson's famous lyric poems, in which Emerson, assuming the role of Brahma, expresses his idea that human beings can perfect themselves morally and spiritually only through the realization of the Brahman. This article is a tentative study of the poem in terms of its artistic form and its connotation from the perspective of Transcendentalism.

Keywords— Emerson, Brahma, Transcendentalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Brahma was one of Emerson's best poems, which was written in the summer of 1856, and initially published in the first issue of *the Atlantic Monthly* 1 (November 1857). However, at first the draft of the poem was titled *Song of the Soul* in one of his notebook. In 1845, Emerson copied in his journal a source for the poem, a passage from the *The Vishnu Purana*: "What living creature slays or is slain? What living creature preserves or is preserved? Each is his own destroyer or preserver, as he follows evil of good"^[1]⁶⁴. Very similar passages occurred in the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. "It should also be noted that Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau were indebted to Oriental mysticism as embodied in such Hindu works as *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita* and to the doctrine and philosophy of the Chinese Confucius and Mencius"^[2]⁵⁸ Here it was clear that Emerson must have read some classical Hindu works, especially the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which exerted great influence on him. And he also knew of Hindu Brahmanism, for he called himself the Brahmin in the poem. "This poem reveals a sympathetic understanding of Hindu mythology"^[3]

Brahmanism was polytheistic and mysterious, and worshiped the power of nature, offering sacrifices and giving prayers to gods in order to invite blessings and avoid disasters. Brahmins were "members of the highest Hindu caste, originally also priests; responsible for officiating at religious rites and studying and teaching the

Vedas"^[1]³⁸ In Brahmanism, Brahma was the Creator of all things in the universe, part of the trinity with Vishnu (the protector) and Shiva (the destroyer). And Brahman was regarded as the essence, or "soul," of the universe. Therefore, the three words Brahmin, Brahma and Brahman were closely related to one another. This poem had a strong religious connotation, in which Emerson assumed the persona of Brahma, the Creator in Brahmanism. As a Transcendentalist, Emerson firmly asserted the existence of an ideal spiritual state that transcended the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through human knowledge, experience and reason, and this ideal spiritual state he called the Oversoul, which best embodied Emerson's conception of Transcendentalism. In this sense, the Oversoul was in essence the same as Brahman. This paper is a tentative analysis of the poem in terms of its content and artistic form from the perspective of Transcendentalism.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF EMERSON AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

2.1. Life of Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803—1882) was a well known American thinker, prose writer and poet in the 19th century. He was born into a priest's family in Boston. When he was 8 years old, his father died, and his family was soon in poverty. Before the age of 14, in order to accumulate tuition for admission to university, he got a

position as a waiter in a middle school canteen. He had to did part-time job while studying. He was admitted to Harvard College in 1817. After graduation in 1821, he taught at his brother's Boston Women's School until 1825. He became a pastor of Boston's Second Church in 1828 and preached as the pastor of Unitarianism. Later, because he disapproved of some doctrines of this sect, he abandoned this priesthood. In 1833, he traveled to Europe, visited Coleridge and Wordsworth, the pioneers of the Romantic Movement, and made friends with Carlyle. And at that time he was deeply influenced by Kant's transcendental philosophy. After returning home in 1836, he published his first important work, *Nature*, which focused on his transcendentalist view, and was later called the Manifesto of Transcendentalism. In the same year, he together with several like-minded writers began to meet occasionally to discuss theological, philosophical and literary issues, and published the comprehensive literary journal *The Dial*. On August 31, 1837, Emerson attended the American College Students' Fellowship Association and delivered a speech on the American Scholar, which was regarded as "America's Declaration of Intellectual Independence". During the American Civil War, he actively opposed slavery in the South and supported John Brown's actions. In a speech, he publicly called himself an abolitionist. In 1862, he delivered a speech entitled "American Civilization". On April 27, 1882, he died of illness in his home town of Concord, less than a month before his 80th birthday.

2.2. A brief introduction to Transcendentalism

New England Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement flourishing in New England in the 1830s. Emerson, like other Transcendentalists, emphasized that spirit or the Oversoul was the most important thing in the universe. He believed that the universe was made up of nature and soul. High above nature and the individual soul, there existed an ideal spiritual entity that could make the mind perceive the beauty of nature, and it was infinite, serene, invisible, imperishable, immutable, formless, and existed in the hearts of all the individuals. This Emerson called the Oversoul, which was the source of everything in the universe. Emerson regarded nature as a symbol of Spirit or God, a cloak or shadow of the supernatural. In nature, one

could feel the existence of the Oversoul and communicate with it spiritually. He believed that nature had its inherent value, that man was a part of it, and that returning to nature was the fundamental way to realize one's self-perfection. "The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other"^{[1]163}

III. ARTISTIC FEATURES OF THE POEM

3.1. Structure

This poem consists of 4 stanzas. Each 4-line stanza constitutes a quatrain with some kind of metrical and rhyme pattern. As the rhyme scheme of each stanza is ABAB, it is called an alternate or interlaced quatrain. The theme of the poem is that human beings can exalt their spiritual realm only through the realization of the Brahman. Through the 4 quatrains Emerson reveals and expresses the theme of the 16-line poem.

3.2. Point of view

Point of view refers to the angle or the perspective a writer adopts to narrate or tell a story. There are altogether three kinds of points of view: first-person, second-person and third-person. Generally speaking, Emerson uses two kinds of points of view. He expresses his ideas in the voice of Brahma, so he presents the first 14 lines in the first-person point of view, and the last 2 lines in the second-person point of view.

3.3. Rhyme and meter

In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third line, and the second line rhymes with the fourth line: (slays / ways, slain / again, near / appear, same / fame, out / doubt, wings / sings, abode / good, seven / heaven). As for the meter, most of the lines are written in iambic tetrameter, and take some for example:

They **know** | not **well** | the **sub**tle **ways**

I **keep**, | and **pass**, | and **turn** | a **gain**.

The **va** | nished **gods** | to **me** | a **ppear**;

And **one** | to **me** | are **shame** | and **fame**.

Some of the lines are not in line with this pattern, e.g. line 1, 5, 6, 13, 14.

3.4. Rhetorical devices

Alliteration

If the red slayer think he slays, (line 1)
 Or if the slain think he is slain (lines 2)
 Shadow and sunlight are the same (line 6)
 When me they fly, I am the wings (line 10)
 I am the doubter and the doubt (line 11)
 And pine in vain the sacred Seven (line 14)

Symbolism

The strong gods pine for my abode (line 13)
 The word “abode” symbolizes the transcendence of the Brahman.

Find me, and turn thy back on heaven (line 16)
 In the word “heaven”, the letter “h” is not capitalized, which refers to the place where man is still bound by physical desires. So here “heaven” symbolizes the worldly life.

Paradox

Far or forgot to me is near; (line 5)
 Shadow and sunlight are the same; (line 6)
 The vanished gods to me appear; (line 7)
 And one to me are shame and fame. (line 8)

Metaphor

When me they fly, I am the wings (line 10)
 Emerson compares Brahma to a bird with wings.
 I am the doubter and the doubt (line 11)
 Brahman is compared to the doubter and the doubt itself.
 And I the hymn the Brahmin sings (line 12)
 Brahma is compared to a hymn.

IV. TRANSCENDENTALISM REFLECTED IN THE POEM

Emerson, in first stanza, got inspiration from *Bhagavad-Gita*. “Anyone who thinks the soul is the slayer and anyone who thinks the soul is the slain both of them are in ignorance; the soul never slays nor slain; The soul never takes birth and never dies at any time nor does it come into being again when the body is created. The soul is birthless, eternal, imperishable and timeless and is never destroyed when the body is destroyed; One who knows the soul as eternal, unborn, undeteriorating and indestructible; how does that person cause death to anyone and whom does he slay?” (19, 20, 21. Chapter 2 of *Bhagavad-Gita*).

Here, the red slayer refers to Siva the Destroyer. What he slays is the body, rather than the soul. And also what the slain loses is his body, but not his soul. In Brahmanism or Hinduism, Brahman is regarded as a powerful and mysterious force which dominates the world. It is the essence of the universe, and is the absolute or universal soul. All things originate from it. “The subject of the poem is not Brahma, the Creator, but Brahman, the Absolute or Universal Soul whom Emerson himself terms elsewhere ‘Oversoul’”^[4] In this sense, Brahman is the same as what Emerson called the Oversoul. Emerson, through the mouth of Brahma, complained of his fellow countrymen’s ignorance about the immortality of the soul. So he writes: “They know not well the subtle ways /I keep, and pass, and then turn again.” According to K. R. Chandrasekharan, “the subtle ways I keep, and pass, and then turn are ways in which the Absolute Soul regulates the circle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth.”^[4] What Emerson really means is to remind the people of his time to be aware of the transcendence of the Oversoul. Like Brahman, the Oversoul gives birth to all things in the universe, and regulates their birth, growth, death, and rebirth.

In the second stanza, Emerson grounds his idea that far is near, shadow is sunlight, to vanish is to appear, and shame is fame, etc, on the Hindu work *Bhagavad-Gita*: “I am generation and dissolution; the place where all things are reposed, 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”^[5]. These lines involve the idea of binary opposition, which is a philosophical way of thinking in the West, that is, the idea of “either this or that” or “either that or this”. On the level of empirical rationality, both sides of binary opposition are antagonistic and incompatible; on the level of transcendentalism, the two sides belong to Brahman or Oversoul that embraces all spiritual and natural phenomena. In Emerson’s eyes, people’s cognition of things is always limited. Different people have different opinions about the same thing. “One man’s justice is another’s injustice; one man’s beauty, another’s ugliness; one man’s wisdom, another’s folly; as one beholds the same objects from a higher point.”^[11]⁷⁹ Emerson thinks that the reason why every man supposes himself not to be fully understood is due to their cognitive limitations. “Men

cease to interest us when we find their limitations. The only sin is limitation. As soon as you once come up with a man's limitations, it is all over with him. Infinitely alluring and attractive was he to you yesterday, a great hope, a sea to swim in; now, you have found his shores, found it a pond, and you care not if you never see it again."^{[1]176} He holds that if there is any truth in every man, and if he rests on the divine soul or the Oversoul, then cognitive bias will be removed at last. According to Emerson, if a man reaches the height of the Oversoul or God, or becomes one with the Oversoul or God, everything is essentially the same. In *nature* he writes: "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God"^{[6]99} In this connection, from the perspective of Transcendentalism all things become one under the umbrella of Brahman or the Oversoul. "Emerson indicates the transcendent power of the Brahman to permeate every aspect of life, yet remain aloof of the world"^[3] Therefore he says in the voice of Brahma: "Far or forgot to me is near; /Shadow and sunlight are the same; /The vanished gods to me appear; /And one to me are shame and fame."

In the third stanza, Emerson continues to explore the nature of Brahman. From the first line "They reckon ill who leave me out", we know that Emerson, in the tone of Brahma, expresses his satisfaction with those who realize their wrong deeds in the past about their disbelief in the transcendence of the Brahman. They come to be aware of the importance of the existence of the Brahman, and to realize that it is blasphemous and sinful to leave the Brahman out. The poet calls on them not to forget the Brahman. "For one who sees Me everywhere and sees everything in Me, I am never forgotten by them and they are never forgotten by Me"(30, chapter 6 of *Bhagavad-Gita*). In the next line, the Brahman is visualized as something like a bird with wings. Evidently Emerson gets his creative inspiration from the *Upanishad*: "His eyes are everywhere; his face, his arms, his feet are in every place. Out of himself he has produced the heavens and the earth, and with his arms and his wings he holds them together"(*Svetasvatra Upanishad*, p 194). Emerson points out a proper way to those who want to be made one

with the Brahman or the Oversoul, and that way is to embark on the wings of Brahma and fly with Him, because Brahma says "When me they fly, I am the wings". Since one chooses to believe in Brahma, he should not care whether He is "the doubter and the doubt" or not, because He is "the hymn the Brahmin sings".

In the last stanza, "the strong gods", according to Hindu cosmology, refer to the devas (gods), who, like human beings, are creatures originating from the Brahman. "Edward Emerson identifies the strong gods as the Hindu gods Indra, god of the sky; Agni, god of fire; and Yama, god of death and judgment"^{[1]465} If they want to acquire their salvation, they must integrate themselves into the Brahman and must be made one with it. Therefore, they pine for the abode of Brahma. As for this, Emerson gets the inspiration from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "The scriptures declare that merit can be acquired by studying the Vedas, performing ritualistic sacrifices, practicing 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"^{[7]178} The sacred Seven, according to Hindu religious literature, refers to seven sages. According to Richard Poirier, the sacred Seven refers to the "Seven Seers" or Maharsis of ancient Hindu poetry, who are singers of the sacred songs. It is said that the sacred Seven "pine in vain" for the abode of Brahma because they attempt to commune spiritually with Brahma just through the observance of religious rites, and do not grasp the essence of the Brahman and keep it in mind. "Neither the demigods nor the great sages understand My divine transcendental appearance; because I am the original source of the demigods and of the great sages in every respect"(chapter 10 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*). So the realization of the Brahman can come easily through the mind, rather than through religious rites. "Mind alone can picture the indescribable Brahman; and mind alone, being swift in its nature, can follow Him. It is through the help of this mind that we can think and meditate on Brahman; and when by constant thought of Him the mind becomes purified, then like a polished mirror it can reflect His Divine Glory"^{[8]62} As for the last two lines, Emerson gets the inspiration from the *Upanishads*: "The good is one thing and the pleasant is another. These two, having

different ends, bind man. It is well with him who chooses the good. He who chooses the pleasant misses the true end"^[8]^[25]. Here "the good" means virtues or good deeds. "The pleasant" means bodily pleasure. In Emerson's eyes, the man who chooses the good will ascend into the imperishable spiritual realm, and the man who chooses the pleasure will descend into the perishable physical realm and miss the true purpose of his existence. Now pay attention to word "heaven". "h" is not capitalized, so it is quite different from Heaven in meaning. In this "heaven" man is still bound by physical desires while in the "Haven"(the abode of Brahma) man cast off all worldly desires. Just like what McLean said: "When man finds Brahman he is no longer subject to worldly desires, rebirth or the victim of the strong gods. The reason man will turn his back on heaven is because he is no longer subject to these lesser powers-he is now one with Brahman"^[3] Therefore, at the end of the poem Emerson writes: "But thou, meek lover of the good! /Find me, and turn thy back on heaven".

V. CONCLUSION

Brahma is one of Emerson's famous lyric poem originally entitled *Song of the Soul*. The poem is well written concerning its artistic form in terms of the use of rhyme, meter, point of view, and rhetorical devices. Emerson condenses his ideas into this short compact poem. It is evident that Emerson must have read such Hindu works as the *Upanishad* and *Baghavat-Gita*, for Brahma frequently appears in these Hindu religious literary works. When the poem got its first publication in the *Atlantic*, many American readers were bewildered at its paradoxical style and its exotic obscurity in meaning. In view of this, "Emerson told his daughter that one did not need to adopt a Hindu perspective to understand the poem. One could easily substitute 'Jehovah' for 'Brahma,' he explained, and not lose the sense of the verse."^[9] If Jehovah can be substituted for Brahma, then God or the Oversoul can also be substituted for Brahma or Brahman. On the basis of this point, we can discuss the connotation of this poem from the perspective of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism, as a religious, philosophical, and literary trend, attaches much importance to the spirit or the Oversoul. In this poem, according to Arthur Christy who is

an American author and critic, Emerson interpreted Brahma as "unchanging reality" in contrast to Maya, "the changing, illusory world of appearance." Brahma is infinite, serene, invisible, imperishable, immutable, formless, one and eternal. In this connection, Brahma and the Brahman in the East are relative in attributes to God and the Oversoul in the West. Here in the poem, Emerson, in the tone of Brahma, advocates his thought of the Oversoul or Transcendentalism. Therefore, his real intention to compose the poem is certain to awaken his contemporary fellow countrymen who are indulged in their frenzied pursuit of material wealth. He spares no effort to call on them to believe in the transcendence of the Oversoul and exalt their spiritual life.

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