PART ONE
Varieties and Forms

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Epic
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Readers of *Aurora Leigh*, *Idylls of the King* or *The Ring and the Book* rightly wonder that epic poetry persisted so long after notices of generic expiration had been clearly posted by Milton, then by Dryden and Pope, and then by several generations of public-spirited novelists. This was a reaction to which the Victorian poets themselves were no strangers. The Brownings and Tennyson repeatedly betray, and indeed incorporate into their masterworks, suspicion that the modern epic is a contradiction in terms, its traditional functions having been taken over by the newer narratives of science, history and above all realist fiction. That the great Victorian epics were written in spite of such suspicion surely has something to do with the emphasis their plots give to heroic faith in an era of doubt, be that era medieval (Tennyson), early modern (Browning) or frankly contemporary (Barrett Browning). The poet who contrived, against long odds, to pull another epic out of the hostile fire of modernity might well rank as a culture hero for that deed alone.

Yet it would be a mistake to regard such feats as solo performances. For one thing, these three epic virtuosi had each other's example to emulate or play against; for another, they worked their epic magic in a surprisingly numerous and diverse company. Stretch the frame of Victorian literary history beyond its ordinary dimensions and the canvas fairly swarms with poetical monuments of immense ambition, narrative and lexical daring, cultural and historical sweep, whose failure and success alike tell a tale that the student of nineteenth-century poetry needs, if not to know, then at least to know something about. What follows here, then, is a chance to make acquaintance with a surprisingly vigorous anachronism, as it was exemplified in many poems, running often to hundreds of pages, that even in their day were overshadowed by hardier literary species; some poems practically as tough to find as they are to read; even a few poems swallowed in deep night since the hour of their birth. This inventory of the obscure is offered less in the hope of finding converts than in blunt recognition that it is these works, with as many more unmentioned congeners, that make 'Victorian epic' more than a nonce label for a tribe of oversized freaks. Not only do these works bridge an otherwise mysterious gap between Blake's epic experiments and Pound's, shedding by the way a collateral light on Victorian literary kinds we know much better. The epics treated below were themselves episodes in the history of a coherent and durable idea about poetry's relation to culture, an idea in which it

remains possible to take a lively interest today, and which the changing circumstances of Victorian Britain placed under extraordinary and revealing pressure.

The Whole Idea

For two centuries now a remarkably stable theory about epic poetry has been in place, to which commentators on the genre have confidently referred, and to which aspiring poets have either conformed or else conspicuously refused to conform. This theory arose during the later 1700s to supersede another one, also long-lived, which Renaissance neoclassicists had centred on the principle of *unity of design*. In the neoclassical view, Homer, Virgil and their early modern imitators had striven above all to unify the epic action, with special attention to its duration, setting and moral theme. These means of control and focus had let each poet frame a massively roomy structure and affix to it such refractory generic conventions as supernatural agents, celestial interventions and underworld descents, casts of clashing thousands and a hero's worldwide travels. So ran the established view, which the new epic theorists of the eighteenth century inherited only to recast it radically. Retaining unity as a key concept, they began to seek it not so much in the internal structure of epic as in the ambient culture for and about which epic spoke, looking less at the unified work a poem *was* than at the unifying work a poem *did*. Enlightened, self-respecting readers could not help being more impressed by the difference than by the similarity between the lives they led and the exploits of archaic, far-flung heroes; accordingly, they found traditional neoclassicist dogma about the timeless human universality of epic hard to believe. Rather than reject the dogma outright, however, they recuperated it by way of a paradox: they learned to regard epic's universality as a function entirely of its unique locality and moment. The authority of an epic was indeed a binding force for cultural unification, they conceded, but it was binding only on members of the historically specific culture that had produced and been reflected in it.

This migration of the unity criterion from formal to cultural premises was abetted by certain tendencies within neoclassicism itself, as curiosity about questions of textual design intensified to the point where the great antique epics started to crack under cross-examination. Towards the end of the eighteenth century textual scholars brought newly sophisticated analysis to bear on the Homeric poems and, gingerly but surely, on the books of the Bible as well. These efforts loosened the legendary grip of Homer and Moses while restoring the epic testaments to the collective possession of the ancient Greek and Jewish peoples. Neoclassicism had decried as artistic flaws the gaps and redundancies that dotted the text of the *Iliad* or Genesis. But these now became legible instead as fault lines witnessing to the work's durable history: the very imperfection of the palimpsestic text now gave evidence of the living tradition of its cultural reception, among successive generations whose earnest interference demonstrated how vital a stake they had in its meaning. The new ideal of cultural unity in one sense set Homeric and Hebraic (and, by increasingly evident implication, Norse and Persian – and of course Anglo-Saxon) peoples apart from one another, since each people was as unique as its founding epic text. In another

sense, though, the new ideal furnished the ground of an enlarged understanding that complex wholeness as such was a property shared by all cultures, no matter how distant in space or time.

These ideas now possess the force of truism, a force that they have exerted for generations and that the Victorians felt if anything more strongly than we do. The international culturalist consensus that extends from Vico and Herder in eighteenth-century Italy and Germany to Lukács (Hungary), Bakhtin (Russia) and Frye (Canada) in the twentieth owes some of its plausibility and much of its stamina to the persistence among us of distinctive anxieties that the modern reconsideration of epic confronted from the first. Do we live in a unified culture, or want to? What does cohesion cost, when reckoned in terms of exclusivity? How much disorder are elasticity and diversity worth? It was when such questions would not go away two hundred years ago that literary intellectuals began rehearsing them in the newly culturalist theory of epic. Cultural unity became a working criterion for analysis only once it could no longer be taken for granted in practice. The vindication of cultural unity within the forms of epic first arose among scholars and poets who became modern intellectuals at the point where they realized that unity, as an intuitive and unconsidered cultural given, had disappeared from their world.

This troubled awareness was a precondition of the literary refinements of alienation and palliative nostalgia that we call Romanticism; and in Britain it emerged most clearly in the ballad revival of the later eighteenth century and in its epic analogue, the Ossian debate. The latter arose when in the 1760s James Macpherson published English translations of old epics whose Gaelic originals turned out not to exist, and it riveted British literary attention for decades. It did so because Macpherson's experiment on the public hunger for recovered origins revealed to his attackers and champions alike the extent to which whatever is recovered from the past must be *recreated* before it can be received in the present. The same principle also emerged as the collectors of old ballads quarrelled over editorial procedures and fumed over hoaxes: the unity of an epic text was at bottom an imaginative matter. Not only that, so was the unity of the culture that the epic text spoke for. This dawning consensus made of the poet – imaginative shaper *par excellence* – a legislator with a national mandate. The stage was thus conceptually set for the shattering events that closed down the century, when the French Revolution swiftly elevated the imagination of national identity from a contemplative possibility into a practical crisis of European proportions. The spectacular unification of a people around the idea of their own sovereignty was infectious; the shock waves of revolution traversed Europe in a few years and the world in a few decades, producing a pandemic of nationalist constitutionalism from which we have yet to recover.

In nearby Britain the French germs of revolution bred contagion in some quarters and allergy in others. But both the radical vanguard and the reactionary establishment formulated their positions in nationalist terms, and the most pronounced literary symptom of this insurgent nationalism was an outbreak of epic. Ambitious verse narratives of every ideological stripe poured from the British press, as the genre that had slumbered since Milton reclaimed in practice a prestige it had held only in theory for more than a hundred years. Nearly every major Romantic poet projected an epic; and the loss of those projects

that failed, like Coleridge's and Keats's, was more than compensated by the multiple epics of Southey, Blake and a constellation of lesser lights now utterly dimmed but notable in their time. Our still rather Victorian habituation to anthologies of lyric poems masks from us the literary-historical fact that the epicizing long poem was not anomalous for British Romanticism but paradigmatic. When Wordsworth called his lyrics 'little cells' and 'adjuncts' to the cathedral of social renovation he meant to edify, he did no more than utter the dream of his generation. The serious poet's task at the start of the nineteenth century was to show the people of Britain their destiny through an archetypal history in which they were included and defined.

Such was the generic bequest that descended from the Enlightenment through the Romantic era to the Victorian poets. They received it, understandably, with ambivalence. On one hand gleamed an irresistibly flattering challenge: the construction of a lofty tale whose artistic coherence and affiliation with the greatest of poetic traditions should assert at once Britain's fitness to lead the world and the continuity of such national promise with the glory of the past. On the other hand loomed an invincibly discouraging tangle of intelligent doubts: about the state of the national health, about the direction or even existence of the national mission, and thus about the viability of any master narrative presuming to vindicate them. Epic came to the hardiest Victorian poets as a problem, and those who took it up did so as a compound *trial*. They had to try the resources of the genre, submitting its antique conventions to the stress of an accelerating modernity, and they had conversely to test the worth of modern experience by the standard which was held up for emulation by the formidable virtues of epic grandeur, comprehensiveness and permanence.

As a result the Victorians' epic performances were extraordinarily tentative: sometimes guardedly hesitant, more often impelled by a bravado that hid an else crippling self-consciousness; at their best, more inventively experimental than all but a few of the big fictional and historical narratives in prose that dominated the age. (The more a prose narrative practised formal innovation, the likelier it was to be discussed in epic terms, as were Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, Eliot's *Daniel Deronda.*) The apologetic burden under which Victorian epic laboured also generated a comic impulse shading into self-raillery, which had been perfected by Dryden and Pope as mock-epic survivalists in the aftermath of Civil War and Glorious Revolution, and lately reprised by Byron once victory over Napoleon had left the nation, its war machine unharnessed, wondering what on earth it was supposed to be next. The risqué, flamboyantly unfinished *Don Juan* (1819–24), making no secret of the generic pretensions it also made fun of, expressed the unsettled state of the epic art before sober Reform dawned around 1830; and Byron's cheeky nerve would persist, if only as nervousness, in epicizing poems across the century. At the same time, such generic satire was parasitic by nature and could subsist only so long as straightforward epic retained enough vitality to prop it up – as *The Excursion* (1814) by Wordsworth had done for *Don Juan.* While the Victorians naturally looked to Tennyson as their pillar of epic state, those who read *Idylls of the King* with care realized what a willowy and often self-parodic performance that long-evolving work actually was. Like their laureate, the best poets learned to rescue epic from its own excess by playing

high seriousness and abundantly grounded scepticism against each other. Shifting, dissonant intervals of faith and doubt give epic its curious tone during the Victorian decades, as alternating affirmation and subversion of an ideal of cultural coherence recapitulate the ambiguous reception of a legacy felt to be ennobling and embarrassing in roughly equal measure.

In State

Not the least embarrassing feature of the epic legacy was the clarity of its call for a great national poem. Such a poem, seizing on a prestigious action from the past and showing how the values it exemplified had persisted for good into the present, should carry forward the tradition that led through Virgil's *Aeneid* to Camoens's *Lusiads*, and that originated – so argued the chief Victorian statesman W. E. Gladstone in the no fewer than five books he devoted to the subject – in Homer's ur-patriotic feat of imagining the archaic Greeks into civilized unity. In the Revolutionary and Napoleonic years shoals of epic poets had answered the national muster; *Alfred* (Joseph Cottle, 1800; James Pye, 1801), *Richard the First* (James Bland Burges, 1801; also Eleanor Porden, 1822), *Wallace* (Margaret Holford, 1809) and many another worthy stalked the pages of Romantic epic during Britain's hour of need. But once peace had ushered in the 1820s, and certainly once the point of First Reform had been gained circa 1830, the long burst of patriotic inspiration was spent and the sails of poetry flapped among inglorious trade winds. Was the national poem dead in the water? *Beowulf* was dusted off after long cold storage in an Oxford library, equipped with new Anglo-Saxonist scholarship in a parting salvo against the French and their puny *Song of Roland*, and circulated among general readers by 1835. The very outlandishness of this thawed-out epic's Geatish glory must have made readers wonder, though, where the British epic of the future was to come from.

Apparently from outlands more outlandish still. With few exceptions Victorians wrote their national poems about nations other than England. The Gaelic fringes of Great Britain continued to attract epic notice, and not just in *Idylls of the King*, which, as Tennyson's scheme crystallized during the 1860s, increasingly withdrew into Welsh sources and Cornish headlands. William Allingham's *Lawrence Bloomfield in Ireland: A Modern Poem* (1864) was half a verse novel but half an epic too, while Ulsterman Samuel Ferguson's five-book *Congal* (1872) was the thing itself; Irish traditions of heroic verse remained sufficiently vital to bring the young W. B. Yeats into the lists with *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889). Emily Pfeiffer's *Glân Alarch: His Silence and Song* (1877) returned to medieval Wales for a plot that united Gael with Saxon as it blent epic with novel; the Scottish Highlands, seemingly confiscated by Macpherson and Scott, enjoyed a late-blooming but genuine glory in *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich* (1848), Arthur Hugh Clough's wittily sturdy dactylic hexameter romp in and out of just enough seriousness to keep its epic pretences real. With remarkable consistency the epic impulse of these works flags as their scene approaches England, whose Victorian account evidently had to be rendered in the coin of the novel. This generic geography becomes unmistakable in Barrett Browning's *Aurora*

Leigh (1856), which is the greatest of verse novels while its heroine resides in England, and which is obliged – for precisely that reason – to quit the country for France and Italy in order to consummate its marriage plot in a way that leaves Aurora free to fulfil her epic potential.

Aurora Leigh's flight abroad stands for the Victorian national poem's. The travails of Italy furnished the plot for Robert Browning's two major achievements in the genre, each of which sought to do for Italy what could not – or need not – be done for Britain. *Sordello* (1840) went back behind Dante into the pre-Renaissance, to pursue Browning's characteristic interest in the problematics of transition: although the troubadour hero squanders his political opportunity, the contribution he makes to an emergent vernacular literature helps lay the ground for the Italian emancipation from papal, French and German power that was under way in Browning's lifetime. Then from the apex of that emancipation *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9) looked back to another twilight historical zone, the late seventeenth century. Here Browning's prismatic vision of multiple narratives shows the swirl of decadent authoritarianism and liberal modernity stirring up forces that will project, through the Risorgimento, a new united Italy. Each epic showcases a problem of national identity, each was written in London, yet neither evinces more than passing interest in the condition of England. Nor were the emigrant Brownings alone in the epic export trade. *Sordello* was scarcely published (and forgotten) when Thomas Babington Macaulay hit the jackpot with an 1842 collection of national poems in foot-tapping stanzas that were not the British ballads they sounded like but *Lays of Ancient Rome* instead. At just the time when Browning was looking past the Second Reform Bill agitation at home and towards the Continent, so was George Eliot, who would novelize her own nation's crisis in *Middlemarch* only after epicizing another's in *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), a work whose generic experimentation complements a theme of ethnic hybridity. When Robert Lytton (under the pseudonym of Owen Meredith) took most seriously the epic pretensions of his verse novel *Lucile* (1860), he whisked the action off to a Crimean battlefield. Alfred Austin, on his way to becoming the century's last poet laureate, set the high point of his much-revised epic *The Human Tragedy* (1876) in Rome with Garibaldi and moved its disillusioned catastrophe to the barricades of the Paris Commune, which is where the socialist William Morris, before refusing the laureateship Austin would accept, set his red idyll *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1886).

Poets from the most powerful state on earth thus repeatedly apprehended the greatness of nation-making as a literally alienated majesty, just as they relegated home affairs to the novel or 'domestic epic' (Matthew Arnold, Preface to *Poems*, 1853). Victorians who noted this oddity customarily explained it with reference to the unheroic nature of contemporary British life – a theory advanced by Thomas Love Peacock as early as 1820, spurned as cliché in book 5 of *Aurora Leigh*, yet still dear to Austin in the preface he wrote for the final edition of *The Human Tragedy* (1889). But the centrifugal force of Victorian national poetry admits of an explanation closer to home. It was a response to the challenge that burgeoning empire poses to national identity. When a nation's extent is fixed by global coordinates rather than landed borders, when administration supersedes conquest as the national mission, the nation will learn to regard itself as *post-national*. It will

conceive its identity as a back-formation, to be grasped primarily in contrast to the diversity of tribal or pre-nationalist others that it has to manage – and that it therefore must not too closely resemble. Nationalism being other peoples' affair, it was the business of imperial Britain to train a surveillant eye on them and, by knowing them, to know itself above and beyond the limits of the merely national. For such training the fugitive, exported Victorian epic of state proved a highly eligible instrument. On one hand it indulged hot blood and the confused alarms of struggle abroad; on the other hand, the linguistic and mannerly Englishness that brought it home made it into something like state intelligence. Disinterestedly attentive supervision of an alien strife became the content of a comprehensive epic form at just the time when it was becoming the official posture of empire. In this sense no Victorian narratives so well captured the mind of Britain as those that fled its shores, like the Brownings' cosmopolitan *chefs-d'oeuvre*, like William Morris's intransigently Icelandic *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), and like Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), a work set not so much abroad as afloat, on the open (but Britannia-ruled) sea that was the century's highway. Through commerce with a larger world these works diversified a British experience that had been made prosaically dull by the very commercial and executive virtues to which Britain's hegemony in that larger world was due.

Of this shift towards a post-national identity the cannier poets who did stick to home-grown epic took due note. Failure to do so led to productions like Alexander Smith's *Edwin of Deira* (1861), four books of generically correct blank-verse narrative devoted to the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon king who first embraced Christianity and gave his name to Edinburgh. Here was a subject that fit the national epic formula perfectly, only to show that epic nationalism of the Romantic sort had become suddenly, firmly parochial, its inlandishness unmistakably outmoded. A scrappier domestic example was set by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in *King Arthur* (1849), which flaunts the skittery ambivalence that epic duties could prompt in even a seasoned Victorian author and turns that ambivalence into jaunty amazement at what a complicated affair Britishness has lately become. Veering between romance and epic modes, Bulwer-Lytton cannot decide where to get a purchase on his Arthurian materials, or where to put an Arthur who will obviously not stay at home. Destined by a Virgilian fate to fuse by marriage the Welsh and Saxon stocks that will breed a British future, Bulwer-Lytton's Arthur first must make a Grand Tour over the Alps and back into Tuscany and Scandinavia, and before the end he is dealing for good measure with Aryan Druids and Odin-worshippers from the Caucasus. The whole miscellany seems bent on proving from what a multicultural midden Britain's favourite legend has sprung, and proving too how auspicious it is, for purposes of empire, that the national hero should turn out to know his way around the map so well.

Between Bulwer-Lytton's promiscuity and the probity of Smith stands Tennyson's sustained public performance (1842–85) in what was by virtual royal commission *the* Victorian national epic. *Idylls of the King* wielded the matter of Arthur with utmost decorum and minimal foreign traffic of the Bulwer-Lytton sort; yet the poem's impressive array of styles, tones and narrative modes is there to enact a set of themes – cultural translation, systemic corruption, political collapse – whose contemporary referent could only be the

dynamics of Victoria's distended empire. For the island realm of Camelot knows sorrows of imperial scope; Arthur's experiment in administrative organization is doomed by the splendid logic of its own ambition. Harried at every outpost by subcivilized barbarians, the Arthurian regime of elective discipline and invisible knightly bonds succumbs not to these but to failures that are internal to its system: treason, espionage, and the sheer fatigue that besets an overextended network of intelligence and abstracted trust. Saddest of all Victorian epics, the *Idylls* in their gloomy analytic coherence shadow with equivalent plangency the losses that empire exacts and the downfall that awaits it.

A radically different nationalist subgenre, the working-class epic, took root in England during the first Victorian decades by turning the problematics of mainstream epic inside out. To the voiceless constituency of a poet disenfranchised by the First Reform Bill's property thresholds, the epic ideal of social totality offered precious leverage on the still open question of national identity. How was British society as a whole to be constituted, for whose benefit and at whose behest? No less a politician-in-waiting than Disraeli staged the question for debate between allegories of Order and Progress in his aborted *Revolutionary Epick* (1834). As the diffident orthographic flourish of its title may suggest, this poem conceded but did not applaud the inevitability of reform, focusing its suspended judgement on the problematic conquest/liberation of Italy by Napoleon – a test case whose selection looked inspired indeed by the time of the 1864 revised edition, once a second Napoleon had invaded Italy again, and under democratic banners of even more ambiguous stripe. Disraeli's dilettantism of the 1830s was meanwhile put to shame by contemporaries who had more at stake than self-promotion. Ebenezer Elliott's *The Village Patriarch* (1829) was 'in its nature and unconscious tendency, Epic', declared Carlyle in an essay of 1832; yet not much seems 'unconscious' about the long memory of Civil War insurgency that embeds its vision of 1820s agrarian hardship. By the hungry 1840s Chartism was raising consciousness of and about the working class at a fast clip, and during these years poets across the political spectrum had recourse to long narratives that invoked the social whole from an avowedly partisan perspective.

Sarah Stickney Ellis in *The Sons of the Soil* (1840) traces for twelve books the fortunes of a propertied farming family, explicitly linking their rise and decline to the effect exerted on local prices by the geopolitical economies of war- and peace-time. As Ellis disapprovingly notes the way inflated expectations of gentility damage a wider agrarian community, the poem lives up to the epic implication of its title and offers a conservative assessment of the national basis that is Eng*land*. One would call W. J. Linton's *Bob Thin or the Poorhouse Fugitive* (1845) an epic only after calling it other things like a doggerel tract or comic book. Still, the stark contrast it draws between alternative social systems – an industrially displaced weaver escapes London's degrading parish workhouse to join a utopian rural commune of mutual help – enlists for propaganda purposes a cogently epicizing grasp of those systems as wholes (imaginatively facilitated by abundant graphics, in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* spirit in which Blake had laboured a generation before). Between Ellis and Linton, in *The Vale of Caldean; or, The Past and the Present* (1844) William Dearden lashes out evenhandedly to right (workhouses) and left (Owenite socialism), certain only that commercial recklessness has reduced his Yorkshire home to a sink of

factory waste and urban sprawl, his dalesmen neighbours to wage slaves. All three works represent downtrodden and neglected people as victims of a circumstance that, because it is national in character, entitles its victims to national attention and concern – a political correlative of the coherentist epic vision. All three tap epic's power to project historical, diachronic continuity onto the present as active, synchronic value; and they do so in order to mobilize nostalgia into a plan for the nation.

For progressives impatient with such a retrofit there was *Orion: An Epic Poem in Three Books* (1843), which R. H. Horne priced for the people in its first edition at a mere farthing per copy and billed as 'an experiment upon the mind of a nation'. An *Endymion* for the age of industry, Horne's farthing epic takes Orion through puppy love and trials of giant strength to establish the dignity of the body, the virtues of free trade, and above all the salvation that lies in hard work. Honest toil is where the thinking 'mind of a nation' merges with its labouring body in this allegorical epic, 'Divine with human blending'; and the 'higher consciousness' with which in the last book Orion looks out on Mount Epos (!) implies a technological vision of all nations as one gigantic working class. A more advanced working-class epic was written by the more politically advanced author who signed himself 'Thomas Cooper, the Chartist' on the title page of *The Purgatory of Suicides* (1845). Seasoning ten books of Byronized Spenserian stanzas with remarks on his condition as a political prisoner in Stafford gaol, staring down despondency after a decade's effort on behalf of the now-stagnant People's Charter, Cooper finds his theme in a high consultation among shades of the eminent kings and revolutionaries, poets and sages, who saw fit to take their own lives. Their discourses on religion, science and politics present an unsurprising compendium of radical thought; what requires notice is the way Cooper suspends narrative interest in favour of theoretical debate – an odd strategy for epic, but oddly appropriate to his theme. The narrative meaning of suicide being *ipso facto* nihilistic, it poses a worst-case scenario for the storytelling impulse that ordinarily belongs to epic: the faith in posterity that upholds an individual hero has precious little to hope for in the company Cooper keeps. What is needed is not new stories but fresh perspective on the old ones. Accordingly Cooper the Chartist converts the infernal Dantesque dead-endedness of his suicides into a 'purgatory' where there is a job to do. The name of that job is theory, and its aim is to cast out despair by recasting apparent lost causes (like the People's Charter) as stalled causes instead. Taken up into dialectic and debate, the life-story episodes of *The Purgatory of Suicides* become weighty chapters in the one story, longer than lifetimes and radically epic in import, of winning broad participation in a just commonwealth.

In Faith

Religion may seem an implausible option for compassing an epic totality, yet it was an option that Victorian poets repeatedly exercised. That their motives for doing so were not altogether fanatical can be hard for anyone who reads their interminable poems to bear in mind. Still, those motives were important, and they lead to the heart of one principal

conception of British identity: membership in the established Anglican church. As the passing decades disentangled church membership from the rights (and spoils) of state, the bitterly contested process of secularization produced repercussions noisy enough to direct attention to the historically national dimensions of religious life. Since Tudor times the Protestant island had defined itself denominationally, and during the nineteenth century the materials of the Bible still had much to offer an epic aspirant. Possessing the gravest dignity, Biblical narrative at the same time extended to poetic fancy a sublime range of great practical flexibility. To the Bible stories, broadly familiar for longer than anyone could remember, the true believer brought a still-Miltonic conviction of personal implication in the still-unfinished story they told: as the American poet James McHenry explained in introducing *The Antediluvians, or the World Destroyed* (1840), in the Flood he had a subject 'not only great in its character, but *universal* in its effects, that all men might feel an interest in its details'. Geology and ethnology gave increasing cause to doubt such a claim to universality, yet in the patriarchal Genesis stories even the sceptic confronted narratives of primitive origins whose relevance as sheer secular ancestry lay beyond dispute. Believer and infidel alike could be expected to find in the Biblical thematics of election, sacrifice and redemption a deep structural paradigm for the destiny which they shared as Britons, and which the Victorian religious epics' favourite scenery of revelation and judgement repeatedly staged.

The definitive version of epic apocalypse was *The Course of Time* (1827), published by the evangelical admirers of young Robert Pollok in the year of his death. This ten-book immersion *in ultimas res* begins after Doomsday and flashes back from eternal Paradise, through the song of a 'Bard of Earth', to embrace Old and New Testament history (one book), a moralized satire on the nineteenth century (two books), the Millennium and the corrupt age that follows (one book each), and the Last Judgement (four whole books). Pollok's preter-Miltonic sweep commits him to a fast-forward narrative preferring pageantry to incident, masses to persons and, where persons do come into play, moral exemplars to developed individuals. These features distinguish *The Course of Time* from the more earthbound epics that had appeared during earlier waves of evangelical revivalism. Richard Cumberland's *Calvary* (1792), its interpolated two-book prequel *The Mount of Olives* (1814) by Charlotte Dixon, and James Montgomery's well received *The World Before the Flood* (1813) look like ploddingly humane character studies next to Pollok's righteous overdrive.

The features that set Pollok apart from his Romantic precursors were widely gratifying to the rising Victorian generation. Not only did his epic have a prominent place by mid-century on the missionary syllabus in India, but it was also regularly imitated at home. When Montgomery's antediluvian theme recurred in John Abraham Heraud's self-describedly 'gigantick' *The Judgement of the Flood* (1834) and Jean Ingelow's 'semi-epic' *A Story of Doom* (1867), both manifested Pollok's influence. The latter kept the faith with regimental severity and a tendency to archaic diction, while the former inflamed piety by every means not forbidden to the orthodox; and both epitomized their shared evangelical cultural formation by the moral satisfaction they took – and trumpeted in their titles – in the delivery of summary verdicts on the panorama of history. The anonymous poet of

The Last Judgment (1857) hails Pollok by name among the Righteous Bards but outdoes him too, by beginning at 'the end of Time' and staying there for twelve books of unremitting eschatology in the present tense. In a better instance of the genre, Edward Henry Bickersteth's *Yesterday, To-Day, and For Ever* (better-selling, too, with twenty-three printings between 1866 and 1893), our protagonist dies in book 1, only to be reunited a book later in a 'suburb of the New Jerusalem' with the loved ones he has left behind, all of them to be regaled for six books by the history of the universe in review and then four more of participant observation of Doomsday and the Apocalypse.

No lover of Milton and Blake can reject such epic topics out of hand, although the flabbergasting badness of their routine execution exhaustively demonstrates the difference between transfiguring imagination and pedestrian fancy. But then it is the very interplay between the flat-footedness of these religious epics and their will to soar that engenders their literary-historical interest. Their vast ambition makes them studies in the dynamics of omniscience, a narrative convention which is so widespread in the Victorian realist novel that we overlook its peculiarity, but which the Biblical epics flush out into the open by floodlighting its literal, theological origins. This ambition is, at the same time, typically pursued by the timidest of means, approximations of epic cleanliness to godliness that have everything to do with the administrative zest attending each work's climactic division of the wicked from the blessed. At the micro-level triumphantly correct versification and routinized grandiloquence; at the macro-level a tidy, task-oriented symmetry careful to match beginnings with ends, and pleased to install a smooth narrative hinge smack at mid-poem – all bespeak a bureaucratic confidence in regularity which Max Weber was not the first observer of nineteenth-century Protestantism to note. This drive to classify and dispose inevitably lands the subgenre of the Victorian religious epic in contradiction: its will to segregation within an ark or New Jerusalem defeats the epic purpose of summoning a culture-wide congregation. The more fervently Heraud or Bickersteth invokes divinely omniscient sanction for his sectored vision, the more he denominates that vision's partiality to a single sect. The formidable cohesiveness of the Victorian Biblical epic is purchased by trading the uncertain promise of a culture for the sure communion of a cult.

This result was, while not forestalled, at least forecast by a different epic subgenre, one that packed up the Bible and ventured abroad to imagine one or more foreign cultures as experienced from within a holistic belief system other than Christianity. Southey had pioneered such epic tourism among the Arabs of *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), the Aztecs of *Madoc* (1805) and the Hindus of *The Curse of Kehama* (1810). While emergent British interests in Asia Minor, Latin America, and India gave a distinct colonial timeliness to this first Victorian laureate's projects of poetic penetration, their overriding aim was not conquest but sympathy: the grasp of another culture by acknowledging, and imaginatively inhabiting, the independent totality comprised by its customs and beliefs. Sympathy being a two-way street, Southey and such immediate successors as Byron and Thomas Moore (*Lalla Rookh*, 1817) travelled it with strong misgivings. The extensive annotation that accompanies their oriental narratives cushions the journey east or south – north, too, if we include Scott's verse narratives – with plenty of insurance, in the form of

ethnocentric scholarship that by turns certifies unlikely wonders and removes the mask from a modern Western poet who remains ultimately superior to his stunt of cultural ventriloquism. Such a cleft response to alterity reprised a familiar, age-old feature of epic reception: witness the efforts of urbane antiquity to civilize barbaric Homer and of early Christianity to convert pagan Virgil. It was something else, though, for the Romantic bard to serve as his own commentator. His anxious escape into the notes registers modern epic's problem of how to go forth into otherness without going native, how to render, without surrendering to, an alien cultural whole.

Among Victorian poets who took up the challenge of the ethnic epic, ambivalence yielded to polyvalence, intercultural confrontation to multicultural diffusion. As fresh versions of both the canonical European classics and world epics poured from British presses – the Finnish *Kalevala*, the Persian *Sháhnámeh*, the Indian *Mahabharata* – the reader's access was nearly always made easier, and safer, by editorial introductions and interventions. Yet these accessories, and the cognitive dissonance they had fostered in so many Romantic texts, disappeared from original poetry in Victorian years. What took their place was a kind of archival epic, a gathering of tales representing diverse peoples, faiths and outlooks. This tourist's or collector's subgenre was comparable in some respects to the fellow-travelling political epic of state we considered in a previous section, but it was even freer of overtly self-interested agenda. Here the principle of unity was anthological, which is to say based on the motives of acquisition, classification and display that typified the Victorian museum and exhibition. The bestselling pathbreaker in this kind was *The Earthly Paradise* by William Morris (1868–70), an enormous tapestry of two dozen leisurely tales from the northern and southern streams of European narrative; lesser performances included his namesake Lewis Morris's *Epic of Hades* (1877), Owen Meredith's *Chronicles and Characters* (1868) and Arthur O'Shaughnessy's *Epic of Women* (1870). In each of these works a medley of storied voices is brought to choral order by a conducting intelligence, which bespeaks at one and the same time a world-weary sophistication and a zeal for world-historical universalism. All faiths are relative, these many-sided epics confess, but in such a way as to constitute a new confession of faith in faith itself, a free-trade mysticism without duties. Their comparativist creed looks through systems of mythology to a cluster of pan-cultural absolutes: the divine mystery that myth can only shadow forth, the collective human power that shapes myth in its myriad local forms, the progressive history of the cultural endeavour to approximate the ultimate. The French had a word for it – *l'épopée humanitaire* – though it was the British who erected its visible symbol in the Albert Memorial (1872), where the frieze of poets at the progressive royal's sculpted feet is crowned by none other than Homer.

Before century's end this new faith inspired modern bards to reintegrate and consolidate what Morris and others had exhibited in profusion, and to weld the earlier samplings of culture into an evolutionist narrative whole. In the central canto of *Balder the Beautiful: A Song of Divine Death* (1877), Robert Buchanan had expressly universalized his Nordic twilight-of-the-gods theme by introducing the sacrificed Balder, through his 'brother' Christ, to a fraternity of slain gods that includes Prometheus and Buddha among others. The same comparativist universalism structures Buchanan's allegorical *The City of Dream,*

An Epic Poem, published the same year (1888) as Mathilde Blind's yet more ambitious *The Ascent of Man*. This latter work, an avowedly Darwinian epic by a poet of radical sympathies, surveys planetary history from the primeval earth through human prehistory to the vaunts and sorrows of empire whereby Rome brought forth Waterloo, the whole poem being keyed to an essentially erotic mythology of humanity's ongoing self-redemption, scheduled for completion in aeons to come.

It would be hard to find, or even imagine, a more panoramically liberal scope for total action than Mathilde Blind's. What strikes the student of Victorian epic, nevertheless, is the structural resemblance her freethinking opus bears to Pollok's monument to evangelical orthodoxy sixty years before in *The Course of Time*. Taking the two poets' titles together, we might say that the Course of Time and the Ascent of Man prove to be two names for the same process. We find in both epics not only a cosmologically sweeping embrace of all ages, bound for ultimate redemption by the power that subtends all nature, but also a preference for ecstatic overview that discounts human will and action, to the point where traditional epic heroism and responsible agency drop from sight. Whether scripturally or scientifically derived, providential or promethean, a common fate attends the epic of religious totality: a fate, moreover, that ironically dooms the genre to record the ideology of its moment with crisp fidelity. Heraud and Ingelow, as we have seen, were preaching in spite of themselves to the Victorian choir; yet so were Blind and Buchanan haranguing the Victorian lecture hall. For the ethnic-anthological epic itself presupposed and catered to an intellectual audience of mobile bourgeois privilege that came into its own during the last, imperial third of the century. The gallery of evolving epic worldviews fell into coherence when regarded from a perspective that was quite historically and culturally specific: that, namely, of a managerial and leisured class of educated, comfortable, anglophone whites. This class beheld in its own deliverance from creed and system the last, logical step in religious history. Their comparativism crowned the pageantry of bygone myths it saw through, in confident expectation that the utopian harmonies of a liberal-spirited future would ratify exactly the position which the emancipated reader occupied already. In this sense the post-sectarian epic of graduated myth constituted a religious counterpart to the post-nationalist epic that Victorian poets were concurrently outsourcing to foreign parts: the claim that each subgenre made to disengaged summary overview now seems in hindsight the most historically distinctive thing about it.

In Person

We have seen how the epic drive towards a comprehensive vision of cultural integrity, pursued by way of either state or church, incurred a certain risk of grandiose dissipation. Where political imperialism or ecumenical universalism tempted the Victorian imagination to feats of self-transcendence, the result usually looks in historical hindsight like self-gratification instead. Call it the transcendental fallacy: left to their own devices, the unattached, freethinking British intelligentsia who undertook epics tended to reshape the histories of nation and spirit from the vantage of the present and in their own image.

The most resourceful poets anticipated this liability by incorporating it into the stories they told. Tennyson allegorizes the collective anomie of obsessive self-culture in the *Idylls* with the vanishing knights of 'The Holy Grail' (1869), Browning imputes a tincture of needy idealism to his admirable and complicated pope in *The Ring and the Book*, and Barrett Browning averts a like risk in *Aurora Leigh*, or tries hard to, by making visionary idealism the ruling passion of her (blind and fallen) leading man Romney. These diversionary defences were necessary because the transcendental fallacy came with the territory of modern epic, and indeed had done so since Macpherson decked out a sentimental Man of Feeling around 1760 as an ancient Celt. The unity of culture might have a life of its own, and it might not, but the standpoint from which poets imagined such unity had to be built afresh every time. Nor was there any way, under a modern dispensation, to keep the scaffolding from impinging on the panorama.

One could, of course, make a virtue of necessity by focusing on the scaffolding itself, which is exactly what the most wholeheartedly transcendentalist school of Victorian epic poets did. This was the Spasmodic school, so called as it flared up during the early 1850s under immodest critical encouragement and then was extinguished by the mockery of an inspired parodist. W. E. Aytoun's hilarious *Firmilian* (1854) made eclectic fun of three works in particular: Philip James Bailey's *Festus: A Poem* (1839, revised and colossally expanded 1845, 1864, 1889), Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama* (1853) and Sydney Dobell's *Balder* (1854). At their ridiculous worst these productions defy parody by pre-empting it; what made them nevertheless worth the attention of a conservative critic like Aytoun was the serious challenge their Romantic constructivism posed to any essentialist faith in cultural norms. Everything about these loosely framed, roughly joined, insistently extemporized poems is in flux – indeed, in convulsive spasm. Their mode is rapturous, their narrative opportunistic, their worldview up for grabs. This effect proceeds from the completely unstageworthy yet still pointedly dramatic form that they all share, wherein the poet does not narrate action from a fixed position at variable speed but projects it, never mind how plausibly, at the real-time rate of consciousness itself, one moment per moment. Spasmodic action, furthermore, is largely coextensive with the poet's creative activity: the protagonists are all poets, and when not reciting or discussing their verses they are likely to sound just as if they were, converting the now-wild, now-mundane experience that comes their way into tropes whose headlong originality earned the wondering accolades of contemporaries like Tennyson and Browning, Arnold and D. G. Rossetti, who eclipsed them but learned from them first.

It was the saturation of the poetic product by the poetic process that made the Spasmodic epics significant in their day, and that claims our attention here. These poems found their epic totality in the wholeness of a creative psyche whose perception of the world was unapologetically reflective of itself. The plot is programmatically engrossed by the instant, Blake's 'pulsation of an artery' wherein the poet does his work: the moment impulsively lived becomes analogically equivalent to the fullness of time, all history being a God-sized pattern of humanity's instantaneously creative interval. Smith's title *A Life-Drama* thus denotes both sheer vitality and the *Bildung* design of a biography conceived as the succession of sheerly vital moments. The same holds for Bailey, England's counterpart to

Victor Hugo in France and Walt Whitman in America (whom Bailey in fact helped to inspire). The uninhibited dilation that is Bailey's hallmark not only pervades *Festus* thematically but sponsored its elephantine growth into a jubilee edition, five times its already hefty original size, that dwarfs *Leaves of Grass*. The reader who has toured the solar system with Bailey's hero, and girded for scenes set 'Anywhere' and 'Everywhere', learns to think nothing of pausing for a 2,000-line disquisition on the joint mission of the eminences of world humanity. That such an interpolation might be redundant or irrelevant is a judgement ruled out in advance by the poem's expressly 'omnist' ethos of plenary indulgence, its glad omnium-gatherum embrace of epic's traditional function as cultural encyclopedia and warehouse of genres, and its plot of total forgiveness: at the close even Lucifer is redeemed, on an epic understanding that *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. Dobell shares this transcendentalism – 'As God contains the world', his Balder declares, 'I will contain / Mankind, and in the solvent of my soul / The peopled and unpeopled ages' – but he conveys it in a punitively severe mode that renders spasm as cramp. Balder's shamed failure to live up to the totalizing ideal he repeatedly imagines makes in a negative way much the same point that Bailey's super-Faustian euphoria and Smith's improvisation affirm. The ordered wholeness of world or psyche or plot is not a given but a project under construction, thrown together on impulse and held together by ever-ready, fast-dissolving analogies. This makes the traditional heroic simile an essential part of the epic action, and indeed makes non-stop assimilation the working logic of a narrative structure comprising nearly interchangeable episodes.

Bailey exulted in this logic when he wrote for his second edition (1845) a long scene in which Festus summarizes, under flimsy cover of rehearsing the long poem of an unnamed 'friend', the action of the long poem that he is in. 'It hath a plan, but no plot. Life hath none.' Maybe so, but what follows is a scene-by-scene recapitulation of Bailey's *Festus*, right up to the very scene in progress, and then straight on to a preview of coming attractions including the plump finale. Set at 'Home', the scene occurs at about the point where in classical epic the hero goes to ground zero, descending to the underworld to learn the future from ghosts of the past. Bailey's version of this convention is extravagant in its navel-gazing panache yet not atypical of Spasmodism, and it illustrates the dumbfounding candour with which the Spasmodics produced their own creative procedures for inspection. Laying all their cards on the table, they in effect called in the immense bet that cultural coherentism had placed on epic a century before; and they almost broke the bank. It took Aytoun's brilliant intervention – fortified by Arnold's ostentatious 1853 rejection of his own introspective drama of vocation *Empedocles on Etna*, and by the conservative philippics evoked by what savoured of Spasmodism in Tennyson's *Maud* in 1855 and Barrett Browning's epic poem about an epic poet the year after – to stigmatize as inflationary counterfeit the Spasmodic currency of self-awareness raised to cosmic pitch.

Spasmodism may have been overpowered by the critical establishment, but its hunch about the grounds of epic coherence in modern culture was not thereby falsified. What an official literary culture pronounced against in the 1850s the poets continued to harbour, assess and replay. The Victorian epics worthiest of the name would incorporate into their speaking on behalf of national and spiritual identity a sharp sense of who it was that spoke,

and how 'he that tells the tale' (Tennyson's formula in the *Idylls*) occupied a subject position that constrained, even as it enabled, whatever comprehensiveness the poem might pretend to. And no wonder: an epic whose terms were not also lyrical would not have represented the nineteenth century very satisfactorily, while conversely the sense of civic duties that never deserted epic kept visible (what lyric forms tended to conceal) the abidingly political implications of poetic perspectivism. That Victorian Calliope took up the lyre and strung it with the gut of an irresistible self-consciousness is an observation consonant with much that the study of other genres has shown about the heyday of the British middle classes: not least, how their prickly individualism was codependently related to their unslaked thirst for political and cultural communion.

See also: Nationhood and Empire; Poetry in the Four Nations; Domestic and Idyllic.

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