

THE RIG VEDA

An Anthology

ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHT HYMNS,
SELECTED, TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED
BY WENDY DONIGER O'FLAHERTY



PENGUIN BOOKS

1981

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

- 1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred?¹ Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?
- 2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign² of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
- 3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign,² all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.³
- 4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets⁴ seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.
- 5 Their cord⁵ was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers.⁶ There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.
- 6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe.⁷ Who then knows whence it has arisen?
- 7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in

the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

NOTES

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

10.121 *The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo*

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

The creator in this hymn is called *Hiraṇyagarbha*, a truly pregnant term. It is a compound noun, whose first element

means 'gold' and whose second element means 'womb, seed, embryo, or child' in the *Rig Veda* and later comes to mean 'egg'; this latter meaning becomes prominent in the cosmogonic myth of the golden egg that separates, the two shells becoming sky and earth, while the yolk is the sun.³ In the present hymn, the compound functions straightforwardly: the god *is* the golden embryo or seed. Later, it is glossed as a possessive compound: he is the god who (more anthropomorphically) *possesses* the golden seed or egg. *Sāyaṇa* suggests that the compound may be interpreted possessively even here, making it possible to include several levels of meaning at once – 'he in whose belly the golden seed or egg exists like an embryo'. This seed of fire is placed in the waters of the womb; it is also the embryo with which the waters become pregnant (v. 7). So, too, *Agni* is the child of the waters but also the god who spills his seed in the waters. These are interlocking rather than contradictory concepts; in the late Vedas, the father is specifically identified with the son. Furthermore, the egg is both a female image (that which is fertilized by seed and which contains the embryo that is like the yolk) and a male image (the testicles containing seed). Thus the range of meanings may be seen as a continuum of androgynous birth images: seed (male egg), womb (female egg), embryo, child.

- 1 In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky.⁴ Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 2 He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality – and death.⁵ Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?
- 3 He who by his greatness became the one king of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures – who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?