

A NEW APPROACH TO THE VEDAS

AN ESSAY IN
TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS

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THREE VEDIC HYMNS

The Vedas, as we possess them, embody a tradition of immemorial antiquity, already locally developed in characteristic idioms, but by no means original or exclusive to themselves: Veda antedates the Vedas. However, it is not so much intended here to stress this argument, as to point out that there is little or nothing in the metaphysics of the Upaniṣads that necessarily implies a "progress" with respect to the older Vedic books. The "three Vedas" are primarily concerned with "Works" (*karma*, *yajña*) and with "Genesis" (*bhāva-vṛtta*, *Bṛhad Devatā*, II, 120⁹³; perhaps also *jāta vidyā*, *Rg Veda*, X, 71, 11, and *Nirukta*, I, 8): exegetical matter, such as appears abundantly in the Atharva Veda, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads, and *nirukta* generally, is included amongst the Vedic liturgies only as it were by accident and incidentally. That the language of the Upaniṣads is less archaic than that of the three Vedas proves only a late publication of the traditional exegesis, but in no way proves, nor even suggests to those who recognize the consistency of one tradition in the Vedas and Upaniṣads, that the essential doctrines of the latter had not "always" been taught to those possessed of the necessary qualifications.⁹⁴ This would fully accord with the traditional interpretation of "Upaniṣad" as "secret doctrine" or "mystery," *rahasya*, without contradicting the traditional connotation "doctrine with respect to Brahman." In any case, the history of tradition, and the history of literature, are two different things; and that is especially true in India,

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where even at the present day it is felt that none but a living teacher can communicate ultimate truth.

Furthermore, that is an erroneous view which describes the "beginnings" of Indian "philosophy" as a process of "syncretic" thought, as a "tendency to see that all the angels are really One." On the contrary, Vedic "mythology" as we possess it represents an already "late" and sophisticated stage in the history of symbolism, an employment of increasingly diverse similitudes and images, and of new-found essential names and epithets, accompanied by a tendency towards a conception of these names as those of independent powers, so that a superficial aspect of polytheism is brought about, of the same sort as that which can be recognized in Christianity when it is said with respect to the Trinity, "We do not say *the only God*, for deity is common to several," St. Thomas, *Sum. Th.*, I, Q. 31, A. 2⁹⁵. These elaborations may be regarded from some points of view as a progress in theological science, but from that point of view which takes into consideration that "the angels have fewer ideas and use less means than men," and holds that in a single seeing and in one idea "He" beholds himself and all things simultaneously, and accordingly that with the knowledge of That One "this entire universe becomes known," *Mundaka Up.*, I, 1, 3, rather as a decline. In reality, the notion of a progress or decline is out of place, an absolute progress or decline being no more conceivable in metaphysics than in art: the thing known can only be in the knower according to the mode of the knower,⁹⁶ and that is why under changed conditions alternative-formulations (*paryāya*) necessarily present themselves; each of these, in so far as it is "correct," and not in the measure of its complexity or simplicity, expressing one and the same truth. All that concerns the historian of style, rather than the expositor of the meaning of meanings, *paramārtha*: it is precisely with respect to that ultimate significance that *ya evam*

vidvān might have been said at any time, and not for the first time when the Upaniṣads were finally "published." A single illustration of this may be cited in the equivalence of Varuṇa, Brahmā-Prajāpati, Viśvakarma, and Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu, which can be demonstrated easily from many points of view (cf. *Yakṣas*, II, p. 36). That the Vedic *kavi*⁷ was in fact *vidvān* is shown by such well-known assertions as that "The priests speak in divers ways of that which is but one: they call it Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan . . ." *Rg Veda*, I, 164, 46; "Priests and singers make manifold the (Sun-) bird that is unique," *ibid.*, X, 114, 5; or when Aditi or Prajāpati are identified with all that is, *ibid.*, I, 89, 10, and X, 121. The ideas and often the actual locutions of the Upaniṣads are to be found in the Vedas, e.g., VI, 16, 35, *yastā vijānat*, equivalent to *ya evam vidvān*; and even more striking, V, 46, 1, *na asyāḥ vaśmi vimucaṁ na āvṛttam punaḥ, vidvān pathaḥ puraḥ' etā ṛju neśati*, "I covet neither deliverance nor a coming back again, may He that is waywise be my guide and lead me straight," where *punar āvṛttam* can hardly be otherwise understood than in the "later" literature.

A translation of the famous *bhāva vṛtta*, or "Creation hymn," *Rg Veda*, X, 129, now follows:

Rg Veda, X, 129

"Non-existence (*asat*) then was not, nor Existence (*sat*); neither Firmament (*rajas*), nor Empyrean (*vyoman*) there beyond:

What covered o'er all (*āvarīvar*) and where, or what was *any* resting-place (*śarman*)? What were the Waters (*ambhaḥ*)? Fathomless abyss (*gahanam garibhīram*). 1.

Then was neither death (*mṛtyu*) nor life (*amṛta*), nor any fetch (*praketa*) of night or day:

That One breathed (*ānīt*) breathless (*avāta*) by intrinsic-power (*svadhā*), none other was, nor aught there-beyond. 2.

In the beginning (*agre*), Dark-Inert (*tamas*) was hid (*gūḷha*) by Dark-Inert (*tamas*). This all was fluid (*salila*), indeterminate (*aparaketa*):

Void (*tucchi*) by void (*ābhu*) was overlaid (*apihita*): That One was born (*ajāyat*) by the all-might (*mahi*) of intension (*tapas*). 3.

In the beginning, Will (*kāma*) arose (*samavartat*) therein, the primal seed (*retas*) of Intellect (*manas*), that was the first:

Searching the heart (*hr̥d*) thoroughly by thought (*manīṣā*) wise-singers (*kavayaḥ*) found there the kin (*bandhu*) of Existence (*sat*) in the Non-existent (*asat*). 4.

What trace was stretched across below, and what above?

Seed (*retas*) was, Allmight (*mahimānaḥ*) was; Intrinsic-power (*svadhā*) below, Purpose (*prayati*) above. 5.

Who knows it aright? who can here set it forth? Whence was it born (*ājātā*), whence poured forth (*visṛṣṭiḥ*)

These Angels (*devāḥ*) are from its pouring-forth (*visarjana*), whence then it came-to-be (*ābabhūva*), who knows?

Whence outpoured (*visṛṣṭiḥ*) this came to be (*ābabhūva*), or whether one appointed (*dadhe*) it or not,

He who is Over-Eye (*adhyakṣa*) thereof in uttermost Empyrean (*vyoman*), he knows indeed, or knoweth not. 7.

That is what is called a "late" hymn: from our present point of view it suffices that it antedates the earliest Upaniṣads by some centuries. A likeness to Upaniṣadic texts generally, and to our *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, I, 2, 1, and *Maitri Up.*, V, 2, in particular will be noticed at a glance. This similarity is partly one of verbal identity (*agre, sat, asat, tamas, salila, tapas, kāma, retas, manas, hṛd, tad-eka, ānīt = prāṇiti, vāta = vāyu, avāta = nirvāta, viśṣṭi, visarjana, etc.*), partly of verbal sense (*ambhaḥ, salila = āpah, tapasaḥ-mahi = tejas, svadhā = māyā, śaktī, svabhāva*),⁹⁸ and partly of total statement. *Bandhu* (= *sajāta*) "kin" as of blood relationship, is an exceedingly well-found expression for the "opposite relation" of Existence to the Non-existent, God to Godhead, Essence to Nature⁹⁹; as also in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, I, 1, 2. As for *rajas*, granted that no more is here directly implied than "firmament" or "space," and that the Sāṅkhya as a formulated system is of later publication,¹⁰⁰ it still remains significant that in our hymn (not to speak of other Vedic sources) we have a trinity of terms (*tamas, rajas, and tapasaḥ-mahi = tejas = sattva*)¹⁰¹ employed in their correct factorial (*gaṇa*) senses to denote the principles of passivity, movement, and essentiality, "later" represented by the three *guṇas* more explicitly, and by the corresponding Trinity of Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and Śiva. By the "primal seed of Intellect," I understand rather "intellectual virility," "creative intellect," than the *source* of Intellect: cf. *Rg Veda* X, 71, 2, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, I, 5, 7, and similar passages, where Intellect (*manas*) is the fecundating power that begets upon Utterance or Wisdom (*vāc*). *Amyta*, in the second stanza, is not "immortality," but

simply life; continued existence, as in *Rg Veda*, VII, 57, 6, and equivalent to *dīrghamāyuh* in X, 85, 19; the sense is "neither birth nor death as yet were."

That "He breathes without air" (*avāta*, cf. later *nirvāna*, "despiration") is a profound and significant expression, implying all the correlative of motion without local movement, and the like, which may be properly enunciated of the First Principle, "for (only) where there is a duality, as it were" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, IV, 5, 15) could it be otherwise. The thought is taken up and further developed in several passages of the Upaniṣads, particularly the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, as quoted above, p. 46, *Kena Up.*, I, 8, "Know that as Brahman which breathes (*prāṇiti*) without breath (*na . . . prāṇena*) yet by whom breath (*prāṇa*) is breathed (*prāṇīyate*)", *Muṇḍaka Up.*, II, 1, 2, and 3, where That from which Intellect (*manas*) and Spiritus (*prāṇa*) are born (*jāyate*) is Itself imageless (*amūrta*), un-intelligent (*amanassa*), de-spirited (*apṛāṇa*), and *Taittirīya Up.*, II, 7, where That without which none might breathe (*prāṇīyāt*) is Self-less (*anātmya*), indiscriminate (*anirukta*), placeless (*anilayana*).

"By intrinsic power" (*svadhā*): cf. *Rg Veda*, IV, 13, 5, "by what intrinsic-power (*svadhā*) does he move?" and the answer in I, 144, 2, "When he (as Fire) dwelt diffused in the womb of the Waters (*apāmṛpasthe*), thence got he (*adhayat*) the intrinsic powers (*svadhāḥ*) whereby he proceeds (*īyate*)": the Waters, *nirguṇa*-Brahman, unconscious Godhead, being as explained above, the source of all omnipotence (*mahimānaḥ*) and facility (*kausalya*). Essence being impotent (*stari*) apart from nature; nature being power (*śakti*) and magic (*māyā*), means whereby anything is done.¹⁰² Cf. *Bhagavad Gītā*, IV, 6, "I am born by my own power," where *ātma-māyayā* is clearly the same as *sva-dhayā*, cf. *māyayā* in *Rg Veda*, IX, 73, 5 and 9.

"That One" is clearly here not an existence, for

as we have seen, his mode is modeless, in that he breathes without breath: a similar conception is met with in *Rg Veda*, I, 164, 4, where That "which supports Him who is by way of being the first born embodiment," *prathamam jāya-mānam-asthanvantam . . . vibharti*, is itself "bodiless," or more literally, "boneless," *anasthā*, that is to say, "structureless." "That" is not yet "Selfed" (*ātmanvī*)—"before creatures were, God was not God, albeit he was Godhead," Eckhart, I, 410. *Tamas* (as in *Maitri Up.*, V. 2), *apraketa salila*, *gahanam gambhīra*, etc., are all terms naturally designating the undifferentiated, unintelligible Godhead, "which is as though it were not," Eckhart, I, 381: *asat*, non-existent, *gūḥya*, hidden, there where "darkness reigns in the unknown known unity," Eckhart, I, 368, Cf. p. 6 and Note 21.

"What covered o'er?" That is, what and where was the world? *āvarīvar* being from *varī*, intensive reduplicated form of *vṛ*, "to cover," "veil." The world is thought of as veiling the ultimate reality, cf. *Rg Veda*, V, 19, 1, "state after state is generated, veil (*vavri*) from veil appears," hence also the prayer, *Maitri Up.*, VI, 35, with respect to the Sun, "That face do thou unveil (*apāvṛṇu*)" or "That door do thou open."

Our hymn is by no means necessarily an expression of scepticism: it is rather wonder than a wondering that is suggested. "Who knows" is no more "sceptical" than Kabīr's *tāsukā soi santa jānai*, "who are the Comprehensors thereof?" or Blake's "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" "He knows or knows not," if understood to mean "he knows *and* knows not" would be sound theology. In the last stanza, alternative theories of "emanation" and of "creation by design" are propounded.¹⁰³ In any case, the very form of the various statements and questions proves that sound ontological speculation was by no means a new thing, for it is inconceivable that such questions had been correctly

formulated just a week or year before this particular hymn was published.

Not only are the terms and implications of our hymn all formally correct (*pramiti*), they tally also in form and content with those of the Upaniṣads. Yet we are asked to believe that Vedic thought was "primitive"¹⁰⁴—that the wise-singers of the Vedic hymns were able to express themselves in terms that have been universally employed elsewhere and otherwhen with a deep and known significance, and all without knowing what it was they said. It is as though it were argued that the law of gravity had been hit upon by lucky chance, long before anyone had consciously observed that heavy objects have a tendency to fall. Surely our faith in uniformity forbids us to imagine, what is outside the range of our experience, viz., that any sound formula, any clear statement of principles, could have been propounded by anyone who did not understand his own words.¹⁰⁵ It would be far easier to suppose that such a statement had been propounded in the past by those who knew what they were saying, and that it had since come to be repeated mechanically without understanding: but on the one hand, that would be to push the beginnings of wisdom too far back for the comfort of those who fondly believe that wisdom came into the world only in their own day, and on the other would need proof by some internal evidence of the presumed misunderstanding. I prefer to believe that wherever and whenever a proposition has been correctly and intelligibly stated (and that covers both verbal and visual symbolisms, both "scripture" and "art") the proposition was also understood. Problems of ontology are not so simple that they can be solved by "luck" or "inspiration": on the contrary there is no sort of work more arduous than "audition," and here a man has need of all the power of the pure intellect.

A version now follows of another hymn of creation, *Rg Veda*, X, 72: