

Reconciling Religion: Bulleh Shah, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Transcendentalist Tradition

By Mike Unher and Sara Bano

Introduction

Much has been written regarding the influence of Persian and other Islamic poets on the literature and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It has been revealed in much of his work that a strong line ran from Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz through Emerson's own corpus of essays, prose and poetry. In fact, it is now apparent that Emerson was the first so-called Western author to have incorporated—indeed, to have been immensely influenced by—those and other 'seers and sayers' of the East. His translations of Hafiz and others, as well as his juxtaposition of Persian verse with his own, are clear indications that Emerson drew his muses from a deep and distant wellspring in his exploration of the inextricable mutual bond and co-dependence between mankind and nature. His poems *Brahma* and *Saadi*, in particular, serve as strong examples of the role that the semiotics of 'out-lying' cultures, so distant in time and place from his own New England, played in his poetics and his view of life as a universalist.

He wrote in the introduction to his essay *Nature*,

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?

Now, in hindsight of over a century and a half of reflecting on Emerson's work, it will be interesting to consider the poetry and beliefs of a Sufi poet who, though unaffiliated with Emerson's work *per se*, presents an indirect illumination of the universal tolerance and values of American Transcendentalism.

Sufism: Definitions and Beginnings

To undertake such an exploration, it is helpful to define terms, especially for the non-specialist. Sufism, or *Tasawwuf* as it is known in the Muslim world, is often characterized as Islamic mysticism (Lings 15).

The first people to call themselves *Sufi* were a group of disciples of the Prophet Mohammed, *Praise Be Unto Him* (henceforth abbreviated in this paper as *PBUH*), who would often sit at his feet to listen to the tenets of Islam and receive enlightenment in the faith.

Seyyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha writes an interesting definition of Sufism and of its early beginnings:

The history of the origin of Sufism records that during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*), fifteen centuries ago, there was a group of pious individuals from different nations who, guided by the Laws of Islam, sought for the direct experience of the Divine. Companions of the Prophet, they were people of principles practicing certain disciplines and meditations for the sake of purification, the realization of Divine love, and the understanding of reality. They were the Lovers of God who sought union with Him through losing the limited self in His Divinity (*fana*), and remaining alive in that Reality (*bagha*).

These individuals met on the platform, or *suffe*, of the mosque where Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*) used to pray in Medina, Arabia. They would meet there almost every day to discuss the ways to inner knowledge, the truths of revelation, and the meanings of the verses of the Koran. Thus the platform of that mosque in Medina became the first gathering place of one of the most influential groups in the history of mankind's spiritual civilization. They were called *ahle suffe*, the People of the Platform.

Among the most famous of these *suffe* (adherents of the Sufi path who followed the Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*)) were: Salman Farsi, Ammar Yasser, Balla'al, and Abdullah Masoud; some historians have added Oveyse Gharani to this list as well. Avoiding proselytizing among the multitude, their gatherings were held in private, open only to true seekers of reality. Instead of preaching in public, these pious individuals were more searchers for truth than performers of rhetoric.

After the Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*) passed away, each Sufi returned to his homeland to instruct students eager to follow the path toward inner knowledge. There they became the great missionaries of Islam. History shows that within a

century or two their style of self-understanding and discipline was introduced by their students to nations as diverse and widely separated as Persia, India, Indonesia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other regions of North Africa. Their teachings were based on individual understanding and direct experience, not just on particular texts or rote learning. In this manner their fundamental teachings have been preserved in their style up to the present.

Non-Muslims often mistake Sufism for a sect of Islam. Sufism is more accurately described as an aspect or dimension of Islam. Sufi orders (*tariqas*) can be found in Sunni, Shia, and other Islamic groups. Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century Arab historian, described Sufism as

dedication to worship, total dedication to Allah most High, disregard for the finery and ornament of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, wealth, and prestige sought by most men, and retiring from others to worship alone. (Keller)

On the other hand, in something of a departure from more prevalent definitions, Paul Yachnes quotes Islam scholar Victor Danner, in Yachnes' own introduction to his translation of Ibn `Ata'illah's *Book of Wisdom* (1978): "When dealing with Sufism, it is best to leave to one side such terms as 'mystic' and 'mysticism,' if only because in the modern Western world such words nowadays often lead to confusion." According to Yachnes, Danner instead prefers to identify Sufism "operatively and institutionally," as he does in his book *The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction:*

Sufism is the spiritual Path (*tariqah*) of Islam and has been identified with it for well over a thousand years. . . . It has been called 'Islamic mysticism' by Western scholars because of its resemblance to Christian and other forms of mysticism elsewhere. Unlike Christian mysticism, however, Sufism is a continuous historical and even institutionalized phenomenon in the Muslim world that has had millions of adherents down to the present day. Indeed, if we look over the Muslim world, there is hardly a region that does not have Sufi orders still functioning there. (Danner 84)

A strong cultural element has evolved with the interpretation of Sufism; as mentioned earlier, Sufism has been prevalent throughout the Muslim world up to the present time. While the shades of meaning and understanding and apparent shape of Sufism might be different across cultures, the basic ideology is the same from East to West, from Sufi poets as diverse as Rumi and Bulleh Shah.

Paul Yachnes (20) mentions different perspectives of Sufism in light of different definitions in his paper "Sufism Name and Origin." R.A. Nicholson, in his brief introduction to Sufism, *The Mystics of Islam* (1914), remarks: "Sufism, the religious philosophy of Islam, is described in the oldest extant definition as 'the apprehension of divine realities'" (1). Despite referring to it as "Islamic mysticism," he still maintains the popular idea that Sufism was largely the product of diverse philosophical and spiritual influences, including Christian, Neo-Platonic, and others. Nicholson further states that Sufism is "a subject so vast and many-sided that several large volumes would be required to do it anything like justice" (1). Nicholson's definition focuses on the diversity, universality and acceptance of all religions and creeds, which is one of the most significant and unique aspects of Sufism.

As Hidayat Inayat-Khan writes in his article "What is Sufi?":

Sufism is neither a religion nor a cult or a sect, nor is it only from east or from west. Sufism, which means wisdom, has always been and shall always be an open door to Truth; the wise feel sympathy towards all beliefs, while at the same time avoiding speculation upon abstract concepts. Sufism believes in the Divine origin of every form of worship in which the unity of religious ideals is respected.

Meanwhile, in his book *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling was content to refer to a Sufi as "a free-thinker" (167).

Almost all scholars today accept the concepts of divine origin and tolerance in Sufism. But Hidayat Inayat-Khan has given the meaning of Sufism simply as *wisdom*, which, like Kipling's *free-thinker*, seems to be an incomplete term compared with the basic doctrine that follows. In his article "Sufi Path," the definition of Sufism (*Tasavof*) is given thus, as a much more rigorous characterization:

Tasavof is the journey of the soul in search of the Truth, as well as its arrival. This is the renunciation of everything but God. It is paying complete attention and having a heart-felt connection to Him. It is infinite resignation to the point that one sees nothing but God with the vision of the heart, to the point that all other beings are seen as mere shadows of the Divine, until the state is reached in which "There is no being but God," and "There is nothing but Him."

Bulleh Shah and Ashfaq Ahmed

The compositions of Bulleh Shah, considered by many to be the greatest mystic poet of the Punjab, have been regarded as the pinnacle of Sufi literature. His admirers (many of whom have referred to him affectionately as Baba Bulleh Shah) compare his writings and philosophy to the work of Rumi and Shams-i-Tabriz. At present, he is held in great esteem equally in Northern India and Pakistan. Conveying this sense of “timeless appreciation” of Bulleh Shah’s work, Pakistan’s *The Daily Mail News*, published in Islamabad, recently printed the following announcement regarding an upcoming *urs* (devotional fair dedicated to Sufi saints):

BABA BULLEH SHAH URS BEGINS TODAY

KASUR—The annual Urs of Baba Bulleh Shah, the Punjabi mystic poet, will begin on October 1, 2009 and will conclude on October 3, 2009 in Kasur. Bulleh Shah’s poetry reflected his rejection of orthodox hold of mullahs over Islam, the nexus between the clergy and the rulers and all the trappings of formal religion that created a gulf between man and his Creator. A common theme of his poetry is the pursuit of self-knowledge that is essential for the mystical union with the Beloved.

There are varying opinions regarding the dates of Bulleh Shah’s life, but most researchers believe that he lived from 1650 to 1758. He was born Abdullah Shah, in the Punjab region of present-day Pakistan, in the village of Uch Gilaniyan in Bahawalpur. He was of the Sayyid caste, and was thus related to Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). His family was constantly shifting from place to place during his childhood. Bulleh Shah’s father, Shah Mohammed Dervish, was well-versed in Arabic, Persian and the Koran. His family moved to the district of Malakwal, and before long the head of the village of Pandoke sought a preacher for the village mosque. On the recommendations of the people of Malakwal, he approached Bulleh Shah’s father and retained him not only to perform the duties of the preacher, but also to become the teacher for the village children.

For young Bulleh it was a simple case of a natural curiosity and receptiveness as well as environment. These factors provided him with his early education and awareness of the power of religion and the written word, as well as a deep respect for learning.

Later, he was sent to Qasur for higher education, which in those days was a well-known center of learning. There he encountered eminent, well-known teachers such as Hazarat Ghulam Murtaza and Maulana Mohiyuddin. Bulleh Shah be-

came a pupil of Hazarat Ghulam Murtaza, and with his innate intelligence and moral proclivity, he gained much from his contact with this teacher.

According to Puri and Shangari in their article “The Life of Bulleh Shah,” there is strong historical evidence to show that Bulleh had become an eminent scholar of Arabic and Persian:

From his own compositions we can find many references to Islamic thought and mystic literature. Later, when he attained mystic realization, his erudition and learning acquired a new significance. But Bulleh Shah had to pass through a hard struggle before he could attain the inner knowledge. This attainment was possible only through his contact with his *Murshid* or Master, Inayat Shah. The study of scriptures and other holy books had only aroused his interest and curiosity about spiritual realization. His longing for union with the Lord reached its consummation only after he met a perfect Master in the person of Shah Inayat Qadiri.

Thus, it was his contact with Shah Inayat Qadiri that enabled Bulleh to realize his deeply-felt wish to transcend earthly passion, including that which he felt for his master, and attain the divine love he sought of the Lord.

Because of his pure life and high spiritual attainments, he is equally popular among all communities. Scholars and dervishes have called him ‘The Sheikh of Both the Worlds,’ ‘The man of God,’ ‘The Knower of Spiritual Grace’ and by other equally edifying titles. (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*)

Sufism had been established in the Muslim world centuries before Bulleh Shah, and this tradition is still a part of the modern day Muslim world. So while his ideas were not alien and his message did not stop there, Bulleh Shah’s rather unconventional and bold poetry was not something easily acceptable for the so-called norms of fundamental society. For example, during his time with his master Shah Inayat Qadiri, he used the feminine metaphor to voice his thoughts, and he dressed like a woman and whirled like a common dancing girl of the street though he was from a highly esteemed and respected background (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*).

It can be said that Bulleh turned rather eccentric in his behavior (and some around him even called him crazy) as he tried to define the love he felt for both his master and his deity. The following lines are taken from Bulleh’s homage to the love and passion he felt toward both his master and God:

*Your love has made me dance all over;
Falling in love with you was supping a cup of poison.
Come, my healer; it's my final hour.
Your love has made me dance all over.*

And

*Leaving my parents, I am tied to you.
Oh, Shah Inayat, my beloved guru.*

(Granger)

Bulleh's message through much of his poetry matches his broad perspective of universality that is much deeper than the mere appraisal of natural beauty—it has deep roots that reach down to the human soul and human heart. This concept is larger than life: divinity to universality and then to spirituality; all are interconnected and cannot be separated. This interrelation is characterized by the phrase “Ana ul Haq” (“I am divine”). Uttering such a phrase was considered at the time such a blasphemous expression that when it was uttered by the seer Mansoor Halaj (c. 858–922), he was forced to drink poison for his spiritual crime.

Bulleh Shah was a unique voice at that time in the Muslim world (and certainly in the present place and time as well), as he asked the people to destroy the mosque and the temple since it is in the human heart that God dwells. The concept of “self” is his focal point as he addresses mankind, asking in one of his more famous poems (known as a *kafi*), *Come to Our Abode*:

*Time and time again you go to temples and mosques,
but have you ever entered your own heart?*

This concept of forsaking the established constructs of prayer, and in particular the physical trappings of worship, such as mosque, church, and religious books, later drew universal attention, and brought new awareness to people like Malcolm X and others who felt disenfranchised by the majority religion and culture by which they were ruled. Such an awareness or enlightenment often can be found to turn many from criminal outcasts to leaders and visionaries. To regard all as equals, to achieve a humanistic equality, is paramount to the path of the human being on earth, which was and remains the heart of Sufism:

*Remove duality and do away with all disputes,
The Hindus and Muslims are not other than He.*

Deem everyone virtuous, there are no thieves.

For within everybody He himself resides.

How the trickster has put on his mask!

(Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*)

Many years before, the Sufi seers of Persia, such as Hafez, Rumi, and Saadi, whom Emerson so admired many years later, conveyed the same message, and Bulleh Shah carried forth with the same vigor centuries after. Even today, Pakistani literature—not only in the national language of Urdu but in all regional languages—has a very strong Sufi tradition, as is found in the work of contemporary Sufi writers of Urdu, such as Quadrat-Ullah-Shahab, Mumtaz Mufti, Wasif Ali Wasif, Bano Qudseia, and, of course, Ashfaq Ahmed.

Ashfaq Ahmed (1925-2004) was a more contemporary voice of Sufism in our time. He was a well-known and highly respected playwright, broadcaster, university educator (in Pakistan and abroad), and intellectual author of more than 25 books, and was deeply inspired by Sufism in the latter part of his life. He had begun a TV talk show called *Baitthak*, meaning a place where people from all walks of life gather together and talk about their experiences and exchange wisdom. Later it was named *Zaviya* (perspective, dimension), where he professed his Sufi ideas to the Pakistani nation every week for more than a year. This talk show later came into book form also under the title of *Zaviya*, appearing in several volumes. He was not a born Sufi, and it came to him as a gradual transformation due to his lifelong experiences and his close contact with the authors Quadrat Ullah Shahab and Mumtaz Mufti, both prominent Sufi-inspired writers in the Urdu language. Perhaps the greatest influence was later in his life, when he would spend time sitting with Sufis, often in their impoverished homes, in an effort to unravel the mysteries of Sufism. At times Ashfaq would participate with the families in such mundane household chores as shelling beans and sewing cloth, and through these simple acts done within the context of simple lives, he was able to better understand the concept of balancing one's struggle for wealth and knowledge with an existence of devoted simplification and austerity in the so-called modern life. Out of these experiences came the question he was to ask for the remainder of his life: "All this struggle in life is for what?"

It was a question he could not answer at international universities, but rather found at the *dyera* (an open place to sit and talk) of Sufism. He was not immersed in the trance of divine love like Bulleh Shah, whose passion tore his soul apart and who reached such ecstatic heights that people believed he was insane. Rather, Ashfaq was a man of the world, a normal man with day-to-day worries and human shortcomings, looking for the meaning of life like many others.

While Ashfaq Ahmed was a prose writer and intellectual with the subtle sense and worldlier mood of the 21st century, and Bulleh Shah was a more passionate, fiery poet of the 17th century, both nevertheless focused their work on humankind. Their quest and longings were explorations of “self” in order to unfold the secrets of spirituality and divinity while living with and accepting universal diversities. Theirs has been a tradition that has survived and flourished as it passed from generation to generation and has undergone metamorphoses as it passed from culture to culture.

It is a major tenet of Sufism that the adherents are all-accepting and all-tolerant of every faith and race in that every human being is to be treated with equal love and respect—Hindu, Jew, Christian—in a universalist view toward one humankind, one God. This universalist quality can be found echoed later in R.W. Emerson’s own “conversion” from the strictures of his earlier Calvinist faith, through Unitarianism, and finally in his arriving at a devotion that transcended the limits of the parochialism of his present-day Christianity to embrace all people of all faiths, of all humankind, removing dualities.

Reconciliation: Adopting, Adapting, Empowering

The Reverend Jone Johnson Lewis, in her piece *What is Transcendentalism?*, writes of the concept this way:

One way to look at the Transcendentalists is to see them as a generation of well-educated people who lived in the decades before the American Civil War and the national division that it both reflected and helped to create.

It must be kept in mind that this period was a time of molding a national identity out of European roots. The academia and scholarship, the sensibilities and cultural trappings of the Old World were quickly becoming encumbrances, especially for the so-called academic elite of the northeastern U.S. Lewis goes on to write, “These people, mostly New Englanders...were attempting to create a uniquely American body of literature. It was already decades since the Americans had won independence from England. Now, these people believed, it was time for literary independence.” With the questions being asked then in European countries of old assumptions of religion and beliefs, we can see them “as a generation of people struggling to define spirituality and religion in a way that took into account the new understandings their age made available,” especially in light of the rise of evangelical Christianity and Unitarianism. Emerson, in particular, was drawn to religious thought and the scriptures of non-Western cultures—Hinduism, Islam and

Buddhism, for example—using such sources to examine his own ideas of God and truth. Emerson found much in them to direct his understanding of truth as something more widespread, close to a universal truth. In Emerson’s famous oration delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the end of the summer of 1837 (and published as “The American Scholar”), he ends his speech with a manifesto of Transcendentalism:

We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

While its tangible essence is that of a movement grounded in literature, one can say that its truer landscape is comprised of a way of seeing mankind as an inextricable part of the natural world. The ideals of transcendentalism have been manifested in the writings of its adherents and proponents, and continue to this day to be seen in what is termed “nature writing” and the environmental movement.

Yet our ability to express our profound link with nature is limited by the language we require in order to articulate this connection in any spiritual sense; as Emerson sought to express such a bond with nature, he relied on its symbolism to make the human-nature connection. Let us then look briefly at how Emerson’s own sense of semiotics were reflected in his view of nature:

this origin of all words that convey a spiritual import,—so conspicuous a fact in the history of language,—is our least debt to nature. It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us, is respectively our image of memory and hope. (*Nature* 9)

In fact, we can see in the above a remarkable illustration of Emerson’s progression of thought from natural fact through a recognition of the mind’s own incompleteness—the inability to characterize a symbolic essence through language. With his essential axiom, stated in *Nature*, that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiri-

tual fact,” let us consider the tripartite of this dynamic structure of his thought: 1) the inchoate essence of the natural fact—the stimulus, exists; 2) the mind, seeing this fact as a symbolic manifestation, gives it a meaning; 3) the mind recognizes the symbolism as something spiritual (transcendent of the object’s merely physical and unobserved presence in nature), and as such, the symbolism falls short of its tangibility. As the mind seeks out a sense of the spiritual in the symbol, with language it tries to seize and then convey its essence. But of course it cannot—we cannot—as language itself falls short of such an endeavor. Perhaps then it is the inadequacy of our language rather than any shortcomings in the mind’s perception and apparatus of thought. This is something that Emerson was acutely aware of, and a problem that absorbed much of his writing, especially in his work *Nature*.

Returning to Bulleh Shah’s poem *Come to Our Abode*, the reader may notice several references to the author’s regard for the conventional religion of his day. On the one hand, at the time Bulleh penned these works, Islam had become a fundamental part of everyday life in the Punjab. The influence of religious doctrine was an important element of the political and social structure of life in the Punjab region of Pakistan. Indeed, to speak out against the so-called system was tantamount to blasphemy, or at the very least, it was seen as a rejection of one’s own society. Yet it was Bulleh’s perspective as a Sufi that guided him away from the formalist religio-political establishment and toward a more open-minded, humanistic, yet deeply spiritual view of God in one’s own life. Thus, his point of view was very personal rather than societal.

As can be seen in *Come to Our Abode*, Bulleh makes reference time and again to the rejection of the trappings of religion—the sacred texts, the mosque, the religious hierarchy that governed the lives of Muslims—and calls on all people to instead embrace what God can mean to their own lives as they see Him for themselves.

Come to Our Abode
(*Sade Veray Aaya Karoo*)

*If God could be found by the clean and well washed
then frogs and fish could find God
If God could be found by roaming in the forests
then cows and fowls and animals could find God
Oh dear Bulleh, God is only found by those who are of good heart.
While reading thousands of books,
you haven’t even read your self,
Time and time again you go to temples and mosques,*

*but have you ever entered your own heart?
Oh Mankind, you fight with Satan in vain
but you have never fought with your own demons and desires
Says Saint Bulleh Shah, you try to reach the sky
but you could not capture the One who dwells in your own heart.
Come to our abode,
oh Beloved, in the morning and in the evening
Come to our abode,
Friend, in the morning and in the evening
Come to our abode,
Guide, in the morning and in the evening.
By God,
his God would not be angry with him
the one who has the skill to reconcile with his beloved
He does not need to go to Makkah, who can experience pilgrimage just at
the sight of his beloved
Seek in the forest, seek on the island
Destroy the mosque, Destroy the temple
Destroy anything that you can destroy
But never break the human heart
As God dwells in hearts, therein
While seeking in forests and among islands,
Seek in all the world
Do not torment me, Beloved
Oh Beloved come to our abode in the morning and in the evening.*
(Translated from the Punjabi by S. Bano)

Bulleh Shah never intended that his poems would be published, nor did anyone ever record the story of his life until many years after his death. His poetry comes to us through the generations mostly via the *qavvals* or singers of his poetry. Because of his unorthodox beliefs of the day, Bulleh's own sister had to pay the price for her brother's religious non-conformity and eccentricity—she was treated as an outcast of society and remained unmarried. At Bulleh's death, the *mullahs* denied him burial in his community's graveyard. Yet today, many regard his tomb as a holy place, where people come to revere him as a Sufi saint.

We can observe Bulleh's rejection of the established, and for him suffocating, religious didacticism of his day and see his desire to embrace the individual heart as tantamount to the veritable house of God. All else is equal and worthy within the walls of the abode, the dwelling place—the heart. We may then look

at these verses selected from Emerson's poem *Brahma*, wherein we may glimpse imagery and sentiment that bear resemblance to Bulleh's own:

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

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

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

Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish-born author and essayist of the 19th century, put great stock in the importance of *the leader* as an essential element of any structure of civilization and system of belief. He wrote in his essay "Heroes and Hero Worship," published in 1840, that "No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men," citing as examples Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, and Mohammed (*PBUH*).

While Carlyle was raised as a strict Calvinist, his subsequent religious ideals were nevertheless modified by the influence of his studies in German Romanticism and by the scientific and social changes then taking place. Perhaps he saw the dogma of religion as an unsatisfactory guide for the common man in a changing society.

F.O. Matthiessen writes in his *American Renaissance*, "Carlyle had declared and Emerson agreed with him: 'Literature is but a branch of Religion and always participates in its characteristic: however, in our time, it is the only branch that still shows any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem'" (25). Matthiessen mentions that they were both following Herder's *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1833), abolishing the distinction between the sacred and the secular (25)—in Emerson's words, "Always the seer is a sayer" (Emerson, *Selected Essays*). In other words, the prophet is the poet. At the time, and in the place—New England—where religion, and most particularly Christianity, was a fundamental, pervasive and considerable power in society, it is poignant that this, too, was the

time and place in which Emerson went to look for his own God, to seek a belief that would meet his own changed needs. It consumed much of his time and literary efforts.

Bulleh's master Inayat Shah is said to have told him:

What problem is there in finding God? It only needs to be uprooted from here and planted there (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*).

The metaphors of transcendence and reference to nature are not lost here. Nor is the path from Bulleh's problem to his solution very distant from that followed by Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists of the American 19th century. The dogma of religion that suffused both Bulleh's time and Emerson's—be it Islam, Calvinism, or Unitarianism—was to be cast off by those so encumbered; the setting of nature then provides the domain for belief, Bulleh in his "mango grove and orchard of dates" (Puri and Shangari, *The Life of Bulleh Shah*, 6); Emerson in his New England woods; Thoreau, of course, in his Walden Pond and his bean garden. Emerson writes in his essay *Nature*, "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" (3). These words show a clear break with the past idea of the cloistered academic or even religious fervent, isolated in his study or cell. Emerson urged those who would seek spirituality and learning to step outside, thereby stepping into the realm of nature. Walt Whitman exhorted the classroom-bound to 'rise up and glide out' in his poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," which is found in his collection *Leaves of Grass*. The poet is sitting in a lecture hall surrounded by sundry charts, tables, and numbers, as the lecturer seeks to convey the essence of the stars. After which Whitman writes,

*How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Indeed, it is precisely what Henry David Thoreau had done when he quit village life and society in Concord to spend his 14 months in a cabin alone by Walden Pond, thinking, writing, studying the birds, flowers and trees, and of course, growing his beans.

In his essay on Persian Poetry, which appeared at the end of E. Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám and Salámán and Absál*, Emerson mentions "the seven masters of the Persian Parnassus—Firdousi, Enweri, Nisami, Dschelaleddin, Saadi, Hafiz, and Dschami" (*Selected Essays* 105). He refers to or

quotes from works of these revered names in this essay, as well as in his own poetry published elsewhere. One wonders if the fatalism of Omar Khayyám's *rubaiyat* might have appealed to Emerson's own understanding of Calvinism, in the sense of his own retained Puritan ethic.

According to Richardson in his "Emerson—The Mind on Fire," his first encounter with non-Western (i.e. non-Christian) religious ideas was a book entitled *Akhlak-I-Jalaly* (translated as *Philosophy of the Muhammedan People*), published in 1839. It was Emerson's first encounter with Sufism, which its translator W.F. Thompson called the "practical pantheism of Asia." Thompson stated further that the book should actually be translated as *Transcendental Ethics*, "holding all visible and conceivable objects to be portions of the divine nature" (406).

Emerson also owned the publication *The Desatir: or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets*. These and other writings enabled Emerson to consolidate his understanding of the various "parts" of Sufi poetry and thought into a holistic structure (Richardson 407).

It was an all-encompassing "system" that gave Emerson the wide view of mankind he was seeking. Iranian scholar Farhang Jahanpour recently wrote of Emerson's intellectual journey in his essay *Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Sufis: From Puritanism to Transcendentalism*: "The study of his religious thought charts the journey from a narrow and dogmatic religious outlook towards a mystical, universal outlook" (2).

As was his point, Dr. Jahanpour might very well have written the above with Bulleh and other Sufi poets in mind, as well as Emerson.

And of course, Henry David Thoreau, often seen as the godfather of present-day nature writing as well as of the environmental movement, traveled a similar line, from doubts of the religious sentiment of the day to consideration of humanity's place in nature and, thus, with God. Thoreau saw nature as God's dwelling place and humanity as an equal part of the grand universal abode: "This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself" (*Walden*, "Solitude" 60).

Thoreau's high regard for the spirit of nature is seen in his deep understanding of all its contiguous parts. Nathaniel Hawthorne was particularly taken with Thoreau's insight. The following is an excerpt from Hawthorne's journal:

September 1, 1842. Mr. Thoreau dined with us yesterday... He is a keen and delicate observer of nature--a genuine observer--which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which

few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures, and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. Herb and flower, likewise, wherever they grow, whether in garden or wildwood, are his familiar friends.

The following is taken from Thoreau's seminal work *Walden*, which reflects his time in his cabin at Walden Pond, when he devoted himself to living "deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" (42). Here, he describes what it means to tend his beans, which one senses is for him a near-religious devotion to nature herself:

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance, that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. (6)

Thoreau mentions beans 35 times in *Walden*, as if the subject itself were a spiritual link with nature and an understanding of how humankind can coexist as her equal partner.

In fact, reference to this same so-consecrated legume is made with regard to Bulleh's life. While society in general has not looked upon farming as an intellectual pursuit, tilling and cultivating the land for one's sustenance is held in high regard by both Thoreau and Bulleh's master, Inayat Shah. Puri and Shangari write of the nonconformity of a religious disciple and master in engaging in such a vocation and the severe effect it has on society: "For a distinguished scholar [Bulleh Shah], who belonged to the line of Prophet Mohammed (*PBUH*), to accept an ordinary vegetable grower as his master was a very extraordinary event in the social conditions of Bulleh Shah's times. It was like an explosion which shook the prevailing social structure" (*The Life of Bulleh Shah* 6).

The Settings of Nature: Servants and Domains

There is little evidence that Bulleh or other Sufis had any special recognition of nature as we see it *per se*, as something apart from the trappings of civilization, but of course it was certainly a spiritual entity for the Transcendentalists. That tradition of regarding nature in a sacred sense is carried today by such contemporary

authors as Gary Snyder (*Turtle Island*, among other works), Mary Oliver (*Thirst: Poems*), Terry Tempest Williams (*Finding Beauty in a Broken World, Illuminated Desert* and *The Open Space of Democracy*), Rebecca Solnit (*One Nation Under Elvis: An Environmentalism For Us All*), Ed Abbey (*Desert Solitaire*), Jack Kerouac (*On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*), and Linda Hogan (*Dwelling: A Spiritual History of the Living World*). It has become an integral part of academia; for example, Rebecca Chamberlain teaches a course at Evergreen State College (Washington) called *TRANSCENDENTAL VISIONS: Re-Imagining The American Dream*. She offers two quotes on the course website that are pertinent here:

In Wilderness is the preservation of the world. —Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

The spirit of transcendentalism might even be called a kind of cultural personality trait in the American collective conscience, having manifested itself throughout the 20th century in politics and social revolution (non-violent civil disobedience, transformational activism concerning human rights and minority enfranchisement, the hippie movement, environmentalism and anti-pollution lobbying, and the consumer rights movement spearheaded by Ralph Nader).

In Chapter 2 of Emerson’s essay *Nature*, called “Commodity,” he writes:

Under the general name of Commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature. This, of course, is a benefit which is temporary and mediate, not ultimate, like its service to the soul.

The taking from nature to extract, to form, to mold, to create, to manufacture, he says, is “the only use of nature which all men apprehend.”

Of course, Emerson and his peers did not see “giving back to nature” as we do today—recycling and conserving in such a rhythm as to endeavor to at best match our material appropriations, in some kind of physical balance with what we take from nature’s abundance. Rather, they saw their “returns” to nature as recognition of the deeply spiritual sense of their natural environment, to see nature’s attributes as gifts to humankind. And so he presents us with his concept that what we extract will (must) be returned to nature in the form of veneration, to be revived as our own spirit and enterprise needs us to do, in holding nature’s gifts in reverence. For to return what we have wrought from the earth back unto it, for Emerson and

his descendents of the more ecological environmentalists, is an act of the highest moral virtue of humankind:

What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? this zodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this fourfold year? Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him. The field is at once his floor, his work-yard, his play-ground, his garden, and his bed.

Recently, work of photographers John Willis and Tom Young was included in a small chapbook authored by the eminent geographer and author Yi-Fu Tuan titled “Place, Art, and Self.” The photographers presented images they had made of a paper recycling plant located along “the seemingly pristine hills of western Massachusetts” (81) in an artistic statement juxtaposing the images of discarded newsprint and advertisements with the paper’s own first source of the absent trees.

In ways both disturbing and intriguing, the rural landscape of forested hills has been transformed into a landscape of bales of discarded paper. This paper carries images and text from popular culture, and is formed into a new topography with lingering evidence of its past existence. (81)

This is what we see in the photographs, all in black and white: Stacks of huge square bales of paper bundled with wire arranged like stone walls enclosing an alley, piles of shredded paper nestling old printed images of a group of people, a gazing eye, anatomical drawings from an early 20th century medical textbook, a torn fragment of a Raphael reprint, some Hebrew text beside a photograph of nurses tending to patients in a hospital, a man with hands clasped in prayer, two mirror images of a toddler at the beach, arranged on a sheaf of folded, soft white wrapping paper.

All are awaiting their conversion into blank pages.

On reading the photographers’ views and impressions and considering the end results, one is acutely aware of the sense of time passage in parallel with transformations made from source to discard, from utility to abandonment. It is a disquieting series of photographs and ideas, yet the underlying functionality of their setting—a recycling plant—also conveys a sense of hope that the discarded paper will be revived into something once again, that it will carry a different meaning, that those trees still exist. Bulleh Shah writes of the inexorable link between life, death, and the earth itself:

*The soil is in ferment, O friend
Behold the diversity.
The soil is the horse, so is the rider
The soil chases the soil, and we hear the clanging of soil
The soil kills the soil, with weapons of the soil.
That soil with more on it, is arrogance
The soil is the garden so is its beauty
The soil admires the soil in all its wondrous forms
After the circle of life is done it returns to the soil
Answer the riddle O Bulleh, and take this burden off my head.*
(Puri and Shangari, *Bulleh Shah: The Love-Intoxicated Iconoclast*)

Of the oceans of air and water, of fields of soil, of ‘beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn,’ Emerson quotes George Herbert in bringing to mind both the utility of nature and the inference of our own stewardship:

*“More servants wait on man
than he’ll take notice of.”—*

(*Nature*, 24)

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