

B. THE WORD

Vac



The Word, imperishable, is the Firstborn of Truth, mother of the Veda and hub of immortality. May she come to us in happiness in the sacrifice! May she, our protecting Goddess, be easy of entreaty!

TB II, 8, 8, 5

The Person cannot be alone, not merely or mainly on the psychological level but on the constitutive level, that is, the level on which he can be what he is. Being is in fact never alone; it always has its own accompaniment, its shadow, so to speak (really and truly "so to speak"), for this is *vac*, the Word, the Firstborn. Now, to discover one's own shadow, one's own self, is a terrifying experience; it involves, to begin with, the loss of the original solitude and thus also of the primogenital innocence. The very fact of Being implies Being-with-itself, the principle of reflection, the real beginning: *manas*, the mind, was there at the beginning, the *Shatapatha Brahmana* will affirm, qualifying the cryptic verses of the *Rig Veda*. The shadow has been discovered as the (own) image, the icon.

The Vedic Revelation tells us in innumerable texts that *vac*, the Word is not just a man-made invention or a mere tool of communication, or even simply an expression of what Man is. The Vedic Word is indeed this, but is infinitely more. It is ultimately as important as Brahman and, in a way that has to be properly understood, it is Brahman itself, not as every being "is" ultimately Brahman, but in a special manner: the Word is the first offspring of the Absolute and sprang from it in a peculiar way.²⁸ In the last analysis God has no name because He himself is Word.

According to Vedic Revelation, *vac*, which was at the beginning, cannot be reduced to a single one of its dimensions. To begin with, thought and language are here so intermingled that no separation is possible. *Vac* is grammatically feminine²⁹ and this fact has conditioned a great deal of thinking about the Vedic Word. If an ontology of sex has any meaning at all, it would find here a decisive basis. However that may be, *vac* expresses that total surrender to the source from which it springs which is characteristically found in the archetype of feminine love, the feminine feature of love being that of finding not only fulfillment but being itself in the beloved.

It would be inadequate to describe *vac* exclusively as the principle of intelligibility of the universe, because she is equally the principle of pure affirmation emerging out of sheer nothingness.³⁰ *Vac* is really the total living Word, that is to say, the Word in her entirety, including her material aspects, her cosmic reverberation, her visible form, her sound, her meaning, her message. *Vac* is more than merely meaning or sound devoid of sense; she is more than just an image or simply a vehicle of certain spiritual truths. She does not contain revelation; she is revelation. She was at the beginning. She is the whole of the *shruti*. The *shruti* is *vac*.

Vac, indeed, is the primordial mystery combining in herself the three worlds of time: past, present, and future. Everything that is participates in *vac*; through her everything has come into being and her imprint has been left everywhere. No wonder, then, that every word is sacred and thus powerful. If to throw a stone at a person may be a dangerous activity, to throw a word is much more so. A blessing or a curse does not work by magic; its efficacy depends upon whether you are conveying an empty sound (or an equally empty intention or a purely rational idea devoid of power) or rather a full and living reality. Only the Almighty is Lord of the Holy Word; only the Spirit has power over the Word and knows all words. It is not possible here to elaborate the many distinctions Indian speculation has built on the Word, to speak of *shabda* as sound and verbal testimony, of *sphota* as the eternal sound, and so on. We would like, however, to make one comment on the Word as prayer, which is more in tune with the purpose of this anthology.

It is a well-known fact that an epoch-making mutation took place, around the sixth century B.C., in India mainly through the reform movements of Buddha and

Mahavira and the more orthodox renewal of the early *Upanisads*, and in other countries through parallel movements. The attention (as well as the intention) was now no longer being directed toward external sacrificial actions (*karma-marga*), but rather toward their interiorized acts. In this development the Word was the link between the religious way of life, based on sacrifice and other actions, and the subsequent spirituality, based on the inner meaning of those same actions and its expression in the words accompanying them. The decisive factor in any religious act was seen no longer in the actual performance of the action but in its intention expressed in the words. Similarly, later, the Word was also the link connecting the path of knowledge, the *jnana-marga*, with the path of devotion, the *bhakti-marga*. The accent here was not so much on the intellectual contents and gnostic power of the Word as on its emotional, sensitive, and concretely efficacious power of moving the will and elevating the whole being to the heights of the Divine.

In the context of the *jnana-marga* the mediatory aspect of *vac* is visible in the *upadesha* of the guru, that is, in his powerful word of instruction, capable of effecting realization in the disciple. In the context of the *bhakti-marga*, on the other hand, this mediatory character is found in the name of God, as the most powerful means of union with the divine. Here is the place of the *nama-japa*, or spiritual discipline of the repetition of the name of God.

In each instance the Word is the mediator. The Word, in point of fact, comprises an external action as well as an internal act or movement of the heart; the Word, one might say, has a soul as well as a body and a spirit. Not only are truth and untruth related to the Word, but also love and hate, action and inaction. From the perspective of the Vedic Revelation one would not hesitate to say that the Word is the embodiment of Man as well as of God. In the Word, whose function is both to conceal and to reveal, God and Man meet. It is the cosmotheandric reality par excellence.

The mediatory character of *vac* is manifested even in post-Vedic times, when the stress is upon the merely anthropological level. From the *Upanisads* onward one could say that the human components are considered to be *prana*, life or the breath of life (often replaced by the body, *kaya*), *vac*, here the speech or the word at large, and *manas*, the mind.³¹ It is significant that *vac* (standing here for all *indriyas*, sense organs)³² has in this context a mediatory function between the

body and the mind. She shares, in point of fact, in the nature of both, being neither a merely bodily function or a purely spiritual organ. It is owing to this characteristic that *vac* plays so important a role in the spiritual ascent of Man, and that control and purity of speech are considered essential in almost all spiritualities.

It is also her mediatorial function that explains the importance of the Word in prayer. It is in this sense that the Word is prayer considered as Man's most authentic act, that is, as the act by which he reveals himself as he really is, and through which reality is revealed to him. So understood, every authentic word is prayer, and prayer is that act in which and by which Man enters into contact with the core of the real. Prayer, furthermore, is both active and passive, a giving and a receiving. Prayer in this sense is inseparable from the Word in the integral meaning given to it by the *shruti*.³³ Every full word is a liturgical act.

Prayer, moreover, is the language of the Gods learned by Men. Yet Men know, as one text of the *Brahmanas* says,³⁴ that when Men say "no" (*neti*) the Gods say "yes" (*Om iti*), and vice versa. Man cannot cease to be Man, even if he learns the ways of the Gods. What he may do is to integrate both languages, the yes and the no, into his own intuition. When the conflict between the two worlds is too acute he may prefer to keep silent. This silence is not the emptiness of a soundless vacuum, but rather the fullness of having to say complementary and conflicting words at the same time; the *yes* and the *no*, uttered together, produce the full silence of the unspoken word: the total and true word. When Man realizes that language, because it is bound by yes and no or by either-or, does not convey adequately his experience, he has to keep silence. Yet *vac* existed unspoken at the beginning and in the same way she will exist unspoken at the end. It is only in between that the Word speaks. The mediator is not absolute, but without such a mediator there could be no absolute. Out of the silence the Word sprang up³⁵ and into the silence she will plunge again; meanwhile the world is made by the Word and, moreover, the second silence is not like the first one. Once the Word has become Cosmos, the Word cannot go back to her Source without the Cosmos accompanying her--as the later myths of Yudhisthira and Harishcandra so beautifully symbolize.

Revelation

Jnana

9 After the period of the *Brahmanas* the whole corpus of the *Vedas* is often designated by the name *vac*, the Word, meaning revelation. The *Veda* is neither "inspired" (having God as its author) nor "the Word of God" (containing or expressing the message of God); it is simply the primordial Word of whom no human being is the author: *apauruseya*, according to the doctrine elaborated by the Mimamsa with much scholarly detail and mental acuteness.³⁶ This Word is *nitya vac*, the "eternal Word," according to a famous *mantra*.³⁷

The present hymn to the sacred Word, known as a song to holy Wisdom, begins with an address to Brhaspati, "the Lord of the Holy Word," the inspirer of sacred poetry. What was the origin of this word? Where does speech come from? From the sages, the seers, who, expressing their own inner experience in words, communicated to mankind all that was best, purest, and most secret in their hearts. They gave a name to each single thing--a lengthy and laborious task. This revelation was motivated by love and achieved by collaboration with one another. Afterward they were able to express their purified thought in adequate words, as meticulous a task as that of sifting flour through a fine sieve (v. 2). The sages, it is said, found a bond of unity and friendship through this sacred work undertaken in common. The Word is here represented as the product of mediation, love and a common concern. The function of name-giving is in the last analysis a divine function and men can do no more than share in it, performing this creative activity on behalf of God. A sacred text tells us: "I know that Great Being who shines like the Sun beyond darkness, who delights in Understanding; who, having created things with their distinct forms and given them names, deals with them through those names that he has given."³⁸

To call a thing by its own name is to be capable of discovering its most intimate structure, which is possible only if one participates in the act by which the thing comes into existence. It is for the father to give a name to the child, for the sage to designate an object, for the discoverer to label his discovery, for the lover to apostrophize his beloved, for God to name his creature. When we designate a being by its own name we symbolize the fact that we are dealing with that being through its own freedom, by entering into communication with its inmost structure. We do not command, we call (by name), and only the echo responds.

We may note in passing that later philosophical speculation had much to say regarding the function of name-giving, which obviously cannot be equated with the mere act of labeling.

Once expressed, the Word is spread abroad (v. 3); it is the fundamental tool in the performance of sacrifice and it is associated, through sacrifice, with the salvation of Men. There is no salvation without a calling and an answer. The Word, thus, is used in the sacrifice not merely as an accidental instrument, but as a necessary one. It is the Word that, by virtue of its "atoning" function, unites heaven and earth.

Verse 4, continuing the vivid personification of verse 3, speaks of disloyalty to the Word when Men fail to hear and understand her. Yet the Word reveals herself only to certain ones. The others have eyes, indeed, but they have not beheld the Word; they have ears but they have not heard her. The communication of the Word is like the union of man and woman, for the Word comes and offers herself as a bride to her husband, to the one who is worthy to receive her. The Word is vitally connected with community and communication, and therefore those who are not faithful in friendship are excluded from participation in the Word, even if they are Brahmins and hence have a traditional right to "share in the holy Word" (vv. 6, 8). The Word is not a possession to be manipulated at will; on the contrary, one can be worthy of it only by constant attention and by "quickness of mind," degrees of which are here compared to ponds of differing depths (v. 7). Only those who possess a certain depth can really hear the Word; for the others it resembles a tree without flower or fruit (v. 5). This attention, moreover, demands an active collaboration and proper participation in the sacrifice, by means of which the strong thread will be woven that holds together all the threads of the universe (v. 9). Sacred competition forms part of the sacrifice (v. 10), and different roles reflecting the different aspects of the Word are assigned to those who concelebrate in it: the creation of poetry (corresponding to the *Rig Veda* with the *hotr* or offerer as priest), the melodious recitation of it bringing out all its inherent sound vibrations (the *Sama Veda* with the *udgatr* as the singer or celebrant), the exposition of its meaning and of the wisdom contained in it (the *Atharva Veda* with the *brahman*-priest), and its application in the sacrificial action (the *Yajur Veda* with the *adhvaryu* as the minister).³⁹

Jnana

1. O Lord of the Holy Word! That was the first beginning of the Word when the Seers fell to naming each object. That which was best and purest, deeply hidden within their hearts, they revealed by the power of their love.
2. The Seers fashioned the Word by means of their mind, sifting it as with sieves the corn is sifted. Thus friends may recognize each other's friendship. An auspicious seal upon their word is set.
3. They followed by sacrifice the path of the Word and found her entered in among the Seers. They led her forth and distributed her among many. In unison the seven Singers chant her.
4. Yet certain ones, though seeing, may not see her, and other ones, though hearing, may not hear her. But to some the Word reveals herself quite freely, like fair-robed bride surrendering to her husband.
5. One man they call morose, unbending in friendship; him they do not send forward to competitions. He goes on his way deluded, his endeavors sterile. Void both of fruit and flowers was the word he heard.
6. No longer does the man who has abandoned a congenial friend possess a share in the Word. Vain is his hearing, whatsoever he hears. He does not recognize the path of goodness.
7. Friends, though endowed alike with sight and hearing, may yet in quickness of mind be quite unequal. Some are like ponds that reach to mouth or shoulder, while others resemble lakes deep enough for bathing.
8. When Brahmins sacrifice together in friendship, forming within their hearts inspirations of the spirit, their wise resolves may leave one man behind, while others, though reckoned as Brahmins, stray away.
9. Those who advance not in this direction or that, who are not knowers of Brahman or Soma-pressers, they have obtained the Word in sinful fashion. Being ignorant, they weave a faulty thread.
10. His comrades all rejoice when their friend returns covered with glory, proclaimed victor in the assembly. He frees them from their sin, provides them with food. Prepared is he, fit for the competition.
11. One man with utmost care creates the verses; another sings a song in chanted meters.

A third, the Brahmin, tells forth the wisdom of being, while yet a fourth prescribes the rules of sacrifice.

1. Lord of the Holy Word: Brhaspati Cf. *brh-*, *brahman* as utterance. Cf. BU I, 3, 20.

2. Cf. TB II, 8, 8, 5 (§ I B Antiphon), for the idea that the Word is brought forth by the Sages.

3. The seven Singers may refer to the singers who accompany sacrifice with their chanting or perhaps to those same Sages from whom the Word took its origin. Certain commentators, however, see here a reference to the seven well-known Vedic meters, quoted in AV XIX, 21. Others see a reference to the seven stars of the Great Bear. The root *dha-* with the prefix *vi* may also be translated "to reveal" instead of "to distribute."

4. To hear and understand the Word is not an act of the will or of the intellect alone. The relationship between the Word and the hearer is a much more intimate one; it is a vital assimilation.

5. His endeavors sterile: *adhenu*, lit. without a milch cow.

The word he heard: *vacam shushruvan*, i.e., the knowledge he received is useless.

6. Share in the Word: cf. also RV I, 164, 37 (§ I 11).

7. In quickness of mind: *manojavesu*, in their intuitions.

9. This direction or that: lit. neither forward nor backward.

Faulty thread: *siristantra*; a word of doubtful meaning, it could also mean a "thread of water," referring to the useless enterprise of trying to "weave" a tissue out of water (cf. Geldner).

11. One man: the *hotr*

Another: the *udgatr*.

Chanted meters: *shakvari*, a kind of verse or meter.

A third: a Brahmin, a knower of Brahman.

A fourth: the *adhvaryu*.

Prescribes the rules. . . : *yajnasya matram*, or "he measures the sacrifice."

The Divine Word

Devi Sukta

10 This hymn, though the name *vac* does not appear in it, is the most magnificent chant to this feminine principle, the *devi* of the supreme power, which later on would be known under the name of *shakti*.

Vac was before all creation, preexisting before any being came to be. It was she who initiated the creative process. The first two stanzas require a total immersion into the Vedic world in order for their full meaning to be grasped. With a beauty of their own, they say in solemn cadences that the Word is not only the First of the whole Vedic pantheon, but that she has a unique place, for her nature is not to

be compared with that of any other being, whether created or uncreated.

The Word is not only an integral part of the sacrifice; she is also the Queen who commands homage in every sphere and who, expressing herself under different forms, remains essentially the unique Word that preserves the unity of all worship. *Vac* is the lifegiving principle within all beings, even if they do not recognize this fact; she is the wind, the breath of life. She is the mother, attentive to the needs of both Gods and Men. She bestows her gifts and favors graciously and freely. She, existing from all eternity, reveals the Father and for the sake of creatures "begets" him who otherwise would remain utterly disconnected and nonexistent.

Devi Sukta

RV X, 125

1. I move with the Rudras and also with the Vasus,
I move with the Adityas and all the Gods.
I support both Mitra and Varuna,
Indra and Agni and the two Ashvins.
2. I uphold Soma the exuberant;
I uphold Tvastar, Pusan, and Bhaga.
I pour wealth on the offerer of oblation,
the worshiper and the pious presser of Soma.
3. I am the ruling Queen, the amasser of treasures,
full of wisdom, first of those worthy of worship.
In various places the divine powers have set me.
I enter many homes and take numerous forms.
4. The man who sees, who breathes, who hears words spoken,
obtains his nourishment through me alone.
Unrecognizing me, he yet dwells in me.
Listen, you who know! What I say is worthy of belief.
5. It is I myself who announce and utter the tidings
that Gods and men alike rejoice to hear.
The man I love I make increase in strength.
I make him a priest, a sage, or a learned seer.
6. It is I who draw the mighty bow of the God,
that an arrow may pierce the hater of the Holy Word.
Among the people I arouse the struggle
and I have permeated Earth and Heaven.
7. At the world's summit I bring forth the Father.
My origin is in the Waters, in the ocean.
Thence I am spread through all existing worlds

and even touch the heaven with my forehead.

8. I breathe out strongly like the wind while clasping
unto myself all worlds, all things that are.

I tower above the earth, above the heavens,
so mighty am I in my power and splendor!

1-2. See glossary for the meanings of the names of the Gods.

3. Cf. RV VIII, 100, 10; VIII, 101, 16.

The Word as the Firstborn has complete primacy over all.

The divine powers: *devah*.

The Word pervades everything and is also expressed in many forms and in many languages,
all of which are forms of the one and only unique Word.

4. The power of the Word presupposes consciousness but not self-consciousness. The Word
has a power of its own, though not necessarily a magic power.

The literal translation of l. 4 is: "Listen, you who know, I tell you what is to be heard with
faith," or "Hear, you that are [yourself] heard [by me]."

5. Priest: *brahman*.

It is the Word that favors men and has the initiative.

6. The God: Rudra.

The third line is conjectural.

Line 4. The whole cosmos is not only a "fruit" of the Word but it is also "steeped" in her.

7. Some would prefer to say in line 1 that the Word "inspires" or "impels," instead of
"begets," the cosmic and divine Father. It could also be said that she reveals the Father and
declares what He is. The theme of reversible parenthood, on the other hand, is well known
in Vedic culture. It is even on occasion the son who saves the father, though this idea may
be related to the later conception of *samsara*.

Origin: *yonī*, womb.

For the Waters, cf. RV X, 129, 3 (§ I 1 and notes).

8. Again the theme of the immanence and transcendence of the Word.

Sharing in the Word

Vaco bhagam

11Few texts provide a deeper insight into the cosmic mystery of the Word than
the following few stanzas taken from a long poem full of riddles and
extraordinary statements. The Word is the central mystery that is situated in the
very core of reality; the Word is the soul, the vital principle of every being,
although not every creature can listen and, much less, understand the total sum of
words. It is only the Maker of the universe who knows all words: the Word
herself. Our field of experience is reduced to one fourth and we realize, as we
become more and more aware of this limitation, that even the fourth part is not

completely intelligible to us. The Word is not only speech, though constitutively connected with it; it is also intelligibility, the principle of reason, the power of the intellect, the rational structure of reality.

Stanzas 34 and 35 contain the four classic questions found in practically all traditions of the world. In the language of the *Vedas* these four riddles of the universe are:

What is the furthest limit of the earth,
the center of the world,
the seed of the horse, and
the highest heaven of the Word?

This symbolic language is investigating:

The boundaries of our existence, its extreme limits; the core of the whole creation, its energy and dynamism; the mystery of life, especially of human life; and the all-encompassing spiritual reality that embraces not only the created world but also transcendent reality, that is, the mystery of the Spirit.

The answers are extremely concise:

The altar of sacrifice is the "limit" of the human condition. Man cannot go further than the altar where all his humanness is concentrated. Any theory about the nature of the altar has to start from this anthropological insight. The "furthest limit" is thus the altar, where the Spirit, Man, and Matter meet, that is, the divine, the human, and the material or *adhidaivika*, *adhyatmika* and *adhibhautika*.

Sacrifice is the center of the world, its force, that which gives it the strength to be, to be what it is and what it shall be, that which supports the cosmos and maintains it in existence. Sacrifice is not primarily a human affair but a cosmic venture, and God and the Gods are the prime actors in it. Sacrifice is not only the creative act; it is also both the conservational and the actively transforming act of the whole universe. The second question is the cosmological question.

The origin of life resides in Soma, the life-principle. It is the principle of fecundation, of love, and of every form of vital activity. The third question is the psychological or biological question.

The origin and place, the locus, of the Word is prayer, the sacred formula, the *brahmana* priest or Brahman, the spirit. The Word is not only sound, not only idea and intelligibility; it is also action, spirit, the unique Word permeating everything. This is the right and the deepest theological or philosophical question.

Metaphysics and linguistic analysis meet in *vac*.

We would diminish, however, the power of this enigma if we were to understand it in an abstract and generalized manner. In response to the query of verse 34, the poem affirms that *this* altar is the furthest limit of the earth; *this* sacrifice of ours is the world's center; *this* Soma we offer here and now is the vital seed, the semen of life; *this* word we utter as we make this offering is the highest heaven, the metaphysical location of the Spirit. In each sacrificial act, in each liturgical performance, we are at the very center of space and time, at the navel of the universe, in the very heart of Being. To the centrifugal dispersion of a schizophrenic existence real wisdom, that is to say, the knowledge of the Word, opposes a centripetal dynamism toward the center of all things.

The motto of our anthology, a most astonishing quatrain which has been considered as describing the poetic and divine inspiration of the *rishi* and which can be said to articulate indeed in a profound way the specific human condition with its grandeur and its misery at the same time, is: "What is this that I am, I do not know." Man is a riddle to himself; he is a mystery he cannot decipher. Man is an "I am," he is a spark of being, he is real, but he does not know who he is because the very faculty he is endowed with, the very power he has, his mind, is what reveals to him that he is and conceals from him who he is. It is by his mind that Man wanders about; it is by his mind that Man recognizes his human condition and that he is free because he knows that he is; but that very mind is for him a burden, almost a prison in which he is secluded. He cannot fly beyond, because it is his own mind that makes the space available and sets the limits to his own incursion into reality; the mind is the organ he has in order to discover reality and even to be real. This is the first distich. Man is because he thinks, and he is because he thinks to be. No pretension is possible here. Thinking and being are not identical, but they are so intrinsically correlated that in Man there is not the one without the other. Man cannot escape the "space" of his own consciousness or transcend the "time" of his own being.

This is perhaps hinted at in the particular Vedic symbolism of this hymn:

Below the realm above,
above the realm below
the Cow has risen,
leading her calf.
Where has she turned?

To which side has she departed?
 Where does she give birth?
 For she is not in the herd.⁴⁰

Here the Cow is the Dawn carrying her rays, all symbolizing the power of human consciousness.

And yet the second distich discloses to us that there is something that does not come from Man as involution, evolution, or development, but falls upon him and hits him as a revolution, revelation, and surprise. It is the mystery of the Word which makes Man aware that he is primarily a spoken rather than a speaking reality, a spoken rather than a speaking Word, a receiver rather than a giver, created rather than creator. Man goes around heaven and earth; he wanders in search of what he does not know, of himself, of his Self, of the Self. At a certain moment he meets what was most close to him: the Word; he discovers his world, he realizes that he is in the world, he approaches the Firstborn of Truth, as the parallel text we are commenting upon tells us.⁴¹ He shares then in immortality, in wisdom, in knowledge; he simply picks up the fruit of the tree of life as a bird eats the ripe fruits from the top of an earthly tree.⁴²

The Truth, whose Firstborn is the Word, is not a mere static truth or a sheer moral truthfulness; it is the dynamic order of the entire reality, the primordial activity out of which everything comes to be; it is *rita*. The first offspring of it is the Word. When the Word overshadows Man, when it dawns upon him, then Man shares in the Word, participates in the speaking structure of the universe, and enters into the dialogical reality; then he can listen, speak, command; he becomes Man when the sounds he emits become words. Man is Word shared, according to this Vedic stanza. Man *is* by participation in the Word.⁴³

The following stanza (v. 38), here omitted, speaks of the sun and/or the spirit marching backward and forward and introduces the thought that the mortal and the immortal, though of the same origin, move in opposite directions, so that he who sees the one does not perceive the other. An Upanisadic idea is here insinuated. He who sees the perishable element in the total dynamism of the world is blind to the immortal one and vice versa.

The next text, which is also the Antiphon of the General Introduction, says, first of all, that without the knowledge of the *aksara brahman*, the Imperishable, the

Spirit, the entire literal cognizance of all the *samhitas* is of no avail whatsoever. It formulates the basic hermeneutical principle, that without possessing the key to understanding a text the text remains a dead letter, and it affirms that this key is the eternal, the indestructible Spirit that gives us real understanding of the Scriptures.

In our context, however, this stanza conveys still another, though related, message. It says that the entire gist of the *Vedas* lies in one syllable, in the unalterable and thus eternal sound. The insight that language is given with consciousness accounts for the conviction that the elements of language, that is, the syllables, are considered the indestructible bricks out of which the intelligible world is made. *Aksara*, in fact, means both "imperishable" and "syllable." Now, the immutable *rc* is here the simplest and the fonal *rc* par excellence. It is the syllable contained in all the words; it is the soul of every word, as it were. It is the primal sound which, sounded at the beginning, resounds in every portion of the *Vedas*, which are nothing but echoes of this syllable. The *pranava*, or sacred syllable *om*, is not explicitly mentioned, but it is adumbrated.

Our text tells us that only he who has reached this transcending wisdom, which is as simple as a syllable, sits in peace and communion with Gods, Men, and all beings. The knowledge of the true word makes us reach understanding and harmony; it creates the authentic communion with all beings. The last stanza given here introduces an intuition concerning *vac* which had far-reaching repercussions in later philosophical and religious schools, specially in Saivism. It asserts that there is a fourfold division of the Word parallel to th: division of *purusa*, the primordial Man. In both instances the symbolism of the number four expresses cosmic completeness, though at the same time it is stressed that such fullness is not accessible to Man in his earthbound state. As the verse quoted just before (37) says, even the seer, who has a more than normal insight into reality, obtains only "a share of the Word." Man has a certain consciousness of the Word's totality, but he cannot grasp the whole; he can only grasp a portion of it. This revealed and spoken portion is only one quarter, one foot out of four (the four feet expressing stability and wholeness). Later speculations on the subject say that the first and highest (*para*) dimension of *vac* is transcendent and thus inaccessible; the second is illuminated (*pashyanti*, the seeing one) but is still on a transcendental plane; the third, the middle one (*madhyama*), consists of purely mental articulation; the fourth is the intoned word (*vaikhari*), the external

expression of *vac*, that is, human language in the usual sense.

The four parts of speech have elsewhere been interpreted very differently. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (IV, 1, 3, 16) says: "Only one fourth of the Word shall I speak intelligibly, if they have given me only a fourth each time for my portion. Hence only one fourth of speech, which is that of Men, is intelligible. The fourth that beasts speak is not intelligible. The fourth that birds speak is not intelligible." And the following stanza quotes our particular text. The *Taittiriya Upanisad* I, 5, 1-5 and the *Maitri Upanisad* VI, 6 also offer speculation on the four utterances.

This text is also related to the *purusha* in *Rig Veda* X, 90, 3-4 and belongs to the same fundamental myth that is expressed in the *Mandukya Upanisad*. The *Taittiriya Brahmana*, II, 8, 8, 5 and the *Rig Veda* VIII, 100, 11 are also enlightening in this point.

Vaco bhagam

RV I, 164, 34-35; 37; 39; 45

34. I ask you about the furthest limit of earth;
Where, I ask, is the center of the world?
I ask you about the Stallion's prolific seed;
I ask you about high heaven where abides the Word.

35. The altar is the furthest limit of earth;
this sacrifice of ours is the world's center;
the Soma is the Stallion's prolific seed;
our prayer is the highest heaven where abides the Word.

37. What thing I am I do not know.
I wander secluded, burdened by my mind.
When the Firstborn of Truth has come to me
I receive a share in that selfsame Word.

39. He who knows not the *Veda's* eternal Syllable,
that highest point on which dwell all the Gods,
what has he to do with the *Veda*?
Only those who know it sit here in peaceful assembly.

45. The Word is measured in four quarters. The wise
who possess insight know these four divisions.
Three quarters, concealed in secret, cause no movement.
The fourth is the quarter that is spoken by Men

34. Earth: *prthivi*.
The center: *nabhi*, lit. the navel.
The world: *bhuvana*, the cosmos, existent things.
The Stallion's seed stands for the essence of virility.

35. Cf. YV XXIII, 62, for the same stanza.

The altar: *vedi*, the place of the sacrifice.

This sacrifice: *yajna*.

Center: *nabhi*, navel. Cf. § III B Antiphon.

The highest heaven: *parama vyoman*, the purest state (of anything).

Cf. also in relation to *vac* this same hymn (RV I, 164, 41). *Vac* and *manas* form a divine unity. Cf. AB V, 25 (XXIV, 6); BU I, 2, 4 (§ I 14). *Prana* and *vac* also form this same union (*maithuna*). Cf. SB I, 4, 1, 2. After all, *vac* is the very glory and splendor of Prajapati; cf. SB II, 2, 4, 4. For the relation between *vac* and Prajapati, cf. also SB V, 1, 5, 6; VI, 1, 1, 9; XIII, 4, 1, 15. *Vac* is also called *paramestini vac* in AV XIX, 9, 3 (§ II 38).

Prayer: lit. *brahman*-priest, though the emphasis here is on the holy utterance.

37. Secluded: *ninya*, inward, secret, hidden. Perhaps an allusion to the retired life of a forest dweller (*Vanaprastha*).

Samnaddho manasa means "bound by" and also "bound to" my mind, the mind that is my only instrument and does not give me the clear vision for which I am longing.

39. Eternal Syllable: *aksara*; imperishable, immutable, and thus the elements of a word, a syllable, and perhaps here the *pranava* or mystical syllable *om* (cf. VI 12). Philologists would translate either way; commentators would understand the syllable to be *om*. We have brought the two currents together.

Highest point: *parama vyoman*, highest heaven, place; cf. v. 35.

Vedas: *rc*.

Sit here in peaceful assembly: *samaste*, from *sam-as*, to sit together in assembly, deliberating.

45. The wise: *bramanah*, the Brahmins, "wise men."

Quarter: *pada*, originally meaning "footprint," is the technical term to designate the fourth part of a Rig-Vedic *mantra*. It means a part that symbolizes the whole.

The Knowledge of the Sacred Word

Brahmavidya

12 Brahman, as both word and concept, contains a profound ambiguity which tends to irritate those who approach the *Vedas* with an exclusively rational curiosity. Brahman is not only everything and nothing; it is also the highest and the lowest and that which lies in between, prayer, the effusion of the Spirit and the Spirit itself, the sacred formula, its meaning, and its ultimate intention. This hymn tries to portray the unity that nevertheless underlies Brahman. This unity constitutes the mystery of *vac*, the sacred Word.

The first verse recalls the origins of the Word, here Brahman, which is firmly and indissolubly linked with sacrifice and which makes and sustains the world. It says that the Word "was born in the East," for it is toward the East as the symbol of the

origins that the sacrificial rite is performed. The seer, or sage, who discovered the Word penetrated to such an ineffable depth of contemplation that he saw in the Word the matrix of both Being and Nonbeing.

In verse 2 the same Word, now called *vac*, is seen in its feminine and thus cosmic aspect, the Word that was already in existence at the primordial creation, the all-powerful queen who truly reigns because she dwells within all beings.

In verse 3 the Word is boldly identified with the connecting link that imparts life to all beings and unites them with one another, the metaontic undercurrent that imparts harmony to the entire universe and in the already quoted text⁴⁴ is considered to have its ground in Nonbeing rather than in Being. By a sort of two-way relationship the Supreme Principle is said to have drawn forth the Word from the bosom of the Word; the Word is not other than her Source: the Father and the Daughter are one and yet He has begotten Her.

Verse 4 recalls to our minds the support of the universe, the *skambha* who, while dwelling simultaneously in heaven and on earth, upholds them both and keeps them separate. Cosmic Order is neither created nor uncreated. It is not created, for if it were it could not reside in God; nor is it uncreated, for in that event the Supreme and *rita* would be identical and there would be no freedom or room for decision in the Ultimate.

Verse 5 contains a profound and enigmatic note: the poet invokes Brhaspati, the Lord of the Sacred Word, "born from nothingness but ascended on high," as the supreme and ultimate divinity.

The latter half of this verse and the following two verses extol the power and wisdom of the poet-sage as being so great that he even enhances the lustre of the "ancient God" (the Sun?). He alone among those born on earth is wakeful before the Sun rises (v. 6). Verse 7 shows in a similar way the power of the priest, "friend of the Gods," of whom Atharvan and Brhaspati are, respectively, the human and divine prototypes. Through the mediatorship of the priest Man can rise up from his earthly condition and attain divine freedom.

The hymn could be summed up in the following way:

May the Sages, who first discovered the Word, who, after meditating upon it long and silently in their hearts and spirits, were illumined in their own inner beings and succeeded in communicating and pronouncing that same Word to their fellowmen--may they themselves

shine with lustrous splendor!

Brahmavidya

AV IV, 1

1. That Sacred Word which was first born in the East
the Seer has revealed from the shining horizon.
He disclosed its varied aspects, high and low,
the womb of both the Existent and the Nonexistent.
2. May this ancestral Queen who dwells among beings
stride forth toward primordial creation!
I have conveyed to her this shining Sunbird.
Let them offer warm milk to the one who is thirsty for worship.
3. The wise who knows from birth this world's hidden thread
discerns the coming to birth of all the Gods.
From the bosom of the Sacred Word he brought forth the Word.
On high, below, he abides in his own laws.
4. Abiding by Cosmic Order, he fixed as his seat
the mighty firmaments of Heaven and Earth.
Mighty from birth, dwelling in earth and heaven,
he fixed those mighty masses, defining their spheres.
5. From birth at depths abysmal the Sacred Word
has passed up to the summit; the cosmic ruler,
the Lord of the Sacred Word, is her divinity.
Just as the luminous day is born from light,
so may the radiant singers shine far and wide!
6. Truly the Poet's wisdom enhances the glory
of the Ordinance decreed by God the powerful, the ancient.
He was born here together with many; they
were found sleeping when the Eastern hemisphere was opened.
7. Whoever you are who approach Atharvan our father
and Brhaspati, the friend of the Gods, with reverence,
you shall become the creator of all that is,
a sage, a God, invulnerable, self-dependent.

1. That Sacred Word: *brahman*. Cf. AV X, 2, 71-33; cf also the two hymns to *skambha*, AV X, 7 and 8 (§§ I 3, VII 27), for this conception of *brahman* as the Holy utterance.

The Seer: Vena Cf. AV II, 1, 1 (§ VI 1 Introduction).

Womb: *yonī*.

Existent. . . Nonexistent: *sad*. . . *asat*. Cf. RV X, 129, 1 (§ I 1 and notes).

2. There is a significant transition from *brahman* to *vac*, who is here regarded as a queen and is the subject of the following verses. Cf., e.g., X, 125, 3 (§ I 10).

Sunbird : *hamsa* the mythical bird of Vedic lore.

The boiling (warm) milk is in accordance with a prescribed sacrificial rite.

3. Hidden thread: *bandhu*, connection; cf AV II, 1, 3; RV X, 129, 4 (§ I 1).

Bosom: *yoni*.

Sacred Word : *brahman*

4. Cosmic Order: *rita*.

5. The Lord of the Sacred Word: Brhaspati.

Connecting vv. 1 and 2 with 3 and 4, and recalling the already quoted RV X, 71, 1-29 (§ I 9), we may venture to interpret this obscure text as describing the origin of the Word in the depths of the human spirit. The Word proceeds from an unformed and unconscious state up to one of full manifestation and finally, to the recognition of Brhaspati (Brahmanaspati) as her Lord. Cf. BU, I, 3, 20-21.

6. Poet's wisdom: *kavya*.

Enhances: the root is *hi-*, to further, to increase, to love, to glorify, to praise.

Ordinance: *dhaman*, also abode.

Born. . . together with many: the commentary assumes that sunrays are meant.

7. Atharvan: he is father inasmuch as he was the first priest in ancient times to discover fire.

Friend of the Gods: *devabandhu*.

The Origin of the Word

Vagvisarga

13 *Vac* is truly "the womb of the universe."⁴⁵ For "by that Word of his, by that Self, he created all this, whatever there is."⁴⁶ The *Brahmanas* are fascinated, one might almost say obsessed, by the position and function of the Word. They are never far from ascribing to it a magic power and on occasion they virtually do so, but their underlying intuition is of something greater than magic, for they are testifying to the unique character of the Word and its equally unique mediatorial function. The Word belongs to both worlds, the created and the uncreated; the Word is needed for sacrifice, because sacrifice is the Word. *Vac* and *manas*, Word and mind, go together, though at times not without a certain strain. A significant tale is told concerning the relative merits of mind and speech. As each claimed superiority they had recourse to Prajapati, who declared that mind is better than speech because the word or speech can only imitate and follow that which the mind has already conceived (iv).⁴⁷ The main themes of Upanisadic culture as well as certain characteristics of the Vedantic world view could be said to stem from this emphasis on the primacy of the spirit over language.

Throughout the *Brahmanas* we find a certain ambivalence as the texts oscillate between two extremes, sometimes identifying *vac* with Prajapati⁴⁸ and sometimes considering the Word as a mere instrument, subordinate not only to *manas* but also to certain other fundamental concepts that constantly reappear in the *Brahmanas*. The ambiguity is not resolved. There are, however, various texts

that introduce us in striking fashion to the power of the Word and its unique character. The fact that *vac* is feminine is especially significant in the *Brahmanas*. She is supreme, but in a very feminine way; she is queen, but she has a king as partner, for she is the consort of Prajapati, the Creator. She has a feminine characteristic of complementarity, a mediatorial role, and a certain feminine docility and obedience. She needs always to be uttered, by men, by Gods, or by the Creator himself. This element of submission is responsible, however, for her decline. She gradually loses her primordial supremacy until she is defeated by *manas* in the *Brahmanas* and plays a secondary role in the *Upanisads*.⁴⁹

Vagvisarga

TMB XX, 14, 2

i) This, [in the beginning], was only the Lord of the universe. His word was with him. This word was his second. He contemplated. He said, "I will deliver this Word so that she will produce and bring into being all this world."

TB II, 8, 8, 4

ii) The Word is infinite, immense, beyond all this. . . . All the Gods, the celestial spirits, men and animals, live in the Word. In the Word all the worlds find their support.

SB I, 4, 4, 1

iii) That same fire, then, that one kindles, thinking: in this fire, when kindled, we will sacrifice to the Gods--in this fire, therefore, one first makes two oblations: to Mind and to Word, for Mind and Word, when yoked together, convey the sacrifice to the Gods.

SB I, 4, 5, 8-12

iv) 8. Now once there was a dispute between the Mind and the Word. "I am excellent," said the Mind, and the Word said, "I am excellent."

9. The Mind said: "I am certainly better than you, because you do not utter anything that is not previously understood by me. So, as you just imitate what I am doing and simply follow me, I am certainly better than you."

10. The Word said: "I am certainly better than you, because whatever you know, I make it known, I communicate it."

11. They went to Prajapati, asking for his decision. Prajapati spoke in favor of the Mind, saying [to the Word]: "the Mind is certainly better, because you only imitate and follow what the Mind is doing; and he who is imitating and following what another does is undoubtedly inferior."

12. As the Word was thus refuted, she became ashamed and miscarried. The Word spoke to Prajapati: "I shall never become the carrier of your oblation, I whom you have refuted!" Therefore, whatever in the sacrifice is performed for Prajapati is done in a low voice, because the Word refused to carry the oblation to Prajapati.

SB X, 5, 3, 1-5

v) 1. In the beginning this universe was neither Being nor Nonbeing. In the beginning, indeed, this universe existed and did not exist: only Mind was there.

2. . . . This Mind was, so to speak, neither existent nor nonexistent.

3. This Mind, once created, desired to become manifest. . . .

4. That Mind then created the Word. This Word, when created, desired to become manifest, more conspicuous, more physical. It sought after a self. It practiced fervid concentration. It acquired a substance. It was the thirty-six thousand fires of its own self, made of the Word, built up of the Word. . . with the Word they chanted and with the Word they recited.

Whatever rite is performed at the sacrifice, whatever sacrificial rite exists, is performed by the Word alone, as a vocal performance, on fires composed of Word, built up by Word. . . .

5. That Word created the Life Breath.

i) Cf similar texts in § I 6.

ii) Cf. the continuation of this text in the antiphon of § I B.

iii) The indispensable role of both Word and Mind is one of the cornerstones of the concept of worship, from the Vedic sacrifice down to contemporary forms of *puja*

iv) Cf. TS II, 5, 11, 4.

8. Spirit: *manas*, mind.

Word: *vac*, speech.

10. I make it known: *vijnapayami*, I reveal it.

12. In a low voice: *upamshu*, the "middle way" of recitation at the sacrifice, the other two being *nirukta* (clearly pronounced) and *tusnim* (silent).

v) This text relies on RV X, 129, 1 (§ I 1) and develops the idea of the Word taking its origin from the Mind, the breath from the Word, and thus successively: eye, ear, work, fire. On *manas*, *vac*, and *prana* and their homologization with the *Vedas* cf., e.g., BU I, 5, 5.

4. More conspicuous: *niruktatara*, more pronounced, explicit.

More physical: *murtatara*, more formed, incarnate. Mind and Word are the two essential elements of worship (cf. the later *namarupa*, etc.).

The Interior Word

Manovac

14The Word, the primordial principle at the origin of every thing, has many dimensions, as we have already indicated. Almost all of them are summed up in the liturgical Word as it is understood in the *Vedas* and *Brahmanas*. The *Upanisads* add depth to the same vision, but their different language represents also a deep ontological change: the liturgical Word can be called, according to tradition and to etymology, Brahman. The *Upanisads* put emphasis on Brahman and relegate *vac* to the performance of the other functions of the Word, though without making a clear-cut distinction.

The first cleavage of that which is *one* 50 can be seen in the *Rig Veda*, where in one verse *vac* is both the subject of speech ("the Word speaks," i.e., "revelation") and the object of speech ("the word is spoken by all kinds of beings," i.e., language). In the first instance she is also the Queen of the Gods; in the second she is produced by the Gods.⁵¹

The attention of the *Upanisads* is directed more toward the realization of the individual and the interiorization of external actions. In consequence the revelational, liturgical, and cosmological aspect of *vac* loses momentum. Generally *vac* is counted among the human organs (*indriya*), and her status varies, although at times her importance is rediscovered, as, for instance, when she is ranked next to *atman*, which on an interiorized level corresponds to the *purusa* or Prajapati of the *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas*. As the general tendency of the *Upanisads*, however, is toward the unconditioned knowledge of *atman* as the knower and not the known, the seer and not the seen, any type of mediation is to be refused--the mediation of the sacrifice and also therefore of the liturgical Word of Revelation. While the Vedic *rishis* were overwhelmed by the power of the Word, the Upanisadic sages enquired *whose* is this Word; and so they were directed not only to the speaker, but even beyond him to the Self, which inspires all speech from within, the *antaryamin* the Immortal, as one of the texts affirms. Speech cannot know its own source of inspiration, just as the body cannot know its life-giving principle, the soul. And yet speech is one of the nearest "bodies," that is, embodiments or manifestations, of the inmost Self, as the same text suggests.

Since the final word of the *Upanisads* is *neti, neti*, "not this, not this,"⁵² the Absolute can only be designated as *tad avacyam*, "the unspeakable,"⁵³ that to which *vac* cannot be applied and from which any word recoils.⁵⁴ Even this world was, at the beginning, unspoken, unuttered, as one *Upanisad* says.⁵⁵

The fact should be kept in mind, nevertheless, that the concept of Brahman arose out of that very horizon of sacred speech and liturgy which we have been describing. Without it the whole religious and mystical fervor of the *Upanisads* could not have come into being; even that which must be transcended, has first to be.

Manovac

AU Invocation

i) May my word be firmly established in my mind!
May my mind be firmly established in my word!
O Self-manifest one, be manifest to me!
Be for me the cornerstone of Revelation.
May what I have heard not depart from me!
Thus meditating on your wisdom I link nights and days.
I will speak the Right.
I will speak the Truth.
May that protect me!
May it protect my teacher!
Yes, let it protect me
and protect my teacher!
May that protect him!
Om! Peace, peace, peace!

BU I, 2, 4-6

ii) 4. He yearned that a second self might be born to him. He [Death or Hunger] united with the Word by means of the Spirit. In this union the seed became the year, for prior to this there was no year. He bore him for that much time--a year--and after that he brought him forth. When he was born he [Death] opened his mouth to swallow him up. He [the Newborn] cried out *bhan!* And that became the Word.

5. He pondered by himself: If I destroy him, I shall have less food for myself. Accordingly, with that Word, with that Self, he brought forth this whole universe, everything that exists. .

..

6. He longed to sacrifice again with a still greater sacrifice.

BU III, 7, 17

iii) He who dwells in speech, who is different from and interior to speech, whom speech does not know, whose body is speech, who inspires speech from within, he is the Self, the Inner Inspirer, the Immortal.

BU III, 9, 24-25

iv) 24. "Which is the divinity in the zenith?"

"The divinity Fire."

"In what is this fire established?"

"In speech."

"In what is speech established?"

"In the heart."

"In what is the heart established?"

25. "You absurd man!" said Yajnavalkya, "how can you think that it is anywhere else than in ourselves? If it were to be found in anything else, the dogs might eat it or the birds might tear it to pieces!"

CU III, 18, 3

v) The Word is one quarter of Brahman. It shines and gives warmth with the light of fire. He

who knows this shines and gives warmth with glory, with praise, and with Brahman-splendor.

CU VII, 2, 1

vi) The Word verily is greater than name. The Word in fact makes known the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Atharva Veda* as the fourth, the Ancient Lore as the fifth [*Veda*], the *Veda* of *Vedas*, the ritual for ancestors, calculus, the augural sciences, the knowledge of the signs of the times, dialectics, ethics, political science, sacred knowledge, theology, knowledge of the spirits, military science, astrology, the science of snakes and of celestial beings. [The Word also makes known] heaven, earth, wind, space, the waters, fire, the Gods, Men, animals, birds, grass, and trees, all animals down to worms, insects, and ants. [It also makes known] what is right and wrong, truth and untruth, good and evil, what is pleasing and what is unpleasing. Verily, if there were no Word, there would be knowledge neither of right and wrong, nor of truth and untruth, nor good and evil, nor of the pleasing and unpleasing. The Word makes all this known. Meditate on the Word.

i) This invocation is traditionally chanted by the student at the beginning of every session of study. It belongs to any *Upanisad* of the *Rig Veda*.

Word: *vac*; it could also be translated here by "speech."

Firmly established: *pratishthita*, well fixed, firm.

Mind: *manas*.

O Self-manifest one, be manifest to me: *avir avir ma edhi*.

Revelation: *veda*.

The Right: *rita* could equally well be rendered here by "the real," as also could *satya*, truth.

Teacher: *vaktr*, the speaker or he who instructs.

The first two lines could also read: May my speech rest on my spirit! May my spirit rest on my speech!

ii) 4. Cf. SB 1, 4, 4, 1 (§ I 13); X, 6, 5, 5.

The One is called here Hunger and/or Death; cf. § I 7 notes.

Spirit: *manas*

This union: *maithuna*, i.e., the copulation between *manas* and *vac*

iii) 1-16. Cf. § VI 5.

Speech: *vac*, word.

Different from and interior to: *antara*.

Body: *sharira*, stands here for the external manifestation of the *atman*, or, in other words, for its symbol. Cf. the other terms in this series, BU III, 7, 3-23 (§ VI 5).

Inner Inspirer: *antaryamin*, inner controller, inner ruler. Cf. § I C Introduction, note 56.

18-23. Cf. § VI 5.

iv) 1-9. Cf. § VI 2.

10-17. Cf. § VI 7.

21. Cf. § I 37.

24. Fire: Agni, here in its aspect as the sun.

Speech: *vac*. The correspondence between Agni (*devata*) and *vac* (sense organ) is common: cf. BU II, 5, 3 (§ VI 6) and CU III, 18, 2, where we find the exact correspondences: speech-fire, breath-air, eye-sun, ear-regions of space.

25. Another instance of asking questions beyond the proper limits of the question (cf. also BU III, 6).

26. Cf. § VI 5

28. Cf. § VI 3.

v) Cf. the fourfold division of the primordial Man, *purusa* (I 5). *Vac* is here one quarter of *brahman* on the individual level, as *Agni* is on the cosmic level. Again the close correlation between *vac* and *agni* (or *jyotis*, light in general).

vi) The Word is the key to all human knowledge.

Cf. the complete CU VII (§ VI 3) and the corresponding notes regarding the main terms used here.

Fire: *tejas*, light, splendor, glory.

What is right and wrong: *dharmam cadharmam ca*.

Truth and untruth: *satyam canrtam ca*.

Good and evil: *sadhu na asadhu*.

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