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John P. McWilliams

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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The epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature, differ from one another not by their authors' fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted. The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality. It would be superficial – a matter of mere artistic technicality – to look for the only and decisive genre-defining criterion in the question of whether a work is written in verse or prose.

George Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (1914)

### I

To create some kind of heroic song for the New World remained a pressing cultural need from the time the Republic was formed until the time it was severed, yet the history of this initially embarrassing quest has not yet been written. This neglect is not justified, but it has surely been understandable. Readers with New Critical assumptions about literary art have scarcely been able to endure the poems of Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow. No one, to my knowledge, has yet even considered the many later attempts to wrench a "Homeric" verse epic out of American experience.<sup>1</sup> Dogged patience is sometimes needed to read them; to write about them depletes one's resources of humor. Moreover, much of the debate over the substance and style of the American epic was carried on in literary periodicals that appeared, and usually foundered, between the Revolution and the Civil War. As long as the American epic is seen as a closed couplet cul-de-sac, a cemetery for long patriotic poems, the debate cannot seem worth the exhumation.

I shall contend that the American epic did not expire in the first quarter of the nineteenth century only to be revived, in troublingly imagistic

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form, by such dissimilar poets as Pound, Crane, and Williams a century later. The disgrace of the imitative verse epic led authors to portray American heroic subjects in new literary forms more engaging to contemporary readers. If we mercifully except *Hiawatha*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is still the one work commonly believed to have fulfilled this end. Perhaps now, however, America's heroic leaves might be looked for under someone else's bootsoles. Long before 1855, Cooper, Simms, and Melville had deliberately assimilated the spirit and conventions of the epic poem within the prose romance. Prescott and Parkman, who were admiring readers and reviewers of Scott and Cooper, had adapted epic techniques of the historical romance into heroic history. If we view Barlow's and Dwight's imitative poems as the beginning of a generic transformation into newer, more open forms, the effaced inscriptions upon the older verse-epic tombstones become decipherable, important, even interesting.

Authors of longstanding reputation need to be seen in a new generic context. The chasm of scholarly interest and literary quality separating Whitman from Barlow, Fenimore Cooper from Daniel Bryan, Prescott from James Ralph, suggests a liberating contradiction. When American writers attempted to shape their prospect of American glory into traditional epic form, they created grave, elephantine poems crammed with the husks of epic convention but lacking the pressure of a significant credible heroic action associated with the epic since Aristotle. As early as 1810, however, the breakdown of generic categories was allowing for the rise of what Charles Olson would later call "open field" forms.<sup>2</sup> Romance, novel, history, and epic became overlapping rather than discrete literary types; their infinite possibilities for blending produced exhilarating possibilities as well as pathless confusion. The historical romancer, the romantic historian, and the free-verse poet (to use our century's terminology) were able to capture epic qualities – and plausibly adopt epic conventions – not only because the authors who used them were better artists, but because the new forms subverted the epic as it was traditionally defined. Just as Virgil and Milton had contributed to epic tradition only by transforming it, so an epic for the New World had to be something other than a Homeric, Virgilian, or Miltonic poem. The New World epic somehow had to supplant what Whitman called "feudal chants" while still seeming to be their recognizable outgrowth. Humor and new literary forms would thus prove to be as essential to the American epic as democratic values.

Writing a literary history is a sometimes dusty but always risky pilgrimage. Before arriving at the heavenly gate inscribed "New Reordering," literary histories must trudge past – and may fall into – beckoning pits of scholarly falsity. There is the seeming inevitability of periodiza-

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tion, of dividing literary history up as if it conformed to political and social history (for “Americanists,” 1776, 1865, 1914, 1945 come to mind). There is the easy resort to all the familiar categories of genre, stylistics, and intellectual history that can so readily assimilate new information to old ways of seeing – and thereby box that information into unmemorable obscurity. There is the imposing of an a priori pattern upon all the anarchies of life, with the concomitant slighting of all those texts, or parts thereof, that do not fit one’s thesis. There is the danger of nationalism, of ignoring the possibility that “American” should mean “of the New World” rather than “of the United States.” And now in the 1980s there is the prospect that literary history’s connections to cultural history, once assumed, seem to many scholar-critics not to matter in a world where words are regarded as interreferential signs. So why bother to try? In this instance, because I believe I have discovered a neglected, consequential truth about a segment of literary history, and that I can prove it.

At times this book may stray into all these pitfalls, but I hope it is never mired in them. Some degree of muddying may even be both desirable and necessary. The failing of Hawthorne’s *Mr. Smooth-It-Away*, after all, was to believe that the Celestial City could readily be reached by filling in all the pitfalls with abstractions. But this literary history, dealing as it does with the epic, requires more than these expectable caveats. All literary histories have a suspect facticity in their impartial surfaces, but the history of epic criticism from Aristotle to Bowra and beyond has thrived on the act of subjective judgment. Not only have critics wished to reserve the word “epic” for the best, the highest, and the most comprehensive of literary artifacts; “epic” immediately suggests an affirmation of essential cultural values through particularly stylized conventions.

Although so loaded a term demands definition, securing a workable definition that is not idiosyncratic proves exasperating. A genre commonly considered to include *Gilgamesh*, Homer, Virgil, Lucan, *Beowulf*, Tasso, Milton, *The Prelude*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Ulysses*, and *Paterson* is not a genre easily defined with precision. When one contemplates such titles as James B. Walker’s *The Epic of American Industry*, H. R. Hamilton’s *The Epic of Chicago*, D. B. Parke’s *The Epic of Unitarian Boston*, and Herbert Hoover’s four-volume *An American Epic* (on the relief mission), one may well conclude that the word “epic” is only a substanceless advertisement for size and length, as it has long since become for jacket blurbs and film promotion. Even if one attempts to be safely traditional, however, the problem of definition remains. Because *The Odyssey* is in many ways unlike *The Iliad*, because Virgil sang of both Arms and the Man, yet made them serve a new interest in historical forces, and because Mil-

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ton was convinced that the Fall was an “argument / Not less but more Heroic Than the / Wrath of stern *Achilles*,”<sup>3</sup> we must acknowledge that the word “epic” describes a tradition founded, not only upon change, but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities. Although oral heroic poetry can and has been studied as a distinct separate genre, no precise meaning of “epic” can be found that will suit even those few texts that centuries of readers have agreed to call epics. To confront the essential disagreement in the definitions of epic literature proposed by Aristotle, Vida, Le Bossu, Voltaire, Lord Kames, and Jones Very – to mention only a few epic theorists – makes one aware that all such definitions are largely determined by the critical assumptions of their age and by the particular models the theorist had in mind.

In an ill-concealed defense of *The Conquest of Canaan*, Timothy Dwight reminds us that the word “*epos*” originally signified only “narration” or “discourse” and that further specification is likely to end in haggling over terms or in the barren and indefensible conclusion that *Paradise Lost* is not an epic because it is not *The Iliad*.<sup>4</sup> Dwight was not contending that all comparisons are idle, nor that any long ambitious work should be called an epic; he simply recognized that the tradition of epic literature had to evolve if it were to survive. I should like to claim a similar latitude toward the problem of definition. I propose that an epic must be a heroic narrative, but that heroic narrative may assume many forms. To determine whether *Moby-Dick* is a tragedy, an epic, or a romance, whether the *History of the Conquest of Mexico* is history, romance, or epic, or whether “Song of Myself” is a prophetic, lyric, or heroic poem, are ultimately barren exercises. All three works cross over once-accepted boundaries of genre; inclusiveness of form is essential to their achievement. To apply any proscriptive definition of “epic” to American writing after 1815 would only deny to an era the opportunity gained through a new flexibility in the conception of literary genre. When the need for “the American Epic” shifted to various possibilities for “American Epic,” longstanding models of hierarchy, societal as well as generic, were being successfully challenged, although many writers and reviewers could not recognize it.

## II

My title phrase also engages a more particular issue of academic scholarship. The words “American Epic” are presently associated with soporific poems of the early Republic, with the modern verse epic originating in Whitman and/or Pound, and with nothing in between. The reason for the absent center, two ends without a middle, is that in the three commanding studies of American epic literature, Roy Harvey Pearce, James E. Miller, and Michael Bernstein assume, in spite of particular differences, that an epic is a poem, and that ambitious cultural poems,

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mostly of the twentieth century, are the texts to be studied. I have assumed that, once histories and novels became the dominant literary forms in the 1820s and 1830s, “the American Epic” was far more likely to be written in prose, and probably would not be valued by a wide reading public unless it were written in prose. This assumption has led me to seek continuities rather than discontinuities between the poets of the early Republic and writers of the next two generations. I sought confirmation of a liberating generic flexibility in the literary journals of the antebellum era, and I have found it. Thus it now seems to me a touching anachronism that Robert Lowell, in his essay titled “Epics,” should have asserted that *Moby-Dick* is “our best book,” our one epic in prose,” but then, in his very next sentence, worried “Are there epics in prose?”<sup>5</sup> Cooper, Simms, Prescott, and Parkman, to say nothing of Melville, had written as if Lowell’s question were already rhetorical. To them, it was no longer fruitful to consider “epic” and “prose” as possibly separate entities. Because of the attention paid to the modern American verse epic, we have overlooked the possibility that twentieth-century writers and scholars have been more categorical in their thinking about genre than their nineteenth-century predecessors, not less so.

My assumptions about prose epic, in turn, have been shaped by the speculative conclusions of Lukacs’s *The Theory of the Novel* (1914) and Bakhtin’s rejoinder, “Epic and Novel” (1940), neither of which mentions one American text. Both Lukacs and Bakhtin believed that the essence of epic was the literary conveying of cultural values in a heroic and empirical mode that presents those values as “immanent” in the physical world. Both tried to predict whether the demise of the long poem and the dominance of the novel would allow the epic to survive. Although they foresaw that only the novel could continue to reach a wide readership, they also associated the novel with a godless world, a subjectivity of authorial vision, an openness of form, and a mixing of linguistic levels, all of which worked against the unifying affirmations of traditional epic literature.

At this point their views sharply diverged. Lukacs, who clearly hoped that the unifying force of epic would reemerge in a new form, argued that the modern fictional hero who attains a glimpse of immanent meaning in a world abandoned by God is a worthy successor to his prototype in heroic poetry. The achievements of Cervantes, Fielding, Balzac, Goethe, and especially Tolstoy led Lukacs to conclude that empirical renderings of a culture’s immanent values are still possible. Not only do “the really great novels have a tendency to overlap into the epic,” but “the novel is the necessary epic form of our time.”<sup>6</sup> To Bakhtin, however, the great epic poems constitute a completed, closed genre, dealing with an utterly past world of “fathers, beginnings and peak times.” The twentieth-

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century novel, which thrives on present-day ironies, on improvisation in open forms, and on a stylistic *polyglossia* that parodies its own heroic language, is so different from epic that assimilation must totally efface the older genre. Accordingly, Bakhtin argues that “the novel took shape precisely at the point when epic distance was disintegrating” (the eighteenth century) and that the succeeding “novelization of all genres” has meant that the closed unitary world of epic poetry has no vestige.<sup>7</sup>

This book accepts the premise of both Lukacs and Bakhtin that, once prose became the dominant literary medium, no poem could any longer do the cultural work (to use Jane Tompkins’s term) required of the epic.<sup>8</sup> I also share the premise that the novel is a comparatively open, subjective, ironic, and willfully diverse literary form. In pursuing my inquiry into American heroic literature, however, I follow Lukacs in believing that epic fiction and epic prose had been probabilities at least in Balzac’s era and perhaps as early as Cervantes’s. Bakhtin’s brilliant argument for closing the epic out of post-Renaissance literature rests upon an assumption that is fundamentally misleading. Bakhtin’s view of epic as a static genre elegizing past heroism does not allow for the rebellion and transformations that have occurred within the epic tradition itself. Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, and Whitman all felt that they possessed their own “higher argument” that would transform the tradition begun by Homer and modified by intervening poets. As ideas of heroic behavior changed, so did the form of the epic poem; its admittedly special conventions have been a way of measuring change as well as enforcing conformity. As long as the heroic narrative poem retained power over its audience, the cultural prestige of the familiar form of epic was assured. Why then is it not possible for still higher – or simply different – models of heroism to be convincingly represented in the genre that enjoys contemporary power and prestige? If the essence of *epos* is heroic narrative, even its oldest poetic conventions may convincingly survive if properly altered for an appropriate new medium.

To Bakhtin, the epic is antithetical to modern man’s suspicion of absolutes and to our belief that heroism, if it exists, lies in a momentary act rather than fixed character traits. Once life is perceived as flux, everything becomes potentially absurd. “Laughter destroyed epic distance,” Bakhtin claims; “the first and essential step [in the destruction of epic] was the comic familiarization of the image of man.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we might recall that the need to prove one’s heroism repeatedly was scarcely unknown to Achilles, nor was ironic doubt toward absolutes incompatible with Virgil’s imperial theme. Even if, however, we accept Bakhtin’s contrasted terms, we need not conclude that laughter and epic are necessarily antithetical in nineteenth- or twentieth-century texts. The prevailing claim of this book is that American heroic literature succeeded

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only after many attempts to write *either* serious imitative epics *or* burlesque mock epics had severally failed. It was the eventual combining of laughter with sublimity, familiarity with awe, folly with heroism, neo-classic knowledge with the provincial's scorn for it, that enabled Melville and Whitman to achieve splendid seriocomic works of prose and poetry. In *Moby-Dick* and the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, truly New World models of heroic behavior and of the epic genre finally emerged because their authors were able to laugh at the portentous gravity of their own creations.

A close reading of the battle between the red and black ants in the "Brute Neighbors" chapter of *Walden* may suggest the ways in which epic and mock-epic, heroism and mock heroism, finally became one in the 1850s.<sup>10</sup> After characterizing three of the most unbrutish neighbors imaginable (mouse, partridge, and otter), Thoreau discovers absolute ferocity and courage in tiny unnoticed insects. The single combat he witnesses between one red and one black ant is in reality a race war covering all the hills and vales in his woodyard, "not a *duellum*, but a *bellum*," an "internecine war" between "the red republicans" and "the black imperialists" (229). The overmatched red republican ant who engages Thoreau's particular attention is soon joined by a fellow republican who had withdrawn from battle, "some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus" (229). "Locked in each other's embraces," "prepared to fight till the sun went down," the three ants gnaw away each other's feelers and forelegs, acting out their heroic defiance of death in ways that seem the more admirable because no human has noticed them (229). The red ant (Patroclus) is the first to die, his breast ripped open to his vitals, but still attacking so that "the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shone with a ferocity such as war only could excite" (231). But the inevitable victor is the Brobdignagian black imperialist, who displays the two severed heads of his red enemies as trophies, then limps away so crippled that he "would not be worth much thereafter" (231).

In his journal version of this battle, Thoreau had rendered the ant war as a sparse factual narrative, almost without comparisons, references or judgment.<sup>11</sup> For inclusion in *Walden*, however, he embellished the narrative so as to force comparisons between the ant war, the Trojan War, and the American Revolution. All the ants in his yard collectively become "the legions of these Myrmidons" (229). The two attacking red ants are now identified with Achilles rescuing Patroclus. Ten lines are added likening the ant war to "Concord Fight," in which "Two [were] killed on the patriot's side and Luther Blanchard wounded" (230). After the black ant's victory, Thoreau adds an entirely new paragraph to show how "battles of ants have long been celebrated," beginning in the era of

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Aeneas Silvius, progressing through the pontificate of Eugenius the Fourth and the tyranny of Christiern the Second, down to the modern entomologist François Huber, and finally to Thoreau himself (232). The revised version then ends with a new sentence that fixes the historical battle by a politically purposeful misdating: “The battle which I witnessed took place in the Presidency of Polk, five years before the passage of Webster’s Fugitive Slave Bill.”<sup>12</sup>

If we choose to interpret the *Walden* version as evidence of the persistence of the Homeric world in American nature and Revolutionary Man, Thoreau provides us plenty of supporting evidence. He summarizes his own response by declaring “I felt for the rest of that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door” (231). His admiration for the courage displayed by the red republicans is reinforced by his invoking the names of Concord “patriots” in 1775. Among the Minutemen as among the ants, “there was not one hireling there” (230). The red ants are even granted noble motivation: “I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors” (230). On one level, the passage thus shows Thoreau’s desire to keep the heroism of the Revolution alive by seeing it reenacted in contemporary life.

Ever since “The Battle of the Frogs and Mice,” however, the ascribing of heroic postures to inappropriately tiny creatures has been a staple of the mock-heroic. Do Thoreau’s comparisons elevate heroic ants to the stature of Homeric warriors and Concord patriots? Or do they deflate Homeric warriors and Concord patriots by reducing them to totally instinctual and almost imperceptible insects? After his close view of the ants’ dismemberings, Thoreau suddenly shifts perspective, trivializing the combat by a technique adopted from Alexander Pope: “I should not have wondered by this time to find that they [the ants] had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants.”<sup>13</sup> As the black victor crawls away to some formic “Hotel des Invalides,” Thoreau quietly remarks, in devastating throw-away phrases, “I never learned which party was victorious, nor the cause of the war” (231). If the collective bloodshed of Troy, Concord Fight, and Walden woodpile is all so truly inconclusive, so without ultimate meaning, the ants’ courage can be no more than the instinct of a “Brute Neighbor.” Thoreau’s praise of his literary predecessors suddenly seems satiric. His catalogue of poetic entomologists becomes an exercise in mock pedantry very like Ishmael’s mockery of Scoresby and all literary cetologists, including himself.

There is yet a third possibility. The tiny ants may be more heroic than Trojans or Americans, because they fight to an unknown, hapless out-



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come. One sentence elevates the ants above all Revolutionary heroics: “Certainly there is not the fight recorded in Concord History, at least, if not in the history of America, that will bear a moment’s comparison with this, whether for the numbers engaged in it, or for the patriotism and heroism displayed” (230). After insisting that ants and Minutemen both fought for a “principle,” Thoreau undermines his own assertion by insisting that the ants would never have fought merely “to avoid a three penny tax on their tea” (230). The courage of the red ants seems more noble than Homer’s Greeks, because the ants are never told that their sacrifice will secure an eventual victory. The black imperialist conqueror is surely meant to represent Daniel Webster, whose pyrrhic victory in 1850 may have left the Republic even more crippled in integrity than Webster was in person.

The wonder of the passage is that all these diverse possibilities are co-present, held in suspension without an attempt to resolve them. Heroic and mock-heroic, epic and burlesque, do not cancel one another out; they flow together as we read, leaving us finally delighted at the shifting meanings Thoreau provides for us. Thoreau presents himself simply as the “witness to events” (228), a surprised observer who becomes so transfixed by his Trojan–Concordian–ant war that he makes a microscope out of a glass tumbler in order to continue his gazing. As a non-participating observer, Thoreau seems less important than any of the combatants. But as the writer, he becomes a kind of virtuoso who relishes his self-contained tour de force about creatures so outsized as these tiny ants.

Extreme self-consciousness must pervade such a literary entertainment because of Thoreau’s position in American cultural history. Six decades of rhetoric about the epic heroism of Revolutionary forefathers lay deep in the bone of his generation. Like Melville and Whitman, Thoreau can neither discard such rhetoric nor refrain from parodying it. Such an inseparable mixing of epic with mock-epic, heroic with burlesque, becomes a distinctive trait of the literature of the 1850s. As in this passage, tone and language levels shift frequently, heightening our sense of the writer’s joy in his own artifice. Insofar as New World heroism serves as the subject of the literature of “the American Renaissance,” any “re-birth” of the old epic tradition is actually its seriocomic transformation.

## III

At the present moment, when the needed recovery of women’s literature absorbs much attention, while studies of genre are unfashionable, the seeming exclusion of women writers from this study deserves an accounting. The easy explanation that the epic has always been a male literary tradition founded upon warrior cultures is not wholly adequate.

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During the period under study here, Robert Southey published *Joan of Arc* (1796) and at least two British women attempted epic poetry.<sup>14</sup> Nor is this book's middle-aged male author so wholly resistant to change that he would have excluded American epic literature by or about women had he found it. Nonetheless, its absence presents difficulties of logic. To claim, as I do, that by 1830 the future of epic lay in prose, then to make claims for Whitman's early poetry as well as for Melville's fiction, and yet to recognize that the most widely read novelists in America between 1850 and 1860 were all women, seems an untenable contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps it is so. But it would have been equally contradictory to try to approach *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an American *Odyssey*, or *The Wide, Wide World* as an American *Paradise Lost*. However powerful the cultural impact of these two novels may have been, however comprehensive they were in rendering the totality of their culture, their authors did not regard them as an outgrowth of epic tradition. Unlike Cooper's or Simm's frontier romances, the domestic novel was not conceived in epic terms. "Hero" was a word still habitually applied to males. For male authors like Cooper and Simms, the word "heroine" connoted the sprightly but finally submissive young woman (Elizabeth Temple, Bess Matthews) who married the white hero. To the women who wrote domestic novels, the word "heroine" connoted something entirely different, but the heroine's virtues of womanly fortitude and Christian piety under trial were not thought of in terms of epic precedent. Perhaps sex roles were even more sharply divided in antebellum America than in nineteenth-century Britain. Whatever the cause, I have found no American instances of women writing epic poems, of men writing epic poems about women heroes, or of women writing novels that are meant to recall the heroic tradition we think of as epic. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may provide us with a deeper total sense of a culture's immanent values than any other American text of the century. But to force a comparison between Mrs. Stowe and Homer would tell us more of our age than of the nineteenth century, and would violate the obligation of recovering a literary climate that is so essential to writing a literary history.

A final mention of assumptions. I believe that the opinions of periodical writers and reviewers, however stridently authors may claim to be above them, are a crucial agent of literary change. Americanist scholars and critics, intent on analyzing the individual literary text, have slighted their presumably ephemeral contributions to literary history long enough. But I also believe that, although all persons may be created equal, all literary texts are not. The power of words is not separable from clarity, vigor, and grace of style any more than a writer's depth of vision is separable