



Research Paper

## Pacifism and R.W. Emerson

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a critical analysis of Emerson's views on war and peace. Emerson's thoughts on war is equivocal and ambivalent. While on one hand he believes that the actual and enduring triumph is that of peace and not of war, on the other, he does not agree with the opinion of the pacifists that they would refuse to fight a war under any circumstance. He writes in his Journal: "For the peace of the man who has forsworn the use of the bullet seems to me not quiet peace, but a canting impotence" (Porte 224).

**KEYWORDS:** ethical, peace, pacifism, spirituality, war.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Emerson's position and views on war is the most ambivalent and contradictory than any other subject. He was in favor of the abolition of war as it was inhuman and he considered war as an 'epidemic insanity'. But he contradicted himself when he exclaimed after the civil war broke out that "sometimes gunpowder smells good" (Cabot 601). Of the three wars which touched his life as an American citizen, Emerson hailed the American Revolution for bringing in an era of immense opportunity for national development, condemned the Mexican war vehemently as he believed it to be imperialistic and supported the North in the Civil War as it was fighting for the cause of liberty. Emerson contradicted himself when earlier he praised pacifism and held that war and violence are unjustifiable and all disputes should be settled peacefully but in subsequent years his approval of the Civil War led critics such as Philips Russell, and Alfred Odell to conclude that the Civil War had been for Emerson, a philosopher's holiday, when he was so deeply affected by the emotional fervor of war that he conveniently forgot his early sentiments of peace. On the other hand, M.D. Conway, one of Emerson's friends stated that, "the civil war was for Emerson a severe ordeal from which he never completely recovered" (*Emerson at Home and Abroad* 313). Hence there is an element of discrepancy of Emerson's views on war and peace at different periods.

### II. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this paper is to analyse the several works of Emerson and bring forth his views on war and peace. Pacifism form of social reform was assumed in America in the nineteenth century and it was not a new concept. Its origin is traced to the teaching of Buddha in the East and Jesus in the West. The Quakers from the beginning supported non-resistance and strived for peace even refusing to fight in war. The Quakers in Pennsylvania, William Penn and Anthony Benezet published tracts for the cause of peace. Other Unitarians also spoke out against the depravity of war. Noah Worcester, a congregational clergyman in December 1814 published his pamphlet "The Solemn Review of the Custom of War" which soon became a great classic in peace literature. Subsequently, in 1850 the first Peace Society was formed in New York with the initiative of David Dodge, a wealthy Presbyterian merchant. In the same year a group of New Englanders met in the home of William Channing in Boston to organize the Massachusetts Peace Society. The society was attended by intellectuals like Josiah Quincy, President of Harvard College and James Russell Lowell, romantic poet, critic and diplomat. The members of these societies and the hope that the United States with its individualism, Republican government and the freedom of opportunity and its isolation from the quarrels among the European nation was suited to be the leader in the crusade for peace. In 1828, William Ladd strived to unite all the local and state peace societies that were scattered under one national organization which was named American Peace

Society. Many distinguished speakers addressed the society. Notably among them were W.E. Channing, Henry Ware Jr., Samuel May and R.W. Emerson.

Emerson's address to the American Peace Society, entitled "War" was delivered in Spring of 1838. Pacifism as an organized movement was in full swing for over two decades by then and as the Unitarians in Boston were actively involved with it, Emerson had many occasions to examine the entire problems of war and peace before he read his lectures. Even though Emerson approved the peace sentiment, but at the same time he was convinced that civilization has not advanced so much that there will be no more wars in the future. His "Fast Sermon" delivered in 1828 in Divinity Hall in Cambridge is important as it is not only Emerson's appraisal of the Pacifist Movement but also his attitude towards the American dream and progress. In the sermon, Emerson refers to the current optimism in America engendered by a period of peace and prosperity which led people to consider that a new order of thing has taken place in a new world. It would seem as though the causes for war, famine and pestilence have disappeared and events would henceforth run smoothly. But Emerson in his sermon shatters the illusion about the hopes of permanent disposition of famine, pestilence and peace. Emerson asks:

But are these expectations well grounded? Is that government which under God's blessing our fathers framed so perfect in its finish as to admit all good and exclude all evil? Has its beneficent influence indeed been so mighty as to alter the character of the human race as soon as they come within its ample pestilence? Are the sources of natural evil also sealed by the grace of God in this happy country? Are the winds commanded that they shall not breathe poison? And the locust and caterpillar that they shall not eat our harvests? (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* 121)

Emerson takes up the issue of war after dismissing the illusion that humanity has got rid of pestilence, famine and other calamity:

Consider what have been the causes of war. Human passions. Are they removed? When our fathers shook off the dust of the old world from their feet, did they shake off all the pollutions? Was there an emigration from the passions and from sins as well as from prelacy and corrupt institutions? . . . No . . . human nature doth not change with change of place, with change of condition. Fifty or sixty centuries have spent upon the head of Man the storms of their wrath and the sunshine of their bounty; he has met with all events; he has acted all the parts on the round of life; but here he stands the same being God made in the garden; he has not lost one passion nor parted with one frailty. (121-22)

Emerson goes to the very source of evil and asserts that because human nature has not undergone a radical change, hence, there is possibility of wars in the future. His analysis of the contemporary conditions explains his attitude to all social reform movement of his age. He believed that evil is inward; existing in the mind, soul or spirit of an individual and merely outward or legislative reforms will not eliminate or annihilate it. Hence he constantly emphasized on individual integrity and self-reformation and showed little enthusiasm for the external reformatory measures.

In 1838, ten year later, when Civil War seemed almost inevitable, Emerson delivered an address on "War" before the American Peace Society in Boston. Emerson has often been charged with apostasy on the ground that as a young man he advocated peace yet supported the Civil War later. A careful study of his lecture "War" shows that Emerson viewed permanent and universal peace to be the fruit of social and spiritual evolution of man. According to Emerson, peace can be realized if men will learn to cherish love as opposed to the base feeling of hatred. Emerson begins his speech by pointing out how war was unavoidable at the beginning of society, when food was scarce and competition was high. Men were in a savage state in which their animal instincts superseded over their mind and heart. Emerson further in his lecture suggests that war played an useful role in the progression of the culture of man. He writes in *The Complete Works*: "war educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man" (152; vol. 11). In the early days, war was a unifying and civilizing factor also. He writes:

Plutarch, in his essay 'On the Fortune of Alexander', considers the invasion and conquest of the East by Alexander as one of the most bright and pleasing pages in history; and it must be owned he gives sound reason for his opinion. It had the effect of uniting into one great interest the divided commonwealths of Greece, and infusing a new and more enlarged public spirit into the councils of their statesmen. (153; vol. 11)

Alexander's invasions united the divided common wealth of Greece, built seven cities, and introduced Greek arts, language and philosophy to the Eastern nation. Further, Emerson states that war covers the great and beneficent principal of self-help. The instinct of self-help-perpetual struggle to resist opposition, to attain to freedom and security- is unfolded in the coarse and brute form of war. As man mentally evolves into a higher state of perception, war gradually appears to him as juvenile and revolting. It is obvious from that Emerson had no illusion about the true nature of the contemporary civilization and also that total peace was still a dream, a vision rather than a reality. He believes that civilization will see universal peace but at the same time question "How soon?" (161; vol.11). Emerson hopes that man will recognize that love can achieve the same or even

better result than hate and that peace can be noble as well as war. When feelings of respect, love and kindness grows in the heart of men, striking changes will take place and there is no requirement of arms. He reminds his gathering that peace cannot be achieved by public opinion but by “private opinion, by private conviction, by private dear and earnest love” (171; vol. 11). Once again, Emerson expresses his belief that only through self-renovation can man achieve that high degree of civilization where he will prefer love to hatred and peace to war. Emerson observes:

For the only hope of this cause is in the increased insight, and it is to be accomplished by the spontaneous teaching, of the cultivated soul, in its secret experience and meditation, that it is now time that it should pass out of the state of beast into the state of man; it is to hear the voice of God, which bids the devils that have rended and torn him come out of him and let him now be clothed and walk forth in his right mind. (171; vol.11)

Emerson feels that if man is afraid then it is futile to carry on the peace principle as cowards cannot achieve peace. Man should be great in his soul to achieve the spirit of greatness. Self-subsistence has been the course of war as it encouraged the belief of man that he himself is responsible for his behavior. It is spirit of self-dependence that accounts for the attractiveness of the Greek and Roman heroes, and the romantic stories of Shakespeare and Scott. Hence Emerson suggests, “the manhood that has been in war must be transferred to the cause of peace before, war can lose its charm and peace be venerable to men” (171; vol. 11). If peace is to be achieved, it should be by the heroes whose intellectual insight and moral elevation has given them such a perception of their own worth that they are willing to stake their lives at any instant for their principle rather than take another man’s life for fulfilment of these purpose.

Emerson supported peace but he didn’t believe in the fact that society had evolved to such a high degree of moral perfection that there won’t be any more war in the future. Emerson in his lecture on “War” has outlined the different stages of evolution of human society. In the initial stage of evolution and progress, he fights. At a higher stage, he does not make any repulsive revolt but is alert to resist any injury or affliction. At a still higher level, he enters the region of holiness in which he sacrifices himself and when attacked he refrains from retaliating. As an idealist and optimist, Emerson believed that through personal and individual uprightness and love, man would rise one day to such a state of holiness. But he cautioned the member of the Peace Society that till then total or absolute peace must remain in the sphere of an ideal and that man may not give up his right to fight because, “a wise man will never impawn his future being and action, and decide before hand what he shall do in a given extreme event” (169; vol. 11).

Emerson longed for the day when people would put aside the sword and bullet. But he did not feel that war is always avoidable in our low state of civilization. Peace can be achieved when there is a high level of moral sentiments among individuals but he admits that moral sentiments are developed in only a few. He says that there are many times a man is confronted with an emergency that demands force and may even use arms. They may be confronted to use arms on behalf of the common welfare and surely no real man will refuse to protect women and children from a band of degenerate plunderers. Hence he tells not to make a hard and fast rule or sign a pledge today but to let one’s intelligence tell what to do in the present situation. Life is a variable, not a constant. Emerson cherished non-resistance as an ideal but his common sense forced him to make certain reservation about its proper use. Non-resistance will work among angels, but not among wild beasts. Thus he believes that, non-resistance should be used if one’s intelligence dictates the use of non-resistance but at the same time use force if the situation requires forces to.

Emerson was as well aware of the utter foolishness and absolute thoughtlessness of war as of the great desirability of peace. He thought war to be foolish because through war men try to settle hostility and antagonism which would dissipate if only the enemies had the chance to meet face to face. Men fight only because they are not familiar to each other. When they become more than strangers, their opposition will disappear. Even if Emerson was conscious of the foolishness of war, still he did not share the view of the Pacifists that war is an absolute evil which should be avoided at any cost. Emerson’s philosophy does not conceive of absolute evil. Evil has no essence or substantial being. Emerson believed that out of the so called evil may come forth some good. He points out the benefits that society sometimes reaps benefits during war and he was also aware of the possibility of war acting as a beneficent stimulant to the individual.

War sometimes has been a civilizing and educating influence which was readily seen by Emerson in the pages of history. Emerson could note that even the Civil Wars of Cromwell, the military persecution of the Czars, and the savagery of the French Revolution were not without their benefits and that these painful incidents which he notes in his “Consideration By The Way” were like “the frost which kills the harvest of a year” yet “saves the harvest of a century, by destroying the weevil or the locust” (254; vol. 6).

Emerson viewed war as invigorating the passive faculties of an individual and propelling him to fall back on the resources and thereby practicing the great virtue of self-sufficiency. This idea of Emerson must be taken into account while considering his attitude towards the Pacifists and his support of the North in the Civil War. Emerson took pride in the American Revolution and the part played by his own ancestors in it. He was

indignant and resented when the Mexican War broke out because he thought that it was initiated for the benefit of the slave states. Hence he condemned it intensely as a misdeed. As per Civil War, he supported North as he felt “emancipation is the demand of civilization” (304; vol. 11). Thus he fought for this principle – that everyman in the South might live in just and natural relations with every man in the North. Emerson realized war to be not just a conflict between the Northern and the Confederates States of America but as an event which brought new possibilities for all humanity and would have lasting social benefits for the entire world. Dr. William Huggard states that Emerson supported the Civil War only because he believed it to be a second American Revolution which would extend the political freedom gained for the white race in 1776 to all men in America and extend the breadth of the American thought by clearing away the false social ethics like the superiority of one race over other which has hindered and curbed its cultural growth.

### III. CONCLUSION

The Civil War, to Emerson, was not just the freedom and liberation of the Negroes. It was also the liberation of the American culture and the American mind. It was meant to develop the former slave into a meaningful citizen. To Emerson, the war was to give a renewed stress on the values of individual character to all citizens. In one of his letters to Carlyle, Emerson asserted that America was waging a war for charity and humanity. He sincerely believed that the Union army was fighting not for the unity of the Republic but for the principle of liberty throughout the world. If America could survive the test of battle it would become a moral leader of the nations. When Richmond fell in 1865, he hailed the success of the North as a great joy to world, not alone to America. Hence Emerson’s support of the Civil War was based on moral convictions and not on any sadistic delight in the horrid clash. He knew the horrors and outcome of the war but at the same time he was a philosopher to transcend the sight of the present suffering and visualize a great and enduring good emanating from the war. Emerson was well aware of the benefits of universal peace but he looked beyond the founding of Peace Societies and passing legislative measures. Emerson praised the cause of Peace Society as it was a noble deed but he could not turn away from war when moral and ethical ideals were compromised. War is a part of evolution and as he notes in his *Complete Works* “its evils might pave the way for good, as flowers spring up next year on o field of carnage” (578; vol. 11).

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