

Chapter 1

The Gods as Artists: The Formative Power of the Divine Imagination

*Well-established in the world, he was a skillful artist:
he who formed these twins, heaven and earth.
Skilled in visionary imagination, with his power
he joined together both realms, spacious and deep,
well-formed, and unsupported.*

— Rgveda 4.56.3

A WORLD OF SHIMMERING LIGHT

To the Vedic Indian bards who in the second millennium BCE first gave voice to the hymns that form the *Rgveda*, the universe seems not to have been merely a complicated collection of inert objects moving randomly through time and space. During moments of poetic inspiration, the world, for them, came to be seen as a place of wonder, of amazement, of puzzlement; it was a shimmering, almost translucent world which, at once, veiled and revealed hidden sublime forces that, though their effects could be known initially through the senses, finally transcended the empirical realms.

The universe in which the life-giving sun moved through the sky, the silvery moon swelled and diminished through the month's nights, the stars delighted the heavens, bright and fearful darts of lightning punctured the dark thunderclouds, fecundative rain brought new life to the earth below, and streams and rivers chattered boisterously down their valleys and across the plains to the immense and restless oceans: this world was, to these poetic singers, a universe of sparkling light and energy, glimmering with creative power and splendor, and shining with transformative, powerful brilliance.¹

Light, especially, captured their attention. Since it was through the illuminative power of light that objects were known to exist, all things therefore were seen to consist of light: the light of the sun revealed the objects on earth as much as it revealed the sun itself; physical objects were, to these seers, crystallized light. In a sense, therefore, sublime light was the universal essence of every and all particular things. Furthermore, in a way, light gave rise to all things: forms previously laying inchoate and vague in the darkness emerged in the presence of light into their unique shape and texture. As the universal essence and creator of everything, light was seen to be equivalent to being itself, and thereby to truth. To perceive light was thus to gain knowledge of reality.²

Reality itself: this was revealed by the play of light. The universe as a whole glowed with the inner creative power of light, which suffused and gave being to all things. Since creative light played on the many surfaces and forms it created, the world as a whole was a world of play;³ it was a cosmic game, a universal riddle, the meaning of which few could understand. The visionary, poetic sage saw that play, understood those riddles, and sang forth his song in response to the brilliant creation.

Not surprisingly, those seers tended to describe the foundational, formative, and transformative forces that give form and movement to the universe with language that connotes not only effective power but also a kind of shimmering luminance or glow that seems to reflect a deeper and more powerful splendor and brightness. Since the primary luminous objects shining their light onto the world resided in the skies as the sun, moon, lightning, and stars, verbal images of celestial brilliance are particularly prevalent in Vedic songs. Thus, for example, the Vedic noun *div*, which means “sky” and thus “heaven,” likely derives from an Indo-European verbal root meaning to “shine.”⁴ From the root *div* comes the important Sanskrit word *deva*, which as an adjective means “divine” and thus “heavenly.” As a noun, *deva* means “divine power” and thus “deity.”⁵

To the Vedic seers, then, the light-filled objects that gave shape to the universe as a whole were images of hidden forces, the formative power of which gave substance and life to that universe. Those images were regarded as the many *devas* and *devīs*—that is, the various gods, goddesses, and demigods—who were said to live and act in the various earthly, aerial, and celestial domains.⁶ Different poets saw different numbers of divinities in the world. One sang, for example, of the “thirty and three gods,”⁷ while another praised 339 deities who had served the shining god of fire alone.⁸ Later Hinduism was to declare that the number totaled 330 million. A sense of the ubiquity of the divine is succinctly stated in one sage’s admission that wise people had

sought you,
O fire that knows all beings,
O god of wondrous splendor,
in many places.⁹

Since it was suffused with light, the world was filled, for these poets, with the presence of the gods. The stars that illumined the nocturnal heavens were not merely dots in an impersonal sky, but the shimmering eyes of the goddess of the night, Rātrī. Of her we hear a seer's proclamation:

Here comes the Night!
Adorned once more in all her beauty,
she has looked about with her eyes.
The goddess has seen many places.¹⁰

The rivers were not merely water moving toward the ocean; rather, they were sparkling revelations of Sarasvatī, the chattering, flowing goddess who brought life and prosperity to the world. A Vedic verse delightfully described the rivers as

young unmarried girls who,
knowing the true harmony of the universe,
flow forth, streaming and bubbling
like fountains.¹¹

The lightning that jumped across the sky was not simply an impersonal, jagged flash of energy; it was the thunderbolt of Indra, the king of the gods, who battled the cloud-dragon living on the mountaintops. Pierced by those bolts, the demonic serpent gave forth the life-giving waters it had trapped within its body. Indra

. . . killed the serpent who lay on the peaks.
The mighty waters rushed downward, falling into the sea,
As if they were lowing cows.¹²

The wind was Vāyu or Vāta, a powerful and free deity who traveled wherever he wished and who gave colorful rise to the storm's flashing bolts and the red clouds of swirling dust. A verse from a song to Vāyu reads:

The Wind's chariot: its power!
It runs, crackling.
Its voice: thunder.

It ruddies the many regions
and touches the heavens. As [the Wind] moves,
the dust of the earth is scattered.¹³

The dawn on the eastern horizon was not merely the beginning of the day: she was Uṣas, the daughter of Father Sky and the divine Earth and the older sister of the goddess Night. To Vedic poets she was beautiful and playful. Look, for example, at *Rgveda* 1.124.8–9:

Leaving,
but to return,
Night gives up her place
to her older sister who
beaming with the sun's rays,
dresses splendidly,
like a girl
on her way to a festival.

Or *Rgveda* 7.77.1–2:

Dawn arrives, shining—like a lady of light—
stirring all creatures to life. . . .
Dawn's light breaks the shadows.
Her face turned to all things across this wide world,
she rises in splendor, enwrapped in bright clothes.
Shining in golden colors, dressed with rays of light,
she guides forth the day like a cow leads her calves.

The Vedic poets thus seem at first glance to have held the objects of nature in reverence:¹⁴ they sang songs to the wind, to the lightning, to the rivers, to the stars and the dawn. But closer attention to their songs shows that those verses reflect the idea that the objects and events of the natural world gave form to more profound, hidden truths. The actual objects of their praise were not the things of the world, but the forces that brought those things into existence, for to them the real brilliance of being lay not in the shimmering surface of things, but in the effective power of life itself, which somehow linked the many objects to one another in a universal tapestry. Physical forms did not reflect external light; they revealed inner light, the glow of which brought them into view. Similarly, the brilliant gods did not shine onto the world's various objects as much as they lived within them. "Entering into this world through their hidden natures,"¹⁵ the gods adorned the universe as a whole.

So, for example, while the Vedic community venerated the fire (*agni*) that burned in the heavens as the sun and flashed in the sky as lightning as well as that which crackled in the household hearth and cooked the food, the *real* fire the Vedic poets held in reverence was Agni, the divine power of heat itself, the hidden god who lived in and gave brilliant form to all such distant and nearby fiery things at one and the same time. The same Agni who warmed the hearth also bedecked the skies. As one poet said, "He, the friend of the household, has dressed the heaven's vault with stars."¹⁶ According to another,

he who is made to grow within our own homes,
 whose beauty is praised at sunset and sunrise,
 whose truth is unconquerable:
 the glowing one, whose flames do not die,
 shines forth his brilliance
 as the sun does its splendor.¹⁷

The single Agni "of many forms" served as the universal energy of life itself:

O Agni, much acclaimed!
 It is you, O god of many forms,
 who, as in ancient times, gives the power of life
 to all people.
 Because of your power of life you live in all food.
 When you shine forth, your light glows
 without defeat.¹⁸

Hearing their songs, one senses that the poets not so much worshiped the processes of nature as much as they pondered the larger and seemingly more miraculous emergence of truth and being ("light") from evil and nonbeing ("darkness"). This is how one such seer described the arrival of the hidden goddess of the dawn given form by the softly glowing morning light:

As if aware
 that her arms shine
 from her morning bath,
 she rises
 so that we may see her.
 Dawn, the daughter of Heaven,
 has come to us
 with light,
 driving away
 evil and darkness.¹⁹

THE GODS AS UNIVERSAL CREATORS

Their songs thus suggest that the visionary seers who first sang the verses that came to be collected and memorized as the *R̥gveda* saw the world to be populated and enlivened by the many hidden deities revealed, in part, by the play of light. Without those deities, in fact, the world in a sense would not exist, for without light there would be nothing to see. The use of the English word *exist* here is intentional. It literally means to “stand out” (from the Latin *ex-sistere*)—that is, to emerge or come forth from an indistinguishable and vague background—and is distantly related therefore to a number of Sanskrit words that imply the coming into being and preservation of something firm and durable, or that suggest an enduring and abiding firmness.²⁰ From the Vedic perspective, the objective world was brought into existence by the bright and shining gods, who established and stabilized that world by forming and then entering into its many shapes, which they took as their homes.²¹

The world thus established by the shining deities revealed the creative power of the gods, just as the light of the sun revealed the sun itself. However, while the world’s many bright and luminous forms revealed the gods’ formative power, the deities themselves remained hidden, just as light is invisible until it finds reflection in an object.

But, in the Vedic vision, the gods did more than shape and enter into objects, thus bringing them into existence. They also created the dimensions of space itself. Why might this be so? Again, the experience of light is elucidating. Stretching in some mysterious way, invisibly, across empty space, the light that defines the shape of the sun rising in the east simultaneously comes into view again in, say, the shape of a tree on the western horizon. The hidden light thus measures off that distance, as with a ruler, and separates objects from one another, thereby creating the world in a way similar to that in which builder builds a house by marking off its length and width and separating the walls from each other. So it was with the Vedic gods, who not only entered into the many and various forms, but also measured off the distances and thereby created space. We see a suggestion of this idea in the following lines from a hymn sung in praise particularly of the god Indra, but which offers homage to the gods and goddesses in general:

With firm minds, and virtuous, they fashioned the heavens;
they have come to be the foundations of the earth. . . .
Entering into this world through their hidden natures,
they adorned the regions for [Indra’s] control;
measuring with rulers, they fixed the wide expanses and
separated and secured the immense worlds.²²

We see it, too, in another paean, also to Indra:

You, who by eternal law has spread out
flowering and seed-bearing plants, and streams of water;
you, who has given form
to the incomparable bolts of lightning in the sky;
vast, and encompassing the vast universe:
you are a fit subject for our song.²³

Vedic sages were especially intrigued by this, the gods' mysterious and wondrous power to form something where previously there apparently was nothing, an inexplicable power the seers held in wonder and understood to reflect a certain mysterious divine wisdom. One such seer sang this to Indra:

With your wisdom and power, and
through works of wonder,
you have placed nourishing milk in the raw cow's udders. . . .
You, Indra, have spread out the wide earth—a mighty marvel—
and, high yourself, propped up the high heaven.
You have supported both worlds—
young mothers from the timeless, universal harmony whose
sons are gods.²⁴

Another asked the god Tvaṣṭṛ (the "Fashioner") to form children within women's wombs: "At the time when our wives draw near us, may Tvaṣṭṛ give us heroic sons."²⁵

Sometimes the deities were said to use that skill to form objects and to effect extraordinary transformation in order to perform rather mundane magical feats, as when, for example, the celestial Aśvins were said to free two poets who had been tied up, thrown into a wall, and covered with water;²⁶ to release a poet who had somehow become encompassed by the growth of a tree; to have given milk to a cow's dried udder in order to quench a weary man's thirst; to return an old man to youth; and to bring a dead boy back to life so his father could look at him.²⁷

Most of the time, however, the poets praised the gods' wondrous abilities when thinking of the marvels of the natural universe. According to one seer, the gods Mitra and Varuṇa used their miraculous ability to form objects in the dimensions of space, as when they brought the rising sun ("the powerful one") into the skies:

Firmly established in cosmic order,
the powerful one swiftly follows each of the dawns

and enters into the worlds:
 great is Mitra's and Varuṇa's
 magical power!
 Dawn spreads her splendor in all directions!²⁸

The god Varuṇa is the sole object of similar reverence for the singer of the following verses from *Ṛgveda* 5.85, which give a good sense of the manner in which Vedic poets praised the gods in general. We might note also the delightful poetry here: that the poet saw Varuṇa to have "woven the air between the tree branches," for example, reflects a fresh and evocative vision.

1. Sing forth
 a deeply resonant, sublime hymn,
 grateful to the celebrated Lord of lords,
 Varuṇa,
 who has opened the earth
 for the sun to spread out,
 as one would stretch
 the skin of an animal.
2. It is Varuṇa who
 put milk into cows and
 mighty speed into horses, and has
 woven the air between the tree branches.²⁹
 It is Varuṇa who
 has placed fire in the waters,³⁰
 the sun in the heavens,
 ambrosia in the mountains, and
 effective imagination within hearts.
5. I will proclaim
 this wondrous act
 of the mighty Varuṇa,
 the Lord immortal.
 It is he, who,
 standing in the skies,
 has measured the earth with the sun
 as if with a ruler.
6. Truly, no one has ever
 hindered or prevented
 this most wise god's
 mysterious, transformative power,

through which,
 despite all their waters,
 the rivers fill not even one sea,
 into which they flow.³¹

We again see in this song the Vedic idea that the gods, Varuṇa in this case, formed the world by measuring off its dimensions and by placing the various objects in their proper place: the deity has stretched out the earth like an animal skin and marked off its contours as if with a ruler; he also has placed the sun in the skies and *soma* in the mountains. Such is his mysterious creative ability. Furthermore, according to the vision represented by this song, Varuṇa himself is the source of inspiration in the human community, for it is Varuṇa who puts imagination within the human heart.

To the Vedic seers, the many objects of the world thus were not merely separate and insignificant things: they were exactly what they were because they had been brought to light by the gods; they had been measured, placed in position, and impelled to do just what they did by hidden divine forces and powers, which preceded, sustained, and enlivened them. It was the gods who brought out the stars at night, who clothed the mountains with clouds, and who pulled the rivers to the sea, the latter of which miraculously never overflowed. The objects of the world found their individual particularity, their inner integrity or support, in the various gods' creative will; for the world, and all things in it, had been given shape and enlivened by the many deities' clever dexterity and shimmering, transformative splendor.

THE GODS' INNER TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

For the Vedic seers, the world populated and directed by divine powers was therefore a world of mystery, puzzlement, and wonder. Such a perspective found expression in *Ṛgveda* 4.13, a truly beautiful song in praise of the mysterious and brilliant beauty of the dawn. The poet saw the sun as an image of Agni, whom he called here by the more specific names Sūrya (the Shining One) and Savitṛ ("he who sets in motion"). He noted the presence of other deities as well. We have already heard of the Aśvins the poet mentions in the first verse. They were celestial gods, twin offspring of the sun, who were said in many of the *Ṛgveda*'s hymns to ride through the sky in an aerial chariot pulled by flying horses or birds and to bring fortune and health to the world below:

1. Agni has gazed benevolently
 on the radiant, wealth-giving dawn.

Come, Aśvins, to the homes of the pious.
The sun, the divine power, rises with splendor!

- 2–3. The divine Savitr
spreads wide his brilliance,
waving his banner on high,
like a victor searching for spoils.
Following the established law,
Varuṇa and Mitra, the rulers of secure realms,
raise the sun into the heavens.
With unceasing consistency
they impel Savitr to drive away the darkness.
Seven strong and shining steeds
bear upward the sun,
whose eye sees all things.
4. His mighty horses spread outward
like a spider's web,
tearing the night's dark robe.
The shimmering rays of the sun
submerge the darkness beneath the waters,
like a heavy tide.
5. How is it that—neither tethered nor supported—
the sun stays in space?
Why does he not fall?
Who has seen what inner power moves him?
A celestial pillar, he guards the vault of heaven.

Putting aside a discussion of the delightful imagery and use of poetic tropes in this hymn (this *is* vivid language, even in translation: “waving his banner on high, like a victor searching for spoils . . . His mighty horses spread outward like a spider's web, tearing the night's dark robe”), we can see in these verses that the seer's interest was caught by the brilliance of the rising sun, which he praised as an embodiment of the god of fire, Agni. But he sang of more than the Aśvins and of Agni. We note in the second verse that the poet referred to the gods Varuṇa and Mitra, heavenly deities who throughout the hymns of the *Rgveda* receive praise due in part to their ability to guide the movements of the universe as a whole. Here, they are said to raise the sun into the heavens, “following the established rule.”

By the fifth verse of the song we sense that perhaps the visionary sage was even more deeply impressed by this established rule than he was of either the sunrise or the gods, for here he reflected his amazement at the perplexing

fact that the sun does not fall from the sky. Agni may well have “spread wide his brilliance” as he “gazed kindly on the radiant dawn”; Varuṇa and Mitra may have watched over the proper movements of the sun into and through the heavens; but what, the seer asked, was that hidden, sustaining force—that invisible “inner power”³²—that supports even the god Agni himself and by which the sun travels across the skies? How is it that the sun does not fall, although there seems to be nothing supporting it? The singer could see in the sun the heavenly image of the god; but, he asked: Who has seen that hidden inner power that supports even the god himself?

The Fervent Transformative Power of Tapas

Vedic texts often depict the deities’ inward transformative power as an energetic, forcefully fervent heat they describe as *tapas*. In the natural world, the primordial heat of such *tapas* lies principally in the element of fire. The powerful energy of life-giving and life-sustaining fire may exist inherently, as it does, for example, in the god of the sun, Sūrya, who burns with vital and transformative force. Such *tapas* may need to be cultivated and generated through diligent inward fervor, as is the case for the warrior god, Indra, who must fuel his inner fury in order to do heated battle with the various demonic enemies of the sacred universe. *Tapas* is also revealed in the fire, *agni*, which burns in the sacred altars in Vedic ritual arenas.

In any case, *tapas* is understood in the Vedic world to be an effective, energetic power closely associated with creative or transformative activity. As such, it is most closely identified with intense ascetic fervor. Vedic thought holds that the god Prajāpati’s power of *tapas* is so strong that, through it, the Lord of Creatures creates the world itself. A sacred story holds that, in the beginning, Prajāpati existed by himself. He wished no longer to be alone, so he created the universe and all creatures in it. He did so by cultivating his inward heat and, bursting with that blazing energy, exploded outward, just as a well-stoked fire produces innumerable sparks that rise into the darkness. The luminous parts of Prajāpati’s disseminated body formed the various regions and beings in the world. His same *tapas* subsequently served as the vital energy that brought those newly formed creatures to life. According to the Brāhmaṇa literatures of the Vedic canon, the Vedas themselves were born in a like manner. Accounts of such a process appear rather frequently. Here is an example:

Prajāpati wished, “May I be propagated, may I be multiplied.” He practiced *tapas*. Having practiced *tapas* he emitted these worlds: the earth, the atmosphere, and heaven. He warmed up these worlds, and when he did so, the bright ones [that is, the luminous deities] were born. Agni

was born of the earth, Vāyu from the atmosphere, Āditya from heaven. He warmed up these bright ones, and when he had done so the Vedas were born.³³

Vedic thought was to associate *tapas* not only with cosmogonic heat, but also with other forms of transformative energy: it is an intense purifying force as well as initiatory heat, revelatory light, contemplative fervor, and blazing ecstatic power.³⁴ Because it was the energetic heat by which the world was fashioned (we might say “cooked”), *tapas* was a universal force that preceded even the gods and through which the world came into being. Referring to an unnamed, unified deity or primordial state of being he called simply “the One” which came into being from the depths of nonbeing through the force of *tapas*, one Vedic seer sang these verses as part of a cosmogonic hymn:

In the beginning, darkness was obscured by darkness;
all was water, indiscriminate.
Then, stirring, that which was hidden in the void—the One—
emerged through *tapas*.³⁵

In fashioning and sustaining the world through *tapas*, the gods therefore necessarily drew on an inward power through which they themselves had come into being. They “cultivated” or “practiced” *tapas*. Such ascetic practices were usually described in physical terms: the gods were said, for example, to toil and struggle in their creative work. But at times the cultivation of that power was said to occur in the mind and to take fruit in the form of mental activity itself. The same visionary whose verses we just read also noted that the *tapas* through which the world emerges from the chaotic darkness is closely connected with the generative power of the mind:

. . . that which was hidden in the void—the One—
emerged through *tapas*.
Desire entered into the One, in the beginning:
That was the first seed of thought.³⁶

COSMIC CREATIVITY AS DIVINE IMAGINATION

For Vedic seers, then, the world was real not simply because it existed; for them, the world was real because it had been *brought into existence*.³⁷ It had been conceived and constructed, formed and performed by the gods themselves. This idea is suggested by the following verses from *R̥gveda* 10.72:

1. Let us now with poetic skill proclaim
these the generations of the gods,
so that others too may see them
when these songs are sung in future ages.
2. Brahmanaspati formed [this world],
firing and smelting [it together], like a smith.
In an earlier era of the gods,
from nonexistence existence came. . . .
3. In the earliest era of the gods
existence came of nonexistence.
Then, the cardinal directions arose
from within the swelling creative power. . . .
7. O gods! When, like austere artists,
you made all things grow:
just then you brought forward the sun
who had been lying, hidden, in the sea.

Another song, *Rgveda* 10.81, traces all of creation to the work of a divine architect, whom it addresses as Viśvakarman, the Maker of All Things. How the cosmic artist did so remained a mystery. With what materials did Viśvakarman make it? How did he do it? If he made all things, including the dimension of space itself, then where did he stand while he made them? Here are some selections from that song:

1. Taking the role of a priest, the Seer, our Father,
once offered all these worlds in a sacred ceremony
and endeavored to attain munificence.
Through his own power of will, he himself
entered into subsequent creations,
thus cloaking the first creative moment in mystery.
2. Where did he stand when he took his position?
What supported him?
How was it made?
From what did the Maker of All Things,
beholding all things, fashion the earth and
shape the splendor of the skies?
3. With eyes looking in every direction,
with faces everywhere,
with arms and feet extending to all places,

The god,
 —alone—
 creates the heavens and the earth,
 He welds them together with [air blown by]
 his arms and wings.

4. From what lumber, and from what tree
 were the heavens and the earth carved?
 Ponder this, wise people!
 Inquire within your minds:
 On what did he stand when he made all things?

In the first verse, the poet expressed the view that the mysterious universal progenitor created the world from the depths of eternity (before all “subsequent creations”) and then entered into the forms he had shaped, thereby hiding himself within the structures of the world as a whole. We might note also in verse 1 that the poet regarded the god to be not only a cosmic architect but a visionary poet as well; he was also a cosmic priest, a liturgical actor whose drama both formed and performed the world. According to that same verse, the universal artist is said to build the world in and through the power of his will. In other words, the force driving such creation resides in the god’s mind. As the same poet said of that universal creator: “exceptional of mind and of exceptional creative power is Viśvakarman, the establisher, the disposer, and most lofty presence.”³⁸ We have already seen a suggestion of this same idea in a seer’s proclamation of the gods: “with firm minds . . . they uphold the sky.”³⁹ Another poet similarly sang of the artistic ability of a deity he did not name but who, too, formed heaven and earth through the force of the imagination:

Well established in the world, he was a skillful artist;
 He who formed these twins, the heaven and the earth.
 Skillful in visionary imagination, with his power,
 he joined together both realms, spacious and deep,
 well-formed, and unsupported.⁴⁰

Vedic poets used several words to describe the gods’ creative power of the mind. For example, in this last passage Vāmadeva described the unnamed deity who forms the heaven and the earth as *dhīra*, a word built on the verbal root *dhī-* (to “envision mentally,” that is, to “see” in the mind) and thus referring to one skilled in the power of imagination. Another poet similarly proclaimed this of the god Soma:

This sage who is skilled in visionary imagination [that is, this *dhīra*]
 has measured out the six wide realms

in which no beings are excluded.
 This—yes this—is he
 who has made the width of the earth and
 the high heights of the heavens.
 He formed the nectar in the three sparkling rivers.
 Soma supports the wide atmosphere.⁴¹

A third said this of Indra, the king of the gods:

Indra! You are splendid:
 mighty in mental power and
 skilled in visionary imagination [*dhīra*]
 Strengthen us, too, with such might, O Lord of Power.⁴²

The poet here associated Indra's nature as *dhīra* with his possession of resolute mental power. The word is *kratu*, which refers to one's effective skill based on one's deeper force of intention, purpose, or determination. By means of this ability Indra and the other gods inwardly planned the dimensions of an object, drew those mental plans outward, and projected them into the world of space and time, thus forming the world of objective shapes. We see an example of this in *Rgveda* 1.39.1, in which, thinking perhaps of bolts of lightning or rays of sun crossing the sky, the poet pondered the mental power of the gods that such brilliance expresses. The Maruts here are Vedic gods of the storm.

Maruts! Movers of the earth! When you spread forth your measure
 from far away, like flame, O Maruts,
 to whom do you go, to whom, [and]
 by whose *kratu*, through whose image?

We might paraphrase these questions in this way: "What is that divine imaginative power, O Maruts, by which you bring things into existence?"

The *Rgveda* associates such a transformative power of the will with a certain dexterity, not only in the sense of physical strength and artistic skill but also of adroit intelligence, clarity of mind, and mental power. Such dexterity is itself associated not only with imaginative skill but also with a certain shimmering brilliance.⁴³ The gods' power of imagination constituted a creative force the texts sometimes characterize as "all-pervading, far-extending, powerful, creative."⁴⁴ It took extraordinary strength to effect such change.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Indra himself claims that "my power alone is all-pervading; I am able to accomplish whatever I wish through my mental expression."⁴⁶ The gods therefore were understood to be bright, dexterous, and strong artists who

drew the universe into being through the power of their imagination.

So, in the *Ṛgveda* there are many ways to indicate the deities' powerfully transformative, effective, and creative mental power.⁴⁷ The most important of such means, however, would be that represented by the word *māyā*. Later Indian philosophers were often to use this word in the sense of the mind's pernicious and misleading tendency to fabricate unreal worlds; for them, *māyā* was equivalent to what we might call illusion or even delusion. But early Vedic seers used this rich and important word to describe the marvelous and mysterious power by which the gods and goddesses were able through the power of the mind to create dimensional reality seemingly out of nothing. The power of the gods' *māyā* allowed them to convert their divine ideas into manifest forms. Through the power of their imagination they constructed or fashioned the many and various physical objects that constitute the world as a whole. And it was through their *māyā* that they projected themselves into those forms as a way to enliven them and to direct their activities.⁴⁸ We have already seen instances of the word: "great is Mitra and Varuṇa's magical power [*māyā*]," for example⁴⁹ and (we could also translate this as "incomprehensible mental power"), "truly, no one has ever hindered or prevented this god's wondrous transformative power [*māyā*], through which, despite all their waters, the rivers fill not even one sea into which they flow."⁵⁰ Their *māyā* was thus the gods' effective power at converting an idea into physical reality, a marvelous power the poets regarded as derived from and expressing the gods' inner wisdom and insight.⁵¹ For those poets, divine *māyā* was a profound art beyond ordinary comprehension.

The derivation of the word *māyā* remains somewhat uncertain. It may come from the root *mā-*, meaning to "measure" or "give dimension to" something. If so, then the term is related to the verbal root *mā-*, to "mark off, mete out, apportion, arrange, show, display" and thus to a number of verbs⁵² referring to the making, building, fashioning, shaping, or constructing of something by conceiving its dimensions within the mind and then—in the process of "measuring" what has thus been imagined—projecting or converting those plans into three-dimensional space. Converting their mental plans into the plan of the universe, they stretched out the physical world, so to speak. This is the meaning of the verb in *Ṛgveda* 8.41.10, in which the poet sang of the god Varuṇa as he who, "following his sacred vow, spread over the dark ones with a robe of light; he who measured out the ancient place, who propped the worlds apart." This is also the sense in which the verb is used in 8.42.1, in which Varuṇa is declared to have "measured out the breadth of the earth." In both instances, Varuṇa mentally conceives the dimensions of the earth and then projects those plans outward, giving them three-dimensional form.

Alternatively, the word *māyā* may derive from the verbal root *man-*, to "think."⁵³ If so, the implications regarding the role of the deities' imagination

in the formation of the world are obvious. In either case, however, in early Vedic thought the word *māyā* signified the wondrous and mysterious power to turn an idea into a physical reality; the power of *māyā* is the power to realize one's conceptions, specifically through the formative power of the imagination. The gods were described as *māyin*, that is, as "possessed of the power of *māyā*."⁵⁴ Imaginative human beings possessed the same power. We will return to this latter point at length in subsequent chapters, but we might at this time look again for a moment at *Rgveda* 3.38, wherein the poet played with terms signifying such a creative process. While Sanskritists will recognize in this translation the repeated use of words built on *mā-* and *man-*, those not familiar with the language will still see the close relationship between imagination and cosmogony. We have already read from verses 2 and 3 of this hymn; we repeat them here, and add others, to emphasize the point that it is the divine imagination that measures off the dimensions of the different realms of the universe, thereby bringing all forms into being.

1. Like a strong horse good at pulling, like a skilled workman,
I have formed a prayerful thought.
Pondering what is the most cherishable and noble,
filled with inspiration, I yearn to see the [divine] poets.
2. With firm minds, and virtuous, they fashioned the heavens;
they have come to be the foundations of the earth.
These are those expansive realms for which the heart longs;
they have come to support the skies.
3. Entering into this world through their hidden natures,
they adorned the regions for [Indra's] control;
measuring with rulers, they fixed the wide expanses
and separated and secured the immense worlds.
4. They adorned him even as he climbed upward.
Self-luminous he moves, dressed in brilliance.
That is the bull's—the divine being's—mighty form:
consisting of all forms, he bears immortal names.
5. First, the primordial bull produced progeny.
These are the many drinks that gave him strength.
Since time immemorial you two kings, two sons of heaven,
have gained dominion by means of insightful songs.
6. O Lords, three seats do you hold in the sacred assembly.
Many, even all, do you honor with your presence.
Having gone there in my mind, I saw
celestial beings with windblown hair.

7. They fashioned the milk-cow [that is, the dawn] and her friend the strong bull's [the sun's] many various forms. Providing yet other new celestial figures, those with wondrous creative ability shaped a form around him.

Their *māyā* allowed the gods to produce what were, from the Vedic perspective, the genuinely wondrous marvels of nature. According to *R̥gveda* 5.63, to pick just one example, it is through their *māyā* that the gods Varuṇa and Mitra not only somehow placed the sun in the heavens, but also by which they mysteriously brought heavy thunderclouds into a previously empty sky, hiding that same sun but bringing life-giving rain to the earth. The singer of the song seems to have been amazed at the ease with which the Maruts, too, undertook a similarly miraculous art. Indeed, it is through their *māyā* that the gods governed the events of the universe in general. In verses 4, 6, and 7 from that hymn of praise we read:

Mitra and Varuṇa! Your *māyā*
 stretches itself up to heaven.
 The sun—that sparkling weapon—moves forth as light.
 You hide him with clouds and with rains in the sky.
 O Lord of the Rainfall, your sweet drops burst forth.
 Mitra and Varuṇa! With care, the Lord of the Rainfall lets resound
 his refreshing, loud, and mighty voice.
 With their *māyā* the Maruts delicately clothe themselves in clouds:
 you cause the ruddy, spotless sky to rain.
 Wise Mitra and Varuṇa! Through your *māyā*
 and with your laws
 you watch over the ordained way.
 You govern all the world by means of eternal order:
 you placed the sun in the heavens
 as a chariot recognized by all.

Vedic seers understood the gods' *māyā* to be of truly universal import, for without it the world would not exist, nor would it be capable of sustaining itself. We see this idea clearly in a verse to Indra:

He made firm the sloping hills and
 determined that the waters flow downhill.
 Through his *māyā*
 he supported the earth that gives food to all living beings and
 kept the heavens from falling.⁵⁵

That the physical world as a whole in all of its wondrous complexity was seen to have been formed and enlivened by the inexplicable, creative artistry of the gods and goddesses suggests that, in Vedic India, the universe as a whole was an artifact, an image of the divine deities' incomprehensible wisdom and creative mental skill to convert nothingness into three-dimensional form. Viewed from this perspective, the world is an artifact of the divine imagination.

DIVINE IMAGINATION AS COSMIC BEAUTY

If the world of the Vedic poets was one of shimmering light that revealed or reflected hidden divine forces, it also was, in some ways, a world of sublime beauty.⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, these poets often described such beauty with terms that suggest a shimmering luminescence⁵⁷ or the pleasing play of light.⁵⁸ Those terms also suggest the process of sight and the appearing of something into the realm of vision.

To note the appearance of something was to perceive its emergence into being, that is, to recognize the fact that it has been created. Viewed from this perspective, all of creation has been formed by the brilliant gods and goddesses and is, in a literal sense, beautiful. Referring to Agni in the form of lightning, *Rgveda* 3.1.5, for example, proclaims that, "clothing himself in light, the life of the waters, he measures off his expansive and perfect beauty." Not infrequently, a poet's experience of visual beauty therefore was conjoined with his recognition of the hidden, dynamic harmony of the universe as well as of the gods' creative power. So, for instance, noting Varuṇa's sublime presence in the sky's magical change from darkness to light at the sunrise, one poet sang:

He has encompassed the night and
by means of his *māyā*
has formed the mornings:
he is transcendently beautiful!

Following his sublime law, his beloved ones
have brought the three dawns to fullness for him.
Strikingly beautiful over all the earth,
He has formed the regions of the sky.⁵⁹

Another visionary praised Agni, here in his celestial forms as the night's moon and the morning's sunrise:

At night, Agni is the world's head, then
as the sun, takes birth and rises into the morning.

The prompt Priest goes about his work,
intuitively knowing the *māyā* of the gods, who are to be honored.
Beautiful is he who,
glowing in his magnificence,
has shined forth, resplendent,
well stationed in the heavens.⁶⁰

For his part, another seer described the god Indra as the

creator of the earth and he who has formed the heavens:
he whose laws are sure
has brought forth
the swelling, shimmeringly beautiful waters.⁶¹

Praising the presence of Agni in the sun and moon (the “eyes of heaven”) as well as in the rays of light that stream from them, one seer proclaimed:

O, Agni!
When the immortal gods
made both eyes of heaven
to him they gave the gift of resplendent, delightful beauty.
Now they flow forth
like rivers set in motion.⁶²

Of the sunrise and sunset, another sang:

In golden, gorgeous brilliance, well-adorned,
they shine forth
with wondrous beauty!
May dusk and dawn remain with us!⁶³

Since divine power and light were seen to be equivalent in many ways to beauty, the gods were often understood to be the source of beauty itself as well as the source of inspiration through which beauty is appreciated. “You, the divine Maker, have made beauty perfect!” exclaims a verse to the god Tvaṣṭṛ,⁶⁴ while another notes that “under the god Savitr’s influence, we contemplate all that is beautiful.”⁶⁵ Sometimes that divinely created beauty was described in delightfully personal imagery, as in a song to the goddess of the dawn:

You make your attractive form visible to everyone,
as alluring as a bride dressed by her mother.

How brilliantly sacred you are, O Uṣas!
 Shine more expansively!
 No other dawns have achieved what you have achieved.⁶⁶

For Vedic poets, to see light was therefore to see the gods, and to see the gods was to see mysterious beauty. To see the gods was also to see the appearance of being, and to see the appearance of being was to see the process of creation itself. The gods, the creative process, mystery, beauty: all this was revealed to the Vedic poets through images of light. The world was a brilliant image brought into being by the splendid universal imagination.

THE CREATIVE VOICE AND THE EXPANSIVE WORD OF THE GODS

Vedic sages not only saw the divine; they also heard it, and they sang what they heard in the form of verses, songs, and chants. Just as light was seen to be the creative essence of all things, so sublime sound was heard to be the foundation and essential nature of all that is. As such, sublime sound was honored and revered as a goddess, who not only formed all things but stood within them as their essential nature as well. Vedic poets heard the divine as *vāc*, “word”—or, more accurately, as “voice”⁶⁷—and identified it as the goddess *Vāc*, the universal “Voice” herself, who through the power of her creative Word forms the universe in its entirety. *Vāc* was the universal Poetess who, like the ancient Greek *poiētēs*, was known to be a “maker,” a “creator” of worlds, through the power of her language and speech.⁶⁸ Understood in this way, the cosmos was a poetic work of art, for it was, itself, a universal poem.⁶⁹

Just as the bright and shining gods were revealed, in part, by the shimmering luminance of atmospheric and celestial bodies, so too the voice of the goddess *Vāc* was heard, for example, in the thunderous roar of the storm-clouds and songs of the wind blowing through the many regions: “My home is in the [heavenly] waters,” she sang to one seer. “From there I spread out on all sides all over the universe. . . . I breathe as the breeze and support all the worlds.”⁷⁰ Raining from the skies and blowing through the air, her voice became all creatures. The sage *Dīrghatamas* likened *Vāc* to a lowing buffalo cow from whose

thousand-syllabled [voice] in the sublimest heaven . . .
 descend in streams the oceans of water;
 It is from her whence
 the four cardinal directions derive their being;

It is from her whence
 flow the immortal waters:
 It is from her whence
 the universe assumes life.⁷¹

Her association with the flowing waters that brought fertility to the earth and to lowing cows whose milk gave life and nourishment linked Vāc with other Vedic goddesses. One poet described Aditi, the mother of the gods, as a milk cow, for example;⁷² so did another, who praised that same goddess as the “heavenly mother” who “pours forth sweet milk” and “healing waters.”⁷³ Vedic seers frequently described Uṣas, the goddess of the dawn who escorts the day’s light over the eastern horizon, as a cow returning to the pen. One poet noted that all things in the universe were given life by the divine cow he called Viśvarūpā: “she whose form is all things.”⁷⁴ Singers of a hymn in the Paippalāda or Kashmir rescension of the *Atharvaveda* offered praise to the wondrous and generative universal cow and identified her not only with expansive cosmic space and the earth itself, but also with the invigorating goddess Iḍā (“she who streams forth,” “she who refreshes”) and with Virāj, the cosmic principle and power of a multiplying and multiform creation and thus an embodiment of the creative process itself.⁷⁵

Her role as divine creator linked the goddess Vāc with a number of other deities of the Vedic pantheon who are said to fashion the world by one way or another. We might mention here the similarity between Vāc and the god Dhātṛ, who found praise from Vedic poets as “he who establishes” and thus as “he who creates” the world; with Tvaṣṭṛ, “he who fashions”; and with Savitṛ, whose name means “he who sets in motion” or “he who vivifies.” The creative power of Vāc’s divine Word is reminiscent also of that power held by the god Bṛhaspati, whose name means “Lord of the Expansive Power.”⁷⁶

But it is particularly the goddess Sarasvatī with whom Vāc was most closely associated in Vedic literature. In the song offered in praise of Vāc, Dīrghatamas referred to the goddess as Sarasvatī when he sang:

O Sarasvatī, present to us your inexhaustible breast
 so that we may suck from it:
 that source of pleasure with which
 you allow all choice things to flourish,
 which gives wealth, bestows treasure, and grants good gifts.⁷⁷

In later Hindu traditions, Sarasvatī was to become the muse of the imaginative arts and of creativity in general. Her name literally means “she who possesses the quality of flowingness.”⁷⁸ It is not difficult to see the connection here: from both cows and rivers flows nourishing liquid, and both cows and

rivers produce mellifluous sounds. Although she was at times identified as a lowing cow,⁷⁹ Sarasvatī is particularly praised in the *R̥gveda* as a goddess of the divine waters in which she dwells: the flowing streams that brought nourishment to the countryside, the celestial oceans in which the heavenly bodies rest, and the ethereal streams that bring life to various realms as they move throughout the many regions of the universe. “Descending from heaven” and “pervading all regions,” she flows in both “heaven and earth”; she “distribute[s] welfare to the entire vast world.”⁸⁰ Dependent on no other god for her life-giving power, she is described as “virginal” and “autonomous,” in other words, as independent and whole.⁸¹ One seer addressed her as “O Sarasvatī! Supreme mother, supreme river, supreme goddess!”⁸²

As the goddess residing within the vitalizing, revitalizing, and cleansing waters, Sarasvatī received adoration as “she who purifies.”⁸³ Vedic poets understood the sacred waters’ purifying power to have inner as well as outer effect. One of them proclaimed, for example, that “our mother, the waters, will render us bright and shining,” for “they carry way all impurities. O goddesses! I rise from them purified and brightened!”⁸⁴

It is because of her inwardly creative and clarifying function, in part, that the flowing goddess Sarasvatī found praise as “she who inspires excellent ideas,”⁸⁵ a role that placed her in a position of much reverence for Vedic priests singing the poems and songs as part of the ceremonial performance of Vedic rituals, for she was the divine source of and the inspiration for those generative and therefore sacred words, verses, prayers, and hymns. According to the poets, it was Sarasvatī therefore who “perfects our inspired thoughts.”⁸⁶

As a muse who inspired Vedic seers, Sarasvatī was frequently associated in Vedic songs⁸⁷ with two other goddesses who played important roles in the sacred drama. Iḍā, who was representative of the sacral food offered to the gods, and Bhāratī, who directed the priests’ prescribed movements and sanctifying actions during the ritual.⁸⁸ Because (as we will see in Chapter Three) the ritual was the way the Vedic priests aligned human action with divine harmony and order, it is not surprising therefore that Sarasvatī would be known as “she who is possessed of sacred order”⁸⁹ and “she who inspires speech that is in perfect harmony with sacred order.”⁹⁰

In slightly later Vedic literatures, Sarasvatī was not only associated with, but actually identified as, Vāc. The *Vājasaneyī-Samhitā*, for example, literally conflates the two and refers to her simply as Sarasvatī-Vāc.⁹¹ Quoting this passage, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* adds the assertion, “for Sarasvatī is Vāc,”⁹² a line that is repeated elsewhere as well.⁹³ As such, it is not surprising that Vāc—the universal Word who enlivens, refreshes, and inspires all things—is regarded as residing in the flowing rivers and in the rains falling from the atmosphere, which then give life to all beings. Moving through the world as the life-giving waters, the divine Word dwells in and supports all things.

Although residing within the creation, Vāc was more often proclaimed to abide in a transcendent realm above both the skies and the heavens. Even the deities living in those worlds were said to emerge from her creative voice. Her supremacy is indicated in a verse in which the poet described the goddess as “the sacred syllable in which all of the heavenly deities have found their home.”⁹⁴ Another heard her exclaim that “through my power I have come beyond this great earth, beyond the sky itself.”⁹⁵ At times she is said specifically *not* to reside within the objective world, as in the declaration that “above the distant sky, they say, is Vāc, who knows all things but does not enter into all things.”⁹⁶ The goddess’s immortal abode rested above even that of the sun, which some poets saw as residing on a lower level of heaven.⁹⁷

Fully present in the world and yet at the same time fully transcendent, Vāc subsumed all things. She was thereby equivalent to the “one true reality” whom the poet called simply “the One.”⁹⁸

In a sense, then, it was Vāc’s voice that the Vedic sages heard when they opened their hearts and minds to listen to the eternal truth, and it was Vāc’s sublime voice to which they gave human expression when they sang the hymns of the *Ṛgveda*. Their songs revealed the universal Word herself.

As we will see, Vedic visionaries associated what they regarded as that hallowed Word with a principle of harmony and order that preceded even the many gods and goddesses themselves. What was this transcendent, integrated principle of universal balance and order? What was its relationship to the gods, and to the world, and to the human spirit?

These and similar questions lie behind the discussion in the following chapter.