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-vyṛta, Byhad Devatā, II, 120⁸; perhaps also jāta vidyā, Ṛg Veda, X, 71, 11, and Nirukta, I, 8): exegetical matter, such as appears abundantly in the Atharva Veda, Brahmaṇas, Upaniṣads, and niruktā 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.⁸⁴ This would fully accord with the traditional interpretation of "Upaṇiṣad" 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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vidvän might have been said at any time, and not for the first time when the Upanishads were finally “published.” A single illustration of this may be cited in the equivalence of Varuṇa, Brahmā-Prajāpati, Viśvakarma, and Nārāyana-Viṣṇu, which can be demonstrated easily from many points of view (cf. Yakṣas, II, p. 36). That the Vedic kauśt was in fact vidvän 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, Mātarīśvan . . .” 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 Upanishads are to be found in the Vedas, e.g., VI, 16, 35, yastā vijānat, equivalent to ya evam vidvän; and even more striking, V, 46, 1, na asyāh vaśmi vimucam na ārvitam punah, vidvän paṭhaḥ punah’ etā ṇju neśati, “I covet neither deliverance nor a coming back again, may He that is waywise be my guide and lead me straight,” where punar ārvitam 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 Em-pyrean (vyoman) there beyond:
What covered o’er all (dvarīvar) and where, or what was any resting-place (sarman)? What were the Waters (ambhaḥ)? Fathomless abyss (gahanam guṇabhīram). 1.
Then was neither death (mṛtyu) nor life (āmrta), nor any fetch (aprakta) of night or day:

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That One breathed (āṅti) breathless (avāta) by intrinsic-power (svadhā), none other was, nor aught there-beyond. 2.
In the beginning (agre), Dark-Inert (tamas) was hid (gūḥa) by Dark-Inert (tamas). This all was fluid (salīla), indeterminate (aprakta):
Void (tucchi) by void (ābhu) was overlaid (apighita): That One was born (ajñāyat) by the all-might (mahi) of intension (taśas). 3.
In the beginning, Will (kāma) arose (samavartat) therein, the primal seed (retas) of Intellect (manas), that was the first:
Searching the heart (hrā) throughly by thought (manīśā) wise-singers (havayāh) 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, Allmicht (mahimānaḥ) was;
Intrinsic-power (svadhā) below, Purpose (prayaṭi) above. 5.
Who knows it aright? who can here set it forth? Whence was it born (ājātā), whence poured forth (viśṛṣṭiḥ)
These Angels (devāh) are from its pouring-forth (visarjana), whence then it came-to-be (ābahāva), who knows?
Whence outpoured (viśṛṣṭiḥ) this came to be (ābahāva), or whether one appointed (dādhe) it or not,
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He who is Over-Eye (adhyakṣa) thereof in uttermost Empyrean (vyoman), he knows indeed, or knoweth not.

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 Upaniṣad texts generally, and to our Bhādaranyaka Up., I, 2, 1, and Maṭrī 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, ṣṛ, ṣad-eka, ānīt = prāṇiti, vāla = vāyu, avāla = nirvāla, visṛṣṭi, visarjana, etc.), partly of verbal sense (ambhaḥ, salila = āpah, tapasah-mahi = tejas, svadha = māya, ṣakti, svabhāva), 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 Nature; as also in Bhādaranyaka Up., I, 1, 2. As for rajas, granted that no more is here directly implied than "firmament" or "space," and that the Śāṅkhya as a formulated system is of later publication, it still remains significant that in our hymn (not to speak of other Vedic sources) we have a trinity of terms (tamas, rajas, and tapasah-mahi = tejas = satvā) employed in their correct factorial (gauna) senses to denote the principles of passivity, movement, and essentiality, "later" represented by the three gunas 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, Bhādaranyaka Up., I, 5, 7, and similar passages, where Intellect (manas) is the fecundating power that begets upon Utterance or Wisdom (vāc). Amṛta, in the second stanza, is not "immortality," but simply life, continued existence, as in Rg Veda, VII, 57, 6, and equivalent to dharmaḥ ṣuyuh in X, 85, 19; the sense is "neither birth nor death as yet were."

That "He breathes without air" (avāta, cf. later nirbhāya, "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" (Bhādaranyaka Up., IV, 5, 15) could it be otherwise. The thought is taken up and further developed in several passages of the Upaniṣads, particularly the Bhādaranyaka Up., as quoted above, p. 46, Kena Up., I, 8, "Know that as Brahman which breathes (prāṇit) without breath (na ... prāṇena) yet by whom breath (prāṇa) is breathed (prāṇiyate)", Mundaka Up., II, 1, 2, and 3, where That from which Intellect (manas) and Spiritus (prāṇa) are born (jāyate) is Itself imageless (amārtha), un-intelligent (amanassā), de-spirited (apraṇa), and Taiśātīyā Up., II, 7, where That without which none might breathe (prāṇyāt) is Self-less (anāmya), indiscriminately (anirukta), placeless (anilaya).

"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 (apāmārpaṇa), thence got he (aḍhayat) the intrinsic powers (svadhāḥ) whereby he proceeds (iṣyate)"; the Waters, nirguṇa-Brahman, unconscious Godhead, being as explained above, the source of all omnipotence (mahimānāḥ) and facility (kausalya). Essence being impotent (stari) apart from nature; nature being power (ṣakti) and magic (māya), means whereby anything is done. Cf. Bhagavat Gītā, IV, 6, "I am born by my own power," where ātmamāyāya is clearly the same as svadhyāya, cf. māyāya in Rg Veda, IX, 73, 5 and 9.

"That One" is clearly here not an existence, for
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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," prathamaṁ jāya-mānam-asthanvantam . . . viabhartī, is itself "bodiless," or more literally, "boneless," anāsthā, that is to say, "structureless." "That" is not yet "Selfed" (ātmanī)—before creatures were, God was not God, albeit he was Godhead," Eckhart, I, 410. Tamas (as in Maitri Uṛ., V. 2), apraketa salila, gahanaṁ gambhirā, etc., are all terms naturally designating the undifferentiated, unintelligible Godhead, "which is as though it were not," Eckhart, I, 381: asat, non-existent, gūlha, hidden, there where "darkness reigns in the unknown known unity," Eckhart, I, 368, Cf. p. 6 and Note 2r.

"What covered o'er?" That is, what and where was the world? āvarīvar being from varī, intensive reduplicated form of vrī, "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 Uṛ., 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 Kabir's tāsūhā 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 (pramīti), they tally also in form and content with those of the Upāniṣads. Yet we are asked to believe that Vedic thought was "primitive"—that the wise-singers of the Vedic hymns were able to express themselves in terms that have been universally employed elsewhere and otherwhere 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: