


INDIAN INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN
 LITERATURE AND THOUGHT

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AND
THOUGHT**

JOHN T. REID



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P R E F A C E

During my tour of duty as Cultural Attache of the American Embassy in India (1959-63), I have been impressed with the ardent desire among educated Indians to know more of the historical cultural ties which have existed between their country and mine. At first glance such relations seem negligible: in addition to geographic distance, the widely differing backgrounds of the two nations appear to provide little common ground.

However, as I made little exploratory trips into the field of common interests, I came across dozens of signs which pointed to a far wider area of cultural contact than I had suspected. A few of these findings were incorporated in a modest booklet called *Bridges of Understanding* (New Delhi, 1961).

Subsequently, I wrote a lecture entitled "Indian Influences in American Literature"; even though it was a hasty and inadequate summary, it seemed to arouse lively interest among the Indian audiences who heard it. I then resolved, in spite of my limitations as an investigator of this field, to gather in a small volume such information as I could about India in American literature and thought. It has not been an easy task because the evidence has been scattered in scores of books and articles, many of them difficult to locate in India. But it has been a labor of love; part of the results form the pages of this book.

My original intention was to carry the survey up to the present time. It has not been possible to do so because of the complexity of Indian influence on twentieth century American authors and the lack of basic research in this area. It is my hope to be able to do this job in the future, examining such authors as Irving Babbit, George Santayana, T. S. Eliot, J. D. Salinger, Louis Bromfield and a number of others. As it is, the present chapters are limited to the nineteenth century.

Related to the limitation just mentioned is another: the lack in my pages of any kind of a thorough survey of the progress in the United States of the Vedanta movement, Theosophy, the Zen

Buddhist interest among the "beatniks", and other channels through which Indian religious ideas, however distorted and watered down, have affected Americans. In other words, I am unable here to answer Romain Rolland's provocative question: "... it would be a matter of great interest to know exactly how far the American spirit had been impregnated, directly or indirectly, by the infiltration of Hindu thought during the XIXth century; for there can be no doubt that it has contributed to the strange moral and religious mentality of the modern United States which Europe has so much difficulty in understanding..." *Prophets of the New India*, N.Y., 1930, p. 329.

Many Indian students are aware of the remarkable impact that Indian philosophical literature had in the nineteenth century on the English Romantics, German authors and philosophers and some of the French literary men. It has been less commonly known to them that many Americans received the Indian scriptures with no less interest. Indeed, Emerson said in a letter to an English friend, speaking of books from ancient India, "I suppose their effect will appear more conspicuously in America than in England, as the State does not back up the creed, as with you." (*Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*; ed. Rusk; vol. VI, p. 247).

Certain it is that the curiosity and admiration of a good number of American writers of the last century was lively and evident in their work. However, in view of the fact that considerable uncritical exaggeration has accompanied the realization of this fact, I have taken pains in this study to give some moderating perspective to the matter. By no means all of our great nineteenth century authors were influenced by Indian literature, and among those that were the extent of their knowledge and acceptance of Indian thought was limited. I hope my readers will appreciate the objective point of view from which I have tried to approach this complicated subject.

As will be evident in the text, I am indebted to a great number of published studies for clues and information, and particularly to Professor Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*. I am grateful also to Professor R. K. Das Gupta of Delhi University for a number of valuable suggestions.

John T. Reid.

CONTENTS

Preface, v

Chapter One, 1

Early Channels of Influence

European Romantic Writers and Scholars

The East India Trade

The Work of Rammohan Roy

Chapter Two, 18

The Great Transcendentalists

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Henry David Thoreau

Chapter Three, 44

Four Restless Souls

Alcott the Teacher

Whittier the Quaker

Melville the Rover

Whitman the Mystic

Chapter Four, 64

Scholars, Missionaries, and Travellers

Comparing Religions

The Indologists

Missionaries and Vivekananda

Travel Books and Mark Twain

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CHAPTER ONE

EARLY CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE

IN view of the complicated nature of the subject of this study I have been somewhat at loss to find a good starting point. Perhaps the best way is to pose a very basic and intriguing question. Most educated Indians and Americans are aware, even though in a vague and imprecise fashion, that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, outstanding American writers of the last century, were acquainted with Oriental thought, and specifically with the ancient writings of India. The question is: What was the root and cause, which were the channels of information leading to the deep and undeniable interest of these two Americans in the Indian way of life? They were living on the edge of a large and almost virgin continent thousands of miles away from India, and in a developing civilization far removed in its characteristics from the world of ancient India. While a complete answer to this question would necessitate the amassing of a good deal more information than that which we have at hand, I suggest that there were three important channels of communication through which information about Indian thought flowed to early nineteenth-century America and inspired American thinkers to meditate on the treasures of Indian culture. A discussion of those three channels will constitute our first chapter.

European Romantic Writers and Scholars

To many European and Indian scholars the answer to the question we have posed would be fairly simple and exclusive: The Americans, being still intellectual colonials of Britain and Europe, were merely imitating the Romantic authors of the Old World in their newly-discovered fascination with Indian literature. As we shall see, this would not be a very discriminating statement of the facts. It is nevertheless true that the so-called Transcendentalist group, of which Emerson and Thoreau were leaders, was an American manifestation of that great revolution in Western thought and literature called Romanticism; they shared with their European confreres a reaction against the dry rationalism of the preceding century, and in their restless search for fresh, exotic themes and lines of speculation they discovered—like the Europeans—the strangeness of Asia and its scriptures of the olden days. The American Romantic writers manifest that basic concern of their European brothers for the value of spontaneous emotional reaction and of intuitive knowledge. In this respect, they found—or thought they found—abundant support in Indian mystical literature. The reader of Coleridge, or Shelley, or Schelling will certainly find in them a *Weltanschauung* which is not basically different from that of Emerson and Thoreau.

It is also true that Emerson in his visits to the Old World knew personally Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle and had read the work of some of the European Romantic authors. Thoreau too was to a lesser extent acquainted with European literature of the time. Unquestionably, Coleridge's works had an important general influence on the Transcendentalist group. But from these facts to the blanket assumption that the Oriental inspiration and knowledge of the Transcendentalists was simply a borrowing from European literature, there is a wide gap. In the first place, the extent to which Indian thought really influenced men like Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and some of the Continental Romantics is an obscure question, in spite of a number of studies on this question.¹

Secondly, and more important, is the almost complete lack of any internal evidence in the works of Emerson and Thoreau to

1. See for example: Munir Ahmad, "Coleridge and the Brahman Creed," *The Indian Journal of English Studies*, I, 18-37 (1960).

indicate that they found in the works of the European Romantics any direct guidance toward the Indian classics. In my reading of Emerson, for example, I have found only one reference which points to his receiving Oriental inspiration by way of an English poet. That is an entry in his *Diary* in which he notes an Indian quotation suggested to him by reading Southey's *The Curse of Kehama*.²

In the case of the German philosophers and literary men who became acquainted with Indian sources, there is every probability that they had some influence on the Transcendentalist group. Although neither Emerson nor Thoreau appears to have been a particularly avid reader of the German writers, other members of the group had either studied in Germany or were conversant with intellectual developments there. Frederick Hedge, Edward Everett, Margaret Fuller and George Ripley, for example, had considerable knowledge of German literature and doubtless knew of Herder's enthusiasm for Indian culture, Goethe's lines inspired by Kalidasa, Schopenhauer's admiration for the *Upanishads*, and other manifestations of German literary interest in India.

Setting aside the always murky question of literary influences, there is one important point which we must emphasize now: Emerson and Thoreau derived their knowledge of Indian philosophy from a direct reading of the sources.³ Although neither American read Sanskrit, they did have access to the many good translations which had been made by that remarkable group of Englishmen in the Asiatic Society of Bengal which included Sir William Jones, Sir Charles Wilkins, Horace Hayman Wilson, Henry Thomas Colebrook, John Stevenson and others. To a lesser extent they knew the translations of some French scholars, such as J. H. Garcin de Tassy, Alexandre Langlois, Anquetil Duperron, and Eugene Burnouf. There is no record of any knowledge on the part of the Concord writers of the respectable number of translations of Indian material made by German scholars, with the exception of Max Mueller.

Thanks to the meticulous labors of Professor Arthur Christy, we know with some accuracy the Indian works which Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott actually read. With painstaking care, Christy examined the writers' diaries and journals, the library records of the

² *Letters*, ed. Rusk, VI, p.24b (footnote).

³ *Op. Cit.*, Appendix.

Boston Athenaeum and Harvard College, and the remaining personal collections of the authors themselves.

In summary, the translations which seem to have been most influential for these writers were: Jones's *The Ordinances of Menu*; Wilkins's *The Bhagvat-Geeta*; Wilson's *The Vishnu Purana*; and fragmentary translations of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* found in Jones's *Works*, Colebrooke's *Miscellaneous Essays*, and Rammohan Roy's *Translation of Several Principal Books*, etc. Among the secondary sources used by the Transcendentalists, the *Histoire comparéedes systemes de philosophie*, by Joseph Marie Degérando and Spence Hardy's *Eastern Monachism* appear to have been of particular use.

We may conclude, therefore, by stating that the European and especially the British channel of communication was an important one for the American writers attracted to the Orient, not as a source of second-hand inspiration from poets and essayists, but as providing good translations of the original Indian material. In other words, what Emerson received from India he did not get through Coleridge or Wordsworth, but through direct familiarity with the translations of Sir William Jones, *et al.*

The East India Trade

A second channel through which India probably reached the Transcendentalist writers and others of the time was much more natively American: the brisk sailing ship trade with India. There is not, to my knowledge, any comprehensive account of this trade and a great deal of careful research in sea-captains' journals and other documents, especially in New England, will be required before such an account can be written.⁴

The well-known American Indologist, W. Norman Brown, does not believe that this early trade between India and America had any appreciable effect on Americans' knowledge of Indian literature and philosophy. He says, ". . . a few (ships) made the full passage to India, to return with tea, spices, and other com-

⁴ See Holden Furber, "The Beginnings of American Trade with India", *New England Quarterly* XI, (1938); and James M. Snyder, "The First American Voyage to India", *Americana* XXXII, 1-22 (1938).

modities for the American market and often curios of wood, metal, ivory, textiles, and even now and then a sculpture or miniature painting, such as still can be found in old New England homes. The persons engaged in this enterprise were realistic business men and knew about trading conditions, but they had little curiosity about India's intellectual life, history, or politics. America learned nothing of India from them, nor did they leave any impression of America in India."⁵

Much as I respect Professor Brown's wide knowledge of Indian affairs, I venture to say that his conclusion is too sweeping and that further study in this relatively unexplored territory may confirm my belief that, indirectly at least, the frequent voyages of the early sea captains helped to make thinking Americans conscious of India's cultural heritage and even provided them with books and philosophical ideas. Unfortunately, in the absence of extensive investigation, we must content ourselves here with a brief review of fragmentary evidence which seems to point in the direction of my thesis.

As a matter of background, if we go back before the independence of the American colonies, we see that they were by no means cut off from India. The American colonies and some regions of India were in the eighteenth century part of the far-flung British domain and there was at least limited communication between the two segments of it. They shared the presence of British troops, and the Seven Years War (1756-1763), originating in Europe and spreading to both India and North America, marked the end of French power in those domains and the ascendancy of the British.

Those who know the name of Cotton Mather (1663-1728), one of the most famous and curious of the American Colonial divines, usually remember only his involvement in the trials for witchcraft and in provincial and sundry theological controversies. Nevertheless, in 1721-28, he published *India Christiana*, a treatise on methods of converting the "heathen". Mather sent books and money to German Protestant missionaries in India. In return he received a Tamil translation of the New Testament.⁶

⁵ *The United States and India and Pakistan*, New York, 1953, p. 263.

⁶ Bernard Stern, *American Views of India and Indians, 1857-1900*, (unpublished); Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1956.

It was Cotton Mather who was responsible in part for the early ties between Madras and Yale University. Yale started in 1701 as the Saybrook Collegiate School and soon found itself in dire financial straits. The trustees appealed to Mather for help, and he addressed a letter to Elihu Yale, Governor of Fort George in Madras. Yale had been born in Boston, had gone to England as a young boy, and in service with the East India Company had come to occupy one of the most important posts in British India. When he received the plea on behalf of the humble Connecticut college, he did not forget the New England of his birth and dispatched in 1718 a shipment of three bales of the renowned Madras cotton goods, a collection of his own books, and a portrait of King George I. These gifts, sold at auction in Boston, made possible the survival of the School. In gratitude the trustees changed the name to Yale College.

That other contacts between the American Colonies and India were not lacking is indicated by several random examples: Nathaniel Higginson, the grandson of one of the founders of Salem, Massachusetts, the Rev. Francis Higginson, went to India early in life and became wealthy and prosperous there. Sir David Ochterlon, a well-known general of the Indian army, was born in Boston, educated in Newberry, near Salem, and went to India as a cadet in 1777. His son graduated from Dummer Academy in the vicinity of Salem. Although certainly of little importance in spiritual relations, it is interesting to note that Lord Cornwallis, defeated in the American Revolution, was then transferred to India. William Duer, one of the financial backers of the American Revolution and later a member of Congress, served in 1764 as aide-de-camp to Lord Clive in India, and in his later career directed American interest to the Indian market.⁷

Very soon after the American Declaration of Independence, American ships began to make their way around the Cape of Good Hope to India. The most important American termini of this vigorous trading relationship were to be Salem and later Boston. However, it was from Philadelphia that the first American ship to India—the “United States”—set out in 1784, to be followed two years later by the “Chesapeake” from Baltimore. The latter was

⁷ James Warren Gould, *The First American Contact with Asia*, Society for Oriental Studies, Claremont, Calif., 1960, p.4.

captained by John O'Donnell who had served in the British army in India.

The Salem trade began with the voyage of the "Atlantic" in 1788; the ship was commanded by one of the socially prominent Derby family, to become so outstanding in the India trade. Soon after, commerce between Salem and the Indian ports—Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Surat—increased by leaps and bounds: between 1788 and 1800, fifty ships cleared from Salem for India. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, with a brief interruption caused by the War of 1812 with the British, a steady stream of Salem ships traded with India. One ship, the "George", made twenty-one round trips to Calcutta between 1815 and 1837. About 1840 Boston took the lead away from Salem in the India trade.

From America these ships carried varied cargoes, consisting mainly of bullion or products, such as Madeira wine, picked up during the voyage. Beginning in 1833, ships from Boston often carried the astonishing cargo of ice from New England lakes and ponds. On their return they brought a great variety of Indian products: sugar, indigo, ginger, gunny sacks, saltpetre, and a wide range of silk and cotton goods.

During this period, American ships offered a serious challenge to British carriers sailing to India. There were many reasons: timber was plentiful in America and ships were cheap to build; moreover, American skill in building ships and handling them was proverbial. Also, during part of the period, the Napoleonic Wars greatly hindered the British and left a wide-open market for Americans.

To what extent did these many voyages between Indian ports and New England result in the communication of significant information about Indian traditional culture to thoughtful people in America? There are a number of bits of scattered evidence which lead us to suspect that such communication may have been considerable.

For example, when Captain Heard of the Salem brig "Caravan" set out for Calcutta in 1812, he carried with him a request from a friend, Henry Pickering, to bring back "a Sanskrit bible."⁸ There

⁸ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*, Boston, 1921, p.89.

is no record of what Mr. Pickering received: perhaps a copy of Wilkins' translation of the *Gita*.

The April 21, 1827 issue of *The Christian Register*, published in Boston, notes that a file of the Bengal periodical, *Hur Karu*, was received "by the politeness of a gentleman in the 'Mars' from Calcutta."⁹ How many other books from India were likewise brought back in American sailing ships we can only surmise.

The Reverend William Bentley, a learned and versatile Unitarian clergyman of Salem and an avid reader of foreign books, was an intimate of sea-captains who frequently brought him volumes from abroad. He wrote in his diary :

Capt. Sage gave me his bill this day for books brought from India, and has made me pay for trusting so unfit hands. I am to pay 80 dollars for books which cost him this sum and which I might have imported from England for 30." (*New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 1, 1963 page 2).

Sir William Jones' translation of *Shakuntala* was published in *The Monthly Anthology* in 1805. The *Anthology* was Boston's most important periodical of the time. Where did the literary gentleman who published the magazine get the Jones translation? They may have received it directly from Great Britain, or it may have come in some sea captain's chest from India.

In this connection, it is a fact of some significance that most ships carried "supercargoes", or representatives of the owners with the responsibility of selling and obtaining cargoes. Such men were usually members of good families, frequently Harvard graduates whose intellectual interests were lively. We have, for example, the record of one supercargo, John Bromfield, whose wide reading included Henry Colebrooke's *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, published in Calcutta, 1804. Another supercargo was Joseph W. Cogswell, an intellectual who had studied at Gottingen.¹⁰

A more distinguished American who shipped as a supercargo to India was Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), later to become a notable man of letters and art historian at Harvard. After his

⁹ Adrienne Moore, *Rammohan Roy and America*, Calcutta, 1942, p.133.

¹⁰ Morison, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

graduation from Harvard, he was employed in his uncle's counting house, which was involved in the India trade. In 1847 he sailed to India as agent of the company. In India, he made friends with people with intellectual interests, including several rajahs; among them, he says, he found readers of the works of his father (Andrew Norton, a writer on religious subjects) and of Longfellow. He also became acquainted with Fitzedward Hall, the mavorick American who turned out to be a fine Sanskrit scholar¹¹ and from him may have gotten some knowledge of India's ancient literature.

The sea captains themselves ordinarily were not rough-and-ready, ignorant men, but of socially prominent families and with considerable education. Even the sailors were not the heavy-drinking, boisterous "old salts" of the European tradition, but adventure-seeking farm boys with curiosity and some education. They either became ships' officers or went back to their New England villages after a few years sailing the Eastern seas.¹² Furthermore, most of these men came from a deeply religious background and many were doubtless interested in the religious lore of foreign parts.

To me it is almost inconceivable that at least a few of these sea-farers should not have come back from their voyages to Indian ports with ideas and possibly books on India's culture.

There is also some evidence to indicate a relationship among the English missionaries at Serampore (near Calcutta), their early American colleagues, and American ships. It should be remembered that William Carey, and to a lesser extent his two companions at Serampore, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, were men of scholarly interests who diligently uncovered some of the glories of India's cultural past. Carey was not only the author of dictionaries and grammars of the Sanskrit and Bengali languages, but (with Marshman) an editor and translator of the *Ramayana*. Ward was the author of *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos*, published by the Serampore Mission Press in 1818; a copy of this valuable work was used by Emerson from the Harvard Library in 1847. How did it come to be there?

¹¹ See Chapter IV of the present study.

¹² Morison, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107.

The first American missionaries to arrive in India were Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) with his wife, and Samuel Newell, who sailed from Salem on February 19, 1812. They were Congregationalists, but became Baptists on their arrival in Serampore in September, 1812, being baptized by William Ward. They were not permitted by the British East India Company authorities to stay long in Calcutta, and made their way, via Mauritius and Madras, to Burma where Judson and three successive wives spent their lives in missionary work. They did not lose contact with their friends at Serampore, however, and Judson's *Dictionary of the Burman Language* was published in Calcutta in 1826. That there was further contact between the English missionary-scholars at Serampore and American ships is evident in the fact that the Mission Press published in 1812 *Extracts from a Journal, Kept During a Voyage from Philadelphia to Calcutta . . . on Board the Ship "Harmony", Capt. Michael Brown*, described as "a very rare little personal document tying American Missions, British Missions to Serampore".¹³

The important facts for our purpose are that early American missionaries, travelling with American captains in American ships, were without any doubt familiar with the laborious studies in Indian culture being carried on at Serampore by Carey and his colleagues. It is not improbable that they and their sea-faring friends were carriers of some concepts of Indian philosophy to their acquaintances at home.

Even though New England writers were not directly involved in the early maritime and missionary commerce with India, they could hardly have been impervious to its effects. In Salem and Boston the atmosphere of these at the time small towns must have been impregnated with interest arising from the overseas expeditions. Thoreau, for example, knew of the ice trade with Calcutta and used it in one of the most striking parts of *Walden*.¹⁴ Louisa May Alcott, daughter of Amos Bronson Alcott and well-known writer of books for young people, relates in *Eight Cousins* (1874) an episode in which the young heroine is taken to the harbour to visit the East-Indiaman "Rajah." She gloried in the herb-pillows, cloth, and trinkets brought back by her uncle from Calcutta. In her youthful mind, she imagines herself as an "Eastern princess, making a

¹³ *Early Indian Imprints*, Serampore, 1962, p. 20.

¹⁴ See Chapter II of this book.

royal progress among her subjects."¹⁵ Emerson records in his *Letters*¹⁶ a visit in 1839 with Rev. William Adam, a Unitarian missionary from Calcutta associated with Rammohan Roy, recently arrived on an American ship. Such visits must have been not infrequent. The father of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the great novelist was a sea-captain, and in Salem today one can examine the title-page of the old captain's journal, lettered by his famous son: it reads, "Nathaniel Hawthorne's Book—1820—Salem; a Journal of a Passage from Bengal to America in the Ship America of Salem, 1798." How many such journals may have circulated among intelligent citizens of New England?

Even considering all these questions and bits of factual information in conjunction, it is not possible to make any definitive statement about the role of American trade with India as a disseminator of ideas. I am, nevertheless, convinced that in this skein of cases to which we have referred there lies the very likely possibility that a good deal of knowledge about India came to America via trade routes established early in our national history.

The Work of Rammohan Roy

The third avenue which I wish to mention is more specific and better documented. It is the direct influence of Rammohan Roy, the great Indian religious reformer (1772-1833), among the New England thinkers.

Among certain sectors of modern Indian opinion, this extraordinary man has been regarded almost as a saint, and numerous biographies and commentaries have been written about him and his work. Our more limited task is to analyse those aspects of his life and thought which seem to bear most directly on our subject.

Rammohan Roy was born of a well-to-do, aristocratic Brahmin family in West Bengal. As a child he learned Bengali and Persian. As a beardless youth, he went to study at Patna, then a renowned center of Arabic and Persian studies, and precociously became attracted by sophisticated developments of Islamic thought—the rationalism and universal outlook of the eighteenth century Mutazilas and Muwahhidin, or Moslem unitarians.

¹⁵ Referred to in Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds*, New York, 1958, p. 242.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, II, p. 201.

Several years later he moved on to Banaras, a traditional hub of Sanskrit scholarship, and began the serious study of his family's spiritual heritage—the *Upanishads*, the *Brahma-Sutras*, and the *Gita*.

Thus, by the time he was twenty years old, he had used Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic to unlock the treasure houses of two great religions. In 1803, he was given a minor appointment with the East India Company. Under the guidance of a kindly Mr. Digby, he began to perfect his English, to read European rationalistic philosophy, and later, in discussion with Baptist missionaries in Serampore, to interest himself in Christianity and Judaism. With unusual zeal, he explored the Bible, learning Hebrew and Greek in order to read the original texts.

By the time he resigned his post with the Company in 1815 to devote himself to public affairs, his spiritual life had become clarified around certain conclusions: God is a unity; He is basic to the pure and pristine form of all religions; all religions have clustering accretions of impurities—idolatrous worship, unethical practices and customs, conflicting sects, and other forms of corruption. By tradition a Hindu, he recognized that all great religions have a basic identity of belief in one God and of ethical discipline. For his own Hindu brethren, he wished for a purification of their ancient faith and the abolition of moral customs which had become associated with it—suttee, caste, worship of idols, etc.

Rammohan Roy has been called a pioneer in the study of comparative religion, and indeed his encyclopedic knowledge and sympathetic appreciation of Hinduism, Mohammedanism and Christianity, plus a less thorough acquaintanceship with Buddhism, give him credentials for the title. It will be noted that some of the American Transcendentalists were engrossed in the possibilities of the comparative examination of the world's religions; James Freeman Clarke wrote his influential *Ten Great Religions*,¹⁷ and one of Amos Bronson Alcott's dearest ideals was a vast series of "conversations" on the subject.

By a curious parallelism, there was developing at about the same time in America and England a Protestant sect of Christianity

¹⁷ See Chapter IV of this study.

which had reached conclusions similar to those of Rammohan Roy. Unitarianism was a liberal form of Protestantism which grew from elements of the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and others who reacted against the strictness and narrowness of American Calvinism. From a theological standpoint, they emphasized the unity of God and discarded the idea of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, and from a human point of view they cherished tolerance, the free use of the mind, faith in the worth and potentialities of man, and unsullied ethical conduct.

Chronologically, the start of the Unitarian movement is often placed in 1785, when King's Chapel in Boston adopted a revision of the Anglican liturgy which omitted all reference to the Trinity. In the face of conservative opposition, it continued to grow in acceptance in New England, and in 1805 Rev. Henry Ware, an avowed Unitarian, was appointed professor of Divinity in Harvard College, long a stronghold of Congregational orthodoxy. William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), usually referred to as the greatest Unitarian of his time, marked the definite separation of Unitarians from their conservative colleagues in his Baltimore sermon of 1819.

For future reference, let us record that Rev. Ware became one of America's staunchest proponents of Rammohan Roy, and that Emerson for a while was Assistant Pastor in Ware's church in Concord. Let us also note that William Ellery Channing was one of the regular members of the Transcendentalist group.

In England, Unitarianism grew and became a recognizable sect in a very similar fashion and during the same period. Its individuality was crystallized in the formation in 1825 of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association; there was constant communication and exchange of visits between the British and American followers of the movement.

It is not certain precisely when Rammohan Roy first became acquainted with American and British Unitarianism. As early as 1821, he wrote a letter to the Editor of the *Unitarian Register*, a periodical published in Boston. Apparently about the same time, one William Adam, a Baptist missionary associated with Roy in the translation of the Gospels into Bengali, became converted to Unitarianism. He forthwith formed a Unitarian Committee in

Calcutta, and established a Unitarian Chapel. In this work he was substantially backed by Rammohan Roy, who also set up a Unitarian Press. These activities brought him into close contact with both British and American Unitarian leaders. They and their friends frequently discussed the question of whether or not Rammohan Roy was a Christian and, if so, whether he was a Unitarian. There is no doubt that he found in Unitarian Christianity much that was consonant with his own thesis. But as later events proved, he was neither Christian, Muslim, nor—in the orthodox sense—Hindu. As an Indian apologist has said, “. . . he could combine in his personal religion the fundamental Hindu, Christian, and Islamic experiences. He transvalued all these values, and he made them integral to his own valuation of life.”¹⁸

Rammohan Roy came to the attention of American Unitarians and other Christians most forcibly through the controversy which ensued after the publication of *The Precepts of Jesus* (Calcutta 1820). This pamphlet, which today would seem simply a praiseworthy attempt to outline for an Indian audience the basic moral doctrines of Christ, set off a minor explosion in the Christian community, not only in India but in England and the United States. In his introduction, not only had he mildly criticized the customary methods of Christian missionaries in India, but had questioned the need of believing in the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Ghost.

In the controversy, the Unitarians generally and naturally defended the Indian's monotheistic stance, but the more orthodox Protestants, especially the Baptist missionaries in India, violently attacked this “heathen” attitude. The reverberations of the controversy, unwillingly started by Rammohan Roy, shook the religious thought of New England for several years, and had the fortuitous result of arousing interest in the thought and other works of the Indian reformer.

Aside from *The Precepts of Jesus* (which was reprinted in the United States in 1825 and 1828), what books of Roy were known or available to Americans? It is difficult to answer the question in detail because of the lack of accurate information. A pamphlet of his, *A Vindication of the Incarnation of the Deity as a Common Basis of Hinduism and Christianity*, originally published in Calcutta in 1833,

¹⁸ Brajendranath Seal, *Rammohan Roy*, Calcutta, 1959, p. 25.

was reprinted by the *Salem Courier* in 1838. (It will be recalled that Salem was a great terminus of the Indian trade.) Editions printed in England of an *Abridgment of the Vedant or Resolution of all the Vedas* (1816); translations of the *Moonduk—O panishad* (1819) and the *Cena Upanishad* (1824); and *Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages, and Texts of the Vedas* (1832); and other titles were all presumably available to Americans whose interest in Roy and Indian religion had been awakened. The last mentioned, according to Christy,¹⁰ was drawn from the Harvard College Library by Thoreau and was "probably one of the most important Oriental books read in Concord because of the translations contained therein and the expository essay . . ." Christy also believed that Roy's *Translation of the Ishopanishad, One of the Chapters of the Yajur Veda* (Calcutta, 1816) may have been recommended to Emerson, when he was a student, by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. There is no proof to support this belief and there was no separate English or American edition of the work. It is interesting to speculate, however, about how many such volumes may have been brought by Yankee sea-captains and missionaries direct from Calcutta.

Additional information about Roy's personality and beliefs reached America through a number of letters written by him to American friends. We have records of his correspondence with David Reed, editor of *The Christian Register*; Joseph Tuckerman, a Unitarian clergyman; and Rev. Henry Ware. It is likely that he also wrote to William Ellery Channing. Tuckerman, Dr. Kirkland, a President of Harvard, and several other Americans knew Ram-mohan Roy personally during the latter's visit to England (1830-33).

Still another channel by which Americans learned about Hinduism through Roy was the great amount of material which appeared about him in American periodicals of the first part of the last century. Adrienne Moore²⁰ carefully compiled a list of several hundred such articles, and noted that many more published in British periodicals were circulated in America. It is true that the great majority of such pieces concerned the famous Unitarian-Trinitarian polemic; but a number of substantial articles and re-

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 289.

²⁰ Moore, *op. cit.*, *passim*; I am indebted to Miss Moore's study for many details of this section.

views concerned Roy's presentation of the Vedanta. As early as 1810 for example, the *North American Review*, one of America's most-read journals, published a detailed analysis of Roy's translations of Hindu literature.

We can now draw the several threads of this discussion together to weave a fairly firm conclusion: Rammohan Roy, reformer and exponent of the original tenets of Hinduism, was interested in many religions and believed in their basic unity; he was consequently attracted to Christian Unitarianism and there was corresponding interest among American Unitarians in him and his thinking; most of the American intellectuals of the time, including the Transcendentalists, were or had been Unitarians through this circumstance, they became acquainted with Roy and his work.

Adrienne Moore's summing up, in her admirable and scholarly study of the matter, is a fair statement of the important influence that Roy had on American thought:

Because the Transcendentalists were interested in Orientalism, and because Rammohan Roy was interested in Christianity, the chasm between the Orient and the Occident, as personified in New England, was not as great as it might otherwise have been. To the extent that Rammohan Roy was responsible for the interest in the Orient, amongst Americans in general, and amongst New Englanders in particular, to that extent was he an instrument for the formation of the ideas of Emerson and his associates, with their love of Oriental literature, philosophy and religion.²¹

The three channels we have described are, I believe, of the greatest importance to explain how the Transcendentalists came to know and appreciate Indian thought. They do not account for the remarkable fascination that Indian literature and philosophy seemed to exercise on these men. To explain that fascination would go far beyond the limits of documentation and scholarly research. That both Emerson and Thoreau had loving reverence for the Indian scriptures is more the conclusion of an appreciative and sensitive reader than a proposition subject to scientific proof.

²¹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 163

Both American writers, as well as a constellation of lesser men and women of their time, had developed a longing for a deeper insight into the human soul than their somewhat dry Puritan ancestors had felt, a strain of mysticism and wonder. This spiritual direction was abetted by a number of factors in our cultural history, among them the deep appeal of Quakerism and kindred brands of Protestant Christian mysticism, the emergence of Unitarianism, the presence of beautiful nature in its primitive state in America, and the dynamics of the Western Romantic movement in general.

In this sense, Emerson and Thoreau were prepared to greet and welcome to their bosom the intuitive, mystical, and idealistic philosophy of the East. It met a need within them which was a resultant of a complex series of factors within their own Western process of cultural development.

We can now direct our attention to a more detailed examination of the presence of Indian thought in Emerson and Thoreau.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GREAT TRANSCENDENTALISTS

RALPH Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) were the best-known members of the Transcendentalist Club or Circle which flourished in Concord, Massachusetts from 1836 for some years. The Club was in no sense a formal organization with a creed and a programme of action. It was simply a group of like-minded American intellectuals who occasionally met together at the home of one of the members.

Besides Emerson and Thoreau, other members of the Transcendentalist Circle were: James Freeman Clarke, a Unitarian minister and writer; Frederick H. Hedge, also a Unitarian clergyman; Amos Bronson Alcott, a teacher, lecturer, and philosopher of sorts; Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller, writers and teachers; Theodore Parker and George Ripley, both clergymen; and several others who were occasional participants.

Just as the Club lacked any defined organization, so the Transcendentalist group did not produce a rigid philosophy or ideology. It is true that the members shared a generally common set of attitudes: they were individualists who questioned authoritarian tradition; for all that, they were deeply moral and religious people, whose personal habits were hardly Bohemian; all of them, to a greater or less degree, were concerned with social betterment. They were optimists and most of them were idealists but, as one critic says,

"The idealistic philosophy was to many of them more a spirit and attitude of mind than a consciously reasoned-out theory of the world. . . ."¹

The underlying pattern of thought of the Transcendentalists, vague and indeterminate as it was, stemmed from Platonic and Kantian philosophy. Non-dualistic in their view of the world, they conceived of the one reality as the "Over-Soul", of which all other being is a continuous part. The soul of the individual is unified and identical with the universal spirit and contains potentially all of its attributes. Man's life consists of an unfolding of the innate universal stuff and its reincorporation into the divine essence. Sometimes this is brought about by direct intuition of truth or a mystical experience when the human knowingly merges with the Over-Soul without intermediary. At other times nature is the instrument of this union.

The kinship of this view of life with Platonic reasoning and with the idealistic philosophies of India is immediately apparent. Letting Emerson and Thoreau stand as spokesmen for the Transcendentalist group, a fuller analysis of that kinship is worth undertaking.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Without any question, Emerson is the first great American literary figure in whose thought and works the prominent mark of India is evident. In fact, he is probably the first major author of the Western World in whose world view the ideas of Hindu philosophy were clearly and demonstrably etched. Because these facts are so evident in his works—in the *Essays* as well as in his *Journals* and letters, some critics, both in India and in America, have taken the easy path of simplifying Emerson to the extent of making him a devout even if deficient disciple of the main stream of Indian thought to the practical exclusion of all else. Other commentators, through unfamiliarity with the basic materials, have unjustly neglected Emerson's contact with the East. Between the two extremes lies the truth of his relations with Indian literature. Like other Americans of his age, his thinking was affected by

1. Harold C. Goddard, in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Book II, p. 335.

many and diverse trends of thought—European Romanticism, resurrected Platonic and Neo-Platonic inspirations, theological controversies related to Unitarianism, the growing vogue of comparative religion, and—by no means least—by native American thought patterns developed in colonial New England in contact with the natural surroundings of a new and strange world. Within this fairly complicated context let us try as honestly as possible to describe what India meant to Emerson.

His first contacts with Indian thought, when he was a student at Harvard about the year 1818, were fragmentary and apparently guided by Christian missionary attitudes. His aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, a remarkable “blue-stocking”, or female intellectual, wrote letters to him about Rammohan Roy’s work and probably sent him literature about the Indian reformer. We do not know to what extent Emerson became directly acquainted with Roy’s writings: he says in a letter to his aunt, “I know not any more about your Hindu convert than I have seen in *The Christian Register*”.² During his student days he wrote a poem, “Indian Superstition”.³ It certainly reveals no profound knowledge of Indian matters. At this same time he copied into his *Journals* a part of Sir William Jones’s translation of “Narayena”, which appealed to his youthful romanticism, and wrote to his Aunt Mary that he was curious to read “your Hindoo mythologies, the treasures of the Brahmins”.

Perhaps as a result of this curiosity, he borrowed from the library during the years 1820-1825, several numbers of the *Edinburgh Review*, which had published a number of articles on India and some translations of Hindu literature. The result was not apparently an enthusiastic view of the Hindu way of life: in 1823 he wrote in his *Journals*, “that fables should abound, seems not to indicate any special activity of mind, for, although Greece had many, stupid Indostan has more.”⁴

² Quoted in Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

³ Published in 1954 by the Friends of the Dartmouth Library, with a study by Kenneth Cameron on “Young Emerson’s Orientalism”.

⁴ Quoted in Frederic Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1930, p. 6.

It seems that the reporters of the *Edinburgh Review* had a special attitude toward Indian religion: they referred to its "absurdity", "cruelty and sensuality."⁵ Young Emerson was naturally swayed in his attitude to the Orient by such one-sided material. He refers in his notebooks and letters of the time to "this immense goddery" and to "the squalid and desperate ignorance of untold millions who breathe the breath of misery in Asia."⁶

On the other hand an unpublished entry in his Diary, probably about 1822, notes that "enlightened morality was taught in India as long ago as Menu", and quotes a passage from Indian sources on the uselessness of a pilgrimage to the Ganges by a truly righteous man. As was noted above, such references apparently were derived from a reading of Southey's *The Curse of Kehama*.

Just how much Emerson as a young man knew of Indian literature in a truly understanding way is not entirely clear. It seems probable, as Carpenter says, that his early interest was blunted by the obsession that this was silly superstition. At any rate, if we are to judge by the content of his published work between 1836 and 1841, the Indian influence was negligible. His basic thought pattern, as revealed in *Nature* (1836) or in the two series of *Essays* (1841 and 1844), shows little trace of Indian sources. Such similarities with Indian thought in these works as may be evident appear to be more a result of Emerson's reading of Neo-Platonic authors than Indian. That he became progressively more tolerant and receptive, however, to non-Christian religions was apparent in the "Divinity School Address" (1838).

At this point, we should examine in some detail the facts we know of Emerson's reading of the Indian classics. When he was seventy years old, recalling in a letter to Max Mueller his acquaintance with Indian literature, he said, "All my interest in the Aryan is old reading of Marsh's Menu, then Wilkin's Bhagavat Geeta; Burnouf's Bhagavat Purana; and Wilson's Vishnu Purana, yes, and a few other translations. I remember I owed my first taste for this fruit to Cousin's sketch, in his first lecture, of the dialogue between

⁵. *Loc. cit.*

⁶. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 7.



Krishna and Arjoon, and I still prize the first chapters of the Bhagavat as wonderful.”⁷

There is abundant documentary evidence of his reading in his *Journals*. His first very youthful interest in India lagged but was kept alive by some apparently desultory perusal in 1831-32 of Degérando's *Histoire Comparée des Systemes de Philosophie* and Cousin's *Cours de Philosophie*. Not until 1836 did he read his first actual example of Indian literature, the *Code of Manu* (doubtless in Sir William Jones's translation, not "Marsh's"). In 1839-40 the "Vedas" are listed but we do not know which or how much he read. In 1845, the *Bhagavad Gita* is mentioned, a copy of which he seems to have received two years before. Also in 1845, he read the *Vishnu Purana*, and Colebrooke's *Essay on the Vedas*. After these years, he frequently dipped into these and other Indian works which came to hand. In 1862, after the death of his friend Thoreau, Emerson received some twenty volumes of Hindu literature from the Thoreau collection, some of them new to him.

In summary, we may affirm with some certainty that before Emerson was over forty years of age his knowledge of Hindu thought was exceedingly scanty and, as has been indicated, there is little if any evidence in his early works that this thought had made any particular impression on him.

After 1845, however, his reading, thinking and finally his writings reveal a growing understanding of and attachment to the Indian spiritual heritage. It should be emphasized that this interest represented no great and sudden change in the curve of Emerson's meditations. His mind had already been prepared to welcome Hindu thought by his wide reading of Plato and the Neo-Platonists and his absorption in their often Oriental mystical strains.

The influence of his Indian reading will be apparent in a brief review of some of Emerson's later works. It is true, as one critic has said, that his essay on Plato, a chapter of *Representative Men*, "contains the kernel of Emerson's Orientalism."⁸ In it, with

7. *Letters*, ed. Rusk, VI, p. 246.

8. Carpenter *op. cit.*, p. 14.

appropriate references to the Indian scriptures, he makes an excellent descriptive statement about "the conception of fundamental Unity." But he couples with it—and some commentators have failed to note this fact—the necessity of the mind to recognize the existence of variety. "If speculation tends thus to a terrific unity, in which all things are absorbed, action tends directly backwards to diversity. The first is the course of gravitation of mind; the second is the power of nature. Nature is the manifold. The unity absorbs, and melts or reduces. Nature opens and creates. These two principles reappear and interpenetrate all things, all thought; the one, the many."

Far from making of Plato an Oriental philosopher, Emerson dwells on the co-existence of "the infinitude of the Asiatic soul", in Plato's thinking, with the active and creative genius of Europe. "Plato came to join, and, by contact, to enhance the energy of each. The excellence of Europe and Asia are in his brain." Emerson contrasts the "immovable institutions", "the idea of a deaf, unimplorable, immense fate", and the social institution of caste in Asia, with "the triumph of talent", "the sharpened understanding, adaptive skill, delight in forms, delight in manifestation in comprehensible results" which he associates with Europe. In the general context of Emerson's ideas of perfectibility and progress, it would be difficult to say that he could or did sympathize more with the philosophies of the East than those of Europe, however much he may have envisaged an ideal synthesis of the two.

In the final analysis, perhaps Emerson in describing his version of Plato's dilemma describes accurately enough his own when he says: "Having paid his homage, as for the human race, to the Illimitable (meaning the ineffable vision of Unity), he then stood erect, and for the human race affirmed, 'And yet things are knowable!'—that is, the Asia in his mind was first heartily honoured—the ocean of love and power, before form, before will, before knowledge, the Same, the Good, the One; and now, refreshed and empowered by this worship, the instinct of Europe, namely, culture, returns; and he cries, 'Yet things are knowable!'"

The question is further complicated by the fact that Emerson's essay on Plato is not so much a direct reflection of his readings of

Plato as a view of the Greek philosopher through Neo-Platonic eyes. There is some evidence to indicate that his estimate of the importance of Eastern thought in Platonic philosophy was derived more from second-hand interpretations, such as that of Degérando and the translations of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists by Thomas Taylor, than from a face-to-face examination of writings attributed to Plato.

In short, while Emerson's essay on Plato perhaps includes his clearest prose summary of his gleanings from Indian readings, it by no means is an endorsement or even a comprehensive view of the basic elements of Indian philosophic thought.

The Indian origin of Emerson's short poem, "Brahma", has been widely recognised by American and Indian commentators alike. Composed in 1856, after he had passed his apprenticeship in reading Oriental books, it represents the maturity of his comprehension of some of the fundamental concepts of Hinduism. According to Professor Carpenter, these sixteen lines probably express those concepts "more clearly and more concisely than any other writing in the English language—perhaps better than any writing in Hindu literature itself."⁹

The textual origins of the poem are fairly clear, thanks to the careful study of several American and Indian scholars. As early as 1845, Emerson had noted in his journal a germinal passage from the *Vishnu Purana*: "What living creature slays or is slain? What living creature preserves or is preserved? Each is his own destroyer, as he follows evil or good." Similar thoughts crowded his mind as he read the *Bhagavad Gita*, his most beloved Indian book: "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."¹⁰

The "conception of the fundamental Unity", as we have seen, was stated in prose with some completeness in the essay on Plato. But it was not until 1856, when Emerson was reading the *Katha Upanishad*, that the whole structure and vocabulary of the poem took shape. Much of the actual wording appears to have been

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Wilkins's translation, II, p. 18.

suggested by the *Upanishad*, but it is clear that his earlier reading of the *Gita* and the *Vishnu Purana* was in his mind as well.

It is no wonder that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Emerson's friend and colleague, found the poem incomprehensible—being only superficially conversant with Oriental lore. It is indeed a remarkable condensation in metaphorical form of the concept, difficult for the Western mind, that all the Universe is one, in spite of the passing appearances or deceptive forms of diversity.

"Hamatreya", an earlier poem composed in 1845, has been cited as another piece of Emerson's verse which reflects Indian influence. It apparently was inspired by a passage of the *Vishnu Purana* (Book IV) which he copied into his notebook. This passage is a homily on the vanity and foolishness of kings who take pride in their possessions and conquests, forgetting that death and the earth will reclaim them and all that they think is theirs.

Emerson took the idea and gave it a flavourful New England setting. The kings become his Yankee neighbours—farmers who take pleasure in their land "which rendered to their toil—hay, corn, roots, hemp, flax, apples, wool and wood", in their trees, in which sounds the sweet West wind, in their hills, with their graceful shadows. "Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs," they acquire more property and plan its use. But, "Ah the hot owner sees not Death, who adds—Him to his hand, a hump of mould the more." Then follows the "Earth Song", suggested by the *Purana* passage,

"Mine and yours;
 Mine, not yours.
 Earth endures;
 They called me theirs,
 Who so controlled me;
 Yet everyone
 Wished to stay, and is gone.
 How am I theirs,
 If they cannot hold me,
 But I hold them?"

The influence of Emerson's immediate source is evident in a few parallelisms of phrase—(Emerson: "Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys"; *Purana*: "Earth laughs, as if smiling

with autumnal flowers”); the device of the Earth’s chant; and in the title of the poem (Maitreya is one of the disciples of the sage in the *Purana*).

Otherwise, however, the theme is one which is almost universal in literature—the certainty of death, the vanity of human pretensions, the return of the body to the earth. It was a particularly well-worn theme in European medieval literature. In some contrast to Carpenter’s opinion that the poem “expressed the (Hindu) feeling for the identity of matter under its various appearances in spite of the ‘magical illusions of reality’ . . .,”¹¹ it seems to me, as I reread the poem, a somewhat clumsy Yankee variation of the *vanitas vanitatis* dirge, common to most cultures.

In two other poems, “Illusions” and “Maya”, Emerson concisely expressed his thought on the theme of the illusory and deceptive quality of what seems real, a concept which increasingly was present in his mind in his later years.

Sleep is not, death is not;
 Who seem to die live.
 House you were born in,
 Friends of your spring-time,
 Old man and young maid,
 Day’s toil and its guerdon,
 They are all vanishing,
 Fleeing to fables,
 Cannot be moored.
 See the stars through them,
 Through treacherous marbles. . . .
 (“Illusions”)

Illusion works impenetrable,
 Weaving webs innumerable,
 Her gay pictures never fail,
 Crowds each other, veil on veil,
 Charmer who will be believed
 By man who thirsts to be deceived.
 (“Maya”)

11. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

Once again, it is perhaps impossible to distinguish in these bits of philosophical verse the elements he derived from Plato and the Neoplatonists from those inspired by his reading of Hindu literature. The shadowy, false nature of events and experiences was, of course, vividly illustrated in Plato's allegory of the cave.

There are, however, a good many passages in his *Journals* and later essays to indicate clearly that he was very familiar with the Indian concept of Maya. In his essay, "Illusions", he says, "I find men victims of illusion in all parts of life. Children, youths, adults and old men, all are led by one bawble or another. Yogavidra, the goddess of illusion, Proteus or Momus, or Gylfi's Mocking—for the power has many names—is stronger than the Titans, stronger than Apollo."

Again in the same composition he makes specific his acknowledgement of the Indian idea: "The early Greek philosophers, Heraclitus and Xenophanes, measured their force on this problem of identity. . . . But the Hindoos, in their sacred writings, express the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity and of that illusion which they conceive variety to be." He then quotes an appropriate passage from Indian philosophy, "The notions, 'I am' and, 'This is mine', which influence mankind, are but delusions of the mother of the world. Dispel, O Lord of all creatures! the conceit of knowledge which proceeds from ignorance." (Compare this with "Hamatreya".)

Passages from his *Journals* further illustrate Emerson's dependence on Indian sources for his convictions in this field: "The doctrine of the Imagination can only be rightly opened by treating it in connection with the subject of Illusions. And the Hindoos alone have treated this with sufficient breadth in their legends of the successive Maias of Vishnu. With them, youth, age, property, condition, events, persons, self, are only successive Maias, through which Vishnu mocks and instructs the soul."¹²

In several other later essays, he associates the doctrine of illusion with Hindu philosophy. In "Poetry and Imagination", after stating that the passing and allegorical conception of the

¹². *Journals*, IX, 302-303; quoted in Christy, *op. cit.*, p. 87; Christy refers to number of other passages in the *Journals* where the same matter is dealt with: III, 285, 289; V, 179; VII, 505; VIII, 414; X, 162.

material world "is carried to its logical extreme by the Hindoos", and repeating in essence his above-quoted entry in the *Journals*, Emerson says, "I think Hindoo books the best gymnastics for the mind."

In "Works and Days", he refers to Maya and declares with epigrammatic colour, "Seldom and slowly the mask falls and the pupil is permitted to see that all is one stuff, cooked and painted under many counterfeit appearances." Thus he recognizes the indivisibility of the Maya conception and that of the unity of all things.

One of the Indian religious doctrines which has often attracted Westerners because of its strangeness and the neatness with which it solves certain problems is metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. Emerson's first mention of this doctrine was in one of his early essays, "History". Here, following his reading of Neo-Platonic authors he uses transmigration in an allegorical sense to illustrate that in every man's life there is the repetition of the experiences of fabled characters and even animals: "The transmigration of souls is no fable. I would it were; but men and women are only half human. Every animal of the barn-yard, the field and the forest, of the earth and of the waters that are under the earth, has contrived to get a footing and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers." This passage betrays no particular understanding of the Indian concept and was written prior to any extensive reading on his part of Indian literature.

But in his essay in *Representative Men*, "Swedenborg; or the Mystic," Emerson reveals a somewhat more exact knowledge of the Hindu idea of reincarnation. Here he uses it to explain the nature of mystic intuition: "The soul having been often born, or, as the Hindoos say, 'travelling the path through thousands of births', having beheld the things which are here, which are in heaven, and those which are beneath, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge: no wonder that she is able to recollect, in regard to any one thing, what formerly she knew."

In another passage of this essay he says, "That metempsychosis which is familiar in the old mythology of the Greeks, collected in Ovid, and in the Indian Transmigration, and is there objective,

or really takes place in bodies by alien will,—in Swedenborg's mind has a more philosophical character. It is subjective, or depends entirely on the thought of the person."

After chiding Swedenborg for his lack of warmth and poetry, he credits him for his single-minded devotion to "rectitude" and is reminded "of some transmigrating votary of Indian legend, who says 'though I be dog, or jackal, or pismire, in the last rudiments of nature, under what integuments or ferocity, I cleave to right, as the sure ladder that leads up to man and to God!'"

Several times in his *Journals* (VII, 93-94; 120-121) he speculates rather playfully about reincarnation. On one occasion, he imagines an ill-behaved gentleman who subsequently becomes a monkey, a dog, a hottentot and finally, perhaps, "a Massachusetts man!" Such a roguish attitude is probably a clue to Emerson's general opinion of transmigration. While he believed that the individual soul returns "to the unbounded soul of the world", "transmigration was for Emerson probably more a metaphor of the spiritual career of the soul than the full career of the Hindu's Karmic body", as Christy says.

The question of transmigration is, of course, inevitably linked with the law of Karma, which is in some respects akin to Emerson's law of compensation. The latter, like the doctrine of Karma, is conceived of as an immutable law of the universe, independent of men and gods. "These laws", says Emerson, "execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance: Thus, in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire." ("Divinity School Address".) Also, like the Indian idea of Karma, Emerson's compensation evens up the accounts of evil and good: "A perfect equity adjusts its balance in all parts of life. . . . The world looks like a multiplication-table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself. . . . Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and in certainty." (*Compensation*)

The significant difference between the Indian concept and Emerson's law is that, while the results of Karma are principally evident in an endless series of reincarnations, Emerson's compensation—reacting against the Christian theology of his time—

works during a man's earthly lifetime: "Always pay; for first and last you must pay your entire debt. Persons, and events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt." (*Compensation*)

Whatever the resemblances and differences of the two laws, it is evident that Emerson did not have Karma in mind when he expressed his doctrine of compensation. When he wrote his famous essay he had, as we have seen, little knowledge of Hindu literature. As he says, he had been meditating on the question of compensation ever since he was a boy.

As he grew older and read more of Indian philosophy, it appears that he recognized the affinity of his own theory and the Hindu Karma. In his *Journals*, after discarding the Greek idea of Fate as "three respectable old women who spin and shear a symbolic thread—so narrow, so limitary is the sphere allowed to them", he says, ". . . in India, it is the dread reality, it is the cropping out in our planted garden of the core of the world: it is the abysmal Force, untameable and immense."

In his essay "Fate" he continues his meditation, "it was a poetic attempt to lift this mountain of Fate, to reconcile this despotism of race with liberty, which led the Hindoos to say, 'Fate is nothing but deeds committed in a prior state of existence': I find the coincidence of the extremes of Eastern and Western speculation in the daring statement of Schelling, 'There is in every man a certain feeling that he has been what he is from all eternity, and by no means became such in time.' To say it less sublimely, —in the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be a party to his present estate."¹³

While Emerson's conclusions in this and other passages concerning Fate are not as clear as we could wish, he seems to perceive in the Hindu concept something congenial to his own idea of compensation. Certainly, he finds it more acceptable than the capricious Fate of the Greeks and the seemingly unreasonable predestination of his Puritan ancestors.

¹³. *Op. cit.*, pp. 112-113; Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*, p. 141, states the matter more simply: "he never incorporated the transmigration idea into his own thought."

Before concluding this examination of Emerson's relations with Hindu thought, it will be useful to glance at representative Indian opinion of Emerson. Although Emerson's works have not been as widely read in India as one might expect, their resemblance to Indian literature has not gone unnoticed.

Not long after Emerson's death Pratap Chunder Mazoomdar, a lecturer sent by the Brahma Samaj to America, wrote of the New England essayist: "Amidst this ceaseless, sleepless din and clash of Western materialism, this heat of restless energy, the character of Emerson shines upon India serene as the evening star. He seems to some of us to have been a geographical mistake. He ought to have been born in India. Perhaps Hindoos were closer kinsmen to him than his own nation, because every typical Hindoo is a child of nature."¹⁴

Some years later, another Indian contributed an article, "Emerson from an Indian Point of View", to the *Harvard Theological Review* (IV, pp. 403-417; 1911). The author, H. Chandra Maitra, refers to the appeal of both Wordsworth and Emerson to the Indian mind: "They translate into the language of modern culture what was uttered by the sages of India in the loftiest strains. They breathe a new life into our old faith. . . ."

Gandhiji over many years was a devoted reader of Emerson and in 1909 wrote to his son a passage which has become well-known: "The essays to my mind contain the teaching of Indian wisdom in a Western guru. It is interesting to see our own sometimes thus differently fashioned."¹⁵

In his *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru finds in Emerson's "American Scholar" inspiration for independent India's search for national identity: "Emerson warned his countrymen in America not to imitate or depend too much culturally on Europe. A new people as they were, he wanted them not to look back on their European past but to draw inspiration from the abounding life in their new country. We in India do not have to go abroad in search

14. Quoted in Christy, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-64.

15. Quoted in Frederic I. Carpenter, "American Transcendentalism in India," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, II Quarter, 1903 p. 59; see also George Hendrick, "Emerson and Gandhiji," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, I Quarter, 1946, p.7.

of the past and the distant. . . . If we go to foreign countries it is in search of the present Nevertheless Emerson's warning holds today as it did in the past, and our search can only be fruitful in the conditions mentioned by him." (*Epilogue*)

Thus, outstanding Indians have not only recognized familiar elements in Emersonian thought, but also have derived guidance from his writings.

Like all great and original thinkers, Emerson's pattern of ideas was an amalgam of suggestions from many and varied sources—his wide reading as well as his own experience and observations. Moreover, it is a commonplace to note that Emerson was not a systematic philosopher in the technical and rigid sense of one who devises a logical, all-inclusive view of man and the universe. He was a poet and epigrammatist rather than a rigorous metaphysician. For these reasons it is next to impossible to summarize in any precise fashion the extent to which his reading of Indian classics affected his thinking. The following statements are therefore only a tentative effort to condense what we know.

His basic ideas of nature and man's relation to it, the "over-soul", compensation, self-reliance, the role of intuition; his underlying optimism and idealism—all seems to have been developed and set forth in his major essays before he had any extensive knowledge of Indian thought. It is true that some of these ideas, especially that of the "over-soul", closely parallel Indian concepts and were confirmed in his thought by his later reading of literature from India. Although, as we have seen, his knowledge of Hindu philosophy was derived from relatively few sources, he made fairly frequent references to it in his later *Journals* and other writings; these later writings, however, are generally recognized as less germinal, less skilfully designed, and are less read than his earlier and fresher work.

We must also record that there are some elements of Indian philosophical thought that Emerson either was ignorant of or rejected. For example, he appears to have known little of or was not impressed by the complicated ascetic discipline deemed necessary by so many Hindu thinkers for complete "self-realization". *Dharma* in the Indian sense seems to have been unknown or disregarded in Emerson's scheme of things. And, as has been explained above,

reincarnation was a concept which he played with but did not make a part of his thinking in any significant way.

To those truly familiar with the Indian sources, there may occasionally come the suspicion that Emerson did not fully grasp the meaning of what he had read. One of his friends wrote, "Of late years, his work contains allusions to the ancient Oriental literature, from which he has borrowed some hard names and some valuable thoughts, but is occasionally led astray by its influence, for it is plain that he does not understand that curious philosophy he quotes from."¹⁶

Any general statement about Emerson's indebtedness to the East depends on very subtle inflections of emphasis, as is apparent from the following conclusions of two scholars who have examined his relations with Oriental thought in great detail:

"Although many of Emerson's specific ideas found reinforcement in the Hindu scriptures, most of them had been derived or created from other sources."¹⁷

"But to have shown that Emerson was preoccupied with Oriental thought and that he possessed certain temperamental affinities with it, is far from proving that he accepted the organized Vedanta system *in toto*. . . . He took only that which he could accept and mix successfully with his inhibitions and preconceptions."¹⁸

Henry David Thoreau

In spite of their close personal association and the usual pairing of Emerson and Thoreau as Transcendentalists, the two writers were quite different men. Thoreau strikes us as a freer soul whom the wind and the odour of pine resin had freshened; his writing, although it reveals evidence of wide and intelligent reading, smells less of the study lamp. Thoreau is more impetuous and

16. Quoted in Christy, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

17. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-54.

18. Christy, *op. cit.*, p. 182. See James Baird, *Ismael*, pp. 40-41, and Isaacs, *Scratches on the Mind*, pp. 253-54, for a more categorical denial of Emerson's absorption of any vital, religious symbolism of India.

romantic, in the broad sense, than his older friend. Emerson was more sociable, worldly, prim.

Perhaps for this reason, as well as others, Thoreau's considerable acquaintance with Indian philosophical works was reflected in commentaries which were exuberant and unreserved in their admiration. We should remember that he started to read Oriental literature much earlier in life than Emerson. He graduated from Harvard when he was twenty years old and a few years thereafter went to live in the Emerson household, where he earned his keep by doing all kinds of odd jobs. We have no record that he read any Indian literature at Harvard, but in Emerson's study in 1841 he found and read with zest Sir William Jones's translation of *The Laws of Menu*, and other Hindu works.

In his *Journal*, jubilant with youthful enthusiasm, he wrote, "That title (Menu) . . . comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindustan. . . . They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted down from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind. When my imagination travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near to the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place. I remember the book as an hour before sunrise." (I, 261.)

Later, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), incorporating other notes from his *Journal*, he presents a lengthy, dithyrambic commentary on the *Laws of Menu*, in which he says, "Most books belong to the house and street only, and in the fields their leaves feel very thin. . . . But this, as it proceeds from, so it addresses, what is deepest and most abiding in man. It belongs to the noontide of the day, the mid-summer of the year, and after the snows have melted, and the waters evaporated in the spring, still its truth speaks freshly to our experience. It helps the sun to shine and his rays fall on its page to illustrate it. . . . It conveys a new gloss to the meadows and the depths of the wood, and its spirit like a more subtle ether, sweeps along with the prevailing winds of a country. . . . held up to the sky, which is the only impartial and incorruptible ordeal, they (The Sentences of Manu) are of a piece with its depth and serenity, and I am assured that they will have a place and significance as long as there is a sky to test them by."

In that same year, 1841, this young man of 24 was reading pages of what he called the *Dharma Sastra*, (possibly still the *Laws of Menu*) which also evoked lyric praise in his *Journal*, "I cannot read a sentence . . . without being elevated as upon a table and of the Ghauts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, and seems as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh Mounts The great tone of the book is of such fibre and such severe tension that no time nor accident can relax it." (I, 266.)

The *Bhagavad Gita* came to Thoreau's attention perhaps about 1845 and became, as it did for so many New Englanders of the time, one of his favourite books. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he says, "The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindu Scripture, for its pure intellectuality. The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the *Bhagavad Geeta*." Further on he notes, "Its sanity and sublimity have impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants." And in *Walden* he exclaims, "How much more admirable the *Bhagavad-Geeta* than all the ruins of the East!" (Chapter I.) Indeed, it seems that he had the *Gita* with him during his exile by Walden Pond: "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Geeta*, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial;" (*Walden*, Chapter XVI.)

During the remaining years of his short life Thoreau read a great deal in Indian literature, perhaps more than Emerson. Throughout his *Journal* and *Walden* are many passages indicating the joy he found in savouring the books of the East. In 1855 he received from an English friend a veritable treasure-chest of 44 volumes dealing with Hindu literature. For them he fashioned a new case from driftwood found in a New England river, "thus giving Oriental wisdom an Occidental shrine."

As he grew older, his lyric enthusiasm did not wane. By 1850, he had read parts of the Vedas (probably in Rammohan Roy's translations, or John Stevenson's translation of the *Soma Veda*), and he eulogized them in the *Journal*: "What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum,—free from particulars, simple, universal. It rises on me like the full moon

after the stars have come out, wading through some far summer stratum of the sky." (II, 4.)

Some other volumes in which he enjoyed the wealth of Hindu thought were: Jones's translation of *Shakuntala*; Wilson's translation of the *Sankya Karika*, and of the *Vishnu Purana*; Wilkins's translation of *Heetopades of Vishnu Sarma*; Langlois' French translation of *Hariivansa* (which Thoreau put into English); and Garcin de Tassy's *Histoire de la littérature hindoui et Hindoustan* which included a valuable anthology. How many of the books in the driftwood case he read we do not know; a few years after receiving them he sickened and died.

Thoreau was even less of a systematic thinker or philosopher than Emerson and it would be pointless to attempt to define the specific Hindu doctrines which entered into his thinking. We can only speculate on the reasons why that New Englander was so deeply affected by his Oriental reading as he quite apparently was.

In the first instance, as is evident from the mood in which most of the above quotations were written, Thoreau found in the Indian scriptures a manner of expression which was congenial and exciting to him—a tone of strangeness, at once ancient and fresh, of sweeping vastness, of simple poetry. It is perhaps significant that so often when commenting on his reading he seized on similes from nature—which he loved and understood so well—to explain the effect of Indian authors on him. Even in style there is an affinity between the Indian classics and Thoreau's writing (or indeed Emerson's): one finds in them the same love of the pithy, often startling epigram making oracular and arbitrary statements.

On a more philosophical plane, Thoreau must have been attracted to the Indians' emphasis on intuitive knowledge as a way of realizing the oneness of the universe. As one of Thoreau's biographers says, "His own intuition had been that an inner spirit flowed through man and his environment alike, and unified the world, and in the Hindus he found it made articulate as the beginning of a creed."¹⁹

But, in fact, Thoreau had not a very metaphysical mind, and the Hindu writings undoubtedly appealed to him more as a con-

¹⁹ Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau*, New York, 1958, p. 258.

firmation of his own ascetic habits of living than anything else. It is probably significant that he prized the so-called *Laws of Manu* particularly, for they are in essence not only a "manual of private devotion" (as Thoreau termed them) but also a handbook of practical living for the righteous man. He must have nodded in Yankee agreement when he read, "The householder, must, taking his stand on contentment, exercise restraint in his effort to seek happiness; happiness is rooted in contentment; its opposite is the root of misery" (IV, 12). Or, speaking of the householder retired to the forest, "Daily engaged in study, he must be self-controlled, affectionate, composed, always ready to give but never to take, and compassionate toward all beings." (VI, 2-3.) Or, "Contentment, forbearance, self-control, abstention from taking by force, purity, control of the senses, intellectual pursuits, spiritual knowledge, truthfulness, freedom from anger—these ten constitute the definition of *Dharma*." (VI, 92-93).²⁰

Thoreau was obsessed with the ideal of purity, and he found in the *Laws of Manu* a code of purity. "What avails it that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are not more religious? I know of many systems of religion esteemed heathenish whose precepts fill the reader with shame, and provoke him to new endeavours, though it be to the performance of rites merely. We discourse freely without shame of one form of sensuality, and are silent about another. We are so degraded that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature. In earlier ages, in some countries, every function was reverently spoken of and regulated by law. Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine and the like, elevating what is mean, and does not falsely excuse himself by calling these things trifles." (*Walden*, Chap. XI.)

In his personal habits Thoreau was an ascetic by inclination and practice. Emerson said of him, "He ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco." In his own words, he never thought of "dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea." Chastity he con-

²⁰ Quotations are from V. Raghavan, *The Indian Heritage*, Bangalore, 1958.

sidered "the flowering of man." He had no desire for physical wealth and believed that possessions are simply impediments in the good life. Emerson well described his ideal, "He chose to be rich by making his wants few." He craved solitude. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. . . . I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude." (*Walden*, Chap. V.) Obviously, in the Indian prescriptions for the holy life, Thoreau must have found stern and comforting support for his own monastic preferences.

Like the Hindus, Thoreau did not consider his lean and naked kind of simple life to be an end in itself. "Man flows at once to God," he says, "when the channel of purity is open He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established." When he lived by Walden Pond in ascetic solitude, he did so in order to strip life down to its essentials, to discover his true self, "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles."

Whether that "private business" resembled the practice of the yoga to any significant extent is a question which critics have speculated about at some length. In whatever sense one may think of Thoreau as a yogi, he certainly was not of the penance-performing kind which inflicts extraordinary torture on the body. Those holy men who are said to "hang suspended with their heads downward, over flames," or to dwell, "chained for life, at the foot of a tree," he puts in the same scorned category as his harrassed, over-busy Concord neighbours. (*Walden*, Chap. I.)

It is true that he notes in his *Journal*, "One may discover the root of a Hindu religion in his own private history, when, in the silent intervals of the day or the night, he does sometimes inflict on himself like austerities with a stern satisfaction." (I, 279.) But the reader of *Walden* quickly realizes that he is not dealing with a grim self-immolator, but with a soul which enjoys deeply the sweets of nature.

The way in which Thoreau considered himself to be a yogi is hinted at in a letter written to a friend in 1849, after nine years of dipping into Oriental books:

“Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who practise the *yoga* gather in Brahma the certain fruit of their works.”

Depend upon it that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the *yoga* faithfully.

To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi.²¹

It is probable that his contemplative exercises were more in the nature of pleasant random reveries and always associated with the wonders of nature. There is a very beautiful passage in *Walden* which describes one of those pleasurable, refreshing states :

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work. . . I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiselessly through the house. . . I grew in those seasons like corn in the night. . . . They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. (Chap. IV.)

But Thoreau was also aware of the existence of more technically mystic states of contemplation in which the transcendental self looks with detachment on the play of the world :

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things good and bad, go by us like a torrent. . . I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. . . (I) am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but a spectator, sharing no experience but

21. Quoted in Christy, *op cit.*, p. 201.

taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbours and friends sometimes. (*Walden*, Chap. V.)

These words recall the Doppelgänger motif in Romantic literature but are most certainly a reflection of his Indian reading, especially perhaps of the *Sankya Karika* and the *Gita*. Whether they mirror frequent personal experiences is a matter of conjecture.

Another affinity which Thoreau had with Hindu practices was his deep love of the dawn and early morning, and he recognized his kinship with the Brahmins in this devotion: "I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things I did. . . All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, 'All intelligences awake with the morning.' Poetry and art and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men date from such an hour." And we have heard him identify the Laws of Manu "as an hour before sunrise."

Very close to the core of Thoreau's doctrine of the righteous life is the conviction that most men distract themselves from the realities of life by paying attention to "shows and delusions." This conviction is not far from the tendency of Kapila and other philosophers to regard the events of the day as the insubstantial pageantry of life and time. Thoreau uses a Hindu parable to illustrate his point:

By closing the eyes and slumbering and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser, by experience, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him,

revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So, soul", continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*." (*Walden*, Chap. II.)

On another page of *Walden*, he relates an Indian fable at considerable length to show the illusory nature of time in relation to true perfection. He tells the tale of an artist who was determined to make a perfect staff. For centuries he sought for the suitable wood and before he had finished the staff, cities had fallen into ruin, dynasties had passed away, and "Brahma had awoke and slumbered many times." "As he made no compromise with time, time kept out of his way, and only signed at a distance because he could not overcome him." Finally, the perfect work was finished, "and now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain." (*Walden*, Chap. XVIII.)

Thoreau's mind was less involved in the subtle theological argumentations of his time than was Emerson's and consequently, in my opinion, was able to welcome with a fresher heart the Indian doctrines with which he felt a native kinship. Like Amos Bronson Alcott, he had the open, undogmatic mind which sought truth in the world's scriptures. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he notes, "It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindus, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind. This is a work which Time will surely edit, reserved to crown the labors of the printing-press. This would be the Bible, or the Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth." Here he seems to echo the desires of Rammohan Roy and to be a precursor of the great Max Mueller.

In addition to what has been quoted from Thoreau's writings to give some idea of his familiarity with ancient Hindu literature, one could cite a good many further scattered references. To do so would not add substantially to the picture already painted of his

attraction to Indian philosophy. I cannot, however, refrain from quoting one further and particularly appealing passage from *Walden*. In the cargo brought from America to India in the sailing ships, ice cut from New England ponds was a frequent item. Preserved in fragrant pine sawdust, it cooled the thirst of men in Calcutta. Watching a hundred men at work cutting the ice from Walden pond, he muses :

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagvat-Geeta*. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo ! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the *Vedas*, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favouring winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis and the Hesperides, makes the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names.

It has been evident, I believe, in this brief presentation that Thoreau not only was well-acquainted with some of the key-books of Hindu thought, but also found in them nutritious food for meditation and even some patterns of living which fitted rather closely with those woven by his own inclinations. It is more doubtful, although possible, that he understood or accepted fully the inmost spirit of the Hindu doctrines. If you read *Walden* through, without screening its lines for possible foreign influences, the net impression will be that here is a frugal, practical Yankee, greatly interested in the details of New England's flora and fauna, gloriously happy in the tranquil peace of unsullied Nature, an eccentric at odds with most of his neighbours' foibles. Other writings, such as the essay on civil disobedience and on the abolition of slavery, show him to be a protestant deeply concerned with the injustice of his contemporary society. He was not in any accurate sense a yogi, but he did pay

devoted heed to those glimpses of light from the Orient which he saw. As Canby says, "Thoreau's unmetaphysical mind let him sink deeper (than Emerson) into the Hindu books, with little regard for contradictions."²²

²². *Op. cit.*, p. 256.

CHAPTER THREE

FOUR SEEKING SOULS

THE four men who are discussed in this chapter are so different in their literary personalities, interests, and stature that the reader may wonder at their being grouped together. For our purposes, they all manifested a kinship with Indian thought—Alcott and Whittier as avid readers; Melville as a borrower of Hindu mythological themes; and Whitman as a great poet in whose works the main lines of Hindu philosophy are paralleled.

But beyond that common relationship, all four were men who sought, each in his own particular fashion, answers to great questions in their personal view of the world. Three of them—Alcott, Whittier, and Whitman—showed special interest in mystical experience. Melville's questions were of a more broadly metaphysical nature. It is doubtless no mere accident that the four turned to the ancient wisdom of India in their seeking.

While only Alcott was a member of the Transcendentalist group, all to some extent were affected by the directions of thought of that group, including that leading to India.

Alcott the Teacher

It may seem strange to devote attention in this study to a man who, in comparison with Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, was a minor figure in nineteenth century literature, an

indifferent writer and a character with a slightly ludicrous air about him. Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) was, nevertheless, an efficient propagator of the cult of Indian philosophy during a good part of the last century.

Alcott was a visionary, a stimulating and original teacher, a serious and attractive conversationalist. Carlyle called him, "The good Alcott: with his long, lean face and figure, with his grey worn temples and mild radiant eyes; all bent on saving the world by a return to acorns and the golden age . . . a kind of venerable Don Quixote, whom nobody can even laugh at without loving." As such, he was not untypical of his times. The United States in the first part of the nineteenth century was a happy hunting ground for utopian idealists, confident in their altruistic search for a perfect social order and a harmonious personal life. From its first days, America had been a laboratory for idealistic experiments. The Pilgrim Fathers, the Quaker William Penn. and scores of other visionaries sought in the New World a proving ground for new modes of the perfect life. Many of the experiments failed; others contributed richly to American culture and influenced the dominant melioristic note in American society. Alcott was one of this noble, but often impractical tribe.

Born of a poor farm family in Connecticut, he had to struggle to piece together an elementary education making — for example — his own ink from natural juices. As a young man, he earned his living as a peddler in Virginia and North Carolina. There and later in Philadelphia he became acquainted with Quakers and their doctrine of the "inner light", which he was to identify with "Brahma". About 1831 he taught school for a while in Philadelphia and apparently began to read widely in the well-stocked libraries of the city. It is possible that this reading included some exploration of Indian thought.

Soon he returned to his native New England, residing in Boston and Concord. In Boston he carried out his well-known educational experiment at the Temple School which, although it failed after a few years, became a benchmark to later progressive educators. Thereafter his living was precarious: he tried his hand at writing, with practically no success; he held public "conversations", or Socratic discussions on great books; and worked at manual labour.

As far as his Oriental interests were concerned, 1849 appears to have been a fertile year. Having become a friend of Emerson, who opened spiritual doors for him, and a member of the Transcendentalist Club, he read and re-read that year the *Bhagavad Gita*. In his journal he records, "Read the 'Bhagavad Gita' to a large audience in the evening, with lively discussions, etc."

That same year he planned an ambitious project, *Mankind Library*, which was to be a series of collected sacred scriptures, including Oriental and Indian mythology. This project, like so many of Alcott's dreams, he did not realize, but he continued his Oriental readings. His friend, James Freeman Clarke, whose *Ten Great Religions* later carried into wide circulation a modification of Alcott's ideal, suggested that he read Vedic literature and the *Vishnu Purana*.

There is no evidence to indicate that Alcott's knowledge of Indian literature was either profound or extensive. We have indications that he read secondary sources, such as Joseph Marie Degérando's *Comparative History of Philosophical Systems*, (a favourite of Emerson's), Heinrick Ritter's *The History of Ancient Philosophy*, and Spence Hardy's *Eastern Monachism*. To judge from his published work, even the *Gita* impressed him mainly by its passages on food. Alcott, incidentally, was a rabid vegetarian, a fad which caused considerable mirth among his friends. The extremes of his vegetarianism were apparent in the ill-fated utopian experiment of Fruitlands (1841), where milk and eggs were forbidden and only "aspiring" vegetables permitted.

But whatever he did know of Eastern philosophy he popularized through his "conversations", lectures and, later in his life, through his activities as head of the Concord School of Philosophy.

It was during this later period that Alcott made his most unusual contribution to the diffusion of Orientalism in America. It happened this way: William Henry Channing, member of the Transcendentalist Club and son of William Ellery Channing—the great Unitarian, had a daughter, Fannie, who married Sir Edwin Arnold. When the latter published his famous *The Light of Asia* in 1879, his father-in-law immediately wrote to his old friend Alcott and sent a copy of *The Light*. Zealous as usual, Alcott immediately set to work having the long poem on the life of Lord Buddha

reprinted in Boston. He also arranged to have favourable reviews of the book written by several of his literary confreres, among them Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Thus launched, Arnold's book was to have a long and influential sojourn in the United States. Some 83 editions of the poem appeared in America and it became a household book. I remember that, when I was a small boy, my mother used to keep a rather fancy edition in the parlour as a show-piece. Doubtless its popularity in the last century was due in part to the gradual weakening in America of the most narrow and dogmatic forms of Christianity and the quickened interest aroused by the work on comparative religion of Max Mueller, James Freeman Clarke, and—to a lesser degree—Alcott himself.¹ Eventually, *The Light of Asia* was made into a play (produced in California in 1919 and repeated on Broadway in 1928). It is still obtainable in a paper-back edition in the United States.

Amos Bronson Alcott, in summary, was a genial middle-man or broker of information about the religions of the East. Something of a mystic himself, he managed to communicate his interest and knowledge, however jumbled, to a wide circle of Americans.

Whittier the Quaker

While the name of Alcott is commonly associated with his interest in Oriental religions, and with the Transcendentalists, that of John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) has for Americans quite a different connotation: For generations he was considered in his country a beloved and talented poet, second only to Longfellow in his simple appeal to the common man. Today's more sophisticated literary taste tends to dismiss him as a sentimental poetaster. In neither view has he been recognized as a devotee of Indian literature, which he was especially in later life.

Like Alcott, Whittier early learned the doctrine of the "inner light." He was born of Quaker parentage on a farm near a small Massachusetts town. His rural boyhood and his Quaker faith determined the salient characteristics of his life and work, his comfortable devotion to the "common unrhymed poetry of simple life

¹ Isaacs, *op cit.*, p. 255.

and country ways", his zeal for social justice, and—in my opinion—his later interest in the mystical aspects of Indian religion.

Whittier's affection for sunlit rural scenes is evident in scores of poems, including his much-maligned "The Barefoot Boy", and his ability to summon up the joys of old-fashioned family life on the farm is warmly manifest in "Snowbound". These and others of his poems used to be greatly cherished by Americans and were often learned by heart.

But Whittier's energies were by no means spent only in recreating homely rural idylls. For thirty years he was a fervent "abolitionist", combating the institution of human slavery in the United States. He gave his best strength to the cause, writing much verse and journalistic prose in support of it. Inspired by the ideals of common brotherhood bequeathed to him by his Quaker parents and forefathers, he persevered and suffered persecution in his efforts to bring freedom to the Negroes. For some critics, this crusade of Whittier's is a greater claim to remembrance by posterity than his poetry.

After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation had pledged at least legal freedom to the Negro slaves, and after he had passed middle age, Whittier's thoughts and energies turned less and less to political and social matters and more and more to a religious concern with the ultimate meanings of human life. This side of his Quaker background quietly reasserted itself. While he never had been an intimate of the Transcendentalist circle, he knew Emerson and could hardly have been unaware of the breezes from the Orient which were blowing in the land of New England. It was natural that his autumnal search for religious truths should lead him to wander, however haphazardly, in the forests of Indian thought.

As early as 1852 Emerson lent to him a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a work which appears to have stirred him deeply. He wrote to Emerson, "I will e'en keep it until I restore it to thee personally in exchange for George Fox. It is a wonderful book—and has greatly excited my curiosity to know more of the religious literature of the East." (George Fox was the founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers.) Many years later a friend suggested to him

that he get a copy of Mohini M. Chatterji's translation of the *Gita*, which was published in Boston in 1887. We presume that he did.

During a period of years friends gave or lent him books on the Orient which apparently he studied carefully and sympathetically. In his library he had Alger's *The Poetry of the Orient*; Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*; and Bayard Taylor's *Poems of the Orient*. He also knew the valuable works of the English Orientalists: those of Monier-Williams; John Muir's *Metrical Translations from . . . Sanskrit Writers*; Kendersley's *Specimens of the Hindu Theatre*; and other translations from the Sanskrit. Above all, he had access to the wonderful volumes of Max Mueller's *Sacred Books of the East*. To some extent, he seems to have been familiar with the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. Like so many of his generation, Whittier was greatly stimulated by Arnold's *The Light of Asia*.²

The results of Whittier's reading and its reaction on his spiritual tensions are evident in a good number of his poems which were conceived in the autumn of his life. Christy says that the American Quaker poet "offers in his poetic work more poems on Oriental maxims and more imitations of Oriental models than may be found in Emerson's verse." This statement is somewhat deceptive for our purposes since "Oriental" is a broad term and includes matter which is Persian or Arabic rather than Indian, and because Emerson's vivid interest in India is far less evident in his poetry than in his essays and letters. Nevertheless, Whittier's debt in his later poetry to India is unquestionable.

It is a long way from a New England farm to the Moghal splendours of Agra, but Whittier, in his fashion, soared over the miles: his narrative poem, "Miriam", is one of his more ambitious excursions into Oriental lore. Dedicated to an old friend and fellow-student of Indian literature, the first part of the poem takes the two remembering men to a "green hill-slope", far above the village, valley and sea. There they talk of man's religions—"the bibles

2. For documented accounts of this matter, see Arthur Christy, "The Orientalism of Whittier", *American Literature* V, pp. 248-50 (Nov., 1933); "Orientalism in New England", *American Literature* I, pp. 392; 372 (Jan., 1930).

of the ancient folk, through which the heart of nations spoke." The poet tells his friend,

. . . Truth is one
And in all lands beneath the sun,
Who so hath eyes to see may see
The tokens of its unity . . .

Having thus made clear his belief in the underlying oneness of men's faiths, reminiscent of the times of Rammohan Roy, the poet tells a "story of the days of old, of good Shah Akbar"; weary after a day of justice-dealing, the monarch retires to his apartment,

Where, far beneath, he heard the Jamna's stream
Lapse soft and low along his palace wall,
And all about the cool sound of the fall
Of fountains, and of water circling free
Through marble ducts along the balcony;

Conversing quietly with his Christian concubine, Miriam, he hears from her again the universal truths of forgiveness. And, the next day, recalling his eventide counsel, he spares the life of an Ethiopian girl who seemed to have sinned against his orders.

A Hindu counsellor, applauding Akbar's clemency, begins to chant,

The fragment of a holy Vedic verse;
And thus it ran: "He who all things forgives
Conquers himself and all things else and lives
Above the reach of wrong or hate or fear,
Calm as the gods, to whom he is most dear."

Whittier ends with the dew-fall on the lonely hill, and with a restatement of the poet's conviction that,

All faiths, all worlds, as through the dark
Of ocean shines the light house spark,
Attest the presence everywhere
Of love and providential care.

Other poems which indicate Whittier's knowledge of the East are "The Over Heart", "The Cypress Tree of Ceylon", "The Dead Feast of the Kol-Folk", and "The Khan's Devil".

A particularly striking example of his use of Indian material is his well-known "The Brewing of Soma". The first part of this poem is based directly on a passage of Vedic literature (doubtless found in *The Sacred Books of the East*) which describes the preparation and use of the potent, sacrificial drink. The latter part of Whittier's poem is a beautiful hymn which has become one of the best-loved religious songs in the Protestant Christian hymnal. One of the stanzas reads:

Breathe through the heats of our desire;
 Thy sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
 Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
 O still small voice of calm!

In addition to having considerable knowledge of Indian history, Whittier also knew something of the Indian religious and social reform movement known as the Brahma Samaj, founded by Ram-mohan Roy. In 1883, Pratap Chandra Mazoomdar, a leader of the Brahma Samaj and editor of its publication *Unity and the Minister*, came to America on a lecture tour and attracted rather wide-spread and favourable attention. In his lectures and his book, *The Oriental Christ*, he attempted, as had Rammohan Roy, to present a synthesis of Christianity and Oriental religious thought.

In the year of Mazoomdar's lecture tour, Whittier wrote to a friend, "I hope you and Sarah (Sarah Orne' Jewett, the novelist) will see the wonderful prophet of the Brahma Samaj—Mazoomdar, before he leaves the country. I would have seen him in Boston, but for illness last week. That movement in India is the greatest event in the history of Christianity since the days of Saint Paul."³

The extent of the American poet's interest in the Brahma Samaj may be judged by the fact that he paraphrased some of the "Hymns of the Brahma Samaj" which he found included in Mazoomdar's book.

It may seem strange that this American minor poet, whose life and works in so many respects label him as a provincial product of the New England countryside, should have become so enchanted

3. Quoted in John A. Pollard's, *John Greenleaf Whittier*, Boston, 1949, p. 348. Serious students are referred to Pollard's biography as a good summary.

with Indian religious lore. There are several valid explanations: Whittier was a Quaker, and as such his longing for the quiet soul and his rejection of violence were so akin to some of the basic contours of Hinduism, that he found in Indian literature the thoughts of congenial spirits. Whittier's mind was not particularly complicated and it is doubtful that his understanding of the subtleties of Indian philosophy was very profound, but instinctively he seems to have perceived the kinship between the mystic basis of Quakerism and similar beliefs of Hinduism. Like a number of his nineteenth century fellow-authors he attempted, as one critic has said, "to achieve a synthesis of quietism and of American nineteenth century strenuousness and belief in work."⁴ Both the Quaker faith, as in the case of Alcott and Whittier, and Unitarianism were important factors in developing American interest in India's religions.

Another explanation is an obvious one: interest of one kind or another in Indian philosophy was aroused by the Transcendentalists and kept alive by the vogue for the study of comparative religion. Many of Whittier's more learned friends and contemporaries had something more than a nodding acquaintance with Hindu literature and it would have been unusual indeed if Whittier, yearning in his later years for a resolution of his religious questioning, had not been led by the prevailing winds of intellectual fashion to seek out the mysteries of India.

To what extent Indian religious thought really affected the spirit of the American Quaker poet we cannot, of course, determine with any exactitude. That it left its mark in some degree is clear. Something of the quality of Whittier's gentle religious ideals can be felt in lines he wrote on the death of a dear friend:

"He had somehow reached a state of absolute quietude—a region of ineffable calm, blown over by no winds of hope or fear. All personal anxieties and solitudes were unknown. The outward world was phantasmal and unreal. . . ."

Melville the Rover

Herman Melville, a contemporary of Walt Whitman and the author of *Moby Dick*, found his exotic interests primarily in the Pacific South Seas, but he also found material of more than passing

4. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

importance in Hindu mythology. Melville, in his far-flung travels, did not visit India and we have little evidence about the extent of his reading of Hindu literature. In the memoirs of one of his friends, there occurs a tantalizing passage; describing an afternoon visit with Melville and Oliver Wendell Holmes, the American poet, the friend recalls, "At length, somehow, the conversation drifted to East India religions and mythologies and soon there arose a discussion between Holmes and Melville which was conducted with the most amazing skill and brilliance on both sides. It lasted for hours. . . ."⁵

I believe it is quite probable that Melville had done a good deal of haphazard reading about Indian lore in secondary accounts. We know that he was acquainted with W. J. Mickle's essay, "Inquiry into the Religious Tenets and Philosophy of the Brahmins" (included with a translation of *Os Lusindas* in Alexander Chambers' *The Works of the English Poets*, London, 1810, Vol. 21), with Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities* (London, 1794), and with an article on "Hindoo Superstitions" in Chambers' *Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, Boston, 1847, a very widely-read encyclopedia. Baird suspects "that there was much more heterogeneous knowledge of the Orient in his mind than was ever disclosed in conversation or in correspondence or in the record of Melville's art."⁶ He also points out a number of references to Hindu imagery in *Moby Dick*.

The most significant use of Hindu mythology in *Moby Dick* occurs in Chapters LIV and LXXXII. In the first, "Monstrous Pictures of Whales", Melville writes:

Now, by all odds, the most ancient extant portrait anyways purporting to be the whale's, is to be found in the famous cavern-pagoda of Elephanta, in India. The Brahmins maintain that in the almost endless sculptures of that immemorial pagoda, all the trades and pursuits, every conceivable avocation of man, were prefigured ages before any of them actually came into being. No wonder then, that in some sort our noble profession of whaling should have been there shadowed forth. The Hindoo whale referred to, occurs in a separate department of the wall, depict-

5. M. B. Field, *Memories of Many Men and Some Women*, New York, 1874, pp. 201-202; cited in James Baird, *Ismael*, Baltimore, 1956, p. 176.

6. *Op. cit.* p. 176.

ing the incarnation of Vishnu in the form of Leviathan, learnedly known as the Matse Avatar. But though this sculpture is half-man and half-whale, so as only to give the tail of the latter, yet that small section of him is all wrong. It looks more like the tapering tail of an anaconda, than the broad palms of the true whale's majestic flukes.

Unfortunately, the novelist got his sources somewhat confused and there is actually no representation of Vishnu's incarnation as a whale or other fish in the Elephanta caves. He apparently saw the picture of Vishnu's avatar as a fish in Maurice's *Indian Antiquities* and got it mixed up in hasty recollection with an account of Elephanta in the same volume.⁷

In the eighty-second chapter, which presents a defense of the whaling profession by citing illustrious figures of mythology who were "whalers", he makes out Vishnu, by a rather sly sleight of hand, to be a famous "whale-man":

Nor do heroes, saints, demigods, and prophets alone comprise the whole roll of our order. Our grand master is still to be named; for like royal kings of old times, we find the head-waters of our fraternity in nothing short of the great gods themselves. That wondrous Oriental story is now to be rehearsed from the Shaster, which gives us the dread Vishnu, one of the three persons (Brahma, Vishnu, Siva) in the godhead of the Hindoos; gives us this divine Vishnu himself for our Lord;—Vishnu, who by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has for ever set apart and sanctified the whale. When Brahm, or the God of Gods, saith the Shaster, resolved to recreate the world after one of its periodical dissolutions, he gave birth to Vishnu, to preside over the work; but the Vedas, or mystical books, whose perusal would seem to have been indispensable to Vishnu before beginning the creation, and which therefore must have contained something in the shape of practical hints to young architects, these Vedas were lying at the bottom of the water; so Vishnu became incarnate in a whale, and sounding down in him to the uttermost depths, rescued the sacred volumes. Was not this Vishnu a whale-man then? even as a man who rides a horse is called a horseman?

7. See Howard P. Vincent, *The Tying-Out of Moby Dick*, Boston, 1949, p. 278.

Although there is a certain tongue-in-cheek humour about this passage and the whale chapter as a whole, it is possible that by indirectly identifying the Great White Whale of his famous novel with a Hindu deity, he may have tried to give a transcendent symbolism to *Moby Dick*.

In 1841-42, Melville visited the Galapagos Islands, off the Western coast of South America, and recorded his experiences in *The Encantadas*. The novelist was deeply impressed by the giant tortoises which inhabited the barren islands; some of them live to be from three to four hundred years old and are thus the oldest animals living on earth. In his awe of them, he recalls the ancient Hindu belief that the world rested on the back of an enormous tortoise:

Yea, they seemed the identical tortoises whereon the Hindu plants this total sphere. . . .

With them I lost myself in volcanic mazes; brushed away endless boughs of rotting thickets; till finally I found myself sitting cross-legged upon the foremost, a Brahmin similarly mounted upon either side, forming a tripod of foreheads which upheld the universal cope.

In spite of Baird's intricate identification of Melville's most deeply held symbols with India and the Orient in general (he includes Polynesia in the realm of Hindu inspiration), it would be difficult, in my opinion, to support a thesis that this great American novelist was profoundly influenced by Hindu thought, or even that he was particularly well-versed in Indian lore. His tortured philosophy was his own, illustrated by scraps of knowledge and experience which he had gathered the world over. But he demonstrably was touched by the considerable tide of Indian religious thought that influenced Emerson and Thoreau to a much greater degree.

Whitman the Mystic

The relationship of Walt Whitman to Indian thought is considerably more complex than in the case of the authors heretofore considered. Everyone who has read his strange and vibrant verse with care and reflection realizes that there is a great similarity between his view of the world and his expression of that view, and Hindu Vedantic thought. Whitman's older contemporary, Emerson,

once described *Leaves of Grass* as a blending of the *Gita* and the New York *Herald*, while Thoreau remarked that the poetry was "wonderfully like the Orientals. . . considering that when I asked if he had read them, he answered, 'No, tell me about them!'"

Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of *The Light of Asia*, referred to him as, ". . . my dear and venerated friend, Walt Whitman, who had somehow learned this vast Asiatic complacency, which comes from acceptance of the cosmic process, and from good will to all its living things. . . In his wide affection for humanity and sense of comradeship with all life, high or low, you may perceive what Buddhism taught to Asia, and what Christ tried to teach to Christendom, that the secrets of content, the spells which bring us into harmony with the cosmic processes, are faith in its purpose, work for its furtherance, and fixed good will towards all creatures."⁸

Many Indians have been keenly conscious of the congeniality of Whitman's language and ideas to their own traditional philosophical background, and this fact undoubtedly accounts in part for his considerable popularity in India. Probably the following bit from a modern Indian novel is representative of a sensitive Indian's appreciation of Whitman:

"Anwar became familiar with the kindly and wise old man with a flowing white beard, a battered hat on his head and a staff in his hand, who went about singing songs of man with the same fervour with which hymn-singers had sung the glories of God. . ."⁹

Professor V. K. Chari, who has carefully studied the relationship of Whitman to Indian thought, summarizes his convictions as follows, "Whether impelled by native or foreign influences or by his own innate disposition, Whitman came to express in his poems a body of mystical beliefs which are also the fundamental assumptions of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta. The *Leaves of Grass* is to be studied and understood rather as a body of mystical verse comparable to the apocalyptic utterances of the *Upanishads* and the *Gita* than as a finished work of art. . . In fact, the affinities are so

8. *The New York World*, October 15, 1893; in Guy Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, New York, 1955, p.141.

9. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, *Inquilab*, Bombay, 1943, pp. 280-81.

deep that Whitman's writings lend themselves to a consistent interpretation in the light of the Vedanta."¹⁰

Rabindranath Tagore's explosive admiration for Whitman's poetry is well-known. It was part of his discovery of America; he said, "Whitman is your greatest poet. To me his is the highest name. In poetry one must have originality and spontaneity and that breadth of thought which tells you that the poet has seen deeply and knows humanity. Whitman gives me pictures—pictures!"¹¹

In his numerous comments on Whitman, Tagore does not particularly stress the Oriental inspiration of Walt Whitman, although he did remark, on one of his American visits, that "no American has caught the Oriental spirit so well as Whitman." On the other hand, critics have attempted, with imprecise results, to establish indebtedness on the Indian poet's part to Whitman. In my opinion, the truth is that both Tagore and Whitman were preoccupied with the same problems, basic problems with which ancient Indian philosophers grappled so mightily. This affinity between the two poets is particularly evident in Tagore's lecture on "The World of Personality", in which he frequently refers to Whitman. Tagore says, "When the mind of a person like Walt moves in a time different from that of others, his world does not necessarily come to ruin through dislocation, because there in the center of his world dwells his own personality. All the facts and shapes of this world are related to this central creative power, therefore they become interrelated spontaneously."

Tagore's use of the word "personality" is directly related to Whitman's doctrine of "personalism", which was defined by Amos Bronson Alcott as the belief that "the ultimate reality of the world is a Divine Person who sustains the universe by a continuous act of creative will."¹²

10. "Whitman and Indian Thought," *Western Humanities Review*, Summer, 1959; reprinted in the *American Review* (New Delhi), October, 1960. See also Professor Chari's chapter in *Walt Whitman Abroad* (ed. Guy Wilson Allen), Syracuse, 1955.

11. Quoted in Bailey Millard, "Rabindranath Tagore Discovers America," *The Bookmen*, Vol. 44, Nov. 1916, pp. 244-51.

12. Quoted in Guy Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook*, Chicago, 1946, p. 302.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, eminent scholar and now President of India, is more categorical than most critics in identifying the Indian inspiration of Whitman: "Whitman turns to the East in his anxiety to escape from the complexities of civilisation and the bewilderments of a baffled intellectualism."¹³

There is, however, a kind of mystery about Whitman and India: When and how did he become acquainted with ancient Indian philosophy? Or, to what extent, if at all, did he read the great works of Hindu literature? Unlike the cases of Emerson and Thoreau, whose Indian reading has been well-documented both externally and in their own writings, we know next to nothing about Whitman's first-hand acquaintanceship with Indian books. A recent and authoritative biographer of Whitman states, "Whether Whitman had read any Oriental literature by this time (1855) the most diligent search of scholars has not yet determined."

Whitman's own statements are ambiguous, not to say contradictory. In his reminiscing essay, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1889), he claims to have read "the ancient Hindu poems" before writing *Leaves of Grass*. But, as we have noted above, he denied this to Thoreau.

We have it on good authority that in 1875, an English friend of the poet, Thomas Dixon, sent Whitman a Christmas gift copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* in translation. Whitman underlined certain parts and made a few marginal notes. This gift, however, was twenty years after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*; consequently, it could hardly have been a direct influence on the poet in the formative years of his creative thought.

Leaving this unsolved question of sources, it is worthwhile to examine briefly some of the parallels between Whitman's thought and that of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta. In doing so it is not necessary to predicate any direct influence of the latter on Whitman's work. It may well be, as Romain Rolland has held, that the similarities are simply those arising from similar emotional and spiritual experiences.

¹³. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, New York, 1959, p. 249.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic which Whitman, as well as Emerson and other Transcendentalists, had in common with much of Hindu philosophy was a conviction that reason is insufficient to know truth and that the intuition of the spirit is indispensable. Even though he was a great reader of books, he says, Emerson-like, "A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books" ("Song of Myself", 23); or:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor
 look through the eyes of the dead,
 Nor feed on the spectres in books,
 You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
 from me,
 You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.
(*Ibid.*, 2)

His intuition led him, as has been true with so many mystics, to a vision of the underlying oneness of all things and beings, including himself, in God or the "Kosmic spirit":

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
 that pass all the argument of the earth,

 And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
 And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
 And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and women
 my sisters, and lovers,
 And that a kelson of the creation is love;
(*Ibid.*, 5)

Whitman's constant point of departure in this realization of basic unity is himself, "the real Me". What seems at first unbelievable egoism is simply the identification of himself with all creation:

I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-wash'd
 babe and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
 And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good.
 I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal
 and fathomless as myself.
(*Ibid.*, 7)

Three particular characteristics are apparent in Whitman's expression of the Transcendental Self:

First, like the Hindu mystical writers, he often resorts to paradoxes to try to express the ineffable:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others, maternal
as well as paternal, a child as well as a man. . .

(*Ibid.*, 16)

In the second place, as in Indian thought, his welding of his "real" self with the over-soul brings him a sense of detachment from the other illusory "Me":

I believe in you, my soul, the other I am must not abase itself
to you,

And you must not be abased to the other.

(*Ibid.*, 5)

Battles, war, passing events, changes in mood "are not the Me
myself."

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

(*Ibid.*, 4)

From this concept of the Self as a spectator it is but a step to the Vedantic idea that good and evil are only Maya, and Whitman sometimes indicates this indifference:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the
poet of wickedness also,

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?

Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.

(*Ibid.*, 22)

However, Whitman in his total work and in his unabashed enthusiasm for the good and beautiful aspects of real physical existence, can hardly be called a consistent believer in the Maya concept.

Lastly, as a result of his soul's liberation, Whitman's attitude towards time and space becomes loosed from conventional anchors and allows him to range in cosmic voyages through the centuries:

"My right hand is time and my left hand is space—both are ample—a few quintillion of cycles, a few sextillions of cubic leagues, are not of importance to me—what I shall attain to I can never tell, for there is something that underlies me, of whom I am a part and instrument."¹⁴ His poem, "Salut au Monde", is the best expression of this all-inclusive expansiveness:

Within me, latitude widens, longitude lengthens, . . .

Within me is the largest day, the sun wheels in slanting rings
It does not set for months. . .

The poet in his vision scans the whole globe and visualizes the history of mankind. He has become one with the rain, the waters, the wind to penetrate the earth entire. An infinity of time unrolls before him.

In another great composition, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", he says:

It avails not, neither time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence. . .

Thus, as with Indian mystics and mystics everywhere, time and space become indistinguishable factors in the total mingling of self with the spiritual substratum.

Some Indian readers of Whitman have further seen in his poetry a belief in the transmigration of souls, and it is true that some passages might be so interpreted; but there is really little to support such a thesis.¹⁵

Such passages as these are cited:

And as to you Life, I reckon you are the leavings of my deaths,
(No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

("Song of Myself", 49)

The past and the present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

(*Ibid.*, 51)

14. Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 142.

15. See Sri P. Sama Rao, "Walt Whitman and Vedanta," *Prabuddha Bharata*, Oct., Nov., Dec., 1962.

At least one Indian critic hears in "Song of Myself" a "peculiar resonance from the *Gita*",¹⁷ and it may be that such resonance derived from a reading of the *Gita*.

Certainly the resemblances we have briefly cited between Whitman's poetry and the Vedanta are impressive and there can be no doubt about the mystical element in his thought.

Students of Whitman's life and works have often felt that there is an unexplained miracle in the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, especially "Song of Myself." He had given no previous indication in his journalistic work of the wide thoughts and quality of style evident in "Song of Myself." There have been many conjectures that some crucial explosion in his life released hidden powers of thought and expression. In addition to speculation about some sudden development in his sexual life, it has been suggested that just before the composition of *Leaves of Grass*, he may have undergone a typical mystical experience, a miraculous realization of self. This may have been true, but we have no particular evidence of it, aside from the content of his poetry. It is significant that Whitman himself said, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering. Emerson brought me to a boil." Perhaps constant reading of Emerson did bring about a kind of mystic experience.

But one must remember that mystical experience is also part of the Western Christian tradition and that Whitman lived in a time and land which Transcendentalism, influenced by so many streams of thought, had ripened for the acceptance of mysticism.

Furthermore, in snatching fragments of his poems to illustrate his mystical tendency, one can easily do violence to the meaning of the total body of Whitman's verse which embraces a wide variety of non-mystical moods and subjects — the exuberant joy of living accompanying a healthy body, unmistakable interest in sexual ecstasy (which is not necessarily mystic symbolism), a patriotic enthusiasm for his country's glories and future, etc.

We must conclude then with an indeterminate judgment as to the extent of the Indian presence in Whitman's work.

Whitman's well-known "Passage to India" merits brief mention apart from the poet's possible affiliation with Indian mysticism.

17. S. K. Kumar, "Introduction", *Leaves of Grass*, New Delhi, 1962.

In spite of its title and its eloquent but superficial references to India, it has relatively little to do with the essence of India and perhaps, in Professor Chari's words, is the "least Indian of his poems." The initial verses refer in brilliant terms to some common-places about the India of Western romantic dreams:

O you temples fairer than lilies poured over by the rising sun!
 O you fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the
 known, mounting to heaven!
 You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses,
 burnished with gold!

Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!
 The poet hails India in wide, sweeping terms, a little reminis-
 cent of a text book on world history:

The old, most populous, wealthiest of Earth's lands,
 The streams of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many
 affluents;

(I my shores of America walking today behold, resuming all,
 The tale of Alexander on his warlike marches suddenly dying,
 On one side China, and on the other side Persia and Arabia,
 To the south the great seas, and the Bay of Bengal.
 The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,
 Old occult Brahma interminably far back, the tender and junior
 Buddha,

The rest of the poem is devoted to an optimistic prophecy of how the peoples of the world, after they have been joined together by the wonders of science and technology, will eventually find spiritual links of loving understanding. It is a fine poem of Whitman's most mature years, one of his most skilful. But its tone and theme have more relation to the unquenchable optimism of America than to the arcane mysteries of Indian philosophy.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCHOLARS, MISSIONARIES AND TRAVELLERS

BY the end of the Civil War in 1865, the hey day of the Transcendentalists had passed. Thoreau was dead; Emerson had done his most productive work, and his faculties were beginning to lose their edge. Alcott was more durable and was still to direct the famous Concord Summer School of Philosophy.

But the spell of high tranquillity in Concord was broken. The aftermath of the Civil War, the galloping rise of northern industrialism, the advent of Darwinism and a new respect for science, and a bustling rush to settle the Western lands tended to divert the attention of Americans, even intellectuals, from the idealistic speculation of the Transcendentalist group.

It might be thought that interest in India, so lively in the first part of the century, would become dormant in what is often termed an age of materialism—the last half of the nineteenth century. This would not, however, be an entirely accurate assessment of the situation. It is true that the outstanding American writers of the period showed little interest in India and its culture. But several interlocking factors were at work to keep alive among thoughtful Americans an awareness of India and its religions. If this awareness was more superficial than among Emerson and his friends, it was in all probability more widespread.

These factors were first, an increasing American interest in the science of comparative religion; second, a steady growth in scholarly activity in Sanskrit and related subjects; third, an accelerating participation of Americans in Christian missionary work in India; and, fourth, the vogue of travel books on India.

Comparing the World's Religions

The comparative study of religion or mythology was, as we have seen, adumbrated in the work of Rammohan Roy and was a dream of Amos Bronson Alcott and Thoreau. But it was Max Mueller (1823-1900), the German-British scholar, who is usually considered to be the father of the so-called science of comparative religion. Having studied Sanskrit in Berlin under Franz Bopp and Eugene Burnouf in Paris, he started his survey of religions with the publication of an edition of the *Rig-Veda* in 1848. He continued his research and teaching in English at Oxford, where he wrote *Chips from a German Workshop* (1859) and *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873). Mueller's interest in comparative mythology was closely related to his research in Indo-European linguistics and, as a result, his study of religions was largely restricted to Hinduism and others of the same language family. His greatest achievement in the diffusion of knowledge about Indian religion in the West was his editorship of *The Sacred Books of the East* (1875-1900).

Mueller's work became relatively well-known in America. *The Chips from a German Workshop* was reprinted in New York in 1869, and Emerson borrowed a copy from the Boston Athenaeum Library. Emerson met Mueller on his visit to Oxford in 1873 and was in correspondence with him; the latter sent to Emerson an inscribed copy of his *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, acknowledging his indebtedness to the Concord sage. We have noted that Whittier was apparently acquainted with some volumes of *The Sacred Books*.

American writing in the field of comparative religion was considerable and by no means restricted to a scholarly circle. Perhaps the most notable of such works was *Ten Great Religions* by James Freeman Clarke, published in 1871. Written from a liberal viewpoint free from bigotry, this work includes substantial chapters on Hinduism and Buddhism. It was reprinted in at least twenty-two subsequent editions and found wide acceptance in American liberal

circles. Clarke, born in 1810, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, was a Unitarian, a friend of Emerson, and one of the original members of the Transcendentalist Club. He shared that group's desire to find a series of common denominators in the world's religions and, as lecturer on ethnic religions at the Harvard Divinity School and as a prolific author, he labored mightily to achieve this purpose.

Part of Freeman's chapter on Hinduism was included in Rev. Edward Hale's revised edition of *The Age of Fable* (1881) by Thomas Bulfinch. In his introduction, Hale says, "During the last fifty years new attention has been paid to the systems of religion of the Eastern World. . . Even young readers will take an interest in such books as Clarke's *Great Religions* and Johnson's *Oriental Religions*." (The last reference is to the Rev. Samuel Johnson, *Oriental Religions and their Relation to Universal Religion, India*. Boston, 1872. The author was a prominent clergyman and scholar, born in Salem.) Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* was for decades a very popular family and school book in America and its material on Hindu mythology and Buddhism must have fascinated thousands of readers young and old, who were far from being erudite scholars. It might be noted that Rev. Hale was in the Channing-Clarke lineage of liberal Unitarian pastors, a fact which leads us to re-emphasize the extremely significant role of Unitarianism in maintaining American interest in Indian religions during the nineteenth century.

Other more or less popularized examples of the American curiosity for exploring the world's religions were:

Vestiges of the Spirit History of Man, S. F. Dunlop. New York, 1858. The author was a member of the American Oriental Society, and his work was one of the earliest efforts to make a comparative study of religion. It contains a chapter on "Brahmanism and Buddhism." A gift copy was sent to Emerson by the author.

The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages, Lydia Maria Child. New York, 1855. Three volumes. The author (1802-1880) was a well-known novelist in her day and a tireless worker for idealistic causes. While this work was not that of a scholarly specialist, it gave a readable description of non-Christian

religions from a tolerant and broad-minded point of view. The first volume contained an informative chapter on religion in India.

Sanskrit and its Kindred Literature, Laura Elizabeth Poor. Boston, 1880.

The Indian Saint, or Buddha and Buddhism, Charles D.B. Mills. Northampton (Mass.), 1876. Mills was a friend of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott who lived in Syracuse, New York. Alcott said of him, "Charles Mills has been almost the only American scholar who has cultivated Oriental studies. . . ."¹ While this statement is not entirely true, Mills was indeed active in propagating knowledge of Oriental religions. He also wrote *Pebbles, Pearls and Gems of the Orient*, and *The Tree of Mythology*.

It is evident, then, that serious and even casual readers had access to a considerable body of descriptive material of a relatively objective kind concerning Indian religions. Closely related were two other noteworthy American publications of the time. Wilkins' translation of the *Gita*, so well known earlier in New England circles in its original 1785 London edition, was reprinted in New York in 1867. It continued to be the favourite American classic of Indian philosophy.

In 1856, William R. Alger, a minor litterateur, published in Boston *The Poetry of the East*, which had several successive editions. This fairly popular book not only presented an anthology of excerpts from Hindu and Persian Poetry, gathered from translations by European Orientalists, but also an exceptionally informative introduction dealing with Eastern literature.

To the above notes, one must add the amazing popularity in late nineteenth century America of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, to which we have previously referred.

The Indologists

Somewhat related to the group of American writers who discovered India through comparative religion was a small number of

¹ Quoted in Christy, *op. cit.* p. 252.

American Indologists who, in the last half of the nineteenth century and in this century, "established a distinguished tradition of productive humanistic scholarship concerning India," as Professor Norman Brown says.

The American Oriental Society was founded in 1842, but the study of Sanskrit and the ancient texts written in that and related languages did not take root in American universities until some years later. The first American Sanskrit scholar of note was Edward Elbridge Salisbury (1814-1901) who taught a few pupils at Yale in the period 1840-1850. Another early Sanskritist, Fitzedward Hall (1825-1901), was in the Harvard class of 1846, but left college to search for a runaway brother in India. There he studied Indian languages and became tutor and professor of Sanskrit and English at Government College in Banaras. He was the first American scholar to edit a Sanskrit text—the *Vishnu Purana*, and wrote a number of popular articles on India in Lippincott's magazine, an American periodical. But in reality most of his considerable scholarly labour belongs to the history of British Indology.

One of Salisbury's students at Yale was William Dwight Whitney (1827-1901), destined to become America's first great explorer of the Indian classics in their original languages. Born in Massachusetts of old New England stock, Whitney was a sturdy out-of-doors young man greatly interested in nature study. After his graduation from college, he began the study of medicine; illness interrupted his work and during his convalescence he came across by accident a copy of Franz Bopp's *Sanskrit Grammar* among his brother's books. It fascinated the young invalid and he studied it avidly. Several years later, he further pursued his new-found hobby during a trip to the western frontier country.

In 1849, Whitney went to Yale to study Sanskrit seriously with Professor Salisbury. A year later he was in Berlin where, with the aid of German scholars such as Bopp and Weber, he perfected his knowledge of the ancient tongues of India. By the time he returned to America, the study of the old Hindu scriptures was an obsession with him and, when he was offered the first full professorship of Sanskrit language and literature at Yale in 1854, he accepted with enthusiasm.

Over the years, he taught scores of Yale students the secrets of early Indian books and carried on careful, erudite research in the field. His studies and editions of the *Atharva-Veda* were particularly important and his *Sanskrit Grammar* (1879) is still considered standard. It was reprinted in India in 1961. There has scarcely been a Sanskrit scholar in the United States who has not studied under Whitney or his disciples.

Whitney's successor in the chair of Sanskrit studies at Yale, Edward Washburn Hopkins (1857-1932), has special importance for our survey of India in American thought. Like Whitney, he was born in Massachusetts, the descendant of an old and notably religious New England family. After studying at Columbia University, Berlin, and Leipzig and receiving his doctorate in Sanskrit, he became Professor of Sanskrit at Bryn Mawr College and later at Yale. While his contribution to scholarly linguistic and literary studies was notable, he distinguished himself particularly as a student and expositor of India's religions. His book, *The Religions of India* (1895), was for many years one of the principal authoritative guides to the subject available to Americans. A companion work, *Ethics of India* (1924), won him critical praise, but his *Origin and Evolution of Religion*, published in 1923, appealed to American popular interest in comparative religion and became a "best-seller".

Harvard University, later to become an outstanding center of Indology, did not include Sanskrit in its curriculum until 1872. Starting that year and continuing until 1880, the classical language of India was taught by James Bradstreet Greenough (1833-1900). Greenough was a well-known Latin scholar, deeply interested in comparative grammar, who had taught himself Sanskrit.

He was succeeded as professor of Sanskrit at Harvard by Charles Rockwell Lanman who, along with Whitney, is usually considered among the great Sanskritists of the West. Lanman was a student of Whitney's, graduating from Yale in 1871. Then, taking a path that was beginning to be well-worn, he continued the study of ancient Oriental languages and literature in Germany. Returning to America in 1876, he first taught at Johns Hopkins, a new university which had just opened its doors, and then was called to Harvard as Professor of Sanskrit. There, for over forty years, he carried out solid and distinguished work as teacher and scholar. The year 1884 saw the

publication of his *Sanskrit Reader*, which was to be reissued many times and a familiar text to several generations of students. In 1889 he travelled in India collecting valuable manuscripts for the Harvard Library. Like Hopkins, he was particularly attracted to Indian religion and in 1890 published his *Beginnings of Hindu Pantheism*. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Oriental scholarship in America was the planning and editing of the *Harvard Oriental Series*. Started in 1895, it has continued to date in over forty substantial volumes. Among his students were a number who later achieved literary renown, such as T. S. Eliot, Paul Elmer More, and Irving Babbitt.

This is not the place to chronicle the generous contributions to Sanskrit studies of many other American Indologists such as Maurice Bloomfield (1855-1928; Johns Hopkins University); A. V. William Jackson (1862-1937; Columbia University); Franklin Edgerton (1885-); W. Norman Brown (1892- University of Pennsylvania); and others. Much of their work is preserved in the monumental *Harvard Oriental Series*; the publications of the American Oriental Society; and those of Columbia and other universities.

It is not the intention of these paragraphs to imply that American scholarship in this field stimulated widespread popular interest in India among Americans. At best, the students of Sanskrit were a small, select group and up to World War II only eight American universities included Sanskrit in their curricula. Nevertheless, the serious, methodical research and teaching of these distinguished Indologists served to counterbalance and correct the more superficial knowledge of India's religions propagated by the cultists and missionaries.²

Missionaries

Of an entirely different sort was the interest in India aroused by the Christian missionaries. The number of American missionaries in India increased rapidly during the nineteenth century: there were only two in 1813; by the 1830s there were several score. At the end of the century there occurred an amazing increase—from 394 in 1892 to 1,025 in 1903.³ In the nature of their business,

2. For much of the factual material concerning American Indologists I have consulted the entries in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

3. Isaacs, *op. cit.*, pp. 250; 265.

the majority of these devoted men and women were inclined to look on Hinduism and Indian culture in general with critical eyes. Relatively few, apparently, were concerned with studying in depth the intricacies of Indian philosophy and religion, and inevitably they were impressed with those aspects of Indian life and customs which would seem to justify their own missions: poverty, filth, ignorance, idolatry, "superstition", the evils of the caste system, "moral degradation", etc. Outstanding exceptions, men who sympathetically tried to understand Indian backgrounds, were J. T. Gracey, author of *India: Country, People, Missions*; Bishop James M. Thoburn; Bishop Frederick Fisher; and—in the twentieth century—Eli Stanley Jones, author of *The Christ of the Indian Road*.

With varying degrees of vehemence, this dim picture of India was communicated to thousands of Americans at home through letters, sermons, lectures to church groups, and books. How deeply etched the picture used to be was illustrated in the passionate controversy aroused by the visit of Swami Vivekananda to the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 and his subsequent lecture tours in America.

Vivekananda

Vivekananda considered himself a sort of "missionary in reverse" and extolled the virtues of Hinduism, criticizing at the same time the attitudes of the Christian missionaries in India. While his eloquence and vivid personality captivated many of his audiences, conservative or "fundamentalist" Christians were often outraged and expressed their disagreement in the press and from the pulpit. The image of India from which their outbursts grew was, of course, the stereotype of "the benighted heathen."

They by no means represented, however, the totality of American opinion. The Swami's lectures were frequently sponsored by Unitarian and Congregational churches, and in the press his defenders often betrayed the tolerant influence of the study of comparative religion to which we have referred.⁴

⁴. For a detailed and documented account of Vivekananda's experiences in the United States, see Marie Louise Bourke, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries*, Calcutta, 1958.

The full impact of Swami Vivekananda's visits to America has not to my knowledge been studied with objective care, but it should be recorded in passing that a number of prominent American thinkers came in contact with him and his teachings. On the occasion of his "Cambridge Conferences" a group of well-known university professors, including William James, Josiah Royce, and A.O. Lovejoy signed a statement recognizing the value of his lectures in the comparative study of ethics, philosophy, and religion. William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* quotes a lengthy passage from the Swami's published addresses as an example of the mystical experience in literature.⁵

Representative of the more liberal element in the Christian ranks was Robert Hume, a missionary born in India, who declared in one of the sessions of the Parliament of Religions, "By the contact of Christian and Hindu thought, each will help the other. . . The Hindu's recognition of the immanence of God in every part of his universe will quicken the present movement of Western thought to recognise everywhere a present and living God. . . From the testimony of Hindu thought, Christians will more appreciate the superiority of the spiritual and invisible over the material and seen, of the eternal over the evanescent."⁶ It should be noted that this same Rev. Hume, although he chided Vivekananda after the Parliament for his criticism of the missionaries,⁷ later was a champion of Indian nationalism and thus took a position contrary to that of many of his colleagues.⁸

In fact, the mixed reaction to Vivekananda's lectures was a fair reflection of two trends present in American Protestant Christianity; the situation was in some respects similar to that we observed in connection with Rammohan Roy and America. On the one hand, the more orthodox, conservative, evangelical denominations rejected the implications of Darwinism and of relative tolerance towards other religions to embrace the more fervently a rigid interpretation of the Bible and an evangelizing mission to convert the "heathen". On the other hand, liberal Christianity tried to reconcile itself to the new discoveries of science, turned to the "social gospel", and in missionary

5. Lecture XX; "Conclusions".

6. Quoted in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* III, pp. 213-214.

7. Bourke, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

8. Isaacs, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

work emphasized social and medical service and a less intolerant attitude towards other religious systems. American missionary activity in India increasingly in the twentieth century represented the latter tendency.

Travel Books

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans became very fond of books of travel. In part, this interest was stimulated by the nation's thrust westward into strange and beckoning lands of the North American continent. Scores of narratives of adventure about the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, the Red Indian tribes, and the settlement of California and Oregon were written and widely read. A few, such as Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, became minor classics.

Accounts of travels and experiences in South America, Africa, and China also attracted American readers, and there was a spate of travelogues about India. Unfortunately, the majority of the latter recorded surface impressions, often relying on the earlier and religiously-biased writings of Abbé Dubois and Bishop Heber for sources. A good many of the descriptive books concerning India were written by Protestant missionaries for consumption by missionary societies; typical of these was Mrs. Helen Hocomb's *Bits about India* (1888) in which tales about animals were mingled with descriptions of backward "native" life. One of the most popular travel books on India was Caleb Wright's *Historic Incidents and Life in India* (1851) which appeared in five successive editions. The author claimed to have travelled 40,000 miles in India to gather his data but the result was something less than a balanced picture of the sub-continent.

A kind of horrified fascination with "heathenish" practices characterizes some of these books. In Hollis Read's *India and Its People* (1859) and John F. Hurst's *Indika* (1891) one finds, along with much minute detail, a neurotic preoccupation with such aspects of Indian life as *lingam* worship and temple dancing girls.

Other accounts, however, reveal a more sympathetic and informed knowledge of India. Bayard Taylor, in his *A Visit to India, China, and Japan in the Year 1853* (1855) emphasizes the religious and moral values of the country. In *Travels Around the World* (1873), by William Henry Seward, Secretary of State in

Lincoln's Cabinet, we find great appreciation for ancient India's contributions to Western civilization.

Books by lesser laymen sometimes revealed a liberal attitude toward India. For example, Carter H. Harrison, a former mayor of Chicago, toured India in the 1880s and, while referring in his book to the "blind superstitions" of Hinduism, also remarked that "it started before history, in the mysterious and fantastic realm of the past; it was eternal and fascinating. Who can say my way is right and yours is wrong?"⁹

Even among the missionary writers there were a few who attempted to present a deeper interpretation of India. Among these was J. T. Gracey whose *India: Country, People, Missions* was a discerning and scholarly approach to the subject. The author was a member of the American Oriental Society, the *Journal* of which included over a hundred learned articles on India from 1843 to 1900.

Mark Twain

I think no one would venture to say that Samuel L. Clemens—otherwise called Mark Twain—was deeply influenced by Indian culture, but his contact with India is interesting and instructive. One of America's best known and most beloved writers, he visited India in 1895. He recorded his impressions on his trip to Bombay, North India, Darjeeling and Calcutta in a fat travel book titled *Following the Equator*. It is not one of his most notable volumes, betraying a weakness for rambling from the subject and trying too often to convert remarks on trivialities into humour. Many of his observations about India are by no means penetrating and are frequently platitudinous.

However, Mark Twain found Hindu customs, rituals and traditions a fascinating subject, particularly as he saw them in Banaras. He confesses that he believed Hindu theology to be too intricate for his comprehension, but with the warmth of his human understanding he found in the faith of the Hindus something which he instinctively recognized as genuine and remarkable.

⁹. *Ibid.*, p.280.

Speaking of the pilgrims going to a religious fair at Allahabad, he says, "It is wonderful, the power of a faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys. . . No matter what the impulse is, the act born of it is beyond imagination marvellous to our kind of people, the cold whites."

The interest in Indian religion on the part of Twain was strikingly revealed in his account of his visit to a holy man in Banaras, one who had evidently reached a "state of perfection", and to whom the concerns of the earth were foreign. The encounter must have been strange and memorable: Twain a burly, white-maned, breezy American in his sixties; the elderly Indian saint, "tall and slender, indeed, emaciated" with "a clean-cut and conspicuously intellectual face, and a deep and kindly eye", clothed only in a loin-cloth. During the visit, which was brief, they exchanged autographed copies of their books. The Hindu gave Twain his commentary on the Indian holy writings, and the American tendered a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*. "I know that if it didn't do him any good, it wouldn't do him any harm," Twain remarks.

We have no record of the saintly man's impression of the visiting writer, but the American novelist was sincerely moved. He admired men who "went away into the solitudes to live in a hut and study the sacred writings and meditate on virtue and holiness and seek to attain them."

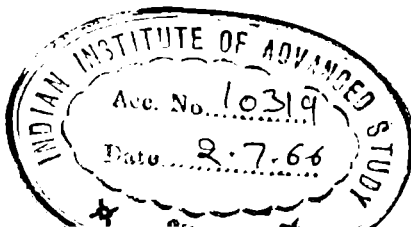
Twain summarizes it very simply, "He has my reverence." He explains that reverence for one's own sacred things is natural and costs nothing. "But the reverence which is difficult and which has personal merit in it, is the respect which you pay, without compulsion, to the political or religious attitude of a man whose beliefs are not yours."

In final summary, we may say that, through a strange chain of circumstances—ranging from the nature of early trade relations to the benevolent curiosity of a great American humorist, India was present in the minds of many thoughtful Americans of the nineteenth century. The nature of that presence varied considerably in degree

and kind. In the earlier years of the century, the virgin zeal of such men as Thoreau and Emerson led them to penetrate relatively deeply into the wealth of ancient Indian thought. Whitman's mysticism offers amazing similarities to the mainstream of Indian philosophy. Other literary men of the time, represented by Alcott and Whittier, showed an appreciative interest in the religions of India, even though their knowledge of it was far from comprehensive or subtle. In the latter part of the century, a group of American academic scholars continued in a different way the earnest and serious study of Indian classics which had characterized the best of Emerson's efforts.

On the whole, however, the later decades of the century were marked by an increasingly superficial attitude toward Indian things. Travel books and volumes which popularized some slender ideas about religion in India, often biased or lacking in any effort to penetrate below the surface, were characteristic of the times. The seeds were sown for the birth and growth of the odd Oriental cults and questionable swamis which were to thrive in the United States during the twentieth century. One must add here, nevertheless, that more serious efforts to understand Indian religion, such as theosophy and the Vedanta movements, also had their origin at the same time.

A detailed study of the directions which characterized American interest in India in the twentieth century remains to be done. In general terms, one can predict that such a study would reveal an increasing concern for the social and political problems of contemporary India, this emphasis taking preference over the more antiquarian and philosophical preoccupations of the Transcendentalists. It is true that the Indologists have diligently continued the pursuit of ancient lore, and that some modern writers, such as T.S. Eliot, Irving Babbit, and Paul Elmer More show sentient familiarity with Indian philosophy. But India, more and more in the minds of thinking Americans, has come to mean the India of Gandhiji and the brave new world of Nehru.



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