Lighting Out for the Rough Ground: America's Epic Origins and the Richness of World Literature

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E PIC TRAVELS. WHATEVER ELSE MIGHT BE SHOWN OR ARGUED IN THIS essay, the idea that epic texts thematize, undergo, and facilitate travel is crucial to understanding the history of their presence in the United States and indeed around the world. One of the first records of an epic text traveling appears in Plutarch's account of Alexander the Great, in which the general brings a copy of the *Iliad* with him on his campaigns, laying it under his pillow each night next to a dagger (544)—no mean feat, considering that the epic would have been in scroll format at the time. Homer's *Odyssey*, the tale of Odysseus's travels following the Trojan War, has entered modern languages as a word referring to a remarkable voyage. Dante inaugurated the modern epic (at least in post-Romantic readers' minds) "in the middle of the journey of our lives." The Portuguese poet Camões narrated the voyage of Vasco da Gama to India in his *Lusiads*, having traced da Gama's journey himself as a diplomat in Calcutta. And North American epic began in an English courtier's travels in Egypt, a poet laureate's exile, and a French linguist's frontier quest for recognition.[1] Such is the start of the historical narrative that I wish to put forward here, one designed to point up the multiplicity of traditions, genealogies, and anomalies that make up—and break down—the contested concept of epic. As I argue, this polyglossia of epics has an archival richness that shows the category of epic to be not so much a genre as a discourse, a historically contingent yet nonarbitrary strategy for meaning making.

I focus my discussion on the literature of British North America and the United States here for two reasons. First, I hope to counteract the "procession to modernism" argument popularized by critics from F. O. Matthiessen to Harold Bloom, which until quite recently has rendered most of the poetry preceding the 1910s virtually invisible

to post–World War II literary histories of the United States. Second, by engaging the postnational turn in American studies through the lens of world literature, specifically through connections between form and world systems recently articulated by Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti, and Wai Chee Dimock, I stress the importance of the history of forms for contextualizing texts concerned with postcolonial and imperial politico-economic relations.[2] I intend to show that epics, as peculiarly social and ideological forms of discourse, have evolved in close connection with colonial expansion and modern nation building, in which processes they often performed vital, though inconsistent, cultural work. Indeed, the concept of world literature arose out of a concern with the power of national imaginaries to screen out international connections, even as the economies that nation-states fueled increased the amount of physical border crossing that texts, titles, and authors could actually do. And few writers combined national or imperial pursuits with as much sensitivity to what Dimock calls "deep time" as those who have engaged the epic tradition across centuries and continents. This essay presents a series of case studies ranging from the early seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, each overshadowed by the imagined space of America, which is one of the most important contributors to the development of post-Renaissance notions of epic. *America* and *epic* have defined each other in myriad ways since the sixteenth century, even as their definitions changed. As *America* came to denote not an entire hemisphere but the singular state entity of the United States, the usage of *epic* changed during the first years of United States independence from nominal to adjectival, challenging the traditional logic of genre as taxonomy and revealing a longing for totality fed by the very vagueness of *epic* as adjective. This vagueness allowed epic to connect, clash, and cross-pollinate with other discourses in radical ways, and a brief survey of the domi-

nant criticism connecting epic and novel shows some of these radical possibilities.

Epic among the Genres

The terms for current discussions of epic form in modernity have largely been set by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács, both of whom deal with the epic in the history of the novel; their discussions of epic, while heuristically useful, ultimately serve to flatten the historical specificity of epic (or *epics*, the term I prefer) for the sake of highlighting the historical specificity of the novel. Bakhtin's view has usually been read as the more simplistic of the two: epic, as the older form and one complicit with monologism and its imperialist implications, stands as the old champion to be challenged and defeated by the upstart, dialogic novel. Lukács, in his *Theory of the Novel*, offers a Hegelian variant of this narrative. While the novel does in some sense replace the epic, as the rise of modernity makes the religious belief and political absolutism that stand behind heroic form increasingly untenable, the novel is also a kind of epic literature, one highly conscious of its newfound limitations. As Lukács famously puts it, "The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (88). In the only book-length treatment of pre-1900 epic in the United States, John P. McWilliams, Jr., uses a version of Lukács's narrative: epic sets in motion the rise of the novel, but it also disperses itself piecemeal into mock epic, lyric, and novelistic modes as the traditional form dies out.

Such narratives as Bakhtin's, Lukács's, and McWilliams's have obviated the perceived need for deep archival investigation of the modern history of epic, and one of the most important objections to their work for epic studies is that they do not account for the persistence of epics after the Renaissance, whether in novelistic or encyclopedic hybrids (to name two possibilities) or in more traditional verse forms—a key historical element of American literary culture. One of the first

major movements in American literature after independence was a wave of epic writing, which coincided with a similar surge in Britain in the wake of the French Revolution and during the rising threat of Napoleonic imperialism (Curran 159–60). Furthermore, Americans kept writing epics well after the Napoleonic era, some with great critical and popular success. In the face of one particularly remarkable national and international success, McWilliams locates epic in *Geist* rather than in form: "The disgrace of the imitative verse epic [in the early republic] led authors to portray American heroic subjects in new literary forms more engaging to contemporary readers. If we mercifully except [*The Song of*] *Hiawatha*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is still the one work commonly believed to have fulfilled this end" (2). While I agree with McWilliams that the quest for new forms was an essential part of the American engagement with epics, the problem of imitation was much more complicated, and perhaps less disgraceful, than he implies. His "merciful" exception of H. W. Longfellow's syncretic *Hiawatha* signals an anxiety that has haunted American studies since the early twentieth century. The idea that Longfellow, the most influential and commercially successful poet in English during the nineteenth century, could have contributed to the progression of American literature threatens the belief, reiterated from F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* to John Carlos Rowe's *New American Studies*, that American literature is about democratic experimentation, liberal cosmopolitanism, and revolutionary iconoclasm—and never boring or imitative (two ways of saying the same thing). Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued that to find previously popular works boring or tedious is not so much an aesthetic evaluation as an aggressive response to what readers perceive to be a serious threat to their fundamental assumptions about the world. Longfellow's remarkably broad reading in over a dozen languages and his interest in

formal experimentation based on that reading made Longfellow one of the most cosmopolitan writers of his day, in any country. His method of focusing that experimentation into moderate arguments about American religion, politics, and domesticity might have made him a fascinating historical anomaly in the eyes of the academy, but his morality has become equated with his use of imported verse forms. One man's cosmopolitanism is now many critics' provincialism.

I am calling for a reassessment of world literature through North American literary history. Though I confine myself in this essay to the territory of the United States and the colonies that precede it, I aim to show how multifarious, as well as how porous, that territory is. The larger project of such a reassessment involves the excavation of buried giants like Longfellow, of near-silent voices like those of the New Jersey Quaker Richard Snowden or Boston's Maria Gowen Brooks—who becomes Maria del Occidente of Cuba. All the characters in this history share what I call the epic impulse, the drive to thrust oneself into a tradition of canonical authors for the purpose of using that tradition's cultural capital to forward a career, a political viewpoint, an aesthetic credo, or an act of devotion. That epic, like any genre, is never an end in itself has been shown by much of the best recent criticism on the form (see Jameson, *Fables* 62–80; Kendrick; Dowling; Quint). Whether in establishing an emperor's legacy, elevating the dignity of the individual soul, or justifying the ways of God to man, epics have often been remarkably candid about their extraliterary ambitions. Moretti's *Modern Epic* has helped redefine the critical debate over epic by blending formalist and Marxist approaches. Moretti treats epics from Goethe's *Faust* onward as belonging to a supergenre—specifically, a phenomenon of what he calls a "world system" of encyclopedic literature in which a few great texts are written to both represent and create an entire world, while consciously seeking for

themselves an international readership. Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Pound's *Cantos* appear in Moretti's supergenre, alongside Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Moretti's more recent work, such as his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*, itself enacts a kind of epic, not unlike the Miltonic mount of vision in its attempt to make sense of global history through geographic distance:

> [L]iterary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become "second hand": a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading.* Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be.
>
> ("Conjectures" 57)

This distance comes with a price, as David Damrosch has observed in his assessment of Moretti's project; Damrosch argues that to abandon close reading and case studies for the sake of large-scale observations seems far from necessary to understand larger forces at work in and among texts (25–26). Dimock has also voiced a critique of "distant reading," in which she objects to Moretti's emphasis on universal laws in his methodology. As alternatives, Dimock offers two different kinds of laws: those of fractal geometry and those of Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" theory. Both of these kinds of laws are designed for talking about categories and phenomena that defy classification, and Wittgenstein in particular emphasizes the need for maintaining soft boundaries around certain concepts, such as games, for which hard, logically consistent boundaries are highly problematic. I would push Dimock's genealogical methodology even further, for one of the understudied elements of intertextuality is the ability of authors to (at least to some extent) choose their own intertexts: Vergil, for example, combines the *Iliad* and the

Odyssey through the two halves of his *Aeneid*, while Camões focuses on the *Odyssey* alone in his narrative of Vasco da Gama's voyage to India, with the addition of material from Iberian travel narratives. Particularly from Camões's era (the late 1500s) forward, Western writers of epic became increasingly choosy about the texts that would dominate the epic tradition in which they participated.[3] While unconscious and indirect connections between texts certainly abound, the family resemblances that bind post-Renaissance epics together are to a considerable extent the result of chosen relations, as I shall show in my case studies.

One of the most studied genealogies, that between the epic and the novel, must be reconsidered in the light of the vagaries of literary history, especially American literary history. Critics for the last twenty years have sought to dismantle the paradigm of American exceptionalism inherited from Matthiessen and Perry Miller (among others). The most influential studies that participated in that dismantling (Davidson; Rowe; Tompkins; Warner) have left uncontested the claim that the novel is the most characteristic form of American literature, a claim that Joseph Harrington has shown to have originated simultaneously with the academy's institutionalization of modernism before World War II. In fact, the Bakhtin-Lukács line of argument amounts to a kind of novelistic exceptionalism, with a politics not unlike that of the American exceptionalist claim to the moral high ground. Margaret Cohen has called the novel "a constitutively international genre across its history . . . distinguished by its cosmopolitan thematics," in which Homer's *Odyssey* serves as an archetypal "pre-history" (481). Epic's own claims to international and cosmopolitan distinctives are silenced, like Madeline Usher, in the tomb of prehistory. Michael McKeon explains in his anthology *Theory of the Novel* that he begins with genre theory because such study is "a 'historical approach' to literature" that "understands literary categories in their contingency" (1).

Such an approach to genre requires going beyond the novel, then, to consider more deeply the genres that created the novel and that have since competed and traded with the novel, commercially, aesthetically, and ideologically.

This is not to say that American literary studies has yet to loosen its obsession with the novel. The difficult move from deductive theory to inductive archival work in pre-1900 poetry is already occurring, through the work of critics such as David Shields, Virginia Jackson, Max Cavitch, Mary Loeffelholz, and Eliza Richards. Almost all this work, however, has focused on shorter lyric forms rather than long narrative works. This essay brings the excellent recent work on lyric into conversation with the most traditionally prestigious form in Western literature, the epic, as a way into nation making as well as into the transnational rhetorics and systems that created various forms of epic poetry and prose. The richness of difference among post-Renaissance epics must lead us to revise our conceptual understanding of the place that epic has in literary history—and the place of theory in that history. Moretti expresses the paradox of literary history quite well: "We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this 'poverty' that makes it possible to handle them, to know" ("Conjectures" 57–58). The tension between conceptual knowledge and archival richness must remain dynamic if literary history is to provide a meaningful basis for generating and supporting further scholarship.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, which Dimock invokes in her discussion of family resemblances, Wittgenstein famously states the problem to which Moretti points, but the philosopher offers a solution: "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground" (46).

At their purest, concepts (such as that of the epic) become so weak they prove useless to us, and we thus find ourselves returning to the rough ground—to the archive. I appreciate Dimock's Wittgensteinian resistance to the hermeticism of universal laws, but in order for us to work with any laws in genre studies, a detailed study of the archive must inform our theorization inductively. As an impressionistic example of what I mean, I will now examine several texts, most of which are currently on the periphery of the epic canon and all of which are on the periphery of American literature. The question of what constitutes an epic raises questions similar to that of what constitutes American literature, and I argue that we might make a bit more headway by pursuing these questions as if they were related—as indeed they are. On to the rough ground!

Reshaping the Origins of American Epic

George Sandys, a career diplomat and translator, began his "Englishing" of Ovid after his first encounter with fantastic people, things, and locations, having finished a travel narrative based on his time in Egypt and the Levant in 1615. By the time Sandys prepared for his next voyage, this time to Virginia to become treasurer of Jamestown, he had completed the first five books of the *Metamorphoses*, and he used his own physical *translatio* to the New World as inspiration for his further translation of Ovid. According to his account, he translated another two books during the voyage across the Atlantic and the remaining eight books while in residence in Virginia (Pearcy 37), in hopes that such a literary monument would win him a court appointment on his return to London. Sandys's work, in literature as well as in politics, is defined by the dynamic between margin and center, between the liminal and the hegemonic, and his ability to play the role of insider and outsider simultaneously comes across most explicitly in his *Ovids Metamorphosis*.

Sandys makes his ambition for his work clear from the first line; he renders Ovid's original opening thus: "Of Bodies chang'd to other shapes I sing" (1). Written within a generation of Vergil's *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses* has long defied easy generic classification.[4] The main reason for this difficulty is that while the length of Ovid's work and the use of hexameters—a meter largely reserved for epic poetry in Latin—invite comparison to Vergil's masterpiece, the episodic structure resists subordination to narrative unity, which for Aristotle characterized the epic form. Furthermore, Ovid adopts many of Vergil's and Homer's distinctive devices: invocations, extended similes, catalogs. But he slyly changes (metamorphoses?) many of these conventions so that they are clearly his own and not as clearly in line with the developing epic tradition. For example, in the invocation, which involves "singing" for Homer and Vergil, Ovid replaces the *Aeneid*'s "cano" 'I sing' with "dicere" 'to tell'. That Sandys should choose "I sing" to translate Ovid's cagey phrase pushes his poet firmly into the epic tradition, and the translator thus associates himself with the tradition as well: the greatest of genres for any Renaissance poet, but especially for a royally commissioned one, as Sandys hoped to become. James Ellison argues that Sandys's own poetics are closer to Vergil's than to Ovid's, emphasizing the regularity of line and expression rather than witty agility; in fact, Sandys also translated the first book of the *Aeneid*, probably before his Ovid project (Ellison 158, 101–08). *Aeneid* I, with its explication of the Roman legacy of colonialism and its account of Aeneas's landing with his crew on the shores of Carthage, the first brave new world of Vergil's epic, would have been an ideal choice as a prolegomenon for an imperial project—such as the colonization of Virginia. Ellison speculates that Sandys translated Vergil as a form of political posturing, hoping to win royal favor at a moment when Sir Edwin Sandys, George's older brother, was

part of a faction seeking to seize control of the Virginia Company from within Parliament. The younger Sandys's engagements with Vergil and Ovid certainly had immediate political implications, but the translations also served as exercises in preparing the imagination for encounters with the Native American other. *Metamorphoses* VI and VII, the books Sandys translated en route to Virginia, relate several famous voyages, most notably that of Jason and the Argonauts, a story that includes Jason's civilizing of and marriage to the barbarian sorceress Medea—an acting out of the fantasy of what Roland Greene has termed "unrequited conquest," which describes well the attraction and repulsion that Sandys had for, and experienced from, the Natives of the Chesapeake region.

Ovid's treatment of the violence of the Trojan War as yet another cycle in an endless chain of changes would have served Sandys well during the aftermath of a massacre of over three hundred colonists by Natives. Like the Trojans, Sandys had assumed with his fellow administrators that violence at Jamestown was over at the start of his appointment. Despite ominous intelligence reports and other warning signs, the leaders of Jamestown renewed efforts to educate and evangelize the Natives of the Chesapeake region; as a result, Sandys and his colleagues barely escaped with their lives. His administration proved a failure, and Charles I dissolved the Virginia Company a few years after Sandys's return to England in 1625. Eager to regain political favor from Charles, Sandys quickly published his Ovid translation, which he titled the *Metamorphosis*, in 1626. In his dedication to the king, he attempted his own metamorphosing of administrative failure into cultural capital: "had it proved as fortunate as faithfull, in me, and others more worthy; we had hoped, ere many yeares had turned about, to have presented you with a rich and wel-peopled Kingdome; from whence now, with my selfe, I onely bring this Composure."

Sandys in fact achieved considerable fame throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the strength of his Ovid translation, the only lasting legacy from his work in Jamestown. Part of what made the translation so valuable was the extensive commentary that he wrote later for the 1632 edition, which included engravings for each of the fifteen books—plus the *Aeneid* I translation, added as an appendix. The commentary distills classical and medieval thought regarding Greco-Roman myths and their interpretation, but Sandys also provides examples from his experience in the New World as well as his extensive reading in the history of Spain's New World empire. He likens centaurs to the initial appearance of Spaniards on horseback in Mexico; the Spanish lust for gold in South America is a modern antitype to Midas; and "*Columbus* by his glorious discoveries more iustly deserved a place for his ship among the Southerne Constellations, then ever the *Argonautes* did for their so celebrated *Argo*" (Ovid 418, 389, 454).[5] Sandys, like his translation, stood between two worlds, as he comments in his dedication: "It [the poem] needeth more then a single denization, being a double Stranger: Sprung from the Stock of the ancient Romanes; but bred in the New-World, of the rudenesse whereof it cannot but participate; especially having Warres and Tumults to bring it to light instead of the Muses." Here the English language, as well as England the legal territory, becomes the space of denization; the act of translation naturalizes temporal and cultural difference, even as it seeks to sublimate violence and failure into an epic monument. Translation breeds new forms in consequence of conforming to the authority of estranged spaces.

The double strangeness of Sandys's Ovid would continue to be a problem for American epics in particular—using an imported form to create a native literature seemed both paradoxical and inevitable even after the Civil War—but along with the strangeness came a certain ambition, an epic impulse, through

which even texts seemingly on the periphery of the epic tradition (like the *Metamorphoses*) are placed in that tradition in the service of rhetorical capital, both for the work and the author. Unlike Vergil's epic, which breaks off suddenly with Aeneas's victory over Turnus in single combat, Ovid ends his work with an epilogue arguing the eternal glory of himself beside that of Rome; Sandys renders it thus:

> And now the worke is ended, which, *Ioue's*
>   rage,
> Nor fire, nor Sword shall raze, nor eating Age.
> . . . .
> And my immortall name shall neuer die.
> For, where-so-ere the *Roman* Eagles spread
> Their conquering wings, I shall of all be read:
> And, if we Poets true presages giue,
> I, in my Fame eternally shall liue.   (510)

Here the poet-exile makes a virtue of his ignominious travel, for wherever his language is spoken—and it is the language of an empire—so far will his words extend their influence. We may read Sandys here as figuring his own political failure as poetic exile transformed into canonical fame, using his rhetorical position as outsider to regain insider status. That fame has its own weird history. In 1897, Moses Coit Tyler declared the translation "the first utterance of conscious literary spirit articulated in America," while Howard Mumford Jones almost fifty years later argued that the *Metamorphosis* was not American enough to warrant Tyler's declaration (Davis 297–98). One of the first instances of an American epic, Sandys's work situates the form at the geographic and formal margins of both *American* and *epic*, margins arrived at and negotiated by the vicissitudes of textual and corporeal travel.

Paradise Interrupted: Other American Trajectories

Yet the origins of American epics also entail stories of failed "denizations." In 1649, following the execution of Charles I and the flight of

the Stuart court to France, the exiled Charles II appointed a new treasurer to Jamestown. His appointee, William Davenant,[6] was a soldier-poet whom Charles I had named poet laureate in 1638 and had knighted in 1643. At the time of his Virginian appointment, Davenant was in France writing a work set in medieval Lombardy and titled *Gondibert: An Heroick Poem*. The plot of *Gondibert* revolves around the eponymous knight's refusal to enter into an arranged political marriage for the sake of his private love of a scientist's daughter—Davenant's rejection of traditional epic in the name of modernity was far from subtle. Already famous for his heroic plays, Davenant emphasized that his epic dealt only with human characters, not with any of the machinery or supernatural elements that had been considered obligatory but increasingly irrelevant in Renaissance poetics. One of the poem's first readers was Thomas Hobbes, whom Davenant befriended during the exile and to whom he had shown the first two books of *Gondibert*. Before the transatlantic voyage, Davenant addressed to Hobbes a preface for his poem, in which the poet promised to send the rest of the unfinished work from America for Hobbes's review. The preface was published without the poem in 1650, the same year that Davenant set sail to assume his post, though now as lieutenant-governor of Maryland; the next day he was captured by one of Cromwell's privateers. He was imprisoned first on the Isle of Wight and then in the Tower of London, where the threat of execution loomed daily. Nevertheless, he continued to work on his epic, and the first part of it was published in 1651, while he was still in the tower. The following year, a group of admirers including John Milton pleaded for Davenant's release, and he was made a "prisoner at large" that fall, eventually receiving a full pardon in 1654 (Bordinat and Blaydes 18–23).

Yet Davenant never completed his epic. Its interruption paralleled the interruption of his entry into the New World, according to the logic of his friends' anticipation of the poem reflecting their dreams for what the colonies might yield. Edmund Waller and Abraham Cowley equated the writing of modern epic with the attractions of discovery and empire in their commendatory poems to Davenant, which appeared with the first printing of *Gondibert* in 1651. Waller's poem opens with the classical image of "the wise Nightingale" migrating from the winter of "Her native Wood" to the warmer climates of "forraign Groves" as an analogy to Davenant's impending departure for America. Yet while the natural inevitability and "wisdom" of migration opens the poem, the rhetoric of exile quickly takes over, as Davenant's "Courage" is compared approvingly to the "drooping *Hebrews* banish'd" who abandoned their "Harps unstrung" while in Babylon. The next comparison places Davenant on a par with another exiled poet:

> So *Ovid* when from *Caesar's* rage he fled,
> The *Roman* Muse to *Pontus* with him led;
> Where he so sung, that We through Pity's
>   Glass,
> See *Nero* milder then *Augustus* was.   (269)

Waller's analogy between Ovid and Davenant is difficult to parse. If Cromwell is Davenant's Augustus, then he is the final victor in civil war, though a tyrant, and the only obvious candidate for a "*Nero*" is the exiled Charles, who would by no means have found the comparison flattering—especially since Davenant was his poet laureate. Yet Waller's viewpoint is not from the contemporary civil war but from "Posteritie," the historical memory of readers looking back across generations, even centuries (269). Not only does *Gondibert* require another climate for its completion, it requires another age for its recognition.

Cowley saw *Gondibert* as actually marking a change in ages, and he cast Davenant as a Spenserian hero:

> Methinks Heroick Poesy till now,
> Like some fantastique Fairy-land did show . . .

Thou like some worthy Knight, with sacred
    Arms
Dost drive the *Monsters* thence, and end the
    Charms:
Instead of those, dost *Men* and Manners plant,
The things which that rich soyl did chiefly
    want.   (270)

Cowley symphathized with Davenant's emphasis on human actions and interactions while largely abandoning traditional machinery and elements of the "fantastique." For *Gondibert*'s most recent editor, this realism constitutes the poem's importance for literary history, which "has followed Davenant, though it has celebrated Milton . . . the realism of Davenant adumbrates a much more prominent strain in our present culture than does the theism of his predecessors" (Gladish xxiii). Nevertheless, this historical argument again requires the long view—Davenant is among the literary winners but a century too early to enjoy it—and Cowley's metaphor of planting, carefully couched in the language of colonization, further suggests the length of time needed for the poem's development in readers' esteem.

    English ambitions for national and imperial fame run through Cowley's poem, as Cowley muses on the shame Italy feels in seeing "Her Conqu'rors call'd to life" by an English poet, as well as the "blush" that "ancient *Rome*" displays on seeing "her Wit o'rcome" by a modern. The novelty of Davenant's realistic epic, a work based structurally at least as much on romance and heroic drama as on classical epos, mimics the ambitious drive of the explorer-colonist, mapping out a new route for future poetic adventurers:

Thy Fancy, like a Flame, her way does make;
And leaves bright tracks for following Pens to
    take.
Sure 'twas this noble boldness of the *Muse*
Did thy desire to seek new Worlds infuse;
And ne'r did Heaven so much a Voyage bless,
If thou canst Plant but there with like success.
                              (271)

Thus, Cowley's poem closes with the blending of poetic ambition and the drive to travel west to "seek new Worlds." Yet this blending signals an anxiety concerning the belatedness of poetry and of epics. Cowley praises the artistic success of *Gondibert* but sees the blessing of heaven only in a more worldly matter: "If thou canst Plant" in Maryland as he did on paper "with like success."

    This anxiety over the relative "success" of poetry and other pursuits would surface continually in the writing of epic from this point on (it was already at the forefront of *The Faerie Queene* and had haunted works such as Camões's *Lusiads* as well), and rarely more so than in the words of Davenant's similarly cagey and (at least initially) neglected successor, Walt Whitman: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (616). These words, which appeared in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, argue for the inevitability of singing the chants democratic, but it raises the question as to whether, if the nation (or the states, depending on one's reading of the antebellum "are") is the greatest poem, another poem is actually necessary. It further raises the question whether that new poem can successfully compete with its larger, more concrete if less easily digested predecessor, the United States—the weakness of poetry versus the richness of the nation. The shadow of poetic belatedness that hangs over Whitman has its roots in seventeenth-century colonialist rhetoric, and the American bard's struggles to move beyond epic to another world of poetry are at least as old as Sandys and Davenant. The epic impulse often involved the desire to escape from the tyranny of epic at least as much as the drive to pursue its glory. Pursuit runs both ways in the epic tradition.

    Unlike Whitman's fame, Davenant's died before he did, and only after his death could his widow arrange with a family friend for the publication of the former poet laureate's works in a single folio volume, a production she declared in a dedicatory note to be "his

great Desire" in life (Herringman). That volume, completed in 1673, contained the incomplete *Gondibert* together with the preface, Hobbes's reply, Davenant's afterword written in the Tower of London, and the commendatory poems by Waller and Cowley. There Davenant's role in the history of epic seems to end—until an aspiring American novelist, while peddling his latest manuscript to London publishers in late 1849, acquires a copy of the 1673 *Works* in a flurry of folio buying at secondhand stores. On the voyage back to New York, Herman Melville begins work on the manuscript that would become *Moby-Dick*. Either during the voyage or after, he marks the following passage in Davenant's preface: "God ordain'd not huge Empire as proportionable to the Bodies, but to the Mindes of Men; and the Mindes of Men are more monstrous, and require more space for agitation and the hunting of others, then the Bodies of Whales" (qtd. in Olsen-Smith and Marnon 86). The colonization of the American Atlantic had, less than two hundred years later, become an empire of the mind that writers like Melville would sublimate into a space that encouraged not only oppression but also rebellious escape from that oppression, if only as an orphaned exile. Sir William Davenant, poet laureate to two kings of England and buried in Westminster Abbey, remains only a footnote in literary history—but his *Gondibert* is a leviathanic extract in *Moby-Dick*, an echo far enough into the past to strike an exotic note in Ishmael's prodigious rhapsody.

Davenant's example might indeed be said to have inaugurated a dubious tradition of writing epic poems while unsuccessfully trying to reach America, one that includes texts besides Melville's "wicked book" (Melville, *Correspondence* 212). A century and a half after Davenant's arrest by English privateers, Napoléon Bonaparte's radical younger brother, Lucien, fled to seek political asylum in the United States; he was captured by the English navy and placed under comfortable house arrest in the English countryside. During his captivity, the younger Bonaparte occupied his time by working on an epic poem, which he published in 1811. After Napoléon's final defeat, his brother was released and lived the rest of his life in Italy as Prince of Canino (Stacton 39–42). Lucien never saw America, but his poem did; in 1816, two Philadelphia printers published the respective halves of *Charlemagne; or, The Church Delivered*, an English translation of Bonaparte's exilic work, which celebrated the pope's power even though that power failed to protect Lucien from his brother's wrath. If Sandys could use epic to make sense and capital of his American voyage, Davenant and Bonaparte adapted the form for their personal poetics of extra-American exile. For all these figures, separation from their homeland showed them how trapped they were in the world of the nation, and their epics represented not so much a longing for those homelands as a wish to transcend nation by bringing international forms and narratives to bear on it—a wish not unlike that contained in Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*. Political exile seems to foster epic, and American epic in particular. William Spengemann has argued that one of England's greatest political exiles, John Milton, wrote *Paradise Lost* as an American poem (94–117). *Paradise Lost* would provide not only essential content but also an indispensable grammar for epicists seeking cultural independence from the legacy of Europe.

Futurity as Transmutation: Temporal Optics in American Epic

Much has been made of Milton as an "American poet," and the influence of *Paradise Lost* as a source text is well documented, for American poetry and for political prose on both sides of the Revolutionary War (see Sensabaugh; Schulman; Stavely). However, Milton's epic included an important formal innovation that, while it forced virtually all American epicists

to either accept or reject it, has been little noted by Americanists or Miltonists.

The last two books of *Paradise Lost*, which contain Adam's vision of futurity with commentary by the archangel Michael, have long provoked critical controversy. The most famous assessment of these books is that by C. S. Lewis, who characterized the books as "an untransmuted lump of futurity" (129). Milton's style in these books certainly does differ from that of the first ten books, in the relatively bare narration and relentless forward drive of the story. What interests me is not so much the debate over the stylistic merit of books 11 and 12 as what the debate has bracketed: Adam's vision continues not only up to Milton's time but all the way to "the world's great period," the second coming of Christ and the foundation of the new heaven and new earth (Milton 296). This marks the first time in the history of epic visions of futurity—another device tracing back to Homer— that the vision moves temporally beyond the author's own era. The vision of futurity provides an apology—or, more precisely, a teleology—for the work. In the *Odyssey*, this teleology belongs exclusively to the past; in his prophecy at the edge of the underworld, Teiresias predicts only as far forward as the circumstances of Odysseus's death. Vergil shifted the tense of his teleology in the *Aeneid* by projecting Anchises's Elysian prophecy to Aeneas up to the death of Caesar Augustus's son, Marcellus: the poet's present. In the poet's present the teleology rested, at least in the Counter-Reformation works of Ariosto and Tasso. But the uneasy alliance between Christian eschatology and epic teleology resulted in the shift from present to eternity in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and in the Redcrosse Knight's similarly antichronological glimpse of the heavenly city in book 1 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Yet the move from present to eternity did not change the inflection of the works: Dante's and Spenser's respective presents still dominate their texts. In *Para-*

dise Lost, a work similarly a product of its time, Milton seeks to transcend that time by inflecting his narrative into the future tense. Epic was no longer about its own present but about its own future, and the long-debated flattening of Milton's poetic voice in books 11 and 12 would serve as a stylistic point of entry into *Paradise Regained*—and into the United States' epic poetry from the 1780s onward.

The mount of vision, by virtue of its association with the imperialist gaze of prospect poetry and its futurist telos thanks to *Paradise Lost*, attracted American authors and critics alike. Timothy Dwight's *Conquest of Canäan*, the first new epic published in the United States, expands the biblical story of Joshua to include a book-long mount-of-vision passage, which encourages Joshua to complete his conquest in the face of defeat. Sarah Wentworth Morton offers the first book of a projected epic in her 1797 *Beacon Hill*, in which the remembered view of the battle of Bunker Hill from a neighboring promontory prompts a sweeping overview of the Revolutionary War from a Bostonian vantage point. Part 2 of Longfellow's *Evangeline* pans back to a bird's-eye view of the American continent as the narrator follows the eponymous heroine on an odyssey traversing the American frontier from south to north, anticipating the opening of the West in a story set in eighteenth-century North America (the journey ends in Philadelphia, site of the United States' national origin, in the 1790s). And Ishmael's epic gaze in *Moby-Dick* gains its perspective from the roving promontory of the masthead. The mount of vision became the very site of transmutation in American epics, the place where a past-focused tradition suddenly telescopes into a sublime future, whether apocalyptic or millennial (or both). Epics thus became sites not so much of celebration as of critique, able to do the cultural work that Sacvan Bercovitch described in *The American Jeremiad* while narrating the community into existence, a powerful combination in an

age when nations were discovered not only by other peoples but also by themselves.

The Eighteenth-Century Invention of Epic

If the Miltonic mount of vision gave American epicists a grammar for their works, a complex web of European intertexts provided the lexicon with which Americans could contextualize their epics for readers at home and abroad. Two texts in particular, François de Fénelon's *Telemachus* and James Macpherson's "translation" of Ossian's *Fingal*, played major roles in what amounted to the invention of epic as a national form in the eighteenth century. Both texts enjoyed numerous translations and reprintings throughout Europe, and Ossian became a favorite figure for Thomas Jefferson in his quest to escape the Anglo-Norman specter that haunted his America (Degategno). Ironically, Ossian was also a common model for American elegists of George Washington in 1800 (Cavitch 251). A vital element of the influence of *Telemachus* and *Fingal* on epic theory and composition was that neither was written in traditional verse form. Fénelon chose a metered prose as his form, which in translation could just as easily be read as a novel or a poem,[7] while *Fingal* and the other Ossian poems were composed in highly figurative prose.

The popularity of *Telemachus* led promodern critics, such as Hugh Blair and Henry Home, Lord Kames, to gesture toward a more open epic canon. Blair anticipates Lukács's dismissal of verse form as a requisite for the epic:

> In reviewing the Epic Poets, it were unjust to make no mention of the amiable Author of the *Adventures of Telemachus*. His work, though not composed in Verse, is justly entitled to be held a Poem. The measured poetical Prose, in which it is written, is remarkably harmonious; and gives the Style nearly as much elevation as the French language is capable of supporting, even in regular Verse.   (*Lectures* 508)

Blair's one objection to *Telemachus*'s status as an epic lies not in form but in content, specifically the "minute details of virtuous policy" that the highly didactic Fénelon speaks through the mouth of Mentor to the young hero. According to Blair, the "object" of an epic is "to improve us by means of actions, characters, and sentiments, rather than by delivering professed and formal instruction" (508). Kames, while not as willing as Blair to welcome *Telemachus* into the epic canon, uses the work as an occasion to disagree with Voltaire's argument that verse is essential to epic. Kames notes that the lack of verse form is the French critic's "single reason" for denying *Telemachus* epic status, while unspecified "others" who favor "substance" over form (such as Kames?) "hesitate not to pronounce that poem to be epic" (Home 2: 649). Instead of turning to his own critical judgment, as Blair does, Kames turns to popular opinion as the gatekeeper of the epic canon: "As to the general taste, there is little reason to doubt, that a work where heroic actions are related in an elevated style, will, without further requisite, be deemed an epic poem" (649). The rise of substance over form as the prime criterion for epic coincided in the eighteenth century with a growing disparity between traditional formalist understandings of the genre and popular usage of the term *epic*.

Yet while the critical reception of *Telemachus* made the writing of modern epics more feasible, the publication of *Fingal* and the other Ossian poems sparked nationalist antiquarian projects in both Europe and America, as nations emerging from the fallout of eighteenth-century empires sought to establish cultural independence through the "discovery" of their own Homeric pasts. Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* helped make Ossian a standard author for sentimental readers in the early nineteenth century, but equally influential was Herder's including Ossian in his discussions of poetry as expressing the *Geist* of a nation. In English-speaking nations,

Blair emerged as a champion for Ossian, arguing that the poetry contained native energy now foreign to civilized nations, even exhibiting "a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament" ("Critical Dissertation" 354). Indeed, Blair made an almost Herderian statement on the power of primitive language in his often reprinted essay on Ossian: "An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an Epic poem" (346). The ancient vigor of *Fingal* trumped even the refinement of Fénelon and Voltaire, according to Blair, who further attacked his French counterparts by remarking, "To refuse the title of an epic poem to Fingal, because it is not in every little particular, exactly conformable to the practice of Homer and Vergil, were the mere squeamishness and pedantry of criticism" (358). Blair goes on to defend Ossian on Aristotelian grounds, stating that Homer and Ossian both wrote from nature and that Aristotle used Homer to examine nature: "No wonder that among all the three, there should be such agreement and conformity" (358). Little wonder, too, that by 1840 the Ossian revolution had helped numerous "primitive" European epics into print for the first time, including the *Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, several of the Icelandic *Eddas*, and Elias Lönnrot's construction of Karelian legends, *The Kalevala*. Most of these poems became familiar to American audiences partly through Longfellow's anthology *Poets and Poetry of Europe*, in which Longfellow offered his own translations alongside those of Sir Walter Scott and others. He also based the structure of *The Song of Hiawatha* on a German translation of the *Kalevala*, and his own German translator, Ferdinand Freiligrath, commented on the Herderian roots of such a choice (ix–xiii). Indeed, as Freiligrath observed, Longfellow's ability to use European forms to "discover America for the Americans" in his poetry gave him a high place in

"the pantheon of world poetry [*Weltpoesie*]" (x, xii; my trans.).

Thanks to new horizons for formal experimentation, to which *Telemachus* had contributed, and to a new ambition to discover a national epic to answer Homer and the imperial shadow of the Western canon, epic forms took on new meaning in the eighteenth century: epic changed from a structural sum of its parts to a vehicle for national and international self-assertion. Such was the ambition that Freiligrath and other European writers marked in Longfellow, and the creation of American literature—and particularly American poetry—owes a great deal of its "calculus of motives" to the eighteenth-century invention of epic.[8] In one sense, the decline of Longfellow's reputation among critics may be said to coincide with the decline of *Weltliteratur* as a context for American writing.

Red Records and Forged Letters: Rafinesque's *Walam olum*

What we might call the discovery movement in epic poetry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries influenced not only Longfellow, Whitman, and some of the more recognizable American writers of the antebellum period. One of the most bizarre texts in all of American literature, the *Walam olum*, or "red record," of the Lenape or Delaware Indians, has inspired more controversy than almost any other extracanonical epic. C. S. Rafinesque, a French American botanist, ethnologist, and philologist (to name just a few of his claimed areas of expertise), published a "translation" of the *Walam olum* in 1836 in his *American Nations*, which itself was to be a complete compendium of knowledge concerning the peoples of the western hemisphere. According to Rafinesque, the poem had been handed down orally and in pictograph form; he had acquired a set of the pictographs and a transcription of related Lenape songs, which he used in his translation.

The *Walam olum* begins with a creation story, then recounts the Lenapes' journey from Asia to the Midwest of North America, as well as a history of wars and kings down to the arrival of white explorers around 1600. Rafinesque also included a set of verses, which he said had no Lenape original, that narrated the story of encounters with whites and their oppression of the Lenape, up to around 1800. The poem was largely ignored for most of the nineteenth century, but through the twentieth century it enjoyed increasing acceptance, despite doubts expressed from the 1830s onward about its authenticity (Warren 149–53).

Only in 1994 did David M. Oestreicher publish the first definitive case against the authenticity of the *Walam olum*, in which he demonstrated that the work was translated not from Lenape to English but vice versa. Oestreicher's work received so little attention that six years later the *Walam olum* appeared in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature*, without any mention of doubt of, much less proof against, the poem's authenticity. Dennis Tedlock, in his foreword to the anthology's edition of the poem, remarks, "What makes the *Walam Olum* unique is the reach of its narrative, stretching from the beginning of the world to the arrival of the Europeans" (96).[9] The narrative scope was certainly unique; Leonard Warren called the poem "an unbelievable story" spanning over three thousand years (148). Instead of reducing the Lenapes' story to an Aristotelian unity, Rafinesque used the comprehensiveness of the annals and the encyclopedia as his organizing principles. The *Walam olum* provides evidence that he desperately wanted to vindicate his theories concerning the Asiatic migration of the Indians (in sharp disagreement with the Book of Mormon's identification of the Indians with the lost tribes of Israel), his Herderian theories of language (he named Herder as a main source for his methods in *American Nations* [4]), and his insistence that the Indians held the key to an all-encompassing theory of the world's

peoples. The same year in which he published *American Nations*, Rafinesque also published another lengthy epic poem, first anonymously and then under the pseudonym "Constantine Jobson," entitled *The World; or, Instability*; this poem was to be a literary expression of his Ovidian cosmology, by which the entire universe operates foremost by the principle of mutability. Two years later, Rafinesque added to his literary credentials by publishing a treatise on translating the Hebrew Bible. His was an epic impulse, if ever there was one.

Yet the *Walam olum* is also written out of the frustration of failure and the threat of utter obscurity. Rafinesque was nearing the end of his career, and publishers had by 1836 refused to consider any more of his works. He had taken to publishing his works himself, at the cheapest rates available, and many, perhaps most, copies of those works have since been destroyed. Even in the opening lines of *The World*, the speaker expresses not the usual speech act—"I sing"—with which Sandys started his *Metamorphosis* but only the desire for such an act: "I wish to sing the changeful ample world" (9). The fragments that make the sequel to the *Walam olum* also echo frustration and defeat, this time projected onto the dwindling Lenapes in the face of white imperialism. The *Walam olum* proper ends with the verse "At this time north and south the *Wapayachik* came, the white or eastern moving souls. / They were friendly, and came in big bird-ships, who are they?" (*American Nations* 140). The sequel begins with an answer to this question:

> Alas, alas! we know now who they are, these *Wapsinis* (white people) who then came out of the sea, to rob us of our country. Starving wretches! with smiles they came; but soon became snaking foes.
> The *Wallamolum* was written by *Lekhibit* (the writer) to record our glory. Shall I write another to record our fall? No! our foes have taken care to do it; but I speak to thee what they know not or conceal.   (141)

The bitterness of exile results in a turn back to origins, as the chiefs decide to "exchange our lands, and return at last beyond the *Masispek* (muddy water, Mississippi) near to our old country. . . . Shall we be free and happy there?" (144). This closing question signals the failure of the mount of vision, the final obscurity of the future in the face of an apocalyptic present, a strained mind's attempt to cope with the prospect of perpetual misunderstanding and rejection.

One of the most flamboyant expressions of the epic impulse, found in Edgar Allan Poe's prose poem *Eureka*, similarly addresses the problem of failed vision. In a work purporting to be a cosmology not unlike Rafinesque's *The World*, the narrator muses:

> He who from the top of Aetna casts his eyes leisurely around, is affected chiefly by the *extent* and *diversity* of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness*. But as, on the summit of Aetna, *no* man has thought of whirling on his heel, so no man has ever taken into his brain the full uniqueness of the prospect; and so, again, whatever considerations lie involved in this uniqueness, have as yet no practical existence for mankind.
> (1261)

This impossible vision returns us to the quandary of weak concepts and rich reality. Can these truly be brought together, or must we approach unity of vision only through diversity of points of attention? From Sandys to Melville, epics played a crucial role across centuries in presenting America to the world and to itself, even as they defined that self. American epics have always been a kind of world literature, in which the exceptionalist stance is as likely to be critiqued as it is to be asserted. If we can move beyond seeing epics, in America or elsewhere, as a matter of decline and failure and understand them more in terms of strategies for damage control and responses to the experience of failure, we may find a renewed understanding of what an "already antiquated" form[10] is doing when it time-travels—when it antiquates and updates itself in a modern world.

Notes

1. An alternative story of the American epic might trace the proliferation of epics in Spanish after the Castilian colonization of the Americas. Well over a dozen epics recounting Spanish exploits in the New World had appeared in either hemisphere by 1626 (Peña 233–52).

2. See Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 103–50; Moretti, "Conjectures"; and Dimock. Kirsten Silva Gruesz's excellent *Ambassadors of Culture* discusses the place of epic forms in specific trans-American networks, though not centrally.

3. The Western epic tradition eventually adopted a more global perspective because of this selectivity: after the rise in interest in Asian literature in late-eighteenth-century Europe, for example, epicists numbered among the authors who included Asian texts in their own genealogies. One example is Melville's canto on the *Ramayana* in *Clarel* (103–05).

4. For an excellent discussion of the history of this problem, as well as a modern case for the classification of Ovid as an epicist, see Otis.

5. For a more extensive discussion of Sandys's references to America, see Davis.

6. I follow David F. Gladish's spelling of "Davenant" rather than the 1673 *Works*'s "D'Avenant," mainly for the sake of simplicity.

7. Translations of *Telemachus* appeared in either form. It was first translated into English prose in 1699, the year of its first French publication (Riley xvi); published verse translations, such as Gibbons Bagnall's in 1790, did appear in London.

8. I take the phrase "calculus of motives" from Kenneth Burke's description of the logic of constitutional interpretation in his *A Grammar of Motives* (377).

9. The *Anthology* dates the poem as "before 1833" (Tedlock 95), apparently basing the date on Rafinesque's own claim to have translated the work in 1833. Oestreicher established that the *Walam olum* dates from 1834 at the earliest (239–40).

10. I borrow this term from Bakhtin 3.

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