

# Epic as Cosmopoesis

LOUISE COWAN

Epic has traditionally been considered so monumental and grand a mode of poetic expression that literary authorities have dared make few official additions over the years to the fixed Homer-Virgil-Milton pantheon. But a of attitude toward genre and a different kind of reading of the works of these very authors, placed beside similar pieces from widely separated cultures, effectively reveals that epic is a phenomenon both more frequent and more diverse than the recognized canon tends to indicate. So unconventional a reading, implying an intuited kinship between seemingly dissimilar works, requires the critic to give less attention to external epic characteristics and more to those intrinsic to its nature—for instance, its sense of totality and its consciousness of mission, whatever the style or medium.

To look at epic in this manner, and to explore its relation to culture, uncovers several findings likely to modify some of the basic notions of the genre. In examining an array of examples, one discovers, for instance, that the epic imagination produces few songs of victory after conquest, tending, rather, to create its heroic chansons in times of defeat, out of need rather than plenitude. It evidently makes its appearance not so much in advanced societies, in celebration of an already established code, as in emerging cultures, still close to the mythological mode of thought. Further, it apparently has little immediate effect upon the people out of whose society it arises, usually bearing centuries later whatever political fruit it produces. Most often, however, its chief influence is upon readers in far removes, after it has become a part of the body of metaphysical and moral resources that poetry represents. The function of epic as formulator of this ideal cosmos demands for its eschatological completion the incorporation of all possible instances of the genre, however humble, since even minor examples contain keys to the larger image of human experience poetry seeks to adumbrate. Hence what we might speak of as the imagination's redemption of history depends on a critical reconception of the purposes of epic and a constant effort to recognize it in unlikely situations and in sometimes inchoate form.

The assumption of epic sublimity and awe has been particularly misleading, not only to critics but fully as much to poets in the pursuit of their vocation. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, for instance, confesses in the sonnet "Epic" his early dismissal of ordinary occurrences in his isolated community as unworthy of epic. But turning back to Homer, as he indicates, made clear that events in themselves are not the real determinants of a poem's significance:

I inclined

To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin

Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind,

He said: I made the Iliad from such

A local row. Gods make their own importance.

(Kavanagh 238)

It is the work of deities, not mortals, Kavanagh suggests, to endow human action with epic stature. Seen in that light, no event should be considered too humble, no "local row" too unimportant—if gods choose to dignify it. Certainly the ordinarily expected elevation is not present in the tales of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis; nor is it to be found in the Sumerian Gilgamesh, the African Mwindo epic, Don Quixote, The Brothers Karamazov, or One Hundred Years Solitude (not to mention Pilgrim's Progress, Alice in Wonderland, and The Wizard of Oz.) Yet all these, in greater or lesser degree, bear the imprint of epic.

Gods may "make their own importance" through inspiration, through Plato's divinely induced madness (Ion, 289-90), through "angel, muse, or duende," as Lorca puts it (44), or, as Maritain suggests, through the Platonic muse descended into the human soul (Creative Intuition 74). However it occurs, the mysterious process that produces any genuine work of art brings with it ab ovo a pattern and identity, so that the kind of poem, its genre, is already determined at the moment of fertilization. It is from this "genetic imprinting," its ontological pattern, as we might call it, that the genre of a work established. In The Formal

Method, Bakhtin and Medvedev contend that "the typical form of the whole work, the whole utterance" is determined by its genre-that a work "is only real in the form of a definite genre" (129). Moreover, they continue, "every genre has its methods and means of seeing that are accessible to it alone" (133). It seems clear that they regard genre as an internal perspective, or, as I have described it elsewhere, a view of a certain psychic terrain ("Introduction" 8). If the determining form of a work is, as I am arguing, an inner disposition, there can be no prescribed structure for it, no privileged medium, nor any preferred external characteristics. In this sense, genre is not a logical category but an ontological image, a state of being, an ideal topography. Furthermore, one ought to be able to recognize it, as a world that one has stepped into in entering any literary work of art-and to find the recognition of the territory an aid rather than a hindrance to interpretation.

As for epic, a work should be identifiable as belonging to that category, whatever its medium, length, or style, when what can be observed from within it activates a full and complete cosmos. This is to say that epic displays on a panoramic scale an entire way of life-caught, it is true, at a moment of radical change and yet, viewed from an omni-dimensional standpoint, in that very act transfigured and preserved. With such a vision Homer committed to a transcendent realm of history the image of Greek honor carried to its utmost extreme; the Beowulf poet raised his Geats in permanence. As these poets demonstrate, however, the immortality of a people is at the expense of a hero. Rion Outlaw, in Caroline Gordon's *Green Centuries*, stands for all epic protagonists when he realizes his position: "Before him lay the empty west; behind him the loved things of which he was made" (469). His anguished cry "Were not men raised into the westward turning stars only after they had destroyed themselves?" voices the question confronting all heroic endeavor.

And the answer, one fears, must be in the affirmative: through their heroes epics raise to the heavens the specific peoples they enshrine; and in those varied and brilliant stars that constellate the poetic cosmos the human race comes to know the full value of its enterprise. Yet before such epic-making transformations of history can occur, societies and poets have to be ready for the event-imagination requires communities with a mythic sense of identity, their tribal memory preserving the heroic past as legend if not as conscious guide. Poetically, it demands bards who can create (within themselves first of all) conscious memories of the heroic past, sufficient for envisioning their people's role in the ongoing process of history and so ensuring their immortality as nations.

But memory is painful, both for the community and the poet. It is surcharged with images of lost and forsaken ideals, so that its retrieval is not without some risk. And, further, to enter into what Eliade calls "the terror of history" has its own perils. Indeed, as he puts it, "The history moment... can never, in its entirety, be anything but tragic, pathetic, unjust, chaotic, as any moment the heralds the final catastrophe must be" (*Cosmos* 131). But the epic poet creates a hero who defies this final end. The poet sees his society as standing between two worlds: it is his difficult and dearly bought achievement in the midst of the violence of the past and the terrors of an unknown future to slow deliverance ... [by] the invisible potencies of truth and justice and love, in action in the mass which goes counter to them" (*Philosophy of history* 50). Hence, in this work of recovering a past which, though worthy of reverence, is almost certain to be (or has already been) overturned, the epic imagination is pulled two ways, toward death and birth and engaged in a double mode of vision, both elegiac and prophetic. Its endeavor is to tell a story in which a people honor and sin against their gods, one in which they transcend ordinary limits-and in the telling to create a world large enough to contain the full dimensions of the story. This viewing of the old sacred pattern from an unfamiliar perspective reshapes the myth, bringing into being a new reality.

Susanne Langer wrote of the epic that it is "not merely a receptacle of old symbols, namely those of myth, but is itself a new symbolic form, great with possibilities, ready to take meaning and express ideas that have had no vehicle before" (165). This new form, capable of accommodating the layered dimensions of time and space, is a poetic cosmos that, true to a specific epoch and a particular people, nevertheless allows sufficient room for the poet to trace the ineluctable movement toward universal order implied in human events. It establishes the *mundus imaginalis*, wherein reside, as in Plato's idea realm, the universal qualities that make up the human condition. It is the glory of the poetic cosmos, however, to show these verities in action, embedded in matter, bearing the weight and expressing the hope of the finite order. Without the epic, they can be known only in the depths of the heart, as in lyric, or in an incomplete and closed-in space such as that presented by tragedy and comedy. Speaking of the sense of totality possible to poetry, Gaston Bachelard has maintained, "A particular cosmos forms around a particular image as soon as the poet gives the image the destiny of grandeur" (*Poetics* 176). Such grandeur, as I have been attempting to show, stems less from a glamorizing of events than from an envisioning of the human lot itself as full of splendid purpose. It is in the making of a cosmos open to both intellectual and affective apprehension that, as Bachelard says, "poetry is a synthesizing force for human existence" (124).

Aristotle named epic as one of the major kinds of poetry in the *Poetics*, meaning by "kind," it would seem, something more basic than external form (49). The four kinds he specifies-epic, tragedy, comedy, and "dithyrambic" poetry-offer "imitations of actions," complex images of four primary human emotions, implying modes of viewing by which fundamental affective stances may be extended into entire patterned worlds of the imagination. In his introduction to the *Poetics*, Francis Fergusson interprets this mimesis of a praxis to mean something like a re-enactment of a "movement-of-spirit" (4). And Aristotle does in fact seem to conceive of these literary kinds as embodying basic spiritual motions that delineate the life of the soul. Yet the

only one of them he explores in any depth in the Poetics is tragedy, which he finds to have its end, its telos, in the phenomenon of catharsis, brought about by the contradictory emotions of pity and terror (78-80). In his consideration of epic, however, Aristotle omits any comparable analysis of purpose and is apparently content to discuss only the external qualities of the genre: it is necessarily grave and stately, massive, elevated, and entertaining. It gives greater scope to the irrational than does any other genre but is less refined than tragedy, which is more concentrated, and, on the whole, "the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly" (105-110; 116-118).

Aristotle's lack of interest in the inner nature of epic (however much he admired Homer) has no doubt had its effect on succeeding critical thought. The philosophic significance of tragedy has provided impetus for countless volumes; but no such probing examination of the nature of human existence has taken place in epic theory. The Middle Ages worshipped *Burgle*, loved the *Aeneid*, "wept for Dido," but regarded the poem only as a kind of Poetics in a late fifteenth-century Latin translation, with its enormous effect on poetic theory, did little more for epic than glorify the heroic. During the Renaissance, epic came to be seen as the standard-bearer for official civilization, a kind of public poetry that could hardly, with decorum, deviate from piety to the established order. According to Scaliger: "In epic poetry, which describes the descent, life, and deeds of heroes, all other kinds of poetry have... a norm, so that to it they turn for their regulative principles" (54). Sir Philip Sidney, too, placed epic at the peak of poetic and ethical achievement: "the lofty image of such worthies" as are portrayed in heroic poetry "most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy" (113).

Whatever the state of epic theory, epic praxis was modeled on the external aspects of Virgil's *Aeneid*, regarded all during the Middle Ages as a quasi-sacred text to be emulated by any aspiring epic poet. As Spingarn points out (6), even minor characteristics of the *Aeneid* were set down as the "rules" for epic—such conventions as invoking the muse, stating the theme, devising a sequence of questions and answers, beginning in medias res, depending upon supernatural agencies, and dividing the work into twelve books. These came to provide what Brooks and Wimsatt have characterized as a "recipe for epic in vacuo" (205).

By Milton's time the supreme task of the poet was still considered to be the composition of a national epic worthy of comparison with the products of antiquity. In effect, epic seemed not only the crown of the language but the necessary emblem of a nation's worth. The era following Milton was virtually obsessed by the desire to produce official heroic poetry. Dryden spoke of epic as "the greatest work of human nature" and went on to declare that to prefer tragedy to epic was to prefer a mushroom to a peach (154). Nevertheless, for all the adulation of the heroic, no genuine epic in the high mimetic style was forthcoming in Europe after Milton. Out of the neoclassic style emerged something quiet different: the English heroic play, a strange conglomerate, filled with splendor and bathos. This hybrid form was meant no doubt to capture the spirit of the epic; but, as Brooks and Wimsatt point out, it was instead "an amalgam of Marlovian and Corneilian passion drama, of Fletcherian romantic melodrama, of French nine volume pastoral romance, of masque and Italian opera." Its concern for the founding of a noble made it exclusively an aristocratic form, urging "the themes of love, honor, and civic virtue, in high places, and with furious confusion and rivalry, before an exotic and pseudo-historical setting, to the continuous fanfare of trumpets and clash of arms on nearby plains" (198).

Except for this flamboyant, theatrical homage to the heroic spirit of the epic, concentration on rules and the ancients produced only ironic and wistful tributes, mock-heroic poems such as Dryden's "MacFlecknoe" and Pope's "Rape of the Lock," or the rougher form of burlesque. The conventional formal dictates, many of them to be found, certainly, in Homer, Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Tasso, and Milton, could all too easily be mastered. Still, despite their appearance of universal law, they were no longer serviceable even for writers in the mainstream of European literature, as they had never been for the authors of *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*, *Inanna*, the *Mahabarata*, *Beowulf*, *El Cid*, the *Lusiads*, the *Divine Comedy*, the *Menriad*, and countless other works that by general agreement are considered epic. And with the dominance of Romanticism, the very concept of genre became increasingly irrelevant, a judgment that has extended on into the present day.

Poetic interest shifted in the nineteenth century to the lyric; and throughout the last two centuries poets such as Wordsworth, Whitman, Tennyson, Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and now Derek Walcott, among others, have attempted to enlarge the lyric's resources into the scope of epic. Lacking a community, a hero, and a myth-tale with which to work, however, most of these efforts remain long sequences of lyrics rather than epic. The broadly inclusive popular aspect of epic found its expression in the novel, with writers following in the train of Sir Walter Scott addressing the huge concept of history. As George Lukacs points out, the historical novel arose at about the time that history became a mass experience, when people began to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned. Linking this phenomenon to economic conditions and class struggle, Lukacs speaks of a "new type of historical portrayal," following Scott-Copper, Tolstoy, Hugo, Bulwer-Lytton, Manzoni, among others—which created literature out of the very materials of history (*Historical Novel* 63). Ordinary rather than exceptional people became the new heroes. Scott changed the consciousness of writers all over the world in giving artistic form to "the historical defense of progress."

Although the epic had certainly before this time dealt with mass movements of people and their entrance into history, its

conception of history had been quite different. The Exodus and the Aeneid, containing the most telling examples of the formation of a people into a nation, depict the movement toward a destiny of fulfillment-toward a New Jerusalem or a New Troy-as the outgrowth of human and divine cooperation. In contrast, the historical novel reduces history to material phenomena, with no outcome envisioned except that produced by varied human purposes pitted against natural forces. So exclusively a horizontal arena precludes the epic extension of causes into any sort of divine purpose. No wonder then that the historical novel has been hardly satisfactory as epic and that we must turn to a strangely assorted mixture of novels, most of them related in some sense to Cervantes and Fielding, to find its real continuance. Works by Gogol, Melville, Dostoevsky, and Twain-and later Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Garcia-Marquez, Toni Morrison, and many others from Third World countries capture the inner drive as well as the reach of the epic vision, not only fitting into the epic world but broadening and extending our understanding of the genre. Many latter twentieth-century novels, in particular, demonstrate the cosmic scope of epic. They have access to the gods through the myths of their people; and, by retrieving myth in an emerging world that stands on liminal ground, they go beyond the exclusiveness of that myth to envision the meaning and direction of history.

ii

The earliest form of social myth is a largely unconscious psychic structure that cannot easily be articulated. It begins with tales. The bard tells a story, venturing farther and farther into what Italo Calvino calls "the forest of fairy tale" (18), and if he has sufficient courage to proceed into the unknown, toward something "darkly felt," he may be fortunate enough to be seized by a power outside himself and to be overcome by "the vibrancy of myth." This overwhelming force, coming, as Calvino says, from the large "ocean of the unsayable" (19), engulfs the poet's tale and absorbs it into a larger, more vital pattern. The novelist Toni Morrison has spoken of going back to the communal folktale as "a point of departure to history and prophecy" (Interview 255). She goes on, "That's what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal." Richard Slotkin has described such a tale's narrative action, maintaining that it "recapitulates a people's experience and vision to a paradigm" (6).

This paradigm of which Slotkin speaks is the tribal myth that unites a people in a culture. The mythic awareness that results permeates the society, not as an occult power granted to the few but, rather, as a heightening of the natural state of sentient beings aware of existence as having meaning. It produces a network of symbols, a web wherein insights are captured, a matrix where intuition can dwell; from it, we might say, extends a kind of lightning rod to attract the divine afflatus. The high arts, science, philosophy, prophecy are particularly attentive to this medium and are responsible for discerning and bringing to the community whatever extrasensory messages are granted them. The poet in particular has the task of listening to the gods, the angels, the presences that are outside the self, outside the community's paradigm, as the supernatural agencies go about their seemingly random selection of events to be crowned with significance. The gods' choices define and beckon a people; the epic poet as conscious artist lest society know its identity and its mission.

What gives the epic its cultural priority, then, might be summed up as its function of cosmopoesis, its making of a cosmos wherein the other genres find their place and within which human life may be envisioned in its varied dimensions. A cosmos is a self-enclosed state of order which must be intuited; and certainly the epic cosmos-a poetic image-cannot be logically encompassed or defined, nor can all its components be listed. No doubt, however, we can isolate some of the determining features of the world in which epic action takes place, knowing that there must be many others which are experienced if not consciously noticed once we step into this expansive arena. A primary feature of the epic cosmos is its penetration of the veil separating material and immaterial existence, allowing an intimate relation between gods and men and a resultant metaphysical extension of space. A second feature is its eschatological expansion of time, and, third, its restoration of equilibrium between masculine and feminine forces. The final feature, one that is no doubt paramount in its importance, is the epic's sense of motion, its linking of human action to a divine destiny, toward which it senses history moves.

ii

Taking up the first feature, what I have spoken of as the penetration of the veil separating the human from the divine, we are immediately confronted by the uniqueness of the epic in bringing gods and mortals together for a common work. To accomplish this extension of ordinary reality, epic poets have to open their imaginations to an arena of sufficient scope that the gods may enter. As Northrop Frye has pointed out, this event is for the poet a crisis situation, usually the crowning work of his life (Anatomy 318). Seen from this perspective, the invocation to the Muse, either overt or implied, is no mere device but a necessary act: it calls for supernatural aid in a heroic endeavor, indicating the presence behind the hero of a bard telling the tale. Poets know their dependency upon celestial help in attempting the epic task; consequently, many times they make their invocation a part of the epic ritual. "Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles," Homer begins, and "Tell me O muse of the man of many turnings." "Tell me the causes now, O Muse," Virgil implores. "Can anger / Black as this prey on the minds of heaven?" And as Dante approaches the paradisaical regions, he feels so much the strain of becoming "a conduit" through which the celestial power runs that he invokes "two peaks" of Apollo's Mt. Parnassus, both the muses and Apollo: "O power divine, grant me in song to show / The blest realm's image, shadow though it be, / Stamped on my brain." Even Milton's invocation:

"Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top / Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire / That shepherd. . .," though it is biblical in its references and indeed, as many suggest, may be addressed to the Holy Spirit, nevertheless gives evidence here as do all the other petitions that their authors are aware of having been assigned a muse.

These supplications are not mere conventions; each is a genuine cry for aid from poets who have intuited the possibilities within their stories at the same time that they apprehend the impossibility of telling them alone. More recent "invocations," the opening lines of novel-epics undertaking mammoth tasks, may be less obvious that hints a bardic utterances: "Call me Ishmael," "There was a man and a dog too this time," and even "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." These strange and arresting runic lines take on the overtones of charms spoken not so much to ward off evil as to summon help. Whether the appeal is to the gods, or to an indwelling spirit, or to an angelic guide, it is a call to a spiritual power with the ability to reshape and transform events in the memory.

This establishment of an arena in which the divine and human can come together to work at the task of history is, as we have indicated, the veritable creation of the epos, the epic word, providing a model for the moral universe within which human beings carry on their lives. In no other genre are poets so closely associated with the source of their inspiration. They are able to speak the epic word because they have been allowed to see the physical order as permeated by the spiritual; in a sense, everything is sacred. As a consequence, they see the divine aura as part of the action, one of the "causes" that make up the story. Within the broad scope of epic the gods enter history, to become the heroes' helpers, their stern mentors, advocates, and contenders. These deities rarely appear in the other genres but allow the protagonist to remain at a safer distance from the celestial magnetism. Tragedy, for instance, portrays the hero cut off from the gods, hearing their oracles, condemned to follow out the divinely destined moira but remaining in a sense a pawn of the immortals. Comic protagonists are either in an infernal or purgatorial world devoid of the numinous or, in paradisaal comedy, lifted up to height of benediction by a force never directly seen or known. The lyric mode depicts what Keats describes as the "wakeful anguish of the soul" at the still center, when it feels its own separation from plenitude, though in rare instances lyric speaks of consummation, of being gathered into "God's holy fire." In the quite distinct world of epic, in contradistinction to these other quite distinct world of epic, in contradistinction to these other modes, the gods descend, to cooperate directly with the mortal protagonist (and the poet) in fashioning an order in which myth can be reinterpreted to redeem history.

The gods come down bodily from Mount Olympus to the battlefield in the Iliad, grieve for human suffering, quarrel over the outcome of the war, sometimes actually suffer wounds. In the Odyssey, before Athena is allowed to intervene to help with Odysseus' nostos, Poseidon is permitted to assuage his wrath by harrying the warrior and his unfortunate men. And though the gods are more removed in the Aeneid (except for Venus) and exert their power chiefly by means of oracles, prophecies, visions, and dreams, Aeneas is permitted in one instance a theophany. Venus removes the scales from his eyes and shows him the Olympian deities busily hovering over the doomed city; he is enabled to see in one horrifying vision all the dimensions of what is destroying Troy:

Look: where you see high masonry thrown down,

Stone torn from stone with billowing smoke and dust

Neptune is shaking from their beds the walls

that his great trident pried up, undermining,

Toppling the whole city down... (II, 799-803)

Aeneas sees the truth: Neptune, Juno, Pallas Tritonia, Jupiter himself-the great immortals that govern human history-are all working together to bring Ilium down in flames. And in some sense that he does not understand, despite his horror and grief, Aeneas recognizes that it is right for Troy to fall; not only the power but the wisdom of the gods has decreed the city's doom. This brief unveiling is, admittedly, the only instance in the poem in which a mortal is permitted to see the divine design, though it is far from being the only encounter Aeneas has with the gods and their oracles and prophets. His mother Venus intervenes throughout the epic, and the reader is allowed to go with her on her frequent visit to Olympus and to overhear Jupiter and Juno quarreling about the outcome of the Trojan quest.

Later, in Paradise Lost, Milton uses this device of overhearing the divine plan in the episode in Heaven with the dialogue between God the Father and God the Son, so that the reader is permitted to see and understand the "justice" of the heavenly dispensation. In this poem as Dante's, angels are the heralds of supernatural action in the world and take part in the actual events. With the advent of the modern world view, however, the divine order most often manifests itself in the epic through

signs in nature, in accord with the tradition of verisimilitude to which the novel is committed. The great whale in *Moby-Dick* and the ancient bear and the dog Lion in *Go Down, Moses* represent the active presence in the world of the wisdom of the creator, like the leviathan and the behemoth of the Book of Job. In the late twentieth century, the "magical realism" of Latin-American novelists and the spiritualism inherited by African-American writers are beginning to make a more overt connection between modernity and more ancient times and hence are bringing the novel ever more surely into the epic cosmos. It appears, then, that in whatever period of history the epic arises, it carries with it in its own cultural symbols this active sense of a numinous presence. Dante is describing an essential element of the epic cosmos when he says, "The Glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and reglows in one part more, in another less" (*Paradiso*, I, 1-3). If the creation of metaphysical space is the primary mark of the epic cosmos, another of its notable features could be said to be its comprehension of metaphysical time. Bakhtin has emphasized the differences between epic and novel, indicating that the first is a finished form, the second incomplete. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, he names three constitutive elements that characterize an epic: the primary one, for Bakhtin, is that a national epic past serves as its subject—"the absolute past," in Goethe's and Schiller's terms (13); its source, he maintains, is a national tradition ("not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it"). A third element is "an absolute epic distance [that] separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer [the author and his audience] lives" (17). What Bakhtin has reference to in these remarks, I would suggest, is the essential impersonality of epic; for the sense of elevation this genre provides stems less from its being "finished," as he has it, than from its godlike and detached view of time. It is this distance from ordinary life, this remoteness, that the epic poet brings to "local events."

Each of the characteristics mentioned by Bakhtin has to do with the magnification of time. Epic poets have a larger view of temporality than other poets. They see the Alpha and the Omega, the entire scheme of things, though they are constrained to speak of this beginning and end in terms of the human society they know. In addition to the qualities Bakhtin mentions, however, epics, even those ordinarily designated as folk, or popular epics, demonstrate other shared properties concerning time. One of these in particular is important to the epic cosmos. Epic bards are aware of an entire poetic tradition preceding them, to which they are accountable—a realm of fame, a permanent repository of values realized in time and preserved only in poetry, implicitly or openly speaking across the ages from bard to bard. The Greeks recognized in this timeless region of immortal fame (*kleos*) the achievement of spiritedness, enshrining such actions in a repository of valorous and comely deeds, whether or not successful. In Book Six of the *Iliad*, Helen declares her conviction that though the events leading to the fall of Troy are shameful, yet they are "our portion, all of misery, given by Zeus / That we may live in song of those to come" (Fitzgerald 11.330-31). In the *Odyssey* King Alkinoos goes so far as to say that men suffer so that there may be songs sung about them: "The gods did this, and spun the destruction / of peoples, for the sake of the singing of men hereafter" (VIII, 579-80). And later the swineherd Eumaeus speaks to Odysseus of their sitting together in the night, "remembering and retelling our sad sorrows" and so having pleasure from them (XV, 399-401). Yet the real significance of *KLEOS* lies in its being a vision of things from a transcendent viewpoint. It is revealed to mortals through a break in time that we might call *chairoi*, the opportune time, the prophetic time. The truth of such moments impels epic heroes to strive for the absolute, committing their deeds to *kleos*. And though poets can use only the vehicle of their own societies to express this eschatological sense, the epic action they depict has all of time in its purview: it remembers the sacred past, contends with the ambiguous present, aspires to the prophesied future.

One might go even further to say that the epic poet accomplishes in his cosmic image the spatialization of time. The poetic cosmos, which, as we have said, comes into being from the act of bringing the myth into consciousness—from shaping the past into memory—contains analogically not only a time-free place (*kleos*) for the deeds that can never die but also a time-bound place for the dead and lost events that cannot go forward (*nekros*). Epic poets relegate these negative things to an underworld, though they set apart a portion of that region, an *Alyssum*, for the virtuous and distinguished dead. Epic heroes are given the task of going not only to the underworld, where the past of their people resides (not always of course literally represented), but sometimes even farther back than human history, to the beginning, to the dark realm where all ladders start, the abiding place of the "old ones," the sacred shrine that marks the origin of the tribal myth. Isaac McCaslin makes this journey into the ancient sources of things when he goes alone into the heart of the wilderness seeking Sam Fathers' burial place, as Ishmael makes it in his imagination, visualizing Pip abandoned in the vast ocean seeing the "heartless, joyous, ever-juvenile eternities" (347). Achilles is actually in this region when he becomes, as Cedric Whitman has called him, a "veritable angel of death" (207), when he stands over the pleading and disarmed Lykaon and sees no essential difference between life and death; and later when he clogs the river with corpses. The haunted pool in *Beowulf* is such a primordial region, pre-human, and, like all the places encountered by Odysseus in his wanderings and the hot crowded region out of which Beloved emerges, not part of the universal movement toward the *parousia*, the fullness that the epic envisions as the goal of history.

v

To discern most clearly the nature of the third feature of the epic cosmos—the masculine-feminine conjunctio—one can turn to an epic only recently known to the literary world, *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, discovered as were *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* in the late eighteenth century but known to the literary world only in the nineteenth—and coming to the attention of critics in

the twentieth. The Igor epic, though brief, is no heroic lay or geste as it has sometimes been called, but a poetic account of an entire cosmos coming into being. It is, in short, an epic by virtue of giving form to the myth of a people and by placing that myth within a larger myth, a moral universe. And, as in all genres, since an ideal form is the basis for establishing the kind of the grouping, a newly discovered epic that fits into the assembly may not only reaffirm the shared elements of the group but bring to the foreground and thus highlight aspects previously unnoticed. In this instance, the chief feature that illumines the world shared by other epics is the affinity of the feminine with the earth and the power of the feminine to affect the course of action.

The Igor poet had the same problem as the Beowulf poet four centuries earlier: to view a declining paganism through Christian eyes without deprecating its genuine virtues, indeed enhancing and ennobling its qualities so that they might be taken into the new order without loss. These poets therefore situate their allegiance in the past, though their imaginations are Christian, and their aspirations are for a transformed order that is yet to come. Hence, at a time of a profound cultural shift, the Igor epic apprehends the mysterious entity that has been variously called "the idea" or "the soul" of Russia.

If we read epic poems with attentiveness, putting aside preconceived ideas about the dominance of the patriarchal virtues, we see in them something of a palimpsest, indicating that nations are not only "twice-" but "thrice-born." In the familiar Greek accounting, before the accession of Olympians, the titans ruled; and before them, Gaia and Uranus. We tend to think those ancestral parents safely done away with and forgotten. Might they not, however, in the aggregate of time, still be present to us analogically? Could we possibly think that epics depict the human struggle to retain all three sets of gods, all three stages of human culture? Certainly we see that the first two Western epics, the Iliad and Odyssey, stand at midpoint between the warrior code and the coming of the polis, the city ruled by reason and justice. Yet is there not, underneath all the masculine furor about honor, a deeper and more pervasive presence? In the stirring accounts of heroes one senses the subliminal presence of a more ancient feminine culture, perhaps stemming from the old religion, the matriarchal worship of the great goddess. One thinks of the empathy of Thetis, who comes immediately in response to her son's grief; the independence of Hera, enlisting Athena to fight at her side; the stature of Andromache and Hekuba, the archetypal beauty of Helen. And of course there is the wide-seeing (periphronos) authority of Penelope-the Odyssey is full of women, who seem to rule the universe and govern the conditions under which the hero returns. Certainly one finds traces of this divine feminine presence in Russian epic literature. George Fedotov has spoken of the cult of the Earth among the ancient Russians, linking it with "the most secret and deep religious feelings of the folk" (12). He goes on to say:

At every step in studying Russian popular religion one

meets the constant longing for a great divine female power.

. . . Is it too daring to hypothesize on the basis of this

religious propensity, the scattered elements of the cult of the

Great Goddess who once had reigned upon the immense Russian plains? (362)

In the Igor poem, in contrast with the Western epics, though the warrior code is strong, the deep and abiding devotion is to the Russian land, to nature, and to the elements. Igor's campaign is undertaken despite the lack of solidarity among the Russian princes, who should be of one accord in defense of the motherland. And though the raid is unsuccessful, it points toward a future when the Russian land will be unified. When Igor and his men ride out on their daring but foolhardy quest, every element of nature warns him of impending disaster. After he has been defeated and taken captive, has "changed his golden saddle for the saddle of slave," the most intimate affinity with natural elements is displayed in the famous song of Jaroslavna, the wife of Igor, "an unseen cuckoo / that sings at dawn."

"I shall fly," she says,

"As a cuckoo, along the Danube.

I shall wash my sleeves of beaver

In the river Kayala.

I shall cleanse the bleeding wounds

On the mighty body of my prince. (599- 604)

The River Kayala is apparently a symbolic river of death, filled with that is choked with Achilles' victims. Jaroslavna is willing to go to this underworld herself to reclaim the wounded body of her prince. Her song, generally referred to as her "lament," is more a prayer, a reproach, or even a command, to the Wind, the River Dnepr, the Sun. She speaks to the elements of nature as a goddess would speak-as Thetis, Achilles' mother, speaks in the Iliad to Zeus in behalf of her son Achilles, for instance; or Athena for Odysseus; and a Venus, Aeneas' mother, speaks to Jupiter. Even further, Jaroslavna speaks with great intimacy and authority to the cosmic elements themselves, not to the supreme god over them, as the others do; she reproaches these elements, reproves them, beseeches, and commands them. Only Hera among Greek goddesses addresses the elements directly, and, as Robert Graves points out, myths associated with Hera stemming from her cultic worship, as well as archeological findings, indicate that she is an ancient deity who, before her alliance with Zeus, was worshipped in cults as the great goddess (I, 51).

However it may be, Jaroslavna's intercession represents the turning point of the poem. Immediately after her entreaties to the elements,

The sea tosses at midnight

The whirlwind comes in clouds,

And God shows Prince Igor the way

From the Polovetsian Land

To the Russian Land,

To the Golden Throne

of his fathers. (636-43)

Viewed intertextually, this is the moment about which Thomas Greene speaks in which the epic hero, caught in an apparently helpless situation, in stasis, is aided by "an emissary god or angel from heaven bringing a message to earth" (7). And though the messenger is usually masculine, the power that causes the celestial intrusion is feminine. In the Odyssey, for instance, Hermes comes from Zeus (in answer to Athena's reproaches), finding Odysseus on Kalypso's island, living as her husband, offered the gift of immortality. In the Divine Comedy, a "gracious lady" in heaven whose pity outweighs divine judgment appeals to St. Lucy, who then turns to Beatrice, who sends a poet, Virgil, to Dante as guide out of the dark forest. In the African Mwindo epic, only the entreaties and instruction of a beautiful aunt-mother figure, Langura, enable the hero to succeed. In Beloved, the daughter Denver causes the troops of women to be mustered, sufficiently strong to "make a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees" and ultimately to exorcise the devil-child (261). In Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Alba's long departed grandmother appears to the young woman in her solitary prison cell, moving her out of her darkest moment of despair and longing for death:

When she had nearly achieved her goal, her Grandmother

Clara, whom she had invoked so many times to help her

die, appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to

die since death came anyway, but to survive, which would

be a miracle. (414)

It is not too inconceivable, then, to maintain that hidden within the masculine action of the ancient great goddess, the mediatrix of grace, the intercessor, and that her version of history offsets and alters the grim march of events. It is in answer to her reproaches and commands that the hero finds his path. As the Igor poet tells us, "God shows Prince Igor the way." The way is the way of hope and grace, out of his seeming hopelessness and despair. In his difficult escape, nature is friendly to him, aiding him, hiding him, lending him its powers, the river cradling him, the usually noisy birds falling silent, with only

the woodpeckers, "with their tapping/Show[ing] the way to the river" (704-05).

Although it is the masculine prowess and thymos that undertakes the heroic task, it is with the help of feminine wisdom and courage that it is accomplished; these powers work together in the epic in a way not depicted in other genres. In tragedy, for instance, the masculine protagonist is in revolt against the "mothers"; it is this guilt that haunts him in his over-rational hybris. In contrast to this victimization of woman in tragedy, both comedy and lyric portray the feminine aspects of the psyche as dominant; Beatrice and the Shulamite, for instance, represent the recognized right order of being in the Divine Comedy and the "Song of Songs"; and in Donne's "Twickenham Garden," the lover is compelled to admit ruefully that "her truth kills me."

In epic, on the contrary, the forces are balanced. For every towering male figure there exists a female fully as imposing: Eve, Helen, Penelope, Sarah, Ishtar, Dido, Beatrice, Jaroslavna, Sethe (in *Beloved*). The Moses epic is a story framed by the secret purposes of the feminine. Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, as persons of recognized power, women have their own way of knowing; and the outcome of history bears the mark of their efficacy. It is perhaps surprising to find that epic gives us our best portrayals of marriage as a powerful institution. The Biblical Adam and Eve in their original unity, like Zeus and Hera in their hieros gamos, set the pattern for the Abraham and Sarah, Odysseus-Penelope, Aeneas-Lavinia, Milton's Adam-Eve, among others, including the great ocean in *Moby-Dick* and the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses*. The epic assumes that the sacred marriage of the two equal and complementary powers is possible and that in that wedding the whole world is renewed.

vi

The epic is concerned, however, with more than the oikos or the polis, the household or the city. It depicts the obscure movement of a people and, by implication, of the entire human race toward the parousia, the culmination of history. All this is to say that, with the help of the gods, the epic poet makes a cosmos within which a hero, following the guidance of prophecy, can lead a people forward on their journey into an unknown future. Its total action, accordingly, is by far greater than the deeds of the hero; for this reason it is not truly of the same genre as the heroic ballad or lay. As E. R. Curtius has remarked, the Germanic heroic lay, which he considers a model for the form, was not linked to a "comprehensive historical picture," perhaps because of its briefness, but more likely because "the German tribes did not regard themselves as constituting a unity, as did Homer's Achaeans" (168). And, further, as he points out, "Germanic heroic poetry is without religion, not bound to the world of the gods. The strongest social bond is the clan" (169).

It is epic, then, not simply heroic lay or saga, that brings to consciousness the entire myth of a culture, and, in the making of a moral cosmos, an ideal form that lies behind human culture, enters upon the long road of human history. The epic cosmos, in itself, implies a force, an energy that impels a people forward. Though such a movement is portrayed through the actions of one person, it affects the life of all, expressing an elemental will within a people, unrecognized among them without the hero's urgency, his pressing outward against the forces pressing inward, "a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without," as Wallace Stevens has described the action of the imagination (36).

Certainly the characterizing mark of epic is striving, as that of tragedy is suffering. Nevertheless, its emphasis, as we have indicated, is not primarily on the hero. Though archetypal patterns of the hero's journey are to be found in cultures all over the world, playing their part in establishing myth, nonetheless in the epic this striving extends beyond the courage and endurance of the hero, whether in battle, journey, wandering, or quest. What is crucial to the epic is an intuition of motion within the body of mankind that strives to overcome currently existing codes and conventions to move toward the fulfillment of a destiny toward which a people are called. The hero is tested by what the *Beowulf* poet called his sothfaestness (his "fastness" to this truth) and whether or not he is lofgeornost (most eager for "of," or glory). This fidelity and this yearning for high achievement commit him unto death; his heroism is measured against a tradition which the hero reveres but which in the course of things he will be compelled by his own striving to surpass. And somewhere along the path, if he is indeed sothfaest, he will be forced to encounter the dragon, the primordial enemy, symbol of de-creation and dissolution. Hence the action of the epic, whatever its vehicle, is that supreme endeavor in which human existence - through the hero - tests itself to the utmost limits by going forward in the march of history toward its end.

vii

It has been customary to say that Homer invented the epic; it would be more accurate, however, to say that he discovered it, for the epic is the portrayal of something potential in the human soul from the beginning, though not known until expressed in poetic form. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Homer provided the two major portraits of the human psyche in its contexts of tragedy and comedy. And granted, of course, that the tone and plot of the *Odyssey* are different from that of the *Iliad*, the cosmos within which the action occurs is nevertheless the same and has, in some sense, engendered the whole of Western culture. The other paradigmatic epic for the West has been the account of the ancient Israelites given in the Biblical stories.

Northrop Frye has spoken of the Bible as our "definitive myth, a single archetypal structure extending from creation to apocalypse. . ." (Anatomy 315). It seems more just, however, to speak of the Bible as epic rather than myth. In it Jahweh calls his heroes to participate with him not only in the building of a nation according to a specific covenant, but in the universalizing of that covenant. And just as the Iliad is an epic that by tone, by incident, by outcome, bears to us tragedy, and similarly the Odyssey brings comedy, so this third of our original epics, the Bible, can be said to carry the lyric (the pure vertical extension of life) into the bardic grange. The Psalms, the "Song of Songs," Isaiah, and Lamentations quite overtly present the lyric eros in their yearning for the fullness of Jahweh's presence. In a more general sense, however, we could say that the Old Testament as a single epic poem exhibits the lyric mark.

It is important to acknowledge that these three sacred texts have shaped our civilization and generated our high genres of poetry, at the same time admitting that they are far from exhausting the resources of epic. For what they and other epics have to teach us is the inexorable lesson of change. Epic shows us again and again the pattern of moving from the old myth to a new, carrying everything of value with it as it goes. Yet it has to be recognized that the future toward which the epic poet looks is a future not yet realized: it is to be seen on Achilles' and Aeneas' shield, Odysseus' oar to be carried inland; Moses' vision on the mountaintop where Jahweh will take him to himself; Adam's vision under the guidance of St. Michael; Rion's vision of the constellation of Orion, "raised to the stars"; the statue-like death of Old Ben, which the boy, who should have "hated and feared" the dog that killed the bear, was instead "humble and proud" to witness:

It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning  
of the end of something, he didn't know what except that  
he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that  
he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even  
just to see it too. (226)

The new order being born in this "beginning of the end of something" comes out of a past that, by means of the poetic imagination (in both hero and poet), has been wrestled with and, in the epic cosmos, transmuted into permanence. Isaac McCaslin stands, like Aeneas, seeing the workings of providence in the destruction of what he loves and hence refusing to grieve. Summing up, then, we might say that the action for which the epic cosmos exists, its single characterizing mark, is the effort- -within the soul of a her- - to preserve a mythic past by presiding at its structural annihilation, while committing its existential reality to a future accepted in faith though as yet unknown. The heroism, in point of fact, is that of the poet.

We might contend, finally, along with the late seventeenth-century critics, that the epic is not simply another genre of poetry: it is the founding genre, the mode from which civilization emerges, the ordinary poesis that enlarges its people's scope, enabling them to enter history. It makes conscious the major symbols of society, shaping its sense of purpose, its forms and standards. And though the vista of epic is retrospective, so that it tends to look back with some nostalgia to whatever communal treasure of inherited nobility may be still visible, it looks back in order to discern what is worth saving from the past and what, as Toni Morrison has written, "ought to be discarded" in the ongoing journey ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 389).

If we may be allowed to speak a bit mythically ourselves, we could say that the epic poet is the human representative of that "angel of the people" who guides and speaks for a particular nation at the end of history, when all shall be made one. This angel, we might suggest, is the muse to whom the poet addresses his appeal. Perhaps our age is ready, in the midst of a "beginning of the end of something," to reinstate the epic as the primary genre and even to begin to see in it, with Scalier and the other Renaissance critics, "a norm," not only for other kinds of poetry, but for culture as a whole.