



Orality and Literacy

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The concept of orality stems from ethnographic descriptions of oral poetry in particular and of oral traditions in general. A foundational work is *The Singer of Tales*, by Albert B. Lord (1960; posthumous new ed. 2000, with new introduction by Mitchell and Nagy). This book documents the pioneering research of Milman Parry on oral traditions in the former Yugoslavia, 1933-35 (collected papers, Parry 1971). Parry died in 1935, at the beginning of his academic career, before he could publish the results of his research on living oral traditions. His publications are limited almost entirely to his earlier research, which was based on the textual evidence of Homeric poetry. Parry was a professor of ancient Greek, seeking new answers to the so-called “Homeric Question,” which centered on the historical circumstances that led to the composition of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Basically, the “question” came down to this: were the Homeric poems composed with or without the aid of writing? Parry’s project, the comparing of Homeric poetry with the living oral traditions of South Slavic heroic poetry, led him to conclude that the Homeric texts were indeed the products of oral composition. Parry’s research was continued after his death by his student, Albert Lord, who conducted his own fieldwork in the former Yugoslavia (especially 1950-51). Lord’s *Singer of Tales* represents the legacy of their combined efforts.

The cumulative work of Parry and Lord is generally considered to be the single most successful solution to the “Homeric Question,” though the debate among Classicists continues concerning the historical contingencies of Homeric composition. The ultimate success of Parry and Lord, however, can best be measured by tracking the applicability {532|533} of their methods to a wide range of literatures and pre-literatures beyond the original focus on ancient Greek literature.

In the case of pre-literatures, Lord’s *Singer of Tales* has become a foundational work for the ethnographic study of oral traditions in all their many varieties, and the range of living oral traditions is world-wide: Scottish ballads, folk-preaching in the American South, Xhosa praise poetry, and the list can be extended to hundreds of other examples (bibliography in Foley 1985; the journal *Oral Tradition*, edited by John M. Foley since 1986, gives an idea of the vast range: see the representative entries in the Bibliography below).

In the case of literatures, the application of the Parry-Lord method to ancient Greek traditions was extended by Lord to medieval traditions in Old English and Old French, and it

has been further extended by other scholars to Old Norse, Middle English, Middle High German, Irish, Welsh, and other medieval European traditions. Even further, the Parry-Lord method has been applied to a vast variety of non-European literatures, including classical Arabic and Persian, Indic, and Chinese traditions (again, see the representative entries in the Bibliography below).

In effect, then, the methodology of Parry and Lord has transcended the “Homeric Question.” Their work has led to an essential idea that goes far beyond the historical context of Homeric poetry or of any other tradition. That idea, as formulated by Parry and Lord, is that oral traditions formed the basis of literary traditions.

This is not to say that such thinking was without precedent. In fact, it did evolve ultimately from debate among Classicists focusing on the “Homeric Question.” Prototypical versions of the idea can be found in the Homeric theorizing of François Hédelin, Abbé d’Aubignac (already as of 1664; posthumous publication 1715), Thomas Blackwell (1735), Giambattista Vico (1744), and Robert Wood (private publication 1767; posthumous edition 1769). The evolving idea reached a decisive phase in the work of two of history’s most influential editors of Homer, Jean Baptiste Gaspard d’Ansse de Villoison (*Prolegomena* to his edition of the codex “Venetus A” of the *Iliad*, 1788) and Friedrich August Wolf (*Prolegomena*, 1795, to his editions of the *Iliad*, 1804, and *Odyssey*, 1807). Both of these Classicists posited a prehistory of oral poetry in the evolution of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The notion of such a preliterate phase in the history of ancient Greek epic is also at work in the 1802 *Iliad* commentary of another major figure in the Classics, Christian Gottlob Heyne. The impact of such notions encouraged a romantic view of oral poetry, as exemplified most prominently by Johann Gottfried Herder, who compared the preliterate phases of Homeric poetry with Germanic folk traditions (*Homer, ein Günstling der Zeit*, 1795). Romantic views of oral poetry led to the creation of literary folkloristic syntheses like Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* (1849; first ed. 1835), based on genuine Finnish oral traditions. The romantic literary appropriation of oral traditions could easily lead to abuses: some such literary productions were of dubious ethnographic value, as in the case of James Macpherson’s re-creations of Scottish highlands folklore in *The Complete Works of Ossian* (1765).

Given all these precedents, we may well ask: why, then, is it Parry and Lord who are primarily credited with the definitive formulation of the general idea that oral traditions formed the basis of literary traditions? The answer is straightforward: Parry and Lord were the first to perfect a systematic way of comparing the internal evidence of living oral traditions, as observed in their “fieldwork,” with the internal evidence of literary traditions. It is primarily their methodology that we see reflected in the ongoing academic usage of such terms as orality and oral theory. (On the pitfalls of using the term oral theory, see Nagy 1996.19-20).

The systematic comparatism of Parry and Lord required rigorous empiricism in analyzing the internal evidence of the living oral traditions - in their case, the South Slavic evidence - which was to be compared with the textual evidence of Homer. To be sure, there have also been other models of internal analysis: an outstanding example is the ethnographic research of Matija Murko on the epics of South Slavic Muslim peoples in the regions of Bosnia and Hercegovina (1913; see especially Lord 1960.280-281n1). Another distinguished forerunner was Wilhelm Radloff, who investigated the Kara Kirghiz oral {533|534} poetic traditions of Central Asia (1887; see Lord 1960.281n4). Such projects, however, were primarily descriptive, not comparative. In the case of Central Asian epics, for example, the systematic application of comparative methodology, as evident in the work of Karl Reichl (2000), is founded directly on the work of Parry and Lord.

What primarily distinguishes Parry and Lord from their predecessors, then, is their development of a systematic comparative approach to the study of oral traditions. The point of departure for their comparative work, which happened to be primarily the Muslim epic traditions of the former Yugoslavia, gave them an opportunity to test the living interactions of oral and literary traditions. They observed that the prestige of writing as a technology, and of the culture of literacy that it fostered, tended to destabilize the culture of oral traditions - in the historical context that they were studying. What they observed, however, was strictly a point of comparison with other possible test cases, not some kind of universalizing formulation (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiii; *pace* Finnegan 1976). For example, Lord himself makes it clear in his later work that there exist many cultures where literary traditions do not cause the destabilization of oral traditions and can even coexist with them (Lord 1991; see also especially Lord 1986b). In general, the textualization or *Verschriftung* of any given oral tradition needs to be distinguished from *Verschriftlichung* - that is, from the evolution of any given culture of literacy, any given *Schriftlichkeit* (Oesterreicher 1993).

For Parry and Lord, the opposition of literacy and orality - of *Schriftlichkeit* and *Mündlichkeit* - is a cultural variable, not a universal. Moreover, their fieldwork experiments led them to think of literacy and orality as cognitive variables as well (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiv).

Moreover, just as orality defies universalization, so also does literacy. The mechanics and even the concepts of reading and writing vary from culture to culture (Nagy 1998; cf. Svenbro 1993). A striking case in point is the cultural variability of such phenomena as *scriptio continua* and “silent reading” (Nagy 2000, Gavrillov 1997).

For Parry and Lord, the histories of literary and oral traditions, of literatures and pre-literatures, were interrelated. To underline his observation that the mechanics and esthetics of oral and literary traditions are historically linked, Lord would even speak of “oral literature” (see Lord 1995, especially chapter 8). Further, Lord developed the comparative study of oral and literary traditions into a new branch of Comparative Literature (Guillén 1993.173-179). It is

no accident that Lord's *Singer of Tales* was originally published in a Comparative Literature monograph series, and that the author of the Preface of 1960 was Harry Levin, who at the time figured as the *doyen* of the new field of Comparative Literature - and who had actually taken part in Lord's thesis defense (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xvii).

Despite this stance of Parry and Lord, it has been claimed - many times and in many ways - that the Parry-Lord "theory" is founded on a hard-and-fast distinction between orality and literacy. These claims stem from unfamiliarity with the ethnographic dimension of Parry's and Lord's work, and, more generally, from ignorance about the observable mechanics and aesthetics of oral traditions. Such unfamiliarity fuels prejudices, as reflected in the criticism directed at Lord for even attempting to undertake a comparison of South Slavic oral traditions with the literary traditions represented by the high cultures of the Classical and medieval civilizations of Western Europe. The implicit presupposition, that oral traditions are inferior to the esthetic standards of Western literature, is tied to romanticized notions about distinctions between literacy and orality (Mitchell and Nagy 2000.xiv):

Much of this kind of criticism, as Lord documents in his later books [1991 and 1995], has been shaped also by an overall ignorance of the historical facts concerning literacy and its cultural implications in the Balkans. Besides this additional obstacle, there is yet another closely related one: many Western scholars romanticize literacy itself as if it were some kind of uniform and even universal phenomenon - exempt from the historical contingencies of cultural and even cognitive variations. Such romanticism, combined with an ignorance of the ideological implications of literacy in the South Slavic world, have led to a variety of deadly prejudices against any and all kinds of oral traditions. In some cases, these prejudices have gone hand in hand with a resolute {534|535} blindness to the potential ideological agenda of literacy in its historical contexts.

Thus the danger of romanticism is two-sided: much as some humanists of the nineteenth century romanticized oral tradition as if it were some kind of universal phenomenon in and of itself, humanists today may be tempted to romanticize literacy as the key to "literature," often equated with "high" culture (on empirical approaches to distinctions between "high" and "low" culture, as occasionally formalized in distinctions between oral and written traditions, see Bausinger 1980).

And yet, the only universal distinction between oral and literary traditions is the historical anteriority of the first to the second. Beyond this obvious observation, it is pointless to insist on any universalizing definitions for the "oral" of "oral tradition." "Oral tradition" and "oral poetry" are terms that depend on the concepts of "written tradition" and "written poetry." In cultures that do not depend on the technology of writing, the concept of orality is meaningless (Lord 1995.105n26). From the standpoint of comparative ethnography, "Written is

not something that is not oral; rather it is something in addition to being oral, and that additional something varies from society to society” (Nagy 1990.8). The absence of this technology has nothing to do with whether there can or cannot be poetics or rhetoric. Poetics and rhetoric exist without writing.

A common misconception about oral traditions is that they are marked by a lack of organization, cohesiveness, unity. The problem here, again, is a general unfamiliarity with the ethnographic evidence from living oral traditions, which can be used to document a wide variety of poetics and rhetoric (see especially Lord 1995). The verbal art or *Kunstsprache* of oral traditions can reach levels of virtuosity that are indirectly or sometimes even directly comparable to what is admired in the classics of script and print cultures. In some cultural contexts, the *Kunstsprache* of oral traditions can be even more precise than that of counterparts in literary traditions, because the genres of oral poetics and rhetoric tend to be more regularly observed (Smith 1974, Ben Amos 1976, Slatkin 1987). In the history of literature, genres can become irregular through a striving for individual greatness: if we follow the perspective of Benedetto Croce (1902), a literary work is great because it defies genres, because it is *sui generis*.

By contrast, the forms of genres in oral traditions are sustained by the forms of everyday speech in everyday life. Thus the *Kunstsprache* of oral tradition allows its participants to “connect,” even in modern times (Martin 1993.227): “Modern hearers of a traditional epic in cultures where the song making survives are observed to comment appreciatively on the smallest verbal changes, not in the way a three-year-old demands the exact words of a bedtime text, but with a full knowledge of the dozens of ways the teller could have spun out a line at a given point in the narrative. In a living oral tradition, people are exposed to verbal art constantly, not just on specific entertainment occasions, which can happen every night in certain seasons. When they work, eat, drink, and do other social small-group activities, myth, song, and saying are always woven into their talk. Consequently, it is not inaccurate to describe them as bilingual, fluent in their natural language but also in the *Kunstsprache* of their local verbal art forms.”

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