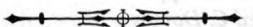


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David L. Pike

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THE ANCIENT WORLD

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possessiveness,
or individuality, he finds peace.

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This is the place of the infinite spirit;
achieving it, one is freed from delusion;
abiding in it even at the time of death,
one finds the pure calm of infinity.

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TRANSLATIONS: THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

No Sanskrit work has been translated more often than the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was the first text rendered directly into a European language, and scores of versions have appeared in English alone. This proliferation is no doubt due largely to the popularity and importance of the work, but the repeated attempts also seem to be tacit acknowledgment that translation success has been elusive.

There are several reasons for the mixed results. The main one is probably the difficulty of explaining the book's complex conceptual universe to Western readership. Another reason, less obvious, lies in the formal grounds of this complexity: the work is a hybrid of two textual modes, the epic and the philosophical, with their two highly differentiated registers. The *Gita*'s hybridity remains an obstacle to translators, few of whom are equally proficient in both the story world of the Indian epic and the thought world of ancient India.

Looking at three English versions of the *Gita* suggests something of the translation challenges it presents. The scene in question shows the hero Arjuna gazing upon the ranks of the enemy army, which includes his grandfather, cousins, and teachers (page 841), while Krishna, his counselor and friend (and hidden deity), tries to encourage him (page 843). Arjuna's despair is expressed with a sublimity that would be familiar to readers of Homer; Krishna responds in a voice of almost Kantian rationality. We start with the version of the text's first English translator, Charles Wilkins (1785):

Arjuna: I would rather beg my bread about the world, than be the murderer of my preceptors, to whom such awful reverence is due. Should I destroy such friends as these, I should partake of possessions, wealth, and pleasures, polluted with their blood. We know not whether it would be better that we should defeat them, or they us; for those, whom having killed, I should not wish to live, are even the sons and people of Dhreetarashtra who are here drawn up before us.

Krishna: Thou grieveſt for those who are unworthy to be lamented, whilst thy ſentiments are those of the wise men. The wise neither grieve for the dead nor for the living. I myself never was not, nor thou, nor all the princes of the earth; nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be . . . A thing imaginary hath no existence, whilst that which is true is a stranger to non-entity.

By those who look into the principles of things, the design of each is seen.

The second translation is from Sir Edwin Arnold's popular Victorian version, *The Song Celestial* (1885):

Arjuna: Better to live on beggar's bread
With those we love alive
Than taste their blood in rich feasts spread
And guiltily survive!
Ah! were it worse—who knows?—to be
Victor or vanquished here,
When those confront us angrily
Whose death leaves living dear?

Krishna: Thou grievest where no grief should be! thou speak'st
Words lacking wisdom! for the wise in heart
Mourn not for those that live, nor those that die.
Nor I, nor thou, nor any one of these,
Ever was not, nor ever will not be,
For ever and for ever afterwards. . . .
That which is
Can never cease to be; that which is not
Will not exist. To see this truth of both
Is theirs who part essence from accident,
Substance from shadow.

The last is a recent attempt (2000) by Stephen Mitchell, not a Sanskritist but a professional translator who assembled an interpretive version from existing renderings:

Arjuna: It would be better to spend the rest of my life as a pauper, begging for food, than to kill these honored teachers. If I killed them, all my earthly pleasures would be smeared with blood. And we do not know which is worse, winning this battle or losing it, since if we kill Dhritarashtra's men we will not wish to remain alive.

Krishna: Although you mean well, Arjuna,
your sorrow is sheer delusion.
Wise men do not grieve
for the dead or for the living.

Never was there a time
when I did not exist, or you,
or these kings; nor will there come
a time when we cease to be. . . .

Nonbeing can never be;
being can never not be.

Both these statements are obvious
to those who have seen the truth

While Wilkins could handle the epic idiom reasonably well, he was at sea in the philosophical—"A thing imaginary hath no existence, whilst that which is true is a stranger to non-entity" is almost meaningless. At the end of the eighteenth century nothing whatever was known of the Samkhya philosophy that informs much of the poem. Mitchell's sources have figured this out, though the readers may still be puzzled by the discussion of "being" and "non-being" in the context of the battlefield. It's only the traditional commentaries that remind us that true "being" here refers to consciousness (the "self"), whereas everything material (such as the body) is ultimately subsumed in "nonbeing."

Arnold strives for greater fluidity with his versified version in the manner of Tennyson, though meter and rhyme, as often, force unnecessary additions ("theirs who part essence from accident, / Substance from shadow," for example, translates the simple Sanskrit *tattvadarśibhi*, "those who see truly"). Yet Arnold's fluidity came at the cost of much of the complexity and sheer *difference* of the original. For his part, Mitchell seems to have addressed the text's hybridity by using prose for the narrative portions and verse for the philosophical, but while the verse is forceful and economic (if sometimes too economic), the prose seems perfunctory. Like Arnold, Mitchell misses telling points of the epic vision of life without which we cannot understand Krishna's arguments. When he writes "It would be better to spend the rest of my life as a pauper" (Arnold's "Better to live on beggar's bread"), we are misled into believing that Arjuna is juxtaposing personal impoverishment with self-enrichment through victory in war. But if the *Mahabharata* is about anything, it is about the exigencies of *dharma*, about the social and moral obligations placed upon people by their position in the social order. What Arjuna is asking here is whether it might not be better to completely opt out of that order, become a wandering ascetic and beg mendicant's alms (something in fact forbidden to kings) than to execute the awful duties that it required of him—such as killing his kin.

This is precisely the conundrum that Krishna will address in the rest of the *Gita*. And it is a conundrum intensified by Arjuna's describing his esteemed elders (not his teachers) as *arthakāmān*. Both Arnold and Mitchell simply leave this detail out; Wilkins tries to convey something of the original ("I should partake of possessions,] wealth, and pleasures"), but he was following a desperate interpretation incited precisely by discomfort at what the text is really saying. For Arjuna is explaining that his elders are "greedy for power": as the *Mahabharata* repeatedly declares, greed for power is inseparable from the possession of power. Arjuna recognizes this terrible truth, and shudders at the thought of continuing the cycle. That over the course of the *Gita* Krishna should finally convince him to do so, and with horrific consequences, challenges Wilkins' (and many later readers') conceptions of ethical discourse and of ancient Eastern wisdom alike.

