The Dying of the Epic

John O'Carroll and Chris Fleming

School of Social Science and Liberal Studies
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst NSW
Australia
jocarroll@csu.edu.au

School of Humanities and Languages
University of Western Sydney
Penrith South DC NSW 1797
Australia
c.fleming@uws.edu.au

Epic Hypotheses

This essay inquires into the nature of the epic. Few dispute that the term has meaning, applying minimally to a genre of verse.(1) To ask for definition is to ask what something is. In the dimension of the epic's whatness, however, we discover an even more essential whenness, which makes ours a temporal hypothesis. The epic has a time, and that time, we contend, is past. Notwithstanding the long and slow process of the way in which the genre is dying, the epic continues to haunt our conceptions of narrative and of story, and to inflect subsequent genres, so that today, for instance, a Hollywood film might seek to capture a little of its reflected glory.

Our hypothesis is a provisional one. It should be tested, *a posteriori*, against popular counter-hypotheses. There are three of these. *First* is the idea that the term "epic" is no more than an adjective that became associated with particular verse forms, but is now just as well attached to other newer forms of narrative art. In this view, the epic is a scattered feature of any culture, arising here and there, be it in a stone-age tale of warriorhood or an excessively long rock concert (especially one invoking Stonehenge, Druids, and Middle Earth). The *second* counter-hypothesis, poststructural in nature, shares features with our own (for instance, the link between the establishment of the epic and sacred violence) but would question our version of its epistemological form (such as our insistence on points of genesis, for instance). A *third* view, one founded in literary textual analysis, is a formalist hypothesis: it concerns the view that the epic is to be thought principally as a textual form. That is, the epic is to be contrasted, for instance, with the *dramatic* or the *lyric*, and is not in any significant sense indicative of broader cultural logics; the logic, causality, and effects of

the epic all remain firmly embedded within the fictional universes it invokes.

About each of these there will be little further to say, because it is possible to make a number of initial clearing observations either by way of showing their non-pertinence, or by suggesting how they are related to our own exploration. The first hypothesis, semantic (and perhaps pedantic) in nature, differs from the others in not engaging with recurring cultural or aesthetic forms, because its nominalism–like the proverbial cop at the crime scene who continues to announce, with diminishing credibility, "there's nothing to see here"–declares in advance that meaning is simply a product of naming, and never the other way around. Accordingly, where such forms become increasingly salient to an inquiry, this approach becomes proportionately useless. About the second (anti)hypothesis we might make this observation: the work of Derrida may question genesis, but has its own operational category of "greatest irreducibility" in place of the origin; one may concur with Derrida's insistence that all formal systems are capable of being deconstructed, and yet insist that more can be said. The epic–as with the case of *écriture* presented at the outset of *Grammatologie*–can be said to be dying *but not dead*, a case of closure (*clôture*) not the end (*fin*) (14). Hence even in its dying, the artworks of today still participate *in* the epic, even if they can never actualize it or "do" it again.

The formalist hypothesis, likewise, is not at base an alternative explanation to our own, but is–like deconstruction–simply insufficient in itself. More positively, "modern" formalist theorizations of the epic are predicated on a long and valuable set of precedents, and these are essential in at least a descriptive sense to all other variants, including our own:

Epic poetry agrees with tragedy to the extent that it is the representation in dignified verse, of serious actions. They differ, however, in that epic keeps to a single meter and is in narrative form. Another point of difference is their length. . . ..(Aristotle 38)These features–serious actions (and heroes), high verse style, and above all, a story rather than drama structure–are in part what enable us to recognize the epic poem, and are perfectly acceptable criteria–even if they do not explain anything about why the epic came into being *where* and *when* it did, the cultural field with which the epic intersects, and *why* we have been witnesses to its two thousand year process of dying. That is the task of the present essay.

In launching our distinctive inquiry into the dying of the epic, we do need to consider the question of the *genesis* of the epic. After all, if the epic is temporally bound it has not just an end, but also a beginning. So even if lies outside the purview of a paper on the dying of the epic, it is worth spending a bit of time thinking about how it came to exist at all. There is a gulf between the words of Gods, and the incantations that have come down to us from different civilizations (witness the earliest Vedic literature for instances)–and the epics that followed in a string of civilizations. In this respect, Gans has written that

The beginnings of secular narrative may be traced to the Babylonian *Gilgamesh Epic* of around 2500 BC at the end of which–assuming the original story ends, as scholars generally believe, with Tablet XI–the protagonist loses the herb of immortality or rebirth. Although Homeric epic and later, Athenian drama take most of their material from myth, they view myth not from the point of view of the gods, agents of transfiguration, but from that of the mortals engaged in the tragic *agon*. (*The Scenic Imagination* 8)The epic, then, is the first of the profane texts *on* myth, *on* divinity. It concerns human attitudes to divinity, *from the human point of view*.(2) From this standpoint, it is now possible to state our principal hypotheses.

We define the epic *first*, as a form of expression linked in an originary sense to sacrifice, and *second*, as a form that has a deep relationship to the sacred in general. Because of its history in Greece (whence its name), we do not seek to assert in a strong form the sacrificial dimension of the epic, even if we hold that there, as elsewhere, the epic has a deep relationship to it. In asserting rather more strongly the relationship to the sacred, we say *third*, that it entails not just sacred writing, but an aspect of the profane. Part of our hypothesis about the nature of the epic concerns the nature and fact of its dying. *Fourth*, therefore, it will be our task to indicate why we agree very substantially with Cesáreo Bandera's contention that there is a "historical failure of the epic" (176). For us, as for him, in a world where the sacred loses its terrifying force, the epic has no initiating role whatsoever, except as a memento of the price of acquisition of our security.

Sacred Stories: the *Mahābhārata*

Since our account of the epic is necessarily tied to changes in culture, we need to explore those events that have come to foreclose the possibility of its existence. Our way into this is to look at the history of a few signal instances–and, initially at least, merely note what changed. We begin with works roughly contemporary–the *Mahābhārata* and the Homeric epics. At least in the way they are traditionally conceived, the two works are thought to occupy very different aesthetic and religious terrain. We're not so convinced.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a brief (700-verse) passage folded into the (1.8-million-word) epic narrative, the *Mahābhārata*, offers us the following scenario: two great armies are facing each other, Arjuna's army, the Pandavas on one side, and his relations, the Kauravas or Kurus on the other. Arjuna's hope for peace has failed, and the sides are arrayed for war. Arjuna, himself a fierce warrior, is the hero of the epic, and in a process earlier in the narrative has chosen to have an unarmed Krishna as his charioteer–and adviser. At the crucial moment before battle, Arjuna is suddenly seized by doubts. The doubts do not concern a fear of losing, but rather that he will be *killing his relatives*:

And Krishna said, "Arjuna, behold

The Kurus gathered here."
And Arjuna beheld
Fathers, grandfathers
Venerable teachers, uncles, brothers, sons,
Grandsons and comrades,
Fathers-in-law and friends
Standing there in either host. (280)

Seeing this, he was "filled with deep compassion" and questions the very point of the battle. This is a crucial turning point in the narrative, setting up the decisive moment of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the unfolding of sacred truths of a people. Arjuna says

My limbs give way (beneath me)
My mouth dries up, and trembling
Takes hold upon my frame:
My body's hairs stand up (in dread).
(My bow) Gandiva, slips from my hand,
My very skin is all ablaze;
I cannot stand, my mind
seems to wander (all distraught). (280)In response to this extended line of questioning (it continues for stanzas beyond these), Krishna thereafter reveals the nature of the world to Arjuna, and also, gives him (and his subsequent Hindu followers) instructions on how to live in it, and to accept the world's apparent contradictions and injustices. But although the contemplative and transcendental moment itself is supposed to transcend time, it still needs to happen *within* it. This is also a *story* after all.(3)

Arjuna's arguments are reasonable enough: it is wrong to kill his own extended family, it is bad luck to fight "mine own folk," that he is murdering descendants and relatives as yet unborn–and that the victory would be pointless anyway (280-81). It builds to a simple climax: "I will not fight" (283). To this, Krishna "faintly smiled" before embarking on a lengthy explanation on the nature of reincarnation and immortal imperishability (284ff). In the course of this, he touches on the role of sacrificial behavior in the universe. The Gods need the humans to make sacrifices, he explains, because sacrifice "sustains" them, and the "evil" ones who sacrifice merely for themselves live in vain (292). Moreover, Brahman might be born from the imperishable, but is also "forever based on sacrifice" (293). The English word should not mislead us. What is invoked by "sacrifice" in Hindu thought is a world away from the kind of sacrifice performed by Christians when they symbolically reenact Christ's sacrifice, but it reminds us–if we need reminding–that sacrifice is closely related to the ancient sacred.(4)

Crucially, the epic enables a crossing-point or "interface" between humanity and divinity,

something that is arguably essential to *all* religions–or at least those with transcendental ambitions. Krishna has to bestow a timeless eye to Arjuna (who would otherwise be destroyed by the divine disclosure); the revelation is recounted, in epic style, as an *event*:

> Sanjaya [the narrator] said:
> So saying Hari [Lord Krishna],
> The great Lord of yogic power,
> Revealed to the son of Prithā [Arjuna] His all highest sovereign form. (329; our insertions)

The result, despite his protection, is sheer terror, itself mediated by a narrative of what he has seen: throned Gods, celestial serpents, "glory shining on all sides," and all the "worlds shudder–how much more I!" (330-31).

In the *Mahābhārata*, we have almost the quintessential epic, a superb and large scale account of a clash of armies, headed by individuals we learn to care about as the narrative progresses, all of it rendered in elevated verse-form. In the midst of the story, what is more, the terror of the sacred is revealed, and the weakness of humanity before an all-conquering destiny. If, as Aristotle says, we are to look up to the epic hero, and to be moved by his drama, then this text (even more than the *Rāmāyana* which is also a central epic of Hinduism) lets us see the key features of the genre in action.

Classical Greece and Rome

Unlike the *Mahābhārata*, the *Odyssey* is no longer part of a living religious structure. Perhaps this is why Greek texts like the *Odyssey* are often seen as just stories, as precursors to novels perhaps. It is certainly possible to read them that way; the *Odyssey* is after all, a terrific story. (The editor of the English translation suggests he can "describe the *Iliad* as a tragedy and the *Odyssey* as a novel" (Rieu, in Homer 10).) They are also apparently "poems" (10). We nevertheless do see what Rieu means, as willful as his reading is: there is a plot such as we might find in a novel: a shrewd and worthy leader seeks unsuccessfully to bring his crew back home, but he, alone deserving, prevails, and reclaims his rightful place at the head of the household. The ingenuity of the story, the trials of the hero, the way it is written–all these things were a marvel then, and they remain so.

It *is* a great story–but so too is the *Mahābhārata*. The point is that the narrative aesthetic does not exhaust the text's resources–there is a sacred fount at its centre. Just as the *Mahābhārata* (a Sanskrit word, but one recognizable in modern Hindi as designating "great" Bharat, i.e., a great tale of the descendants of Bharat) tells the story of a people, so too does the *Odyssey*. Like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Odyssey* is both a story *and a sacred text*. As in the *Mahābhārata*, the Gods mix freely with some of the human actors, and influence actions and

outcomes. Both texts "teach" through their stories. Where Krishna actually explains the morals to Arjuna, morals in the *Odyssey* emerge through actions. Odysseus could seem, to a Judaeo-Christian eye, to be somewhat boastful, even deceitful, but a reader caught up in the narrative world he inhabits cannot ultimately fail to be touched by the qualities taught through his characterization: loyalty, bravery, and at times, even compassion. The cruelty of the Gods to the lost and wandering hero as he makes his way from one desperate scene to another reinforces audience alignment with him. No individual could stand such torture–by the story's end, when he is finally thrown up utterly alone on the Ithacan shore, we are moved to sympathy for the hero's determination to do something very understandable–to get back home to his wife (208).

The qualities of the hero are more than merely narrative qualities. As in the *Mahābhārata*, these are the qualities of the epic hero, who in many respects, is touched by the divine. We go so far as to suggest that these idealizations make no sense without the framework of the sacred that lies behind them at every turn. In this view, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are not just entertainment, but share a common ground in generic terms with the great Hindu texts we have just been discussing. All tell of the exploits of heroes, all are guided by and inflected by the gods, and all are written in the highest and most serious styles of their cultures. Such is the pattern of the epic.

This brings us to the *Aeneid*, a text written some eight hundred years later. When, however, we read its opening lines, we sense a somewhat different note being sounded:

I sing of arms and of a man, a man who first from Troy's coast came as an exile by fate to the Lavinian shore. By those above, *this* was the man who, tossed violently about on the depths or on the land and unforgotten by fierce Juno (on account of whose rage he was to undergo many trials) who was to establish the city and its Gods in Latium. Whence the Latin kind and the fathers of Alba [Rome]; whence also the high walls of Rome (ll1-7)The author is Virgil, the work the *Aeneid*. At one level, the text recreates the world of the *Iliad* only to splice a completely different people's history into it (for we are back in Troy, and the story is told again, but from the other side). Virgil's often-cited opening resonates once the rest of the epic is known; at first the words mean little. The deities introduced in the first sentence are the same ones we later see gathered up from ruined Troy, and indeed, the trials themselves are recounted by sea and by land in the books that follow. Only after these things are understood, can we see the sense and the force of those opening lines.

The poem differs from all the epics written before it in that it was commissioned, and it was written by one man. This, therefore is no unconscious outpouring, but is rather a deliberate and deliberated piece. Virgil, in other words, derived a pattern from the Homeric and other then extant epic-cycle originals upon which to base his own masterpiece. He was not to know, of course, that those who wrote before him were not single individuals like "Homer" or "Sanjaya" which were names for collective cultural achievement. That is, in his act of

imitation as it were, he was to create something so original that it could never again be repeated–even though his very act of creating it produced the desire to do just that in those that came after him.

In the personification of "pious" Aeneas, we find the embodiment of an imagined civilization. As our student edition would have it:

The *Aeneid* is an epic poem. Now without attempting to define epic poetry, let us point out its general characteristics. An epic is a type of narrative poetry. It deals, therefore, with a story, a connected series of events. But it does not aim merely to tell a story for its own sake, as does simple narrative poetry, but for the sake of a higher meaning and intenser feeling. . . . In the concrete, therefore, the action will generally center around (1) a hero or heroic characters (2) some mighty work to be achieved with steadfast courage, (3) a courageous struggle with unusual difficulties in carrying out this high purpose. (Henle 67)Beyond the storyline itself, we get this account (echoing Aristotle down the ages) of the writing:

A metrical system will be chosen which is at once (1) majestic and elevated; and (2) flexible, to fit the changing mood of the narration and to avoid the monotony which is a constant danger in a long poem. (67)The meters of Latin verse, it should be remembered, are based not on stress patterns or on syllable counts as in modern European verse, but on vowel lengths.

The power of the *Aeneid* lies at least partially in the establishing work in the second book. The city of Troy, in a pattern familiar to city-states of the time, ringed by its defensive wall, breached by the giant wooden horse, has a shell like structure. Inside the shell, we discover in a vision presented in the very act of its withdrawal, an inner life. In this place of concentric circles, the inner sanctum is where the sacred and courtly life took place, something that Virgil takes great care to humanize, and to individualize. We learn that Aeneas himself had in happier times used a hidden passageway to move between buildings, that from these rooftops, the sea could be seen. We learn these things not from scene-setting, but either from memories being triggered as he moves or from acts of destruction by the invaders, notably the terrifying–and pedagogically significant–figure of Pyrrhus. We learn about the beauty of the throne room not from descriptions, but from the account of Pyrrhus smashing not just the door, but also the door jamb on which the door itself is mounted. We see the wisdom and merits of King Priam not through accounts of his earlier heroic days, but as he faces death. When, about to rush to the aid of the others, he displays wisdom in heeding his wife's words that it is pointless; but then, when Pyrrhus, with great brutality slays his son before him, he shouts that Pyrrhus has betrayed even the standards of his fierce father, and then, in the pathetic lines, "sic fatus senior telumque imbelle sine ictu conjectit" (thus the doomed old man threw his spear, but without any effect), (2. l544), we are prepared for the even greater brutality of his death, announced after a derisive response

simply with the words "Nunc morere! [Now die!]" (2, l.550). The character, so carefully personified by Virgil, then has his head torn from his body, the trunk thrown onto the shoreline, "sine nomine corpus [a mere body without a name]" (l.558).

In small scenes of great pathos of the kind just described, Virgil forces us to bear witness to the unbuilding of a civilization, a cosmology, an entire order of life. Virgil's sympathies with those whose lives are destroyed prevails throughout the epic, and is part of the way in which the hero is assessed. In his eyes, however successful someone like Pyrrhus might be in battle, his brutality and lack of piety makes him the very opposite of a hero. Virgil also shows what it means to be defeated. Repeated, but again always fleeting, laments for lost Troy, her now failed deities–just pathetic little things to be gathered up by the fugitive remnants, occur in these terrifying pages, and on the basis of them, the quest not just for a new city, but for an entirely new civilization begins.

The Aeneid, perhaps, is the last text that can truly be called an epic. The complexity of claiming for it the same kind of place as that inhabited by texts like the *Odyssey* or the *Mahābhārata* does raise problems. It does not take much to see why–it is an authored book, one with a dedicated aim in mind, a single writer, yet one commissioned to the task, and one whose work was accepted and read for centuries to come as the defining account of Rome. It is at one level a strangely *modern* kind of statecraft, albeit one that pre-exists modern states. Imbued as it was in the epic cultures and histories that formed it (such as the Greek schools the Romans kept going), the "revivified" form lives not just through the genius of its author but also through the genuine idealization of Greek culture on the one hand and the deification of the eternal city/empire of Rome on the other (which is why it is precisely not modern in its statecraft or political and chauvinistic apologetics). To be sure, we read it though a prism of our own. There are also those who now shun it because of its life after the conversion of Rome–the poem is a staple of Catholic cultures in particular–just as there are those who have loved it as "literature." Even if the reader does not accept our claim that it is an epic in the full sense we have identified in the mixed profanity and sacredness of the *Odyssey*, it is an important and undeniable way-station on the road to whatever we think of the epic today–and its inspiration to Christian writers afterwards is the next field we must examine.

After Virgil

Virgil's accomplishment, unfinished as it is, remains the last of the great epics in the true sense. Virgil was not very long dead before his masterpiece found an authored riposte. Lucan's *Pharsalia* (or *De Bello Civili, of Civil War*) rejected, apparently utterly, all aspects of Virgil's project except the epic form itself (and even it was transformed). In place of the mythologizing vividness and pathos of Virgil's work, Lucan wrote in quick oratorical phraseology called "*Sententiae*" (which just means phrases, but which alludes to the oral rhetorical tradition (Conte 442). Where Virgil based his text on a mythic event in the deep

past to articulate the sacred genesis of Rome, Lucan very boldly used his to attack the overthrow of the republic by Julius Caesar. This was brave indeed in an era when "Augustus Caesar" styled himself as such to establish continuity with Caesar's legacy. Crucially, Lucan's epic is based on history, real recorded history such as was available to him through literary sources, and living memory. As Conte says, this makes it not just "annalistic" and slightly wearing, but also, it entailed a denunciation of a "fratricidal war, of the subversion of all moral values, and the arrival of the kingdom of injustice" (443), with the result that the author effects a "systematic refutation" of everything Virgil had attempted (444). Conte takes as a particularly striking example of this Lucan's deliberate reversal of Virgil's promise that the new Rome would name those places "now without name," turning that into the prospect that one day "omne Latinum/fabula nomen erit" ("the fairytale will be of the whole Latin name") (446).

If we step back a moment, we see that while the *Pharsalia* partakes of the epic, it is not an epic in anything like the same sense as its predecessors in Rome, Greece, or India. The text resembles something more akin to a cross between a polemic and a modern historical drama. The issues can be vital, and controversial, but the genre has changed. That said, Lucan's epic *participates in the genre*, without, if we might put it thus, entirely fitting *into* it. There is not sacred value in the sense of the earlier epics, but republicanism is reified into something worthy of sacrifice, and we even sense the author's courage in putting his own life and reputation on the line in creating such a devastating critique. Later, in Europe, republicanism in France and the United States would take on just the same quasi-sacred value, as would nationalism more generally. These "ideas" are deemed worthy of common sacrifice, and, as Benedict Anderson points out, death (7). But we have still moved away from the epic that Aristotle described, from Homer's tale that folds both lived divinity and heroic human exploits into one single text.

Dante and Tasso

After Virgil, there were "modern" attempts to write in this high style, but–unlike the situation with tragedy in France and in England–the results were rarely attended by any real order of success. There were curiosities, such as the "rediscovered" thirteenth book of the *Aeneid*, but this was written in medieval times. The significance of this text is less that it finished the unfinished masterpiece, but rather that it showed the esteem in which Virgil was held in Christendom, making it seem all the more remarkable that no successor appeared. In fact, only three texts since the fall of Rome can really claim both to have had the sweep of earlier epics, and the project of mixing the profane and the sacred in an elevated way that makes the epic what it is.

The first of these texts is the *Divine Comedy*, a text written by Dante Alighieri from 1317 onwards (Dante 376). Neither is it any coincidence that the narrator of Dante's *Divine Comedy* has as his first guide the figure of "Virgilio"–Virgil–as he travels through the

underworld. For anyone versed in the epics of classical times, the text Dante presents is something of a shock. In fact, the opening volume of the three-part work (the others are *Purgatory* and *Paradise*), the *Inferno*, on which our attention is focused, is a horrific text that catalogues the terrors and torments of hell in great detail. The *Inferno* opens with the narrator's dreamlike state being interrupted by his encounter with the deceased author of the *Aeneid*. Virgil introduces himself as the one who has been born *sub Julio* (under Julius), who was a poet (*poeta fui*), and who composed lines on the "son of Anchises" from Troy (10-11). The choice is apt enough: the narrator, and indeed, the author of the *Divine Comedy* itself, will be guided by Virgil, the earlier writer and model (11ff).

As we make our way into this strange yet attractive text, the influence of the *Aeneid* proves to be at once profound and strangely narrow. Virgil, the pious guide, like Aeneas, and perhaps Virgil himself, is a kind of character-model. Unlike the earlier text, where the adventures involve not just piety but also fighting and love, the *Inferno* offers a different kind of drama, if drama is even the correct word for the procession of things the strange pair witness. In terms of action, indeed, it is as if the entire setting of the *Inferno* is drawn from book six of the *Aeneid*. In that book, we are introduced to the terrifying Charon, the *portitor* (gatekeeper) and ferryman of the ghosts of the dead fortunate enough to have the right to cross the water. Dante adds a brilliant touch of his own by appending a notice to the gates of hell. The sign concludes with the celebrated phrase, *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* (Leave all hope, you who enter!) (26-27). There follows in Dante's account the journey across the Acheron, as in the ancient model, and then his progression through the nine levels of hell.

The narrative logic of the *Inferno* is also very different from that of the *Aeneid*. Where the wanderings of the *Aeneid*, like the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* before it, were made up of an epic purpose that entailed a *variety* of travels and battles, the *Inferno* progresses by gradually moving more and more towards the ultimately awe-inspiring and powerful, the figure of Lucifer. This is finally reached in canto 34, when the two travelers arrive at "Judecca" where sinners are frozen like insects in ice, and a three-faced Satan hangs suspended gnawing on three particular sinners, Judas, Brutus, and Cassius (353-55). From this point, of course, things can only improve–and they do–as Virgil guides his companion out, and he can make his way towards paradise.

The distinctness of the narratives raises the question of how it is even possible to see the *Divine Comedy* as an epic. Even setting aside the array of adventures a hero like Odysseus has, even Aeneas does more than *visit* the other-worldly domains. All of the strife of Aeneas' experience in book two (the pathos that elevates the poem in the first place), the tragic romantic failure in book four (the incineration of Dido), not to mention the destined journey on to Italy in the later books and the warfare with Turnus–none of this finds any equivalent in Dante's great work. In certain respects, indeed, the *Divine Comedy* is more akin to the genre of the fabulous journey or travelogue than an epic. Even at its worst, we never feel

any sense of hazard for his "hero." Indeed, unlike Aeneas who goes into the underworld with his sword drawn, or fights battles with his men, or Arjuna who fights, or Odysseus who is threatened with death by an array of impossibly challenging threats (not just forces of divinely ordered nature like whirlpools, but sirens tempting him, Circe with her drugs, the Cyclops, and so on), this narrator never swings a sword in anger. He is, to put it mildly, an epic hero unrecognizable as such to any culture that generated epics. He has no heroic stature, his feats are remarkable through what he witnesses but not for what he actually does, and the journey itself is as much a psychological study as it is physical. The writing, it is true, is superb, and Dante generates powerful pathos from the plight of those he imagines being tortured. But that is not really the stuff of epics–or at least had not been up until this time.

With Tasso, the case is somewhat different–and less important to our inquiry. In 1581, Tasso published *The Liberation of Jerusalem*. In terms of meeting the criteria for epic narrative structure and pattern, Tasso's text is closer to the epic genre than either of the other two literary masterpieces we are surveying from post-classical Europe. Moreover, he invokes the muse to "ennoble" the verse so that he might mix without offence "fictions light" with "truth divine" (Tasso, I.ii). Once again, this is a feature of the epic. Moreover, Tasso's poem celebrates a crusader who goes to liberate Jerusalem. As a result, the travel narrative is in the same family of narratives as the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. In the text, God also addresses the hero, Godfrey, directly, as in earlier epics (I.xii). Finally, the poem is written in elevated verse, which Tasso uses to raise the Crusade into a worthy enterprise–and to honour the hero over the various antagonists he encounters.

And yet… it is nothing like those earlier poems. Most obviously, Tasso's poem's claim to greatness is not based in the long and wearying accounts of military exploits on the one hand, and Godfrey's virtuousness on the other. What is touching in the *Aeneid*, or hardened in the *Odyssey*, is tendentious and cloying here. If the poem had depended on Godfrey to animate its action, it would long ago have been consigned to the dustbin. Its charm lies rather in the reader's attraction to the anti-hero Rinaldo (introduced early in the poem), who late in the story is redeemed when he apologizes "meekly" to Godfrey for all his waywardness (especially with women), and joins the fight on his side (XVIII.ii). The narrative therefore at best has a double-barreled interest, and the engaging part of the story concerns the exploits and journey of Rinaldo, not Godfrey who–unlike Aeneas or Odysseus–fails to engage our interest as a character. Thus, despite the fact that Tasso's poem looks most like the ancient epic on the surface, its major achievements lie outside the epic domain–because his heroes are decidedly not elevated characters, but are more like much more modern troubled heroes with psychological issues to resolve.

Milton

What then of Milton? There are two striking similarities between Milton's project and that of

Dante. Both writers laid out their adventure in major parts (Milton two, Dante three), and–what is more–both moved from hell towards heaven. In Milton's case, the journey begins in hell, moves through earth, and in the second volume, *Paradise Regained*, ends in heaven. And, like Dante, there is little disagreement as to which part is better–in the case of both writers, the sections representing hell are superior for reasons of interest than the supposedly climactic conclusions in paradise. Unlike Dante, however, Milton took the very bold step of launching the action by dwelling on the circumstances of Lucifer himself.

The audacity of *Paradise Lost* is unparalleled in the rest of epic literature, and it is remarkable its opening books were not seen as scandalous. The printer's note to *Paradise Lost* sets the grim high tone of what will follow. The meter, he tells us, is

English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greece and of Virgil in Latin, rhyme being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter. (3)There follows, however, a verse formation that none could have expected. Milton's skill in blank verse had been established in the shorter poem, "Lycidas," and his classical learning was renowned. Yet the sixteen line opening sentence of the poem with its Latinate phrasing and its English clarity announced less with humility than arrogance its relation to the classical muses: to them there is no humble or muted appeal, rather, the Heavenly muse is commanded "Sing" (l.6) and we are told that this poem will not bother with the usual "middle flight" but will straightaway pursue "Things unattempted yet in Prose or rhyme" (l.16). As if that were not enough, shortly thereafter, Milton charges himself–this time with the aid of the Holy Spirit–to "assert Eternal Providence/ and justify the ways of God to men" (ll.24-25).

Milton's use of the blank verse line is unrivalled in English–superior in almost all respects to the Marlovian "mighty line" (from which he obviously learnt much), and even to Shakespearean contortions and set-piece moments of grandiloquence.(5) Milton's power lies especially in the pacing of the line (something evident already even in the opening lines of the youthful "Lycidas")–and the power and elevation of the language of his epic lies in his deployment of something unavailable to his ancient equivalents–the power of modern accented verse.(6) Examples are redundant, as they are everywhere, but let us take one simply for purposes of illustration. Let us see the way in which Milton himself contrasts the nature of two of the fallen angels as they debate at the famous congress of devils. Witness first Moloch, the rousing no-nonsense heroism of classical rhetoric–or of the English civil war–ringing in our ears:

> **My sen**tence is for **op'**n **war**. Of **wiles**
> **More un**ex**pert I boast not. Them let those**
> Con**trive** who **need**, or **when** they **need, not now**.

/	/	–	–	–	/	–	/	–	/
My	**sen**	tence	is	for	**op**	'n	**war.**	Of	**wiles**

/	/	–	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
More	**un**	ex	**pert**	**I**	**boast**	**not.**	**Them**	**let**	**those**

–	/	–	/	–	/	–	/	/	/
Con	**trive**	who	**need,**	or	**when**	they	**need,**	**not**	**now.**

The stressed syllables in the second line offer heavy emphasis ("I boast not–them let those contrive); as the tongue stumbles we sense the speaker spitting contempt for the view. The two caesurae in the final line are also superbly timed–as the pentameter pattern returns with heavy emphasis on the words "when" and the repeated word "need" (not to mention the alliteration in the last three words, with the effect of strengthening the penultimate word, "not"). The blunt opening statement, "My sentence is for op'n war," with its implied emphasis on the first two syllables, shows Milton's mastery not just through the meaning of the words–but also in marked contrast with the styles of Belial, who follows with these silken words:

> **I should** be **much** for **op**'n **war**, o **peers**
> As **not** be**hind** in **hate**, if **what** was **urged**
> **Main reas**on to **persuade** im**med**iate **war**
> Did **not** dis**suade** me **most**.

/	/	–	/	–	/	–	/	–	/
I	**should**	be	**much**	for	**op**	'n	**war,**	o	**peers**

–	/	–	/	–	/	–	/	–	/
As	**not**	be	**hind**	in	**hate**,	if	**what**	was	**urged**

/	/	–	–	/	/	–	/	–	/
Main	**rea**	son	to	**per**	**suade**	im	**med**	iate	**war**

–	/	–	/	–	/
Did	**not**	dis	**suade**	me	**most**.

Note the sing-song regularity that opens and closes these lines, making a mockery of the speaker, and contrasting with the bluntness of the far more courageous–if

foolhardy–Moloch. We see again the matching of character and verse: witness the run of stressed syllables–the third of the above lines races into the fourth with its hissing antinomies (persuade/dissuade) and the final foot's infantilising "mama" ("me most"). In almost any passage, from any part of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's poetic ability is a match for anything that went before, and is certainly able to meet the challenges he set for himself, at least in terms of versification.

All the more reason to ask then: so what went wrong after book two? It is certainly not a question of ability. Nor are we the first to wonder about this question. Much has been written on the decline of the epic. Yet in our view, only Bandera has tackled the problem as we understand it. For him, it is a question of a relationship to the sacred. In his hands, the question gains sharp articulation:

Whether or not one sees Virgil as an *anima naturaliter Christiana* (a naturally Christian soul) . . . one can see the *Aeneid* as the poem of fallen man, man as the sacrificial founder of his own *civitas terrena* (earthly city), thereby caught in a vicious circle of his own violence, struggling to separate good from evil; in other words, the poem of fallen man, without *the promise of redemption*. In this sense, there is only one successor to Virgil in Christian Europe: Milton. (183)The problem is, as Bandera rightly puts it,

"fallen man" understood in the sense in which the Judeo-Christian text means it, cannot be a hero. . . . Milton's poem, being the best, simply magnifies the inevitable contradiction of all Renaissance attempts to emulate and Christianize Virgil's achievement. (183-84)A consequence of the character map of *Paradise Lost* is the inevitable Blakean reading of the poem. Satan displaces Adam as the hero. Satan is beyond salvation, and in his defiance of all that is good, betrays a sensibility we recognize as all too human. As for poor pale Adam and Eve in the poem, we feel admiration neither for their deeds nor for them, despite all Milton's efforts to make it so.[(7)]

Bandera, like Gauchet and a range of other writers in the Girardian tradition, have pointed to the power of Christianity to make visible the sacrificial logics of human societies. Virgil does not, as Bandera seems to imagine, fall short of the Christian ideal–such a charge makes no sense–but rather, (and this would be the ingenuity of Bandera's suggestions), he is like Christ himself in what he does–he is a *re-presenter of the sacrificial scene*, and just like Christ, he pierces the veil of representation in the very fact that he is able to duplicate the scenes construed by the Homeric epics and the Greek epic cycles in his own tale of the founding of Rome.

Alexander Pope and The Case of Wagner

There are many ways of telling the demise of the epic. Perhaps, for English-speaking readers, the task is easier than for those of other modern European languages and

literatures. In our tradition, the end is explicit. It took the form of a poem called "The Rape of the Lock." This poem, appearing as it did just fifty years after *Paradise Lost*, effectively put the English epic down like a feral animal. If the analogy seems crude, it is nothing to the lacerating wit of the poem, or the incisive sarcasm of its brilliant author. Alexander Pope, like his great contemporary John Dryden, wrote a style of verse that was more demanding than blank verse. Both men wrote in what is called the heroic couplet. This is a pentameter line arranged in rhyming couplets. That such an impossibly demanding verse form should be deployed to put down the ageing beast seems apt enough: the "Rape of the Lock" is what is known as a mock epic, and it details in the highest possible verse form the events of the securing of a lock of hair from an attractive girl's head. If the poem failed to solve the problems with this kind of humour, it is hardly surprising, but we can be quite sure that no one could consider writing an epic poem without having serious second thoughts about whether or not the attempt would end in farce.

Such punctuation did not attend the wake in all languages, however, and the high serious Germanic tradition, with its Romantic/confessional possibilities, left the epic avenue open longer than for most. This brings us to what Nietzsche rightly called "the case" of Wagner. We should recall that the epic mode once had embedded in it actual music. The neo-Romantic composer, Richard Wagner, with his Bayreuth festival and specially designed concert hall, surely must be one, if not the greatest of the contenders for the last modern epic. The Ring cycle, with sixteen hours of music, performed still at Bayreuth for those who make the pilgrimage (and let us not be afraid to use that word when it is apt), was a kind of music that tore up the rules of melody in favour of a chromaticism that, in certain respects, doomed the entire orchestral idiom of which it was part.

Serious events and actions? The ring cycle certainly aspires to that, with its tales of the origins of the German people (or is it of humanity in general?). The scale of the work is monumental, and certainly justifies the name. Dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, it sought to poeticize the rise of the human from the divine in much the way–arguably–that Homer did, when he showed (in the spirit of Hesiod who showed the Olympian gods imprisoning the titans) the prevalence of smaller, weaker, yet shrewder and cleverer beings over great, dull ones (be it over Polyphemus, or indeed be it in Odysseus' actual success in getting home despite the disapproval of the most powerful gods in the firmament).

It is at this point that the first problem emerges. Unlike the *Mahābhārata*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*, the material of the Ring cycle does not reflect direct belief. We know, as Bandera points out, that Milton considered, and rejected, the option of an Arthurian epic (183). His intuition, sound entirely in this respect, was that the sacred is essential to the epic, and it must reflect things the author, and by extension, the author's culture, actually believe. The world of the *Götterdämmerung*, with its weakening gods, is one that by the nineteenth century could only be described as mythic. The nearest anyone

could contend to belief would be to hold that once upon a time, the originary Germans had believed in it, and that somehow this was what made it special today. The problems with the thesis are obvious, even in terms of the designation of what the Germanic people's belief might, or might not, have been. Paradoxically, therefore, the first failure of this epic cycle lies in its very conception.

Perhaps the best parts of these operas should have been orchestral–as in the powerful opening in E-flat, or the solemn funeral march on the occasion of Siegfried's death. If this were the case, another series of failures could have been forestalled. The orchestral music, as impressive as it often is, is nevertheless not the main achievement of the work. Were it so, we would see it eclipsed by other monumental achievements, such as Beethoven's "epic" Ninth Symphony, with its grandeur, its evocativeness, and even its failures (such as the catastrophic disintegration early in the final movement, when he set Schiller's great poem to a basic marching song).(8) In its magnificence, we see the inspiration of much of Wagner's work–and what Wagner himself did not surpass.

The orchestral version of the epic is a patently unacceptable way to deal with Wagner. Examples can be elaborated from each of the operas, and then we need–however inexpertly–to deal with the verse. Surely one of the most powerful moments in the opera occurs in *Die Walküre*, when that character, having been confronted by her father, Wotan, manages to persuade him not to strip away godhead for just any man, but only for a heroic mortal worthy of crossing a line of fire. He, duly inspired, assents with these words:

> Leb' wohl, du kühnes
> Herrliches Kind!
> Du meines Herzens
> Heiliger Stolz,
> Leb' wohl! Leb' wohl! Leb' wohl! (III, iii).

And so on. It carries the sense of the action, but not much more (there isn't much poetry for a daughter in being a "herrliches Kind" even though–if we enjoy the music–we as foreign listeners with our merely "operatic" German can go along with it as we, fortunately, miss the nuances of the language). Yet even *we* can see that these verses about not being able to be greeted anymore by his favourite daughter need music to animate what the words fail singularly to achieve. The stock vocabulary Wagner frequently deploys at key moments like this one weakens the verse further.

Perhaps the success would have been greater had Wagner remembered the sternness of the initial Greek formulation–no drama. Even the poor versification does less damage to a

performance of the Ring cycle than does a poor cast or a clichéd visualization consisting of bulky men in horned helmets accosting equally large women with swords and chain mail with sentiments like those cited in the lines above. In ruling off our account with Milton's spectacular failure therefore we intend no criticism of Wagner but rather suggest that the factors weighing down his works may not be those that concern modernity or the epic form in their specificities.

A parsimonious definition of the epic derived

From all we have seen, we are now in a position to make observations on the nature of the epic. These we lay out in as a simple list in two parts, those things which we regard as essential to the epic, and those things which appear merely to be associated with it.

Essential to the epic are these features:

- The epic is formally described as a creation of elevated characters in elevated language. These formal features are essential to the epic, and reflect the fact that it is an interleaving of the gods and the profane in any society.
- The epic is a narrative form. This is essential to the epic, as it is the one genre that seeks to capture the life and significance of a people in a story that is also–thesis 1–both entertaining and infused with the sacred.
- The epic is large scale. This actually can be derived from the first two points, but needs to be stated. Because it is a tale of elevated characters and of the link to the gods, and because it is a narrative that captures the life of a people, it must be large scale.
- The epic models virtues. The virtues may be those of the heroes alone, or they may be reflected also in the virtues of the gods. All the epics we have traced here from the true epic cultures perform this way: we see it in Odysseus, in Arjuna, and in Aeneas.
- The epic in its time enjoys wide acceptance–the communal authorship is a symptom as much as a cause of this feature. Indeed, the fact that Virgil alone could author an epic shows that authorship is not the point–what is at stake is rather its receptive horizon. Virgil's epic, like those that went before him, was accepted as the main truth of the culture in a way that even those of Dante Alighieri and Milton were not.

Common to the epic are these tendencies:

- The epic tends not to be dramatized. This is not, so far as we can see, essential to it. While we can think of no successful "play" that is an epic, we can see no reason for ruling out the possibility.
- The epic tends to pick up blocks of myth (in the Girardian sense), and enjoys a relationship to it.
- The epic has a relationship to song, and is, for the most part either sung or chanted,

however strange this may seem to us today.

- The epic of one society tends to be read as mere story by another. Hence our treatment of Greek and Roman epics; hence to the Christian tendency to read epics like *Gilgamesh* or the *Mahābhārata* as story (as in the Brooks adaptation).

That the epic is dying, we can be sure. That its long afterglow will continue to haunt the memory of all civil societies is even more certain. Embedded in it are the traces not just of histories of lost cultures, but also, of the sacred terrors that motivated them, and inspired them to write their heroes into legend. Their memory haunts all of us.

References

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Trans. J. Nichols. London: Hesperus, 2005.

Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. London: verso, 1991.

Aristotle, The Art of Poetry. *Classical Literary Critiicsm.* Ed. T.S. Dorsch. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.

"Bhagavad-Gītā." [the theological centrepiece of the *Mahābhārata*] *Hindu Scriptures*. Trans R.C Zaehner. London: Dent (Everyman),1966.275-363.

Conte, Gian Biagio. *Latin Literature : A History*. Trans. Joseph Solodow. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1953.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres de Marx: L'Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* Paris: Galilée, 1993.

—. *De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967.

Gans, Eric. *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008.

—. *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology.* Berkeley: University of California P, 1985.

Harvey, Paul. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1940.

Hindupedia. "Yajna." http://www.hindupedia.com/en. (Accessed 19 November 2010).

Homer. *The Odyssey.* Trans. E.V. Rieu. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946.

Marlowe, Christopher. "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus." Ebook. Project Gutenberg. http://www.gutenberg.org. (Accessed 19 November 2010).

Milton, John. *The Poetical Works of John Milton*. Ed. Helen Darbishire. London: OUP, 1958.

Riezler, Walter*. Beethoven*. Trans G. Pidcock. London: Forrester, 1938.

Tasso. *The Liberation of Jerusalem*. (Accessed 19 May 2010) http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/392/pg392.html.

Virgil [Publicus Vergilius Maro]. *The Aeneid* in *Latin* Robert J. Henle, Chicago; Loyola P, 1941. 86-403. The translation by W.F Jackson in the Penguin edition is both readable and close to the original [*The Aeneid*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.]

Wagner, Richard. *Die Walküre*. *The Opera Libretto Library.* New York: Crown, 1939, 1980. 143-87.

Williams, R.D. "Introduction." *The Aeneid of Virgil – Books 7-12*. London: Martin, 1973. Ix-xxxvi.

Notes

1. This essay is dedicated to Peter Stevens whose patience in correcting hundreds of pages of translation over the years finds this uncertain reward. (back)

2. Elsewhere indeed, in an argument beyond our purview (yet surely in support of its framing), Gans contends that the Homeric epic gives rise to *culture itself* (*The End of Culture* 7-8). This accords very well with our view – and this is a point of emphasis for our essay – that the epic is *also* a quasi-sacred text – and this is the key to why its death, so long prefigured, is *still* taking place. If Gans marks off the epic's closure more emphatically than we do, we nevertheless concur in our view of its originary significance. (back)

3. Another acknowledgement: Sudesh Mishra's role (in conversation) in helping to develop the thesis about the interleaving of profane and sacred aspects of the narrative in the *Mahābhārata* warrants mention at this point – we acknowledge his endorsement of the idea (but do not blame him for any of our own (mis)interpretations!). (back)

4. The *yagñas* in this tradition concern processes not just of sacrifice but apt reverence (the Hindupedia helpfully explains that while the word implies *worship*, its nearest English equivalent is the word *sacrifice* – because this is part and parcel of worship itself). The entry also makes it plain, however, that the specific strict sense of the term is sacrificial: it entails "offering oblations to propitiate" a deity ("Yajna"). (back)

5. Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*: "Was *this* the *face* that *launched* a *thous*and *ships*/and *burnt* the *top*less *tow*ers of *Il*ium?/ *Sweet Hel*en *make* me im*mor*tal with a *kiss*!" (Marlowe). These are superb lines: the opening line in perfect iambic pentameter gains its force from the fact it is a question. The hissing throughout the three lines finishes with the words "Her lips suck forth my soul – see where it flies!" the sounds evoking the sucking forth of the soul by Lucifer. (back)

6. But see R.D. Williams' account of Virgil's versification, with its interaction between quantitative and accented patterns (xxvi-xxviii). (back)

7. There is a well known literature on this: the trouble with a lot of the conversation, however, is that while the Milton critics frequently successfully point out the techniques Milton uses to *try* to make his epic fly and his Gods rise (by diminishing the status of the devils and so on), such writers all too frequently leap to the conclusion that just because they can find these techniques in the poem, he actually succeeded in achieving those lofty aims. (back)

8. Wagner was instrumental in training the twentieth century ear that absorbed his musical vision to a view of Beethoven that saw the outburst of cheap melody as the pinnacle of his achievement. As for Riezler's remark that "Probably no one to-day accepts Wagner's view that with the choral movement Beethoven sealed the doom of instrumental music" (199), we can only concur. (back)