Chapter VI

Agni and the Truth

THE RIG VEDA is one in all its parts. Whichever of its ten Mandalas we choose, we find the same substance, the same ideas, the same images, the same phrases. The Rishis are the seers of a single truth and use in its expression a common language. They differ in temperament and personality; some are inclined to a more rich, subtle and profound use of Vedic symbolism; others give voice to their spiritual experience in a barer and simpler diction, with less fertility of thought, richness of poetical image or depth and fullness of suggestion. Often the songs of one seer vary in their manner, range from the utmost simplicity to the most curious richness. Or there are risings and fallings in the same hymn; it proceeds from the most ordinary conventions of the general symbol of sacrifice to a movement of packed and complex thought. Some of the Suktas are plain and almost modern in their language; others baffle us at first by their semblance of antique obscurity. But these differences of manner take nothing from the unity of spiritual experience, nor are they complicated by any variation of the fixed terms and the common formulae. In the deep and mystic style of Dirghatamas Auchathya as in the melodious lucidity of Medhatithi Kanwa, in the puissant and energetic hymns of Vishwamitra as in Vasishtha’s even harmonies we have the same firm foundation of knowledge and the same scrupulous adherence to the sacred conventions of the Initiates.

From this peculiarity of the Vedic compositions it results that the method of interpretation which I have described can be equally well illustrated from a number of scattered Suktas selected from the ten Mandalas or from any small block of hymns by a single Rishi. If my purpose were to establish beyond all possibility of objection the interpretation which I am now offering, a much more detailed and considerable work would
be necessary. A critical scrutiny covering the whole of the ten Mandalas would be indispensable. To justify for instance the idea I attach to the Vedic term Ritam, the Truth, or my explanation of the symbol of the Cow of Light, I should have to cite all passages of any importance in which the idea of the Truth or the image of the Cow are introduced and establish my thesis by an examination of their sense and context. Or if I wish to prove that Indra in the Veda is really in his psychological functions the master of luminous mind typified by Dyaus, or Heaven, with its three shining realms, Rochana, I should have to examine similarly the hymns addressed to Indra and the passages in which there is a clear mention of the Vedic system of worlds. Nor could this be sufficient, so intertwined and interdependent are the notions of the Veda, without some scrutiny of the other Gods and of other important psychological terms connected with the idea of the Truth and of the mental illumination through which man arrives at it. I recognise the necessity of such a work of justification and hope to follow it out in other studies on the Vedic Truth, on the Gods of the Veda and on Vedic symbols. But a labour of this scope would be beyond the range of the present work, which is confined merely to an illustration of my method and to a brief statement of the results of my theory.

In order to illustrate the method I propose to take the first eleven Suktas of the first Mandala and to show how some of the central ideas of a psychological interpretation arise out of certain important passages or single hymns and how the surrounding context of the passages and the general thought of the hymns assume an entirely new appearance in the light of this profounder thinking.

The Sanhita of the Rig Veda, as we possess it, is arranged in ten books or Mandalas. A double principle is observed in the arrangement. Six of the Mandalas are given each to the hymns of a single Rishi or family of Rishis. Thus the second is devoted chiefly to the Suktas of the Rishi Gritsamada, the third and the seventh similarly to the great names of Vishwamitra and Vasishtha respectively, the fourth to Vamadeva, the sixth to
Bharadwaja. The fifth is occupied by the hymns of the house of Atri. In each of these Mandalas the Suktas addressed to Agni are first collected together and followed by those of which Indra is the deity; the invocations of other gods, Brihaspati, Surya, the Ribhus, Usha etc. close the Mandala. A whole book, the ninth, is given to a single god, Soma. The first, eighth and tenth Mandalas are collections of Suktas by various Rishis, but the hymns of each seer are ordinarily placed together in the order of their deities, Agni leading, Indra following, the other gods succeeding. Thus the first Mandala opens with ten hymns of the seer Madhucchhandas, son of Vishwamitra, and an eleventh ascribed to Jetri, son of Madhucchhandas. This last Sukta, however, is identical in style, manner and spirit with the ten that precede it and they can all be taken together as a single block of hymns one in intention and diction.

A certain principle of thought-development also has not been absent from the arrangement of these Vedic hymns. The opening Mandala seems to have been so designed that the general thought of the Veda in its various elements should gradually unroll itself under the cover of the established symbols by the voices of a certain number of Rishis who almost all rank high as thinkers and sacred singers and are, some of them, among the most famous names of Vedic tradition. Nor can it be by accident that the tenth or closing Mandala gives us, with an even greater miscellaneity of authors, the last developments of the thought of the Veda and some of the most modern in language of its Suktas. It is here that we find the Sacrifice of the Purusha and the great Hymn of the Creation. It is here also that modern scholars think they discover the first origins of the Vedantic philosophy, the Brahmavada.

In any case, the hymns of the son and grandson of Vishwamitra with which the Rig Veda opens strike admirably the first essential notes of the Vedic harmony. The first hymn, addressed to Agni, suggests the central conception of the Truth which is confirmed in the second and third Suktas invoking Indra in company with other gods. In the remaining eight hymns with Indra as the sole deity, except for one which he shares with the Maruts,
we find the symbols of the Soma and the Cow, the obstructor Vritra and the great role played by Indra in leading man to the Light and overthrowing the barriers to his progress. These hymns are therefore of crucial importance to the psychological interpretation of the Veda.

There are four verses in the Hymn to Agni, the fifth to the eighth, in which the psychological sense comes out with a great force and clearness, escaping from the veil of the symbol.

\begin{quote}
Agni rhotā kavikratuḥ, satyaś citraśravastamaḥ; 
devo devebhir ā gamat.
Yad anga dāśuṣe tvam, agne bhadram kariṣyasī;
tavet tat satyam aṅgirah.
Upa tvāṅne dive dive, doṣavastar dhiyā vayam;
namo bharanta emasi.
Rājantam abhvarāṇām, gopām ṭasya dīdivim;
vardhamānām sve dame.
\end{quote}

In this passage we have a series of terms plainly bearing or obviously capable of a psychological sense and giving their colour to the whole context. Sayana, however, insists on a purely ritual interpretation and it is interesting to see how he arrives at it. In the first phrase we have the word *kavi* meaning a seer and, even if we take *kratu* to mean work of the sacrifice, we shall have as a result, “Agni, the priest whose work or rite is that of the seer”, a turn which at once gives a symbolic character to the sacrifice and is in itself sufficient to serve as the seed of a deeper understanding of the Veda. Sayana feels that he has to turn the difficulty at any cost and therefore he gets rid of the sense of seer for *kavi* and gives it another and unusual significance. He then explains that Agni is *satya*, true, because he brings about the true fruit of the sacrifice. *Sravas* Sayana renders “fame”, Agni has an exceedingly various renown. It would have been surely better to take the word in the sense of wealth so as to avoid the incoherency of this last rendering. We shall then have this result for the fifth verse, “Agni the priest, active in the ritual, who is true (in its fruit) — for his is the most varied wealth, — let him come, a god with the gods.”
To the sixth Rik the commentator gives a very awkward and abrupt construction and trivial turn of thought which breaks entirely the flow of the verse. “That good (in the shape of varied wealth) which thou shalt effect for the giver, thine is that. This is true, O Angiras,” that is to say, there can be no doubt about this fact, for if Agni does good to the giver by providing him with wealth, he in turn will perform fresh sacrifices to Agni, and thus the good of the sacrificer becomes the good of the god. Here again it would be better to render, “The good that thou wilt do for the giver, that is that truth of thee, O Angiras,” for we thus get at once a simpler sense and construction and an explanation of the epithet, satya, true, as applied to the god of the sacrificial fire. This is the truth of Agni that to the giver of the sacrifice he surely gives good in return.

The seventh verse offers no difficulty to the ritualistic interpretation except the curious phrase, “we come bearing the prostration.” Sayana explains that bearing here means simply doing and he renders, “To thee day by day we, by night and by day, come with the thought performing the prostration.” In the eighth verse he takes r.tasya in the sense of truth and explains it as the true fruit of the ritual. “To thee shining, the protector of the sacrifices, manifesting always their truth (that is, their inevitable fruit), increasing in thy own house.” Again, it would be simpler and better to take r.tam in the sense of sacrifice and to render, “To thee shining out in the sacrifices, protector of the rite, ever luminous, increasing in thy own house.” The “own house” of Agni, says the commentator, is the place of sacrifice and this is indeed called frequently enough in Sanskrit, “the house of Agni”.

We see, therefore, that with a little managing we can work out a purely ritual sense quite empty of thought even for a passage which at first sight offers a considerable wealth of psychological significance. Nevertheless, however ingeniously it is effected, flaws and cracks remain which betray the artificiality of the work. We have had to throw overboard the plain sense of kavi which adheres to it throughout the Veda and foist in an unreal rendering. We have either to divorce the two words
satya and ṛta which are closely associated in the Veda or to give a forced sense to ṛta. And throughout we have avoided the natural suggestions pressed on us by the language of the Rishi.

Let us now follow instead the opposite principle and give their full psychological value to the words of the inspired text. Kratu means in Sanskrit work or action and especially work in the sense of the sacrifice; but it means also power or strength (the Greek kratos) effective of action. Psychologically this power effective of action is the will. The word may also mean mind or intellect and Sayana admits thought or knowledge as a possible sense for kratu. Śravas means literally hearing and from this primary significance is derived its secondary sense, “fame”. But, psychologically, the idea of hearing leads up in Sanskrit to another sense which we find in śravana, śruti, śruta,—revealed knowledge, the knowledge which comes by inspiration. Drṣṭi and śruti, sight and hearing, revelation and inspiration are the two chief powers of that supra-mental faculty which belongs to the old Vedic idea of the Truth, the Ritam. The word śravas is not recognised by the lexicographers in this sense, but it is accepted in the sense of a hymn,—the inspired word of the Veda. This indicates clearly that at one time it conveyed the idea of inspiration or of something inspired, whether word or knowledge. This significance, then, we are entitled to give it, provisionally at least, in the present passage; for the other sense of fame is entirely incoherent and meaningless in the context.

Again the word namas is also capable of a psychological sense; for it means literally “bending down” and is applied to the act of adoring submission to the deity rendered physically by the prostration of the body. When therefore the Rishi speaks of “bearing obeisance to Agni by the thought” we can hardly doubt that he gives to namas the psychological sense of the inward prostration, the act of submission or surrender to the deity.

We get then this rendering of the four verses: —

“May Agni, priest of the offering whose will towards action is that of the seer, who is true, most rich in varied inspiration, come, a god with the gods.”
“The good that thou wilt create for the giver, that is that truth of thee, O Angiras.

“To thee day by day, O Agni, in the night and in the light we by the thought come bearing our submission, —

“To thee who shinest out from the sacrifices (or, who governest the sacrifices), guardian of the Truth and its illumination, increasing in thy own home.”

The defect of the translation is that we have had to employ one and the same word for satyam and ṛtам whereas, as we see in the formula satyam ṛtam brhat, there was a distinction in the Vedic mind between the precise significances of the two words.

Who, then, is this god Agni to whom language of so mystic a fervour is addressed, to whom functions so vast and profound are ascribed? Who is this guardian of the Truth, who is in his act its illumination, whose will in the act is the will of a seer possessed of a divine wisdom governing his richly varied inspiration? What is the Truth that he guards? And what is this good that he creates for the giver who comes always to him in thought day and night bearing as his sacrifice submission and self-surrender? Is it gold and horses and cattle that he brings or is it some diviner riches?

It is not the sacrificial Fire that is capable of these functions, nor can it be any material flame or principle of physical heat and light. Yet throughout the symbol of the sacrificial Fire is maintained. It is evident that we are in the presence of a mystic symbolism to which the fire, the sacrifice, the priest are only outward figures of a deeper teaching and yet figures which it was thought necessary to maintain and to hold constantly in front.

In the early Vedantic teaching of the Upanishads we come across a conception of the Truth which is often expressed by formulas taken from the hymns of the Veda, such as the expression already quoted, satyam ṛtami brhat, — the truth, the right, the vast. This Truth is spoken of in the Veda as a path leading to felicity, leading to immortality. In the Upanishads also it is by the path of the Truth that the sage or seer, Rishi or Kavi, passes beyond. He passes out of the falsehood, out of the mortal
state into an immortal existence. We have the right therefore to assume that the same conception is in question in both Veda and Vedanta.

This psychological conception is that of a truth which is truth of divine essence, not truth of mortal sensation and appearance. It is satyam, truth of being; it is in its action r̄tam, right, — truth of divine being regulating right activity both of mind and body; it is brhat, the universal truth proceeding direct and undeformed out of the Infinite. The consciousness that corresponds to it is also infinite, brhat, large as opposed to the consciousness of the sense-mind which is founded upon limitation. The one is described as bhūmā, the large, the other as alpa, the little. Another name for this supramental or truth consciousness is Mahas which also means the great, the vast. And as for the facts of sensation and appearance which are full of falsehoods (anr̄tam, not-truth or wrong application of the satyam in mental and bodily activity), we have for instruments the senses, the sense-mind (manas) and the intellect working upon their evidence, so for the truth-consciousness there are corresponding faculties, — drṣṭi, śruti, viveka, the direct vision of the truth, the direct hearing of its word, the direct discrimination of the right. Whoever is in possession of this truth-consciousness or open to the action of these faculties, is the Rishi or Kavi, sage or seer. It is these conceptions of the truth, satyam and r̄tam, that we have to apply in this opening hymn of the Veda.

Agni in the Veda is always presented in the double aspect of force and light. He is the divine power that builds up the worlds, a power which acts always with a perfect knowledge, for it is jātavedas, knower of all births, viśvāni vayunāni vidvān, — it knows all manifestations or phenomena or it possesses all forms and activities of the divine wisdom. Moreover it is repeatedly said that the gods have established Agni as the immortal in mortals, the divine power in man, the energy of fulfilment through which they do their work in him. It is this work which is symbolised by the sacrifice.

Psychologically, then, we may take Agni to be the divine will perfectly inspired by divine Wisdom, and indeed one with it,
which is the active or effective power of the Truth-consciousness. This is the obvious sense of the word *kavikratuh*, he whose active will or power of effectivity is that of the seer, — works, that is to say, with the knowledge which comes by the truth-consciousness and in which there is no misapplication or error. The epithets that follow confirm this interpretation. Agni is *satya*, true in his being; perfect possession of his own truth and the essential truth of things gives him the power to apply it perfectly in all act and movement of force. He has both the *satyam* and the *rtam*. Moreover, he is *citraśravastamah*; from the Ritam there proceeds a fullness of richly luminous and varied inspirations which give the capacity for doing the perfect work. For all these are epithets of Agni as the hotṛ, the priest of the sacrifice, he who performs the offering. Therefore it is the power of Agni to apply the Truth in the work (*karma* or *apas*) symbolised by the sacrifice, that makes him the object of human invocation.

The importance of the sacrificial fire in the outward ritual corresponds to the importance of this inward force of unified Light and Power in the inward rite by which there is communication and interchange between the mortal and the Immortal. Agni is elsewhere frequently described as the envoy, *dūta*, the medium of that communication and interchange.

We see, then, in what capacity Agni is called to the sacrifice. “Let him come, a god with the gods.” The emphasis given to the idea of divinity by this repetition, *devo devebhir*, becomes intelligible when we recall the standing description of Agni as the god in human beings, the immortal in mortals, the divine guest. We may give the full psychological sense by translating, “Let him come, a divine power with the divine powers.” For in the external sense of the Veda the Gods are universal powers of physical Nature personified; in any inner sense they must be universal powers of Nature in her subjective activities, Will, Mind, etc. But in the Veda there is always a distinction between the ordinary human or mental action of these puissances, *manuṣya*, and the divine. It is supposed that man by the right use of their mental action in the inner sacrifice to the gods can convert them into their true or divine nature, the mortal can
become immortal. Thus the Ribhus, who were at first human beings or represented human faculties, became divine and immortal powers by perfection in the work, \( \text{sukṛtyā, svapasyayā} \). It is a continual self-offering of the human to the divine and a continual descent of the divine into the human which seems to be symbolised in the sacrifice.

The state of immortality thus attained is conceived as a state of felicity or bliss founded on a perfect Truth and Right, \( \text{satyam r̄tam} \). We must, I think, understand in this sense the verse that follows. “The good (happiness) which thou wilt create for the giver, that is that truth of thee, O Agni.” In other words, the essence of this truth, which is the nature of Agni, is the freedom from evil, the state of perfect good and happiness which the Ritam carries in itself and which is sure to be created in the mortal when he offers the sacrifice by the action of Agni as the divine priest. \( \text{Bhadram} \) means anything good, auspicious, happy and by itself need not carry any deep significance. But we find it in the Veda used, like \( \text{r̄tam}, i nā) \) special sense. It is described in one of the hymns (V.82) as the opposite of the evil dream (\( \text{duḥṣapnyam} \)), the false consciousness of that which is not the Ritam, and of \( \text{duritam}, \text{false going}, \text{which means all evil and suffering. Bhadram is therefore equivalent to suvitam, right going, which means all good and felicity belonging to the state of the Truth, the Ritam. It is Mayas, the felicity, and the gods who represent the Truth-consciousness are described as mayobhuvah, those who bring or carry in their being the felicity. Thus every part of the Veda, if properly understood, throws light upon every other part. It is only when we are misled by its veils that we find in it an incoherence.

In the next verse there seems to be stated the condition of the effective sacrifice. It is the continual resort day by day, in the night and in the light, of the thought in the human being with submission, adoration, self-surrender, to the divine Will and Wisdom represented by Agni. Night and Day, \( \text{Naktosāsā} \), are also symbolical, like all the other gods in the Veda, and the sense seems to be that in all states of consciousness, whether
illumined or obscure, there must be a constant submission and
reference of all activities to the divine control.

For whether by day or night Agni shines out in the sacrifices;
he is the guardian of the Truth, of the Ritam in man and defends
it from the powers of darkness; he is its constant illumination
burning up even in obscure and besieged states of the mind. The
ideas thus briefly indicated in the eighth verse are constantly
found throughout the hymns to Agni in the Rig Veda.

Agni is finally described as increasing in his own home. We
can no longer be satisfied with the explanation of the own home
of Agni as the “fire-room” of the Vedic householder. We must
seek in the Veda itself for another interpretation and we find it
in the 75th hymn of the first Mandala.

Yajā no mitrāvaruṇā, yajā devān rtaṃ bhṛhat;
agne yakṣī svam damam.

“Sacrifice for us to Mitra and Varuna, sacrifice to the gods,
to the Truth, the Vast; O Agni, sacrifice to thy own home.”

Here rtaṃ bhṛhat and svam damam seem to express the
goal of the sacrifice and this is perfectly in consonance with
the imagery of the Veda which frequently describes the sacrifice
as travelling towards the gods and man himself as a traveller
moving towards the truth, the light or the felicity. It is evident,
therefore, that the Truth, the Vast and Agni’s own home are
identical. Agni and other gods are frequently spoken of as being
born in the truth, dwelling in the wide or vast. The sense, then,
will be in our passage that Agni the divine will and power in man
increases in the truth-consciousness, its proper sphere, where
false limitations are broken down, urāv anibādhe, in the wide
and the limitless.

Thus in these four verses of the opening hymn of the Veda
we get the first indications of the principal ideas of the Vedic
Rishis,—the conception of a Truth-consciousness supramental
and divine, the invocation of the gods as powers of the Truth
to raise man out of the falsehoods of the mortal mind, the at-
tainment in and by this Truth of an immortal state of perfect
good and felicity and the inner sacrifice and offering of what
one has and is by the mortal to the Immortal as the means of the divine consummation. All the rest of Vedic thought in its spiritual aspects is grouped around these central conceptions.