

Emerson's Western Rendering of Asian Esoteric Language

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ABSTRACT: *The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson revolve around ideas pertaining to the possibility of containing all of cosmos within the mind of the individual, which can be viewed in relation to the philosophy which propagates a supposedly separate, universal; all-inclusive "American" identity apart from a supposedly traditional, oppressive European equivalent. Emerson attempts to achieve this by utilizing the concept of "the Orient." His writings do this by rendering interpretations of concepts presented in Asian texts, particularly medieval Persian Sufi poetry and classical Hindu texts, into Western discourse and mindset. Such an endeavor, however, disregards the right of non-European realities to speak for and define themselves. Thus the Emerson's effort to establish the millennial America violates autonomy of non-European voices.*

Keywords : *American literature, cultural translation, orientalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalism,*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Ralph Waldo Emerson," Larzer Ziff writes in the Introduction to his edition of Emerson's essays, "occupies the very center of American intellectual tradition." Ziff describes Emerson in this way, utilizing the accepted notion that what is "American" came to existence when what used to be a branch of English culture cut itself off from the main stem and created for itself an independent realm. Emerson is at the center because "[r]eading his works we recognize that we are at [that] great junction point"[1], which, I believe, was deliberately brought about. Thus, to talk about an "American intellectual tradition" means to locate this as a point in history where a transformation occurred, one that serves as a main parameter in defining an identity named "American."

In order to achieve this metamorphosis, Emerson's writings utilize ideas pertaining to the "infinite of the private man." [2] The philosophy in which these notions are organized, especially as it is expressed in *Nature*, "The American Scholar," "Plato," "Persian Poetry," and *English Traits*, can be identified as one which propagates a separate, supposedly universal, all-inclusive "American" identity apart from a supposedly traditional, oppressive European equivalent. In other words, they represented an attempt to transcend the conceived limitations of what Europe was imagined to be. They did this by incorporating the Eurocentric Other commonly referred to as "the Orient" which, in Emerson's case, assumes two interrelated forms. First, these writings embrace "Oriental" texts and ideas, which can be interpreted as stepping outside the boundaries of Europe as a conceived racial Self. Emerson deals with them more by exploiting their Eurocentric interpretation than by attempting to benefit from the invocation of their original voices. By ignoring the right of non-European consciousness to express itself, Emerson's tone becomes paternalistically imperialistic because it textually subjects and silences the Other under the rubric of European domination.

Second, he employs concepts about returning to an Edenic teleological state of being, which is what Emerson's idea of America represents. This suggests an effort to depart from the idea of Europe as "civilization," presuming that the ontological "America" will naturally be apparent once the contaminated European tradition is disintegrated. The problem with this is that it disregards the right of indigenous peoples over the land and how it is to be perceived. In this light, Emerson's endeavor becomes an act of colonization, where foreign consciousness unilaterally redefines the meaning of an environment, denying "native" autonomy.

These two directions, with which Emerson sought to escape Europe, intersect. Both concepts of Eden and the Orient refer to supposedly extra-European spheres. This implies that their definitions depend on a European center. They are objects of a European teleology. Therefore, the Eurocentric view of America is not different from that of the Orient. Dathorne explicitly states that "the earlier 'known world of the 'East' anticipated and prescribed the later 'unknown' world of the 'West'"[3], that is, in more ways than one, America is itself a variant of the Orient. The basic difference is that while in the Old World Orient the European finds still, mute, yet existent peoples; America prior to European immigration was conceived to be wild, empty, and needed cultivation.

This paper, thus, will discuss Emerson's idea of America and how it uses the concept of “the Orient” and “Oriental” philosophy and literature, using mainly “Plato” and “Persian Poetry” as the objects of discussion to show how these ideas deal with non-European realities and how they finally absorbed the *others*, though unilaterally, into a Eurocentric discourse, thereby justifying themselves.

II. THE ORIENTALIST NATURE OF EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALIST PHILOSOPHY

Considering their inherent ethnocentrism, Emerson's writings contradict the supposedly universalistic philosophy they promote and justify the imperialistic tendencies that existed in their Anglo-American socio-political context. Thus, rather than extending his Self to the world beyond European delineations, he reduces the world to center on the New England educated white elite to which he thought he belonged by reorganizing the significance and the value of non-European realities within a Eurocentric framework.

It has been too much taken for granted that what is meant by the American identity is one that has come into existence after its transformation from a British selfhood, in particular, or a European one, in general. Current arguments concerning restrictions on a certain group of people labeled “immigrants,” or the fact that such foreseen phenomena as the “browning of America” has become an issue at all, only augment the expediency of a discourse that puts the definition of what is “American” into question. We can no longer-not after more than two centuries--resort to a conclusion that “[t]he history of the [American] culture [is] the history of the European man in the new world, bringing to it institutions best fitted to subdue it”[1]. Such a notion in the least can only be considered as a familiar historical narrative but not a historical fact. This means that Emerson's America, if it is to be inclusive, it must embrace non-European identities as equal contributing factors. What is more important is that if America is to be independent, and not merely be an extension of Europe, its Self and history must be rooted in the land. Thus, if there is to be a center in America, it should emphasize on the significance of Native American history, and view the introduction of European culture to this land as what it actually is: a foreign influence. Otherwise, all indigenous and imported systems must be considered as symmetrical forces in a centerless, multicultural interplay.

We can no longer insist on one “American way” which is simultaneously uniform *and* universally acceptable because the realities of a culturally diverse America, like the reality of a diverse world, are too stark to ignore. The present tendencies of globalization confront us with actualities that prompt the recognition of existing differences, and accept those differences as inevitable facts rather than attempts at reaching back to historical archetypes. Such beliefs are inappropriate because they are based on a naive assumption that one is able to step out of his culture, and actually observe all the events in the world from an “objective” point of view. This is almost impossible, considering that we can only know and understand by placing the things we know and understand within the boundaries of our own language and culture.

To believe that we can ultimately be “objective” would also mean that occurrences as they are inherently meaningful, and that words signify objects in the world rather than ideas in our mind. Thus, we assume that these ideas, which we derive from our experiences, our views, our culture, and our beliefs, are ontologically true phenomena which are universally accepted. Moreover, being objective in dealing with peoples and cultures also means treating them as objects of knowledge, therefore disregarding the fact that they are in fact conscious subjects, capable of self-definition.

This is a major problem with the “universalistic” philosophy found in Emerson's writings. It pretends to break off from European tradition and worldview by seeking to have a direct, original relationship with nature in its supposedly purest state as well as by borrowing “Oriental” ideas. The problem is that Emerson's notions of nature and the “Orient” are derived from a European legacy of defining phenomena. The result is that Emerson's philosophy is not so much the freeing of the American mind from the limitations of European tradition as an innovative, creative usage of Eurocentric language, for it is based on the same assumptions as the parent culture and language from which it attempts to depart.

“The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face;” Emerson laments, “we, through their eyes” [4]. It is quite convenient to assume that the Sage of Concord is speaking of the present contemporary state of humankind in general, but that would mean taking Emerson out of the context of history and making him into some kind of deity from a realm outside the confines of time and space who had sent a text into the historical world to enlighten all of humanity with the truth of his words. To treat Emerson in such a way leads to conclusions that Emerson's words hold truths that are characterized as being “universal,” that it transcends time limitations and geographical boundaries as well as cultural definitions. This, of course, is advantageous to the idea Emerson propagates. Thus, we attempt to examine his works by the very standards he himself establishes.

Furthermore, to do this means to monolithize humanity, an act that acknowledges and validates only a single system of thought, undoing other systems that conflict or pose as a threat for it. In so doing, they deny the existence of any other consciousness. Their very denial eliminates other forms of consciousness from the acknowledged language they speak. This monolithization, I think, more or less helps to bring about the

occurrence of that very human endeavor which has come to be known as “imperialism.” I wish to argue that Emerson, as the main spokesperson of American literary Transcendentalism, is, in fact, by the nature of the assumptions that founded his philosophy, Eurocentrically imperialistic.

Emerson was a person in and of nineteenth-century Western history. He spoke and wrote of ideas defined by the historical context in which the text *Nature* (of which the above statement is an excerpt) was produced. This means that Emerson was not a prophet for all of humanity. His texts speak to, and of, a particular consciousness. Thus, the question arises about who “we” are and which “foregoing generations” Emerson implies.

There is no doubt that Emerson's intended audience is that of upper-middle-class white males. But, by this we would also describe the intended audience of most other canonical literary works produced before the mid-twentieth century. I think, however, that in the case of Emerson the textual exclusiveness is much more amplified for the very reason that Emerson was calling for universality, that is the elimination of particular existing realities, in favor of a new one that pretended to include all.

The imagining of the American wilderness and the Orient were inevitable alternatives to the familiar European environment not only because they represented metaphysical worlds outside the boundaries of Europe but also as an escape where existence was more desirable than the corruption of an oppressive Europe. They signified a journey to extratemporal and extramundane realms; and these realms subsequently represented extraordinary or chaotic unreality--that is outside the known order of things or beyond cosmos. They had to be conceived as such because “in the context of factual discourse.... there is an opposed, compensatory, competing *world* out there somewhere, Elsewhere” [3]. In Emerson's case, if the known world was one which had become so mechanical that it “ha[d] lost the use of [its] feet,” the Other world had to be idealized.

To validate his idea of universality, he also proposes “Oriental” philosophy. The “Orient” for him was a source of extratemporal, extramundane Truth. Emerson's attitudes toward these concepts were in compliance with Eurocentric definitions of “Self” and “Other;” for if the Europe is physically “real,” and if the embryo of the American is imprisoned by this “reality,” extra-European realities must have metaphysical significance. This too carries a note of American millennialism in which idea America was represented as an amalgam of the people of the world bound together by, as Werner Sollors puts it, voluntary consent and not bygenealogical descent [5].

In general, Emerson viewed the American environment as a wilderness where the “American” would newly emerge and, by “the transformation of genius into practical power,”[4] establish “a nation of men ...[who] each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”[4] The idea of nature untouched by humanity is associated with the Judeo-Christian ideas of “Eden” and the “Promised Land,” a motif characteristic of Western culture also found in Classical Greco-Roman literature, though in Emerson's case it more closely succeeded the Puritan strain of the idea. Thus, the land which had come to be known as “America” was defined by a European system of Self, World, and Language. Emerson in his search for “universality” used these notions, and assigned them to the “American” environment.

Thus, Emerson only extends the European center incorporating what was previously known as non-European peripheral realities into a Eurocentric system of Self, World, and Language. This seems to be a very pervasive form of ethnocentrism, for not only does it assign superiority to “home” but also disavow the existence of *other* realities as autonomous entities. Therefore, when he talks about “Persian poets” and “Hindoos,” he is really discussing how Orientalists have described them with a prior notion that “Orientals” cannot represent, define, and understand themselves. The matter has more impact when the issue is taken to deal with the way Emerson deals with “America.” Not only does he disregard Native American voices by defining *their* land with his definitions, but he also ignores their existence by viewing America as empty.

III. ORIENTALISM, ROMANTICISM, AND THE TRANSLATION OF PERSIAN SUFI POETRY AND HINDU SACRED TEXTS

Romanticism, especially that developed in England and later in America, is dominantly characterized by Orientalist thought and language. Orientalism itself is an important element in Western discourse. Edward Said states that for Western imagination the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West; to some of the German Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of German-Christian pantheism. Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental. [6]

According to Said, Romanticism is a cultural movement that sprung in Europe, especially in England, starting from the 18th century, as a response to the rigid rationalism that developed at that time. In nineteenth-century England particularly, Romanticism was an attempt to revive the Romanticism that had previously developed in the 16th century. Said goes on to say that “a major part of the spiritual and intellectual project of the late eighteenth century was a reconstituted theology—natural supernaturalism, as M. H. Abrams has called

it” [6]. What Said refers to as a revisionist movement in England in the nineteenth century developed as the Romantic Revival with figures such as William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. What developed in England was subsequently imported by American writers by poets such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and members of the Transcendentalist Club in New England, including Emerson.

However, according to Said the Orientalist element who characterized these English Romantic works was problematic. He says: “The idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia is a piece of pure Romantic Orientalism” [6]. So prevalent was this Orientalist mode of thought in the nineteenth century that writers as were as rational and as conscious of the adverse effects of colonialism on human suffering as Marx had also shown these characteristics in his writings. Therefore, according to Said, two questions need to be raised, namely

first...how Marx's moralequation of Asiatic loss with the British colonial rule he condemnedgets skewed back towards the old inequality between East and Westwe have so far remarked. Second, it requires us to ask where thehuman sympathy has gone, into what realm of thought it has disappeared while the Orientalist vision takes its place. [6]

What can be concluded from this problem, according to Said, is that western nineteenth-century discourse tends to look at humanity with broad and generalized groupings. This characteristic is very visible in the literary discourse in England mainly because of its close relationship with the territory that stretches from the Mediterranean to India. As one of its largest and most important colonies. “Romantic writers like Byron and [Walter] Scott,” Said says, “consequently had a political vision of the Near Orient and a very combative awareness of how relations between the Orient and Europe would have to be conducted” [6].

The problem concerning the Orient in Romanticism also applies to Emerson and his works. Emerson's understanding, judgments, and attitudes of the so-called “Orient” were also in accordance with those cultivated in Europe. This is not surprising: since Emerson's philosophy was preoccupied with the “New Worldness” of America, the old Other as the necessary opposition to the old Self had to be imported from the Old World, which was itself the necessary opposition to the New World.

Emerson exploits the Eurocentric idea of the Orient to have somewhere to go in his effort to free the individual from European limitations. Also he needed the Orient to complement the already apparent European legacy. Thus, his ideal individual is one that has outgrown the West because he has also encompassed the East. Consider the following passage.

An Englishman reads and says, ‘how English!’ a German, — ‘how Teutonic!’ an Italian, — ‘how Roman and how Greek!’ As they say that Helen of Argos had that universal beauty that everybody felt related to her, so Plato seems to a reader in New England an American genius. His broad humanity transcends all sectional lines. [7]

This is the Emersonian ideal. Of course, for Emerson, Plato is more appropriately the American genius than he is one of England, Germany, Italy, Rome, or even ancient Greece. “This citizen of a town in Greece,” Emerson says earlier in the same paragraph, “is no villager nor patriot.” Like, or as, the American ideal he breaks down all European internal definitions, and yet in the resulting new identity the essences and the culminating points of the constituents can still be recognized. In other words, Plato is represented to have outgrown his specific locality and even Europe in general, while at the same time embodies the idea of the ideal Grecian, Roman, and Teuton as well as the perfect European. Thus, the passage above provides us with an implied definition for “American genius”: an individual who has all of cosmos within him, and at the same time an Emersonian theory of interpretation, that a text is stabilized by the reader's identification with it.

Both of these issues--both basically linguistic ones--are useful in a discussion of Emerson's exploitation of the idea of the Orient. Emerson's association with this idea is obvious. For instance, he has been said to have heavily borrowed from Hindu philosophy. He has also been said to have directed his poetic aspirations to the form of the Persian Sufi poet Hafiz. The question is, however, whether matters such as Hindu philosophy and Sufi poetry are to be entered in one general classification. An affirmative answer can only be acceptable to me in that both discourses are not commonly recognized as being European in characteristic. This would mean that what is understood to be “Oriental” is a unifying idea ascribed to non-European regions, peoples, and cultures.

The Orient was important in that it posed as the Other against which European civilization was defined. This, ironically, was not peculiar to Emerson's philosophy. In fact, he only kept the European Romantic tradition of using the idea of the Orient as a symbol of the exotic as well as the mystical, like the Coleridgean Xanadu whose existence totally depends on the separation of the individual from European worldly business. He, however, applied this notion to the quest of a supposedly independent American identity. Thus, he attempted to go beyond the traditional boundaries of what Europe supposedly stood for by using definitions which are very Eurocentric.

It is also important, as Arthur Versluis points out, because “[t]o study nineteenth-century American

Transcendentalist Orientalism is to study variants in American millennialism” [8]. Looking toward the mystical Orient was an alternative in the effort to transcend worldly existence as it was understood by Emerson's society, since the Orient, as I have mentioned earlier, represented the desirable extramundane and extratemporal: The Augustinian City of God. In other words, Emerson's interest in, and utilization of the Orient, must be seen within this framework. This is especially so considering the fact that any form of Orientalism is basically an intellectual activity that “reinterpret[s] ideas in a European narrative”[9]. This is an essential notion to keep in mind, that “the Orient” is really “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’”[6].

In the context of American millennialism then we encounter the conceived culmination of the inevitable summit of human history to be established in the New World. If America was to be the last and final of all great civilization, apparently the immediate European heritage was not enough. The Emersonian American had to go beyond Europe, both historically and geographically. This prehistory and metageography was subsequently named “Asia,” the Orient. Here is where Plato becomes necessary. He is, as Emerson describes him, “the germ of that Europe we know so well, in its long history of arts and arms; here are all its traits already discernible in the mind of Plato, —and in none before him” [7]. He is the arch(e)-European. Plato's placement demonstrates how he becomes the center and origin of European consciousness, and therefore, also a crevice through which Emerson is able to have knowledge of the Other world. As the center, Plato represents the essence of the European Self and therefore he is also the standard by which the Other is to be identified. As the origin, he becomes the connecting point to “the Orient” which is not merely outside European history but also before it.

Consequently, “[t]he unity of Asia and the detail of Europe; the infinitude of the Asiatic soul and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, opera-going Europe, —Plato came to join, and, by contact, to enhance the energy of each”[7]. This dichotomy is obviously unfair to both realities of Europe and Asia because it makes their existence dependent on their being understood and expressed by a particular critic. Yet, if we were to deal with realities, it would be just as unfair to put such broad terms as “Europe” and “Asia” to usage because general classification depends on how particulars are *perceived* to have similarities. Moreover, in this context Emerson—as he was in most others—was not concerned with realities, at least not the Oriental ones contemporaneous to his time. He was interested in texts and ideas, which, for him, was more important and at times more “real.”

If we look back at Emerson's concept of reality, even natural reality, as it is expressed in *Nature*, we will find that both the thing and the idea manifest themselves and are understood through the word. The issue about the relation between language, as the system with which consciousness functions, and “material” reality, Raymond Williams observes, is crucial [10]. In European thought “[t]he pre-Socratic unity of the *logos*, in which language was seen as at one with the order of the world and of nature, with divine and human law, and with reason” has been abandoned in favor for the dichotomy in it. He goes on to say that Plato had found “an intermediate but constitutive realm, which is neither ‘word’ nor ‘thing’ but ‘form’, ‘essence’, or ‘idea’,” which seems to be more determining than the former two [10]. This is so because it demotes both “nature” and “consciousness” into manifestations of “idea.”

Edward Said, however, warns us that “it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, a creation with no corresponding reality”[6]. If it were essentially an idea, the Orient would virtually lose its meaning for Emerson. Emerson did not create an Orient so that he would find something when he violates the boundaries of Europe. He knew that there was something out there and he called it “the Orient.” What concerns me here is, then, the kind of meaning attributed to the word and the thing it refers to, so that the Other-thing can function for the idea in the Self.

Basically, there are two interrelated conceptions of the Orient in “Plato.” First, the Orient is “a sort of surrogate and even underground self”[6]. The second is the Orient as an ante-European world. Edward Said observes that the former gives the European self “strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient”[6]. Emerson finds that his Europe by itself stands on shaky ground because it is too external. He needs a counterpart, “the religion of Asia, as the base”[7]. This base, however, must be static if it is to serve as a base at all. In this sense, Emerson objectify the various non-European peoples and their cultures, making them into non-developing, inorganic things that lack consciousness.

The Orient is also the origin of the “real” European world. Thus, not only does Emerson excludes extra-European realities from any meaningful concurrent participation in history, he also has Asia exist in that it is only meaningful in relation to Europe but not to itself. Either way, “Asia” allows Emerson to ward off the presence of Europe in America.

Thus, the part of the world Emerson terms “the Orient” or “the East” (be it Near or Far) becomes a region in which the West saw alternatives. It is a space over which Europeans travel and find wonders (both desirable and monstrous), as well as, in many cases, their utopia and the origin of their civilized world. For Emerson, whose mind was obviously constructed by a Eurocentric language, as Frederic Ives Carpenter notes,

“the Orient had always been the unexplored country—the land where humanity had originated—the birthplace of all civilization and literature”[11]. This suggests a definition of a Self whose origins are separate and unknown. This reflects a Self existing in the context of nineteenth-century east-coast America who is very concerned about the influence of the past on itself and at the same time tries to ascribe some kind of significance upon itself by connecting itself to an origin with which it can validate its own existence. However, unlike the case with Europe, since Emerson only lets Asia exist metaphysically, it is not a threat to the newness of America.

It is important to note, however, that the Asia that he wished to incorporate in his ideal America is the ancient one. As for the real Asia of his time, he says in a journal entry:

The poor inhabitants of Indostan are distressed & degraded by the horrors of a flimsy & cruel Superstition. The iron hath entered into their souls, & their situation is in all respects abominable. Why is it their misery is thus darkened & deepened far different from the lot of the rejoicing nations of Europe & America[?] It is because a flaming sky boils their blood & blackens their skin & maddens their nature enervating the mind while it renders it fiercer & more brutal. [12]

It is crucial to distinguish between the existing India and the India as the origin of European civilization. To view the India colonized by Britain as fallen empire strengthens the providential history of millennialism. Such an assessment assumes that India's portion to history has finished. Then, her having Queen Victoria as her Empress becomes evidence of Britain's possession of history as well as India's dependence on England for her participation in history. Furthermore, it accentuates the idea that the Orient is essentially a European past and is doomed to stay in the past. The entry above offers the image that it was a natural process that India was decaying the way it did, as if it can only be rejuvenated through, and in the form of, Europe [12]. It is also a fine example of how Emerson was very much influenced by imperialism in that he blames the Indians for their being colonized, and that being colonized means being raised from their degraded state. It implies that European imperialism, if it cannot cleanse and refresh their burnt skin, can at least enlighten the Indian mind. This seems to be how America, which Emerson shows to be Britain's imperial successor, comes to be viewed as the vehicle for the salvation of humanity. Russell B. Goodman, reiterating Carpenter and Versluis, states that “Emerson was a philosophical original, and he transformed everything he touched”[13]. This touch, “reconstructive rather than deconstructive,” saves both the mechanical Europe and the decaying Asia by integrating them forming the new America.

How Emerson has utilized Oriental philosophy and literature, be it of Neoplatonist, Hindu, or Islamic origin has been the topic of many a scholarly work. What is important about Emerson's usage of “the Orient” in formulating his philosophy is the fact that he *used the idea*. That is to say that he never set out to give an objective account of what it was to the point where he “did not merely accept Oriental ideas; he transmuted them... (and) used them to illustrate and give substance to his own thought”[11]. Critics like Carpenter and Versluis regard such an effort of “making a new and perfect poem out of old snatches of a foreign idea”[11] as the manifestation of Emerson's genius. I think it does injustice to the consciousness that originally conceived these “ideas.”

It is unjust because it is an imperialist and Orientalist act, that is it uproots indigenous consciousness out of its context and then places them in a supposedly better European framework, thereby denying their autonomy. I would like to demonstrate this fact by observing how Emerson came to know Asia. Goodman remarks that “(t)hough Emerson did not see a complete Hindu text, such as the *BhagavadGita*, until he was in his forties, it would be misleading to think there was no Indian influence before then” [13]. Such an assumption is only valid if there is an assumption that Indian thought had in fact infiltrated European scholarship, especially, as Goodman himself notes, considering the fact that Emerson

lived during the first great period of European Sanskrit scholarship--exemplified by William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke in England. Eugène Burnouf in France, and by Friedrich Schlegel in Germany—which followed the Western colonial expansion into the Indian subcontinent initiated by Vasco de Gama in 1498 and reached a climax in the establishment of the British Empire in India in 1757 [13].

This explanation only shows that what might be called “Indian influence” was brought about within the context of imperialism. Thus, what it really was was a means by which the colonizer yearned to understand the object of his efforts. This is Said's interpretation of the Baconian maxim: “Knowledge is power” [6]. In this light, we are prompted to ask whether Emerson was influenced by Indian thought, or whether he was influenced by European Sanskrit scholarship.

I tend to resort to the conclusion that what Emerson understood as Hindu philosophy (or any other “Oriental” thought) was in fact an interpretation of what Orientalist scholars understood it to be. If we note what Carpenter, Versluis, and Goodman have emphasized about Emerson's use of it, then we should question whether it is still Hindu philosophy that we read in his works, since it has been so far removed from its original context.

Goodman states that Emerson's initial knowledge "India" were through "accounts of Indian-poetry, politics, and philosophy" the most influential of which is his encounter with an "account of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Victor Cousin's *Cours de philosophie*." Goodman himself recognizes that Cousin did not read the original Sanskrit but made use of Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation, which Emerson only got hold of in 1845 [12]. Thus, we have this course of displacement. The original is translated to English. The English is translated to French. Finally, Emerson relocates it in his own nineteenth-century New England mind and language. In between the original and the two translations we have a consciousness interpreting a foreign text which is in itself an act of displacement. I cannot share Goodman's confidence by believing that "certain points about Hinduism would have come through to Emerson," and one of which would actually become "an idea that would prove central to Emerson's own philosophy" [12]. If we find that the first two lines in "Brahma" to resemble a passage in the *Bhagavad Gita*, do we come to the conclusion that they are in fact an expression of an idea derived from the original Sanskrit? Even so, we must assume that the original text does contain that idea.

Let us attempt to reconstruct how this idea has made its way to Emerson's "Brahma." In the second chapter nineteenth verse of the original *Bhagavad Gita* we find the statement:

य एनं वेत्ति हन्तारं यश्चैनं मन्यते हतम्
उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते

Wilkins read this, mentally transliterated the text into a system of phonemes that suited Wilkins's English-thinking mind and came up with something like:

ya enam vetti hantaram yas cainam manyate hatam
u bhau tau na vijanito nayam hanti na hanyate[14]

This is the first removal. Even if we assume that there are adequate English equivalents for some Sanskrit phonemes, we cannot fully account for the transliteration, though a mental one, of the nasal sound at the end of the second, fourth, eighth, and fourteenth word. While in Sanskrit it is represented by a mere paracritical dot, in English it becomes a complete phoneme being represented by the letter "m." Extending this notion, we may even doubt whether medial and final vowels in Sanskrit are equal the English parallels if the alphabetical system of the former integrates them within the preceding consonants. These differences shows that, at least, the extraction of these elements from their originating Sanskrit context causes further problems to the already intricate queries about the relation between the language and what it signifies.

Taking the passage to the morphological level, the translator, that is Wilkins [15], uses English words as equivalents for Sanskrit ones. This level is more problematic in that now we are dealing with complete ideas. Take the fourth word for example. Wilkins translates "*hantaram*" as "which killeth," although it is actually a noun denoting an agent of an act, so the English equivalent would more appropriately be "killer." Consequently, he translates other words derived from the same root as its variations. "*Hanti*" becomes "killeth," while "*hanyate*" becomes "is ...killed." Yet, his translation for "*hatam*" is "be destroyed." Perhaps, Wilkins was in the opinion that the latter two were in fact different words, and therefore their English translations should also be. This shows that since different languages operate with different morphological systems, the outcome depends on the purpose and preference of the translator.

In its final stage Wilkins' translation arrives at the sentence:

The man who believeth that it is the soul which killeth, and he who thinketh that the soul may be destroyed, are both alike deceived; for it neither killeth, nor is it killed. [15]

This is a further displacement of the text from the context. It is more than mere replacements of individual Sanskrit ideas by English ones but more pervasively a modification of ideas to fit a foreign syntax, the expression of ideas in its fullest. Furthermore, in a way, translations destabilize the original text by attempting to ascribe specific meanings to the text which depends on the experience and the purposes of the translator.

Let us compare Wilkins' translation to those made by Swami Prabhupada [14] and Juan Mascaró [16]. The former, who locates the text in the context of the theology of the Krishna Consciousness movement (popularly known as the Hare Krishna) translates the passage in discussion as:

Neither he who thinks the living entity the slayer nor he who thinks it slain is in knowledge, for the self slays not nor is slain. [14]

Mascaró, on the other hand, whose translation is meant for a popular reading, translates it as:

If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain, neither knows the ways of truth.

The Eternal in man cannot kill; the Eternal in man cannot die. [16]

Though each seems to render similar meanings, it is very doubtful that they actually convey the same ideas. Then, we might as well offer the query as to whether different cultures deal with identical, or even similar, ideas.

Furthermore, Wilkins, who viewed the *Bhagavad Gita* as an expression "of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines, [15] seems to have found it necessary to render the Gita in the linguistic mode of the King James

Bible. Thus, this Visnuist text is extracted from its original theological framework, and relocated in a Protestant environment. Thus, Wilkins' translation has become Protestant.

If we assume that texts are essentially vulnerable to interpretation in that its stability depends more or less on their being read, then Wilkins's translation determines the meaning of the Gita for an English-speaking reader. The translator has deciphered the ambiguous "*enam*" by determining that it refers to "the soul." Moreover, by giving variety of denotations to the root "*hat*," he determines the shades of its value. I am not suggesting that translations are in essence efforts done in vain so long as there is no assumption that the translator is actually communicating the same ideas in a different language. He merely expresses the equivalent of the original text in a foreign context. Translations are beneficial so long as they are read as translations.

Now, Emerson, without any pretension that he is actually translating a passage from the Gita, snatches a fragment of what he has read from Wilkin's already modified translation and creates his own poem, "Brahma." The first stanza reads as follows:

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again. [4]

Emerson has uniformed the translation of the root "*hat*" as well as Wilkins' "believeth" and "thinketh" which the latter has translated from "*vetti*" and "*manyate*." The poet has even attributed the adjective "red" to the subject, which incidentally is quite different from Wilkins'. In the last line he does not even bother to adhere to the literal. Thus, Emerson has further the displacement of the original idea by now replacing it in his context of Transcendentalist literature.

Thus, the presence of non-European elements in Emerson's philosophy cannot be proven by offering Hindu counterparts for Emersonian concepts. A documentation of how these ideas were transmitted to Emerson, as I have argued, only demonstrates how they have been transformed to the point where they may have no longer existed except in that similar vocabulary is used to represent them. Thus, we are left with what we can read in Hindu and Emerson's texts.

Goodman, for example, finds that Emerson's concept of the "Over-Soul" is parallel to the Upanishadic idea of "Brahman," and the term an almost literal translation of "ParamAtman." Yet, he admits that these ideas were expressed prior to Emerson's reading a translation of the Upanishads. He even goes so far as to say and quite convincingly argues that "Emerson's Indian associations shape the images and doctrines of his greatest essay, 'Experience'" [13].

Sufism is also similar to Transcendentalism in the importance of self-negation. Martin Lings, in order to explain the Sufistic idea, retells the "saying of a Persian Sufi," which states, "I went and left myself outside": for since nothing can be added to the Paradise of the infinite, only nothing can enter it" [17]. In *Nature* the idea is expressed in the well-known paradox: "I am nothing; I see all" [4]. By negating his "self" the "I" becomes one with the Absolute and assumes omniscience.

Emerson's writing also presents such dubious notions as those which proposes that "Mahometism draws all its philosophy in its hand-book of morals, the Akhlak-y-Jalaly, from him [Plato]" [7]. However, his understanding of Islam involves another matter. This is a fine example of how for Emerson the Orient is basically a text. He generalizes his understanding of the translation of quite an unimportant book in Islamic scholarship by ascribing it to the whole phenomenon.

Versluis comments that Islam has a unique place in Orientalist scholarship in that it "both geographically and metaphysically stands midway between the East and West, so it is only natural that an intellectual journey, like a physical journey to the East, pass through Islam" [8]. Yet it is exactly this proximity that makes Islam pose as a threat to the integrity, if not political stability, of the West.

Emerson's relationship with Islam is a peculiar one. On the one hand his attempt to understand it was necessary in his project to go beyond Europe. On the other hand, he was, as a Euro-American, "heir to a great deal of knowledge of Islam and Muslims [sic!] and to a long-standing tradition of prejudice towards them, from its European back ground and ancestry" [18]. Emerson's philosophy, and his Unitarian predecessors can be viewed in a long line of religious figures that insists on the Unity of God, a concept upon which the Islamic religion is rested [18].

It is quite obvious that Emerson was indebted to Hafiz and Sa'di, for he himself admitted it. Nevertheless, it is surprising to me that Carpenter found it necessary to arrive to the conclusion that "[t]he Persian poets probably affected Emerson more profoundly than any other Oriental writers except the Hindus—and, of course, the [Alexandrian] Neoplatonists" [11] while afterwards reserves a separate chapter for "Arabian literature and the Koran." This is ironical in that the Orientalist classifies such distinctly different ideologies as Neoplatonism, Hinduism, Islam, and Confucianism into one category; and simultaneously he distinguishes a system of thought from its historically and philosophically originating order.

Carpenter's rationale is that an Islamic way of thinking that "expresses the fatalism of the Koran, of

the 7th century.... cannot be classed with the Persian poetry of the 10th to the 15th centuries," adding that "[a]ctually ...the Persians were very often poor Mohammedans"[11]. For that same reason, Carpenter believes, Emerson was more interested in the medieval Sufi poetry than in Islamic philosophy. The problem here is that both Carpenter and Emerson seem to have had a prior notion of what Islam was supposed to be and based judgements made afterwards on that presumption.

Thus, the idea of Islam inherited by Emerson and his critic Carpenter has prompted them to read Islamic texts in a very stable way. While a Quranic verse that states that every individual has been assigned a day when they shall die is read as a sign of fatalism, a similar notion in the *Bhagavad Gita*, very individual has been assigned a particular profession in her life, is interpreted as a philosophy that liberates the soul from worldly entanglements.

This predicament, along with other textual problematics, is what makes Emerson's absorption of ideas originating from the poetry of medieval Persian Sufis more intriguing than his association with Indic philosophy. Emerson's Orientalist approach to Hafiz's texts is quite explicit in his essay "Persian Poetry" where he states

To Baron von Hammer-Purgstall, who died in 1856, we owe our best knowledge of the Persians. He has translated into German, besides the Divan of Hafiz, specimens of two hundred poets.... The seven masters of the Persian Parnassus--Firdusi, Enweri, Nisami, Jaleleddin, Saadi, Hafiz and Jami-- have ceased to be empty names; and others, like Ferideddin Attar and Omar Khayyam, promise to rise in Western estimation. [19]

This passage suggests a great deal of how Emerson's mind is operating in an Orientalist manner. First, there is the assumption that the existence of non-European consciousness depends entirely on the West's "discovery" of it. It denies that the reality of these real poets is in itself. In other words, it was crucial that von Hammer-Purgstall provided these names with meaning. Second, the quality of Persian literature requires European appraisal. Whatever the Persian voice has to say about their own literature was of no importance, for "in Western estimation" they were meaningless. Extending this notion, it seems that for Emerson in a way von Hammer-Purgstall has granted them an identity.

Subsequently, Emerson's understanding of medieval Persian poetry becomes a more complex problem than his knowledge of Indic philosophy, especially because he acquired it from a translation foreign to his own language. Furthermore, there seems to be an effort on Emerson's part to re-render what he has gathered from von Hammer-Purgstall's translation into an equally poetic form in English, which seems to demand his active creativity.

Let us take a look at some of Emerson's reproductions of Hafiz's poetry in "Persian Poetry." The following is the first two of lines of what in von Hammer-Purgstall's version is the thirteenth *ghazal* of Book Ta. Emerson's rendition is as follows:

Come! —the palace of heaven rests on aery pillars, -

Come, and bring me wine; our days are wind. [19]

This seems to be quite a literal translation from von Hammer-Purgstall's

Komm! es ruht der Pallast der Hoffnung auf Luftigen Pfeilern,

Konim und bringe mir Wein, unsereTagesindWind. [20]

However, Emerson has taken the liberty of translating "*Hoffnung*" as "heaven" instead of "hope."

The Persian is "*amt*" of which the literal English equivalent is "hope." Compare them to Arberry's translation, which I think more closely adhere to the original syntax and diction, and therefore also the original meaning:

The house of hope is built on sand, And life's foundations rest on air;

Then come, give me wine into my hand,

That we may make an end of care. [21]

It appears that Emerson's poetic aspirations have deviated the meaning into one that Emerson might have thought to be more appropriate, without consulting what it would mean in Persian. This demonstrates that Emerson was concerned with what von Hammer-Purgstall had to say, while Hafiz's voice is kept silent.

Moreover, Emerson is quite indifferent to the modifications that his source has done. In the original the word related to "air," "*dadist*" only appears in the second line pertaining to "*bania 'umr*" (literally "the foundation of life") while in the prepositional phrase in the first line we only find words denoting feeble foundations. Thus, while he modified "*Hoffnung*," he kept "*Tage*" as "day" and "*luftigen*" as "aery."

The last line of this poem is more interesting. Emerson's version is: "Know that a god bestowed on him [Hafiz] eloquent speech." Von Hammer-Purgstall's is: "*Wik' es hat ihm ein Gott Unmuth dere Rede veriliehn.*" What interests me here is that both versions suggest that Hafiz, the author as well as the speaker of the poem, is associated with a god of a mythological pantheon. This is impossible because this poem is Sufistic in nature and therefore is founded on the strict concept of the unity of God. The word "*khuda*" (literally "god"), which Hafiz uses in the original Persian, in another instance has been translated as "Herrn" by von Hammer-

Purgstall, and consequently, "Lord" by Emerson.
Consider the following ghazal, the twenty-seventh of Book Mim.

*O prahle nicht du Furst der Pilger
Zu viel mit deinem Glucke,
Du haft den Tempel, ich hingegen
Des Tempels Herrn gesehen.*[20]

Emerson translates this as:

Boast not rashly, prince of pilgrims, of thy fortune.
Thou hast indeed seen the temple; but I, the Lord of the temple. [19]

It appears here that "Lord" suits Emerson considering that he viewed this as the expression of one who "asserts his dignity as bard and inspired man of his people ...[t]o the vizier returning from Mecca"[19]. While Hafiz seems to be merely emphasizing the importance of esoteric knowledge of the Absolute, Emerson has interpreted the lines to mean Hafiz's rejection of Islamic orthodoxy. On the one hand, it represents his own biography; on the other, such an interpretation extracts Hafiz and Sufism from their Islamic framework because they do not fit the image of Islam which Emerson has been conditioned to believe.

IV. CONCLUSION

Emerson, apparently, was not able to understand the dynamics that may have occurred within Persian and Indian societies. Though he recognized the potential energies of "Eastern" thought and culture, it was assumed that they could only be manifest and put into action through a European consciousness: a Wilkins or a von Hammer-Purgstall; for physically or textually "colonized peoples do not have a voice within the colonial system but are obliged to seek paternalistic spokespeople from within that system who are sympathetic to their plight [22]. Emerson preferred to view them in the manner which the texts he had read had represented them. He furthered the stabilization of these so-called Oriental peoples by relocating them in his own texts. Subsequently, he was able to exploit their textual existence for his own Transcendentalist undertaking. Thus, when he broke the walls of the European world he found the ideal he sought because he had been conditioned to perceive them in such a way. Then, Emerson's interest in the Orient is that he saw the possibility of becoming a Plato: combining the energies of Asia and Europe, he envisioned the transformation of Eastern genius into Western practical power.

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