

REVIEWS

JOANNA JUREWICZ, *Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda*,
Warszawa: Elipsa 2010, 485 p. (ISBN 978-83-7151-893-5)

1. The title of this book might create the impression that it represents a mere inquiry into the imagery of fire as a concrete counterpart of Cognition in the R̥gvedic *saṃhitā* and as a consequence, readers might expect a long survey of occurrences with some literary and speculative comments but no more. By contrast, this work unequivocally aims at going beyond this strictly philological level of research, which however has been accurately carried out, in order to “concentrate on the metaphysical role of Agni” as a piece of evidence for the ancient “beginnings of abstract and general thought” in India and more generally in the ancient pre-Socratic world.

Actually, Joanna Jurewicz has long accustomed us to reading Vedic texts and specifically Vedic metaphors through the glasses supplied by cognitive linguistics. This almost seems to have been a crucial planned project of hers, as explicitly suggested, e.g., in her article “*Back to the roots. Metaphor in the R̥gveda and examples in the philosophical sūtras*”, published in *Cracow Indological Studies* IV-V (2002-2003, pp. 287-301), where she programmatically wrote: “What we need is the appropriate method of investigation of the R̥gvedic metaphor. In my opinion the method of cognitive linguistics, especially as practised by George Lakoff serves this purpose best” (p. 287).

In fact, Metaphor has been a central topic within Cognitive Linguistics since its origin in the 1970s, partly as an historical consequence of the dominant role played by George Lakoff (and some of his colleagues, who at that time were defining the field of Cognitive Linguistics itself), whose major contributions focused precisely on the metaphor. As is well known their theory is based on a preliminary distinction between basic conceptual metaphors and particular linguistic expressions of these conceptual metaphors and mainly on the analysis of metaphors into source- and target-domains. The term ‘source domain’ refers to the conceptual area from which a metaphor is drawn, while the ‘target domain’ is the subject to which the

metaphor is applied. Each metaphor is additionally examined as having a set of correspondences between categories in the source domain and those in the target domain, which Lakoff and Turner describe as a source-to-target ‘mapping’.

Accordingly, the role played in the present work by cognitive linguistics, whose “fundamental assumption is that abstract thinking is motivated by experience and is conceptualised in concrete terms referring to everyday life”, precisely consists in allowing the Author to get rid of “the need to accept that the Ṛgvedic ideas about gods and nature were anthropomorphic in the sense that the poets were unable to go beyond the frames of concrete imagery”.

2. A fresh interpretation of ṚV 10.129, i.e., the well-known *Nāsadīya* Hymn, seems to be proposed by Jurewicz as a pivotal basis of almost all her book. Indeed, this hymn is considered as “a repository of earlier ṚgVedic thought about creation”, which urges “the learned recipient to evoke the context of the earlier *maṇḍalas*”. A piece of evidence for this assumption is the occurrence of some formulas, designated as “formulaic expressions” (even though in most cases they are unique), which trigger “conventionalised mental operations and activate concepts stored in the long-term memory of the linguistic community”. The whole process of creation is divided into eight stages depicted in the verses of this hymn, each including one or more of these supposed formulaic expressions.

For instance, the very first verse of the hymn depicts the precreative state as “a state of the inability to organise reality and describe it”, i.e. a world where no manifestation is recognizable, and the Creator and Creation cannot be discerned. In this context the expression *nāsad āsīn nō sād āsīt tadānīm* is precisely classified by the Author as a formula evoking earlier concepts of the primeval lack of cognitive ability. In the second verse the expression “was breathing breathlessly” (*ānīd avātām*) is emphasized as a contradiction in terms and self-evidently, as a fact which is inconsistent with everyday life experiences. Therefore *That One* (*tād ékam*) attains the most perfect realisation of freedom through this violation of everyday limits

and the word *svadhā́* is then used to qualify its activity. It is thus *That One*, “internally contradictory and free”, which actually starts cognising something.

The earlier cosmogonies involving the general domain of Water might have been alluded to by means of the formulaic expression “*apraketāṃ salilāṃ sárvaṃ ā idám*”, employed to express the primeval form of the world in the third verse, while the formula “darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning” (*táma āsīt támasā gūḷhám ágre*) evokes a vague domain integrating the precreative state and the initial creative stages. *Tucchyénābhvāpīhitam* is segmented in two ways, namely including the word *ābhū́* in the sense of “that which is about to be”, and *ābhū́* “that which is not, that which is empty, void”. The contradiction between opposites would thus change from the coexistence of the previous stanza to this simultaneous potentiality of *That One* which divides itself in the void, and what is about to be. In fact this latter part of reality which does not yet exist at this creative stage finally comes into being “thanks to the power of heat” (*tápasās [...]* *mahinā́*), whose image evokes the concept of light and the current possibility of cognising which is strictly connected to it. Unfortunately this formidable transition from a binomial nature to a sort of *śleṣa* (a *śliṣṭam bhinnapadaprāyam* according to Dandin’s classification) relies on the mere supposition that the second meaning of *ābhū́* as ‘void’ actually dates back to such a high chronology (cf. the contribution by Daniele Maggi, *Sul “vuoto” in Ṛgvedasamhitā* X.129.3c. In: “Studi Linguistici in onore di Roberto Gusmani”, Alessandria 2006, vol. 2, pp. 1011-22, and bibliography quoted there). The only (double) RV occurrence which has been compared is indeed RV X.27.1; 4 (see p. 68 in the book under review here).

In the fourth stanza we discover that the desire (*kā́ma*) of *That One* is directed towards the heated part. Then *That One* creates those who will cognise this object: these are the poets described in the second hemistich. They can be understood as a manifestation of the subjective power of *That One* within creation. Moreover, Jurewicz explains that it is *That One* who acts upon itself within the poets, as they focus upon their hearts:

in this way, through its manifested aspects, *That One* divides itself into the subject and object of cognition. The description activates the general domain of Procreation by use of *rétas* (semen), with *kāma* as “sexual desire” and *bāndhu* as “kinship with mother”. Here the sentence “desire firstly came upon that which was the first semen of thought/ mind” (*kāmas tād āgre sām avartatādhi mānaso rétaḥ prathamām yād āsīt*) is classified as a formulaic expression. In the following stanza, the poet’s cognitive process is presented in the more concrete shape of a sunrise, by means of the supposed formulaic expression *tiraścīno vitato raśmīr eṣām*. The R̥gvedic conceptualisation of the Earth and the Sky in terms of a woman and a man might have been recalled here: from their coitus, i.e. from the night, the Sun originates as their child. Gods are presumed to be the next subjective manifestation of *That One* and possibly the actual recipient of the hymn is himself requested to repeat the creative activity of *That One* (and of the first poet).

Lastly in the seventh stanza, the composer of the hymn wonders about the object of his cognition, which Jurewicz proposes to interpret as a *brahmodya*, which in the former hemistich formulates a question about the source and nature of creation and in the latter it singles out who should answer, i.e. the poet who takes part in the competition referred to as *asyādhyakṣaḥ paramé vyòman* ‘its eye-witness in the highest heaven’. With this regard Jurewicz (quoting the interpretation by Thompson 1997 of the RV 1.164.34-5) proposes that *brahmán* does not necessarily hint at priesthood as such, but rather at the man who solves the riddle. *That One* who can repeat its creative activity thus manifests itself in a particular human being. In this way, the answer to the questions addressed in the last two stanzas can be given every time by an actual human being realising a particular cognitive act.

3. As shown in the analysis of this hymn, Jurewicz believes that the role of the source domains referring to the experience of everyday life is to make abstract concepts easier to be understood and allow the recipient to see the sequence of events and the nature of the process. Accordingly, the scenario of

expansion of the Indo-Aryan speakers into the Punjab is an important defining event in Jurewicz's reconstruction of Vedic metaphorical speculation. The protagonists long for some goods, which are possessed by enemies and as a consequence are substantially inaccessible, since they are hindered by various kinds of enclosures and obstacles. Enemies are thus associated with the darkness where goods seem to be hidden and excluded both from their possession and from their real cognition itself. As a third step of this cursory thought-association series, the "lack of cognition" as well as the "lack of speech and lack of rituals and rules" is mapped onto the enemies themselves, so that they are conceived as sub-human beings. Nevertheless they are also praised as superhuman beings, because they are the owners of the goods which are longed for. The conquest of the foreign land which as a source-domain corresponds to the image of the enclosure which is broken, of the hidden treasure which is discovered and of its guardian who is killed, has as its target domain the creative and cognitive act, which is performed by a man who has to arrange an unknown space according to his specific life experiences (and rules).

The identification of Agni with *That One* of the *Nāsadīya* Hymn is of course a fundamental aspect of Jurewicz's interpretation. The creative activity can be conceived in terms of the procreation of fire, but at the same time Agni can be conceived in the sense of a human being (a poet). The recipient can also see the creation of the poets as the result of cosmic transformations understood in terms of the general domains of Procreation: he is expected to integrate the concepts of *That One* and Agni with both input spaces of the production of fire and human behaviour. He will see "the manifestation of *That One* as the self-ignition of fire and as the birth of the poet", his growth and his conquest of cognition.

4. Indeed, the Child of the Waters (*apām nāpāt*) is the "philosophical model" which really gives a full account of the contradictory and autonomous essence of Fire, as the almost perfect image of self-transformation which Cognition has to be. This is mainly elaborated in RV 2.35 and is also involved in

some single stanzas of the tenth *maṇḍala*. It basically relies on the idea of the light which arises from darkness. The waters which are the symbol of darkness are the mothers of Fire which manifests itself as the Sun in the morning. It is depicted as a calf milked by waters which are cows, although it is also incestuously a bull conceiving the embryo in the waters (cows), i.e. he is a husband of the waters. In turn, the image of a bull activates the common metaphorical identification with the rain-cloud. The recipient is thus expected to simultaneously visualize both Agni's cosmic movements, i.e. upwards, typical of sunrise, and viceversa downwards, occurring when it rains. Agni is a free agent who goes beyond cosmic and social rules. The already emphasized term *svadhā* which seems to hint at the Somic beverage but literally denotes "own will, self-determination" consistently constitutes the food of Agni (RV 1.144.2).

Another strictly connected topic is the identity of Agni with Varuṇa (RV 7.88.2) and other gods and in this regard the analysis of hymn RV 10.124 advanced by Jurewicz is very interesting. She aims to show that the hymn can be understood as cognitive transformations of Agni who acts through Varuṇa, Indra and other gods in his manifested forms. The Author proposes her interpretation as the dialogue between a sacrificer who summons Agni and Agni who responds to his appeal. Nevertheless, Jurewicz stresses the fact that R̥gvedic poets either failed in their attempt to fully identify other gods with Agni or did not want to carry it out completely and, as an historical consequence, the gods preserved their independence to a large extent. Eventually, the only R̥gvedic concept of a god which became metaphysically productive was the concept of Agni conceived as an internally contradictory reality.

To sum up, the whole complexity of metaphors reconstructed by Jurewicz around this concept of Fire by means of the patterns and terminology supplied by cognitive linguistics is really convincing and extremely helpful. We only wonder why the Author, even though her object of inquiry is a literary text, seems to strictly adhere to Lakoff's theory, instead of paying more attention to the specificity of literary metaphors, as has

recently seemed to be suggested by the explosion of interest in cognitive approaches to literature over the past few years. Note e.g. the thoroughly literary exemplification (based on Tennyson's work) of metaphor taxonomy advanced by Gerard Steen, *Three kinds of Metaphor in Discourse* (in: *Metaphor and Discourse*, edited by A. Musolff-Jörg Zinken. New York 2009, pp. 25-39).

Additionally, as far as the historical perspective is concerned, the reconstruction of the supposed link between the Ṛgvedic concept of heat and fire and, on the other hand, the upaniṣadic concept of *ātman* and Buddha's *praṭīyasamutpāda*, is really intriguing. The Author already explained her historical reconstruction in some thought-provoking articles, such as *The Fiery Self. The Ṛgvedic roots of the Upaniṣadic concept of ātman*, in: *Teaching on India in Central and Eastern Europe. Contributions to the 1st Central & Eastern European Indological Conference on Regional Cooperation (Warsaw, 15-17 September 2005)*, edited by Danuta Stasik and Anna Trynkowska, Warszawa 2007, pp. 123-37, and *Playing with fire: the praṭīyasamutpāda from the perspective of Vedic thought*, in: *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 26 (2000), pp. 77-103. According to this interpretation, it should deal with a diachronically regular development of the original idea, i.e. a sort of unorthodox response to older Vedic cosmogonies. Of course according to an alternative hypothesis, the Ṛgvedic speculative horizon, imagery included, could instead depend on a brāhmaṇic reform which might have been the outcome of a clash between two distinct branches of the immigrant Indo-Āryan population (supposed on the basis of Parpola's 1983 two-wave theory), reconsidered in the light of the late-Vedic fresco recently painted by Bronkhorst 2007 and of the relevant criticisms arising especially from his innovative relative and absolute chronologies (see, e.g., Witzel 2009). As a consequence, the continuity that Jurewicz highlighted here and explained according to a well known pattern of historical interpretation inaugurated by Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, London 1964, should be interpreted in a quite

different way, more specifically as a trace of the one of the two supposed distinct traditions.

Whatever the historical reconstruction pattern adopted, the whole comparison which points out the relevant *anvaya*- and *vyatireka*- details analysed here and elsewhere by Joanna Jurewicz is a precious work which must henceforth become an essential starting point for every serious analysis of metaphors from a diachronic perspective.

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