

## **Krishna Takes Enlisted Against the Nazis and the Japanese: The Reception of the Bhagavad Gita in T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer**

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the role played by the Bagvad Gita, the emblematic Sanskrit text, in the search for answers to some of the daunting ethical questions haunting the Western civilization during the Second World War. Particularly, it will look at the references to the Gita in some of the major discourses on war to see whether they function as mere decoration or they are organically incorporated in the works where they are cited. It will focus on the reception of the Gita in the 1940s by T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer, to see if the Gita played any significant role in shaping the response of the two thinkers to the war against the Nazis and fascist forces. Separating the use of texts like the Gita for their supposedly exotic idiom of thought and expression from the organic incorporation of these texts as part of the efforts to understand the human condition is crucial to genuine literary inquiry.

**Keywords:** T.S. Eliot, Robert Oppenheimer, Bagavad Gita, Second World War

The saint may renounce action, but the soldier, the citizen, the practical man generally – they should renounce, not action but its fruits. It is wrong for them to be idle, it is equally wrong to desire a reward for industry. It is wrong to shirk destroying civilization and one’s kindred and friends, and equally wrong to hope for dominion afterwards. When all such hopes and desires are dead, fear dies also, and freed from all attachments the “dweller in the body” will remain calm while the body performs its daily duty, and will be unrestrained by sin, as is the lotus leaf by the water of the tank.

E.M. Forster, “Hymn before Action”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Indian studies scholars have claimed that the Western reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* contributed to the refusal to take India seriously (Halbfass, Hulin, Droit). Indeed the Hindu “Song of the Lord” has a varied and controversial life in the West. It was the first Sanskrit text translated (into English) and published by Charles Wilkins in 1785. It spawned commentaries by

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<sup>1</sup> E.M. Forster: A Tribute. New Delhi: Rupa 2002: 142-4, cited in Chandan 2007:63.

Victor Cousin, A.W. Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel. Embraced in the West as the Bible of Hinduism, it influenced Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In a previous publication, I examined the reception of the *Gita* and showed how the European search for models in an Indian exotic ultimately collided with the vision of fatalism (Figueira, *The Exotic*). In this essay, I will expand this investigation to examine the readings of this emblematic Sanskrit text during the Second World War. Particularly, I will look at whether references to the *Gita* function as decoration or whether they appear as organically incorporated in the works where they are cited. I will focus on the reception of the *Gita* in the 1940s by T.S. Eliot and J. Robert Oppenheimer.

### **T.S. Eliot**

T.S. Eliot (1898-1962) shared Emerson's admiration for the *Gita*, claiming it was in his experience the next greatest philosophical poem after the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>2</sup> Eliot also shared Whitman's and Emerson's habit of sprinkling his poetry with words (Figueira, *BG In American Poetry and Opera*). His most famous appropriation of Sanskrit terminology is found in *The Waste Land* (1922) which concludes with the customary formal closure found in all Upanishads: "*shantih, shantih, shantih.*"<sup>3</sup> But, earlier in the same poem, in Section V, "What the Thunder Said," Eliot teases his readers with other Sanskrit words and sounds. He repeats the rumblings of the thunder (*Da, Da, Da*) that he borrows from the Hindu god Prajapati and admits in another note that he had requisitioned the injunction from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 5.1: "*Datta, Davadhvam, Damyata.*"<sup>4</sup> In these instances, one can get the sense that Eliot used Sanskrit terms much in the same ornamental manner as he quoted from Dante or Rimbaud in their original

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<sup>2</sup>See the "Dante" essay in Eliot 1932:219.

<sup>3</sup>"Peace, Peace, Peace" in line 43 that Eliot explains in a note.

<sup>4</sup> See line 432, translated from the Sanskrit as "Give, Sympathize, Control." Eliot directs his reader to the translation of the Upanishads by Deussen (*Sechzig Upanishads des Veda* 1898:489).

languages. Is it a form of cultural appropriation, especially since after Eliot has the Thunder God speak Sanskrit, he then has his words interpreted by Western voices (Brooker and Bentley 191)? Can we say that Eliot used Sanskrit terminology as a means of rejecting the possibility of interpretation (Brooker and Bentley 200), in much the same way as Hegel did (Figueira, *The Exotic* 63-91)? Or was he doing something quite different? Were evocations of India as serious as readers of Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, have taken them to be even though their knowledge<sup>5</sup> and involvement with India was at times superficial (Figueira, *BG In American Poetry and Opera*)? In contrast to the Transcendentalists' understanding of India, Eliot was far more informed. Yet, critics do not take his involvement with India as readers of the Transcendentalists have viewed the Concord contingent's reception of Indian thought. Eliot's critics viewed his use of Indian thought as fragmentary or, in describing it, they indulge in their own exoticism, as when Cleanth Brooks notes that *The Waste Land* contains "the oldest and most poetical truth of the race" (Unger 343). Eliot's use of Indian thought is also interpreted in simplistic psychological terms as when Eliot's call for asceticism is viewed as an attempt to check his "drive of desire" (Unger 336). For the most part, Eliot's critics brush his Indian references aside as accidents, errors, inconsistencies that crept into his work. This scholarship is also negative and generally dismissive (Gross 213) of the Indian elements Eliot incorporated in his work.<sup>6</sup> Conrad Aiken saw it as evidence of Eliot's overall "decadence" (Perl and Tuck 129, n. 6). Helen Gardner, who disliked Eliot's Christianity (Gardner), sees the adding of Krishna as an error that destroys the harmony of the poem. William Blisset sees the *Four Quartets* as a Christian exposition, merely mixed with incompatible non-Christian themes. Philip

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<sup>5</sup> This is not due to lack of materials available. Major texts were in print and available to them either through the Harvard collections or Thoreau's library of some thirty seminal works given to him by his friend Cholmedeloy.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Gardner, "Four Quartets: A Commentary" in B. Rajan (1947: 69) and B Rajan ("The Unity of the Quartets" s1947:87, cited in Srivastava (1977)

Wheelwright dismisses Eliot's use of Indian philosophy to a synthesis of Hindu ideas and Heraclitus.<sup>7</sup> H. H. Wagoner agrees with Gardner, especially when she sees the Gitaas exhibiting an element of "quietism" that is also found in Christian thought. The problem that this critic does not grasp, is that such quietism is nowhere present in the Gita, but such an ill-informed and erroneous understanding of Hinduism does not appear to be of any consequence to these English literature critics/professors who feel they can pontificate on matters they know nothing about (McCarthy 34).

What I find so interesting here, from the perspective of a comparatist, is not that these critics should be opinionated but rather that they feel justified in discussing Hinduism in such an uninformed manner.<sup>8</sup> Let me say something here that might strike some readers as outrageous, but is something I have heard voiced also by scholars in other fields in the humanities. It is the following: many English literature professors suffer from a tendency, all too prevalent in their discipline, of thinking that one is an expert on everything, because one has studied English literature, considered the acme of humanistic training. These same English literature professors who may view Comparative Literature scholars as superficial have no problem viewing themselves as omniscient. Moreover, their expertise in pontificating on other fields does not take the form of a dialogue with other experts, i.e. talking sociology with sociologists, as is the aspiration of Comparative Literature, but rather understanding sociology enough to impress another English literature scholar. We see this same disciplinary arrogance when English literature scholars approach the foreign, as in the criticism of the Indian influence on T.S. Eliot. I was quite surprised about all the things said about India and Eliot.<sup>9</sup> Even a very astute scholar

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<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the theme of impermanence can be attributed to Heraclitus, but Eliot is actually referencing Krishna and Arjuna here, suggesting that he was talking about India and not Greece.

<sup>8</sup> For more on critics, Vimala Rao (1981).

<sup>9</sup> For an early summary of this criticism, see McCarthy 1952.

such as Balachandra Rajan, who also happens to be of Indian origin, addresses Eliot's use of Indian thought as a "maze of Oriental metaphysics" that was "uncomfortably sinuous." Did Eliot use Indian thought seriously, and was his cultural appropriation merely ornamental, as some critics would have us believe?

Beginning in 1911, after his return from the Sorbonne, Eliot studied Sanskrit (Indic philology) for two years with Charles Rockwell Lanman (Eliot, *After Strange* 43-44, cited in Rao, *TSE &BG* 572).<sup>10</sup> He also read Indian philosophy under James Houghton Woods who was writing his *Yoga System of Patanjali* at the time (1914) (Howarth 201). Eliot abandoned the study of Sanskrit in the Spring of 1913. In lectures Eliot much later presented in Virginia, he described these studies laconically. As Helen Gardner would later parody,<sup>11</sup> Eliot confessed:

Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. (Eliot, *After Strange* 43-44, cited in Rao, *TSE &BG* 572)

Eliot went on to clarify that he concluded at the time that he would have to forget thinking and feeling as an American or a European in order to pursue these studies, something he did not care to do.<sup>12</sup> However, before abandoning his Indic studies, Eliot translated and annotated the Gita.<sup>13</sup> For him, the Gita was different from philosophy. It addressed more worldly concerns. As

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<sup>10</sup> Lanman himself had studied Sanskrit at Yale with William Dwight Whitney, who himself had studied in Tübingen under the renowned Vedic scholar Rudolf Roth. The President of Harvard, Charles Eliot's, who happened to be T.S. Eliot's cousin, had brought Lanman to Harvard where he inaugurated the Harvard Oriental Series, and wrote the Sanskrit Reader, still in use today.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Gardner would later parody this quote claiming that Eliot's poem left her as mystified as he had been by his studies of Patanjali.

<sup>12</sup> Upon leaving Indian philosophy he bought a copy of F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* at the Harvard Coop (cited Howarth 1964:206).

<sup>13</sup> He had studied Indic Philology 1A and 1B (elementary Sanskrit) with Lanman in his first year. Then in 1912-13, he did Indic Philology 4 and 5 (Pali) with Lanman. He also did Indic Philology 9 (Philosophical Sanskrit) with James Woods and read the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*. In short, one third of his graduate classes at Harvard dealt with

Eliot observed in a 1931 essay on Pascal, even the most exalted mystics must return to the world and use reason to employ the result of their experience in daily life. Commenting on the Spanish Civil War in 1937, Eliot felt that he was not compelled to take sides, since he did not have sufficient knowledge.

Partnerships should be held with reservation, humility and misgiving. That balance of mind which as few highly-civilized individuals, such as Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, can maintain in action, is difficult for most of us even as observers.<sup>14</sup>

Well before World War II, the *Gita* had informed Eliot's thoughts regarding action and conflict.

The *Gita*'s theme of detachment, desirelessness and love are central to the *Four Quartets*, Eliot's last poetic work written between 1936-42. Eliot saw time and mystical experience as central themes in the work and understood them in light of Indian thought. In a radio talk in 1946 on "The Unity of European Culture," Eliot noted:

Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility. (cited in Howarth 201)

This sensibility is best seen in the theme of detachment that pervades the *Four Quartets*. In "Little Gidding", he writes:

There are three conditions which often look alike

Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:

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Asian philology and philosophy. Eliot wrote of having read the *Gita* in Sanskrit in a letter to K.S.N. Rao, see *Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi 1970, xiv, no 1): 92.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot writing in the *Criterion*, cited in Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*. Berkeley: U of Ca. P 1988, 252.

Attachment to Self and to things and for persons, detachment

From self and from things, from persons; detachment

From self and from things and, growing

Between them, indifference

Which resemble the others as death resembles life,

Being between two lives – unflowering between

The live and the dead nettle. (Eliot, FQ 195)

In the last section of the second quartet, “East Coker”, we learn that: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (Eliot, Complete Poems 182). This message nicely parallels the Gita 2.47, where Krishna first explains detached action.

Another key Indian theme, suffering, animates the second movement of the third quartet, “Dry Salvages”:

Where is there an end of it, the Soundless wailing,

The silent withering of autumn flowers

Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;

Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage,

The prayer of the bone on the beach... (Eliot, Complete Poems 185)

Eliot’s adoption of a Hindu understanding of suffering becomes quite clear, in the third section of “Dry Salvages” where he features the Gita’s battle scene. Here Krishna justifies the killing of his kin to Arjuna who shrinks from battle. Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfil his *dharma* and fulfil his appointed role in the cosmic drama. Eliot suggests that one cannot comprehend the Lord’s will:

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant –

Among other things – or one way of putting the same thing:

That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray. . . (Eliot, Complete Poems 187).

He then reiterates the central teaching of the *Gita* - that one should act without being concerned with the fruits of one's actions: "And do not think of the fruit of action" (Eliot, Complete Poems 188).

The Krishna and Arjuna found in the middle movement of "Dry Salvages" stand for the resolute pursuit of life. They warn that whatever we are doing at this moment is what we are destined to do in eternity. Eliot seems to ask us to consider whether we are doing what we would like to be doing in eternity and if not, amend ourselves (Howarth 205). It is significant that Eliot does not end his poem by saying "Fare well" but rather "Fare forward, voyager."

So Krishna, as he admonished Arjuna

On the field of battle.

Not fare well,

But fare forward, voyagers. (Eliot, Complete Poems 188)

These sentiments resonate with what Krishna admonishes Arjuna to do:

Antakale sa mameva smaramuktva kalevaram/

Yah prayati sa madbhavam yati nastyatra samskaya

Who at the time of death thinks of me alone, leaves the body and goes forth, he reaches My Being; there is no death. (Bhagavad Gita 8.5)

The voyagers can be saved if they heed the advice of Krishna and only perform action without thoughts of the Self. In his advice, Eliot is essentially paraphrasing the above quote.

One can die at any moment (not the immanent death facing Arjuna), so one should be intent on

the highest sphere of being and thus fructify the lives of others. Of the various themes in the *Gita*. Eliot was not focusing on the soul as unborn, eternal, and everlasting. He was not fixating on the world as illusion. What he took from the *Gita* was its concept of disinterested action, the *karma yoga* – it is Arjuna’s duty (*dharma*) to fight. But Eliot completes Krishna’s words with an important modification – whatever one dwells on, one attains upon death (i.e. is fructified in the next life if one is reborn). Here, Eliot expresses the central truth of the *Gita* 8.6-7

Yam yam vapt smaran bhavam tyajatyante kalevaram

Tam tam evaiti kaunteya suda tadbhavabhavatih/

Tasmat sarveshu kaleshu mam anusmara yudhya ca

Mayyarpitamanobuddhir mam evaishyayyasamshayam

On whatever Being one is thinking at the end when one leaves the body,

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

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

You shall doubtless come to Me.<sup>15</sup>

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

At the moment which is not action or inaction

You can receive this: “of whatever sphere of being

The mind of a man may be intent

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

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<sup>15</sup>Philip Wheelwright points out the almost literal translation of the *Gita* 8.8 (“Eliot’s Philosophical Themes “in Rajan 1947: 103-05, cited in McCarthy 1952:37

(And the time of death is every moment)

Which shall fructify in the lives of others. (“Dry Salvages, lines 155-160)

Eliot writes near the end of “Dry Salvages”:

And right action is freedom

From past and future also (Eliot, Complete Poems 190)

Eliot is questioning what concerns and what paths “most of us,” who like Arjuna are caught up in action (Fowler 414), will follow. Like the Gita, Eliot is encouraging detachment, as in the third section of “Little Gidding”:

Not less of love but expanding

Of love beyond desire, and so liberation

From the future as well as the past. (Eliot, Complete Poems 193)

Hence, we are advised to “fare forward” rather than “fare well.” We are also enjoined to “be still and wail without hope.”

To reach Little Gidding, the place embodying the state of the liberated soul, described in the quartet named after that destination:

You would have to put off/ Sense and notion (Eliot, Complete Poems 192) . . . because in order to possess what you do not possess/ You must go by way of dispossession. (Eliot, Complete Poems 181).

Sense and notion can be understood here as Eliot’s translation of the Gita’s explication of Samkhya philosophy. Of course, one also finds there is self-denial and deprivation in Christian mysticism also, but it was the particular expression of the concepts found in the Gita’s code of moral conduct that Eliot found attractive.

Ardor, selflessness and self-surrender appear in the third section of “Little Gidding”, where there are numerous parallels to the Gita’s description of attachment to the self and others, detachment from the self and others, and indifference. The way of action is announced in the first section of “Little Gidding” and the rest of this quartet reintroduces concerns found in the preceding quartets and highlights their particular significance for the tranquil, the attached, and the non-attached voyager. The second and third sections of “Little Gidding” suggests how attached and non-attached beings may be represented and evaluated. Just as fire, water, earth, and air can never be free of action, so too are beings limited by attachment. In the fourth and final section, attraction is defined as the desire for an object. “Higher attraction” consists of the “drawing of this Love” for the unmoving source of unending action from which we need to be freed. It is only through an awareness of moments of intersecting life and death that the traveler with the “drawing of this Love” (that is love unattached to endings and beginnings) becomes free and can “fare forward.”

Indian influences are not limited to *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*; they appear elsewhere in Eliot’s work. In 1943, Eliot was commissioned to write a poem for Queen Mary’s *Book for India*.<sup>16</sup> His contribution, “To Indians Who Died in Africa”, was intended, as were all the contributions to the volume, to benefit the war effort.<sup>17</sup> Its role in this anthology is quite similar to that of the Gita in the *Mahabharata* – both serve as a call to battle. Just as Arjuna is instructed to lead the Pandavas into the Great War, so too does Eliot encourage Indians to fight in the Second World War as they had done in the First World War (*Figueira, Subaltern can Speak*).

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in KS Rao, 1962: 573.

<sup>17</sup> “Dry Salvages” and “To Indians who Died in Africa” were written within a year of each other. The poem was solicited by the editor Cornelia Sorabji for the war effort (Chandan 2007:54).

Just as Krishna in of the Bhagavat Gita urged Arjuna to pursue activity without attachment to the fruits of action, here too Eliot sends the same message and draws the parallel between the cosmic battle of Kurukshetra depicted in the Gita and Indians fighting in both World Wars for England. It is to be noted that at the time Eliot composed this poem, World War II had already taken a considerable toll on the India combatants who had been fighting for their imperial masters without much to gain. Moreover, they were in combat without the British having even consulted the Indian National Congress before declaring war on their behalf. Also, in the First World War, Britain had not bothered to poll Indian opinion. Since, in the intervening years, the English had made and broken quite a number of promises and given that the independence movement was in full swing, there were fewer Indian subjects willing to support the Second World War in the hopes of gaining concessions from the British this time around (Figueira, *Subaltern can Speak* 90). Eliot's poem is best understood in this context and in light of the Indian combatants' involvement in both World Wars.

In the First World War, the role of the Indian Army was not negligible. By the time the Armistice was signed, India had provided 1,270,000 soldiers to the war effort of which 827,000 were combatants. Indians comprised one-tenth of the Empire's manpower. The Indian Army in the First World War, as in the Second, was comprised mostly of Punjabi, Muslims and Sikhs (Omissi 2).<sup>18</sup> The recruits mostly stemmed from warrior castes, so Eliot's evocation of the Mahabharata War to describe the modern Indian soldier is apt.

Eliot realistically portrays the morale and bravery that the Indian soldiers exhibited. As sepoy letters from the First World War attest, they were dedicated to their duty as soldiers. Unlike British soldier-poets such as Rupert Brooke who focused on the glory of battle, or

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<sup>18</sup> The British avoided recruiting from the educated classes whom they believed had been tainted by radical politics.

Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen who wallowed in the horror of their impending deaths, the Indian soldiers, as we can gather from their testimonies attempted to make religious or philosophical sense out of the war (Figueira, *Subaltern can Speak* 97-100). Whether professional soldiers or hapless villagers conscripted into the Indian Army, the sepoys of the First World War exhibited in the letters they left behind a certain detachment and sang-froid in the face of destruction. Moreover, they rejected the certainty regarding battle, glory and hallowed dust – the sentimentality and lies of wartime propaganda. Even more than the British poet-soldiers, the Indian sepoys of the First World War offered a convincing repudiation of the lies of old men, who led them into the trenches of the Ypres Salient (Figueira, *Subaltern can Speak* 101). Eliot wonderfully evoked the worldview of such soldiers when he writes in “East Coker” (II, 76-8):

Had they deceived us,  
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,  
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit.

In “To the Indians Who Died in Africa,” Eliot juxtaposes the Indian soldiers fighting in Africa during the Second World War<sup>19</sup> to Arjuna. In both war zones, the Indian soldiers fulfil the duty of their caste (as warriors) to perform without attachment to the fruits of action. In the poem, Eliot presents the dilemma of the Indian as it is presented in the Gita; the goal of individual warrior is salvation as expressed specifically in the Gita’s emphasis on action (3.5; 3.9).

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<sup>19</sup> The 2 million Indians who enlisted to fight during the Second World War comprised the biggest volunteer army that ever existed (see Geoffrey Moorhouse, *India Britannica*. London: Harvill, 1983, pp. 242-3, cited in Chandan 58) The fourth, fifth and tenth divisions fought in North Africa between 1939-43, The fourth and fifth divisions fought in East Africa between 1940-41 The fourth division smashed the Italians at Sidi Barrani and took the entire Italian army prisoner and they led the conquest of Italian East Africa and the liberation of Abyssinia (Chandan 2007: 59).

Eliot's poem contains four stanzas. The first three have five lines, the last consists of seven. The first two stanzas present a picture of a happy old warrior whose destination should consist of returning home to his wife's cooking, sitting by his fire, and watching his grandson play. He will relate his war stories:

A man's destination is his own village,  
His own fire, and his wife's cooking;  
To sit in front of his own door at sunset  
And see his grandson and his neighbour's grandson  
Play in the dust together.

Scarred but secure, he has many narratives  
To repeat at the hour of conversation  
(The warm or the cool hour, according to the climate).

The last two stanzas announce that the land does not belong to anyone. Two people, two countries, one from the Punjab, the land of five rivers and the other from the Midlands in England can share the same memories (Rao, TSE and BG574-5):

Of foreign men, who fought in foreign places,  
Foreign to each other  
A man's destination is not his destiny.  
Every country is home to one man  
And exile to another. When a man dies bravely  
At one with his destiny, that soil is his.  
Let his village remember

This was not your land, or ours: but a village in the Midlands

Another in the Five Rivers, may have the same memories. Let those who go home tell the  
same story of you: Of action with a common purpose, action

None the less fruitful if neither you nor I

Know, until the judgment after death,

What is the fruit of action.

In 1943, the repetition of the term “foreign” in “foreign men” could not but evoke the issue of foreign rule in opposition to the self-rule (*swadeshi*) that the Indians were militating for with the Quit India Movement. In response to such an association, Eliot asserts that the land was “not your land, or ours.” The poem then moves from the material to the spiritual. In the beginning, a man is attached to “his own fire, his own village, his wife’s cooking, his grandson.” However, by the third stanza we find him detached from his homeland. He belongs where he dies bravely.<sup>20</sup> The final stanza emphasizes the spiritual and the eternal elements. There is the exhortation to pursue action without regard to its fruits, in the manner of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna . As in the *Gita*, the poem speaks in direct address

In addition to the Four Quartets and “To the Indians Who Died in Africa,” the *Gita*’s teaching of love and non-attachment also appears in Eliot’s dramatic works. In *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot presents a vision of life as a matter of choice similar to the proper attitude with

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<sup>20</sup> The Indian dead of the First World War are mourned in cemeteries throughout Belgium and France, where they were cremated and buried with full religious respect and honour. On these graves, the sepoy’s name, number, name of regiment and date of death are duly noted in English. The largest and most sumptuous memorial to the Indian fallen is found at Neuve Chapelle, the site of one of their more significant engagements. The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle is a particularly impressive lieu de memoire. Designed in the Indo-Saracen style, an enclosure with a 15-meter pillar resembling the pillar of Asoka surmounted with a lotu capital, the star of India, and the imperial crown. On either side of the column are two carved tigers, guarding this temple to the dead. On the pillar itself are the written words: GOD IS ONE HIS IS THE VICTORY. This lofty sentiment is accompanied by roughly equivalent citations from the Koran written in Arabic script, from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib written in Gurmukhi (IK ONKAR SRI WAHEGURU JI KI FATEH) and finally from the Bhagavad Gita in Devanagari script (OM BHAGAVATE NAMAH). The column and tigers are supported by a podium on which is carved ‘INDIA 1914-19’. This monument is so spectacular; it is only surpassed by the ossuary at Verdun.

which the *Gita* teaches that one must perform action (Rao, Cocktail Party and BG 195). Reilly, the psychiatrist, tells Edward, Lavinia and Celia that they all need to understand the nature of their love (self, selfish and lovelessness).<sup>21</sup> He also tells Celia that her way is that of knowledge. When Celia asks Reilly to clarify what her duty is, he responds that neither way is better, The two paths presented in the *Gita*, that of *karma* and *jnana*, are similar to the two paths that Reilly presents to Celia. Moreover, he explains how the two paths to attain salvation are suitable to individuals according to their temperaments, similar to the *Gita*'s teaching regarding the *gunas*, already suggested in "Little Gidding." Reilly instructs his "patients" that their duties must also conform to their position in life and with the proper attitude. Reilly points out to Edward and Lavinia that they are householders and that life is as important as that of the ascetic. In other words, he presents an elaboration of the *varnashramadharma*, as it is found in the *Gita*. In the end, the Reilly bids farewell to his "patients" with words both for a discriminating pursuit of life as for its renunciation. Here, Eliot has him speak not from the *Gita*, but using the words of the dying Buddha: "Work out your salvation with diligence." This refrain is found throughout *The Cocktail Party*. The characters are exhorted at several reprises to "work out" their "salvation with diligence."<sup>22</sup>

With the exception of this citation of the Buddha's last words, we would be hard pressed to see a Buddhist turn in Eliot, despite Steven Spender's comment that Eliot had almost become a Buddhist.<sup>23</sup> These evocations equally show a reliance on the *Gita*, since in terms of ethics Hinduism and Buddhism share the same belief - that we must become emancipated from desire.

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<sup>21</sup> Celia needs to become more universal in her love, Edward needs to change his self-love into selfless love for Lavinia and Lavinia needs to transform her lovelessness to become responsible for Edward (Rao 1981:196).

<sup>22</sup> This is a well-known citation from accounts of the Buddha's death that Eliot most probably took from his Sanskrit teacher's third volume edition in the Harvard Oriental Series that he edited, Warren's *Buddhism in Translation* (1922:109). Eliot also cites Warren's anthology (still in print today and used in classrooms as source material) in "The Fire Sermon, the third part of "The Wasteland" (Eliot 1969: 308).

<sup>23</sup> Spender, T.S. Eliot. New York: Viking 1976, cited in Perl and Tuck 1985:116.

Similarly, the theme of impermanence so important to Eliot and expressed in “East Coker” and especially in “Dry Salvages” where he writes: “Fare forward. . . You are not the same people who left that station. Or who will arrive at any terminus. . .” could equally well reflect his appreciation of Buddhist thought. We must remember he studied both religions and philosophies consecutively.<sup>24</sup> Hindu and Buddhist themes (such as *karma*, predestination, illusion, the ability to make the right choice at death) appear elsewhere in Eliot’s plays (Ghosh 1974: 131), such as *The Elder Statesman*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and *The Family Reunion*. In *The Family Reunion*, one character notes:

O God, man, the things that are going to happen  
Have already happened (Eliot, complete  
Poems 317, cited in Ghosh 134)

Among the Transcendentalists, we can identify two tendencies operant in their readings of the Gita – a superficial use of Sanskrit terminology for its evocative potential and a conscious attempt to cull some religious meaning from this “exotic” text (Figueira Subaltern Can Speak). Eliot was far more knowledgeable in his appropriation, using the Gita as an inspirational springboard for his wartime reflections on human and social responsibility. It is not without significance that Eliot chose to quote Krishna’s command to fight in the middle of World War II. He was signaling the Gita’s teaching that since the unchanging spirit does not dwell in the mortal body, one should continue to act and fight on the battlefield without attachment to the world. What is interesting here is not that Eliot evoked the Gita, this seems to have become almost a cliché among America’s artists and intellectuals, but the manner in which he appropriated it. He was telling his readers that they should not be concerned with their own fate, but rather with the

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<sup>24</sup> In 1913-14, Eliot attended Masaharu Anesaki’s class “Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought In Japan” which consisted of the study of Buddhism in Japan and China. Eliot thus showed a desire to study Buddhism outside India; it should be noted that he abandoned Sanskrit after the first year in order to study Pali.

good of mankind. In this sense, Eliot appropriated the Gita in particular in “Dry Salvages” in order to Christianize its message and urge his fellow citizens to fight for the greater good of the nation and humanity. To fight the Nazis in order to preserve civilization as they knew it was at issue. It was this impulse that drew Eliot to reconnect with Hindu philosophy as he understood it from his reading and translating the Gita. It was this same impulse that animated the appropriation of the Gita by Eliot’s fellow American, J. Robert Oppenheimer, at roughly around the same time.

### **Oppenheimer**

J. Robert Oppenheimer’s (1904-67) admiration for the Gita can partially be understood within the context of his upbringing. He was born into a rich and cultivated New York Jewish family. His father had been a textile merchant who immigrated to the States and married a cultivated Midwestern woman who was a painter. Oppenheimer’s mother was attentive to the needs of Robert and his younger brother Frank. Handicapped with a withered hand, she sought to instill in them a certain hardiness. The Oppenheims did not raise their sons as religious Jews. In fact, from an early age, Robert had been affiliated with Felix Adler’s Society for Ethical Culture of which his father was on the Board of Directors. The Society for Ethical Culture rejected the transcendental aspects of religion and focused on human welfare as a basis of universal faith. It advocated that one was to assume responsibility for the direction of one’s life and destiny. For ten years, Oppenheimer studied at the Ethical Culture School in New York, graduating as its valedictorian. He then moved on to Harvard University, where he graduated *summa cum laude* in three years (1922-5) and first in his class with the highest grade-point average that Harvard had ever recorded. At some point in his studies, he became familiar with

ancient Indian literature in English translations.<sup>25</sup> In fact, I.I. Rabi, who knew him as a young man and later worked on the Manhattan Project with him, remarked in 1929 that he thought Oppenheimer was more interested in the Hindu classics than he had ever been in physics.<sup>26</sup> He appreciated, in particular, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Smith and Weiner 165). Frank Oppenheimer noted how his brother “was really taken by the charm and the general wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita” but added that he felt he had never got “religiously involved in it.”<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that Oppenheimer listed the Gita along with *The Waste Land* which had just been published,<sup>28</sup> as one of the ten books that did most to shape his vocational attitude and your philosophy of life. In fact, the *Gita* gave Oppenheimer a code of belief that he would use throughout his professional life. Its teaching also afforded him a timely rationale to question and ultimately reject his upbringing in Ethical Culture.

In the 1920s, Oppenheimer was conspicuously ambitious. He was also very depressed. John Edsall, a college friend, recalled how Oppenheimer desperately wanted to make a big contribution to science. At Harvard, the distinguished physicist, Percy Bridgeman, had told him that he could not yet consider himself a physicist until he had done original work<sup>29</sup> and Oppenheimer fully realized how he had missed out on participating in the important breakthroughs in the field by Werner Heisenberg and others that had already taken place. He knew full well that he needed to make his own big discoveries and that, in the field of physics,

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<sup>25</sup>Jeffrey Wyman, interview by Charles Weiner, 28 May 1975 in J. Robert Oppenheimer Oral History Collection, MC 85 (transcript), Institute Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Libraries. Cambridge, Massachusetts, cited in Hijjiya 2000:129.

<sup>26</sup>Rabi et al, Oppenheimer. New York: Scribner’s 1969: 5, cited in Hijjiya 2000:130.

<sup>27</sup>Frank Oppenheimer in the film production Day After Trinity, cited in Hijjiya 2000:126.

<sup>28</sup>In addition to the Gita and Eliot, he also cited Baudelaire, Bhartrhari, Dante, Flaubert (*Education sentimentale*) Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the works of the German mathematician Riemann and Plato’s *Theaetitus*( Hijjiya2000:130).

<sup>29</sup>Interview in Weiner 16 July 1975, p. 14 in Oppenheimer Oral Collection MIT, in Hijjiya 2000:149

such discoveries are usually made when one was young. After graduating from Harvard, Oppenheimer went to the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge University to continue working in applied physics. This stint in England was a calamitous. In fact, Oppenheimer became suicidal and sought treatment from psychiatrists both in Paris and in London. He was on the verge of a complete breakdown and there is some evidence that he did indeed suffer a psychotic episode at that time (Hijiya 149). Part of his problem was his failure to stand out as the most gifted applied physicist at Cambridge, an ego blow that was all the more upsetting, given his oversized ambition. His youthful training in Ethical Culture installed in him a sense of social burden whose ideal entailed the development of the individual's ability to change the environment and have a beneficent effect upon the world. Ethical Culture focused on the role of privileged and exceptional humans in the making of history.<sup>30</sup> His friend, I. I. Rabi thought that Ethical Culture had been an immobilizing burden on Oppenheimer (Bird and Sherwin 101). Rabi's wife, Helen Newmark, who had been a classmate of Oppenheimer at Ethical Culture, commented on his conflict with its philosophy. She felt that it had soured Oppenheimer as a budding intellectual, even if it instilled in him a more profound approach to human relations (Bird and Sherwin 101).

Even so, and despite his psychological crisis and failure to succeed at Cambridge, Oppenheimer moved on to Göttingen where he completed his doctorate under Max Born in 1927. He had resolved the feelings of inadequacy he felt at Cambridge as an applied physicist by finding his bearings as a theoretical physicist in Germany. Upon graduating, he was offered (and accepted) dual posts both at Berkeley, where he would build the Theoretical Physics department, and Cal Tech. It was at this time that, as a young professor of physics, Oppenheimer began to

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<sup>30</sup>See Horace L. Friess, Felix Adler and Ethical Culture. (Ed.) Fannie Weingarten, Columbia UP 1981: 122, 124 cited in Hijiya 2000: 146-7.

study Sanskrit with Arthur W. Ryder at Berkeley. He wrote to his brother that it was “very easy and quite marvelous” (October 7, 1933 in Smith and Weiner 165). He attended Ryder’s Thursday evening readings of the Gita. Oppenheimer’s letters to his brother express how the Gita’s teaching on detachment and renunciation could serve as viable alternative to Adler’s insistence on constant self-analysis and self-evaluation. Oppenheimer felt that he could replace Adler with Ryder as a more amenable guru. Oppenheimer had come to view his Sanskrit teacher as his moral paragon. “Ryder felt and thought and talked as a Stoic. . . a special subclass of people who have a tragic sense of life” (Thorpe 53). With his study of Hindu religious philosophy, Oppenheimer was also perhaps adding to his life an element of spirituality that had been lacking in both Ethical Culture and his secular upbringing. It also suited his sense of his own exceptionalism.

Oppenheimer’s discovery of Indian philosophy thought and particularly his study of the Gita, would have a tremendous influence on his future endeavors. Once Oppenheimer embraced the ethics he found in the Gita, its notion of duty, and its injunction to renounce the fruits of one’s actions, he could easily reject the burden of personal responsibility that the teaching of Ethical Culture had imposed on him. Oppenheimer preferred the *Gita*’s laws of *karma*, destiny, and duty to Ethical Culture’s stress on individual human will. Yet, in its celebration of action and engagement, Oppenheimer could also see the Gita as compatible with what he did appreciate in his Ethical Culture upbringing: its mandate to succeed and produce results. Around this time, he wrote:

I believe that through discipline, though not through discipline alone, we can achieve serenity, and a certain small but precious measure of freedom from the accidents of

incarnation. . .and that detachment which preserves the world which it renounces, (Bird and Sherwin 100)

Oppenheimer would henceforth use the Gita as a manual for regulating his life. Since the emotional crisis of 1926 at Cambridge, Oppenheimer had desperately sought equilibrium and the *Gita* now supplied him with it.. Discipline and hard work always had worked for him in the past and with the Gita, he could now raise duty to a philosophy of life.

The Gita gave Oppenheimer a “feeling for the place of ethics’ and an understanding of vocation. It taught him that “any man who does a hard thing well is automatically respectable and worthy of respect” (Thorpe 53).It is clear that Oppenheimer had found in the Gita and the behavior he saw embodied in his teacher Ryder an ascetic ethos on which to model his own self-fashioning. In a letter to his brother, Oppenheimer wrote:

I think that all things which evoke discipline: study and our duties to men and to the commonwealth, and war, and personal hardship, and even the need for subsistence, ought to be greeted by us with profound gratitude; for only through them can we attain to the least detachment; and only so can we know peace (cited in Bird and Sherwin 100).

Oppenheimer was seeking detachment from the world, yet he was still quite an intellectual snob who desired worldly fame and scientific glory. Like so many of the other exoticist *Schwärmer*, Oppenheimer was looking for an alibi in India, an elsewhere to inhabit to make himself more interesting to himself and others (Figueira, *The Exotic*). He was also looking for some peace of mind. The Gita’s concept of *dharma* meshed with Oppenheimer’s interest in ascetic discipline and his understanding of science as a vocation. What is interesting is the manner in which he used the language of the Gita to express his own variation on the “Protestant ethic” (Thorpe53) that he had absorbed earlier from his training in Ethical Culture.

Oppenheimer felt that the Gita was “the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue.” He would always keep a copy on the bookshelf closest to his desk and had the habit of giving out translations as gifts (Royal 64). He carried a copy of the Gita in his pocket for casual consultation during his work at Los Alamos. Ryder had written in the introduction to his Gitatranslation (1929) about the inspiration that had been found in this text by “uncounted millions” for the road to salvation. It is clear that this was the case for his student who found in it a new ethics: the single-minded performance of personal duty. No longer focusing on Ethical Culture’ humanitarianism and its quest for greatness (fruits of action) Oppenheimer now honed in on the Gita’s teaching regarding the execution of duty without care for the fruits of one’s actions. If the Gita did not free Oppenheimer from his overweening ambition for distinction, it at least soothed his frustrations at not achieving greatness for some significant discovery. Although he was a man very much enmeshed in creature comforts, wealth, a privileged lifestyle, Oppenheimer wrote in a letter to his brother (March 12, 1932) how he wanted very much to free himself from the desire of things of the world (Smith and Weiner 155). The ethic he discovered in the Gita would guide him in the decade he taught in California but it would be put to the test subsequently.

In 1942, despite lack of seniority, the lack of any administrative qualifications or experience, with considerable promise yet no great discoveries under his belt (i.e. no Noble Prize), Oppenheimer was appointed Director of the laboratory for the Manhattan Project. He had greatly impressed General Leslie Groves, the head of the bomb project, with organizational ideas he had expressed at a conference of assembled scientists in the planning stages for the project. He had also showed an initial willingness to allow the project to be run by the military and this

willingness (or cluelessness) had also impressed Groves,<sup>31</sup> Oppenheimer's appointment surprised many. It was not only his relative lack of qualifications for the job,<sup>32</sup> but his political affiliation that triggered the response to his appointment. Through a former fiancée, his wife and his brother, Oppenheimer had been active in leftist politics. There was some speculation that he had been a Communist Party member. The 30s and 40s were not yet the time of the Red Scare of the 50s, nevertheless Oppenheimer had in his social and familial milieu more involvement in and had offered financial support for Leftist causes than customary even in his cultural and professional milieu. It might certainly have been deemed excessive for an appointment to such a highly sensitive position. Nevertheless, he was appointed to this task and became responsible for coordinating the work of thousands of men and women. Charged with and deciding upon a location for the operation, he chose Los Alamos as its headquarters, an area he knew from summers spent there camping and horseback riding with his brother. He went about the task of organizing and directing the project of building the Atomic Bomb with single-minded devotion and competence.

After some initial organizational glitches, he had the sense to seek the aid of more experienced colleagues at how to run things. There were no delays and Oppenheimer allowed no protests to impede the accomplishment of the project. The official report on the Manhattan Project cited him as the one person credited with its implementation for military purposes. The Atomic Energy Commission had judged him virtually indispensable (Hijiya 164). While at work on the project, the teachings of the *Gita* were never far from his mind. Indeed, Oppenheimer often regaled his fellow workers at Los Alamos by evoking the wisdom of the *Gita*. He saw it as

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<sup>31</sup> It was only when physicists refused to join the project if it was to be militarily run, out of concern that military bureaucracy would impede their efforts – a legitimate fear of men who had more political acumen and/or experience of the military, that Oppenheimer backed out of this initial stipulation.

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that many other scientists were already involved in running other major laboratories for the war effort.

the crucial inspiration for the project's success. He explained, in a speech to the Association of Los Alamos scientists, that it was their duty as scientists to build the bomb (Smith and Weiner 1980:317). It was their *dharma*. In fact, this sense of duty became the key managerial tool for Oppenheimer. It allowed him to manage the work as well as any ensuing conflicts. His fellow Manhattan Project scientist, Leo Szilard, and sixty-eight other scientists had signed a petition not to drop the bomb over a city (Smith 53-5). Szilard had wanted to submit this petition to President Truman. But Oppenheimer told physicist Edward Teller, who had come to him with the request, not to do so. He calmly stated: "Our fate was in the hands of the best, the most conscientious men of our nation, and they had information which we did not possess" (Brown 13-4). He thus forbade circulation of the petition (Smith 155, cited in Hijiya 138). Moreover, Oppenheimer refused to advocate any target other than a city, since he believed that such a target would not intimidate the Japanese (*USAEC* 236) who would view it like a 'firecracker over the desert' (ibid 34). Furthermore, he discouraged colleagues from even discussing the consequences of the bomb, since it would distract them from creating it (Smith and Weiner 240). Simply, he saw it as his duty to build the bomb and it was the duty of others to decide how to use it.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Oppenheimer's attitude of detachment was picked up subsequently by other scientists, with varying degrees of sincerity. This stance of "doing own's duty" was brilliantly parodied by Tom Lehrer in the late 1960s, in a satirical song where he sings of the "great American know-how of scientists and their "patriotism." The "American" scientist Lehrer evokes is Werner von Braun who so easily segued from being a Nazi rocket scientist into his Cold-War usefulness to the Americans

Gather 'round while I sing you of Wernher von Braun,  
A man whose allegiance  
Is ruled by expedience.  
Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown,  
"Ha, Nazi, Schmazi," says Wernher von Braun.

Don't say that he's hypocritical,  
Say rather that he's apolitical.  
"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down?  
That's not my department," says Wernher von Braun.

Although happy when the test and the actual detonation over Japan were successful, Oppenheimer was otherwise detached from the fruits of his work. Just as Arjuna came to understand his duty as tied to his caste obligations as a *ksatriya*, so too did Oppenheimer understand duty in terms of his social class (a lesson taught by Ethical Culture) and his place (as a scientist) in society. As an American citizen, he defined his duty in terms of his profession and expertise. His duty of an American scientist was to build the bomb; it was the duty of the statesmen to decide how or whether to use it (Smith and Weiner 1980:317). "I did my job which was the job I was supposed to do. I was not in a policymaking position at Los Alamos" (*USAEC* 236). In "Physicists in the Contemporary World", Oppenheimer spoke about the importance of scientists to do duty, consistently using vocabulary borrowed from the Gita, (2.47; 4.20; 5.12; 12.11; 12.12; 18.2; 18.11), and emphasizing especially that they should not attempt to assume responsibility for "the fruits of their work." At a memorial service for Roosevelt at Los Alamos after his death in April 15, 1945, Oppenheimer quoted the Gita; "Man is a creature whose substance is faith. What his faith is, he is "(Gita 17.3) (Smith and Weiner 288, cited in Hijiya 130). Throughout the process and as the bomb neared completion, Oppenheimer regularly cited it.

The extent of Oppenheimer's intense involvement with the Gita as a source of inspiration and a guide for living has not received the attention it deserves. His involvement with the

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Some have harsh words for this man of renown,  
But some think our attitude  
Should be one of gratitude,  
Like the widows and cripples in old London town,  
Who owe their large pensions to Wernher von Braun.

You too may be a big hero,  
Once you've learned to count backwards to zero.  
"In German oder English I know how to count down,  
Und I'm learning Chinese!" says Wernher von Braun

Sanskrit text is most famously eclipsed by the Gita passage that Oppenheimer claimed flashed into his mind upon the detonation at Los Alamos:

If the radiance of a thousand suns  
Were to burst into the sky,  
That would be like  
The splendor of the Mighty One –

With a certain dramatic flair, the interviewer relating Oppenheimer's account notes:

Yet, when the sinister and gigantic cloud rose up in the far distance, our Point Zero, he was reminded of another line from the same source:

I am become Death, the shatterer of Worlds. (Jungt 201, cited in Hijjiya 124)

Oppenheimer's Gita quote solidified slowly with subsequent retellings. In *Time Magazine*, the American public read:

Oppenheimer recalls that the lines of the Bhagavad Gita flashed through his mind: "I am become death, the shatterer of worlds." ("The Eternal Apprentice," *Time*, November 8, 1948: 77)

In the aftermath of the war, Oppenheimer was investigated as a potential security risk due to his poor choices in several appointments at Los Alamos, his ambiguous reporting of security risks, but primarily because of his resistance to the development of the Hydrogen Bomb – to be possibly used against the Soviets – in contrast to his willingness to develop the Atomic Bomb for use against the Japanese. His defense before the Commission was not stellar nor was the trial objective and well-run. Oppenheimer was stripped of his authority and lost his security clearance. It was a humiliation for someone who had so effectively served his country.

Oppenheimer's "fate" now took on a life of its own and a new hagiography was put in place. Oppenheimer was no longer viewed as the genius scientist who loved poetry and read Sanskrit. He was now seen as a victim of the Red Scare hysteria and a government that persecuted him for what they suspected was his lack of patriotism. It was no longer of any interest how he used Indian philosophy to rationalize his involvement in creating the Atomic Bomb. His persona (that he cultivated) as the slightly mystical adept of Hindu wisdom who happened to be a scientist was replaced by the image of him as a tormented victim of the government, guilt-ridden by his contribution to the bomb. In a NBC 1965 documentary, "The Decision to Drop the Bomb," there is a close up of Oppenheimer where he recounts his memory of moments after the blast:

We knew the world would not be the same. . .I remember the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*: Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty and, to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." I suppose we all thought that one way or another.

Much has been made of this documentary image of him. It has been interpreted as showing Oppenheimer as haunted and forlorn (Banco 143). The reality was much more prosaic. After losing his security clearance, Oppenheimer's "exile" consisted in his becoming the Director of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies, not quite Ovid's banishment to the far reaches of the known world described in the *Tristia*. It was not a bad early forced retirement for a scientist who had never made the discoveries of a Fermi or a Heisenberg and had he never produced the significant body of publications that his early promise had foreshadowed. His directorship of Los Alamos was his legacy and, as we have seen, his love of the *Gita* played a great role in his success.

Today, Oppenheimer is often portrayed as the ultimate victim of the military industrial complex, supported by post-McCarthy-era scholarship and artistic production. In a recent book of criticism, Oppenheimer's comment that the bomb project was "technically sweet" (Polenberg 46). is seen as evidence of an "emerging form the discourse of efficiency, scientism and patriarchy" (Banco 130). But, the truth is that Oppenheimer never regretted the bomb. When he visited Japan in 1960, he was asked by reporters whether he felt guilt over the bomb and replied: "I do not regret that I had something to do with the technical success of the Atomic Bomb (Michelmores241 cited in Hijiya165). He said he would do it again (Lemont302-3) and wished he had finished the bomb sooner to drop it on the Germans for what they had done to the Jews. To the end of his days, he saw his involvement in terms reminiscent of the *Gita*. "I never regretted and do not regret now, having done my part of the job." In the *New York Times* on August 1, 1965, (p. 8), he noted, ... "There was uncertainty of achievement not of duty."<sup>34</sup> He said on too many occasions that it was his duty that mattered. He firmly believed (as do most historians) that it saved lives by speedily ending the war. He had full knowledge of atrocities that had been committed by the Germans and were being committed by the Japanese. He felt that something had to be done to save Western civilization (Smith and Weiner 173). He hoped it would deter future wars (letter to Herbert Smith on August 26,1945 (Smith and Weiner 297, all cited in Hijiya 128). In 1966, in the month before his death, in an argument regarding the consequences of what he termed the subsequent "chattering," Oppenheimer clarified that the important thing was "doing what I should."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Newsweek, July 19,1965:51, both Times quote and the *Newsweek* quote cited in Hijiya 2000:141-2

<sup>35</sup>Thomas B. Morgan "With Oppenheimer on an Autumn Day" Look, Dec 27, 1966. 67 cited in Hijiya 2000:160

Ethical Culture had emphasized moral action in the world aimed at improving human welfare. Oppenheimer, rebelling perhaps at his upbringing, sought mystical renunciation of the world. Yet, he was also a product of his parent's German Jewish attachment to *Bildung*. Rather than seeking the flowering of the self through aesthetic cultivation, he sought in the *Gita* a subjugation of the self through ascetic discipline. But, this asceticism was only partial because Oppenheimer was also a worldly cosmopolitan sophisticate with his pipe and pork-pie hat gracing the cover of a scientific journal. We hear of his charm as a host, particularly with the ladies, his ability to make a perfect martini, his collection of Van Gogh, Vlaminck, and Derain gracing the walls of his elegantly appointed 17<sup>th</sup> century-house in Princeton, complete with an artist's studio for his wife, horses and stable for his daughter and photography studio for his son.

Oppenheimer contributed to his mythologization as the ascetic scientist. His appreciation of the *Gita* and his frequent references to it play no small part in this portrait. Harry M. Davis in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* (April 18, 1948:57) entitled, "The Man who Built the A-Bomb," wrote that Oppenheimer "studied Sanskrit so that he could sip eternal truth from the bygone philosophies of India." This article highlights Oppenheimer's mysticism; it portrays him as a genius and "wise man" whose esoteric wisdom was as deep as his technical wizardry. Oppenheimer's appreciation of the philosophy of the *Gita* functions here "as an anodyne for the pangs of conscience" (Hijiya 125). For all his sincere love for the *Gita* as a genuine source of wisdom for him, the Sanskrit text was also an aesthetic and decorative accomplishment and a display of his virtuosity. In an interview on November 16, 1998, David Hawkins relates the following anecdote:

I once was sitting in his living room before the war in Berkeley, and to the left on the bookshelf was a whole string of classics. I saw Plato and pulled down a volume, and I

said, ‘You know, I’ve just been studying this volume.’ And he said, owlshly, ‘I’ve read the Greeks, I find the Hindus deeper.’ Wow! One upmanship! He had that side too.

(Thorpe 54)

At the heart of Oppenheimer’s scientific and intellectual identity, Hindu philosophy could function as an ornamental cultivation, offering him the opportunity to engage the world while renouncing it.

Like many of us, Oppenheimer sought refuge from the world in which he felt ill at ease. His friend and colleague I.I Rabi disapproved, noting that if he “had studied the Talmud rather than Sanskrit” it “would have given him a greater sense of himself (cited in Thorpe 53). The attraction of the Gitawas that it appeared to transcend its particular religious and cultural tradition (Thorpe 53). But, why, I ask? Here we can go back to Adler and his attempt to extract from Judaism and Christianity a universal morality. Maybe Oppenheimer was, after all, continuing Adler’s universalist ideal. In this respect, he was rather not unlike other Western questers who sought solace and inspiration in the Sanskrit classic. The Gitaprovided a guide by which privileged Westerners as gifted and entitled as Eliot and Oppenheimer could find meaning in a chaotic world, but at the same time showed that world how cultivated and interesting they were.

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