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Silvia D'Intino
(CNRS, Paris)
dintino@ehess.fr

Alterity and Poetry
The *Ṛgveda* and the Invention of Indian Theatre

ná ví jānāmi yád ivedám ásmi
niṇyáḥ sáṃnaddho mánasā carāmi[1]

I really don't know what I am like;
hidden, well swaddled, I wander through my mind.
ṚV I 164, 37

SUMMARY: Ancient Indian literature, poetry and prose, shows different forms of dialogue that have been regarded as the first vestiges of a dramatic art in India. In the *Ṛgveda*, dialogue appears to be more than a genre, what gives a fundamental structure to the hymns. The study of the *ṛṣis*' style and the formal peculiarities of Vedic poetry may shed light on a deep filiation. Among these peculiarities, we will focus on the use of personal pronouns, namely the first person singular. In a small group of Varuṇa hymns attributed to Vasiṣṭha (ṚV VII 86–89), the remarkable conception of the speaking 'I', different from the poet himself, different from the lyric 'I', sheds light on the distancing effect operated by the Vedic poet, on the difference between subject and persona as a main feature of his art, thus anticipating the emergence of the character, and secretly contributing to the invention of theatre in ancient India.

KEYWORDS: *Ṛgveda*, Vasiṣṭha, Varuṇa, dialogue, alterity, *persona*, character

For a long time, Indologists have been searching inside Vedic literature for the earliest evidence of Indian theatre. They could highlight a double filiation: on the one hand, the line of ritual, descending from Vedic sacrifice, especially the solemn (*śrauta*) ritual, which is often described as a drama, presenting a model both for theatre performance

[1] I am following Aufrecht's edition for the Sanskrit quotations from the *Ṛgveda* (=ṚV).

as a whole, and for some essential moments of it, most significantly its 'preliminaries' (*pūrvaraṅga*); on the other hand, the line of poetry, from Vedic hymns to classical *kāvya*, marked by 'scenes' and dramatized verbal exchanges. After Bergaigne (Bergaigne 1883), Sylvain Lévi drew particular attention to the dialogue hymns of the *Ṛgveda* (Lévi 1890) and considered these compositions as the oldest examples of Indian dramatic art. The study of the dialogue hymns allowed Kuiper to identify the avatar of a major Vedic god in a theatrical figure, the *vidūṣaka* character, seen as an embodiment of the Varuṇa 'type' (Kuiper 1979); his work has durably shaped an entire field of studies. Moreover, as Bansat-Boudon has shown in a penetrating essay, one of the origin myths of Indian theatre can be traced back to a dialogue hymn (Bansat-Boudon 2004b). These paths and outcomes attest to the proximity between two worlds and their respective modes of expression—the Vedic world and the ancient Indian theatre—whose mutual interconnections appear to be fairly significant.

During the last half century, the line of ritual has been particularly emphasized. The analysis of the *pūrvaraṅga* found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (and the *Abhinavabhāratī*) shed a decisive light on the ritual ascendance of Indian theatre, the performance being considered as a ceremony, entirely pervaded by the religiosity proper to all ancient Indian culture. At the same time, we are more aware today of the theatricality involved in Vedic ritual, which is often compared to a 'drama', as recalled by Malamoud in an illuminating study (Malamoud 2005),[2] where the action is punctuated by verbal exchanges, and the ritualised verbal contests (*brahmodya*s) framing crucial steps of solemn rituals, mainly recorded in the *Śrautasūtra*s and *Brāhmaṇa*s of the *Yajurveda*, have

[2] Malamoud quotes Renou: "Le sacrifice védique se présente comme une sorte de drame, ayant ses acteurs, son dialogue, ses exécutions chantées, ses intermèdes et sa péripétie." (Renou–Filliozat 1949–1953, vol. 2: 352 quoted in Malamoud 2005: 124). He adds to this list the 'scene' (= the sacrificial area, and its setting), and the 'spectators'—including particularly the *dṛśīku*s, both 'assistants' and 'supervisors' involved in solemn rituals. See *ibid.*: 121–128.

been namely regarded as archaic examples of dramatic performances.[3] The impact of Brāhmaṇa mythology on Indian theatre has also been explored: the antagonism between *deva*s and *asura*s typically involved in all Brāhmaṇa stories frames also the major origin myth of theatre, and is at the backdrop of the *pūrvaraṅga*, the "anterior scene" (*ibid.*), which is, in the end, "a commemoration, aiming at reaffirming, during New Year festivals, the defeat of the demons, and at renewing the cosmogonic power of Indra's victory."[4] Malamoud's considerations prolong the line of ritual. They also encourage further enquiries into the interrelation between theatre and poetry: the dramatic character of many Ṛgvedic hymns—sometimes referring to, describing, or commenting on specific moments of a ritual, sometimes depicting them as in a live report[5]—the use of direct speech, and other peculiarities of the *ṛṣi*s' style, are all features adding to our investigation.

Back to the dialogue hymns

The *Ṛgveda* is a collection in ten books (*maṇḍala*s) of about one thousand hymns, whose elaboration covers four or five centuries (14th–8th century BCE);[6] it gathers 'praises' (*stuti*s) and 'prayers' (*āśīs*), the two main 'genres' of these compositions according to the traditional exegesis.[7] The hymns are addressed to one or more dedicatory deities (*devatā*s), whose presence, latent of manifest, makes

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3 See Kuiper 1960.

4 Malamoud 2005: 123 (my translation).

5 See Malamoud 2005: Introduction.

6 Witzel observes that the Ṛgvedic period covers ca. seven centuries "from the infiltration of the Indo-Aryans into the subcontinent, c. 1900 B.C. (at the utmost, the time of collapse of the Indus civilization), up to c. 1200 B.C., the time of the introduction of iron which is first mentioned in the clearly post-Ṛgvedic hymns of the Atharvaveda", and yet the core of the *Ṛksaṃhitā* represents only six or seven generations of kings, and poets. Cf. Witzel 1997: 263.

7 The distinction between *stuti* and *āśīs* appears already in *Bṛhaddevatā* I 7. Cf. Macdonell 1904–1906, vol. 2: 2. On this matter, see Gonda 1989. On the *stuti* genre in Vedic poetry, see Pinault 1994.

dialogue a natural and always implicit frame of the Ṛgvedic hymns, and a fundamental structure of Vedic poetry. Moreover, the *Ṛgveda* presents true dialogues: more or less achieved, involving two or more voices, where the tension reaches its utmost, and just sketched ones, limited to a few stanzas in a longer composition.

From the ancient core to the latest hymns, Renou highlighted a development in the tone itself of the *Ṛgveda*, a tendency for the *ṛṣi*s to leave the intimacy of the prayer and/or the effusion of the eulogy, to bring in a more animated atmosphere, and a tension towards action and drama, particularly marked in the last *maṇḍala*,[8] including compositions both formally more accomplished, and more evidently speculative. Yet, the dialogue hymns are a very old genre, already attested in the family books (II–VIII) of the *Ṛksaṃhitā*. There are a few 'colloquia' (*saṃvāda*s)[9] acknowledged in the *Anukramaṇī*, while modern interpreters identify around twenty of them[10] with alternating voices in a structured composition. Among the most famous dialogue hymns, one comes across loving conversations, as in the Yama-Yamī hymn (ṚV X 10), or the famous dialogue between Pururavas and Urvaṣī (ṚV X 95); poems centred on legendary exploits, such as in

[8] In his introduction to the last *maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda*, Renou observes: "Le discours direct au livre X vient, en nombre de passages, affleurer sous l'expression usuelle : on passe de l'un à l'autre registre sans préparation, sans transition. L'éloge de forme ancienne est abandonné peu à peu au profit d'une sorte de mise en scène : qu'on observe à cet égard les éléments de discours enchâssés dans le récit de Śusna (22), les monologues du chantre (33), du joueur (34), de l'Homme ivre (119), l'*ātmastuti* d'Indra (27–28), où le monologue sort insensiblement du dialogue. C'est cette vitalisation, cette animation, qui donne son accent nouveau au livre X." Renou EVP II: 19.

[9] The term *saṃvāda* typically designates the dialogue hymns of the *Ṛgveda*; the same term may be also used for ritual dialogues, looser in their structures than the ritual *brahmodya*. See Malamoud 2005: 128–129. A different kind of exchange is the *vyavahāra*, a term for simulated (or actual) negotiations inserted in rituals.

[10] See von Shroeder 1908; Gonda 1975.

the dialogue between Saramā and the Paṇi (ṚV X 108), or between Viśvāmitra and the rivers (ṚV III 33), but also allegorical dialogues, as the Frogs' hymn (ṚV VII 103).

Kane considered these compositions as the most accomplished and imaginative in the *Ṛgveda*, where dialogue is an essential element—along with songs, music, and dance—of an ancient dramatic art "of a religious character" (Kane 1951).[11] Their general autonomy from ritual[12] does not free the dialogue hymns from the permanent preoccupation of the Vedic *imaginaire*: the constant reference to the sacrifice—a sort of leitmotiv, both in the poems and, more openly, in ritual literature (instructions and exegesis). As we have seen, the latter corpus presents dialogue scenes inserted in crucial sequences of solemn rituals, the *brahmodya*, "dialogues à clé" (Renou 1960)[13] following a precise scheme, with expected replies on predefined issues, and an expected resolution. In these ritualized pieces, more than in the dialogue hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, Renou sought the beginnings of Indian theatre. More precisely, in the *brahmodya*s recorded in the Brāhmaṇa prose, that present a looser scheme, and a less predictable end:

> […] Mais autant le *brahmodya* inséré dans le culte apparaît fixé d'avance et comme figé, autant la controverse dont le ŚB [*Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa*] nous livre des échantillons était libre de forme et susceptible de prendre des développements imprévus, de s'encadrer dans un schème sommairement dramatique. Plus que les 'hymnes dialogués' du *Rgveda* où l'on sent trop l'*itihāsa* sous-jacent, ces *brahmodya*, avec leurs reparties parfois incisives, sont les vraies ébauches du théâtre indien. (Renou 1948: 84) [14]

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[11] See Kane 1951: 329–330.

[12] It may seem surprising that the dialogue hymns, or some portions of them, are not included in ritual recitations. Yet, as Witzel explains, this is a general trend in the *Ṛgveda*. Cf. Witzel 1997: 265.

[13] The most rudimentary examples of *brahmodya*s are "des faisceaux de questions et réponses qui s'entrecroisent, autrement dit la clé de l'énigme est donnée (comme dans le *kāvya*) à la suite immédiate de son énoncé, la réponse reproduit—à la manière du catéchisme—tous les mots figurant dans la question" (Renou [1960] 1978: 15).

[14] See also Renou 1949.

Renou did not endorse the hypothesis advanced by Lévi, who sought precisely in the Ṛgvedic *saṃvāda*s for the first sketches of Indian theatre: "Il est impossible—observed Lévi—de lire la plupart de ces hymnes sans s'imaginer une sorte de spectacle dramatique" (Lévi 1890: 307). The difference in their approaches lies ultimately in the emphasis given by the two Indologists to either the line of ritual or that of poetry as mentioned above. In Renou's opinion, the dialogue hymns are essentially literary pieces.[15] Indeed, the study of dialogue in the *Ṛgveda* opens to the more general question of the nature of the hymns. Trying to resume it, Keith observes:

> There is, of course, no doubt of the possibility of the dialogues really representing portions of the old ritual in which the priests assumed the character of gods or demons, for there are abundant parallels for such a supposition. But there is no sufficient ground to compel us to seek for such an explanation of these hymns […] it is perfectly legitimate and much more natural to regard the RV as a collection of hymns, in the vast majority of case of ritual origin, but including some more secular poetry, for which genus alone can we reasonably attribute the battle hymns of Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha. (Keith 1924: 17–18)

While adopting a wider perspective, Keith does not quit the line of ritual, but—what marks his different approach—he draws attention to the secular inspiration and agonistic nature of some dialogue hymns echoing a different rivalry, whose model is the emblematic contest between the *ṛṣi*s Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha.[16]

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[15] The same argument is resumed in Renou's *Introduction* to the reprint of Lévi's *Le théâtre indien*: "ces hymnes [the dialogue hymns] éclairent moins de choses dans la tradition ultérieure qu'ils ne posent eux-mêmes des problèmes nouveaux. Il se peut en effet qu'on doive y reconnaître l'esquisse de figurations dramatisées, mais il est improbable qu'ils soient vraiment les sources du théâtre classique: le dialogue n'y est qu'une forme modifiée de la narration." Renou 1963: xiv–xv, square brackets mine.

[16] Though their figures are slightly defined in the hymns, Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha embody the emblematic opposition between *kṣatriya*s and brahmins particularly recorded in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—thus sketching another important filiation, from Vedic poetry to the Indian epics. See Biardeau 1981.

In our view, the dialogue hymns are not really at odds with the general scheme (and inspiration) of the *Ṛgveda*: they all have a symbolic and ultimately religious signification. Nevertheless, their explicit topics, more appropriate to free conversations, encouraged Oldenberg to look at them as part of longer narratives (or epic compositions). The *ākhyāna* theory (Oldenberg 1883, 1885) had a great influence on the interpretation of these compositions. Yet, there is at least one element in Oldenberg's theory that is difficult to accept: their popular origin. Renou, as Lévi before him, was not ready to imagine these compositions as a genre alien to learned Indian poetry—out of a continuous development from the *Ṛgveda* to *kāvya*—and did not consider Indian theatre as the heritage of a popular art. Indeed, both Indian theatre and Ṛgvedic poetry do not ignore popular imagery and make use of motives and expressions derived from it. But they are essentially learned arts:

> Éclairer l'évolution préhistorique du théâtre sanskrit par le folklore peut amener à des comparaisons intéressantes: l'inconvénient est que l'originalité d'un art savant se trouve diluée dans l'anonymat des structures élémentaires. Le fait sanskrit, ici comme ailleurs, est d'abord un fait singulier. (Renou 1963: xii)[17]

From subject to persona

It is a different filiation, on the line of poetry, that I would retrace today—a more discrete heritage inscribed in the hymnic expression, and yet addressing the question of Indian theatre in its deeper issues and philosophical implications. According to Bharata's theory of Indian theatre, and Abhinava's exegesis, the aesthetic experience

[17] A similar argument is found in Kuiper: "There are at least three points which speak against a 'popular' origin [of drama]: […] First, the performance of the 'Preliminaries' (*pūrvaraṅga*), far from being a mere entertainment, was considered equal to a sacrifice for the benefit of the king and his country; secondly, the older situation as described by the NŚ seems to have been that the sponsor and patron of a performance was mainly, if not exclusively, the king; thirdly, the oldest forms of the drama we know were based on the Vedic mythical picture of the world" (Kuiper 1979: 113–114).

appears to be a sort of initiation.[18] At the top of his art, the actor is both the character and the witness of the action on the stage:

> L'acteur doit demeurer acteur et ne pas laisser prendre à sa personnalité le pas sur son personnage […] À aucun moment, l'interprète ne doit en effet oublier qu'il est aussi ce technicien qui connaît son texte et conforme le rythme de son jeu à celui que le chant et la musique impriment à la représentation. Cela se traduit par un incessant va-et-vient entre distanciation et sensibilité, extériorité et intériorité. Mouvement continu d'ouverture et de fermeture dont rend compte, emprunté au Śivaïsme Kaśmirien, le couple *unmeṣa*/*nimeṣa* qui dit les paupières qui se lèvent ou s'abaissent sur le regard, le lotus qui s'épanouit ou replie ses pétales. (Bansat-Boudon 1992a: 148)

The actor's art much resembles that of the Vedic poet, as I will try to show. A similar splitting of roles characterises poetic expression: the poet rarely speaks exclusively in his name, or tells us a personal story, nor are we able to gather even a few sparks of the poet's biography, while quite often the poet evokes the fears and expectations associated with his art. He speaks more generally as poet, rather than 'this' or 'that' poet, and such impersonality is an essential step in the construction of his 'poetic persona',[19] a practice of role-splitting especially visible when he speaks in the first person singular, and particularly within the dialogue compositions.

As we have seen, in the *Ṛgveda* dialogue is more than a genre. The poet brings out the voice of someone else (sometimes two or three different voices)[20] using direct speech, saying 'I' and 'you'. This feature allows for looking at dialogues as the expression of a dramatic poetry. In a distinctive way, the poet uses the pronoun 'I' (*ahám*) also to give voice to the god, the divine interlocutor in the poem who is, at the same time, the ultimate recipient of the hymn. It is the *ātmastuti*, the 'autoeulogy [of the deity]', a well codified genre in Vedic poetry. The god Indra in ṚV IV 26, just as later the goddess Vāc in ṚV X 125, for instance, speaks in the first person singular;

[18] On the aesthetic experience in the theory of Indian theatre, see Gnoli 1956; Bansat-Boudon 1992a, 1992b, 2004a.

[19] On this notion, see Jamison 2007, ch. III.

[20] E.g. ṚV I 170. Cf. Gonda 1975: 198–210.

the reiteration of the pronoun 'I' at the beginning of each stanza of the poem (sometimes at the beginning of each *pāda*) is a common device in the *ātmastuti*: *ahám rudrébhir vásubhiś carāmi / ahám ādityaír utá viśvádevaiḥ...*[21]

In his remarkable study on self-assertion in the *Ṛgveda*, Thompson characterises the *ātmastuti* as "the phenomenon of self-assertion in its most emphatic and most dramatized form" (Thompson 1997: 146). It is truly a fascinating reading:

> I would suggest that the ṚV *ātmastuti* is of particular interest precisely because it shows us a moment in Vedic, when the gods manifest themselves here on earth, for all to hear, if not to see: they are made manifest within, are represented by, and are performed by the poets, in such performances as the *ātmastuti*. It would appear to me that a poet who performs an *ātmastuti* is herself (or himself)[22] a veritable sign of the targeted god. (*ibid*.: 153, brackets mine)[23]

In Thompson's view, the *ātmastuti* is the mark of a theophany for the poet, who literally takes the role of the god in a codified ritual performance, and manifests the presence of the deity, in a sort of 'verbal theatre':

> In lieu of any certain evidence of other overtly theatrical features of impersonation, we might consider the Vedic *ātmastuti* as a strictly 'verbal impersonation', or even a verbal masque. (*ibid*.: 157)[24]

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[21] ṚV X 125 1: "I roam with the Rudras and the Vasus, I with the Ādityas and the All Gods. / I bear both Mitra and Varuṇa, I Indra and Agni, both the Aśvins." Transl. Jamison–Brereton 2014: 1603.

[22] Thompson 1997: 196. The author says "herself," as the passage follows the analysis of the *ātmastuti* ṚV X 125 (quoted *supra*).

[23] To substantiate his demonstration, Thompson extends his enquiry, following in the steps of Mauss 1937, to other Indo-European cultures: "For in fact the phenomenon of self-assertion, in ritual or in poetic contexts in which gods are impersonated or incarnated (or rather in which humans are possessed by them), is by no means unique to Vedic. This is a phenomenon which is very widespread and perhaps should be recognized as an *independent* ritual or folkloric *performance*" (Thompson 1997: 155, my italics).

[24] The "verbal masque" recalls Lévi-Strauss' "virtual mask." Thompson adds: "(If it was not intended as an impersonation, then what else could

Thompson uses the terms "impersonation," "identification",[25] and "incarnation" to describe the process the poet undergoes during the *ātma-stuti*. A similar transformation, he says, is at work in the dialogue hymns:

> But what does it mean to say that this [ṚV 4, 42] is a dialogue hymn? […] Either there are two (or more) speakers physically present and the hymn is a literal record of their dialogue […] Or there is one speaker physically present and performing alone. In this case, the hymn is a performance in a rather strong, even theatrical, sense: the speaker adopts the roles, the personae, and indeed the names of all those represented in the hymn as speakers. (*ibid*.: 165)

According to Thompson's hypothesis, the *ātmastuti* and the dialogue hymns may be considered as the oldest form of Indian theatre, in its most mimetic expression (if not a form of possession).[26] We are closer to theatre than to lyric poetry. Yet, does the poet, in both cases, and more generally when he uses the first person pronoun, consider himself as the one who says 'I' (*ahám*)? To what extent assuming different roles or personae induces in the poet a process of identification? The Vedic context, and particularly Vedic poetry, seems to suggest a different approach.

Let us remember here that in the hymns we rarely listen to the poet's voice exposing his personal ideas and emotions. Moreover, the poetic creation is regarded in the hymns as a collective work—a theory which has its manifesto in ṚV X 71. Generally, in the close of the hymn, the poet uses the first person plural, a 'we' presenting himself as the speaker for a community—his clan, his school. From this point of view, the hymns appear rather as a form of choral lyrics, although some actual choirs do appear here and there in the *Ṛgveda*. Among these choirs, we shall isolate the voice of the *ṛṣi*'s companions, the other poets, and particularly the ancient *kavi*s, whose support is requested to get inspiration, as we read in the incipit of another old hymn, ṚV III 38, attributed to Viśvāmitra:

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the *ātmastuti* have been understood to be, if not an identification with, or an incarnation of, a god?)" (Thompson 1997: 155).

[25] A term associated by the author to Sanskrit *bándhu*. Cf. Thompson 1997: 143.

[26] Thompson, *op. cit.* (see *supra*, fn. 23–24).

abhí tásṭeva dīdhayā manīṣā́m átyo ná vājī́ sudhúro jíhānaḥ /
abhí priyā́ṇi mármṛśat párā́ṇi kavī́m̐r icchāmi saṃdṛ́śe sumedhā́ḥ //

[Víśvāmitra:] Like a craftsman I conceived an inspired-word, as a winning steed well-trained and moving forward: longing for beloved and remote [days], I, well-inspired, wish to meet the ancient-poets (*kavís*).

inótá pṛcha jánimā kavīnā́m manodhṛ́taḥ sukṛ́tas takṣata dyā́m /
imā́ u te praṇíyò várdhamānā mánovātā ádha nú dhármaṇi gman //

[Indra:] Ask the generations of poets (saying): "steadily inspired, artfully acting, you crafted the sky" / and for you these guides, fully vigorous, moved by inspiration, will come here according to *dhárma*.
(ṚV III 38, 1–2ab)[27]

Though this hymn is not inventoried among the dialogue hymns, the quoted passage shows a dialogue sequence, the subject shifting from the first person singular in the first stanza to the second singular in the following one. Introducing this hymn, Jamison observes that it is a frequent device in the *Ṛgveda* to see the poet addressing himself in the second person (Jamison, Brereton 2014);[28] yet, though the poet does not (as he never does) explicitly identify the interlocutor, I suggest this could be, at some point, the deity praised by the poem, Indra himself. His name is not recorded in the whole poem, except for the formulaic last stanza (the Viśvāmitra refrain), and yet it is possible to read the beginning, and the whole hymn as a dialogue between the poet and Indra, who gives him some instructions on poetic art. Be that as it may, shifting from the first to the second person singular, while suggesting an extraordinary intimacy between the poet and the god, simultaneously enhances the ambiguity of the poem. In such a context, the use of the pronoun 'I' produces more of an estrangement effect than a mimetic one. A form of alterity is on display, and that is one of the most fascinating features of Vedic poetry.

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[27] Translation mine.

[28] In the introductory note to this hymn, Jamison observes: "In the second verse, addressing himself (as so often) in the 2nd person, he [the poet] exhorts himself to seek models from the earlier poets" (Jamison, Brereton 2014: 521).

Alterity and poetry

In the ideal reconstitution of what we may call *the invention of theatre* (more than its 'origin') in the Indian tradition, we are engaged in a backwards reflexion, up to the moment that precedes the emergence of characters, or even types—the Indra (virile) type, the Uṣas (gracious) type, or the (losing) gambler character, the (abandoned) lover… Among the strategies employed in the Vedic hymns to set up a shift from subject to persona (and *vice versa*), I have particularly focused on the use of the first personal pronoun 'I' within a dialogical sequence. Jamison observes that in the Ṛgvedic hymns, the dialogue-effect comes out of the poet's mindful use of personal pronouns, setting out a strategy of rapprochement and distanciation, and a reflexion, inside the hymns, on the grammatical category of the person. The poetic *aham* in the hymns is not the lyric 'I'. It does not stand alone, but immediately evokes a counterpart, a responding 'you', in an explicit or imaginary dialogue, where the interlocutor is able to say 'I' in his/her turn—though the expected reply may be absent, or simply not recorded in the poem. It is also impossible to imagine such an *intimate theatre* out of an oral context: the poet in fact speaks in front of other poets, and addresses himself to an ideal witness. The responding 'I' *par excellence* is that of the addressed god: *ayám asmi jaritaḥ páśya mehá* "Here I am, o singer. Look at me here."[29]

In the hymns, shifting from the poet's voice to a responding 'I' often also means covering the distance between men and gods. The hymns I am going to focus on now belong to a small group of poems (ṚV VII 86-88) addressed to Varuṇa and attributed to one of the most 'personal' voices of the *Ṛgveda*, that of the *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha, so personal and exclusive that, in her remarkable study on this group of hymns, Jamison recalls Heinrich Zimmer's comparison between Vasiṣṭha's voice and that of Zarathustra in the *Avesta* (Jamison 2007: 91). Jamison also observes that the use of the first person singular in the *Ṛgveda* shows

[29] ṚV X 28, 4a. Transl. Jamison 2007: 44. On this stanza, and the construction of the "poetic persona" in the *Ṛgveda* (and in the *Avesta*), see ch. I and III.

a substantial difference with the poet's autoreferential 'I' in the *Avesta*.[30]

The intimate tone of the dialogues between Vasiṣṭha and the god of dharma and *ṛta*—a god of asurian nature, what in the *Ṛgveda* does not mean less divine than the *deva*s, but rather more ancient, venerable, and fearsome—is particularly remarkable. These hymns, and Vasiṣṭha's language, may help us to better understand the capacity of the poet to take multiple 'roles' as a significant example of Ṛgvedic 'poetics of alterity'. The poet inserts direct speeches, reported replies, and other verbal exchanges reflecting forms of alterity and puzzling duplicity, a tension lastly exalting the *mystery of speech*. Beside the density (economy) of expression, the poet's choice of personal pronouns partakes in the expressive ambiguity of the *Ṛgveda*:

> L'économie n'est pas une fin en soi. L'objectif, en définitive, est de voiler l'expression, d'atténuer l'intelligibilité directe, bref de créer l'ambiguïté. C'est à quoi concourt la présence de tant de mots obscurs, de tant d'autres qui sont susceptibles d'avoir (parfois, simultanément) une face amicale, une face hostile; c'est ce que montre aussi l'état d'inachèvement où sont la plupart des hymnes dialogués […] On ne peut faire d'étude linguistique valable sur le Veda sans tenir compte de ces tendances qui, loin d'être un jeu, adhèrent au plus profond de la pensée indienne. (Renou 1966: 55)

The first stanza of ṚV VII 86 introduces a conventional celebration of the god Varuṇa, his cosmogonic deeds, the separation between heaven and earth:

> *dhī́rā tu àsya mahinā́ janū́ṃṣi ví yás tastámbha ródasī cid urvī́ /*
> *prá nākám ṛṣváṃ nunude bṛhántaṃ dvitā́ nákṣatram papráthac ca bhū́ma //*
>
> Insightful are the races (of gods and mortals) through the greatness of him who propped apart the two wide world-halves.
> He pushed forth the vault of heaven to be high and lofty, (also) the star [=the sun] once again, and he spread out the earth.
> (ṚV VII 86, 1)[31]

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[30] With few remarkable exceptions in late Gathas, namely the "Lament of the Soul and the Cow", where "the referent of the pronouns are constantly shifting, making it impossible to be certain who is 'I' and who is 'you' from verse to verse […]" (Jamison 2007: 46).

[31] I follow Jamison's translation for the whole hymn. Jamison, Brereton 2014: 991–992.

In contrast to this evocation of Varuṇa's exploits—both a conventional *incipit* and a *captatio benevolentiae*—the following stanza shows Vasiṣṭha abandoned by the god:

> *utá sváyā tanvā̀ sám vade tát kadā́ nv àntár váruṇe bhuvāni /*
> *kím me havyám áhṛṇāno juṣeta kadā́ mṛḍikáṃ sumánā abhí khyam //*

> And together with my own self, I speak this: "When shall I be within Varuṇa? Might he take pleasure in my offering, become free of anger? When shall I, with good thoughts, look upon his mercy?"
> (ṚV VII 86, 2)

The poet speaks to himself, and yet, starting his monologue, he uses a recurrent formula, saying emphatically (and redundantly) that he is in dialogue with his own 'person' (*tanū́*),[32] and at the same time calling into play his divine friend, the addressee of the poem, explicitly named here. For a moment, in his dialogue with the god, the poet introduces a reflection on the speaking I, who is neither exactly himself, nor someone else, a figure of the alterity at work in Vedic poetry. The poet plays both roles, the poetic 'I', and his/its alter-ego.[33] Intimacy and distanciation go side by side. The wish for 'accessing' (the favour of) the god (*antár váruṇe bhuvāni*) expressed in the first stanza is recalled (and fulfilled) in the last one: "This praise song is for you, Varuṇa, you who are of independent will. Let it be set within your heart" (*hṛdí stóma úpaśritaś cid astu*).[34]

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[32] On the meaning of *tanū́*, 'body-and-self,' see Malamoud 1989: 231. Renou translated twice this hymn, and this expression: "Je tiens un colloque avec moi même", Renou 1947; "Alors je me consulte en moi-même" (Renou EVP V: 71).

[33] I propose here an alternative reading of this stanza (and the whole hymn), with Varuṇa being tacitly involved in the play, what precisely makes it a drama. Jamison observes: "[…] But the second verse leaps into intimacy with the emphatic 1st person: 'With/through my own self I speak…' Or so it first appears, but notice that though the verbal idiom *sám vad* 'speak together with' presupposes a dialogue, the other participant is absent" (Jamison 2007: 97).

[34] ṚV VII 86, 8ab.

Scenes

The hymn turns around a separation, and Varuṇa's fault. Something is broken in the relation between the poet and the god. The poet's companions, in choral function, amplify the tension and the dramatic force of the scene. They are both witnesses and participants:

> *pṛché tád éno varuṇa didṛ́kṣu úpo emi cikitúṣo vipṛ́cham /*
> *samānám ín me kaváyaś cid āhur ayáṃ ha túbhyaṃ váruṇo hṛṇīte //*

> I ask myself about this guilt, o Varuṇa, wanting to see; I approach those who understand in order to enquire.
> Even the sage poets say the very same thing to me: "Varuṇa is now angry with you."
> (ṚV VII 86, 3)

The intimate dialogue between Vasiṣṭha and Varuṇa is not based on a story, nor on an actual plot; it rather focuses on the scene of the *abandonment* of the poet by the god, whose reason(s) he ignores, or cannot recover—an uncertainty that dramatically spreads over the whole poem. Vasiṣṭha's fault is left in a vague past, and the poet seeks reconciliation with the god:

> *kím ā́ga āsa varuṇa jyéṣṭhaṃ yát stotā́raṃ jighāṃsasi sákhāyam /*

> Was the offense so very great, Varuṇa, that you wish to smash a praise singer and companion? […]
> (ṚV VII 86, 4ab)

The general scheme in the dialogue hymns is the convergence of its elements towards a 'scene': its present mystery, and a few sparks of memory brought into the picture as 'past scenes' (flashbacks), following an evocative (vs narrative) logic aiming at deepening its obscurity. Varuṇa's wrath against the poet introduces a reflexion on the fault, which appears now as the topic of the hymn—does this anticipate a karmic conception of the action?

> *áva drugdhā́ni pitriyā sṛjā nó 'va yā́ vayáṃ cakṛmā́ tanū́bhiḥ /*
> *áva rājan paśutṛ́paṃ ná tāyúṃ sṛjā́ vatsáṃ ná dā́mno vásiṣṭham //*

> Release from us ancestral deceits and those that we ourselves have committed.
> O king, release Vasiṣṭha from his bond like a cattle-stealing thief, like a calf.

ná sá svó dákṣo varuṇa dhrútiḥ sā́ súrā manyúr vibhī́dako ácittiḥ /
ásti jyā́yān kánīyasa upāré svápnaś canéd ánṛtasya prayotā́ //

This was not one's own devising nor was it deception, o Varuṇa (but rather) liquor, frenzy, dice, thoughtlessness.
The elder exists within the misdeed of the younger. Not even sleep wards off untruth.
(ṚV VII 86, 5-6)[35]

We know from the other hymns in the same series how strong the friendship between the poet and the god is—culminating in the epiphanic character of their encounter, Varuṇa's face beaming throughout the fire (ṚV VII 88, 2), and the memorable scene of Vasiṣṭha's initiation on the boat, the object of Vasiṣṭha's endless nostalgia:

ā́ yád ruhā́va váruṇaś ca nā́vam prá yát samudrám īráyāva mádhyam /
ádhi yád apā́ṃ snúbhiś cárāva prá preṅkhá īṅkhayāvahai śubhé kám //

When we two, Varuṇa and (I), will board the boat, when we two will raise the middle of the sea,
when we two will voyage through the crest of the waters, we will swing on the swing for beauty.

vásiṣṭhaṃ ha váruṇo nāvy ā́dhād ṛ́ṣiṃ cakāra svápā máhobhiḥ /
stotā́ram vípraḥ sudinatvé áhnāṃ yā́n nú dyā́vas tatánan yā́d uṣā́saḥ //

Varuṇa placed Vasiṣṭha on the boat. Skillful in his work, he made him a seer through his great powers.

The inspired poet (made him) a praise singer on that brightest day of days for so far as the heavens, for so long as the dawns will extend.

(ṚV VII 88, 3–4)

Beyond the theme of Vasiṣṭha's fault, it is his poetic vocation we find at the core of the dialogue with Varuṇa, a dialogue between two poets,

[35] I thank here the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of Jurewicz's interpretation (Jurewicz 2010) of this group of hymns, where Vasiṣṭha's lack of cognition, expressed in terms of night, sin and bondage, will be solved with the recovering of vision (exaltation), and daylight, in a coherent symbolic network: "What is important is that the lack of cognition is not only the reason for sin but also its result. The poet does not even know which one of his activities could be sinful" (*ibid*.: 414).

divine and human, about the mystery of speech, condensed in a famous, enigmatic stanza:

> *uvā́ca me váruṇo médhirāya tríḥ saptá nā́mā́ghnyā bibharti /*
> *vidvā́n padásya gúhyā ná vocad yugā́ya vípra úparā́ya śíkṣan //*
>
> Varuṇa said to me who am wise: "the inviolable cow bears three times seven names."
> Knowing of its track, he will speak (its names) like secrets—he the inspired poet who strives on behalf of the later generation.
> (ṚV VII 87, 4)[36]

And again, in the last hymn of the series, we come across the leitmotif of the abandonment of the poet:

> *kvà tyā́ni nau sakhyā́ babhūvuḥ sácāvahe yád avṛkám purā́ cit /*
>
> Where have these companionships of ours come to be, when previously we would have accompanied one another without wolfish hostility?
> (ṚV VII 88, 5ab)

All these elements are opaque. What happened? Nobody knows. The poet is excluded from the divine companionship, he is abandoned by the god for a reason he himself doesn't know. Vasiṣṭha looked for mercy, asked for forgiveness, as we have seen. But this mysterious scene receives new light when observed through the mirror of the relation between the poet and speech, the poem being a means to provoke the deity (into the scene), and to assure divine protection:

> *śáṃ naḥ kṣéme śám u yóge no astu yūyám pāta svastíbhiḥ sádā naḥ //*
>
> Let there be good fortune in peaceful settlement for us and let there be good fortune in war for us.—Do you protect us always with your blessings.
> (ṚV VII 86, 8cd)[37]

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[36] Jamison's translation follows one of the two possible readings of the stanza, depending on the value ascribed to the particle *ná*, both a comparative and a negative conjunction. See D'Intino 2011. Renou sees in the second half of the stanza the poet affirming that "celui qui connaît le[s] *padá* doit les enseigner comme des arcanes" (Renou EVP I: 10); and yet he translates the stanza as follows: "Varuṇa m'a dit, à moi clairvoyant: la vache-Parole porte trois fois sept noms. Que celui qui connaît (sa) trace, *qu'il ne dise pas ces (noms) secrets*, poète désirant être utile aux générations futures" (EVP V: 71, my italics)—a translation I would also be inclined to follow.

[37] For the first part of the stanza, see *supra* fn. 34.

Conclusive remarks

Notwithstanding the lack of material and historical evidence, the delicate question of the beginnings of Indian theatre may be rewardingly put in hermeneutical terms. Our enquiry on the Ṛgvedic hymns concentrates on the peculiar strategies and devices worked out by the Vedic seers to built up *a poetic persona*, to gather multiple voices in the hymn, and to actualise these voices by devising effective distancing strategies. It partakes in a questioning about the mystery of speech (and voice), and about the difference between subject—the grammatical subject—and persona—the fictional subject. The Ṛgvedic dialogues may thus shed light on the emergence of the character, and the relation between the actor and the character, as it is later attested in the theory of Indian theatre. Moreover, the hymns are built up on 'scenes', following an evocative logic. As in dramatic pieces, the Ṛgvedic hymns do not contain stories; they rather evoke scenes, destined, in some cases, to a long-lasting future in the history of Indian poetry. If the *sacrificial scene* shapes the Vedic *imaginaire*, it also appears as a 'spectacular' place, the place of a 'vision', and at the same time the object 'to be seen' (and listened to), forever awaiting new witnesses. In the *Ṛgveda*, this scene is doubled by the constant reflection of the poets on their art, dissimulated within elaborate allegories, as in the case of the losing gambler (ṚV X 34),[38] or in Vasiṣṭha's abandonment—a 'scene' amplified by a vague culpability, uncertainty, and nostalgia for his divine companionship, all motives participating in his 'dramatic' relation to speech, the poet being always exposed to the risk of being unable to speak, abandoned by Vāc, his divine partner and ultimate interlocutor.

[38] See D'Intino 2011.

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