



# A personal checklist of memorable wordings in Albert B. Lord's The Singer of Tales

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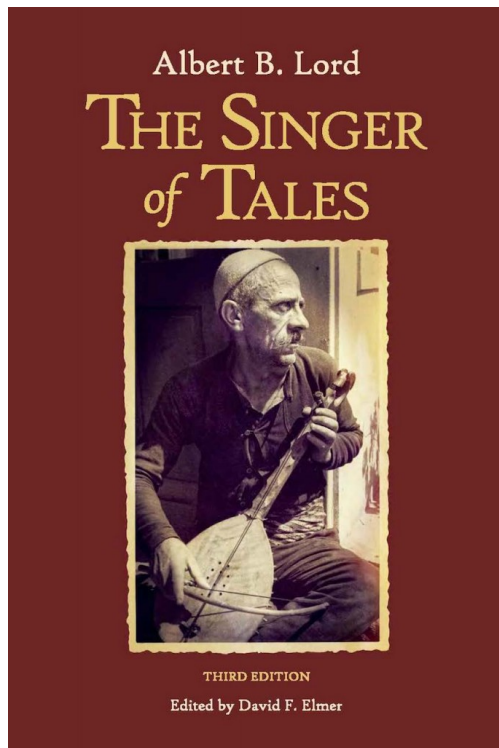
## A personal checklist of memorable wordings in Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*

April 5, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2019.04.05 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. To celebrate, in my own personal way, the publication of a third edition of Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, edited by David F. Elmer (2019), I have put together in the present posting a checklist of wordings I have found to be particularly memorable in the course of my many re-readings of the book over so many years. In future postings, I plan to add relevant annotations to these wordings of Lord.



To situate the wordings that I list below, I use two sets of page-numbers, separated from each other by a diagonal line (/). The first set of numbers, to the left of each diagonal line, indicates the page as found in the third printed version edited by David F. Elmer (2019), while the second set, to the right, indicates the corresponding page as found in the second printed version, which had been edited, with introduction, by Stephen M. Mitchell and myself (2000). The second edition, which appeared forty years after the first edition (1960) and had the same page-breaks as did the first, is now out of print. The third edition (2019), which has its own page-breaks, conveniently indicates the original page-breaks for Lord's text and for the Mitchell-Nagy introduction to the second edition. These original page-breaks are also indicated in an online version of the second edition, the URN for which is [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS\\_LordA.The\\_Singer\\_of\\_Tales.2000](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_LordA.The_Singer_of_Tales.2000). (This online version has rescued the audio and video files from the compact disc that had originally been shrink-wrapped and attached to the inside of the back cover for the printed second edition.)

Here, then, is my personal checklist of some of Lord's wordings, sometimes directly quoted and at other times merely paraphrased:

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4 / 4... definition of formula, following Milman Parry: "By formula I mean 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'." Note also Lord's definition of "theme" on this page. Also on this page: "...every performance is a separate song."

5 / 5... "What is important is not the oral performance but rather the composition during oral performance." Also, this page is where the idea of "fixed text" is first mentioned.

13 / 13... "An oral poem is not composed for but in performance." Same page: "... we are not in the habit of thinking of the performer as a composer."

17 / 17... "One of the reasons also why different singings of the same song by the same man vary most in their endings is that the end of a song is sung less often by the singer."

19 / 19... About... "...the information which we heard indirectly concerning the blind singer *Ćor Huso*..."

20 / 20... "It is a great pity, of course, that someone did not collect songs from him [= *Ćor Huso*] a couple of generations ago, but he seems to have escaped the attention of collectors—just why would be interesting to know."

21 / 21... About three stages of learning for the singer: (A) period of listening and absorbing; (B) period of application; (C) period of singing before a critical audience

27 / 27... "word for word and line for line"

29 / 29... "And the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it."

31 / 30... On the "method" of focusing on "repetitions"... "Yet it seems to me that in confining ourselves to this method we tend to obscure the dynamic life of the repeated phrases and to lose an awareness of how and why they came into being."

32 / 31... "For the singing we hear today, like the everyday speech around us, goes back in a direct and long series of singings to a beginning which, no matter how difficult it may be to conceive, we must attempt to grasp, because otherwise we shall miss an integral part of the meaning of the traditional formula."

33 / 32... "The fact of narrative song is around him [= the singer] from birth; the technique of it is the possession of his elders, and he falls heir to it. Yet in a real sense he does recapitulate the experiences of the generations before him stretching back to the distant past. From meter and music he absorbs in his earliest years the rhythms of epic, even as he absorbs the rhythms of speech itself and in a larger sense of the life about him. He learns empirically the length of phrase, the partial cadences, the full stops." Same page... "Basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody have become his possession, and in him the tradition begins to reproduce itself."

34 / 33... "Only in performance can the formula exist and have clear definition." Same page... "Usually the rhythms and melodies that the youth learns at this period of initial specific application will stay with him the rest of his life."

36 / 35... "substitution system"

36–37 / 35... "Again we may turn to language itself as a useful parallel."

37 / 36... "...the 'grammar' of the poetry"

38 / 37... "at least one oft-repeated melodic pattern for sustained narrative" ...

42 / 38... "the feeling for the mid-line break is very real"

44 / 42... On assonance as a factor in choices of alternative wording.

44 / 43... "The remembered phrase may have been a formula in the other singer's songs, but it is not a formula for our singer until its regular use in his songs is established."

47 / 45... On invocations... Nagy connects with what is said further at pp. 69–70 / 66–67.

47–50 / 46–48... On the logical outcome of underlining "repetitions" if you have a potentially infinite input...

49 / 47... "There is nothing in the poem that is not formulaic."

47–48 / 49... On numbers of themes, numbers of formulas...

51 and following / 50 and following... On the principle of "thrift" or "economy"...

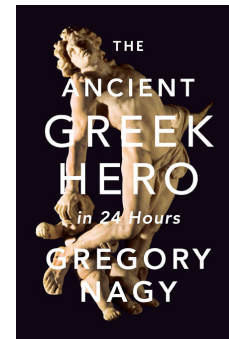
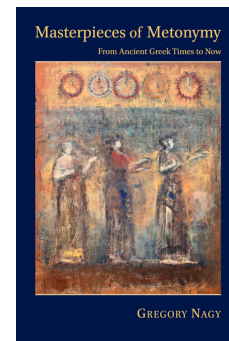
52 / 51... On other factors, like chiasmus, etc., that determine choices of wording...

55 / 53... On thrift vs. "acoustical context"...

56 / 54... "The need for the 'next' line is upon him even before he utters the final syllable of a line." How this "need" relates to questions of enjambment.

58 / 55–56... On alliteration, assonance, etc. ...

59 / 57... On a zigzag effect (Nagy compares the idea of iconicity)...



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68 / 65... One of the most important pages in the whole book! A favorite sentence for me: "It is certainly possible that a formula that entered the poetry because its acoustic patterns emphasized by repetition a potent word or idea was kept after the peculiar potency which it symbolized and which one might say it even was intended to make effective was lost—kept because the fragrance of its past importance still clung vaguely to it and kept also because it was now useful in composition."

68 / 65–66... On the "pathetic fallacy"...

68–69 / 65–66... On the "drunken tavern" syndrome... (Nagy introduces related ideas: transferred epithet, metonymy, etc.)

69 / 67... A precious general statement by Lord on the "ritual" background!

69–70 / 66–67... On invocations of goddesses, and how the use of these invocations may be related to the use of epithets.

100 / 94... A most valuable formulation... "In a traditional poem, therefore, there is a pull in two directions: one is toward the song being sung and the other is toward the previous uses of the same theme."

103 / 97... Another most valuable formulation: "The habit is hidden, but felt."

107 / 101... "...we cannot correctly speak of a 'variant,' since there is no 'original' to be varied!"

108 / 102... On the pitfalls of searching for "the original"...

127 / 119–120... On the idea of "multiform"...

128 / 120... "Multiformity is essentially conservative."

158 / 147... "He is the tradition."

160–161 / 150... How writing per se cannot nail down an oral tradition.

164 / 153... Homer and the "Cycle"...

164 and following / 153 and following... prototypes of a dictation theory

169 and following / 158 and following... Lord chooses to analyze the Odyssey before analyzing the Iliad.

194 and following / 181 and following... On the poetics of the "return" narratives...

198 and following / 186 and following... the pattern of "WDR" = withdrawal, devastation, return.

206 / 195... On Patroklos as the "double" of Achilles

211 and following / 198 and following ... "medieval epic" (such as Beowulf, Roland, Digenis): problems with reapplying concepts of "formula," etc.

Tags: [Albert Lord](#), [formula](#), [Milman Parry](#), [performance](#), [The Singer of Tales](#)

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