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First, a disclaimer. I am not a historian, an anthropologist, or a philologist. Nor do I have any scholarly knowledge of Hindu culture. I am a poet—one for whom measured language is the constant—who came to Roberto Calasso’s first book, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, in search of insight into Greek myth but discovered the author’s rare ability to follow disparate stories into coherence. He displayed that same capacity in his next work, *The Ruin of Kasch*, a study of Talleyrand’s role in the creation of the modern world. Consequently, I was eager to hear what he had to say in his third volume, *Ka*:
Stories of the Mind and Gods of India, which is what the subtitle claims, but with his extraordinary gift for attaching those stories to a cosmology that allows readers to discover that mind in which creation rides on a tide of rhythm expressed in syllables. This cornucopia of stories, linked by their insistence on revealing the circumstances of creation, offered my first glimpse of the centrality of language to Hindu practice. The modern American poet, Robert Duncan, wrote that “an absolute scale of resemblance and disresemblance establishes measures which are music in the actual world,” and it is this scale that is the constant of these stories.

Ardor is not a book of stories in the way Ka is, though it is enriched with exemplary tales. Only a person more in love with words than icons could have written it. The author’s first substantial claim for the primacy of

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language in the Vedas is that, in contrast to what remains of Greek ritual, the ruins of temples, the continuing vibrancy of Hindu practice stems from the fact that, instead of buildings, Hindu rituals were built on the more durable edifice of Sanskrit. There are times when Calasso’s affair with the terms of Vedic ritual is too intimate for a stranger to the classical language in which they are written to follow, yet the helix of concurrent stories is never lost in the author’s rapture, the narrative of knowledge through sacrifice to stop the repetition of death is told in ever elaborating variations. The coupling of mind and voice is, for instance, a factory of Brahmanic explanation, expressed—rather than viewed—by connecting names and actions into the originary instances of the behaviors that link the Gods to, and separate them from, humans. Who we are is not separate from whom we
came from, yet our progenitors hide from us, preferring the invisible truth to the visible charade, unwilling to share their immortality. It is this gap, this yawning chasm that the stories seek to bridge by means of the ritualists’ insatiable need to explain.

The central act of Vedic practice is sacrifice, and, in Calasso’s telling, the central purpose of the ritualists is to explain the ritual observance: its forms, its meanings, its role in killing death by killing life. The sacrifice is considered from the point of view of the officiants, the victim, the builders of the altar, the communicants, and, inclusively, the fire and its manifest Gods. Whereas the Greeks must make do with Hephaestos, the Vedas name Rudra, Varuna, Indra, Mitra, and Brahman as the multiple aspects of Agni, all of them distinct and crucial to the ritual. As he does with fire, Calasso unveils the shifting
but never minimalized roles of each of the participants of
the sacrifice and the essential truth that can never be
exhausted: that only through the sacrifice of the willing
victim can death be acknowledged and defeated. The
origin of this self-sacrifice is Prajapati, the Lord of
Creatures”, whose bodies are torn from his own. Calasso
points out the crucial difference between the sacrificial act
of creation, exemplified by Prajapati, and the self-
sacrifice of Christ, who came to save, rather than create.
Through the ritual of sacrifice, the body of Prajapati is
restored, a belief that is critical to the complex
relationship between the unavoidable death of the
individual and the knowledge of death that alone can
defeat it. There is, hidden among these factors, a truth of
which the Gods are aware: humans sacrifice in order to
keep alive that unknowable kernel that fends off death
through the inexhaustibility of the act. It is the knowledge that can only be acquired through sacrifice that can ultimately defeat death.

It is in the sacrifice that humans acquire and demonstrate the knowledge of what is at stake. Knowing begins with the evagination of Vac (voice, speech without which the offering is not possible) from the mouth of Prajapati (in Calasso’s telling phrase “the background noise of existence), morphs into the coupling of Indra and Viraj when wakefulness swerves (as in the Latin *clinamen*) into awareness, then mind (Prajapati: “the working of a mind that is the [original] mind”), the seat of ardor, the burning of the mind’s desire, into voice (Vac), all leading with the growing light as from dawn to day to reach the inescapable cascade of truths: that “down here there is nothing but the devourer (Agni) and the devoured...
(Soma)”; that there is no neutral state between prey and predator; that humans are forced to be one or the other; that eating is an involuntary evil; that killing the other is a necessary evil; that evil can be mitigated by the consent of the victim; that death is always and everywhere present; that the only weapon humans have against death is knowing. Thus, the obsession with ritual: how to avoid dying over and over. Only death, the absolute understanding of the ubiquity and necessity of death, can free the observant from the endless cycle of death.

This is a scant summary of what is a profound work of human understanding, which Calasso ends by offering a view of the ways the Vedas remain connected to our lives. He distinguishes between two dominant modes of relation, the connective and the substitutive, demonstrating that, while both are necessary to a mature
understanding, the connective provides an immediacy that makes it the preferred mode of the Vedas—in contrast to the modern reliance on substitution—and of clear, deep value to anyone who cares enough to know. With apologies to those Vedic scholars who know more than I can ever hope to concerning the contents of this book, I recommend it as a profound connection between language and belief as exemplified in the oldest continuing spiritual literature known.