CHAPTER ONE

EDITING AND TRANSLATING TRADITIONAL ORAL EPIC: THE SOUTH SLAVIC SONGS AND HOMER

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In the mid-1930s Milman Parry journeyed to the former Yugoslavia to test his hypothesis that Homer was a traditional oral poet, and that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that have reached us bear the unmistakable signs of an oral traditional heritage. Together with Albert Lord and their native assistant Nikola Vujnović, he recorded hundreds of epic narratives from South Slavic *guslari*, or oral poets, and samples of these performances from the regions of Novi Pazar and Bijelo Polje have been transcribed, edited, and translated in the series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*. It is chiefly on this evidence—most of which remains unpublished in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University—that Lord based his epochal book, *The Singer of Tales*, and from which the comparative field of studies in oral tradition has since taken root. To say that the South Slavic oral epic tradition was instrumental in rediscovering ancient Greek orality is thus a vast understatement; from a historical perspective the guslar’s performances were from the beginning a *sine qua non*.¹

This chapter is intended as a prospectus on a long-term project, a map that charts a pathway toward its eventual goal: providing usable original-language editions and English-language translations

of South Slavic oral epic poetry. As such, it has four linked aims. First and most generally, I aspire to increase the limited number of translations of non-canonical works of verbal art. The available selection has of course long been dominated by Western works accepted as ‘part of the heritage’, silencing many other voices—especially the voices of oral traditions—in the process. In an era of rapidly evolving globalization, these other voices need and deserve to be heard, by both scholars and students.\(^2\)

Second and more specifically, I want particularly to add to the available sample of editions and translations of South Slavic epic. It is a continuing irony that, since the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s and for that matter well beforehand, so much has been based upon the epic tradition of the \textit{guslari} when so little of its riches have stood open to anyone but specialists. The Oral-Formulaic Theory rests almost entirely on the initial comparison between Homer’s \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey} on the one hand, and the Moslem epic songs from the former Yugoslavia on the other; yet the comparatist is hobbled by the paucity of published, circulating evidence. This situation has led to polarization, with South Slavic specialists sometimes claiming more than can be fully illustrated on the basis of the present inventory of English-language exemplars while scholars from other areas not seldom profess doubt over the length, quality, and overall viability of an epic tradition they have been able only to glimpse here and there. A wider and deeper view of the tradition will help to relieve this tension.

Third, and relatedly, the present project responds to a need to bolster existing theory by a fresh emphasis on practice. That is, instead of beginning with scholarly perspectives, it will return to the performances of South Slavic epic in order to avoid the automatic, ‘default’ assumptions we too often make about works of verbal art we encounter only as texts. Thus, for example, translation will be construed as broadly as possible—not merely the conversion from South Slavic to English, but the transformation from performance to record, from record to transcription, from transcription to edited text, and from edited text to a suitably configured English equiva-