

Discovering the Vedas

Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights

FRITS STAAL

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would rather describe it as thinking aloud. I shall quote its most recent and reliable translation, that of 1999 by Joel Brereton, adding Wendy Doniger's sage comment on poems that puzzle: 'Good. They are meant to puzzle.'

1. The non-existent did not exist, nor did the existent exist at that time.
There existed neither the midspace nor the heaven beyond.
What stirred? From where and in whose protection?
Did water exist, a deep depth?
2. Death did not exist nor deathlessness then.
There existed no sign of night nor of day.
That One breathed without wind through its inherent force.
There existed nothing else beyond that.
3. Darkness existed, hidden by darkness, in the beginning.
All this was a signless ocean.
When the thing coming into being was concealed by emptiness, then was the One born by the power of heat.
4. Then, in the beginning, from thought developed desire.
Which existed as the primal semen.
Searching in their hearts through inspired thinking.
Poets found the connection of the existence in the non-existent.
5. Their cord was stretched across:
Did something exist below it? Did something exist above?

There were places of semen and there were powers.
There was inherent force below, offering above.

6. Who really knows? Who shall here proclaim it?
From where was it born, from where this creation?
The gods are on this side of the creation of this world.
So then who does know from where it came to be?
7. This creation—from where it came to be,
If it was produced or if not—
He who is the overseer of this world in the highest heaven,
He surely knows. Or if he does not know . . .?

I have retained the words of the translator but would prefer to render *visarjana* as 'emission' and *visṛṣṭi* as 'production', not 'creation', because the latter term evokes a personal creator and verse 6 says that the gods are 'on this side of it'. It is moreover in line with 'produced' in the last verse though the Sanskrit term used there is different. Geldner has 'Schöpfung' but Renou senses a difficulty and wonders: 'création secondaire?'

This poem recognizes genuine problems of philosophy at a level most religious poetry does not even touch. Since it can speak for itself and speaks well, I need only add that no translation can do full justice to the sounds of the original. Brereton's translation is ringing ('deep depth death—deathlessness then', etc.), but the original sounds can be heard only in the original. Tatiana Elizarenkova has quoted them: Negations as expressed by *na*, *a-*, *an-* supported by constant repetition of *mā*, *ma*, *am*. Existence as expressed