

How To Enter The Vedic Mind? Strategies In Translating A *Brāhmaṇa* Text

by
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The text selected here is one that I edited and translated some twenty years ago: the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka* (*KaṭhA*),¹ a *Brāhmaṇa* style text of the Black *Yajurveda*. In doing so, I had to go through all steps of dealing with a Vedic text: learning a new script, the *śāradā* of Kashmir, figuring out the unmarked ends of sentences and trying to understand their meaning, and interpreting the arcane *śrauta* ritual and the homologies of Vedic thought. All of this, in itself, is a most educational enterprise that I can only recommend to graduate students with the words of Louis Renou: "Où est le temps quand chaque sanskritiste éditait un texte védique..." In this paper, however, I will concentrate on translation, intertwined as it may be with the task of editing.

Before we even can attempt a translation of *Brāhmaṇa* texts, there are a number of procedures that must be discussed and several obstacles that must be overcome. Most of them can be taken care of by our old hand-maiden, philology. It is well-known that to merely mention this word is already the kiss of death in some circles, including Harvard. In fact, one of my colleagues here once explained philology to me as "the study of *a* word." I rather prefer to define it, as we did in a symposium some five years ago: as "*Kulturwissenschaft* based on texts", or "the study of a civilization based on texts".

In order to proceed with such a study, we have to take into account a number of factors: the nature and grammar of the Vedic language in its late *Brāhmaṇa/Āraṇyaka* stage; the setting of the text: its time, place, as well as the contemporary society, natural surroundings and climate; the style of the text: the typical *Brāhmaṇa/Āraṇyaka* prose with its many repetitions, the *Zwangsläufigkeit* ('inevitability') of its way of expression (see below); the parallel texts, the medieval exegesis (traditional commentators and *their* setting); the problems concerning the translation of certain Vedic words (see

¹ M. Witzel, *Das Kaṭha Āraṇyaka, textkritische Edition mit Übersetzung und Kommentar (Teildruck)*, Erlangen/ Kathmandu, Nepal Research Centre, 1974.

below); and finally, the difficulties in making the train of Vedic thought understandable and readable to our contemporary audience.

The Text and Its Background

Under investigation here is a late Vedic text, an *Āraṇyaka*. *Āraṇyaka*-s are a genre of texts that are composed in Archaic (Vedic) Sanskrit in the expository prose of the *Brāhmaṇa* style. The *Kaṭhā* deals with one of the more secret and dangerous rituals of the Vedic period. Like all *Brāhmaṇa*-s, this is a text that was orally composed *by Brahmins for Brahmins* in order to explain the many details of a particular ritual and the whole ritual as such. In this case, it is the *Pravargya* milk offering to the Aśvins, a part of the solemn Soma ritual.

A few remarks on Vedic oral composition and early oral literature are in place here. Unlike the hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, which were created by bard-like craftsmen schooled in traditional Indo-Iranian poetics, the *Brāhmaṇa*-s were composed by priests who were specialists in the complicated Vedic ritual.

This large mass of texts, rather surprisingly, was composed and compiled without recourse to any artificial means of structuring and ordering except for the underlying structure of the rituals themselves, which was, of course, well-known to the priests.² Nevertheless, the order of the ritual is not always strictly followed in the texts. Rather, various myths (*itihāsa*), deliberations (*arthavāda*), incidental allusions to the actions carried out in the rite (*vidhi*),³ and various other topics are inserted, all of which the authors felt necessary in order to explain the secret meaning of the ritual and its various parts, as well as the texts and melodies used during the actual performance.⁴ Sometimes one or the other

² One did not follow, as for example in Polynesia, external categories, e.g. the structure of a fish on whose bones various types of knowledge, stories, etc. are mentally arranged, similar to the device used in classical antiquity, for example a palace in whose rooms various types of knowledge were "stored." One could also envisage other mnemotechnical devices, such as lines drawn on the ground or the use of pebbles (or twigs which are actually used in *Sāmaveda* chanting); however, there is no evidence of these kinds of techniques in the Vedic texts themselves.

³ As the later *Mīmāṃsā* texts classify these items found in the *Brāhmaṇa* style texts. Note, however, that the "*vidhi*" elements in the *Brāhmaṇa*-s do not prescribe ritual action, they merely refer or allude to them to indicate the topic of discussion.

⁴ See K. Hoffmann, "Die Komposition eines *Brāhmaṇa*-Abschnittes (MS. I 10,14-16)", *Aufsätze zur Indo-Iranistik*, ed. J. Narten, Wiesbaden (Reichert) 1975, pp. 207-220; author,

of these aspects simply takes over and the originally clear structure of the section in question gets diluted beyond recognition (as often is the case with *itihāsa* in *JB*, and with *arthavāda* in *ŚB*), or various other topics are introduced, sometimes even in *Sūtra*-like style (as in the *KaṭhĀ* itself). Also, various additions to the original ritual, such as second thoughts or rebuttals of objections abound in these texts. A *Brāhmaṇa* simply does not strictly follow the order of the ritual;⁵ it is not a *sūtra*-like step-by-step *description* of a ritual, but a *ṭippaṇi*-like *discussion* of particular points in the performance and of their meaning.

Many features of the texts still point to their oral composition, for example, the use of deictic pronouns. When the texts say "do it in *that* way...", we simply do not know what **that way** means. Further, the older *Brāhmaṇa* style texts were composed in simple paratactic phrases, and only gradually the language became hypotactic with longer and involved phrases found especially in late *Brāhmaṇa* texts such as *ŚB* and *JB*.

Equally typical for the oral compositions of this period is the repetitive style, the *Zwangsläufigkeit*, which closely resembles that of the ensuing early Buddhist texts. The subject matter is discussed by adducing several examples that are formulated in virtually the same way, through using the same words, phrases, and order of argumentation. Thus, the next sentence or group of sentences are not only largely predictable. The device also serves as a mnemo-technical device that allows for remembering, teaching and learning by heart long prose passages more easily.

Another mnemo-technical device is the constant use of *pratīka*-s, the short heading-like introductory phrases of a prose section or of a *mantra* which immediately evoke the complete passage. Surprisingly, even internal references are met with on occasion, for example *ŚB* 4.1.5.15 --> *ŚB* 14.1.1, a referral to a text that now is found a few hundred pages apart from the first one in our printed editions.

We can even determine that *Brāhmaṇa* texts were composed on the offering ground itself. Some references mentioning the three sacred fires, which are arranged on the offering ground in a slightly irregular triangular fashion,

"JB *Palpūlanī*. The structure of a *Brāhmaṇa* tale", *Felicitation Volume B*. R. Sharma, ed. M. D. Balasubrahmaniam, Tirupati, Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha, 1986, 189-216.

⁵ Differently from what Kashikar attempted to show in his article on the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*, *ABORI* 68 (1987), where he silently contradicted his general statement in *A Survey of the Śrautasūtras*, Bombay, University of Bombay, 1968, p. 15 sq.

indicate that the speaker (i. e. the teacher) stood between the two fires that were close together, the Gārhapatya and the Dakṣiṇāgni (the western and southern fires) when explaining the ritual to his young Brahmin students.⁶ The teacher apparently carried out a dry run of the ritual for his students.

Both types of texts, the poetic *RV* and the expository *Brāhmaṇa*-s, however, had the same strict means of preservation and transmission: rather surprisingly, in both cases, a strictly oral one. This is a well known topic and it therefore may suffice to point out that just as in the transmission of the *RV*, the *Brāhmaṇa* type texts were handed down from teacher to students as virtual "tape recordings" of the first millennium B.C. without the change of a word, of a syllable, or even an accent. If one did so, one would have faced the terrible example of Viśvarūpa whose head was cut off by Indra as he had mispronounced a single accent, thereby grammatically turning Indra into his enemy.

Let us return to the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*. It was composed during the late Vedic period. This means that the great collections of Vedic hymns (*Ṛgveda*), sorcery stanzas (*Atharvaveda*), melodies (*Sāmaveda*), and formulae spoken during the rituals (*Yajurveda*) had long been composed and collected, and that a considerable amount of theological discussion of the rituals had already been accumulated in the various *Brāhmaṇa* style texts.

Among these, the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka* is a rather fragmentary text dealing with the secret Pravargya ritual of the Kaṭha school of the Black *Yajurveda*. Among the various *Yajurveda* schools,⁷ only the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (*TĀ* 4-5) and the last section of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (*ŚB* 14) deal with the Pravargya ritual in *Brāhmaṇa* style while *Maitrāyaṇi Saṃhitā* (ms. 4.9) contains only the Mantras. The *TĀ*, while often close to the *KaṭhĀ* in its Mantras, is a rather late text, and the *ŚB* belongs to the White *YV*, a different tradition that is equally late but much more inclusivistic and reformist. Only the *ŚB* section, which is quite different in wording from the *KaṭhĀ*, had been translated at the time I dealt with *KaṭhĀ*.⁸ At any rate, it has been our experience that the parallel texts usually are

⁶ Incidentally, this is the place where the wife of the sponsor of a Vedic sacrifice is seated; it is different from that of the various priests taking part in the ritual.

⁷ It is not a *sūtra*-like step by step description of a ritual, but a *ṭippanī*-like discussion of particular points in the performance and their meaning.

⁸ In the meantime, J. E. M. Houben has translated the *TĀ* section as well: *The Pravargya Brāhmaṇa of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka an ancient commentary on the Pravargya ritual*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

the best commentary⁹ of *Brāhmaṇa* style text. They mention the same facts with a more or less differing choice of words or give a completely different exposition, both of which shed light on the topic under discussion.

Apart from the parallel texts, the various *ŚrautaSūtra*-s though composed later than the *Brāhmaṇa*-s are of help as they do more than allude to the ritual performance; they present it step by step. Unfortunately the *ŚrautaSūtra* of the *Kaṭha*-s is almost completely lost and I had to rely on the texts of the more or less closely related schools of the Taittirīyas and Maitrāyaṇīyas of the Black *Yajurveda*.

Finally, there are the medieval commentaries and *Paddhati*-s. They too supply much information about the actual performance of ritual during the middle ages. Since Vedic ritual is very conservative, we can rely to a large extent on their testimony, but we constantly have to countercheck their descriptions with that of the older texts so as to detect medieval innovations.¹⁰ Generally speaking, one has to be aware of the fact that the medieval commentators were almost as distant from the ancient Vedic texts as we are nowadays: in time, location, society, religion, climate and natural surroundings. For example, the great commentator Sāyaṇa (d. 1387 A.D.) was a citizen of the last great Hindu empire of Vijayanagara, a medieval Hindu kingdom of South India with a full blown caste system, Bhakti/Tantric Hindu religion, a tropical climate dominated by monsoon, and an economy based on rice agriculture, crafts, and trade. This is quite different from being a member of one of the small tribal, pastoral societies of the Eastern Panjab without or with only an incipient caste system, a pre-Hindu religion, a cold winter, no real monsoon, without cities, and with an economy based on cattle herding. While the medieval commentaries can help us in understanding the ritual and some of the grammar, syntax, and the general background of the texts, they cannot be relied on for the exact interpretation of individual words, of *Brāhmaṇa* sentences, and even less for the meaning of the archaic *mantra*-s, the original meaning of the rituals, and of Vedic religion and myth in general.

What we have before us, thus, is the unfortunately fragmentary text of an old *Yajurveda* school of the eastern Panjab surviving in Kashmir without a living

⁹ Both the *TĀ* and the *ŚB* version have medieval commentaries of Sāyaṇa and others. The *KaṭhĀ* lacks any commentary, *Padapāṭha*, *Prātiśākhya*, etc.

¹⁰ Nowadays we might add the films and the video tapes of Staal's 1975 *Agnicayana* in Kerala which includes several *Pravargya* performances.

tradition of recitation and exegesis.¹¹ The *KaṭhĀ* has come down to us only in one rather lacuneous birchbark ms. This puts certain limits to any sort of investigation and it added some additional constraints to my task of translation. I had to supply, as is the case with the translation of most Mesopotamian and Hittite texts on clay tablets, much of the lost text portions for consistency and continuity. I even did not know exactly how my text began, and its end was even more uncertain. While this certainly is not typical for Vedic texts, it presents some additional problems.

Taking all of the preceding into account, I first had to establish a reliable edition, which is difficult with just one ms. but can be established by carefully comparing the parallel traditions, ritual, style, and the Vedic grammar of the period in question. As has been mentioned, I proceeded in constant overlap with the actual translation since one obviously cannot establish an intelligible text without knowing its meaning, and that means without at least preparing a rough translation in the process. The most intriguing and difficult part of this undertaking was to translate according to the **original intent** of the composers of the text. One has to enter the **Vedic mind** in order to be able to achieve this aim.¹² There are, however, several stages of work that usually precede this most difficult part of the translation process.

Grammatical or Literal Translation

For many purposes, such as grammatical study, it often is sufficient to prepare a rough, that is a grammatically correct literal translation without understanding *exactly* what the implications of the passage are. For example, one can, without much actual understanding, some of which is supplied here in parentheses and brackets, translate *KaṭhĀ* 2.10: *īyaty āgra āsīr īty. yād varāhāvihatam bhāvaty, asy ā evā téjo yajñīya... sām̐bharati.* "(He [the YV priest, the Adhvaryu,] mumbles):¹³

¹¹ The Kaṭha school has been confined to Kashmir for the last millenium or so in the later part of which they have lost their oral tradition. For details, see author, *The Veda in Kashmir* (forthcoming).

¹² This is quite apart from the problem of translating concepts and even single words typical of the source language (Sanskrit) which are not present in the target language (English, or in my case, German).

¹³ Note that we must already know beforehand, from the study of *Yajurveda* texts in general, that it is the *Adhvaryu* priest and not someone else who mumbles but does not recite this formula.

"You [fem.] were so large in the beginning when earth dug up by a boar is used (*bhavati*)¹⁴ [in the preparation of the Pravargya clay vessel]. When he (the priest) brings together the earth dug up by a boar, he collects the heat of her (the earth) fit for sacrifice." By proceeding in this fashion, we can be sure to have captured the literal meaning (and to even have supplied some of the ritual details), but we do not need to care about the religious or mythological implications of the passage. In fact, it refers to one of the creation myths in which the earth was dug up from the bottom of the sea by a boar, the later form of Viṣṇu. The story is a variant of the North American and Siberian diver myths. The clay has to be pure or cleansed to be usable in the ritual (as is the case still in modern Kashmiri cleansing rites). All of this we do not need to know for a simple, grammatical translation, but, of course, we need it for a proper *understanding* of the text and an interpretation of the underlying ritual. Actually, this passage is a typical example of *Brāhmaṇa* style. It "explains", so to say, a formula spoken in the course of the ritual by pointing out its mythological origin (*itihāsa*): **illo tempore**, the gods did thus, and therefore humans have to follow suit; this is the message. Since the story is well known (and actually referred to in the preceding and following passages), no further explanation is necessary, and it is indeed not provided by the author of *KathĀ*. In using this procedure, the *Brāhmaṇa*-s¹⁵ created a web of ritualistic discussion, interwoven with myths, referrals to ritual facts, explanations of the origin of customs, cultural objects, the surrounding nature, facts of tribal history, and many other items of their contemporary ambience.

Some Vedic Peculiarities

While straightforward, literal translations may suffice in many cases, certain Vedic peculiarities of language and style nevertheless present further problems. The seemingly easily understandable phrase *iyam gauḥ* cannot simply be translated literally into "this cow." The two words rather mean: "The earth is this one here (i.e. a female object, being)." One first has to notice, first, that this is a nominal sentence and not just a noun with its pronoun; secondly, one has to

¹⁴ *Bhavati*, 'is used', is a typical expression of the *Brāhmaṇa* style texts, while otherwise *bhavati* usually means 'he/she/it becomes'.

¹⁵ See K. Hoffmann, "*Die Komposition eines Brāhmaṇa-Abschnittes*, (MS. I 10,14-16)", *Aufsätze zur Indo-Iranistik*, ed. J. Narten, Wiesbaden (Reichert) 1975, pp. 207-220.

know that the subject of nominal clauses is put at the end of the phrase;¹⁶ thirdly that *iyam* habitually refers to "this one here", the earth; and fourthly, that "cow" can signify (among many other things) "earth" as well. The sentence, thus, is a tautology. In addition, to approach an understanding, we have to know something of the nature of Vedic "identifications" or homologies. For reasons of space I cannot go into details here. Oldenberg¹⁷ has extensively written about this topic under the heading "Prescientific science".¹⁸ The matter may be summarized as follows: Any two objects, ideas, entities can be linked with each other by establishing connections of smaller or greater similarity (*bandhu, nidāna*) between them. Then they are not only regarded as linked but as essentially "identical" -- at least within the framework of the ritual. Whatever is done to one object or entity affects the other. Ritual is the mesocosm that links and affects the macrocosm of the universe and the gods with the microcosm of the humans and their immediate surroundings. The identifications or homologies can cover a single aspect of the two or three entities involved (even the number of syllables of the word signifying both entities) or they can cover a larger number of such links. To discover them is the aim of much of the discussion in the *Brāhmaṇa* style texts. The outcome can be such as the one mentioned above: "The cow is the earth."

Of the initial list of concerns noted in translating this text, we have already dealt with some of the ritual and mythological background, which for want of space, I will not discuss further. We have also seen how some of the myths are interwoven with the text and how we need to pay attention to them in interpreting a *Brāhmaṇa*. Furthermore, it goes without saying that we have to know a large amount of the *realia* of the period, whether it is items of cattle herding, local climate, tribal society, or ancient customs and beliefs.

Literary structure

¹⁶ A feature not restricted to Vedic but also found in good Pāṇinian Sanskrit.

¹⁷ H. Oldenberg, *Vorwissenschaftliche Wissenschaft. Die Weltanschauung der Brāhmaṇa-Texte*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Rupprecht, 1919.

¹⁸ See now my *On magical thought in the Veda*, Leiden, Universitaire Pers, 1979, where I tried to understand some of the thought processes underlying the Brāhmaṇical "identifications". Cf. also B. K. Smith, *Reflections on resemblance, ritual and religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, who has, however, not added to our understanding of the problems except for providing a fashionable framework.

For a different level of understanding, we have to deal with the literary structure of the texts themselves, which is, as I have already mentioned, rather complicated. One has to follow the arguments sometimes not just over a page or two of our printed texts but through a whole chapter¹⁹ to recognize the many disjointed parts (as we would feel) of the exposition. In the mind of the Brahmin authors these sections were not disjointed at all, as they more or less closely followed the only grid they had at their disposal: the structure of the ritual. Myths, ritual discussions, deliberations, quotations from earlier texts, and especially Mantras were all subjected to this outline.

One item that comes to our rescue in following such arguments and in our actual understanding of them, and indeed the most important one that came to my rescue in restoring the partially damaged text, is the so-called *Zwangsläufigkeit* of *Brāhmaṇa* style. This expression coined by K. Hoffmann signifies the "inevitability of *Brāhmaṇa* style". The argumentation in the texts almost always follows a certain fixed pattern. For example, one normally starts with a statement, something "new" or important to the teacher, often the discovery of new connection between the various entities in macrocosm, mesocosm and microcosm. Its authoritative statement ("x, I say, is y") is usually indicated by the particle *vai*: A straightforward case that involves nothing that cannot be understood immediately is found in *KaṭhĀ* 2.2. It discusses the collection, with the help of wooden hoes, of the clay from which the Pravargya vessel is made. "He takes up the hoes. ... He takes up four (of them). The directions (of the sky), I say (*vái*), are four. From the (various) directions (the clay for) the Pravargya (vessel) is collected. Only (*evá*) from the (various) directions he collects (the clay for) the Pravargya (vessel). Wooden (hoes) are used. With 'trees' (wooden hoes) is the Pravargya collected. Only (*evá*) with 'trees' (wooden hoes) he collects the Parvargya (vessel)." [*ábhrīr ádatte. ... cátsra ádatte. cátsra vái díso. digbhyáḥ pravargy às sámhriyate. digbhyá evá pravargyàṃ sámharaty. vānaspatyá bhavanti. vānas-pátibhir vái pravargyàs sámhriyate. vānaspátibhir evá pravargyà... sámharati.*] What follows the initial assertion is an argument (or, often a mythological tale) that shows in what respect the hoes are related to the directions and the trees. This is regarded as the proof of the

¹⁹ See again K. Hoffmann, "Die Komposition...", cit.

argument. The author usually returns to the initial statement and presents it as truth: "x *only* is y."

This structure of *Brāhmaṇa* argumentation necessarily implies that certain sentences have to be repeated either verbatim or in a slightly changed way. If the text is damaged (as in *KaṭhĀ*) or corrupt (as in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*), this device greatly helps in restoring or understanding the section in question. If one does not immediately understand what the author wanted to say, one can also reread the passage backwards, from the end of the argumentation: since the sun is the fire here on earth, whatever is told in the myth or in the often rather obscure discussions is informed by this outcome. This procedure is especially helpful when the pattern described above is incomplete, which is quite often the case, since well known "truths" are no longer argued at great length, e.g. in *KaṭhĀ* 2.140,180 (*ātmāna evāitām āśiṣam āśāste*). The *Brāhmaṇa* teacher assumes that his listeners already know.

Style and Translation

Another problem is that of the style of our translation. It still is a fashion among scholars in Indian Studies to resort to Shakespearean English when translating religious texts from India. But should we really do so? Even in the later Vedic period, many Mantras quoted from earlier texts such as the *Ṛgveda* were easily understandable. For example, a Mantra such as *īyaty āgra āsiḥ* (*KaṭhĀ* 2.10) could be regarded as contemporary Vedic Sanskrit by any educated Brahmin listener while groups such as children, women, and members of the lower classes might have regarded such phrases as "adult", educated, and prestigious speech. Why, therefore, should we write "thou wert so large in the beginning" and not simply "so large you were in the beginning"?

It is, of course, quite another matter when the formula or verse in question uses a level of speech older than that of the expository prose of the text. We may try to imitate the distinction in English, though this might prove difficult at times. Thus, when the *Brāhmaṇa* explanation of the Mantra *divī te sadhāstam* (*KaṭhĀ* 2.99) paraphrases this with *divī te grhām*, we might try to imitate the two levels of speech by translating: "'in heaven is your seat', (that means:) in heaven is your house". The case actually is more complicated because the word *sadhāstha* 'dwelling/seat' is more archaic (it is prominent in the *RV*) and, secondly because it differs in meaning from *grhā* 'house'. How to imitate this in English? If we translate the first sentence as "in heaven is your palace/throne" we express some

of the archaic level of speech of *sadhásthā* but we do not exactly indicate the meaning of the type of dwelling meant in *RV* (which is in need of a separate investigation).

Or, to enter a sphere in which Wendy Doniger specializes: *KaṭhĀ* 2.101 has the *mantra anavadhyābhis sām u jagmābhīḥ* explained as: *tābhir (hotrābhir) vái pravargyām sāṅgamayati*. "with the blameless (Apsaras) he (Rudra) has come together" (i.e., *among other things*, 'had intercourse', see *PS* 1.7). (This means:) "with them (not the Apsaras but the recitations, *hotrābhīḥ*, this time) he (the priest) lets (him, the sponsor) get together." I do not think that we must, as Wendy Doniger prefers, always find a "hip" translation such as "he had sex." We simply can translate "he has come together" -- just as the Sanskrit says -- and only where we need to be explicit, we could add "he made love with..." as to explain the double meaning in the original.

"Ambiguous" Words

A much more difficult problem is that of "ambiguous" words such as *ṛta*. Like *dharma*, *ṛta* is very difficult to translate.²⁰ In fact, *ṛta* is variously translated as 'cosmic law, rule, order, human law, order, customs', etc. There simply is no English, French, German, Italian, or Russian word that covers the range of meanings of this word. The case is not isolated; it is a well known problem in translating from other languages. For example French *liberté* or German *Freiheit*, Italian *libertà* or Spanish *libertad* correspond to both English 'freedom' **and** 'liberty'. Each time we want to translate, for example, the German, or French word, we have to choose the proper English equivalent, just as we have to do with *ṛta*, where we could simply choose from among the translations mentioned above. However, in this case a reader will never know what is found in the Sanskrit original, and we would have to explain each time (e.g. in a footnote) that *ṛta* is intended.

Thieme has proposed another solution to this problem. He translates words such as *ṛta* by **just one** German or English word, thus '*Wahrheit*'/'truth'. However, neither the German nor the English word covers the whole range of meanings of the Vedic word *ṛta*. If we translate *ṛta* by "Wahrheit/truth/Truth"

²⁰ In *KaṭhA* 2.9. "*ṛtāsya rdhyāsam adyā makhāsya śírah*" "today I want to complete the head of Makha, which I came by (*ṛtāsya*) accidentally" another word *ṛtá-* is meant, p.p.p. of *ṛchati*.

we would have to relearn our own language for the sake of reading Vedic texts, -- just as Heidegger imposes on us through his idiosyncratic use of German when we read his philosophy. Actually, it seems that no western language has a word more or less corresponding to *ṛta*. As far as I see, it is only the old Egyptian *ma'at* (and perhaps Sumerian *me*) that convey a similar concept.

What then, does *ṛta* mean? We can approach the problem from its antonym: *druh*. This is easily translatable into English as 'deceiving, cheating' or better into German with the etymologically related words 'Trug, Betrug' (cf. Engl. 'betray'). Deceiving means to say the untruth (*anṛta*) and to actively carry it out (*druh*). The other side of the coin is speaking the truth (*satya*) and acting according to it (*ṛta*). *Ṛta* thus is a force opposite to **deception**, it is the **force of active truth** (*Wahrheitsverwirklichung*). Only *because* of *ṛta* does the sun move in the sky and does not fall down, do the rivers flow in their beds, does human society function, do people speak the truth and carry out their obligations and alliances (*mitra*), do sons offer for their departed fathers and ancestors. Without *ṛta* we enter into the state of *Nirṛti*,²¹ of absolute destruction with no light, no food, no drink, no children, -- a sort of Vedic hell to which only those miscreants are sent who have violated the basic order of Vedic society.

How to translate *ṛta* then? We cannot put 'active truth' (*Wahrheitsverwirklichung*) into our text each time; this would at least be cumbersome. And, our readers still would not understand what is intended in the Sanskrit text. Another possibility would be to leave the word untranslated. For the general reader this would mean that important portions of the text remain equally unclear and this cannot be the aim of our work. The best solution to me seems to translate *ṛta* idiomatically but to add the Sanskrit word in parentheses each time, as to allow the reader to gradually understand the concept of *ṛta* with the **whole range** of meanings it implies.

Inside the Vedic Mind

With *ṛta* and similar problematic words we have come to one of the more important and difficult chapters of translating Vedic texts. Yet, we still will face a host of problems if we want to translate the argumentation of the texts in an understandable fashion and not in the (often Victorian) "jargon" of Vedic

²¹ See L. Renou, *Vedic nirṛti, L'Inde fondamentale*, Paris, Hermann, 1978, pp. 127-132.

scholars. The real task, however, is how to enter the Vedic mind, the mind of those Brahmins who composed poetry and prose texts such as the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*. With some effort,²² we can see that their logic is understandable, more or less Aristotelian, if we accept that the ultimate premise of the texts is wrong, namely **similarity means complete identity**, and not just 'partial identity', at least in the sphere of the ritual.²³ As we know, the *Brāhmaṇa* style texts are full of "identifications", of homologies made between various entities which are based on this principle, which, incidentally, is also the one underlying all magical procedures.

The whole web of links established on this premise between various entities in macrocosm, microcosm, and the mesocosm of ritual has to be known or acquired by a translator of a Vedic text; the same applies to the range of meanings, or, in more technical terms the **aggregates of noemes**²⁴ that are associated in the Vedic mind with each Sanskrit word.²⁵ They have to be **actively** known by the translator. Only then can we **begin** to understand what certain statements in the text meant to their authors and listeners. Luckily, *Brāhmaṇa* prose is explicit enough to provide us with an inkling of the possible range of mental connections made for each word, although we may be surprised time and again about the enormous range, the seemingly strange links, and the unusual shades of meanings that are employed by the authors.

But how to accumulate an encyclopedic knowledge of Vedic thought? Certainly by a lot of (slow) reading. Even then, many connections and shades of meanings will escape us. Instead, we have to painstakingly follow the well known rules of philology by studying the meaning, or rather, the whole range of meanings and the usage of the particular word or concept in question. However, in Vedic Studies at least, we are lucky in that we have a (nearly) complete word index, prepared in India from 1935-1965 by Vishva Bandhu and

²² Leaving aside the surprise of former generations of scholars who regarded these texts as the "twaddling of idiots"; for a characterization see author, *On Magical Thought in the Veda*, Leiden, Universitaire Pers, 1979, p. 1.

²³ See author, *On Magical Thought*, cit.; note that many of the "identifications" are similes or rather metaphors that cover, in the ritual framework *only*, anything from partial to complete identity of the two entities. They are based, to use a Pāṇinean term, on *ādeśa* "substitution" of one item by another in the related spheres of the cosmos that the *Upaniṣad*-s refer to by the terms *adhidevata*, *adhiyajña*, *adhipuruṣa*..

²⁴ See K. Hoffmann, *Der Injunktiv im Veda*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1967.

²⁵ Or the words of other Sanskrit, foreign, or, for that matter, even older English texts such as those of Shakespeare.

his collaborators.²⁶ Whoever does not use this index can simply no longer claim to have done thorough work but only to have carried out work of an impressionistic nature.²⁷

If we face the problem of determining a particular noematic aggregate, all shades of the meaning of a word or concept in Vedic, we are even luckier. Since 1966 we have had access to the *Brāhmaṇoddhāraakośa*²⁸ which actually lists Vedic sentences under important, alphabetically arranged headwords though, unfortunately, by no means comprehensively. If we want to get a quick overview of the range of meanings of a word we can simply look up some five to two hundred sentences under each headword and arrive at a provisional, yet quite often sufficient impression, which, if need be, can further be substantiated by painstakingly going through all of Vishva Bandhu's *Vedic Word Index*.²⁹ In this fashion, and due to the large number of texts available to us, we have a real possibility to "interview" our Vedic "informants" of three millennia ago and to enter their mind as well as any anthropologist can do.

If we follow these rather straightforward rules and use all the other tools mentioned earlier, we can achieve in Vedic Studies a certainty that approaches that of the natural sciences. In fact, we can proceed in a similar fashion, by trial and error, and by proposing a theory and actually testing it. Only when the word, concept, or custom is a *hapax* or is attested too **infrequently** to allow a proper investigation of the whole range of meanings, must we remain content with a merely **probable** answer, or a **mere guess**. In all other cases, of course only after painstaking study, we can conclude that **yes** the theory was right, or **no** it was not.

If it sounds unbelievable that we can actually enter the Vedic mind and argue from the inside, following the thought pattern of the Vedic authors, I invite the reader to try the beginning of the *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*. As the facsimile shows, it is rather fragmentary. In order to restore and to translate the text, I had to study similar phrases or the occurrences of a few key words retained in the fragment. The restoration was supported by the *Zwangsläufigkeit* of *Brāhmaṇa* style: the

²⁶ Vishva Bandhu, *Vaidika Padānukrama Kośa (A Vedic Word Concordance)*, 16 Vols., Lahore/Hoshiarpur, Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute, 1935-1965.

²⁷ It is educative to note how little this or similar important indices are quoted.

²⁸ Vishva Bandhu, *Brāhmaṇoddhāraakośa*, Hoshiarpur, VVRI, 1966; see also *Upaniṣaduddhāraakośa*, Hoshiarpur, VVRI, 1972.

²⁹ Curiously (cf. the preceding notes), I have never seen this work quoted in any article or book.

initial, half peeled off sentence is more or less repeated by a later one. But how to be sure? Fortunately, the passage contains another clue, the frequently met with concepts of "thought-speech-action" (*manas- vāc -karman*), a collocation that is found not only in the *Veda* but also in the closely related Old Iranian texts (*manah- vacas - šīiaoθna*, Y 34.1-2). Therefore, I was completely sure that I had restored the text correctly. When I finally went to Tübingen University Library to check the original ms. again (I had worked from a microfilm), I found that a portion of my initial *lacuna* was covered by a small, dislodged piece of birchbark that had overlapped with my text. When I lifted the dislodged fragment, I found the text I had restored.

If we can **write** Vedic texts that well, we can also **translate** them.

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