

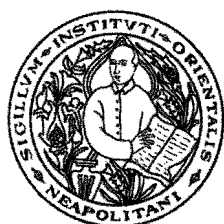
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Essays in Honour of Raffaele Torella

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Prahasann iva.
On Kṛṣṇa's Hint of Laughter
in Bhagavadgītā 2.10

Antonio Rigopoulos
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When shall I see your lotus face
With its always smiling dawn-red lips,
Joyously swelling the charming flute song
Which is sweetly accompanied by half
closed eyes that widen and dance?
(*Kṛṣṇakarmāmyta* 1.44)¹

To every single Arjuna, with heavy heart and empty hand,
Afraid to fight the battle of life on to victory,
You feel He has come for you, to you.
You see Him, silently looking around!
The searchlight eye full circle swings!
How lucky, you are there!
He smiles; He wins you by that smile!
You scarce can take your eyes from off that face,
So alluring, so divine!
(Excerpt of a poem by Narayan Kasturi, 1958)

1. Introduction

The expression *prahasann iva* is frequent in the *Mahābhārata* (MBh) occurring 84 times in its 18 books, especially in the Droṇaparvan, the 7th book (28 times). In the 6th book of the

¹ Wilson 1975: 110.

Bhīṣmaparvan, besides the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG) occurrence (MBh 6.24.10b = BhG 2.10b),² it appears 8 more times.³ It is worth noticing that the cognate expression *hasann iva* is also common — 34 occurrences — again mostly in the Droṇaparvan (12 times) while in the Bhīṣmaparvan it occurs 4 times. All in all, there are a total of 118 occurrences of *prahasann iva* + *hasann iva* in the MBh (40 in the Droṇaparvan, followed by 13 in the Bhīṣmaparvan, 10 in the Karṇaparvan, 9 in the Śalyaparvan, etc.). Even in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rm) *prahasann iva* occurs 12 times whereas the cognate *hasann iva* occurs only once.⁴

1.1 Translations of *prahasann iva*

The English renderings⁵ of *prahasann iva* in BhG 2.10b have been varied, ranging from a preference for smile or a semblance of a smile (especially in the early period and up to the 1970s) to a preference for laughter or a hint of laughter (starting with J. A. B. van Buitenen's seminal translation in the early 1980s).⁶ Here follow

² The Sanskrit text of BhG 2.10 is the same in the vulgate edition, the Kashmirian recension, and the critical edition. For the critical edition of the BhG, see Belvalkar 1945.

³ The complete list of the 84 loci of *prahasann iva* in the MBh is as follows: 1.127.5d, 1.141.1b, 1.147.21c, 1.151.7b, 1.151.14d, 1.152.15d, 1.181.2b, 1.206.16c, 1.211.16b, 2.54.11b, 3.38.36b, 3.38.39b, 3.40.17f, 3.40.21b, 3.77.11b, 3.97.5d, 3.186.116b, 3.294.9d, 4.13.5c, 4.23.22d, 4.52.23b, 4.53.14b, 5.7.9b, 5.73.1b, 5.89.23d, 5.179.1b, 6.24.10b, 6.41.16d, 6.43.21d, 6.54.15d, 6.75.39f, 6.79.36b, 6.79.48e, 6.107.2d, 6.115.34b, 7.21.10d, 7.37.13b, 7.47.26b, 7.57.46b, 7.77.29c, 7.82.14d, 7.82.20d, 7.90.28d, 7.91.32b, 7.91.35d, 7.91.43d, 7.96.13d, 7.99.16b, 7.102.98c, 7.103.4b, 7.111.3b, 7.114.50f, 7.130.29b, 7.137.18d, 7.137.26d, 7.141.7b, 7.142.6d, 7.142.16d, 7.144.16d, 7.146.28d, 7.148.39d, 7.169.20d, 7.173.48b, 8.9.26d, 8.33.14d, 8.34.16d, 8.40.85b, 8.50.2b, 9.27.51d, 9.30.15f, 12.3.29b, 12.24.8d, 12.125.18d, 12.142.41b, 12.151.10b, 12.310.27b, 13.141.74d, 14.19.46d, 14.54.17b, 14.73.6b, 14.83.8b, 14.93.39c, 16.8.49d, 18.1.11b; see the electronic text of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute's critical edition, available at <http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/welcome.html>.

⁴ *prahasann iva*: 1.38.3b, 1.51.12d, 2.85.3b, 3.27.28f, 4.8.19d, 4.10.26d, 5.11.18d, 6.95.21c, 7.4.11b, 7.17.3d, 7.60.13b, 7.80.3d; *hasann iva*: 2.63.9d; see the electronic text of the Baroda critical edition, available at <https://sanskritdocuments.org/mirrors/ramayana/valmiki.htm>.

⁵ For a comparison of select English translations of the BhG, see Larson 1981: 513–541. For a survey of BhG translations in Indian and non-Indian languages, see Callewaert and Hemraj 1982.

⁶ With reference to Italian translations of the BhG, it is worthwhile noting the rendering of *prahasann iva* by contemporary indologists Raniero Gnoli, Marcello

some examples in chronological order: Charles Wilkins (1875) translates 'smiling,'⁷ Kāshināth Trimbak Telang (1882) 'with a slight smile,'⁸ Alladi Mahadeva Sastry (1897) 'as if smiling,'⁹ Sir Edwin Arnold (1900) 'with tender smile,'¹⁰ Lionel D. Barnett (1905) 'with seeming smile,'¹¹ Annie Besant and Bhagavān Dās (1905) 'smiling,'¹² Swami Swarupananda (1909) 'as if smiling,'¹³ W. Douglas P. Hill (1928) 'as one smiling,'¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo (1938) 'smiling as it were,'¹⁵ Franklin Edgerton (1944) 'with a semblance of a smile,'¹⁶ Swami Nikhilananda (1944) 'smiling,'¹⁷ Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (1944) 'smiling,'¹⁸ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1948) 'smiling as it were,'¹⁹ Swami Vireswarananda (1948) 'as if smiling,'²⁰ Nataraja Guru (1961) 'with a semblance of smiling,'²¹ Juan Mascaró (1962) 'smiled,'²² Swami Chidbhavananda (1965) 'smiling, as it were,'²³ Robert Charles Zaehner (1966) 'faintly smiling,'²⁴ A. C. Bhaktivedanta

Meli, Stefano Piano and Tiziana Pontillo: Gnoli and Pontillo both translate 'sorridente'; Meli translates 'che pareva sorridere'; Piano translates 'quasi sorridente.' See Gnoli 1987: 51; Pontillo 1996: 19; Meli 1999: 9; Piano 1994: 100. Raniero Gnoli also translated into Italian the Kashmirian recension of the BhG, together with Abhinavagupta's commentary: Gnoli 1976. Herein, his translation of *prahasann iva* is the same, i.e. 'sorridente.' All current Italian translations of the BhG that I was able to consult follow along these lines: see for instance Raphael, 'apparendo sorridente' (Raphael 2006: 51); Ramana, 'sorridente' (Ramana 1996: 28).

⁷ Wilkins 1785: 35.

⁸ Telang 1908: 43.

⁹ Mahadeva Sastry 1977: 22.

¹⁰ Arnold 1900.

¹¹ Barnett 1928: 88.

¹² Besant and Bhagavān Dās 1905: 28.

¹³ Swami Swarupananda 1967: 34.

¹⁴ Hill 1953: 84.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo (tr.) available at <https://www.auro-ebooks.com/bhagavad-gita>.

¹⁶ Edgerton 1964: 10.

¹⁷ Swami Nikhilananda 1944: 71.

¹⁸ Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood 1958: 36.

¹⁹ Radhakrishnan 1963: 102.

²⁰ Swami Vireswarananda 1948: 33.

²¹ Nataraja Guru 1961: 116.

²² Mascaró 1978: 49.

²³ Swami Chidbhavananda 1972: 127.

²⁴ Zaehner 1973: 124.

Swami Prabhupāda (1968) 'smiling,'²⁵ Eliot Deutsch (1968) 'smiling as it were,'²⁶ Swami Venkatesananda (1972) 'as if smiling,'²⁷ Kees W. Bolle (1979) 'seemed to smile,'²⁸ Swami Sivananda (1979) 'as if smiling,'²⁹ Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van Buitenen (1981) 'with a hint of laughter,'³⁰ Robert N. Minor (1982) 'with a semblance of a laugh'/'faint smile,'³¹ Winthrop Sargeant (1984) 'beginning to laugh, so to speak,'³² Eknath Easwaran (1985) 'smiled,'³³ Barbara Stoler Miller (1986) 'mocking him gently,'³⁴ Swami Chinmayananda (2000), 'as if smiling,'³⁵ Stephen Mitchell (2000) 'smiled,'³⁶ Lars Martin Fosse (2007) 'with a hint of derision,'³⁷ Angelika Malinar (2007) 'almost bursting out in laughter,'³⁸ Graham Schweig (2007) 'as if about to laugh,'³⁹ Alex Cherniak (2008) 'almost laughing,'⁴⁰ Swami B. V. Tripurari (2010), 'smiling,'⁴¹ Georg Feuerstein and Brenda Feuerstein (2011) 'laughingly, as it were,'⁴² Gavin Flood and

²⁵ Swami Prabhupāda 1976: 21.

²⁶ Deutsch 1968: 37.

²⁷ Swami Venkatesananda 1984: 109.

²⁸ Bolle 1979: 21.

²⁹ Swami Sivananda 1996: 9.

³⁰ van Buitenen 1981: 75.

³¹ Minor 1982: 33.

³² Sargeant 2009: 95.

³³ Easwaran 2007: 89.

³⁴ Stoler Miller 1986: 31.

³⁵ Swami Chinmayananda 2000: 63; available at <https://factmuseum.com/pdf/upaveda/Holy-Geeta-by-Swami-Chinmayananda.pdf>.

³⁶ Mitchell 2000: 47.

³⁷ Fosse 2007: 13.

³⁸ Malinar 2007: 64.

³⁹ Schweig 2007: 45.

⁴⁰ Cherniak 2008: 183.

⁴¹ Swami B. V. Tripurari 2010: 40.

⁴² Feuerstein and Feuerstein 2014: 95. On the 'important qualifying remark' that Hṛṣīkeṣa imparted his teaching 'laughingly, as it were,' the authors note (2014: 105, n. 36): 'We could understand this easily in the sense that he was benignly mocking Arjuna. In order to create a mind of clarity (*sattva*) in a student, the teacher first has to dynamize a lethargic mind by introducing the quality of *rajas* into it. The progression, then, is *tamas* → *rajas* → *sattva*. Ultimately, of course, all three primary-qualities (*guṇa*) must be transcended in order to bring about spiritual liberation. From the highest perspective, even *sattva*, the principle of lucidity, represents a limitation.'

Charles Martin (2013) 'while laughing at him, as it were,'⁴³ Swami Mukundananda (2014) 'smilingly.'⁴⁴

In the MBh the present active participle *prahasana*⁴⁵ (masculine nominative singular of *prahasantī*) fulfils a quasi-adverbial function.⁴⁶ It is derived from √*has* — meaning 'to laugh'/'smile' as well as 'to deride'/'mock' — with the addition of preverb *pra* whose primary meaning is 'forward,' 'onward,' 'forth,' 'fore,' often used pleonastically.⁴⁷ Monier-Williams' dictionary translates *pra* + √*has* as 'to burst into laughter,' 'to laugh with,' 'to laugh at, mock, deride, ridicule,'⁴⁸ and Apte's dictionary translates it as 'to laugh, smile,' 'to deride, ridicule, mock,' and 'to brighten up, look splendid, cheer up.'⁴⁹

In dramaturgy, the term *prahasana* identifies one of ten types of play (*nāṭya*) in which the comic sentiment predominates and in

⁴³ Flood and Martin 2013: 13.

⁴⁴ Swami Mukundananda 2014, available at <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org>.

⁴⁵ The doubling of *n* in *prahasann iva* is due to a rule of external sandhi, which takes place when the nasal *n* occurs as a final after a short vowel before any initial vowel. In Sanskrit, present participles are normally reserved for actions which are contemporaneous with those of the main verb, as in this case. They function as verbal adjectives and must agree in case, number, and gender with the noun they modify. On the present participle, see Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 2002: 255–272.

⁴⁶ As in BhG 2.10b, present participles appear most frequently at the beginning of even *pādas*. Among them, *prahasana* is one of the most popular; see Sellmer 2015: 198.

⁴⁷ See Whitney 1987: 396; Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 2002: 150. Among the many examples of prefix *pra* meaning 'forward'/'forth' I may mention the nouns *prajā*, 'procreation'/'propagation,' *pravṛtti*, 'moving onwards'/'coming forth,' *prakāśa*, 'light'/'manifestation'/'expansion,' and *prajñā*, 'wisdom'/'intelligence.' Along these lines, an insightful comparison between the nouns *śānti* and *praśānti* is proposed by the contemporary guru Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011): 'Swami once asked His students: "What is the difference between Shanti and Prashanti?" Understandably none could answer, following which Bhagavan Baba Himself gave the answer. He said: "Shanti is the peace and tranquillity you experience when you go within and commune with God. When you then move around the world uplifted by that internal bliss, you would radiate nothing but Pure Love, which would touch everyone you come across. That fragrance of Love you radiate into the outer world is called Prashanti. Obviously, there can be no Prashanti without Shanti' (http://media.radiosai.org/journals/vol_09/01FEB11/03-musings02.htm).

⁴⁸ Monier-Williams 1988: 700.

⁴⁹ Apte 1986: 1121.

which the object of laughter is characterized by the improper conduct of someone who is criticized and put to shame.⁵⁰ Along these lines, the Monier-Williams' dictionary translates the noun *prahāsa* as 'loud laughter,' *pra* being understood to mean 'loud.'⁵¹ It should be noted that the prefix *pra* — corresponding to Greek $\pi\rho\omicron$ — has a variety of possible denotations, not always predictable, among which noticeable are the meanings of 'eminence'/'excellence' or 'superiority,' as for instance in the words *pradyumna* ('the preeminently mighty one'), *pravīra* ('hero'), *pramā* ('true knowledge') and *pramāṇa* ('a means to acquire true knowledge'). As a prefix to adjectives, *pra* means 'excessively,' 'very,' 'much,' whereas in nouns of relationship it means 'great.'⁵²

As it happens in almost half of the *pādas* in the MBh, the participle *prahasana* is followed by the indeclinable particle *iva* — 'like,' 'as it were'/'as if,' 'in a certain manner'/'a little,' 'nearly'/'almost' — which always follows the word to which it refers and which in such participial usages is not easy to render. With reference to *iva* in Vedic prose, Joel Brereton noted long ago that '... with verbs and verbal expressions, *iva* affirms that the action is true but that its realization or its extent is uncertain.'⁵³

In view of the above, I think that the most appropriate renderings of *prahasana iva* are the ones which translate *prahasana* as 'laughing' rather than 'smiling,' though to be sure the action of laughing is mitigated by the presence of the *iva* particle and *prahasana iva* might be understood as meaning 'to smile before laughing.'⁵⁴ My favored translation of this formulaic diction is van Buitenen's 'with a hint of laughter,' followed by Malinar's 'almost bursting out in laughter.' The full verse of BhG 2.10 may thus be rendered as follows:

⁵⁰ See Rossella 2009: 117–33. For an overview of India's comic tradition, see Siegel 1989. On humor in South Asian religions, see the collection of articles in Raj and Dempsey 2010.

⁵¹ Monier-Williams 1988: 700.

⁵² Ibid., 652; Apte 1986: 1052.

⁵³ Brereton 1982: 446. On *iva* clauses, see Hale.

⁵⁴ Nataraja Guru (1961: 118) notes: 'The term *iva* (as if) applied to the smile of Krishna is a peculiarity of the lingua mystica familiar in the Upanishads ... by which the edge is, as it were, taken off the actuality of the description, tending to make it more perceptual and thus more in keeping with a contemplative text.'

Samjaya⁵⁵ said: (*saṃjaya uvāca*)

To him [= Arjuna] spoke Hṛṣikeśa⁵⁶ (*tam uvāca hṛṣikeśaḥ*)

With a hint of laughter, son of Bharata,⁵⁷ (*prahasann iva bhārata*)

In between the two armies (*senayor ubhayor madhye*)

As he was despondent, this speech: (*viśīdantam idam vacaḥ*)

1.2 *Prahasann iva in Context*

BhG 2.10 is a solemn moment in the poem given that it is at this crucial juncture that lord Kṛṣṇa starts uttering his salvific teaching (*upadeśa*) to the hero Arjuna who, in his dejection, has finally surrendered himself to him. Significantly Śāṅkara (7th–8th c.), the founder of non-dual (*advaita*) Vedānta, starts his seminal commentary (*bhāṣya*) to the BhG from this point, considering the first chapter and the first nine verses of the second as preparatory, setting the scene to the incipit and unfolding of Kṛṣṇa's *upadeśa*. In Śāṅkara's own words:

Now the portion from 1.2 to 2.9 should be interpreted as showing whence arose those evils of grief (*śoka*), delusion (*moha*), etc., which in sentient creatures cause the misery of *samsāra*.... Grief and delusion are thus the cause of *samsāra*. And seeing that their cessation could not be brought about except by Self-knowledge added to renunciation of all works, Lord Vāsudeva wished to teach that knowledge for the benefit of the whole world through Arjuna and began His teaching with 2.11.⁵⁸

From both a poetical and religious point of view, Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter at 2.10 is to be regarded as the pivotal *trait d'union*, being

⁵⁵ Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer and bard, son of Gavalgaṇa, to whom he narrates the events of the great battle. He is the 'eyes' of the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, having been granted divine vision by sage Vyāsa.

⁵⁶ An epithet of Kṛṣṇa meaning 'he whose hair is splendid'/'the bristling haired one' (*hṛṣī-keśa*) as well as 'lord of the sense-organs' (*hṛṣīka-īśa*); see 1.15a, 1.21a, 1.24a, 2.9a, 2.10a, 11.36a, 18.1c. For an overview of Kṛṣṇa's names and epithets in the BhG, see Bhargava 1979: 93–96. On the other hand, Arjuna is referred to as 'the thick-haired one' (*gudā-keśa*); see 1.24b, 2.9b, 10.20a.

⁵⁷ Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind king of the Kurus, husband of Gāndhārī and father of Duryodhana and of 99 other sons, i.e. the Kauravas. He was born blind as a result of his mother, Ambikā, closing her eyes during intercourse with his father, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa.

⁵⁸ Mahadeva Sastry 1977: 22–23.

what immediately precedes his revelatory speech. In order to fully appreciate its import and function we need to contextualize it within the BhG and the epic's framework.⁵⁹ As Alf Hiltebeitel has noted, 'one always has to watch these smiles.'⁶⁰ In commenting upon the *Mahābhārata* play of the English theatre and film director Peter Brook (b. 1925), first staged in 1985, Hiltebeitel pointedly observed:

Also, Kṛṣṇa, you know, schemes with a smile. But this was missing in the Brook version. Kṛṣṇa is supposed to set the stage for some kind of catastrophe with the most subtle grin. That's one of the things that you can't miss if you know what the iconography looks like. That's a statement about seeing what Kṛṣṇa's up to in a bhakti kind of mode. But Peter Brook doesn't develop this subtlety, his player doesn't have this Kṛṣṇa smile. Rather, he looks like he's a figure who's going through one long weary scene of dire disaster, and the *Mahābhārata* is not really like that. I thought that this was a failure.⁶¹

Besides the BhG episode there are several other places in the MBh where Kṛṣṇa either smiles or laughs — as for instance when he responds with an enigmatic smile to Gāndhārī's curse in the Strīparvan — and it would be most rewarding to examine all these occurrences in a systematic, comparative fashion, be they conveyed through the phrase *prahasann iva/hasann iva* or in a different way. To my knowledge, this is a study which so far no one has ever undertaken.

While Saṃjaya reports to Dhṛtarāṣṭra that on the Kuru field the war between the two armies of Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas is about to begin, with the tumultuous din that made heaven and earth resound (1.19), the course of events is given an unexpected turn when Arjuna,⁶² the great hero of the Pāṇḍavas, having seen (1.20)

⁵⁹ For a fine introduction to the BhG, see Davis 2015. See also Rigopoulos 2010: CLXXIII–CXCI, 1500–1504. For an excellent contextualization of the BhG within the MBh, see Malinar 2007. For an overview on Kṛṣṇa in the BhG, see Minor 2007: 77–94. On Kṛṣṇa's central place within the MBh, see Hiltebeitel 1979: 65–107. See also Hiltebeitel 2007: 23–76.

⁶⁰ Even though here he is referring to Śiva's smile, not Kṛṣṇa's; see Hiltebeitel 1984: 19.

⁶¹ Rosen 1992: 54.

⁶² For an overview on Arjuna in the MBh, see Katz 1989.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons arrayed in battle order with their bows risen, asks his charioteer Kṛṣṇa — whom he calls *acyuta*, 'imperishable' — to halt the chariot in between the two armies so that he may have a closer look at those who have marched up eager to fight (1.21–23). Arjuna feels the urge to intently look at the Kauravas, and it is precisely this act of seeing that determines a change in the hero's attitude.

According to political treatises, 'standing in between' (*madhya-stha*) two armies exemplifies a neutrality of weakness, as is here Arjuna's case given his emotional involvement. By contrast, Kṛṣṇa is wholly detached and uninvolved (*udāsīna*; see BhG 9.9c), and his neutrality is a neutrality of strength.⁶³ Theologically, Kṛṣṇa is the witness (*sākṣin*), i.e. the pure *ātman*; he is the charioteer of the 'chariot' of the individual soul (*jīva*). Arjuna's equidistant position between the two fighting parties symbolizes the sole point from where it will be possible for him to achieve a condition of objectivity and equanimity (*samatva*).⁶⁴ Such middle position represents a space of freedom in which time is temporarily suspended, and from this privileged vantage point Arjuna will be able to exercise discriminative inquiry and detachment (*vairāgya*).⁶⁵ Indeed, it is the place where his transformation will be effectively brought about thanks to Kṛṣṇa's teachings.

Having complied with Arjuna's request of positioning the chariot in between the two armies, Hṛṣīkeśa asks him to behold the assembled Kurus (1.25) — Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and all the kings — and symptomatically the following verses focus upon what the hero sees and its consequences. As in other places in the MBh, here the act of seeing is most powerful and is equated with knowing.⁶⁶ Now Arjuna does not behold enemies on the Kaurava's side

⁶³ See Emeneau 1968: 276–277.

⁶⁴ 'Equanimity is yoga,' as per Kṛṣṇa's solemn definition in BhG 2.48d: *samatvaṃ yoga ucyate*. The wise considers pain and pleasure as being the same (*sama-duḥkhasukha*; see BhG 2.15c, 14.24a). There are twenty-five occurrences of *sama/samatva/samatā* in the BhG, which proves its relevance: 1.4b, 2.15c, 2.38a, 2.48c, 2.48d, 4.22c, 5.18d, 5.19c, 6.8d, 6.9d, 6.13a, 6.29d, 6.32b, 9.29a, 10.5a, 12.4b, 12.13d, 12.18a, 12.18d, 13.9c, 13.27a, 13.28a, 14.24a, 14.24b, 18.54c.

⁶⁵ The term *vairāgya* is found at BhG 6.35d, 13.8a, and 18.52d; see also the cognate terms *asaṅga* at 15.3d and *tyāga* at 16.2b and 18.1 ff.

⁶⁶ Within the Bhīṣmaparvan itself, see 6.1.33, 6.19.3, 6.21.1, 6.41.6.

but rather what he calls *bandhus*, i.e. relatives: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, companions, fathers-in-law, and friends (1.26-27). In particular, Arjuna is anguished at the idea of having to fight against his revered teachers Bhīṣma and Droṇa.⁶⁷

As a consequence, Saṁjaya tells us that Arjuna is immediately filled with utmost pity (1.28a, *kṛpayā parayaviṣṭah*).⁶⁸ Seeing his own folks (*dr̥ṣṭvaimān svajanān*) arranged in battle-order against him, eager to fight, he is emotionally and physically overwhelmed and breaks down: his limbs sink down, his mouth dries up, he trembles and has goose-bumps, his *gāṇḍīva* bow falls from his hand, he feels his skin burning, he gets dizzy, and his mind wanders astray (1.29–30). Moreover, Arjuna is said to see inauspicious signs (*nimittāni ca paśyāmi viparītāni*)⁶⁹ which are both a warning and an opportunity to prevent what he perceives as an impending catastrophe, since he sees nothing good in killing his kinsfolk (1.31).⁷⁰

Refusing to fulfill his own duty (*svadharma*) as a warrior, i.e. his *kṣatriyadharmā*, Arjuna declares that he desires neither victory nor the kingdom.⁷¹ In his speech (1.28–46) he puts forward reasons for peace which to the reader of the MBh are familiar, having been voiced in the preceding Udyogaparvan which is dominated by the conflict between *kuladharmā* and *kṣatriyadharmā*, the duty pertaining to the family/clan and the one pertaining to the warrior class. Arjuna's argument is as follows (1.32cd–33ab):

⁶⁷ Master-archer and teacher of the military art, Droṇa himself was especially fond of Arjuna whom he considered his best pupil.

⁶⁸ In *Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.62, one of the reasons for the arising of the sentiment of compassion (*karuṇarasa*) is the viewing of the killing of one's beloved.

⁶⁹ In the Bhīṣmaparvan, even the sage Vyāsa makes an appeal to stop the battle after the enumeration of adverse omens (6.2.16ff., 6.4.43). But Dhṛtarāṣṭra considers Vyāsa's words to be futile, viewing war as a matter of fate (6.4.44–46).

⁷⁰ Arjuna's refusal to fight is motivated by the prevalence of the lower *guṇas* of *rajas* and *tamas*: the thought of the painful consequences (*śoka*) of having to fight against his *ācāryas* and *bandhus* (which is due to *rajas*) and his confusion (*moha*) about *dharma* (which is due to *tamas*).

⁷¹ In MBh 5.131.36 and 5.133.3, Vidurā's son questions the value of a warrior's *svadharma* by putting forward views which are quite similar to Arjuna's. Just like BhG 1.32d, both verses end with the refrain: 'What is the use of enjoyments or life?' (*kiṁ bhogair jīvītena vā*).

Of what use to us were kingdoms, Govinda,⁷²
Of what use enjoyments or life?
For whose sake we desire
Kingdom, enjoyments, and happiness,
They are drawn up here in battle,
Giving up life and wealth.⁷³

Contrary to his cousin Duryodhana, the chief of the Kauravas, Arjuna rejects *kṣatriyadharmā* and regards his clan's prosperity as the paramount value. For him, the purpose of war can only be the welfare of the family. Wishing to be loyal to it, the very idea of fighting against his *bandhus* is something he instinctively repudiates (1.35):

Them I do not wish to slay,
Even though they slay (me), O slayer of Madhu,⁷⁴
Even for three-world-rulership's
Sake; how much less for the sake of the earth!⁷⁵

Arjuna ponders over the evil⁷⁶ of killing one's kith and kin and states that the destruction of the family is a crime that must be prevented, even if the others do not see it, their intelligence being overpowered by greed (1.36–39). His words may be regarded as an anticipation of the mourning for the dead and are a last, desperate attempt to avoid the conflict. In his passionate defense of *kuladharmā* over *kṣatriyadharmā*, Arjuna proceeds to describe the vicious circle which the destruction of family members entails, considering the inevitable disruption of the larger network of social relations defined by the endogamous rules of marriage, which in turn determines lawlessness (*adharmā*) and the collapse of the entire society through pernicious caste-admixture (*varṇa-saṃkara*).⁷⁷ With the destruction of caste, the inexorable destiny of each and all is said to be none other than hell (1.40–44):

⁷² An epithet of Kṛṣṇa meaning 'tender of cattle.'

⁷³ Edgerton 1964: 6.

⁷⁴ An epithet of Kṛṣṇa meaning 'destroyer of [the demon] Madhu.'

⁷⁵ Edgerton 1964: 7.

⁷⁶ On evil/sin (*pāpa*) in the BhG, see Hudson 1996: 65–84.

⁷⁷ On these issues, see Chapple 2001: 23–31.

Upon the destruction of the family, perish
The immemorial holy laws of the family;
When the laws have perished, the whole family
Lawlessness overwhelms also.
Because of the prevalence of lawlessness, Kṛṣṇa,
The women of the family are corrupted;
When the women are corrupted, O Vṛṣṇi-clansman,⁷⁸
Mixture of caste ensues.
Mixture (of caste) leads to naught but hell
For the destroyers of the family and for the family;
For their ancestors fall (to hell),
Because the rites of (giving) food and water are interrupted.
By these sins of family-destroyers,
(Sins) which produce caste-mixture,
The caste laws are destroyed,
And the eternal family laws.
When the family laws are destroyed,
Janārdana,⁷⁹ then for men
Dwelling in hell certainly
Ensues: so we have heard (from the Holy Word).⁸⁰

Arjuna wants to have nothing to do with the impending war — which he regards as a major sin (*mahat pāpam*) motivated by the greed for the joys of kingship (*rājyasukhalobha*) — and is rather willing to be slain in battle by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's men, without opposing any resistance (*apratikāra*) and unarmed (*asāstra*). Indeed, he views suicidal surrender as more beneficial (*kṣematara*) than being involved in the family slaughter (1.45–46). Saṁjaya ends chapter 1 by depicting Arjuna as sinking down in the box of his chariot, letting his bow and arrows fall, 'his heart smitten with grief' (1.47, *śokasaṁvignamānasa*).

At the beginning of chapter 2 Saṁjaya repeats what he had said at 1.28a, i.e. that Arjuna is overwhelmed by pity (2.1a, *kṛpayāvi-ṣṭam*), his eyes being blurred with tears.⁸¹ At this point, Kṛṣṇa

⁷⁸ The name of a Yādava people and their ancestor, connected with the Āndhakas and Bhojas. Kṛṣṇa as well as other figures such as Sātyaki and Kṛtavarman belong to this clan.

⁷⁹ Another name of Kṛṣṇa, meaning 'people-agitator.'

⁸⁰ Edgerton 1964: 7–8.

⁸¹ On the religious significance and function of crying, see Hawley and Patton 2005.

offers a first, brief reply (2.2–3) in which he upholds *kṣatriyadharmā* and underlines how Arjuna's faintheartedness is offensive to the noble, excludes him from the heavenly world which awaits all heroes, and causes disgrace.⁸² Kṛṣṇa intimates him to stop being a eunuch (*klība*), which does not befit him: he must shake off his miserable weakness of heart and get up. His reproach to Arjuna of being a eunuch, a symbol of impotence and cowardice,⁸³ is common in the epic being addressed to weak heroes who are unable or reluctant to fulfill their *kṣatriya* duties.⁸⁴ It must be remembered that Arjuna had spent the thirteenth and last year of his exile disguised as a eunuch at the court of Virāṭa, the king of the Matsyas,⁸⁵ and thus Kṛṣṇa's reproach may also be insinuating that he had learnt to play his role so well that he was still behaving as a eunuch, subtly accusing him to have in fact turned into one.⁸⁶ Kṛṣṇa wants to hurt Arjuna's pride so as to trigger a manly reaction in him, given that in a warrior society the first commandment in order to maintain social status is to avoid shame by behaving bravely.

In 2.4–8, Arjuna repeats his main argument saying that he cannot fight against the great heroes Bhīṣma and Droṇa whom he reveres as teachers worthy of worship. The importance of his words is signaled by the fact that in verses 5–8 the meter changes from *śloka* to *triṣṭubh*.⁸⁷ Arjuna argues that rather than eating food

⁸² Long ago Jacobi (1918: 325) noted that Kṛṣṇa's reply lists topics which are used elsewhere in the MBh when a warrior refuses to fight and gives the example of Arjuna's reply to Uttara in 4.36.17–23. Other examples are Kṛṣṇa's reply to Bhīma joining the peace party (5.73) and Vidurā's speech to her son (5.131–134).

⁸³ On the fruitlessness and bad reputation of the *klība*, see *Mānavadharmasāstra* (MDh) 2.158, 4.211.

⁸⁴ See Vidurā's speech to her son (5.131.5–7). See also MBh 2.34.21, 2.38.24, 5.73.17. A hero is required to be a man (*puruṣo bhava*; see MBh 5.167.6, 5.167.13–15).

⁸⁵ The story is told in the Virāṭaparvan, the fourth book of the MBh. Dressed as a woman, Arjuna presents himself as the eunuch Bṛhannalā and disguises himself as a dance teacher in the king's harem. On this episode and Arjuna's incongruous, grotesque appearance as an androgynous clown, see Shulman 1985: 256–276.

⁸⁶ On these issues, see Hejib and Young 1980: 235–244. See also Malinar 2007: 38–42.

⁸⁷ In chapter 2 of the BhG the meter changes from *śloka* to *triṣṭubh* in three other places, which again is meant to highlight their importance: at 2.20, 2.29,

besmeared with blood, i.e. gaining victory by slaying his masters and relatives, he prefers to eat alms-food in this world. Again he puts forward an argument for peace, his reference to living from alms pointing to the fact that he prefers ascetic renunciation to killing his own dear ones. By embracing a life of renunciation, he thinks he may be able to escape the conflict between contradictory *dharmas*. He is thus ready to relinquish all territorial claims and social status, and to live in the realm of another king.⁸⁸ He reiterates that neither a kingdom nor the earth is worth fighting for at the cost of killing his *bandhus*, and once again refuses to follow *kṣatriyadharmā*.

Finally, recognizing that his own being is afflicted with the weakness of pity (*kārpānyadoṣa*) and that his mind is confused as to what is right (*dharma*), Arjuna turns to Kṛṣṇa as his ultimate resort, desperately seeking his help.⁸⁹ Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to tell him decidedly what is better,⁹⁰ what he ought to do at this critical juncture. Decisive is the close of verse 2.7d, in which he falls at Kṛṣṇa's feet accepting him as his supreme *guru*.⁹¹ He solemnly declares that he is his disciple, and asks him to offer his liberating teaching to him: 'I am Thy pupil, teach me: I surrender to Thee' (*śiṣyas te 'haṃ sādhi māṃ tvāṃ praṇannam*).

and 2.70. Each of the four lines of the *triṣṭubh* verse is made up of eleven syllables whereas the *śloka* has eight syllables.

⁸⁸ This is the same solution that Saṃjaya, acting as Duryodhana's ambassador, recommends to Yudhiṣṭhira in the Udyogaparvan: 'I think it is better to live on alms in the kingdom of the Andhaka-Vṛṣṇis' (*bhaikṣācaryam andhakavṛṣṇirājye śreyo manye*; 5.27.2). On the other hand, in a speech to Yudhiṣṭhira Kṛṣṇa states that victory or death is the 'alms' a *kṣatriya* lives on; see 5.71.3-4.

⁸⁹ The Kashmirian recension of BhG 2.11 especially emphasizes the issue of *kārpānyadoṣa*.

⁹⁰ The BhG author seems to have in mind *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.1 where Yama, the god of death, instructs the Brahmin boy Naciketas thus: 'The good (*śreyas*) is one thing, the gratifying (*preyas*) is quite another; their goals are different, both bind a man. Good things await him who picks the good; by choosing the gratifying, one misses one's goal'; Olivelle 1998: 235. Besides 2.7c, the term *śreyas* is found in BhG 1.31c, 2.5b, 2.31c, 3.2d, 3.11d, 3.35c, 5.1c, 5.2b, 12.12a, 16.22c.

⁹¹ Kṛṣṇa claims authority as supreme teacher both at the beginning of chapter 3, where he declares to have taught the doctrines of *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* long ago (3.3), as well as at the beginning of chapter 4, where he proclaims himself to be the original teacher of yoga (4.3). On the guru's foundational role in Indian culture, see Steinmann 1986; Rigopoulos 2009.

Arjuna does not see what else could possibly dispel his grief (*śoka*) which dries up his senses, even if he was to attain on this earth unrivalled, prosperous kingship and even sovereignty over the gods. For him, *kuladharmā* stands above and beyond *kṣatriya-dharma* given that he sees his duty as a warrior as harboring demerit, not merit. His conflict over *dharma* is reinforced by the anticipation of the sorrow that the death of his *bandhus* will cause to him and wants to avoid it. The hero's tragedy, which makes him utterly despondent and incapable of action, is that he is both intellectually and emotionally dumbfounded by the whole situation.

At 2.9, Saṁjaya reports Arjuna's last words to Govinda: 'I will not fight' (*na yotsya iti*), after which he became silent (*tūṣṇīm babhūva*). The fact that Arjuna, who is the son of the war-god Indra and the main warrior-hero among the Pāṇḍavas, categorically states that he will not fight, is in itself emblematic of an ironic — and tragic — reversal of roles.⁹²

From 2.11, Kṛṣṇa patiently begins⁹³ to impart his *upadeśa* to Arjuna pointing out that he is grieving for those he shouldn't grieve for (*aśocyān anvaśocas tvam*), since the wise (*paṇḍitāḥ*) don't grieve for neither the dead nor the living. And yet, Kṛṣṇa seems to acknowledge the fact that Arjuna has spoken 'words of wisdom' (*prajñāvādān*). I think one needs to understand this statement — which has always been an interpretative crux — as being ironic. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa's subtle irony at this solemn juncture is in perfect keeping with his hint of laughter at 2.10b. The idea is that with his words Arjuna only mimics a true sage, since he is just the parody of one who is endowed with real wisdom (*prajñā*). Therefore, I think that the expression *prajñāvādān ca bhāṣase* of 2.11b should be understood as meaning 'you claim to speak words of wisdom.'⁹⁴

⁹² On these issues, see Minnema 2013: 51–62, 101–114, 241–254, 307–344.

⁹³ As Sathya Sai Baba remarked during a speech he held in Prasanthi Nilayam on January 14, 1965: 'Krishna did not remove the delusion of Arjuna by His resolve, in a trice, as He doubtless could have done; He made him go through all the steps of hearing [= *śravaṇa*], reflection [= *manana*] and concentration [= *nididhyāsana*] by himself. The patient must take the medicine, not the doctor; the doctor only prescribes and persuades. One thing too must be said. The aspiring disciple must have an inkling already of the Truth; or else, he cannot master the secret. The telegram is sent in the Morse Code; so the man who sends as well as the man who receives must be aware of the code' (Sathya Sai Baba 2009: 12–13).

⁹⁴ Along these lines, Edgerton points out that in MBh 2.61.38 the expression

In his first teaching to his devout *śiṣya*, Kṛṣṇa develops four major themes. First of all, he addresses the hero's sorrow and emotional crisis by imparting a speech of consolation (2.11–30) that teaches the immortality of the 'owner of the body' (*dehin, śarīrin*), i.e. the Self, vis-à-vis the mortality of the body.⁹⁵ At 2.20, he solemnly declares that only the body can be killed, not the embodied Self which is beyond birth and death.⁹⁶ Therefore Arjuna has nothing to worry about — as repeatedly underlined by the formula *na śocitum arhasi* (see 2.25d–27d, 30d) — and must learn to cultivate an equal attitude with respect to happiness and suffering.⁹⁷ Death is only an occasion for 'changing old clothes,' i.e. for transmigrating into a new body.⁹⁸

Kṛṣṇa then addresses the hero's conflict over tradition, emphatically endorsing *kṣatriyadharmā* given that Arjuna's *svadharmā*, his own duty as a warrior, overrules *kuladharmā*: therefore, he tells him that he must fight since refusing to do so is a sin.⁹⁹ The *kṣatriya* must engage in battle at all costs, without caring about winning or losing, i.e. indifferent to its consequences since the consequences of war are no criteria for establishing its validity. Kṛṣṇa points out that he should consider himself lucky since there is nothing better for a warrior than a legitimate, righteous battle.

prajñāvādikaḥ means 'talking as (pretending to be) wise'; Edgerton 1964: 92. Significantly, the Kashmir recension of the BhG reports the variant *prajñāvān nābhībhāṣase*, 'you don't speak as a sage.' For an overview, see Kato 2014: 1144–1150; Kato 2016: 1106–1112. See also Piano 1994: 100–101, n. 11b.

⁹⁵ It draws on the style of funeral orations. These verses are included in the *Viṣṇusmṛti* (19.24) as words of consolation which should be addressed to mourners. For the recurrent and parallel passages in the BhG and other Sanskrit texts, see Haas 1949: 560–562. For other speeches of consolation in the MBh, see 11.2.3 ff. On the hour of death, see Edgerton 1926–27: 219–249.

⁹⁶ On the parallelism between BhG 2.20 and *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.18, see Rocher 1963: 45–58.

⁹⁷ At 2.38, Kṛṣṇa reiterates that Arjuna must not be attached to the outcome of the battle: 'Holding pleasure and pain alike, gain and loss, victory and defeat, gird thyself for battle: thus you shall not bring anything bad on yourself.'

⁹⁸ See also MBh 11.3.6. This idea is probably derived from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5. Death is not to be understood as non-being (*asat*) but as a mere change in appearance given that what truly is (*sat*) cannot vanish into non-being.

⁹⁹ In contrast to other parts of the MBh, Kṛṣṇa does not view fighting against one's relatives as an emergency situation, a calamity that allows the application of *āpaddharma*, i.e. special rules in times of distress.

Herein, Kṛṣṇa's *kṣatriya* ethos is the same as that which is upheld by his opponent Duryodhana, for whom 'the warrior has been created for fighting' (*yuddhāya kṣatriyah sṛṣṭah*; see 5.158.11–12). The code of honor does not allow for any regrets, afterthoughts or doubts since a *kṣatriya* must engage in fight and never submit to anybody.¹⁰⁰ The idea is that a fighting warrior will always win: both victory and defeat will lead him to Indra's heaven (2.31–37).

Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa criticizes the old ritualistic worldview of *karman* of the followers of the Vedas and argues that solely discriminative knowledge purged of all personal interests is the precondition for right action. He thus redefines *karman* as per the famous doctrine of disinterested action (*niṣkāma karman*, 2.47):

On action alone be thy interest,¹⁰¹
Never on its fruits;
Let not the fruits of action be thy motive,
Nor be thy attachment to inaction.¹⁰²

Action must be carried out at the best of one's capacities and yet it must not be judged by its results. Most importantly, one must relinquish all desires attached to it: only in this way one may free himself from the bondage of *karman*, i.e. interrupt the ongoing production of karmic retribution. One must always consider the intentions that trigger action and exercise self-control. In order to do this the intellect (*buddhī*), the highest faculty that allows to control the lower faculties such as ego-consciousness (*ahaṃkāra*) and possessiveness, must be purified through the practice of *yoga* (*buddhiyoga*), poignantly defined as equanimity (*samatva*), so as to leave the realm of 'acquisition and conservation' (*yogakṣema*) behind oneself and abandon all attachment (2.38–53).

¹⁰⁰ As Duryodhana states in MBh 5.125.15–19: 'He [= the warrior] must stand erect; never must he submit. Manliness means steadfastness! Even if he feels like falling apart, he should never here on earth bow to anybody!' In the Śāntiparvan, Bhiṣma gives the same advice to Yudhiṣṭhira (12.131.9). In the epic even women formulate the rules of manliness: for instance, Pṛthā/Kuntī to her son Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidurā to her son Vidura (5.132.36–38).

¹⁰¹ Here Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that Arjuna's entitlement (*adhikāra*) is only to the ordained act.

¹⁰² Edgerton 1964: 14.

Kṛṣṇa brings chapter 2 to a close by answering Arjuna's question regarding the characteristics of a man whose insight is firm (*sthitaprajña*, 2.54–72). Herein, he offers a lesson on yogic meditation which shows how perfect detachment from sense-objects results in clarity (*prasāda*) and peace, in a contemplative withdrawal from the world which culminates in liberation, i.e. *brahmanirvāṇa*, 'the vanishing away that is Brahman.'¹⁰³ Noteworthy is that Kṛṣṇa for the first time in the poem proposes himself as the privileged object of concentration, the 'highest goal' (*matpara*) to whom the practitioner must surrender himself (2.61, my translation):

Them [= the senses] all restraining,
Let him sit disciplined, intent upon Me as the highest goal;
Only when his senses are under control,
Is his wisdom secure.

To be sure, this is the fundamental teaching of the BhG, the most thorough presentation of which is found in chapter 18.54 ff. Although several scholars consider this reference to Kṛṣṇa's divinity to be out of context, a later interpolation inserted when the theistic layers of the text were added,¹⁰⁴ I think this need not be the case. In fact, 2.61 is consonant with 2.7d which is the decisive *κατάρα* that occasions Kṛṣṇa's *upadeśa*, i.e. the momentous time when Arjuna surrenders himself to him, falling at his feet and taking 'refuge' (*śaraṇāgati*) in him as his guru, which implies that he has accepted him as his beloved lord. The hero's surrender (*prapatti*),¹⁰⁵ his leap of faith (*śraddhā*),¹⁰⁶ is a silent, heartfelt prayer

¹⁰³ Other possible translations of this compound which is synonymous of *mokṣa* ('liberation'/'release') are 'the extinction in Brahman' or even 'the inexpressible [state] of Brahman.' Besides 2.72d, *brahmanirvāṇa* is found in BhG 5.24c, 5.25a, and 5.26c. The term *nirvāṇa* is indicative of Buddhist influence.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance Malinar 2007: 77.

¹⁰⁵ Besides 2.7d, the verb *pra* + *√pad* occurs in BhG 4.11a, 7.14c, 7.15b, 7.19b, 7.20b, 15.4c. On the crucial notion of *prapatti* in Śrīvaiṣṇavism, see Lester 1966: 266–282; Raman 2007. The *praṇama* goes through six stages, the final one being *kāraṇya* or *ākimcanya* which is the perfection of *prapatti*; see Piantelli 1996: 109–110.

¹⁰⁶ *Śraddhā* can be understood to mean 'putting one's heart in someone/something,' *śrad* being probably cognate to Latin *credo* and *cor/cordis*; see Monier-

for help that he addresses to his eternal charioteer (*sanātana-sārathī*) as his last resort: it expresses the human need for god, which manifests itself in all its imperativeness at the time of existential crises and impending death.¹⁰⁷

This paradigmatic *guru-śiṣya* relationship is the foundational presupposition of the BhG's dialogue, its 'secret' (*rahasya*) being pure love (*bhakti*).¹⁰⁸ As the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* solemnly proclaims in its closing verse (6.23): 'Only in a man who has the deepest love for God, and who shows the same love towards his teacher as towards God, do these points declared by the Noble One shine forth.'¹⁰⁹ If Arjuna's act of surrender to the divine master had not preliminarily taken place, Kṛṣṇa's teaching could have never been uttered.¹¹⁰ The hero's ripeness to receive Kṛṣṇa's *upadeśa* is demonstrated by his *prapatti*. According to Rāmānuja (traditionally believed to have flourished 1017–1137), the great master of Śrīvaiṣṇavism and the leading theologian of Viśiṣṭādvaita or 'qualified non-dualism,' the *praṇanna* who has surrendered himself to the deity is the one worthy of divine favor (*prasāda*). In its culminating, sixth stage known as *kārpaṇya* ('poorness of spirit') or *ākimcanya* ('nullity'), *prapatti* is characterized by a condition of total vulnerability: one then 'belongs' to the deity, his/her ego being shattered. The idea is that when one reaches such *κένωσις* or complete self-emptying, god intervenes filling him/her with his *prasāda*. It is noteworthy that the term *prasāda* — derived from *pra*

Williams 1988: 1095. As Kṛṣṇa teaches to Arjuna in BhG 17.3cd: 'Man here is made up of faith; As a man's faith is, just so he is.' The term also recurs in BhG 3.31c, 4.39a, 6.37a, 6.47c, 7.21b, 7.21c, 7.22a, 9.23b, 12.2c, 17.2a, 17.3b, 17.13c, 17.17a, 17.28a, and 18.71a. On *śraddhā*, see Hara 1964: 132–145.

¹⁰⁷ On the various forms of Hindu prayer, see Piantelli 1998: 34–89.

¹⁰⁸ On the term *bhakti*, see Hara 1964: 124–132. For an overview of *bhakti* theology and its nine characteristics, see Rigopoulos 2005: 191–211. On Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, see Holdrege 2005.

¹⁰⁹ Olivelle 1998: 265.

¹¹⁰ As Sathya Sai Baba (2010: 14) points out in his commentary to this crucial passage of the BhG: 'From that moment, Krishna became the guru and Arjuna the disciple. Arjuna prayed for that status and got it. Until Arjuna accepted this attitude of a learner, his heart was filled with egotism and weakness. The hero had become a zero. He had taken a position the very opposite of that taken up by Krishna. The reason for all this, if you study the situation carefully, is nothing but "egotism". Love is the viewpoint of Krishna and delusion (*bhrama*) the viewpoint of Arjuna.'

+ √*sad*, ‘to become clear/tranquil,’ ‘to become satisfied/pleased/glad’ — though usually translated as favor/grace also means good humor and smile.¹¹¹

Having said this, it must be remembered that within the framework of a theology of grace the very possibility of Arjuna’s seeking refuge at Kṛṣṇa’s feet originates from god’s overwhelming love (*preman*).¹¹² His initiative is thought to precede and predetermine all human endeavor, suspending/vanquishing the law of *karman* itself. The sublime paradox of *bhakti* lies precisely in this: love is activated/instilled within man by the beloved and man, in turn, is called to reciprocate it, i.e. donate it to the beloved. But how is it possible to donate something that does not belong to us, since man received it as a gift of grace in the first place? The answer lies in the recognition that there is only love and such love is no ‘thing’ but the very nature/essence of god. Love is therefore to be understood as the foundation of all creatures and of all that exists, it being the alpha and the omega, the way and the goal. There is but one circularity of love, with no beginning nor end, an eternal dynamism of love, and this is precisely what the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is all about, its presupposition and its telos.

Even before the BhG episode, there are other instances in the MBh which reveal Arjuna’s devotional pose towards Kṛṣṇa. Thus when Arjuna approaches the latter in order to ask him to be his ally in the war against the Kauravas he stands bowing at the foot of Kṛṣṇa’s bed — as Govinda was sleeping — with folded hands (*kṛtāñjali*; 5.7.7), an attitude which contrasts with that of Duryodhana who, having come there for the same purpose of asking Kṛṣṇa to ally himself with him against the Pāṇḍavas, comfortably seats himself on a choice seat near Kṛṣṇa’s head. When Kṛṣṇa leaves them the option of selecting either the strong army of the Yādavas or himself alone and non-combatant, Duryodhana chooses the army, i.e. quantity, whereas Arjuna chooses him, i.e. quality. And by choosing Kṛṣṇa, who will then act as his charioteer,

¹¹¹ Thus the compound *prasannamukha* means ‘with a pleased countenance’/‘smiling.’ See Monier-Williams 1988: 696–697; Apte 1986: 1115. Within the BhG, *prasāda* is found at 2.64d, 2.65a, 17.16a, 18.37d, 18.56c, 18.58b, 18.62c, 18.75a. On grace in Hinduism, see Martin 2013.

¹¹² See Hara 2007: 81–106.

Arjuna is definitely chosen by him.¹¹³ As Piantelli writes, Arjuna's choice is 'the measure of the exceptional preciousness of Vāsudeva's word, of the unlimited power of the divine and of the risk that anyone who approaches such power with uncompromising dedication must face.'¹¹⁴

The BhG aims to establish the legitimate rule of the ideal king who is none other than the god-obeying king, i.e. Arjuna, given that god, i.e. Kṛṣṇa, is the sole, eternal sovereign of the cosmos. It rejects the claims of those evil rulers who, like Duryodhana, make themselves absolute monarchs and affirm a god-like status for themselves. Within the BhG, the religious dimension of *bhakti* is inextricably intertwined with the political dimension of kingship. In the end, Arjuna must fight as a devoted *bhakta* for the cause of the one and only god, Kṛṣṇa, and for the welfare of the world that Kṛṣṇa himself has manifested through his will. Although keeping to his yogic detachment, Kṛṣṇa shows interest in the world and his devoted king must act as his collaborator in the ongoing endeavor of maintaining its welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*). As Angelika Malinar states:

Kṛṣṇa's position is unique in that he is in command of the creative powers like a yogin, protects the created cosmos like a king, and surpasses all cosmic levels and established realms of liberation in that the 'knowing devotee' reaches not just identity with the elements of creation and liberation of the self, but the eternity in

¹¹³ With Kṛṣṇa on Arjuna's side, victory is assured. As Saṃjaya solemnly states in the last verse of BhG 18.78:

Where is Kṛṣṇa the Lord of Discipline,
And where is the Bowman, the son of Pṛthā,
There fortune, victory, prosperity,
And statecraft are firmly fixed, I ween.
(Edgerton 1964: 91)

¹¹⁴ Piantelli 1996: 191 (my translation). For an analysis of this episode, see Hildebeitel 1990: 102–113. Arjuna's choice calls to mind the words of *Psalms* 20.7: 'Some [trust] in chariots and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God'; <http://www.lambfold.org.uk/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/kjvbible.pdf>. Along these lines, in the Christian tradition saint Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621) wrote: 'With Christ, our leader and king, it is not anymore in chariots and horses that we place our faith but in the devoutly invoked name of God'; Ravasi 2006: 105 (my translation).

which Kṛṣṇa exists. This state of being can be reached only by those who are devoted to him¹¹⁵

1.3 Interpretations of *prahasann iva*

Given such context, I now come back to Hṛṣīkeśa's hint of laughter.¹¹⁶ From the outset, it must be noted that at this crucial juncture the poet who wrote our text plays on some fundamental oppositions which at the same time complement each other making up an indissoluble whole, since the relation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna is one of intimate reciprocity and mutual dependence.¹¹⁷ Kṛṣṇa is not only the model for Arjuna, who is the ideal king and man, but his necessary companion since in the theology of the BhG god and king/devotee, religion and politics, *mokṣa* and kingship are never conceived as separate. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, symptomatically 'the white/silvery one' and 'the black/dark one,' are none other than the incarnations of Nara, literally 'man,' and Nārāyaṇa, literally 'resting on the waters'/'resting place of men,' revered as one being in two persons.¹¹⁸ Arjuna's cry and sad situa-

¹¹⁵ Malinar 2007: 135. Although Kṛṣṇa transcends the cosmos he also encompasses it and is keen to preserve it. As Kṛṣṇa cares for the world's welfare, in the same way Arjuna and his *bhaktas* must care for it. Kṛṣṇa unifies the conflicting values of social responsibility and world renunciation, blending in himself the characteristics of both the king and the ascetic.

¹¹⁶ For an insightful excursus of the typology of laughter, see Tagliapietra 2012: 1–13 (<http://www.fillide.it/19-articoli/151-andrea-tagliapietra-tipologia-del-riso>). See also Berger 1997; Apte 1985. On laughter in Greek and Roman antiquity, see Halliwell 2008; Beard 2014. On laughter in the Bible and in early Christianity, see Achtemeier - Society of Biblical Literature 2003: 717; Mazzucco 2007; Stroumsa 2006. See also Scarsato 2017; Ventura 2014. A saying falsely attributed to Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430) but actually of Medieval origin (*Patrologia Latina* XL, 1290) concisely states: *Dominum numquam risisse sed flevisse legimus*, 'We read that the Lord never laughed but cried.'

¹¹⁷ See Hildebeitel 1990: 1–26. Their association is already mentioned in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, dating back to the 4th c. BCE: *sūtra* 4.3.98 addresses the issue of how those who possess *bhakti* towards Vāsudeva and Arjuna should be called. Arjuna is the son of Pṛthā/Kuntī and thus Kṛṣṇa's cousin, as she is Kṛṣṇa's aunt. By abduction (*haraṇa*), Arjuna marries Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa's sister, and the couple has a son, Abhimanyu. When in the Mausalarparvan Kṛṣṇa dies by means of a hunter's arrow piercing his heel — the sole part of his body which is vulnerable, as in Achilles' story — Arjuna instantly loses his strength, a premonitory sign that he is nearing his end.

¹¹⁸ The sons of Dharma and Ahimsā, they are an ancient pair of warriors and

tion is skillfully contrasted with Kṛṣṇa's laughter and otherworldly serenity.¹¹⁹ The hero represents man who in his despondency can only take refuge at his lord's feet as his *śiṣya*, vis-à-vis the laughing/smiling god who stands in front of him as his authoritative *guru*.¹²⁰ As god and man, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are regarded as unbeatable and represent the perfect relationship, being supportive and respectful of one another.¹²¹

Significantly, whereas Arjuna is lost in silence, Kṛṣṇa opens his mouth in a laughter/smile which is the prelude to his nectarine words of grace (*kṛpā*, *anugraha*), his liberating teaching. His *pra-hasann iva* is the bridge between silence and the word:¹²² it triggers Arjuna's transformation by interrupting his dejection, i.e. who he *thinks* he is, and leading him to a new understanding of himself, i.e. who he *truly* is. Thanks to the lord's *upadeśa*, the hero will overcome his paralysis and will be prepared to act, having acquired resoluteness. As artfully staged in the BhG through these series of oppositions, Arjuna will emerge as the ideal king precisely because as a *bhakta* he is made to represent the ideal human being who, having surrendered to the sovereign of all creatures, will be granted his share of Kṛṣṇa's transcendent state.

Apparently Kṛṣṇa — who is as much a *kṣatriya* prince as he is the ultimate godhead, descended on earth as an *avatāra* for the pro-

seers (*ṛṣi*) who undertook asceticism at the Himālayan site of Badrīnāth. On the indissoluble couple of Nara and Nārāyaṇa, see Biardeau 1991: 75–108.

¹¹⁹ On the interplay of these opposite motifs in Indian literature, see Bloomfield 1916: 54–89. On laughing and crying, see Plessner 1970.

¹²⁰ Such opposition is reminiscent of the iconographic contrast between the two philosophers Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–370 BCE) and Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–475 BCE), the first being represented as laughing and the latter being represented as weeping. In his *De tranquillitate animi*, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) sides with Democritus affirming that 'laughing down life' (15.2) is the way through which humans can effectively distance themselves from the world and achieve cheerfulness (*euthymia*). Democritus' laughter is interpreted as revelatory of his serene wisdom, of his indifference towards the world and the vanity of human endeavors; see Ghisu 2006: 135–142.

¹²¹ As Sathya Sai Baba (2015: 65) remarked at the close of a speech he held in Nellore on July 25, 1958: 'Nara (man) and Narayana (God) are the two wires, the positive and the negative, which combine to bring electricity through. Nara will cooperate with Narayana and become the vehicle of divine power, if he has acquired the two qualities, *sathya* (truth) and *prema* (love).'

¹²² On the dialectical opposition (*Gegensatz*) between silence and the word, see Zucal 1999: 89–109.

tection of the good and the reestablishment of *dharma* (BhG 4.8) — exhibits what is the typical reaction of a warrior when someone fails to fulfill his martial duty. This is confirmed by the high frequency of the stock expressions *prahasann iva/hasann iva* in the epic, though not all such occurrences are intended to be derisory. Just to mention one example, when at 5.7.9b Duryodhana approaches Kṛṣṇa for asking him to be his ally in the war against the Pāṇḍavas, he introduces his speech by a hint of laughter which he does not intend to be in any way sarcastic or offensive.

In Indian literature, the mood of laughter (*hāsyarasa*) is said to be induced when a character acts contrary to his *svadharmā*: his behavior is laughable precisely because of its inappropriateness (*anaucitya*), as in Arjuna's case. In the world of the epic, such a misdemeanor is invariably regarded as shameful and therefore laughable¹²³ and conducive to disgrace (*akṛti*) and loss of social esteem, as Kṛṣṇa himself had already made apparent by derogatorily calling Arjuna a eunuch at 2.3 and as he further points out to him at 2.34–36:

Disgrace, too, will creatures
 Speak of thee, without end;
 And for one that has been esteemed, disgrace
 Is worse than death.
 That thou hast abstained from battle thru fear
 The (warriors) of great chariots will think of thee;
 And of whom thou wast highly regarded,

¹²³ On these issues, see Tschannerl 1992: 101–112. The laughter of Homeric heroes was also aggressive, charged with sarcasm. In ancient Greece the warriors' laughter was personified as a god, Γέλως, and the Spartans had erected a sanctuary to him which stood side by side to the ones dedicated to the personification of terror and the personification of death. On the warriors' laughter, see Tritle 2015: 117–134. In Hinduism, the warrior goddess Kālī laughs on the battlefield: her solitary laughter when everyone has been killed and everything has been destroyed makes her the embodiment of terror. For an introduction to Kālī, see McDaniel 2009: 587–604. One is also reminded of the transgressive laughter (*hasita*) of the adepts of the ancient movement of the Pāśupatas, in imitation of the 'laud laughter' (*aṭṭahāsa*) of their chosen deity Rudra ('Roarer,' 'Howler'), the wild and terrible form of Śiva; see *Pāśupatasūtra* 1.8. With his ghastly laughter, Rudra-Śiva breaks the shell of Brahmā's egg (*brahmāṇḍa*), i.e. transcends the limits of our finite universe; see *Kālabhairavāṣṭaka* 7. On the Pāśupatas' practice of courting dishonor, see Lorenzen 1972: 185–192; Ingalls 1962: 281–298.

Thou shalt come to be held lightly.
And many sayings that should not be said
Thy ill-wishers will say of thee,
Speaking ill of thy capacity:
What, pray, is more grievous than that?¹²⁴

Undoubtedly, what a warrior fears most is to be laughed at due to his supposed weakness.¹²⁵ Strength and manliness (*balapauruṣa*) are the sole values that count within a *kṣatriya* milieu, and Arjuna's crisis and last-minute appeals for peace cannot be deemed acceptable.

Thus at a *prima facie* level, the hint of laughter of Arjuna's charioteer appears to be mocking and derisory, a warrior's typical reaction towards another warrior's lack of courage. It might be argued that Kṛṣṇa's derisive laugh/smile has a pedagogical function, being intended to put Arjuna to shame so as to induce in him a reaction capable of triggering discriminative knowledge. Along these lines, Swami Swarupananda writes:

Smiling— to drown Arjuna in the ocean of shame. Krishna's smile at Arjuna's sorrow is like the lightning that plays over the black monsoon cloud. The rain bursts forth, and the thirsty earth is saturated. It is the smile of the coming illumination.¹²⁶

And yet at a more subtle level, Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter is the expression of his pure mirth and of something superhuman, being the sign of his divinity. His laughter/smile conveys a sense of joyful levity and relief, of unburdening and liberation. It indicates his benevolent sovereignty and transcendent detachment,¹²⁷ above and beyond *saṃsāric* circumstances though being constantly engaged in the protection of the good and the welfare of the world.

After all, laughing as well as smiling are constitutively ambivalent and ambiguous actions being as it were suspended at the

¹²⁴ Edgerton 1964: 12–13.

¹²⁵ See for instance Yudhiṣṭhira's predicament in MBh 5.70.75.

¹²⁶ Swami Swarupananda 1967: 34.

¹²⁷ Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter may be compared to the enigmatic smile of many statues of deities of ancient Greece which reflect their detachment and Olympian serenity.

fringe of reality: they ‘stand in between’ and are akin to a dream experience. The *iva* particle of our text, in its nuance of indefiniteness, reinforces the liminal character of Kṛṣṇa’s hint of laughter, which is at the same time human and divine. The Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1903–1989) noted long ago that laughter is a case of redirected activity, i.e. the transformation of an originally threatening movement — as for most animals is the opening of the mouth and the showing of the teeth, signaling the intention to bite — in a reassuring, peaceful gesture.¹²⁸

My contention is that *prahasann iva* is constitutively polysemic and that both understandings should be acknowledged, i.e. the hint of laughter as mock and the hint of laughter as mirth, given that Kṛṣṇa is *both* a prince, i.e. a warrior, *and* the supreme godhead. The poet of the BhG is deliberately playing with such polysemy, which reflects Kṛṣṇa’s unfathomable personality within the epic.¹²⁹ Though these understandings are mutually exclusive if taken in isolation, an almost imperceptible and yet decisive movement from one to the other may be inferred: the hint of laughter as ridicule of Kṛṣṇa the prince gives way to the sweetest expression of blissful grace of Kṛṣṇa the godhead, resort of all *bhaktas*.

Moreover, I am persuaded that given Arjuna’s surrender to Govinda as his *guru* and lord at the close of 2.7, *prahasann iva* rather than as an ‘ordinary’ mocking laugh/smile must be understood *in the first place* as a laugh/smile of pure grace and complacency on the latter’s part. Kṛṣṇa rejoices at Arjuna having finally sought refuge at his feet and promptly responds to his utter despondency through his benevolent gaze. The *upasargas pra* which primarily mean ‘forward’ of *pra-pannam* (2.7d) and *prahasann* (2.10b) subtly respond to one another, the former inevitably attracting the latter. The past passive participle *prapa-anna* (*pra* + √*pad*) literally means ‘to throw one’s self down [at a per-

¹²⁸ See Lorenz 1966: 172–173, 269, 284–287. And yet baring one’s teeth is not always a threat: in primates showing the teeth, especially if they are held together, is usually a sign of submission and the human smile may have evolved from that. In any given culture, the variety of smiles is due to the simple fact that there are many different ways and reasons for smiling; see <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170407-why-all-smiles-are-not-the-same>.

¹²⁹ On Kṛṣṇa’s enigmatic personality within the MBh, see Matilal 2002: 91–108.

son's feet], 'to go forwards,' 'to resort to,'¹³⁰ and it is precisely Arjuna's act of surrendering at Kṛṣṇa's feet, of moving forwards and resorting to him, that attracts the lord's positive response, i.e. his hint of laughter/smile towards him.

Though Arjuna's last words at 2.9 that he will not fight (*na yotsye*) evidence the hero's deluded stubbornness and inevitably attract Kṛṣṇa's irony — because of the patent contradiction between his discipleship on the one hand and his claimed independence on the other — such hint of sarcasm is nonetheless secondary with respect to the lord's all-forgiving hint of laughter/smile, given the new, transformative context of the sacred *guru-śiṣya* relation which has just been established. Kṛṣṇa's standing in front of Arjuna with a hint of laughter expresses the fullness of god's *prasāda* towards his *bhakta*. It is not a cynical laughter filled with contempt, since Govinda does not laugh *at* or *against* Arjuna. His is not a condescending or nasty grimace but rather a cheerful laughter of sympathy and encouragement,¹³¹ which welcomes the Pāṇḍava hero as his dear pupil and devotee: Govinda laughs/smiles *for* Arjuna, embracing him in the warmth of his love.¹³² Along these lines, Douglas Brooks observes:

Krishna's reply begins with the 'hint of a smile,' ... the signal of grace descending (*shakti-pāta*), and promises a radical transformation and awakening. This descent of grace comes from the highest, self-luminating reality and is refined in the awareness of the seeker who opens to its presence in her or his own thoughts (*vikalpa*).¹³³

¹³⁰ Monier-Williams 1988: 682.

¹³¹ As Swami B. V. Tripurari (2010: 40–41) observes: 'Kṛṣṇa smiles to encourage Arjuna. As Kṛṣṇa prepared to speak grave topics, he sought to make light of the situation that so overwhelmed Arjuna. The preceptor similarly makes light of the task at hand in the beginning by allowing us to believe that perfection is almost within our grasp, when in fact it may be lifetimes away... Viśvanātha Cakravartī comments that because Arjuna has at this point become Kṛṣṇa's disciple, Kṛṣṇa merely smiles and refrains from chiding him as he did earlier.'

¹³² In his commentary to BhG 2.10, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1963: 102) writes: 'The smile indicates that he [= Kṛṣṇa] saw through Arjuna's attempt at rationalization or what is now known as wishful thinking. The attitude of the saviour God who knows all the sins and sorrows of suffering humanity is one of tender pity and wistful understanding.'

¹³³ Brooks 2008: 47.

Swami Chidbhavananda's commentary is also worth quoting:

Significant is the smile beaming on the lips of Hrishikesa. As the dawn is the harbinger of day-break, the Lord's smile forecasts the *yoga* and the spiritual enlightenment that are to come on Arjuna. It was *Preyas* [= the gratifying] that he had been receiving till now. What he is going to receive forthwith is *Sreyas* [= the good], the sovereign remedy for all the evils of the mundane existence. It is the inviolable means for the attainment of Beatitude. There is nothing greater than *Sreyas* for man to seek. Existence finds fulfillment in It. Arjuna is going to be initiated into It. Hence this divine smile on the lips of the Lord.¹³⁴

As noted, Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter is the connecting point between the hero's distressed silence and the lord's word of grace, the pivotal moment which immediately precedes the deliverance of the divine teaching. The smile of the *guru* towards his disciple(s) marking the effusion of his *upadeśa* — be it through silence or through the medium of speech — has a long-standing tradition in Indian religions: one is reminded of the Buddha and of Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and, within the Hindu milieu, of the figure of Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti, who is said to convey the truth of Vedānta through his eloquent silence.¹³⁵ Just to offer one example, I here quote two beautiful verses taken from the *Dakṣiṇāmūrti-stotra* attributed to Śaṅkara:

I have contemplated Him, the One who is rich of inexhaustible
compassion,
The Primeval Teacher seated at the root of the Banyan tree,
Who through His silence adorned of His gentle smile
Vanquishes the darkness of ignorance for the multitude of the
great seers.

....

¹³⁴ Swami Chidbhavananda 1972: 127–128.

¹³⁵ On the Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti icon and its resemblance to the iconography of the enlightened Buddha, see Geetha 2012: 74–85; Gail 2008: 457–462; Bakker 2001: 41–53. On silence and its eloquence, see Rigopoulos 2015: 101–117. As the South Indian mystic Ramaṇa Maharṣi (1879–1959) once wrote: 'Silence, the universal language, which always springs out from the heart, is the state of grace' (Sri Ramana Maharshi 2012: 157, my translation).

I bow to the Teacher of Teachers who, by inclining His gaze,
From the corner of His eye discharges
The waves of nectar of His boundless compassion
On the ascetics who are worn-out by the sultriness of the
desert of rebirths.¹³⁶

Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter shatters Arjuna's bewildered silence and anticipates the dissolution of the hero's mortal anguish: in fact, it is the definite cure to Arjuna's 'disease' caused by *sōka* and *moha*. More to the point, it signals the theological truth that Govinda has *already* dissolved his negative condition, even before the pouring forth of the nectar of his words. His hint of laughter is the expression of the gushing out of his superabundant grace, which eradicates the disciple's doubts¹³⁷ and vanquishes the numbness of his mind and body.

Theologically, the prefix *pra* can indeed be interpreted as meaning 'supreme'/'excellent,' pointing at the spiritual dimension of Kṛṣṇa's hint of laughter. A reason that supports such interpretation is the implied body language of the two protagonists: whereas Arjuna's posture as a *prapanna* entails that he has thrown himself down at his lord's feet, Kṛṣṇa the *guru* stands up facing his disciple and illumining him with a hint of laughter which 'comes from above' and is indicative of his otherworldly eminence.¹³⁸ Arjuna awaits everything from Kṛṣṇa, with his eyes fixed upon him as his last resort — concentrating his attention on Kṛṣṇa's feet, they being the receptacle of divine power and grace¹³⁹ — and the

¹³⁶ *Śrīśāmkaragranthāvalīh, samputāh* 11, 1972: 257–258 (my translation). In Medieval Europe, a parallel is represented by the 'compassionate eyes' (*miseri-cordes oculi*) of the Virgin Mary, the 'Gracious Queen.'

¹³⁷ Doubts (*saṁśaya, saṁdeha*) must be dissolved since they confuse the mind and paralyze action. Given two or more alternatives, the wise must exercise thorough discrimination (*viveka*) in order to establish what is right and what is wrong and decide his/her course of action.

¹³⁸ On these issues, see Prentiss 2000.

¹³⁹ The sacredness of the *guru*'s feet is sung in countless devotional hymns, past and present, as in this beautiful incipit: *mānasabhajare guru caraṇam | dustarabhasāgaratarāṇam |* 'Worship in thy mind the guru's feet: [these alone] carry over the ocean of existence, hard to overcome.' *Gurugītā* 76b solemnly proclaims: *pūjāmūlam guruḥ padam*, 'The root of worship is the foot of the guru.' To Śaṅkara is attributed a hymn of eight verses in praise of the guru's lotus feet (*guror aṅghripadme*), the *Gurvaṣṭaka*; see Mahadevan 1970: 28–35.

lord bountifully turns his beaming countenance towards him and gives him peace, filling the hero's emptiness with his luminous gaze which annihilates all sins. It is the sacred moment of *darśana*, the transformative experience of seeing the divine person and, most importantly, of being seen by him.¹⁴⁰

Arjuna's surrender to the lord entails his 'falling like a stick, with the eight limbs of his body touching the ground' (*sāṣṭāṅga daṇḍavat*; forehead, chest, palms, knees, and feet): love of god and fear of god are perfectly integrated in the all-important act of prostration, the *praṇipāta* or *namah*.¹⁴¹ On his part Kṛṣṇa, standing upright, through the first, imperceptible opening of his mouth in laughter/smile asserts his *saṃkalpa*, i.e. his 'intention' of love towards his *bhakta*. And through the expansion of his facial muscles, the lord radiates and pours down on Arjuna his invigorating, pure *preman*.¹⁴² Thus Arjuna's devout attitude as a *pra-panna* inevitably attracts Kṛṣṇa's graceful hint of laughter, his *pra-hasan*, the call of love being irresistible. The *prahasann iva* abolishes all hierarchies and signals the bond of intimacy between the two that characterizes their relation throughout the BhG. Even at the beginning of chapter 4, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that he will teach him his ancient (*purātana*) yoga precisely because he is his loyal devotee and comrade (*bhakto 'si me sakhā ca*; 4.3c). This bond of love is truly 'the highest secret' (*rahasyam uttamam*; 4.3d) and such relation between *guru* and *śiṣya* will find its culmination in chapter 11 when the lord will grace his devotee with the vision of his univer-

¹⁴⁰ See Valpey 2010: 380–394.

¹⁴¹ A disciple must always approach the guru by reverently prostrating himself/herself to him. As Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna in BhG 4.34:

Learn to know this (*tad = jñāna*) by obeisance (*praṇipātena*) (to those who can teach it),

By questioning (them), by serving (them);

They will teach thee knowledge (*jñānam*),

Those who have knowledge, who see the truth.

(Edgerton 1964: 26)

¹⁴² As Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) wrote to Swami Brahmananda (1863–1922) in 1895: 'All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. He who loves lives, he who is selfish is dying. Therefore love for love's sake, because it is the only law of life, just as you breathe to live. This is the secret of selfless love, selfless action, and the rest' (https://www.vivekananda.net/KnownLetters/1895_96NewYork.html).

sal form.¹⁴³ Indeed, after having had this astonishing revelation Arjuna praises Kṛṣṇa as the father of the world (*pitā'si lokasya*) and the most venerable *guru* (*tvam asya pūjyaś ca gurur gaṛṅyān*) whose greatness is matchless. He then asks Kṛṣṇa to please forgive him if in the past he treated him lightly, as if he was just his comrade and friend (11.42–43). In particular, at 11.42 Arjuna says:

And if I treated Thee disrespectfully, to make sport of Thee
(*avahāsārtham*),
In the course of amusement, resting, sitting or eating,
Either alone, O unshaken one (*acyuta*), or in the presence
of those others,
For that I beg forgiveness of Thee, the immeasurable one.¹⁴⁴

Herein the noun *avahāsa*, 'jest'/'joke,' 'derision,' is derived from *ava* + √*has* meaning 'to laugh at'/'deride.'¹⁴⁵ Remarkably, it is the only other occurrence in the whole poem besides *prahasann* at 2.10b of a term derived from verbal root √*has*. The compound *avahāsārtham*, which Edgerton translates 'to make sport,' can be more appropriately rendered 'with jesting'/'deriding purpose,' 'by way of a joke.' As a prefix to verbs, *ava* — literally 'down,' 'off' —¹⁴⁶ can be used to express disrespect and depreciation.¹⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that Arjuna begs Kṛṣṇa to forgive him if in the past he 'put him down' and treated him disrespectfully (*asatkṛta*): here the *upasarga ava* is meant to draw attention to the sin of irreverence verging on blasphemy, which the hero and all humans are prone to commit through their frivolous attitudes and humorous language. The prefix *ava* of *avahāsārtham* — entailing inferiority/horizontality, i.e. humanity — stands in complementary opposition to the prefix *pra* of *prahasann iva* — entailing superiority/verticality, i.e. divinity. My suggestion is that Kṛṣṇa's *pra* + √*has* at 2.10b and Arjuna's *ava* + √*has* at 11.42a are an interrelated pair, mirroring two opposite and yet corresponding modes of expres-

¹⁴³ On divine visions in the MBh, see Laine 1989.

¹⁴⁴ Edgerton 1964: 59.

¹⁴⁵ Monier-Williams 1988: 106.

¹⁴⁶ See Whitney 1987: 396; Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 2002: 148.

¹⁴⁷ See Apte 1986: 238.

sion of laugh/jest, the first being sublimely divine and the second being all too human. Such contrastive wordplay is not casual but consciously aimed at by the poet of the BhG.

With regard to the hero's supplicant words to his guru-god, Hildebeitel remarks:

Friendship (*sakhyam*) is thus a suitable relationship for understanding Krishna's dharmic role, but, as Arjuna says, it is not adequate to carry the devotional appreciation of Krishna in his universal form. Thus, after the theophany, Arjuna apologizes for his earlier familiarity with Krishna, that is, as he puts it, for:

'Whatever I said rashly, thinking Thee my boon companion (*sakhe 'ti matvā*), calling Thee "Kṛṣṇa, Yādava, Companion (*sakhe*)!"' (11.41)

Arjuna is, of course, forgiven his familiarities, and he stands as the exemplar of both of these relationships to Krishna: those of *sakhi* and *bhakta*, the former implying a variety of social and dharmic relations, the latter a means to salvation.¹⁴⁸

Hildebeitel's authority notwithstanding, I think that his statement needs to be corrected. As Malinar notes: 'Well-established social relationships of kinship (father-son), friendship/comradeship (*sakha*) and love (*priya*) are now placed within the religious framework of *bhakti*.'¹⁴⁹ In such framework, friendship is regarded as one of the highest forms of devotion given that *sakhya* is the penultimate, eighth limb of the 'nine limbs' (*navāṅgāni*) of *bhakti* which culminate in self-surrender, i.e. *ātmanivedana*, which is a synonym of *prapatti* (see *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 7.5.23).¹⁵⁰ Therefore, that Arjuna's intimacy and comradeship with Kṛṣṇa — which is extolled as the paradigm of *sakhya*¹⁵¹ — resulted in his falling at the latter's feet must be appreciated as the hero's final, crowning achievement along the *bhakti* path (*mārga*).¹⁵² This is the reason

¹⁴⁸ Hildebeitel 1990: 258.

¹⁴⁹ Malinar 2007: 184.

¹⁵⁰ See Rigopoulos 2005: 204–206. On *bhakti* in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, see Gail 1969.

¹⁵¹ The noun *sakhi* ('friend,' 'companion') occurs in BhG 1.26d, 4.3c, 11.41ab, 11.44c.

¹⁵² In commenting upon *prahasann iva*, Swami B. V. Tripurari (2010: 40) notes: 'Kṛṣṇa's smile further indicates his affection for Arjuna, who remains his

why Kṛṣṇa gazes at Arjuna with tenderness, since by completely surrendering himself to his lord he has done *the one* right thing, which solely counts.

It should be noted that the epithet *acyuta* ('imperishable'/'unshaken'/'changeless') with which Arjuna acknowledges Kṛṣṇa's divinity at 11.42c, had been used by the hero at the beginning of the poem, i.e. at BhG 1.21d, when he had asked Hṛṣīkeśa to halt the chariot between the two armies. This name is meant to hint that Arjuna was all along aware of Kṛṣṇa's divine nature, though his comradeship with him had brought him to forget such truth as he was misled by the *avatāra*'s humanity, i.e. the veil of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*.¹⁵³ Besides 1.21d and 11.42c, *acyuta* is used a third time at the end of the poem, at 18.73b, when Arjuna pronounces his last, solemn words:

Destroyed the confusion; attention (to the truth) is won,
By Thy grace, on my part, O Changeless One (*acyuta*);
I stand firm, with doubts dispersed;
I shall do Thy word.¹⁵⁴

The curling of the god's lips, the corners of his mouth turned up, and the glimpse of his glimmering teeth are for Arjuna as well as for all *bhaktas* the sure sign of the lord's benign favor. Such benevolent *darśana* of Kṛṣṇa's mouth and teeth coexists with the wrathful vision of the god's mouth and terrible tusks (*daṁṣṭrākarāla*) in the theophany of chapter 11 (in particular 11.23, 11.25, and 11.27). Indeed, ultimately Kṛṣṇa is the supreme godhead who is responsible for the manifestation, preservation, and annihilation of all beings. But leaving aside the god's cosmic form and his destructive function as the personification of time/death (*kāla*), the *darśana* of Kṛṣṇa's laughter/smile is thought to be so captivating — his teeth being compared to the buds of jasmine flowers, reflecting

friend even as he becomes his disciple. In the Gauḍīya tradition, the disciple sees the *guru* as a dear-most friend. The *guru* teaches the disciple like a friendly elder. Here Kṛṣṇa's smile indicates the union of friendship and servitude that characterizes Arjuna's love for him.'

¹⁵³ See Piano 1994: 89, n. 21c. If *acyuta* is a well-known epithet of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, in the epic it is also the epithet of great warriors such as Yudhiṣṭhira.

¹⁵⁴ Edgerton 1964: 91.

the splendor of his rosy lips — that his *bhaktas* are advised to constantly contemplate such sheer beauty within their hearts. Once again, the act of seeing plays a key function being the way through which the god's grace is effectively conveyed.

Through his hint of laughter Kṛṣṇa challenges Arjuna's entanglement to the world by calling attention to what solely is, i.e. the *ātman*. The lord's laughter exhibits his pure joy (*ānanda*) and blissful equanimity,¹⁵⁵ his *līlā* or playful attitude towards existence that subverts mundane preoccupations and ordinary, well-established patterns of thought.¹⁵⁶ As Swami Mukundananda notes: 'In sharp contrast to Arjuna's words of lamentation, Shree Krishna smiled, displaying that the situation was not making him despair; rather he was perfectly happy with it. Such is the equanimous attitude exhibited by someone with knowledge in all situations.'¹⁵⁷

Kṛṣṇa laughs also because he knows beforehand that his *bhakta* will assuredly reach him: then Arjuna's hair will stand on end not anymore due to the despondency/grief born out of ignorance (1.29c) but as the unmistakable sign that he has realized Kṛṣṇa's true identity. This is testified by the hero's reaction at BhG 11.14, after witnessing his lord's cosmic form, in which he is depicted in the typical position of a devoted disciple worshipping his chosen deity:

Then filled with amazement (*vismayāviṣṭo*),
His hair standing upright (*hṛṣṭaromā*), Dhanamjaya¹⁵⁸
Bowed with his head (*praṇamya śīrasā*) to the God,
And said with a gesture of reverence (*kṛtāñjalīn*):¹⁵⁹

While the hero's crisis was originally determined by his sentiment of pity, its solution is now represented by another overwhelming emotion, i.e. awe at the sight of Kṛṣṇa's theophany.¹⁶⁰ Nothing but

¹⁵⁵ Which is reminiscent of the perfect joy exalted by Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226), the *ioculator Domini*; see Benedetti 2019: 29–40.

¹⁵⁶ On these issues, see Narayan 1989: 181–182.

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/2/verse/10>.

¹⁵⁸ A name for Arjuna, meaning 'the wealth-conqueror.'

¹⁵⁹ Edgerton 1964: 56.

¹⁶⁰ On this glorious manifestation of the divine as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, see the classic study of Otto 1950.

bhakti can secure such otherworldly vision, as the lord proclaims at 11.54:

But by unswerving devotion (*bhaktiyā tv anyanyā*) can
I in such a guise, Arjuna,
Be known and seen in very truth,
And entered into, scorcher of the foe.¹⁶¹

Devotion is therefore indispensable. Arjuna alone was granted the privilege of seeing the lord's cosmic form, precisely because *bhaktiyoga* (14.26) is the most excellent type of discipline an adept can resort to. Eventually, by realizing Kṛṣṇa as the highest godhead one goes beyond virtue and vice, beyond *dharmas* of all kind. Along these lines BhG 18.66, the so-called *caramasloka* or ultimate verse, declares:

Abandoning all other duties (*sarvadharmān*),
Go to Me as thy sole refuge (*śaraṇa*);
From all evils I thee
Shall rescue: be not grieved!¹⁶²

Arjuna's original conflict between *kuladharmā* and *kṣatriyadharmā* which led to his tragic breakdown and impasse has been definitely superseded by his loyalty to the lord of the universe who abides in the heart of each and every one (*sarvasya cāhaṃ hṛdi samniviṣṭo*, BhG 15.15a) as their inner controller (*antaryāmin*). The complete surrender of body, mind, and all possessions to the guru-god is the acme of *bhakti*,¹⁶³ after which nothing else is needed: all duties drop away just as a flower drops off as soon as its fruit appears.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Edgerton 1964: 61.

¹⁶² Edgerton 1964: 90. See also Malinar 2007: 222. On Śaṅkara's commentary on this verse, see Marchignoli 2018: 233–235, 355–356.

¹⁶³ Significantly, in Śrī Vaiṣṇava circles the theology of *prapatti* is understood as a development of BhG 18.66.

¹⁶⁴ As per the insightful comment made by saint Ramakrishna (1836–1886) in Gupta 1942: 406.

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