Modern Asian Studies **40,** 2 (2006) pp. 303–332. © 2006 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Printed in the United Kingdom

Gandhi, 'Truth' and Translatability

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This essay considers the role of translatability in Gandhi's project of 'Truth'.[1] I will argue that translation as a category and a mode of thinking grounds what Gandhi's autobiography refers to as 'the Story of My Experiments with Truth.'[2]

There are two crucial sites of translation in Gandhi's work. The first consists of his self-presentation as a translator in his interventions between different groups of Indians, and the second is his engagement with the *Bhagavad Gita*. My contention here is that the *Gita* is not a stable text whose doctrinal meanings are effortlessly conveyed by Gandhi to others. I will argue that the *Gita* is a repository of 'Truth' for Gandhi precisely because of way it is necessarily entangled with translation as both a mode of thinking and a process.

Gandhi's Self-presentation as a Translator and the Question of Vulnerability

Gandhi often refers to himself or presents himself as a translator in his autobiographical texts.[3] Gandhi's experimental dwellings such as Tolstoy farm and the Phoenix settlement are partly sites for

[1] This paper was presented at a seminar at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, in April 2004. I am grateful to the participants for their comments at the time, and also to Vinay Lal for commenting on the manuscript from which this paper is taken.

[2] M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927–29; Harmondsworth, 1982) translated Mahadev Desai, hereafter *An Autobiography*.

[3] I refer to autobiographical texts in the plural because I include *Satyagraha in South Africa* under this rubric. Gandhi makes it clear in his chapter on 'The birth of Satyagraha' in *An Autobiography* that the reader who 'wishes to consider these experiments in their strict chronological order will now do well to keep the history of Satyagraha in South Africa before him,' before going on to read about the experiments conducted by Gandhi on his return to India. He also refers the reader to *Satyagraha in South Africa* for a fuller description of the 'conditions of Indians in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State.' See *An Autobiography*, p. 292, p. 128. For Gandhi, then, *Satyagraha in South Africa* had to be read alongside *An Autobiography* as an autobiographical text.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

multilingual experiments, such as instructing pupils in a variety of Indian languages, and launching the periodical *Indian Opinion* in English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Tamil. But what is striking about Gandhi's multilingual experiments is how he calls attention to their failures. Regarding the *Indian Opinion* he narrates how the Hindi and Tamil sections were discontinued, because the 'burden they imposed upon us seemed to be excessive,' and 'we would not find Tamil and Hindi writers willing to settle upon the farm and could not exercise a check upon them.'[4] Elsewhere he describes the Hindi and Tamil sections of the paper as 'a make-believe.'[5] Similarly, at Tolstoy farm he ultimately opts for dividing the class into two sections, a Gujarati and an English section.[6]

These failures parallel his own lack of success in mastering languages. He makes it clear that he 'never learnt to speak Tamil, and the little I could do by way of reading is now rusting away for want of practice.' As for Telegu, 'I did not get beyond the alphabet.'[7] Similarly at Tolstoy farm, where he undertakes to teach Tamil and Urdu, he again makes it clear that his Tamil is rudimentary and that 'even my Gujarati was no better than that which one acquires at high school.' He also points to the limits of his knowledge of Urdu.[8] In what he refers to as another 'experiment,' he describes how he serves as (a self-appointed) 'translator by special appointment' to Gokhale during the latter's tour of South Africa, when at Gandhi's insistence Gokhale spoke Marathi at public gatherings. Yet Gandhi cites himself as admitting to Gokhale that 'What is true of my Hindustani is equally true of my Marathi. I cannot speak a single word of Marathi.'[9]

Thus, in his self-presentation as a translator, Gandhi foregrounds his lack of linguistic expertise. The shaping of his persona as an interpreter, translator, and language teacher is self-consciously and paradoxically rooted in his lack of knowledge of the languages he works with, not in his mastery of them. In part, Gandhi's foregrounding of linguistic ineptitude needs to be read in the context of a larger discourse on vulnerability in his autobiographical writings. Far from being a masculine, heroic self-presentation of the kind that Mary

[4] M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1924–5) in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi, 1984) 39: p. 117. Hereafter *SS*.
[5] *An Autobiography*, p. 263.
[6] *SS*, p. 195.
[7] *An Autobiography*, pp. 161–2.
[8] Ibid., p. 307.
[9] SS, p. 213.

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Evans argues characterises the bulk of modern autobiographical narratives in the West authored by men,[10] Gandhi is at pains to articulate his own vulnerability as a human being, both sexually and emotionally. An important instance of this is the intimate detail of his sexual jealousy towards his wife.[11]

Given the importance of dialogue in Gandhi's work as a whole, which is especially evident in the dialogue form of *Hind Swaraj*, the fore-grounding of vulnerability is an important strategy for winning the trust of his readers and interlocutors. As one eminent political philosopher has argued, it is only through the mutual and reciprocal recognition of vulnerability that dialogue can be secured by rooting it in an radically honest sense of inwardness.[12] In this sense, Gandhi's fore-grounding of vulnerability is a key strategy for securing interpersonal communication through a mutually shared acknowledgement of what Matustik has called being shaken and wounded.[13] Gandhi's self-confessed vulnerability extends to his openness about his ignorance in crucial matters. He suggests that it is because he makes no attempt to disguise his ignorance from his pupils that he 'never lost their love and respect.' In terms which recall his invocation of radical honesty as the structuring motif of *An Autobiography* as a whole, he claims that 'In all respects I showed myself to them exactly as I really was.'[14] In this sense ignorance and vulnerability are not just the condition and medium of self-revelation in *An Autobiography*, but are the enabling conditions for his autobiographical project as a whole.

For Gandhi, revealing his ignorance is not just a way of securing trust through an openness about one's own vulnerability, it is also in keeping with his general distrust of any claims to totalising knowledge. This is exemplified in the open-ended final chapter to *An Autobiography*, where he uses an image of travelling to note that he still has a 'difficult path to traverse' before him, and that he has embarked upon a set of current experiments whose conclusions are as yet not 'decisive.'[15] This sense of

[10] Mary Evans, *Missing persons. The impossibility of auto/biography* (London/New York, 1999) Chapter 4.

[11] *An Autobiography*, pp. 26–9, p. 38, pp. 42–44.

[12] Martin J. Matustik, *Postnational identity: critical theory and existential philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard, and Havel* (New York, 1993) pp. 50–52.

[13] Ibid., p. 198.

[14] *An Autobiography*, p. 307. In his introduction, Gandhi says 'I am not going to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told.' Ibid., p. 16.

[15] Ibid., p. 454, p. 452.

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the autobiography as an open-ended series of experiments with 'Truth' reflects the inexhaustible nature of 'Truth', which Gandhi describes as 'a vast tree, which yields more and more fruit, the more you nurture it.'[16]

Thus, Gandhi's foregrounding of his linguistic ineptitude in his self-presentation as a translator is part of the larger discourse of vulnerability in *An Autobiography* as a whole. Gandhi also calls attention to his linguistic ineptitude in his reading of the *Gita*. He describes his encounter with the text of the *Gita* in a reading group composed of 'Theosophist friends' in which they study the text in translation. Gandhi makes it clear to the reading group that his Sanskrit 'was not much to speak of, that I had not read the Hindu scriptures in the original, and that even my acquaintance with the translations was of the slightest.' He adds that he uses 'one or two' translations of the text for the 'necessity of diving deeper into it.'[17] However, his inability to read the *Gita* in the original Sanskrit does not prevent him from referring to it as 'the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth.'[18]

More importantly, Gandhi uses a striking simile to represent the status of the text in his life: 'Just as I turned to the English dictionary for the meanings of English words that I did not understand, I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials.'[19] The *Gita* is not the Sanskrit text alone, but also its translations. It is also like an English dictionary which Gandhi uses to look up English words he does not understand. By likening his use of the *Gita* to his use of an English dictionary, Gandhi deepens the sense of translation as a mode because the comparison suggests that both the *Gita* and the English language are at one level 'foreign' to him; they are both not his 'mother tongues'. Neither is ready made nor unproblematically available and both have to be worked through translation. This translation is simultaneously interlingual and intralingual[20] because a dictionary is

[16] Ibid., p. 206.
[17] Ibid., p. 244.
[18] Ibid., p. 76.
[19] *An Autobiography*, p. 244.
[20] That is, translation that takes place within a language, or rewording in the same language. This is distinguished from interlingual translation when translation takes place across two languages, or 'intersemiotic' translation/transmutation when verbal signs are transmuted into nonverbal signs, for example, when a novel is turned into a film. These distinctions are Roman Jakobson's, for which see Susan Bassnett-McGuire,

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used for intralingual purposes but when used by a non-'native' speaker intralingual translation of necessity becomes interlingual. We thus arrive at a complex layer in Gandhi's motif of translation as it frames his reading of the *Gita*, namely that translating within a language and translating across languages collapse into each other. Intralingual and interlingual translation cannot be clearly differentiated, and the consequence of this is that the unity and identity of a language and its decidable limits also cannot be rigorously determined.[21] The act of translating from Sanskrit into another text is likened by Gandhi himself to the act of rewording within English.

There is another layer to the motif of translation in this passage. After he describes the *Gita* in terms of a dictionary, Gandhi asks a series of questions about how its key terms, such as *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability), might be translated into the daily conduct of his life.[22] In this way, the encounter with the *Gita* is also framed by a reference to translation as transmutation.[23] Gandhi's reading of the *Gita* becomes part of a series of transmutations and exchanges between his lived life, the *Gita*, and the text of his autobiography. His search for 'Truth' is embedded within these multiple translations. For him, the *Gita*, 'the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth,' does not exist as a singular, autonomous and clearly demarcated text. It exists as a text which holds together points of equivalence and substitution (translations, dictionaries, and Gandhi's own life).The 'Truth' of the *Gita* is in some sense actually constituted through the 'mode' of translation, and not just made available through translation.[24]

But Gandhi's engagement with the *Gita* in his autobiography also represents a distinctive intervention in and appropriation of the history of its translation into English during the nineteenth century. I now turn to this history in order to show how Gandhi opens up a space

Translation Studies (London/New York, 1980) p. 14, and Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary translation theories* (London,1993) p.1.

[21] This is a point that Derrida makes about the demarcation of languages in general in Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', in Joseph F. Graham ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca, 1985) p. 173.

[22] *An Autobiography*, p. 244.

[23] What Jakobson calls intersemiotic translation, or the interpretation of verbal signs by means of non-verbal sign systems; see Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, p. 14.

[24] The exploration of translation as a 'mode' is key to Walter Benjamin's notion of translation; see his 'Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn (London, 1973) pp. 70–82.

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for the rethinking of the concepts of originality, commentary, and textuality within the terms of his enactment of his autobiographical project as a series of 'experiments with Truth.'

The Task of the Translator and the Nature of British Rule in India: Charles Wilkins and the *Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* played a pivotal role in the translation of Sanskrit works into English. It was the first work to be translated directly from Sanskrit into English, without the mediation of any intervening languages, such as Persian. This cannot be ignored in its centrality to Gandhi. Its importance lies not just in its being a culturally and religiously important text but also in being the first direct translation from Sanskrit into English, in the history of which categories of authorship, translation, and questions of 'Truth' were grappled with in different ways in different versions of the text. The title of the first translation by Charles Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes. Translated from the original, in the sanskreet, or ancient language of the Brahmans*, drew attention to the fact that it was a direct translation from a Sanskrit text itself. Recently Michael Dodson has pointed to how subsequent Orientalists rejected work prior to Wilkins' 1785 translation of the *Gita* as lacking in authority because they were not translations made directly from a Sanskrit text.[25]

The phrase 'translated from the original' in Wilkins' title sets up the relationship between the source text and its translation in terms of the category of originality. The source text is the origin of the translated text, while the translated text is secondary to and derivative of a pre-existing text. This is reinforced by Wilkins' stress on the translation's 'fidelity' and 'accuracy' to the source text, and these words are also used to describe Wilkins' translation by Warren Hastings in his preface.[26] These terms represent the relationship between source and target text which has been taken to be paradigmatic of the practice of translation

[25] Michael S. Dodson, 'Orientalism, Sanskrit Scholarship, and Education in Colonial North India,' University of Cambridge PhD 2003, p. 67.

[26] Warren Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' in Charles Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon; in Eighteen Lectures; with Notes. Translated from the original, in the sanskreet, or ancient language of the Brahmans* (London, 1785) p.11. The Advertisement which appears after the title page also refers to the 'fidelity, accuracy, and merit of the Translator.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the West from the nineteenth century onwards. This practice is usually conceived in terms of the language of originality, in which the source text and the author who produces it are valorised in terms of being 'original,' while the translator is denied the status of being an author in his or her own right.[27]

There was another reason why Wilkins' translation acquired a crucial status in European Orientalist scholarship. Sir William Jones in his 'Tenth Anniversary Discourse' of February 1793, entitled 'On Asiatick History, Civil and Natural', stressed the need for both 'an accurate knowledge of Sanscrit and a confidential intercourse with learned Brahmens [as] the only means of separating truth from fable.'[28] Wilkins' text fulfilled both these criteria because it was translated directly from a culturally important Sanskrit text and because it was produced with the assistance of pandits in Benares. This is stressed by Warren Hastings' in his 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith' which serves as a preface to the book, and by Wilkins' own preface.[29] The 'authenticity' of Wilkins' translation was partly vouchsafed by his collaboration with pandits from Benares, which increasingly came into its own as 'the first seminary of Hindoo learning'[30] in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[31]

While on one level Wilkins' translation suggests that the translated text is inferior to the source text, on another level his translation also inaugurates the Orientalist translator as a heroic figure. Hastings refers to this heroic labour in terms of the difficulty of learning Sanskrit in the first place as well as the difficult nature of the text itself, in terms of its linguistic complexities, its antiquity, and its abstruse philosophical nature. Wilkins in his preface suggests that these difficulties actually place both himself and the pandits in a similar relationship to the text. He refers to obscure passages of the text and his own inability to deal with them effectively, so that his notes to the text are still insufficient to 'remove the veil of mystery'

[27] For a description of this paradigm, see Theo Hermans ed. *The manipulation of literature. Studies in literary translation* (London/Sydney, 1985) pp. 7–9; Lawrence Venuti ed. *Rethinking translation. Discourse, subjectivity, ideology* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992) pp. 3–4.

[28] Sir William Jones, 'Tenth Anniversary Discourse' in Lord Teignmouth, *The Works of Sir William Jones with the life of the author* (London 1799) 13 volumes, 3: pp. 217–8.

[29] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith' p. 12, and 'Translator's Preface', p. 26.

[30] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith', p. 12.

[31] For an excellent examination of the reinforcement of Benares as a culturally important centre of learning, see Dodson, 'Orientalism, Sanskrit Scholarship, and Education', Ch. 5.

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from it, but he adds that the text is 'imperfectly understood by the most learned *Brahmans* of the present times.'[32] The labours of the Orientalist translator are measured against the alleged shortcomings of the learned pandits. The translator and Benaresi pandits are equal in their ignorance in relation to the *Gita*. Furthermore, this labour of the Orientalist translator includes presenting the *Gita* as a text in its own right without any of its commentaries. According to Wilkins these commentaries are at times more obscure than the original they are intended to elucidate. In his notes he cites a passage from one pandit's commentary which he characterises as a 'labyrinth of scholastic jargon.' This commentary is also superfluous because the meaning of the passage it seeks to elucidate is 'too evident to require a note.'[33] More importantly, Wilkins modestly claims that he is able to make an important observation which 'has escaped all commentators, and was received with great astonishment by the Pandeet, who was consulted in the translation.'[34] In producing the text, therefore, Wilkins is not just equal to the pandits whose collaboration he requires to lend his text cultural authority, but his translation is also equal, if not superior to, the text's many commentaries by pandits. Translation begins to obviate the need for commentary. It produces the *Gita* as a text in its own right which is no longer embedded in a succession of abstruse commentaries. Here, then, we have the beginnings of the translator as a heroic figure, who at one level is in tension with the relationship set up by the terms in Wilkins' title and preface between an 'original' source text, and a derivative translated text. We shall see how the tense relationships between Orientalist scholar and pandit are negotiated in other translations, but we can note here that for Gandhi the question of 'brahmanical' learning is simply irrelevant for his engagement with the text of the *Gita*. For Gandhi, the *Gita* exists as a text in its own right for him to appropriate, rather than one which had to be approached through traditions of exegesis. In this sense, then, Gandhi is a beneficiary of a process which begins with Wilkins' translation. In supposedly undermining 'brahmancial' authority, Wilkins opens up a space for Gandhi's later appropriation of the text.

Wilkins' translation of the *Gita* also reflects the larger project to legitimise British rule in Indian idioms. Hastings argues that the

[32] Wilkins, 'Translator's preface', p. 25; Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith' p. 13.
[33] Wilkins, *Bhagvat-Geeta*, p. 154.
[34] Ibid., p. 26.

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very availability of the translated text validates the justness and effectiveness of British rule, in contrast to the 'intolerant principles' of the British state's (Muslim) predecessors.[35] Wilkins makes a similar point when he argues that it is the 'liberal treatment' of the pandits by the East India Company, and the 'blessings of internal peace,' which persuaded the pandits to no longer conceal the 'grand mysteries of their religion' from figures such as himself.[36] The production of the translated text therefore bears testimony not just to Wilkins' fidelity and accuracy, but also to the fidelity of British rule to the principles of justice, a fidelity which is supposedly recognised by Indians themselves. This also needs to be read against the background of Hastings' Judicial plan of 1772 which called for the dispensation of civil justice in Bengal according to one's religious affiliation within a regularised judicial system. This plan was seen as reinstating the ancient 'constitution' of the people of India.[37]

Thus, Wilkins' translation of the *Gita* becomes part of the legitimisation of the Company's state. Furthermore, his translation is framed within an invocation of the different levels of authority within the East India Company itself, from the Court of Directors to the Governor General of India and the Chairman of the Company.[38] The preface articulates a number of relationships between British officials, between Warren Hastings, 'offering' the text to the Chairman of the Company in an attempt to vindicate his own cultural policies as Governor General, and between Wilkins and Hastings as scholar and Governor General respectively. Wilkins' preface as a translator is preceded by his own letter of dedication to Hastings, in which he underlines how decisive Hastings' role as an enabling presence is, because it is through his encouragement that East India company servants are able to 'render themselves more capable of performing their duty in the various branches of commerce, revenue, and policy, by the study of the languages, with the laws and customs of the natives.'[39] The translated text becomes a space for the reconciliation

[35] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' p.15.
[36] Wilkins, 'Translator's preface,' pp. 23–4.
[37] Dodson, 'Orientalism, Sanskrit scholarship, and Education,' p. 44.
[38] See the Advertisement which reads 'The following Work is published under the authority of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, by the particular desire and recommendation of the Governor General of India; whose letter to the Chairman of the Company will sufficiently explain the motives for its publication, and furnish the best testimony of the fidelity, accuracy, and merit of the Translator.'
[39] Wilkins, 'Translator's Preface,' p. 21.

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of different levels of East India Company administration, and for the unification of the different branches of its activities into one coherent policy, placed within a clear hierarchy of authority. In effect, the translated text is seen as a way of stabilising the fluid and uncertain nature of East India company authority, diffused as it between different levels of its complicated structure. Moreover, by bringing together these three men it also works towards countering the inconveniences of physical distance between the Chairman in London, the Governor General in Bengal, and the translator in Benares. So while on the one hand Wilkins' translation opened up a space for Gandhi's later appropriation of the text of the *Gita*, independent of any commentaries, at the same time it underpinned the British State's constitution of its own colonial authority on multiple levels. Gandhi's later engagement with the *Gita* might be seen as an attempt to create alternative forms of authority to colonial authority by appropriating Orientalist translations of the text.

In some ways, the prefaces to the 1785 translation of the *Gita* also outline the different ways in which processes of translation can involve what Tejaswini Niranjana has called 'strategies of containment.'[40] Hastings assesses the text in relation to canonical works in European literature, such as the first and sixth books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and prose translations, especially the 'best French versions of the most admired passages of the Iliad or Odyssey.' Here Hastings refers to these translations because it would 'not be fair to try its relative worth by a comparison with the original text of the first standards of European composition.'[41] In stressing this, he is clearly trying to safeguard the pre-eminence of classical European texts from the possible destabilising effects of Europe's 'discovery of Sanskrit.' As Raymond Schwab has pointed out, the 'discovery' of Sanskrit threatened a sense of European identity by uncovering a world that was independent of both the classical Greek and Roman world, and also of Biblical chronology.[42] Hastings' 'Letter' uses strategies of containment to safeguard classical legacy of European culture as well as the priority of Biblical narrative.

[40] Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting translation. History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, 1992) p. 3.

[41] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' p. 10.

[42] Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York, 1984) p. 17.

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Both Hastings and Wilkins try to read the *Gita* as both conforming to and confirming a prior narrative of Christianity as a revealed religion. The anxiety to reconcile Orientalist researches in Sanskrit literature and the rediscovery of ancient India with the status of Christianity as a revealed religion and the Mosaic chronology was to be a defining theme of the work of Sir William Jones and his successors in general.[43] In both Hastings' and Wilkins' prefaces we have the beginnings of this attempt at reconciliation. Hastings categorises Sanskrit texts such as the *Vedas* and *Puranas* as 'scriptures' whose coming into being are indicative of the inception of an organised religion, or what he calls 'a scientific and allegorical system.'[44] He reads into the *Gita* 'a theology accurately corresponding with that of Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines.'[45] Wilkins repeatedly refers to the *Gita* as 'scripture,' and represents Brahmins as simultaneously Unitarian in their concept of the Deity, while complying with 'the prejudices of the vulgar, as outwardly to perform all the ceremonies inculcated by the *Veds*, such as sacrifices, ablutions, & c.' These ceremonies 'are as much the bread of the Brahmans, as the superstition of the vulgar is the support of the priesthood in many other countries.'[46] Not only is the category of scripture drawn from a monotheistic conception of religion in order to classify the *Gita* as a text, there is also an implicit Protestant narrative here in which the pandits behave in a similar way to the Roman catholic clergy. Producing the text of the *Gita* in translation without any commentary, so that 'the most difficult passages [are left] for the exercise of the reader's own judgement,'[47] reflects a Protestant notion of the self-evident nature of scriptural truth in translation which can be grasped by the reader's own judgement. In this way, the 'Unitarian' conception of the deity held by the Brahmins will be revealed to 'the vulgar' as well, so that the 'superstition' which supports this powerful priesthood will also be dispelled and the position of the Brahmins as 'divines'[48] who monopolise the interpretations of key texts will no longer be tenable. Once again, this is indicative of the relationships of Company

[43] J. Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings. James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism* (Oxford, 1992) Chapter 1.
[44] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith', p. 5.
[45] Ibid., p.10.
[46] Wilkins, 'Translator's preface', p. 24.
[47] Ibid., p. 25.
[48] Wilkins argues that the term Brahman signifies 'a theologist or divine.' Wilkins, *Bhagvat-Geeta*, p. 156.

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officials with pandits, on whom they relied for cultural information, but whose trustworthiness they frequently suspected. Many of the translations into English from Sanskrit especially in the legal sphere were motivated to reduce the dependence of Company officials on the testimony of pandits and maulvis in the courts.[49] This is another reason for the repeated insistence on the terms 'fidelity' and 'accuracy' in describing Wilkins' translation. It serves as a contrast with and correction of the possible 'infidelity' of Indians themselves. As early as 1777 in his preface to his *Grammar of Persian* Sir William Jones stressed the need for East India Company officials to learn Asian languages because it would lessen the reliance of British officials on native 'fidelity.'[50]

However, it is clear that the inaugural moment of Wilkins' translation is also an unstable one, shrouded in anxieties and doubtfulness. On the one hand, Wilkins' text articulates a rhetoric of translation which makes the original text transparent in order to secure the foundations of British rule itself, but on the other hand, both Hastings and Wilkins point to how the text also resists translation. Translation as a strategy of containment ultimately fails to discipline the text of the *Gita*. Alongside the inauguration of the direct translatability of the *Gita* looms the shadow of the untranslatable.

First, implicit in the framework Hastings uses to try to familiarise the *Gita* is the acknowledgement that there are no ready made criteria for assessing it. He argues that 'in estimating the merit of such a production, all rules drawn from the ancient or modern literature of Europe, all references to such sentiments or manners as are become the standards of propriety for opinion and action in our own modes of life, and equally all appeals to our revealed tenets of religion, and moral duty' are to be excluded.[51] Secondly, Hastings suggests that the philosophical abstruseness of the text means that there are terms in the *Gita* which are 'impossible to render by any of the known terms of science in our language, or even to make them intelligible by definition.' The result is that Wilkins has left some terms with 'the same sounds in which he found them.'[52] The recourse to transliteration rather than translation is also referred to by Wilkins who explains that he has left 'untranslated, and unexplained'

[49] Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings*, pp. 18–21.
[50] Niranjana, *Siting translation*, p. 16.
[51] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' p. 7.
[52] Ibid., p. 9.

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some 'original words and proper names.'[53] These words include the 'mystic emblem of the Deity,' the syllable *Om*, which not only cannot be translated, but is 'forbidden to be pronounced but in silence.'[54] So alongside the more conventional problems of translating complex terms such as *yog*, which 'bear so many interpretations' and has so many derivatives,[55] the *Gita* forces both Hastings and Wilkins to meditate upon the nature of the untranslatable per se. In doing so, they are forced to encounter the way in which the translator's will to power over the Sanskrit text is confounded, and the relationship of power between the translating colonial official and the translated Indian text is reversed. Not only does the text of the *Gita* resist translation into English in places, but the frequent slippage between translation and transliteration means, that in Hastings' words, Wilkins has 'familiarized . . . his own native language to so foreign an original.' It is not so much that Wilkins has turned Sanskrit into English, but that English has been turned into Sanskrit, so that Wilkins has left these with 'the same sounds as he has found them.'[56] To adopt Walter Benjamin's phraseology,[57] Wilkins has allowed his own tongue to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue, such that English becomes a broken, hesitant language which transplants the original into a higher and purer linguistic air. Thirdly, Hastings suggests that if the meaning of the *Gita* appears obscure, this must be ascribed to 'the incompetency of our own perceptions, on so novel an application of them, rather than to the less probable want of perspicuity in the original composition.'[58] What is at stake is the inadequacy of our understanding as readers rather than any shortcomings in the *Gita* itself.

Finally, Hastings also touches on what Benjamin was to later call the great work of art's potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.[59] He suggests that the *Gita* 'will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance.'[60] The translation which Hastings writes a preface for

[53] Wilkins, 'Translator's preface,' p. 25.
[54] Wilkins, *Bhagvat-Geeta*, p. 142.
[55] Ibid., p. 140.
[56] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' p. 11.
[57] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator,' p. 75, p. 81.
[58] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' pp. 9–10.
[59] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator,' p. 72.
[60] Hastings, 'Letter to Nathaniel Smith,' p. 13.

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marks the continued life of the original. It is a form of its afterlife,[61] which brings to the fore the fragile temporality of British rule in India. As Krishna says in Wilkins' translation, 'I am Time, the destroyer of mankind, matured, come hither to seize at once all these who stand before us.'[62] The imposing text becomes a fearful emblem of Time itself which underpins the transitory nature of British rule in India. Here translation has become less a strategy of containment and more an opening up of a text which not only predates British rule by unknown centuries but will also succeed it by vast stretches of time. The attempt to secure Company authority through translation actually ends up by undermining its presence.

The tortuous nature of Hastings' and Wilkins' prose prefaces to the *Gita* evince both an attempt at translation as strategies of containment, and also the failures of those strategies. In the end, both in spite of and because of themselves as translators, the text overwhelms and interrupts their strategies of translation as containment. Wilkins' translation in the end becomes what Benjamin has called a 'real translation,' one that is 'transparent' to the original and which does not 'block its light.'[63] Hastings' and Wilkins' struggles with the text are less an imposition of their will on the text, and more the text imposing its translatability on them, irrespective of whether or not they are able to fulfil that call to be translated. We shall see how Gandhi's reinforcement of translation as secondary and derivative represents a mode of self-effacement in relation to the text of the *Gita*, which avoids the mistake of trying to aggrandize one's self in relation to the textual autonomy of the *Gita*. Gandhi willingly submits to the text, while Hastings and Wilkins are forced to do so.

Translating Scenes of Genealogical Indebtedness J. C. Thomson's *The Bhagavad Gita* (1855)

If Wilkins' translation marks the beginning of an attempt to displace the pandits through the figure of the translator, by the time of J.C. Thomson's 1855 translation of the *Gita*, the lineage between British male Orientalists all but displaces the source text. This accords with some key changes in the tone and self-presentation of the translator.

[61] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator,' p. 72.
[62] Wilkins, *Bhagvat-Geeta* p. 93.
[63] Benjamin, 'Task of the Translator,' 79.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The beginnings of the heroic figure of the translator which were evident in Wilkins' translations become more pronounced. Thomson dedicates his translation to Horace Hyman Wilson, 'To whom Europe owes so much of her knowledge of India, India so much of her esteem of Europe; and whose indefatigable labours and rare abilities have thrown a bright light over the mysteries of the East; This humble attempt to follow in his footsteps is inscribed; as a mark of admiration for his talents and gratitude for his friendship; by his pupil, The Translator.'[64] In the dedication the translator is no longer in debt to the original Sanskrit text. Instead there are three other debts, all of which bind together the genealogy in the dedication. Thomson is indebted to Wilson, to whom both Europe and India owe their own debts. The relationship between Thomson and Wilson is that of a teacher to his pupil, but it is also one between friends who are at the same time translators. The act of translating brings British men together in an even closer tie than that envisaged in the preamble to Wilkins' translation. The indebtedness of the translator to the source text is displaced by his indebtedness to his Orientalist predecessors.

We also saw how Wilkins sought to displace the source text from its embedment in traditions of commentary. In Thomson's case this displacement is taken a step further. He places his own translation within a genealogy of translations in European languages. In doing so he refers to Wilkins' translation as the 'original translation' of which 'we cannot speak with entire satisfaction.'[65] The word 'original' is no longer appended to the Sanskrit text but to the first English translation of the text. The oxymoronic implications of the term 'original translation' mark a decisive stage in the rise of the figure of the heroic translator whose text now threatens to displace the source text. It also indicates the beginning of a slippage between the category of the translator and that of the author. This blurring is in part made possible by the fact that the key texts of what emerged as the Sanskrit canon in translation did not always have single identifiable 'authors' in the modern sense of the word. Even if they were identifiable as single individuals, reliable biographical and historical information about them was not always available. Both Wilkins and Thomson

[64] J.C. Thomson, *The Bhagavad-Gita; or A discourse between Krishma and Arjuna on divine matters. A Sanskrit philosophical poem, translated, with copious notes, an introduction on Sanskrit philosophy, and other matter* (Hertford,1855) title page.

[65] Thomson, p. xii.

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point to the uncertain historical dating of the events in the *Mahabharat* and the life of its narrator.[66] Thomson argued because of the lack of historical evidence, we should 'resign ourselves to consider the authorship of the finest specimen of Hindu literature as lost in oblivion for ever.'[67] It is this 'oblivion' which enables a slippage between author and translator to take place. Thomson also argues that this problem of the 'complete absence of any chronological data' characterised 'Hindu literature' as a whole.[68] By placing his translation in a genealogy of European translations, each of which has a specific date of publication, he is also supplying a linear chronology for textual production in sharp contrast to his inability to date the Sanskrit text itself.[69] The genealogy of European translations of the *Gita* substitutes both a list of authors and of dates which are lacking in the case of the source text.

This displacement of the text from its Indian commentaries is taken a step further when Thomson characterises previous European translations as having commentary-like features. The previous translations are depicted in similar terms to the way Wilkins characterises Indian commentaries on the Sanskrit texts. Thomson writes of them as explications which have rendered the Sanskrit text even more obscure. He refers to how the 1787 French version of Wilkins' translation rendered the 'the meaning of Wilkins . . . rather more obscure than clearer,' and he argues that the 1823 Latin translation by A.W. von Schlegel, supposedly improved by his pupil Lassen in 1846, is problematic because the student is often 'as much puzzled to divine the meaning of the Latin translation' as the Sanskrit text itself.[70] Wilkins' aim to produce the *Gita* as a text in its own right, shorn of its commentaries, assumes a clear cut distinction between translation and commentary, but Thomson's ambiguous characterisation of previous translations blurs the distinction between commentary and translation. This is also made clear in Thomson's assessment of previous translations, in which the nature of the explanatory notes appended to each translation assumes central significance. He distinguishes his translation from those of his predecessors precisely in terms of the range and depth of his notes,

[66] Wilkins, *Bhagvat-Geeta*, p. 5, p. 23.
[67] Thomson, p. cxiv.
[68] Ibid., p. cxiii.
[69] Ibid., pp. xii–xiii.
[70] Ibid., p. xii, p. xiv.

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which amount to forming a commentary which frames the translation. He admits 'I cannot pretend that I have departed very materially from any of these translations in the more essential points.' Instead he points to his 'minute investigation' of the doctrines in the poem, his historical and critical review of the work, the footnotes which enable 'the sense of every obscure word or passage [to] be grasped at once,' the 'long explanations [which] are given where ever they are required,' and finally the index of proper names which is much more extended than the index in Lassen's text.[71] These commentary-like features are presented as distinguishing his text from those of his predecessors, but especially from Wilkins' translation, in which there is 'nothing but a short and barely sufficient note added to explain' obscure words.[72] We shall see later how Gandhi also blurs the boundary between translation and commentary, but he does so in a radically different way from Orientalist translators such as Thomson.

Once again, though, the *Gita* cannot be disciplined so easily by Thomson's strategies of containment. If anything, these strategies reinforce the elusive nature of the text. The greater Thomson's deployment of disciplinary tactics, the more a silhouette of the original[73] appears in his commentaries on the text. Or as Derrida says in his discussion of Benjamin, in the translation the original becomes larger. It grows rather than reproduces itself.[74]

The Question of Demanding a Name

First, Thomson tries to frame the *Gita* within a master narrative of Christian doctrine. Both the excellence and the shortcomings of the *Gita* are reminders of the superiority of Christian doctrines, irrespective of the latter's date of origin. At one point, Thomson explicitly reads the *Gita* as recalling Christians to their true faith:

'in the present selfish age, and this northern active clime, it [the *Gita*'s teachings] could be applied and successfully carried out by Christians, as we call ourselves! It is the teaching of our Saviour when he bids us hate father and mother, and take up the cross, and when He points to the lily of the field, which toils and spins not, but puts faith in its Creator to give it

[71] Ibid., pp. xii–xiv.
[72] Ibid., p. xii.
[73] Graham, *Difference in Translation*, p. 205.
[74] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', p. 191.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nourishment. We, too, should have *our* final emancipation, our salvation ever as our only desire, and *our* Supreme Being-so far superior, so far more loveable than the imperfect deity of the Hindu philosopher-ever as our chief object of love. We, too, should do our duty in this world without self-interest and attachment, and morally renounce the world in the rejection of all interest in it.'[75]

But by the same token, this passage could be read in another way, namely that the excellence of Christianity has to be ratified through the priority of the *Gita*. Rather than Christianity supplanting the *Gita*, the *Gita* is actually grounding Christianity. In the context of 'Christianising' the *Gita*, Thomson also uses an interesting metaphor to consider the possibility of converting India to Christianity. He describes how India seems to be a 'fine groundwork for the eternal teaching of the Sacred Book,' but 'the sward that looks so green and tempting to the eye, covers a morass, in which the pure doctrines of the gospel would sink to be swamped.'[76] Thomson's attempt to consider Christianity as the final and consummate development of the *Gita*'s teaching gives way to a scenario of how Christianity might be absorbed into the 'morass' of Hinduism itself. There is no pure and stable moment of either Hinduism or Christianity in his preface, and the attempt to define either Christianity or Hinduism as exclusive and external to each other founders on each in some way incorporating the other. Thomson's overt attempts to master the *Gita* within a Christian narrative ends up by opening a space for a religious syncretism which is rooted in the source text. In abstract terms, 'unity' and 'plurality' become interchangeable. By this I mean that for Thomson 'Christianity' and 'Hinduism' are on one level identifiable as separately monolithic categories. However, this separation is intertwined with the imagining of their mutual incorporation, an incorporation which suggests a possible syncretistic unity that by its every nature would be plural because of the varied traditions at work within it.

Secondly, this interchangeability between unity and plurality is made explicit in Thomson's key references to the Tower of Babel in his preface. For Thomson the Tower of Babel is both a site of unity and a site of plurality. The two cannot be separated as succeeding each other in a temporal narrative. Similarly, construction and reconstruction are interchangeable in Thomson's representation of Babel. There is no original moment of construction of the Tower, there is only always

[75] Thomson, pp. cx–cxi. Emphases are in the original.
[76] Ibid., p. cxii.

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reconstruction. This is made clear in the opening passage of Thomson's preface:

'There are many portions of Sacred Writ which, while it would be presumptuous to refuse their literal acceptation, forcibly prompt an allegorical construction, serving at once as a lesson and a prophecy. Such is the narrative of the building of the Tower of Babel. When the world, recovered from all but entire destruction, rose fresh in all its worldliness, Godless and independent; exulting in the discovery of the strength of its physical, and the unbounded vastness of its mental powers, man first learnt the truth that union is the secret of all strength, and that by it, though a mere unit in creation, he might attain a super-human position. Nor was ever confusion more complete or more wonderful than the miracle which crushed his efforts and lowered his proud schemes to the dust.

Yet since that moment man has ever been building another and a greater tower which, none the less, has Heaven for its object. Science and enlightenment are ever rising brick by brick, layer by layer, story by story, towards the level of super-human knowledge; and the great obstacle which put a stop to the erection of the material Babel-the confusion of tongues-still exists to impede that of the Tower of Knowledge, and still constitutes the chief hindrance to man's united action and united strength.

But if the obstacle exist [sic], the means of surmounting it have been granted us. We have never been debarred from acquiring another language than our own; and if the scientific man of each country be considered the maker of the bricks, the linguist may, at least, claim to be that no less useful workman who visits the kiln of knowledge in every land and brings together the materials for the great work.'[77]

What is striking about this passage is that Thomson ponders the Tower of Babel as both the unity of languages and the confusion of tongues which impedes that unity. Or put another way, it is both archaic meaning and archaic confusion of meaning. But crucially Babel's confusion of tongues is both an obstacle and yet also the means to overcome that obstacle.

Furthermore, while Thomson speaks of how the linguist helps to raise the tower 'brick by brick,' he also represents the relationship between himself and his predecessors in similar terms. Thus, he writes that 'a period arrives in every study, when the labours of all its scholars must be reduced to one united and harmonious whole; when the bricks that one has baked, the mortar another has mixed, and the beams which a third has cut, must be brought together and arranged by the hand of the builder, in the form of another story added to the great

[77] Thomson, pp. v–vi.

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Tower of the Knowledge which may reach to the skies.'[78] His text of the *Gita* is yet one more story/storey in the Tower but he stresses that there are always other stories/storeys to add. For Thomson the Tower of Babel is also a figure for the impossibility of completion and finishing. The multiplicity of languages which limits and impedes the completion of translation is itself a 'structural order, a coherence of construct.'[79] This needs to be kept in mind when Gandhi refers to the *Gita* as the book of 'Truth', and yet characterises 'Truth' itself as inexhaustible, growing, and therefore necessarily incomplete. For Gandhi it is the confusion of tongues which underpins the growing nature of 'Truth' through translatability.

Thirdly, Thomson tries to unify the meaning of the *Gita* but at the same time keeps showing how this is impossible. In his exploration of the nature of the word, Heidegger argues that if key words did not have original meanings or capacities, there would be nothing to delimit translation.[80] Thomson tries to define just such an archaic unity of meaning in his reflections on the *Gita*. In the context of considering how in ancient Greece and India 'philosophy developed itself clearly, independently, and, so to speak spontaneously; and demanded for itself a name,' he argues that in India names have an inherent significance when they refer to philosophical systems. They are not arbitrary signs for what they denote, but 'convey the meaning of the most prominent doctrine which they put forward.'[81] However, although this is characterised as being typical of the 'literal and logical Hindu,' no sooner does Thomson reflect upon the term 'sankhya' than he has to consider a multiplicity of possible meanings for the word, which undermines any attempt to interpret it in strictly literal terms.[82] In fact, the *Gita* opens up to Thomson the impossibility of ever arriving at an original and archaic unity of meaning. Nor can he arrive at a stable and unprecedented moment of inception and origin. Again, when discussing the 'sankhya' system he argues that Kapila may have been its founder, but by this is meant that he 'reduced

[78] Ibid., p. x.

[79] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel,' pp.165–166. These are the opening terms in which Derrida considers the tower of Babel, as exhibiting 'incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.'

[80] Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy. A New Theory of Words* (London/New York, 1989) pp.14–17.

[81] Thomson, p. xvii, p. liv.

[82] Ibid., p. liv.

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[certain ideas] to a system.' These ideas, taken singly, must have had 'an earlier origin,' and 'much speculation, much demonstration even, must have preceded Kapila.'[83] Each individually identifiable school of thought which has a place in the *Gita* is not a site of unified meaning but is a coalescence and mediation of pre-existing ideas, with no stable or single moment of origin.

Furthermore, this coalescence and mediation reflects the nature of the *Gita* itself as a 'conciliatory' text. Each school of thought is further modified as it is brought into contact with other schools through the mediating presence of the *Gita*. According to Thomson, this is the case with the *Gita*'s engagement with Patanjali's yogic philosophy, which attempts to reconcile yoga with 'brahmanism' and so with the institution of caste. In doing so, Thomson argues that the author of the *Gita* himself adds another branch to yoga.[84] This in turn reflects the plasticity of the term 'yoga', which like the other names in the text, is both a site of semantic plurality and a reference to a unified discourse, or at least a discourse which mediates these differences. This mediation between different schools of thought, which are themselves internally plural, reflects what Thomson calls the 'conciliatory doctrines' of the text which were 'receivable by all classes of belief [and] met on all sides with a welcome.'[85] As Feuerstein has argued, the different schools of thought which the *Gita* engages with exist in 'flexible coalescence' in the text.[86] To this we can add that this flexible coalescence also means that each school of thought, itself a modified coalescence of pre-existing ideas, is further modified by the *Gita* as a mediating and 'conciliatory' text.

Thus, as in Wilkins' translation, strategies of containment are continually challenged by the text itself. In particular, the attempt by Thomson to impose a unified archaic frame of meaning on the text through translation fails. His extended reflections on the Tower of Babel are ultimately rooted in the nature of the *Gita* itself, as, to adopt a phrase from Andrew Benjamin, a site of differential plurality.[87] We will see how important this inability to arrive at a unified and archaic site of meaning is to Gandhi's notion of 'Truth'.

[83] Ibid., p. xxxvii.
[84] Ibid., pp. cv–cvi, p. cviii.
[85] Ibid., p. xci, p. cxiv.
[86] G.A. Feuerstein, *Introduction to the Bhagavad-Gita. Its Philosophy and Cultural Setting* (London, 1974) p. 99.
[87] Andrew Benjamin, *Translation*, passim.

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Self-Authorship, Translatability and 'Truth'

Keeping these points in mind, we can now turn to Edwin Arnold's translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, *Song Celestial* (1885). Arnold's version is the one in which, according to Gandhi, he first engaged with the *Gita*.[88] Like Thomson's translation, Arnold's mentions previous translations but only briefly.[89] But unlike Thomson's version, Arnold's eschews the scholarly apparatus and lengthy commentaries of previous English translations. Arnold's own preface is brief, and there are very few footnotes to his translation. Charles Wilkins' attempt to present the *Gita* as a text in its own right, shorn of any commentary, reaches its apogee in Arnold's verse translation. As Arnold says in his short preface, 'there is little else to say which the Song Celestial does not explain for itself.'[90] From a complex text of esoteric philosophy, the *Gita* has now become a self-explanatory text which needs virtually no commentary from either pandit or British orientalist. While Wilkins relied on collaboration with pandits to authenticate his own translation, even as he tried to displace them through the act of translation, Arnold dispenses with any reference to pandits altogether. Rather than accruing authority through an engagement with a culturally important class of learned Indians, the translator's authority is now, like the translated text of the *Gita*, self-evidently assured. With Arnold, the act of translating the *Gita* justifies itself, and requires no other grounds for legitimisation.

This unravelling of the figure of the Indian pandit from that of the British translator is also evident in the way that, for Arnold, the imbrication of the categories of Hinduism and Christianity in Thomson's introduction is reversed. In Arnold's preface the challenging potential of the *Gita* is contained by reading it as an unproblematic reflection of a given Hinduism, hermetically sealed off from any potential to subvert or challenge the category of the West or Christianity. It is referred to as a 'philosophical system which remains to this day the prevailing Brahmanic belief.'[91] The category of Hinduism is doubly essentialised, both in temporal and in cultural terms. The unfolding of philosophy in the *Gita*, far from being a complex mediation between and development of previous schools of

[88] *An Autobiography*, p. 76.
[89] Edwin Arnold, *Song Celestial* (London, 1885) p. ix.
[90] Ibid., p. x.
[91] Ibid., p. vii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06001971 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thought, is now reduced to the unproblematic reflection of ready made beliefs which have remained unchanged through the centuries.

It is striking that on the title page of his version of the *Gita*, Arnold is actually referred to as the 'author' of the *Light of Asia*, even though this text was also a translation. In Arnold's version the slippage between author and translator, which began with Wilkins' translation, is evident in other ways too. In Wilkins' version of the *Gita*, we saw how the text is the site for the construction of relationships between British men, and the same is also true of Thomson's dedication. In both cases, the dedications refer to processes of the mediation of expertise which enable the translated text to come into being. In Arnold's dedication, however, the translator stands alone in a direct relationship to India, to whom the poem is offered. There are no references to any other British male officials or orientalists in the dedication. The use of the first person singular pronoun in the dedication, unmediated by any reference to a third person, represents a final attempt to seal the construction of orientalist writer as author: 'So I have read this wonderful and spirit-thrilling speech, /By Krishna and Prince Arjun held, discoursing each with each; /So have I writ its wisdom here, its hidden mystery, /For England; O our India ! is as dear to me as She !' The translator's authority is now such that, like the translated text itself, he can exist in a direct relationship with India and England, without the inconveniences of any mediators.

Moreover, unlike Wilkins' and Thomsons' versions, there is very little sense of the force of the Sanskrit original in *Song Celestial*. Arnold's aim is to translate the poem 'because English literature would certainly be incomplete without possessing in popular form a poetical and philosophical work so dear to India.'[92] It is as if the Sanskrit of the source text has to be erased in order to effect its integration into the canon of English literature. Furthermore, this translation is set in terms of ownership, of 'possessing' a work which is 'dear' to India. In contrast to the more complicated notion of the relationship between 'Eastern' and European literatures imagined almost a hundred years earlier by Sir William Jones in his essay 'On the poetry of the Eastern nations', in which translation would revivify moribund European literature,[93] the task of appropriation here is almost effortless. The complex comparative framework in which the *Gita* is placed in relation to Greek and Latin literature in preceding

[92] Ibid., p. x.
[93] Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings*, p. 48.

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translations is also missing. This lack of effort is further signalled by the ease with which the *Gita* can be made available in 'popular form.' Its abstruse philosophical difficulties and its linguistic complexities are easily converted into a widely accessible form, with no need for the mediation of commentaries.

We are now in a position to return to the centrality of the processes and motifs of translation in Gandhi's work in general, and in his engagement with the *Gita* in particular. Edwin Arnold's translation emerges from a particular narrative of the translation of the *Gita* into English in the nineteenth century. This narrative bequeaths a legacy of translation processes and spaces which Gandhi was to appropriate and also contest for his own purposes in his autobiographical project.

It is important to note that while Gandhi expresses some regret at his basic knowledge of Sanskrit, he does not problematise English translations of the text as translations in themselves. He refers to how in his study of the *Gita*, he read 'almost all the English translations of it,' and how he tried to delve deeper into the *Gita* by using one or two translations.[94] Gandhi's endorsement of translations of the *Gita* as a way of approaching the text is in keeping with his own translation practice. His 1908 translation into Gujarati of Plato's *Apology* is not made directly from the Greek but via an English translation.[95] As a secondary translation, that is as a translation of a source text made via an intervening language, there is no sense in Gandhi's preface or his conclusion that this in any way compromises the 'Truth' of the text. Instead he points to how Socrates' speech has already been translated into many languages. The translatability of the speech, as reflected in its history as a translated text, is referred to by Gandhi to justify his own translation. As he says, the 'speech has been translated into many languages ... We, therefore, wish to translate it.'[96] Furthermore, it is clear that Gandhi sees his translation as renewing the life of the text in a new context. Socrates is set up as a model for the struggle of Indians in South Africa and in India, and he is appropriated as a 'great satyagrahi.'[97] His words are described by Gandhi as having 'the qualities of an elixir,' and he urges his

[94] *An Autobiography*, p. 76, p. 244.
[95] For the text of this, see 'Story of a Soldier of Truth', *Collected Works*, 10: pp. 172–4, pp. 185–7, pp. 196–9, pp. 212–4, pp. 217–221, pp. 227–29.
[96] Ibid., p. 173.
[97] Ibid., pp. 173–4.

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readers to 'imbibe a deep draught' of it.[98] Clearly, this quality of Socrates' words is not compromised by translating them. Instead it is enhanced and even deepened by the act of translation. In Benjamin's words, what is at work here is the notion of translation as the 'after-life' of the text, as marking the stage of the continued life of the original.[99]

Gandhi's Preface also seems to assume a link between the nature of the source text as already mediated, and its translation into many languages, in so far as the 'Truth' of Socrates' speech is already mediated by Plato.[100] Like the *Gita* itself, the source text is an already mediated text which enacts yet further mediation. Furthermore, in general terms, Plato's *Apology* also exemplifies the processes at work in Gandhi's authoring of his own key texts. Like Gandhi's *An Autobiography* and *Hind Swaraj*, the *Apology* is an intervention in an ongoing process of debate and dialogue.[101] Socrates' speech is dialogically oriented, in the sense that his speech is oriented towards speeches that others have made, whose charges and arguments can be reconstructed from the contents of Socrates' defence. This is in addition to their cited responses to his cross-examination.[102] Furthermore, the source text, like Gandhi's key texts, is a multi-authored text.[103] It is authored both by Socrates, who makes the speech in the first place, and then 'his companion' Plato, who commits it to writing.[104] In this sense the further mediations of the Speech through translations begin to appear as part of a collective project of authoring in the history of those engagements with 'Truth' which fall under the project of self-rule. Hence the description of Socrates as a 'satyagrahi.' At the same time, Gandhi's own writings, as experiments with 'Truth', enact this ongoing

[98] Ibid., p. 174.

[99] Walter Benjamin, 'Task of the translator,' p. 72.

[100] 'Story of a Soldier of Truth', p. 173.

[101] Gandhi begins *An Autobiography* by referring to his friend's doubts about the practice of writing an autobiography. In this sense, *An Autobiography* begins as an ongoing disussion of its legitimacy as a form of literature. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi says that the 'dialogue, as it has been given, actually took place between several friends, mostly readers *of Indian Opinion*, and myself.' See *An Autobiography*, p. 19, and *Hind Swaraj*, ed. Parel, p. 6.

[102] See the text of Socrates? speech in Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, ed. *Plato. The last days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth, 1993) pp. 37–67.

[103] By calling attention to how *An Autobiography* and *Hind Swaraj* are continuations of dialogues, Gandhi is also suggesting that they are, in a sense, multi-authored, because their genesis as texts lies in the interactions between individuals.

[104] 'Story of a Soldier of Truth', p. 173.

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project in texts which, as we shall see, are themselves constituted through processes of translation.

In translating a translation, then, Gandhi is not trying to elevate the translated text to the same level as the source text. Instead he compounds and reinforces the secondary nature of translation in a way which suggests that any understanding of the source text will be enhanced and not impeded by secondary translation. This is in contrast to European Orientalists, who as we saw above, struggled to displace the *Gita* as source text by trying to overcome the secondary nature of translation as they authored themselves. There is one more mark of Gandhi's wilful reluctance to overcome the secondary nature of translation. Although Gandhi outlines how his wish to 'translate' Plato's *Apology* emerges from its previous translation into many languages, coupled with its ethical content, he qualifies this by saying that he will not 'render it literally' but will summarise it instead.[105] Benjamin argued that the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translated text. While content and language form 'a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.'[106] In his own translation of and commentary on this passage, Derrida develops Benjamin's point by saying that the best translation resembles a royal cape. It remains separate from the body to which it is conjoined.[107] To say of a translation that it reads as if it had been originally in that language is not to praise it.[108] It is also for this reason that Benjamin argues a literal translation cannot reproduce the meaning of the original, and that anyway the translation must refrain from wanting to communicate something, 'from rendering the sense.' This is because the original has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed.[109] Gandhi's refusal to render the text literally, and his intention to summarise it instead, invites attention to what his practice of 'translation' cannot do. It cannot reproduce the meaning or sense of the original, nor can it read as though it were written in that language. It also cannot reproduce the unity between the content and language in the original, and so in no

[105] Ibid., p. 173.
[106] Benjamin, 'Task of the translator,' p. 76.
[107] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel,' p. 194.
[108] Benjamin, 'Task of the translator,' p. 78.
[109] Ibid., pp. 78–79.

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way does it attempt to displace the source text. By summarising Plato's *Apology* Gandhi calls attention to the secondary nature of his already secondary translation.

The reinforcement of the secondary nature of processes of translation highlights the distinguishing feature of Gandhi's practice of translation as part of his experimental engagements with 'Truth'. Benjamin writes of how a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. These fragments which are to be glued together 'must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another.' As regards meaning, a translation should give voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself.[110] Gandhi's foregrounding of the secondary nature of translation assumes a relationship of complementarity between his 'A Soldier of Truth' and Plato's *Apology*. Both are adjoining fragments of some larger whole, this whole being 'Truth'. But this is less a unified whole, and more an aggregate, in which, in Derrida's words, openness would not contradict unity.[111] They are complementary fragments of the same 'vast tree' of Truth, with its many roots and branches. These adjoining fragments make sense at one and the same time in terms of each other and in terms of the nature of 'Truth', which is instantiated in a range of texts/cultures, without being exhausted by these instantiations, and without being exclusive to any one text or culture. It is in keeping with this sense of the inexhaustible nature of 'Truth', that Gandhi's own autobiographical writings exemplify the necessarily incomplete nature of any experiments with 'Truth', as well as the eschewal of any totalising knowledge.

Gandhi's insistence on the secondary nature of his translations also needs to be placed in the context of another strand in the engagement of European Orientalists with the text of the *Gita*. This is the troubled attempt to frame the *Gita* within a Christian narrative, so as to try to displace it as a source text by arguing that it reinforced the distinctive teachings of Christianity itself. This kind of reading clearly resists the practice of translation as negotiating relationships between fragments which complement each other as part of 'Truth'. Instead it

[110] Ibid., p. 79.
[111] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel,' p. 190.

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uses the *Gita* to reinforce the exclusive claims to 'Truth' on the part of Christianity. But this recurring history of the text as supporting a comparative framework of religions, no matter how distorted and weighted towards Christianity, is sustained by the very nature of the *Gita* itself as a site of differential plurality, and as such, is a paradoxical testimony to its power. In Gandhi's encounter with the *Gita*, the text is also framed in a comparative reading of religions, but in his reading this comparative frame of reference is not used to confirm some prior narrative of 'Truth' as exclusively circumscribed in one religion, but to expand the notion so as to put into question the category of religion which was deployed in English versions of the text. In his first encounter with the *Gita* as a written text, there are echoes of previous histories of Orientalist readings, in so far as Gandhi mentions in particular the impact the New Testament had on him, and his subsequent attempt to compare the Sermon on the Mount with the *Gita*.[112] But the frame of reference is immediately extended as he describes how 'his young mind tried to unify the teachings of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia*, and the Sermon on the Mount.'[113] His conclusion that 'renunciation was the highest point of religion' bears out his clear sense that this 'Truth' is to be found not in the *Gita*, Buddhism, or the New Testament alone, but in all three read together.[114] Gandhi's reading of the *Gita* as grounding an expanding frame of reference in which 'Truth' is not the monopoly of any one religion therefore subverts translations of the text into English. In these translations, as we have seen, there is an ongoing attempt to contain the expansive possibilities of the comparative frame of reference which the *Gita* as a site of differential plurality sustains. In contrast, for Gandhi the *Gita* is 'the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth,' precisely because it opens up a frame of reference for expanding and not constricting the category of 'Truth'. It helps us uncover a 'religion which underlies all religions,'[115] precisely because it is a site of differential plurality.

Thus, Gandhi's autobiographical enactment of the *Gita* in translation works towards opening up possibilities for 'Truth' rather than circumscribing it within the form of pre-existing cultural narratives. The framing of 'Truth' through translatability is also

[112] *An Autobiography*, p. 77.
[113] Ibid., p. 78.
[114] Ibid., p. 78.
[115] Ibid., p. 76. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, ed. Antony Parel (Cambridge, 1997) p. 42.

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evocative of the very text of *An Autobiography*. The Gujarati and English versions of *An Autobiography* appeared simultaneously in two different periodicals between 1925 and 1929.[116] Furthermore, the English translation by Mahadev Desai was revised by Gandhi himself 'as far as the meaning of the author is concerned' and by Madeleine Slade 'as far as the language is concerned.'[117] So Gandhi was involved in translating the first edition of his own autobiography. He was also involved in translating some of his other key works from Gujarati into English. In the Preface to the English translation of *Hind Swaraj*, he describes how he dictated his English translation of the Gujarati text to a European friend (Hermann Kallenbach) who took it down.[118] Similarly, Gandhi revised the English translation of *Satyagraha in South Africa* by Vajli G. Desai.[119] Thus, Gandhi's autobiographies are themselves texts in translation, with Gandhi simultaneously playing the role of author and translator. Indeed, for Gandhi being an author and being a translator cannot be distinguished.

I have argued that Gandhi's encounter with the *Gita* is framed by an understanding of translation as simultaneously 'intrasemiotic' and 'intersemiotic', that is, as a series of transmutations and exchanges between his lived life, the *Gita*, and the text of his autobiography. In these series of exchanges, Gandhi also enacts his own self-authoring in terms of a different kind of relationship between commentary and text from that implicit in the work of European orientalist. Gandhi tries to construct a reciprocal relationship between the *Gita* and his autobiographical project. His translation of the *Gita* into his life is at the same time a commentary upon it, and the *Gita* as a book of daily reference is equally a commentary on the text of his own life. Here Gandhi, like previous translators, has conflated the categories of translation and commentary, but in contrast to his predecessors, both texts are coeval and comment on each other. This reciprocal commentary between autobiographical enactment and the *Gita* compensates for the recuperative losses occasioned by Arnold's too easy and too usable translation.[120] The performative register of

[116] *Collected Works* 39, p. 1 f.n.

[117] Mahadev Desai's preface to the first edition of the English translation of *An Autobiography*, 1927 in *Collected Works*, 39: p. 473.

[118] *Hind Swaraj*, ed. Parel, 5.

[119] Gandhi states this in his Foreword to the English translation; see *SS*, p. 1.

[120] Here I am calling upon Philip Lewis' excellent discussion of the general relationship between commentary and translation in Graham, *Difference in Translation*, pp. 61–2.

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the autobiographical project regenerates the textual energy lost in the translation without forsaking the task of translation. The experiential difficulties of autobiographical enactment in the project of self-rule are a continuance of the difficulties of the *Gita* as a text, not an attempt to erase those difficulties by presenting an easily consumable textual entity without any commentary at all.

In conclusion, Gandhi's key works are testimony to the inescapability of translation, not just because of his reliance on a wide range of texts in translation from the *Gita* to some of Tolstoy's works,[121] but at a more fundamental level because of the way in which motifs of translation constitute the very nature of his texts and his notion of 'Truth'. When he says that 'Truth' is a 'vast tree', we can see how it is translation-like. Like the source text, it grows in translation rather than is displaced or contained by it. Furthermore, when he assumes 'Truth' is inexhaustible, we can also see how he has incorporated the Babelian principle of incompletion as a structuring principle in his experiments with 'Truth'. And finally, when in the preface to *Hind Swaraj* he stresses that he is not being original,[122] he is emphasising that because of the translation-like character of 'Truth' there are no original texts, only always texts in translation.

[121] See Gandhi's appendix to *Hind Swaraj* which lists those works of Tolstoy he uses; *Hind Swaraj*, ed. Parel, p. 120.
[122] Ibid., p. 10.

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