Speak for itself

How the long history of guesswork and commentary on a unique corpus of poetry has rendered it incomprehensible

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THE RIGVEDA
The earliest religious poetry of India
Three volumes
1,728pp. Oxford University Press. £257.50 (US $399).
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The first translation into English for over a century of the earliest Indo-European poetic anthology has at last appeared, the work of two distinguished American indologists. Within its soberly academic trio of hardback volumes, however, seethes an incoherent mix of mumbo-jumbo and misplaced obscenity, most of it apparently meaningless. It reads like a burlesque version, in the style of *Hamlet Travestie*, of a long lost original – except that the original is not lost, on the contrary, it has been immaculately preserved. "What", as the Prince of Morocco said when he opened the golden casket, "have we here?"

I believe that history can explain. Over unknown generations this ancient poetry had been transmitted orally in prehistoric India by a priestly elite. It was believed to be of divine origin, so its exact preservation was of paramount importance. Not a word, not a syllable, not a sound, was to be altered. The sophisticated form and poetic style of the poems made them suitable for ceremonial use; some thought the fact that they were no longer understood gave them ritual efficacy.

News of this remarkable survival reached the West in 1733 in a letter from a Jesuit traveller in India. What astonished Père Jean Calmette was that knowledge of the "Samouscroutam" or Sanskrit, as familiar to the Brahmans as Latin was to him, was insufficient, "without the help of a commentary", for them to understand the poems. But this had been the case for two millennia. Around 500 BC an early scholar, Yāska, had attempted to refute the suggestion that the poems were meaningless, and we know from the extensive quotations in his *Nirukta* that they have remained unchanged for well over 2,000 years. But it is also clear that the Sanskrit of 500 BC didn't help either when it came to understanding either the language or the subject matter of the poems.

By the early 1840s, manuscripts had found their way into Western libraries, and the intention of the young German linguist Friedrich Max Müller was to produce an edition of the two forms in which the anthology had been handed down. One of these reproduced the spoken sounds strung together, and the other divided the sounds into words – an important adjunct to oral tradition, preventing, for example, "pea stalks" from sliding into "peace talks" (or vice versa). His edition remains definitive. But the difficulty of his task was multiplied many times over by the French orientalist Eugène Burnouf, who insisted that the fourteenth-century Commentary, of which he owned a manuscript, should be edited at the same time. This monument to medieval scholasticism, presumably the one that Père Calmette had heard about, drew on a mass of derivative material known loosely as "the Veda". It was vast.

Finding a publisher for the extended project was not easy. Scholars were deeply curious about the "Rig-veda", the name that had been given to the anthology in antiquity, but not much interested in the Commentary. The Boden Professor at Oxford, Horace Hayman Wilson, thought he could persuade the University to publish the work but on condition that he himself should edit the poems, and Otto von Böhtlingk in St Petersburg made a similarly unacceptable proposal. When a publisher was at last found, further difficulties surfaced. The manuscripts of the Rigveda were entirely consistent, but those of the Commentary were a mess. By the time Max Müller's sixth volume had lumbered into print in 1874, Burnouf had been dead for over twenty years, and Max Müller was no longer a struggling scholar in Paris but an eminent member of the Oxford establishment: its first Professor of Comparative Philology, a member of Christ Church, and a Delegate to the OUP.

While the Rigveda, encumbered by this heavy clog, was wearily dragging its slow length through the press – the description, with its nice echo of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, came from Professor Whitney at Yale – Max Müller had to defend himself against the charge that he had wasted his time. His task had been made particularly onerous by chaotic references in the Commentary to a vast corpus of prose texts called the Brāhmaṇas. Whitney gave their authors short shrift, deriding their "misapprehensions and deliberate perversions of their text, their ready invention of tasteless and absurd legends to explain the allusions, real or fancied, which it contains, their often atrocious etymologies". When the classicist-turned-Rigvedic-scholar Edward Vernon Arnold wrote, in "Recent Works on the Rigveda" in the *Classical Review* for 1900, that in the Brāhmaṇas the Rigveda was "distorted to suit a creed and a ceremonial that the authors of the hymns would never have recognised", he was summarizing nineteenth-century opinion.

But the fact that the authors of the Brāhmaṇas had not understood them did not mean that the poems were indecipherable. In 1839 a Greek scholar had, by chance, made a significant contribution even *before* he was able to consult the text. In his *Griechisches Wurzellexikon* Theodor Benfey had postulated the existence of an abstract compound *sva–dhā́* ("self–placing, inherent nature") in Sanskrit, on the analogy of Greek *éthos*, from which English *ethics* ultimately derives. When, years later, Max Müller encountered the word *svadhā́* in Benfey's abstract sense in the Rigveda he proclaimed a triumph for Comparative Philology. The Brāhmaṇas regularly assigned concrete, ritual interpretations to unfamilar words of sophisticated meaning, and had explained the word *svadhā́* as "sacrificial drink offering", or, where this didn't work, a sacrificial shout: "svadhā!"

Misinterpretations reiterated over countless centuries are, however, hard to shed. Much of "the clog" stuck, and made the rest impossible to decipher. The sheer volume of exegesis was dispiriting, and Max Müller felt its growing effect. By the preface to the fourth volume, his youthful optimism had begun to dim: "the dark and unintelligible passages have still a decided preponderance over those that have been made out", he wrote gloomily.

Burnouf's intervention had guaranteed that Western scholars could not approach the text with a clean slate. But while they struggled with the "dark and unintelligible passages" like flies caught in a web, a ray of hope gleamed from a study in distant Pondicherry. The poet and philosopher Aurobindo Ghose, born in Calcutta but given a classical education in England at St Paul's and King's College, Cambridge, had returned to India in 1893 and embarked on an independent study of the poems. It was as clear to him as it had been to Whitney and Arnold that childish stories and ritual interpretations had been invented to explain passages that were no longer understood. He, too, was forthright, describing them as "grotesque nonsense": "What for instance could be made of clarified butter dropping from heaven or dripping from the horses of Indra or dripping from the mind?" But the year was 1914, the world was plunging into war, and the journal in which he published his arguments had a tiny circulation. It seems never to

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"We twa hae paidl'd in the burn, / Frae morning sun till dine; / But seas between us braid hae roar'd / Sin' auld lang syne." Robert Burns's most celebrated watery stanza might have come to mind as firefighters did their best to protect an East Ayrshire inn, Poosie Nansie's, from the unprecedented assaults of Storm Frank at the end of the year (it had already survived a battering by car earlier in 2015). More accomplished Burnsians could quote from the work he set in the building itself, a doss-house for "The Jolly Beggars", with its even more appropriately wintry opening: "When lyart leaves bestrow the yird, / Or wavering like the bauckie-bird, / Bedim cauld Boreas' blast; / When hailstanes drive wi' bitter skyte, / And infant frosts begin to bite. . . ".

have found its way into Western libraries.

The focus of attention has now changed, and the prose texts called the Brāhmaṇas are respected in Sanskrit departments as an important source of information about ancient ritual practices. The earliest Indo-European poetry has had to take a back seat. As Frits Staal wrote in 1982 in "What is happening in Classical Indology?", "Some chocolates can only be sold if they are wrapped up in gold-speckled papers. Books about the Rigveda will only be read through the medium of some fashionable theory". Rudolph Roth, in the preface to the seven-volume *Sanskrit Wörterbuch* (1853–95), compiled jointly with Otto von Böhtlingk, had been clear that the poets of the Rigveda "speak a language divided from that of the Brāhmaṇas (which scarcely differs from the so-called classical Sanskrit) by a chasm as wide as that which separates the Latin of the Salic hymns from that of M. T. Varro", but today's indologists see it the other way round. As Wendy Doniger puts it in the introduction to her Penguin selection from the Rigveda: "one feels that the hymns themselves are mischievous translations into a 'foreign' language".

The sea change that took place in the middle of the last century is vividly depicted in *Ardor*, Roberto Calasso's study of the ritual world of the Brāhmaṇas. He describes the moment, at a conference in Essen-Bredeney in July 1959, when the Vedic scholar Karl Hoffmann finally accorded respect to the long-despised authors of the prose texts. "It was as if", writes Calasso, "a group of patients had suddenly been moved from a mental hospital to an academy." And it was then that the ancient Indo-European poets, with their lyrical songs in a long-forgotten language, were led away to take their place in the asylum.

Stephanie Jamison, the co-author, with Joel Brereton, of this latest translation of the Rigveda, has been advocating the approach of the Brāhmaṇas since 1991, when she wrote "as the Brāhmaṇas tell us so often, 'the gods love the obscure', and in investigating Vedic matters we must learn to cultivate at least that divine taste". In a presentation given in 2012 at Wolfson College, Oxford, she entertained her audience with a description of the "magic decoder ring" that this requires. The "decoding" is provided in their new translation in square brackets: "weapons [=soma drinks]", "offspring [=soma drinks]", dawns "anoint their beam [=sacrificial post]", gods lay down good wood "in the belly [=the hearth(s) of the ritual fires]". There are well over 2,000 of these pairs of square brackets in their translation, which seems at odds with the statement in their introduction, "by translating the text literally, we hope to leave the interpretive opportunities open for the readers".

With the requirement for making sense removed, a *vogue la galère* atmosphere pervades the whole. The interpretation of a *hapax legomenon* with a feminine ending as "penis wielder" hardly comes as a surprise, nor the suggestion, at 1.126.6, that "the second half of the verse appears to allow the word *yabh* 'f***' [the bashful asterisks are mine] to be assembled from parts of several words" (the verb √*yabh* does not occur in the Rigveda). There's a great deal of "thrusting" for some reason, a word Jamison and Brereton use to translate at least six unrelated verbs; and although the precise sense of the complex word *dhā́man*, "foundation, law, precept", related to Greek *thémis* and to Old English *dóm*, is debated, it surely never means "buttocks" (8.92).

This approach is inevitably at a considerable remove from the text itself, and not just in terms of all the supplied material. In their introduction the authors express their commitment to the text: "Among older scholars there was a tendency to deal with difficulties in a text by emending it. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, scholars increasingly recognized that they could gain a much better understanding of the text by accepting the text as transmitted. We too are committed to accepting the traditional text". In fact, a large proportion of the emendations of earlier scholars have been silently incorporated, of which they appear unaware. They note, for example, to 5.17 that "in verse 3, the poet refers only to the mouth of Agni and shifts to a sexual image" (and "thrusting" follows), but the translation "mouth" depends on a nineteenth-century emendation. At the end of 8.58, a poem to the Aśvins, the Dioskouroi of the poems, the ritual implications of "left-over (soma)" are keenly discussed. Jamison and Brereton have to supply a noun to agree with their translation "left-over", but it again depends on an early emendation. The verb is not a past participle, a form common in later Sanskrit, but a dual aorist imperative concluding the poem. The word "soma" is not present, but supplied material in round brackets is as necessary to their approach as is exegesis in square brackets. The process of emending the text on the basis of assumed meaning has been going on since medieval times: their translation of 8.99.6 reflects a change of verb dating back to the Commentary, also unmarked.

Professors Jamison and Brereton are more confident than their predecessors about reading back bizarre translations from later texts. This is clearly explained in their introduction, where they give the example of a verb previously understood to mean "sing": "To give a single example, there is a verbal root √*ribh* that seems literally to mean 'croak', 'creak', 'rasp', 'squawk' – used, for example, of the sound of a creaky wagon". This sense is incorporated throughout: Dawn is "squawked to" by the singers in 7.76, and the Aśvins have a song "rasped out" to them in 1.120. The fact that the "creaky wagon" comes from a text that is at least a thousand years later is not considered important, and not mentioned (the source was, however, named when this example was first given, in a presentation by Professor Jamison in 1999).

This "reading back" leaves scholars in other fields hopelessly groping for information. The introduction is firm that "the Ṛgveda does not attest rice cultivation", but their text then regularly incorporates the "striking whiff of a narrative . . . further developed in Vedic prose" of the god Indra's supposed theft of something they translate as "rice porridge". And the statement made by Michael Witzel at Harvard, first published in 1992 in a joint paper with Stephanie Jamison and much cited in archaeological circles, that "ruins", *armaká*, in the Rigveda are evidence that its composition post-dates the collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization itself collapses here, where the word *armaká* is translated "mudflat". The word only occurs in one verse of the 10,000 or so in the Rigveda, and is effectively a *hapax legomenon*.

Roberto Calasso vividly portrays the world of the Brāhmaṇas in *Ardor*. But he has been misled in one crucial respect: it is not the world of the Rigvedic poets. His book opens with a description of the fundamental importance to what he calls "Vedic civilisation" of the division between priests and warriors, of brahmin and kṣatriya. But this has no place in the ancient poems of the Rigveda, where *kṣatríya* is an epithet of gods. Nor is the devotion to the ritual fire he describes in such detail to be found in the poems. Although incessantly discussed in the Jamison/Brereton commentary, "ritual fire" never occurs in the poems themselves. Exegesis such as the example already given, of gods laying down wood "in the belly [=the hearth(s) of the ritual fires]", or, for the same word, "o you who stand in the belly [=fire pit]", is simply the traditional way of explaining inherited mistranslations. The word *vakṣáṇā* "belly" (in other contexts "udders", and in a previous study by Jamison "breasts"), is not any part of the body: this derives from a later text called the *Atharvaveda*. The word is consistently plural in form and a study of Rigvedic contexts shows that it means "fertile places".

Max Müller, from *Vanity Fair* (1875)

Calasso also recounts that the Vedic people "from time to time moved around on chariots with spoked wheels", but there is no evidence of this in the poems. "Chariots" in the Rigveda usually belong to the gods, and their wheels range in number from one to seven; they travel through the sky accompanied by winged horses or drawn by birds. The introduction of a "wheel" in a human context in two verses of 10.95 in the Jamison/Brereton translation – "When will he let a tear roll like a wheel?" – depends on another textual change, this time dating from the 1950s, once again unmarked. Jamison and Brereton do not name their source text, but it is clearly not Max Müller's.

Strangely, though, "spoked wheels" have been introduced twenty-two times into this translation, as a new interpretation of the word *aratí*. This epithet of the fire god was previously understood to mean "servant" or "messenger"; Böhtlingk and Roth had compared it with Greek *hypērétēs*. The translation doesn't relate to any of the contexts in which the word occurs: "the powerful spoked wheel, now kindled, has appeared". But their explanation is characteristic. "The poet's pet word for Agni, 'spoked wheel', presumably originally referring to the shape of the fireplace." The translator Louis Renou, writing in 1964 after the publication of the essay on which this interpretation is based, while acknowledging the suggestion, was applying considerations of sense when he concluded, "la traduction, sur le plan pratique, ne peut guère différer de 'messager'". Given the current frantic search for evidence of "spoked wheels" in the remains of the Indus Valley Civilization, the translation could even be considered irresponsible.

The word "enigmatic" is used throughout their commentary. An early occurrence introduces their translation of 1.22.14, "the inspired poets lick the ghee-filled milk of Heaven and Earth with their poetic insights", a translation that exemplifies what Aurobindo had described as "grotesque nonsense". Jamison has recently set up a website to allow scope for additional commentary, in which she repeats her puzzlement at this verse. But it doesn't need more commentary, it needs to be deciphered. As Rudolph Roth wrote over a century ago, "A translation must speak for itself. As a rule, it only requires a commentary where it is not directly convincing, and where the translator does not feel secure". Three inherited mistranslations converge here. The verse, as I've written elsewhere, simply means

> In the productive plenty of heaven and earth
> Poets indeed delight in their thoughts.

This latest attempt by Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton at interpreting the earliest Indo-European poems by means of Vedic tradition must surely bring the process to an end: it clearly doesn't work. Can anyone seriously believe that their version of 9.101.12–13:

> These purified soma juices, attentive to poetic inspiration, mixed with curds, are worthy to be seen like suns, mobile yet fixed in the ghee. Like a mortal he [=the dog] has shown preference for the speech of the stalk being pressed . . .

– is anything other than simply wrong? As *Hamlet Travestie* slid into *Dogg's Hamlet* I found myself wondering: could this be a long-hatched plot by the Pentagon to destroy Hindu fundamentalism at its heart?

I have argued the sophistication and decipherability of this ancient anthology elsewhere. The approach that is required is straightforward. First, we need to begin with a different assumption: that the poems are as meaningful as their complex grammar, consistent language and word formation, and highly sophisticated metre would suggest. All later emendations should be set aside – including the only one universally accepted by modern scholars (but not incorporated by Max Müller), that at 1.70.7 *ca rátham* must be a mistake for *carátham*, which is based on the belief that *rátha* invariably has the concrete meaning "chariot".

But the most important thing is that this still undeciphered body of ancient poetry needs to be studied independently of "the clog". Modern scholars owe a huge debt of gratitude to the ancient Indian tradition, which has preserved the text of these poems so faithfully. But it has proved a double-edged sword. If the Rigveda is to be allowed to take its place in world literature, guesses dating back to prehistory about its subject matter and meaning need to be firmly put away. Until then, the absence of scholarly engagement with its decipherment continues to present a major block to our knowledge of early Indo-European history.