



Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

Brahma (1856)

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.

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.

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 they back on heaven.

ANALYSIS

“Brahma’ is the most notable expression of Hindu religious thought in Emerson’s writings. Brahma is the underlying, unchanging reality; it can best be understood in contrast with Maya, the changing, illusory

world of appearance, as shown in the following passage from the Hindu scriptures (quoted in Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p. 91):

‘Brahma is without attribute and form, Maya is endowed with both; Brahma is infinite, Maya finite; Brahma is immaculate and serene, Maya is fleeting and restless; Brahma is without adjuncts, Maya is full of them; Maya is visible, Brahma invisible; Maya perceptible, Brahma imperceptible; Maya perishable, Brahma imperishable; Maya growth, Brahma waxeth not; Maya diminisheth, Brahma wanteth not; Maya appealeth to the ignorant, Brahma attracts him not; Maya is born, Brahma is birthless; Maya dieth, Brahma is deathless; Maya descendeth into cognition, Brahma is beyond cognition; Maya fructifieth, Brahma doth not; Maya dissolveth, Brahma is indissoluble; Maya palleth, Brahma is a joy forever; Maya changeth, Brahma is immutable; Maya acteth, Brahma is beyond all activity; Maya assumeth various forms, Brahma is formless; Maya is...manifold, Brahma is one and eternal... Maya is spread everywhere enveloping the Brahma, the sage alone can pierce through the mist.’

[In the second stanza of the poem the line ‘And one to me are shame and fame’...must mean ‘Evil and Good are to me one and the same.’ Emerson is said to have suggested to a puzzled reader the substitution of ‘Jehovah’ for ‘Brahma,’ and E. W. Emerson (*Poems*, Centenary Edition, p.467) tells with approval the story of the child who said that the poem means simply ‘God everywhere.’ These suggestions are seriously misleading. To Jehovah, or to the God of the Christian Bible, Good and Evil are not the same. [In the last stanza the ‘sacred Seven’ are] the highest saints of the Hindu hierarchy.”

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*The Literature of the United States I*, 3rd edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1966) 1161-62