



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## **A Personal Appreciation: How John Miles Foley Laid the Foundation for My Life in an Ashram**

**Ward Parks**

It is an honor and a pleasure to offer this personal tribute to John Miles Foley, in whom I have found not only an outstanding scholar—one of the great scholars of his generation—but a dear personal friend. In response to the kind invitation of this volume's editors I would like to devote these pages not to scholarly inquiry in a strict sense but to a personal narrative about a significant impact that he has had on my life—one that few people would have anticipated in the days of my academic association with him. For while I began my career as a scholar, and indeed occupied a tenured professorial position in one of our state universities, I left that post and have spent the last two decades in an ashram in India. And though I never expected it, much of what John taught me has played a key role in the work that I have done in this new, very non-academic setting. I have immersed myself in this new life for so long now that I no longer find myself in a position to write a conventional scholarly article as my contribution to this volume. For the world of assumptions in which I now live and operate—the world of an ashram—differs so radically from academe that, were I to write directly out of the research interests that I am now pursuing, I would have to impose too much on the tolerance and forbearance of my readers here. Instead, as my own personal appreciation for an old and dear friend, I wanted to chronicle how what I learned from John Foley transformed itself through the course of my life into a crucial foundation for a very different kind of intellectual and spiritual enterprise.

Meeting John during the early years of his professorial career, I was the first graduate student to get a master's and subsequently a doctoral degree under his tutelage. When I joined the graduate program in English literature at Emory University in 1977, he was still an assistant professor—though clearly one of the department's rising stars. I was much drawn to him and his methodological approach, which recognized the oral dimensions of literatures that conventionally had been regarded exclusively as written texts. When he left Emory for a new job at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I followed him there, earning my Ph.D. in 1983. Happily I found for myself an academic post at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and over the next decade I maintained a close association with my former mentor, contributing essays to various collections and joining him at academic conferences.

Naturally the training that John gave me included a mastery of skills that any medievalist needs. Most medieval literature arose in linguistically and culturally complex milieus; one studying this literature needs to know languages and linguistics—and has to be able to find his or

her way around in an intellectual landscape in large measure contoured by manuscripts. Beyond this, since John is a comparatist, I wound up cultivating expertise not only in the heroic literature of Anglo-Saxon England but also that of Homeric Greece. Comparative work demands that one affirm the cultural and historical specificity of particular literary acts while discovering fundamental patterns that bring the artifacts of different eras and cultural environments into significant relationship with each other. My having cultivated this facility and these habits of mind proved most useful when I subsequently shifted my seat of operations (as it were) from ancient and medieval Europe to modern Asia.

Yet what I found especially appealing in John's approach was that it called into question the presumption that "literature" is inexorably and primarily textual, that its inscription, its written-ness, belongs to its root nature, to its very core identity. Instead, it opened the possibility of a literature that resonates within the active present of speech—spoken utterance—within human interactional settings. But in fact that very "present," in the context of traditional society, is vitally linked with past and future iterations as well. The power of an oral "formula," whether one conceives this as a lexical or narrative or thematic or any other kind of structure, lies precisely in the fact that it engages not only the performer-audience group in a particular performance setting but a greater cultural inheritance transmitted through the memory. During those days of the 1970s and 1980s, structuralists and semioticians had popularized the term "intertextuality." But oral-traditional theory suggested "interperformativity" as a better descriptor of the environment and ambience and world of resonance in which an oral utterance occurs. The oral performance finds itself contextualized not as a book being read in the carrel of a library but as a voice speaking or singing in a hall that still echoes with many other voices from the near and distantly remembered past.

These kinds of cultural issues engaged me as a scholar until 1993, when my life took what must have seemed to others as an erratic turn: and here my narrative swerves from matters academic to matters personal and spiritual. From the time that I was a teenager in the late 1960s, my primary life attraction had always been toward spirituality. Only spiritual realities, I felt then and feel now, can provide ultimately satisfactory answers to the fundamental problems of human mortality and meaning. Searching through some of the world's spiritual traditions (in the way that one does when one is a teenager), in 1970 I found what was for me an authentic spiritual Master in Meher Baba (1894-1969), who had declared himself the Avatar of this age. I had accepted him as such and had been a follower of his for more than twenty years; but in 1993 suddenly an opportunity arose for me to become a permanent resident at Meherabad, the spiritual center established around Meher Baba's tomb-shrine adjoining the village of Arangaon (six miles from the small city of Ahmednagar) in Maharashtra Pradesh on the western Deccan plateau. Though I had little savings and though the ashram provided no financial support, I took the plunge anyway, left my comfortable academic job, and have lived in India ever since. Realizing that few of my academic associates had the kind of background that would enable them to understand (let alone sympathize with) the decision I was making, I made no attempt to explain and justify myself but simply, like Bilbo the hobbit, put on a magic ring and disappeared from the academic scene.

At the Meher Baba ashram my new life brought with it an array of duties that might have seemed, from the standpoint of a former professor, dull and menial. For five years I took

dictation and typed letters, filed papers, compiled lists, organized records, and performed other tasks of a secretarial sort. I fully accepted this and assumed that the rest of my life would be spent thus. For in the spiritual life the kinds of accomplishments and credentials that you would put on an academic curriculum vitae count for absolutely nothing. Renunciation means forgetting who you were. Instead, one seeks self-effacement, for this constitutes the necessary preliminary to inner awakening. The thought of pursuing scholarly research again never so much as crossed my mind. It was as if a veil had fallen over my academic past which receded like a dream vaguely and distantly remembered, while the active present was devoted to trying to experience God in the now of this moment.

But then my life path took another unexpected turn, which abruptly brought me back face to face with a universe of the mind that I thought I had left forever. For in 1998 suddenly a new trove of literary-philosophical manuscripts came to light in one of the ashram's old storage sheds (or "go-downs," as they are called in India). During the 1920s, when Meher Baba was first establishing his center at Meherabad, among the many other activities he was engaged in, he gave talks on spiritual subjects, some of them to his disciples (who were undergoing their first spiritual training), and others to boys in the school that he was operating on the Meherabad property at the time. Though Meher Baba did not himself write up any of these lectures, disciples took extensive notes. All this material—a considerable mass of it—had been stowed away in an old briefcase for seventy years; but when it was rediscovered in the late 1990s, those who read through it saw at once that it was highly substantive and revelatory, providing new perspectives on the main body of Meher Baba's writings composed and published later, in the 1940s and 50s. Since in those early days of the 1920s Meher Baba's various disciple-scribes were working without the benefit of any special literary training and under the pressure of many other duties all of which had to be carried out in difficult material conditions, the prose of these early manuscripts was raw in the extreme, sometimes the content was jumbled, it was written in several languages, and it was embedded in a nexus involving both the specific historical context of India in the 1920s and a confluence of several spiritual traditions. Despite its obvious value, by any reasonable measure this material needed extensive editing and reconstruction before it could be presented to the public.

Until this time I had been working directly under the personal supervision of one of Meher Baba's close disciples, Bhau Kalchuri, to whom Meher Baba had given various literary and philosophic writing assignments which had occupied him through much of the 1960s into the 1970s. When these new manuscripts surfaced, Bhau immediately put other work aside and plunged into the task of preparing them for publication; since my own background was in this very line, I went along with him. Thus I was inaugurated—in a sense reinaugurated—into what has emerged as my life's work. Since 1998 the research team here has edited and seen through to publication five primary editions, and more major volumes loom in prospect. I have come full circle and find myself living the life of a scholar again, though now in the improbable setting of an ashram in rural India.

To my own abiding astonishment, it turns out that the particular training that John gave me is most apt to the job in which I am now engaged. Particularly critical are skills relating to the treatment of language and manuscripts. For though raised a middle-class Indian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Meher Baba was born into a family of Zoroastrians

recently migrated from Iran. His father had left his home in Yezd as a boy of twelve and wandered alone as a dervish in the Indo-Iranian deserts for twenty years before settling in Poona (now Pune) in the 1880s and starting a family. Meher Baba himself was fluent in Persian, Urdu, Marathi (the local language in Maharashtra), Gujarati (his mother tongue), and, of course, English (the language of the British Raj). He had both Hindu and Muslim spiritual Masters. When he discoursed in the 1920s, he spoke in a patois that drew on the vocabulary of all these languages—along with their cultural resonance from their various Hindu, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds. So each day I find myself working with old handwritten diaries, transcripts of talks, and other manuscripts on a desk piled high with dictionaries, glossaries, histories, and other such reference sources in the manner of a nineteenth-century philologically trained textual editor compiling the first standard editions of classic medieval texts. And while my years under John's tutelage gave me no instruction in the particular languages or philosophical systems I am working with at present, in terms of general skills and methods, I could have had no more perfect preparation for what I now do a hundred miles from the nearest decent library collection on the outskirts of a small farming village in south Asia.

Yet even more striking has been the relevance of oral-traditional theory—in a most unexpected application. For any student or scholar of Meher Baba's "writings" has first of all to deal with the basic fact that, through most of his adult life, Meher Baba was silent. He inaugurated this complete verbal silence on July 10, 1925, and maintained it until his death on January 31, 1969. For the first year and a half he expressed himself by writing with chalk on slate; but from the beginning of 1927, but for occasional signatures, he renounced writing as well, communicating by pointing to letters on an alphabet board, and later, through his own system of hand gestures. His books and messages were never "written" by him in the ordinary sense, then, but were dictated to disciples who had to cultivate the facility of swiftly interpreting a word or phrase or facial or hand gesture—each of these a hint or cue that needed to be unpacked—and fleshing it out in suitable and fluent discourse in whatever language was called for at the time. Inevitably "formulas" and mnemonics played a major role in this process. As I have studied the matter more deeply, I have come to feel that Meher Baba's communication, emerging very literally from silence (since for forty-four years he never once spoke), occupies a curious space between the "oral" and the "literate." His verbalizations were "textualized" from their very incipience in that they began with fingers pointing to letters on an alphabet board. Yet their "reading out" and interpretation by disciples, in the accomplishment of which task these disciples had necessarily to draw on their memory of previous dictations and things that Meher Baba had "said" in the past, were radically interactive in their root articulation, public and performative, in this sense like an oral-traditional rendering—and quite unlike the process of writing, in which the writer introspects, closes the door to his or her office, and finds the right words in isolation from others.

This ambivalence between the written and the oral, between the sign visually fixed and the spoken utterance resonating in recollection, serves a purpose, I have come to feel, in Meher Baba's "teaching" to the world. Part of the significance of his silence, obviously, concerns the ancient apophatic truth that God cannot be understood through the mind or expressed in words. For the process of signification—indeed, of thinking itself—presupposes duality. You cannot think unless there is a thinker, an act of thinking, and an object of thought. Yet Reality itself—

which is God the Father, or Brahman, or Paramatma, or Yahweh, or Allah, or Wujud, or Logos, or Nous, or Infinite Intelligence, or Sunya, or Tao: words fail as one approaches this subject—inhabits a domain that precedes the first division. God cannot be thought about: anything one says about God falsifies God. To speak or write or theorize about God is to speak or write or theorize about someone else.

I feel that Meher Baba, living in an age of great intellectual development in which historically and culturally diverse religions and creeds and ideologies and systems of thought were seriously confronting each other for the first time, did not wish his own words to get fixed and invested with significance as objects in their own right, since this would only obscure the underlying Reality that it was his very purpose to unveil and bring into consciousness. Over the last two or three millennia it was precisely such reification of sacred discourse within religious life that produced the phenomenon of *scripture*—the Qur'an, the Gospels and the Torah, the Buddhist Tripitikas, the Vedas and Upanishads and Puranas, the Avesta, the Guru Granth Saheb. While this may have served the needs of the past, the urgent need of the present is to translate words into realized truth, to loosen the ties of dogma and to rediscover the primordial Light (Nur, Prakash) from whose rays these dogmas have been spun. Meher Baba did not wish his words to be scripturalized but *lived*. The process which he used to compose his books and messages—their ambiguous relationship to writing and textual fixity, indeed, to his own authorial act—serves to underscore this point. Anyone who studies Meher Baba's words closely has to realize that their real significance lies in his silence. For behind the Word of God abides the Silence of God. One finds God beyond the first inscription and before the first vibration.

Thus my own journey of discovery has led me to this deeper appreciation of my own Master and Guru, and so to a clearer perception of my own path. For as many monks and mystics in the West once knew and sometimes still know, and as Sufi dervishes and Hindu munis and yogis have known and put into practice even into modern times, scholarship as an act of devotion in the spiritual line has as its goal not the cultivation of greater understanding but the living achievement of gnosis, of spiritual realization. When I left my previous world in 1993, I did not expect that my road would spiral back to its beginnings as a way of leading me onward and up. But it has done so, and now I can see that the training I got in the world of scholarship was, for me, a providential foundation making possible the work that I do now. I don't imagine that my old friend John perceived what he was doing for me in those terms, since I did not even see it that way myself in those days. But I am deeply grateful for a gift which I believe God gave through his hands. And I am happy in the thought that all real gifts create in the inner being of the human giver a space that God fills with something greater and more, for it is by this means that humanity, and each person, find their way back to the Source.

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