**EPIC**

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1. **Summary**

Among major literary kinds, epic offers the most long-standing and globally distributed evidence of the human habit of thinking by means of narrative. What it cherishes is the common good; what it ponders are the behaviors and values that forward or threaten collective welfare. What it reckons are the stakes of heroic risk that any living culture must hazard in order to prosper, by negotiating core identities with margins and adjusting settled customs to emergent opportunities; and it roots all these in the transmission of a tale that commands perennial attention on their account. Such dialectics underlie epic’s favorite narrative templates of strife, quest, and foundation; and they find expression in such conventions as the *in medias res* opening and suspended closure; the epic invocation, ancestral underworld, superhuman machinery, and encyclopedic simile; the genre’s formal gravitation towards verse artifice and the lexical and syntactic mingling of old with new language. The genre steadfastly highlights the human condition and prospect, defining these along a scale of higher and lower being, along a timeline correlating history with prophecy, and along cultural coordinates where the familiar and the exotic take each other’s measure.

1. **Keywords**

*Convention, Culture, Dialectic, Epic, Genre, Muse, Narrative, World, Tradition*

1. **Main Essay**

***Definitions***

Epic is so long-lived and wide-spread a genre that a definition is no sooner attempted – a long poetic narrative, let us say, that in rehearsing its audience’s antecedents imparts through heroic epitome the values the future will demand of them – than that definition falls subject to embarrassing qualification, by reason of the very richness and variety of the genre’s exemplars. Must it be verse? Is it always didactic? Why lay such stress on history? To define and refine in that way is an exercise whose genuine heuristic value, while beyond doubt, is countervailed by its inconclusiveness. It may be more instructive to ask what kind of definition we are seeking. For epic is at once an idea and a tradition, a remarkably stable general concept and an agent with an incomparably diversified global and historical portfolio. The genre may with equal validity be identified by listing its intrinsic features (catalogue of worthies, celestial messenger) and by enumerating recognized titles (*Ramayana*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Omeros*)or, where these are known, authors (Ovid, Camoens, H. D.). A work belongs to the genre if it displays a modicum of the requisite features; a feature ranks as a generic convention if a quorum of the canonical works make use of it. This all but trite circularity of generic classification becomes informative in the case of epic, because there the stability of the idea and the dynamism of the history prove, to a striking degree, mutually constitutive.

On one hand storytelling is how epic thinks. The genre abounds in ideas and values, which occasionally take a propositional form that has encouraged their adoption as proverbial wisdom. But the characteristically epic expression of ideas and values comes, not in aphoristic extracts, but rather in the currency of normative or deviant behaviors exhibited by its heroes or antagonists; and the proof of such ideas and values emerges in the vicissitudes of plot. Thus from the Renaissance into the nineteenth century epoists frequently summarized the action of a work in a prose “Argument,” which consisted not in debater’s points but in a forecast of the incidents about to be narrated; similarly, where this information was given in the verse body of the poem editors and critics were apt to designate the lines in question the poem’s “Proposition.” Both terms have survived into modernity as reminders of a deeply rooted intellectual habit – less superseded as primitive than upheld as radically essential – to wield stories as thought experiments and frame logical consequences as narrative ones.

Conversely, behind the whole enterprise there stands a major idea that does much to determine what kind of story an epic may tell. This is the idea of collective cultural representation, which need not be abstractly articulated in philosophical or theoretical fashion before it can wield decisive influence at the level of enacted behavior. A story attains epic-worthy consequence when, by enlarging an incident into an exemplum or an individual into a hero, it flexes a strength of communal spokesmanship that is tantamount to ideation. An episode stands in relation to an entire plot, or an individual character to an inter-related community, much as a perception stands in relation to an idea, via inductive reasoning, or a lesson to a rule. The ingredient behavioral norms may be kept or broken or bent, and in the most elaborated epics each of these options will have a role. But at every turn the norms must evince such collective scope that they bespeak their audience as a totality, along a scale of inclusion that in the genre’s historical development has graduated upward from the clan through the nation to the species. This generalizing pressure makes the epic tale render its sponsoring culture’s most evolved ideas about itself, which are also, thanks to that same pressure, the culture’s most complex, often contradictory ideas. In this sense the thought a culture cherishes, and expresses most pervasively in behavioral terms, prompts the story whose episodes furnish ways for the culture to think it over.

Among genres epic enjoys a place of distinct privilege, whose diverse figurations we might pause to sample here. Within the neoclassical taxonomy that has informed generic theory so robustly and so long, epic crowns a hierarchy defined jointly, and with mutual reinforcement, by the apprehension of poetic challenge and the award of poetic prestige. Or we may say, still on the vertical but with a shift in trope, that epic sits at the top of a laddered food chain, whose component genres – *inter alia* invocation to the muse, debate, ekphrasis – are patently of lesser rank because they are what the apex predator metabolizes. Or again, to put the same idea less flamboyantly, epic occupies a circumference that encyclopedically includes its culture’s knowledge because it includes the genres – descriptive, epideictic, lyric, and so on – that constitute the culture’s ways of knowing. Or yet again, to the extent that those constituent genres form a network, epic takes place at the focus or node of maximal intersection within that network, where the intergeneric exchange is busiest and has furthest systemic reach.

Each of these figural locations for epic has its use, but they are all misleading on account of their very explicitness. For the epoist has toiled to little purpose unless, in the end, the resulting poem wields the understated force of an inevitability that looks like common sense and feels like common property. It is epic’s special calling to elucidate in memorable narrative the culturally obvious; to declare in a tale the thing that, once it is said, would seem to have gone without saying. Recent scholarship has shown how, within the classical Greek society that the cardinal Western epics of Homer underwrote, *epic* was the “unmarked” or default term for poetry as such: the presumed category to which “marked” poetic kinds named *tragedy*, say,or *ode* were tacitly understood to belong, as adjectives belong to the noun they modify.[[1]](#endnote-1) This finding neatly epitomizes the generic pre-eminence just discussed. It also squares nicely with what many a child maintains, and many an untrained adult reader supposes too: that any book unless it is expressly labeled otherwise – indeed any designated speech act, from a joke to a TED talk – will present the form of a *story*. So it will not quite do to regard epic as one genre among others: instead it forms the basis or background from which other genres emerge (both historically and conceptually) and in which they find their places. As with language itself, epic’s taken-for-granted status grounds the intelligibility of each component genre within the culture’s textual system, whether literary or oral, and shapes the relation that each one bears to the others. By and large, this grounding subsists unconsciously. Its influence is the stronger for remaining tacit, in ways that subtend epic’s categorical authority as historical witness and moral guide.

All of which means that, when epic does announce itself and claim attention in its own right, more than literary values are at stake. When the book is opened or the recitation strikes up, the reader or the audience enters into play as an interested party within the total action of the event. The traditional fanfare of invocation, the harp and drum and song that resound in the antechambers of epic, herald the manifestation of something momentous: namely, the disclosure of the cultural operating system. For the experience of epic promotes into consciousness certain coefficients of identity that make people – a people – what they are. Epic exposes the culture to itself, and always with a double valence of affirmation and critique. Group identity being its criterion, the privileged tale reintroduces the audience to itself; at the same time, as epic narration rehearses the thinking of the collective mind, its performance prompts that mind to reflection by revisiting familiar loci of crisis, choice, and deed. That this process issues in the sheer reinforcement of conservative norms is far from certain; indeed, that issue is precisely what an epic, if worthy of its generic prestige, must contrive to place in fresh question at each engagement. The turns of plot must think again through a set of contradictions whose resolution is never more than provisional and therefore, in a living culture, requires with some frequency the sort of adaptive reconsideration to which a complex narrative affords access. Now as ever, the abiding problematic of epic makes students of all who receive it.

***Master Plots***

Each major type of epic plot carries out this cultural obligation in a manner inherently dialectical. The epic of *strife* is most prominent, both because the rendition of battle embodies in a most direct way the fundamental narrative formula of conflict and resolution, and because warriors become not just valorous but heroic when they take up arms and risk lives on behalf of a larger cause possessing communal importance. This collective criterion for epic glory is one of the things Achilles learns, the hard way, over the course of the *Iliad*. If Napoléon never does quite learn it in Hardy’s *The Dynasts*, the reader certainly does, having been trained for the lesson by Napoleonic Europe’s transformation of warfare from an elite to a mass-nationalist undertaking that made “world war” a foregone conclusion – an epic redundancy, almost – during the century that followed publication in 1908. The other thing Achilles learns is harder still, and that is the regard a noble victim exacts, even in defeat, of a noble victor. For the strife epic arrays its many winners and losers along a binary that is not only differential but dialectical. Even the most abjected loser – winsome Hector’s grossly disfigured corpse – can be made beautiful by epic’s panoramic calculus, which factors the slain together with the survivors in a reckoning that tallies the history written by winners against the counter-narrative of memory that losers nurse and bequeath.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The lesson is so exigent that strife epics, again in sequel to the *Iliad*, like to rehearse it in deflected forms, of which epic *games* are the most salient. This ludic convention is to epic warfare as the Olympics are to a geo-political era: a competition drained of lethal violence, yet still playing out the rivalry that lies at the root of both, now for stakes whose comparative triviality if anything shows the larger agonistic enterprise more clearly for what it is. An episode of epic games, indeed, resembles the poem that contains it more than a scene of battle does. Both the athletic match and the poem offer high-tension entertainment; both perform a kind of secondary processing – a theoretical reflection, as it were – on the fundamental matter of war; and both bring home how triumph co-dependently entails defeat. The sheer survival of losers on the playing (unlike the killing) field means that their losses must be dealt with, in some civil way or another; humiliation and dejection must be not merely noted, but sympathetically imagined, as integral to the total event.

When epic takes time out at the races, then, it is only relaxing into a version of itself, and it is thinking as hard as ever. The alternative sublimation of combat into debate may mince the matter of epic’s self-reference more finely still. In the *grand consult* or public forum, contestants strive with the mind rather than the body, and their weapons are poetry’s own tools, words. This forensic convention summons the audience into an imaginary parliament or courtroom to assess on its merits the case each speaker makes, with a prowess not related at second hand like spearcraft but laid out in discourse for all to judge. Here, at least, the loser’s best shot is read right into the record, where it outlives whatever adverse or favorable judgment is eventually rendered on the forensic scene; in the process, the dialogue of cross-examination and counter-argument transparently rehearses a species of dialectic that, while an epic constant, is never so overt in its workings as here. When in classical times the forensic episode spun off into Greek and Roman drama, the new medium maximized certain potentials already present in epic, to which it has returned ever since in a number of reprises keyed to intervals of political upheaval: Blake’s epics of “Mental Fight” in the aftermath of the French Revolution, for example, and a generation later a proliferation of forensic epics surrounding the Reform Bill of 1832 in Britain. Although in epic practice the martial overshadows the deliberative – which accordingly takes shape as combat by other means – the persistence of the latter brings out the genre’s deep political suspicion that, from the dispositive standpoint of collective interest, war is diplomacy by other means after all. Heroic valor finally subserves communal value.  
 A close second to the strife epic is the epic of *quest*, which also shows the hero in strife with armed antagonists, but only by the way. Ranged along that way, en route towards some goal of greater moment, is exactly where such antagonists belong, and their defeat matters less than their removal for the sake of the quest. In a quest epic, human opponents are narrative components, roughly interchangeable with obstacles of other kinds, be they in the landscape, the weather, or the superhuman order of things. The hero’s overcoming each such impediment provides quest epic’s version of experiential learning, in which an error like Odysseus’s gloating over Polyphemos is as instructive as success, especially from the vicarious perspective of an auditor or reader. The problem-solving instruction gleaned from this sort of encounter remains, however, comparatively practical and, on an epic scale of value, superficial. The great magnetic attraction remains the stated object of the hero’s quest, which may medially be a golden fleece or dragon hoard but is really to execute the full homecoming circuit and at his return to bestow on the community he started from a prize that will concurrently fortify and alter it. Odysseys do that, as do crusade and mission epics where they can.

But sometimes they cannot, and in that case a crucial variant comes into play: the *foundation* epic, which, finding shattered Troy or prohibited Eden unreclaimable, makes a new home instead in Rome (*Aeneid*) or the New Jerusalem (Revelation; *Aurora Leigh*). The plot that establishes a city solves for epic at one stroke a number of allied problems: securing relevance for an intended audience of future citizens; running a thread between history and posterity, twin distances that gild the present time with meaning; inculcating a civic economy of sacrifice that subordinates short-term individual interests to long-range general ones; boosting the poem’s own architectural design by analogy to the built and developing urban complex. The founded city is, like the epic poem, a collective accomplishment that demands renewal: a feat that is perennially to be revived, with a difference, yet never done. Witness Tennyson’s Camelot: “For an ye heard a music, like enow / They are building still, seeing the city is built / To music, therefore never built at all, / And therefore built for ever.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

***Conventions***

The dynamism of a heritage accepted, considered, and projected forwards is essential to the vitality of cultures; it essentially quickens their epics too, which even where they exist in a fixed textual form must be grasped within a changing history of reception. “Classic” works in Frank Kermode’s sense, epic poems can outlast the era of their inception only by remaining available for later appropriation on new terms in the context of changing circumstances.[[4]](#endnote-4) This imperative to hospitality is something that epic has always understood about itself, optimizing its likelihood of survival by practicing arts of continuity between self and other, past and future, and building the means of accommodation into its very tissues.

Most if not all of the quaint and curious conventions associated with epic turn out, on inspection, to be instruments of this kind. Take the plunge *in media res* that Aristotle noticed and Horace named. Where an academically methodical mind would begin at the beginning of its chosen matter and expound forwards until the story was spent and the loose ends tucked away, a canny epoist typically begins in the middle, flashing back and ahead at will by means of embedded narratives and prophecies. So arbitrary a procedure eventually covers all the same ground as a stepwise method, but does so in higher fidelity to the way human cognition works, negotiating actualities while toggling back and forth between memory and anticipation. The *Odyssey*, to look no further, is dazzlingly accomplished in this respect: the plot commences at a late point in the chronological action, most of which we hear about in a retrospect that so dilates the trunk of the poem that, by the time Odysseus makes land in Ithaca where we began, we seem to be coming home with him. Such real-world calisthenics of temporality also realize dividends for the dynamic worldedness of epic itself: like the action it relates, the poem too has come into a world long since begun, and must hold its own in a game of catch-up with elder stories it can rival only if it reckons with their priority.

Related questions of priority suffuse another inaugural epic convention, the *invocation* to the muse. Here the petitioning poet candidly outsources the power of the story that is now to be revived, but does it in such a way as to level the playing field on which he is competing with those who have told it before. In the face of all that the muse knows, every poet is fallible and every version partial. Memory’s daughter, she figures in superhuman form a mnemonic archive that, like the collective mind we found at the defining rim of the epic idea, transcends individual talent – yet, at the same time, seems to require the individual talent as its mouthpiece in order to speak with a voice humans can hear. If the poet is her agent, by the same token she is his resource and has his back. Moreover, by the very act of summoning her, the poet lays preliminary claim to the power that ostensibly lies in her gift; in requesting her blessing to begin, the poet has seized the day and begun already. The whole strange convention thus jump-starts the epic *in medias res poeticas*, and in a highly practical way that tests out the poet’s relation to a tradition he finds himself in the thick of. No wonder epoists since Virgil have larded latter portions of an epic with a supplementary invocation, flashing a poetic license that they have, if not forged, then customized.[[5]](#endnote-5)

To the strategic raggedness of the *in medias res* convention for beginning, epic adds a corresponding incertitude at the end. As Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* puts it in approaching closure with its last book’s first line, “Here were the end, had anything an end.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Aesthetic fulfillment there surely must be: the action initially proposed will have seen fruition by the time any successful epic closes down. But if the poem’s role within cultural history is to be an enduring one, then there must be something else: a remainder of unfinished business, some imbalance on the moral or political scale, the forward momentum of an unkept promise, a violence unredressed. Odysseus will have to shoulder his oar some day and march into the hinterlands; King Arthur takes leave of this life but not quite of his own, reserving an option on a sequel. *Don Juan* just stops where Byron left it and went off to death; the *Aeneid* does nearly the same, and leaves the reader gasping, like the gibbering shade of slain Turnus, for a humanizing explanation that never arrives. These and the like remainders fray the epic story line into divergent, unnarrated but implied futures; in so doing, they insert epic’s artificially ordered regime back into the world it abruptly arose from. And that shapeless world – ruled by chronicular sequence, not patterned consequence – then receives the ordered work as a living thing to be thought and fought with, in a future the poet could not foresee yet could, in epic’s way, provide against.

Into the world. It is the worldedness of reality that epic holism aspires to represent, in conformity to the culture it speaks for.[[7]](#endnote-7) In the production of this worldedness are enlisted both the genre’s encyclopedic reference to heterogeneous details, for whose handling it models a pertinent expertise in culture-spanning lore, from weaving and smithery to navigation and oratory, and tenders its comprehensive warrant that all these details and crafts are globally integrated with one another as the cohesive arts of a civilization. Here the creakily antique epic *catalogue* finds its raison d’être. In Whitman as in Homer, enumerative inventory does a kind of distributive justice to the battalions of an army, or the representative occupants of a nation, in a trial display that, although it may not be exhaustive, lasts long enough to imply that it might be exhaustive if it had to be and if the archival muse came through on call. Hence too epic’s recurrent interest in *cosmology*, which it typically pursues along the narrative dimensions of a cosmogony, so that a tale about the universe’s origin and early history stands proxy for the worlding axiom of the universe’s coherence. (With this shift, once again, narrative supplies epic’s preferred form of conceptualization.) In some epics the mining of cosmic origins evokes its symmetrical corollary, a vision of the end of the world. The convention of *apocalypse*, from the nested convulsions of Hindu epic and the Bible to the Norse sagas, Milton, and a host of flood and eruption epics, conceives totality as a consummate effect beheld from the last instants of time. With such ultimata, even worldedness itself shares the transiency of epic action, which, having begun, must make an end: the microcosm of the poem recruits the macrocosm into an image of itself that will hold up as long as anything does: not eternal but perennial, the next best thing.

Important though the postulate of worlded coherence remains on its own account, it will not suffice to sustain a poem of epic length. The postulated coherence needs reinforcement at regular intervals, and for this purpose an indispensable tool is the ubiquitous epic *simile*. A little staple with a big reach, in Homer’s hands simile brought the ferocious grandeur of Trojan battle and the far-flung adventuring of Odysseus throughout the storied world home to an audience whose imagination it enhanced and sweetened, even as it dignified by heroic association details from the workaday artisanal world they knew. And in epics ever since, similes by the score have furnished the local stitchwork binding a work’s imagined extremities to each other, and into the fabric of the cultural whole.

The theory of the simile writes the theory of the epic in shorthand. Any simile may be unfolded in the form of an analogy. “A is like B” implies more than that: its implication fans out into “A is to X as B is to Y,” which full analogical form the amplitude of epic lets the poet spell out at will, though X or Y may also be left implicit, or indeed X may equal Y in order to emphasize a common substrate such as brilliance or beauty or leadership. Already this analogical work of comparison performs through narrative description the sort of epic thinking discussed above, pinching the world together in local correspondences that point cumulatively towards a holistic comprehension – galvanized, all the same, by an insistent differentiation that keeps comparison from collapsing into identity. Furthermore, epic similes often imply a further sub-substrate, one buried deeper in the analogical grounding of the trope: the comparands X and Y occupy an unmarked relation to some Z, a third term that goes unspoken because it is taken for granted, and thus, being generally understood, approaches the status of a culture-wide universal. At bottom this Z for Homer is human craft, which Plato with some condescension called *techne* and we in our more deeply cloven modernity call by turns either technology (the sciences) or technique (the arts). When the ship’s keel furrowing the waves is likened to the farmer’s plow tilling the field, through the respectively implied sea and soil is glimpsed the common ground these actions share within civilizing culture, which term happens to derive from the “coulter” or blade that forms part of the simile in question, and that does its work at the interface where the power of nature is engaged by human skill. The coulter/culture link here is just an etymological coincidence in English, of course; but it spotlights the thought of civilization that saturates epic as its paramount idea.

In the foreground of epic’s display of human arts and sciences, if not foremost among them, is the poet’s linguistic medium. Here too the genre takes measures that stress its own artifice, and it does so with a variety of interests in mind. The choice of verse rather than prose elevates both the matter told and the occasion of its telling; the formalities of a *prosody* – meter, rhymed stanza, incantatory recurrence of other kinds – set the business of epic off from communicative business as usual. Aesthetic or performative distance underscores the legendary or historical distance that keeps the now and the once-upon-a-time at art’s length from each other, and thereby keeps them in continuous relation as well. Where literate epic is concerned, the variously musical devices of prosody affirm a likewise distanced relation to the oral modes of a minstrel tradition that, while outmoded, remains unforgotten: epic writers aim to induce in print some recapitulation of the extemporizing performance whereby minstrels and griots share, before their audience’s ears and eyes, the momentaneous making that is poetry. The resources of verse as an aide-mémoire are manifest; and no chapter in scholarship on epic is better known than Milman Parry’s ethnographically buttressed thesis about the role of the epithet as a metrical unit enabling bardic performers to piece out the rhythm of the line in order to bear the tale along.[[8]](#endnote-8) Meanwhile, at a higher level of poetic integration, scholars have discerned principles of symmetric “ring” composition that constitute, for early texts of more than one kind, a large-motor narrative prosody analogous to the finer metrical one, no less artificial and no less gratifying.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Similar causes motivate the practice, in nearly all times and lands, of casting epic narrative in archaic *lexicon* and *syntax*, or at all events in a verbal medium conspicuously remote from the colloquial. While on the definition this essay has proposed the prose epic appears a solecism, its existence must be conceded; and the concession comes more easily when one notes with how much care Rabelais and Cervantes, Scott and Tolstoy, Joyce and Bolaño not only cultivate prose as an art form but do so in a blend of archaism with neologism, of urbane with outlandish diction, that is fully consistent with the experimental vernacular, and heteroglossia, of their counterparts in poetry: Dante, Goethe, Pushkin, Pound each have a niche in epic history that entrains a benefactor’s place in the history of their languages. Since the time of classical Athens, dramatists have been carving tragedies and comedies out of the epic quarry; these extracted forms, whether in stage-script or closet-drama form, reclaim venerable material for a new vocal and physical performance. The persistence of such dramatic offshoots, further transformed during the last century by new cinematic projection, attest what has been a nearly unbroken history of re-oralizing the ancient heritage.

In this as in so many ways, the transformative reception of epic seems uncannily scripted by conventions of its own prescient devising. We saw above how the invocation to the muse affiliates the living poet in sibling confraternity with predecessors. That paratextual affordance gets replicated within the narrative body text of many an epic in an interlude of *nekuia*, or descent to the dead.[[10]](#endnote-10) Such an interlude despatches the living hero, while in pursuit of this-worldly affairs, down to the underworld to seek answers that will help him prosper once back above ground. Virgil follows Homer in planting Aeneas’s underworld descent, like Odysseus’, plumb at the center of the work. From this structural navel each poem peers back behind its own diegetic action into an antecedent past, and on beyond its proper terminus into a future farther off, via the periscope of an ancestral prophecy. The hero’s dependency on helpers and elders at this omphalic juncture forms part of his lesson, which is part of epic’s generic lesson as well. Somewhere in the genealogy of both these Mediterranean epics stands the Sumerian *Gilgamesh*, where nekuia forms the climax of the plot – which is to say, of the poem’s ethical meditation – and the the hero’s frustrated quest for eternal life both demarcates the needy mortality of the human condition and valorizes in compensation the mission of civilization that is scaled to the lifespan the hero has. So secular a prospect would not satisfy Christian epoists like Dante and Milton, for whom the soul’s immortality was a matter of faith. Still, in devoting the first third of the *Divine Comedy* and the first sixth of *Paradise Lost* to underworld descents, both poets followed followed out pagan-epic leadings towards a chastened dependency: the underworld of each poem bristles with negative examples, anti-heroic sinners and demons who are doomed to fail at grasping just that humbling but redemptive point.

Because defining the human prospect is an essential cultural function, it is a function epic definitively takes on also. The genre most obviously discharges it by contrasting human beings with nonhuman ones, which epic theory has long called *machinery* – and rightly, since with rare exceptions machines are what they are, means to an end: range-finders, fixtures on which to leverage a human bearing. The gods and spirits, the angels and devils and more extravagant saints of religious legend, are welcome in epic, provided they respect the strictly subordinate place that epic’s radical humanism assigns them. They may wield superhuman powers, all the way up to divine omnipotence, but only on the condition – the human condition – that heroes be left free to recognize and embrace the parameters of destiny that mortal finitude and communal belonging impose. Likewise giants, trolls, dwarves, fairies and others whose less exalted status as para-humans suits them for heroes to contend with (or against), as metrics for taking the size of humanity. Likewise dragons, bears, eagles, and other animals, with whom the epic hero may form a significant relationship only if it serves to sharpen his own significance, by cutting off the shortcut into mere instinctual response that is, from epic’s point of view, no better or worse than divine transcendence flipped upside-down. To the extent that a story finds it definitively human to confront the complementary vertical attractions these orders of nonhuman being exert, that story is ripe for epic treatment. To the extent that, forfeiting such tension, a story simply meshes with its machinery, it swerves from the orbit of epic into that of romance or fantasy. It is for the same reason, incidentally, that epic puts magic on very short rations. A witch or clairvoyant may temporarily curb or forward an epic hero’s trajectory; indeed, the hero may embark like a magus on a shamanic vision-quest after something the plot requires; but anything more than that is generically illicit, because in slackening the bounds of possibility beyond repair, it blurs the human prospect beyond recognition.[[11]](#endnote-11)

***Co-ordinates***

The gist of the foregoing remarks might be plotted for convenience along co-ordinate axes in three dimensions that orient epic’s focal topic – the human prospect – in relation to cosmos, history, and culture respectively. Let a vertical axis represent the topic just considered: human nature as it is constituted by the diametric appeals of body and spirit, action and abstraction, the gratification of appetite and also its mastery whether sublime or perverse. Epic situates human life on a contentious middle ground between heavenly and infernal regions. Their denizens – god and beast, angel and demon – frame alternative options whose up-and-down tug, sometimes concretized along the lines of a mountain or cavern itinerary for the epic action, a protagonist learns to regard as limiting conditions that give this world shape and meaning. The muse in her inspiring descent, the poet lifting the great song’s burden to panoramic vantage, the erection of city walls and the felling of towers, the graveward pull of mortality and the exaltation of heroism, all transpire along epic verticals whose calibration establishes the genre’s incorrigible anthropocentrism, its focus on humanity’s middle state as the area of ultimate concern.

Next, let epic’s horizontal axis be the time-line of historical awareness. From what has been said already it will be apparent that the line admits, indeed requires, a busy two-way traffic. Time’s march from past to future is a constant; but so is epic’s refusal to fall into step with the pace of mere chronicle, its steadfast insistence on converting linear series into the knots and embroideries of significant design. The forward motion of history meets its match in the retrospect of the historian-narrator, who moreover flaunts a license to mingle old with new vocabularies, formulas, and verse structures, and to discover latter-day applications for embedded mythic archetypes. The back-and-forth workings of epic serve as a template for the operation of tradition itself, which founds its guess at the future on knowledge of the past, but includes in that knowledge an awareness of how incessantly emergent realities have ever reshaped that past, which is in practice also a changing quantity like the performance that is epic – and from the same cause. The genre’s strong will to continuity enforces a negotiated equilibrium between stability and innovation. These two complementary functions may get expressed as functions of the plot: the throned monarch and the heroic free agent are seldom quite compatible, and the friction between their interests enacts within the narrative a version of the same energy that powers the genre.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Last, from the plane where epic’s cosmic vertical intersects its historical horizontal, let a perpendicular be constructed into the third dimension that represents the definitive generic context of culture. Here the gradation runs not up-and-down or back-and-forth but in-and-out: the vital dialectics between same and other, autarky and debt, vest cultural integrity in the commerce of the center with the margin, the capital with the provincial. From the local brokerage of similes to the contact zones and cross-border sorties that so often outline and expand the reach of an epic plot, the genre ushers in the logic of assimilation that, grounding identity in difference, recognizes the unfamiliar at once as other and as like. The hero’s transaction with (if not provenance in) the outlandish, and the poet’s verbal borrowing (or theft) from other tongues, equally instantiate that exogamous drive with which any culture must either come to terms or perish. If epic’s longevity depends on its openness to change, and so to appropriation by posterity, its reach depends on its openness to alterity, and the welcome it accords to strangers.

1. **Discussion of the Literature**

It follows from the preceding section that the first place to look for theories about epic - first in order of importance as well as historical sequence within a given tradition – is in epic poems themselves. Scenes of bardic performance from the Homeric poems and *Beowulf*, for example, show and tell in epitome what those works take the work of epic to be. As primary epics survived into succeeding eras (classical, high-medieval), often they did so with undimmed luster yet on new terms of reception. For it was in these secondary eras that theory split off formally from practice to engender such formal and informal essays in criticism as Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica.* That was also when interpreters of the archaic epic texts bridged the gap between archaism and self-conscious modernity by proposing allegorical readings that harmonized old incidents with new values, be the latter Neoplatonic or Christian. This process came full circle in such a work as Prudentius’ fifth-century *Psychomachia*, which pressed the conventions of the pagan strife epic into service as an allegory of the “soul-war” named in its title, wherein the doctrines of morality dictated, rather than emerged from, the action of the plot. Such allegoresis let the Middle Ages recuperate Virgil’s *Aeneid* in a Christian image, which is what Augustine had done on an intimate scale when mapping his spiritual journey from sin to Catholic conversion in the *Confessions* on Aeneas’ pious itinerary from Carthage to Rome. Figural interpretation, the leading idea in medieval hermeneutics from Augustine through Dante*,* was honed on study of the Bible with a view to salvation; but what it saved for our purposes here was the epical portions of Old Testament narrative, whose historicity was not denied by *figura*, but fulfilled typologically in its New Testament sequel. This pattern of recovery would remain, in however masked a fashion, theoretically essential to the history and interpretation of epic that was built up after the waning of the Middle Ages during the last half-millennium.

With the revival of learning in the sixteenth century, the theory of epic revived too. Lodovico Castelvetro bequeathed to Neoclassicism a less philosophically inquisitive and substantially rulier version of the *Poetics* (1570), which subjected the genre to newly disciplinary unities of time and place as well as action. (Cue Rembrandt’s famous portrait of a sumptuously 1650s-clad Aristotle contemplating Homer’s austere bust.) Torquato Tasso wrote not only a major crusader epic (*Jerusalem Delivered* , 1581) but a long discourse on epic poetry; a decade later Edmund Spenser prefaced *The Faerie Queene* with an epistle explaining how the chivalric epic was to be understood and didactically applied. Two decades before that, Luis Vaz de Camoens had eschewed the detachment of theory and built into *The Lusiads*’ celebration of Portuguese naval conquest plenty of allegorical, mechanical, and oratorical reinforcement for that imperial epic’s propaganda. Milton more or less followed suit a century later, thriftily leaving *Paradise Lost* to speak for itself armed only with serial prose précis and a bracingly curt preface in defense of blank verse. That was when the critical regime of Neoclassicism made its last stand with a platoon of French heirs to Castelvetro’s Aristotle, chief among them René Le Bossu, whose 1675 *Treatise on the Epic Poem* forcefully reasserted the by-then-familiar case for homogeneous unity as the definitive hallmark of the king of genres.

This Neoclassical unitarian program was dutifully carried out across the eighteenth century in several nations on either side of the Atlantic – but only by minor poets. At the same time, and in marked counterpoint, leading poet-scholars were breaking ranks to hazard on one hand mock-epic forms that twisted the genre against its own conventions (Swift, Pope), on the other hand early-Romantic forms that, although they appeared to jettison the criterion of unity altogether, in fact found that the only way of keeping faith was submitting it to radical revision. The postulate of *formal* unity was replaced in the course of the eighteenth century by new hypotheses of *cultural* unity, which arose in turn from a ferment of new ideas about the development of civilization for which one principal incubator was scholarship on Homer. Notwithstanding the late flare-up of didactic allegory in Fénélon’s *Télémaque* (1699) and Voltaire’s *Henriade* (1723), the modern mind confronted in archaic Achillean heroism not a moral mirror but the stark revelation of a chasm between ancient and modern values (great but rude vs. polished yet puny). This cultural standoff was finessed through the relativist and progressivist ministrations of historical distance, through whose lens the barbarity of primitive epic was seen to typify a vanished but tributary phase in the longer human story. From Vico and Herder and thinkers of the French and Scottish Enlightenments arose new bases on which to apprehend an epic’s internal integration of plot, manners, and affects – especially given brand-new work like the Ossian reconstructions of James Macpherson around mid-century – as the distinct literary expression of the unified cultural and historical determinants that underlay it.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Readers who note how closely that last formulation resembles this entire entry’s leading theses will be prepared to hear that the same culturalist theory of epic, which by 1800 had largely supplanted the formal one descended from classic times, remains in place today, having also, with tectonic aplomb, assumed its place in the deep theoretical background of nearly all our literary history. While the culturalist theory has gone fundamentally unchallenged for a quarter-millennium, from the first its terms not only have admitted, but in several ways have actively solicited, successful bids to break open the canon of received congeners that, as we saw earlier, has always operated as a de-facto branch of epic theory, instrumental to any practical task of generic definition. These bids have come from two major directions – the the modern evolution of narrative genres, and the widening vista of a global literary archive – which between them have generated the most important adjustments to culturalist epic theory in the last two hundred years.

Among genres the first entrant was, and probably remains, the novel. The mode especially of historical fiction, which Scott in Britain taught among others to Hugo and Balzac in France, Manzoni in Italy, Galdós in Spain, Tolstoy in Russia, Cooper and Melville and Stowe in the United States, has done in long prose narrative everything that theory can impute to the epic except scan in lines and rhyme, and has done it chiefly on a national basis. The modern supersession of epic by novel, however problematic it remains as a bald thesis in literary history, is nonetheless so popular a notion that studies in which it is memorably articulated (Lukács, Bakhtin, Moretti) appear on so many short lists of titles in epic theory that it needs no further elucidation here.[[14]](#endnote-14) We might note instead how steadily the historical novel has itself been rivaled by another prose genre imbricated in epic’s traffic with history, namely historiography proper. When the multi-volume history of Gibbon’s Rome, Michelet’s France, or Prescott’s Mexico is strongly plotted (or, *per contra*, theorized with critical keenness), it is apt to assume the elder genre’s duties of encyclopaideia; it too tends, like epic, to shuttle between nationality of focus and universality of exercised worldview.

Nor are these the only generic claimants. Critics since Aristotle have acknowledged the epic bearings of drama, whose affordances differ from those of narrative but whose dialectic of individual heroism with collective responsibility is manifestly eligible. Hardy thought so when quitting fiction for the “epic-drama” of *The Dynasts*; “epic theatre” was likewise Brecht’s label for the experimental playwriting he undertook in service to an expressly internationalist ideology. Both dramatists learned much from the example of Goethe’s *Faust* a century before; and arguable Goethe had found a model in Shakespeare. Shakespeare never scripted a *Henriad* by that name, but critics in bestowing it after the fact on a tetrad of his history plays have made a gesture that nicely illustrates the remedial expansiveness entailed by a culturalist canon.[[15]](#endnote-15) The audience that a stage play reaches by hundreds, a mass-circulation film reaches by millions; while the moniker “epic” gets even worse abused by movie studios than by booksellers, since Griffith and Eisenstein the feedback loop between cinema and its myriad viewers has been strong enough to sustain any number of films – witness what a classicist might call the epic cycle of the *Star Wars* franchise – that a culturalist theory perforce must accommodate within the genre’s burgeoning fold.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The expansion of epic into new genres and media has largely depended on punctuated innovations in the technology of textual production and distribution. The globally expansive accretion of a modern epic canon has occurred more steadily, and has reflected for more than two centuries the economy of an emergent world traffic between centers and margins. Missionaries and colonists took their Bibles and classics with them to outposts where, despite dynamics that were tilted in every way against indigenous cultural productions, in time a local tale of the tribe caught their eye. Some structural or functional resemblance between the indigenous epic and the venerable archive commended the new-found curiosity to educated notice, and the settlers who transcribed and shipped it home to the metropolis were effecting a sort of *translatio imperii* in reverse. Back at the imperial center, appreciative reception and study of a new system of mythic narratives not only enriched the canon and bolstered the culturalist criterion, but it also broadened the repertoire of available models, for scholarly comparatists and practicing poets alike. It was an irresistible if gentle effect of these recurrent discoveries both to strengthen the linkage between epic and culture and to season into relativity the once staunch exclusiveness of each linked term. Inasmuch as a culture was seen to harbor subcultures marked by class or gender or (the very term says much) ethnicity, room arose for epics by and about members identified with those subcultures.[[17]](#endnote-17)

The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* from India, the Akkadian *Gilgamesh* from Mesopotamia, the Persian *Shahnameh*,the Finnish *Kalevala,* and indeed the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* fished out of storage in a university vaultare but the most prominent among nineteenth-century discoveries (for so, from a Eurocentric vantage, they seemed) of a world literature whose characteristics enabled the Western canon to rediscover itself – not least, to confront the arbitrariness and vagrancy of its own origins. Analytic deconstruction of the Homeric epics, along lines pioneered in F. A. Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), became the more plausible the more one knew about the constructedness of Ossian or the *Kalevala*. In a corollary development, the nineteenth-century penchant for anthological or serial epics (William Morris’s bestselling *Earthly Paradise*, 1868) made way for twentieth-century readers’ willingness to hail as epic a work structured by additive compound affinity rather than plotted through-line (the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*).[[18]](#endnote-18) Parry’s South Slavic scholarship (cited above) bid fair to dismantle the very hexameters of Homer, and yet in a way that permitted theoretic reconstruction of a Homeric unity based no longer on fixity of the text but now on a rule-governed tradition of performance. It was the prosthetic performativity of Finnish minstrelsy that set the metrical tune for Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* (1855): an ersatz epic of Native America composed in a borrowed European code to reach the same settler audience that was industriously destroying the culture the poem professed to valorize. This groove of vicarious spokesmanship remains well-worn up to the present, from Alfred Domett’s Maori epic (*Ranolf and Amohia*, 1872) through W. S. Merwin’s Hawaiian “narrative” (*The Folding Cliffs*, 1998). Each poet executes, like Longfellow, an essentially Ossianic maneuver that forms a second-order derivative from the culturalist holism that is axiomatic to the theory of epic.

The theory’s first derivative, and the cardinal fact for epic theory across the twentieth century, is the proliferation of primary texts from around the world – or, more properly, their claim to equivalent notice within an increasingly crowded generic field. Bedouin, Tamil, Turkic, Mali, Korean, Mayan, Icelandic, Japanese, Congolese epics have existed for centuries, of course, in various states of adaptation and preservation; but for centuries those who prized and nourished them did so for the most part in mutual isolation. What is new today is their virtual adjacency within a diversified library that is in one sense a consequence of modern epic theory and in another sense its chief contemporary driver. Not even the epic polymath Frederick Turner can know all these works in their many versions; and when area experts pool their learning, more salient than any conspective central synthesis is how slender an overlap obtains between the discrete regions of their radial expertise.[[19]](#endnote-19) In the face of this invincible practical deficit we might do worse than to summon an amplification of epic theory’s constitutive holism and dial it up an order of magnitude. That is to say, we might postulate, on the scale of global literary history, an epic meta-narrative whose episodes are the world’s received epics. An untold but not unimaginable story comprising the stories that peoples the world over have told about themselves would – albeit only in theory – affirm a mutual human belonging of which, these days, we can hardly have too much.

1. **Further Reading**

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1. See Gregory Nagy, “Epic as Genre,” in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, eds. Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 21-32; Richard P. Martin, “Epic as Genre,” in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 9-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The reciprocation of winners’ with losers’ histories centrally informs David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The same point appears, differently inflected, in Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); and in Jeremy Downes, “ ‘Epics the Lichen Whisper’: Inclusive and Exclusive Tensions in Three California Epics,” p. 360: “this continuing tension of exclusion and inclusion, the one the irreducible trace of the other, is a crucial feature of the genre.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Alfred Tennyson, “Gareth and Lynette,” lines 271-74, in *Idylls of the King*, ed. J. M. Gray (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This point is developed in Herbert F. Tucker, “Changes of Address: Epic Invocation in Anglophone Romanticism,” in *The Call of Classical Literature in the Romantic Age*, ed. K. P. Van Anglen and James Engell (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Browning, “The Book and the Ring,” line 1, in *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Richard D. Altick (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001), p. 731. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On the oral-formulaic hypothesis about epic composition that he based, following Milman Parry, on research in Bosnia during the 1930s, see Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On the elaboration of chiastic or ring composition in ancient texts, see Cedric M. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), and Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Sneharika Roy, “An Ever-Extending Dialogue with the Dead Poets: *Nekuia* as a Site of Epic Dialogization in New World Epics,” in Vincent Dussol, ed., *Elle s’etend, l’épopée: Relecture et ouverture du corpus épique* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 267-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas M. Greene sketches the epic case against sorcery in “The Natural Tears of Epic,” in *Epic Traditions,* eds. Margaret Beissinger et al., p. 194, a case also embraced by the volume’s editors (p. 2). On the shamanic or spirit-journey roots of the epic quest motif see Paul Merchant, “Epic in Translation.” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed Catherine Bates (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 246-63; and Frederick Turner, *Epic: Form, Content, and History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), pp. 163-4 and 182 – a study to which the present entry is especially indebted. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Turner, *Epic*, p. 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. These paragraphs much condense an argument spelled out in Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic*: *Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press*,* 2008), pp. 30-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historical-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1915), trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.,Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962); Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist ; Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London and New York: Verso, 1996). Turner, *Epic*, rebuts *passim* the supersession-by-fiction thesis, particularly pp. 2, 55, 169, 329*.* The imputation to epic of a false or stodgy alterity is the very motor of untrustworthy if delightful witness in that pioneering novel *Don Quixote*; apologists for fiction who repeat it with Lukács and Bakhtin fail to note its anticipation within the epic tradition by the likes of Ovid and Apuleius. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. E. M. W. Tillyard’s discussion of the epic Shakespeare, in *The English Epic and its Background* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), pp. 260-61, has had numerous elaborators. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Among many studies see Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (London: Routledge, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. On the gendering of epic see, e.g., Jeremy Downes, *Female Homer: An Exploration of Women’s Epic Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010); Elisa Beshero-Bondar, *Women, Epic, and Transition in English Romanticism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, for example, K. Sara Myers, *Ovid’s Causes: Cosmogony and Aetiology in the* Metamorphoses*.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Pertinent collections by divers hands include Felix J. Oinas, ed., *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World’s Great Folk Epics* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978); Beissinger et al., eds., *Epic Traditions*;Bates, ed., *Cambridge Companion*.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-19)