Foreword

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Karl Reichl's *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* forces a radical reassessment of the history of literature in medieval Europe. This book compares European poetic forms, as preserved in medieval manuscripts, with a dazzling variety of corresponding poetic forms surviving in the living oral traditions of the Kirghiz, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Uzbeks, Uighurs, and other Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Reichl's detailed comparisons add up to an inevitable overall argument: the genres of medieval European literature, including forms of "high art" conventionally linked with Classical epic poetry, derive from vernacular oral traditions as well as post-Classical literary traditions.

Reichl's argumentation, combining internal analysis with comparative methodology, continues where Milman Parry and Albert Lord left off. Parry analyzed the ancient text of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as evidence for a pre-existing poetic system, which he then compared with the living poetic systems of the South Slavic oral traditions in the former Yugoslavia, collecting more than 12,500 texts of live performances from 1933 to 1935. After Parry's premature death in 1935, the continuation of his comparative work was left to his student Albert Lord, who went on to write a definitive account in *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard University Press, 1960; 2000 edition, with new introduction by Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy). Lord's book lays down a fundamental challenge to all readers of European literature when he announces, at the very beginning of his Foreword: "This book is about Homer. He is our Singer of Tales. Yet in a larger sense, he represents all singers of tales from time immemorial and unrecorded to the present. Our book is about these other singers as well."

For Parry and Lord, the primary point of comparison with Homer was the *guslar*, the singer of tales in the South Slavic oral traditions. The heroic songs of the South Slavs were now suddenly being juxtaposed with the heroic poetry of Homer, which has been by hindsight the original model of epic in the history of European literature—or at least the prototype of the classical genre conventionally called “epic.” By now, the debate originally generated by this juxtaposition in *The Singer of Tales* has had a long history, but the actual challenge retains its freshness: How are we to compare the most canonical of canonical texts, the epics of Homer, to oral traditions that represent “all singers of tales from time immemorial and unrecorded to the present”?

The debate continues not only in the field of Classics (defined in a narrow sense as the study of Greco-Roman antiquity) but also in medieval studies, thanks largely to the last chapter of *The Singer of Tales*, “Some Notes on Medieval Epic.” Like the classicists, medievalists appreciate what is at stake when such classics (in a broader sense) as *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland* are juxtaposed with the nonclassical traditions of oral poetics. It is at this crucial point in the debate that Reichl’s book enters the picture.

The point of entry for *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* has to do with a salient fact. We can find this fact signaled by Albert Lord himself in his two last books, both of which appeared in the Myth and Poetics series: *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (1991) and *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (posthumously published in 1995, edited by Mary Louise Lord). Engaging the ongoing debate among medievalists as well as classicists concerning the applicability of oral poetics, Lord makes it clear in these books that the South Slavic model of oral traditional poetics is but a single example among many when it comes to comparing the forms of classical and medieval literature to corresponding forms in oral traditions. As a particularly effective comparative example, alongside the South Slavic evidence of the Balkans, Lord singles out the oral traditions of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia (*Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, Chap. 13, pp. 211–244: “Central Asiatic and Balkan Epic”). The importance of the comparative Turkic evidence is highlighted also by the very first book in the Myth and Poetics series, Richard Martin’s *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the “Iliad”* (1989; see especially pp. 6–7).

Reichl’s work not only continues where Parry and Lord left off. Reichl himself boldly went where Parry might have gone if only he had been given the chance. The young Parry, not contenting himself with his work as a classicist studying the text of Homer, had sought the best place to study the comparative evidence of living oral traditions. Parry’s first choice, as Albert Lord was fond of recounting to his students, had been the Soviet Union; it was only after he was denied a visa to travel there that Parry decided on Yugoslavia as his

destination. The young Reichl, not contenting himself with his own work as a medievalist studying the text of *Beowulf* and other medieval classics, managed to travel throughout the former Soviet Union and China in his ongoing quest to engage the comparative evidence of the living oral traditions in Turkic Central Asia. Like Parry, Reichl had been inspired by the ethnographic work of Radloff, whose *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme* (I–VIII, 1866–1899) remains to this day a classic in the study of oral traditions in Central Asia. Unlike Parry, however, Reichl also had the advantage of hindsight, inspired by the ethnographic work of Parry and Lord in the Balkans. Reichl writes in an earlier book (*Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure* [New York: Garland Publishing, 1992], ix):

While still a student in Munich I bought a book with the title *Der Sänger erzählt: Wie ein Epos entsteht*. It was A. B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, which had only just come out in a German translation. It made fascinating reading and first revealed to me the relevance of living oral epic poetry for the study of medieval epic poetry, in particular of works such as *Beowulf* or the *Chanson de Roland*, epics which have come down to us in written form but betray their origin in an oral milieu. The path to Central Asia was opened for me only later when I discovered that the Bavarian State Library possessed a complete set of Radloff's *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme*. Radloff's translations, in their charming, antiquated German, introduced me to a world of heroism and passion, romance and adventure, marvel and magic, which has held me spellbound ever since.

In Karl Reichl's *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry*, the sense of wonder initially experienced by the young student reading Radloff's old volumes in a library has become transformed. Not only have Reichl's own first-hand experiences in collecting Turkic oral poetry surpassed those of Radloff himself in breadth and depth of knowledge. Even more than that, this knowledge has now been applied to a most lively re-reading of medieval European literature. To compare this luminous body of writings with Turkic oral traditions of song and music, in all their dazzling varieties of genre and artistic bravura, is to be spellbound all over again.