

Emerson's Gita: Krishna and the Tradition of Conscience

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I. The Meeting of East and West

The historical meetings of East and West have passed into commemorative tapestries of discourse leaving many knotted and tangled strands along with a host of innovative patterns as well. The *Bhagavadgita* is now part of the established "Wisdom of Old," an approved icon of a non-Western "core curriculum" in a number of major universities and is enshrined as a "classic text" in contemporary yoga centers. And even if it remains largely unread in these centers (or in core-curriculum courses for that matter, where it may receive two whole class hours of attention), "wisdom cards," containing sayings culled from the text, and like products, sold in New Age and ashram bookstores, help to maintain an aura of "Eastern Wisdom" around the work, a brand name that has become accessible and acceptable to certain communities.

The more vital meetings of the moment are occurring between the North and South, both in India, Europe, and the Americas, the northern cultures that have stamped their schemas upon southern cultures for so long are being obliged to take a second look and are opening their doors to the possibility of a more whole humanity in which North, South, East, and West meet and share from the same table.

If you ask what this has to do with the reception of the "*Gita*" (as we shall call it) in the West, I might be tempted to say, "Very little." But that would be too glib. In fact, I want to argue here that the "cannibalizing of the *Gita* by the West" is not, as some post-orientalist scholars often contend, some horrific disregard of "the other," but is rather a very natural, proper, and even Indian thing to do, to assimilate what comes to you and recast it in another pattern, one which is your own.

Somewhere in the middle of all this sits Ralph Waldo Emerson, still, the Emerson, who walking in the woods becomes a "transparent eyeball," the Emerson who eschews the past while echoing the past, the Emerson who chalks out self reliant freedom while relying upon his Unitarian community for sustenance. Emerson's reception of the *Gita*, may be better viewed as a fulcrum on which East and West, past and future have balanced themselves, than as one level event, for it serves as a turning point in the evolution of Yoga in the West. Perhaps more than a single turning point, even, the Emerson reading and reception of the *Gita* may be envisioned as a particular pattern in the loom of globalization. At worst, this strand becomes what Quinten Anderson labeled, "the imperial self," an aggrandized form of Protestant-based "me religion," or Robert Bellah's personal nightmare of "Sheilism" in which the individual picks and chooses among bits of culture as she pleases constructing her own form of designer religion. At best, however, Emerson and his band's interest in, reception of, and re-casting of the *Gita* marks an historic opening to the universal religion of freedom, the tradition of conscience that Emerson so epitomized.

Michel Pollan puts an ecological spin on the "anxiety of influence" in his *Botany of Desire*, a text that discusses the relationship between the human community and four

members of the plant kingdom (the apple, the tulip, the potato, and the cannabis plant). He suggests that while humans believe they have been progressively manipulating various plants for their own comfort, breeding progressively sweeter apples, jacking up the market for tulips during Amsterdam's 1800 tulip "dot.com" craze, shooting fish genes into potatoes to make them marketable for McDonalds, and banning the cultivation of Cannabis, the plants themselves may be up to something as well: positioning themselves for greater distribution and power (i.e. the THC content in the banned cannabis is eighty percent higher since the growers went indoors and underground).

Likewise, many of the complaints about "the appropriation of Asian texts" often sound to like sour grapes, reifying "the *Gita*" as some monument that has no mind of its own, even though textual history demonstrates how this "monument" was carved out of the *Mahabharata* and employed in specific times and communities for specific purposes (what to speak of the Epic itself being carved out of various narrative streams and redacted in different times and places to fit the needs of particular communities). If, on the other hand, one took the title "*Bhagavadgita*" literally and seriously, as "The Song of God" then the transcendentalists have been remarkably prescient and radically liberating in their insistence that the song of God belongs to no one: to no person, no place, and no nation. As Emerson poetically expresses it in "Self Reliance,"

"When a man lives with God, his voice will be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn."¹

Emerson proclaimed no anxiety of influence: the roses under his window, he declares in "Self Reliance," make no reference to former roses or to better ones.² And yet, as Cameron first noted, Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball" passage in his inaugural essay "Nature" is taken almost verbatim from Coleridge's description of entering a gothic cathedral,³ for Emerson, however, there was no a question of plagiarism or appropriation. Rather, he was assimilating what was germane in this moment, and he did likewise with the *Gita*. Emerson's "originality" could, perhaps, accept overt textual influence without feeling contradiction or disturbance. His critic, Perry, on the other hand, complained that Emerson was rooted in a past that he tore down.

Emerson was certainly not rooted in the *Gita*, what to speak of its cultural past. In his now infamous line upon his first reading of the text, he called it "the much renowned book of Buddhism."⁴ There are some who are riled by this ignorant gaffe, and see it as the beginning of a cavalier appropriation of the *Gita*. The *Gita*, however, only became a "book" by itself being appropriated out of the epic. The Mahabharata tradition that bequeathed the *Gita* to the world is vast and all containing (so it says), and literacy may be but a brief print-interlude between mega-layers of oral culture. Moreover, the *Gita* is more than this, for a text is as much a meeting of differences as it is a unified entity, and one thing that is clear in the *Gita* as we now know it, is that it is a compendium of various perspectives – samkhya, yoga, bhakti, monist and dualist philosophies. Barbara Stoler Miller, one of the recent translators of the *Gita*, remarked that at least ten percent of its' vocabulary is of Buddhist derivation, and Alex Wayman used to call it "The Ecumenical Council of India," an attempt to reconcile everything and everyone. Historically speaking, the attempt was a success" every spiritual teacher must have a *tika*, a commentary on the *Gita*, just as every academic publishing house must have its translation. Even so, few people read the *Gita* (or anything for that matter) cover to cover, and one can argue that in fact it would be nearly impossible to read the *Bhagavadgita* in

its entirety, for would entail a reading of the entire Epic. And why should one be expected to? It is a hassle, it is problematic, and the ending does not fit. Arjuna may understand it all in the *Gita*, but by the end of the Epic he loses all of his power. Krishna knows it all in the *Gita*, but he is unable to avert a major holocaust, nor stem the greed of warring tribes. Only one man out of the mythical six hundred and forty million who fought at Kurukshetra is privy to what is actually happening on the battlefield (from a transcendentalist point of view, anyway). And that would have suited Emerson just fine, which may be one reason he liked the *Gita*. It could support his ideal of the solitary individual (minus Krishna of course), Arjuna, the one insightful mind among the ignorant, violent desire-driven mass of humanity heading for destruction in the fangs and maw of Vishnu.

Emerson took what he wanted to (or perhaps better yet, what he needed to) from the *Gita*, just as we all do. Self righteous academic and religious badge wearers will speak of “plundering Asian texts” and even more self righteous avatars of yoga will knowingly tell you that American transcendentalism, that brief spark of genius amidst the industrial insensitivity of America, came from the “influence of the East.” Arguing about such things is a staid pastime, however, a *lila* that is no longer a *lila*. Things can become thorny, however, since allegiances to interpretive communities abound; from the theological, to the Indological, to the economic (perhaps Marx is always there on the background here in terms of the relationship of interpretive authority to private property and social organization). Both Emerson and the *Gita* are still with us, however, they still inhabit the cultural landscape (as well as the memory) of America and the discourse of various interpretive communities.

Emerson, appearing as the icon of the individual, the harbinger of the “religion of the One,” saw America as the new holy land, one in which the individual could integrate the wisdom of many old worlds into the new. And the *Bhagavadgita*, emerging out of the list of “oriental translations,” pumped up by Emerson, Thoreau and their ilk, became an emblem of a certain kind of wisdom as it eventually flowed into the somewhat popular esoteric fiction of Theosophy along with variant ideas about reincarnation. The same *Bhagavadgita* became an icon in an America that wanted a Hindu Bible and was appropriated by fundamentalist groups like Iskcon, while other translations of the *Gita* are taught in universities that still serve as arbiters of intellectual history.

William Theodore De bary fought for a core curriculum at Columbia University that would include classic Asian texts. And the *Gita*, due to its recent stature and relative readability, was perfectly suited for a “great books of orient” tier to match the Western Core. Meanwhile, the champion of the “infinite of the solitary man,” Emerson, eventually voted for compulsory chapel attendance at Harvard, and is now one of the names enshrined on the outside wall of Columbia’s Butler library, you get the idea.

I. Who Inherits The Mantles of these Crossing Stars?

What then may be at issue in Emerson’s reception of the *Gita*? Perhaps one can say “tradition” in the struggle for definitions in a multicultural world. It was not that the

“Sage of Concord” and his colleagues discovered the east; they made their east in order to remake the West, and a bouncing pizza effect, which was truly unprecedented, would lead them to remake one another. The “yoga” that transitioned to American for example (as De Michele had documented) was already influenced by Western esotericism, which in its turn was influenced by New England transcendentalists.

Versluis remarks that “Asia grew on Emerson slowly,” there are no references to Asia in his published works until 1841. Perhaps as Versluis contends, Emerson had to work his way past many prejudices to arrive at what one scholar called “a neo Vedanta that was an amalgam of German idealism and mystical Christian and Hindu concepts.”⁵ More than likely, he was “simmering” as the junior Whitman later described himself.

Emerson received the *Gita* through a lineage of political conquest and cultural acquiescence. The British thought it would make good politics to translate some brahminical texts, the brahmins acquiesced to the *Gita* since technically it was *smṛti*, not *śruti*, which was not to be shared with outsiders.

Emerson, however, had previously read what the Unitarians had to say about Ram Mohan Roy in the early 1820’s and was probably first introduced to the *Gita* through reading Victor Cousin’s lectures on the “Dialogue between Krishna and Arjoon.” Sharpe remarks that Cousin’s *Cours de Philosophie* was published in 1828 and was translated into English by H.G. Lingberg in 1832 as an *Introduction to Hindu Philosophy*.⁶ So even though Emerson published “The Oversoul” in 1841, before receiving the text of the *Bhagavadgita*, he certainly had secondary knowledge of some of its contents.

In 1845 Emerson acquired his own copy of Wilkins’ 1785 translation of the *Gita*, which he initially called in the now infamous aforementioned letter to Elizabeth Hoaror, dated July 17 1845, one of the most renowned books of Buddhism.⁷ This was an honest mistake, and the scholarly harping upon it (including my own) seems a bit akin to the media’s recent harping upon the inappropriate comments of talk radio personality Donald Imus. We have nothing better to do.

The Wilkins work is a pretty decent translation, all things considered, and it had quite a long life, being the text used by Theosophists until the Annie Besant translation in the nineteen forties. Wilken’s work was commissioned by Warren Hastings in an effort by the colonial power to acknowledge native culture as necessary to maintain good business. It made its way through England, Germany, and France along with other seminal Indian texts, including “the Code of Manu, “Buddha” the “Vedas (which some brahminical communities had finally acquiesced to sharing), and the “Vishnu Sarma.”

Following the Buddhism gaff, Emerson had nothing but praise for the *Gita* declaring: “It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered over and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”⁸ Note, how even in his first recorded response to the *Gita*, Emerson’s focus is existential, on the “questions which exercise us,” which to me separates him from the romantic, orientalist notion of the “wisdom of a pristine past.” The *Gita* also made its way to Emerson through Thoreau, who eventually bequeathed to him his entire library of Asian texts.⁹

In this way, the trajectory of the celestial song found its way to Concord, and it served Concord well, in its own peculiar way. Interestingly enough, Emerson did not seek to promote the *Gita* among his fellow citizens, as he did with Whitman’s work, probably

because he thought that his fellow Americans would not be up to understanding it in its “native form.” However, the *Gita* and the *Upanishads* served an Emersonian purpose: along with confirming his expanded, transcendental vision, they would serve as a hedge against the universalizing and absolutizing of Christianity.¹⁰ It was not that Emerson needed the *Gita* to develop his theories of the self or the oversoul. His self reliance and self trust could easily be traced back through Classical and European sources up to Goethe’s self-cultivation and the Essays of Montaigne or even those of Ben Franklin. And theories of metempsychosis abounded in the Neo-platonic literature that Emerson was familiar with. I would imagine, however, that Arjuna was an inspiration to Emerson, who himself was a sort of Arjuna; not as in a story from thousands of years ago, or as a servant of a scriptural God, but as an advocate and model for the possibility of every individual to arise and hear the voice of Spirit:

“If therefore a man claims to know and speak of God
and carries you backward to the phraseology of some
old moldered nation in another country, in another world,
believe him not.

“Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom,
old things pass away-means, teachers, texts, temples fall;
it lives now and absorbs past and future into the present hour.”¹¹

Let us not mistake rhetoric for reality, however. Emerson struggled with his sense of, and debt to, a past that he valued enough to remake in the present. Emerson does a service, one could argue, by reconstituting the past through the sum of influences upon him, not in a straight line from Greece to Europe to the shores of the New World but by winding his way back through Persia, India, and China. In a way, the “appropriation of the East” gave Emerson leverage, room to move, to create his own tradition as millions would after him.

Versluis argues that the Unitarian rejection of the church and its heretical embrace of progress led to the transcendentalists ultimately jettisoning Christianity entirely and affirming an “absolute religion universal religion”¹² But Emerson was more complex than New Age re-makers of the wheel. In the autumn of his life, as an overseer at Harvard University, he voted for compulsory chapel attendance, and his transcendentalist project of the “religion of humanity” did not prohibit him from being an abolitionist advocate willing to lose the union if the union maintained slavery. There are a series of stock answers that appear when considering Emerson’s relationship with his various predecessors. One may say that he had the ability to consider the spiritual writings of all ages without sacrificing the pure and immediate revelation of truth. One may say that Emerson came into contact with the very same universal truths as the ancients and could speak in a similar tone while still leading men to the “law of their own hearts.” More plausible, perhaps, is the idea that the Emerson texts were produced under a different set of assumptions (and perhaps a shared set) around influence and originality than are presently held.¹³

While the *Gita* itself does not condone slavery, the Epic takes it for granted. And the *Gita* does promote a social system based on *varnas* that are evidenced by birth, something Emerson would have found abhorrent. Hence, Emerson's relationship with the "Wisdom of the East" had little to do with the romantic embrace of an older and wiser culture. However, there was an intuitive recognition of affinity between thought processes and perspectives. And this affinity allowed Emerson to "translate" the *Gita* from one context to another, a project that may be more delicate and difficult than the literal translation of a text. As has been argued on numerous occasions, influence has become a moot point. While an awareness of the aura of influence serves to cure one of the illusion of the solitary, individual author, the extended focus on the agonistic aspects of influence is a remnant of a Nietzschean, Adlerian world view that is unable to see beyond the purview of conquest and loss (which interestingly enough is exactly what Krishna tells Arjuna to do). Rather than worrying about "influence" or engaging in spineless academic comparisons, one might simply say of Emerson and the *Gita* that "They met," they met like two crossing stars each with their own trajectory, each with their own *karma*, in the ongoing flow of history.

II. The Turning of Emerson

In his Divinity School Address of 1838, Emerson dared his audience to love God without a mediator and to completely reject formal religion. This address, along with the opening salvos of "Nature," is the Emerson that has endured, while the later more skeptical Emerson has faded further into the background. As stated in terms of Emerson's relationship with the past, however, this seeming complete break was problematic, and not absolute in any sense. Professor Quinten Anderson used to intone to hushed graduate students in Columbia University seminars, that Emerson, "left the church, left the academy, and became Emerson." But just how did he do that? How did he break away from his friends and kinsmen, as Arjuna was urged to do, and fight the battle he had to fight? Once again, there is rhetoric and there is reality, and in reality most of Emerson's speaking engagements, which he depended upon for his physical sustenance (along with his pear orchards) were "booked" through the Unitarian church. Yes, he left the pulpit, but he did not burn his bridges. And this brings us to the most crucial issue of community, not only in its social sense, but in the sense that literary critic Stanley Fish has written on, propounding the primacy of "interpretive communities" in determining the "meaning" of a text. The text is always mediated through a particular community that assigns it value for its own purposes. In this sense, then, Emerson's struggle for freedom is akin to Arjuna's. They must both forge a path through the power dynamics and nuances of their particular communities. The teachings of Krishna, in the *Gita*, are clearly mediated through various communities, Buddhist, Samkhya, Yoga, Brahmanical, etc., and the seemingly contradictory statements attributed to Krishna can be seen as efforts to placate or incorporate variant communal perspectives (as Larsen, Sharpe, and others have argued). Hence, what may often appear as an unmediated transcendental vision may be something else as well. This is clear in the celebrated "transparent eyeball" passage in "Nature." While arguing for an original relationship with the universe and a philosophy of insight as opposed to tradition, Emerson walks into the woods and declares:

Standing on the bare ground, -my head bathed by the blithe air, and
uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent
eyeball; I am nothing: I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate
through me. I am a part or a particle of God.¹⁴

The Rev. H.A. Braun, writing in “The Catholic World,” in 1885, cited this passage as evidence of insanity,” while others praised it as evidence of an experience of inspired rapture.¹⁵ Emerson probably penned this *Gita*-like passage before ever reading the theophany in the eleventh book of the *Gita*, and hence one looks at a kinship of sensibility. Nevertheless, one can only wonder about Emerson’s actual chronological relationship to the *Gita*, for like a finally enlightened Arjuna, Emerson goes on to declare:

The name of the nearest friend sounds foreign and accidental; to be
brothers, to be acquaintances, -master or servant, in then a trifle and a disturbance.
I am a lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.

As mentioned before, it is to say the least ironic that this celebrated vision of original unity is largely lifted from Coleridge’s passage on entering a gothic cathedral. But Emerson made his adjustments. His “cathedral” is the woods and his God is fashioned from his own amalgam-like insight. The over-soul doctrine, adopted through a conglomeration of German Romantic, Neo-Platonic, and Hindu sources will follow with Emerson forging a new language to fit his intuitions. It is not possible to fruitfully speculate to what degree the *Gita* helped open a way for that language, but the resonance of sensibility is unmistakable. A further irony may be that Emerson’s openness to the *Gita* and his recasting of its philosophy (as well as that of specific Upanishads) in the poem *Brahma*, helped bring it to the attention of later theosophists who then brought it back to India, where the *Gita* would go on to play a much more central role in the developments of both Hindu and National consciousness.

Brahma, in my estimation, is all too often and easily glossed over when discussed as an example of the “influence of Asia” on Emerson, and the like. What is remarkable here is how far Emerson has come since his “renowned book of Buddhism” days. Not only does this little poem paraphrase the author of the *Kathopanishad* and the *Bhagavadgita* in cadence as well as in sensibility, taking on the first person voice; it communicates subtle aspects of the *Gita*’s polemic, touches the sublimity of the seventh, tenth, and eleventh chapters, and interweaves monistic and dualistic strands of poetic discourse.¹⁶ One might speculate that the final line “Find me, and turn thy back on heaven,” takes a stab at the Christian heaven, but more overtly, it is evidence of Emerson’s resonance with the panoramic largesse of the *Gita*’s divine landscape, and how opening to this landscape may allow one more room to move and breathe on the ground upon which one stands.

IV. The Song of God in America

If we take the *Gita* as the “the Song of God” (which need not obfuscate its being a small portion in the eighteenth chapter of the Great Epic), and if we take the title at its word, it is neither surprising nor the least bit scandalous that this text fit right in with the developing ideal of a perennial philosophy. If Krishna is the strength of the strong, the taste of water, the fragrance of the earth, and the one behind the many, and if he descends in appropriate forms in age after age to restore the dharma, his incarnation into Concord, New England might look quite different than on the battlefield of Kuru. One might even suggest that the transformation of the work out of the Epic narrative it has been embedded in is part of its incarnational prowess. Somewhat like the apple, tulip, potato, and cannabis, the *Gita* may have embedded itself into the Epic like a seed in the earth in winter. And when the time is ripe, it takes a manageable and portably readable form that allows it to become a standard bearer of “Eastern wisdom.”

Ironically, the *Gita* can be, and has been, taken to task, like Emerson, for an eclectic and unsystematic view of life, and yet it might very well be this humanistic aspect of the *Gita*; the fact that it is both a philosophical tract, a poem, and an exhortation to action, that has allowed it to be claimed by such diverse communities. The *Gita*’s emphasis on liberative action and its framing of knowledge within the context of action were also crucial, I would argue, in its embrace by the West.

I suspect that even serious and sensitive scholars like Sharpe, however, sell the impact of the *Gita* short when they remark that Emerson, however much he studied the *Gita* “absorbed no more than its general atmosphere”¹⁷ The point may need to be taken that “absorbing the general atmosphere” of the *Gita* was and is no small task, and that Emerson was able to absorb the atmosphere of the *Gita* because he already lived in such an atmosphere and hence was able to magnetize a text like this to him as more than a chance or incidental encounter. Again, the issue is not one of influence, but of dialogue and its consequences. Certainly, Emerson’s Neoplatonic readings and forays into German idealism prepared him for the *Gita*, but his ability to absorb its’ atmosphere had as much to do with his inherent disposition and his willingness to follow it as it did to any literary tradition (or, in other words, his *samskaras*). Hence, Emerson’s reception of the text is not merely a “romantic one,” the focus and import of Emerson’s reading of and meeting with the *Gita* is not just on his subjective apprehension of the text, nor about idealized notions of its grandeur, but like Thoreau, he is around his grappling with the existential issue of how shall I live my life. And lives that proceeded from the meetings of Walden and the Ganges, as Thoreau put it, were indelibly marked by this meeting.

One might then ask, “How so.” Emerson, like many intellectual Vedantins, resonated with *karma* and *jnana* yogas as “works” and “illumination,” but not, or much less, with *bhakti*. Moreover his monistic disposition would lead him to focus on oneness over difference in his general consideration of the path of yoga, which for Emerson was the path of universal virtue. Bringing the *Gita* into such a mix, however, immediately opens the field, makes this consideration more than a Western humanities or philosophical problem and casts it within larger global context. It legitimizes not only world religions, but a world that can no longer be narrowly limited to a few texts deemed appropriate by those who have refused to look outside the confines of their self-created container. The disciplines of comparative religion and the evolution of spirituality without the bounds of organized denominationalism owe a lot to this move.

Like Thoreau, Emerson absorbed the parts of the atmosphere that suited him. Is this something to be disparaged, however? Who really wants to take the caste system, even when whitewashed as *varnashrama* and divinely justified? Who wants class ridden and sexist ridden paths of virtue (both institutionalized in the *Gita*, which does grudgingly allow for women and commoners to attain to divine status) condoned by absolute scripture? Emerson, who had his own issues to deal with in terms women's rights and liberties, nevertheless breathed the spacious atmosphere of the *Gita* and let go of its more stuffy aspects.

The issue of divorcing the text from its culture is often brought to the fore here, and it is an important consideration. More often than not, this is accompanied by presupposition that texts belong to someone (which it arguably does). But who does memory belong to (*smṛti*)? And on what basis does a text belong to a community? Would the righteous Ramachandra be acting dharmically if he followed scriptural exhortations about having lead poured into the ears of lower class persons who have heard the Vedas? Who texts belong to are often based on power (the brahmins), but these relations are temporal (publishing rights). Texts might grow out of a certain historical moment, but like one's children, they take on a life of their own, go their own way, and forge their own destinies.

Ultimately, issues of authority, be they literary or scriptural, are intimately bound up in community, what Fish calls the interpretive community. We need not reify the text or the tradition, but acknowledge the communities it has resonated with and accept the fact that texts do migrate from one community to another and reestablish contexts (as has occurred with various versions of the Bible). What I am arguing for here is less reifying of texts and traditions and more focus on what is actually important. And from Emerson's point of view, one that I obviously share, what is of major importance is not ownership or influence or minutiae (although these all have their place), but the very pressing issue of how shall we live. Arjuna had to decide whether or not to participate in a civil war; Emerson likewise had to decide between war and slavery and made a resounding decision. The fact that this decision echoes that of the *Gita* may or may not be happenstance, but it is an important resonance, because we too have decisions to make in face of wars hoisted upon us. Hence, a scholarship that treats the *Gita* and the work of the transcendentalists as nothing but objective documents, abdicates the call to engagement that both of these texts offer.

In Emerson's case, the Song of God fit his call to evolve one's personal dharma. The genius of the personal dharma in many ways prefigures Sartre and the existentialists, essence or not you have to make your own existence be your own Krishna and not allow the authority of Krishna to be usurped by Churches or *sampradayas*, as the case may be. A significant question in this regard may be, "Will the cult of the self overturn society and plummet all into chaos?" This was a charge often hurled against the "heretical" Emerson, and it brings us to what may be the crux of the issue in contemporary interpretations of the *Gita*, "Who is Krishna?"

V. Who is Krishna

Interestingly enough, this question plagues the Epic as well. Arjuna sees Krishna as a friendly prince before he sees him as the supreme personal God. Throughout the Epic different people see Krishna quite differently, and if one is sensitive to issues of redaction, one might perpetually investigate the layering of texts, who wrote what when and why, as Jacobi did with the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. Is Krishna the one divinity in a specific human form, an aboriginal tribal hero exalted in later eras by Vaishnava editors, an avatar of Vishnu, or a historically significant warrior/prince? This question has more than academic consequences, however, and is one that many contemporary readers of the *Gita*, particularly those attached to a Vedantic or quasi-universalist view of things, often seem to sidestep, if not ignore altogether.

And can one ever consider the Krishna of the *Bhagavadgita* apart from Arjuna? They are seen, after all, as the *nara-narayana*, human and divine perpetually linked together. Along with its convenient size, ecumenical outlook, and monumental scenarios, one often overlooked aspect of the *Gita*'s promulgation in both contemporary India and America may be the transition into what could be labeled the "Age of Arjuna," containing the democratic ethos that extols the single man. It is quite amazing (even in poetic terms) that among the six hundred and forty million soldiers said to participate in the battle of Kurukshetra, only one has the conscience and the courage to balk at the coming fratricidal slaughter.¹⁸ True, Arjuna's eldest brother, Karna, is offered an opportunity to stop the battle, and like Arjuna he might have some inkling of who Krishna is, but his own circumstances demand the war, as do Bhishma's, whose following of the letter of the law arguably caused the war in the first place.¹⁹ The focus on the individual as the moral arbiter of action and center of attention may be part of the "protestantization" of the *Gita*, popularized by both M.K. Gandhi, whose guide to action became his "inner voice," and Aurobindo Ghose, whose early visions of Krishna while in prison, later became expressed as a more amorphous "Divine."²⁰ Like Emerson, Aurobindo eschews the temporal *Gita* for a universal one. The fourfold *varnashrama* system, for example, is seen as "a rightly ordered expression of the nature of the individual being through whom, work is done."²¹ The outer Krishna becomes the inner voice.

T.S. Eliot, another significant Western reader of the *Gita* on the other hand (and the first Western reader to my knowledge to note that the text is a philosophical poem), mentions Krishna by name in little Gidding, saying, "I think this is what Krishna meant." Eliot's move, casting the voice of Krishna in a poetic meditation on time and eternity that is largely informed by his Christian perspective, represents a different contemporary strategy. It casts the *Gita*'s voice, Krishna's voice, as part of a universal wisdom that is congruent with the message of the Western savior. Less thoughtful Krishna and Christ comparisons, with their fanciful etymologies and the rest, abound. I would argue, however, that ultimately—at least as far as contemporary history is concerned—Arjuna wins the day. The focus of the world moves toward the individual and to the problem of aligning the individual with a higher will, with an absolute knowledge, in face of the loss of absolute systems of knowledge, of trust, and authority. Interpretive authority moves from the Brahmin priests, who in a sense abdicate their power by surrendering their texts to the British (for a price I would imagine) and over to the solitary man, the new Arjuna, before getting swept up again by nationalist tides, beginning with Aurobindo, who in a sense puts these two sensibilities together, and on to Hindutva and the rest. One can argue,

and indeed the most well known Indian commentators such as Ramanuja and Madhva have argued that the “ultimate” verse of the *Gita*, its final *upadesha*, *sarva dharman partyjya mam ekam saranam vraja*, “abandoning all varieties of dharma surrender to me alone,” is clear and transparent in its giving final authority to the supreme being. Shankara, however, read this somewhat differently, and so did Emerson, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and even Kerouac, who went on a search as a Dharma Bum, for a missing father he would never find. Please note the “somewhat differently here.” After all, these are only minor contentions in face of the enormity of the absolute, and the principal narrator of the *Gita* clearly states that all beings follow his path. What might be significant then, is not so much “Who is Krishna? Rather, one might ask, “How does Krishna reveal himself in a new different time and a different place?”

And while I cannot emphasize how serious an issue this is; the focal point of, the reality of, the centrality of Krishna, I cannot also point out how this message is not ubiquitous in Indian, even in classical Indian readings of the *Gita*, particularly the Vedantic reading that arguably carried the day and that is more aligned with contemporary universal notions of a perennial philosophy. Because of the Shankaras, (and the later Shivanandas and Maharishis), Emerson and those who followed him; theosophists and neo-Hindus, can let the person Krishna slide, much to the frustration and chagrin of both Krishna fundamentalists and Hindu fundamentalists.

On one hand, this sleight of hand overturns the paternal authority of dharma and may give rise to an “imperial self” as Anderson called it, a self that is a law unto itself and that seems to have much more in common with the *Gita*’s sixteenth chapter’s description of the asuric (demonic) nature than with any spiritual paradigm. On the other hand, however, it also gives rise to the Oversoul, a meta- historical self that confronts the assumed authority of linear history which is ultimately but the most plausible consensus narrative of those who hold cultural power. The move from time bound subject to the Oversoul slices through and exposes the narrative of time and progress for what it is; a narrative as opposed to an episteme, and this is significant. The fulcrum moving toward Arjuna is so strong however, that it becomes less and less conceivable, as it was to Emerson, that Krishna can be more than a particularized version of the Oversoul, one whose voice cannot contradict the voice of conscience which is his true voicing.

III. The Tradition of Conscience

Emerson did to some degree step out of the ethnocentric perspectives of his era and used the *Gita* to validate and spark his imagination. The *Gita* became one way out from under the thumb of the father, the church, the Boston Brahmins, but the last thing Emerson needed was a new father, a new church, and new Brahmins, hence his refusal to join the utopian Brooke Farm community.

The *Gita* contributed toward Emerson’s meta-historical ideal, as did Plato, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Mme De Staël, and his contemporaries Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Whitman, Alcott, and others. Ultimately, Emerson’s taking what suits him from the *Gita* is not much different than Shankara,

Ramanuja, Madhva, or the Maharishi for that matter, showcasing the *Gita* to suit their theological agendas. The Bloomian argument that only the strong readings survive is suspect, simply because what is considered strong in one community might not be in another or in another period. Along with the “age of Arjuna,” the key figure in this drama is Krishna of course. And how ironic that Krishna is an embarrassment to contemporary sensibility which is why the Bhaktivedanta fundamentalist reading of “The Bhagavad-Gita as it is” remains highly marginalized. Krishna was an embarrassment to Emerson and his ilk, who preferred the vagaries of an open aired divinity to another personal God who would crack the whip. Any yet, Krishna remains as the puzzling narrator of the Gita, as well as its protagonist. Whether envisioned as an incarnation of Vishnu or valorized as the seed of love in everyone’s heart (theosophy) or placed on a pantheon along with Christ, Buddha, and Sri Yukteswar (Self Realization Fellowship), it is not easy to write out the main character of the play.

I asked a Vaishnava swami if he thought that Krishna could appear in business suit, and he said absolutely. And while spirit-men wearing business suits and bowler hats adorn popular Daoist temples in Shanghai as ancestors of the city; it is not likely to see this happening in India. And one can only wonder if Krishna, like Jesus, would have left the visible world so conclusively if he knew what his followers would make of him. These are rhetorical questions. But the texts remain to be reconstituted by ongoing communities and generations. Perhaps one can only say, seriously and respectfully, “We have met.” Emerson opens a banquet of the past spreads the table widens the aperture of a common human inheritance. Could anyone have imagined that the Gita would ultimately be integrated into the American experience through yoga soy chai lattes? With Emerson, one might fall off of a cliff – Nietzsche did, carrying his copy of Emerson with him, but with Krishna it is easy to become a subservient server of authority. Both paths have their pitfalls and both have their attainments. And as empowered words shift over localities and centuries, the song is heard and sung again, and the dharma is lived. This is Yoga. And in Emerson’s case and I would argue in the post-reformation Western world, yoga can only be the exercise of freedom, and Krishna can only appear as one’s conscience.

¹ “Self Reliance” in Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems. Ed. Robert D. Richardson jr. (New York, Bantam, 1990), p. 160

² Ibid p.160

³ Cameron, K.W. *Emerson the Essayist*, Vol. I Raleigh: Thistle Press, 1945. The passage is found in the Collected works of Coleridge IV. p 232-235.t

⁴ Emerson, Letters III. 290 (Sharpe,22)

⁵ Versluis, p.53

⁶ Cousins probably heard of the Gita in Germany

⁷ The letters, vol. 3. p.290 The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, edited by Ralph L Rusk New York, 1939

⁸ Christy, p. 23 The Orient in American Transcendentalism, New York, 1932

⁹ Not only Gita but Eugene Burnouf’s translation of the Bhagavata-Purana Le Bhgavata Purana, ou histoire poétique de Krichna 3 Vols. Paris: Impromirie Royale, 1840-47 was given to him by Thoreau.

¹⁰ This is a nice way of saying it. Emerson's critic, Yvor Winters, on the other hand, charged that Emerson was expounding a doctrine that was "a moral parasite to a Christianity it is endeavoring to destroy." Cited by Harold Bloom in *Figures of Capable Imagination: Emerson, the Self Reliance of American Romanticism*, p.51.

¹¹ Emerson, *Self Reliance*, 150

¹² Versluis, op. cit. p. 6

¹³ Perhaps Emerson's "originality" could accept overtly intertextual influences without being disturbed or seeing contradictions to his protestations of originality, unlike his critic Perry who complained that Emerson was rooted in a past that he tore down. Matthiessen and Sampson claimed that Emerson was fully cognizant of the measure to which he was simply rephrasing the works of Sampson Reed and others. Coleridge himself says, "All teachers of moral truth who aim to prepare for its reception call men's attention to the law of their own hearts." (*On the Growth of the Mind*)

¹⁴ Emerson, "Nature" .

¹⁵ Braun, "Hegel and his New England Echo." *The Catholic World*, XLI 55-61 (Cited by Cameron, 1945). Harold Bloom cites the passage as "ecstatic," and Sherman Paul in *Emerson's Angle of Vision* sees it as a true archetype of inspiration.

¹⁶ If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he has slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forget 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 that Brahma 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.

¹⁷ Sharpe, *The Universal Gita*, p.2

¹⁸ This number is given in the tenth skandha of the *Bhagavata-Purana*

¹⁹ Karna refuses an offer of kingship that will end the conflict out of loyalty to the Kurus and to the family of chariot drivers that brought him up. See my article in JVS on Karna. Bhishma, of course, fulfills his conditions set down by the daughter of Satyawati, allowing his father to marry her as he renounces both the throne and any sexuality. This vow causes him to refuse Amba who is later reborn as Sikandhin to kill Bhishma in battle. Karna himself brings this point up in one of his numerous clashes with grandfather Bhishma.

²⁰ In his *Essays on the Gita*, Aurobindo often refers to the "supreme Godhead," and "Divinity," the "divine Self in things," but rarely to Krishna. Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1921-22.

²¹ *ibid*, p.4

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