

ORALITY AND LITERACY REVISITED

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I AM SURPRISED that I have never been asked the question: since Albert Lord was your mentor, and since you count yourself among those who claim to be his followers, how come you think that orality and literacy are not incompatible? I have asked myself that question many times, and I thought I had answered it, at least for myself, in “Orality and Literacy,” an article I published in 2001. In that article, I thought I answered the question adequately by saying, in effect, that Lord did not think that orality and literacy were universally incompatible. Lord recognized that there were indeed some incompatibilities between oral and literate aspects of verbal expression in some societies, but he resisted, especially in his later publications, any kind of universalizing formulation about some grand incompatibility between orality and literacy.¹ I already said all this—and more—in “Orality and Literacy,” but I now sense, so many years later, that still more needs to be said about the general question of orality and literacy. That is the reason for my revisiting the question here, though I am fully aware that whatever I say now is a far cry from the last word.²

The occasion for my renewed visit is my current reading of a 2016 book by Peter Grossardt about the Life of Homer traditions, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni: Studien zur Entwicklung der Homer-Vita in archaischer und klassischer Zeit*. The book offers a useful review of relevant facts about those traditions. Of particular interest to me are his remarks about Aeolian populations in the general region of ancient Troy (especially with reference to the island of Tenedos and to mainland cities like Sigeion on the south side of the Hellespont as well as Sestos and Ainos on the north side).³ But I focus here on something else. It is what Grossardt has to say about a myth, transmitted in Vita 6 of Homer—the so-called Vita Romana.⁴ This myth is about the blinding of Homer by Helen, who appears to him in an epiphany and demands that he destroy what he has said about the love story of Helen and Paris=Alexandros (Vita 6, lines 51–57). Grossardt draws attention to a detail in the story as told here: in the context of her epiphany, Helen demands that Homer burn his *poiēseis* (poetic creations). Accordingly, the story presupposes the existence of a text, and it is the refusal of Homer to burn this text that leads to his blinding by an angry Helen. Grossardt argues that such a prototypical text of Homer was the possession of a guild of singers in the Ionian island state of Chios, the *Homēridai*, who claimed genealogical or at least notional descent from *Homēros* (Homer), and it was

¹ See, for example, Lord, “Merging of Two Worlds” and *Singer Resumes the Tale*, 212–37.

² The present essay, as published in this volume honouring John Miles Foley, derives from an earlier online version, G. Nagy, 2017.02.03.

³ Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 133–34.

⁴ I cite Vita 4 throughout from Allen, *Homeri Opera V*, 250–53.

these *Homēridai* who supposedly mythologized such a text as the original possession of an original Homer.⁵

This myth, which Grossardt traces back to the Ionian island of Chios, was in competition with another myth about the blinding of Homer. In this case, Grossardt traces the competing myth back to the Aeolian island of Lesbos.⁶ Again, the source of the myth is Vita 6 of Homer. According to this competing myth (Vita 6, lines 45–51), Homer is a herdsman who visits the tomb of Achilles, where he prays that he may see a vision of Achilles armed with the second set of armour made for the hero by Hephaistos. Homer's prayerful wish is granted, but he is struck blind by the mere sight of Achilles, who makes his epiphany by appearing in all his martial glory, enveloped in the blinding radiance of his armour. As compensation for Homer's blindness, Thetis and the Muses bestow upon Homer the gift of poetry. This myth about Homer's validation as poet—his *Dichterweihe*—is then compared by Grossardt with various examples of Irish and other north-European myths about *Dichterweihe*. In these myths as well, poets or would-be poets visit the tombs of heroes and, in some versions, the dead heroes respond by coming alive and directly narrating to their visitors the content of the poetry that will thereafter be mediated by the poets.⁷

Grossardt refers to such myths about a poet's validation at the tomb of a hero by using the more specific term *charter myth*,⁸ developed by anthropologists in describing a kind of myth that aetiologizes the overall identity of whatever social group transmits such a myth.⁹ Grossardt also uses the same term in referring to the story about the blinding of Homer at the tomb of Achilles, since this blinding becomes a validation of his identity as poet.¹⁰

I suggest that we can go one step further and apply the same term *charter myth* to the story about the blinding of Homer by Helen. In that story, the detail about the refusal of Homer to destroy a prototypical *text* of his poetry corresponds to similar details found in Irish myths. A most striking example, analyzed by Joseph Nagy, is a myth about a book of heroic deeds, named the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Cattle-Raid of Cooley),¹¹ the prototype of which had supposedly disintegrated but was then reintegrated when a visitor at the tomb of a hero experienced an apparition by that hero, who then retold for him the entire narrative content of the disintegrated book: this way, the formerly disintegrated book was reintegrated. The retelling of the story by the hero is evidently represented here as an oral tradition that is foundational for the ultimate existence of the book, the textual reality of which is, of course, a given. What

5 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 157.

6 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 165–66, 175–86.

7 On the subject of narrations as performed by dead heroes in Irish traditions, I cite especially J. Nagy, "How the *Táin* was Lost."

8 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 156.

9 For more on working definitions of the same term *charter myth*, see G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance*, 202, and G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 132.

10 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 206–8.

11 J. Nagy, "How the *Táin* was Lost."

makes the story a *charter myth*, however, is the fact that the existing text, which is considered to be integral, is a metaphor for the integrative power of oral traditions, which are considered to be the source of the text. In other words, the text that tells about the *charter myth* becomes a *charter text*, and the reality of that text becomes a metaphor for the reality of the myth. So the text of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is not only a reality, it is also a metaphor for the oral traditions from which that reality evolved. Without the integrative power of oral tradition, the myth is saying, there cannot exist an integral book.

This Irish myth is duly mentioned by Grossardt,¹² citing some of the relevant work of J. Nagy,¹³ who shows clearly the compatibility of oral and written traditions in medieval Ireland, but Grossardt does not cite the related work of the same Nagy, “How the *Táin* was Lost,” already mentioned above, which explores further the metaphorization of oral traditions as an integral text.

In my own work,¹⁴ I highlighted this Irish example as analyzed by J. Nagy in his “Orality and Medieval Irish Narrative,” together with an analogous Iranian example. I turn now to that Iranian example, attested in the classical Persian epic known as the *Shāhnāma* or Book of Kings, composed by the poet Ferdowsi in the late tenth and early eleventh century CE. This epic features a myth about the making of the Book of Kings in the classical Persian epic tradition. I will quote here a summary of the myth—a summary that I had put together in *Homeric Questions* based on work done by Olga M. Davidson in *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*.¹⁵ Here, then, is my summary:¹⁶

According to Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāma* I 21.126–136, a noble vizier assembles *mōbad*-s, wise men who are experts in the Law of Zoroaster, from all over the Empire, and each of these *mōbad*-s brings with him a “fragment” of a long-lost book of Book of Kings that had been scattered to the winds; each of the experts is called upon to recite, in turn, his respective “fragment,” and the vizier composes a book out of these recitations [...] The vizier reassembles the old book that had been disassembled, which in turn becomes the model for the *Shāhnāma* “Book of Kings” of Ferdowsi (*Shāhnāma* I 21.156–61). We see here paradoxically a myth about the synthesis of oral traditions that is articulated in terms of written traditions.

In this Iranian example, as in the Irish example, the text is not only a reality: it is also a metaphor for the oral traditions from which that reality evolved. Once again the formulation applies: without the integrative power of oral tradition, the myth is saying, there cannot exist an integral book.

Grossardt makes reference to this myth about a disintegrated and then reintegrated Book of Kings,¹⁷ but he does not refer to the relevant work of O. Davidson, who has argued in *Poet and Hero* that

12 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 200.

13 J. Nagy, “Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative.”

14 See G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 70.

15 G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 70. See O. Davidson, *Poet and Hero*, 29–53.

16 This is also quoted in G. Nagy, 2017.01.26.

17 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 200.

1. this myth shows the compatibility of oral and written traditions in classical Persian poetry
- and
2. classical Persian poetry is in fact an ideal example of a situation where oral and written traditions are compatible—and coexist smoothly with each other.¹⁸

By contrast with O. Davidson, Grossardt assumes that the oral and the written traditions of Persian poetry were incompatible with each other, and he questions whether it can even be said that oral poetry was a source for the text of the Book of Kings. If oral poetry was not a source, then written poetry would have to be the only source.

I see here a missed opportunity for Grossardt. If he had not assumed that oral and written traditions were incompatible, he could have easily argued that the Persian idea of a prototypical Book of Kings was parallel to the Greek idea of a prototypical text of Homer as we see it mentioned in the myth about the blinding of Homer by Helen. Further, Grossardt could also have argued that the myth about the blinding of Homer by Helen was a *charter myth*, just like the myth about the blinding of Homer by the gleam emanating from the armour of Achilles.¹⁹ But why is Grossardt reluctant to think in terms of a *charter myth* when he considers the story about the text that Homer refused to burn? It has to do with what he thinks about another story that features a text of Homer. Grossardt thinks that the Homeric text of the so-called “Peisistratean recension” was primarily that, a text,²⁰ and he doubts my argument that such a text was primarily a metaphor (as I infer from his remark at 201n319). Although I allow for the existence of a Homeric text in the era of Peisistratos, my central argument is that the mythologized prototype of such a text could be seen as a metaphor for the collecting of oral traditions—just like the mythologized prototypes of the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and of the Persian *Shāhnāma*.

To summarize as briefly as possible my own views on the so-called Peisistratean recension, I quote what I published in *Classical Inquiries* 2017.01.26, Part 9:

[The quotation starts with a reference to an epigram in *Greek Anthology* 11.442.] This epigram is attributed to Peisistratos, who ruled Athens during the sixth century BCE. This ruler was later demonized as a tyrant after his dynasty (known as the Peisistratidai) was replaced by the prototypically democratic régime installed in Athens by Cleisthenes toward the end of the sixth century. Back in his glory days, however, as we see in the wording of this epigram, Peisistratos was boasting that he had reassembled what are described as fragments of a body of poetry that had once been composed by Homer—and that we know today as the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. And this body of poetry is imagined here as a corpus that had disintegrated, fallen to pieces, which were then scattered all over the region of Asia Minor. In terms of the myth propagated by Peisistratos, however, he as ruler of Athens took the initiative of reassembling the pieces and thus bringing the body of Homer back to life, as it were, every time the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were performed “live” at the festival of the goddess Athena in Athens.

18 On this point about compatibility, I recommend especially O. Davidson, “Written Text as a Metaphor.”

19 In this connection, I take note of two essays I have published in *Classical Inquiries* about the two separate stories about the blinding of Homer. See G. Nagy 2016.02.18 and 2016.02.25.

20 Grossardt, *Praeconia Maeonidae magni*, 199–201.

This formulation as I quoted it here goes further back to my book *Homer the Preclassic*,²¹ which in turn goes even further back to an argument I was already developing in my book *Homeric Questions*.²² In work that is forthcoming, I hope to elaborate on my formulation as quoted here, linking it with the following further argument: if the written word can be used to metaphorize oral poetry in the history of Homeric reception, then it follows that the oral tradition of Homeric poetry was basically not incompatible with the written tradition designed to record it.

Such an argument is relevant to the title of my book *Homeric Questions*, published in 1996, where I already challenged the tired old use of the singular in the course of countless tedious references to “the Homeric Question.” I also have to address a related matter: it has to do with the tired old use of the word “theory” with reference to the findings of Parry and Lord about living oral traditions. How to apply those findings to the textual traditions of, say, Homer is a question of theory, yes, but the findings themselves are a matter of fact. The distinction I am making here eludes, I think, some users of such terms as “the Parry–Lord theory” or “the oral-formulaic theory.”²³ For further background, I recommend especially O. Davidson, “On the Sources of the *Shāhnāma*.”²⁴

For me, in any case, the unifying question is simply this: how to apply empirical descriptions of living oral traditions to written texts that may have originated from such oral traditions?

²¹ See, G. Nagy, *Homer the Preclassic*, 314–16.

²² See, G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, chap. 3, “Homer and the Evolution of a Homeric Text,” 65–112.

²³ G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 19–20.

²⁴ Additionally, see O. Davidson, *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*; O. Davidson, “Haft K’ān”; O. Davidson, “Some Iranian poetic tropes”; O. Davidson, “Parallel Heroic Themes”; O. Davidson, “Persian/Iranian Epic”; O. Davidson, *Poet and Hero*; O. Davidson, review of Yamamoto; O. Davidson, *Oral Background*; O. Davidson, “Testing of the *Shāhnāma*”; O. Davidson, “Text of Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāma*”; O. Davidson, “Written Text as a Metaphor”; Davis, “Problem of Ferdowsi’s Sources”; Foley, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*; Lord, “Perspectives on Recent Work”; Lord, *Epic Singers*; G. Nagy, *Homer the Preclassic*; Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature*; and Reichl, “Memory and Textuality.”

Author Biography Gregory Nagy is the author of *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (1979), which won the Goodwin Award of Merit, American Philological Association, in 1982. Other books include *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (1990), *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (1996), *Homeric Questions* (1996), *Homeric Responses* (2003), *Homer's Text and Language* (2004), *Homer the Classic* (online 2008, print 2009), *Homer the Preclassic* (2010), and *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (2013). He co-edited with Stephen Mitchell the 40th anniversary second edition of Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (2000), co-authoring with Mitchell a new Introduction. Recent articles include: "Ancient Greek Elegy." There are also weekly articles published by Nagy in *Classical Inquiries*, see <http://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu>; to date, there are over two hundred such articles. Since 2000, Nagy has been the Director of the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC, while continuing to teach at the Harvard campus in Cambridge as the Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature.