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**OS ORIENTES E OS OCIDENTES**

*THE EAST(S) AND THE WEST(S)*

*Coordenação de Maria Celeste Natário, Renato Epifânio e Maria Luísa Malato*



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# THE WESTERN RECEPTION OF THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*

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## Resumo

Este ensaio examina a recepção do *Bhagavad Gita*, um poema religioso hindu fundamental incorporado no épico sânscrito, o *Mahabharata*, a partir da sua tradução inicial para o inglês em 1785. Começando com os comentários ao texto de A.W. Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt e Hegel na Alemanha do século XIX e passando ao seu tratamento nas mãos dos transcendentalistas americanos (Whitman, Emerson), examino então as apropriações do *Gita* do século XX nas mãos de T.S. Eliot, Simone Weil e Philip Glass. Em cada instância, o *Gita* fornece um alibi literário no qual os autores individuais projetam os seus anseios.

**Palavras-Chave:** *Bhagavad Gita*, Recepção Literária, Schlegel, Humboldt, Hegel, Whitman, Emerson, T.S. Eliot, Simone Weil, Philip Glass

## Abstract

This essay examines the reception of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a fundamental Hindu religious poem embedded in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, from its initial translation into English in 1785. Beginning with the commentaries to the text by A.W. Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Hegel in nineteenth-century Germany and moving on to its treatment in the hands of American Transcendentalists (Whitman, Emerson), I then examine twentieth-century appropriations of the *Gita* in the hands of T.S. Eliot, Simone Weil and Philip Glass. In each instance, the *Gita* provides a literary alibi onto which individual authors project their longings.

**Keywords:** *Bhagavad Gita*, Literary Reception, Schlegel, Humboldt, Hegel, Whitman, Emerson, T.S. Eliot, Simone Weil, Philip Glass

While I understand that this essay does not directly address the topic “Portugal-Goa: os Orientes e os Ocidentes”, I feel that it introduces and examines the dynamic at play in all transcultural events, namely the quest that such encounters seek to engage and what is ethically at stake in cross-cultural dialogues or attempts at dialogue. Indian Studies scholars have claimed that the Western scholarly reception of the *Bhagavad Gītā* contributed to the refusal on the part of the philosophical establishment to take India seriously.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Hindu “Song of the Lord” has had a varied and controversial life in the West. It was the first Sanskrit text translated (into English) and published by Charles Wilkins in 1785. It spawned commentaries by A. W. Schlegel, W. von Humboldt, and G. W. F. Hegel. Embraced in the West as the Bible of Hinduism, it influenced Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and T. S. Eliot. More recently, the *Gītā* made a splash on stage in *Satyagraha*, an opera by the American composer, Philip Glass. In this essay, I will introduce this Hindu sacred text and outline its initial Western reception. In a previous publication, I examined how the European search for models in an Indian exotic ultimately collided with a vision of fatalism (Figueira 1994). I will summarize this inquiry and expand it to investigate American readings of this emblematic Sanskrit text. I wish to question whether the early European responses to the *Gītā* resonated in its subsequent Western reception. But first, let us summarize the work for those unfamiliar with its import. The *Gītā* provides an interlude in the much larger Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. It presents a dialogue between Krishna, the god incarnate in the character of a charioteer and Arjuna, one of the five Pandu brothers fighting an apocalyptic war against their evil Kuru cousins. Arjuna hesitates to begin the fight, since the opposing army consists of his kinsmen and his preceptors. He wonders aloud why he should fight if he does not want to. He tells his charioteer that all law and order is destroyed with the destruction of the family. If he slays his kinsmen for power, he invites utter destruction. He thus turns to Krishna for counsel. The charioteer responds and the ensuing dialogue makes up the body of the poem. Krishna tells Arjuna not to be concerned, since the soul is without beginning or end. There is no real slayer, since death is merely the putting off of one body for another. Pleasure and pain do not touch the soul; they are but transitory matters. Arjuna should

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<sup>1</sup> See Halbfass 1988; Hulin 1979; Droit 1989.

merely fulfil his duty as a warrior according to the teaching of Samkhya philosophy. Next, Krishna has Arjuna approach the problem of what he should do from the viewpoint of the philosophy of Yoga. Here too, works must be done, but without thought of any reward. Krishna advises that these two paths are the roads to salvation: the higher path of knowledge and the lower path of sacrifice and mortification of the flesh. He advises Arjuna to seek a merging of Samkhya and Yoga. He should not seek flight from the world as a path to salvation, but do his work and perform his duty in the spirit of Yoga without hope for reward and without attachment to the fruits of one's actions. He also tells Arjuna that he should be devoted to god and reveals himself to be, in fact, god. If Arjuna places his mind on Krishna, he will break the cycle of rebirth and achieve salvation.

Wilkins's rendition of the *Gītā* was particularly important because it determined the view of Indian philosophy that European intellectuals would initially form. In 1823, August Wilhelm Schlegel published the Sanskrit text of the *Gītā* along with a Latin translation of which the French Sanskritist A. S. Langlois wrote a scathing review. Wilhelm von Humboldt subsequently responded to this review with his own essay on the *Gītā*. Humboldt, who also knew Sanskrit, expounded upon the central theme of the *Gītā* – that one should perform one's duty without any regard for the fruit of one's actions (Humboldt 1841: 1.79).

Humboldt's exposition of the *Gītā* did not escape Hegel's notice. The philosopher had initially discounted Indian thought but now realized that he had to address what he perceived as its deleterious influence. Hegel misinterpreted the *Gītā*'s message, that the individual soul must recognize its intrinsic identity with the universal, as a call to immobility and inaction (Hegel 1970: 74). He based his analysis largely on the translation of the term *yoga*. Wilkins had correctly glossed *yoga* as the application of the mind in spiritual matters and the performance of religious ceremonies. Schlegel had translated the Sanskrit term as *devotio*. Hegel opted, however, for *Vertiefung* in the sense of "absorption," finding Wilkins's gloss unwieldy and Schlegel's translation inadequate. But Hegel's difficulty in finding an adequate translation for the term *yoga* was not just semantic quibbling. It stemmed rather from problems he had with the very issue of the (im)possibility of translation itself. Hegel held that meaning was not transferable and original theoretical meaning is, of necessity, lost (Hegel 1970: 188). Thus, the practice of

translation in general posed a fundamental epistemological problem for Hegel (Hegel 1970: 149). Humboldt, like Herder before him, had eschewed any temptation to compare. His universalism rejected arguments of commensurability. Humboldt, therefore, avoided setting value judgments upon Indian philosophy in his discussion of the *Gītā*. Hegel, however, was all about value judgments, especially when he perceived some system of thought threatening his own. The discussion concerning the inadequacy of translating the term *yoga* led Hegel to postulate a theory concerning the impossibility of translation in general due to the incommensurability of source and target languages. Hegel's judgment, therefore, established a justification for free and creative translations. This is an important point for the subsequent reception of the work. Just as Hegel felt unconstrained in offering imprecise and fragmentary readings of the *Gita*, so did its initial American readers.

Perhaps, the first literary reference we find to the *Gita* in American letters was Emerson's comment that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was a "mixture of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *New York Herald*" (Zweig 1984: 8). Thus, from the very beginning of its reception in the US, parallels were drawn between the Sanskrit mystical poem and Whitman's poetry (Allen 1946: 457). Thoreau even asked Whitman if he had read the Indians and Whitman replied in the negative (Whitman 1973: 919). Given Whitman's cursory method of reading – perusing a dozen books at a time, reading a few pages here and there, and seldom getting sufficiently interested in any volume to read it in its entirety (Lopez 2011: 5) – his response might well be true. Yet, Whitman's literary executor, Horace Traubel, claimed that Whitman had told him that he was very familiar with the *Gītā* and saw it as a formal classic (Allen 1946: 458). Also, in "A Backward Glance o'ver Travel'd Roads", Whitman claims to have knowledge of "ancient Hindoo poems" (Whitman 1973: 569). Since the *Gītā* was the only "poem" translated at the time, he may well have read it before the first edition of the *Leaves of Grass*. It was also reported that when Whitman was found dead in his bed, a translation of the poem was under his pillow (Hendrick 1959).

However, all one finds in Whitman are echoes of Indian philosophy and superficial references to Indian terminology. In the "Song of Myself", he evokes the "Shastas [sic] and the Vedas" (line 1105), "Brahma" (line 1030), and "gymnosophists" (line

1103). References in the “Passage to India” are similarly vague. The poet does not refer to the text by name, but one can assume that it was one of the “Asian bibles” he had in mind. The “Salut au Monde” offers equally common references. Whitman speaks of Indian holy cities (line 142), and their plagues (line 207). Aside from these vague evocations and general praise for the genius of India, there is no clear evidence to show that Whitman was directly inspired by either India or the *Gītā*. Whitman’s idea of the soul – a concept of the Self as a unifying energy that is permanent, indestructible, eternal and all-pervading – is indeed similar to that found in the *Gītā* and the Upanishads (Mercer 1933: 110). But, such a vision of the cosmic Self is not unique to Indian thought and appears in most mystical literature. In other words, Whitman’s pantheistic worldview was not exclusively Indian. Moreover, he did not believe in certain central tenets of Hinduism expressed in the *Gītā*. He did not accept that life is an illusion (*māyā*) and he certainly did not discount the physical body or in any way believe in any yogic subjugation of the senses. In fact, in the “Song of Myself”, he called for a surrender to the senses (lines 20-9). Whitman’s references to Sanskrit terms were evocative rather than substantial. He incorporated them into his poetry perhaps to valorize and legitimate his pantheistic worldview. Whitman was a nineteenth-century exoticist, a little less well-read than others.

In contrast to Whitman, Emerson was quite knowledgeable about Indian literature and studied some Sanskrit at Harvard. While critics ascribe the poems “Hamatreya” and “Brahma” to Emerson’s knowledge of the *Vishnu Purana*,<sup>2</sup> these two poems actually reflect far more his knowledge of the Upanishads. Hamatreya, was Emerson’s variant of the spelling of the name of a famous upanishadic female seer Maitreya (Hollender 1993: 1055)<sup>3</sup> and his poem “Brahma” is derivative (to the point of plagiarism) of key passages from the *Katha Upanishad*.

According to a letter from 1873 (Christy 1963: 207), Emerson claimed to have first read the poem in 1845, having been introduced to it from his reading of Victor Cousin (Christy 1963: 287), who had been involved in the Schlegel-Humboldt-Hegel debates. Emerson also held the *Gītā* in high regard, claiming it was a

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<sup>2</sup> This is due perhaps to his frequent citations of the *Vishnu Purana*, see Emerson 1960-82: 9.288-90, 312-14. 318-22.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson makes reference in his journal to Maitreya (Richardson 1995: 407).

“transnational book” (Emerson 1960-82: 9.231-2) that was unparalleled in wisdom (Emerson 1990: 131).

“I owed – my friend and I owed – a magnificent day to the Bhagavat Geeta – 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 has pondered and thus disposed of the same questions that exercise us.” (cited in Christy 1963: 23)

Emerson felt that the poem was congenial to the Concordians, since it espoused loving devotion to god and endorsed a life of labor, whether scholarly or manual (Christy 1963: 29). In a letter to Elizabeth Hoar on June 17 1845 describing his day-to-day experiences, Emerson wrote of his enthusiasm upon receiving his very own copy of the poem:

“The only other event is the arrival in Concord of the Bhagavad Gita, the much renowned book of Buddhism, extracts from which I have often admired, but never before held the book in my hands.” (cited in Christy 1963: 287)

While he did not quite understand the book’s provenance, he nevertheless was glad to finally own it. We will return to this notion of possession of the exotic artefact in our conclusions.

Emerson accepted the necessity that Krishna lays on Arjuna – that he must fulfill his duty and fight. Contrary to the quietism that Hegel had read into the text, Emerson felt that the *Gītā* did not prevent us from acting (Emerson 1960-82: 9.232). In fact, the message of Emerson’s essay entitled *The Oversoul* – that we all rest in the great nature and that it contains everyman’s particular nature – clearly evokes Arjuna’s order to Krishna on the battlefield, as does Emerson’s 1837 lecture “The Affection”, where he defined courage as a belief in the identity of the nature of one’s enemy with one’s own nature. Unlike Whitman, Emerson was willing to accept the illusoriness of the world, as he does in the poem “Brahma.” In terms reminiscent of the *Gītā*, Emerson instructs us that we should engage in battle because all is illusion and it is necessary to act as if one acted not (Emerson 1959-92: 2.285,295, 306). It is not surprising that Emerson’s appreciation for the *Gītā* was shared by his disciple Thoreau.



Henry David Thoreau possessed just about every Sanskrit text that had until then been translated into English, including the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>4</sup> His commentary on the *Gītā* can be found in *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and the Merrimack Rivers*. In *Walden*, Thoreau evokes the *Gītā* in two rather mystical episodes. In the “Pond in Winter”, he speaks of reading the *Gītā* and bathing his intellect in its “stupendous and cosmogonical” philosophy. Thoreau goes to his well for water and communes with the servant of a brahmin priest who is reading the Vedas or dwelling under a tree with his crust of bread and water jug. He imagines the pure Walden Pond water mingling with the sacred water of the Ganges (Thoreau 1973: 298). It seems that both the Hindu priest and the Concord seeker are involved in similar quests after religious truth.

Thoreau also provides an Indian parable at the end of *Walden* regarding the artist of Kouroo, a name that evokes Arjuna’s family name (Kuru). It is a parable of the artist’s dedication to creating the perfect work and can be read as a translation of Krishna’s message of spiritual discipline into artistic terms (Miller 1986: 158). The mystical love of nature that brought Thoreau to Walden Pond becomes a path to self-knowledge and spiritual realization, as Thoreau expresses it in the “Higher View” chapter of *Walden*. He articulated similar thoughts in a letter of 1849 addressed to H. G. O. Blake where he equates his life in nature as the equivalent of the practice of yoga (cited in Miller 1986: 161). However, Thoreau’s indebtedness to the *Gītā* is more direct in *A Week on the Concord and the Merrimack Rivers* where he quotes extensively from Wilkins’s translation and expresses his own enthusiasm for Krishna’s critique of inaction.

On “Monday”, Thoreau notes that the *Gītā* exhibits “sublime conservatism” which preserves “the universe with Asiatic anxiety” (Thoreau 1884: 140). In fact, “the wisest conservatism of the Hindoos” is exemplified in the *Gītā* since this poem dwells on the “inevitability and unchangeableness of laws, on the power of temperament and constitution” whose end is the immense consolation and eternal absorption in Brahma (Thoreau 1884: 141). The *Gītā* offers “effectual conservatism; its raises the reader to the highest, purist and rarest regions of

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<sup>4</sup> His collection of Indian literature had been given to him by his English friend, Thomas Cholmondeley (Harding 1957: 15). It was inclusive and included Colebrooke’s Essays on the *Gītā*. Thoreau also had access to the Harvard College Library whose records show he took out the *Gītā* on January 28, 1850 and Oct. 9, 1854.

thought". It is "unquestionably one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures (Thoreau 1884: 142).

Clearly the *Gītā* provides an opportunity for Thoreau to present here his thoughts regarding the continuity of man's spiritual ideas from antiquity to the present. India appears as timeless: "In everyman's brain is the Sanskrit" (Thoreau 1884: 160). The past is not past but ever present, like the flowing of a river or the mingling of waters from Walden Pond and the Ganges. "Sunday" had offered a sweeping critique of the Christian church and a denunciation of the State. Thoreau followed this critique on "Monday" with his commentary on the *Gītā* and a recapitulation of his 1842 essay on the *Laws of Manu*, as foils to counter what he saw as deleterious in Western religion and political traditions. India is presented as the better alternative to activity he despises in New England. But, since his discussions of the *Gītā* and *Manu* are so torturous and vaporous, he does not really succeed in his comparison.

Yes, the *Gītā* is a "good book" that "deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees, as part of the sacred writings of a devout people" (Thoreau 1884: 147-8). Even the "intelligent Hebrew will rejoice to find in it a moral grandeur and sublimity akin to those of his own scriptures" (Thoreau 1884: 148). "Even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green" and merely "practical" next to the *Gītā* (Thoreau 1884: 149). It is such a "sane and sublime" work that the minds of soldiers and merchants are impressed with it (Thoreau 1884: 159). We see in Thoreau's commentary the elevation of the *Gītā* as a scripture for the people, a text on a par with Jewish scripture and finally a work that can compete with the New Testament. Thoreau claims that the *Gītā* is a text known for its pure intellectuality, whereas the New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality (Thoreau 1884: 142). The God (Brahm) of the *Gītā* was merely "brought down to earth and to mankind" by Christianity (Thoreau 1884: 141).

The *Gītā*, however, is not "practical in the sense of the New Testament." The brahmin "never proposes courageously to assault evil but to starve it out because his active faculties are paralyzed by caste" (Thoreau 1884: 146). Here again we have the notion of Hindu fatalism and inertia. Thoreau thus deems Krishna's argument to be defective, since he gives no "sufficient reason not to fight." Moreover, the *Gītā*'s concept of duty is arbitrary. The brahmins' virtue consist in

doing, not right but arbitrary things (Thoreau 1884: 146) and many questions are left unresolved. Thoreau asks: “What is action, what are the “settled functions”, a “man’s own religion? Why is it better than another’s? What are the duties appointed by one’s birth?” These questions surely betray Thoreau’s incomplete knowledge of Hindu thought even though he owned all the material needed to answer these queries. But, Thoreau does seem to understand one fundamental premise: that the *Gītā* (particularly in light of his reading of *Manu*) presents a defense of caste (Thoreau 1884: 147) and for all its mystical value, this one point troubles the New England radical.

T. S. Eliot shared the Transcendentalists’ admiration for the *Gītā*, but eschewed their fuzzy mysticism. Eliot simply claimed it was the next greatest philosophical poem after the *Divine Comedy* (Eliot 1934: 258). Eliot also shared Whitman’s and Emerson’s habit of using the Sanskrit language in the service of poetry. His most famous appropriation of Sanskrit terminology can be found in “The Waste Land” which he concludes with the customary formal closure of all Upanishads, “*shantih, shantih, shantih*” [peace, peace, peace] (line 433). But earlier in the same poem, in section V, “What the Thunder Said”, Eliot teases his readers with other Sanskrit terms. He repeats the rumblings of the thunder (“*Da, Da, Da*”) that he borrows from the Hindu god Prajapati and he requisitions the injunction from the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* (5.1): “*Datta*” [give], “*Dayadhvam*” [sympathize], “*Damyaya*” [control] (line 432). Here Eliot uses Sanskrit terms much in the same way that he quotes from Dante or Rimbaud. They serve pretentiously evocative aims. Moreover, it is worth noting that, after Eliot has the Thunder God speak Sanskrit, he then has his words interpreted by Western voices (Brooker and Bentley 1990: 191). Can we say that Eliot uses Sanskrit – as a means of rejecting the possibility of interpretation (Brooker and Bentley 1990: 200), and in much the same way that Hegel did? Probably not.

Eliot had studied Sanskrit extensively at Harvard upon his return to his studies in 1913. He had read and annotated the *Gītā* (Lyndell 1987: 121) and immersed himself in Indian philosophy. After a few years, however, he gave up the study of Indic philology and philosophy claiming, in “After Strange Gods” (1934), that all it left him with was a state of enlightened mystification (Eliot 1934: 40-41, cited in Gardner 1978: 54). But in reviewing his poetry, particularly the “Third Quartet”, it

is clear that he had an adequate understanding of the *Gītā*. “Dry Salvages” features the *Gītā*’s battle scene, where Krishna justifies the killing of his kin to Arjuna who shrinks from battle. Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfil his *dharma* and play at his appointed role in the cosmic drama. One cannot comprehend the Lord’s will: “I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant” (Eliot, “Dry Salvages”, line 124). Eliot adds that one should act without being concerned with the fruits of one’s actions: “And do not think of the fruit of action” (Eliot, “Dry Salvages”, line 161). He does not conclude his poem by saying “Fare well” but rather “Fare forward, voyager”.

“So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna  
On the field of battle  
Not fare well,  
But fare forward, voyagers.” (Eliot, “Dry Salvages”, line 166-69)

These sentiments are exactly what Krishna admonishes Arjuna to do:

“Antakāle ca māmeva smaranmuktvā kalevaram  
yah prayāti sa madbhavam yāti nāstyatra samshāya  
And who at the time of death thinks of me alone, leaves the body and goes forth,  
he reaches My Being; there is no death.” (*Bhagavad Gītā* 8.5)

The voyagers can be saved if they heed the advice of Krishna and only perform action without thoughts of the Self. In his advice, Eliot is essentially paraphrasing the above quote from the *Gītā* (8.5). One can die at any moment (not the immanent death facing Arjuna), so one should be intent on the highest sphere of being and thus fructify the lives of others. Eliot was not focusing on the soul as unborn eternal and everlasting (as in Whitman and Emerson), or on the idea of the world as illusion. What he takes from the *Gītā* is the concept of disinterested action, the *karma yoga* – it is Arjuna’s duty (*dharma*) to fight. But Eliot completes Krishna’s words with an important modification – whatever one dwells on, one attains upon death (i.e. is fructified in the next life if one is reborn). Here Eliot expresses the central truth of the *Gita* 8.6-7:

“yam yam vāpt smaran bhāvam tyajatyante kalevaram  
tam tam evaiti kaunteya sudā tadbhāvabhāvatiḥ  
tasmāt sarveshu kāleshu mām anusmara yudhya ca  
mayyarpitamanobuddhir mām evaishyasyasamshayam  
On whatever Being one is thinking at the end when one leaves the body,

that being alone, O son of Kunti, one reaches when one constantly dwells on that Being.

Therefore at all times, meditate on me and fight with mind and reason fixed on me,

You will doubtlessly come to me.” (*Bhagavad Gītā* 8.6-7, translation my own)

But, contrary to the *Gītā*'s injunction that disinterested action leads to one's salvation (understood in the Hindu context as release from rebirth), Eliot speaks of the fructification in the lives of others:

“At the moment which is not action or inaction

You can receive this: “Of whatever sphere of being

The mind of a man may be intent

At the time of death” – that is the one action

(And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others.” (Eliot, “Dry Salvages”, lines 155-60 see unpublished essay by B. P. N. Sinha, cited in Gardner 1978: 55-6)

It is not without significance that Eliot chose to quote Krishna's command to fight in 1941. He was signaling the *Gītā*'s teaching that since the unchanging spirit does not dwell in the mortal body, one should continue to act and fight on the battlefield without attachment to the world. In this context, he foreshadows Robert Oppenheimer's quote from the *Gītā* (2.32) upon the first detonation of the Atomic Bomb: “Now, I am become Death, the Destroyer of the Worlds”). What is interesting here is that Eliot should evoke the *Gītā* (after all, its evocation seems to have been rather a cottage industry among America's artists and intellectuals), but the manner in which he appropriated it. He was telling his readers that they should not be concerned with their own fate, but with the good of mankind. Eliot appropriated the *Gītā* in “Dry Salvages” in order to Christianize its message and urge his fellow citizens to fight the Nazis for the greater good of the nation and humanity.

About the time that Eliot was seeking guidance from the *Gītā*, the French philosopher and “mystic” Simone Weil also found particular inspiration from this same poem. She saw in it a method for countering force in an era of injustice. Its message, for Weil, was that the individual should embrace suffering as one's duty or *dharma*. Suffering and duty became for Weil the cornerstones of a transcendental

orientation, allowing her to come to terms with the vicissitudes of her existence in wartime.

“We must die to ourselves and become defenseless to the “fangs of life” accepting emptiness as our lot in life. We must annihilate our ego by suffering and degradation.” (Weil 1979: 21)

As she interpreted Krishna’s advice to Arjuna, she should submit to the obligation of force as a necessity. She welcomed the lowly status that such obedience imposed upon her. She saw in the *Gītā* a call to suffering and martyrdom to which she readily responded (Weil 1979: 83). The *Gītā*, according to Weil, proposed a process of *décréation* through self-abnegation and dying to oneself. She believed that it instructed her not just to empty herself of self-attachment, as in a customary reading of the text by Hindus and Westerners alike, but to embrace affliction, suffering, and death (Weil 1979: 80). The *Gītā*’s call to action became for Weil obedience and self-renunciation (Weil 1950: 230). She would die soon after from self-starvation. As a Jew who had fled the Nazi occupation of Paris, it is indeed odd that she did not recognize that the story of her time was more terrible than anything she could have read into the Sanskrit poem.

We have seen how Whitman’s and Emerson’s uses of the *Gītā* exhibit two tendencies – a superficial use of Sanskrit terminology for its evocative potential and a conscious attempt to cull some religious meaning from this exotic text. Eliot was far more knowledgeable in his appropriation, using the *Gītā* as an inspirational springboard for his wartime reflections on human and social responsibility. Simone Weil’s reading of the text was much more problematic. Also written at the height of World War II, it fulfilled a truly exotic purpose, offering her a justification and legitimization for what can only be called a serious emotional disorder, her will to auto-destruct.<sup>5</sup>

What is, however, central to all these Western readings of the *Gītā*, we find the melding of the two aforementioned tendencies – the serious and the superficial. In this manner, the *Gītā*’s reception can be seen to perform the ideal role of the exotic

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<sup>5</sup> More recently the *Gītā* was again evoked as offering solace in time of battle. In 2013, Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu member of the US Congress, whose father was Catholic and mother Hindu, took the oath of office on the *Gīta*. She said at the time that during her tour of service in the Iraq, its teaching inspired her to strive to be a servant-leader, dedicating her life in service of others and her country. She said that she took strength from Krishna’s battlefield teachings to Arjuna on the indestructability of the soul.

– to provide an elsewhere where one can appropriate the other for its intrinsic truth as well as valorize oneself in the process. Oppenheimer’s aforementioned use of the text is a case in point and can be clearly seen in John Adams’s 2005 opera, *Doctor Atomic* which tells the story of the atomic bomb and in which the character of Oppenheimer sings translated passages from the *Gītā* along with the poetry of John Donne. However, even before *Doctor Atomic*, the *Gītā* appeared on the American operatic stage in Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha*. This opera, which premiered in 1979, provides a hagiographic interpretation of Gandhi’s development in South Africa of a philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience.<sup>6</sup> Glass devoted the opera to Gandhi because he felt that the “*Mahātma*” inspired all subsequent dissident movements. Glass even claimed that Gandhi’s legacy had been assumed by contemporary artists such as himself (Glass 7, 10). The entire libretto consists of twenty excerpted verses from the *Gītā* with Gandhi singing Krishna’s words as well as Arjuna’s responses.<sup>7</sup> In effect, Glass renders god, in the form of Krishna, silent and replaces him with Gandhi who also assumes Arjuna’s moment of doubt.<sup>8</sup> The action then moves to Gandhi’s South African agrarian collective, to his journalistic activities in Durban and then returns to the battlefield of the *Gītā*, to portray the Newcastle March where Gandhi persuaded the South African miners to strike. The opera concludes with Gandhi alone on stage, with Martin Luther King suspended in the air looking on. Glancing upward at King, Gandhi again sings Krishna words.<sup>9</sup> As much as I would like to criticize Glass’s venture, we must realize that this opera is not as radical as it might at first seem. Granted Glass has taken historical

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that Gandhi, although a devout Hindu, was not really knowledgeable about the Gita and became acquainted with it only through his contacts in England. He was more influenced by Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” which he was introduced to by the British Fabian Henry Salt (Thoreau 1993: 9). Glass’s opera forms part of an operatic trilogy, preceded by an opera about science (*Einstein on the Beach*) and followed by an opera dealing with the theme of religion (*Akhnaten*). *Satyagraha* purports to deal with the theme of politics.

<sup>7</sup> “I see them here assembled, ready to fight, seeking to please the king’s sinful son by waging war.” Arjuna responds: “My very being is oppressed with compassion’s harmful taint. With mind perplexed concerning right and wrong. I ask you which is the better course?”

<sup>8</sup> At the choral climax of the scene, we hear Gandhi’s solo voice again speaking Krishna’s words: “Hold pleasure – pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat to be the same, then brace yourself for the fight”.

<sup>9</sup> “I have passed through many a birth and many have you. I know them all, but you do not. Unborn am I changeless is the Self of all contingent beings I am the Lord. Yet by my creative energy I consort with Nature come to be in time. For whomever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate myself on earth. I come into being age after age and take a visible shape to move a man with men for the protection of good, thrusting the evil back and setting virtue on her seat again” (*Gītā* 4.7-8).

material and mythologized it. But the mythologization of history is common to opera, as in the case of Bellini's *I Puritani* and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* and *Maria Stuarda*. As a medium, opera is self-consciously a myth-making enterprise.<sup>10</sup> So Glass's mythologization of Gandhi's career is not without precedent. Nor are Glass's fanciful motifs in any way extraordinary since as an art form, opera deliberately and ostentatiously brackets off reality. While a libretto in Sanskrit is irksome (there are no subtitles in any production to date), incomprehensible libretti are not unknown even in languages far more understandable to the opera-going public than a dead Indian language. By the 1750's, Italian opera had become largely incomprehensible with the emphasis placed on vocal display and acrobatics. That the audience of *Satyagraha* cannot understand the libretto is not an exceptional occurrence. What is interesting is that the Sanskrit text of the libretto, even if understood, has absolutely no relation to the action on stage.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, whatever reservations one might have about the liberties Glass took with the historical record and with the Sanskrit text fade into obscurity when one views Achim Freyer's 1983 production<sup>12</sup> where the *Gītā's* battlefield becomes a circus filled with absurd props, trapeze artists and a Gandhi who holds a huge barbell that bends to the floor while he sings tripping about under its weight. The agrarian collective is presented as a dystopia with rags on the floor where the actors move aimlessly, reposition ladders, and run in place to somehow depict Gandhi's vow of civil disobedience. Freyer's Second Act opens in a bar with dwarves serving drinks from cocktail shakers and crawling menacingly after Gandhi. In the final act, a blue electric snowman with a dove over his head wheels in as a finale<sup>13</sup> and an army of zombie-like figures in slow motion advance amidst blinding red lights, Nazi-costumed guards and police dogs. Even if we acknowledge that opera, as an art form, is licensed to entertain both the irrational and the

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Anne Williams for her insights into opera and literature.

<sup>11</sup> The repeal of the Black Law (Act 1, scene 3) is accompanied by the following verses from chapter 18 of the *Gītā*: "Whoever gives up a deed because it causes pain...follows the way of darkness" and ends with similar sentiments taken from chapter 3: "So curse the wheel set in motion and who here fails to match his turning...lives out his life in vain."

<sup>12</sup> Freyer prides himself as the last and true disciple of Brecht. As perhaps is fitting for a former East German artist, he now plies his craft at the Los Angeles Opera

<sup>13</sup> Another confusing aspect of the Freyer production is that he gives us three tenors who perform the role of Gandhi, one who acts, one who sings, and one who moves about the stage. Their voices and aspects differ considerably from each other.



hysterical, we can safely conclude that, with Freyer's production, the text of the *Gītā* is transformed into a kitsch spectacle.

What can we conclude from all these appropriation and misappropriations? I have tried to show in this brief overview how the early European reception of the *Gītā* introduced several hermeneutical problems involved in engaging the Other. In their initial translations and commentaries, Schlegel, Humboldt and Hegel questioned how philosophical thought could be understood outside its own tradition. In contrast to Schlegel and Humboldt, Hegel foreclosed the very possibility of such understanding, when he rejected the notion of a common universal meaning and inflicted the standards from one culture (his own) upon another (Indian). The impossibility of reading the Other with a European mode of understanding resulted, therefore, in nothing more than an appropriation and colonization of the Other, since the hermeneutical project had been aborted. I then examined how the resulting lacuna were subsequently be filled in by popular notions of the esoteric East in the American reception. Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Eliot, Weil, and Philip Glass all exhibit this tendency. The *Gītā* does not function as itself but rather as an exotic tool. Whitman probably borrowed from its mystic vision to support his pantheism. Emerson was somewhat more serious in his expropriations of Indian thought, to the degree that he partially plagiarized it. He and Thoreau used the *Gītā* to strengthen their critique of 18<sup>th</sup>- century rationalism and 19<sup>th</sup>-century materialism (Miller 1986:155). Eliot understood the *Gītā* best, even if he used it as an exotic vehicle for his Anglican message. For these American poets, the *Gītā*, as a sacred text performed in a sacred language, added *gravitas*, legitimacy and a mystical allure to their work.

But all this exotic borrowing suggests a less radical and, might I say, decadent and exclusionary interpretation that we see epitomized in Weil and Glass. Beginning in the nineteenth century, India supplied Westerners (particularly Americans) with an alibi in the true sense of the term, an elsewhere onto which they could project their longings. Weil offers a wonderful example of this dynamic and, to a lesser degree, so does Glass. People who are world-weary or have lost faith can seek in the India a new system of belief. They can travel farther from home than the ordinary seeker of Truth. Esoteric quests are, therefore, not egalitarian; they tend to foster elitism. It suits those for whom quotidian experience does not suffice,

those who seek the super-ordinate in order to invest their existences with greater value and intensity. In other words, it suits philosophers, poets, and artists, those very individuals who arrogantly believe that, while the divine spark is present in us all, not everyone is capable of reuniting his spark with the Divine. Emerson exemplifies this elitist tendency when in a letter of October 19, 1856 to William Rounseville Alger, the editor of *The Poetry of the East*, he wrote:

“When it was proposed to me once to reprint ‘The Bhagavat’ in Boston, I shrank back and asked time, thinking it not only some desecration to publish our prayers in the ‘Daily Herald’ but also that those students who were ripe for it would rather take a little pains and search for it, than find it on the pavement. It would however be as neglected a book, if Harpers published it, as it is now in libraries.” (Williams 1923: 483)

At what time did Emerson come to the conclusion that he “owned” or was the custodian of this text and could decide if, when, and how it should be disseminated to the rabble? I suspect that those engaged in a Promethean flight are often attracted to the exotic precisely because of its elitist potential. When Weil writes to her mother in the midst of the Holocaust, that she should be meditating on Krishna or when Glass travels to India on Rockefeller money to explore spirituality in two month-installments, both are considerably more elitist and pretentious than those poets who sprinkled their work with colorful Sanskrit words.

But, it is Freyer’s production of Glass’s operatic *Gītā* that brings me back to Hegel. I think we can all agree that Hegel deserved our opprobrium for refusing to make a place for India in world philosophy. And I think we can acknowledge and respect the imperfect attempts of Schlegel, Humboldt, Emerson, Thoreau, and Eliot to engage Indian religious thought. But how should we read Glass’s insertion of himself as an avatar of Gandhi, the dissident? Are we supposed to accept this self-serving and grandiose equation? And how should we respond to Freyer’s trivialization of the *Gītā* in a *cirque de soleil* setting, with Gandhi stumbling under barbells, attacked by drunken Nazi dwarves and singing the *Gītā* to Glass’s repetitive ascending scales in mispronounced Sanskrit? (What would have been the reception of an opera that used the Koran in such a fashion?) These various readings of the *Gītā* should give us pause. Once the persona of the translator, poet, philosopher, and artist overshadows the text, we then become engaged in a process of self-reification from which little enlightenment can be expected.

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