

ALTERITY, ART, AND THE LANGUAGE
OF THE SOUL

Fire cannot burn the soul,
Weapons cannot cleave the soul,
Water cannot drench the soul,
Wind cannot dry the soul.

—*Bhagavad Gita*

This poetic text, taken from the heart of Vedic scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, represents a dialogue between Sri Krishna and his friend, kinsman, and disciple Arjuna. The scene is the neutral ground between two armies drawn up to fight in an epic battle that will decide the fate of the world. Although Arjuna has Krishna's assurance that he is fighting on the right side, the side of light and progress, the issue is far from being clear-cut. Friend will be fighting friend, family against family, many of them honour-bound by allegiances beyond the larger issues at stake. Because of his ties to both sides Krishna, who is a great warrior, has declared he will not take part in the fighting, but has accepted a role as Arjuna's charioteer, thus formally remaining neutral whilst revealing where his support lies.

In the still tension before the fighting starts, they have driven out together to survey the lines of battle. There between the armies, at seeing the enormity of the task before him, and at the thought of the terrible slaughter that is bound to ensue, in which he must disregard ties of family and friendship and slay or be slain in combat with many he has known and respected all his life, Arjuna breaks down. He cannot bring himself to countenance what is about to take place, nor find the will to fight.

Krishna rebukes him gently, reminding him of his station, and then offers his friend wisdom and insight into the real nature of birth, life and death. Krishna encourages him with the certain knowledge that if he performs his duty without attachment, he need not fear, whatever the result. If he surrenders his actions to the will of the Supreme Being, the source of everything that is, then all will be well.

For the soul, says Krishna, does not perish with the body, nor is the good man forsaken, in this life or in the next.

The words used by Krishna to express the existence of the soul do not describe or define what the soul is: there are many passages in Vedic scripture that do so, usually in terms approaching the apodictic and apophanic. In this instance Krishna alludes to the soul's nature by saying what it is not. Fire cannot burn it, weapons cut it, wind dry it, nor water drench it. The soul is not material. It is immortal. It is immortal, says Krishna, because it remains unborn, and what has not been born cannot die.

THE LIMITS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The principle of a transcendent is intrinsic to metaphysics. Metaphysics is in turn intrinsic to language. As soon as we speak about 'the world' we are speaking metaphysically: in naming the world we signify something that is too vast to be grasped physically. We are bodily in touch with the world immediately surrounding us, but it is impossible to comprehend the 'whole world' other than as a concept. It cannot be grasped subjectively by the senses: it can only be comprehended by the mind through a concept. Its physical reality is never present to the subject in the concept, and can only be presented by the concept to the imagination. The world, and here I am speaking of the 'world' figuratively, is first apprehended by the senses, and then interpreted through the mind, the intellect, and the imagination.

If we take all of these to be embodied, then the idea of the physical world as an entity separate from ourselves becomes questionable. Can it be rationalised, objectified, and represented in the way we imagine a photograph presents the real world? (Deleuze noted, for example, that even the most stringent efforts of *Cinéma Verité*, using hand-held cameras and non-actors, failed to capture the 'real' or truly objective world). Is objective reality a radical and concrete existence quite apart from and independent of human perception (a material *substratum*, the notion of which Berkeley saw as 'repugnant, and altogether inconceivable'¹)? Or is there, as Merleau-Ponty suggested, an ambiguity in the definition and separation of self and the world, subject and object, body and mind?

It is problematic to establish an exact objective truth of anything that is present in and to perception, because that perception is affected by human intentionality, and as Husserl has shown, only by allowing for inter-subjectivity, can we arrive at a general definition of truth. Even the most rigorous positivist analyses are in the end subject to human perception, a human agency. Thus the mind that seeks to be objective will always depend