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Emerson's Far Eastern Fascinations

Ralph Waldo Emerson is most of all seen as an optimistic philosopher, the father of American individualism, as designed in his essay "Self-Reliance," and perhaps of American identity in general. However, there are dark territories in his philosophy, as he had to face doubt and scepticism, especially in his later essays. His choice of an enthusiastic mood, whether conscious or unconscious, seems to have a therapeutic dimension. Emerson may be seen as writing against crisis, and persuading himself out of doubt. However, doubt or scepticism seems to be not the opposite of Emerson's assertive ideas but a direct consequence of them, especially of his understanding of individualism. His conception of man expands so much that it starts to encompass not only God but also the world, which perhaps would be acceptable to a twentieth-century postmodern philosopher, but which seems to get out of hand against the background of the mid-nineteenth-century thought. Thus, philosophy becomes to Emerson both a possible remedy and a source of his metaphysical problems. To some extent his interest in Hinduism and Buddhism provides an answer to his questions, but as Emerson has been formed by Western culture, he ends up rejecting the consolation epitomized by the Far East as insufficient.

Emerson read what was in his time available of Hindu thought, that is mostly the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Carpenter, "Immortality" 235),¹ and he is known to have had some acquaintance with Buddhist ideas, though only as late as in 1846 (Whicher 151), that is after having written the first and second series of his *Essays*, but before writing *The Conduct of Life*. However, already at the age of eighteen he was, as Frederick I. Carpenter puts it, an "orientalist" (*Handbook* 211), having at least some acquaintance with Far Eastern philosophies.² On the one hand, a direct inspiration can be easily seen in Emerson's poems and essays, where he adopts some philosophical ideas or cultural and religious emblems (like the exact Hindu terms, or names of gods and characters from what might be called the Hindu mythology). But what is even more striking, Emerson's own philosophical concepts, possibly preceding his study of the Far East, show a great deal of

¹ The *Bhagavad-Gita* is a part of the *Mahabharata* epic, framed as a war scene, but in fact consisting almost entirely of an instruction of the god Krishna to the archer Arjuna, presenting to him the main philosophical tenets of Hinduism.

² References to Hinduism and Buddhism appear interchangeably in the present essay as the distinction between both philosophies is not necessary for its purposes; they both constitute a part of Emerson's Oriental interests and influences.

similarity between his opinions and those common to Hinduism and Buddhism. Such coincidence, or a meeting of independent but congruent systems, might have been what attracted him so much to Eastern culture. He found in it a reverberation of his own intuitions, a remarkable coincidence, according to his principle of truth being generally accessible, “in the air,” and to be announced by “the most impressionable brain” first, but by all “a few minutes later” (“Fate,” *EL* 965). The affinity led to his deeper study of Hindu texts, which became an important source of further inspiration, especially for his late writings. Yet, even in the earlier essays he spoke with admiration of the “devout and contemplative East” and the “oriental genius, its divine impulses” (“The Divinity School Address,” *EL* 78-79).

The most evident example of a direct inspiration could be Emerson’s poems “Hamatreya” (1846)³ and “Brahma” (1857). Brahma is the name of one of the three main Hindu deities, who along with Vishnu and Shiva constitute the so-called *Trimurti*, three aspects of a more abstract God. As Hinduism is not exactly a polytheistic religion in the sense that the term is usually employed, all gods are only a sort of “subdivisions” of the main spiritual entity, which is the *Brahman* (to be discussed in detail further on, as it has immense consequences for Emerson’s understanding of the nature of the world). The title of the poem “Brahma” immediately sets a Far Eastern context for it, but also points to the poem’s subject: the unity of everything, including the material and the spiritual, which is as much part of Emerson’s reasoning as of the basis of Hinduism. The first stanza of the poem, spoken by Brahma:

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again. (*P* 205)

is almost a direct quotation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Krishna teaches the archer Arjuna that “[h]e who thinks that this [i.e. the self, or an individual being—J.F.] slays and he who thinks that this is slain; both of them fail to perceive the truth; this one neither slays nor is slain” (Radhakrishnan 107). Death is only a misperception, since everything that exists is a part of God (whether He is called Brahma or Krishna, who in fact is an *avatar* or incarnation of Vishnu, Hinduism still involves one abstract essence of divinity). And Krishna says of himself: “Never was there a time when I was not, nor thou, nor

³ “Hamatreya” is a poem about men deluding themselves that they can own the earth, whereas they depend on it; Emerson is thought to have been inspired by the religious text of the *Vishnu Purana* and the character of Maitreya (O’Keefe 15).

these lords of men [the enemy warriors on the battlefield where the whole instruction takes place—J. F.], nor will there ever be a time hereafter when we shall cease to be” (Radhakrishnan 103).

This understanding of the perpetuity of spiritual life reverberates in Emerson’s essay “Illusions,” where in the opening poem he speaks of the eternal existence as an everlasting flux or waving. The words “When thou dost return / On the wave’s circulation” (EL 1113) can be taken as a version of the Hindu *Samsara* or the cycle of reincarnation, which is often likened to the waves of the ocean. The poem may seem quite dark and full of resignation; however, its ending, when read in the light of Hinduism, proffers an absolutely new quality of strength:

Then first shalt thou know,
That in the wild turmoil,
Horsed on the Proteus,
Thou ridest to power,
And to endurance. (EL 1114)

The transience of all things, symbolized by Proteus, the Greek sea-god known for his ability to change shape and avoid uniformity, becomes man’s source of “power” and “endurance,” and grants him some sort of immortality as he can forever return to existence in a changed form.

The essay “Illusions” as a whole refers to Hindu thought. As Carpenter notes, the title “Illusions” is one possible translation into English of the Sanskrit term *Maya* (*Handbook* 212), which is also appearance, or play of the *Brahman*, the immaterial essence of reality, disguising itself as the material world. The fact that everything we immediately experience is *Maya* does not mean that physical reality does not exist; rather, through transcending its level, one can understand that it is only a veil, a manifestation of the *Brahman*. Here Hinduism is quite close to Platonic idealism, with the material world being a reflection of the spiritual one (although in Hinduism the material would be only one, low dimension of the ideal). Both systems are of interest to Emerson and what he describes in “Illusions” is exactly the Platonic experience of entering a cave that by its shapes and shadows offers an illusion of reality. Emerson uses Plato’s didactic metaphor, and says: “The child walks amid heaps of illusions, which he does not like to have disturbed” (“Illusions,” EL 1116). Such is the condition of human beings misled by the character of *Maya*. The playful dimension of this spectacle, usually stressed by Hinduism, is also acknowledged by Emerson, when he speaks of life as a “masquerade” (EL 1117).

The fact that the essence of reality is spiritual does not lead one to detachment from the physical life, quite the contrary. As the *Bhagavad-Gita* says, the human being exists through action, and it is the only way he/she can live. However, attaining a higher spiritual level is conditioned by a particular approach to one's activity. Krishna's advice is basically to do as one thinks one should, but without making one's happiness depend on the results: "Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle. Thus thou shall not incur sin" (Radhakrishnan 114). Inactivity and pure intellectualism would not be advised by either Hinduism or Buddhism, because, to put it in Platonic terms, remaining in the realm of thoughts would mean being "twice removed" from reality: *Maya* is a mere veil of *Brahman* and human thinking is a reflection of *Maya*. Emerson in the essay "Experience" expresses a similar intuition that too much thinking takes one away from reality: "Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy.... To fill the hour, —that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval" (EL 478), and, as a consequence, "The only ballast I know is a respect to the present hour" (479). This goes very well along the Buddhist principle of not concerning oneself with intellectual concepts as they are only constructs of the human mind, but of trying instead to experience the eternal now.⁴ Also Emerson's giving priority to intuition over tuition, the faculty of the poet he describes in "Nature," seems to fit in the Eastern conception that one's self is not the mind but something much broader or deeper, and a spiritual "third eye" is judged to represent a higher level of perception than simple physical seeing. Such belief in the power of intuition might be one of the reasons why Emerson's writings do not take the shape of a coherent philosophical system, but stay at the level of reflection about his understanding of the world. He never wants to build an abstract ideology; writing is for him only a means of approaching or dealing with the real, in the same way that he believed the death of his son Waldo would make him feel the real.⁵

In a way, Emerson intends his writing to be a form of meditation, a technique of being here and now and experiencing one's unity with the world. "I become a transparent eye-

⁴ There is a famous parable of the Buddha, about a man who, chased by a tiger, runs away and falls into a precipice, down in which another tiger is waiting. While falling down he manages to grab a root of a wild vine protruding from the rock and to hang on it between the two tigers. Suddenly, he sees two mice eating away the plant he is holding; he also notices a strawberry, eats it and delights in its sweetness (Reps and Senzaki 38-39). The story explains very well the philosophy of living always in the present moment, and experiencing the eternal now in the world full of actual or potential suffering.

⁵ When in the essay "Experience" Emerson writes about his son Waldo's death, he hopes that at least suffering connected to that tragedy will bring him a sense of the real, of the tangible world entering his mind and fusing with his abstract notion of it. Instead, he discovers that "An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with.... In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, - no more. I cannot get it nearer to me" (EL 473).

ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of particle of God” (“Nature,” *EL* 10)—this fragment of the essay “Nature” is a description of a mystical experience, but a very particular one, quite close to the assumptions of Far Eastern religions. The “transparent eye-ball” passage brings to mind the idea of the “third eye,” which allows the meditating person to experience another kind of seeing thanks to his/her unification with God. Understood differently, Emerson’s passage has its equivalent in the following verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: “The man who is united with the Divine and knows the truth thinks ‘I do nothing at all’ for in seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, walking... he holds that only the senses are occupied with the objects of the senses” (Radhakrishnan 177). Emerson’s “I am nothing” is the real goal of all meditation, like in Buddhism providing an insight into the *Shunyata*, the nothingness or emptiness which is behind all appearance; the “Universal Being” he speaks of is as much the Judeo-Christian God as it is the Hindu *Brahman*.

The aim of such a meditation is not an escape from the world into one’s mind and a life dependent on projections—in fact, Hinduism is the very opposite of (and a possible remedy to) Emerson’s major fear, solipsism. In the Far Eastern view, the universe is not a projection of the “I,” moreover, the “I” does not have an “independent” or “separate” status; it is an extension of the world, just as a wave is a manifestation of the sea. Both solipsism and the Hindu belief stem from the same root, that is the assumption of the unity of me and not-me, so there is a danger that the boundary between the two might be quite permeable. However, if solipsism claims that the world does not or might not exist, in Hinduism the truly nonexistent entity is the “I.” It all depends on one’s interpretation or the direction of one’s thoughts—and just as Emerson admits that thinking is both the most important of human activities and the greatest trap, so the *Bhagavad-Gita* says: “for the Self⁶ alone is the friend of the self and the Self alone is the enemy of the self” (Radhakrishnan 189).⁷

To some extent, the way man’s thoughts will go depends on him, his will and action. Man “knows himself to be a party to his present estate”, says Emerson (“Fate,” *EL* 948), which is an aspect of his idea of self-reliance. He must have found a fascinating correspondence between his understanding of individualism and the idea of self-realization and spiritual growth present in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Krishna tells Arjuna:

⁶ In the translation by Radhakrishnan the “Self” is written with capital “S,” suggesting that it refers to the universal Self, the *Atman*. However, a different reading is possible, where this word would refer simply to the human, individual self.

⁷ The meaning of this verse is even clearer in the religious rendition of Prabhupada: “The mind is the friend of the conditioned soul, and his enemy as well” (277).

But the man whose delight is in the Self alone, who is content with the Self, who is satisfied with the Self, for him there exists no work that needs to be done. Similarly, in this world he has no interest whatever to gain by the actions that he has not done. He does not depend on all these beings for any interest of his. (Radhakrishnan 138)

Self-realization means absolute freedom and independence, a kind of solitude stemming from one's inner strength. This is very close to the Emersonian self-reliance as a necessary basis of genuine human existence. Even his idea of reading presented in "The American Scholar," where books are seen as dangerous and useful only as the first impulse for their reader, finds its equivalent in the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "As is the use of a pond in a place flooded with water everywhere, so is that of all the Vedas for the Brāhmin who understands" (Radhakrishnan 119). The self-realized or self-reliant individual is the "reservoir of water" who does not need the well of the sacred writings (the *Vedas*)—in such an approach to reading there can be found a reverberation of Emerson's passage about the "luminous" books, i.e. pages that start to glow while being read, thus obscuring their meaning to the reader who does not need them anyway. The works of other authors are supposed, according to Emerson, to give the reader an impulse and leave him/her in a way blinded with their luminescence. If in the process of reading the pages start to shine, the reader is able only to take an initial inspiration from books instead of closely following their content ("American Scholar," *EL* 59).

At the same time, both the Emersonian and the Indian concepts of self-reliance share an important injunction of self-realization as the starting point for going back to practical life. For Emerson "isolation must precede true society" ("Self-Reliance," *EE* 45), yet one does eventually return to be a part of the social mechanism. Wiesław Gromczyński claims that

ecstasy... is not for him a value in itself and Emerson does not aim at its prolongation, and even less at entering nirvana through it.... Intuitional understanding, ecstatic experience is needed according to Emerson to grasp the unconditional truths, and after that one returns to everyday life illuminated by the absolute knowledge. (55; trans. J.F.)

Also Hinduism and Buddhism (perhaps Buddhism even stronger) advocate the process of "descending" after one's "ascension." In Hinduism, one is advised to become a yogi and retreat from ordinary life only after having worked in a profession and after having had a family. In terms of Mahayana Buddhism, a person who in the course of the self-perfecting process goes away from the world in search of enlightenment becomes

a *Pratyeka-buddha*—a “private” Buddha, or “Buddha for himself.” However, a higher spiritual level is attained by the one who can become a *Sammasam-buddha*, a “complete” one or *Bodhisattva*, that is a Buddha who after experiencing his oneness with the Eternal Being goes back to life to serve humanity.

The problem of unity is probably the strongest link between Emerson and the Indian religions, as the conception of the Oversoul is central to Emerson’s philosophy. For him it is a common source of all men and of what he calls nature, that is the whole world. Hence the Emersonian democratic conception of genius as the one who first announces the truth that is “in the air” (“Fate,” *EL* 965), i.e. shared by all men. The Buddhist compassion resulting from the feeling of organic unity with all mankind is a consequence of the same way of thinking about men as limbs of one spiritual body. Emerson writes about man: “Where he is, there is nature” (“Self-Reliance,” *EL* 267), stressing the inseparability of the human being and his surroundings, as having one source. This source is called in Sanskrit the *Brahman*, which is a universal spiritual entity, identical with human *Atman* or soul, and comprising all gods. The world is, as it were, an extension, a visible manifestation of the *Brahman*. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna says: “I am the origin of all; from Me all (the whole creation) proceeds. Knowing this, the wise worship Me, endowed with meditation” (Radhakrishnan 258); “The yogin who established in oneness, worships Me abiding in all beings lives in Me, howsoever he may be active” (Radhakrishnan 204).⁸

The unity of God or the Oversoul and the world manifests itself to Emerson in the here and now, and it is something that can be directly experienced by way of reflection, when “the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own, shines through it” (“Nature,” *EL* 25). “The intellect sees that every atom carries the whole of Nature,” he writes in “Illusions” (*EL* 1120), and this unity finds its expression in the Hindu formula “*tat tvam asi*,” meaning “you are it”: there is no distinction between the “I” and the “not-I.” Emerson expresses the same in the poem “Brahma,” where his Brahma says that he is everything and that it is impossible to abandon him, as he inheres in the very act of leaving: “They reckon ill who leave me out; / When me they fly, I am the wings” (*P* 205).

Why then, if Emerson found a system which corresponded so closely to his own philosophical intuitions, was he not satisfied with its solutions and had to struggle with doubt in his later essays? Why was not the explanation that the essence of everything is

⁸ For the Emerson reader again the religious translation of Prabhupada would be even more telling: “Such a yogi, who engages in the worshipful service of the Supersoul, knowing that I and the Supersoul are one, remains always in Me in all circumstances” (301).

spiritual, and the material world is only a *Maya*, sufficient to him? The main reason was probably that he belonged to the Western, Judeo-Christian cultural and philosophical circle, founded on what could be called “ethical materialism,” that is an attitude aiming at active changing of the world we come to, and not solving its problems by the means of self-perfecting. When Franz Rosenzweig in his *Star of Redemption* argued against philosophers who immerse themselves in idealism, he judged their attitude as immoral, as expressive of a kind of contempt for the material world. In the West, disdain for material reality is not only unreasonable but also poses a serious ethical problem, as it seems to be a form of escapism. Stephen E. Whicher, when writing about Emerson’s learning from Far Eastern cultures, judges the idea of the *Brahman* as “grand... but also inhuman,” setting from a strictly Western point of view the standards of “human” and “inhuman” philosophies (151). However, the sort of stoical detachment from happiness and unhappiness in the Western context may induce horror, while at the same time from the Eastern perspective can be treated as the highest level of enlightenment. Still, Emerson remains within the framework of the West, and at the end of “Illusions” he refuses not to take the world seriously, even if he realizes that it might be only an ideological, that is subjective, choice (how close to William James’s *Will to Believe!*⁹):

I prefer to be owned as sound and solvent, and my word as good as my bond, and to be what cannot be skipped, or dissipated, or undermined, to all the éclat in the universe. This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art. At the top or at the bottom of all illusions, I set the cheat which still leads us to work and live for appearances, in spite of our conviction, in all sane hours, that it is what we really are that avails with friends, with strangers, and with fate or fortune. (*EL* 1122)

His choice is to believe the world’s masquerade to be the basis of everything we think is valuable in life, which, within the framework of Western philosophy, can be seen as a form of heroism, as hope against all odds. Emerson’s intentional optimism is a tool that helps him to survive in this world, and not a sign of his naivety. To use a religious metaphor, Emerson is like the Buddha in that they both face a choice between living with faith in man’s immortality and power on the one hand, or accepting the dark side of reality on the other. However, Emerson, unlike the Buddha, voluntarily chooses not to “awaken,” but to remain in the palace as the prince Siddhartha, without going out to the outer world of suffering, and using his philosophy as a remedy against doubt.

⁹ William James, one of numerous disciples of Emerson, defends in this lecture the choice of one’s beliefs even if unsupported by objective proofs.

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