

Is the Rigveda Translatable?

Despite its paramount importance as the earliest Indo-European poetic anthology, the Rigveda remains largely undeciphered. Its composition, generally believed to date from around 1200 BC, predates the fixing of classical Sanskrit by the grammarian Pāṇini in the 4th century BC by a period similar to that which separates *Beowulf* from Shakespeare. Although the language in which it has come down to us is recognizably Sanskrit, this earliest recorded form is morphologically much more complex than classical Sanskrit and has a lexicon that is to a large extent unfamiliar. Sanskritists, many of whom prefer to be known as indologists, are not primarily linguists, and most are quick to admit that they are not Rigvedic scholars.

The earliest complete version of the Rigveda into English by Horace Hayman Wilson, published between 1850 and 1888, was based on the commentary of the 14th-century scholar Sāyaṇa. E.B. Cowell, in the preface to the posthumously published fifth volume, is clear about the value of this translation: “Wilson’s work enables the English reader to know what the Hindus themselves suppose the Rig-Veda to mean.”ⁱ Wilson had explained in his introduction to the first volume what interested him in the Rigveda: “The real value of the original lies not so much in its merits as a literary composition, as in the illustration which it supplies of the most ancient Hindu system of religious worship and social organisation.”ⁱⁱ At the same time he remarks, with some surprise, on the enormous differences that he has discovered between the Rigveda and later texts: “The hymns it comprises represent a form of religious worship, and a state of society, very dissimilar to those we meet with in all the other scriptural authorities of the Hindus... the great mass of the ritual, all the most popular deities, possibly the principal laws and distinctions of society, and the whole body of the Heroic and Pauranik [mythological] *dramatis personae*, have no place, no part, in the *Suktas* of the *Rig-Veda*.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The subtitle to Wilson’s translation of the Rigveda defines it as “a collection of ancient Hindu hymns . . . the oldest authority for the religious and social institutions of the Hindus”. This remains the prevalent view. When Colin Renfrew writes that the hymns, or as I describe them, poems, “stand at the head of the whole body of Indian literature, and at the very sources of the Hindu religion”, he is following the received opinion. Like Wilson, however, he comments upon

the apparent discrepancy: “That is not to say that we can see the Hindu religion in them with any degree of clarity.”^{iv} Indian scholars from the earliest times have approached the Rigveda as a religious text taking its place at the beginning of a long tradition, and Western indologists continue to view it in this way. This approach has always coloured attempts to discover its meaning.

The only version generally available to the English-speaking reader is the selection of passages by Wendy Doniger, Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, first published by Penguin in 1981 and frequently reprinted. In the introduction to an earlier book, *Hindu Myths* (1975), Doniger had written: “The major sources of Hindu mythology in the ancient and medieval periods are a series of texts composed in Sanskrit, an Indo-European language closely related to Greek and Latin. The earliest source—and, indeed, the earliest known Indo-European document—is the Rg Veda”.^v The fact that the earliest known Indo-European document has always been regarded as a source for the study of Hindu religion and mythology continues to prejudice the approach of indologists to the Rigveda, despite the fact that, as the distinguished American linguist W.D. Whitney observed as long ago as 1873, “the condition and manners depicted in it are... of a character which seems almost more Indo-European than Indian.”^{vi}

How easy is it to recognise when a translation is wrong? John Chadwick in *The Decipherment of Linear B* refers to a misguided attempt by K. D. Ktistopoulos to translate the Phaistos Disk, and gives the following extract:

Supreme – deity, of the powerful thrones star,
supreme – tenderness of the consolatory words,
supreme – donator of the prophecies,
supreme – of the eggs the white...

Chadwick comments: “It does not need the author’s apology for inexpertness in Semitic philology to make us suspect that something has gone wrong here.”^{vii} Indeed: one way of confirming that a translation is probably right is that it makes sense. We “suspect that something has gone wrong” because the *meaning*, in Ktistopoulos’ version, is far from apparent. What, then, of translations of the Rigveda? Arthur Macdonell, the Oxford Professor of Sanskrit during the first quarter of the last century, translates verse II, 35, 6: “The birth of this steed is here and

in heaven. Do thou protect the patrons from falling in with malice and injury. Him that is not to be forgotten, far away in unbaked citadels, hostilities shall not reach nor falsehoods”. He notes, “Though every word is clear in this stanza the meaning of the whole is somewhat uncertain.”^{viii} The Hawaii professor Walter Maurer offers for II, 16, 5: “The trough of the bull, the wave of honey, flows clear for the bull to drink, whose nourishment is the bull. The two adhvarus are bulls, the pressing-stones are bulls: they press the bull Soma for the bull.”^{ix} And Wendy Doniger suggests that IX, 74, 8 begins: “Now he has gone to the white pot coated by cows; the racehorse has reached the winning line”.^x

Indologists believe that usual semantic rules do not apply to the Rigveda. Maurer comments in the footnote to his translation above: “Their delight in this word-play is surely at least in part due to the paradoxical statements to which it readily leads.”^{xi} Doniger in the introduction to her Penguin selection explains that “the hymns are meant to puzzle”.^{xii} Professor Jan Gonda, on the other hand, had suggested that the poets may not have understood the language they were using. “Are we right in the tacit assumption that the meaning of the words under discussion always admitted of exact definitions?; were they completely clear to those who used them?”^{xiii} An alternative explanation, of course, could be that existing translations are just wrong, because they are based on wrong assumptions – like Ktistopoulos with his attempt at the Phaistos Disk.

We believe that from the beginning the text of the Rigveda was orally transmitted with scrupulous accuracy.^{xiv} Perhaps it was always largely nonsense, as indologists suggest. Yāska, whose *Nirukta*, generally dated to about 500 BC, is the oldest surviving study of the Rigveda, quotes an assertion made by a sceptic called Kautsa (about whom nothing else is known) that “the Vedic stanzas have no meaning.”^{xv} Kautsa’s view of the Rigveda makes clear that knowledge of classical Sanskrit is no help when it comes to understanding the obscurities of the Rigvedic lexicon and its forms. Shakespeare also, we suspect, would have struggled to make sense of *Beowulf*. Sanskrit scholars, with their knowledge of the later language and texts, face the same difficulties as Kautsa. Indeed, having stated that the “hymns are meant to puzzle”, Doniger goes on to confess that the puzzlement sometimes lies with the translator. “I have retranslated several hymns used in my earlier publications, and the alert reader will notice massive differences between the two versions. ... Translators should, I think, be allowed to make their

guesses out loud, treating their own earlier attempts like old wills: I hereby revoke and declare null and void, all previous translations”^{xvi}.

The tradition of guessing, in studies of the Rigveda, is rooted in antiquity. We do not know what circumstances led the poems to become obscure, although the fact that the Rigvedic dialect is not the direct ancestor of classical Sanskrit no doubt contributed.^{xvii} Certainly by the time of Kautsa and Yāska the Rigveda was no longer understood. Yāska tries to disprove Kautsa’s sceptical assertion by linguistic analysis, and he bases his explanations on etymology; a valiant attempt, worthy of a near contemporary of Plato. Etymological reflections were however largely guesswork until the end of the 18th century, and although Yāska’s study of more than two millennia earlier merits our admiration, it is highly speculative. Professor Macdonell examined the evidence for the existence of an authoritative native tradition and his conclusion was decisive. “Yāska’s own interpretations... are evidently often merely conjectural, for he frequently gives several alternative explanations of a word... Yet he must surely have had more and better ways of ascertaining the sense of various obscure words than Sāyaṇa who lived nearly 2000 years later. Sāyaṇa’s interpretations, however, sometimes differ from those of Yāska. Hence either Yāska is wrong or Sāyaṇa does not follow the tradition. Again, Sāyaṇa often gives several inconsistent explanations of a word . . . it is clear from a careful examination of their comments that neither Yāska nor Sāyaṇa possessed any certain knowledge about a large number of words in the RV.”^{xviii} Hermann Oldenberg was surely right in saying that the ancient “authorities” can be of no help to us when it comes to deciphering the Rigveda. “Die Angaben von Sāyaṇa und Konsorten sind auch hier *quantité négligeable*; zum einen Teil sind sie falsch; wo sie zum anderen Teil richtig sind, können wir erst hinterher herauserkennen, nachdem wir unsererseits des Richtigen uns bemächtigt haben, und dann werden wir sie nicht um der Autorität des Sāyaṇa willen, sondern allein aus unseren eigenen Gründen als richtig betrachten.”^{xix} The usefulness of the works of these early critics is exclusively twofold. Their quotations assure us that the text itself has remained unaltered since the time of Yāska; and their comments give some indication of the multitude of passages and words that they did not understand, and which as a result were open, from a very early stage, to the kind of speculative exegesis that continues to flourish.

Wilson's translation was made and published in stages, in step with the appearance of Max Müller's first edition of the Saṃhitā text in the Devanāgarī script. The text was tediously long in production, coming out between 1849 and 1874, because Max Müller had been persuaded by the French orientalist Eugène Burnouf to publish the commentary of the medieval scholar Sāyaṇa alongside it. Whitney describes the circumstances, his image evoking the wounded snake of Pope's *Alexandrine* in the *Essay on Criticism*: "The students of the Veda long waited with despairing hope, while the work, with this heavy clog upon it, was wearily dragging its slow length through the press."^{xx} But Max Müller realised his error. In 1873 he produced another edition of the Saṃhitā text, this time accompanied, not by Sāyaṇa's commentary, but by the Pada text in a separate volume. His awareness of the importance of the Pada text, which is outlined below, continued to grow, and in 1877 he issued another edition with the Saṃhitā and Pada texts on facing pages. His authoritative printing of the two texts in Devanāgarī has long been out of print. Theodor Aufrecht brought out a transliterated version before the completion of Max Müller's text, but he made use of it as far as he was able: "Für die ersten sieben Mandala stand mir die vortreffliche Textausgabe von Professor Müller zu Gebote."^{xxi} A second, corrected, edition of Aufrecht's transliteration appeared in 1877. This initial flurry of scholarly attention to the text was followed by a long period of silence.

Although the poems of the Rigveda were composed in a metrical form of great sophistication,^{xxii} it was not until over a century later, in 1994, that an edition of the text showing their original form was published.^{xxiii} For the first time, the fact that the Rigveda is after all a "literary composition", *pace* Professor Wilson, became abundantly clear. But the metrically restored text is also now out of print, and a reprint is uncertain. This would seem to indicate an extraordinary lack of scholarly interest in the earliest poems of the Indo-Europeans. This lack of interest has come about, I suggest, because the continuing failure to shake off the "heavy clog" of the traditional interpretation interferes with our ability to pay the text proper linguistic attention. In fact, such attention has been rendered impossible.

For the majority of interested readers, including linguists, the only access to the text of the Rigveda is provided by translations. Given the continuing uncertainty about the meaning of much of its vocabulary, a translation with a detailed *apparatus criticus* must be necessary, as described by Max Müller: "I mean by translation, not a mere rendering of the hymns of the

Rig-veda into English, French, or German, but a full account of the reasons which justify the translator in assigning such a power to such a word, and such a meaning to such a sentence... a mere translation... will never lead to any solid results.”^{xxiv} Wendy Doniger’s Penguin selection is however designed for the general reader. She wishes to protect her audience, and her “critical apparatus” is not intended to give Max Müller’s full account, but, as she says, to gloss over the difficulties: “The skeletal nature of the critical apparatus is... intended to spare the reader a painful and confusing glimpse behind the curtain into the translator’s messy workshop, to gloss over a number of the agonized (and often unsatisfying) decisions that were necessary... the notes, therefore, provide only enough glosses to allay the reader’s suspicion that something important may be missing or that something is wrong with the verse.”^{xxv}

Wendy Doniger’s is the translation to which the majority of English-speaking readers will turn, and to which they have turned for the last twenty years. A sample passage from her selection demonstrates the form that the notes take, showing the kind of information that the reader is spared, and the kind that is provided. I have chosen verses 3–8 of IV, 18, because this passage is relatively free of a network of lexical obscurities whose traditional ritual interpretation I question. I am giving Doniger’s translation of each verse in turn, and explain some of the problems raised by the text and the decisions that she has made. The words in her translation which I shall discuss are in bold. The poem is headed, in the Penguin version, *The Birth and Childhood Deeds of Indra*.^{xxvi} I have added the text of each verse, from Van Nooten and Holland’s metrically restored edition, below her translation.

*Verse 3. He watched his mother as she went away: ‘I cannot help following: I will follow. In Tvaṣṭr’s house Indra drank the **Soma worth a hundred cows pressed in the two bowls.***

parāyatīm mātāram ānv acaṣṭa
 ná nānu gāni ānu nū gamāni
 tvāṣṭur gr̥hé apibat sómam índraḥ
 śatadhanīyaṃ camúvoḥ sutāsya

Can we be sure that the traditional interpretation here, as offered by Wendy Doniger, is right? The word “pressed” translates the past participle of *√su*, *sutá*, which inflects as an adjective. If

the translation is correct it should be in agreement with the word *sóma*. However, *sóma* is in the accusative, *sómam*, and *sutá* is genitive, *sutásya*. In addition, elsewhere in her selection she explains that “the two bowls” of her translation represent sky and earth^{xxvii}, but this is not mentioned here. The cows, also, are supplied: the text simply reads *śatadhaniyam*, literally ‘of a hundredfold worth’. These points are not discussed. Doniger’s note confines itself to the comment: “According to later tradition, Indra killed Tvaṣṭṛ in order to get the Soma away from him.” The relevance of this reference to later tradition is not clear.

4. Why has she pushed him far away, whom she carried for a thousand months and many autumns? For there is no one his equal among those who are born and those who will be born.

kíṃ śá ś́dhak kṛṇavad yám saháśram
 māśó jabhāra śarádaś ca pūrvīḥ
 nahī nú asya pratimānam ásti
 antár jātéśu utá yé jānitvāḥ

In this verse either the text or the translation is wrong. Doniger’s version depends upon a significant textual alteration, and very free interpretation of the verb. The subject of the first clause in her translation, “she”, ignores the reading of the Pada text, which is *śáh*, “he”. The Rigveda, as described above, has come down to us in two forms. The Saṃhitā (‘put together’) is a continuous text, applying later sandhi rules which change the appearance of words, sometimes making their form ambiguous. Here it gives *śá ś́dhak*. To ensure that the text is understood correctly, the Pada (‘word’) text, believed to be of similar antiquity, restores all the sandhi changes, providing a word-for-word version. The rejection of an unequivocal explanation by the Pada text—here *śáh*, “he”, not *śā*, “she”—is not to be undertaken lightly.

Doniger is not the first to ignore the Pada text in translating this verse. Karl Geldner, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Marburg in the early years of the last century, in his complete translation of the Rigveda did the same. His footnote gives the source. “Kein Zweifel, daß *śá* vor *r* hier für *śā* steht. Mit recht hat Oldenberg diese von Ludwig (V, 466) nur angedeutete Erklärung aufgenommen.”^{xxviii} Van Nooten and Holland in their edition of the text however follow the

Pada text reading; see their note to this passage.^{xxix} Alexander Lubotsky in his recent concordance to the Rigveda also follows the Pada text.^{xxx} Why do *translators* do otherwise?

Ludwig had suggested that we make the alteration to the text for interpretative reasons; it makes possible a translation that seems to fit the traditional story. “Würde *śdhak* local (X. 49, 7.) concret gefasst werden können, und wollte man $sá = sã$ (vor *ś*) verstehn, so liesze sich übersetzen: warum will sie beseitigen (auf die seite schaffen) den, den sie tausend monde getragen? er hat ja doch seines gleichen nicht u.s.w.”^{xxxix} Oldenberg, similarly, based his agreement on what he saw as a “Widerspruch”, a contradiction, in the text.^{xxxii} Doniger makes no reference to the textual alteration. Her note explains: “The argument is either, Why did she try to kill him when she knew he was so powerful that he couldn’t be killed, or, Why did she try to kill him when she knew he was destined to be a great hero? In fact, she merely pushed him away in order to preserve him...” Her exposition of the “argument” depends entirely upon the textual alteration; and for her translation to work, the object, “him”, has to be supplied. What is more, the story that she tells requires the tense of the verb here, *kṛṇavat*, a subjunctive form of $\sqrt{kṛ}$, ‘do’, to be mistranslated. The subjunctive, which has largely disappeared from classical Sanskrit, is the usual means of expressing future tense in the Vedic language. It never has a past sense.

Doniger continues, “but one is reminded of the mother of Mārtāṇḍa, Aditi, (who is traditionally identified as the mother of Indra as well) who pushed her son away to kill him (10. 72. 8)”. Her cross-reference to X, 72, 8 leads to another footnote, which curiously serves only to undermine this. “The verb describing what his mother did to him may mean either to throw aside or to miscarry, and later etymology of Mārtāṇḍa is ‘dead in the egg’.”^{xxxiii}

There is no linguistic justification for the rejection of the reading of the Pada text. “Why has she pushed him far away” translates *kīṃ śá śdhak kṛṇavat*. The interrogative, *kīṃ*, can mean ‘why?’, ‘what?’, or merely flag a question. The only obscurity in the line is the indeclinable adverb *śdhak*, which Doniger translates “far away”. The meaning of this word has been much debated. The exact force of such a word can only be identified by the comparison of passages in which it occurs – a process that is of course jeopardised if any of those passages have been subjected to textual alteration on the basis of assumed meaning. Monier-Williams, in his Sanskrit-English dictionary first published in 1872 and many times reprinted, offers “separately, aside, apart”.^{xxxiv} The Viennese linguist Manfred Mayrhofer, in his most recent study of the Vedic lexicon,

suggests, among others, “besonders, abgesondert”.^{xxxv} A likely translation here then could be, ‘when he’s on his own’, i.e. after birth. But at present the precise meaning of *ṛdhak* remains uncertain.

What will he [*ṛdhak*] do

Whom she carried for a thousand months, and many autumns?

For there is none equal to him, none

Not among the born, nor those yet to be born.

5. *As if she thought he was **flawed**, his mother hid Indra though he abounded in manly strength. Then he stood up and put his garment on by himself; as he was born he filled the two world-halves.*

avadyám 'va mányamānā gúhākar

índram mātā vīriyeṇā nīrṣtam

áthód asthāt svayám átkam vásāna

ā ródasī aprñāj jāyamānaḥ

What are we to understand by the translation “flawed” here? The Sanskrit word is *avadyá*, a gerundive of *√vad*, ‘speak’, with privative *a-*, literally ‘not to be spoken’. Stanley Insler, in his edition of the Gāthās of Zarathustra, draws the parallel between *avadyá* and Avestan *an-āxšta* ‘unrecountable’, that is, ‘shameful’.^{xxxvi} Ralph Griffith, whose translation of the complete Rigveda was published in Benares at the end of the 19th century, translates “Deeming him reproach...”^{xxxvii} Doniger again provides a footnote, again with reference to the mysterious Mārtāṇḍa. “The flaw may be a physical birth flaw such as Mārtāṇḍa had, the cause of Aditi’s rejection of him [“rejection”? Or was it miscarriage?]. Again the suspicion is invalid: Indra is *not* physically flawed. But the phrase may also foreshadow the moral flaw which is to be a problem to Indra”. The “invalid suspicion” originates in her gloss, based on her translation, not in the text. There is no suggestion of physical flaw in *avadyá*.

6. *These waters flow happily, shouting “Alalā!”, waters that were screaming together like righteous women. Ask them what they are saying, what encircling mountain the waters burst apart.*

etā arṣanti alalābhāvantīr
ṛtāvarīr iva saṃkrósamānāḥ
etā ví pṛcha kím idám bhananti
kám āpo ádrim paridhīm rujanti

The first half of this verse is considerably padded. A literal translation would read: ‘These [f] rush, being *alalā* [*hapax legomenon*],^{xxxviii} crying out together as if possessing truth.’^{xxxix} The subject could be ‘waters’, a feminine word in Vedic, and the subject of the last line of the verse. But this is not certain. Doniger again explains: “The waters set free when Vṛtra was killed... Also perhaps the waters in which Indra was placed to hide him from danger”. Her translation has supplied a number of words not in the text: not only “waters”, twice, but also “happily”, “that were”, and “women” (better, perhaps, than the cows which are suggested by Norman Brown).^{xi} In addition, Doniger gives “shouting” for ‘being’ (*bhāvantīs*). She notes to the line: “At first the waters scream for help when Vṛtra assaults them; then they chortle onomatopoetically when they are set free.” But the distinction between past and present action, and between happy cries and unhappy cries, on which this note depends, is not present in the text.

7. *Are they speaking words of praise and invitation to him? Do the waters wish to take on themselves the flaw of Indra? With his great weapon my son killed Vṛtra and set these rivers free.*

kím u ṣvid asmai nivído bhananta
índrasyāvadyám didhiṣanta āpaḥ
mámaitān putró mahatā vadhéna
vṛtrám jaghanvām asṛjad ví síndhūn

Doniger’s “words of praise and invitation” is a translation of *nivídas*. The word comes from *√vid* ‘know’, with prefix *ni-* ‘down, into’, and Böhtlingk and Roth give, with reference to this passage, “*Anweisung, Aufforderung; Vorschrift, Lehre*”,^{xli} ‘instruction, invitation, teaching’. Doniger’s footnote explains that the word is “a technical term for a formula of praise and laudatory epithets, used to call a god”. The first translator into English, Horace Hayman Wilson, while basing his translation on the medieval commentary of Sāyaṇa, had made it clear in his footnote that he suspected that the “technical” interpretation was later.^{xlii} Doniger’s footnote demonstrates her familiarity with later texts; but its relevance to the passage she is translating is not clear.

8. *Still a young woman, I did not throw you away for my sake; nor did Evil-childbirth swallow you up for my sake. But for my sake the waters were kind to the child, and for my sake Indra stood up at once.*

mámac caná tvā yuvatīḥ parāsa
 mámac caná tvā kuśāvā jagāra
 mámac cid āpaḥ śísave mamṛdyur
 mámac cid índraḥ sáhasód atiṣṭhat

The chief difficulty in this verse lies in the word *mámat* (*mámac* is the result of a sandhi change), which is repeated at the beginning of the next verse, but appears nowhere else. Its meaning can be determined only by linguistic means or from the context. Doniger, like Geldner, in translating “for my sake”, takes it to be related to the personal pronoun; it appears to echo *máma* ‘my’, in the previous verse. Mayrhofer keeps an open verdict: “wohl (gegen U. [Uhlenbeck, who had described the connection with *máma* in his dictionary as “sicher zu verwerfen”,^{xliii} ‘certainly to be dismissed’]), etwa, ‘von mir her, um meinetwillen’”. Hermann Grassmann and Monier-Williams had roughly concurred in an entirely different interpretation following Böhtlingk and Roth (who translate *mámat-mámat* “modo-modo”), the German scholar giving “bald-bald”, and the English “at one time... at another time.”

Another significant question mark is raised by Doniger’s translation of the verb in the first line, *parāsa*. Its form could be either 1st. or 3rd pers. sing. perfect. Grassmann takes it as the latter, as does Geldner, translating: “Um meinetwillen hat dich die junge Frau nicht beseitigt”, ‘Not for my sake did the young woman put you aside.’ This seems a more likely reading than Doniger’s; *yuvatīs*, ‘young woman’, is the subject, and the second line is structurally parallel to the first. She has supplied the word “still” (“Still a young woman, I..”) to make her reading more convincing, but it has no textual authority. What is more, this verb, from *√as*, ‘throw’, with prefix *parā-* ‘away’, we have already come across. It appears only twice in the Rigveda, here and at X, 72, 8. Doniger’s footnote to the other passage I quoted above: “The verb... may mean either to throw aside or to miscarry”. This significant piece of information is not repeated here, a context in which the suggested alternative meaning would be a distinct possibility.

One thing is clear. The first half of the verse is in antithesis to the second. The accentuation of the verbs tells us this. The accent, which is no longer in use in classical Sanskrit, is consistently applied in the Rigveda. The omission of all accents from the Penguin edition's index of first lines, perhaps to be accounted for by printing difficulties, is unfortunate. Accentuation is frequently decisive in deciphering the text.

The accent can help us to understand this verse. Antithetical clauses are often highlighted by verbal accentuation, the verb in the first having the accent, and that in the second not. Here, the two perfect indicatives in the first two lines (*parāśa*, *jagāra*) are accented, but the verbs in the last two, *mamṛdyur*, an optative form, and *atiṣṭhat* (imperfect), are not. The antithesis is borne out by the corresponding words *māmat* – *māmat*, accompanied by *caná* in the first two lines and *cid* in the last two. Setting aside the unknown quantities, I suggest the following version:

[*māmac caná*] has a young woman abandoned you
[*māmac caná*] has Kuśavā swallowed you
[*māmac cid*] may the waters be kind to the child
[*māmac cid*] Indra stood up in his strength.

The last two lines seem to be related to earlier verses. The third recalls verse 7 immediately preceding, and the fourth the second half of verse 5, where the verb describing Indra's action is the same. However, if the text in verse 4 is left unaltered, the first two lines, with their parallel verb forms, seem to describe events that did *not* happen. I suggest that the second half of the verse is positive, but the first half, in contrast, is negative; in other words, the young woman did not abandon, nor did Kuśavā (see below) swallow. This however runs entirely counter to the interpretation of the passage given by Wendy Doniger.

Doniger translates the *hapax legomenon kuśavā* in the second line “Evil-childbirth”. Her footnote glosses: “This may be the name of a demonness who swallows children, whose name indicates that she brings evil to those in childbirth (i.e. causes the death of the child or the mother or both) or brings forth evil. More likely however it is the name of the river who ‘swallows’ up Indra – not for the sake of his mother (i.e. not because she was a rejecting mother) but for *his*

sake – to save him from danger.” This explanation depends entirely upon her translation “for my sake” for the uncertain *mámat*. And if this second meaning - “it is the name of the river” - is the more likely one, as she says in her footnote, why, then, does her translation give the other?

Doniger’s interpretative annotations, which occupy more space than the translation of this passage, have assumed an importance far greater than the translation itself. She finally glosses the verse: “The mercy of the waters may be *their kindness in adopting him when his mother was forced to abandon him, or their willingness to forgive him for the sin of killing the demon (for their benefit) and to take part of the sin upon them. Indra’s mother takes credit for persuading him to do this, and for letting Indra stand up at once, though earlier (v.5) the poet emphasizes that Indra did this despite her efforts to hide him*”. Most of this note is unrelated to the text. I have used italics to show where it is entirely based on stories drawn from the later tradition; as a result of which Doniger has to explain the portion not in italics as a contradiction in the text.

9. *Not for my sake did the shoulderless one wound you, generous Indra, and strike away your two jaws; though wounded, you overpowered him, and with your weapon you crushed the head of the Dāsa.*

mámac caná te maghavan víamso
nivividhvāñ ápa hánū jaghāna
ádhā níviddha úttaro babhūvāñ
chíro dāsásya sám piṇak vadhéna

Again the verse opens with *mámac caná*, and the main verb in the first half of the verse is accented, but that in the second is not. The two halves are again in antithesis. In this verse the second half is introduced, not by *mámac cid*, but by the Vedic particle *ádha*, which means ‘then’, or when there is a contrast, ‘but’. Once more, I suggest that the first half of the verse describes an event that did *not* happen. Indeed, in X, 152, 3 it is Indra who is enjoined to break *Vrtra’s* jaws: *ví vrtrásya hánū ruja*. And were Indra’s jaws ever under threat in this passage? The verb here translated “strike away”, from *√han* with prefix *ápa* ‘away’, occurs twenty-seven times in the Rigveda. In the other twenty-six instances, according to Grassmann’s analytical concordance, it means ‘ward off, repel’. Doniger’s gloss shores up her interpretation. “Elsewhere it is said that *Vṛtra* wounded Indra in this way, shattering his jaws (I.32.12)”. But the passage to which she

cross-refers reads, in her translation: “Indra, you became a hair of a horse’s tail when Vṛtra smote you on the corner of the mouth.”^{xliv} Leaving aside the translation “hair of a horse’s tail”, and the fact that “corner of the mouth” and “jaws” are not synonymous, “on the corner of the mouth”, translates *syké*, which Doniger understands as the locative singular of the word *syká*. Both the meaning of the word *syká* and the form it takes in this passage are disputed.

She herself had translated it differently in her earlier work. “O Indra, you became a hair of a horse’s tail when Vṛtra struck at your thunderbolt.”^{xlv} This seems preferable to her revised version which is based on the questionable analogy of the word *sykvan*, for which the translation “corner of the mouth” is, according to Mayrhofer, later than the Rigveda. The cross-reference to a passage of uncertain meaning in her footnote simply sabotages any possibility of correctly deciphering the verse under view. She concludes: “Indra’s mother seems to be saying that it wasn’t *her* fault that Indra got into such trouble; *she* had tried to keep him safe in her womb.” Her understanding of the passage has depended upon textual alteration, loose translation and questionable interpretation. It is built on sand. Only the thick plaster of interpretative glosses holds it together.

I have mentioned a few of the problems raised by these seven verses, but there are many more. This is also just a sample of the style of the Penguin selection. Wendy Doniger’s translations, “guesses” as she herself acknowledges, are accompanied by detailed notes that are designed to perform a function that is quite different from that of an *apparatus criticus*. I have already quoted the passage in which she explains the purpose of her footnotes: “The notes... provide only enough glosses to allay the reader’s suspicion that something important may be missing or that something is wrong with the verse.” (1981: 13, 15). But this is not what her footnotes do. They tell stories; stories which derive from the later tradition of “making sense” of the Rigveda, a tradition which has no authority, and which is, furthermore, extremely muddled. This style of glossing is not confined to the Penguin translation. Griffith’s complete version remains the most careful attempt into English. But when he renders the beginning of the first verse discussed here, IV, 18, 3, very differently from Wendy Doniger: “He bent his eye upon the dying Mother: My word I now withdraw. That way I follow”, his footnote simply explains that Indra “has changed his mind”. This is not intended to be obstructive. But his gloss, like those in the Penguin selection, is merely an attempt to bolster a translation that is highly questionable.

The traditional interpretation of the Rigveda bears little relationship to the text, which at present languishes unstudied. Wendy Doniger believes that the Rigveda is deliberately obscure, and that this justifies the lack of scholarly attention. “This austerity in commentary may often puzzle the reader. Good. The hymns are meant to puzzle”. I disagree: the puzzlement stems from the fact that Sanskrit scholars view the text through a glass, and darkly. Doniger sums up: “I have tried to find the bare bones of the Vedic verses and clothe them with as few scholarly veils as possible”. There are indeed no “scholarly veils” concealing the original in her selection. It is enveloped in an exegetical *chaddar*.

Indologists hope that through interpretation based on later texts will come an understanding of the language of the Rigveda. As Wendy Doniger puts it: “One is reminded of Samuel Johnson’s criticism of a colleague: “ ‘He has too little Latin; he takes the Latin from the meaning, not the meaning from the Latin.’”^{xlvi} She continues, “To some degree, we all do take the Sanskrit from the meaning...” This approach is the root of the problem.

Until all assumptions, the accretion of three millennia, are abandoned, and the text subjected to independent linguistic analysis, the meaning of the Rigveda will remain as closely guarded as ever it was by Brahmanical priests. Because of its antiquity and size – older, we believe, than Homer, and as extensive as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined – the Rigveda has immense linguistic and historical importance. Over a hundred years ago Griffith wrote, in the preface to his translation, “As in the interpretation of the more difficult books of the Old Testament and the Homeric poems, so in the explanation of the Veda complete success, if ever attainable, can be obtained only by the labours of generations of scholars.” We have hardly begun to study it as it needs to be studied.

ⁱ Horace Hayman Wilson, *Rig-Veda-Sanhitā. A collection of ancient Hindu hymns... of the Rig-Veda; the oldest authority for the religious and social institutions of the Hindus*. 6 vols. (London 1850-1888), 5.6.

ⁱⁱ 1.6–7.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1.45.

^{iv} Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: the Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London 1987), 183.

^v Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (Harmondsworth 1975), 14-15.

^{vi} William Dwight Whitney, *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* (New York 1873), 101.

^{vii} John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B* (Cambridge 1959), 30.

^{viii} Arthur Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (Oxford 1917), 71.

^{ix} Walter Maurer, *Pinnacles of India’s Past. Selections from the Rgveda translated and annotated* (Amsterdam 1986), 63.

^x Wendy Doniger, *The Rig Veda. An Anthology* (Harmondsworth 1981), 123.

- ^{xi} 65.
- ^{xii} 15.
- ^{xiii} At the beginning of his paper “The Vedic Concept of Amhas”, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 1 (1957), 33.
- ^{xiv} See Thomas Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language* (London 1959), 35; William Dwight Whitney, *Sanskrit Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass. 1889), xvii.
- ^{xv} Lakshman Sarup, *The Nighaṅṭu and the Nirukta. The Oldest Indian Treatise on etymology, philology, and semantics* (Delhi 1962), 16.
- ^{xvi} 19.
- ^{xvii} M.B. Emeneau, “The dialects of old Indo-Aryan,” in *Ancient Indo-European Dialects* (Berkeley 1966), edd. H. Birnbaum and J. Puhvel, 127.
- ^{xviii} *Vedic Reader* (Oxford 1917), xxx.
- ^{xix} Hermann Oldenberg, “Vedische Untersuchungen,” in *Zeitschrift der Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (1900), 611.
- ^{xx} *Oriental and Linguistic Studies* (New York 1873), 113.
- ^{xxi} (1861–1863: 1.viii).
- ^{xxii} see Edwin Arnold, *Vedic Metre* (Cambridge 1905).
- ^{xxiii} Barend Van Nooten and Gary Holland, *Rig Veda. A metrically restored text with an Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge, Mass. 1994).
- ^{xxiv} Friedrich Max Müller, *Vedic Hymns* (Oxford 1869) xv–xvi.
- ^{xxv} 13, 15.
- ^{xxvi} 141-146.
- ^{xxvii} 83, footnote 20.
- ^{xxviii} Karl Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda. Aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsch übersetzt und mit einem laufenden Kommentar versehen*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. 1951), 1.442. The usual sandhi of $\bar{a} + r$ (vocalic r) is ar . “In the Vedic texts, the vowel r is ordinarily written unchanged after the a -vowel... the two vowels, however, are usually pronounced as one syllable” (Whitney, *Sanskrit Grammar* (1889), 43). This would give a different reading in the Saṃhitā text, *saṛdhak*, with loss of a syllable. However, for a discussion of the complexities of Rigvedic sandhi of $\bar{a} + r$ see Jakob Wackernagel, *Altindische Grammatik. I. Lautlehre* (Göttingen 1896), 314 and 318–319, and Hermann Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum Rig-Veda* (Leipzig 1873), vii.
- ^{xxix} 611.
- ^{xxx} II, 1435.
- ^{xxxi} Alfred Ludwig, *Der Rigveda oder die heiligen Hymnen der Brāhmaṇa*, 6 vols (Prague 1876-1888), 466; he does not use standard capitalisation.
- ^{xxxii} Hermann Oldenberg, *Rgveda. Textkritische und exegetische Noten* (Berlin 1909-1912), 1.281. The perceived contradiction results from his different interpretation of *kīm... ṛdhak* as “was Besonderes”.
- ^{xxxiii} 40.
- ^{xxxiv} Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford 1974).
- ^{xxxv} Manfred Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindiarischen* (Heidelberg 1992-20--).
- ^{xxxvi} Stanley Insler, *The Gāthās of Zarathustra* (Leiden 1975), 203.
- ^{xxxvii} Ralph Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rigveda, translated with a popular commentary* (Benares 1896-1897), 1.416.
- ^{xxxviii} Mayrhofer points to the Greek parallel: “ etwa ‘freudig erregt, sich lebhaft bewegend’ ... wie gr. $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\iota$ ” (Heidelberg 1992-20), I. 125-6.
- ^{xxxix} “In recent years... the idea has gained ground that *aśavan-* and its OPers. (*artāvan-*) and OInd. (*ṛtāvan* [*fem. ṛtāvarī*]) equivalents mean “owning, possessing, Truth.” (Gershevitch 1959: 153; for a detailed exposition see pages 153–156).
- ^{xl} Norman Brown, *India and Indology. Selected articles* (Delhi 1978), 38.
- ^{xli} Otto Böhtlingk and Rudolph Roth, *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch* 7 vols. (St. Petersburg 1855-1875).
- ^{xlii} III. 155.
- ^{xliii} Christian Uhlenbeck, *Kurzegefaßtes Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Altindischen Sprache* (Amsterdam 1898-1899).
- ^{xliv} 150.
- ^{xl} 442.
- ^{xlvi} 14-15. I have not been able to identify the quotation. In a later essay, ‘On translating Sanskrit Myths’, Doniger attributes it instead to Ben Jonson.