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Hermann Grassmann and Alfred Ludwig, the first German translators of the Rigveda

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In our modern times, which show everywhere a regrettable tendency to mechanize everything and to overestimate the value of logic and reason, the human aspect of science is mostly neglected to a high degree. We read the books of famous scholars, we criticise them or agree with them, but we communicate with books only and we forget that there are living personalities behind them, human beings of flesh and blood as we are ourselves. And I think that few of us do realize how much could be gained by the thorough study of the lives of our great scholars, and how much the knowledge of the men would help to a better understanding of their works.

Western indology of the 19th century is full of interesting characters. This is by no means an astonishing fact if we recollect how much the study of Sanskrit attracted the educated people of that time, especially in Germany. And it was in particular the Rigveda, its archaic language as well as its contents, the thorough exploration of which was expected to bring about the solution of the most important and difficult problems of history. As a matter of fact, the critical study of the Rigveda has been practically confined to Germany for many decades, and it was in this country that the first

complete translation of the Rigveda, or rather : the first two translations, were printed. Today these translations are of a rather limited value to the indologist as they have already long before been replaced by a modern translation, and the time will not be far in which they will be completely forgotten, but what should not be forgotten is the memory of the two translators, Hermann Grassmann and Alfred Ludwig, two colourful personalities and representatives of an intellectually rich and interesting time.

By a strange coincidence the first volumes appeared in the same year, in 1876. But this date of publication is, beside the same subject, nearly the only thing the two translations have in common, and all the rest seems to be totally different. And that this difference was deeply rooted in the characters of the two men will be evident from a comparison of their lives and activities.

Hermann Grassmann was a man of astounding versatility, his indological studies being only a small part of his life work. In fact he was one of the great men of his time, but his external life was uneventful like that of many great scholars of his century. He was born in Stettin on the Baltic Sea, and he became a student of the municipal gymnasium where his father was a professor of mathematics. At the age of eighteen he went to the University of Berlin to study Protestant theology and philosophy; privately he also dedicated himself to mathematical studies. After three years he returned to Stettin where he qualified for teaching Latin and Greek and also mathematics; three years later he passed his examination in divinity. He was made a teacher of mathematics at the industrial school of Berlin in 1834, but he returned to Stettin two years later, in order to teach at the Otto School, where he stayed for six years. Then he was appointed teacher at the gymnasium, where he stepped into his father's place as the first mathematician of the school, and

in this position he remained to the end of his life. This is indeed a very modest career, in the scope of the different schools of his small home-town with which many young people of our times would not be satisfied, even if they were much less gifted than Grassmann was. But how much has this man contributed to various branches of science! It is very difficult to give a full account of all his books in the short time at our disposal, and it is really impossible for a single man to appreciate fully their value; to accomplish this various papers should be read by specialists. But I hope that already a mere enumeration of his books will give some impression of his vast learnedness and brilliant mind.

There is a general agreement in our times that Grassmann was one of the greatest mathematicians of his century, and we hear only with great surprise that his achievements in this field were not acknowledged by his contemporaries for a long time. His chief contribution was the so-called "theory of extension" (German: "Ausdehnungslehre") on which subject he published a book in 1844. The main idea was to free the theory of space from empiricism based on sensual perception and to build up a new theory solely derived from human thought, in which the empiric space is only a special application. His ideas were brilliant and revolutionary, but at the same time strange and difficult to follow for most of the people, and as it was also written in a hard style—the traditionally weak side of German scholars—it failed to produce any impression on his contemporaries. Not a single reviewer was found for his book, and nearly the whole edition had to be scrapped! Only Moebius, a German mathematician of that time, understood that Grassmann had founded a new branch of mathematics, and he decided to promote its propagation. Seeing that Grassmann's work was partly an answer to a question already put by Leibniz in the 17th century, he wrote out a prize competition to renew and further develop the problems

of Leibniz. Grassmann promptly wrote a paper on it and won the prize; the paper was published—but it was forgotten like his first book. Only sixteen years later, when the second edition of his “theory of extension” was published, its merits were fully appreciated, partly due to the fact that in the meantime mathematics on the whole had made great progress. But at that time Grassmann, embittered and disappointed, had left—as he expressed it himself—the “brain-destroying business of mathematics” and started to study Sanskrit “for recreation”. As a result of this pastime he published a number of works that caused a sensation among the philologists. Next to his translation of the Rigveda, about which more will be said later on, his main work was his Dictionary of the Rigveda, which is still in use among Rigveda scholars and was again reprinted only a few years ago. The whole book betrays the clear and systematic mind of a true mathematician. By an ingenious system of abbreviations he was able to arrange the vast number of words in such a clear way that the work will retain its value for ever, although it was inevitable that the meanings of the words were not determined rightly in all cases. At that time nearly all sanskritists were at the same time students of comparative linguistics. So it was not astonishing that Grassmann wrote also some significant articles on that subject. In one of them, which was published in 1863, he established a phonetic law which is still named after him. Its purport is that in Sanskrit as well as in Greek, if there are two aspirate stops (i.e. consonants with subsequent ‘h’ as ‘bh’ in hindi *bhai*) in one word, one of them is converted into a non-aspirate. This law is of great importance not only because it explained away one of the greatest difficulties of the Greek and Sanskrit consonantal systems and thus paved the way for the later idea that the so-called “phonetic laws” work without any exception, but also because it gave one of the first proofs for the hypothesis that also Sanskrit had undergone deep changes and did not represent

the pure "Ursprache" or original language as it was thought in the beginnings of comparative linguistics.

Considering the immense work done by Grassmann in the field of both mathematics and Rigveda-philology one might think that there was little time left for other activities, all the more as we are told that he took great care in the education of his eight children. But it was not so. He found also time enough for two important discoveries in physics. He found out that the difference between front vowels and back vowels is mainly due to different harmonic tones. (This was five years before Helmholtz advanced the same theory in his famous work on tone-sensations), and he published a theorem on the mutual influence of two electric currents, which was rediscovered independently only 31 years later by the physicist Clausius. Among his publications we find also a text book of German for the use in higher schools, a book on German names of plants, and a compilation of folk-songs which he had collected himself and put into three voices; among his literary remains a theological work "On Apostasy" was found. He had a keen interest in religious and political matters throughout his life. Together with his brother he published a weekly journal "for State, Church and people's Life", which was replaced after some time by the "Northern German Newspaper for Politics, Trade and Economy". From the title of the first journal it can be easily gathered that he was rather conservative in his political thoughts. An allusion to his rather inflexible attitude during the German revolution of 1848 is found in one of the biographical sources.

But it is time that we turn to Grassmann's co-worker or rather rival in Rigveda philology, to Alfred Ludwig. Ludwig was a few years younger than Grassmann, but as the latter had begun his Rigvedic studies only towards the end of his life, both translations

were published at the same time. Ludwig was born in 1832 in Vienna, where his father was a teacher of French. He was a student of the Academic Gymnasium of Vienna, and at the age of twenty he attended the lectures of the Vienna University. He studied Greek, Latin, Old Slavonic and also Sanskrit with Hermann Bonitz, the first Sanskrit scholar of Austria. He proved so successful that he was granted a scholarship from the Government of Austria for a foreign university which enabled him to go to the University of Berlin for two years. The Berlin years must have been decisive for him, as he became a disciple of the famous sanskritist Albrecht Weber. This great scholar, whose numerous books and papers are still indispensable for the student of Sanskrit, has always remained a friend and patron of Ludwig although he differed considerably from him in his scientific opinions. When he returned to Vienna, he became a teacher at the Academic Gymnasium for a short time, then he qualified as a recognized university teacher of Greek and Latin. At the age of 28 he was appointed professor of Greek and Latin and comparative linguistics at the University of Prague. He remained in this town, which was at that time a renowned centre of German culture to the end of his life. He died in 1912 at the age of eighty. Like Grassmann, Ludwig was of an astounding versatility, but unlike his great contemporary, he confined his whole energy to philology and comparative linguistics. But within this scope he must be called one of the last great universalists of modern time. He knew not only Sanskrit, Latin and Greek, but also all the Iranian and Semitic languages, and he had read all important books of their respective literatures. He was also well-versed in modern languages and literatures; it is reported that it was easy for him to converse in German, English, French or Italian on international congresses, and he has also written some articles in Czech. His articles and books on comparative linguistics are numerous, but they differ widely from the views of his contemporaries as well as

from modern views. Lengthy and sometimes bitter controversies were the inevitable result. But he was more successful in his works on literature, history and religion. The variety of subjects treated by him is bewildering. We find articles on solar eclipses in the Rigveda, on the origin of the Homeric epics, on Old Persian prayers, on ancient geography. Quite a number of books show that he was not only an expert of the Rigveda, but also of the voluminous later vedic literature, and one of the best connoisseurs of the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana that ever lived. Likewise he was well acquainted with the two Greek epics, Iliad and Odyssey; he wrote many articles on their development and their origin. It is, however, not easy to read his books. By the time Ludwig had become an eccentric recluse, full of oddities and whims. His style is old-fashioned and hard, and he uses an orthography of his own, the principles of which are not easily to be guessed. Otto Boehtlingk, the great indologist, wrote about him after controverting one of his theories : "I admire Ludwig as a secluded and systematically developed original of unbelievable learning. His contemporaries cannot appreciate him fully; perhaps a superman in a remote future will do him justice". To complete this picture of his character we may add that he was much interested in mysticism and that he was a member of the British Psychical Research Society, which endeavours to explore the mysteries of human soul through scientific methods.

Compared to the Northerner Grassmann, the Austrian Ludwig appears as a typical representative of the South of the German-speaking area, that introverted and musical south, which at all times had been the indispensable counterpart of the more energetic and active North. Of course this does not mean that every German hailing from the North or the South demonstrates this difference of character as a single person; I speak here of a general distinction of

mind between the two halves of a population, which can be observed also among many other peoples of the world. But it is interesting to see how it became evident in the life works of two great scholars of the same time. Grassmann had a clear and logical mind, but in learnedness and knowledge of facts he was certainly inferior to Ludwig. Whatever Grassmann had dealt with, he was never interested in the accumulation of dates, he always tried to find out the general and abstract laws that determine things; he was the born scientist and mathematician, and he applied mathematical methods also in his linguistic books, as I have already mentioned in the case of his Rigveda dictionary. On the other hand, clear thinking has never been the forte of Alfred Ludwig. Although we learn that he also took interest in natural science, it was but natural that he confined his own activity to the purely human subjects of history, religion and philology. It would be wrong to say that those branches of knowledge do not admit the application of laws—in fact it is the special merit of the 19th century to have introduced scientific methods for them for the first time—but it is also clear that the abundance of phenomena, which is found in the history of human mind, cannot be fully realized by the Grassmann type, who will always be inclined to force his theories upon the facts.

Some of my listeners may perhaps think that I have wasted already too much time in describing the character of two German indologists, who have been dead now for long, and that it is high time to speak of their translations of the Rigveda. To this I must answer that it is impossible to understand the remarkable differences between the two translations and their role in the later development of Rigveda-philology without an adequate knowledge of the two translators. But this is not only for the understanding of those two translations, which now belong to the past. It is not very difficult to see that Grassmann and Ludwig represent more or less the prototypes of two

different types of Rigveda-research which can be traced up to this day. But before we go into details on the two translations, it will be useful to give a general account of the problems connected with the Rigveda and its exploration.

The Rigveda is, as it is well known, one of the oldest books of mankind, if not the oldest. There is no agreement among scholars about its age; the date of 1200 to 1800 BC. seems to be generally accepted by western scholars, but it is evident that it is based more on surmise than on real evidence. This Rigveda is a compilation of 1028 songs by different authors, which, with only a few exceptions, are hymns to one god or a group of gods as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and so on. Its voluminous text has been preserved with a faithfulness, that is unparalleled in the literature of all peoples in the world. Although the tradition was exclusively oral for many centuries, even the most complicated peculiarities of *Sandhi*, accentuation etc. remained unchanged through the ages. The language is Sanskrit, but a Sanskrit far different from the language used in the epics, the Upanishads and the classical poetry. The grammatical system is richer and more complicated than in the later language, and the vocabulary contains a great number of words which are not found in later texts and whose meaning, therefore, can be only guessed from the context. But not only the language is difficult, also the meaning cannot be easily understood. The Rigveda does not give a coherent mythology like the Puranas, it only alludes to facts, which are supposed to be known to the listener and which most probably differ considerably from the views in later Hinduism. Besides, the old poets, who are reported to have composed their hymns in a state of trance or ecstasy, apparently used a deliberately cryptic language, a kind of code, in order to make it ununderstandable to the non-initiated. No wonder, therefore, that in modern times many students of indology have abandoned Rigveda-research and turned

to—as they believe—more promising tasks. But scholars in the time of Grassmann and Ludwig were more optimistic, and without their optimism it would not have been possible to lay the foundations for the investigations of one of the most absorbing chapters of human spiritual history.

When in 1879 the first volumes of both Ludwig's and Grassmann's translations were published, the difference in method and purpose was to be seen already from the external sight. Ludwig's translation was much more voluminous and it took eleven years till the last volume had appeared, whereas Grassmann's translation consisted only of two volumes, which appeared within two years. The reason for this was the circumstance that Grassmann confined himself to a mere translation of the text, whereas Ludwig gave also an exhaustive commentary with numerous excursions on different matters of interest. Though his dictionary shows on every page that he was well aware of the intricated problems of language and contents, Grassmann wanted to give an easy and polished translation. It meant a considerable concession to a broader public that his translation was written in verses; philologists are never delighted about metrical translations, because you never know if a word or grammatical construction has been chosen by the author for really cogent reasons or only because it fitted into the metrical scheme. No wonder that Ludwig, whose translation is in simple prose, has criticized Grassmann's employment of verse in a rather scathing way. But this was not the only point to arouse the criticism of Ludwig. He also rebuked Grassmann for having started his translation work with preconceived ideas, and this was not at all unjustified. As a matter of fact Grassmann betrays a remarkable self-confidence in his work. The difference between Ludwig and Grassmann can be seen from one seemingly accidental peculiarity. Grassman translates every Sanskrit word of the text into German, sometimes even in the

case of proper names; Ludwig, however, keeps a great number of Sanskrit terms, especially those pertaining to peculiar ritual and mythical conceptions, such as *rtvij* "vedic priest", *patra* "the Soma vessel", *svaha* "a particular oblation", etc. As a result of this it does not make an easy reading matter to the common reader, nor does it add any beauty to Ludwig's already unelegant style, especially in lines, where two or more of those Sanskrit terms occur; but it can be called a more scholarly device. As those religious terms have been coined in a culture, which was completely different from the European one, it is in many cases impossible to render them in a single German, French or English word. Such single-worded translations are always makeshifts, but on the other hand they are also a necessary compromise, because otherwise any translation work would come to an end. How the two conflicting requirements are reconciled, will be always a personal decision of the translator, and it is significant of our couple that Grassmann gave preference to intelligibility, counterfeiting in some way a more exact translation than in reality had been possible for him; Ludwig, hesitating in his translations, payed more reverence to the original text than Grassmann did. The retiring—one might say "shyer"—character of Ludwig is also shown in another point of high importance, I have mentioned already that in the beginnings of indology Sanskrit philology was practically identical with comparative linguistics. The originality of the Sanskrit language, both in phonology and grammar, was so impressing at first sight that it was believed for some time to be the parent language of all the languages of the world, a dignity which had been held by Hebrew through the centuries before. Later it was discovered that also Sanskrit had undergone quite a number of changes before it was reduced to writing and that Greek, Latin and even Slavonic and Old German in some cases have preserved older traits which are lost in Sanskrit. But still it was considered for a long time to be representing more or less a kind of slightly

spoilt Indo-European, and as a consequence of this many indologists hoped that a thorough study of the cognate languages would throw some light on the many unintelligible words in the Rigveda-text. Grassmann was not the first to introduce this method, but he was a typical representative of it. In contradiction to him, Ludwig, although he was an accomplished linguist himself, did not apply linguistic methods to his interpretation of the Rigveda. But he became a pioneer of another type of Rigveda-research which became more and more important in the later time, namely in consulting systematically the post-Rigvedic literature, especially the ritual texts called Brahmanas, of which he possessed an unsurpassed knowledge. It must be said that the later vedic tradition is by no means infallible because very often the priests themselves no longer understood the archaic text, or interpreted it in a way that fitted into their theoretical scheme. Ludwig was not always aware of this circumstance and there are cases, in which he evidently has too much confidence in the brahmanical tradition, as f.i. Rigveda X, 121 "*kasmai devaya havisa vidhema*", where the natural translation is no doubt "which god shall we attend to with our sacrifice?" as given by Grassmann, *kasmai* being the dative of the interrogation pronoun *ka* "who"; here Ludwig follows the rather speculative explanation of the later interpreters, who found in the text the name of an otherwise totally unknown god *Ka*, and translates "*Ka*, the god, we shall attend with our *havis*". But it is only natural that a new method, once discovered, is at first carried to an extreme. Regarding the immense difficulties, which the Rigveda presents, and also the great difference in the methods applied by the two translators, it is astonishing how much they agree on the whole. Passages, in which the translation is completely different, are comparatively rare, as for instance in a hymn to *Usas* the goddess of the morning light, Rigveda I, 48, 6, where Ludwig reads "she (namely *Usas*) drives asunder what is assembled, she who comes with swelling breasts to the place of him

who longs for her", whereas Grassmann has a much more prosaic translation : "she urges on the festival assemblage, she urges on the merchants, and, wandering about, she does not turn her steps". But with most of the other cases the difference lies more in the style than in the meaning. Although it must be feared that specimens of both translations lose much of their originality when rendered in English, I quote here as an example the first two stanzas of Rigveda III, 43, a hymn dedicated to the god Indra, hoping that even in the garb of a foreign language the individual style of each of the two translators can be felt. It is a pity that the strange orthography in Ludwig's translation cannot be rendered in English. Grassmann translates : "Come near to us, standing high on a chariot, the *Soma* drink, yours is it from days of yore; set free the loved pair of horses towards the litter, these men, they call you, bringing sacrifice. Come here to us, passing by many people, to our zealous prayers with the light bay horses, for our songs are calling you, o Indra, composed in praise of you, asking for friendship". Ludwig's translation is such : "Come towards us, standing on the seat of the thill; yours is from olden times the *Soma* drink; your two dear friends release towards the *barhis*, these *havya*-offerers here call you. Draw near passing over many people, friendly to our prayers with your two fallow horses; these thoughts, joined to a *stoma*, call you, loving your friendship". Hearing this we subscribe, I think, willingly to the remark of Windisch in his History of Sanskrit Philology : "It will remain fascinating for ever to compare the two translations : where they agree it is highly probable that the text was understood rightly, where they differ from each other, there must be a difficult passage. With a slight exaggeration one can say that when reading Grassmann's translation we get the impression that everything is quite easy and when reading Ludwig's translation we get the impression that in every line a difficulty is contained".

Mention was already made of the fact that Ludwig and Grassmann represent two types of vedic scholars, who can be found even in present day indology. It would to a great extent be a mere repetition of all what had been said about the characters and methods of the two men, if I recorded in detail how their basic ideas reappear, sometimes in disguise, in later times, and it would surpass the scope of the present paper to call by name the number of scholars who belong to the Grassmann type and to the Ludwig type. I just want to mention one important point. Grassmann treated the Rigveda more from the linguist's point of view, Ludwig resorted to the later Sanskrit sources for his explanations of the Rigveda text. In modern indology two types, which we can call the "linguistic" and the "indological" school can easily be distinguished. In fact the Rigveda is decidedly an Indian book, but even within India it belongs to such a remote past that it stands nearer to the hypothetical Indo-European parent language than any other document written in an Indo-European language. There is no doubt in our time that the linguistic Rigveda scholars were too optimistic in their belief that the comparison with Greek or Latin or Gothic words would lead to a satisfactory explanation of the numerous difficult terms of the Rigveda. But further research work in the Iranian field showed that the Avesta, the holy book of the Parsis, bears such a resemblance to the Rigveda, that a comparison not only of the language but also of the religious thoughts became possible. The most significant representative of this modernised linguistic method in Germany, which combines textual criticism with the methods of comparative linguistics, is at present Paul Thieme of Tuebingen University. The main representative of the indological school was Karl Friedrich Geldner, who died in 1925 and who is the author of the modern German standard translation of the Rigveda, the third and last volume of which appeared in 1951. Of course it cannot be said that one scholar applies only one of the two methods and neglects the other one, but

at least a tendency to stress one of them is always felt. And here another thing is interesting. Exploring the unwritten stages of old languages is always a highly hypothetical work, in which the scantiness of concrete dates must be compensated by intellectual combination. It is, therefore, not astonishing that we find among the vedic scholars of the linguistic type mostly brilliant and imaginative people, who take delight in creating bold theories. On the other hand the Rigveda-interpretation, which sticks to the later brahmanical literature, has always attracted people of a more sober mind, who prefer trustworthy facts to brilliant thoughts. The ideal Rigveda translation will consist in a harmonious union of both methods, but perhaps it is not possible for one man to accomplish this and thus it remains a task for Boehtlingks "superman of a remote future". A preliminary synthesis will be possible by joining the works of different people; in retrospect the competition is recognized as a disguised collaboration for a common goal, and even quarrelling and rivalry are only means of history for the same purpose. So the study of the lives and works of great scholars enables us to form a conception of the social importance of science, which unfortunately is neglected so widely in our modern times.