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# REVIEWS

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John Miles Foley. *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. 363p.

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*Homer's Traditional Art* is a summative work by a leading practitioner in the field of what has been called "Oral Theory." It recapitulates and extends work done by Foley in several previous books on the subject of traditional epic, as manifested primarily in the Homeric poems and studied comparatively in the South Slavic and early English traditions. Foley's mastery of the relevant primary and secondary materials is unquestionable; thus the book raises questions not so much about the skills of the practitioner (which are above reproach) but of the practice itself.

"Oral Theory," as it has been called with significant capitals by its practitioners (e.g., Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research* and *The Theory of Oral Composition*), is what Foucault would term a discourse, with foundational authorities (Parry, Lord), and a tendency to argue in terms of orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy. It began as a discourse (although many of its individual theorems had been advanced earlier) with Parry's analysis of Homeric epithet formulae in the 1920s (material reprinted in Parry) and subsequent comparative work by Parry and Lord on Slavic epic. The central claim of the theory was that Homeric and cognate epics were composed orally and improvisationally out of traditional formulae (at phrase, scene, and story level), and thus should not be understood in terms of romantic notions of the individual literate author but instead as part of a collective oral tradition. The elements of oral composition worked like a language, and could be analyzed along typically structuralist lines in terms of semantic rules (*langue*) and individual instantiations (*paroles*). Despite extensive ethnographic fieldwork and historical research, Oral Theory shared in common with other forms of structuralist analysis a resolutely synchronic approach, namely a deliberate avoidance of considering diachronic change and an assumption of estrangement (that the realm of oral epic is self-contained and independent of specific historical circumstances). Through the 1960s, opposition to Oral Theory among classicists had generally been limited to a sort of naively new critical objection that the "great art" of Homer could not be produced by such a dehumanized and mechanistic process as formulaic composition. More recently, however, Oral Theory, in its most orthodox

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manifestations, has been attacked on grounds not readily dismissed as nostalgic or ill-informed, and Foley's book is an effort to reformulate the theory in face of possibly fatal objections. The problem with his enterprise is that he may, in eliminating the least tenable aspects of the theory, also have eliminated its *raison d'être*.

The greatest discovery and most fatal weakness of Oral Theory was its presumption of a "Great Divide" between orality and literacy, a concept advocated especially by Eric Havelock and Walter Ong. More extensive anthropological and theoretical work, especially by Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody, has made the presumption of a rupture between oral and literate untenable; the focus of orality/literacy studies has now shifted more to an examination of the interfaces among various forms of communications, much enriched by the addition of non-written material. *Homer's Traditional Art*, therefore, attempts to rescue the discoveries of Oral Theory by eliminating orality, a brilliant, paradoxical, and not entirely successful move.

Foley directly confronts the problem of the "Great Divide," stating that it is an untenable assumption, and instead suggests that the important characteristic of "oral traditional epic" is not its orality but its traditional referentiality. Since the sort of epic he discusses cannot, under his theoretical formulation, be distinguished from other verbal artifacts by its technology of oral composition, he shifts focus from compositional technology (*metri causa*) to reception aesthetics (*artis causa*), showing how formulae on level of phrase, scene, and story work to establish a system of traditional referentiality. Any appearance of a traditional sign (epithet, sequence of actions accompanied by formulaic phrases, story pattern) can only, for Foley, be understood against the entire tradition of such elements, a claim standard in earlier Oral Theory which Foley preserves independent of compositional technology. While the notion of traditional reference, which is not tied to orality, is quite sustainable, it has consequences, which Foley does not seem to engage.

*Homer's Traditional Art* follows the critical pattern mapped out by Oral Theory in considering the aesthetics of traditional epic synchronically, as a self-contained universe manifested in multiple exemplars. Comparanda are selected by their traditionality (i.e., what among earlier theorists was their orality) rather than geographical and chronological proximity. If, however, what is important is specific tradition rather than oral structure, diachronic and historical analyses become crucial, and these are conspicuously absent. Most egregiously, Foley suggests the difficulty of finding return songs other than *Odyssey* in the Greek tradition, and thus the necessity for comparing it to Slavic examples. If we exclude the implicit requirement for "orality," however, we have several return-from-Troy stories in tragedy, most obviously Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which Foley rather paradoxically

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does not discuss even as he compares Odysseus' return to Agamemnon's. If we are not dealing with an estranged and independent universe of "orality," we should also consider possible lines of influence from Mesopotamia to Homer (as discussed by Burkert, Goody, Penglase, and West, among others) and from Greek to Slavic epic.

As Foley distances himself from the oralist (especially Parryist) notion of formulaic composition for the sake of technical ease of composition (placement of epithets for the sake of meter), he repudiates the aspect of oral theory which had been most abhorrent to its detractors, namely the way in which its "mechanistic" account of composition seemed to belie the "greatness of the Homeric epics." While Foley sees his notion of traditional referentiality as broadening our understanding of great art, and while he does examine, to some degree, the role of reception in what may constitute such greatness, he still accepts the notion of "great art" in a relatively unproblematic manner that most readers acquainted with postmodernist theory will find disturbing. In certain ways, Foley seems to be saving a structuralist theory of art by moving not forward to poststructuralism, but backward towards a new critical mode of close reading based on organic unities, symbolic referentiality, and coherence. Like the U.S. military saving Vietnamese villages from communism by bombing them, Foley, in order to save Oral-Traditional theory, may well be contributing to its annihilation. ✱

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