

Editor's Column

Oral Tradition for 2003 presents something quite different from its usual contents. Over this and the last issue we explore the “state of our art” across the multiple academic disciplines and hundreds of individual traditions, ancient through contemporary, that collectively constitute our field. That is, volume 18 of *OT* is devoted exclusively to sampling the heterogeneity of studies in oral tradition, to gaining some insight on the variety and limits of investigation and understanding as of the year 2003.

We start not just by admitting but by stipulating that “oral tradition” is in numerous practical ways anything but a unified field. Most obviously, it refers to all verbal art that comes into being and is transmitted without texts, and recent years have shown that it must also encompass myriad forms and genres that interact in many fascinating ways with texts, and now with electronic media. If “literature” names a hopelessly complex ecosystem of manifestly different species, then “oral tradition”—which dwarfs literature in amount and variety—presents an even greater ecological challenge.

Of course “oral tradition” should never have been so simplistically construed, but such has been the tyranny of print, text, and related media that verbal art outside their culturally sanctioned auspices did in fact suffer from this kind of marginalization. From one perspective this historical trajectory was entirely predictable. Cultures define themselves by defining competitive modes and ideas out of existence: just as regularly as mother-tongue learners of any given language eliminate certain sounds from their vocal repertoires even as they acquire the acoustic network to support their own particular language, so we textualists have narrowed our focus to textual works—complete with authors, situated inside a literary tradition, and available for individual and silent perusal via books stored in libraries. Ironically, the voices that made these texts possible, the non-textual verbal art that was both the precedent and the crucible for the book-bound strategies we so admire, was often labeled “primitive,” “unsophisticated,” or “simple”—or, more characteristically, simply ignored.

In the modern era, and never more than in today's world, we are coming to understand that “oral tradition” plays an enormous and necessary part in any concept of verbal art. Moreover, the stakes are high. If we fail to take sufficient account of these riches, we disenfranchise whole cultures, misconstrue the cognitive categories and social activities of others, and redefine the ancient and medieval worlds in our own necessarily graven image. Hopefully, over the past seventeen years the pages of *Oral Tradition* have contributed to this ongoing reassessment and rebalancing, participating

in helping to make us aware of some of the wonderful richness and complexity of “oral tradition” while offering both tradition-specific insights and comparative analogies that can be useful to a responsible citizen of the twenty-first century. That at least has been our goal.

Amid the hurly-burly of these nearly two decades’ worth of exchange, *OT* now seeks to “take the pulse” of the field, a composite field construed as broadly as possible. We do this without in any way suggesting that the measurement is or can be precise or exhaustive; indeed, such is the heterogeneity of our subject that any claim of this sort would be illusory at best. Instead, we aim at a random sampling of what the concept of “oral tradition” means to individual scholars and practitioners, and at what they see as the next challenge(s) in their particular corner of an ever-expanding world of investigation.

Among our emphases in the present issue are Hispanic, Celtic, Scandinavian, English, and Pan-Asian oral traditions, along with contributions on the ballad and on comparative studies. The more than eighty contributions over the two halves of the 2003 volume touch on many other fields as well.

We hope that the result is thought-provoking for our readership. The very nature of the exercise precludes expounding anything at length or saying anything “final,” of course, but that isn’t the point. This collection of perspectives draws whatever strength it may have from its diversity and suggestiveness, that is, from the extent to which its contents awaken ideas within readers’ own disciplines and conceptualizations of “oral tradition.” Think of these often telegraphic responses as an invitation to dialogue, comparison and contrast, and new directions that might translate fluently to your own field.

Finally, as the dedication page at the beginning of issue 18, i indicates, the collection as a whole is offered as a *Festschrift* for Robert Payson Creed, who introduced me to Old English poetry and oral tradition. I remember vividly how he made both subjects vital and very much alive via his daily seminar performances of scenes from *Beowulf* in the original Anglo-Saxon. As one of Albert Lord’s early students, and as an accomplished scholar and thinker who has contributed essentially to our grasp of (as he himself put it) the “making of an Anglo-Saxon poem,” Bob has made a singular difference in many of his students’ lives. I present him this tribute on behalf of all of us. *Wes þu, Robert, hal!*

John Miles Foley, Editor