

The Museum of Verbal Art: A Parable

Museum and canon

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[*Author's/wikimaster's note*: What follows in this node is a story. It requires an effort of the imagination.]

Imagine a museum that houses and displays the core of the literary canon—literature as we know it, or, more to the point, as generations of scholars and students have established its scope and identity[1]. Visitors to this privileged edifice have the opportunity to trek through the most treasured of texts, to read and study what Western culture has identified as the very most important verbal art, from the ancient to the contemporary world. Admission is gratis, the stacks are open, and the ever-diligent library staff has even placed a suggestion box just inside the front door.

But there is trouble brewing: the MVA is under serious threat.

Losing accreditation

After a lengthy and painful process of evaluation, the verdict is in: our much-admired, elegantly appointed Museum of Verbal Art—the cultural centerpiece and pride of the *tAgora*—has lost its accreditation. We've been duly notified, and the evidence is unfortunately compelling, that our collection is radically incomplete, even deeply biased in its parochialism.

It's true, alas. The relatively few cherished items chosen for public display have been gathering dust, undisturbed on their pedestals, for far too long. We've tried to upgrade by repackaging our exhibits, pasting on fresh new labels, shifting the viewer's perspective this way and that, but none of these increasingly desperate strategies addresses the accreditation team's most damning charge: that we've created an unrepresentative display of *homo sapiens'* verbal art.

And the criticism goes on. We're told that generations of our curatorial staff have shirked their duty in assembling the Museum collection. Relying on inherited and unexamined assumptions about what constitutes verbal art, they've foreshortened rather than broadened horizons. Sadly, an unblinking appraisal must admit that, until recently, our labors have all too often produced a circular result: we continue to celebrate what has always been celebrated, privileging those very artifacts from which we draw our criteria for selection. A kind of "subcultural narcissism," one evaluator observed.

Recent renovations

On the bright side, over the last few decades complaints from visitors and experts alike have begun to stimulate dramatic and rewarding gains in many areas. Where are the long-lost women authors, you ask? Nationwide, new generations of scholars labor to bring women's literature into plainer view. Where are the exciting new works by African American and Native American authors, you challenge? Again, the answer is gratifying: today's reader-visitors are often as familiar with Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich as with William Shakespeare, Herman Melville, or Leo Tolstoy.

In these and other once-marginalized areas, boundaries truly are expanding. New voices are entering the discussion, new champions are joining the fray, and the wizened old guard of canonical authors and texts is also profiting from immersion in a revitalized context of human diversity. The Museum of Verbal Art is inarguably a much more interesting place to visit these days. Nonetheless, we've apparently lost our accreditation. How could that possibly be?

The silenced majority

Living oral traditions

Well, it turns out that the problem goes far deeper than our selection of tAgora texts, no matter how many and no matter how diverse. For even our most visionary curators have largely failed to tap potential resources of verbal art that dwarf even the MVA's recently expanded holdings in size and variety. We've taken such brave and important steps to acquire and display newly discovered and rediscovered treasures from the four corners of the known world (the literate and textual world, of course). How unfortunate, then, that we should have largely ignored the magnificent array of expressive forms that have but a single shortcoming: their preference for the spoken over the written word. By depositing in our Museum only what we can collect from the tAgora, we've programmatically ignored the oAgora. We've excised the greater part of *homo sapiens' experience*, past and present, as a creator of verbal art.

Even when we haven't entirely failed to credit the existence of oral tradition, we've done the next worst thing: banning all or most such works from the hallowed halls of literary studies, treating them like unworthy pariahs by lodging them "where they belong" in buildings adjacent to the Museum. Finding other quarters for these textless kin may have passed for recognition, and within the Museums of Folklore and Anthropology unwritten verbal art—the proud issue of the oAgora—has certainly prospered. But the Museum of Verbal Art itself remains largely off-limits to prospective donations that lack a *lettered pedigree*.

Works with OT roots

Nor has our beloved tAgora-driven MVA been much more receptive to rethinking the descriptions and interrelationships of its current holdings as new discoveries about their oAgora history and most basic characteristics have emerged. Not that substantial pressure for change hasn't been brought to bear. It just hasn't worked yet: old cognitive habits die hard.

The Curator of Antiquities has probably had the worst of it so far: with evidence for the influence of oral tradition on Homer, Hesiod, and other ancient authors accruing at an alarming rate, it's gotten harder to recycle the same tired old portraits of these figures as modern authors of original texts[2]. Never mind that Homer "himself"—probably a *code-name for the oral epic tradition* rather than a fully historical person—doesn't agree. He celebrates bards not as *literati* but as masters of oPathways. So far, however, the oAgora origins of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* haven't appreciably affected the Museum exhibit: curator and patrons like still defer to the time-honored concept of these and related poems as the fundamentally textual cornerstones of the Western tAgora.

Nor has the Curator of Medieval Studies had an easy time of it as the rediscovery of oral tradition has spread from era to era and item to item. The exhibit on the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*[3] cries out for radical refashioning, as do those on the Old French *Song of Roland*, the medieval Spanish *Poem of the Cid*, and the Old Norse sagas, all of whose identities as uncompromisingly literary monuments once seemed safe and secure. There have even been

whispers that high-traffic Museum exhibits featuring elite authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, long recognized for his mastery of texts in many tongues, require a bit of face-lifting to acknowledge the dimensions of their artistry[4].

Similar woes have beset the Curators of Eastern Art, whether Indian, Oriental, or Arabic. Not only do texts like the *Mahabharata* stem from oral traditions, it seems, but some of them also appear to have “lesser” kin still alive today in folk tradition[5]. And this is to say nothing of Middle Eastern Art, in particular the Judeo-Christian Bible—both Old and New Testaments—with its roots firmly planted in the realm of the spoken, embodied word[6].

Textual authority

Still, even with the pressure exerted by reports from fieldwork on living oral traditions and by the rediscovery of oral traditions at the root of many canonical texts, the Museum has undergone no fundamental change, no major building program or renovation, no paradigm shift. And the reason isn't far to seek: the canon of literary, text-based art looms far above the fray, austere and practically unchallengeable. Boasting both historical depth and *contemporary political power*, it selects and rejects with a faceless and final authority, supposedly objective but in reality self-fulfilling to the core. When it comes to verbal art from outside the textual marketplace, the chances for mounting a new installation are very slim indeed, no matter how urgent the need.

This is a critical situation. As it stands, the MVA ***simply fails even to acknowledge the preponderance of the world's verbal art***: those myriad and vital oral traditions that dwarf written literature in size, content, and diversity.

How, then, can we begin to remedy this disappointing situation? How can we restore our lost accreditation? What sorts of curatorial programs and strategies for acquisition are necessary to fill the enormous and important gaps in our collection? How do we ensure that visitors to our cherished institution are exposed to an appropriately expanded and enriched canon? What we need is an MVA that realistically reflects the many faces and voices of verbal art, and especially the worldwide cornucopia of oral traditions and works that derive from and depend upon this non-textual medium.

We need, in short, to hear from the Agora.

From the Alexandrian Library to the Internet

As a first step, let's attempt some revisionist history. Let's try to place our hoped-for new Museum and its open, expanded collection in perspective. To do so, we'll compare it to two famous “depositories”: the great and mysterious Alexandrian Library, wonder of the ancient world; and its present-day analogue and wonder of the modern world, the Internet. These two imposing edifices, bookends to the waning age of inscription and print, represent watershed moments in the technology of storing and communicating knowledge. Underlying their physical differences, however – the one a towering stack of *brick-and-mortar maps*, the other a *networked web* of electronic potentials – lies a more radical distinction. The Alexandrian Library consisted of things, while the Internet consists of pathways.

A warehouse in ancient Alexandria

Although plagued by contradictory testimony from earliest times, enough of the history of the ancient *Library* has been reconstructed that we can be sure of its central, ongoing purpose: nothing less than to house under a single roof copies of all texts ever created. During its

prime under the Ptolemies, reports were required every year on progress made toward what was considered an achievable goal. How many scrolls were presently in hand? Were there prospects for major new collections? How were the *ship scrolls* coming along?

Behind this bibliographical imperialism lay an astonishing assumption, straight out of tAgora thinking. Since there must be a limited, finite number of items, so went the reasoning, let's find them all and *make them our own*. This policy may not sound entirely unfamiliar to a twenty-first-century culture of authors, readers, and objectified works of verbal art. In our era the same spirit has filled old-fashioned library buildings to overflowing, created the need for off-site storage facilities, and accelerated the advent of the digital library.

The Ptolemies had virtually unlimited funds at their disposal with which to pursue their dream of a universal library, of course. But more important to the project than their deep pockets were their most deeply held convictions about the necessary relationship between, for example, the author and works we call Homer and the numerous scrolls at Alexandria that wholly or partially recorded some version of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

Twinned illusions

One of these convictions, what we might call the *illusion of object*, is still very much operative today, although evolving electronic media are daily forcing us to extend our definition of what constitutes a tangible object. Under the influence of *textual ideology*, the ancient Librarians effectively equated Homer and the scroll; for the purposes of collection, the two were indistinguishable. This is all the more remarkable because oral composition, transmission, and performance were still ongoing in some parts of the Greek world during at least the early years of the Library. Nonetheless, the illusion that the work of verbal art was a tangible and therefore collectible object made possible the Library's foundation and its continuing existence—despite the *irony of that assumption*.

Hand-in-hand with the work-as-object fiction went the *illusion of stasis*. Only if the work of verbal art had the permanent value of a static, immutable object could it merit deposit in the Library. This second illusion must have helped relieve the embarrassment of the hundred-odd versions of Homer at Alexandria. If something had attained the form of a tangible object, then its suitability for the Library's collection was warranted and defensible. And if one item, why not many? If you're aiming at a comprehensive collection, then by definition you need them all.

The First MVA

Once again, the early stages of this process must have taken place even as "*Homer*" was being performed and re-performed—in different places, by different poets, and certainly with varying results (as variant manuscripts prove). But the most important purpose served by the static objects so assiduously amassed by the Ptolemies and their agents was to nurture that sustaining dream of an exhaustive material record, a treasure-house of thought-become-written word, an archive complete in itself. In this respect the Alexandrian Library also housed the first Museum of Verbal Art, the original canon.

And so was created the royal model that has reigned for two millennia and more, just as significant for what it excluded as for what it included. The collectible was defined as the written; everything unwritten was implicitly defined out of existence. The Library could aspire to all-inclusive, universal coverage because that universality was restricted solely to objects, that is, to texts. A finite canon was conceivable only because of the twin illusions of object and stasis, which then and in years to follow also made possible librarianship, literary studies, and, not least, text-driven *cultural self-definition*.

By the same token, these illusions entailed a built-in program of exclusion that was vast and far-reaching. Because performances of oral tradition were neither objective nor static (since in tAgora terms there was no substance to them), they couldn't qualify as entries in the grand inventory of concrete items. Oral traditions were not so much unwelcome as simply *unshelvable in the Library*.

A virtual inventory in cyber-space

Now we leap forward to the other bookend, to the incipient and *ongoing construction of the Internet*, the information superhighway that promises unprecedented access to theoretically unlimited knowledge. In its grandiose aspirations, this claim may seem to echo what the Ptolemies had in mind, and the two “repositories” do in fact have some features in common. While no single site on the Internet can play more than a supporting role, the system in its entirety—as a “virtual library” without geographical or other physical limitations—aims at providing universal access to everything.

And “everything” now means a great deal more than simply “books.” Already colleges, universities, and other institutions specialize in and subscribe to electronic archives of texts, manuscript facsimiles, and other tools economically or technologically impractical to publish or own in conventional printed format. Already various organizations sponsor *electronic journals* in various disciplines, while *citizen journalism* moves Everyperson's thoughts and commentary into virtual newspapers available and updatable 24/7/365. Already those at home in the virtual environment write their very identities into the Internet card catalogue on personal home pages, blogs, and social networking sites. Already internet-savvy readers subscribe via RSS aggregators to favorite sources, each other's updated podcasts, and other kinds of automatable feeds. Taken as a whole, this computer-driven system brings a heretofore unthinkable number of “volumes” into the electronic marketplace of the *eAgora* and under the same virtual roof. And of course the “holdings” only increase daily as more institutions and individuals join the network, as more of their often unparalleled facilities go online, and as those networks – unlike static books – themselves continue to morph.

But what makes the Internet much more than even an Alexandrian Library is neither the sheer number nor the remarkable diversity of its “eScrolls,” but rather their unprecedented, hands-on accessibility. What sets the Internet apart, in short, are the connections woven into its web – the hyperlinks that open up a universe of immanent knowledge via the surfing of pathways.

Visiting the Book of Kells

So, for example: how do you get a look at that incomparable medieval masterpiece of manuscript illumination, the Book of Kells? Start up your browser and click on your first destination – in this as in so many other cases, Wikipedia *offers a promising start*. From that point of origin you encounter a cascade of information, powered by ePathways and organized in a network that you can surf as you wish. Public-domain color photographs of the splendidly illustrated pages sit alongside sections on history (origin, medieval period, modern period, reproductions), description (contents, text and script, decoration), use, bibliography, and other related sites. Everything is linked together – both intra- (within the Wikipedia entry) and inter- (to other Wikipedia entries). In other words, you pass effortlessly, according to your own needs and designs, among different texts, authors, languages, and centuries, *fashioning your own understanding* of the Book of Kells against a panoramic background as you go.

Compare this procedure to physically visiting *Trinity College, Dublin*, where the manuscript itself is housed in a conventional university library setting, and where you can examine a

single page or two in dim light at the end of a musty corridor. Or perhaps you prefer the complete, freestanding facsimile printed on paper and bound between covers, which will allow you to examine more than a couple of pages, as long as your library is privileged enough to own a copy of the volume presently available for \$20,511.40 as a used book. Or, for the bargain price of about 30 euros, you could purchase the *DVD-ROM* of the Book of Kells approved by Trinity College, with a full visual record (plus zooming) along with information on the manuscript's history and the eighth-century technology used to produce it.

But neither a journey to Dublin nor a research expedition to your local library nor even a personal copy of the DVD-ROM can offer the kind of immediate, proximate, multi-dimensional context that is a built-in staple of Internet study and research. And it is not so much that Trinity College or your nearby library or the latest disc merely lacks the requisite information (though that may be the case), but more that they lack the living web of pathways that make the information instantly and always *accessible to everyone*, and which allows for continuous updating and surfer-determined exploring via new and existing pathways.

A virtual journey

These ePathways have other characteristics as well, salient features that categorically distinguish *an interactive journey through the Internet* from browsing the best-stocked library, even the Alexandrian Library. For one thing, any route taken through the electronic maze is inherently more than a standardized, repetitive tour of the facilities. Within the interests and according to the judgment of whoever constructed the given site and its options, it offers automatic, institutionalized access to myriad related possibilities as an ever-present reality. What's more, your itinerary is never writ in stone, but always susceptible to change enroute. After all, it's being assembled by you, as you go.

Correspondingly, each Internet session – whether to research the Book of Kells or any other topic – is a unique event and experience, providing a fresh perspective for each user each time he or she enters the virtual edifice. Even after many sessions on the same topic, the opportunity to try out new avenues or follow out the same links in a different sequence or at a different depth, branching here or there or even contributing to the communal network (as in the case of open-source facilities like *Wikipedia*), will always shed new light on the most familiar surroundings.

Indeed, the watchword for successive visits to the Internet library must be variation within limits rather than rote repetition. As the Pathways Project illustrates, with these same observations we could just as well be describing the oAgora.

Pathways versus Canon

Homer's "inside take"

In explaining how the ancient Greek bard navigates through the maze of traditional story, Homer also speaks of pathways (which he calls *oimai*). During the great feast among the Phaeacians on Scheria, for instance, he portrays Odysseus as honoring the celebrated singer Demodokos with the choicest cut from the shining-tusked boar and with a fascinating tribute to oAgora technology:

For among all mortal men the singers have a share in honor and reverence, since to them the Muse has taught the **pathways**, for she loves the singers' tribe. (*Odyssey*, Book 8, lines 479-81)

What the Muse teaches, we should notice, isn't texts – that is, items supporting the twin illusions of object and stasis – but rather routes, avenues, means for getting there. She is represented not as lending volumes from an immense story-archive, but as providing links for the performing bard (and his audience) to click on. Her repository of traditional oral epic consists not of scrolls shelved in an Alexandrian Library, but rather of a web of pathways that give users access to the stories via a *pre-textual analogue* to our Internet.

Let's pursue this analogy, historically counterintuitive as it may appear. We've already suggested that the Homeric *oimai* are parallel to links on the Internet, and therefore that a web or network of potentials is a more apposite cognitive model for OT than any model associated with the tAgora, even such influence-sharing theories as *intertextuality*.

Some modern colleagues

Modern-day oral traditions certainly bear this out. For example, *South Slavic guslari*, preliterate singers of epics who have been particularly well *studied at close range*, focus not on the thing but the process. For them the song exists in its doing, its performance – its movement from here to there, partially predictable and partially unpredictable; for them the song has nothing to do with the cenotaph of the book. To be sure, by recording one of their performances we can manufacture a textual item, a durable good, a “scroll” fully fit for acquisition and deposit by the Ptolemies' librarians. But a second and third recording made the next day, or in front of a different audience, or even with the same bard in a different frame of mind, will reveal inevitable disparities that quickly put the lie to the “authority” of any one version.

The OT poem lives outside any single performance or *any single performer* – never mind beyond the reduced medium of any recording or transcription. It lives and thrives as a series of potentials, a network of pathways that offers innumerable options at the same time that it connects with innumerable unspoken assumptions and implicit references. Any South Slavic oral epic is thus nothing more or less than a special case of language, and as such there can be no end to its morphing. There are limits and rules, of course, but they foster rather than prohibit change. Had we the patience to sit through a hundred performances by one or a hundred singers, we would simply reconfirm the same thesis a hundredfold: none of the recordings would actually be “the epic,” but all of them would in their different ways *imply* “the epic.” OT can no more be canonized than IT can be forced *between two covers*.

Exploding the canon

Thus we come to the first of the major reasons why OT is fundamentally incompatible with the concept of canon. Although Petrarch's sonnets, Montaigne's essays, and Gogol's novels readily found a home in the Museum of Verbal Art, and even though the recently expanded Museum now features new displays on works like Morrison's *Beloved* and Silko's *Ceremony*, we still find no space for oral traditions. More to the point, there can't ever be space, at least in the present building. And it isn't the curators who are at fault this time. The problem lies instead with the very nature of oral tradition as a medium for verbal art, with the incontrovertible fact that any one performance is just that – one performance. We can't file it, title it, edit and translate it as we would a papyrus manuscript, first edition, or other artifact of the tAgora. OT exists only in its multiformity and in its enactment, and to reduce that living complexity to a single libretto for ease of shelving is to falsify its art. *Proteus* exists only in his shapeshifting, and will forever resist the captivity of canonical form.

Virtues of plurality

To accommodate the world's oral traditions, our Museum will have to undergo more than cosmetic alterations. First and foremost, the staff must find effective methods for representing plurality, as well as what that plurality stands for. Singularity, authority, and epitome are useless criteria for living OTs; they continue the illusions of object and stasis, ignoring the oAgora realities of process and *rule-governed change*. The many faces of OT are what folklorists seek to expose when they insist on eliciting and publishing multiple performances of a given story or charm or riddle, and we can take an initial step in renovating the MVA by following their lead. Just as any single node pales in importance against the totality of the Internet – since by isolating even the most valuable such resource we sap its greatest strength: connectivity – so concentration on any single fossil from a once-living OT blurs the focus on its naturally dynamic context. Always different and yet always the same, OTs are most realistically understood as *immanent to* rather than uniquely **contained in** each separate yet related performance.

Ethnopoetics

There are also many other strategies that can be engaged, some of them presently available and others on the near horizon of our updated “museum science.” Take the approach called *Ethnopoetics*, which amounts to constructing scripts that allow for more faithful reperformance of OTs. How do we proceed? In a sense, by being non-textual: by reinstating the pauses, intonations, gradations of volume, and other performance features that text-making customarily levels out or silences. We can make a start by respecting the actual structural units that each OT employs, rather than translating the performance to our default concepts of verse, stanza, syllabic line, or whatever. In short, we need to restore the expressive life that textualization robs from performances. Then, when readers read, at least they'll hear some echo of the original performance in their heads. Some fidelity to the experience will survive the trajectory from the oAgora to the tAgora.

eArchives, eEditions, and eCompanions

Additionally, electronic text archives, in whose ready resources web-surfers will eventually be able to experience many dimensions of a performance (sound, video, etc.) as well as probe many parallel performances, are coming online. Tools such as *eEditions* and *eCompanions* are overcoming many of the hindrances imposed by spatial limitations inherent in the book format. No longer will editors be required to incarcerate the performance in one silent and epitomized version, unfairly consigning its sibling versions to secondary status in appendices and footnotes. What's more, with the multimedia revolution, oral traditions can also be presented in more than one dimension concurrently, with the acoustic and even visual reality of the performance becoming an integrated part of its transcription. No longer will a reader/surfer have to be content with segregated edition-parts; transcription, translation, commentary, glossary, and any other “chapters” can be meshed electronically, enriching the reader/surfer's experience by *resynchronizing the performance*.

Texts rooted in oral tradition

Very importantly, these strategies also apply to an appreciable number of texts with oral roots, what we might call *Voices from the Past*. These Janus-like items, chiefly from the ancient and medieval worlds, are already comfortably housed in the MVA collection on the basis of their presumably literary and textual merits. Recently, however, they've been shown to derive from OT and are therefore deserving of additional attention. In many ways these works are also more process than product, and thus not entirely “canonizable,” even though they survive

only as manuscripts (with limited contextual information) and may appear to belong strictly to the tAgora. Of course, our readiness to accept that either-or reduction is just another measure of how blindly we adhere to *textual ideology*.

In updating these exhibits, we must take care to convey what we can learn about the background and foreground of each oral-derived text. Is their textuality merely an accident of transmission (as is always the case with performances recorded in writing before acoustic and video media were available)? If so, *Ethnopoetics* can help by creating a script for reperformance. Or are there performance cues that survive their reduction to texts? In that case *Performance Theory* can assist our understanding. Or are there special contextual meanings—traditional idioms—that require explanation? We can turn to Immanent Art for a way to *discover* and convey such meanings.

Even when we're dealing with singly-authored, oral-derived texts, much closer to what most of us have been trained to call *literature*, we still have a curatorial responsibility to discover what we can about the history behind the work, its possible multiformity (in part or in whole), and the nature and degree of its dependence on an oral tradition. Even singly-authored texts often harbor more than meets the eye.

The list of MVA exhibits needing attention includes, as mentioned elsewhere in this node, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Old French *Song of Roland*, the medieval Spanish *Poem of the Cid*, the Old Norse sagas, the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, the Judeo-Christian Bible, and even the "literary" genius Chaucer. To these and many similar Voices from the Past we'll need to add still-living forms such as the ubiquitous and familiar ballad, which has long prospered as both oral tradition and text. In fact, mentioning the ballad offers the opportunity to emphasize how the worlds of orality and literacy, once thought to occupy mutually exclusive orbits, can and do coexist and interact in myriad fascinating combinations, within the same culture or region and even within the same person. Not only do OT features persist alongside and into texts, that is, but a single individual may be fluent in both expressive media. We know from real-life observation that the very same individual can indeed manage fluently in multiple agoras.

Conclusion: The Challenge for the MVA

So why did our Museum of Verbal Art lose its accreditation? Because in paying exclusive attention to the tAgora it completely ignored the oAgora. In focusing on *objects*, *stasis*, and *shelf-space* it failed to pay due attention to pathways, performance, and networks. What it managed to accomplish it did very well, but in the process the MVA unfortunately eliminated the larger part of *humankind's verbal art* from consideration. In a word, by confining its displays to texts, the institution just didn't live up to its title and purpose.

If our Museum is ever to house a collection truly representative of human diversity, then we must accept a new challenge. As responsible curators we must step outside of the tAgora and take full account of what transpires in the oAgora. And because of the developments in media technology, we are better equipped to do just that than at any other time in history.

The key is to enlist the tools of the eAgora to do what the tAgora was unable to support. The Internet, with its web of links, built-in context, and ever-emergent dynamics, offers both an analogue to oral tradition and a *blueprint for renovation* of the MVA. Online *electronic editions*, as well as *online companions* to brick-and-mortar textual items, can bring the verbal art that is OT to new (and new kinds of) audiences. *Wikis* like the one used as a vehicle for the Pathways Project offer another avenue for multi-layered and multimedia representation, and there are certainly many *promising initiatives* already underway or on the near horizon. The

core of the renovation effort will lie in educating Museum-goers about the broadened and much more realistic scope of its holdings and displays, to demonstrate that verbal art need not be purely and exclusively textual. In regard to the oAgora, texts cannot by them-selves present verbal art without serious reduction and distortion, no matter how polished and gemlike the treasured *documents* may be. Whether publishing or reading OT, the eAgora offers unique opportunities.

In terms of the untold wealth of living traditions, verbal art inheres in the instance of performance and in what that performance-instance implies. As for oral-connected traditional texts – and, as we have seen, there are many crucially important works in this category from all over the world – our responsibility is to gauge the extent to which pathways, performance, and traditional meaning are still applicable when speech-acts take on textual form. In either case, a significant part of the context for any individual performance or text will always lie outside the most expansive, comprehensive canon, just as it lay beyond the Alexandrian Library and the most ambitious acquisitions program in history. The Museum of Verbal Art must acknowledge these vital realities and reconfigure itself accordingly.

Homer was right

Homer had it right when, as he began navigating through the fantastic web of the *Odyssey*, he made this petition to a virtual resource undreamed of even by the Ptolemies:

“Of these events from somewhere, O Muse, daughter of Zeus,
speak also to us.”
(Book 1, line 10).

Of what events? All of Odysseus’ adventures, from boar-hunt to Trojan War to perilous trials and back home to reunion with Penelope. From where? From within the untextualized mythic reservoir of the oAgora. By whose agency? Under the aegis of the Muse, patroness of pathways and the OT internet. And to whom? Why, to Homer, to her beloved tribe of ancient singers and their audiences, and now, we hope, to future generations of Museum visitors.

Notes

- [1] For the essay on which this node is based, “The Impossibility of Canon,” see Foley 1998b.
- [2] See Martin 1998, Foley 2004a and 2005b.
- [3] On Beowulf and oral tradition, see Olsen 1998. For a performance of Beowulf in the original Old English, see Bagby 2007.
- [4] On medieval French, medieval Spanish, Old Norse, and Chaucer, see, respectively, Vitz 1998, Zemke 1998, Harris 1998, and Lindahl 1998.
- [5] On the folk-Mahabharata, see Smith 1990.
- [6] On the Old Testament, see further Niditch 1996 and Jaffee 1998 on the New Testament, see further Kelber 1998 and Hearon 2004.

Revised on March 4, 2009 14:08:13 by FoleyJ

Pathways Project

The major purpose of the Pathways Project is to illustrate and explain the fundamental similarities and correspondences between humankind’s oldest and newest thought-technologies: oral tradition and the internet.

<http://www.pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/HomePage>

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