

The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology

John Miles Foley

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. xv + 170pp.

\$35.00 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

Reviewer: Michael G. Kenny
Simon Fraser University

This book recounts the evolution of the theory of oral composition, as developed by Milman Parry and expanded by his student, Albert Lord, into an analytically powerful and broadly influential method for understanding oral literary forms. Having begun with armchair studies of Homeric epic, Parry came to realize that the analysis of still extant traditions of oral epic poetry could cast much light on early classical literature and, most particularly, on the vexing question of whether 'Homer' himself was a literate or oral poet. Accordingly Parry, and then Lord, undertook complex studies of South Slavic epic in Yugoslavia which – in addition to generating a collection of disc-recorded texts still available for use at Harvard – led to the conclusion, on comparative grounds, that Homer was indeed an oral bard and, further, that other early European literary traditions have similar roots.

The proposition which underwrites this hypothesis is that Homer contains many formulaic elements, such as the epithets associated with the various gods, which are easily transposable into differing poetical contexts according to the metrical requirements of the line. Parry supposed that this suited the requirements of the bard in spontaneously fashioning narratives according to the circumstances of the recitation. Parry and Lord found a supposition derived from the internal evidence of Homeric epic ethnographically confirmed in Yugoslavia, and hence the empirical persuasiveness of their theory. As Lord's thought developed he came to see that, in addition to these oral "formulae," there are also "themes" – stories within stories, as it were, "groupings of ideas rather than of words" (p. 42) – which can be inserted in the same way as phrases and epithets. Thus the Parry-Lord theory has grown in complexity and expanded in range of application, and Foley documents the scholarly debates which have arisen as it did so, about, among other things, whether the proper unit of analysis should be formula, theme or overall mythic structure.

According to the "Oral-Formulaic Theory," the oral bard creates his art within the constraints of traditional poetics, phraseology and theme. This is illustrated by Lord's assertion that, though such narratives seem to have historical content, in fact "their matrix is myth and not history; for when history does have an influence on the stories it is, at first at least, history that is changed, not the stories" (p. 47). However, though structure constrains, it does not determine; the oral artist remains an individual creative force, a player of extemporaneous variations.

Foley documents the emergence of the Parry-Lord hypothesis and its fullest expression in Lord's now classic work, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard University Press, 1960); he then proceeds to show how subsequent work on oral tradition has been influenced by Parry and Lord and he discusses the general directions in which such work has tended and may go in the future. In doing so Foley shows the effects this view has had on contemporary understanding of European literatures and

those of the world in general. He concludes with a call for greater methodological refinement and analytical precision in the future, and he hopes that the journal *Oral Tradition*, recently founded under his editorship, will serve as an international forum for the exploration of such issues.

As an "introductory history," *The Theory of Oral Composition* accomplishes its purpose admirably. It has the capacity to arouse interest on the part of the uninitiated. Its discussion of theoretical issues is concise yet clear, and its bibliographical resources and notes easily allow one to follow these problems into what is by now a highly complex scholarly literature.

The Domestication of the Human Species

Peter J. Wilson

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. xvi + 201 pp. (cloth)

Reviewer: Michael Blake

University of British Columbia

Wilson's insightful and engaging volume poses the question: What are the social consequences of sedentary life? The trail of discussion down which this question leads him and down which he in turn leads the reader is both fascinating and productive. In the first section of the book he introduces us to some of the basic assumptions on which his argument relies. He convincingly elaborates a series of social distinctions from non-human primates to mobile hunter-gatherers to sedentary communities that set the stage for what follows. The essential distinction that he draws is that of "openness" vs. "domestication." These simple words do not convey the complexity of the interrelated ideas that he attaches to them and so their definitions must be expanded and clarified. Wilson sees *open* societies as those that have no permanent boundaries, physical, social, visual or ideological, among members of the group. This is not the simple egalitarian vs. non-egalitarian dichotomy that anthropologists usually make, since some egalitarian societies may be open while others may be domesticated. "Openness" is a basic characteristic of the social order that structures perceptions of morality, conservatism, innovation and all aspects of individual and group interactions. A key shift (if not *the* key shift) in the social evolution of humankind is, according to Wilson's argument, that *open* society gives way to the social closure of domesticated society.

At first I found the choice of *domestication* to be rather confusing, since, as an archaeologist I am usually confronted with its usage in the context of the transformation from hunting-gathering economies to the agricultural production of plant and animal foods. But after reading on (and, I must confess, after consulting my Oxford English Dictionary) it soon became clear that "domestication" provides exactly the right framework on which to interweave so many different implications of the closure of social relations. Wilson is not as concerned with how this domestication of humans comes about as he is with the ways in which the concept can be used in cross-cultural comparisons, and with its implications for understanding social structures. The central element in human domestication is the built environment, specifically, the home. The rise of sedentary society is equivalent to the rise of home-life and the shifts in social values, ideologies and economies that home-