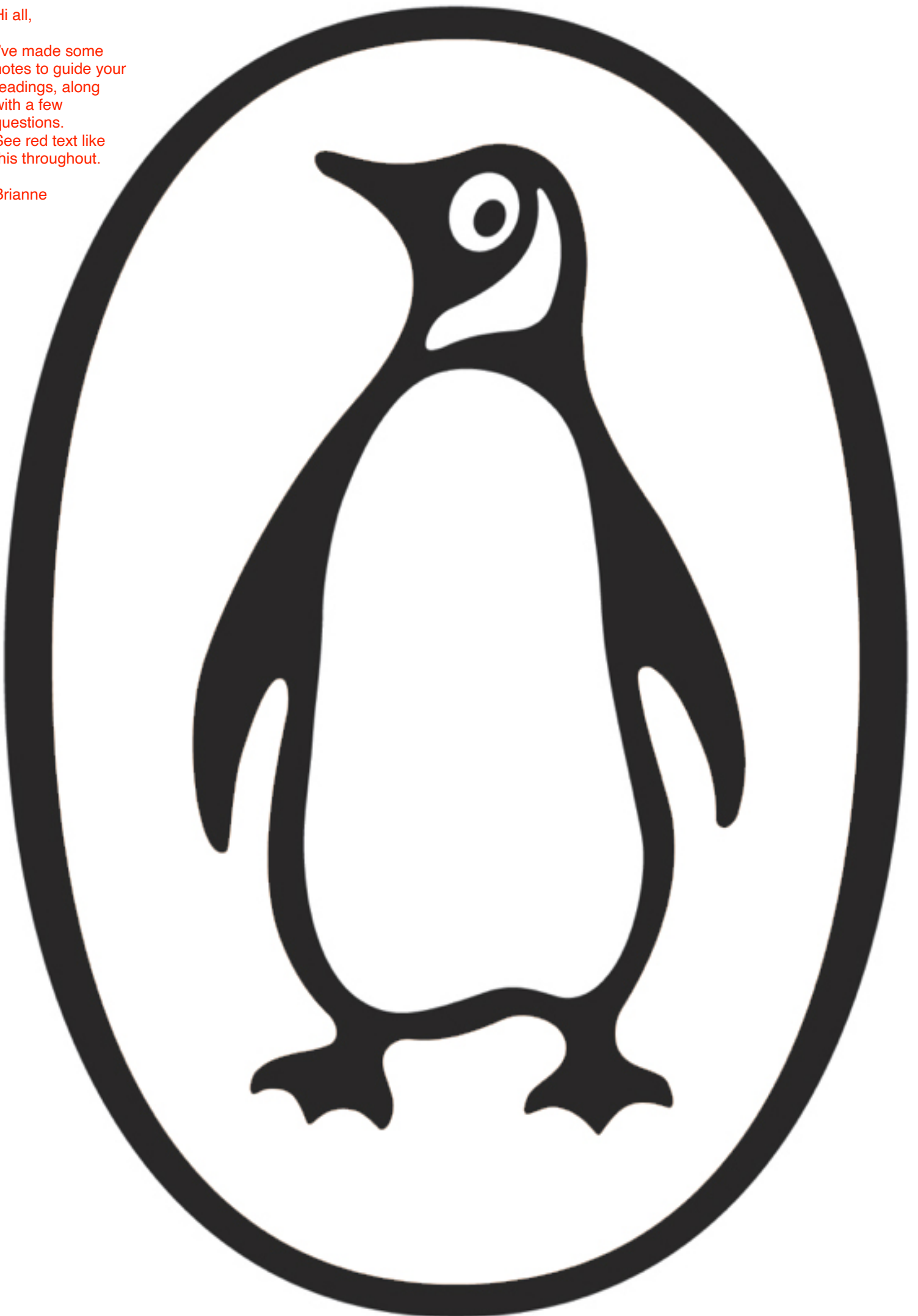


Hi all,

I've made some notes to guide your readings, along with a few questions. See red text like this throughout.

Brianne





## THE RIG VEDA

You can learn a bit about the translator Wendy Doniger [here](#).  
She also add some short comments before each hymn.

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

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# The Rig Veda

## *An Anthology*

*One hundred and eight hymns, selected,*

*translated and annotated by*

WENDY DONIGER

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,  
USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M4V 382

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road,  
Camberwell Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia  
Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New  
Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,  
Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank  
2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R  
0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

This selection first published in this translation 1981

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*For*

**Tatyana Yakovlena Elizarenkova**

**and**

*Frits Staal*

You can feel free to glance through the titles of the 108 selected hymns if you like to see if you identify any themes or words that activate your interest.

\*\*You can also click on the blue titles to be taken to the assigned hymns.

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## ***Introduction***

THIS is a book for people, not for scholars. Real scholars will read the *Rig Veda* in Sanskrit; would-be scholars, or scholars from other fields, will fight their way through the translations of Geldner (German), Renou (French), Elizarenkova (Russian) and others;\* they will search the journals for articles on each verse, and on each word;† they will pore over the dictionaries and the concordances.‡ But there is so much in the *Rig Veda* to interest and excite non-Vedists; it seems a shame to let it go on being the treasure of a tiny, exclusive group, hidden as it is behind the thorny wall of an ancient and cryptic language. There are several good reasons why it has remained hidden for so many years: it is so long (1, 028 hymns, each averaging about ten verses) that a complete translation is a daunting prospect ;§ and it is so complex that most serious translations have been rendered unreadable by critical apparatus.

Yet, this need not be so. One need not read *all* of the *Rig Veda* to enjoy its beauty and wisdom; and since the text is itself an anthology of separate, individually complete hymns, a selection destroys no continuity of the original. Moreover, despite its awesome and venerable reputation, the *Rig Veda* proves surprisingly accessible when one has a little help from one's friends.

By standing upon the shoulders of the many giants (and pygmies) in the long academic procession of Vedists, I have tried to construct a translation that is sound but readable;\* by using the available scholarship, I have tried to make the best educated guess on the many problematic points; and by citing this scholarship in the bibliographies, I invite the would-be scholar to make a better guess. For although this is not a book *for* scholars, it is a book *from* scholars, from the many painstaking Indian commentators (Yäska, Saunaka, Säyana and lesser figures) and European interpreters (beginning with Max Müller) who were driven by a sharp need to fathom this fascinating work.

Having resolved upon a working method, it was necessary to rationalize a selection. My field was automatically limited by the realization that I would be forced to exclude all the hymns that I could not decipher (or that I could only render intelligible by means of a commentary too complex for the present purpose) and that I would indulge myself by excluding all those that I found boring. This is certainly not a ‘representative’ anthology of the *Rig Veda* except in the sense that it is representative of my taste and of the taste of those scholars whose works I have so shamelessly plundered; it is the product of serendipity and hot tips from my friends and colleagues, living and long dead. It is a selection of what I have found to be beautiful,

interesting, and profound in the *Rig Veda*, following the leads of my elders and betters. In number, these 108 (a holy number in India)<sup>†</sup> hymns are ten per cent of the whole collection, roughly the size of one of the ten books. These are the hymns that I have come across and loved, that scholars whom I respect have found most worthy of study, that later Hindus have made use of in building their religious ideas. Idiosyncratic and eclectic, it may yet serve as an introduction to a significant number of hymns in many diverse veins. Many of these centre upon mythology, which interests me most; many delve into philosophy (and therefore come from the latest books of the *Rig Veda*, the first and last), which has interested students of Indian thought most; many explore the symbolism and mechanism of Vedic ritual, which has interested historians of religion most; many are included for the sake of the light they shed on details of daily life, which interests historians and sociologists most, and many for the sake of their poetry.

I have kept the notes to a minimum, and avoided the tautological type entirely ('This is the name of a sage', 'Here the hymn switches from the singular to the plural'), for these seem to me mere automatic reflexes and conventions into which translators often lapse, like hosts showing their guests a new house ('This is the kitchen, ' 'This is the bedroom'). I have also resisted, often with great difficulty, the powerful temptation to

explain the *Rig Veda* by looking backward or forward, to draw upon the ancient Indo-European civilization out of which it grew or to show how Vedic ideas developed in post-Vedic India. Such explanations are fascinating and often useful, but they would have doubled the length of my notes and would, in any case, have distracted the reader from the particular moment in time when these hymns were composed, the moment that I strove to capture in my translations.

The skeletal nature of the critical apparatus is also intended to spare the reader a painful and confusing glimpse behind the curtain into the translator's messy workshop, to gloss over a number of the agonized (and often unsatisfying) decisions that were necessary in rendering the Sanskrit into a comprehensible form of English. The magnitude of the problem faced by the translator of the *Rig Veda* is immediately evident from the disgruntled mumblings, apologies, and *cris de cœur* that slip out of the notes in the extant translations – 'This hymn is one of the most obscure in the whole *Rigveda*'; 'I can make no sense at all of the second line'; '*mot inconnu*'; '*Ein dunkles Lied*'; '*Nicht ganz klar*'. Translation should be exempt from fault-finding, but it is hard to resist the temptation to wonder where the obscurity comes into play along the long, fragile thread that connects the original with the translation. Is it an obscure transmission, or an obscure reception?



In many places, a difficult idea is couched in simple language; in others, a simple idea is obscured by difficult language. Every translator has encountered the latter problem, and such instances occur frequently in the *Rig Veda*, but so do instances of the opposite type: several hymns are simple enough to translate, but impossible to understand. The linguistic problem in both cases is intriguing, if we try to separate idea from language, structure from vocabulary. In the first instance, the language may be intrinsically difficult (dense, complex, and esoteric even for the people of its own time), difficult to people of another time (because of archaisms, *bapax legomena*, discontinued usages), or difficult because we have lost the thread of the underlying idiom. In the second instance, how can we know that we are in fact translating correctly and not merely unconsciously simplifying complex ideas?\*

Almost a century ago, Abel Bergaigne pointed out that one must make a choice between simplifying the Vedic lexicon and thereby dealing with more complex ideas, or complicating the lexicon in order to simplify Vedic ideas. † Although Bergaigne inclined to the former method (and many Vedists today still follow him), my own feeling is that Vedic words are more complex than Vedic contexts; that to seek various English equivalents for single words along a broad spectrum of linked concepts is ultimately more productive than to seek to boil down such a term into a single neutral word that

can be plugged into any context. Poetic applications even of basic terms always retain a certain measure of ambiguity, but this cannot be captured by a compromise gloss.

How can we understand the words if we do not understand the meaning behind them? Here one is reminded of Samuel Johnson's criticism of a colleague: 'He has too little Latin; he takes the Latin from the meaning, not the meaning from the Latin.' To some degree, we all do take the Sanskrit from the meaning, especially where the words themselves are difficult. And to this extent, we cannot translate a hymn in 'simple language', either, if we do not understand it. Nor can we write something that we know to be obscure; if what we write is obscure by accident, that is another matter, but we must think we understand an obscure poem in order to translate it.

In some cases, a linguistically simple phrase contains a thought that might be explained by a long footnote, but often such a note cannot be written with any confidence. The phrase, 'We have become immortal', for example, is linguistically straightforward; few would challenge the plain English rendering. But what does it mean? What did they mean by immortality? Surely not eternal life, but what kind of afterlife? Questions of this sort may begin to be answered when one undertakes a thorough study of Vedic religion and philosophy (a

subject on which far too many books have been written, and one to which this volume will not add);\* but even then the hymn remains tantalizingly obscure. What does it mean? It means what it says. This is a book of questions, not a book of answers; and, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, ‘What is the question?’ must always be our starting-point – and often our finishing-point as well.

The notes, therefore, provide only enough glosses to allay the reader’s suspicion that something important may be missing or that something is wrong with the verse; scholarly material (‘This also occurs in the Avesta’) has been used only when the verse makes no sense at all without it. This austerity in commentary may often puzzle the reader. Good. The hymns are meant to puzzle, to surprise, to trouble the mind; they are often just as puzzling in Sanskrit as they are in English. When the reader finds himself at a point where the sense is unclear (as long as the language is clear), let him use his head, as the Indian commentators used theirs; the gods love riddles, as the ancient sages knew, and those who would converse with the gods must learn to live with and thrive upon paradox and enigma.

The riddles in the *Rig Veda* are particularly maddening because many of them are *Looking Glass* riddles (‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’): they do not have, nor are they meant to have, answers. They are

not merely rhetorical, but are designed to present one half of a Socratic dialogue through which the reader becomes aware of the inadequacy of his certain knowledge. This deliberate obfuscation of issues that are in any case intrinsically unfathomable sometimes seems to add insult to injury; one feels that the hymns themselves are mischievous translations into a 'foreign' language. Like the Englishman who announced that he preferred English to all other languages because it was the only language in which one said the words in the order that one thought of them, one feels that the *Rig Veda* poets are not saying the words in the order that *they* thought of them, let alone the order that we would think of them.

An example of this is the complexity of tenses and references to past and present. Sometimes the poet slips from the present to the past in the traditional way, collapsing the mythical past and the ritual present together: Indra, do now what you did in the past. But sometimes the poet deliberately invokes or highlights a paradox of time: Aditi gave birth to Daksa, and Daksa gave birth to Aditi. These cognitive paradoxes, underscored by grammatical inconsistencies in tense, draw the reader into the timeless world of the myth and ritual.

Another, related, form of deliberate confusion is the use of mutually illuminating metaphors. Certain

concerns recur throughout the *Rig Veda*: the themes of harnessing and un harnessing (yoking cattle, controlling powers), which shift in their positive or negative value (sometimes harnessing is good, sometimes bad); the closely related theme of finding open space and freedom, always a positive value, in contrast with being hemmed in and trapped (suffering from the anguish of *ambas*, a 'tight spot', constriction and danger); and the fear of being hated and attacked (by the gods, or by other human beings). These are linked to other constellations of images: conflict within the nuclear family and uneasiness about the mystery of birth from male and female parents; the preciousness of animals, particularly cows and horses; the wish for knowledge, inspiration, long life, and immortality; awe of the sun and the rain and the cosmic powers of fertility. The problem arises when one tries to determine which of these are in the foreground and which in the background of a particular hymn: are the cows symbolic of the sun, or is the sun a metaphor for cows? The careless or greedy exegete finds himself in danger of rampant Jungianism: everything is symbolic of everything else; each is a metaphor for all of the others. The open-minded interpreter will sit back and let the images come to him; when asked to pinpoint the central point of a particular verse, he will fall back upon the traditional catch-all of the short-answer questionnaire: all of the above.

In places the metaphors are incomplete or jagged, the language elliptic or dense; I have not tried to smooth these places out or simplify them. An eloquent defence of this approach to translation appears in David Grene's review of Robert Lowell's translation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, a trilogy whose extraordinarily rich poetry may have rendered it difficult even for an Athenian audience at first hearing:

The temptation to a modern translator in such a matter is either to cut or to substitute a kind of poetry that is more acceptable. But Aeschylus was like that, and perhaps we ought to settle for the strangeness and roughness of a literal rendering. There was a creative poet there whose images and metaphors were his own and no one else's, and if we brood over them even in their bare bones we may learn more about poetry than by trying to make them over in our own terms.\*

I have tried to find the bare bones of the Vedic verses and clothe them with as few scholarly veils as possible.

There is yet another, related ambiguity which will plague the reader of this translation, and one that I cannot resolve. Some of the poetry works as poetry even in English; some of it does not. When it does not, the break may occur at any of several points along the line. One tends to think that it occurs at the point of translation (following the ancient observation that a translation is like a woman: if it is beautiful, it cannot be faithful; and if it is faithful, it cannot be beautiful), and there are many verses in this collection that I love in the Sanskrit and am bothered by in the best rendition that I

could produce. But there are other obstacles to the poetry, places where complex ritual vocabulary or highly abstract philosophical arguments interfere (to our ears, though not necessarily to those of the ancient audience) with the power of the poetry. Perhaps the single factor that tends to interfere most with the poetry throughout the *Rig Veda* is the fragmentary quality of the work. Not only is each hymn a separate statement (though some work well together, like 4.26-7), but each verse stands on its own and often bears no obvious relationship with the verses immediately preceding and following it; indeed, each line of a two-line verse – and sometimes each half-line – may contain a thought not only grammatically distinct from what surrounds it but different in tone, imagery, and reference. This discontinuity – which is, ironically, the one continuous thread in the *Rig Veda*, the one universal semantic feature – tends to produce a kind of poetry that can be overpowering in the intensity of the separate forces that it juxtaposes but disconcerting to anyone looking for a sustained mood. It also tends to obscure the narrative flow of the stories hidden behind the hymns, for the *Rig Veda* has no true mythology; it is written out of a mythology that we can only try to reconstruct from the Rig Vedic jumble of paradoxes heaped on paradoxes, tropes heaped on tropes.\*

Yet one does sense a solid mythological corpus behind the hymns, for one hymn may refer obliquely to a story that is told fully in another hymn, which makes us suspect that other oblique phrases may in fact allude to texts widely known at the, time of the *Rig Veda* though lost to us now. This suspicion is strengthened by other, fuller variants of such thumbnail episodes that we encounter in other Indo-European mythologies and in the texts of later Hinduism.

There are, nevertheless, times when, I suspect, the Vedic poet himself fails to carry off what he intends (after all, why should we expect *any* poet to remain first-rate for over 1, 000 hymns, let alone a motley group of ancient sages?), or, finally, when the poem is not poetry in the modern sense at all, and we do it a disservice to look for modern poetic qualities in it.\* This being so, the reader is advised to be as open to the words as possible, letting them move him when they can, and not trying to wrench from them a kind of poetry that they cannot yield.

While we are still in the mood for apologies and laying it on the line, let me say that for this volume I have retranslated several hymns used in my earlier publications, and the alert reader will notice massive differences between the two versions. I have learned a lot about the *Rig Veda* in the intervening years and I hope to continue to do so; translations made ten years



from now would probably be equally different from these, and with good reason. Translators are, to paraphrase Charles Long, painters rather than photographers, and painters make mistakes. Translators should, I think, be allowed to make their guesses out loud, treating their own earlier attempts like old wills : I hereby revoke and declare null and void, all previous translations ... In the present instance, most of these mistakes will probably occur in places where the text is so vague or obscure that one is given the choice either to hedge (to say nothing unequivocal) or to go for broke: to figure out what it most probably means, and to say that. For example, when a god is said to be ‘man-gazed’ (*nṛ-cakṣas*) does it mean that he gazes at men or that his eye is like that of a man? In the contexts in which it occurs, the former seems more likely to me, and that is how I have translated it; years from now it may turn out that the term does, in fact, mean that his eye is like that of a man; I would rather live with that possibility than leave the reader in the lurch with a hedged ‘man-gaze’.

Idiosyncratic as this collection is, it is nevertheless in many senses a collaboration. I owe, first of all, a great debt to my predecessors in the field of Vedic scholarship, in particular to Renou, Geldner, Grassmann, and the medieval commentator Sāyana, who is, for all his sins, someone good to be able to argue with about

the meaning of a Vedic hymn. I owe a more immediate debt to my potential successors in the field, my students, who have helped me puzzle out many a recalcitrant verse: my students in Berkeley (Gar Emerson Kellom, Charles Pain, Elizabeth Read Kermey, Linda Blodgett Spar-rowe) and in Chicago (Ralph Strohl, Catherine Bell, Gary Ebersole, Vicki Kirsch, Barry Friedman, and Susan Turk). In particular, I must thank William Kalley Mahony and Brian K. Smith, who did much of the work for the bibliographies; Ralph Strohl, who helped me with the index; and Martha Morrow, who retyped much of the text with unflagging enthusiasm.

I never would have undertaken this project without the help of Frits Staal, who worked with me for the first year, until his other commitments and the daunting distance between Chicago and Berkeley reduced this to a one-person project; I owe him thanks not only for the start he gave me in Vedic bibliography and the hymns that he taught me to appreciate, but especially for his joyous and stylish support throughout. To A. K. Ramanujan I owe thanks not only for his continuous warm support of my work but also for the simple but apocalyptically helpful suggestion that it was useful to translate *part* of the *Rig Veda* if one lacked the *Sitz fleisch* for the whole thing. David Grene generously allowed me to tap his great expertise as a translator, and his great innocence of things Vedic, to act as the perfect guinea-

pig; I am grateful to him for the care he has taken in reading through an early draft and responding so frankly and sensitively to it. Last of all, I owe an inexpressible debt of gratitude to my friend and colleague Tatyana Yakovlena Elizarenkova, for her help, for the brilliant example set by her own *Rig Veda* translations (which always made more *sense* to me than those of anyone else), and for her encouragement. When I first wrote to her of this project she replied, ‘Let the two of us dig the mysterious old *Rig Veda* from both sides, I from Russia and you from America, and perhaps we will meet in the middle.’ I doubt that any of us has come near to the molten centre of this rich and secret book, but perhaps by digging at it from all sides, each of us will mine a treasure worth labouring for. I lay mine at the feet of the reading public.

### 8.30 *To All the Gods*

- 1 Not one of you, gods, is small, not one a little child;  
all of you are truly great.
- 2 Therefore you are worthy of praise and of sacrifice,  
you thirty-three gods of Manu, arrogant and powerful.
- 3 Protect us, help us and speak for us; do not lead us  
into the distance far away from the path of our father  
Manu.

4 You gods who are all here and who belong to all men,  
give far-reaching shelter to us and to our cows and  
horses.

Read this summary and Creation Hymn 10.129; you'll then read three other creation hymns (10.121, 10.90, 10.130) and also two hymns on Death (10.14, 10.16 on p. 41-47)

## CREATION

THE *Rig Veda* refers glancingly to many different theories of creation. Several of these regard creation as the result – often apparently a mere by-product – of a cosmic battle, such as those mentioned in the hymns to Indra, or as a result of the apparently unmotivated act of separating heaven and earth, an act attributed to several different gods. These aspects of creation are woven in and out of the hymns in the older parts of the *Rig Veda*, books 2 through 9. But in the subsequent tenth book we encounter for the first time hymns that are entirely devoted to speculations on the origins of the cosmos.

Some of these hymns seek the origins of the existence of existence itself (10.129) or of the creator himself (10.121). Others speculate upon the sacrifice as the origin of the earth and the people in it (10.90), or upon the origins of the sacrifice (10.130, 10.190). Sacrifice is central to many concepts of creation, particularly to those explicitly linked to sacrificial gods or instruments, but it also appears as a supplement to other forms of creation such as sculpture (10.81-2) or anthropomorphic birth (10.72).

### 10.129 *Creation Hymn (Nāsadiya)*

This short hymn, though linguistically simple (with the exception of one or two troublesome nouns), is conceptually extremely provocative and has, indeed, provoked hundreds of complex commentaries among Indian theologians and Western scholars. In many ways, it is meant to puzzle and challenge, to raise unanswerable questions, to pile up paradoxes.

1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred?<sup>1</sup> Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign<sup>2</sup> of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign,<sup>2</sup> all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.<sup>3</sup>

4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning ; that was the first seed of mind. Poets<sup>4</sup> seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

5 Their cord<sup>5</sup> was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers.<sup>6</sup> There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

6 Who really knows ? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe.<sup>7</sup> Who then knows whence it has arisen?

7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

#### NOTES

1. The verb is often used to describe the motion of breath. The verse implies that the action precedes the actor.
2. That is, the difference between night and day, light or dark-ness, or possibly sun and moon.
3. *Tapas* designates heat, in particular the heat generated by ritual activity and by physical mortification of the body.
4. *Kavi* designates a poet or saint.
5. Possibly a reference to the ‘bond’ mentioned in verse 4, or a kind of measuring cord by which the poets delimit – and hence create – the elements.
6. Through chiasmus, the verse contrasts male seed-placers, giving-forth, above, with female powers, impulse, below.
7. That is, the gods cannot be the source of creation since they came after it.

10.121 Read this description and creation hymn, looking for differences between this and the previous creation hymn

#### 10.121 *The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo*

This creation hymn poses questions about an unnamed god (whom Max Müller first dubbed *Deus Ignotus*) ; later tradition (beginning with the subsequent appending of the final verse of this hymn, a verse that ends with a phrase used to conclude many other *Rig Veda* hymns) identified this god with *Prajāpati* and made the question in the refrain (who?) into an answer: ‘Who’ (*Ka*) is the name of the creator, a name explicitly said, in later texts, to have been given to *Prajāpati* by *Indra* (as agnostics are sometimes accused of praying ‘to whom it may concern’). But the original force of the verse is speculative: since the creator preceded all the known gods,<sup>1</sup> creating them, who could he be? In verse 7, he seems to appear after the waters; in verse 9, the waters appear from him. They are born from one another, a common paradox.<sup>2</sup>

The creator in this hymn is called *Hiranyagarbha*, a truly pregnant term. It is a compound noun, whose first element means ‘gold’ and whose second element means ‘womb, seed, embryo, or child’ in the *Rig Veda* and later comes to mean ‘egg’; this latter meaning becomes prominent in the cosmogonic myth of the golden egg that separates, the two shells becoming sky and earth, while the yolk is the sun.<sup>3</sup> In the present hymn, the compound functions straightforwardly: the god is the golden embryo or seed. Later, it is glossed as a possessive compound: he is the god who (more anthropomorphically) possesses the golden seed or egg. *Sāyana* suggests that the compound may be interpreted possessively even here, making it possible to include several levels of meaning at once –

'he in whose belly the golden seed or egg exists like an embryo'. This seed of fire is placed in the waters of the womb; it is also the embryo with which the waters become pregnant (v. 7). So, too, Agni is the child of the waters but also the god who spills his seed in the waters. These are interlocking rather than contradictory concepts; in the late Vedas, the father is specifically identified with the son. Furthermore, the egg is both a female image (that which is fertilized by seed and which contains the embryo that is like the yolk) and a male image (the testicles containing seed). Thus the range of meanings may be seen as a continuum of androgynous birth images : seed (male egg), womb (female egg), embryo, child.

- 1 In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky.<sup>4</sup> Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 2 He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality -and death.<sup>5</sup> Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 3 He who by his greatness became the one king of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 4 He who through his power owns these snowy mountains, and the ocean together with the river Rasā<sup>6</sup> they say; who has the quarters of the sky as his two arms<sup>7</sup> – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 5 He by whom the awesome sky and the earth were made firm, by whom the dome of the sky was propped up, and the sun, who measured out the middle realm of space<sup>8</sup> -who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 6 He to whom the two opposed masses looked with trembling in their hearts, supported by his help,<sup>9</sup> on whom the rising sun shines down – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 7 When the high waters came, pregnant with the embryo that is everything, bringing forth fire, he arose from that as the one life's breath of the gods. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 8 He who in his greatness looked over the waters, which were pregnant with Dakṣa,<sup>10</sup> bringing forth the sacrifice, he who was the one god among all the gods – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 9 Let him not harm us, he<sup>11</sup> who fathered the earth and created the sky, whose laws are true, who created the high, shining waters. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 10 Prajāpati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches.

## NOTES

1. Cf. 10.129.6. Here and throughout these notes, numbers with out a designated text refer to Rig Vedic hymns translated in this volume.
2. Cf. the birth of Dakṣa and Aditi from one another in 10.72.4.
3. Cf. 10.82.5-6.
4. This traditional cosmogonic act is often credited to Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Indra, and other gods.
5. This may refer to the world of gods and the world of humans, or it may have some subtler and darker metaphysical significance.
6. The river Rasā surrounds heaven and earth, separating the dwelling-place of men and gods from the non-space in which the demonic powers dwell. Cf. 10.108.2.
7. A reference to the cosmic giant, Puruṣa (cf. 10.90), whose arms are in that part of space which the four cardinal directions span.
8. This act of measuring out space, closely connected with the propping apart of sky and earth (cf. v. 1), is also attributed to Viṣṇu and Varuṇa, who are said to set up the sun and then to measure out a space for him to move through, a space which (un- like sky and earth) has no finite boundaries. The sun itself also functions both as a prop to keep sky and earth apart and as an instrument with which to measure space. Cf. 1.154.1 and 1.154.3.
9. This verse presents an image on two levels. The two opposed masses are armies, the polarized forces of gods and demons (Asuras) who turn to the creator for help (as in 2.12.8). But they also represent the parted sky and earth, who seek literal 'support' (the pillar to keep them apart). The images combine in a metaphor suggesting that sky and earth themselves form a phalanx in the fight between gods and demons.
10. Dakṣa represents the male principle of creation and is later identified with Prajāpati. As the embryo of the waters, he is identified with the seed or fire (v. 7), the latter then explicitly defined in this verse as the sacrifice, or sacrificial fire. Sacrifice is often an element in primeval creation (cf. 10.90.6-9).
11. In this verse, the abstract tone vanishes and the poet lapses back into a more typical Vedic fear (and particularly typical of book 10), the fear of a personified, malevolent god.

10.90 Read this description and creation hymn, looking for differences between this and the previous creation hymns  
10.90 *Puruṣa-Sūkta, or The Hymn of Man*

In this famous hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Puruṣa, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> Though the theme of the cosmic sacrifice is a widespread mythological motif, this hymn is part of a particularly Indo-European corpus of myths of dismemberment.<sup>2</sup> The underlying concept is, therefore,



quite ancient; yet the fact that this is one of the latest hymns in the *Rig Veda* is evident from its reference to the three Vedas (v. 9) and to the four social classes or *varṇas* (v. 12, the first time that this concept appears in Indian civilization), as well as from its generally monistic world-view.

- 1 The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.
- 2 It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.
- 4 With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this<sup>4</sup> he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.
- 5 From him Virāj<sup>5</sup> was born, and from Virāj came the Man. When he was born, he ranged beyond the earth behind and before.
- 6 When the gods spread<sup>6</sup> the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.
- 7 They anointed<sup>7</sup> the Man, the sacrifice<sup>8</sup> born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass.<sup>9</sup> With him the gods, Sādhyas,<sup>10</sup> and sages sacrificed.
- 8 From that sacrifice<sup>8</sup> in which everything was offered, the melted fat<sup>11</sup> was collected, and he<sup>12</sup> made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.
- 9 From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.<sup>13</sup>
- 10 Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth;<sup>14</sup> cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.
- 11 When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?
- 12 His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.<sup>15</sup>
- 13 The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.
- 14 From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they<sup>16</sup> set the worlds in order.
- 15 There were seven enclosing-sticks<sup>17</sup> for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.

16 With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice<sup>18</sup> These were the first ritual laws.<sup>19</sup> These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sādhyas,<sup>10</sup> the ancient gods.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. the horse as the primeval sacrificial victim in 1.162 and 1.163.
2. The dismemberment of the Norse giant Ymir is the most striking parallel, but there are many others.
3. This rather obscure phrase seems to imply that through food (perhaps the sacrificial offering) Puruṣa grows beyond the world of the immortals, even as he grows beyond the earth (v. 1 and v. 5). He himself also transcends both what grows by food and what does not (v. 4), i.e. the world of animate and inanimate creatures, or Agni (eater) and Soma (eaten).
4. That is, from the quarter still remaining on earth, or perhaps from the condition in which he had already spread out from earth with three quarters of his form.
5. The active female creative principle, Virāj is later replaced by Prakṛti or material nature, the mate of Puruṣa in Sāṅkhya philosophy.
6. This is the word used to indicate the performance of a Vedic sacrifice, spread or stretched out (like the earth spread upon the cosmic waters) or woven (like a fabric upon a loom). Cf. 10.130.i-2.
7. The word actually means 'to sprinkle' with consecrated water, but indicates the consecration of an initiate or a king.
8. Here 'the sacrifice' indicates the sacrificial victim; they are explicitly identified with one another (and with the divinity to whom the sacrifice is dedicated) in verse 16.
9. A mixture of special grasses that was strewn on the ground for the gods to sit upon.
10. A class of demi-gods or saints, whose name literally means 'those who are yet to be fulfilled'.
11. Literally, a mixture of butter and sour milk used in the sacrifice; figuratively, the fat that drained from the sacrificial victim.
12. Probably the Creator, though possibly Puruṣa himself.
13. The verses are the elements of the *Rig Veda*, the chants of the *Sāma Veda*, and the formulas of the *Yajur Veda*. The metres often appear as elements in primeval creation; cf. 10.130.3-j and , 1.164.23-5.
14. That is, incisors above and below, such as dogs and cats have.
15. The four classes or *varṇas* of classical Indian society.
16. The gods.

17. The enclosing-sticks are green twigs that keep the fire from spreading; the fuel sticks are seasoned wood used for kindling.

18. The meaning is that Puruṣa was both the victim that the gods sacrificed and the divinity to whom the sacrifice was dedicated; that is, he was both the subject and the object of the sacrifice. Through a typical Vedic paradox, the sacrifice itself creates the sacrifice.

19. Literally, the *dharmas*, a protean word that here designates the archetypal patterns of behaviour established during this first sacrifice to serve as the model for all future sacrifices.

10.130 Read this description and creation hymn, looking for differences between this and the previous creation hymns; When done please go to p. 41-44.

### 10.130 *The Creation of the Sacrifice*

The image of weaving the sacrifice (cf. 10.90.15) is here joined with explicit identifications of ritual and divine, ancient and present, elements of the sacrifice.

1 The sacrifice that is spread out with threads on all sides, drawn tight with a hundred and one divine acts, is woven by these fathers as they come near: 'Weave forward, weave backward, ' they say as they sit by the loom that is stretched tight.

2 The Man<sup>1</sup> stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs, that are fastened in place; they<sup>2</sup> made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.

3 What was the original model, and what was the copy, and what was the connection between them? What was the butter, and what the enclosing wood?<sup>3</sup> What was the metre, what was the invocation, and the chant, when all the gods sacrificed the god?<sup>4</sup>

4 The Gāyatri metre<sup>5</sup> was the yoke-mate of Agni; Savitṛ joined with the Uṣṇi metre, and with the Anuṣṭubh metre was Soma that reverberates with the chants. The Bṛhatī metre resonated in the voice of Bṛhaspati.

5 The Virāj<sup>6</sup> metre was the privilege of Mitra and Varuṇa; the Triṣṭubh metre was part of the day of Indra. The Jagatī entered into all the gods. That was the model for the human sages.<sup>7</sup>

6 That was the model for the human sages, our fathers, when the primeval sacrifice was born. With the eye that is mind, in thought I see those who were the first to offer this sacrifice.

7 The ritual repetitions harmonized with the chants and with the metres; the seven divine sages harmonized with the original models. When the wise men looked back along the path of those who went before, they took up the reins like charioteers.

#### NOTES

1. Puruṣa, as in 10.90.

2. The gods who first performed the sacrifice. Cf. 10.90.14.
3. Cf. 10.90.15.
4. The circular sacrifice of the god to the god, as in 10.90.6, 10.81.5-6.
5. The metres alluded to in 10.90.9 are here enumerated and associated with particular gods.
6. Virāj, a female cosmic principle in 10.90.5, is here merely a metre.
7. Sages (*r̥ṣis*) are seers as well as poets.

### 10.190 *Cosmic Heat*<sup>1</sup>

1 Order<sup>2</sup> and truth were born from heat as it blazed up. From that was born night; from that heat was born the billowy ocean.

2 From the billowy ocean was born the year, that arranges days and nights, ruling over all that blinks its eyes.<sup>3</sup>

3 The Arranger has set in their proper place the sun and moon, the sky and the earth, the middle realm of space, and finally the sunlight.

#### NOTES

1. *Tapas*, the heat produced by the ritual activity of the priest, is equated with the primeval erotic or ascetic heat of the Creator.
2. *Ṛta*, cosmic order. Truth (*satya*) is, like *ṛta*, also a term for reality.
3. For blinking as a sign of a living creature, cf. 10.121.3.

### 10.81-2 *The All-Maker (Viśvakarman)*

These two hymns to the artisan of the gods speculate on the mysterious period of the ancient past, now veiled from the priests of the present (10.81.1 and 10.82.7). The Creator is imagined concretely as a sculptor (10.81.2), a smith (10.81.3), or as a woodcutter or carpenter (10.81.4), but also as the primeval sacrificer and victim of the sacrifice (10.81.1, 10.81.5-6, 10.82.1), assisted by the seven sages (10.81.4, 10.82.2 and 10.82.4). Finally, he is identified with the one who propped apart sky and earth (10.81.2-4, 10.82), the one who inspires thought (10.81.7) and answers questions (10.82) but is himself beyond understanding (10.82.5 and 7).

#### 10.81

1 The sage, our father, who took his place as priest of the oblation and offered all these worlds as oblation, seeking riches through prayer, he entered those who were to come later, concealing those who went before.<sup>1</sup>

2 What was the base,<sup>2</sup> what sort of raw matter was there, and precisely how was it done, when the All-Maker, casting his eye on all, created the earth and revealed the sky in its glory?

3 With eyes on all sides and mouths on all sides, with arms on all sides and feet on all sides, the One God created the sky and the earth, fanning them with his arms.<sup>3</sup>

4 What was the wood and what was the tree from which they<sup>4</sup> carved the sky and the earth? You deep thinkers, ask yourselves in your own hearts, what base did he stand on when he set up the worlds?

5 Those forms of yours that are highest, those that are lowest, and those that are in the middle, O All-Maker, help your friends to recognize them in the oblation. You who follow your own laws, sacrifice your body yourself, making it grow great.<sup>5</sup>

6 All-Maker, grown great through the oblation, sacrifice the earth and sky yourself. Let other men go astray all around;<sup>6</sup> let us here have a rich and generous patron.

7 The All-Maker, the lord of sacred speech, swift as thought – we will call to him today to help us in the contest. Let him who is the maker of good things and is gentle to everyone rejoice in all our invocations and help us.

10.82

1 The Father of the Eye,<sup>7</sup> who is wise in his heart, created as butter<sup>8</sup> these two worlds that bent low. As soon as their ends had been made fast in the east, at that moment sky and earth moved far apart.

2 The All-Maker is vast in mind and vast in strength. He is the one who forms, who sets in order, and who is the highest image. Their<sup>9</sup> prayers together with the drink they have offered give them joy there where, they say, the One dwells beyond the seven sages.

3 Our father, who created and set in order and knows all forms, all worlds, who all alone gave names to the gods, he is the one to whom all other creatures come to ask questions.

4 To him the ancient sages together sacrificed riches, like the throngs of singers who together made these things that have been created, when the realm of light was still immersed in the realm without light.<sup>10</sup>

5 That which is beyond the sky and beyond this earth, beyond the gods and the Asuras<sup>11</sup> – what was that first embryo that the waters received, where all the gods together saw it?<sup>12</sup>

6 He was the one whom the waters received as the first embryo, when all the gods came together. On the navel of the Unborn was set the One on whom all creatures rest.<sup>13</sup>

7 You cannot find him who created these creatures; another<sup>14</sup> has come between you. Those who recite the hymns are glutted with the pleasures of life ;<sup>15</sup> they wander about

wrapped up in mist and stammering nonsense.

#### NOTES

1. The early stages of creation remain in shadow, perhaps because the All-Maker destroyed them by sacrificing them and then prayed anew for the materials of creation.
2. The question, to which verse 4 returns, is the problem of what the primeval sculptor stood on before there was anything created.
3. Though he has arms on all sides, here the anthropomorphic smith has two arms and 'wings', probably the feathers used to fan the forge. Cf. 9.112.2.
4. The assistants of the Creator, perhaps the seven sages (cf. 10.82.2 and 10.82.4).
5. Here and in the next verse, the Creator is both the sacrificer and the sacrificial victim, as Puruṣa is in 10.90.16.
6. Here, and in 10.82.7, the enemies of the poet in the contest are mocked.
7. That is, creator of the sun.
8. Butter is symbolic of primeval chaotic matter, the seed of the creator, and the sacrificial oblation. The creator churns chaos. Cf. 4.58 for butter.
9. The wishes and sacrifices of the first sacrificers, the pious dead, are fulfilled in heaven.
10. Day and night separated, like sky and earth.
11. The Asuras are the ancient dark divinities, at first the elder brothers and then the enemies of the gods (Devas).
12. For the embryo, cf. 10.121.1 and 10.121.7.
13. The navel is the centre of the wheel; cf. 1.164.13, 1.164.48.
14. Another creator has come between you, or, more likely (for the noun is neuter), another thing – ignorance – has come inside you as an obstacle; or a bad priest (such as are mentioned in the second half of the verse) has obscured the way to the gods.
15. A double meaning here: the priests are glutted with the life they have stolen from the sacrificial beast and with the high life of luxury they have bought with their undeserved fees. Here the poet speaks of his priestly enemies, who do not understand the meaning of the sacrifice. The mist is both the miasma of their clouded minds and the smoke from the useless sacrifice.

#### 10.72 *Aditi and the Birth of the Gods*

This creation hymn poses several different and paradoxical answers to the riddle of origins. It is evident from the tone of the very first verse that the poet regards creation as a mysterious subject, and a desperate series of eclectic hypotheses (perhaps quoted from

various sources) tumbles out right away: the ‘craftsman’ image (the priest, Brahmanaspati or Bṛhaspati, lord of inspired speech); the philosophical paradox of non-existence;<sup>1</sup> or the paradox of mutual creation (Aditi and Dakṣa, the female principle of creation or infinity and the male principle of virile efficacy, creating one another)<sup>2</sup> or contradiction (the earth born from the crouching divinity and then said to be born from the quarters of the sky).

At this point, the speculations give way to a more anthropomorphic creation myth centring upon the image of the goddess who crouches with legs spread (Uttānapad); this term, often taken as a proper name, designates a position associated both with yoga and with a woman giving birth, as the mother goddess is often depicted in early sculptures: literally, with feet stretched forward, more particularly with knees drawn up and legs spread wide. Since she is identified with Aditi, the hymn moves quickly to the myth of Aditi and Dakṣa (in which the paradox of mutual creation is given incestuous overtones) and the creation of gods and men.

The creation of the universe out of water (vv. 6-7) and the rescuing of the sun from the ocean (v. 7) are well-known Vedic images that move the hymn back to the cosmic level, from which it then returns to anthropomorphism and to the myth of Aditi, when the sun reappears as Mārtāṇḍa’, whose birth from Aditi is the subject of the final two verses.

1 Let us now speak with wonder of the births of the gods – so that some one may see them when the hymns are chanted in this later age.<sup>3</sup>

2 The lord of sacred speech, like a smith, fanned them together.<sup>4</sup> In the earliest age of the gods, existence was born from non-existence.<sup>5</sup>

3 In the first age of the gods, existence was born from non-existence. After this the quarters of the sky were born from her who crouched with legs spread.

4 The earth was born from her who crouched with legs spread, and from the earth the quarters of the sky were born. From Aditi, Dakṣa was born, and from Dakṣa Aditi was born.<sup>6</sup>

5 For Aditi was born as your daughter, O Dakṣa, and after her were born the blessed gods, the kinsmen of immortality.

6 When you gods took your places there in the water with your hands joined together, a thick cloud of mist<sup>7</sup> arose from you like dust from dancers.

7 When you gods like magicians<sup>8</sup> caused the worlds to swell,<sup>9</sup> you drew forth the sun that was hidden in the ocean.

8 Eight sons are there of Aditi, who were born of her body. With seven she went forth among the gods, but she threw Mārtāṇḍa’,<sup>10</sup> the sun, aside.

9 With seven sons Aditi went forth into the earliest age. But she bore Mārtāṇḍ’ so that he would in turn beget offspring and then soon die.

## NOTES

1. Cf. 10.129.1.
2. Cf. Puruṣa and Virāj in 10.90.5.
3. The idea of 'seeing' the births of the gods may refer not to being actually present at that early time but rather to the poet's gift of 'seeing' mythic events by means of his inspired vision.
4. 'Them' must refer to the two worlds, heaven and earth, rather than to the gods; the lord of sacred speech is here regarded as responsible for manual rather than spiritual creation.
5. Cf. 10.129.1.
6. Sāyana remarks that Yāska's *Nirukta* 11.23 states that by the *dharma* of the gods, two births can be mutually productive of one another.
7. 'Mist' or 'dust' refers to the atomic particles of water, a mist that plays an important part in creation by virtue of its ambivalence, half water and half air, mediating between matter and spirit. Thus the steam rising from the asceticism of the Brahmācārī in the water (cf. 10.129.3-4) or the foam that appears when Prajāpati heats the waters is the source of matter for creation.
8. These are Yatis, who may be a class of sages or ascetics; more likely, however, they are magicians, among whose traditional bag of tricks in ancient India was the ability to make plants suddenly grow. They may be linked with the dancers in verse 6, another aspect of creative shamanism.
9. The verb (*pinv*) implies swelling up as with milk from the breast.
10. Mārtāṇḍa's name originally meant 'born of an egg', i.e. a bird, and is an epithet of the sun-bird or fire-bird of Indo-European mythology. The verb describing what his mother did to him may mean either to throw aside or to miscarry, and a later etymology of Mārtāṇḍa' is 'dead in the egg', i.e. a miscarriage. The story of Mārtāṇḍa's still-birth is well known in Hindu mythology: Aditi bore eight sons, but only seven were the Ādityas; the eighth was unformed, unshaped; the Ādityas shaped him and made him into the sun. On another level, Mārtāṇḍa' is an epithet of man, born from the 'dead egg' that is the embryo; he is thus the ancestor of man, like Yama or Manu (both regarded as his sons), born to die.



Read these short remarks on Death and read 10.14 and 10.16, paying attention to different aspects of death described in various ways.

## DEATH

EVEN as the *Rig Veda* speculates in various contrasting, even conflicting ways about the process of creation, so too there is much variation in the speculations about death, and in the questions asked about death. There is evidence of different rituals – cremation (10.16) or burial (10.18), the latter also underlying the image of the ‘house of clay’ in a hymn to Varuṇa (see 7.89). Several fates are suggested for the dead man: heaven (10.14), a new body (10.16), revival (10.58), reincarnation (10.16), and dispersal among various elements (10.16.3, 10.58). It is also evident that there is a wide range of people that the dead man may hope to join, wherever he goes (10.154), and so it is not surprising that different groups of people are addressed, even within a single hymn: the fathers or dead ancestors in heaven (10.14), the gods (10.16), particularly Yama (10.14, 10.135), the dead man (10.14, 10.135), the mourners (10.14.12 and 10.14.14, 10.18), mother earth and Death himself (10.18). Together, these hymns reveal a world in which death is regarded with great sadness but without terror, and life on earth is preciously clung to, but heaven is regarded as a gentle place, rich in friends and ritual nourishment, a world of light and renewal.

### 10.14 *Yama and the Fathers*

This funeral hymn centres upon Yama, king of the dead, the first mortal to have reached the other world and the path-maker for all who came after him. Verses 1 and 2 address the mourners and describe this ancient path; 4 and 5 invoke Yama to come to the funeral in order that he may lead the dead man to heaven. Verses 3 and 6 invoke famous ancestors already in the world beyond; 7, 8 and 10 speed the dead man on his way, and 9 speeds the evil spirits on *their* way. Yama and his two dogs are addressed in 11 and 12; these dogs are regarded (like many Vedic gods) as dangerous because they kill you (verses 10 and 12) but also as potentially benevolent, because they lead you to heaven (verse 11). Verses 13-15 call upon the priests to offer Soma<sup>1</sup> to Yama, and the final verse recapitulates the two main themes : the farewell to the dead man on the path of Yama, and the offerings of Soma and praise to Yama.

1 The one who has passed beyond along the great, steep straits,<sup>2</sup> spying out the path for many, the son of Viva- svan,<sup>3</sup> the gatherer of men, King Yama – honour him with the oblation.

2 Yama was the first to find the way for us, this pasture that shall not be taken away.<sup>4</sup>  
Where our ancient fathers passed beyond, there everyone who is born follows, each on his own path.

3 Mātala<sup>5</sup> made strong by the Kavyas, and Yama by the Angirases, and Br̥haspati by the R̥kvas – both those whom the gods made strong and those who strengthen the gods :<sup>6</sup>  
some rejoice in the sacrificial call, others in the sacrificial drink.

- 4 Sit upon this strewn grass, O Yama, together with the Angirases, the fathers. Let the verses chanted by the poets carry you here. O King, rejoice in this oblation.
- 5 Come, Yama, with the Angirases worthy of sacrifice: rejoice here with the Vairūpas,<sup>7</sup> sitting on the sacred grass at this sacrifice. I will invoke Vivasvan, who is your father.
- 6 Our fathers, the Angirases, and the Navagvas, Atharvans, and Brhgas,<sup>7</sup> all worthy of Soma – let us remain in favour with them, as they are worthy of sacrifice, and let them be helpful and kind.
- 7 [*To the dead man :*] Go forth, go forth on those ancient paths on which our ancient fathers passed beyond. There you shall see the two kings, Yama and Varuṇa, rejoicing in the sacrificial drink.<sup>6</sup>
- 8 Unite with the fathers, with Yama, with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds,<sup>8</sup> in the highest heaven. Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again;<sup>9</sup> merge with a glorious body.
- 9 [*To demons:*] Go away, get away, crawl away from here. The fathers have prepared this place for *him*.<sup>10</sup> Yama gives him a resting-place adorned by days, and waters, and nights.<sup>11</sup>
- 10 [*To the dead man :*] Run on the right path, past the two brindled, four-eyed dogs, the sons of Saramā,<sup>12</sup> and then approach the fathers, who are easy to reach and who rejoice at the same feast as Yama.
- 11 Yama, give him over to your two guardian dogs, the four-eyed keepers of the path, who watch over men. O king, grant him happiness and health.
- 12 The two dark messengers of Yama with flaring nostrils wander among men, thirsting for the breath of life. Let them give back to us<sup>13</sup> a life of happiness here and today, so that we may see the sun.
- 13 For Yama press the Soma; to Yama offer the oblation; to Yama goes the well-prepared sacrifice, with Agni as its messenger.
- 14 Offer to Yama the oblation rich in butter, and go forth.<sup>14</sup> So may he intercede for us among the gods, so that we may live out a long life-span.<sup>15</sup>
- 15 Offer to Yama, to the king, the oblation most rich in honey. We bow down before the sages born in the ancient times, the ancient path-makers.
- 16 All through the three Soma days,<sup>16</sup> he<sup>17</sup> flies to the six broad spaces<sup>18</sup> and the one great one. Triṣṭubh, Gāyatrī, the metres – all these are placed in Yama.

#### NOTES

1. Soma is the sacrificial drink pressed from the Soma plant; it is the ambrosial food offered to the gods to make them immortal.

2. These are the paths leading to the highest heaven, where Yama dwells ; they may be the watercourses at the end of the world.
3. A name of the sun, father of Yama.
4. The meaning is either that everyone gets to heaven or that, once there, you never leave (i.e. that there is no rebirth).
5. A name of a god or demi-god who appears only here in the *Rig Veda*.
6. This verse contrasts two groups of individuals to be encountered in the world beyond (an expansion of the 'ancient fathers' mentioned in the previous verse). Mātali, Yama, and Bṛhaspati are here regarded as semi-divine figures, who are made strong by other gods and by the sacrificial drink, the Svadhā, here – and elsewhere – a name for Soma. The Kavyas, Angirases, and Ṛkvas are families of ancient poets, priests, and singers who make the gods strong and who rejoice in the sacrificial call, the sound 'Svāhā' that they make to call the gods and the fathers to receive the offering.
7. Other priestly clans related to the Angirases.
8. Not merely the dead man's own good deeds but those which are done on his behalf in the funeral ceremonies.
9. The dead man takes on a new, perfect body in place of the old one burnt in the fire (see 10.16); he 'goes back home' to heaven or to earth.
10. The flesh-eating ghouls who live in the burning-ground may contest the dead man's right to enter the world of heaven, or perhaps, as in later Hinduism, they merely wish to eat the corpse.
11. The waters may be the rains (that fall from heaven) or the cool, refreshing waters that are so often described as a feature of heaven, where the days and nights rotate as on earth. Yet another possible interpretation of the 'resting-place' would be a burning-place on earth, purified by water.
12. Yama's two dogs are the descendants of Saramā, the bitch of Indra (cf. 10.108), who guard the doorway to the other world, like Cerberus in Greece. They may be four-eyed in the sense of sharp-sighted or in reference to the round spots situated above their eyes.
13. The dogs are asked to give back to the mourners the life that was endangered while they were in the shadow of death.
14. That is, back into the world of the living.
15. Here Yama is asked to give life back to the mourners who are not yet ready to die, to keep them among the living who worship the gods, and not to lead them to the dead fathers.
16. The fire that burns during the three days of the Soma ceremony is directly connected with and follows immediately upon the cremation fire.

17. The dead man wanders for three days after death before arriving in heaven.

18. Either the three earths and three heavens (cf. 1.164.6, and 1.164.9) or two of each of the three worlds (earth, air, and sky; cf. 1.154.4). The one great space is the top of the sky, where Yama lives.

#### 10.16 *The Funeral Fire* **Please read this for your last Rig Veda reading**

Agni appears here in various roles: he is the cremation fire, who carries the oblation as well as the dead man to the fathers. In the first part (vv. 1-8), Agni is asked to burn the corpse gently but not too much, to temper it to perfection (*à point*, as Renou puts it) and to send it to the fathers, but not to destroy it. In the second part (vv. 9-12), a new fire is lit to carry the oblation to the gods and to lead the dead man to Yama. Thus the first fire is associated with the corpse and the fathers, and the second fire is associated with the oblation and the gods. In the third part (vv. 13-14), the funeral fire is extinguished.

The recurrent epithet 'Knower of creatures' (Jātavedas) is usually said to apply only to the auspicious, oblation-bearing form of Agni; but here it is also used to invoke, perhaps euphemistically, the corpse-eating Agni as well (vv. 1, 2, 4, and 5). The two fires interact in other ways, too: in verse 9, when the corpse is sufficiently 'cooked' and has undergone purification after its funeral pollution, the first, corpse-burning fire is dismissed to serve the gods and to carry the body to the fathers; at this time, a new, pure fire is summoned (kindled) to carry the oblation to the fathers and to carry to the gods whatever is laid upon it. But the first fire, now purified, is also sent to the sacrifice of the fathers, thus taking on a function similar to that of the second, pristine fire (participation in sacrifice) while retaining its original association with the fathers (in contrast with the gods, the masters of the second fire). This is a transformation, rather than a confusion, for in verse 9 the one fire becomes the other; as both are forms of Agni, he is merely asked to stop burning the corpse and to start carrying the oblation (a role prefigured by the reference to the 'gentle forms' in verse 4). In verse 11, both forms of Agni unite, and in verse 5 the corpse itself becomes the oblation.

The ambiguous nature of Agni in this hymn finds a parallel in the ambiguities surrounding the body of the dead man. Verse 3 states that the body will disperse into sky, earth, and water, while the eye, breath, and limbs go to their cosmic equivalences: sun, wind, and plants. The waters are often identified with the air, the middle realm of space between sky and earth; this would mean that the body disintegrates into the three worlds. But it is not clear whether the body is dispersed into all three places or whether one may choose one or the other; parts of the body (eye, breath, limbs) are specifically distributed, while the dead man himself is said to go into the three worlds.

This might imply that the soul of the dead man goes to these worlds, while his physical parts are distributed elsewhere. But the verse says that the limbs go to the plants, the place to which the soul is consigned in the *Upanisads*, where the doctrine of transmigration is first expounded. Moreover, the breath (often identified with the soul in

the *Upanisads*, and here called the *ātman*, the word that came to designate the transmigrating soul) is here said to disperse separately into the wind. Indeed, it seems to be the body, not the soul, of the dead man that Agni is asked to lead to heaven, to Yama, to the fathers, and to the gods, the body that is the focus of the entire hymn. It would thus appear that here, as in several of the more speculative creation hymns, the poet has tried out various, perhaps conflicting, views of the afterlife. These views overlap in the liminal figures of the hymn, for Yama and the fathers are both mortals and immortals, both pure and impure, the ones who receive the corpse but also the ones who receive the oblation and the Soma; moreover, the dead man himself begins as an impure corpse but becomes, by the end of the hymn, himself one of the fathers to whom the oblation is sent.

These problems are compounded by verse 5, which states that the dead man will get a new body (cf. 10.14.8) in order to reach his descendants. This latter word, literally ‘remaining’ (*śeṣa*), has provoked several interpretations that attempt to circumvent the paradox. Sāyana suggests that it refers to the body that remains after cremation (i.e. the bones); or it may refer to the survivors of the dead man, i.e. the mourners, or to those who have been buried before, i.e. the ancestors whom the dead man will join. But it more likely means the posterity of the dead man, i.e. the people that he has begotten or will beget with his new life and his new body. Is this body to exist in heaven or on earth? A few verses of the *Rig Veda* (and more detailed passages in the *Brāhmanas*) give ample evidence for the concept of the new body in heaven, depicting the afterlife as an improved replica of life on earth, a place where one raises children and watches them grow up. But the idea of a new body on earth is supported by the *Brāhmana* funeral ceremonies, the *śraddha* offerings in which a man’s descendants create for him, ritually, a new body in which he is reborn on earth. If this is the meaning of the verse, it is an early prefiguration of the doctrine of reincarnation.

Finally, if the dead man is to have a new body anyway, what is the motivation for the desire to keep the old body from being burnt too much (a concept that conflicts paradoxically with the idea of cremating the body in the first place) and to keep it from being destroyed by unclean animals (in verse 6, which may in fact refer to damage done to the live body in the past as well as to the corpse; cf. 10.14.8, where apparently natural ‘imperfections’ of the body are to be removed)? It would appear that Agni cooks the corpse, a function regarded as the opposite of eating it (as he usually does); cooking raises it to a higher state (fit for heaven), while eating reduces it to a lower state (fit for animals). The wild beasts who would eat the corpse are kept away, as is the omnivorous Agni; instead, the corpse is to be cooked to prepare it for the gods, like the prepared Soma. And Soma, the healer, is asked to assist Agni in cleansing and healing the body (v. 6).

1 Do not burn him entirely, Agni, or engulf him in your flames. Do not consume his skin or his flesh. When you have cooked him perfectly, O knower of creatures, only then send him forth to the fathers.

- 2 When you cook him perfectly, O knower of creatures, then give him over to the fathers. When he goes on the path that leads away the breath of life, then he will be led by the will of the gods.
- 3 *[To the dead man:]* May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature;<sup>1</sup> or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs.
- 4 *[To Agni:]* The goat is your share; burn him with your heat.<sup>2</sup> Let your brilliant light and flame burn him. With your gentle forms, O knower of creatures, carry this man to the world of those who have done good deeds.<sup>3</sup>
- 5 Set him free again to go to the fathers, Agni, when he has been offered as an oblation in you and wanders with the sacrificial drink.<sup>4</sup> Let him reach his own descendants, dressing himself in a life-span. O knower of creatures, let him join with a body.
- 6 *[To the dead man :]* Whatever the black bird has pecked out of you, or the ant, the snake, or even a beast of prey, may Agni who eats all things make it whole, and Soma who has entered the Brahmins.<sup>5</sup>
- 7 Gird yourself with the limbs of the cow as an armour against Agni,<sup>6</sup> and cover yourself with fat and suet, so that he will not embrace you with his impetuous heat in his passionate desire to burn you up.
- 8 *[To Agni:]* O Agni, do not overturn this cup<sup>7</sup> that is dear to the gods and to those who love Soma, fit for the gods to drink from, a cup in which the immortal gods carouse.
- 9 I send the flesh-eating fire far away. Let him go to those whose king is Yama,<sup>8</sup> carrying away all impurities. But let that other, the knower of creatures, come here and carry the oblation to the gods, since he knows the way in advance.
- 10 The flesh-eating fire has entered your house, though he sees there the other, the knower of creatures ; I take that god away to the sacrifice of the fathers.<sup>9</sup> Let him carry the heated drink<sup>10</sup> to the farthest dwelling-place.
- 11 Agni who carries away the corpse, who gives sacrifice to the fathers who are strengthened by truth – let him proclaim the oblation to the gods and to the fathers.
- 12 *[To the new fire :]* Joyously would we put you in place, joyously would we kindle you. Joyously carry the joyous fathers here to eat the oblation.
- 13 Now, Agni, quench and revive the very one you have burnt up. Let Kiyāmba,<sup>11</sup> Pākādūrvā, and Vyalkaśa plants grow in this place.
- 14 O cool one,<sup>11</sup> bringer of coolness ; O fresh one, bringer of freshness; unite with the female frog. Delight and inspire this Agni.

#### NOTES

1. Literally, your *dharma*. Sāyana links this with *karma*, interpreting it to mean that the dead man will be reborn according to his good works, to enjoy their fruits in heaven; it may have a more general meaning, according to the way the worlds are arranged in general. But the simplest idea would be ‘according to your natural affinities’.
2. This refers to the practice of placing the limbs of a scapegoat over the dead man, so that Agni would consume them and not the corpse with his violent flames.
3. Cf. 10.14.8 and 10.154 for joining with good deeds and the doers of good deeds in heaven.
4. The Svadhâ offered to the gods at the funeral. Cf. 10.14.3.
5. Soma appears here in his capacity of god or plant (cf. The cooling plants in the final verses), or simply as the Soma juice inside the priests.
6. This refers to the limbs and caul (inner membrane of the embryo) or skin of a dead cow which would be used in addition to or in place of the scapegoat, while the corpse would be anointed with fat and suet.
7. A wooden cup that the dead man had used in life to make Soma offerings to the gods and to ‘those who love Soma’ (i.e. the fathers) was placed at the corpse’s head, filled with melted butter.
8. The fathers.
9. This could be a sacrifice by the fathers to the gods, or, more likely, a sacrifice to the fathers.
10. The hot oblation for the fathers, who either come to the sacrifice (brought by the non-flesh-eating Agni) or have Agni bring them the drink.
11. The plants in verses 13 and 14, some called by obscure names, others by descriptive epithets (‘cool one’), are water plants. These verses accompany the ritual of dousing the fire with water so thoroughly that it produces a marsh where water-plants and frogs may thrive. In later rituals, these items were actually used; here they are merely metaphorically invoked. The female frog, in particular, is a symbol of rain and fertility (cf. 7.103). Thus new life sprouts at the end of the funeral.

### 10.18 *Burial Hymn*

This evocative hymn contains several references to symbolic gestures that may well have been accompanied by rituals similar to those known to us from later Vedic literature. But the human concerns of the hymn are vividly accessible to us, whatever the ritual may have been.

1 Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods. I say to you who have eyes, who have ears : do not injure our children or our men.