INTRODUCTION

Invoking the Epic Poem

> Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
> A lasting impression, sanctified
> By reason, blest by faith: what we have loved,
> Others will love, and we will teach them how
>
> –William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

Robert Southey's boast that his *Joan of Arc* (1796) had created a wave of 'epomania' may have overestimated his poem's influence, but it perceptively diagnosed a growing literary trend.[1] Since the French Revolution, an increasing number of British poets were daring the heights of Parnassus. At the turn of the century, the radical orator John Thelwall would note that when he came to publish fragments of his own epic, *The Hope of Albion* (1801), he found the 'press teeming, and, perhaps, the public already satiated with National Heroics'.[2] Nearly a decade later, Lord Byron would mock the epic pretentions of his contemporaries in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1810) before eventually adopting the genre playfully in his *Don Juan* (1820). Indeed, the Romantic era saw more epic poems written than any other time in history.[3] Although the period is named for the romance revival, its vast and unprecedented production of epics suggests that writers found in this ancient genre unique tools to speak to the tensions of the historical moment. Most prominent among these anxieties is the development of the idea of imperialism into the concept of a benevolent project of spreading British culture and religion across the globe: not only did the Romantic era witness a vast expansion of British imperial power, it observed a resurgence of interest in evangelism as the

[1] Robert Southey to John Rickman, October 1800, Letter 554. *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey* [*CL*], ed. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford, and Ian Packer. *Romantic Circles*, Web.
[2] *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Hereford: Parker, 1801), xliii.
[3] See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 158–79, on the epic revival in Britain during the Romantic era.

modern international British missionary movement began. This book argues that the epic revival both reflects and interrogates this evangelical turn of British imperialism.

Looking back on the nineteenth century today, a common impression of the missionary enterprise is that it was the unambiguous partner of empire. Such an idea is easily derived from many Victorian-era works. Take, for example, Thomas Jones Barker's 1863 painting *The Secret of England's Greatness*, which makes no secret of the referent of its title: the Bible in Queen Victoria's hand is positioned almost exactly in the centre of the canvas as an African chief kneels before it, looking with a mixture of curiosity and reverence upon the sacred book (Figure 1). At this point in the middle of the nineteenth century, after nearly seventy years of missionary activity accompanying a vast expansion of imperial power, the spreading of Christianity had become integral to conceptions of the British Empire. Indeed, it is difficult to look at this painting without thinking of the account most often attributed to Desmond Tutu: 'When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.'[4] Yet a number of historians have begun to challenge the idea that the missionary endeavour was a comfortable assistant to imperialism. While twentieth-century historians largely considered missionaries 'ideological shock troops for colonial invasion' – the first wave of British imperialism that paved the way for conquest – recent investigations have revealed tensions between the mission of evangelism and the goals of empire, anxieties that lay just beneath the surface of developing ideologies of imperialism.[5]

It may not be an exaggeration to think of the accepted account of the simple collusion of religion and empire in Britain's global development as

[4] Quoted in Steven Gish, *Desmond Tutu: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 101.

[5] See David J. Silverman, 'Indians, Missionaries, and Religious Translation: Creating Wampanoag Christianity in Seventeenth-Century Martha's Vineyard', *William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 62.2 (2005): 141–74. Silverman is not himself identifying missionaries as such 'shock troops', but rather surveying historians' assessments. As he discusses, 1970s studies of the colonial period often took for granted that Native American converts to Christianity were in fact merely cynical fur traders adopting the religion nominally for personal gain and that missionaries were zealous ideologues who mistook this manipulation for authentic conversion. These assumptions have been called into question by later scholarship, which has been less critical of missionaries and more invested in exploring the sincere faith of many converts. Studies that have complicated the understanding of missionaries and empire include Andrew Porter's *Religion versus Empire?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Brian Stanley's edited volume *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2014); Norman Etherington's edited collection *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Amanda Barry, Joanna Cruickshank, and Andrew Brown-May's edited volume *Evangelists of Empire?* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Custom Book Centre, 2008).

Figure 1 *The Secret of England's Greatness*, Thomas Jones Barker (1863)
National Portrait Gallery, London

itself something of an epic tale. Like many epics, this story of missionary and imperial cooperation is rooted in some historical fact, but it also tends to obscure the complex details and tensions. Christian evangelism and empire were actually often competing projects that both supported and resisted one another throughout the nineteenth century, even as the accepted narrative of their bond was being forged. We can trace the origins of this narrative to the formative years of the British missionary enterprise during the Romantic era, when writers confronted the anxieties exposed by the friction between these projects and began to construct (as well as critique) the notion of imperialism as a generous mission of spreading both civilization and salvation. In addition to the obvious effects that imperialism and evangelism had in colonial contact zones, they also had profound implications for British identity.[6]

[6] It is important to recall that the term 'imperialism' refers to a variety of global political actions and discursive strategies at home and abroad to establish the power of Britain in the world. There were many ways to participate in imperialism, and this book explores how epic writers from across the

Britons' perception of their nation as a just colonial ruler had been upset by the American Revolution (in which colonists depicted the British government as tyrannical) and by the trial of Warren Hastings for abuses in India.[7] And while the British had once thought their constitutional monarchy a just system of government, especially when compared to the absolute monarchy of France, the French Revolution was challenging the very idea of monarchy close to home. In one sense, the proliferation of missionary societies in the early 1790s provided a timely means of rehabilitating the British self-image. Dovetailing with conceptions of empire as uplifting, evangelism could contribute to the narrative that the British were magnanimously spreading the light of civilization to the world.

However, evangelism could also serve as a dark mirror for imperialism, and friction between missionaries and imperialists highlighted conceptual conflicts underlying this benevolent notion of empire. These conflicts did not merely exist overseas or in the chambers of Parliament, where the legal status of missionaries in the colonies was hotly debated in the early nineteenth century. Tensions pulsed across the complicated interchanges between the conceptions of imperial identity at home and the strategies practised abroad to transform the globe. Literature of the Romantic period could embody these tensions as writers constructed and questioned the narrative of a heroic Christian empire, even as they grappled with the less heroic implications of the relationship among Britain, its Protestant Christian identity, and its colonies across the world.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the epic poem was returning to widespread use during this time of growing missionary and imperial activity. While eighteenth-century writers frequently theorized about the epic mode, the end of the century and the beginning of the next marked an unparalleled revival of the writing of these poems.[8] Traditionally concerned with divine heroes, empire, and conquest, this poetic form fit well with the historical moment: as Britain increasingly extended its powers politically and economically, during a time when British identity was coming into sharper focus through colonial contact, poets turned to

political spectrum attempted to distance themselves from aspects of empire, even as they acceded to some of its assumptions.

[7] Hastings's impeachment trial, during which he was eventually acquitted, wore on for seven years (1788–95) and famously began with an address by Edmund Burke.

[8] Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 30–48, provides an overview of eighteenth-century epics and writings about the epic form, including especially the popular Ossian poems (39–43), which helped to prepare the groundwork for the Romantic epic revival.

a genre whose classical examples narrate the forging of nations out of cultural interaction.[9] Imagining and interrogating Britain's imperial role in the world, these epics could promote specific visions of national and imperial identity by presenting heroes as models to be emulated by readers. Many epics from the period translate the missionary fervour of the times into their notion of the heroic, featuring heroes who engage in modes of evangelism, both religious and cultural, as they confront and convert peoples in Britain and abroad.

As we will see, many of these epics attempt to quell the conflicts between empire and evangelism to endorse the idea of an imperial Christian nation. At the same time, more radical epics seek to exploit these tensions to attack the conceptual underpinnings of empire. Across this spectrum, epics frequently remain ambivalent about the possibility of religious (and, more broadly, cultural) conversion supporting the goals of imperialism, an ambivalence often mirrored in writers' uncertainty about the genre itself. Though epoists were likely drawn to this genre for many reasons, part of their attraction may have been the totalizing drive of epic, its ability to produce a unifying fantasy of a state or empire held together by exemplary heroes and often divine forces. Yet the traditional connection of the epic to conquest, oppression, and injustice haunts a great number of Romantic-era poems. Often, epoists attempt to convert the genre into literature more suitable for expressing egalitarian and peaceful values, but their wariness about its traditional associations discloses their caution about the implication of good intentions in oppressive global actions.

It is important to point out that, despite the history of epic engagement during the Romantic era, the period's epic poems have more often than not been regarded in terms of interiority, of an investigation of personal psychology isolated from history. Taking the 'high argument' of Wordsworth's *Prelude* as the archetypal Romantic-era epic, critics have emphasized a poetic retreat from the world of action and towards the realm of the mind. In Alan Liu's well-known formulation, Wordsworth denied

[9] For an overview of this period, see *The Oxford History of the British Empire Vol. II* (P. J. Marshall, ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998]) and *Vol. III* (Andrew Porter, ed. [1999]); Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation* (London: Pimlico, 2003) and *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (New York: Random House, 2010); Kathleen Wilson's *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Vincent T. Harlow's *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793* (London: Longmans, 1952). David Armitage's *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) explores the ideological groundwork of Romantic-era imperialism.

history and replaced it with the imagination, much as Harold Bloom suggests that Wordsworth interiorized the quest romance.[10] While *The Prelude* indeed concerns the 'Growth of the Poet's Mind', concentration on its inward orientation has often directed how we look at the period's engagement with epic and has tended to eclipse the varied uses of the genre, including more conventional and outward-focused works. While some critics have examined the political implications of the period's epics, many conceive of the Romantic-era epic as one stage in the increasing interiorization of the genre.

Yet attention to this interiorization has often obscured the fact that many more outward-focused epics were written during the Romantic era. Several of Robert Southey's long poems, for example, explore the dynamics of global contact zones. Ann Yearsley's 'Brutus' recounts the legendary founding of Britain itself, and Thomas Williams's *The Missionary* and Thomas Beck's *The Mission* both celebrate the work of British evangelicals around the world in contrast to the work of imperialists and traders. Drawing inspiration from both classical and Miltonic epics, these works – and many more – feature heroes active in the external world, even as they study their heroes' inner resources, especially their faithful connection to God, as a means of unifying, transforming, and revitalizing the nation and the world.

Although the Wordsworthian lens still shapes the way that many view the Romantic era's epic experiments, critics have begun providing a fuller picture. Stuart Curran surveys several non-canonical, externally oriented epics of the period, though he stresses the internalizing tendency of the genre during the Romantic era by concentrating on the generic shift away from battles. Highlighting the influence of Milton, he points to Christ from *Paradise Regained* as the prototype for Romantic heroes, whose task is wholly internal: 'For Romanticism', he claims, 'the last epic hero in the British tradition was the Jesus of *Paradise Regained*, whose "illustrious enterprise" is simply to define the god within: warfare, past and future

[10] Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989) argues that Wordsworth displaces history with his own personal, psychological, and poetic journey. Perhaps the best example is Liu's argument that the Simplon Pass episode in *The Prelude* is a denial of Napoleon's 1800 crossing of the Alps (23–31). Liu contends that Wordsworth turns away from history to construct his own empire of self. Less focused on questions of historical context (and how Wordsworth elides or displaces it), Bloom argues that Wordsworth applies tropes of romance and epic to an inward journey, offering in the process a map of the psyche, in ways similar to Blake and Freud, but blending aspects of Blake's apocalyptic poetry and Freud's naturalist psychology. 'The Internalization of the Quest Romance', *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), 3–24.

history, the high achievements of human culture, all must give way to that exploit of the mind'.[11] And while Herbert Tucker's extensive survey shines a light on a wide variety of understudied epics throughout the nineteenth century, he attends to Romantic-era epics largely in terms of their inward turn. He identifies the first generation of Romantic-era epoists as divided between 'militantly patriotic propagandists' and 'chastened former radicals' who reflect on 'how a mistaken cause might be revisited and made good'.

The second generation, by contrast, engages in 'darker encounters with the mysteries of guilt and atonement, endurance and forgiveness'.[12] Tucker's interest here lies on how these writers turned inward to meditate on errors and to withstand loss. Departing from this focus on interiority, Joseph Crawford's study of Milton's influence on epics of the Romantic era has explored how writers could recruit epic allusions to support a variety of political positions.[13] Attending to the role of female characters, Elisa Beshero-Bondar has examined the ability of the Romantic-era epic to undermine various dominant ideologies: she argues that Romantic-era heroines are confined within systems of male dominance and oppression but also strive to challenge them.[14] Elaborating on these tensions, Adeline Johns-Putra has explored how female writers of Romantic epics could celebrate the ideology of domesticity imposed upon women and use it as a vehicle for authority and empowerment.[15] As the work of these critics indicates, Romantic-era epic does far more than simply focus either inward or outward: instead, it richly addresses both action and meditation. Critics have yet to study fully the intersection of these orientations of the Romantic epic in relation to their historical context.

The relationship between the inner and outer worlds comes into greater focus when we turn our attention to how these poems portray heroes. Commenting on the tendency of some of the most well-known Romantic epics to take the poet's self as a heroic figure, Tucker notes that this concentration on the self coexists with an epic impulse to speak for the entire nation. In discussing the presence of Blake and Wordsworth themselves as characters in their epic poetry, he notes their 'ambition to speak

[11] Curran, *Poetic Form*, 174. [12] Tucker, *Epic*, 11.
[13] Joseph Crawford, *Raising Milton's Ghost: John Milton and the Sublime of Terror in the Early Romantic Period* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
[14] Elisa Beshero-Bondar, *Women, Epic, and Transition in British Romanticism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011).
[15] Adeline Johns-Putra, *Heroes and Housewives: Women's Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology in the Romantic Age (1770–1835)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

not for themselves but, through themselves, for their country'. Tucker argues that Blake and Wordsworth 'realized this ambition' within their epic poems 'by coming forward as *exemplary* figures'.[16] I would augment this point by contending that many Romantic-era epics are doing more than speaking for the nation and to the nation: in their representation of heroes, they reflect critically on the process of addressing the nation and even the globe by investigating the role of interiority in influencing the actions of others.

Heroes of a great number of Romantic-era epics are more than exemplary figures: they function as transformative figures within the text, improving other characters by performing their interiority, connecting their inner selves to those around them. These long poems afford writers the space to depict and examine how the inner life – whether religious faith, virtue, the emotions, or the imagination – might be communicated to others in order to benefit the world. These performances of interiority and their effects, contained in texts that often query the relationship of tyranny and freedom, become occasions to examine and critique the pressures that shape their depiction: the civilizing mission of British imperialism and its tense relationship with evangelism.

In the chapters that follow, I engage with more recent examinations of outward-focused texts in order to revise our understanding of interiority in Romantic-era epics. Foregrounding these understudied poems allows us to see how more familiar epics from the period not only invoke heroic interiority as a means of bringing about external change, but launch complex critiques on that interiority as a way of examining ideologies of empire. These poems demonstrate that the traditional epic focus on the hero as an agent of social change is both attractive and repellent to many writers, and these works often preserve the idea of a great individual as a fulcrum of social transformation while seeking to mitigate the connection of such heroism to tyranny. Some of these epics, such as laureate Henry James Pye's *Alfred* (1801), present national epic heroes who unite Britain by spreading divinely sanctioned virtue to the masses. These texts participate in the construction and promotion of ideologies of the nation and the empire as they stress the importance of purifying a hero's inner self as a necessary precursor to dispensing the values fundamental to a national and imperial identity. Many writers seek to stabilize this identity, guarding it from conceptual anxieties being brought into focus by the missionary

[16] Tucker, *Epic*, 113. Emphasis in original. Throughout this book, italics within quotations denote emphasis in original.

project. Others, such as Ann Yearsley, affirm many assumptions of imperialism and evangelism but raise concerns about the potential misuses of religious or cultural conversion as tools of violent conquest. Still others, such as Olaudah Equiano and William Blake, call upon tropes of epic poetry and evangelical discourse to challenge more audaciously the rigid racial and cultural hierarchies that underpin imperial ideology. In all of these works, the intersection of interiority and exteriority is key: inner transformation precedes – and often functions as the means of – heroes creating change in the external world. The effects of these heroic transformations on characters within the texts frequently mirror the effects that writers envision their own epics having on audiences, disseminating specific values and notions of identity.

Seen against this backdrop, some of the most well-known Romantic-era epics appear to be deeper examinations of the role of interiority in the process of changing the world. We might even consider them efforts to 'evangelize' the world poetically. Attention to a fuller picture of the period's epics clarifies the interest of many canonical authors in creating social transformation through literature. If the Romantic era in some ways secularized the Christian tradition, as M. H. Abrams has argued, we could see the Romantics as also having secularized the concept of missionary work, especially in their epics. Yet this apparent secularization is fraught with tensions that suggest less a simple appropriation than a struggle with some evangelical and imperial impulses, and especially with efforts to coordinate them. In converting the age's evangelical zeal into fantasies of social transformation through poetry, some of the most well-known epics of the period grapple with the question of how an individual might be purified to become the bearer of renewal to the world. Consider the inner labours of William Blake's Milton and Los; the tortures endured by Percy Bysshe Shelley's Laon, Cythna, and Prometheus; the attempt of the speaker of John Keats's *Fall of Hyperion* to climb the steps and prove himself more than a 'dreamer'; the growth of the speaker of Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

Each of these epics seeks to locate poetry itself as a vehicle of positive social and even global transformation while recognizing and attempting to diminish the extent to which such benevolent intentions could inadvertently contribute to alibis for oppression. Even Wordsworth's supposed denial of history appears more like an attempt to intervene in history by teaching the world to cultivate an inner connection to nature. *The Prelude* seeks less to displace history than to transform the disappointments of history through poetry. In all of these works, the focus is not merely on

interiority itself, but on the extent to which interiority (and its purification) might improve the world and the degree to which such plans might escape entanglement with imperialism. Ever the black sheep among the canonical poets, Lord Byron largely rejects the evangelical drive in *Don Juan*, crafting a hero who is almost a counter-missionary: rather than imposing his values upon others, Juan adopts the dress and the attitudes of the cultures he encounters, exposing in the process the constructed and artificial nature of national identities. In rejecting the notion of imposing his values on others, Byron becomes a different kind of evangelist altogether: a proponent of a scepticism that encourages his readers to question the apparent certainties of creed, race, and nation. Engaging with the tensions of the era's developing ideologies of empire, these canonical works broadly operate within the discursive system of British imperialism to advocate for various modes of spreading freedom from the worst aspects of empire.

Romantic epics also expose the frictions of a secularizing world. They generally do not seamlessly incorporate religious concepts but wrestle with them. Critics such as Charles Taylor and Talal Asad have challenged the idea that secularism is a simple break from or absence of religion, analysing it instead as a historically constituted category that has emerged in response to religion in complex ways.[17] And indeed, Abrams's secularization thesis has long been disputed: for instance, J. H. Miller's review of *Natural Supernaturalism* points out Abrams's questionable assumptions that Western religious culture is unified and can be directly translated into non-religious terms. Religion was as turbulent and contested a category as many others in the Romantic period, and critics such as Robert Ryan have discussed the religious debates and conflicts that stretch across the era and influence its literature. While Protestantism became central to ideas of British identity over the course of the eighteenth century, the ascendency of Enlightenment critiques of religion challenged literalist and enthusiastic understandings of Christianity. These antagonisms spurred on the missionary enterprise, as evangelicals saw their religious views as not only under attack from sceptical intellectuals but frequently disparaged by other (perhaps more nominal) Christians. At the same time, supporters of

[17] Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) rejects the view that religion simply and directly retreats in the face of reason and science. Tracing secularism's origins to Protestant reform movements and a desire to keep peace between rival faiths, Taylor examines kinds of secularism and the changes they produce in subjectivity and experience. Talal Asad has explored secularism not as the mere absence of religion, but as a 'concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life' (*Formations of the Secular* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003], 25).