BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

FOLEY, JOHN MILES. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002. xviii + 256 pages. Illustrations, bibliography, index, web links. Paper US$19.95; ISBN 0-252-02770-1. Cloth US$44.95; ISBN 0-252-07082-8.

How to Read an Oral Poem (*HROP*) is the latest work in Foley's quest to raise awareness of oral traditions worldwide and place them on an equal footing with historic canons of written literature. Aimed at a general, educated audience, *HROP* seeks to summarize and refine ideas developed in his earlier works aimed at specialist audiences, notably *Immanent Art*, *The Singer of Tales as Performance*, and *Homer's Traditional Art* (reviewed by Sabine WIENKER-PIEPHO). *HROP* is presented in what the author hopes is a readily accessible register, making it in many ways subject to the same spirit that guided his recent anthology of essays targeted at the undergraduate classroom, *Teaching Oral Traditions*.

The key notion to the entire work is summarized in the last of the ten cryptic proverbs on how to read oral poetry that appear on page 184 (see also WIENKER-PIEPHO): "True diversity demands diversity in frame of reference." Foley would ask us to open our minds not only to the vast number of oral poetries from around the world, but to new ways of regarding them. In order to aid his readers in this endeavor, he employs a conversational register throughout *HROP*, replete with the sort of repetitions, asides, artful description, humor, and occasional anecdote used by many storytellers. He systematically lays out his text in a series of "words" that play off of the limited English sense of bounded word units, into the sense of "word" as units of meaning in extensive chunks of narration or verse. In urging readers to develop new ways of reading and appreciating oral poetry the author suggests a new noun—"oralpoetry"—albeit one he describes in another of his proverbs as being a "very plural noun" (128-30).

The work begins with a brief introduction to four traditional oral artists (a Tibetan paper-singer, a North American slam poet, an ancient Greek bard, and a South African praise poet) working in four different oral or oral-connected mediums. These four mediums, distinguished from each other by varying combinations of oral, aural, and written mediums, are: oral performance, voiced texts, "voices from the past," and written oral poems that are intended for reading (39). Foley adds a caveat to the construction of these categories, noting that they are flexible and non-hierarchical. Moreover, he asserts, "We need grant every culture, tradition, genre, poem, and individual poet and audience the license to add their own qualifications to complicate the system, to add their own qualifications and footnotes to whatever assertion we make in the spirit of overall explanation" (40). He then asks readers to contemplate what several South Slavic bards have to say about "words" (which tend to be rather large units of speech) before turning to the task of relating the eight "words" that comprise the rest of the volume.

These words include more in-depth discussions of the parameters of oral poetry, a deconstructive look at assumptions on reading and orality, samples of a range of oral poetries

from select cultures around the world, and a closer look at the "ecology" of South Slavic oral poetry in live contexts that treats magical charms, funeral laments, genealogies, and epics on an equal footing. The three central words (three, four, and five) illustrate at length the major theoretical approaches that the author has, over the last decade, melded into what might be considered an oral pragmatics, in the sense of being a practical, result-oriented strategy for dealing with oral and oral-connected traditions. The three major members of this theoretical toolkit are: the Performance Approach that stresses context and process of performance; the Ethnopoetics Approach that asks us to appreciate the diversity and artistry of local oral traditions from a global perspective; and the Immanent Art Approach (with roots in the Oral-formulaic theory) that "asks how the structure means" (109).

Once the interpretive grid—composed of the categories and approaches delineated in the first to fifth word—are in hand, readers are led in the seventh word to actual exercises in reading oral poems. Other examples in this section are straightforward: Passages from the *Odyssey* and *Chanson de Roland*, are classed as "voices from the past" and given an "Immanent Art" approach, while passages from an oral version of the *Siri* epic of Karnataka, India, categorized as oral performance and read using the performance approach. Examples of slam poetry from contemporary North America, are considered "voiced texts" and supplied with elements of the performance approach. Though at first glance these grids may seem reductive, the author demonstrates great depth in interpretive acumen and reminds readers that these categories are meant to open up possibilities for interpretation and that several approaches can profitably be applied to a particular text.

Along this line, one section of the seventh word featuring two Native American texts raises questions on both the nature of text-making and interpretation. The examples are both described as oral performances and textualized in ethnopoetic formats that cue readers on how to revive them by reading them aloud in translation. The recommended reading strategy is the ethnopoetic mode.

While this choice is clear for texts already in an ethnopoetic register, reading along, one wonders how to read oral performances that have been textualized in styles that do not register most rhetorical features of actual performance. Such texts still make up the majority of published oral performance-based texts, some even utilized as promptbooks or inspiration by storytellers in libraries and schools who (re)perform them for listeners who often have little sense of the original contexts or cultures, much less language skills of native audiences. What combination of strategies should be brought to play upon them? Are they oral-connected texts, or as Honko (1998: 37–43) might say "tradition-oriented" texts that may require reading strategies besides an ethnopoetic one?

In a "diversity" based approach, the answer would seem to be: take each text on its own and experiment with a variety of approaches to understand the strengths and limitations of each text. Or in Foley's words, " In the end our perspectives for reading must reflect and serve oral poetry's own manysidedness" (216). In the final example in the chapter, the author casts a passage from *Beowulf* in an ethnopoetic interpretation, answering in part the questions raised above. As demonstrated, reconstructive methods may work in some cases where live performance contexts are impossible to obtain, provided the reader has the requisite cultural knowledge to do so.

Though *HROP* can at times be as challenging as Foley's other works, the author patiently elucidates basic but difficult concepts, such as "word-power" [that is, how "words of all kinds engage contexts and mediate communication" (123)] or selections from his list of proverbs such as, "Oral poetry works like language, only more so" (184). As suggested above, the greatest contribution of *HROP* is that it enables and encourages readers to explore and appreciate, "word" by "word," oral poetries with which they are unfamiliar on both local and

global levels, or give new insights into those with which they are familiar. Although the excitement of this quest is conveyed throughout the text, college undergraduate instructors may wish to first ground students in the relevant essays on the three interpretative approaches noted above that appear in *Teaching Oral Traditions*. A visit to the nicely-crafted companion web-site (http://www.oraltradition.org/) will also increase student interest in and understanding of some of the traditions discussed by engaging in oral poetry via the medium of virtual reality.

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JAPAN

EMIKO OHNUKI-TIERNEY. *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. xvii+411 pages. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. Paper US$20.00/£14.00; ISBN 0–226–62091–3. Cloth US$45.00/£31.50; ISBN 0–226–62090–5.

To learn why people must evanesce (die after living but briefly), a European might turn to the universal chronicles of the Old Testament. A premodern Japanese might turn to the universal chronicles of Japan: the *Koji-ki* and the *Nihon Sho-ki* (PHILIPPI 1969; ASTON 1956).

According to the anthropogonic myth in the Japanese chronicles, the progenitor deity Ninigi descends from heaven (ecumene of the spirit) to earth (ecumene of the flesh), mantled in a coverlet and bearing with him seed rice. The coverlet symbolizes the spirit-mantling flesh (METEVELIS 2002; 76–78, 81–82). The rice symbolizes food, in order to satisfy the first of two fundamental needs of the flesh: refection and reproduction. The second fleshly need is satisfied by matrimony.

So, unsurprisingly, upon alighting on earth the first thing Ninigi does is erect a wedding palace. Next, he spurns an ugly rock and weds a beautiful flowering tree.[1] The type of tree goes unspecified in the chronicles, just as the type of Eve's arboreal fruit goes unmentioned in the Genesis of the Old Testament. Today Europeans often claim Eve's fruit came