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Remembering John Miles Foley

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Abstract: The tremendous impact of John Miles Foley’s contributions to oral tradition research can be attributed in large part to the interconnectedness of his teaching, scholarship, and service to the many and varied academic communities to which he belonged. Drawing representative examples from the three cultural traditions with which he worked the most closely—Old English, Ancient Greek, and South Slavic—this article explores a few of the many ways that John Foley brought diverse approaches and individuals into productive and meaningful dialogue. Special attention is given to the concepts of traditional referentiality, performance arena, and register.

Keywords: John Miles Foley, oral tradition, Old English, Ancient Greek, South Slavic

John Miles Foley often compared his work as a scholar and teacher of oral traditions to a journey. He described Greek bards as leading audiences “through the maze of traditional story” (1998: 20). In the Pathways Project, which he creatively produced as both an interactive website and a printed book (Foley, 2012), he explored the “thought technologies” of oral tradition and electronic communication as complex navigation systems with infinitely variable routes. And, speaking of own his path as a scholar, he wrote in *Immanent Art* that “long journeys are . . . the most pleasant and the most rewarding” (1991: ix). In this spirit of travel, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for being invited to the International Congress on the Poetics of Orality Conference in Morelia and asked to share my perspectives on John Foley’s life as a teacher and scholar. It has been a joy and an honor to celebrate the journey of John Miles Foley and the many pathways that he opened for all of us in our scholarship, our teaching, and our collaborative work with one another.

The sheer volume of work that John Miles Foley produced is staggering—eight single-authored books, eleven edited collections, and almost two hundred articles and shorter pieces, which together provide methodologies for analysis that have been applied

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across countless cultural and linguistic traditions. But the depth of John Foley's impact resulted just as much from personal interactions. Much of the ground-breaking work he did in building bridges across disciplines occurred not in lecture halls, as numerous colleagues have noted, but during informal or chance conversations that often led to long-standing relationships and collaborations.

In a poignant introduction to a co-authored essay published after John's death (Foley and Gejin, 2012), colleague and long-time friend Chao Gejin describes the unassuming manner that characterized John Foley's collaborative endeavors:

[W]e started to work on this piece together two or three afternoons each week [...] sitting side by side, composing paragraph by paragraph, and incorporating examples and scholarship from our respective experiences and backgrounds. We moved forward steadily and eventually fulfilled our plan (381).

And in dedicating his most recent book to John Foley's memory, Werner Kelber offers additional compelling testimony to the genuine friendship that John Foley shared with colleagues: "I have dedicated these essays to the late John Miles Foley, a shining light in the humanities, and a very dear friend of mine" (2013: 9).

Many of John Foley's deeply devoted students shared remembrances for his memorial service in May, 2012, including the following words from Amy Elifrits, a former graduate student at the University of Missouri, where John taught for more than thirty years:

It was a remarkable experience, to take a class on oral tradition and a Homer seminar from one of the world's leading scholars, though you would never really know it from his humble manner. He wanted the information and ideas of his classes to be accessible to all, to be thought-provoking for you wherever you were in your study of Homer or oral tradition. The root of the word 'education' in Latin means 'to lead out.' And that is what Dr. Foley did patiently, with that dry humor and slow smile, with that distinct nod when a correct answer was offered, with quiet enthusiasm, with genuine care for his students – he led out what he already saw inside of us.

The fond acknowledgements of Tom DuBois, who attended one of John Foley's NEH Summer Seminars on oral literature, attest to the potential of even the most casual exchanges in leading to fruitful and illuminating scholarship (DuBois, 2006):

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I owe a special debt of gratitude to John Miles Foley. . . . I remember fondly sharing with John my first attempts at diagramming my ideas about lyric interpretation, drawn with my young son's crayons on a hot afternoon. In the years since, John has remained solidly enthusiastic and supportive of the project. I am delighted that this book appears in his series with the University of Notre Dame Press (VII).

John Foley himself was quick to credit his own teachers with fostering his early work. For a symposium on orality, it seems most appropriate to let John's own words from an oral exchange speak for themselves. Below is a transcript of approximately 90 seconds from an interview where he explains how he first began his journey as a scholar of oral traditions and the teachers who first influenced him (Roth, 2010):

After a detour in undergraduate school where my family required that I major in physics, math, and chemistry, then finally getting to graduate school, being able to do what I always wanted to do, then I had a teacher, had two teachers actually, who introduced me to oral tradition, first in Old English—Anglo-Saxon before, say, 1100 in English tradition—Robert Creed, who used to perform *Beowulf* for us every day. I don't mean read it aloud. He would perform it. And so I got an idea of what it was like. This wasn't just a text over there. This was something living from way back when, clearly before the year 1000.

John goes on to explain how his interests became more comparative, with interests expanding into Greek and South Slavic:

Then I had a Greek teacher, Anne Lebeck, who did something similar with Homer and encouraged us to understand that. But then understanding Old English, long-gone, and Greek, long -one, was good for comparison but limited in value to modern times because I had no modern analogue. So that's when I looked for a way to study South Slavic, the language of the former Yugoslavia—the traditions I should say, oral traditions of the former Yugoslavia—and in that moment that I like not to remember too much, I had the temerity to call a professor of anthropology I had never met at home and ask him if he would like to teach me the language because I knew from the roster of the linguistics club that he knew the language. He said, “no I don't want to, but my wife might.” And there began a partnership that still continues. So, that's how the South Slavic got into it. We did fieldwork together. We lived in the village for quite a long time and recorded things, learning to understand it, a gradual process.

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Conveying far more than a resume of research interests, John Foley's personal account here conveys how, from the very beginning of his studies, his interests in oral tradition were always more than academic to him, built on strong bonds and relationships with mentors and colleagues.

Building on the work of these and other teachers and scholars, John Foley shifted the direction of work in oral tradition in many important ways. Prior to Foley's contributions to the field of oral formulaic theory, the primary focus—as exemplified in Albert Lord's *Singer of Tales* (1960)—had lain in what a *singer* does, on the side of composition. Foley added the aspect of *performance*, even in the very title of his book, *Singer of Tales in Performance* (1995). Oral formulaic theory, as laid out first by the Homerist Milman Parry and advanced by his student Albert Lord, had offered a way to explain how oral singers—specifically singers in the former Yugoslavia—could hold poems the length of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* in memory without the technology of writing—through repeated patterns, rather than through verbatim memorization.

As Foley furthered the work begun by Lord and Parry, he insisted on the *diversity* of oral tradition across genres and across cultures, and he constantly cautioned against using any single model for analysis. He encouraged dialogue across diverse fields—such as literature, folklore, anthropology, and classical studies. And he located meaningful and productive points of connection among various approaches in addition to Lord and Parry's work (1969), such as Richard Bauman's analysis of performance (1977), Walter Ong's insights into orality and literacy (1982), and Dennis Tedlock's ground-breaking work in ethnopoetics (1999). By bringing such methodologies into more direct dialogue with one another, John Foley pioneered a new approach to oral and oral-derived poetry that left us a methodology and vocabulary for understanding and appreciating oral traditional texts across various genres and traditions worldwide—on their *own* terms.

I would like to share now a few concepts that have been especially influential on subsequent scholarship across fields, drawing examples from the three traditions that formed the core of much of John's comparative work: Old English (his first field of study); ancient Greek; and South Slavic. I'll start, as seems logical, with a beginning, the opening lines of *Beowulf*:

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“**Lo, we** have **heard** the valor of the Spear-Danes,
of the people-kings in days of yore,
how these nobles performed glory.” (1-3, trans. Foley, 1991: 219)

“**Hwæt, We** Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcýninga þrym **gefrunon**,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.” (ed. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, 2008)

In what he called “the *hwæt* paradigm,” Foley identified a group of conventions that mark numerous Old English poems in the heroic style (1991: 214-23). Common to all instances of this pattern is the interjection *hwæt*, usually translated in modern English as “lo” or “listen.” Together with *hwæt*, Foley observed, we “customarily find a verb of hearing or speaking” (215), in this case *gefrunon* (line 2), which means “we heard.” The paradigm also includes a first person identification of the speaker, either “we” or “I,” in this case “we.” While in isolation, these words “what,” “heard,” and “we” would not evoke any particular context, together and in this opening position, they work metonymically to activate a very specific register, that is, “ways of speaking or writing that are linked to specific social situations” (Foley, 2002:26). The process Foley describes here for Old English heroic verse is similar to the way that “once upon a time” prepares many English and American children to expect a fairy tale. In Foley’s view, these opening lines lead an audience to expect valiant and heroic deeds, expectations that the poem more than fulfills. Over the course of *Beowulf*, the poem’s central hero defeats the monster Grendel, Grendel’s even more monstrous mother, and dies himself while defeating a dragon who has laid his kingdom waste.

But John Foley did more than simply identify such patterns. He was always interested in exploring the creative and innovative possibilities any such pattern left to a skilled singer’s disposal, and his methodology helps us find meaning in oral poetry in surprising places. This *hwæt* paradigm makes perfect logical sense in the epic *Beowulf*, here setting us up for the glory of the Danes; but it sometimes indexes meaning in unexpected ways. Foley identifies no fewer than nine such occurrences of what he calls this “powerful metonymic switch” (1991: 215). For Foley, any given instance of a traditional pattern metonymically invoked the entire tradition behind it, the part for the whole.

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As an example, the Christian hagiography *Andreas* follows the life of St. Andrew, his confrontation of the Mermedonians, and his rescue of St. Matthew. In a radical and meaningful departure from its Latin and Greek analogues, the Old English poem activates the register of Anglo-Saxon heroic verse, through the *hwæt* paradigm:

“**Listen** , **we** have **heard** in days of old
of twelve renowned heroes under the stars,
thanes of the chieftain.” (trans., Foley, 1991: 215)
“**Hwæt! We gefrunan** on fyrndagum
twelfe under tunglum tireadige hæleð,
þeodnes þegnas.”

In the opening line, we see the *hwæt*, the first person pronoun, and the verb of hearing. Together, these elements function as a traditional metonym, activating the register of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. And within this specialized register, Andrew and the other apostles become no less than heroic thanes of Christ, just as noble and powerful as the valiant warriors who accompanied Beowulf in the epic tradition.

The second aspect I’d like to share from Foley’s work involves a pattern of lament found in ancient Greek epic following the deaths of fallen warriors. Building on the work of Margaret Alexiou (1974), Foley examined the three-part structure typifying women’s laments for slain warriors in terms of a *typical scene* (1991: 168-74). In this pattern, the bereaved woman first addresses the slain warrior directly, indicating that he has died or “fallen”; then provides a narrative of personal history and future consequences for the mourner herself; and concludes with a re-address to the warrior for a final intimacy. Not surprisingly, given the numbers of deaths in the *Iliad*, this is a recurrent pattern.

A fairly typical example occurs when Briseus mourns Patroklos in Book 19 (lines 287-300). She addresses him as follows:

“Patroklos, far from most pleasing to my heart in its sorrows,
I left you here alive . . .
but now I come back, lord of the people, to find you have fallen.” (trans.,
Foley, 1991: 169)

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Next, she shares the narrative of her husband's own death, her subsequent bondage to Achilles', and Patroklos's promise to help her become Achilles' wife, rather than slave:

“So evil in my life takes over from evil forever. . . .
And yet you would not let me. . .
sorrow, but said you would make me godlike Achilleus's
wedded lawful wife. . . .”

Last, her re-address and final intimacy: “Therefore I weep your death without ceasing. You were kind always.”

The lament of the Trojan women follows the same pattern, as in Andromache's heart-wrenching lament of Hector, after he has been slain by Achilles in Book 22 (trans. Foley, 1991: 172). First, she addresses him directly and declares him fallen: “My husband, you were lost young from life. . . .”

Then follow the consequences of his death for their son: “I think [Astyanax] will never come of age, for before then head to heel this city will be sacked, for you, its defender, are gone. . . .”

This narrative continues to forecast her own enslavement and ends, predictably, with a closing address and final intimacy: “[B]ut for me, passing all others is left the bitterness and the pain. . . , shedding tears through nights and days.”

But not all of the laments are so predictably employed. And whenever there was unexpected occurrence of a traditional pattern, John Foley used his creative methodology to resolve seeming contradictions and seek deeper meanings. As an interpretive tool for understanding recurrent patterns in all their myriad—and sometimes surprising—variation, he developed the concept of *traditional referentiality*. In his words, traditional referentiality “entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text” (1991: 7). In *How to Read an Oral Poem*, he compared this phenomenon to internet links: “Like a keyword in a book index or a URL on the Internet, they [traditional patterns] furnish a pathway—quick and

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immediate—to information that is otherwise difficult or impossible to come by” (2002: 76).

Returning to the *Iliad*, it is this larger and “echoic” context that gives profound meaning to a speech that Andromache makes to the living Hector much earlier, in Book 6. With their infant son Astyanax on her lap between, Andromache tearfully and emotionally begs Hector not to go to battle. This scene is utterly heart-breaking in itself, but what Foley shows is that she actually casts her plea in the form of a traditional lament for a slain warrior, with her living husband right in front of her—as though he were already dead (trans. Foley, 1999: 190-91):

“Andromache stood close beside him, letting her tears fall,
and clung to his hand and called him by name and spoke to him.”

In typical lament form, she addresses him and forecasts his fate as fallen:

“Strange one, your own great strength will be your death. . .
for presently the Achaeans, gathering together,
will set upon you and kill you. . . .”

In the narrative portion of this anachronistic lament, she implies the consequences for herself, noting that no one will be left to protect her:

“For me it would be far better
to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other
consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny –
only grief; since I have no father, and no honored mother.
. . .
and they who were my seven brothers in the great house
all went upon a single day down into the house of the death god. . . .”

And she concludes her speech with a final redress and intimacy:

“Hektor, . . . But come now take pity on me, stay here on the rampart,
that you may not leave your son an orphan, your wife a widow.”

For an audience aware of the lament structure, this passage transforms the scene of

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an understandably worried wife into a powerful and unequivocal forecasting of her husband's death, as well as the demise of herself and their son—which, of course, does indeed come to pass exactly as the traditional structure of this passage led us to expect.

Let us turn now from Andromache's sadness to a happier aspect of John Foley's work, in the healing tradition of Serbian charms. In part through his work with these charms, Foley demonstrated that the specialized meaning of a given paradigm or pattern must occur within a recognizable context, what he called the "performance arena." "In simplest terms," Foley stated, "the performance arena designates the locus where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power" (1995: 47).

In the instance of the Serbian charms as analyzed by Foley (1995: 99-135), the performance arena is more than a physical space and is established by much more than the words alone. The words, recited by a healer, or *bajalice*, in octo-syllabic meter, must be intoned softly, rapidly, and rhythmically, without instrumental melody, as can be heard in John Foley's own field-work recording. Following a brief exchange with her daughter and grandson present, it is possible to hear, unquestionably, the *bajalice* enter into the performance arena of healing charm and the silence that falls on the group when she does so.

Foley's analysis of this performance demonstrates that once this performance arena has been established, the healing words themselves can vary considerably, within certain, traditionally-determined limits, as can be seen through comparison of two performances of the Serbian charm discussed earlier, both recorded during John Foley's fieldwork in 1975. These two versions were performed by the same healer only a week apart and for the same audience. Yet, there is still significant variation and, as Foley compellingly demonstrated, neither is more "correct" or "authentic" than the other.

The incantation of this charm against a skin disease opens with the announcement of a horse and rider coming to take the disease away. The healer's incantation then continues,

"He lifts out the disease immediately,
He carries it off and carries it away,
Across the sea without delay—

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Where the cat doesn't meow,
Where the pig doesn't grunt,
Where the sheep don't bleat
Where the goats don't low,
Where the priest doesn't come,
Where the cross isn't borne..." (trans., Foley, 1995: 119-20)

But a week later, when she performs the same charm, four additional lines are included between the lines involving goats and priests:

"Where the horse doesn't neigh,
Where the chick doesn't peep,
Where the rooster doesn't crow,
Where the hen doesn't cackle."

This phenomenon is what Foley referred to as the "variation within limits" that naturally occurs in living, dynamic oral traditions. This particular example also reminds us that oral poetry can be modified even in the moment of performance in a way that written texts cannot, as the healer interrupts herself mid-line: "Where the horse . . . priest doesn't come."

John Foley's own performance arena was infinitely variable. In his position at the University of Missouri, where he taught from 1979 through 2012, he was on the faculty of four different departments: English, Classical Studies, Anthropology, and Germanic and Slavic Languages. He worked with scholars in Finland, the Basque region, Mexico, and South America, as well as slam poets as close to home as New York City. He also established multiple book series, such as the Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition series. Hispanic studies was a priority for John Foley. The Lord series, for instance, included a *Trilingual Anthology of Guatemalan Oral Tradition* by Maria Cristina Canales and Jane Frances Morrissey (1996), an edited collection on *Oral Tradition and Hispanic Literature* in honor of Samuel Armistead (Caspi, 1995), and Ruth Webber's *Hispanic Balladry Today* (1989). In these and many ways, he set up practical and long-lasting ways for us to establish communication with one another and to

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collaborate across disciplines with colleagues around the world.

Bonnie Irwin, who specializes in medieval Spanish and Arabic traditions, expressed the gratitude that I know many of us still feel:

Among the many things that were so remarkable about John, the one that stands out is the way he seemingly effortlessly created a community of scholars. We all have had a relationship with him, but also with one another, as our careers have intersected in conferences, classes, anthologies, and in various online fora. Just as those in the Agora, we meet, share ideas, and grow the discipline he so loved.

One of the earliest and most enduring ways he forged such lasting connections was in founding the journal *Oral Tradition*. From its very inception, he envisioned it as a space for connections that weren't yet being made—maybe couldn't even have been imagined—elsewhere at the time. Here are some words from his very first editorial column in January 1986:

Tradition demands that an editor of a new scholarly journal perform the ritual gesture of justifying the birth of the new academic child. . . . Nowhere . . . have we found a journal devoted exclusively to the study of oral tradition in its many forms, nowhere a single, central periodical through which scholars in this wide variety of specialties might communicate. . . . We invite all members of the community interested in studies in oral tradition to join this enterprise.

And he did just that for more than 25 years. He established an editorial board with specialists from many disciplines and from all over the world, and with their help edited volumes covering a wide range of diverse oral traditions, including numerous articles in Hispanic traditions, beginning with the very first volume in 1986 (Webber).

Through these and other foundations that he laid, John Foley continues to bring radically diverse individuals and methodologies into meaningful and mutually enriching dialogue. As Joseph Nagy eloquently observed in a tribute published only days before John's death, John Foley brought people together:

Criss-crossing the globe in his academic travels, contributing his research and ideas to fora dizzying in the variety of their locations and disciplinary foci, and creating an international journal that showcases the work of scholars so diverse that nowhere else would one expect to find their names listed in the same table of contents, John has laid the foundation for a network binding together a vast community of scholars (2012: 252).

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And of course the conference in Morelia has provided a beautiful opportunity to continue the kind of conversations he began.

Whether he was home or journeying abroad, John Miles Foley consistently sought creative ways to open up knowledge, share ideas, and bring new individuals into the conversation. Very early in his career, John said of his own mentors: “it is the light of their learning that was kindled and burns yet within us” (1983: 7). It is clear that the light of his ideas continues to illuminate new pathways for us all as we continue to explore the fascinating richness and diversity of oral poetry around the world.

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