

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Brahma and Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract:

This article discusses the poetic excellence of Emerson. The poem under discussion is Brahma (Brahman). Select poems of Emerson, Boston 1876, Poems of Emerson 1814 and poems of Emerson 1904 throw light into the genius intension of Emerson. While his Essays and lectures are voluminous and cover the entire gamut of our life the poems are the beauteous part of it.

Keywords: Brahma and Brahman- Gita and Brahman- Emerson –Gita- Criticism-Atlantique journal.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Emerson an American litterateur who believed in the individuality of individual and respected all souls alike was respected by his contemporaries and afterwards alike. He lived for 28,797 days in this world. His literary journey remain the best and non-comparable till this date. Emerson started his first lecture on 17th Feb 1830 and his last on 10th Feb in 1881 which counts for nearly 15001. In his life time itself 64 publications were made. The first being "Thoughts on the Religion of the middle ages in the Christian Disciple and Theological Review in 1822 and the last being "superlatives" in the "Century " Feb,1882.In his Dial a short lived Magazine between 1840 and 1876 Emerson Contributed 65 article which is the single largest. The best collection of his poems account for 150 in 1904. General 63 entries, Occasional and Miscellaneous 15,Nature and life 15,Elements 15 Mottoes to Essays 8 and so on. The poem under discussion in this article is "Brahma" and Catalogued under Occasional and Miscellaneous.

1.A memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson by James Eliot Cabot 1888 Vol.II Appendix –F pages 710-803.

Brahman and Brahma

Brahman is a Vedic Sanskrit word, and is conceptualized in Hinduism, states Paul Deussen, as the "creative principle which lies realized in the whole world". Brahman is a key concept found in Vedas, and extensively discussed in the early Upanishads.

The word comes from the Sanskrit verb root "brh", meaning "to grow". Etymologically, the term means "that which grows" (brhati) and "which causes to grow" (brhmayati).

In the 'Taittiriya Upanishad' II.1, Brahman is described in the following manner: "satyam jnanam anantam brahma", "Brahman is of the nature of truth, knowledge and infinity." Infinite positive qualities and states have their existence secured solely by virtue of Brahman's very reality.

The Vedas were originally propagating the concept of Deities and attendant rituals. But as an evolutionary process they brought in the concept of Brahman as Supreme being. He was described as the immortal self of the individual beings and the container as well as the inhabitant of entire Universe. This concept is revelation of our great seers out of their intense experience

The primary focus on the early Upanishads is Brahavidya and Atmavidya, that is the knowledge of Brahman and the knowledge of Atman (self, soul), what it is and how it is understood. The texts do not present a single unified theory, rather they present a variety of themes with multiple possible interpretations, which flowered in post-Vedic era as premises for the diverse schools of Hinduism.

Paul Deussen states that the concept of Brahman in the Upanishads expands to metaphysical, ontological and soteriological themes, such as it being the "primordial reality that creates, maintains and withdraws within it the universe"¹, the "principle of the world"¹ the "absolute"², the "general, universal"³, the "cosmic principle"⁴, the "ultimate that is the cause of everything including all gods"⁵, the "divine being, Lord, distinct God, or God within oneself"⁶, the "knowledge"⁷, the "soul, sense of self of each human being that is fearless, luminous, exalted and blissful"⁸, the "essence of liberation, of spiritual freedom"⁹, the "universe within each living being and the universe outside"⁷, the "essence and everything innate in all that exists inside, outside and everywhere"¹⁰.

According to Dr. Radha Krishnan, the sages of the Upanishads teach Brahman as the ultimate essence of material phenomena that cannot be seen or heard, but whose nature can be known through the development of self-knowledge (atma jnana).¹¹

The Upanishads possess many mahā-vākyas or "Great Sayings" on the concept of Brahman: They discuss the metaphysical concept of Brahman in many forms,

aham brahmāsmi	"I am Brahman"	Brihadaranyaka	I.4.1012
sarvam khalvidam brahma	"All this is Brahman"	Chandogya	III.14.113
ekam evadvitiam	"That [Brahman] is one, without a second"	Chandogya	VI.2.114
tat tvam asi	"Thou art that" ("You are Brahman)	Chandogya	VI.8.715
prajñānam brahma	"Consciousness is Brahman"	Aitareya	III.i.3.16
ayam ātmā brahma	This self is Brahman	Mandukya	1.2 17

In this light let us analyse what exactly the text of Gita has to say apart from its interpretarial aspect.

Bagyan Sri Rama Krishna an enlightened soul who is absorbed in Brahman, Says:
“Concept of Brahman cannot be explained in words. If a man is called upon to give an idea of the ocean to one who has never seen it, he can only say, "It is a vast sheet of water, a big expanse of water; it is water, water all around." 18

Arvind Ghose: “It is for this reason that the Gita opens its gospel of works by insisting on the Brahmic consciousness, the impersonal life, that great object of the discipline of the ancient sages. For the impersonal, the infinite, the One in which all the impermanent, mutable, multiple activity of the world finds above itself its base of permanence, security and peace, is the immobile Self, the Akshara, the . If we see this, we shall see that to raise one’s consciousness and the poise of one’s being out of limited personality into this infinite and impersonal is the first spiritual necessity. To see all beings in this one Self is the knowledge which raises the soul out of egoistic ignorance and its works and results; to live in it is to acquire peace and firm spiritual foundation. The way to bring about this great transformation follows a double path; for there is the way of knowledge and there is the way of works, and the Gita combines them in a firm synthesis. The way of knowledge is to turn the understanding, the intelligent will away from its downward absorption in the workings of the mind and the senses and upward to the self, the Purusha or ; it is to make it dwell always on the one idea of the one Self and not in the many-branching conceptions of the mind and many-streaming impulses of desire. “19

Acarya Vinoba Bhave:

“Brahman is the Absolute—the Supreme Truth, the Ultimate reality. The concept is, in fact, too grand for conceptualization and description, the Upanishad had, therefore, to speak of the Brahman in negative terms: 'The Real is not this, the Real is not that.' Brahman is the Supreme Principle that is the root cause of the generation, evolution and extinction of the world. It pervades everything and transcends everything. It is the Supreme Self. The lower self is a part of the Brahman and the consummation of its development and evolution lies in merging with it, that is, attaining spiritual liberation.20

The Supreme Truth or the Brahman, is said to have three aspects—sat, chit and ananda. Sat means being, that which really exists. It also means abiding, actual, right, self-existent essence. Chit means perception, (Moksha means the liberation of Self from bondage, from the cycle of births and deaths, whereby the Self unites with the Brahman, the Supreme Self. It is believed to be the ultimate goal of human life for which everybody should aspire and strive for. It is often translated in English as 'salvation'. 21

Brahman in Bhagavad Gita

Sl.No Chapter and Sloka

1 2.72.This is brahmi sthiti (firm standing in the Brahman), O son of Pritha. Having attained thereto one is not bewildered; fixed in that status at his end, one can attain to extinction in the Brahman.

- 2 3.15.From food creatures come into being, from rain is the birth of food, from sacrifice comes into being the rain, sacrifice is born of work; work know to be born of Brahman, Brahman is born of the Immutable; therefore is the all-pervading Brahman established in the sacrifice.
- 3 4.24. The oblation is Brahman; the means is Brahman, Brahman offers into the Fire which is Brahman. Him whose mind is confined in the Karma ,the Brahman,Brahman only is attained.
- 4 4.25. Other Yogis offer sacrifice to the celestials only. Yet some others offer the Self as sacrifice by the Self in the fire of Brahman
- 5 4.31.They who enjoy the nectar of immortality left over from the sacrifice attain to the eternal Brahman, this world is not for him who doeth not sacrifice, how then any other world?
- 6 4.32 Therefore all these and many other forms of sacrifice have been extended in the mouth of the Brahman (the mouth of that Fire which receives all offerings). Know thou that all these are born of work and so knowing thou shalt be free.
- 7 5.10 He who, having abandoned attachment, acts reposing (or founding) his works on the Brahman, is not stained by sin even as water clings not to the lotus-leaf to the fruit and bound by the action of desire.
- 8 5.12 By abandoning attachment to the fruits of works, the soul in union with Brahman attains to peace of rapt foundation in Brahman, but the soul not in union is attached
- 9 5.16. But, to those whose ignorance is destroyed by wisdom of the Self, wisdom illumines the Supreme (Brahman) for them like the sun.
- 10 5.17. Their intellect absorbed in That, their self being That; steadfast in That, That is their refuge, they dispelled sins by knowledge have no return(Re birth).That: Brahman
- 11 5.19. Birth and Death are conquered in this birth itself by those who are firm in their mind on equanimity. Verily Brahman is impartial and non guilty. Hence are they established in Brahman
- 12 5.20. One who has understood Brahman,established in Brahman, with firm intellect, non deluded, doesnt rejoice on obtaining what is liked and becomes not sorrowful on obtaining what is not liked.
- 13 5.21. One who has no attachment to external sensations finds joy in the Self itself the same happiness.One who is established in Brahman in yoga attains eternal happiness.
- 14 5.24. He who is ever happy within, who rejoices within, who is illumined within, such a Yogi attains Bliss of Brahman , himself becoming Brahman.
- 15 5.25. The seers attain liberation whose sins have been perished, whose doubts have been removed, who has controlled his sense organs, and becomes happy on the welfare of all beings
- 16 5.26. Absolute Bliss exists in this birth and to come for those ascetics who are free from desire and anger, who have controlled their mind and who have realized the Self.

- 17 13.12. I will declare that which has to be known, knowing which one attains
immortality, the beginningless supreme Brahman, called neither being nor non-being.
- 18 13.13. With hands and feet everywhere, with eyes, heads and mouths everywhere,
with ears everywhere, He exists in the worlds, enveloping all.
- 19 13.14. Shining by the functions of all the senses, yet without the senses; unattached,
yet supporting all; devoid of qualities, yet their experience,
- 20 13.15. Without and within (all) beings, the unmoving and also the moving; because of
His subtlety, unknowable; and near and far away is That.
- 21 13.16. And non-divisible yet exists as if divided in beings; He is to be known as the
supporter of beings; He devours and He generates also.
- 22 13.17. That, the Light of all lights, is beyond darkness; it is said to be knowledge, the
Knowable and the goal of knowledge, seated in the hearts of all.
- 23 13.18. Thus the Field as well as knowledge and the Knowable have been briefly
stated. My devotee, knowing this, enters into My Being.
- 24 13.19. You shall know that Prakriti (Nature) and Brahman (Spirit) are beginningless;
and know also that all modifications and qualities are born of Prakriti (Nature).
- 25 13.20. In the production of the body and the senses, Nature (matter) is said to be the
cause; in the experience of pleasure and pain, the soul is said to be the cause.
- 26 13.21. The soul seated in Nature experiences the qualities born of Nature; attachment
to the qualities (Gunas) is the cause of his birth in good and evil wombs.
- 27 13.22. The Supreme Soul in this body is also called the spectator, the permitter, the
supporter, the enjoyer, the great Lord and the Supreme Self.
- 28 13.23. He who thus knows Spirit and Matter, together with the qualities, in whatever
condition he may be, he is not reborn.
- 29 13.24. Some by meditation behold the Self in the Self by the Self, others by the Yoga
of knowledge, and others by the Yoga of action.
- 30 13.25. Others also, not knowing thus, worship, having heard of it from others; treating
what they have heard as the supreme refuge, they, too, cross beyond death definitely.
- 31 13.26. Be it movable or non-movable, You shall know, O Bharatarshabha. (best of the
Bharatas (Arjuna), that it is born from the union of the Kshetra and Kshetrajna (Field
and its Knower).
- 32 13.27. He alone sees who sees the Supreme Lord, existing equally in all beings, the
imperishable among the perishables.
- 33 13.28. Because he who sees the same Lord dwelling equally everywhere does not
destroy the Self by the self, he goes to the highest goal.
- 34 13.29. He who sees that all actions are performed by Nature alone and that the Self is
actionless.
- 35 13.30. When a man sees the life of individual living beings as rests in the One, and
expands forth from That alone, he then becomes Brahman.
- 36 13.31. Being without beginning and devoid of (any) qualities, the imperishable
Supreme Self, though in the body, O Kaunteya, does not act and not bonded.

- 37 13.32. As the all-pervading ether is not tainted because of its subtlety, so the Self existing everywhere in the body is not tainted.
- 38 13.33. Just as the one sun illumines the whole world, so also the Lord of the Field (the Supreme Self) illumines the whole Field, O Bhaarata!
- 39 13.34. They who, through the eye of intuition, perceive the distinction between the Field and its Knower, and also the liberation from the Nature of being, they go to the Supreme.
- 40 14.26. Whomsoever serves Me with unswerving devotion, he, crossing beyond the qualities, qualifies to be a Brahman.
- 41 14.27. I am the abode of Brahman, the immutable immortality, of everlasting Dharma and of absolute bliss.
- 42 17.51. Endowed with a pure intellect, controlling the self by firmness, relinquishing sound and other objects and abandoning both hatred and attraction,
- 43 17.52. Dwelling in solitude, eating but little, with speech, body and mind subdued, always engaged in concentration and meditation, taking refuge in dispassion
- 44 17.53. Having abandoned egoism, strength, arrogance, desire, anger, and possessions, free from ideas of self importance and remains peaceful one is fit for becoming Brahman.
- 45 17.54. Absorbed in Brahman, serene in the Self, he neither grieves nor desires; remains equal to all beings, and attains supreme devotion to Me.

Emerson's BRAHMA GENESIS

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. 1845 he was reading the Vishnu Purana, and made these among other extracts:—

"He who eternally restrains this and the other world, and all beings therein, who standing in the earth is other than the earth, whom the earth knows not, whose body the earth is, who interiorly restrains the earth, the same is thy soul, and the Internal Check immortal." (J.7.p.110)

"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 or good." (J.7.127)

His knowledge and high esteem of Brahman is evident and has provided his soul.

"Brahman is the Omnipotent, omnipresent, supreme deity who is the absolute which mankind fix to be united with Brahman. If conceived of as personal, will be a creator- Brahma, preserver- Vishnu, destroyer -Shiva or Rudra. Brahman is changeless, unknowable, timeless and sustainer of the universe. By Brahma Emerson meant to designate what we call Brahman and the subject of his poem is really the concept of Brahman the absolute and not Brahma the creator. This becomes clear when we understand that the first line of Brahma presents a

confused mixture of Brahma and Brahman while the rest of the poem is definitely an expression of aspects of Brahman.” (J.7.108)

It had taken nearly 11 years for him to finalise his Poem Brahma in the year 1856. ‘Brahma’ is seen in the volume of journals in the year 1856 in the name of ‘Song Of the soul (Brahma)’: and are preceded by the following quotes:

" From whom the sun rises, and in whom it sets again, him all the gods entered; from him none is separated ; this is that.” 22

"What is here, the same is there, and what is there, the same is here. He proceeds from death to death who beholds here difference. 23

“

He (Brahma, or the Soul) does not move ; is swifter than the mind: not the gods (the senses) did obtain him, he was gone before. Standing, he outstrips all the other gods, how fast soever they run.”24

“He moves, he does not move. He is far, and also near.” 25

‘Song Of the soul (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.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods not less appear. ;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out ;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven ;
But thou, meek lover of the good
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

And as a continuation are found these quotes infra:

“Know that which does not see by the eye;and by which they see the eyes, as Brahma,and not that is worshipped as this. Kena Ch.1.7 26

“ Know that which does not think by the mind, and by which they say the mind is thought, as Brahma, and not what is worshipped as this. Kena Ch.1.6 27

“The soul declared by an inferior man is not easy to be known, but when it is declared by a teacher who beholds no difference, there is no doubt concerning it, the soul being more subtle than what is subtle, is not to be obtained by arguing.”²⁸

And at the end would say: A grander legend than Western literature contains, is the story of Nachiketas.’ . . (J.9. 56 & 57)

Hence his journal entry in Vol.9 Pp 56-57 brings to the fore the knowledge and familiarity of Vishnupurana, Katha Upanishad and Isa Upanishad form the foundation and basis of knowledge in Indian Spiritual Literature.

His earliest acquaintance with Bhagavad Gita is found in his sources for his poem “Indian superstition”.

Interestingly the Upanishads and Bahagavad Gita have a central theme of Brahman understanding and attainment of Him relieves one from repeated births. Hence his first presentation of Indian Subject on “Brahma” the Immortal Brahman.

The Atlantic Monthly

In the fall of 1857, a new magazine went into the U.S. mails. Its design was emphatically plain.²⁹ Its title, The Atlantic Monthly. A set of verses titled “Brahma,” appeared on page 48. The author was none other than the celebrated Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Neophobic literary veterans derided these verses of Song of the soul vehemently.

The New York Times immediately deemed the poem an “exquisite piece of meaningless versification.”³⁰ Soon friends and sympathizers came to Emerson’s aid. Walt Whitman published an article in Brooklyn Daily Times exhorting Brahma’s identity and defending the poem.³¹

Even Oliver Wendell Holmes one of the founders of the magazine was notoriously impatient with Emerson’s “Oriental” warbling, he was carrying a penknife instead of pencil to evaluate Emerson. His employment of epithets to analyze Emerson needs an evaluation of himself. He Criticised Emerson’s conception of the fundamental Unity, in its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, especially in the Indian Scriptures with derision. He condemned Emerson's poem "Brahma the poem which so mystified the readers of the "Atlantic Monthly," was one of his spiritual divertissements” ³² and further would sharpen his pencil with razors edge,” The oriental side of Emerson's nature delighted itself in these narcotic dreams, born in the land of the poppy and of hashish. They lend a peculiar charm to his poems, but it is not worthwhile to try to construct a philosophy out of them. The knowledge, if knowledge it be, of the mystic is not transmissible. It is not cumulative; it begins and ends with the solitary dreamer, and the next who follows him has to build his own cloud-castle as if it were the first aerial edifice that a human soul had ever constructed” were his aberrations.

But his assessment was proved not tenable by Arthur Christy who reconstructed an exhaustive chronology of every book from or about Asia and the Middle East Emerson ever

read based on his journals, letters, book collection, and borrowing records from Harvard College Library and the Boston Athenaeum. Christy's labors weren't in vain. His book marshalled enough evidence to counter any claim that Emerson had brought back only trinkets and cloud castles from his mental journeys to India.

Twenty-six parodies were written in just the first month after the poem's publication, and these were frequently reprinted over the next year.

"Emerson's 'philosophical poems, though least appreciated, because not understood, are perhaps his best. They are full of power, often entering into the profoundest questions with a wisdom and clearness of vision seldom found.'" 33

When Emerson's publishers were about to issue his Selected Poems in 1876, they asked him to omit "Brahma," because it had excited such ridicule ! 34

Nevertheless it was, its creator's favourite, so much so that risking everything he insisted upon retaining the poem in his Selected Poems of 1876 "whatever else had to go". 35

Emerson was not rocked by the criticisms and parodies but would continue as a victorious soldier. His self and determination to win against odds and hurdles strengthened his belief in oriental interests and more particularly in Bhagavad Gita. Whitman once said of Emerson, "Even when he falls on stony ground he somehow eventuates in a harvest." 36

Brahman not Brahma

Though the poem is titled "Brahma", the subject under discussion is solely on the Brahman. Many scholars have misunderstood the concept and consequentially misinterpreted." In Hindu philosophy, God is often represented as trinity, are the creative, the preservative, and the destructive. God the creator is termed Brahma. God the preserver is Vishnu and the God destroyer is designated Shiva. Carpenter obviously mistakes the Brahma of Emerson's poem to be a God the creator who is one of the trinity. The subject of the poem is not Brahma the creator but Brahman the Absolute or the universal soul whom himself terms elsewhere the over soul. The correct title of the poem ought to have been Brahman and not Brahma." 37

The poem Brahma gives a definite expression to his Oriental interests. In Oriental religion and philosophy is most fully treated in Elements of Brahmanism in the Transcendentalism of Emerson. 38

In the poem Red slayer He (Emerson) confuses and mixes together two different concepts. The first is that of Brahma, the creator God of the universe who is the first member of the triad and after whom the poem assumes its title; the second concept is that of Brahman 'that which is immutable and independent of any cause but itself' 39

SOURCES OF "BRAHMA"

1. In 1886 W.S Kennedy discovered in a volume of the Bibliotheca Indica (Calcutta, 1852) 40 (Clews to Emerson's Mystic Verse By WILLIAM SLOANE KENNEDY THE AMERICAN

AUTHOR JUNE 1903 The American author p.10) the particular translation of the Katha Upanishad used by Emerson in writing his "Brahma."

1. "If the slayer thinks I slay, if the slain thinks I am slain, then both of them do not know well. It [the soul] does not slay nor is it slain."

2. Dr. William T. Harris finds the source of "Brahma" in the second chapter of the Bhagavadgita "Perhaps nowhere in our literature may one find so complete a characterization of the East Indian philosophy as is contained in the short poem called "Brahma" which appeared in the first number of the "Atlantic Monthly" in 1857, 41

3. Shri Asim Chaudhuri believes "Emerson was exposed to the Bhagavad Gita, which refers to the theory of reincarnation in several places, directly and indirectly. In his poem, "Brahma," the overall theme is the divine relationship and continuity of life and the unity of the universe. The poem opens with a precept from the Bhagavad Gita: "Neither of them is in knowledge—the one who thinks the soul can slay and the one who thinks the soul can be slain. For truly, the soul neither kills nor can it be killed," (B.G 2.19) and it ends with another: "Abandon all varieties of dharmas and simply surrender unto me alone. I shall liberate you from all sinful reactions; do not fear (B.G 18.66) 42

4. This was partly brought out by Swami Nikhilananda as follows:

Emerson, a keen student of the Bhagavad Gita, was familiar with the Upanishadic doctrines and published translations of religious and philosophical tracts from the Oriental languages. His beautiful poem "Brahma" and his essay "The Over-Soul" show clearly his indebtedness to Hindu spiritual thought. 43

Emerson himself quotes Kena Upanishad slokas below Song of the Soul and verses from Katha Upanishads and Vajasaishopaniṣad in the same page. (J.9. 57-58)

Emerson's profound harmony with the Indian scriptures is best illustrated in his poem "Brahma," (Brahman) derived from Kalidasa, and in numerous essays. According to his Journals, the theme for "Brahma," composed in 1856, came to him after he read the Upanishads in the Bibliotheca Indica. He was clearly influenced by the Katha Upanishad and by the second discourse of the Bhagavad Gita. His poem "Brahma" reached the highest level of American Vedantism. 44

That which the Brahmans had found in the East our little company knew there in the West also: "From the poisonous tree of the world two species of fruit are produced, sweet as the waters of life: Love, or the society of beautiful souls, and Poetry, whose taste is like the immortal juice of Vishnu." 45

5. George Willis Cooke finds the source in Bhagavat Gita 46

John S. Harrison opines "Brahma is filled with Greek thought." "A Hindoo term has thus been filled with Greek thought; or Greek thought has been capped with a Hindoo name. In Emerson's poem, Brahma, is found an expression of Emerson's doctrine of soul, or God, which is almost entirely Hindoo in its manner of speech. Without a knowledge of the Bhagavat-Gita the poem could never have assumed the form it now has. But its doctrines of the soul immortality and independence of time and space, to which it gives expression are shared by the Platonist as well as the Hindoo." 47

They are conceived as if uttered by the All pervading Spirit : Quotes Red slayer—What a prospect, dark and void, — this Supreme Spirit, before whom all human endeavor, all noble ambition, all hope, all love, is blighted ! What a contrast, a relief, when we turn from this to the teachings of the gentle Nazarene. 48

Emerson speaks with apparent approval of the Hindoo theosophy, which represents Brahma, and also finds expressions in Boethius a philosopher of Rome says Guernsey. 49

“Yes, Emerson had all the wisdom and spirituality of the Brahmans. Brahmanism is an acquirement, a state of being rather than a creed. In whomsoever the eternal Brahma breathed his unquenchable fire, he was the Brahman. And in that sense Emerson was the best of Brahmans.”50

To Emerson, Brahma is synonymous with the terms such as ‘Over-Soul’, says Carpenter 51 About the impact of Indian thought on Emerson, Mahatma Gandhi-an admirer of Emerson-wrote as follows: "The essays to my mind contain the teaching of Indian wisdom in a western guru. It is interesting to see our own thus differently fashioned." 52

“The substance of all of these [quotations from the Gita and Sankhya Karika] and much more can be found in Emerson’s ‘Brahma,’ a poem that condenses the Yoga doctrine into four short verses, and furnishes a surprising contrast to the tedious recapitulation in oriental literature”53

“Brahma” represents Ralph Waldo Emerson’s search for a synthesis between the Indian and Hebrew-Christian cultures, a synthesis which does not destroy but keeps the individual characteristic of the traditions. In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words, the aim of the synthesis is to increase the energy of both cultures and to avoid ante religious or theological monopoly.”54

The schematic analysis of the views expressed by the veterans and critics suggest the oriental impact and influence of Bhagavad Gita as the guardian source and influence to pen this great Poem Brahma.

Summary of the Poem

If the blood-stained killer thinks that he has killed someone, he is wrong and if the killed thinks that he has been killed, he is equally wrong. They do not know the mysterious ways of Brahma, the Brahman. It is he who lives, he who dies, and he who is born again. It is he who is both the creator and the destroyer. He is the real doer of all things.

Brahma(n) is timeless and spaceless. Therefore distance does not matter to Him. Things past and forgotten are to Him as near as things that at present. To Him shadow and sunlight are the same. To Him the vanquished gods appear to be present and to Him fame and shame are the same.

Those who who believe that they can ignore Brahma(n) or escape from Him are wrong. When they fly away from Him, their wings are His own. Brahma(n) Himself is both the doubter and the doubt. Brahma(n) himself is also the hymn that the Brahmin sings.

Even the strong gods yearn to go to the abode of Brahma(n). The seven sages (Sapta Rishis) also try in vain to attain His abode. But the humble lover of Dharma finds Brahma and turns his back on heaven.

The theme of the poem

The theme of the poem is that human beings can exalt their spiritual realm only through the realization of the Brahman. All the sixteen lines are pregnant with the theme. "While the predominance of the self or "I" characterizes a large section of the Bhagavad-Gitā, we find such a privileging of the self over others in Emerson's "Brahma" where the speaker is the subjective self who almost egotistically relates"⁵⁵ in the first fourteen lines are assumed to be addressed by Brahma and last two lines by the second person. The Bhagavad-Gitā and Emerson's "Brahma" are dominated by the spirit of sameness, evenness, and oneness.

George Willis Cooke contends,⁵⁷ "His philosophical poems, though least appreciated, because not understood, are perhaps his best. They are full of power, often entering into the profoundest questions with a wisdom and clearness of vision seldom found. One of the most striking of these poems is Brahma, which sums up the "Yoga" doctrine of the ancient Hindoos in a few perfect words. It teaches that subtle ever-present Spirit is the absolute life in all things. ... The soul can not be slain, nothing can destroy it; for it is one with the Over-soul. life in all things. The soul can not be slain, nothing can destroy it; for it is one with the Over-soul. 56

"Perhaps nowhere in our literature may one find so complete a characterization of the East Indian philosophy as is contained in the short poem called "Brahma" which appeared in the first number of the "Atlantic Monthly" in 1857. There is no subject farther from the thought of the average commonsense of the modern European or American than the all-absorbing unity which the East Indian conceived under the name Brahma. The Bhagavat Gita, seemed a wholly admirable epitome, or condensed statement, of that wonderful book. Harris also quotes from Bagavad Gita of J. Cockburn Thomson 59 Harris also summed up "The substance of all of these [quotations from the Gita and Sankhya Karika] and much more can be found in Emerson's 'Brahma,' a poem that condenses the Yoga doctrine into four short verses, and furnishes a surprising contrast to the tedious recapitulation in oriental literature." 58.

Let me analyse the poem:

1. If the red slayer think he slays,

He who takes the Self to be slayer and he who thinks He is slain, neither of these knows He slays not, nor is he slain (B.G 2: 19). He is not born nor does He ever die at any time, He again ceases not to be. Unborn, eternal, changeless and ancient, He is not killed when the body is killed,⁶⁰ (B.G 2:20). Whosoever knows Him to be indestructible, eternal, birthless and unchangeable, how and whom does he make to be slain, how and whom does he slay ? (B.G 2:21)

2. Or if the slain think he is slain,

" He who believes that spirit can kill, and he who thinks that it can be killed, both are wrong in judgment. It neither kills, nor is killed. It is not born, nor dies at any time."

(B .G 2.17-2.21)

"To this menace, Prahlāda answered, "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 or good" 63- 'And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.' 64

3. They Know not well the subtle ways .

'That Brahman shines forth, vast, self-luminous, inconceivable, subtler than the subtle. He is far beyond what is far and yet here very near at hand. Verily, He is seen here, dwelling in the cave of the heart of conscious beings.' 22 Beings are unmanifested in their beginning, manifested in their middle state, O Bharatha, and unmanifested again in their end! What is there to grieve about at this state? (B.G 2:28)

Whosoever meditates on the Omniscient, the Ancient, the ruler (of the whole world), subtler than the subtle, the supporter of all, of inconceivable form, effulgent like the sun and beyond the darkness.(B.G.8:9)

As the mighty wind, moving everywhere, rests always in the ether, even so, you shall know that all beings rest in Me. (B.G .9. 6) All beings, O Kaunteya, enter into My Nature at the end of a Kalpa; I send them forth again at the beginning of (the next) Kalpa!

(B.G .9. 7) I repeatedly send forth all this multitude of beings with my Nature, helpless by the force of Nature. (B.G .9. 8) Without and within (all) beings, the unmoving and also the moving; because of His subtlety, unknowable; and near and far away is That. (B.G 13:15). As the all-pervading ether is not tainted because of its subtlety, so the Self existing everywhere in the body, is not tainted. (B.G.13: 32)

4. I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Just as a man casts off his worn out clothes and puts on new ones, so also the embodied self casts off its worn out bodies and enters others which are new (B.G 2: 2.). Many births of Mine have passed, as well as of yours O Parantapa! I know them all but you are not aware of it. (B.G 4.5) Though I am unborn and of imperishable nature, and though I am the Lord of all beings, yet, standing over My own Nature, I am born by My own divine potency.61(B.G 4.6) Whenever there is a decline in righteousness, O Bharata, and increase in unrighteousness, then I manifest Myself! (B.G 4.7) For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in age after age. (B.G 4.8) O Arjuna, he who thus knows verily My divine birth and action, after having left the body is not born again; he comes to Me,! (B.G 4.9)

5. They reckon ill who leave me out ;

Without and within (all) beings, the 'unmoving' and also the 'moving'; because of its subtlety unknowable; and near and far away -- is that (B.G 13: 16)

Ishavashya Upanishad 5." It stirs and it stirs not; it is far, and likewise near. It is inside of all this, and it is outside of all this."

6. Far or forgot to me is near;**

He who is the same to foe and friend, and also in honour and dishonour, who is the same in cold and heat and in pleasure and pain, who is free from attachment -- that man is dear to Me . (B.G 12: 18)

From the self this breath is born. Like this shadow of a person, the breath spreads in this body (from the Self) by the actions of the mind “67

7. Shadow and sunlight are the same;

Even those devotees, who, endowed with faith worship other gods, worship Me alone, O son of Kunti, (but) by the wrong method . (B.G 9: 23)

He who is the same to foe and friend, and also in honour and dishonour, who is the same in cold and heat and in pleasure and pain, who is free from attachment -- that man is dear to Me (B.G 12: 18)

8. The vanished gods not less appear;

And I am all-devouring death, and prosperity of those who are to be prosperous; among feminine qualities (I am) fame,prosperity,speech, memory,intelligence, firmness and forgiveness. B.G 2. 34

I am the gambling of the fraudulent; I am the splendour of the splendid; I am victory; I am effort; I am the goodness of the good. B.G.10:36

9. And one to me are shame and fame.

Even if the most sinful worships Me, with devo-tion to none else, he too should indeed be regarded as 'righteous', for he has rightly resolved (B.G.9: 30).In whatever way men approach Me, even so do I reward them; My path do men tread in all ways,O son of Pritha (B.G 3: 11).

10. When me they fly, I am the wings;

Psalms 1:4 .Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. psalm 91:4-13
4 He will cover you with his feathers,and under his wings you will find refuge;his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.(5) You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

8 You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.9 If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling,10 no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.13 You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. 68

‘That individual soul is as subtle as a hair-point divided and sub-divided hundreds of times. Yet he is potentially infinite. He has to be known.’ 65

11. I am the doubter and the doubt, 69

“I am the logic in all arguments” (B.G.10:32),

12. And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

“I am the hymn (Mantra)” (B.G 9: 16).“Those who attempt to liberate themselves from old age and death by taking refuge in me, they realize the Supreme Reality (Brahmin).” (B.G.7:29) “ Of the Vedas, I am the Sama-Veda. I am the Vrihatsaman among the hymns (of the SamaVeda) ; the Gaytri among rhymes.” (B.G 10:49-51) Among the hymns also I am the Brihatsaman; among metres Gayatri am I; among the months I am Margasirsa; among seasons (I am) the flowery season. (B.G.10: 35)

Taitriaya Upanishad:1.8.1. This Aum is Brahman.

13. The strong gods pine for my abode,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 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 Brahman’s abode.

14. And pine in vain the sacred Seven ;

(Saptha Rishis) Neither the hosts of Celestials nor the great seers know My origin; for, in every way I am the source of all the Celestials and Seers.62 (B.G Ch 10-2) The seven great seers, the ancient four and also the Manus, possessed of powers like Me (on account of their minds being fixed on Me), were born of (My) mind; from them are these creatures born in this world. (B.G .10:6)

15. But thou, meek lover of the good

Abandoning all Dharmas (of the body, mind, and intellect),take refuge in Me alone; I will liberate thee from all sins; grieve not (B.G.18: 66).

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.Psalms 37:11 But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity. 70

Dwelling in solitude, eating but little, with speech, body and mind subdued, always engaged in concentration and meditation, taking refuge in dispassion (B.G.18.52.)

16. Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

Those whose wisdom has been led astray by this or that desire, go to other gods, following this or that rite, led by their own nature (B.G.7: 20).The worshippers of the Devas (gods) go to the Devas, but My devotees come to Me (B.G.7: 23).

Abandoning all religious duties, seek me as thy refuge." (B.G.18.66) If you are slain you’ll reach heaven; victorious, you will enjoy the earth; therefore, stand up, resolved to fight! B.G 2. 37 And Insatiable desires, hypocrisy, pride and arrogance, delusion, detrimental resolution, Lust ,love for wealth , ostentation, egoism, power, insolence, with these,these cruel haters, the evil doers, the impious and the most degraded men in the world,—they are hurled into Demons wombs. (B.G.16.10.to 16. 19)

The most popular Seven Rishis recognized are Atri, Vashishta, Kashyapa, Vishwamitra, Jamadagni, Bharadvaja and Gautama. As given below, there is variation according to different literature.

Literary variation of Saptarishis

Sl.No Brhadaranya Upanisad 2.2.4 71 Brihat Samhitah 72 Vaivasvata-manvantara 73
swayambhuva manvantara73

- 1 Bharadvaja Marichi Atri Angiras
- 2 Gautama Vashista Bharadvaja Atri
- 3 Atri Angiras Gautama Kratu
- 4 Jamadagni Atri Jamadagni Marichi
- 5 Kashyapa Pulastya Kashyapa Pulaha
- 6 Vashista Pulaha Vashista Pulastya
- 7 Vishvamitra Kratu Vishvamitra Vashista

* Brahadaranyaka Upanishad-

The Saptarishis are said to pine in vain because the realisation of the God does not come as easily through the observance of religious rites and the mortification of flesh as through the spontaneous surrender to the Divine Will. The upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita frequently referred to the superiority of such surrender and simple piety to elaborate ritual and sacrifices.

The Lord Krishna says:

B.G.8.11. Now shall I instruct you in brief that which is declared as imperishable by the knowers of Vedas, which the mystic attains when free from passion and for which they live the life of Brahmacharya.

B.G 8.12. Having closed all the gates, confined the mind in the heart and fixed the life-breath into the head, engaged in the practice of concentration, all the gates:

B.G. 8.13. Chanting the monosyllable Om—the Brahman—meditating Me always, he who departs thus, leaving the body, attains the supreme goal.

B.G 8.14. I am easily attainable by that ever-steadfast Yogi who constantly and daily meditates on Me (for a long time), with unified mind, O Partha .

“ I tell you briefly of that goal which all the Vedas with one voice propound, which all the austerities speak of and wishing for which people practice Brahmacharya: it is this viz OM .”-
Katha. 1. ii.15 74

Similar expression is found in Svetasvatara IV,9. “”. That from which the matter(mayin) sends forth all this- this sacred verses, the offerings, the sacrifices, the panaceas, the past, the future, and all that Vedas declare- in that order is bound up through that Maya”75

IGNOU places on record and instruct their students,

“ 'Brahma' is one of the popular poems of Emerson. A discerning reader of this poem can easily see the influence of Indian thought on the author. According to ancient Indian thought, there is one Supreme Power that governs and guides the whole universe. This Supreme Power is the origin of all beings and the final destination of all souls (atmas). Through a ceaseless cycle of births and deaths, through nobility of actions and purity of heart, through purgation of base passions, the soul (atma) finally merge? with Brahman (Paramatman) or Over-soul (to use Emerson's term). “76

None of Emerson's works so boldly illustrate what he termed, “the Infinitude of the Asiatic Soul,” more completely than his poem, “Brahma”77

‘According to Professor Frederic Ives Carpenter, those sixteens probably express those concepts “more clearly than any other writing in the English language — perhaps better than any writing in Hindu literature itself.”78

Professor Lanman says: "The doctrine of the absolute unity finds perhaps its most striking expression in Sanskrit in the Katha-Upanishad; but nowhere, neither in Sanskrit nor in English, has it been presented with more vigor, truthfulness, and beauty of form than by Emerson in his famous lines paraphrasing the Sanskrit passage. They are conceived as if uttered by the All- pervading Spirit . The beginnings of Hindu pantheism 79

With reservations, he had high regard for the Bhagavad Gita whose central thought was brought home to him by Emerson's poetic restatement. 80

"In it, Emerson managed to compress Brahman, the Absolute, or Supreme Being, whose names, qualities, and powers clutter India's most sacred texts, into four adamant verses.

"Brahma" is not so much a poem as a paean to a divinity that more closely resembles gravity, an impersonal, immutable force, than it does the God of the Bible. By the time "Brahma" appeared, he was an icon of independent thinking in a country proud of its independence. In Emerson's hands, "Brahma" was American." 81

Conclusion

Therefore, Ralph Waldo Emerson, understanding the spirit of the Bhagavad Gita, made a free rendering of some of the passages, and he immortalized the Bhagavad Gita by his poem on "Brahm". The moment we study this, we are lifted up in a different realm to the oneness of the Spirit.

"That which exists is One, men call it by various names—*eham sad-vipra hahudha vadanti*" 82 This is the eternal Truth, and from the Truth we have come into existence, in Truth we live, and into the Truth we return after the death of the body. This is the philosophy of Vedanta, and this was expressed by that beautiful poem on "Brahm" by Ralph Waldo Emerson. 83

Foot Notes

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