

II. REVIEWS

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METAPHORICAL OR MYTHOLOGICAL THINKING?*

Joanna Jurewicz, *Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda*, Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2010, 485 pages; *Fire, Death and Philosophy. A History of Ancient Indian Thinking*, Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2016, 717 pages.

I have already had the opportunity (Bartmiński 2004) to express my highly positive opinion of Joanna Jurewicz's earlier book *Kosmogonia Rygwedy. Myśl i metafora* [Cosmogony of the Rigveda. Thought and Metaphor] (2001), offering comments and raising certain questions on the occasion. These questions concerned the relation of metaphor to myth and mythological thinking, and the application of the cognitive theory of metaphor to interpretations of ancient Indian cosmogonic myths. This review concerns Jurewicz's two other books, impressive in size and analytical precision: *Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda* and *Fire, Death and Philosophy. A History of Ancient Indian Thinking*. They are continuations of the author's research into early Indian writings, taking into account new texts. The basic framework of methodology has remained the same as in *Kosmogonia Rygwedy*, the most interesting modification of the author's approach being an incorporation of the theory of conceptual blending.

Reconstructing the philosophy of ancient Indian cosmogony on the basis of texts produced over three thousand years ago is a daunting task for several reasons: (i) ancient Indian mythology is extremely original; (ii) one is faced with the issue of one-sidedness of the available sources; and finally, (iii) one must overcome the language barrier – this last point Joanna Jurewicz easily overcomes, having an expert knowledge of Sanskrit. The major interpretative difficulty lies in the startling originality of the cosmogony of ancient India, which stands in contrast especially to Judaeo-Christian mythology, fundamental to European culture, in several important respects. First, it assumes an infinite existence of the world; second, it contains nothing similar to the Biblical idea of *creatio ex nihilo*; third, it does not separate the sphere of sacrum from the general sphere of existence; fourth,

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it does not contain the notion of a personal and transcendental God; fifth, it is monistic in that reality itself and the process of cognising it are treated as one. All those factors pose serious barriers for the translation of early Indian texts into Polish, especially as some of the ancient Indian concepts seem almost untranslatable into contemporary linguistic expressions. The author bravely responds to these challenges not only as an interpreter but also as a translator: apart from presenting scholarly analyses, Jurewicz has also produced a Polish rendering of fragments of the *Rigveda* (Jurewicz 2013).

The first of the two books, *Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda* (henceforth FaC), aims to reconstruct the metaphysical assumptions underpinning the model of creation and the role of humans in it. Jurewicz uses the methodology of cognitive linguistics, in particular Lakoff's theory of metaphor, Taylor's conception of frames and domains, Holland/Quinn's and Geertz's cultural models, Radden/Kövecses's conception of metaphorical and metonymic paths, and the idea of embodiment, according to which lexical meaning derives from sensory experience. She also uses Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) theory of conceptual blending, a significant and probably the most fortunate innovation. The tools used allow the author to capture very diverse research material, her arguments are crystal clear, and the analyses are contextually grounded. Jurewicz writes: "Application of cognitive linguistics in the interpretation of the *R̥gveda* allows us to see the conceptual order lying behind the apparent chaos of its linguistic expressions" (FaC, p. 42).

Jurewicz reconstructs the worldview in the *Rigveda* – a collection of hymns composed ca. 1300 B.C., collected into ten "circles" known as *mandalas* – and presents the results in two main parts of her book. In the first part (pp. 63–197), she presents the so-called "defining events" experienced by the poets of the *Rigveda*: the appearance of the morning light and fire; the pressing of Soma as a process of origination of light from darkness; appearance of the sun and rain; Somic exultation. Reality is understood in terms of fire, conceived in turn as an internally contradictory entity that combines in itself the features of "fieriness" and "wateriness". The mythical Soma (the author prefers to designate Soma as masculine) also possessed a dual nature. It is, however, far from clear what Soma actually is. According to ancient Indian beliefs, at dawn Soma ritually fills up fire with itself, which then becomes the rising sun. When the sun reaches its zenith, Soma falls back to the earth in the form of rain. When people drink the falling remains of Soma, they are filled with joy, enter a supernatural state, feel free and immortal. When a person dies, they repeat the ritual journey in the opposite direction: they go back to the earth with the falling rain and are reunited with their relatives. This cosmic and human cycle is conceived of in terms of transformations of two different aspects of reality, fiery and "Somic". Such is the cosmic model reconstructed from the *Rigveda* hymns.

In the second part of FaC (pp. 201–335), Jurewicz discusses philosophical models, more general and abstract conceptions of reality. These are conventionalised models referred to as "Child of Waters", "The Boiled in the Raw", "The Wave of Honey and of Streams of Clarified Butter", "The Angirasas Freeing Cows". On the linguistic and conceptual level, Jurewicz observes tendencies towards generalisation and abstraction, towards transition from event presentations to metaphysical statements on the unity of the world. These philosophical models integrate rich images of

events: they allow us to perceive similarities between them, their simultaneity and identity. The author says: “The general model of reality transformation reduces complex creative, cosmic and human processes into one basic pattern of alternate manifestations of opposing aspects of Agni” (p. 442). She emphasises that in the process of cognising, as it is reconstructed from the *Rigveda*, the subject and the object are one and the same entity. The prime causative factor is fire, *Agni*, an acting god. Creation is perceived as self-cognition, and self-cognition is a valid method of understanding everything outside of a human being because there is an ontic and a structural correspondence between a person and all things.

The other book, *Fire, Death and Philosophy. A History of Ancient Indian Thinking* (2016; henceforth FDaP) is a continuation of FaC in terms of both its subject matter (with extension onto other texts) and its research methods, also drawn from cognitive linguistics.

The book contains a comprehensive Introduction (pp. 11–56) and five chapters with systematic analyses of selected concepts from early Indian texts: *Ṛgveda* (pp. 57–189), *Atharvaveda* (pp. 190–305), *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (pp. 306–402), *Upaniṣads* (pp. 403–576), *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* and others (pp. 577–644). It ends with general conclusions (pp. 645–660), followed by the bibliography and index. The units discussed in the book are concepts, presented in context, written in Sanskrit and translated into English, and then explained in the form of an elaborated contextual definition supplemented by relevant commentary.

The author accentuates the specificity of the language of the Vedas, where images are manipulated for an expression of philosophical content. Philosophical systems are interpreted by Brahmin thinkers with the help of images that can be very specific but at the same time ambiguous. For example, the image of cows being driven out of an enclosure, originating from the experience of Aryan expansion, may signify processes that take place both outside a person (the sunrise, the rising of rivers, the rain falling from clouds, the milking of cows, extracting a drink out of Soma, making fire) and inside a person (transformations under the influence of the Soma drink that facilitate understanding of reality and its linguistic expression). Those are texts about creation and the formation of life-supporting conditions: light, warmth, water, food. The cognising process is interwoven with a performance of ritual. Jurewicz emphasises that text reception is not about choosing one meaning of an image (metaphor) but about creating a synchronised consonance of all meanings: it is only in this way that all the processes of reality are grasped. The most workable cognitivist model within this approach to text is Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of conceptual blending.

Having said that, Jurewicz’s ideas pose three questions.

First, are we talking about metaphor or myth? The cognitive understanding of metaphor is the key notion in the methodology adopted here. Referring to Lakoff’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and Lakoff and Turner’s *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (1989), Jurewicz follows the fundamental assumption of this approach, which views metaphor not only as a matter of language but also of cognition. The cognitive theory of metaphor models metaphorical processes as patterns of the type LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A GAME, TIME IS MONEY, etc., with the clearly distinguished and contrasted target and source

domains, the former being more abstract and the latter more concrete. However, the extent of the theory's applicability is disputable. For example, it is debatable whether the distinction into the source and target domains is valid in research on holy texts, such as the *Rigveda*, or whether the alleged experiential grounding of metaphors is verifiable in the context of the experience of the ancient Aryan tribe. Are the images of events, such as the obtaining of space, water and resources, the acquisition of cows, the rising of rivers, daybreak and sunrise, lighting *Agni* (fire), pressing *Soma*, Somic ecstasy, rain, etc., merely metaphors, or are they the manifestations of mythological thinking, based on the belief that things are literally as they are presented? Is the sentence *The Sun is joyful* a metaphor or an expression of mythological animist thinking? Joanna Jurewicz herself is well aware of the hypothetical nature of the metaphorical conception; in relation to daybreak, for example, the author writes:

[I]t is impossible to tell whether the similar descriptions of expansion and daybreak and their treatment as mutually dependent result solely from the language of metaphors or whether they are also manifestations of the belief of Rigvedic poets that the two processes really are one and the same. If the latter were the case, expansion and daybreak would constitute two aspects, human and cosmic, of one life-giving process. (Jurewicz 2001: 110)

However, the author does not take the mythological perspective into consideration in either FaC or FDaP. She openly admits that “the Rigvedic thinking is not a kind of mythological thinking” (FaC, p. 443). Consider in this context the reason why Enrique Bernárdez questioned the applicability of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the interpretation of Ancient Greek texts that was proposed by Eve Sweetser (1995). According to Bernárdez, Sweetser “did not take into account any possible linguistic, cultural, or historical variations in mythological thinking but adopted a strictly USA-centred, contemporary view of the world” and “tried to use her own culture's view of the world in the analysis of something existing 3,000 years ago” (Bernárdez 2010: 378). Undoubtedly, Bernárdez favours a mythological interpretation of archaic texts.

Second, there is the problem of embodiment or body-centrism. Are all concepts grounded in sensory or somatic experience? Jurewicz unarguably accepts the cognitivists assumption that “meaning is embodied” (FaC, p. 32; FDaP, p. 19) and emphasises the role of everyday somatic experience. In *Kosmogonia Rigwedya* (Jurewicz 2001), the author is more careful, more willing to recognise the cultural grounding of the *Rigveda* metaphors:

[E]xperience is not the only fuel for the creation of metaphors; other sources are metaphors that express the linguistic worldview of the poets' cultural community. The *Rigveda* is above all an expression of the conscious transformation of this worldview and the creation of new metaphors on this basis. Here one finds the foundations of the cultural code of a later Indian civilization, making continual and ample use of the *Rigveda* metaphors. (Jurewicz 2001: 11)

In both of her later books, there is little mention of the cultural sources of metaphors; instead, emphasis is put on embodiment, despite critical voices that

come even from cognitivist circles.¹ Doubts have also been expressed by Guy Dove (2016) and Enrique Bernárdez: “From a culture-centred point of view [...], the absolute value of embodiment as the basis for nearly everything has to be limited and relativized” (Bernárdez 2010: 382).

Third, Jurewicz’s research focuses on the available poetic texts based on oral tradition but poetic texts do not exhaust the universe of speech. The texts analysed here are peculiar in two ways, i.e. in their relation to written texts, and in their relation to non-poetic texts. By reconstructing a worldview on the basis of poetry alone and by exposing the semantics of fragments of this worldview through contextual definitions, the author fails to make contact with language as a whole in its diversity. A confrontation of Vedic poetry with non-poetic texts is impossible for lack of the latter. However, it is possible to relate to a wider Proto-Indo-European linguacultural background, which had been largely reconstructed, so as to obtain insight into the archaic worldview of Indo-Europeans, a worldview that is older and in some respects more complete than the Indian Vedas. Before Vedic Sanskrit and Sanskrit evolved, in the Neolithic period, there had existed a community of Proto-Indo-European speakers believed to have dispersed around the 10th c. B.C. (cf. Pokorny 1959, Benveniste 1969, or Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984, none of which – surprisingly – are included in the bibliography in either of Jurewicz’s two books). Within this great Proto-Indo-European community there was a consistency of certain phonetic and grammatical features but above all of lexis and the conceptual system integrated with it. The lexis of ethnic groups of the family of Proto-Indo-European languages includes many words and concepts that refer to crafts, transportation, economy, social organisation, family relations, mythology, law and medicine, funerary rituals and beliefs in an afterlife, the numeric system and the symbolism of numbers. Gamkrelidze and Ivanov list 954 Proto-Indo-European concepts: they may provide the basis for a reconstruction of not only the natural environment but also the social and cultural setting of the Proto-Indo-European community. They may serve as background for the early Indian poetic texts.

All in all, it should be emphasised that Joanna Jurewicz’s research is immensely valuable not only for Indology or South-Asian studies (in which she has a long-established position) but also for general linguistics, methodology of cognitive studies, as well as for Polish and Slavic studies. Through the analysis of early Indian texts we obtain insight into the earliest text-documented beginnings of generalised human thinking that involves a shift from concrete to abstract notions. These Indian texts help reconstruct the history of human thought on the pan-cultural scale. For researchers on Polish, Jurewicz’s study is interesting because it reconstructs the tradition dormant in the Polish language, a tradition of which Polish speakers are not aware, but which underlies their cultural identity, whose roots can also be found in Indo-European heritage.² Therefore, in my opinion, Indological studies should be recognised as an integral part of all historical and comparative research on Indo-European languages.

Translated by Anna Wyrwa

¹ Cf. Hohol and Wołoszyn (2017) for a report aimed at general readership.

² Cf. in this vein Bartmiński (2015).

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