I. POSITION PIECES
CHAPTER ONE

WEIGHTING ORALITY AND WRITING IN THE SANSKRIT EPICS

Once the divine seers foregathered, and on one scale they hung the four Vedas in the balance, and on the other scale The Bhārata; and both in size and weight it was heavier. Therefore, because of its size and its weight, it is called The Mahābhārata—he who knows this etymology is freed from all sins.¹

In delivering a paper at the First DICSEP Conference in August 1997, I felt that I could detect sympathy for my views only from a small number of participants. When I began to prepare that essay for what was to become the DICSEP Vol. 1 (1999), I decided to preface it with a brief introduction to try to explain one of the unstated—yet basic—underlying ideas (see now Hiltebeitel 1999b: 155–157). I feel it is worth briefly quoting from it as a bridge to this essay: “I believe that the largest inadequacy of Mahābhārata scholarship, including my own up to

¹ MBh. 1.1.208; van Buiten: MBh, 1, p. 31 (this chapter reluctantly accedes to the editorial preference for the potentially misleading 'MBh' over 'Mbh' in the volume in which it appeared). I thank Christopher Minkowski and Yaroslav Vassilkov for their generous readings of this essay in accordance with that volume’s editorial review policy: Vassilkov in a five-page single-spaced commentary cited as Vassilkov 2004; Minkowski in a smaller note and in the margins of a draft. Let me note, however, that in the case of Vassilkov—long an advocate of archaic oral epic behind the Mahābhārata—I will not be able to speak to all his reservations and indeed disagreements. But since this is meant to be a dialogical piece, I respond to his views from time to time. For starters, he finds my suggestion that this epigram ‘could suggest a written book’ to be ‘highly doubtful’: “…But if so, the same may be suggested for the four Vedas. Were they also a written book? And if they were, then in what historical period? In the time of the MBh (I would say—of the late MBh) it was considered that ‘those who write the Vedas, these surely go to hell’ (MBh 13,24.70, as quoted [later in this essay]). Now the only choice we have is: 1, to admit that the phrase about scale and ‘weighting’ has no literal meaning, or 2, to admit that the text of the 1st chapter in the Adīparvan is much later than the text of the Anuśāsanaparvan (which is considered to be itself one of the latest parts of the MBh). I wonder which of the two possibilities the author would prefer” (Vassilkov 2004: 2). I do not accept the dichotomous reasoning. For a metaphor to work, it would be perfectly possible to imagine both sides of the scale bearing written texts even if only one of the texts might at that point have actually been written. Further, the cascade of ‘laters’ upon ‘latests’ has never had solid grounding or acceptable chronological scaffolding (see below, position 12, and Hiltebeitel 2004c).