

Eric J. Sharpe

In 1985, the Bhagavad Gita (hereinafter abbreviated to the simpler form "Gita", without diacritical marks) will have been available to English-speaking readers for two hundred years. Appearing in English in 1785, during the middle years of the nineteenth century Latin, German and French translations followed, providing the reading public in much of Europe and America with an incomparable and at the same time compact first-hand insight into Hindu religion and philosophy. Since 1785, translations of the Gita have indeed provided the western world with its most usual introduction to Hindu thought - often a solitary and self-sufficient introduction, since many readers appear not to have found it necessary to pass beyond the Gita, preferring its consummate synthesis to the study of the independent elements out of which it emerged.

With the forthcoming bicentenary in mind, I have begun to prepare a survey, not of the Gita's many European-language translations, but rather of the reactions of the western mind on reading them. It is unlikely that this survey will be fully comprehensive, however. Up and down the western world, the Gita was read assiduously, inspiring not only more and more translations, but also numerous detached observations, systematic commentaries and the occasional partisan squabble. To have read and digested all the publications involved is therefore a vast undertaking, and probably incapable of completion. The broad outlines are, however, clear enough. The study falls conventionally into two parts, in the first of which the Gita was looked upon either as a specimen of the literature of ancient India, inviting comparison with Greek and Latin writings; or as a source-book in the

transcendental wisdom of the East. In the second period, beginning in the years around 1885, the Gita came to occupy a position of central importance in the ideology of the Indian national movement. From being regarded as a survival out of India's remote past, it won a position (which it has since those days never lost) as the inspiration of India's present and the promise of India's future. It was only natural, therefore, that in this second period, new questions should have been asked and answered by western readers, while some of the older questions retreated into the background.

This present paper is limited in two ways. First, in that it deals only with the West's initial encounter with the Gita down to approximately 1885, the year in which Edwin Arnold published The Song Celestial. And secondly, in being, even within the limits of one hundred years, severely selective. On this occasion I can do little save merely to point to a few of the landmarks along the way, and to narrate rather than analyse. Doubtless there will therefore be as many omissions as there are inclusions - a distortion which I trust will be rectified when my fuller study finally sees the light of day.

Before I proceed, I should like to take a moment to justify more fully my choice of subject, and to locate it within the category of "intercultural hermeneutics".

Hermeneutics as such is of course a widely-accepted concept in the study of religion, and needs no explanation from my side. Mostly, however, it has operated from a position within a given tradition, and has directed its attentions mainly toward whatever scripture may be considered as authoritative by that tradition. Clearly, though, there is a growing need for a study of comparative, or intercultural hermeneutics - by which I mean the study of the interpretation of scriptural data provided from within someone else's

tradition. During the last two centuries in particular, believers the world over have had, at least in principle, wide and in the end almost unrestricted access to one another's holy scriptures. In view of this, it is surprising that scholars should not have devoted more time to considering precisely how believers (and non-believers) react to the perusal of scripture originating in traditions other than their own.

In 1968 Guy Richard Welbon published his book The Buddhist Nirvāna and its Western Interpreters, in which he demonstrated some of the principles on which comparative hermeneutics might profitably be pursued. In his preface he wrote that "Problems in intercultural hermeneutics can be approached most satisfactorily sub specie particularis."¹⁾ This was sound advice. In isolating a single Buddhist concept, that of Nirvāna, and in examining the ways in which a representative selection of western scholars had dealt with it, he was able to achieve far more than had he chosen, in the grandiose manner of an earlier tradition of scholarship, to discuss the vast and unwieldy question of "western attitudes to Buddhism".

This present study is intended to be a modest exercise in the comparative, or intercultural hermeneutics of the Gita. Its rationale is similar to that found in Welbon's book: like his, my study "may be taken as a footnote to the comprehensive understanding of European [and in this present case, also American] intellectual history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries".²⁾ In this case, though, the encounter is not with an idea, but with an entirely specific scripture of manageable size. Nevertheless in the end it may well prove to be the case that to study western interpretations of the Gita is in fact tantamount to studying in microcosm western reactions to something much larger - Indian religion and culture in its entirety.

When and how the Gita first came to the attention of European visitors to India I have not been able to ascertain with absolute certainty, and it may be that there is still material to be discovered from Portuguese sources. The West's effective encounter with the Gita began, however, at the end of the eighteenth century, when it found its first translator in the person of Charles (later Sir Charles) Wilkins (1749-1836), a senior merchant employed by the East India Company and a man under the direct patronage of the then Governor of Bengal, the ill-fated Warren Hastings.³⁾ Wilkins had arrived in Bengal in 1770, and took up the study of Sanskrit eight years later, apparently with the ambitious purpose of making a complete translation of the Mahābhārata, which was coming to light in a classically educated age as (among other things) an interesting parallel to the works of Homer and as a new and exotic example of the emergent category of "folk poetry". Work proceeded slowly, however, and in the early 1780s Hastings urged Wilkins to print a translation of the Gita separately.⁴⁾ By early in 1785 it was presented to the Directors of the East India Company, who were sufficiently impressed to order that it be published, provided that the total cost did not exceed ₹ 200. Later in 1785, The Eṅgavāt-Geetā or Dialogues of Krēeshnā and Ārjōōn appeared, announced (in an advertisement dated May 30th, 1785) as "one of the greatest curiosities ever presented to the literary world", and with a prefatory letter, dated October 4th, 1784, from the pen of Warren Hastings himself.⁵⁾

In his letter, Hastings suggested to the Chairman of the East India Company that one might be cool but not unfriendly when reading this strange new document. He called the Gita "a very curious specimen of the Literature, the Mythology, and Morality of the ancient Hindoos"⁶⁾ - and we note that he referred it to the "ancient" and not to the "modern" period in Indian history. In judging it, he said, the western reader should exclude

from his mind

... all rules drawn from the ancient or modern literature of Europe, all references to such sentiments or manners as are become the standards of propriety for opinion and action in our own modes of life, and equally all appeals to our revealed tenets of religion, and moral duty.⁷⁾

Read it, he seems to be saying, as one would read the Iliad or the Odyssey, or even as one would read Milton, and no one's susceptibilities need suffer. Not that there was any real danger of offence being created; for in Hastings' opinion, with some few qualifications, the Gita was

... a performance of great originality; of a sublimity of conception, reasoning and diction, almost unequalled; and a single exception, among all the known religions of mankind, of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines.⁸⁾

It is a little hard to tell what precisely may have been in Hastings' mind in making this particular comment, though it seems to have been prompted by his reading of the Gita as a treatise on the sacredness of moral duty and the necessity for action.⁹⁾

Wilkins for his part had little to say about the personal impression which the Gita had made upon him. In a short Translator's Preface he did however note that the Brahmins had previously been rather reluctant to grant foreigners free access to it;¹⁰⁾ we must remember that in the 1780s it had not yet become the widely-read popular work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Brahmins considered it, he said, to embody

"all the grand mysteries of their religion", and "grand mysteries" are not to be disseminated freely to the uninitiated. Otherwise he considered the main purpose of the Gita to have been the setting up of "the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead" over against "idolatrous sacrifices, and the worship of images"; this was certainly an interpretation which appealed to the age of Deism.

It is, however, worth mentioning in passing that a contemporary Hindu theist like Ram Mohun Roy did not in fact appeal to the Gita for confirmation of his religious views, resting his case instead upon the Upanishads and upon an inter-religious consensus concerning the nature and attributes of God. This is not to say that he was not well acquainted with the Gita, though. I am assured by a Bengali scholar that he wrote a bhashya on the Gita, though this has been unaccountably lost. That he regarded it as "law" rather than as "gospel" is clear from a polemical pamphlet, A Second Conference between an advocate for, and an opponent of, the practice of burning widows alive (1820), in which he calls it "the essence of all Shastrus". But since this hardly falls within the category of "western" interpretations, it must regretfully be left on one side.¹¹⁾

During the earlier part of the nineteenth century, Wilkins' translation remained the English-speaking world's major source of information about the Gita; thanks to Wilkins, the Gita was read by literati on both sides of the Atlantic, though on the whole not before the sober concerns of the Age of Reason had begun to give place to the enthusiasms of Romanticism.

Some of the interests of the Romantic movement, which began in the years around 1800, have been described (or perhaps caricatured) as "The

melancholy sound of the post-horn and the ruined castle by moonlight, the fairy princess, the blue flower and the fountains dreamily playing in the splendour of the summer night..." 12) But these were no more than the stage properties of a movement based on a passionate longing for the unattainable, the remote and the exotic, and on the cultivation of the individual's "feelings". To the Romantics, few of whom actually set foot in India (and those who did, had mixed feelings about it), 13) that mysterious country served temporarily as a focus of beauty and a place of emotional refuge, and as the idealized source of that sense of cosmic oneness which they had failed to find under the analytical and moralistic banner of the Age of Reason. These emotions the Romantics could express in verse or in prose, in music and art - and in antiquarian scholarship. To their enthusiasms the literature of the East, and not least the Gita, made its full contribution.

In Britain, to take only one example, we find the poet Robert Southey writing works like The Curse of Kehama (1810), a lurid narrative poem in preparation for which, according to G.D. Bearce, he had read

... as widely as possible in the inadequate literature about India. He purported to understand a great deal about the philosophy and society of India from reading translations of Indian law, drama, and the sacred writings of the Hindus, especially the Bhagavad-gita. 14)

But it was in the circle of the "New England Transcendentalists" that the Gita made its deepest impression. Although it had come to the notice of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1830s, the book itself did not fall into Emerson's hands (on loan from James Elliot Cabot) until 1845; but once arrived, it made a profound impression on the eclectic amateur Orientalists

of the group. Its advent was hailed in slightly curious terms by Emerson on June 17, 1845, in a letter to a friend:

The only other event is the arrival in Concord of the "Bhagvat-Geeta", the much renowned book of Buddhism(!), extracts from which I have often admired but never before held the book in my hands. 15)

Arthur C. Christy has written that "No one Oriental volume that ever came to Concord was more influential than the Bhagavadgita." 16) To Emerson it was "the first of Books"; for Thoreau, its philosophy was "stupendous and cosmogonical" - sentiments echoed in various ways by others of the brethren. The general impression is, it can scarcely be denied, one of romantic Schwärmerei. And certainly, Emerson and Thoreau were in no way concerned with whatever the Gita might perchance mean, or have meant, to the heart and mind of India. The important thing was that it spoke, and spoke directly, to them, engaged as they were in fighting themselves free from the twin gods of tradition and rhetoric and toward religious and philosophical independence. This being so, it is easy to assume that the Gita was of value to them chiefly because it was a piece of exotic pantheism. This, though, would be to do the Transcendentalists an injustice. Remember what Emerson wrote in his essay on "The Over-Soul":

Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this, namely, that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there [my italics]. 17)

It was this sense of duty, Wordsworth's "Stern Daughter of the Voice of God", which acted as a brake on the Transcendentalists' speculations.

But what is the Gita, if not a treatise on the sacredness of duty (dharma)? On this point, Deists, Romantics and Transcendentalists held common ground.

Henry David Thoreau took at least the memory of the Gita with him on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers in the late 1830s, and wrote about it in A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, first published in 1849. Here Thoreau sees the Gita not as pure morality, but pure intellectuality. "The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvata-Geeta." 18) To forsake works Thoreau finds to be a somewhat remote ideal; after all, the things that one has to do are so trivial:

The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane? 19)

In the end, Thoreau reads the Gita almost as a treatise on eastern "quietism", or at least quietness, from which modern Europe and America desperately need to learn something other than pragmatic activity. The Gita is sane and sublime, and "Its sanity and sublimity have impressed the minds even of soldiers and merchants" - evidently Thoreau is here thinking of Hastings and Wilkins. 20) In comparison with "English sense", "Hindoo wisdom never perspired". 21) What does it matter if it is not altogether intelligible? "Give me a sentence which no intelligence can understand. There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it, and under its words a kind of blood must circulate for ever." 22)

The Gita is also mentioned in Walden, most notably in a celebrated passage prompted in part by the use of Walden ice for refrigeration on the high seas:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial... I lay down the book and go to my well for water, the lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra... The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. 23)

With this we may compare an entry in Emerson's Journal, describing a "magnificent day" spent with the Gita:

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 is another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. 24)

Bronson Alcott is restrained in comparison, though his journal records for January 25, 1849, "I read the Bagvat Geeta" as the only event of the day. 25) He was probably no less enthusiastic about the Gita than were his more famous friends, but he had less ink in his veins.

Meanwhile, the Gita had also begun to make its mark on the Continent of Europe, again mainly as a result of the attentions of the Romantics. In 1823 a Latin translation, the work of August Wilhelm von Scilegel, was

published in Germany. ²³⁾ Concerning this work Wilhelm von Humboldt was later to write:

This translation is so masterly and at the same time so conscientious and faithful, it treats so intelligently the philosophical content of the poem, and is such good Latin besides, that it would be a great pity if it were used only for a better understanding of the text, and not read for its own sake as well. ²⁴⁾

We might well say, in fact, that Schlegel and Humboldt together brought the Gita to the attention of the German-speaking world, Schlegel through his translation and Humboldt mainly through a lecture delivered on June 30, 1825 to the Berlin Academy of Sciences, Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gītā bekannte Episode des Mahābhārata (published in 1826). ²⁵⁾

A formidable polymath, Humboldt had begun the serious study of the Gita in 1824, partly as a result of his connections with the Sanskritists of Paris, among them Max Müller's teacher Eugène Burnouf. His lecture of 1826 however comprised mainly a summary of the Gita's contents, since he argued, not unreasonably, that knowledge of the text would have to precede the attempt to theorize about it. But it would be wrong to assume that there is no theory in his account. Although Humboldt's biographer Haym calls his lecture "ein Muster klarer, vollständiger und treuer Darstellung", ²⁶⁾ it was clear enough even at this time that Humboldt was looking at the Gita as a philosophical poem rather than as a religious treatise. He read it as Naturdichtung, not essentially different from what he had found in Schiller, ²⁷⁾ and was soothed by it as though listening to music. ²⁸⁾

It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find that in a fairly recent

study, Marianne Cowen says that Humboldt found in the Gita his own "spiritual ancestors".²⁹ Basically, she says, this is a matter of "the Perennial Philosophy", the essential message of all mysticism, eastern and western, past and present.³⁰⁾ This can be misleading, however - an anachronistic as well as a vague judgment. It was in Humboldt's case not only a matter of reading the Gita with an eye to the spiritual perception of the oneness of all things, or to a discovery of the transcendental essence of all religions. It was equally a deeply moral insight - understandably so, for anyone brought up on the Kantian ideas of duty and the categorical moral imperative was almost bound to respond in some way to the Gita's emphasis on the immutable dharna, as well as to the depths of bhakti devotion. In this, Humboldt's response was not unlike that of Warren Hastings, or of Emerson, who was never, even in his most visionary moments, free of the profound sense of moral obligation.

Otherwise, what chiefly appealed to Humboldt in the Gita was its originality and its simplicity, at least when compared with the intricacies of the Brahmanical systems. Krishna's doctrine, he wrote,

... develops in such a peculiarly individual way, [and] it is, so far as I can judge, so much less burdened with sophistry and mysticism, that it deserves our special attention, standing as it does as an independent work of art...³¹⁾

It is perhaps worth noting that Humboldt was here using the word "mysticism" not to express the heights of spiritual attainment and insight (Mystik), but in a pejorative sense (Mystizismus), common in the early nineteenth century, meaning an unhealthy reliance on the irrational and the emotional in the realm of religion and thought generally.³²⁾

Of Humboldt's enthusiasm for the Gita there could be no doubt. He wrote to a friend that it contained "... wohl das Tiefste und Erhabenste, was die Welt aufzuweisen habe", ³³⁾ and his biographer Haym notes that both as a translator (in the broad sense of the word) and expositor, he sought, both spiritually and formally to make Krishna's teaching his own. ³⁴⁾ This may fairly be described as the Romantic consensus on the Gita, to the extent to which it was actually known: that its contents were universally human, and that its message of oneness, duty and devotion were such as to lift it high above local or partisan concerns.

Before proceeding to a brief review of some of the critical questions raised by western Indologists faced with the text of the Gita, we may at this stage pause for a moment to glance at another question, that of the "mysticism" of the Gita. We have already noted Humboldt's delight at the absence of Mysticism from its pages. A diametrically opposite view was taken, thirty years later, by the English writer Robert Alfred Vaughan (1823-1857).

In 1856 Vaughan published a book entitled Hours with the Mystics: A Contribution to the History of Religious Opinion (6th ed. 1893), which for almost half a century was virtually the only book on "mysticism" in the English language. In it, though mentioned only briefly and in passing, the Gita received some unexpected criticism - unexpected, that is, to those viewing the "mysticism" question in the light of later assumptions. Vaughan was, as it happens, a Free Churchman, whose father had been Principal of a theological college; and he may be taken as an excellent example of a type of intellectual Nonconformity not uncommon in mid-

nineteenth century England. He appears to have chosen the subject of "mysticism" rather more as a literary exercise than out of profound conviction - which fact may account, among other things, for the peculiar dialogue form in which the book is cast. Its "Book the Second" is entitled "Early Oriental Mysticism", and it is here that the Gita puts in its appearance.

Vaughan had no knowledge of Sanskrit, nor was he concerned to interpret the Gita independently of other "mystical" writings. His source was of course Wilkins' translation. But for the Gita's brand of "mysticism" he had no manner of use. In Arjuna's being taught "to disregard the consequences of his actions", Vaughan saw something morally reprehensible:

I find here [he wrote] not a 'holy indifference', as with the French Quietists, but an indifference which is unholy. The sainte indifference of the west essayed to rise above self, to welcome happiness and misery alike as the will of Supreme Love. The odious indifference of these orientals inculcates the supremacy of selfishness as the wisdom of a god... 35)

What might be the cause of this? In Vaughan's view, the blame was to be placed upon the doctrine of metempsychosis, which resulted - so he believed - in the setting aside of the moral imperative. The "Hindoo adept" was able to set aside good and evil at will, and hence in the Gita, "Mysticism...is born armed completely with its worst extravagances" - a serious and indeed fatal beginning, "for responsibility ends where insanity begins". 36)

It is curious that Vaughan should have been led to this conclusion, since we will recall that it was precisely the Gita's emphasis on duty

which seemed to have appealed most strongly to the pragmatic Warren Hastings, and which certainly played a part in the reflections of the New England Transcendentalists where the Gita was concerned. Carrying out duty for its own (or Krishna's) sake was however evidently not an option which Vaughan could accept; duty to him was the expression of a response to the sovereign will of God, and true mysticism (Mystik) consisted in the conforming of self to "the will of Supreme Love". Separate the moral imperative from the notion of the will of God and - so Vaughan thought - what was left was moral indifference. Ally it to the belief in transmigration, and to the conviction that the true Self is merely encapsulated temporarily within a human body, which it casts off on death as a man might cast off his worn-out clothes, and there remains only a non-moral exercise in irrationality and make-believe.

Among the Romantics, attention was focussed chiefly on the universal message of the Gita, only incidental notice being taken of the purely literary critical problems posed by its text. But during the whole of the nineteenth century, western Orientalists showed an understandable interest in questions concerning the date and origin of the Gita. It would be well to remember that at this time, one side of the western intellectual tradition was almost obsessively historical in its emphases, and also that before branching out into Indology, most western interpreters had been thoroughly trained in the Latin and Greek classics. In dealing with the Sanskrit texts, therefore, they tended to work along somewhat similar literary critical lines, and produced theories of authorship similar to those which accompanied, for instance, the Homeric corpus of

writings. The Hindu Epic material as a whole they looked on as a literary deposit belonging essentially to the remote past, though one which had unaccountably (though excitingly) survived down to modern times. Questions of authorship and date permitted of few firm answers, and the link between the Mahābhārata and its traditional author, Vyāsa, appeared to be no greater than that between the Iliad and Homer; probably it was far more tenuous. The events which the Mahābhārata described might, like the Trojan War, have had some remote foundation in fact, but probably not a large foundation, and there was no Schliemann on hand to attempt to excavate the Kurukshetra battlefield. Arjuna and Krishna might perhaps have been historical figures, but they were probably at best legendary, and might even be completely mythical. The Krishna stories in the Purāṇas did nothing to improve matters, since their apparent association with the world of practical erotica created an instinctive barrier which the West was not able to overcome at that time. At all events, western scholars generally felt that there were two Krishnas in the Indian tradition, bound together by nothing save a name.

However, the connection between the Purāṇas and the Gita under the name of Krishna did send some western scholars off on an independent line of inquiry. Given that some of the birth stories of Krishna were similar to the legends surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus Christ, and that the Purāṇas and the Apocryphal Gospels contained comparable material, might the connection extend to the Gita? Might some of the Gita's devotional teachings be evidence of the early presence of Christianity in India, and might they have come directly from a Christian source? An attempt to demonstrate such a dependence was made by a certain Franz Lorinser, who published in 1869 a metrical translation and commentary on

the Gita, Die Bhagavadgītā, übersetzt und erläutert, in which he expressed a conviction that the author of the Gita not only knew and in many cases used the writings of the New Testament, but also in general incorporated Christian ideas and views into his system. ³⁷⁾

Lorinser's theories found surprisingly little support, however. Their credibility depended, among other things, on the Gita being dated to a period subsequent to the arrival of Christianity in India; and even those few scholars who were prepared to date the Gita to, say, AD 200 were in general unwilling to allow that there could have been an established Christian presence in India (the Thomas legends notwithstanding) as early as that. Both were highly controversial questions, on which there was nothing approaching a consensus. Some limited support for Lorinser's theory was however forthcoming from Oxford's Boden Professor of Sanskrit, Sir Monier Monier-Williams, in his book Hinduism (1878), though even this staunch Evangelical Christian felt that in the last resort, some of Lorinser's comparisons "... seem mere coincidences of language, which might occur independently". ³⁸⁾

Otherwise, what Monier-Williams has to say about the Gita may be taken as fairly typical of the conclusions which western critical scholarship had reached by about the 1870s - that the Gita contains independent Vedāntic, Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Bhakti lines of thought, which have been brought together to create what Monier-Williams calls "the Eclectic school of Hindu philosophy". ³⁹⁾ But which of these strands might have come first? Monier-Williams' conclusion was that the Gita's root-stock had been Vedāntic (after all, was it not known as an Upanishad?), and that the Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Bhakti elements came later, as the result of the efforts of a poet who, being dissatisfied with the various separate systems which surrounded

him, was driven to construct an eclectic school of his own. 40) Oddly, the epic and dramatic element was at that time left out of the reckoning almost entirely. But these were at best speculations.

Toward the end of the first century of Gita interpretation in the West, there can be no doubt as to who was the most influential of scholarly Indologists. Friedrich Max Müller had been working in Oxford since the 1840s, had completed in 1862 his monumental edition of the Rig Veda, and had begun his equally monumental series of Sacred Books of the East. Oddly, in view of his background in the German Romantic movement, it must be recorded that compared with his beloved and idealized Vedas, his interest in the Gita was slight. Indeed, he was apt to lament that the Gita, along with other specimens of post-Vedic Hindu literature, had aroused more interest in the West than it properly deserved. For instance, lecturing in 1882 to candidates for the Indian Civil Service, he had this to say:

It was a real misfortune that Sanskrit literature became first known to the learned public in Europe through the second, or, what I have called, the Renaissance Period. The Bhagavadgita ... [and other writings of the period] ... are, no doubt, extremely curious ... [and when they were discovered, appeared to be of great antiquity] ... But all this is now changed. 41)

It was not that the Gita was not old, but that from Max Müller's point of view, it was simply not old enough. Much of this "younger" literature - and here he refers explicitly to Nāla and Śakuntalā - he went so far as to relegate to the category of entertainment. Burnouf, he wrote,

"was not likely to waste his life on pretty Sanskrit ditties" 42) - not that the Gita is a "pretty Sanskrit ditty", but it is not very much more, and the best that he can find to say about it in his lectures is that it is"... a rather popular and exoteric exposition of Vedāntic doctrines..." 43)

In his 1888 Gifford Lectures, incidentally, Max Müller was one of those who took up the subject of Lorinser's theories. Writing on the general subject of bhakti, he conceded that there were resemblances between Christian conceptions of faith and love and those qualities as they appear in the Gita. But for all that, he was not prepared to support Lorinser:

It is strange [he wrote] that these scholars should not see that what is natural in one country is natural in another also. If fear, reverence, and worship of the Supreme God could become devotion and love with Semitic people, why not in India also? 44)

Max Müller did not in fact believe the Gita to be of great antiquity, and he was prepared to admit that Christian influence might be a chronological possibility. The theory was not, however, a religious necessity:

Still, even if, chronologically, Christian influences were possible at the time when the poem was finished, there is no necessity for admitting them. 45)

Mention of Max Müller leads naturally to a brief mention that in 1882 there appeared, in the Sacred Books of the East series (Volume VIII), Kashinath Trimbak Talang's well-known version of the Gita. I do not propose to deal with this work in detail. I would, however, mention that in his introduction, Telang virtually throws up his hands in despair at the complexity of the critical issues involved in the study of the Gita, writing that

...it is almost impossible to lay down even a single proposition respecting any important matter connected with the Bhagavadgîtâ, about which any ... consensus can be said to exist. 46)

On the whole, though, Telang opts for a date before the second century BC, at the close of the Upanishadic period, of which the Gita is therefore one of the youngest representatives.

In 1885, the Gita had been in western hands for a century, and it was in a way appropriate that the unofficial centenary should have been marked by the publication of what is perhaps the most celebrated, and in some ways the most influential, of Gita translations, Edwin Arnold's The Song Celestial.

Edwin Arnold (1832-1904) was one of those many Victorian authors and poets who enjoyed enormous fame in their heyday, but who are little read at the present time. In fact almost the only thing for which Arnold is remembered nowadays is the indirect role he played in introducing Gandhi to the Gita. In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote: "I have read almost all the English translations of it [the Gita], and I regard Sir Edwin Arnold's as the best. He has been faithful to the text, and yet it does not read like a translation." 47) It is also significant that Gandhi was persuaded to tackle the Gita by certain Theosophical friends, since as we shall in due course see, the Theosophists were particularly well disposed toward the Gita, and not unnaturally regarded Arnold as an ally.

Arnold's sympathies were, however, Theosophical only indirectly and by implication. He might perhaps be characterized as the broadest

of a notable generation of broad-church Anglicans. He was influenced by such men as F.D. Maurice and F.W. Farrar, and while at Oxford had been tutored by A.P. Stanley, later Dean of Westminster and a close friend of Friedrich Max Müller. In 1852, at the age of twenty, Arnold won the Newdigate Poetry Prize for a poem entitled "The Feast of Belshazzar", which began:

Not by one portal, or one path alone
God's holy messages to men are known. 48)

The years 1857 to 1860 he spent in India as the Principal of the Government School (Deccan College) in Poona, returning to England and a career in journalism and freelance writing. His interests were world-wide, and his personal philosophy tended more and more in the direction of a form of Transcendentalism. In 1868 he married the great-niece of William Ellery Channing, and he was a friend of Emerson and of Walt Whitman. It is perhaps also worth noting that his youngest son became a convert to Theosophy.

Arnold's most celebrated excursion into the world of Oriental thought, his poem on the Buddha, The Light of Asia (1879) was written, so his most recent biographer tells us, "as a witness for religious liberalism". 49) Not unnaturally, this gained him a considerable following among the Theosophists, for whom the most extreme liberalism was part of the very air they breathed; and he was very well received by the Theosophists (many of whom were at this time crypto-Buddhists) on a visit which he paid to India and Ceylon in 1885-1886. But by this time he had further added to his reputation as a literary Orientalist through his version of the Gita.

In preparing to write his version, Arnold is said to have worked with

the Latin translation of Schlegel (1823) and the English translation of John Davies (1882), and appears not to have used Wilkins. The Song Celestial is of course a free interpretation rather than a literal translation (though it does embrace a few minor ventures in textual criticism). It has been said that

...there is no literary translation that has superseded this one. Today it is the only one of Arnold's poems that is still regularly read and the one on which his future reputation must rest. 50)

It is sometimes suggested that when in 1891 Arnold published The Light of the World about the life of Jesus, he did so mainly as a "reversion" to Christianity after too many dangerous adventures among the religions of the East. This I for one do not believe. Certainly he was aware that he had been criticized for his involvements with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Japan. But to assume that he came to believe that there had been an imbalance in his religious life which was in need of correction, is to misunderstand the nature and ethos of late nineteenth-century liberal Christianity, which in fact saw the great non-Christian traditions less as competitors to the Christian Gospel than as legitimate preparations for its message. The Gita therefore had its own integrity and value, just as had the life of the Buddha; but it was not, in Arnold's view, sufficient of itself, since it needed to find its fulfilment in Christ. Significantly, in The Light of the World, Arnold makes the Magi who brought their gifts to the infant Jesus, not Zoroastrians (or whatever) but Buddhists! They might equally have been warriors from the Kurukshetra battlefield.

Perhaps Arnold's personal religion was "magnificently unorthodox", at least by the officially accepted standards of his day, but he was not

alone among Christians in seeing the Gita as "celestial", and therefore as worthy of the deepest respect. That he finally, in The Light of the World, appeared to be moving back to what his contemporaries clearly regarded for the most part as uniquely revealed Truth, is to misread the evidence. He was not moving back, but (as he saw it) onward and upward, in the manner of all nineteenth-century religious evolutionists.

With the publication of The Song Celestial we have come to the end of the first century of Gita interpretation in the West. It is worth noting that practically everything on which we have reported actually took place, geographically speaking, in the West, and as a consequence of the publication of a series of more or less adequate translations. Two things have emerged from our survey thus far. On the one hand - and leaving the early Deists aside - we have seen a resolute attempt on the part of some readers to build the central message (or what appeared to be the central message) of the Gita into a system of instinctive, "transcendental" philosophy, and to find in it support for a world-view already held for other reasons; to this enterprise, questions of authorship and dating were strictly irrelevant. On the other, we have seen the beginning of an attempt to subsume the Gita under the categories of literary criticism. Approached from this angle, the general view appears to have been that although nothing could be said with certainty about the absolute age or the origin of the poem, it had apparently begun life as an Upanishad. Its philosophical and religious foundation had therefore seemingly been Vedāntic, though it had afterward had elements of Sāṁkhya, Yoga and Bhakti incorporated into it. In neither case was the Gita

considered as a living Hindu scripture, part of the ongoing religious tradition of Hindu India.

Beginning at about this time, however, a great change begins to come over the situation, due almost entirely to the new role which the Gita began to play from the 1880s on, in the life of the Indian national movement. Certainly some of the old questions continued to be asked and answered by western scholars; but to their number were added a host of new questions about the capacity of the Gita to continue to be a source of religious (and increasingly also political) inspiration. Two new interpretative schools emerged, in support of or in response to the challenge of what some called "the neo-Krishna movement": the Theosophists on the one hand and the Christian missionaries on the other. In comparison with the first century of Gita interpretation in the West, the second century was characterized by being played out less in the geographical West and more in India itself; equally it was characterized by a new spirit of give-and-take (at its best, dialogue, at its worst, mud-slinging). Before 1885, remarkably few Hindus were prepared to rise up and challenge the West's reading of the Gita. After 1885, not only did the Gita rapidly become the supremely authoritative, and in some respects all-sufficient holy scripture for the whole of "educated India"; it became equally the nationally aware Hindu's declaration of spiritual independence, a symbol of nationhood on which the mleccha might comment only with the greatest circumspection. The western interpreter therefore was apt to find his theories and his constructions challenged and contradicted -- perhaps most notably in respect of the Gita's unity and with regard to the question of "the Krishna of history".

In short, while from 1785 to 1885 the Gita appeared to the West

as a fascinating document, after 1885 it became a powerful symbol, to which the older canons of interpretation were capable of answering only in part. A consideration of these later developments must however await some future occasion.

References

- 1) Welbon, The Buddhist Nirvāna and its Western Interpreters (1968), p. viii.
- 2) Ibid., loc.cit.
- 3) Dict. Nat. Biogr. LXI (1900), p. 259 f.
- 4) Marshall (ed.), The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century (1970), p. 12.
- 5) Reprinted, together with Wilkins' preface, in Marshall, op. cit., pp. 184 ff.
- 6) Hastings, in Wilkins, op. cit., p. 5 Marshall, op. cit., p. 184.
- 7) Wilkins, p. 7. Marshall, p. 185 f.
- 8) Wilkins, p. 10. Marshall, p. 187.
- 9) See Davies, Strange Destiny: A Biography of Warren Hastings (1935), pp. 343 ff.
- 10) Wilkins, p. 23. Marshall, pp. 192 ff.
- 11) Although it will be argued at a later stage (though not in this paper) that the Gita did not become "popular" much before the 1880s, it should be noted that in his pamphlet,

Ram Mohun Roy states that "The Geeta is not a rare work..." and that "the Geeta and its Commentaries are available to all". There is no contradiction here. Previously it was indeed well known and widely read, but only among the learned ("Let the learned decide the point." Roy). Here Roy is writing as a pundit to pundits, not as a mass communicator to the general public. It was only during and after the 1880s that the Gita came to be mass produced and widely and freely circulated.

- 12) The quotation is from Karl Barth, From Rousseau to Ritschl (ET 1959), p. 226.
- 13) Cf. Bearce, British Attitudes to India, 1784-1858 (1961), pp. 112 ff.
- 14) Ibid., p. 103.
- 15) Rusk (ed.), The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1939), Vol. III, p. 290.
- 16) Quoted by George Hendrick, in his Introduction to the 1959 (New York) reprint edition of Wilkins, p. xi.
- 17) The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Modern Library ed. 1964), ed. Atkinson, p. 276.
- 18) Thoreau, A Week on the Concord... (1906 ed.), p. 117.
- 19) Ibid., p. 120.
- 20) Ibid., p. 126.
- 21) Ibid., p. 127 f.
- 22) Ibid., p. 129.
- 23) On the German writers as a whole, see von Glasenapp, Das Indienbild deutscher Denker (1960).

- 24) Quoted in Cowan, Humanist without Portfolio (1963), p. 175.
- 25) Cowan's book contains a partial translation.
- 26) Haym, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1856, repr. 1965), p. 581.
- 27) Ibid., p. 582.
- 28) Ibid., p. 583: "Wie Musik wiegten ihn die Verse der Bhagavad-Gita ein."
- 29) Cowan, op. cit., p. 23.
- 30) Ibid., p. 24.
- 31) Quoted in ibid., p. 169.
- 32) As we shall see, R.A. Vaughan, Hours with the Mystics (1856, 6th ed. 1893) appears to take a diametrically opposite view.
- 33) Haym, op. cit., p. 580.
- 34) Ibid., p. 581.
- 35) Vaughan, op. cit. (6th ed. 1893), p. 52.
- 36) Loc.cit.
- 37) Lorinser, op. cit., p. v. Cf. Garbe, Indien und das Christentum (1914), p. 244.
- 38) Monier-Williams, Hinduism (1878), p. 2]2n. Cf. idem, Indian Wisdom (1875), p. 143 f.
- 39) Idem, Hinduism, p.207.
- 40) Ibid., p. 207 f.
- 41) Muller, India. What can it teach us? (2nd ed. 1892), p.90.
- 42) Ibid., p. 94.
- 43) Ibid., p. 252.
- 44) Müller, Natural Religion (1889), p. 97.
- 45) Ibid., p. 99.

- 46) Telang, The Bhagavadgita (SBE VIII, 1882), p. 1 f.
- 47) Gandhi, The Story of my Experiments with Truth (1969 ed.), p.50.
- 48) Quoted in Wright, Interpreter of Buddhism to the West: Sir Edwin Arnold (1957), p. 18.
- 49) Ibid., p. 71.
- 50) Ibid., p. 127.