

BRAHMA –EMERSON’S PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLICATION POSITIONING UNITY WITHIN THE WORLD’S POLARIC STRUCTURE

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Abstract

The poem “Brahma” by Ralph Waldo Emerson is a philosophical explication of the universal spirit signifying the name. Emerson was greatly influenced by a sacred text of Hinduism, Katha-Upanishad in the composition of the poem. He has, in “Brahma,” used a series of images borrowed from Hindu scriptures many of which he translated in the issues of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, which he co-edited with Margaret Fuller for two years and then edited himself to reflect the coordinated pattern and unity in the physical universe, which is itself a reflected pattern of the same unity in the spiritual universe. Throughout the poem, Brahma, the creative spirit in the universe, or the Over-Soul, appears as the only speaker, sustaining the continuity of the work signifying not only its absolute nature but also its power, upon which the existence of the entire universe—metaphorically, the poem—is based. Other central themes in Emerson’s work are reflected in this poem: the idea of compensation, for example, which shows that there is a principle of balance in the universe, since for everything that is given, something is taken away, and vice versa. In the whole or spiritual sense, nothing is ever lost.

Keywords: philosophical explication, Katha-Upanishad, Transcendentalist, creative spirit, Over-Soul.

The poem “Brahma” by Ralph Waldo Emerson is a philosophical explication of the universal spirit signifying the name. Emerson was greatly influenced by a sacred text of Hinduism, Katha-Upanishad in the composition of the poem. He has, in “Brahma,” used a series of images borrowed from Hindu scriptures many of which he translated in the issues of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, which he co-edited with Margaret Fuller for two years and then edited himself to reflect the coordinated pattern and unity in the physical universe, which is itself a reflected pattern of the same unity in the spiritual universe.

The poetic form of elegiac quatrain is used in “Brahma” to represent the solemn nature of the subject. Throughout the poem, Brahma, the creative spirit in the universe, or the Over-Soul, appears as the only speaker, sustaining the continuity of the work signifying not only its absolute nature but also its power, upon which the existence of the entire universe—metaphorically, the

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poem—is based. “Brahma” reflects Emerson’s periodic use of the standard poetic meter and rhyme of his time: The fourquatrains are in iambic tetrameter, and his use of coupled rhymes (*abab*) is a reflection of his thematic sense of the inescapable polarity in the universe.

Having the Brahma as the speaker allows Emerson to posit the unity within the world’s polaricstructure; though contradictions seem to exist, he suggests, they are in fact meaningful paradoxes and notmeaningless contradictions. Emerson makes extensive use of irony in his poetic strategy; he indicates thatdeath is not really death, that shadow and sunlight are the same, and that both the doubter and doubt arecontained within the Brahma, to which all persons aspire to return.

There are other ironies as well: It is clearly implied that it is the abode of Brahma which is to be sought rather than a Christian heaven and that those who adopt the Darwinian perspective of the survival of the fittest miss the realization that, in reality, all survive.

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.

“Brahma” is an excellent reflection and representation of Emerson’s work as a whole. Though he is more widely known as a writer of essays, several of his poems may be seen as keys to his use of style and theme in all of his work, and this is one of those poems. Stylistically, he uses the same spiral or circular method that he does in his prose, rather than the more straightforward linear development used by most poets of his time. Thematically, he insists on the same spiritual and physical unity and harmony in the universe, expressed in a similarly intensive and dense language, as he does in his essays. In Hindu theology, Brahma is the supreme spirit or divine reality in the universe, the eternal spirit from which all has come and to which all shall return, similar to what Emerson more commonly called the Over-Soul.

The “strong gods” are secondary gods who, like all mortals, seek ultimate union with the supreme god, Brahma: They include Indra, the god of the sky; Agni, the god of fire; and Yama, “the red slayer”, or god of death. The “sacred Seven” are the highest holy persons or saints in Hinduism, who also seek union or reunion with Brahma.

If the red slayer think he slays,

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;

The poem begins by examining the common-sensical view that the spirit ends with one’s death. Even though the body may be destroyed, Brahma, which resides in each individual as the fountain of life, never ceases to exist:

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,

When the body is destroyed, the poet maintains, the spirit will appear again, likely in a different form. By employing the examples of both the slayer and the slain, the speaker is suggesting not only the prevalence of their view that the spirit may not be eternal but also the dichotomy that normally characterizes a person’s perception.

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The dichotomy recurs in the second stanza, in which opposite notions such as far and near, shadow and sunlight, vanishing and appearing, and shame and fame are juxtaposed. To the speaker, who unifies the universe, the seemingly unbridgeable differences between opposite concepts can be perfectly resolved; hence, the paradoxical statements. Brahma's great power is further described in the third stanza, where the spirit states that it comprehends yet transcends everything—both “the doubter and the doubt,” the subject and object, and matter and mind. In addition, the rhyme scheme befittingly reinforces the spirit's interweaving power, yielding a sense of wonder based on unusual metrical symmetry.

In stanza 1, Emerson insists that in the creative spirit of the universe, nothing dies; if death thinks that in fact it kills, or if those who are killed think that they are really dead, they are wrong, for death is Maya, or illusion. Brahma is subtle; the patterns of life and death, of eternal return, are not always obvious to the human eye or mind. Through the intuition, however, a person can see and understand his or her role in these patterns and can accept and learn from them.

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.

In the second stanza the reader discovers the essential unity of opposites—what Emerson called polarity. The physical and spiritual are intimately intertwined, with the physical being the concrete representation in the material world of the spiritual, which alone is real. In Emerson's terms, “both shadow and sunlight are the same”, in other words, light and dark, good and evil, life and death, happiness and sadness, and “shame and fame” are all the same. They are illusions which mortals believe to be real but which are not. In the same way, all human experience is one and is eternally present; what is “far or forgot” is in fact near, and both past and future are encapsulated in the present moment.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

Stanza 3 suggests that one can never escape this creative energy, since it is present everywhere in the universe. Humans ignore it at their own peril, since it alone is real, and it encompasses both “the doubter and the doubt”. It is the song of creative joy sung by the Brahmin, the highest caste in Hinduism. Fortunately, however, even if one does ignore the creative spirit, it remains present in one's life, and eventually one's spiritual eyes will open and one will recognize it. Both the person who doubts and the doubts themselves are essential parts of the universal plan.

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

Stanza 4 states that all seek union with this eternal spirit—whether lesser gods, saints, or those persons who are considerably farther down on the spiral of spiritual enlightenment. If one loves the good, regardless of one's faults, one shall find it. Even if one is insecure or “meek” in

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one's beliefs, one should turn away from the illusion of the Calvinist Christian heaven, where entrance is limited to the very few elect, and all others are rejected and damned. One should seek the Brahma, or Over-Soul, the eternal spirit of creativity and life in the universe, from which all have come and to which all will return.

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.

Emerson insists in his writings that it is only the spiritual world which is "real"; the material world is simply an illusion, created by human senses that must eventually be transcended. He frequently used one segment of the world as did Henry David Thoreau, who learned the method from him as a microcosm of the universe as a whole, believing that if one could but understand all of one aspect of the reality, one would have a clear entry into understanding the whole.

Another central Emersonian theme is implied in this poem, one that has to do with the relationship between people and nature: Physical nature can be a mirror to reflect back to humankind the spiritual facts which lie behind and inform all physical facts. Shadow and sunlight, for example, can reveal that they are inescapable parts of one phenomenon and thus one spiritual reality. Just as a person may come to realize that shadow is only the absence of light, so may one come to realize that evil is only the absence of good.

Other central themes in Emerson's work are reflected in this poem: the idea of compensation, for example, which shows that there is a principle of balance in the universe, since for everything that is given, something is taken away, and vice versa. In the whole or spiritual sense, nothing is ever lost. There is also a commentary on the nature of experience, which Emerson saw—in a metaphor which he used in several works—as being like beads strung on the string of one's temperament. In other words, what one sees and finds in the world is directly connected to one's perspective, or point of view, since how one looks at things determines what one sees. It is much like holding up a string of colored beads to the light and looking through them with all their varied colors—except, as Emerson states in his essay "Experience," that these beads are named desire, reality, temperament, succession, and subjectiveness. It is also the case, as he argued in his essay "Fate," that the universe is structured as much or more by one's internal fate or destiny as it is by any external fate. Since everyone desires to return to the Brahma or Over-Soul, from which they have come, whether they realize it or not, and since the Brahma, Over-Soul, or creative principle in the universe is waiting to accept or re-accept them when they are ready, the purpose of free will is to lead people to choose what has already been chosen another paradox, and another polarity, to return to the ultimate unity and harmony from which everyone originally came.

Different from the otherworldly spirit in Hinduism, however, the transcendental spirit represented by Brahma in this poem leads the follower not to Heaven but to this world. By using the conjunction "but" in the last stanza, Emerson prepares his reader for his own interpretation of the universal spirit. The concluding statement that justifies self-sufficient existence in this world makes this poem characteristically Emersonian:

But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven,

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