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 **Emerson, John Brown, and Arjuna: Translating the *Bhagavad Gita* in a Time of War**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Emerson, John Brown, and Arjuna:
Translating the *Bhagavad Gita* in a Time of War**

Nikhil Bilwakesh (bio)

In an 1854 journal entry, Ralph Waldo Emerson begins to cite India's governor general. He writes, "Warren Hastings, in his Preface to the Translation of the Bhagvat, says" . . . but then strikes the fragment through diagonally, leaving the rest of the page blank, and on the next page he composes an original meditation on the individual's involvement with "war":

Heaven takes care to show us that war is a part of our education, as much as milk or love, & is not to be escaped. We affect to put it all back in history, as the Trojan War, the War of the Roses, the Revolutionary War. Not so; it is *Your War*. Has that been declared? has that been fought out? & where did the Victory perch? The wars of other people & of history growl at a distance, but your war comes near, looks into your eyes, in Politics, in professional pursuit, in choices in the street, in daily habit, in all the questions of the times, in the keeping or surrendering the controul [sic] of your day, & your house, & your opinion, in the terrors of the night, in the frauds & skepticism of the day, the American independence! that is a legend. *Your independence!* that is the question of all the Present. Have you fought out that? & settled it **[End Page 27]** once & again, & once for all in the minds of all persons with whom you have to do, that you & your sense of right, & fit & fair, are an invincible, indestructible somewhat, which is not to be bought or cajoled or frightened away? That done, & victory inscribed on your eyes & brow & voice, the other American Freedom begins instantly to have some meaning & support.¹

Into this brief entry, written in the year of the Kansas-Nebraska Act's passage and his own "Fugitive Slave Law" speech in New York, Emerson condenses the mythic and historic, the global and personal, and in so doing approaches the essential martial question of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He begins by bringing forward "past" wars only to put them in their place. The Trojan War is "a fiction"; and while the Revolutionary War, whose fields Emerson and his contemporaries walk and whose veterans they

know, would seem more proximate, in his reckoning this celebrated event, too, is merely "a legend." As with the Trojan War, so with the Revolutionary War: it must be personally and continually enacted to be meaningful; it must become "*Your War*."

In this space—between the aborted citation of Hastings's 1785 preface and Emerson's own composition—lies a translation of Arjuna's dilemma to the personal, professional, and political concerns Emerson himself faced in the 1854 U.S. Arjuna's universally human dilemma is embedded in the specific context of the imminent fratricidal war at Kurukshetra. Following years of exile, on the precipice of carnage, Arjuna considers whether or not he should fight a just war against his cousins in order to reclaim a kingdom for his brothers and himself. How might Emerson be responding to the resonance of this dilemma in his own work in 1854, embedding his approximation of a universal philosophical system in the conditions of impending civil conflict?

I propose that a reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* can help elucidate Emerson's growing support for armed confrontation with the slave power, and his approach to vocation and duty in his antislavery writings, both the prose and the poetry, between 1854 and 1867. Critical attention to Emerson's relationship **[End Page 28]** with India has largely limited itself to questions of Hindu influence on the "transcendental" aspects of his writings. However, a martial reading of the *Gita* can provide new insight into Emerson's somewhat extraordinary support for the militant abolitionist John Brown, whom he describes as a "pure idealist" who "saw how deceptive forms are" and "use[d] [his] eyes to see the fact behind the forms"²—much as Arjuna, after seeing Krishna behind his placid form, becomes fixed in his resolve, free from doubt, and sure in action. This is not to say that John Brown and Arjuna...

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