

John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2002, 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-07082-8

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This title leads the reader directly to the book's main business: imparting useful strategies for reading records of verbal arts. It contemplates the dimensions of performance endemic to them, why it is important to account for those aspects when reading, and how performance itself enmeshes verbal expressions in social fabric, both past and present. The primary audience for the book is the general reader. It offers a straightforward exposition of fundamental insights into the nature and function of verbal arts, based on the collective achievements of modern scholarship in the field, and, especially, on summaries of the author's pioneering work in Homeric Greek, Old English, and modern South Slavic traditions.

Preliminary cautions are voiced regarding the pitfalls of hewing to unexamined assumptions, whose invidious effects constrain readers to a too narrow appreciation of verbal arts. Such warnings are strategically reiterated throughout this solidly reasoned case for reading texts according to the rules of their sponsoring generic tradition and acknowledging the parameters of the performance arena, their proper milieu. Foley also articulates a compelling argument for the real advantages that will accrue from the adaptation of information science for editing records of verbal art, owing to the capacity for linking and cross-referencing the multiple pathways for discovery that is a hallmark of both phenomena.

This thoroughgoing and fundamentally pedagogic treatment of oral poetry examines living traditions from South Africa, Tibet, Indonesia, North America, Central America, and the Balkans, as well as preterit traditions in Anglo-Saxon, Old French, Ancient Greek, and Classical Hebrew. Substantive analysis pinpoints explicit and implicit aspects of their content and performance, the modern reader's relative position to them, and teases out how an awareness of differences leads the reader to appreciation of the texts' aesthetic qualities and communicative advantage. The presentation, analysis, and documentation make plain that seemingly familiar and well-understood genres of verbal art, *when* examined in their proper contexts – on their own terms – manifest dimensions of meaning otherwise unnoticed by readers whose training is in the reception of literature.

Foley offers a panoramic view of oral tradition. Reading the book is akin to viewing the zoom-out technique of cinematography: the frame surrounding a focal point widens and encompasses more and more of the

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surrounding field so that focal point and contextual ground are seen to be recursive points in an interrelated system.

In addition to underscoring the universality and diversity of verbal arts, the four initial scenarios discussed (from as many continents and dating from 600 B.C.E until the present day), those of a Tibetan Paper-Singer, a Nuyorican Slam Poet, a South African Praise-Poet, and an Ancient Greek Bard, make evident the cardinal point that the assumptions a modern western reader may have about how such poets compose, and for what purposes, stand in need of revision. Diversity of time and place notwithstanding, a common thread runs through their verbal creations. It is the creation of a fictional space where issues of identity, social dilemma, and the human condition are confronted, interrogated, and disposed. The section concludes, as do all subsequent ones, with suggestions for further reading.

The second section, *What the Oral Poets Say*, essays a statement of principles that calls attention to “different ways of composing and ‘reading’ poetry” (11). It advocates methodological pluralism, “open-mindedness,” and defines the essence of oral poetry, “universality of occurrence paired with thoroughgoing variety” (11). Harking back to the initial sortie against unexamined assumptions, the fundamental question is not *what* but *how* a poem means. Efforts aimed at answering that question by transferring literary precepts to the realm of verbal arts are infelicitous, and constrain the reader to misunderstand the work under consideration.

Foley’s substitution of the term “Word”, adapted from the South Slavic epic singers’ *ref*, a term that designates not a single lexical item but rather an utterance, an entire poetic line, motif, type-scene, speech-act or large unit of discourse, for “Chapter” marks a pedagogic strategy and accomplishes a neat propositional shift. In this context “Word” names a substantial unit of discourse and prompts recognition on the part of the reader that the logic of verbal arts generally and specifically, the subject under discussion, is predicated on rules and conditions that are inoperative in modern models of literature that are premised on a circuit of communication between a solitary author and a silent reader. A simple substitution, “Word” for “Chapter,” opens the reader’s eyes to the possibility of other frames of reference and contexts of reading that are irreducible to the terms of intertextuality.

This study posits responses to four questions: (1) What is oral poetry? (2) What is an oral poem? (3) What is reading? and, finally, (4) What do we mean by how? The answers marshaled involve examinations of poetic line and poetic genre, assay the dynamics of the triad composition, performance, and reception, and calculate different gradients of oral poetry: Oral Performance, Voiced Texts, Voices from the Past, and Written Oral Poems. Examples of these four categories of verbal arts serve throughout the exposition as illustrations of theory and praxis.

The First “Word”, *What is Oral Poetry*, recalls the relative dates on the human species calendar when verbal communication and writing systems

emerged, and asks what if writing is not the optimum code of human communication? The false dichotomy of oral culture versus literate culture is shown to be a misapprehension. Foley draws attention to a more productive binomial opposition: the mediacy of the printed word versus the immediacy of the spoken word.

The Second “Word”, *Contexts and Reading*, recalls the contingency of human verbal communications follows it into related issues. No specific performance can, in point of fact, be experientially duplicated, but its transformation into a linear text nullifies its salient features. Disadvantaged though readers of such texts are in comparison with audiences of its performance, even in reduced circumstances readers have access to tools and concepts they can deploy to reinvigorate the indited text with some of its contextual breath. We may jettison our literate biases, and acknowledge the protean quality of written and oral communication by taking into account different “communicative ecologies.” Specific examples of how reading in fact names fundamentally different activities –reading aloud of the Holy Koran in Indonesian villages where Arabic is not understood, the Tibetan reading practice of *lung* in which “the spoken word must be heard, not necessarily understood” (72), the Hebrew Scriptures before 100 C.E., when the literate populace’s knowledge of its foundational canon derived mostly from public declamations, and finally, the trenchant example from Homer’s *Iliad* of Bellerophon’s letter– illustrate the advantageous of considering such expressions from multiple points of view and opening up one’s horizon to the net of underlying references that each tradition and sign indexes. Foley proposes that a URL address on the Internet is roughly equivalent to the Homeric *sēmata* in that both “furnish a pathway –quick and immediate– to information that is otherwise difficult or impossible to come by” (76). According to this view, reading per se is not always the behavior literate western society presumes it to be. Proper understanding of this subject matter requires recognition of its diversity and the effects context has on it.

A first interpretive approach to verbal arts is made in the Third “Word”, *Being There: Performance Theory*, which presents illustrative case studies of performances of verbal art. Unrelenting insistence that no single interpretive theory is apposite for understanding all exemplars of verbal arts underlies Foley’s call to take advantage of the analytical tools furnished by different approach. Beginning with Richard Bauman’s repertoire of *keys to performance*, this “Word” delineates the encoding of performance by referring to South Slavic epics, Nuyorican Slam Poets, Elias Lönnrot’s fashioning of the *Kalevala*, and Homer’s *Odyssey*; representatives of the previously alluded to four varieties of verbal arts: Oral Performance, Voiced Texts, Voices from the Past, and Written Oral Poems. In each case Foley elucidates how the *keys to performance* reference a specific traditional framework, “every one of them is nominal in form but institutionalized in meaning” (93).

The Fourth “Word”, *Verbal Art on Its Own Terms: Ethnopoetics*, considers an apparent paradox, a way of reading that is non-textual, whose challenge to the reader is how does one accommodate reading strategies to specific poetic structures of performance. At each inflection in the exposition, Foley draws attention to the errors, preconceived notions, unexamined assumptions, and anachronisms that stultify a reader’s reception of verbal arts. Beginning from Dell Hymes’ structure focused method, *Ethnopoetics*, Foley undertakes “a forensics of oral poetry” (97) in order to return *performative* qualities to the printed linear text. The point of departure are facing editions of Slam Poet Lynn Procope’s performance “elemental woman.” One is an unadorned printed text, the other adapts typographical cues to restore dynamics, phrasing, silences, and the rhythm of performance to the text in the manner of Dennis Tedlock’s editions of Zuni oral narratives. The confrontation shows the possibility for reading into the here-and-now what was performed there-and-then. Foley commends learning the ethnopoetics of a tradition whose expressions the reader would endeavor to appreciate instead of misreading them by hewing to a consensus concept of poetry that is based on print rather than performance. Comparative passages from *Beowulf* convey *how* traditional idioms communicate as well as *what* they communicate.

The Fifth “Word”, *Traditional Implications: Immanent Art*, concentrates on the idiomatic implications of register, performance arena, communicative economy, and the indexical nature of “Word” that girds these special languages. Oral-Formulaic theory, with its stress on structure and formula, stands in contrast to the approach of *Immanent Art*, attentive to the meaning of structures and patterns as well as to the skill of the artificer. Register, performance arena, and linguistic economy imbue the concrete specific with implications of a complex whole. Dell Hymes’ definition of register prepares the reader for Foley’s elucidation of how and why the special registers of verbal arts, generically unique and not to be confused with everyday diction, persist by virtue of their dynamic structure and idiomatic meaning. The poet of verbal arts acquires mastery of the idiom and, as a fluent speaker of it, fully exploits the idiom’s aesthetic potential. The highly-coded poetic register indexes a rich poetic tradition, for example the Anglo Saxon “wordhoard,” that, editorially, may be likened to the action of the resonance chamber of a musical instrument that gives specific timbre and quality to the notes that sound there. The author posits a fundamental principle “Oral Poetry works like language, only more so” (116); the accuracy of this rule is repeatedly born out in the exposition of case studies. Register is a part of the *performance arena*, “the enactment or ritual of oral poetry that creates the place” (116), the locus where poet and audience, well versed in the rules that govern the performance transaction, communicate. *Communicative economy*, the “more so” of Foley’s first law, is enabled by register and performance arena. “Once upon a time,” for example, always connotes something more and something different than its literal temporal denotation. Illustrations of how a referent

indexes antecedents, of how “Words” map pathways to multiple frames of reference in the performance arena, are drawn from South Slavic epic (a woman who is metaphorically termed *kukavica crna* [“black cuckoo”] is, or is soon to be, widowed), epic subgenres (Return Song, Wedding Song, Siege of city Song), and Homeric lexicon (*chlôron deos* [literally, “green fear”] whose idiomatic meaning is “supernaturally induced fear”) as well as the Lament “Word” of *Iliad* 6, lines 405-39. The discussion closes with a review of register, performance arena, and communicative economy. The triad licenses what Foley terms *word-power*, “how words of all kinds engage contexts and mediate communication” (123).

The Sixth “Word”, *A Poor Reader’s Almanac*, offers ten manufactured proverbs about oral poetry. These formulations point to the frame of reference as the meaning, and function in the exposition in analogous fashion as cues that index a frame of reference. The first one, “Oral Poetry Works Like Language, Only More So”, stresses the process of exploiting the attributes of these special languages. The second, “Oral Poetry is a Very Plural Noun”, points to the plurality of genres, contexts, conditions, and factors that constitute dimensions of oral performance and oral poetry world wide. The third proverb, “Performance is the Enabling Event, Tradition Is the Context for That Event”, directs attention to the interpretive signature of shared tradition, the “expressive contract in force” (130); this agreement is illustrated by *tubalica*, a Serbian funeral lament. Performance conveys meaning. The rule-governed flexibility of tradition means that the specifics of a performance depend on event and context for the making and conveying of their meaning. Proverb number four, “The Art of Oral Poetry Emerges through Rather Than in spite of Its Special Language”, stresses that traditional conventions imply a web of meanings communicable only with reference to those conventions. The poet of traditional verbal arts expresses not a string of clichés but a command of the implications that inhere in the “Words”. In other words, this art is possible only in this language. The fifth proverb, “The Best Companion for Reading Oral Poetry is an Unpublished Dictionary”, discusses why standard reference dictionaries are opaque when one wishes to learn the meaning of words from the special lexicon of verbal arts. Clear examples of this point are drawn from South Slavic poetry, as well as from Homer, and from *Beowulf*. The dilemma one confronts is how to acquire fluency in that language. Foley suggests that some fluency may be acquired by making an inventory of a specific lexical item and comparing its instances and what they signal. The sixth proverb, “The Play’s the Thing (and Not the Script)”, makes the analogy that the script is to the play as the text is to the performance. It highlights that the loss of voice, gesture, blocking, set design, costuming, for instance, that deprives the script of the play is akin to the impoverishment of the tradition based text deprived of its performance. Seventh of the proverbs, “Repetition Is the Symptom, Not the Disease”, examines vocabulary, grammar, and syntactic structures in

different genres of verbal arts and shows that occurrences not repetitive but recurrent, iterations are felicitous. The eighth proverb, “Composition and Reception Are Two Sides of the Same Coin”, stresses that traditional poet and audience share native fluency. For the reader who resides outside of the traditional network, it is imperative to restore intelligibility to the text by framing it adequately, hearing it on the appropriate channel, and interpreting correctly the “Words” of the text. The ninth proverb, “Read Both behind and between the Signs”, demonstrates that variation within strict rules is an essential characteristic of oral poetry. Examples illustrating variation within generic limits are drawn from Serbian magical charms, each one a cure unique to a particular individual, time, and place. The tenth proverb, “True Diversity Demands Diversity in Frame of Reference”, reiterates the author’s conviction that the modern literate reader of verbal arts must diversify interpretive assumptions and, to the extent that it is possible to do so, restore performance to the oral-derived text to the extent possible so as to read them on their own terms. The task is worthwhile because, in Foley’s view, records of oral performances offer a way of examining “the roots and present reality of human culture at large” (142).

The Seventh “Word”, *Reading Some Oral Poems*, puts to work theoretical precepts and interpretive tools in the analyses of diverse texts. Analytical methods are coupled with specific test cases in the elaboration of thumbnail readings that demonstrate helpful techniques for reading oral poems of the four previously mentioned categories. Two poems from Mayan Oral Poetry (Oral Performance and Ethnopoetics) illustrate the truth of Foley’s proverbs two, three, and six. A detailed account of an American Slam Poetry event (Voiced Text and Performance theory) illustrates Bauman’s *keys to performance*. Discussion of *The Odyssey* (Voices from the Past and Immanent Art) –analyses of the Return Song pattern known in hundreds of versions in several different languages, of the Lament scene, of phraseology such as, “But come ...,” signaling a shift in oratorical direction or command or an invitation to prayer, and “sweet sleep”, that signals a choice between alternatives– bear out the felicity of Foley’s first, fourth, and ninth proverbs. The Indian *Siri Epic* (Oral Performance and Performance theory), an oral epic whose social and religious compact with the Tulu people is its reason for being, manifests features of Bauman’s *keys to performance* and the author brings to light how the fifth and tenth proverbs operate in the passages reviewed. *La Chanson de Roland* (Voices from the Past and Immanent Art) illuminates *keys to performance* as well as the first and ninth proverbs. His reading of the *planctus* scenes in the poem makes plain why it is incumbent upon readers to learn the idiomatic language of a traditional genre in order to appreciate its implications. The expressive advantages of patterned language, and the interpretive perils of ignoring them, are also made patent in a substantive response to the critical problem, “Roland is worthy and Oliver is wise” (179). The answer to which turns on the requirements of

meaning in the traditional register, the warp of traditional structure and the woof of situation specific contexts (182).

These suggestive analyses establish a practice for using theoretical tools in order to imagine parameters of performance and restore word-power to the texts, thus transforming the reified poem into a performance event. Foley supplies his reader with the necessary tools for formulating different ways to address reading oral poetry. What emerges from the discussion is the inevitable conclusion that each specific poetic example is a channel for focusing a social dynamic, a frame of reference outside of place and time that is vitally concerned with specific places and times. The heterogeneity of Oral Tradition requires that one learn to read oral poems idiomatically, on their own terms. The final section, "A Repertorie for Reading Oral Poetry", reprises Foley's ten proverbs and offers an eleventh: "Without a tradition there is no language; without a speaker there is only silence" (185). Oral poetry is not, finally, a question of individual versus tradition but of synergy.

The Eighth "Word", *An Ecology of South Slavic Oral Poetry*, returns to South Slavic oral traditions: magical charms (*bajanje*), funeral laments (*tubalice*), genealogies (*prianje*), epics (*epske pjesme*), and as yet unclassified forms that show oral poetry to be "a crucial cog in the revolving wheel of culture" (189). Foley's advocacy for recalibrating basic assumptions of what poetry is and the plurality of purposes it carries out, he asserts, endeavors to bring about an ecumenical understanding of the "role of poetry in human culture" (215). The edifice upon which the assertion rests is the result of a well considered design whose architect understands the materials being employed and the needs of the buildings' inhabitants.

The final installment, Post-Script, which includes pre-script, para-script, and post-script, reprises and elaborates upon the mentioned propositions about verbal arts: the ancient and innovative portrayal of oral tradition as a web of pathways, of linkages rather than linked items; the tradition that offers multiple possibilities to the poet at every fork in the road amounts to a linked series of pathways; and, a renewed call for cyber-editions and E-readers. Such adaptations of information technology would, ideally, include an *aparatus fabulosus* comprising ancillary files (hotlinks) leading to background information, audiovisual support providing the dimension of performance, and an interactive tableau that would give prominence to the multiforms of tradition. Such an apparatus would advance our understanding of the interplay between the constituents of tradition, traditional reference, performance, and multiformity as well as make editions faithful to original context in the degree that it is possible to do so. Foley proposes the practical and possible over the absolute impossible. Cyber-editions would, he argues, make accessible the dimension of traditional implication. Constructing a cyber-structure for editions would, and this, in my view, is the central purpose of this fine book, "make us a better audience" if only because "oral poetries use pathways to access multiformity, ecology, and idiom" (225),

and the newest technology can help us to understand how oral tradition works.

A full bibliography and detailed index enhance the scholarly value of this book. Attractively bound and carefully prepared, this volume is an essential addition to research libraries and to libraries of researchers concerned with oral tradition. Directed to the general reader, it offers an accessible introduction to the range of issues raised in the study verbal arts. Advanced students of oral traditions will, nevertheless, find much in its comparative approach that stimulates revisiting precepts about how the range and operation of verbal arts in society. The author is to be congratulated for this outstanding contribution to the study of Oral Tradition.