

# INTRODUCTION: THE PATHWAY(S) FROM ORAL-FORMULAIC THEORY TO CONTEMPORARY ORAL THEORY

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THE COMMENTS ALBERT Bates Lord offers on the back cover of John Miles Foley's *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*—that it “is a remarkable and important book, and [that] its publication will be a landmark in the study of oral traditional literature”—remain as true today as when the book appeared in 1988. Foley, whose knowledge of the field was unsurpassed even at what was then still a relatively early stage of his remarkable and unfortunately truncated career,<sup>1</sup> was uniquely positioned to write the definitive history of the field, one that was—despite the more general term Foley, with his characteristic prescience, opted for in his title—at the time still largely defined by the theory of oral-formulaic composition, or as it was and is still known, the Parry–Lord theory, although it is more accurate, and certainly less dogmatic, to describe it as “the Parry–Lord approach to oral poetics.”<sup>2</sup> First set forth by Milman Parry in his two 1928 French theses,<sup>3</sup> this approach was most fully articulated by Albert B. Lord, who had been Parry's student and collaborator at Harvard, in *Singer of Tales*. Truly ground-breaking, the Parry–Lord approach proved to be extremely polarizing as well because it posited a view of how literature was composed (and, by extension, received) that was radically at odds with not just decades but several centuries of received thought predicated upon the practices and habits of mind that accompany, mark—and limit—literate culture.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Foley's first contribution to the field appeared in print in 1976, two years after he completed his 1974 dissertation, “Ritual Nature.” See R. Garner's valuable and comprehensive annotated bibliography for a full list of Foley's published work.

2 The phrase is M. Lord's in the preface, xii, to her husband's posthumously published *Singer Resumes*. See also G. Nagy, this volume.

3 See Parry, “*L'Épithète Traditionnelle*” and “*Les Formules*.”

4 Cf. Hoffman, “Exploring the Literate Blindspot,” and Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 1–32. By way of illustrating just how radical the theory of oral-formulaic composition was when it was first introduced, Alain Renoir on occasion would tell how Lord's 1949 dissertation defence, which was open to interested members of the Harvard community, lasted nearly eight hours because so many people wanted to question him about his findings. While an effective tale, especially as told by Renoir, a short time before her death in August 2009 Lord's wife, Professor Mary Louise Lord, confirmed, personal communication, that while Lord's dissertation defence was at times spirited, it did not last much longer than a typical one.

Although the Parry–Lord theory was (and in some quarters remains) extremely influential,<sup>5</sup> and although it stands as one of the first truly multidisciplinary theories,<sup>6</sup> it was also unintentionally hamstrung from the outset by its structuralist focus, by its conceiving of oral tradition as a single, monolithic, universal entity, and, perhaps most importantly, by its insistence that the oral and literate modes of composition (and, indeed, their underlying modes of thought) were “contradictory and mutually exclusive.”<sup>7</sup> It was on precisely this point—the putatively fundamental incompatibility of the oral and literate expressive economies—that the theory’s adherents and detractors found perhaps their only point of agreement: for the former, the presence of such things as, for example, repeated verbal formulas and typical scenes unquestionably established the orality of a given work of verbal art, while for the latter that same verbal art’s survival only in writing pointed just as unquestionably to its situation in the literate world. As a result, during the hey-day of the Parry–Lord theory,<sup>8</sup> the mutual exclusivity of the oral and literate expressive economies hardened into a largely unexamined first principle, and scholars positioned themselves on one side or the other of what Ruth Finnegan aptly described (and just as aptly criticized) as the “Great Divide” between the oral and the literate.<sup>9</sup> Because each side held firmly to its own polemically articulated articles of faith, the theory of oral-formulaic composition did not benefit from the ideational cross-fertilization that is the necessary by-product of sustained and productive, if at times painful, critical debate.<sup>10</sup>

The widespread adoption of the Parry–Lord theory by scholars in many fields, and its productive application to the verbal art produced over the course of many centuries

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**5** Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 88, notes that the Parry–Lord theory “can be said to be the currently ruling theory about the nature of oral composition,” a comment that continues to ring true today in certain quarters. That *Singer of Tales* has not been out of print since it first appeared in 1960 and went into a third edition fifty-nine years after it was first published are but two indicators of its continuing importance. While its influence in North America has largely waned, the theory of oral-formulaic composition remains influential among European scholars. See further, Amodio, review of Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature*, and Amodio, review of Helldén and others, *Incline Aurem*.

**6** Oral-formulaic theory encompasses, among other areas, literary studies in many languages and across many centuries, cultural and linguistic anthropology, folklore, performance studies, and diachronic and synchronic linguistics, although there has not been as much cross-fertilization among these fields as one would hope for, or expect. See Amodio, review of Goody, *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*.

**7** Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 129.

**8** Although what would come to be known as the Parry–Lord theory became part of the critical discourse of classicists from the time of Parry’s initial publications in the late 1920s, and although Lord had begun developing the theory in a series of publications beginning with his “Homer and Huso I” in 1936, it was, Foley notes, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*, 3, not until after Magoun extended it to Old English literature in his “Oral-Formulaic Character” in 1953 that oral-formulaic theory gained a wider audience among practitioners of “literary studies, folklore, comparative literature, linguistics, history, and anthropology.”

**9** See Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 12–14, 86–109, and 139–74. Cf. Stock, *Implications*, 71, who observes that “literacy’s rise did not automatically spell the demise of traditional attitudes and tastes.”

**10** Foley, *Theory of Oral Composition*, 57–111, succinctly sketches the contours of the positions staked out by adherents to and detractors of oral-formulaic theory.

by cultures spread throughout the world testify eloquently to the theory's foundational role in shaping the way we understand the creation and dissemination of traditional oral verbal art.<sup>11</sup> By the 1980s, however, the theory was on the verge of stagnating because its practitioners continued to focus almost exclusively on applying, not developing, it.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this are too complex to be addressed here, but it is important to note that this situation was not the result of any conscious effort to keep the theory "pure"; rather, its failure to evolve can be traced in large part to its radicalness, to, that is, the degree to which the theory unsettled the accepted orthodoxies of how works of verbal art were composed and disseminated, to its mapping what had been terra incognita, and to the failure of its adherents "to concur even on general definitions."<sup>13</sup>

That those scholars who embraced and applied the theory of oral-formulaic composition did so largely unreflectively is not surprising, especially given that the results of their investigations continually validated the theory and so reinforced its orthodoxies, including the tacit, a priori assumption that the oral and literate expressive economies were discrete cultural components that could neither coexist nor intersect. And while many scholars questioned or simply rejected out of hand the idea that cultures lacking the technology of writing could produce and disseminate verbal art of any complexity, length, or aesthetic value,<sup>14</sup> a few, chief among them Finnegan, challenged the stark binarism upon which so much of the discourse surrounding the theory of oral-formulaic composition rested by positing that the relationships between the oral and the literate and between their respective expressive economies were *not* mutually exclusive but were rather intertwined and interdependent. Finnegan and others also questioned the aptness of the Parry-Lord theory's one-size-fits-all approach, which flattened out, elided, or simply ignored the many unique features of the traditional verbal art produced by different cultures (and sometimes even within different genres produced within the same culture) at different times and in different places. Despite the inherent limitations of its structuralist focus,<sup>15</sup> and despite the development of compelling alternative ways of thinking about the production and dissemination of traditional verbal art,<sup>16</sup> the theory of oral-formulaic composition continued to dominate the critical landscape of oral studies throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s. By the middle

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**11** As Foley remarks, *Oral-Formulaic Theory*, 4, his annotated bibliography catalogues "more than 1800 books and articles from more than ninety language areas," the great majority of which belong to the Parry-Lord school of thought.

**12** See further Foley, *Immanent Art*, 2–5, and Renoir, *Key to Old Poems*, 49–63.

**13** Foley, *Immanent Art*, 14.

**14** On writing as a technology and on what he labelled "the technologizing of the word," see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, especially 5–15.

**15** As Lord, 17, notes, *Singer of Tales* "is concerned with the special technique of composition which makes rapid composing in performance possible." See Parry, "Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making," 314–22, for a succinct explanation of the theory of oral-formulaic composition's structural focus. For Parry, 317, and many who adopted his (and Lord's) theory over the following decades, the presence of formulas was the strongest indicator possible of "the necessity of making verses by the spoken word."

**16** See Foley, *Theory of Oral Composition*, 94–111.

of the latter decade, however, some issues that had been consciously or unconsciously ignored, including the unique features of individual traditions and the equally unique expressive economies through which they are articulated, the reception of traditional verbal art (by its intended and other audiences), and the aesthetics of traditional verbal art, began to receive more scholarly attention. As a result of these and other issues coming to the fore, the field of oral studies, which for so long had been so closely aligned with the Parry–Lord theory as to be largely synonymous with it, underwent a tectonic shift. While all oralists remain indebted to the Parry–Lord theory, which continues to be applied in some quarters as unreflectively as it was during its hey-day (with predictably similar results), it now figures far less prominently in the broad, rich, complex, and complicated landscape of contemporary oral studies than it for too long had.

Tracing in detail the process by which contemporary oral theory grew out of and eventually supplanted the theory of oral-formulaic composition is beyond the remit of this brief and selective overview. Therefore, rather than attempting to map this process and the attendant development of contemporary oral theory in detail, the focus here will be on the pivotal role the work of John Miles Foley, Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, and Alain Renoir played in moving the field of oral studies beyond the limitations that the Parry–Lord theory had unintentionally imposed upon it. Working independently, these three scholars produced in a three-year span four books—Renoir’s *A Key to Old Poems: The Oral-Formulaic Approach to the Interpretation of West-Germanic Verse* (1988); Foley’s *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song* (1990); O’Brien O’Keeffe’s *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (1990); and Foley’s *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (1991)—that reinvigorated and redefined the field of oral studies, not by rejecting the then still-dominant theory of oral-formulaic composition (or, for the most part, even overtly addressing its flaws and limitations<sup>17</sup>), but by grappling with and ultimately reconfiguring some of its most closely held orthodoxies. There are other scholars, including several of this volume’s contributors, whose work was also instrumental in changing the trajectory of the field, but, especially when considered as a group, the above cited works by Foley, O’Brien O’Keeffe, and Renoir—all of which are based on what were at the time the still very much contested assumptions that orality and literacy are not the competing, mutually exclusive cultural forces they had been thought to be and that the surviving material records witness the persistence of non-performative oral poetics<sup>18</sup>—arguably deserve the greatest credit for setting the course contemporary oral theory would follow.

Given its announced focus on the tectonics, or in Foley’s words, “‘the gross anatomy’ of the [...] texts” it examines,<sup>19</sup> his *Traditional Oral Epic* may seem an odd choice for

<sup>17</sup> This is especially true of Renoir’s *Key to Old Poems*, a work in which Renoir, in a remarkable display of his characteristic *savoir faire*, deftly redefines and redirects many of Lord’s foundational principles without ever directly challenging or criticizing them.

<sup>18</sup> On the notion of persistence, see Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, especially 60–98. On non-performative oral poetics, see Amodio, “Re(si)sting the Singer” and *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 39–44.

<sup>19</sup> Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 20.

inclusion in this survey since it was at the time of its publication—and remains to this day—the most thorough articulation of Parry and Lord’s structuralist theory and the most detailed accounting of the mechanics of the traditions to which it applies. But even though it should rightly be seen as the most compelling and convincing application of the Parry–Lord theory yet (or likely) to be produced, and even though its analyses and critical approach fit comfortably within that theory’s strictly structuralist parameters, *Traditional Oral Epic* also stands as one of the cornerstones upon which the contemporary oral theory that would shortly come to supplant it rests.<sup>20</sup> Understanding that the Parry–Lord theory was not the complete, closed, or singular system for understanding the verbal art produced in oral cultures that it had long been taken to be, Foley posits that the Parry–Lord theory was instead an essential, integral, and, most importantly, *partial* component of the theoretical approach that would come to be known simply as Oral Theory.

The formula is an important constituent of many (and perhaps most) of the expressive economies of cultures that produced or continue to produce verbal art orally. However, there is no *ur-form* against which all instantiations of it can be measured, for the formula in each culture emanates from and must conform to each culture’s unique prosodic and metrical features, and, further, it must, and can only, be articulated through each culture’s unique lexicon and through each culture’s equally unique expressive economy.<sup>21</sup> Although he is addressing only the constellation of problems inherent in comparing texts from ancient Greece and Anglo-Saxon England, Foley’s contention that the “documents cannot be forced into a single category, any more than the languages or prosodies involved can be forced into absolute comparability” is broadly applicable,<sup>22</sup> and were we to change his “cannot be forced” to “should not be forced” and his “can be forced” to “should be forced,” this statement would rise to the level of an axiom, for, as he was succinctly to remind us years later, “[o]rality isn’t simple or monolithic.”<sup>23</sup>

In *Traditional Oral Epic*, Foley neither elides nor ignores these problems—as so many before him had done (and as some contemporary oral-formulaicists continue to do)—but rather considers them directly and, in the process, refines and recalibrates their underlying premises. As Foley notes in the coda to *Traditional Oral Epic*’s third chapter, while “Parry’s theory of the formula was [. . .] based firmly on determining ‘the same metrical conditions’ that made possible the recurrence of elements of diction,” in

**20** Cf. Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 1n1, where he alludes to the then “tentatively titled *Immanent Art*,” a work he considered to be the necessary complement to *Traditional Oral Epic* and alerts the reader that “the present volume will concentrate on the various levels of structure in comparative oral epic” because “the reading program” that will be articulated in *Immanent Art* “can proceed only after a firm foundation in the comparative philology of oral epic poetry exists.” Developing and expanding this “reading program” would occupy his attention almost exclusively from the publication of *Immanent Art* onward.

**21** See Foley, “Tradition-dependent” for an early, concise, and important articulation of thinking that would find full expression in *Traditional Oral Epic*.

**22** Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 38.

**23** Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 65.

actuality “each epic tradition has an idiosyncratic, tradition-dependent *prosody* that we may expect to exist in symbiosis with a correspondingly idiosyncratic and tradition-dependent *phraseology*.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though *Traditional Oral Epic* is not chronologically the earliest of the four works on which we are here focusing, its status as the culminating articulation of the theory of oral-formulaic composition makes it both a monument (and thorough guide) to that theory and a convenient and fitting point of departure for understanding the development of the oral theory that would grow out of and come to supplant the Parry–Lord approach. As Foley himself argues by way of justifying *Traditional Oral Epic*’s structural focus, creating the sorts of “philologically sound profile[s]” it does provides “a foundation for aesthetic inquiry that is firm because it is faithful to the language and poetics” of the traditions being investigated.<sup>25</sup>

Trumpeting as it does its embrace of oral-formulaic theory, not only in its title but in a foreword in which Lord attests (perhaps overly so) to its oral-formulaic bona fides, Renoir’s *Key to Old Poems* may also seem to be an unlikely candidate for inclusion among the works most responsible for reinvigorating and redirecting the field of oral studies. Yet while its title announces its fealty to the Parry–Lord approach, the word “interpretation” subtly signals that this study will most decidedly *not* fit comfortably within the school of oral-formulaic criticism. Rather than challenging the structuralist principles of oral-formulaic theory, Renoir simply and deftly offers answers to questions the field had not yet posed and that, indeed, oral-formulaic theory would prove unable to formulate, let alone answer. Other scholars had touched on issues related to the ones that occupy Renoir’s attention in *Key to Old Poems*,<sup>26</sup> but his is the first full-length study to explore the reception aesthetics, or to use his phrase, the “affective dynamics” of traditional verbal art as he focuses on neither its modes of production nor dissemination, but on *how* it conveys meaning and on *how* that meaning was received by its intended and subsequent audiences. Arguing “that certain poems of the past which exhibit all kinds of oral-formulaic features could actually have been composed in writing within the context of a society in which preliterate and literate culture could still interact with each other,”<sup>27</sup> Renoir shifts attention from the formal, mechanical aspects of traditional verbal art to its reception aesthetics, a strategy that allows him to avoid becoming entangled in the one issue that more than any other was responsible for bringing the field to a near impasse by the early 1980s: the belief in the mutual exclusivity of orality and literacy foundational to the theory of oral-formulaic composition.<sup>28</sup> However, by exploring the

<sup>24</sup> Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 120; emphasis his.

<sup>25</sup> Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, 200.

<sup>26</sup> Cf., Foley, “Literary Art”; “Tradition and the Collective Talent”; and “Reading the Oral Traditional Text”; and Finnegan, *Oral Poetry and Literacy and Orality*.

<sup>27</sup> Renoir, *Key to Old Poems*, 63. His reliance here on “preliterate” rather than the broader and more applicable “oral” is another sign of his working—with limited success—to stay within the theoretical paradigm Lord initially established.

<sup>28</sup> Lord, in what would prove to be an extremely—and unfortunately—influential assertion, argues, *Singer of Tales*, 137, that the arrival of literate habits of mind, especially the notion of the “set, ‘correct’ text,” sounded “the death knell of the oral process.”

affective dynamics of traditional oral poetics in medieval West-Germanic verse, he convincingly demonstrates that orality and literacy, far from being situated on either side of the cultural fissure that is the so-called Great Divide, were rather intertwined components existing on a cultural continuum, the same continuum on which they continue to exist—as ineluctably and as complicatedly intertwined as ever—today.<sup>29</sup>

Although he does not explicitly address the specifics of how traditional oral poetics survives the transition from being articulated exclusively through the mouth to being articulated chiefly (and perhaps solely) through the pen,<sup>30</sup> Renoir nonetheless demonstrates that the traditional oral expressive economy that survives in written records dating as far back as to when English as verse was first committed to the page is not vestigial, but dynamic.<sup>31</sup> By carefully mapping the specialized, dedicated register of traditional oral poetics, a register that preserves the most concrete evidence we are likely ever to have regarding that expressive economy's existence, oral-formulaic theory developed a clear picture of the architectonics of traditional verbal art, but in concentrating solely upon that art's formal, structural components, oral-formulaicists mistook what is just a component, albeit an important one, of traditional verbal art for that art's totality. We can perhaps best understand the approach oral-formulaicists adopted and the limits the theory imposed upon the developing field of oral studies by comparing them to palaeontologists who, after discovering the fossilized bones of dinosaurs, remain focused only on those remains and never attempt to flesh out (or realize that they need to flesh out) the entirety of the complex organism of which the bones are but partial, if the most concrete, evidence.<sup>32</sup>

Not long after the appearance of *Key to Old Poems*, O'Brien O'Keeffe published *Visible Song*, a volume that, like *Key to Old Poems*, grapples directly with matters with which oral-formulaicists had proved unwilling or unable to engage, including, most notably, that all the evidence we have of ancient and medieval oral poetics is undeniably *textual* and, as such, is unequivocally situated in and a product of the literate world. O'Brien O'Keeffe neither ignores nor attempts to explain away the textuality of verbal art that oral-formulaicists confidently, if paradoxically, labelled "oral," a label that others just as confidently, and based upon the same evidence, rejected. At a time when textuality thus continued to be routinely cast in absolutist, and chiefly abstract, terms, O'Brien O'Keeffe adopts a significantly different approach. Far from seeing textuality as demarcating the

**29** See further Foley's posthumous *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, and Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read*.

**30** Cf. Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, especially 1–98, and Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*.

**31** The expressive economy of oral poetics is thoroughly attested in the version of *Cædmon's Hymn* preserved in the margins of folio 107<sup>r</sup> of St Petersburg, M. E. Saltykov-Schedrin Public Library, lat. Q.v.I.18. This version of the *Hymn* is one of the earliest specimens of the written vernacular to survive, in a manuscript Ker, *Catalogue*, 158, dates to "s. viii."

**32** Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 4, was well aware that those features of the traditional oral expressive economy upon which he concentrates, namely the "formula," "formulaic expression," and "theme" are "but the bare bones of the living organism which is oral epic," but he never articulated a theory of the entire "organism" or, as Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 188, puts it, of the "ecology of verbal art" that "oral poems inhabit."



division between the oral and the literate worlds, she rather looks to entexted verbal art and asks critical—and crucial—questions that had hitherto gone largely unasked, among which are what does the materiality of the manuscripts in which the extant Old English poetic corpus survives tell us about the oral-literate nexus in Anglo-Saxon England and what does it tell us about the situation within that nexus of those who entexted the verbal art contained in the manuscript records? Her interrogation, from multiple perspectives, of the ways in which the physical materiality of entexted verbal art witnesses the complex intersections of orality and literacy in the period demonstrates that far from being an uncomfortable, or perhaps even disqualifying, impediment to our understanding of medieval English oral poetics, textuality (in both the abstract and concrete senses of the term) is central to understanding that poetics, since it is only the mute, static surfaces of manuscript pages that witness the expressive economy oral theory is devoted to exploring.<sup>33</sup>

O'Brien O'Keeffe's argument that the "higher the degree of conventional spatialization in the manuscripts, the less oral and more literate" an individual or group is likely to be not only establishes that the graphic practices witnessed in the manuscripts constitute the most compelling evidence we have, and are likely to have, of an individual's (or group's) situation along the oral-literate continuum,<sup>34</sup> but it also addresses—and in the process, obviates—one of oral-formulaic theory's major weaknesses: its failure to account for the physicality of the written records that preserve the evidence upon which the theory necessarily had to rest.<sup>35</sup> Texts figured in oral-formulaic theory only as abstractions in part because the technology of writing was long viewed as being antithetical to the verbal art the theory explored. Composed and received in the crucible of performance, the traditional oral verbal art hypothesized by the Parry-Lord approach existed in the world only as long as it took for the reverberations of the words the poet was articulating in any given moment to die, and it existed only in the minds of those present when it was performed and only for as long as they retained a recollection of it. But in so imaging texts, or, following O'Brien O'Keeffe, what we should perhaps more properly designate "texts" to signify their abstractness,<sup>36</sup> oral-formulaicists neglected to see that understanding verbal art "in its fullest historical dimensions requires not only study of the circumstances of its composition but study as well of those means by which it acts in the world, its realized texts."<sup>37</sup>

The final work in this brief overview, Foley's *Immanent Art*, was published in 1991 and stands, arguably, as the single-most important volume in oral studies since the publication of Parry's French PhD theses in 1928 and the publication in 1960 of Lord's *Singer*

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**33** It is important, however, to keep in mind that the poetics entexted on the manuscript page is not the strictly performative poetics central to oral-formulaic theory, but is rather non-performative. See Amodio, "Res(is)ting the Singer" and *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 39–44.

**34** O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 25.

**35** But see Donoghue, *How the Anglo-Saxons Read*, 83, who argues against adopting "certain march-of-progress assumptions about the historical development of reading and writing."

**36** Cf. O'Brien O'Keeffe's discussion of this point, *Visible Song*, 150.

**37** O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 95.



of *Tales*, a revision of his similarly titled 1949 dissertation. Foley modestly describes *Immanent Art* as the “companion” to *Traditional Oral Epic*.<sup>38</sup> While this description is certainly apt, it also—and this will not surprise anyone who knew Foley—understates the aims of a volume that was to revolutionize our understanding of how oral traditions function by uncovering and exploring the specialized channels through which traditional oral verbal art was received and the equally specialized channels through which its meaning was transmitted. As its subtitle, *From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*,<sup>39</sup> announces, the impulse driving *Immanent Art* is transitive; while built upon insights derived from the Parry–Lord theory’s structuralist approach, *Immanent Art* also acknowledges that that approach led ultimately only to an imperfect, because partial, understanding of traditional oral verbal art. While Renoir and O’Brien O’Keeffe explore territory that lay beyond oral-formulaic theory’s self-imposed borders, they do so by taking metaphorical leaps over those borders. It was Foley who discovered and unlocked the “wealldor” (gateway) to that territory, and it was he who began charting the pathway(s)—to use the metaphor that came to dominate his conception of oral tradition in the later years of his life—connecting the mechanics of traditional oral verbal art to its aesthetics.<sup>40</sup> In doing so, Foley was to provide us, more than sixty years after the publication of Parry’s ground-breaking theses, with the first full exploration of oral aesthetics, a long neglected but essential component of the architectonics of traditional oral verbal art. Foley was to spend the remainder of his career refining and expanding our understanding of the full complexity of oral tradition by concentrating, in a series of articles and books, on how traditional oral verbal art *means*, both in its originally performative context and in the non-performative one in which it is preserved. These investigations led him to explore the even larger issues he was to make the subject of his final, most ambitious project, one that traces the ways in which the structure and functioning of the internet mimic that of oral tradition.

As we saw above, one of the Parry–Lord approach’s most important and enduring findings is that the literate expressive economy that has dominated the ways in which verbal art has been articulated and disseminated in the West for at least the last millennium is not the only means through which such art can be produced and circulated. While this view has informed the critical discourse of oral studies from its earliest days, its equally important corollary, namely that the same holds for the interpretive strategies brought to bear upon verbal art, did not receive much, if any, concerted attention, until Renoir and O’Brien O’Keeffe indirectly took it up and until Foley made it central to *Immanent Art*.

The array of critical interpretive strategies that have evolved over the past millennium have proved to be apt and useful tools for investigating verbal art produced by the culture in which those strategies developed, one that is dominated by the rich, complex constellation of literate practices and habits of mind that remain culturally central today. However, when applied to verbal art produced within a different cultural framework,

<sup>38</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, xi.

<sup>39</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> See Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*.

one in which the traditional oral expressive economy continued to play a role in the composition and reception of verbal art, these interpretive strategies proved largely inapt, and their (mis)application to texts grounded in traditional oral poetics resulted in inquiries that were based on inappropriate—and so faulty—sets of assumptions that, consequently, led to unproductive, and often impertinent, conclusions.<sup>41</sup> While Renoir's and O'Brien O'Keeffe's works illustrate the value and utility of not imposing solely literate-based interpretive strategies on texts composed under the ambit of performative or non-performative oral poetics and while they both explore the ways in which traditional oral verbal art means,<sup>42</sup> Foley offers the most detailed and important examination of this issue. Perhaps more than any other scholar, Foley was aware that without a pertinent interpretive strategy, one that enables us to gain a clear sense of *how* traditional oral verb art means, investigations into *what* it means would be severely handicapped.

Of the many contributions to our understanding of the expressive economy of oral poetics Foley made prior to the publication of *Immanent Art* and that he was to make in the remaining twenty-five or so years of his life following its publication,<sup>43</sup> the most important may well be the one central to *Immanent Art*: “traditional referentiality.”<sup>44</sup> As he explains, in traditional oral verbal art, the meaning of structures, “whether phraseological or narrative, [. . .] derive[s] not from the kind of denotation or conferred connotation with which we are familiar in literary texts but [. . .] from the natural and

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41 The tendency to assume myopically that current practices, be they interpretive, cultural, etc., are universally applicable is a characteristic not just of the present moment, where it runs fairly rampant, but of most and perhaps all cultures, all of which are, in the moment, modern. Cf. Swift's send-up in *Tale of a Tub*, 329, of critics who, to cite but one example, criticise Homer for being ignorant of modern material culture: “[Homer's] Failings are not less prominent in several Parts of the *Mechanicks*. For, having read his Writings with the utmost Application usual among *Modern Wits*, I could never yet discover the least Direction about the Structure of that useful Instrument a *Save-all*.” See also Swift's scathing “A Digression Concerning Criticks,” 311–17.

42 For Renoir, this entails focusing on, *Key to Old Poems*, 18, the “five categories of context which [. . .] most often interact supportively or contrastively with the oral-formulaic context.” Of these, the most pertinent to the current discussion are the “intrinsic context” and the “extrinsic context” (emphasis his). He defines the former as “the context provided by the text proper” and the latter as “the context drawn from outside” it. For O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song*, 6, it entails arguing “that the manuscript records of Old English poetry witness a particular mode of literacy” and that the “significant variants” and “developing graphic cues for presentation” discovered within them “provide strong evidence of persisting residual orality in the reading and copying of poetry in Old English.” Cf. Parkes, *Pause and Effect*, 20–29, on the “grammar of legibility.”

43 Although his major contributions are far too numerous to be listed here, a brief and highly selective list of them would include the notion of the *sēmata* developed in *Homer's Traditional Art*, especially 13–34; that, “Individual Poet”, 152, the traditional register draws from “both the singular talent of an individual *aoidos* and the collective bequest of tradition”; that, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, 188–218, oral and literate culture exist within an “ecology” whose borders are permeable; and, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, that oral tradition and the internet mirror each other.

44 Foley, *Immanent Art*, xiv; emphasis his. For a useful and concise introduction to this concept, see Bradbury, “Traditional Referentiality.”

inherent associations encoded in them and accessible to the informed audience."<sup>45</sup> Via "a mode of signification wherein the part stands for the whole," a process Foley "call[s] *metonymy*," the constituent elements of traditional expressive economies "reach out of the immediate instance in which they appear to the fecund totality of the entire tradition, defined synchronically and diachronically and they bear meanings as wide and deep as the tradition they encode."<sup>46</sup> Although the pathways through which the meaning of traditional verbal art is transmitted and received differ, sometimes significantly, from those utilized by literary texts, there is nonetheless considerable overlap among them. Just as orality and literacy are not mutually exclusive cultural components but are inextricably interconnected ones, so, too, is the specialized way of speaking that is oral poetics fundamentally inseparable from a given culture's quotidian, non-specialized ways of speaking because both are intertwined elements of a culture's broad and idiosyncratic communicative landscape.

It is on the idiosyncratic nature of cultures' communicative landscapes that this brief survey will close because while it is taken up most fully by Foley in *Immanent Art*, this pivotal notion is woven as well into the fabric of the other three works considered above. Beyond serving as a convenient through-line connecting these works, this notion speaks to the heart of what distinguishes contemporary oral theory from the theory of oral-formulaic composition. Parry and Lord's working in what was then Yugoslavia with a living oral tradition that supported in so many ways what Parry had theorized regarding ancient Greek oral epic was fortuitous in that they were able to test, refine, and develop many of their hypotheses within what they considered (and what in many ways was) a living laboratory, but it was also crippling in that it reinforced their contention that orality was a pure, isolated state. In contrast, contemporary oral theory sees orality as being a deeply interconnected component of all cultures, one that exists in productive symbiosis with literacy in those cultures possessing the technology of writing. And where the Parry–Lord theory sees oral tradition as a singular, monolithic entity that functions similarly in all cultures, contemporary oral theory understands that it is not universal, but is rather contingent and tradition-dependent. To put matters telegraphically, where the Parry–Lord theory sees an Oral Tradition writ large, one that conformed to and was defined and characterized by a *singular*, invariable mode of expression, composition, and reception, contemporary oral theory sees instead a world of oralities transmitted through a multitude of expressive economies (some oral, some written) that, on the surface, frequently have little or nothing in common. Certain mechanical, formal features may be shared between or among some oral traditions, as is the case with the ancient Greek and South Slavic ones upon which Parry and Lord concentrated, but such instances are rare because oral traditions are articulated through expressive economies that are culture-specific and, as a result, exhibit few, if any, correspondences with the expressive economies of other cultures. Only when we shift our gaze from traditions' concrete, lexical realizations to their more abstract features do significant correspondences between and

<sup>45</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, 7; emphasis his.

among them begin to emerge with any consistency, with the similarities becoming steadily more pronounced the higher the level of abstraction becomes.<sup>47</sup>

Along with illustrating the richness, breadth, and vitality of contemporary oral theory, the essays and performances gathered here also honour the memory of the late John Miles Foley, a prolific scholar to whom oral theorists of all persuasions owe a lasting debt of gratitude for his many and varied contributions. Of the many scholars who have helped shape the field of oral studies over the past ninety or so years, few have been as influential as Foley. As the author of “nearly 200 essays, books, and other types of scholarly contributions,”<sup>48</sup> and as the founding editor of the field’s central journal, *Oral Tradition*, he left an indelible mark upon the field, where his thinking continues to be a central component of its vibrant and continually evolving critical discourse. John also, and perhaps more importantly, left an indelible mark not only upon those fortunate enough to have been numbered among his friends and associates, but also upon all those who had the good fortune to cross paths with such a gentle, generous, kind, humble, and brilliant man.

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**47** For example, the ancient Greek epic formula shares little with the Anglo-Saxon formula, but at the higher level of thematics, we discover a number of correspondences, and it is at the even higher level of the story-pattern that we find correspondences between and among not only a wide variety of Indo-European oral traditions but those from other cultures as well.

**48** R. Garner, “Annotated Bibliography,” 677.