

---

# The Invisible World of the Rigveda

*Caley Charles Smith*

Young Harris College, USA

## Preliminary Remarks

The Rigveda (also written Ṛgveda) is an anthology of 1028 metrical *sūktas*, “well-spoken (poems),” in ten *maṇḍalas*, “books,” in the oldest dialect of Vedic Sanskrit. These poems were composed over three millennia ago as verbal gifts offered to the gods as part of a gift-exchange ceremony in which the gods would give the poet and his community victory and prosperity. Its verses have been used in ritual performances ever since. Its most famous verse, the Gāyatrī mantra, is recited by millions of Hindus every dawn, midday, and dusk.

*tāt savitūr váreṇīyam / bhárgo devásya dhīmahi / dhíyo yó nah̐ pracodáyāt //*<sup>1</sup>

Might we make our own that desirable effulgence of god Savitar,  
who will rouse forth our insights.

(ṚV III.62.10; Jamison and Brereton 2014, 554)

This verse is itself an example of gift-exchange in the Rigveda. Heavenly Savitar sends the visions (*dhíyo*) which inspires the poets to create the very poetry which will celebrate Savitar. My hope is that this chapter will participate in a kind of gift-exchange too, by rousing in the reader the curiosity to learn more about this rich text than can be presented here.

What is usually intended by “the Rigveda” is the Rksamhita (Ṛksamhitā), which is the collection of poems in the flow of fast uninterrupted speech. Because these texts were composed orally, the Rksamhita preserves the sounds of its live performance. The Rigvedic tradition also transmits a second copy of the text, the Rkpadapatha (Ṛkpadapāṭha), in which each word is pronounced *in pausa*. It was created as a memory-checking mechanism,

---

*A Companion to World Literature*. Edited by Ken Seigneurie.

© 2019 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2019 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0019

attesting to the importance placed on the faithful transmission of the text. By these means, the Rigveda has been memorized and orally transmitted longer than any other text in the history of the world, but does the incomparable commitment to its memorization and transmission make it literature, let alone world literature? The Rigveda knows many worlds, both the mundane and the heavenly, but the question of world literature is best posed by Emily Apter (2013, 8–9):

at its very core World Literature seemed oblivious to the Untranslatable – as shown by its unqueried inclusion of the word “world.”

While the market of world literature is benign of intention, it operates on the assumption that local literatures can be aesthetically appreciated by a global audience because quality is independent of origin and can survive translation. The Rigveda has been a part of this market at least since the Indomania of the nineteenth century. Consider the Ezourvedam.<sup>2</sup> Enthusiastically acquired and copied by Voltaire, the Ezourvedam was a seventeenth-century forgery created by Jesuits attempting to repackage Catholic theology as an ancient Vedic text. Another way of thinking about it, however, is as a particularly bad translation of the Gospels. How do we avoid making new Ezourvedams? It is this question which I hope to answer, by querying the worlds of the Rigveda and bringing that which eludes translation to the fore.

That the Rigveda belongs to more than one world is apparent when talking to different people about it. One such world warred with another as recently 2006, when the controversy over the representation of the history of Hinduism in California textbooks resolved, among other things, to refer to the *sūktas* of the Rigveda not as songs or poems, but as sacred texts. The word song or poem, at least to some, makes the texts of the Rigveda comparable to other songs or poems which have human authors. This notion is incompatible with a major tenet of modern Hindu thought: that the Vedas (a category which includes the Rigveda) are authorless, timeless, and eternal. The sacred syllables of the Vedas were revealed to ancient *ṛṣis* or seers, and not composed by them. Thus, the quality of *apauruṣeyatva*, “non-human-ness,” which can be approximated as “authorlessness,” has been attributed to the Vedas since at least the second century BCE, where it is theorized by the earliest text of the Mimamsa (Mīmāṃsā) school of classical Sanskrit philosophy. Francis X. Clooney (1990, 168) writes that:

*apauruṣeyatva* is [used in the Jaiminisūtras] to simply dismiss the possibility that the *ṛṣis* might have a creative or authorial function in regard to the text. Jaimini’s position is that they are secondary, peripheral, whatever their insights or personal qualities might be. That they speak and teach is required; the remainder of their experiences and abilities is simply irrelevant.

From this perspective, the seers were not authors but simply the first to receive and transmit the Vedas, their activity identical to those who receive and transmit the Vedas today. Hieratic families have orally preserved their family’s canonical Vedic texts generation after generation in order to perform selections from them during ritual ceremonies. So, while the uncountable transmissions might compel some to say the Rigveda is from time

immemorial, in a sense this would be inaccurate. From the perspective of the custodians of the Vedas, time never conquered memory. The child of a Vedic household hears recitation everywhere before it can form its earliest memory. Thus, experientially, the Vedas are a soundscape which is both immersive and without beginning. It is the eternal echo of an unbroken lineage of male ancestors. In his fieldwork with Vedic families in the Godavari delta, David Knipe (2015, 28) remarked that his informants “stressed that certain Brahmans ‘exist in Veda.’”

I want to contrast this lived experience of embodied textuality with the experience that fin-de-siècle philologists had of the Rigveda as collections of dusty, worm-eaten, and above all quiet manuscripts. For while Western scholars had been fascinated by Vedic texts before, the end of the long nineteenth century witnessed the first generation of philologists whose credo was the exceptionlessness of sound law, better known as the Neogrammarian hypothesis. If texts were merely frozen forms of language, and language change was rule-governed and path-dependent, then a comparison of the languages of two texts would yield a relative chronology of those texts. The Vedic texts were assigned to a historical “Vedic period” in which some texts were composed first and others later. The Rigveda was dated to the latter half of the second millennium BCE, becoming the oldest Indo-European text until the discovery of Hittite. Needless to say, this ontology of the text is hard to reconcile with one in which the text is timeless and authorless.

Yet reconcile we must, for that is the lived experience of those that encountered the Rigveda intimately, whose bodies the text entered, and who devoted their lives to its unerring reproduction. Both understandings of the text are real, for literature is a phenomenon of human consciousness; text does not exist outside of our experience of it. It is precisely these lived experiences, however, which defy translation, for by consigning the text to a new language (English), to a new medium (paper), and to a new system of visually coding sound (writing), a radically different experience emerges. The old experience of textual sensation is left untranslated. That sensation I neither understand nor can I recapitulate here. However, I will attempt to steer us toward it by exploring three features of verbal art in the Rigveda which are invisible to translation. This invisibility is because they are inextricably rooted in aural perception, in the live performance of the text, which can only be imagined when silently reading an inert page in solitude.

## The Heuristics of Translation

### The Poetic Image

I want to make my presentation of the translatable explicit as a prolegomenon to my presentation of the untranslatable. Let us compare two different translations of one verse from the Rigveda. The first translation is that of Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, who produced the first complete English translation of the Rigveda in over a century.

The inspired poets lick the ghee-filled milk of this very pair  
 [=Heaven and Earth] with their poetic insights.  
 (RV I.22.14ab; Jamison and Brereton 2014, 115)

The second translation comes from a review of the first by Karen Thomson.

In the productive plenty of heaven and earth, poets indeed delight in their thoughts.  
(RV I.22.14ab; Thomson 2016, 3)

Jamison and Brereton add brackets to indicate that *táyor íd*, “of those very two,” resumes a pair identified in the previous verse of this poem:

Let the great two, Heaven and Earth, mix this sacrifice for us  
Let them carry us with their supports.  
(RV I.22.13; Jamison and Brereton 2014, 115)

Jamison and Brereton therefore are making an assumption that a verse that belongs to the same hymn provides better context for another verse in the same hymn than a verse outside of it. Since the preceding verse commands Heaven and Earth to mix (*mimikṣatām*) this sacrifice (*imāṃ yajñām*), it stands to reason that the milk (*páyo*) which is ghee-filled (*ghṛtávat*) in the following verse is the same oblation. Oblations are usually poured into Agni, the sacrificial fire, who licks them up. His flames are likened to tongues. Together, the verses produce an evocative image of poet-priests, whose normal behavior is pouring oblations into the sacrificial fire, as themselves fires who lick up the oblations poured by the mother and father of the cosmos. Poetry is a reciprocal affair, for the poetic performance offered to the cosmos is returned in the form of poetic inspiration.

Thomson, like Jamison and Brereton, interprets *táyor íd* to be a reference to Heaven and Earth, presumably on the basis of the previous verse, but she has not represented the original pronoun in her translation. While Jamison and Brereton present their inference in brackets, Thomson presents “of heaven and earth” as if it were explicit in the text. This deviation from the text is less problematic for Thomson than the ugly use of brackets. In fact, all of her translation choices favor aesthetic English over fidelity to Vedic. She translates *ghṛtávat* as “productive” which erases the existence of a noun *ghṛtá-*, “ghee,” and a suffix *-va(n)t-* “possessing.” In the same vein, I can only imagine that Thomson believes *ribanti*, “they lick,” to be a metaphor indicating not that the poets literally lick but rather that they delight. If she has correctly decoded a metaphor, then by removing that metaphor and replacing it with a gloss she has denied that metaphor to anyone who reads her translation. This kind of semantic bleaching pries figurative language away from the poetic culture which produced it. Further, if a translation fails to carry that poetic image across, is it still a *translation*? Or is it more like an Ezourvedam? It stands to reason that if the Vedic poets describe themselves as licking cosmic milk through their poetic visions, then the capacity of the verbal to convey enigmatic visuals was of utmost importance. A translation should be considered “good” from the perspective of the source material, which is to say I think the aesthetic values of the source material should come across.

### Passive Polysemy

Thomson’s translation is embedded in a larger argument that the poetry of the Rigveda must be distinguished from its use in ritual performances which occurred centuries later as

represented by texts known as the Brahmanas (Brāhmaṇas), which are ritual commentaries composed some generations after the Samhitas (Saṃhitās). She takes it as a fact that “the authors of the Brāhmaṇas had not understood [the poems of the Rigveda],” and therefore tries to sanitize the poetry of its ritual commitments. Here we have an immediate lesson in how to think about the worlds of the Rigveda. We must reject the notion that there is a privileged insider who has perfect and unfettered access to all aspects of the text, precisely because Vedic poetry is a multigenerational process in which new poets borrow from past ones and redeploy archaic material in new ways. To compose in an oral tradition is to draw upon a vast store of memorized poetic material. This poetic storehouse is intrinsically diachronic, because memorization is a result of emulating previous generations who were themselves emulating previous generations. These diachronic dimensions make the poems semantically polyvalent, adding new meanings and connotations to words while preserving older usages in formula. This type of *passive* polysemy is the product of continuous accretion prior to the crystallization of the text, a phenomenon I will keep distinct from the *active* polysemy which I will treat in the following section.

If we were to deny this kind of passive polysemy and adhere to the idea of one correct “understanding” of the text, we would encounter a vicious regress. Since the collection and redaction of the text is younger than the composition of the hymns, we might say that, according to Thomson’s sense of the word, the creators of the Rigveda did not “understand” the hymns. Since some *maṇḍalas* appear more archaic than others, we might be tempted to say that the Vedic poets of a younger *maṇḍala* did not “understand” the older ones. Even the poet of the most archaic hymn in the Rigveda is the beneficiary of an Indo-Iranian poetic tradition which is not transparent to him. When Thomson ignores the depth of time internal to the Rigveda while emphasizing the depth of time outside of it, she reifies the Rigveda into a monolithic synchronic entity with one correct “understanding,” an ontology of the text not reflected by the history of the document.

## Untranslatable Aesthetics

### Active Polysemy

Above, I used the term *passive* polysemy to cover cases in which semantic polyvalence is the product of the preservation of semantic archaisms and innovations across multiple generations in an oral tradition. I use the term *active* polysemy to refer to the intentional layering of meaning by means of metaphor, double entendre, ambiguity, and implication.

Classical Sanskrit *kāvya*, “poetry,” is famous for a kind of protracted double entendre known as *śleṣa*. In a *śleṣa*, not only are the individual words in a verse polysemous, but the result is two distinct sentences emerging from one phonetic structure.<sup>3</sup> The pre-classical origins of *śleṣa* are not well understood, but it must have arisen on some level from the aural experience of the text. An audience of connoisseurs could hear both narratives encoded in the performance simultaneously. Although the Rigveda predates the classical period by over a millennium, Stephanie Jamison (2015, 165) notes that “[s]imultaneous reference is quite common in the [Rig]veda.” In the following verse, she argues that the poet simultaneously praises Indra and Agni in ways not unlike classical *śleṣa*.

He is set down, who, on wood or not, delights  
 – a shining praise-song woke you busy two,  
 on the many days [of its singing did] Indra [delight or did] the pourer –  
 of men, manly, the manliest, the world-protector.

(RV X.29.1; my translation)

One clue that something is going on poetically is the extremely uncharacteristic identification of Indra as an oblation pouring priest (*botā*). Indra is never called a pourer elsewhere, but Agni is very often called the pourer of gods and of men (*bōtā / nṛṇām*, “the pourer ... of men”). The poet could be referring to Agni as the one who delights on wood, this wood a personification of fire combusting logs. The alternative, on the other hand, not delighting on wood, is hardly a quality restricted to Indra alone. In the second quarter-verse, or pāda, we learn that a praise-song (*stōmo*) woke (*ajīgah*) two entities who are directly addressed (*vām*). We can infer that one is Agni, who delights on wood, but the identity of the other is held in suspense until the third pāda gives us a name: Indra.

The final pāda praises *nṛṇām nāriyo nṛtamah*, “of men, manly, the manliest” who is a *kṣapāvān*, which Jamison argues could be understood as *kṣapā*, “by night,” + *va(n)t*, “having,” perhaps a reference to Agni burning all night long on the wood on which he delights. The presence of *purudīneṣu* “on many days” in pāda C corroborates her reading, as night and day constitute a common merism in Vedic poetry. She notes that it can also be read as *pāvant-*, “protecting,” the *kṣam*, “Earth,” and thus perhaps be a reference to Indra as protector of the world. In summary, this verse introduces an ambiguity as to who has been set down here, then explains that this song woke up Indra and Agni. After resolving the ambiguity concerning their identities, the verse then reintroduces ambiguity by praising the manliest of men without telling us whether it is Agni or Indra who is manlier.

What is really going on here? Praise of the gods in the Rigveda is often understood to be tacitly panegyric; the poet praises his own patron as the terrestrial approximation of a god, most frequently Indra. The double entendre allows this verse to praise two gods simultaneously yet denies us a final determination as to which god is supreme. Perhaps there is an invisible third dedicand: the poet’s human patron. He too is a *kṣapāvān*, the manliest of men, who is ultimately *indistinguishable* from (and thus homologous to) Indra or Agni.

### Metalepsis

The poet and his patron will prove crucial to understand metalepsis in the Rigveda. Gérard Genette (1980, 234) defines metalepsis, or metadiegesis, as a change in the level of narration:

The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of discourse, the knowledge of another situation.

However, his theorization of metalepsis is configured for a specific textual encounter: the novel. Genette (1980, 235) uses Balzac as an example of the phenomenon:

“While the venerable churchman climbs the ramps of Angoulême, it is not useless to explain ...” as if the narrating were contemporaneous with the story and had to fill up the latter’s dead spaces.

The narrative shifts from a climbing churchman to another narrative in which an author-character relates a judgment about what is and what is not useless to an imagined reader. The churchman narrative is an inner frame, by virtue of being related by a narrator in the outer frame. This proves to be an excellent model for thinking about Vedic narration – with one caveat: Vedic poetry was performed for an audience.

When we think about metalepsis in Vedic poetics we are imagining two distinct narrative levels: a mythological or cosmogonic level, represented by the narrative the poet relates to us, and a frame narrative in which the text represents itself as being spoken by a performer at a multi-clan social event successfully singing to an audience. From what we can tell, the social event of the performance was a kind of annual festival in which the normally dispersed pastoral clans assembled to consecrate a clan patriarch as suzerain of the allied clans until the next annual festival. We do not know the real history of the society that produced the Rigveda. We neither know how fragmented or united that society was, nor how many patriarchs or pretenders. No matter the actual history, the Rigvedic hymns represent this endeavor as a successful one in which unification is total. The society represented in the text must be an idealization rather than a reality; it is just as fictional as Balzac’s narrator. What is interesting about Rigvedic poetry is not that these narrative levels exist, but that the poets of the Rigveda sometimes break this division between mythological past and performative present. In this way, the performance is re-enactive; the poet impersonates figures in the past in order to make them present at the ritual and speak directly to the audience.

One example is ṚV X.10, a hymn in which Yama and Yami (Yamī) – the first two mortals – are in dialogue. Yami desires to become Yama’s wife lest the human race end with them; Yama resists because Yami is his sister. She claims that their union is the will of the gods. Yama rejects this proposition on the grounds that incest is unprecedented.

That which we have not done before, [is] what [we do] now?  
[While] speaking truths, we might gabble something unreal.  
(ṚV X.10.4ab; my translation)

The verbal forms here are all plural, though only two characters, Yama and Yami, appear in the scene. Since Sanskrit has dual verbal forms, the use of the plural indicates there must be more people present than just the twins. Who, then, are these unnamed others?

As the poem continues, Yami gains the upper hand, dismantling Yama’s objections. She argues that before they were even born, Savitar made them domestic partners. Yama rejects Yami’s claim because knowledge of that time is not properly transmitted:

Who knows of this first day? Who has seen it? Who proclaims [it] here?  
High is the abode of Mitra [and] Varuṇa, you libertine!  
[So] what will you say perversely to the men?  
(ṚV X.10.6; my translation)

How can humans know about the first day unless someone has seen it (*dadarśa*) for themselves? One way is by receiving that eyewitness account through the technology of oral memory and then proclaiming (*prá vocat*) it here (*ibá*). The performer is doing exactly this, by speaking as Yama and transmitting his eyewitness account of this dialogue through oral memory. In so doing he makes this mythological event reoccur “here” at the present ritual. Mitra and Varuṇa, two gods who guard truth and would know about the first day, dwell on high (*bṛhán*) out of earshot, but Yami can speak directly to the men who are located “here.” Who are these men, if Yama and Yami are the only two mortals? The presence of these men explains our mysterious grammatical plural. When the performer says *ná yát purá cakṛmā* “which things we have not done before” he is speaking not just as the first man to the first woman but as a performer to his audience, referring to the behavioral norms of his day.

### Ring Composition

Joel Brereton first noticed that Rigvedic hymns sometimes have a “central focus,” an enigma located midway through the poem. ṚV X.129 contains a mysterious account of creation in seven verses, but midway through is the real secret of creation.

Then, in the beginning, from thought there developed desire,  
which existed as the primal semen.  
Searching in their hearts through inspired thinking, poets found  
the connection of the existent in the non-existent.  
(ṚV X.129.4; Brereton 1999, 253)

The world and the poem spring from the same germ: thought, for from thought comes the desire to create. Georges-Jean Pinault (2012, 155) observed that the same focus on thought and desire appears in the exact center of the Yama–Yami dialogue discussed above. Stephanie Jamison expanded Brereton’s work, by observing that this central enigma was characterized by thematic and lexical chiasmus, better known as ring compositions, which build up tension in the first half of the hymn, reveal a holy enigma, and resolve that tension. She dubbed this central focus surrounded by nested ring compositions the “omphalos” of the hymn. Below is the thematic schema of ṚV I.105 (Jamison 2007, 84).

1–2: cosmic and earthly order  
3–4: fears about maintaining order  
5–6: questions about fate of ritual offerings  
7–8: more anguish; thoughts compared to wolves, co-wives, mice  
9–10: omphalos: cosmic vision  
11: wolf kept at bay  
12: effective words reestablished  
13–15: gods take charge of sacrifice  
16–17: order restored  
[18: structure destabilized]



Jamison emphasizes that the structure is not completely symmetrical; a slight asymmetry gives the poem forward motion. While the penultimate verse resolves the tension of the hymn, Jamison (2007, 85) notes the final verse ends on an anxious note. The poetic performance is a restorative measure, but entropy is the nature of the Vedic world. Things fall apart, the universe, like society, must be restored again next year. Like a heraldic *mise en abyme*, the poem mirrors the world.

### Concluding Remarks

In this final section, I want to integrate these three aspects of Rigvedic poetry to show how they interact with one another to form a cohesive poetic thesis. In so doing, we can evaluate Rigveda as world literature on its own terms, by querying its own notions of literature, the world, and their interrelationship.

The first two verses of the following hymn are spoken from the perspective of a boy who sees his father journeying to the realm of the ancestors, while the following two verses address that boy, telling him of the chariot he has crafted with his mind.

The leafy tree where Yama drinks together with the heavenly ones,  
there the clan-lord, our father, tracks the ancient ones.  
Upon the one tracking the ancient ones, wandering along that wretched [path],  
Unhappily, did I gaze; I longed for him [to be] back.  
Boy! What chariot, new and wheel-less, you made by thought,  
Single-shafted [yet] facing all directions; without seeing, you stand atop it.  
Boy! What chariot you made roll forward from the inspired [poets],  
After it, the melody rolled forward. Together, from here, upon the boat is set.  
Who begat the boy? Who made the chariot roll out?  
Who could say to us today what the counter-gift was like?  
What the counter-gift was like, there the tip was born;  
In front, the foundation out-stretched, in the back the exit is made.  
This (is) Yama's seat; "the house of the gods" is what it is called.  
This, his (wind)pipe, is being blown; this one (is here), made ready by songs.

(RV X.135; my translation)

This verse contains one of the most complex ring compositions in the Rigveda. At the end of the first verse, *purāṇāṃ ānu venati*, "tracking the ancient ones," is followed by *purāṇāṃ anuvénantaṃ*, "idem," in the beginning of the second verse. At the end of the fifth verse, *anudéyī yátbābbavat*, "what the counter-gift is like," is mirrored by *yátbābbavad anudéyī*, "idem." These cases of respension form a ring around the center of the hymn. The first verse and the final verse name Yama. The third, fourth, and fifth verses mention a chariot. After the first mention of a chariot we have a verb of turning (*prāvartayo*, "you made roll forward") and just before the last mention of a chariot we have another verb of turning (*prāvartata*, "it rolled forward").<sup>4</sup> Together these repeated elements form four rings around a central point. This center point is *pári*, an adverb which means "around," cognate with Greek *peri* as in *perimeter*:

{Yama<sub>1</sub>[REP<sub>1</sub>[chariot<sub>1</sub>[turn<sub>1</sub>[around]turn<sub>2</sub>]chariot<sub>2</sub>]REP<sub>2</sub>]Yama<sub>2</sub>}

There are also curious asymmetries too. When Yama is mentioned in the first verse he is far away in the heavenly world of the ancestors. In the final verse, his seat, his pipe, and Yama are referred to by the pronouns *idám*, *iyám*, and *ayám* respectively, which indicate spatial proximity to the speaker. Another asymmetry is in the respension. In the first case, the pāda was repeated with the same word order, but in the second with chiasmic word order.<sup>5</sup> We can now revise our schema:

{Yama<sub>FAR</sub>[REP<sub>PARA</sub>[chariot<sub>1</sub>[turn<sub>1</sub>[chariot<sub>2</sub>[around]]]turn<sub>2</sub>]chariot<sub>3</sub>]REP<sub>CHIASMUS</sub>]Yama<sub>NEAR</sub>}

This asymmetric structuring device turns the very language of poetry into a racetrack, the chariot progresses to the turning point, pivots around it, and returns. The symposium of Yama, once far away along a difficult road, is now here. No ordinary chariot can travel a path of song. This one, the father tells the son, was created *mánasā*, “by thought”:

Boy! What chariot, new and wheel-less, you made by thought.  
Having a single shaft [yet] facing all directions;  
without seeing, you stand atop it.

(RV X.135.3; my translation)

The initial anxiety of the hymn is about an absent father and his hard path to heaven, but this verse resolves that anxiety by making the father speak. The father, however, introduces a new anxiety. The boy stands atop a chariot, but he cannot see it. Perhaps the son has performed a funeral for his father but does “see” the enigmatic truth of the funerary rite. In Vedic poetry, the chariot is often a metaphor for the sacrifice. The chariot’s central shaft may be a metaphor for the sacrificial pole to which animals are tied. The pole faces all directions, because the sacrifice is attended by the Vedic clans. The Vedic clans are frequently called the *pañcajana*, “the five folks,” an epithet that defines the poet’s patron as the sociopolitical center of the world while marginalizing the other clans as the cardinal directions. That truth the boy cannot see is that the funeral ceremony he is performing is a sacrifice and the sacrifice is an exchange. As much is encoded in the riddle verses that follow.

Metalepsis marks the beginning of the riddle, as the inner narrative of a boy and his father vanishes. The poet, always the real speaker behind the curtain, emerges and asks his audience:

Who begat the boy? Who made the chariot roll out?  
Who could say to us today what the counter-gift was like?

(RV X.135.5; my translation)

The answer to all three questions is the poet himself, the creator of the scenario, the mover of the poetic chariot, and the only one fit to tell us about the *anudéyī*, “counter-gift.” Gift-exchange is an important part of Vedic culture; presumably after one presents a gift to a social superior, the patriarch is duty bound to give an even better counter-gift. Sometimes

poets describe the songs they craft as a gift given to the gods; poems often end wishing that the gods return their generosity swiftly.

What the counter-gift was like, there the tip was born;  
In front, the foundation out-stretched,  
in the back the exit is made.

(RV X.135.6; my translation)

This enigma is riddled with polysemy. For on one level, what is being described is the chariot the boy created through his mind: its front pole is the tip, its foundation, upon which the rider stands, is in front, and its exit ramp is in the back. Jamison (2014), however, has noted that these terms may also describe the process of giving birth. I suspect it may also reflect the parts of Rigvedic meters which begin accented and have an opening and a cadence. I think there is merit to all these interpretations; the ambiguity of the riddle suggests to me that the audience is meant to ponder the mystery rather than come to an easy conclusion.

Anxieties about time and death riddle many Vedic hymns, and this one is no different. The narrative of an ignorant son who has lost his father highlights why this anxiety would be so dire to an oral tradition. When a father is lost before he has trained his son, a cultural forgetting occurs. The meaning of the rituals, their secret power, is lost. The hymn provides a solution: let the dead father speak to his son. The singer makes this possible by summoning them from memory and restoring them to life in song. In the riddle, the poet reveals that the chariot of sacrifice is rebirth. This notion of rebirth is more restrictive than what we see in later Hinduism and Buddhism, because we are talking about the rebirth of a father to a son. The Vedic ancestors drink forever in Yama's symposium so long as their immortal songs are remembered and transmitted to the next generation; lost fathers can return. This rebirth is how the tradition is conceptualizing its own diachrony. The success of this song is apparent from the final verse when we find ourselves in Yama's realm:

This (is) Yama's seat; "the house of the gods" is what it is called.

This, his (wind)pipe, is being blown; this one (is here), made ready by songs.

(RV X.135.7; my translation)

We are told that this seat and this pipe near the performer belong to Yama. Jan E. M. Houben suggested to me that this pipe might not be a musical pipe but a reference to the performer's vocal tract. In saying "here he is, made ready by songs," the speaker reveals himself to be none other than Yama himself. Not only can a father be restored to a son through the chariot of performance, but the poet, in impersonating Yama, restores Yama, the first man to die, to life. This entire poem has been Yama's sermon. Each couplet of the poem has stepped out of its perspective into a wider world:

{[[[the boy]the father]Yama]}

All along it was Yama who was our father, the father of all the clans of man, watching over the ancestors. The young poet who learns Yama's riddles makes Yama's voice his. In performance he *becomes* Yama and we *become* his sons. The ancestors at Yama's symposium

join the audience of living humans. No one is lost, for in song we live forever. Throughout the Rigveda, through memory and song, the deleterious forces of death and forgetting are held in check. In the final analysis, the Rigveda is world literature after all, for through literature it restores the world to life.

## NOTES

- 1 All transliterated text of the Rigveda is taken from van Nooten and Holland (1994).
- 2 For more on the Ezourvedam, see Rocher (1984).
- 3 For more on *śleṣa*, see Bronner (2010).
- 4 It should be noted that Brereton (1999) argues the central focus of X.129 is *manas* “thought,” but preceding *manas* is the same verb of turning (*avartata*) as ṚV X.135. Concatenated ring compositions which feature a central verb of turning receive an in-depth treatment by Forte and Smith (2014).
- 5 The correcting of the repeated word order by the chiasmic word order may be a case of “poetic repair.” For more on this topic see Jamison (2006), 133–140.

## REFERENCES

- Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Brereton, Joel P. 1999. “Edifying Puzzlement: Ṛgveda 10.129 and the Uses of Enigma.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119 (2): 248–260. New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society.
- Bronner, Yigal. 2010. *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Clooney, Francis X. 1990. *Thinking Ritually: Rediscovering the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini*. Publications of the De Nobili Research Library. Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili.
- Forte, Alexander S.W., and Caley Smith. 2014. “Wheel Composition in Greek and Indic Poetry.” *Proceedings of the 25th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference: Los Angeles, October 25th and 26th, 2013*, edited by Stephanie W. Jamison, H. Craig Melchert, Brent Harmon Vine, and Angelo Mercado, 47–74. Bremen: Hempen Verlag.
- Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Jamison, Stephanie W. 2006. “Poetic ‘Repair’ in the Rig Veda.” In *La Langue poétique indo-européenne: Actes du Colloque de travail de la Société des Études Indo-Européennes (Indogermanische Gesellschaft / Society for Indo-European Studies) Paris, 22–24 Octobre 2003*, edited by Georges-Jean Pinault and Daniel Petit, 133–140. Leuven and Paris: Peeters.
- Jamison, Stephanie W. 2007. *The Rig Veda Between Two Worlds/Le Ṛgveda entre deux mondes: Quatre conférences au Collège de France en mai 2004*. Publications de l’Institut de Civilisation Indienne, fasc. 74. Paris: de Boccard.
- Jamison, Stephanie W. 2014. “The Earliest Evidence for the Inborn Debts of a Brahmin: A New Interpretation of Ṛg Veda X.135.” *Journal Asiatique*, 302 (2): 245–257.
- Jamison, Stephanie W. 2015. “Śleṣa in the Ṛgveda? Poetic Effects in ṚV X.29.1.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 19 (1): 157–170.
- Jamison, Stephanie W., and Joel P. Brereton. 2014. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*. 3 vols. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Knipe, David M. 2015. *Vedic Voices: Intimate Narratives of a Living Andhra Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pinault, Georges-Jean. 2012. “Sur l’hymne védique dialogué de Yama et Yamī (RV X.10).” In

- Yama/Yima: variations indo-iraniennes sur la geste mythique*, edited by Samra Azarnouche and Celine Redard, 139–178. Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 81. Paris: Collège de France.
- Rocher, Ludo. 1984. *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Thomson, Karen. 2016. "Speak for Itself: How the Long History of Guesswork and Commentary on a Unique Corpus of Poetry Has Rendered It Incomprehensible." *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 January, 3.
- van Nooten, B.A., and G.B. Holland. 1994. *Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text with an Introduction and Notes*. Harvard Oriental Series 50. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## FURTHER READING

- Elizarenkova, T. Ya. 1995. *Language and Style of the Vedic Ṛ̥sis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Jurewicz, Joanna. 2010. *Fire and Cognition in the Ṛ̥gveda*. Warsaw: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa.
- Larios, Borayin. 2017. *Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra*. Warsaw: De Gruyter.
- Proferes, Theodore. 2007. *Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power*. American Oriental Series 90. New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society.
- Watkins, Calvert. 1995. *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Whitaker, Jarrod. 2011. *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Witzel, Michael. 1997. "Early Sanskritization. Origins and Development of the Kuru State." In *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung im klassischen Indien/The State, the Law, and Administration in Classical India*, edited by B. Kölver, 27–52. Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag.
- Witzel, Michael. 1997. "The Development of the Vedic Canon and Its Schools: The Social and Political Milieu." In *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts*, edited by Michael Witzel, 257–345. Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora 2. Cambridge, MA: Dept. of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University.