



## **The Narrative Dialectic of the *Bhagavad Gita***

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### **Abstract**

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s textual fabric includes several modes of speech, creating an interplay of various symbolic forms. In this paper I analyse this interplay with the help of a classification of types of narrative that is derived from the philosophy of myth. Each of these types emerges from the less self-reflexive and less self-conscious forms and in turn generates a more self-reflexive and more self-aware one, but in this successive generation they do not cancel one another out and conceptually prior modes continue to coexist with the subsequent ones. The sequence of the types of speech that I use proceeds from myth to trickster's speech to epic poetry to drama to philosophy and, finally, to mythosophy. The *Gita* is a dramatic dialogue that starts with philosophical speech, reaches the climax in mythosophy, and ends with the theology of *bhakti*. Krishna is presented in it as a personalistic embodiment of universal intelligence, the new Absolute constituting the most

important religious-philosophical breakthrough that occurs in the Song. I close the paper with reflections on boundaries among the world's cultural-historical traditions as the primary sites where the meaning of human communication is formed – in contrast to the older single-origin theories and today's multiple-origin celebrations of ambiguity. The meaning of artworks, historical processes, and cultural identities can be compared to the music produced by the boundary-like membranes of musical instruments.

*Keywords:* narrative, dialectics, myth, poetry, philosophy, mythosophy

## **Introduction**

The *Bhagavad Gita's* textual fabric includes several modes of speech, creating an interplay of various symbolic forms and their corresponding forms of consciousness. It is broadly acknowledged that the *Mahabharata* itself, of which the Divine Song forms a small if highly notable part, contains many genres: traditional mythical stories, folk tales, didactic instruction, theological doctrines, and philosophical arguments – all of which are wrapped in the broad mantle of epic poetry. In the words of one commentator, “Material of divergent origin and the most heterogeneous quality, ranging from the beast fable to high myth, must have formed part of the haphazard accumulation over the centuries” (Chaitanya xiv-xv).<sup>1</sup> It is less frequently noted that this diversity of types of discourse in the sprawling and not altogether stable whole can also be seen as an array of what, following Ernst Cassirer's example, one might call symbolic forms. In literary studies both myth and poetry, for example, are almost invariably

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<sup>1</sup> See also John D. Smith's Introduction, pp. xiii and li and passim.

regarded as genres of fiction. Yet from the philosophical point of view it is of utmost importance that myth is not a narrative that is intended to be understood as fiction, but, on the contrary, projects itself as a true account of the world and of events occurring in it. To reduce it to fiction is the classic gesture of the Enlightenment; it is as ubiquitous in modern times as it is ill-intentioned. Likewise, philosophical speech has its own distinct goals that do not coincide with those of either myth or poetry. And yet some authors, like Krishna Chaitanya, whom I have just quoted above, would subsume even philosophical reflection under the epic's overarching poetic idiom.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I offer an attempt to disentangle some of these confusions with the help of a classification of types of narrative or modes of speech that is derived from the philosophy of myth. Each of these modes emerges from the less self-reflexive and less self-conscious forms and in turn generates a more self-reflexive and more self-aware one, but in this successive generation they do not cancel one another out and conceptually prior modes continue to coexist with the subsequent ones. It is this narrative dialectic that gives rise to the uniquely rich meaning of the Song and is at the root of its extraordinarily broad appeal, ranging from masses of humble believers to great individual philosophical minds. The Song captures a certain phase in the process by which philosophical thinking separates itself from myth and epic poetry – a separation that is far from complete and is marked by the interaction of these symbolic forms. The overall resulting mode of expression integrates several such forms, and the unity that its author or authors imparted to the multi-layered whole is a

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<sup>2</sup> Chaitanya, *The Mahabharata*, subchapter titled “The Failure of Philosophers,” p. 208ff. Chaitanya's anti-philosophical pathos is rather ironic because in order to justify it he himself launches an extensive philosophical disquisition – in which, incidentally, he may have as well been quoting G. W. F. Hegel at times (see, for example, his thoughts on becoming on p. 226).

remarkable poetic and intellectual achievement. The Russian poet Alexander Pushkin once remarked that the design alone of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* was a mark of genius, and the same observation can be made about the *Bhagavad Gita*. But in order to perceive the Divine Song as such a whole one must avoid the tendency to view it exclusively through one lens or another, whether religious, theological, or poetic, and to understand how its varied constituent threads relate to one another. The all too frequent failure to distinguish myth from poetry and both of them from philosophy is among the chief causes that prevent commentators from appreciating the *Bhagavad Gita's* masterful design. G. W. F. Hegel's reading of the Song suffers precisely from this defect, leading the German philosopher to conclude that the Song is a tedious and monotonous "patchwork" (*On the Episode* 151). Hegel may have been biased and unfair, but even the most sympathetic interpretations, including those marked by pious veneration of the text, often suffer from reductive readings that stem from the interpreter's blindness to the distinctions in question. More often than not this blindness drives the interpreter into unresolvable contradictions and tortured attempts to rescue sense from nonsense. However, in this paper I do not set myself the impossible and thankless task of correcting all past errors in the readings of the Divine Song. (Errors, after all, are themselves highly intriguing objects for a philosopher, often shining a brighter light on truth than ostensibly correct opinion.) What I do attempt to clarify is how myth, poetry, and philosophy constitute, each in its own specific manner, the unique yet recognisable dynamics in the complex yet logically compelling structure of the Song.

### **Modes of Speech in the *Bhagavad Gita***

Before we delve into the narrative dialectics of the *Bhagavad Gita*, I need to dispel a possible misunderstanding. Although my approach may overlap to a certain extent with narrative theory, it

is quite distinct from it. Scott Stroud's taxonomy of narratives, for example, is based on different criteria than those I appeal to and, in general, my method belongs to a different scholarly tradition.<sup>3</sup> It is a line of inquiry that goes back to Friedrich von Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel, Ernst Cassirer, and Aleksei F. Losev, supplemented by my own research on the philosophy of myth. Its focus on the philosophical aspects of various types of narratives can be regarded as complementary to the analyses of rhetorical techniques, argumentation strategies, and communicative qualities of texts.

In English grammar there is the notion of the sequence of tenses referring to the series of grammatical structures designed to indicate various temporalities and modalities as they are expressed in English speech. By analogy, one can speak of the sequence of symbolic forms, that is, the types of narratives or modes of speech, each marked by its own unique relation to such fundamentals of a worldview as reality, time and space, agency, truth, and illusion.<sup>4</sup> The sequence of symbolic forms that I propose to use here begins with *myth*, which is a type of narrative that not so much reflects or represents the speaker's sense of reality as *articulates* it. Myth is the story of origins in this precise sense of the word: before it is articulated in myth the world has no form, which is to say it does not exist as an object for consciousness. Further, in mythopoeia the various aspects of this original reality are brought into unity in a *miraculous* manner, which means that the ultimate ground of all things remains *mystical*, inaccessible to rational understanding and accessible only to direct, if elusive, experience. It is on the elusiveness of this mystical ground that the next symbolic form capitalizes – as the *trickster* learns how to

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<sup>3</sup> See Scott Stroud.

<sup>4</sup> The explanation of the sequence of symbolic forms that follows is a brief sketch of a longer and more detailed analysis in my essay "The Chronotope in Myth, Epic, and Novel" (631-635).

create *illusion*, i.e., a false version of reality that he or she uses to deceive the adversary and to attain one goal or another. And yet, even though this doubling of reality implicitly undermines the initial unquestionable authority of myth, the trickster remains fully engrossed in the mythical world and can only grasp his or her purpose in the terms defined by this very world. The *epic poet* emerges when the trickster begins to *play* with illusion not for practical gain, but for the sake of play itself; what used to be deceptive illusion then becomes open and frank ludic image. However, the epic poet's separation from the world of myth is still only partial because this world remains for him a reality – albeit one that is securely locked away in the so-called “absolute past,” radically different from the singer's own mundane and no longer miraculous present. The separation is completed and the ludic impulse is fully realised by the *dramatic poet*, who transforms the epic poet's tale into quasi-mythical worlds presented not in the distant past, but in the here and now before an audience that is fully aware that the illusion before it is the creation of a playing human artist. The artist's *ludus*, however, is only possible as a contrast to reality and art thus sets the stage (forgive the irresistible pun) for serious questions about the relation between illusion and reality. At this moment *philosophy* is born, i.e., the speech that regains a serious attitude towards reality and aims to articulate the truth not in playful images, but in conceptual terms.<sup>5</sup> And yet philosophy is not the last symbolic form in the sequence – at least not at the phase where we find the narratives that make up the *Bhagavad Gita*. For at this early stage philosophy is still incapable of fully resolving by its own means that old mystical core which holds reality together and which has

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<sup>5</sup> I leave out yet another mode of speech, the *sophist's*, that occurs midway between poetry and philosophy in the sequence and is in part a retrograde development, repeating the trickster's *modus operandi* in the domain of thought rather than mythical imagery. It appears *prima facie* to be less relevant to the *Bhagavad Gita* than the other modes.

persisted through all the prior stages; philosophy thus finds itself forced to resort to myth once again – since, unlike trickster’s speech and poetry, it is interested in *reality* and *truth*. However, the original myth cannot be restored by definition: the innocence of the original attitude towards reality has already been irretrievably lost. Instead, philosophy must invent its own myth to complete the philosophical story of the world; I call this philosophically generated final story *mythosophy*.<sup>6</sup> And the last observation to be made about this sequence is that none of the modes of speech, types of narratives, and symbolic forms disappear or become defunct with the advent of the next one, but, once on the scene, each continues alongside the others to participate in the work of human communication. Their multilateral interactions with one another constitute the ceaselessly evolving semantic-expressive totality of a text and, more broadly, of culture at large.

The structure of the poem is that of a dialogue within a dialogue: the seer Samjaya recounts to King Dhritarashtra what he saw and heard, and within this dramatic scene is wrapped the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, likewise a dramatization of an epic narrative. The listener is thus twice removed from the event being described, reminding one of the points Plato made in the *Republic* – also a dialogue – that artworks inhabit an ontological realm at a third remove from genuine reality, i.e., they are the illusion of an illusion. Be that as it may, the *Bhagavad Gita* consists of three main parts. The longest is the first part, comprising Chapters 1 through 10. It builds up to the brief, explosive Chapter 11 that makes up the second part, followed by the third part that spans the remaining seven chapters. The organisation of the Song is driven by its content, where each part is marked by its own

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<sup>6</sup> I first used this concept in my essay “Vladimir Solovyov and Vyacheslav Ivanov: Two Theurgic Mythosophies.” It was also instrumental for my analyses in the book *The Orpheus Myth and the Powers of Music*. I have continued to apply and develop it in subsequent publications.

characteristic mode of speech and all of them together form a progression that testifies to careful planning and keen understanding of the mutually complementary nature of these modes.

In the first part the philosophical idiom predominates: Krishna seeks to allay Arjuna's doubts by opening a new metaphysical horizon for him. However, philosophy ultimately proves to be insufficient: Arjuna's questions persist, in response to which Krishna crowns his philosophical discourse with the mythical vision of the second part. In Samjaya's description of the vision we hear the speech not of a philosopher, nor even of a poet proper, but of a mythopoeist articulating the shape of the god, revealed to the awed warrior-initiate. Shaken to his core, Arjuna becomes a mythopoeist himself: he responds to the vision with his own hymn, which amply confirms that he is now fully convinced and converted. The only thing that remains is for Krishna to explain how the new set of metaphysical beliefs, resting on a mythical foundation, must be translated into practice. This is the task of the third part, which can be called cultic instruction or theology, i.e., translation of the dogmas of faith into guidelines for practical behaviour. By the end of it, Arjuna is ready to act, that is, to join the battle, and the *Mahabharata's* course of events can plunge forward into the new and the last cosmic cycle, the Kali-Yuga.

### *Philosophical Dialogue*

Arjuna is seized with indecision when he realises that the traditional moral lore, *dharma*, forces upon him an unresolvable moral contradiction: he, the perfect Kshatriya knight, must slay his blood relatives and teachers whom he deeply reveres. This is the moment that Sri Aurobindo describes as "an inextricable clash of the various related conceptions of duty ending in the collapse of the whole useful intellectual and moral edifice erected by the



human mind” (xviii-xix). To Arjuna this “useful intellectual and moral edifice,” that is, the worldview that has guided his behaviour up to this moment, looks like a vicious circle of violence and, in despair, he renounces all action. “Action” in the *Bhagavad Gita* refers to ritual acts, to which Arjuna’s participation in the impending battle also belongs (Buitenen, “Introduction” 14).<sup>7</sup> Arjuna’s moral paralysis thus creates the setting for Krishna’s teaching. Among the authorities that underpin Arjuna’s “intellectual and moral edifice” the Vedas form the foundation to which everything else must refer. Therefore Vedic ritual is precisely the authority with regard to which Krishna must establish his autonomy and, in fact, assert his superiority. In doing so, however, he does not flatly reject the significance of the ritual and distances himself from those who preach a complete withdrawal from action. Rather he seeks to incorporate action into the dynamic of ideas that also insists on *the radical autonomy of pure knowledge*, preoccupied, like Aristotle’s Prime Mover, exclusively with itself.

Johannes van Buitenen traces the evolution in the significance of ritual acts from the Vedas, where the rite’s function was “to maintain the cosmic status quo and to allow a person’s expansion within it”; to the *Brahmanas*, where “the sacrifice itself is viewed as the necessary condition of the maintenance of the cosmos as a whole” (“Introduction” 14), testifying to the growing importance of the person who performs the sacrifice; and to the *Upanishads*, where, rather than proper utterance and performance, “a new emphasis is placed on deliberation [...] about the universal power

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Mircea Eliade’s observation that for the “archaic” man *all* action is ritual, modelled after the primordial acts of creation (pages 28 and 63). In this paper I use Buitenen’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (hereafter BG) and follow his manner of referencing it: chapter number in Book 6 of the *Mahabharata*, followed by the chapter number within the *Bhagavadgita* proper, in square brackets.

or principle underlying it all” (Buitenen, “Introduction” 15). We can see two parallel tendencies in this process: the increasing role of intellectual reflection or “a thoughtful address to the metaphysics of the act” (“Introduction” 15), as Buitenen puts it, and the increasing stature of the human individual. The joint action of both, Buitenen sums up, results in the rise of “personal religion” (“Introduction” 17). On the mythological level, the supreme importance of intelligence as the origin of all things was already established in the mythology of the post-Vedic god Brahmā (masculine) (whose nature is underscored by his daughter-consort Sarasvati, the goddess of the arts and sciences), but especially in the closely related, much more abstract mythology of Brahma (neuter), who is described as Paramātman, Supreme Soul, and Parāsamvid, the Transcendental Intelligence.<sup>8</sup> Further, on the philosophical level, as Richard Davis observes, Krishna “lays claim to all the terms that philosophers in classical India employed to point to the Absolute” (23). Davis is referring mostly to the Samkhya and Vedanta schools that have prepared the ground, as it were, for Krishna’s teaching and further advanced the idea of the Absolute as universal thought. The truly novel element in this teaching is the human shape that this thought takes on. “In contrast to the Absolute that the Upanishads had characterized in largely apophatic terms,” Davis continues, “Krishna the new Absolute has a more immediate, palpable, visible identity. [...] The theology of the *Gītā* requires this double recognition: Krishna is the Supreme Being who is both transcendent and physically present” (25).

The fact that Krishna steps forth as a *personalistic embodiment* of *universal intelligence*, asserting the dominion of the mind over the entire world order and cognition as the highest calling of the human person, is the greatest philosophical and religious

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<sup>8</sup> Walker 164-166 (Brahmā) and 393 (Brahma).

breakthrough that occurs in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The new authority at the peak of the hierarchy of beings as it is articulated here is Krishna himself, a new divinity embodying cosmic intelligence and establishing the new purpose of performing ritual acts as *knowledge, jñana*. “The sacrifice of knowledge,” Krishna declares to Arjuna, “is higher than a sacrifice of substances, enemy-burner, but all action culminates in knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> In the ensuing religious-philosophical dialogue Krishna unfolds the content of this knowledge; it encompasses cosmogonic, metaphysical, moral, and devotional aspects. It also contains doctrines of human psychology, intimately woven into the cosmic order, and elements of epistemology. When Arjuna calls him “the knower, the known” and the “infinite form,” he brings out precisely Krishna’s essence as universal intelligence.<sup>10</sup> Krishna’s cosmology likewise projects universal intelligence as “the ultimate support” and “final abode” of all creation:

My material nature is eightfold, comprising the order of earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, spirit, and ego. This is my lower nature, but know that I have another, higher nature which comprises the order of souls: it is by the latter that this world is sustained: I am the origin of this entire universe and its dissolution. There is nothing at all that transcends me, Dhanamjaya: all this is strung on me as strands of pearls are on a string. In water I am the taste, Kaunteya, in sun and moon the light, in all the Vedas the syllable *OM*, in ether the sound, in men their manhood. In earth I am its fragrance, in the sun its fire, in all creatures their vitality, in the ascetics their austerity. Know, Pārtha, that I am the eternal seed of all beings, I am the thought of the thinkers, the splendour of the splendid. I am the

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<sup>9</sup> BG 26[4], p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> BG 33[11] 37-39, pp. 118-119, emphasis added.

strength of the strong, but strength without ambition or passion. In the beings I am that desire that does not run counter to the Law, bull of the Bharatas. Know that all conditions of being whether influenced by *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, come from me; but I am not in them: they are in me.<sup>11</sup>

Smith correctly interprets Krishna's words in this passage: the new god is "the essential property that makes each being what it is" (*The Mahabharata* 361). (A pedant would object to "essential property" as a contradiction in terms: essences are *bearers* of properties; still Smith's meaning is clear enough.) The power that determines the essence of things, as well as its own ontological nature is nothing other than universal thought. Moreover, this universal thought moves in a spontaneously dialectical manner: the world is seen as a series of contradictions and Krishna-the-god is the way of resolving them. Arjuna spells out the basic formula of dialectical thinking when he addresses Krishna: "You are what is and what is not, and what is beyond it," pointing towards a "beyond" where being and nothingness come together. (Let us note in passing that the dialectic of being, nothingness, and becoming forms the beginning of Hegel's *Science of Logic* [*Hegel's Science of Logic* 82-108].)

The recognition of universal intelligence as the ultimate foundation of all reality leads, among other things, away from the cyclical understanding of the course of time as a vestige of naturalistic thinking, and to a breakthrough towards initial apprehension of eternity as an extra-temporal, i.e., purely intelligible domain. "When the great-spirited travelers to the ultimate perfection reach me," says Krishna, "they do not return to rebirth, that impermanent domain of misery. All the worlds, as far

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<sup>11</sup> BG 29[7] 4-13, p. 99.

as the World of Brahmā, return eternally, but once I have been reached there is no more rebirth.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Mythosophy*

In his Introduction to Hegel’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Herbert Herring quotes, with approval, K. Satchidananda Murty who describes the Song as “a magnificent and successful attempt to reconcile Vedic and Buddhist beliefs, Samkhya, Yoga, and the Upanishads, devotion with knowledge, and so on” (*On the Episode* xxix). One can agree with this assessment only to an extent. The peculiar nature of the new supreme authority taking over the world order largely consists in the fact that, elements of dialectical reasoning in Krishna’s discourse notwithstanding, it does not yet reach a thoroughly rational self-awareness. It contains an inner nucleus that cannot be unfolded into further categories, that is to say, the *mystical* moment remains the culminating point in Krishna’s attempts to reconcile the contradictions of the human condition. The new teaching may *use* philosophy for its own purposes, but the purposes themselves still belong to the domain of *practical* reason and *religious* edification. As is generally the case with mysticism, philosophy is invited thoroughly to prepare the ultimate harmonisation of life’s infinite heteroglossia – diversity of speech-types – but is denied any part in the final and most decisive step. This step is always presented in mysticism as the kind of direct experience that reaches beyond the threshold of rational thought, and this is exactly how the final synthesis is handled in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is where I need to return to dialectics and sublation – or rather lack thereof – in Krishna’s philosophical mode of speech. Without sublation, which is the operation that establishes *rational* relations between opposing principles and generates a new concept comprising the meaning of

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<sup>12</sup> BG 30[8] 15-18, p. 103.

the original contradiction as well as the course of its resolution, – without such an operation dialectics remains incomplete and tentative. Krishna’s mystical reconciliation of opposite principles is the device that only partially fulfils the function of sublation. In their mystical unity these principles are perhaps reconciled, but their reconciliation takes the form of the self-denial of reason. In this pseudo-sublation a limit is set to rational comprehension but an attentive observer will notice, as did Hegel, that it is reason itself that is setting this limit and this constitutes the specificity of mystical thinking in general.<sup>13</sup>

The philosophical dialogue in the *Gita* reaches its peak in a mystical vision: Krishna presents himself to Arjuna in his *mythical* form. The Song’s poetics underscores the significance of the episode by placing it at the point of the golden ratio in the text: the eleventh chapter out of the total of eighteen.<sup>14</sup>

Samjaya describes the vision in the following terms:

[T]he great sovereign of Yoga (Krishna), revealed to the Partha (Arjuna) his supreme supernal form, with countless mouths and eyes, displaying multitudes of marvels, wearing numbers of divine ornaments, and raising divine weapons beyond count. And this form wore celestial garlands and robes, it was anointed with the perfumes of the Gods – it was God himself, infinite and universal, containing all miracles. If in the sky the light of a thousand suns were to rise at once, it would be the likeness of the light of that great-spirited One. In that body of the God of Gods the

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<sup>13</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (p. 437, §722), and especially *The Encyclopaedia Logic (with the Zusätze)* (p. 133, §82, Addition).

<sup>14</sup> The correspondence is also precise by verse count: out of 740 lines, the vision scene falls between approximately 440<sup>th</sup> and 494<sup>th</sup> lines. On the use of golden ration in classical Antiquity see Vittorio Hösle.

Pandava (Arjuna) saw the entire universe centered, in its infinite differentiations. Dhanamjaya (Arjuna) was stunned, and he shivered.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the vision Arjuna breaks into a hymn of his own:

I see all Gods in your body, O God,  
And all creatures in all their varieties –  
On his lotus seat the sovereign Brahma,  
The seers all and the snakes divine.

Your own infinitude stretching away,  
Many arms, eyes, bellies, and mouths do I see,  
No end do I see, no beginning, no middle,  
In you, universal power and form.

With diadem, mace, and discus endowed,  
A mass of light ablaze on all sides,  
I see you, so rare to behold, all around  
Immeasurably burning like sun of the fire.<sup>16</sup>

This is the moment of Arjuna's final conversion: his questions are no longer about the nature of things in the light of the new doctrine, but about how this doctrine can be best fulfilled in one's life. Both Cassirer and Losev stress in mythical consciousness precisely such immediate acceptance of mythical reality as the ultimate authority, as contrasted with the abstract intellect's infinite corrosive hesitation.<sup>17</sup> The mystical nature of the vision is further underscored by its esoteric quality. Krishna grants the vision to his disciple as a matter of divine grace and such knowledge as it reveals cannot be gained in any other way:

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<sup>15</sup> BG, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See Aleksei Losev (28-29 and passim), and Ernst Cassirer (34-35 and passim).

Out of grace for you, Arjuna, have I revealed  
By my power of Yoga, *my highest form*,  
Full of fire, universal, primeval, unending.  
Which no one but you has ever beheld.

Not with Veda or rites, not with study or gifts,  
Not with sacrifice or with awesome *tapas*  
Can I in this world be beheld in this form  
By any but you, great hero of Kuru.<sup>18</sup>

Like the myths of Plato, whose thought is also marked by a strong mystical tendency, Krishna's mythopoeia is a new, philosophically invoked myth, or *mythosophy*; it sums up and transforms into mythical imagery those theological and philosophical ideas that constitute the intellectual content of Krishna's doctrine.

### *Theology or Cultic Instruction*

The final resolution of the contradictions inherent in the human condition is attained through *bhakti*, the devotion of Krishna's follower in which the self-identification of the devotee with his or her god must be complete and culminates in *love*. As he explains to Arjuna after the vision, having resumed his "gentle human shape," Krishna can be seen, "entered into," only by way of "exclusive *bhakti*" and "without any animosity against any creature."<sup>19</sup> He goes on: "Beloved of me is the devotee who is dependent on nothing, pure, capable, disinterested, unworried, and who renounces all undertakings. Beloved of me is the devotee who neither hates nor rejoices, does not mourn or hanker, and

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<sup>18</sup> BG 33[11] 47-48, pp. 119-120, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> BG 33[11] 52-55, p. 121.



relinquishes both good and evil.”<sup>20</sup> This is the truly innovative *religious* idea in the Song. Action and knowledge were familiar themes in prior Indic thought but the path of personal devotion to the god is new (Davis 22). “In religious usage the term *bhakti* [...] denotes a vital living relationship between a human being and a god,” writes Davis. “The *Bhagavad Gita* provides the earliest treatment in Indic literature of a religious orientation that would be of enormous significance for the subsequent development of Hinduism and other Indian religious traditions as well” (23). Buitenen also emphasises *bhakti* as the crowning glory of the Song when he states that Krishna’s teaching “replaces the salvation-seeking knowledge with that knowledge of God that only *bhakti* can bring.” (29)

But the full unfolding of *bhakti yoga*, the practice of loving devotion, occurs not so much in the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Mahabharata* as in the popular mythology of the *Bhagavata Purana* containing the stories of Krishna’s birth, childhood, playful courtship with his female followers, *gopis*, and miraculous victories over demonic powers. This mythology has inspired a long tradition of devotional practice and, as Edwin Bryant remarks, “It is this type of devotional yoga – hearing, chanting, imitating and acting the *lila* [...] that remains the most visible form of Hinduism. It is *bhakti yoga* as evidenced especially in the Bhāgavata and Rāmāyana [...] that has most prominently defined the aesthetic character of Hindu culture in the form of the devotional poetry, drama, dance performances, art, iconography and temple worship of the subcontinent over the centuries” (xxxii).

In the famous Preface to his *Phenomenology*, while explaining the relation between Subject and Substance within Spirit, Hegel writes: “The life of God and divine cognition may well be spoken of

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<sup>20</sup> BG 34[12] 12-17, p. 123.

as a disporting of Love with itself; but this idea sinks into mere edification, and even insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative” (*Phenomenology* 10 [§§18-19]). Having completed his sermon to Arjuna, Krishna sets out to perform his own “labour of the negative”: the destruction of the world that has brought into unresolvable conflict the Pandavas and the Kauravas with their enormous armies. Let us also recall that Aristotle’s Prime Mover is likewise the ultimate *eromenon*, that which is loved, “disporting with itself” (Aristotle 879).

### *Trickster’s Speech*

In the *Mahabharata*, both before and after his colloquy with Arjuna, Krishna often assumes the part of a trickster. Krishna’s acts of *adharma* during the battle of Kurukshetra, his repeated sanctions enabling Arjuna and other Pandavas to violate the Kshatriya rules of military conduct belong to the narrative strand that takes shape within mythology as the characteristic *modus operandi* of the trickster. The killing of Bhishma by deceit and of Karna and Duryodhana by downright treachery, when the supposedly noble Pandava brothers strike their enemies in forbidden ways – these and many other flagrantly immoral acts are done with Krishna’s blessing and at his nudging. As in other traditions, such as the Homeric, Norse, and North American lore, the appearance of the trickster – Odysseus, Loki, and coyote – signals the passing of cultural authority from tradition-honoured *belief* to the *intellect*. True, this intellect still remains a practical one, aiming at a specific goal, so it assumes the form of mere cunning and thus inhabits the border territory between myth and epic, but this cunning is the eroding negative force that eventually causes the transformation of myth into poetry. For the rise of the *poetic* view of things demands that brute force, rite by rote, and dull, unreflective moral fortitude all be shown as null and void.

They are nothing by themselves, as Krishna demonstrates by his actions, and derive their true significance and power only insofar as they proceed from *thinking*, which in this poetic phase assumes the form of *free imagination*.

### *Epic Poetry*

Krishna is presented in the *Bhagavad Gita* as such a playing poet, the creator of the cosmos in the artistic sense of the word, when he describes his role as the creator-god:

All creatures return to my nature at the end of the eon, Kaunteya, and at the beginning of the eon I create them again. Resting on my own nature I create, again and again, this entire aggregate of creatures involuntarily by the force of my nature. No acts bind me, Dhanamjaya, for I remain *disinterested and detached* from all acts. Nature gives birth to the standing and moving creatures under my tutelage, Kaunteya, and for that reason does the world revolve.<sup>21</sup>

The disinterested detachment Krishna mentions here is the attitude equally typical of the artist and the philosopher: the revolutions of the world are not for self-interested consumption by the god, as is the case in the votive phase of religious life, but for the god's contemplation. The artistic aspect of Krishna finds its ultimate expression in his main mode of action: play. This is an indispensable aspect of his overall image that found an especially vivid and richly elaborated expression in the *Puranas* where he is depicted as the divine flautist, singer, and dancer.<sup>22</sup> *Lila*, Krishna's divine game, is linked at the deepest level to the newly claimed

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<sup>21</sup> BG 31 [9] 7-11, p. 105, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> See Bryant's Introduction in *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God: Śrīmad Bhagavata Purāna, Book X*, and especially pp. xxii-xxvi on Krishna's *lila*.

autonomy of reason and simultaneously to the image of the god as an artist. Reason, which Krishna symbolises, is not limited by any other principle; it is absolutely free in handling its own creation. Like the material in the hands of the artist, creation offers no resistance to Krishna, which simply means that he *plays* with it. It is this idea and this attitude towards things that one can discern in Krishna's words as he persuades Arjuna to view with detachment his own actions and especially those he must perform on the battlefield. The next transformation in the sequence of symbolic forms, of the poet into the philosopher, brings us back to the beginning of the dialogue.

Hegel's discussion of dialectic in Plato's thought offers numerous parallels to the dynamic of ideas that animates the *Bhagavad Gita*. Many passages in Krishna's speech can be cited as answering directly to Hegel's observation that "contrasted with merely external reality, it is rather the ideal that is the most real, and it was Plato who perceived that it was the only real (and so did Vyasa – V.M.), for he characterized the universal or thought as the true, in opposition to what is sensuous" (*Lectures* 50). And when Hegel sums up Plato's chief contribution to philosophy, the words can apply almost as well to Krishna's doctrine: "The cause he speaks of is divine reason, which governs the world; the beauty of the world which is present in air, fire, water, and in all that lives, is produced thereby. Thus the absolute is what in one unity is finite and infinite" (50). In the image of Krishna the unity of the finite and the infinite is not, as I have already noted, attained through purely dialectical means but there is little doubt that the author of the Song intuitively feels the need to reconcile them, even if the philosophical solution remains out of reach. And the ultimate solution that Krishna proposes once again resonates with ancient Greek thought to a remarkable extent.

But it is impossible now to see the achievement of the author or authors of the Song strictly in philosophical terms. Or rather, it would be a poor philosophy indeed if it left out of its own story the wonders of mythology and the inspired games of poetry. The Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a *mythosophic symbol* that has absorbed the entire sequence of symbolic forms and transmuted them into a seamless multifaceted whole. This polysemic totality is certainly a product of a localised cultural-historical time and space, but it has also defied confinement within those original bounds. It is woven of threads – stories, poetic images, ideas – that inextricably connect it with a multitude of world's cultures and traditions, with which it was in a dialogue, so speak, long before and long after it was first written down.

### **Cross-cultural Resonances**

There is a statement by Mikhail Bakhtin that resonates with so much of today's debate on the philosophy of culture:

One should not imagine the domain of culture as a spatial totality possessing boundaries, as well as interior territory. The cultural domain has no interior territory, all of it is situated on boundaries, boundaries traverse it everywhere, through each of its moments, the systematic unity of culture reaches into the atoms of cultural life, as the sun is reflected in each of its drops. Every cultural act lives essentially on boundaries: therein lies its seriousness and significance; abstracted from its boundaries, it loses its soil, it becomes vacuous and arrogant, it degenerates and dies. (25)

The question of boundaries as sites where meaning takes shape belongs among the basic problems in the arts and humanities and arises in various disciplines, from art history to linguistics to cultural studies. Two models can be identified in the current

approaches to this question. According to one, the meaning – of artworks, historical processes, cultural identities – is best understood by exploring their *origins* as far back in history as possible. The origin is understood, further, as a singular moment that becomes the source of the phenomenon in question: e.g. an artwork is produced by a single individual, culture, or nation and serves as a unique expression of their essential nature. An artistic or cultural tradition can likewise be traced to a single source and what parallels exist among various traditions must be explained by many epigones or epigone cultures borrowing from one genius or genius culture. This approach was at its apogee in the romantically inclined nineteenth century and, despite considerable erosion, remains influential today. According to the other approach, it is futile to look for any single origin of an artwork's meaning: upon a closer look all origins turn out to be composite rather than simple, each of the factors – social, ideological, or cultural – in their formation demanding explanation in turn, and the chase after a single pure beginning is endless. Artworks, historical phenomena, human agents are best understood by looking at them in their proximate contexts and particular circumstances. Their meanings arise simultaneously from many sources and their multiplicity and differences cannot – or rather *should* not – be reduced to any overarching, hegemonic narratives and hierarchies. This approach was articulated, needless to say, to counter the patronizing and reductive claims of the first one and is typical of the poststructuralist school of thought.

I would suggest, by contrast, that neither the single-origin approach nor the multiple-source one can do justice to the simultaneous diversity and remarkable multilateral resonances among artworks, artistic traditions, and cultural-historical processes of the world. The error of the former way of thinking consists in assuming that, in order to count for anything, meaning must begin with some simple unity. The error of the latter

approach is to assume that multiplicity and irreducible difference render meaning unstable and indefinable. My argument is, however, that *the only* site where meaning takes its definite shape is the boundary between simplicity and complexity, singularity and multiplicity, immediacy and mediation. It is my firm conviction, borne out by years of research and reflection, that the most important acts of meaning-creation and articulation occur *between* individuals, *between* the individual and society, *among* societies and cultures, and in encounters *between* cultural-historical traditions. Like the skin of a drum, a string, or the air column in a musical instrument, these boundaries produce the music of meaning, and without these vibrating membranes there can be no such music. The narrative dialectics of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a microcosm in which the dynamics of the global cultural macrocosm is reflected, to borrow Bakhtin's metaphor, as the sun is reflected in each of its droplets.

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