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A Plea for an Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of Arab Oral Tradition

Saad A. Sawayan

In reviewing the history of scholarship in the field of oral literature, we find that the theory of oral-formulaic composition and performance is one of its most outstanding landmarks. The application of this theory in its traditional conception as proposed by Milman Parry and enunciated by Albert Lord is rather sterile and restricted, however, in that it applies only to the poetic genre looked at strictly from a formal literary perspective. It is a surface-structure-oriented theory with very meager intellectual yield, not to mention being prone to gross misapplication. Examples of such limited approaches and misapplications are the works of James Monroe (1972) and Michael Zwettler (1978) on the tribal poetry of Pre-Islamic Arabia.

Jack Goody, Eric A. Havelock, Walter Ong, and others have tried to broaden the anthropological and psychological implications of the theory to include not only an oral mode of composition but also an oral mode of thinking and the processes of oral discourse in general. The discussions since then have shifted to focus on the oral stage versus the writing stage of Culture and what effects the introduction of script has on the individual and on the society as a whole. The emphasis now is on the examination of the structure and working of human memory and cognition and the means through which oral societies store, organize, and retrieve knowledge, pass on their traditions, and maintain cultural continuity through successive generations. What started as an insular theory of textual criticism is now turning into an interdisciplinary enterprise. The scholarship of oral literature has crossed academic boundaries to straddle many disciplines, ranging from aesthetics to linguistics to communication to psychology to anthropology to folklore, and many more. This broadening of the academic base has been very fruitful in bolstering the theories and methods of the field. Yet there is another direction that the field needs to reach out toward and investigate more thoroughly, namely the connectedness of literature to the rest of culture in oral societies.

It was Karl Polanyi (1944, 1959) who first pointed out that in pre-market societies, the economy is embedded in other social institutions and, hence, cannot be analyzed as a separate realm. Organizations carrying out production are dependent on and derived from other sets of social relations. Productive units are undifferentiated and tend to be multipurposed, so that economic behavior is not its sole or governing purpose but just one aspect of its total activity. Therefore, in studying traditional economies it is vital to examine the non-economic aspects, such as kinship system, ethnic composition, religious ideology, political organization, and other social forces.

This is what anthropologists call the holistic approach, which can be fruitfully applied in the study of small-scale traditional and so-called “primitive” societies. It is these kinds of societies where specialists in oral literature usually do their research. Specialists such as Havelock and Ong keep alluding constantly to the encyclopedic nature of oral literature, a fact realized by the ancient Arab philologists who called Pre-Islamic poetry “the register of the Arabs,” meaning that it contains information on their history, genealogy, world view, cultural values, and entire way of life. In other words, oral literature, like the economy, is embedded and enmeshed with the rest of culture in traditional societies. Therefore, literary criticism and exegesis turn out to be not just linguistic and literary, but mainly ethnographic. Literary studies and ethnographic studies merge and intersect in this case.

Studies by Wallace L. Chafe (1982) and David R. Olson (1977) have stressed that use of language associated with literacy is “autonomous” in that meaning is in the text: whatever is needed for comprehension is included in the words of the text, which can carry meaning all by themselves. In contrast, the use of language associated with orality is “nonautonomous” in that meaning is in the context, in the simultaneous transmission of information over paralinguistic, gestural, postural, tonal, and other channels, as well as the contribution of background information on the part of the hearer. This is because speakers and writers have different relations to their respective audiences, the former detached and the latter involved. The same thing can be said about oral literature. Just as we can hardly comprehend a conversation outside its situational context, so we cannot understand or appreciate an oral literary piece devoid of its cultural context. In studying the total cultural ambience of an oral literary text, we come to understand fully not only its content and meaning, denotative and connotative, but also its function, which is usually not strictly artistic and aesthetic, as is the case in the literary texts of script cultures. For example, a speech by Pericles is not intended to be strictly a literary piece; the aesthetic merits of the speech

are not meant to stand alone, but rather to enhance its public functions. A poem composed by a Bedouin chief is not just a poem. It would be considered frivolous and unbecoming for a respectable chief to compose a poem just for its own sake. It has to have a dignified purpose and serious intent—to defend a case, lay a claim, exhort to action, declare war, celebrate a victory, sue for peace, and so forth. Oral literature is, in a sense, like crude oil in that there are so many derivatives you can extract from it, but only if you have good refineries; in the present instances this means sound methodology and a sophisticated theoretical orientation. If you do not enjoy oral tradition as art, you can treat it, for example, as a linguistic corpus or, à la Jan Vansina (1965), as a historical document reflecting or refracting social facts.

There are good examples of the application of this holistic approach in the works of Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), Steven Caton (1990), Saad Sowayan (1992), and Marcel Kurpershoek (1994, 1995, 1999, 2002) on oral tribal poetry in the Arab World. In these works we find linguistic, aesthetic, ethnographic, psychological, sociological, and historical analyses blended together to illuminate the true significance of the poetic texts and to determine their proper place and function in the intricate web of the total culture. Such a multidimensional and eclectic approach is not meant to play down the aesthetic values of oral literature but rather to highlight them against the whole cultural milieu. The object is to look at oral literature from a wider perspective and to treat it with the seriousness it deserves as a potent social, political, and ideological force in traditional societies.

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