1

THE MASTERY OF SPEECH

Canonicity and Control in the Vedas

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INTRODUCTION

THE PAST FEW YEARS have witnessed a growing interest in the concept of canon and its usefulness in the study of the religious traditions of South Asia. To an extent this has been due to the influence of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as well as his students, in arguing for the value of the closely related category of scripture in the comparative study of religions.[1] But much of the interest in canon per se stems from an important article by Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in which he argues for a "redescription" of the category that would make it serviceable not only for non-Western literate traditions, but for so-called primitive, nonliterate traditions as well.[2] Smith's article has already inspired a volume on "traditional hermeneutics" in South Asia,[3] and the influence of the article will be found in the present volume as well. In the specific case of the study of the Vedic tradition of India, the subject of the essays in this book, Smith's influence can be detected in a recent work on the ritual system of Brahmanical India by Brian K. Smith, who invokes the notion of the Vedic canon as a key to defining Hinduism itself.[4]

The utilization of canon as an interpretative category in the study of the religions of South Asia does indeed hold great promise. In the specific and very important case of the Veda, however, a question arises as to the precise meaning that the term might have. As is well known, the Veda was preserved until fairly recently in oral form. If we may assume that the oral tradition of the Veda functioned in some sense as a canon, in what does its canonicity consist? This is a question that must be addressed before we can begin to refer to the role of the Veda as canon in order to

19

clarify other aspects of Indian religious history. The question is a complex one and it is unlikely that a single satisfactory answer can be given to it. The Veda has been different things to different people at different times, as the contributions to this volume make clear.[5] Here I wish to examine the question of the canonicity of the Veda from the perspective of the early Vedic tradition itself, in order to determine where a sense of canonicity first comes into play, and the form that it takes.

I would like to approach this problem from two different perspectives. The first approach will be from the perspective of *content*—from the perspective of canonicity as having to do with specific corpora (whether written or oral) that display the essential features, as J. Z. Smith has noted, of limitation and closure.[6] Are these features found in the early Vedic tradition, and if so, in what context and to what extent? As we shall see, from this perspective we can see part but not all of what is entailed in the problem of the canonicity of "the Veda" as this term is commonly understood. A second approach then becomes necessary, an approach from the perspective not of content, but of *form*. Elsewhere in this volume, Barbara Holdrege argues that the Brahmanical tradition's emphasis on the form of the Vedic mantras is integrally bound up with the mantras' status as transcendent, primordial speech acts that provide a kind of "blueprint" for creation. My own chapter will focus less on the cosmogonic implications of the Vedic canon, than on problems involved in an exclusively literary classification of the Veda as Saṃhitā, or collection. Such a classification ignores the fact that the Veda appears most frequently as a form of speech—speech that is perceived with some anxiety by ritual specialists as a force that must be controlled through ritual mechanisms. From this perspective, less "Western" and more "Indian" perhaps, the canonicity of the Veda will appear to reside more in its form as oral performance than in its content as a well-delimited corpus. The two perspectives are perhaps more complementary than exclusive, but I will argue that from the first perspective alone it is impossible to speak coherently of a Vedic canon. Consequently, our notion of canon must be expanded beyond the dominant Western model, and perhaps even beyond the model suggested by J. Z. Smith, if it is to be applicable to the Vedic material.

IN SEARCH OF CLOSURE: CANON AS CONTENT

In looking for the features of limitation and closure in the oral compositions of the Vedic tradition, the logical place to begin is with the concept of the Saṃhitā, or "collection." A Vedic Saṃhitā would seem to be the closest equivalent to a Vedic canon, in the sense of a collection of compositions that has reached closure, precisely as an authoritative

collection. There are at least two problems involved in equating Saṃhitā and canon, however. The first is that there is not one such Saṃhitā but many. Not only are there three, and later four, Vedic Saṃhitās (The *Ṛg, Yajur, Sāman,* and *Atharva*), but there have been multiple recensions of each of these. Second, while the term "Saṃhitā" refers to something that has been joined together or united, the specific reference is to individual *words,* not the individual hymns, formulas, and chants (*ṛcs, yajus*es, and *sāman*s) of the Veda. Consequently, the term "Saṃhitā" does not properly refer to a collection of "texts," whether canonical or otherwise, although it is commonly used in this way. Each of these points requires further discussion.

In the case of the *Ṛg-Veda* (and undoubtedly the other Vedas as well) the creation of a Saṃhitā is a rather late achievement. The earliest redaction of the *Ṛg-Veda* for which there is clear evidence appears to have been the redaction of the so-called family books that make up Maṇḍalas 2–7 of the present-day Saṃhitās.[7] There is a regularity in the arrangement of these Maṇḍalas that suggests they were intended to be taken as a whole. What is impossible to know is whether this collection was intended to be canonical by those who created it, in other words, whether its content was intended to be fixed. What is in any case clear is that it did not remain so. Somewhat later additional Maṇḍalas were added—8 and 9, and eventually 1 and 10. The order in which these additions were made is uncertain, but it is clear that closure was not reached before the addition of Maṇḍala 10, which is widely recognized as being quite late, at least in comparison to Maṇḍalas 2–7. It is with the addition of the tenth and final Maṇḍala that the collection of hymns reaches something like a stable form, the *Ṛg-Veda* of ten Maṇḍalas that we know today. But there are complications. The *Caraṇavyūha* mentions five different recensions of the *Ṛg-Veda*: the *Śākala, Bāṣkala, Āśvalāyana, Śaṅkhāyana,* and *Māṇḍūkāyana*. Each of these recensions would presumably display the features of limitation and closure associated with canonicity, although in fact the only recension to have survived is the *Śākala*. Louis Renou has noted that the differences between these recensions were probably minor ones involving the arrangement of the hymns. At least this is true of the differences between the *Śākala* and the *Bāṣkala*, for which we have some information.[8] It remains true, however, that the fact that today we know only one authoritative recension of the *Ṛg-Veda* seems to be more a historical accident than the result of conscious intention.

The same is true of the other two of the original three Vedas: the *Yajur-Veda* and the *Sāma-Veda*. There are five extant Saṃhitās of the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Taittirīya, Kāṭhaka, Kapiṣṭhala,* and *Maitrāyanīya,* together composing the four Saṃhitās of the so-called *Black Yajur-Veda,* and the *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* or *White Yajurveda,* which itself survives

in two different recensions, the *Kāṇva* and the *Mādhyaṃdina*. As for the *Sāma-Veda*, there are three distinct Saṃhitās, the *Kauthuma*, the *Rāṇāyanīya*, and the *Jaiminīya*. Thus, there is no *single* authoritative redaction of either the *Yajur-Veda Saṃhitā* or the *Sāma-Veda Saṃhitā*, but rather multiple redactions, existing side by side, the possessions of separate Vedic schools. More important, there is no provision for combining the three Vedic Saṃhitās, of whichever recensions, into a single corpus that could be dubbed "the" canonical Veda. Rather they have continued to be preserved separately, in distinct traditions. In this sense we can speak perhaps of multiple canons, or of no canon at all.

So the concept of Saṃhitā is not without drawbacks as an equivalent for our notion of 'canon.' Nevertheless, at the level of content, of clearly delimited corpora, there seems little alternative. But there is always the possibility that canonicity in the Vedic context operates at some other level. Perhaps we should look more closely at the context for the creation of the Saṃhitās. Who made them, and what were their functions? There are of course few certainties in this area, but nevertheless some probabilities. The *Śākala* recension of the *Ṛksaṃhitā* is of particular interest in this regard, not only because of its degree of fixity, but also because of what we can surmise about its creator.

The *Śākala* recension is believed to be the work of the Śākalya whom we find mentioned in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* as a contemporary of Yajñavalkya, with whom he debates at the court of King Janaka of Videha. It is noteworthy that this Śākalya is also credited with being the principal inspiration behind the Prātiśākhyas, treatises on the phonetic peculiarities of the different variants of the oral tradition (*śākhās*), and the creator of the *padapāṭha*.[9] A *padapāṭha* is a version of the *Ṛg-Veda* (or one of the other Vedas) in which each word is given in its independent form, stripped of the phonetic modifications that occur when the words are recited in a continuous manner. Their form in continuous recitation is precisely what is referred to properly by the term "Saṃhitā." As noted above, what are "united" in a Saṃhitā are not individual compositions but individual words. The concept of a Saṃhitā, then, is logically connected to the concept of a *padapāṭha*: Saṃhitās reunite what *padapāṭhas* separate. Hence, it is no surprise that the term "Saṃhitā," as referring to any of the Vedic collections of *ṛc*s, *yajus*es, and *sāman*s, first begins to appear in the Prātiśākhyas themselves. If in fact Śākalya was the inventor of the *padapāṭha*, then we can conclude that the very concept of a Saṃhitā, in the specific sense just alluded to, dates from his time as well.

The traditional ascription of both the *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā* and the *padapāṭha* to Śākalya has been accepted by such scholars as Weber, Oldenberg, and Geldner. C. G. Kashikar, who has reviewed the evidence

and added some of his own, concludes that Śākalya can be accepted as the compiler of both the Saṃhitā and the *pada* text.[10] Now it is noteworthy that the concern reflected in both of these innovations is not with the meaning of the individual hymns, taken as poetic compositions, but with the proper phonetic form of the individual words. These concerns suggest that the context in which Śākalya worked, and the context to which the "canonical" *Ṛg-Veda* belongs, was one that placed greater emphasis on the form of the words than on their meaning, and this in turn leads us to suppose that the proper context for locating Śākalya's *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā* was more ritual than literary.

This is borne out by what little we know about Śākalya's historical context. Geldner has argued, and Kashikar concurs, that Śākalya's redaction of the *Ṛksaṃhitā* took place during the same period that saw the redaction of the *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā*, one of the Saṃhitās of the *Yajur-Veda*.[11] As Gonda has noted, the geographical setting of the *Yajur-Veda* in general is well to the east of that of the *Ṛg-Veda*: "While the Punjab has receded in importance, the Doab, the land of the Kosalas, has come into prominence and the eastern countries of the Magadhas and the Videhas, though not completely aryanized and brahminized, successively make their appearance in the texts."[12] As for the *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* itself, its name, a patronymic of Yajñavalkya, points to a late origin, something that is borne out by the nature of the collection itself, whose separation of *yaju*s from Brāhmaṇa is probably to be seen as a reaction to the more confused organization of the earlier *Yajur-Veda Saṃhitā*s such as the *Taittirīya*. These considerations place the redaction of the *Ṛg-Veda* in a fixed or canonical form directly in the context of an attempt to consolidate the oral components of an extensive ritual system. Thus, while the *Ṛg-Veda* as a somewhat fluid collection of hymns is clearly quite early, I would argue that the *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā* as a canon, as an authoritative version of the oral tradition that has reached closure, comes late. Furthermore, its canonical form must be understood in relationship to the demands of the ritual system for which it served, whether the hymns that it contains were originally composed for such use or not.

Thus, the problem of canonicity, which is our main concern here, shifts from the question of the redaction of the Saṃhitās taken in isolation, and becomes a question of their redaction as an integral part of the "threefold knowledge" that is an essential component of the *śrauta* sacrificial system, and which is defined, at ŚB 4.6.7.1, for instance, not as a set of three texts, but as three *types* of mantras, the *ṛc*s, the *yaju*s, and the *sāman*s. The context here is not primarily one of texts, but rather one of formulated *speech* as employed in ritual action. When the Saṃhitās are viewed from this perspective, their status as canonical collections looks rather different. Although they remain canonical in the sense of displaying—

precisely as Saṃhitās—a degree of limitation and closure, canonical constraint is exercised not only by closure of the different Saṃhitās as regards their material content (which, as we have seen, for the Veda as a whole remains somewhat fluid), but more importantly by the concern to preserve the correct phonetic form of the individual mantras and by the formal requirements of the ritual in which these mantras, the ṛcs, the yajuses, and sāmans, were to be employed.

This is apparent from the way in which the ṛcs of the Ṛg-Veda, for instance, are actually incorporated into the sacrificial performance. As Renou has noted, in an article devoted to the place of the Ṛg-Veda in the śrauta rituals, "the content of the fragments [of the Ṛg-Veda] recited is relatively unimportant, once the elementary conditions relative to meter, name of deity, and number have been satisfied." He concludes that

> the employment of the Rgveda in the great ritual does not conform to what one ordinarily expects of citations. Only a minority of the mantras are adapted to a particular act, and then only in limited contexts. The bulk of the selections concern in some cases verses used purely for show. . ., chosen for reasons that are extrinsic to their content and their reference as hymns, and in other cases long recitations in which a superficial fit of meter, attribution of deity, or number prevails.[13]

In other words, it is the formal fit of a specific verse at a given moment in the ritual that matters, not the meaning that the verse, or the hymn to which it belongs, might have had in its original context. Ellison Banks Findly has argued, further, that a shift of emphasis from content to form, from the insight expressed in a verse to the correctness of the verse's pronunciation, can be seen in the later parts of the Ṛg-Veda itself, specifically in the concept of mantra, which appears most frequently in the latest portions of the collection, namely, in Maṇḍalas 1 and 10.[14] She quotes with approval Paul Thieme's comment that a "mantra has an effect. . .that is conditioned less through its content than its form, a form that must be safeguarded through scrupulously correct recitation."[15] It was precisely this correct recitation that Śākalya's padapāṭha was designed to guarantee.

The redactors of the Vedic Saṃhitās appear then to have been less litterateurs than specialists in ritual action. Such specialists were responsible for the elaboration of the Vedic tradition in its Indian context, in interaction with the indigenous peoples, and in the new, more sedentary environment of the Doab that made possible the flourishing of Brahminism. Key in this process were the Yajurvedins. As Louis Renou has observed, "It is the Yajurveda that remains the base of the cult and which undoubtedly determined the entire evolution of literary Vedism. It is through this Veda that the notion of brāhmaṇa, the category of sūtra, was fixed; through

and for this Veda that the schools seem to have been constituted."[16] It is to the views of such ritual specialists on the nature of the Veda that I wish now to turn, views set down in the Brāhmaṇas of the Yajurvedins, and in other Brāhmaṇas as well. It is significant that in the Brāhmaṇas, which presuppose the existence of the content of the Saṃhitās, the Saṃhitās themselves are not represented as such, namely, as fixed collections. Rather their contents appear most frequently as forms of powerful speech, as indeed the offspring of the goddess of speech, Vāc. A closer look at this Brahmanical understanding of speech as a powerful reality, and of Vedic speech in particular, may provide us with the context necessary to appreciate the second aspect of Vedic canonicity to which I alluded earlier, namely, canon as form. One striking example of this view of speech is to be found in the mythology of Vāc herself, to which I now turn.

CANONICITY AND THE MASTERY OF SPEECH

In the Brāhmaṇas the contents of what we know as the Saṃhitās of the Veda appear not as literary corpora but as the "threefold knowledge" (*trayi vidya*), which consists of three types of mantra or formulaic speech: the *ṛc*s, the *yajus*es, and the *sāman*s. These three types of mantra, also frequently referred to as simply "meters" (*chanda*s), are all forms of Vāc, or speech. Vāc, the "mother of the Vedas" (TB 2.8.8.4), the "divine speech" (ŚB 10.5.1.1), is personified in the Brāhmaṇas and one can discern an entire cycle of mythology that is devoted to her. A brief look at this cycle of myths, in some ways parallel to the myths of the god Agni, might shed some light on the Brahmanical understanding of speech in general, and Vedic or "canonical" speech in particular. Barbara Holdrege's chapter in this volume addresses the cosmogonic context in which limitless speech is circumscribed through the utterances of the creator, Prajāpati. My own analysis, in contrast, focuses on anxiety about the control of speech within the ritual arena. In many Brahmanical myths, speech is presented as a deeply ambivalent force, potentially disruptive and in need of being controlled. As we shall see, the goddess Vāc, as the personification of speech, is finally "controlled" by being "metered" and integrated into the formal complex of the Vedic sacrifice. This element of the control of speech is but one aspect of the overall interest in ritual control that dominates the late Vedic period and the *śrauta* ritual system. The key to this ritual control is correct form, and I will argue that it is in this concern for correct form as the sine qua non of ritual efficacy and the power it brings that we find an additional and decisively important aspect of canonicity as it is operative in the Vedic context.

The goddess Vāc is probably best known to students of India from the hymns addressed to her in the *Ṛg-Veda*.[17] There she appears as an

independent goddess who reveals herself to those fortunate poets whom she herself chooses. This figure of a goddess who acts spontaneously to inspire the Vedic sages has been altered beyond recognition in the Brāhmaṇas. There we find a group of myths that present Vāc as at first united with the chief deity of the Brāhmaṇas, Prajāpati, the personification of the sacrifice, or as in the possession of the gods generally. Then comes a period of separation during which Vāc is located either within elements of the natural cosmos or is in the possession of the demons (Asuras). Finally, she is "won back" through being united with the sacrifice. While still a powerful goddess, as presented in the mythology of the Brāhmaṇas, her power is creative but potentially disruptive and thus must be kept under the control of the sacrifice, personified by Prajāpati. An examination of these myths will help clarify the Brahmanical view of speech as a force that must be controlled, and the role of the sacrifice in exerting this control.

In one basic form of the myth, from the *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* (12.5.27.1), Vāc is presented as a consort of Prajāpati, whom she temporarily abandons in order to bring forth the creatures of the world, only to return and be reunited with him: "Prajāpati indeed was this, Speech (Vāc) was his second. He copulated with her. She conceived an embryo. She went away from him. She poured forth these creatures. She returned (*prāvisat*) to him again." A variation of this myth is found at *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (PB) 20.14.2: "Prajāpati alone was this universe. His Speech (*vāc*) was his own. Speech was his second. He thought 'I would emit this Speech. She will go, manifesting this All.' He poured forth Speech. She went, manifesting this All"—to which the comment is added: "Speech, who was a single syllable, he divided into three" (PB 20.14.5). Somewhat earlier in this same Brāhmaṇa (PB 7.6.1–3) we find a variant that makes it clear that Vāc is here acting as Prajāpati's instrument: "Prajāpati desired, 'I would be many, I would procreate.' Silently he contemplated with his mind. What there was in his mind became *bṛhat*, the Great. He thought, 'This embryo is placed within me. I would procreate it by means of Speech.' He emitted Speech."

Prajāpati's desire to become many requires that he express himself, that a distinction arise between himself and Speech. In these myths, however, Vāc remains obedient to Prajāpati, who is the "lord of Speech" (ŚB 5.1.1.16). She is his instrument, or to use a term borrowed from a later age, she is his *śakti*, and as such is fully under his control. Through her as the "divine Speech" (ŚB 10.5.5.1) Prajāpati creates all beings, chief among which is the Veda itself, the thousandfold progeny of Vāc (ŚB 5.5.5.12).

Speech is not always such a willing instrument of divine purpose, however. This becomes apparent in myths that describe her desertion of the gods, which echo the cosmogonic themes above, but with more of a sense of loss of control: "Vāc went away from the gods, not being willing to serve for the Sacrifice. She entered the trees. She is the voice of the trees,

the voice that is heard in the drum, the lute and the flute" (TS 6.1.4). PB 6.5.10–13 tells a similar story, according to which Vāc deserted the gods and entered the waters, which gave her up for a boon. She then entered the trees, who refused to give her up, and so were cursed by the gods. The trees then divide Vāc into four parts. Sometimes Vāc is described as being originally separate from the gods, as at ŚB 3.2.1.18: "Now the gods and the Asuras (demons), both sons of Prajāpati, received the inheritance of father Prajāpati: the gods obtained mind and the Asuras Speech. Thereby the gods obtained the sacrifice and the Asuras Speech; the gods obtained that world (heaven) and the Asuras obtained this (earth)." Here the gods are said to be without Vāc from the very beginning. The Asuras, who are said to possess Vāc, are associated with the earth. Further, their possession of Vāc connects with Vāc's flight to the chthonic elements of water and vegetation, at the farthest remove from heaven.

Another group of myths has a different character. Here the gods are said to have first won Vāc, and her desertion seems to be meant as a single event: "Once the essence (*rasa*) of Vāc wished to desert the gods who had won it; it tried to creep away along this earth, for Vāc is this earth. Her essence is these plants and trees. By means of this *sāman* they overtook it, and thus overtaken, it returned to them" (ŚB 4.6.9.16ff.). In another myth (ŚB 3.5.1.21–22), Vāc is slighted by the gods and Asuras and goes away from them angry: "Having become a lioness, she went on seizing upon (everything) between those two contending parties, the gods and Asuras. The gods called her to them, so did the Asuras." Finally, she goes over to the gods in return for a boon.

In a myth preeminent for its connection with the soma sacrifice, the gods intentionally send Vāc away to the Gandharvas to fetch the soma they (the Gandharvas) had stolen. This results in an unintended separation, for although Vāc said that she would return, things develop differently: "They made Vāc into a woman of one year old, and with her redeemed it (the soma). She adopted the form of a deer and ran away from the Gandharvas; that was the origin of the deer. The gods said, 'She has run from you, she comes not to us; let us summon her' " (TS 6.1.6). The gods finally win her over by their singing.

Taken as a whole, these myths of Vāc's separation from the gods exhibit her unstable, ambivalent character. The possibility of the loss of Vāc is ever present, and must be countered by attempts to win her back. Several of these attempts have already been alluded to in the course of describing her departure. Thus, the pith of Vāc was seen to have been overtaken by a *sāman* verse, and Vāc is won back after her flight from the Gandharvas in the same manner—by a song. When Vāc had become a lioness, she was won back by a boon: the ghee in the sacrifice reaches her well before it

reaches Agni. In these episodes already mentioned, one element stands out: the means by which tht gods win back Vāc are associated with the sacrifice.

The role of the sacrifice is made quite explicit. In one of the myths already mentioned (ŚB 3.2.1.18), the gods were said to have received as their inheritance the sacrifice, whereas the Asuras had received Vāc. But this situation was not intended to be permanent, and the gods employ the sacrifice to win over Vāc: 'The gods said to the Sacrifice, 'That Vāc is a woman; invite her and she will certainly call you.' " After two unsuccessful attempts, the sacrifice manages to win over Vāc for the gods. Having thus won her, "the gods then cut her off from the Asuras; and having taken possession of her and enveloped her in fire, they offered her up as a complete offering, for it was an offering of the gods. And in that they offered her with an *anuṣṭubh*-verse, thereby they made her their own; and the Asuras, being deprived of Speech, crying 'He 'lavaḥ! he 'lavaḥ!', were defeated'' (ŚB 3.2.1.19–23). It is through the fire of the sacrifice and the divine Speech of the Veda, the *anuṣṭubh*-verses, or the *sāman*-verses as noted above, that the gods overcame the Asuras. Speech, which had fled, which was in the possession of the Asuras who speak only untruth (SB 9.3.1.13), is restored to the gods, who speak only truth, by the divine words of the sacrifice (or simply by the sacrifice, since the sacrifice is Speech, as the Brāhmaṇas so often affirm). Thus, ŚB 7.4.2.34 becomes intelligible: "By Speech the gods then indeed conquered and drove the Asuras, the enemies, the rivals, from the universe."

CANONICITY AND THE CONTROL OF FORM

These myths concerning the "winning" of Speech present us with a contrast between two types of speech. First, we have one that is unordered, unformed, inarticulate, and out of the control of the gods, the speech of the Asuras and the inarticulate sounds of nature. Second, we have one that is ordered and under control, the sounds of the sacrifice, the measured speech of the Vedic mantras, which are frequently referred to simply as the meters (*chandra*s). The conquest of the inarticulate speech of the Asuras is the work of the sacrifice, which sustains the cosmic order of which speech is an integral part. Moreover, this is a conquest of speech by speech, of inarticulate speech by the properly measured speech of the Vedic *ṛc*s and *sāman*s, and by the ritual formulas or *yajus*es. In this concluding section I would like to return to the question of the historical context in which this view of Vedic speech was elaborated, and to the question of the canonicity of the Veda in that context. My point of departure is a passage from the *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which places the notion of the uncontrolled and inarticulate speech of the Asuras into a more concrete historical context.

I have already referred to the myth, recounted at ŚB 3.2.1.18–23, according to which Vāc was in the beginning in the possession of the Asuras but was won back by the gods through sacrifice, the Asuras being left deprived of Speech, crying "He 'lavaḥ! he 'lavaḥ!'" This passage continues as follows: "Such was the enigmatic (*upajijñāsya*) speech which they then spoke. One (who speaks thus) is a *mleccha* (i. e., a barbarian). Therefore let no Brahmin speak barbarous language (*mlecchet*), since such is the speech of the Asuras. Thus indeed he takes away the speech of hateful enemies; and whosoever knows this, his enemies, being deprived of speech, are defeated" (ŚB 3.2.1.24). Paul Thieme has shown that the phrase uttered by the Asuras is an Eastern dialect of the Sanskrit *he 'rayo 'rayaḥ*, or "hail friends!'"[18] What is being said here, then, is that no Brahmin should speak the Eastern dialect, but only the formally correct Sanskrit as it is spoken in Aryavarta, the Brahmanical homeland in the region of the Doab, farther West, and the region, as we have seen, which probably saw the compilation of the *Yajur-Veda Saṃhitās*. This tension between the established Brahmanical norms of the Doab and the "barbaric" East is made explicit in another passage from the *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.4.1.14–16):

> Mathava, the Videgha, was at that time on the (river) Sarasvatī. Then he [Agni] went toward the east, burning this earth, and Gotama Rāhūgaṇa and the Videgha Mathava followed after him as he was burning along. He burnt over all these rivers. The Sadānīra (= modern Gandak, near Patna), which flows from the northern (Himalaya) mountain, that one he did not burn over. That very river the Brahmins did not cross in former times, thinking, "It has not been burnt over by Agni Vaiśvānara." [15] Nowdays, however, there are many Brahmins to the east of it. At that time (the land east of the Sadānīra) was very uncultivated, very marshy, because it had not been tasted by Agni Vaiśvānara. [16] Nowdays, however, it is very cultivated, for the Brahmins have caused (Agni) to taste it through sacrifices.

Agni Vaiśvānara here of course refers to the fire of sacrifice, the centerpiece of Brahmanical culture. We have here a picture of cultural conquest, with the *śrauta* sacrificial system and the "divine speech" that is inseparable from it, providing both its norm and instrument. Romila Thapar has suggested that the gradual aryanization of language in northern India went hand in hand with the expansion of agrarian village economies. In such a context, the formally "correct" Sanskrit spoken by the Brahmins of Aryavarta would come to serve as an important cultural norm, especially if, as Thapar suggests, this process of expansion included the incorporation of indigenous non-Indo-Aryan speakers into the "Aryan" fold. As she writes:

The archaeological culture of the PGW [Painted Grey Ware] and
its literary counterpart the Later Vedic literature would then be
an evolved culture reflecting the indigenous as well as the later
elements, and 'aryan' would refer not to an ethnic group but to
*a social group identified by status, language and conformity
to a particular cultural pattern,* which certainly seems much
closer to the connotation of the word 'aryan' as it occurs in the
Later Vedic literature.[19]

Recent work on the non-Aryan contributions to the *śrauta* ritual
system makes such an interpretation seem quite probable.[20] And if we can
accept this view of later Vedic society as a hybrid culture forged out of
Indo-Aryan and indigenous (*dāsa*) elements under the aegis of the cultural
norm represented by the sacrifice and its language, then I believe we have
a way of understanding a dimension of Vedic canonicity that is left
unaddressed by the search for textual canons alone. What is being
"canonized" here is as much a form of action, and indeed a form of
culture, as an authoritative collection of texts. In this historical situation
the codification of the Vedic Saṃhitās would have been but one aspect
of the codification of the *śrauta* rituals themselves, with both processes
intended to establish the normativity of Brahmanical culture. But given
what we have seen above concerning the lack of definitive closure of the
canon on the level of content, it would appear that the codification of
the Vedic Saṃhitās remained subordinate to the codification of the rites
themselves, and that therefore the canonical Saṃhitās as such never
became independent norms for the Brahmanical community. Whether
such a thing is even possible in a nonliterate society is a good question.
In the present case it is possible to argue that we have to do not with
canonical texts, but with canonical speech, and with the authority of its
speakers, both of which are to be defined more by correctness of form—
both linguistic and social—than by limitation in content. It was such formal
correctness, acting as a norm or "canon," that would have made possible
the incorporation of non-Aryan content into the dominant Brahmanical
culture through their integration into a common structure.
      Given this probable context for the establishment of a "canonical"
Veda during the late Vedic period, it becomes possible to understand the
apparent lack of concern for *closure* in terms of the *content* of the canon.
It would be sufficient if the many Saṃhitās in their many branches (*śākhās*)
could be seen to be *formally* correct, and to be in the possession of the
proper authorities, namely, the Brahmins. It was in the *form* of the content
of the Vedic collections, and in the proper use of that content by the
appropriate people, that their power was believed to reside. Thus, in the
case of the *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā*, for instance, the creation of the Saṃhitā

would have been motivated more by the desire to preserve the correct form of the *ṛcs* as powerful mantras than by an interest in canonizing a specific number of hymns. This would help explain why it was possible to employ *ṛcs* in the "canonical" *śrauta* rituals that are not found in the "canonical" *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā*,[21] since the existence of such a Saṃhitā would imply merely that all *ṛcs* within it were well formed mantras, and not necessarily that all well-formed mantras are found there and nowhere else. It would also help explain how it was possible to incorporate non-Vedic traditions into the *śrauta* system itself, as extensions to the basic structure. Rather than thinking of the canonical Veda as a fixed collection of texts, then, we might say that the canonical Veda is that which, at a given time, is proper for the dominant learned class, the Brahmins, to use as such. Canonicity then has more to do with formally correct usage in the socially correct context than it does with questions of ultimate origin or authorship, or with questions of limitation and closure.

This lack of fixity, of closure, in the Vedic canon leads us to ask whether it is in fact a canon at all. Individual parts of it, such as the *Ṛg-Veda Saṃhitā* in the *Śākala* recension, display a remarkable degree of fixity over a very long period of time. But no such part, taken in isolation, constitutes *the* Veda, in the sense of incorporating all that is recognized, from the time of the Saṃhitās on, as authentically "Vedic" by the tradition. If we seek in the Vedic tradition a true counterpart of the canonical scriptures of the West, then I believe we will be disappointed. Even the more expansive notion of canon developed by J. Z. Smith, which he believes to be applicable to oral as well as written traditions, nevertheless centers on the essential features of the limitation and closure of content and thus is not fully adequate to the Vedic case.

If, in spite of these problems, we nevertheless wish to speak of the canonicity of the Veda, then we must begin with the recognition that Veda has traditionally been an oral tradition in the exclusive possession of a restricted and authoritative group. As such it is indissolubly united with that group and its historical fortunes. Questions of the canonicity and authority of the Veda thus cannot be separated from questions of the nature of the status of those who preserve it, or from questions concerning the manner in which they employ it. In its traditional context, the Veda has been inseparable from forms of ritual action that have played a central role in the legitimation of a particular social order. That individual parts of the Vedic tradition have survived relatively unchanged over so many generations is an indicator of the extreme conservatism of those entrusted with their preservation. We must not be misled by features that resemble canonical texts as they are known elsewhere into believing that the cases are strictly parallel. While canons everywhere may function as instruments for the creation of identity and the establishment of authority, there remain

real differences in the ways in which these things are accomplished in each case, and even in the degree to which they are accomplished. Such differences are worth preserving.

ABBREVIATIONS

PB   *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*
ŚB   *Śathapatha Brāhmaṇa*
TB   *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*
TS   *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*

NOTES

1. See, for example, Levering, *Rethinking Scripture*; and in particular, Folkert, " 'Canons' of Scripture," 170–79.
2. See Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 36–52.
3. See Timm, *Texts in Context*. In his introduction, Timm refers to Smith's article as "a seminal work read by each author involved in this project, and quoted by many." Although not indebted to Smith's work, mention should also be made here of Bonazzoli's studies of the Purāṇas. See in particular Bonazzoli, "Dynamic Canon of the Purāṇa-s," 116–66.
4. See Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*.
5. I myself have addressed this question briefly, with reference to the grammarian Bhartṛhari. See Carpenter, "Bhartṛhari and the Veda," 24–27.
6. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 44–52.
7. For a survey of the evidence on the redaction of the *Ṛg-Veda*, see Gonda, *Vedic Literature*.
8. Renou, *Les Écoles Védiques*, 20–22.
9. Ibid., 22–33.
10. Kashikar, "Problem of the Gaḷantas in the Ṛgveda-padapaṭha," 44.
11. See ibid.; and Pischel and Geldner, *Vedische Studien*, 1:144–46.
12. Gonda, *Vedic Literature*, 336.
13. Renou, "Recherches," 176–77.
14. Findly, "*Mantra kaviśasta*," 15–47.
15. Ibid., 25; Thieme, "Vorzarathustrisches bei den Zarathustriern," 69.
16. Renou, *Les Écoles Védiques*, 9.
17. See in particular RV 10.71. For an in-depth study of this hymn, see Patton, "Hymn to Vāc;" 183–213.
18. Thieme, "Review of T. Burrow," 437–38.
19. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, 259; emphasis added.

20.   See Parpola, "Pre-Vedic Indian Background of the Srauta Rituals," 2:41–75, and *Sky-Garment*.
21.   See Renou, "Études védiques," 133–41.

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