

**Man, Muse, and Story:  
Psychohistorical Patterns in  
Oral Epic Poetry**

**John Miles Foley**

I have said before  
That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations  
T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

Early studies of oral epic literature, that is, of epic literature composed without the aid of writing within a continuous tradition of some antiquity, focused quite logically and understandably on the somewhat mysterious mechanics of a totally unfamiliar process.<sup>1</sup> Scholars strained at the intellectual bit in an effort to explain how this only quasi-literary phenomenon of letterless composition—which seemed even to defy the etymology of “literature” from Latin *littera* or letter—could have come about, how this practice of oral poem-making could have been carried on throughout the long and unremitting Dark Ages before the advent of alphabets and writing materials. Fieldwork in Yugoslavia and elsewhere has provided some notion of the mechanics involved, and analytical techniques have exposed aspects of particular kinds of structures we have come to know as “oral.” Much more and more careful analysis is yet to be done as we begin to understand that oral literature is, if anything, more complex and varied than its written heir, so that the romantic notion of two entirely discrete worlds—the primitive “oral” and the sophisticated “lettered”—is every day less accurate. What is more, we are starting to absorb the remarkable truth that not just some but all literary traditions

begin with an oral phase that customarily dwarfs the written phase in its longevity.

With the recognition of the primary place of orality at the root of literary traditions, we are at present entering a “second growth” in studies of oral tradition. This second growth, concerned as it is with modalities of *interpretation* rather than strictly of *description*, promises to have permanent and far-reaching effects on the understanding of some of our most cherished texts; already, for example, crucially important studies of this sort have appeared on the Gospels (Kelber 1983) and the Homeric epics (e.g., Havelock 1963, 1982), and many more such works are in preparation. This shifting of emphasis from simple description of oral traditional works to the manifold and challenging problems of their interpretation is due in large part to the brilliantly innovative writings of Walter J. Ong, whose published oeuvre represents not only a major new direction in oral literature research (a discipline that now affects more than 100 separate language areas) but also, as scholars abroad have already recognized, one of the chief contributions the twentieth century has made to the progress of humanistic learning. For this achievement all of us who came to Rockhurst College in July 1985 to take part in the symposium devoted to his work are profoundly, and permanently, in his debt.

Especially since his landmark study *The Presence of the Word* in 1967, Ong’s ideas on the storage and retrieval of culturally significant information have gained wide support among an increasingly diverse group of scholars committed to the study of the world’s oral traditions. Telegraphically put, both Ong and another of the authors in this volume, Eric Havelock, understand the oral epic, such as the ancient Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as a repository for cultural attitudes, values, beliefs, and customs. A member of an oral society cannot turn to a shelf of reference books for such information—first because a library of this conventional kind does not exist but more fundamentally because modern categories such as generosity, honor, truth, and beauty that would be memorialized therein do not exist as uncontextualized abstractions. Rather, this sort of vital information is embedded or inscribed in the stories that circulate orally, that are told time and time again, that pass from one generation to the next and from one place to the next without the inevitable barriers set up by a literate society. To know the story is to know its content: the guest-host exchange of Homeric society as epitomized in the

*Odyssey*, for example, is part of the story told and retold, and of the story remembered; the Catalog of Ships in Book 2 of the *Iliad* recalls an ancient muster list; the raft-building episode in the *Odyssey*, Book 5, fossilizes instructions on how to construct a raft. Nor was Greek society of the Homeric Age alone in using stories as a master filing system for its ideas and data; a number of investigators have observed the same process firsthand in various African societies. But no matter what the specific tradition or the nature of the information encoded, the knowledge embodied becomes available to all present at an oral epic performance precisely because it constitutes part of the story. In the continuous flow of the narrative—and not in the analytical, decontextualized abstractions that populate reference books—are embedded such traditional pearls of wisdom.

Oral epic thus keeps the wisdom of what the Anglo-Saxon oral poets called the “wordhoard” close at hand, maintaining a grasp on the accumulated knowledge of the society not by holding it at a distance via deposit in a library or archive but by keeping alive the story or cycle of stories that serves as its medium. As Ong has said in *Orality and Literacy*, “in the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings” (1982:42). Furthermore, since knowledge is in essence story, and since the very mode of knowing is therefore narrative,<sup>2</sup> one cannot speak with any accuracy of individual, static parts, passages, or characters in the holistic experience of oral epic. The actions and values associated with a hero accumulate to that hero by virtue of his enacted and re-enacted mythic history; he is both complete in any one manifestation and forever becoming complete, because his identity is inscribed in the dynamic of story which is known but can never end. Ong has often spoken of knowledge being centered around such “heavy” characters as Achilles, Odysseus, or Nestor, and neither the knowledge nor the character who serves as encoder of that knowledge can live outside the continuous present of narrative. Such is the phenomenology of the oral epic medium, then: it is complete extratextually by reference to the tradition that constitutes the prior experience of the poet and audience, and it is correspondingly incomplete

intratextually without reference to the “story” that lies outside of the present act and instance of storytelling. In this way the fundamental mode of oral epic is ritualistic, quite the opposite of more modern, literate forms like the original and self-contained stories told in novels.<sup>3</sup>

Let us take as twin exordia, then, the idea of oral epic as encyclopedia and the realization that the knowledge which that encyclopedia contains is not inert, decontextualized fact but ever-dynamic story, and let us attempt an extrapolation of Ong’s and Havelock’s premises toward what I feel is a natural conclusion. For if the oral epic can encode information as relatively distant from the human life-world as raft-building and muster lists, it would seem much more likely to be able to describe within the process of narrative less ostensibly practical but finally more crucial kinds of knowledge. To put it quite directly, it is the drama of psychological maturation—the record a culture maintains not about its things, events, and beliefs but about the secrets of the human psyche in its development from birth to adulthood—that is acted out in the story-form of oral epic. Modern psychology in its many avatars has established the importance of psychoanalytic patterns in the literary texts of our post-oral, post-traditional age, and most scholars have little difficulty with interpreting the complementary narratives of, say, Sophocles’ *Oedipos Tyrannos* and D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* as in part reflexes of a common ontogenic myth. Of course, each represents far more than a simple dramatization of the Oedipal story, and we seldom find much of a consensus on exactly which particular school of psychoanalysis is most apposite for treatment of the root story’s essentials. But no one doubts the mythic power of the psychohistorical underlay; in each case the author has for a brief narrative moment harnessed the tremendous energy inherent in the mythic-psychological pattern and involved his audience in a universal drama whose *dramatis personae*, central conflict, and *dénouement* we all know firsthand.

And if written, post-traditional literature can harness this energy, why not oral tradition? In fact, the oral traditional medium would seem if anything to present the more suitable (because more dynamic and extratextually connotative) medium for the telling of our most basic and far-reaching tales. Ong and Havelock have shown that oral epic provides a vehicle for the encoding of objective and external knowledge; I now suggest that subjective and internal knowledge of the sort examined by

psychoanalysis is yet more readily inscribed in, and apprehended through, the mimetic medium of oral epic. No aesthetic or cognitive distance exists between the collective oral palimpsest of tradition and the minds that compose, erase, and recompose that mental folio. The story of the way we live and grow proves to be the most fundamental of all stories anthologized in the oral epic.

What is more, the story thus told and retold never disappears or goes out of print. At every oral performance, singer and audience alike “re-read” the tradition and retell the story and all that it contains; along with factual information, they re-experience the deepest wisdom “published” in their oral encyclopedia—the accumulated cultural *sagesse* on the psychological evolution of humankind and of the individual. Thus the transmission of cultural knowledge about psychohistory passes as smoothly from one performance situation to the next as do the song-stories that serve as its vehicle. And just as “echoes from one occurrence of a given theme reverberate not simply through the subsequent linear length of the given poem, but through the collective mythic knowledge of the given culture” (Foley 1976:231; cp. Renoir 1981), so the story one hears in the present performance echoes against all earlier performances and the Gestalt that is the experience they provide. The story serves in effect as a counselor (cp. La Pin 1981), a wise old Gerenian Nestor able to rise above the turmoil of the individual situation and offer generic wisdom both on how to organize the things and rituals of society and on how to cope with being human. The archetypal level of the story educates its hearers “by presenting them time and again with a verbal montage of the group’s poetic models and thereby with the data which these models encode” (Foley 1977a:134; also 1978). And this continuing, lifelong process of education takes place over generations of oral performances and under the aegis of tradition.

But we need to ballast theory with an example. In order to illustrate the story dynamic at work, let us concentrate on a single but enormously widespread tale-type, that of the so-called Return Song. This story of return from exile, specifically as described first by Albert Lord (1969; also, e.g., Coote 1981), occurs in at least ancient Greek, Yugoslav, Bulgarian, Turkish, Albanian, Russian, and English, and seems to be a story-form of originally Indo-European provenance.<sup>4</sup> It is convenient to represent the Return Song in Lord’s scheme as composed of five elements, but we must remember that any such oral story’s essence is narrative

and that the story thus cannot be fairly construed as merely a combination of discrete units.

- A — Absence
- D — Devastation
- R — Return
- Rt — Retribution
- W — Wedding

In the various Serbo-Croatian versions, for instance, the tale customarily opens with an imprisoned hero loudly bewailing his confinement and prolonged separation from his wife or betrothed (element A). His noisy complaining leads to an exposition of his prior capture and, sometimes through the report of an intermediary, of the suffering of his wife as she attempts to dispel the suitors usurping her husband's place at home (element D). A bargain with his captor, made necessary by the hero's unrelenting success at disturbing the peace, earns him release (sometimes only conditional) and the opportunity to return home (element R) and to reconcile the domestic dilemma. Once arrived, the hero, almost always disguised as a beggar, engages in ritual combat with one or more of the suitors before driving them off and reasserting his authority (element Rt). A wedding or rapprochement (element W) then takes place between the hero and his wife or betrothed, and this enactment or reenactment of their union ends the story in the great majority of instances.<sup>5</sup>

Of course we recognize in this South Slavic Return Song the story of the *Odyssey*, from Odysseus' captivity by Kalypso through his hard-won return to Ithaca, his vengeance on the suitors, and his reunion with the faithful Penelope. But we can also recognize in both story-forms the more fundamental tale of human development. In Jungian terms adapted for mythic application by Erich Neumann, the first element of imprisonment or containment (Absence), always overseen in some fashion by a female figure, reflects the uroboric stage. Psychohistorically, this part of the tale images that time in ontogeny when the ego is the prisoner of the "mother" unconscious, when the ego has not yet begun to develop a singularity that will eventually lead toward maturity. Devastation also symbolizes, at the narrative level, the *sturm und drang* of this early stage, specifically the slightly later period during which, according to the natural evolutionary pattern, the ego becomes restive in its passive role and readies itself to move

forward into a personal consciousness. This is naturally a time of considerable mental anguish, of psychological birth pains, and that anguish is reflected in, for example, the weeping of the twenty-year exile Odysseus on the shores of Ogygia or by the near-hysterical shouting of the South Slavic prisoner in his wretched place of confinement.

However, the requisite bargaining with a female figure (and here we recall Athena's supplication of Zeus as well as the Yugoslav equivalent of the captor's wife's intercession) soon frees the hero/ego from his state of powerlessness and starts him on the road toward his homeland/maturity (Return). The detail of disguise, always a feature of the Return Song narrative, seems to image the ego's nascent character; having broken free from imprisonment, he nonetheless has a long period of development in front of him before his goal can be reached. Even when the extraordinary Phaeacian rowers deposit Odysseus on Ithaca, he still has almost half of the *Odyssey* to negotiate before he can win back the olive-tree bed. And his many South Slavic *confrères* likewise must successfully pass through a number of verbal, athletic, and sometimes musical tests before they can doff the temporary identity of beggar and re-assume their proper social roles.<sup>6</sup> If Odysseus begins his reaccession to the Ithacan kingship by breaking bread with a lowly swineherd, it is no accident: in terms of psychological development, he has only lately escaped the overpowering unconscious represented by Kalypso, Kirke, and others. And if Alagić Alija or others of his Balkan brethren first appear at home looking very much like the prisoners they have so long been—with “nails grown out like a winged horse,” for instance, or with beards to their waists—it is a mark that they too are ego-figures only recently emergent.

The road toward mature consciousness, and the story that encodes that inner journey, leads on directly through the complexities of the Oedipal problem, here symbolized in part by what Neumann would term the “men's group” competition (1954:138-41) between the disguised hero and the suitors who have challenged not just his skill but his very identity. This competitive, highly agonistic section of the story reflects the emergent ego's wrestling with the parental figures as he comes to further consciousness and begins to develop an identity of his own, complete with sexual alignment. If ritual combat seems inevitable in the story-pattern of Return, and it most certainly is, we may

interpret that necessity as the foregrounding of the Oedipal rite of passage within the larger story of psychological growth. A hero could no more forgo the test offered by his competitors than any individual could or can pass gracefully and unchanged through the equally inevitable onset and process of the Oedipal period. At both levels, the story simply is not complete without the hero's taking up the gauntlet cast down by his peers. With the contest(s) won, however, that is with his Oedipal battle ending in victory, the hero/ego is prepared to continue his quest for maturity.

The final element in the story of Return is also the most transparent from a psychohistorical point of view. The reunion with Penelope, or with Fatima or another *vjerna ljuba* ("true love") in the case of the Yugoslav Odysseus, symbolizes the hero/ego's constellation of the anima figure in Jungian terms (Neumann 1954:379, 403-7). After victory in the Oedipal wars, so goes the ontogenic narrative, the ego is ready to assume its hard-won individuality at a healthy distance from the mother unconscious, ready to make his way as an adult human being in a mature relationship with the opposite sex. Neumann notes two major mythic motifs that gloss this stage of development—the capture of the princess and the raising of the treasure (1954:195-219). Both story features betoken the reaching of the goal of adulthood, that degree of consciousness toward which the ego has been striving since immersion in the uroboros. The fact that the Anglo-Saxon hero Beowulf takes possession of the dragon's treasure just before he succumbs to the mortality that calibrates all human life, for instance, is in this way the same kind of mythic-psychohistorical signal as Odysseus' winning back Penelope through their shared secret of the olive-tree bed. In both epics the climax represents attainment of full adult consciousness, and thus it is that each work ends its narrative and its special counsel at a psychologically appropriate epitome.

Even such a brief and incomplete sketch of the psychohistorical resonance of the Return Song story-pattern, when taken together with the fundamentally mimetic nature of story in oral epic as established by Ong and Havelock, gives some idea of the immense resources of the Homeric and South Slavic "oral encyclopedias," as indeed of other cultural encyclopedias not specifically examined in this essay. But in order to complete the exposition, we need to ask exactly how the encoded content of oral

epic informs its audience; that is, we need to know exactly how the oral story dynamic works. Since the nature of oral transmission is ultimately a phenomenological problem, we may begin by recalling that the essence of knowledge in an oral culture is story. To construe the Return Song as a sequence of five elements is a useful exercise, especially because we in a post-traditional age are concerned with understanding through analysis—through the separation of wholes into their arguably constituent parts, with the division of ongoing processes into isolated moments. But this fragmentation is of course a convenient falsification when applied to oral story, one which becomes immediately obvious when we attempt to reintegrate the decontextualized, inert “parts” or “moments” back into the whole or process. Narrative cannot be experienced as a series of integers, since we are as concerned with what lies between the static invariance of such arithmetical signposts as with the signposts themselves. To do justice to the insistent power of oral epic, then, we must avoid at all costs the murderous act of dissection; rather, we must start by remembering that the story as a dynamic entity is paramount. The perspective offered by moments and episodes may serve our analytical purpose, but for the original audience—and even for the faithful modern-day reader of such works—the story’s the thing.

We may enlarge on this point in two ways. First, in a recent essay entitled “The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics” (1983), Havelock has described the activity of these early philosophers as a “competition between *mythos* and *logos*” (12), by which he means a tension between the *old Homeric word* that is mythologized and embedded in the dramatic action of narrative and the *new Platonic word* that is abstract, decontextualized, and complete in itself. Presocratics like Xenophanes of Colophon felt this tension, and they responded to it in different ways; not a few turned to outright criticism of Homeric ideas, albeit often couching their criticism in the ancient oral medium of the Homeric hexameter. For our purposes, the most significant lesson of this painful and gradual transition must be that when we speak of Homeric story, we are speaking of a narrative medium that cannot faithfully be characterized as analytical in our own sense.<sup>7</sup> Homeric story represents or encodes not in the staccato rhythm of post-traditional cognition, ably supported by the ornate intellectual latticework of rhetorical argument (see Ong 1976) and other kinds

of categorization and conscious dismemberment of reality, but rather in the continuous and continuing present of tradition. The bard is in effect a seer, who, as Homer himself tells us, knows all things past, present, and future, and the song he performs embodies the truths of his culture in action.

Along with Havelock's discrimination of the long-supplanted Homeric mythos from the Platonic logos that is still the staple of our analytical perception, we may distinguish two modes of referentiality. In the case of *logos*-based thinking, we describe the characteristics of an abstract truth and then proceed to ascribe its qualities to a person, place, or thing. In an essay entitled "The Alphabetic Mind" (1986), Havelock has described this intellectual operation of adding abstract qualities to a "motionless" concept as the "is statement," to be contrasted with the oral epic reality of knowledge-as-action. For instance, a modern reworker of the ancient Greek *Iliad* might begin with a discourse on the nature of wisdom and then go on to attribute this abstraction (or its lack) to Achilles, Agamemnon, Nestor, Odysseus, or any of the principals in the Trojan drama. Were this modern author to persist long enough (and were his reader to bear with him), he might eventually establish *ex nihilo* a credible and complex set of characters loosely approximating those who populate the Homeric poem. But even if his result turned out to be similar, his method would have been entirely different from the *mythos*-based thinking of the ancient Greek bard, who, thanks to the remarkable resonance of his oral traditional medium, inherited his Achilles, Agamemnon, Nestor, and Odysseus fully formed and ready for action. For the oral poet would have access to characters replete with prior associations for his audience, heroes whose very epithets — "wily," "swift-footed," "leader of men" — conjured up whole worlds of meaning<sup>8</sup> (see Foley 1984, 1986a). One's epithet in Homeric epic was not a one-time qualifier, appropriate only in the present situation; likewise, the poet did not need to carve out an image of truth or wisdom or honor before assigning it, since that abstraction already inhered in a figure or figures who lived, moved, and breathed in the experiential world of the audience. Heroes were players in a grand pageant, a *mythos*-centered pageant, and the knowledge they mimetically encoded was available to all who took part in the oral performance.

Another way of understanding this homeostatic, narrative process is to speak of the actors and their actions, even of the

constituent units of oral epic, as comprising a language of *metonymy*. Against the timeless background of the song that cannot ever be wholly captured in or reduced to any one version, this or that performance stands in the relation of part to whole, *pars pro toto*. One knows about Beowulf, or Odysseus, or Smailagić Meho not merely from one song sung by one bard in a particular time and place, but from lifelong experience of these cultural heroes in a variety of songs and performances. Even if some of their actions are inconsistent or contradictory, the listener/participant in an oral performance will fashion what he has heard into a composite traditional identity, and it is that identity which will be brought up into each narrative situation. In a similar way, any one typical scene will be defined in the listener's or reader's mind as the Gestalt of all instances of that same scene as he has heard it during other performances (cp. Nagler 1974). Opposite the particularized shape of the theme of arming or feasting or voyaging or whatever, the informed listener or reader places the generic knowledge he has derived from other, prior instances of the same action. Whether we are speaking of a character or of a typical scene, then, the *particularized* occurrence in any single performance draws its traditional meaning from the *generic* wordhoard of storytelling. The individual instance is metonymic of traditional meaning.

The story-pattern, whether of Return or of some other sequence, works correspondingly. In a real sense the entire epic is a single word, functionally (that is, referentially) indivisible and explosively connotative. An audience engrossed in the Return of Odysseus or of one of his South Slavic counterparts is not engaged by a novel tale, a series of actions interesting because they are somehow fresh, original, or unique. If the audience is faithful to the enterprise, they are hearing both the immediate and metonymic instance of the Return Song and its finally ineffable referent that contextualizes this and all other versions. And along with the sequence of events that make up the narrative, the song presents that audience with a symbolic montage of the deeper, more significant story of psychohistory that they no doubt could not consciously tell. Lacking our analytical or logos-centered techniques, they pass on the traditional wisdom-tale of psychological maturation, fueled by the dynamics of story. We, on the other hand, lacking their narrative or *mythos*-centered techniques, cannot tell—or without considerable effort even

understand—their kind of story; not surprisingly, we thus turn to what we do best: dismembering and fracturing the process into an assemblage of manageable parts.

One last observation will complete this brief overview of the enormously powerful process of oral epic psychohistory. In his *Ion* (535e-36a), Plato describes the situation of oral performance in the Homeric era or shortly thereafter as a series of rings surrounding the Heracleian stone; innermost is the poet, with the latter-day rhapsode or performer next, and the audience at the periphery. The magnetism, a metaphor for the Muse's inspiration, passes from the center outward, causing all assembled to vibrate to the strains of her song. The extent to which the audience actually participates in the oral performance is made yet more explicit in a passage from the *Republic* (605c-d):

When even the best among us listen to Homer or to any of the tragic poets *imitating* [the verb is from the same root as *mimesis*] some one of the heroes in mourning and extending a speech of lamentation or, if you like, singing and beating his breast, you know that we both enjoy it and, giving ourselves over to it, *follow along*; *sympathizing* and eagerly paying close attention, we praise as a fine poet the one who most moves us to that state (italics and translation mine).

Quite clearly, the audience does not just look on dispassionately, evaluating the bard's effort analytically, but rather takes up the story as its own—in the simplest and most far-reaching sense. As one can still observe today during an oral performance in Yugoslavia (see Foley 1977b), the participants feel free to join vocally into the presentation, for the song is theirs as well as the poet's.

To sum up, then, we have an audience that actively participates in the ritual of oral performance by identifying closely and strongly with the characters who act out their cultural drama. The drama itself is a process, a fabric of events woven and re woven that cannot survive an analytical shredding: Absence leads inexorably to Devastation, Return to Retribution and Wedding, without interruption and under the aegis of oral story. The poet and tradition do not pluck out redundancy or manipulate motifs any more than we could dismember a lexical word phoneme-by-phoneme and hope to retain the word's meaning.<sup>9</sup>

The essence of story is in its “ongoingness,” its dynamic wholeness, and it is this holistic memory, rife with institutionalized associations, that provides a map for the traditional audience’s narrative journey. Outside of the here and now of one or another version lies the timeless and omnipresent song that can never be reduced to one instance, but the magic of metonymy means that the greater song can be summoned by epitomized example, created anew in a nominal form *pars pro toto*, the part standing for the whole.

And what is the meaning of this long but single, integral “word,” this labyrinth of story made navigable by the extratextual wisdom of tradition? I have argued that, at one level,<sup>10</sup> that meaning is psychohistory, the story of the development of the human psyche from immersion in the unconscious to the independent establishment of consciousness in the adult individual. If that mental development is encoded in the Return Song, consider how powerful an instrument such cornerstones of Western civilization as the *Odyssey* represented for the oral cultures that composed and re-composed them. As Walter Ong has often explained, the repository of epic is an active educational instrument as well as an archive; members of an oral culture “check out” the available “volumes” as well as contribute to the collection. In short, as I have maintained elsewhere (1977a, 1978), the psychohistory inscribed in the Return Song serves what amounts to a therapeutic function, in that it brings before its constituency a ready-made handbook on the logical sequence leading toward psychological maturity. Whatever the age, sex, vocation, or social position of the listener-participant, the Return Song speaks to him the wisdom of ontogeny, reinforcing the process of inner maturation and reminding him of his present place in the overall scheme of the human community. Since we are dealing with a medium that by its very nature excludes analysis, we cannot claim that the participants in an oral performance consciously “know” or “realize” the psychodynamics of the ritual event in which they are, have been, and will continue to be involved. That separation of the whole into parts—that *analysis*—must be left to we who can no longer personally use the traditional medium, to we who no longer know how to tell the story.

From our detached, decontextualized point of view, we cannot appreciate either Homer’s or the South Slavic *guslar*’s song in its original meaning, but we can at least track the inscription of

psychohistory in these stories. We can, by summoning the comparative mythology called psychoanalysis,<sup>11</sup> begin to understand how essential the function of oral epic must have been for its (re-)makers and their audiences. Before the appearance of the aesthetic distance introduced by the commission of verbal art to the exteriorization of writing and then of print (see espec. Ong 1982), one's inmost concerns—concerns of which a person was not even consciously aware—were coextensive with the shared verbal art of the community; it was as impossible to separate such concerns from their embodiment in verbal art as it was to deposit them in the exterior world, cut off from the lifeblood of story and wordhoard. Story was in fact all: truth did not here and there make an appearance as an attribute consciously assigned to this or that character, honor was not an absolute that an author either conferred or withheld. Like the marvelously animate frieze on John Keats' immortal urn, the image lived, full of vital and sensate reality, as a continuing narrative reenacted in oral performance. And as long as words were “winged,” as long as story and its images lived, the core myth of psychohistory served as counselor for the ages. As long as humanity worshipped the god of Mimesis (rather than sacrificing at the altar of Analysis), just so long did the stories of oral epic guide the cultures who told them in that most fundamental of quests—the universal task of “growing up.”

University of Missouri/Columbia

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Murko 1929, Parry 1930 and 1932, Lord 1960; summaries in Foley 1981b, 1985, and especially 1988.

<sup>2</sup>An interesting example from the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition is the verb *cuthan*, ordinarily translated simply “to know,” which really means both “to know” and “to make known.” Knowing involves telling as well as having something to tell.

<sup>3</sup>See the distinctions drawn in Foley 1984.

<sup>4</sup>For references to the various traditions, see Foley 1981c.

<sup>5</sup>One also finds versions of the Return Song that were for one reason or another cut short. In one such case, the singer aborted most of elements R and Rt and proceeded directly to closure in element W (the “Wedding”)—even though the hero ended up betrothed to a near relative. Such is the power of the story-pattern.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, the *re*-entry, as well as the general thrust of the Return Song in restoring the hero to his implicit initial position, indicates by its recurrent or repetitive character both the inevitability of its outcome on the narrative level and the universality of its application on the psychohistorical level.

<sup>7</sup>For a complementary view, see Russo and Simon 1968, e.g.

<sup>8</sup>See further Foley 1984, 1986a, b.

<sup>9</sup>The cultural function of epic is, as one might guess, a genre-dependent quality. Other genres, such as lyric or even the shorter epic forms, do show manipulation of motifs with aesthetic design; see further Foley 1983.

<sup>10</sup>It is important to emphasize that I am treating only one level of interpretation of oral epic in this essay, and that there naturally exist many other levels worthy of close attention.

<sup>11</sup>It may be helpful to remember that psychoanalysis can be seen as a highly conscious (and therefore apposite) modern mythology.

### References

Coote 1981

Mary P. Coote. "Lying in Passages." *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 15, i:5-23.

Foley 1976

John Miles Foley. "Formula and Theme in Old English Poetry." In *Oral Literature and the Formula*. Ed. Benjamin A. Stolz and Richard S. Shannon. Ann Arbor: Center for the Coordination of Ancient and Modern Studies. pp. 207-32.

Foley 1977a

\_\_\_\_\_. "Beowulf and the Psychohistory of Anglo-Saxon Culture." *American Imago*, 34:133-53.

Foley 1977b

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Traditional Oral Audience." *Balkan Studies*, 18:145-54.

Foley 1978

\_\_\_\_\_. "Education before Letters: Oral Epic Paideia." *Denver Quarterly*, 13:94-117.

Foley 1981a

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*. Columbus, OH: Slavica, rpt. 1983.

Foley 1981b

\_\_\_\_\_. "Introduction: The Oral Theory in Context." In Foley 1981a:27-122.

Foley 1981c

\_\_\_\_\_. "Narrativity in *Beowulf*, the *Odyssey*, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song." In *Proceedings of the IXth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. Ed. Zoran Konstantinović et al. Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck. vol. 1:295-301.

- Foley 1983  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "Literary Art and Oral Tradition in Old English and Serbo-Croatian Poetry." *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12:183-214.
- Foley 1984  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Price of Narrative Fiction: Genre, Myth, and Meaning in *Moby-Dick* and the *Odyssey*." *Thought*, 59:432-48.
- Foley 1985  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland.
- Foley 1986a  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "Tradition and the Collective Talent: Oral Epic, Textual Meaning, and Receptionalist Theory." *Cultural Anthropology*, 1:203-22.
- Foley 1986b  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "Oral Epic Poetry: Aesthetics of Creation and Response." In *Current Issues in Oral Literature Research: A Memorial for Milman Parry*. Ed. John Miles Foley. Columbus, OH: Slavica. In press.
- Foley 1988  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Havelock 1963  
 Eric A. Havelock. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, rpt. 1982.
- Havelock 1982  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Havelock 1983  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics." In *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*. Ed. Kevin Robb. LaSalle, IL: The Hegeler Institute. pp. 7-82.
- Havelock 1986  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Alphabetic Mind." *Oral Tradition*, 1:134-50.
- Kelber 1983  
 Werner H. Kelber. *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- La Pin 1981  
 Deirdre La Pin. "Narrative as Precedent in Yoruba Oral Tradition." In Foley 1981a:347-74.
- Lord 1960  
 Albert B. Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1968 et seq.
- Lord 1969  
 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Theme of the Withdrawn Hero in Serbo-Croatian Oral Epic." *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju, i folklor*, 35:18-30.
- Murko 1929  
 Matija Murko. *La Poésie populaire épique en Yougoslavie au début du XXe siècle*. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.

- Nagler 1974  
Michael N. Nagler. *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Neumann 1954  
Erich Neumann. *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ong 1967  
Walter J. Ong, S.J. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Rpt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.
- Ong 1976  
\_\_\_\_\_. "From Mimesis to Irony: Writing and Print as Integuments of Voice." *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 9:1-24. Rpt. in Ong 1977:272-302.
- Ong 1977  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, rpt. 1982.
- Ong 1982  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Ong 1986  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Biblical Text as Interpretation: Mark and After." In *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*. Ed. John Miles Foley. Columbia: University of Missouri Press. pp. 147-69.
- Parry 1930  
Milman Parry. "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I. Homer and Homeric Style." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 41:73-147. Rpt. in A. Parry, ed., *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. pp. 266-324.
- Parry 1932  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. II. The Homeric Language as the Language of an Oral Poetry." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 43:1-50. Rpt. in *The Making of Homeric Verse*. pp. 325-64.
- Renoir 1981  
Alain Renoir. "Oral-Formulaic Context: Implications for the Comparative Criticism of Mediaeval Texts." In Foley 1981a:416-39.
- Russo and Simon 1968  
Joseph A. Russo and Bennett Simon. "Homeric Psychology and the Oral Epic Tradition." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29:483-98.