

# Aesthetic Aspects of the *Bhagavadgita*

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While ethical discussions of the *Gita* justifiably abound, an aesthetic analysis of the text can further illumine its import. In this essay, I identify various senses in which the *Gita* is aesthetic. Of course, the title itself contains an aesthetic term, because *Gita* means the song of the Lord. In addition, the term Bhagavad refers to bhagavan, i.e., the god who possesses all opulences (bhaga). And the supreme opulence, according to Parasara Muni, is unlimited beauty. Radhakrishnan's commentary on the *Gita* underlines this relation between the beautiful and the divine, "... things of beauty and splendor reveal Him more . . ."1 Similarly, Sri Krishna Prem describes Lord Krishna as the "Beauty of all things beautiful".2 Moreover, in the *Gita* (x,22), Krishna identifies himself with the Sama Veda that is known for its aesthetic value, whether characterized as "musical beauty"3 or as "melodious chants"4 Not surprisingly, the idea of the beautiful finds a place within the doctrine of the *gunas*. Of the three *gunas*, *sattva*- which is usually associated with goodness—is also linked to beauty as light, for when *sattva* prevails the beautiful light of knowledge beams (xiv, 11). Furthermore, Krishna takes up the lamp of wisdom in chapter ten. (X, 11). Later he requests credit for his dazzling beauty, "That brilliance which shines in the sun, in the moon, and in fire illumines the entire universe. Know that brilliance to be mine."5

Obviously, the *Gita* is a work of art in two straight forward ways; it is a poem and a story- whether one interprets the narrative literally or allegorically. There are also internal, poetic devices, as in the simile: "Everything in this universe is strung on Me like pearls on a thread."6 Krishna goes so far as to identify himself with the poet Ushana (x, 37). And also identifies himself with rituals and sacrifices (ix, 16). All such activities are aesthetic, for they are expressions of feeling; and as vehicles for the transmission of emotion, they constitute art. Again, if works of art typically unite opposites, it is no wonder that the *Gita*, which unites theism and monism, fatalism and freedom, man and God, is a commanding artwork. Simplicity and complexity apply, because, despite the brevity of the text, there have been endless interpretations and commentaries.

Bhakti, a central notion in the *Gita*, is the way of complete surrender to God. We normally condemn surrender or submission; after all, humans are supposed to be free, independent, autonomous agents. Nevertheless, total surrender to God may be the only antidote to egoism. The devotee's unqualified surrender to Krishna calls to mind an artist's total surrender to his project, as when he gives himself entirely to and is led on by a theme, medium, or materials. Whether an adherent of the *Gita* or an artist, one holds nothing back; he invests heart, mind, and will wholly in the other. Ironically, to effect this immersion, one turns to detachment or distance. This is true because suppressing the ego allows one's higher self to merge with the other. Not only is this a part of the moral life, but it is also a part of aesthetic behaviour. Thus a classical article in the literature of aesthetics explains mental distancing.<sup>7</sup> Through desireless action (*nishkama karma*) or "acting without acting," one transforms everyday acts into sublime offerings. In ethical actions, "I am not the doer," for the ordinary self gives way to the nobler Self or Atman that is continuous with Brahman. Similarly, in creative acts, the lower self is not the doer, for it is only the greater self that can produce great art. Like the doctrine of wu-wei in Taoism, the actionless action of the *Gita* means natural action rather than stagnation. Often philosophers attribute beauty to whatever is natural or true to its own character. One finds an ethical parallel in the *Gita*: "Better to perform one's own duty (*dharma*) imperfectly than to perform the duty of another perfectly."<sup>8</sup> This is true, because one's own duty conforms to one's true nature.

One who acts with no regard for the fruits of one's actions is internally detached (ii, 47-8 and 50-1), like the actor in a play who distances himself from personal concerns in order to deliver a controlled performance. Viewed from without, the actor appears to be deeply embroiled in his actions, but viewed from within, he is removed from them and their outcomes. Moreover, the actor is unaffected by whether the drama is a comedy or a tragedy. In a like vein, the *Gita* recommends, "Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat . . . Thus you will incur no sin"<sup>9</sup> The beholder of art works often favors a distanced perspective in order that he can appreciate them without partiality or prejudice. Obviously there is a tension between distancing oneself from the art work and losing oneself in it. The paradox of distance asks: How can one reconcile the need for distance between oneself and the artwork with the yearning to unite or merge with it? One resolves the paradox when one realizes that two selves are thematic: the self that requires distancing is the self-centred self or ego; and the self that seeks union is the Atman.

At times, artists produce and appreciators appreciate without regard for rewards. They recognize that artistic value, like ethical or religious value, is inherently worthwhile. To have the aesthetic attitude is to create or behold with no concern for consequences. One who follows the *Gita* is also unconcerned about consequences; he participates vigorously in the affairs of world, but

inwardly he is unruffled by events. A follower of the *Gita* does the right thing just because it is his duty; and it flows from his nature. And the true artist honors an inner, aesthetic impulse, irrespective of the consequences. In other words, the ideal artist works in the face of economic opposition and is oblivious to success or failure, good or bad reviews. This is a laudable sense of "art for art's sake" that parallels the Hindu notion of ethical conducts as deeds that one performs with no regard for fruits, but for their own sake alone. Indeed, the Lord himself is detached when creating, above and beyond all creations (ix, 8-9). Similarly, the artist needs psychological distance in order to control his creative endeavor. If the artist were preoccupied with her provincial ego, he could not express the universal. An artist's or beholder's attitude is all important, just as in the *Gita* one's attitude creates or determines one's future state (xiii, 6). Thus, those who fix upon the extrinsic features of an art work, e.g., its monetary value, lack the aesthetic attitude, i.e., an interest in intrinsic value.

As the *Tao Te Ching* says that one cannot express the eternal Tao in words, chapter eleven of the *Gita* teaches that ultimate knowledge is ineffable; one can only know it through direct experience. Likewise, aesthetic awareness is experiential rather than conceptual. Art tries to communicate what conventional language can never fully convey. Aesthetic experiences and religious experiences are always ineffable to some degree. One reason for their ineffability lies in the uniqueness of what one encounters, whether it is Clive Bell's "significant form"<sup>10</sup> that elicits a unique aesthetic emotion or Rudolph Otto's "wholly other"<sup>11</sup> that is like nothing else. A second reason for the ineffability of the aesthetic and the spiritual lies in their inexhaustibility. No exposition of such experiences is ever complete, with all nuances articulated; indeed, what is central in such experiences is necessarily inexplicable. Thus ineffability is a universal hallmark of mystical states of consciousness. Of the painter Monet's work, the fellow artist Marc Chagall said, "There just aren't the words to talk about his painting." In the standard article, "Aesthetic Concepts," Frank Sibley argues that no matter how many facts one knows about a painting in advance of seeing it, he cannot judge the work aesthetically until he beholds it.<sup>12</sup> The reason is that descriptive labels or concepts—however many and however elaborate—are no substitute for the concrete perceptions, impressions, intuitions, and feelings that arise on beholding a work as an aesthetic gestalt. As the theologian Paul Tillich remarks: "One cannot interpret a picture by stating its meaning in discursive sentences and then dispensing with visual form. Every work of art—a poem, picture, piece of music—has something to say directly to its audience that cannot be expressed by scientific formulas or the language of everyday experience."<sup>13</sup>

D. T. Suzuki asserts that if one applies prose language to the spiritual, such discourse, "... becomes warped and assumes all kinds of crookedness: oxymora,

paradoxes, contradiction, contortions, absurdities, oddities, ambiguities and irrationalities.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, one purpose of religious symbols is to bridge two realms: the seemingly transparent domain of everyday life and the transcendent world. Typically it is spiritual and aesthetic experiences, rather than theology, which convince one that the ordinary sphere does not exhaust what there is. In the end, Sibley’s discussion of aesthetic judgements underlines the significance of the experiential over the conceptual. Religious parallels abound; for example, the intellectual study of world religions is profoundly different from a vital participation in their rituals, prayers, and sacraments. Otto’s term “numinous” refers to the divine as transcendent of rational thought; and whatever one cannot intellectually grasp is ineffable. Still, meanings that elude prose may succumb to the artistic language of poetry and symbolism.

In Chapter eleven, Arjuna’s profound spiritual awakening is, at once, aesthetic experience, for he encounters the aesthetic categories of the awesome and wondrous as Krishna appears with multiple eyes and limbs (xi, 10). Arjuna also experiences the sublime for he sees no beginning, middle or end to the boundless Lord (xi, 16). Earlier Krishna identifies himself with splendor as well as goodness (x, 36); here the key word *tejah* is variously translated as splendor, beauty, majesty, glory or another aesthetic term.

Paul Gauguin’s concern with fundamental questions about the human condition is evident in the title of a painting that he completed in 1897 and thought that he could never surpass: “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” In the tenth chapter of the *Gita*, Krishna proclaims that he is the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings (x, 20). Krishna is further identified with celestial beauties (x, 21). Since Krishna’s manifestations are endless (x, 19), he will disclose only his prominent ones to Arjuna. Thus it seems that even an omnipotent being cannot relate all of his infinite attributes to a finite being.

Yoga itself is aesthetic, because it is an art; and it is an art, because yoga is “skill in action” (ii, 50); and “skill in execution” is one of the primary meanings of art. Ethical action is closer to art than to science, for the moral life requires concentrated action; one’s emotions, intellect and will must all be invested, as in the case of art. Of course, the goal of yoga is to effect union, to unite with Brahman (xi, 27 and x, 7). Union between the human soul and God can involve the union of identity or the union of an I-Thou relation. Aesthetic experience also takes these two forms: one can either jump into a lake and merge with it or one can dualistically contemplate the water at a remove from it. Performed successively, the two acts are compatible. Perhaps this aesthetic model can reconcile the monistic and theistic strains of the *Gita*. On the one hand, a person who loses himself in Krishna is not himself, i.e., his ego, any longer; in a sense, he is Krishna, for he participates in the pure consciousness on the one

hand, just a moment later he propitiates, or prays to Krishna, thereby affirming an I-Thou relation between a human and the divine.

To unite with the other is to interpenetrate. Thus Krishna says, "... those who worship Me with devotion are in Me and I am also in them."<sup>15</sup> And Christ declares, "Abide in me as I abide in you . . . (John 15: 4-5 and 17:23)" Uniting with the art work also involves one in interpenetration. The music is in me— it resonates within me— and I am in the music— I flow with it. Just as Henry David Thoreau could discover his true self in nature, he speaks of discovering nature within himself. Discussing the signs of spring, he announces: "... there are as many within us as we think we hear without us."<sup>16</sup> When the artist's insight into things breaks down barriers between the self and the other, interpenetration flourishes. Hence the Taoist painter proclaims: "the mountains are in me and I am in them." The same sort of interpenetration appears in the journal of the naturalist John Muir, "Now we are fairly into the mountains and they are into us . . . the boundary walls of our heavy flesh tabernacle seem taken down and we flow and diffuse into the very air and trees and streams and rocks . . . we are a part of nature now . . . How glorius a conversion . . ."<sup>17</sup>

The *Gita* poses two interesting aesthetic problems; the first I will simply mention and the second I will address. First: How can the visible beauties of nature proceed from the invisible or unmanifest (viii, 18) ? Of course, this is an aesthetic version of the age-old question: How can the one become the many ? A second puzzle may be more tractable. Suppose one withdraws his mind and senses from perceivable objects, as the turtle retracts its limbs (ii, 58). One wonders how aesthetic experience can flourish if he cuts off the avenues to it. The very detachment from the mundane that the *Gita* enjoins would seem to preclude aesthetic appreciation. The renouncing of sense data (xviii, 51 and vi, 4) is , however, compatible with the union of self-integration. Such union is always harmonious and a harmony is always aesthetic. Thus the *Gita* speaks of one achieving harmony (vi, 14). Ultimate peace or the peace that passes all understanding, like a serene lake, is beautiful, because it is undisturbed.

Presumably, in the bliss of *moksha* there would be no institutional religion, since the need for rituals and symbols would drop away. Thomas a Kempis states: "When what is perfect shall come, all use of the sacraments will cease, for they who are blessed in the heavenly glory have no need of this sacramental medicine."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps traditional prayer, creeds, and commandments also become superfluous for any one who enjoys the beatific vision of God, But even if there is no practical need for sacraments, rituals, and prayers, they may endure because of their aesthetic value. Even if the institutions of art and religion are penultimate, surely aesthetic delight— which can be intuitive or conceptual rather than perceptual— and spiritual bliss would abide in *moksha* or any afterlife. Just as surely, the beauties of the beatific vision would endure as long

as beings continued to enjoy their spiritual natures. Art is a means to spiritual states of mind, but the resultant spiritual consciousness is itself aesthetic. Thus it would be a mistake to think that, in a peak state, one leaves the aesthetic behind. Whether or not one transcends art, remains an ongoing and essential aspect of spiritual consciousness. Wherever there is harmonious consciousness and wherever there is the delight of uniting with the other, the aesthetic is present. Moreover, the very goal of the *Gita* is aesthetic, for one aspires to obtain the highest aesthetic state, namely, peace (vi, 17).

To appreciate the *Gita* is to adopt the poet's attitude. In poetry one expects no single, fixed meaning; poems invite multiple interpretations— both / and prevails over either / or. It is in the highest intuition that all inconsistencies become reconciled in an ineffable experience. How can Krishna be both a particular, historical being as well as a universal God? In the aesthetic vehicle of the *Gita*, he is both. Art presents the two; perhaps it even unites them.

### Notes and References

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- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
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