

Theories of the Epic: A Brief Historical Overview

The term "epic" is associated with the very beginning of Western civilization. It originated in the ancient Greek word ἔπος, which meant simply a word, speech, or song; the larger concept of epic as "heroic poetry" developed later. This last meaning, however, eventually became predominant, and the word now usually denotes, in its narrow, literary sense, a certain type of verse produced until the European Renaissance. In this narrow sense, can the term "epic," so intricately rooted in European culture, apply to literary phenomena outside that culture?

Actually, the problem is even more complicated, because not even within European culture is there a clear sense of what an epic is. The generic term makes one think of certain works such as the Homeric poems,¹ the *Aeneid*, *The Song of Roland*, *Beowulf*, the *Lusiads*, *Jerusalem Delivered*, and *Paradise Lost*. But once a work outside this group is considered, few critics can agree on whether or not the term epic should be applied to the candidate. Furthermore, the major works mentioned above as typical examples of the genre show some inconsistency among themselves. Attempts have been made to justify this inconsistency by classifying them into two groups under somewhat awkward terms, such as oral and literary, or "Primary" and "Secondary."² As a result of this lack of agreement, there is a growing tendency to recognize as epics a number of works written after the Renaissance.

This study will seek the essential nature of the epic as a genre in the domain of certain thematic elements. Such a stance is necessary because other approaches, including the philosophical and the poetic, have largely failed to elucidate the generic nature of the epic in its endless variety. By the "poetic approach," I mean the poetics of the epic, that is, speculations on the literary mode intrinsic to the genre, while the "philosophical

approach" investigates the extrinsic significance of the epic. Obviously, no clear dividing line exists between the two basic categories, which can often overlap. This classification can, nevertheless, facilitate a brief review of the most important theories of the epic since classical Greece as far as they are relevant to my own thematic method. Plato can be regarded as the originator of philosophical approaches to the epic, while Aristotle provides crucial points of debate for later poetic approaches.

Philosophical Approaches to the Epic

Plato is the first to take up the question of epic poetry in his Socratic dialogues,³ and his argument has significant bearing on its definition. Plato basically argues against poetry as part of his general argument against writing, as illustrated in the Egyptian myth of Theuth and Thamus in *Phaedrus*.⁴ In the *Republic*, however, Plato admits his fascination with poetry, especially with Homer, whom he regards as the best of poets. Thus, while he calls Homer a tragic poet, apparently meaning an author of tragic stories, Plato places the Homeric poems foremost among literary genres. So, when he denounces most poetry as promoting false or inappropriate statements about the gods and the truth, his attack is mainly directed at the epic. More precisely, Plato's denouncement of poetry is based on his idea of mimetic arts as being "at third remove from reality" or "from the truth."⁵ Accordingly, he banishes, though courteously, poets from his ideal state, except for the ones "who are severe rather than amusing, who portray the style of the good man" (398b) and follow the laws of the city in their works.

Plato's concern is primarily ethical and political, as he tries to show how to secure peace and security for a community. His ideas reflect his critical view of the Athenian morality of his day and the unstable reality in which city-states frequently waged war against each other, wars in which many of them were actually subjugated or demolished. Thus, at the top of his ideal state, Plato places philosophers as just rulers and specially trained soldiers as faithful guardians. He stresses his motive of founding such a state "not to promote the particular happiness of a single class, but, so far as possible, of the whole community" (420b). Anything that undermines this objective has to be removed from the state or excluded from the education of the guardians. In Plato's opinion, the seductive power of poetry poses the greatest

moral threat to the foundation of his imagined state, for poetry charms unsuspecting children and youths to harmful, violent stories of gods and heroes. He argues that the young are prone to imitate characters falsely or inadequately represented in poetry and that their habit will "become second nature" (395d).

The typical examples of those figures are taken from the Homeric poems, including Autolycus who excels everyone "in stealing and lying" (334b) and, above all, Achilles who has "the two contrary maladies of ungenerous meanness about money and excessive arrogance to gods and men" (391c). Plato asserts that poets should not try to make young men, who will become guardian soldiers, believe that "heroes are no better than ordinary mortals" (391e). One should note here that, although Plato does not exclude the military class from his city-state for its self-protection, he does not promote a bellicose mentality in the trained fighters.⁶ In fact, as guardians, the soldiers are expected to perform "the voluntary non-violent occupations of peace-time" with "moderation and common sense and willingness to accept the outcome" (399b) as well as "military service or any dangerous undertaking" with "steadfast endurance" (399a). These qualities Plato enumerates as desirable in his warriors (moderation, common sense, willingness to accept the outcome, steadfast endurance) all contrast sharply with what Achilles stands for in the *Iliad*, including the two shortcomings Plato mentions (ungenerosity and excessive arrogance). The contrast is more than a mere coincidence. It follows that, by dispensing with Achilles' two qualities that occasion the entire plot of the *Iliad* and by advancing opposite qualities, Plato implicitly rejects the warlike mentality of the Homeric heroic code as undesirable in a civilized society.

Another instance of Plato's rejection of strife-oriented heroic mentality is found in the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. There, the soul of Odysseus, picking up the lot of his next life, happily chooses "the uneventful life of an ordinary man" with careful consideration, because "[t]he memory of his former sufferings had cured him of all ambition" (620c).⁷ Plato's attitude toward war and peace is even more overt in the *Laws* where, through the persona of an Athenian engaged in a debate with his fellow travelers, he defines the serious purpose of human life as play. This idea derives from the tragic view of human beings as mere puppets of gods in the Homeric poems. But Plato makes deft use of this view when he states that "each of us should

spend the greater part of his life at peace" because he can endear himself to God by accepting his role "as a toy for God" and "engaging in the best possible pastimes" such as "sacrificing, singing, [and] dancing."⁸ Plato argues that, when thus favored by the gods, a human being can "protect himself from his enemies and conquer them in battle" (*Laws*, 803). As a result, except for self-defense, people should not pursue war as *the* serious matter of life in the pretext of bringing about peace, because "neither the immediate result nor the eventual consequences of warfare ever turn out to be *real* leisure" (*Laws*, 803).⁹

Another important point Plato offers in his view of the epic is related to his idealism and his concept of divinity as the ultimate good. For the Plato of the *Republic*, "[g]od is the cause, not of all things, but only of good" (380c). He also states that "god and the things of god are entirely perfect" (381b); therefore, a god cannot "wish to change himself" (381c). For instance, Plato disapproves of the representation of Achilles in the *Iliad*, because the hero, born to a goddess (Thetis) by a man of great restraint (Peleus), cannot be such an impossibly defective figure as presented in the epic (391c). In contrast to the perfect, unchangeable divine world, he calls the physical reality the "world of change" (518c, 519b) and the "world of change and decay" (508d). Thus, a philosopher is characterized by "his love of any branch of learning that reveals eternal reality, the realm unaffected by the vicissitudes of change and decay" (485b). While philosophers are capable of "grasp[ing] the eternal and immutable," those who do not possess such a capacity are "lost in multiplicity and change" (484b). Obviously, the epic, which by nature represents the flux of worldly affairs in a wide perspective, is the most remote from what Plato has in mind as the ultimate reality and should, in his eyes, be dismissed from his republic.

In this context, it is interesting to speculate what kind of epic poetry, if any, Plato would allow to be rehearsed in his ideal state. There, an epic would be expected to promote not the conflict-oriented, self-centered, unpredictable mentality represented by Achilles, but a sense of communal cooperation and steadfast determination in maintaining communal peace for the happiness of all citizens. Furthermore, such an epic would not represent the world of change; instead, it ought to give the citizens a hint of transcendental reality from which their spiritual virtue would derive. With the Homeric poems predominantly in mind, Plato himself cannot think of this kind of epic, and he simply

bans all epics from his state. With the politically divided Greece of his day, all he can hope for is to preserve the existence of one city-state with an intrepid standing army against external threat. By unintended implication, however, his argument rightly suggests the future direction of the epic, for, as I shall show later on, the epic will increasingly aim at making peace and maintaining it, through some transcendental value, for the sake of an entire community. What Plato would need in order to envision a new kind of epic is a much broader notion of a community, beyond the territory of the *polis*.

Among the few important debates bequeathed to posterity by Plato concerning the epic is the question of whether literature should be taken negatively as an art of imitation. Since the epic is a major form of classical literature, this question is crucial to determine the value of the epic. As we have seen, Plato has an unfavorable opinion of most, if not all, literature because of its supposed harm to society through the misrepresentation of the higher reality he believes in. Thus, Plato in the *Republic* does not hesitate to assert that "the art of representation is something that has no serious value" and that "representative art is . . . inferior" (602b, 603b). Against this view, Aristotle in the *Poetics* takes imitation (*mimesis*) positively and argues it to be the most important element of poetry. Aristotle does not deny that poets create fiction. For instance, Homer is regarded as the poet "who has chiefly taught other poets the art of telling lies skillfully."¹⁰ According to Aristotle, however, an artistic lie in poetry should not be rejected as unethical, because "the impossible is the higher thing; for the ideal type must surpass the reality."¹¹ Here, Aristotle introduces the concept of "the higher reality" or higher truth which should be sought not in a Platonic metaphysical sphere but in the "probable impossibilities" of the actual world.¹² And this higher truth, Aristotle argues, can and should be taught through literature.

The change Aristotle brought in assessing the value of literary representation significantly affected literary discourse during the Renaissance, when the epic was considered the most important genre. The debate on the falsity of literature had persisted until then, and many thinkers had recourse to Aristotle's argument in order to defend poetry. For instance, Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) claims that although the poet "recount[s] things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not."¹³ But Sidney goes beyond merely sounding

like a poet defending his profession when he, as a typical theorist of the Renaissance, combines the Aristotelian higher truth with the Horatian purpose of pleasurable teaching and the Longinean power of sublimity. Sidney asserts that "a feigned example hath as much force to teach as a true example . . . since the feigned may be tuned to the highest key of passion"¹⁴ and that, thus moved, people will perform good deeds. Sidney regards "the Heroical" or the epic as "the best and most accomplished kind of Poetry," because he thinks, with a kind of Platonic utilitarianism, that "the lofty image of such worthies" in epic poetry "inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy."¹⁵ Torquato Tasso holds the same position in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594). Tasso takes the fictionality of literature positively on the ground that what the poet writes is based "on some true action"; therefore, "his matter is the verisimilar, which may be true and false, but is generally closer to true."¹⁶ Continuing, Tasso calls epic poetry "the most excellent kind of poem" because it is "an imitation of a noble action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder and thus being useful" for readers "to raise their own minds to its example."¹⁷ These discourses by Renaissance theorists including Sidney and Tasso, apart from the high prominence they give to the epic, are significant in their articulation of the spiritual values that an epic can propagate. This high regard for the epic also affirms its possible social role, a role which Plato could not have granted it due to the political circumstances of ancient Greece.

Plato's rejection of literature caused another debate regarding the cultural significance of the epic: what kind of audience an epic should address and what nature it should assume. In this respect, too, Aristotle refutes Plato's negative view of poetry as a false or undesirable representation of reality, for, comparing history with poetry, Aristotle points out that "one relates what has happened, the other what may happen."¹⁸ He considers poetry "a more philosophical and a higher thing than history,"¹⁹ because what is possible, unlike the particularity of past occurrences, is universally applicable. Evidently, what is universal cannot be dismissed simply as false or easily as inappropriate. During the Renaissance, Sidney goes beyond Aristotle when he claims that the poet is superior not only to the historian but also to the philosopher, because the poet "coupleth the general notion" of philosophy "with the particular example" of history.²⁰ Poetry thus

provides more than the accumulated knowledge of what has happened by revealing the inscrutable precepts of what should happen and rendering them comprehensible. Sidney here changes the Aristotelian mood of "may happen" to "should happen" under the critical necessity of his day to moralize poetry. These two points proposed by Aristotle and Sidney (universality and philosophical guidance) are highly relevant to our discussion of the epic, because both of them have the epic in mind as a major form of literature in their arguments. With these views combined, an epic should appeal not only to a people from whose culture it arose but also to a larger audience by presenting its philosophically preferable model of conduct. This notion of the epic basically means the removal of Plato's *polis*-oriented provincialism and the reinstatement of the epic's cultural usefulness that he denied.

Another provocative point originating with Plato is the disapproval of the violent, war-oriented mentality of the Homeric poems. In fact, no later theorist approves of the archaic heroic code that defies social justice and disrupts communal harmony. For instance, Tasso says that readers who have not read the Homeric poems in the original tend to find the ancient warfare "tedious and disagreeable" and avoid it as "obsolete and stale," because they are used to "the gentleness and decorum" of their age.²¹ The taste for martial motifs, however, persists even in a supposedly civilized age. Almost in the same breath, Tasso himself states that "epic illustriousness is based on lofty military valour and the magnanimous resolve to die, on piety, religion, and deeds alight with these virtues."²² He thus admires Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which abounds in combats by knights-errant, and his own *Jerusalem Delivered* is full of military conflicts. Apparently, Tasso believes that one can indulge in endless scenes of gory, exciting battles in the epic as long as the fighting is nobly done, with culturally or religiously sanctioned causes that provide the circumstances necessary for sustained hostility, such as a crusade against invading infidels. Apart from the antagonism to Islamic powers, historically understandable in the Europe of his day, Tasso's unabashed pleasure in the excess of violence and destruction casts serious doubt on his claim that his age is characterized by "gentleness and decorum."

In his *Art of Poetry* (1674), Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux further augments this preference for the bellicose element in the epic when he asserts that a hero in the epic should not be "a

commonplace conqueror"; instead, he should be "of the breed of Caesar, Alexander, or Louis."²³ Boileau apparently believes that it is still possible to compose an epic with recent or contemporary military materials. In stating his belief, he promotes imperialism as well as the epic that culturally sanctions large-scale aggression. His view is typical of his time when the European powers were growingly intent on gaining colonies abroad, vying against each other for hegemony. In fact, to acquire literary fame, poets attempted to write the traditional, Virgilian type of epics during the neoclassical period as well as the Renaissance. One might, however, also consider Boileau's remark as representative of the predominant view of the epic as a poetry of war since Greek antiquity.

After the eighteenth century, the epic continued to be perceived as war-oriented. For instance, G. W. F. Hegel in *Aesthetics* (1835) methodologically treats the issue of war, because he views the Homeric poems as the criteria of all epics. One of his main arguments is that the epic should contain a certain national consciousness. Hegel calls the motif of war "the situation most suited to epic,"²⁴ because in war a whole nation is mobilized in response to a new stimulus. According to him, the kind of war that genuinely suits the epic is more specifically the one between entirely foreign nations, which is serious enough to put national identity and existence at stake, and in which one party claims some high, self-justifying cause against the other, beyond mere territorial expansion.

On one hand, Hegel's idea of war as essential to the thematic dimension of the epic reaffirms Tasso's and Boileau's positions, which shows how persistently the epic of war is accepted as a popular norm of the genre. On the other hand, his argument poses two questions: Does the communal unity at stake have to be limited to a national level? And, can a conflict between nations possibly be the only serious communal crisis suitable as an epic topic? In terms of the size of community, Hegel thinks of a nation larger than Plato's *polis*. Moreover, almost as an effort to include Aristotle, Hegel asserts that, to enjoy acceptance by other peoples and in later periods, "what is *universally* human" should be imprinted "on the particular nation described and on its heroes and their deeds."²⁵ But even this statement reveals that the community he has in mind for the epic is no larger than a nation. He also contradicts himself when he later discusses the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* as examples of religious epics, which are

by nature not concerned with national identity.

As to the question of crisis, the epic indeed requires a certain critical situation around which the plot evolves toward a final resolution. Evidently, besides the destruction of war, there are many serious, nonmartial threats to humanity, in physical reality as well as on cultural, spiritual, or philosophical levels. If war can perhaps be justified for self-defense, it certainly should not be tolerated for any other reason as Plato argues. But, as we saw in Tasso's case, even self-defense, or any other justifiable cause, is often used in the epic as an excuse for gratifying the excitement that martial topics arouse. Hegel's argument, which encourages military conflict for some artificial reason as most desirable in the epic, is not an exception. Considering the cultural importance Hegel himself places on the epic, this tolerance of war extends beyond the textual level, whether he intends such implication or not. Thus, Hegel's argument shows the sustained popular acceptance of war-oriented epic while helping us to acquire by reflection a critical viewpoint to such acceptance.

Against this predominant tendency that favors militaristic epic, Giambattista Vico in the *New Science* (1744) is adamant and thorough in denouncing the war mentality of the epic by analyzing the heroic society that the Homeric poems represent as the source of war-glorification. Vico's basic assumption of "the heroic custom" is that all nations took "strangers to be eternal enemies" and that, externally, they "carr[ie]d on eternal wars with each other, with continual looting and raiding."²⁶ Accordingly, he considers the Greek heroic age barbaric, and he calls the early Middle Ages "the returned barbarian times" (636, *passim*). Vico's detestation of the heroism of violence is evident in his considerably negative view of Achilles, "the greatest of all the Greek heroes" (708), in whom he finds a number of grave shortcomings. For instance, because of his personal grudge against Agamemnon, not only is Achilles shamelessly happy with the slaughter of the Greeks by Hector but also "this man . . . expresses the disgraceful wish to Patroclus that all, Greeks and Trojans alike, may die in the war, leaving only the two of them alive" (667). He comes back to battle "only to satisfy a purely private grief" (786), Hector's killing of Patroclus. Then, "because of a little phrase that does not please him and which has fallen inadvertently" from Priam, Achilles "flies into a rage" and threatens to kill the old, pitiful king in "his bestial wrath" (786). Even in death, his displeasure is not appeased until a daughter of Priam

is "sacrificed before his tomb, and his ashes, thirsting for vengeance, have drunk up the last drop of her blood" (786).

Vico's stance completely repudiates Tasso's pedantic assertion that the ancient manner of warfare is horrible only to those ignorant enough to read the Homeric poems in translation. The Achillean heroism can also be repulsive to a scholar like Vico who is most learned in classical literature. Thus, when Vico criticizes Homer, who presents Achilles, "a man so arrogant," as "an example of heroic virtue" (667), he disparages the kind of works Tasso favors: "What he [Homer] preaches is thus the virtue of punctiliousness, on which the duellists of the returned barbarian times based their entire morality, and which gave rise to the proud laws, the lofty duties and the vindictive satisfactions of the knights errant of whom the romancers sing" (667). Such "gallant heroism," Vico argues, is a result of what "post-Homeric poets" either newly fabricated or did to old stories in order "to suit the growing effeminacy of later times" (708) or what Tasso calls the "gentleness and decorum" of his time. Against these two types of heroism of violence, ancient and later, Vico envisions the "heroism of virtue" (708), which only a hero who "devotes himself to justice and the welfare of mankind" (677) embodies. According to Vico, "such a hero . . . is desired by afflicted peoples, conceived by philosophers and imagined by poets" (677). Strictly speaking, however, Vico argues that such heroism "which realizes its highest idea belongs to philosophy and not to poetry" (708).

With Vico's remarks, we come back to a philosophical type of epic which might have been admitted to Plato's republic. Like Plato, Vico's concern is primarily with the security of a community. But, with a subtle twist of Aristotelian universality, what he has in mind is expanded to "the welfare of mankind," and he thereby dispenses with primarily national interests. His concern with humanity as a whole is also obvious when he calls the two forms of politics, "free popular commonwealths and monarchies" which developed later in history, "human" (677). By implied contrast, the ancient society is inhuman with its heroism "now by civil nature impossible" (677). Furthermore, the very fact that he spends an entire book analyzing the system of the ancient heroic society, mainly through the Homeric poems, only to denounce it shows how much cultural significance he assigns to the epic. Otherwise, in his discussion of the authorship of those poems, he would hesitate to state that "the Greek peoples were

themselves Homer" (875). Finally, when Vico mentions his idea of the "heroism of virtue," he follows in Sidney's steps by affirming the spiritual value of the epic in promoting peace and justice.

In a word, grafting the Renaissance views of the epic on a humanistic tradition, Vico manifestly suggests what Plato unintentionally implies by the exclusion of literature from his state, that is, the possibility of an epic of peace. But such an epic is unrealizable if, as Vico argues, the literary work is expected to show the moral perfection of philosophy, a goal which is humanly impossible. If the new kind of epic were to be feasible, it should reveal human imperfections as well as the nobility of human spirit with philosophical insight. Such a mixture of imperfections with virtues is very similar to the Aristotelian concept of a tragic flaw. But, unlike the sense of devastation that results from a tragic hero's character failings, a flaw in a new epic hero ought to enhance a sense of belief in humanness through the work's total effect.

Friedrich von Schiller in *Naive and Sentimental Poetry* (1795–96) proposes a kind of poetry in which the poet aspires after what is lacking in reality due to human imperfection. Schiller calls poets naive when they articulate pure nature, which he understands as beautiful without its "crude necessity" and as "an undivided sensuous unity" of perception (sense) and thought (reason).²⁷ Schiller admires Homer, along with Shakespeare, as a typical naive poet "in his dry truthfulness" of narrating his story without asserting his own self (109). When art develops as a form of civilization, however, the poet expresses himself only "as a moral unity, i.e., as striving after unity," because the harmonious unity that "actually took place, exists now only ideally" (111). Therefore, poets have to strive against the destructive forces of arbitrariness and artificiality within themselves. The poets at this stage are called sentimental because they "seek lost nature" (106).

There are two kinds of sentimental poetry, "satirical" and "elegiac," depending on whether the limitation of actuality or the infinitude of ideas becomes predominant in the poet's perception and his representation. Depending on how the poet approaches the basic motif, satire can be further subdivided into two kinds: punitive or pathetic, and playful. Similarly, there are two sorts of elegiac poetry: the elegy proper and the idyll. Schiller intends his classification of poetry to be a transgeneric concept that indicates "modes of perception" (145n). Therefore, he states that

"individual *genres of composition*," such as the epic, novel, and tragedy, "can be executed in more than one mode of perception, consequently in more than one of the species of poetry" (147n). For instance, he calls Milton's description of the human-inhabited paradise "the most beautiful idyll . . . of the sentimental type" (152).

Schiller's distinction between naive and sentimental poetry is important to our discussion of the epic in several respects. First, it paved the way for the later categorization of the epic into two major kinds, oral and literary. Schiller's influence can be easily detected, for instance, in Hegel, although Hegel gives precedence to naturalness over artificiality whereas Schiller avoids such value codification. Second, Schiller's approach to literature is flexible with his "modes of perception," which are not restrained by conventional generic demarcations, and this method unsettles the authenticity of the conventionally rigidified categorization itself. Just as there can be naive/sentimental, satirical/elegiac, pathetic/playful, and elegiac/idyllic elements in an epic, it is possible to assume the dynamic transgeneric presence of epic elements in other kinds of literature such as drama and the novel. What Schiller says about elegiac poetry is also of some interest: "The elegiac poet seeks nature, but as an idea and in a perfection in which she has never existed, when he bemoans her at once as something having existed and now lost" (127). If so, regardless of whether individual pieces are naive or sentimental, most traditional epics can be considered basically elegiac in their idealized presentation of the lost, bygone glory which they memorialize.

Most significant, however, is Schiller's argument about the nature of sentimental poetry, since naive epic is now impossible to create, and what can be created with the art of civilization is the epic of sentimentality. First of all, he claims that, although the term "sentimental" comes from civilized people's longing for their lost naive nature, it is not appropriate to demean modern poets with a fundamentally different, artistic mode of their ancient counterparts. Schiller thinks that naive poetry attains its end of the perfect representation of actuality "by the absolute achievement of a finite" in nature (113). In contrast, the objective of a sentimental poet is "the elevation of actuality to the ideal or, . . . the *representation of the ideal*" (112), which can be achieved "by approximation to an infinite greatness" in ideas (113). This is essentially a restatement of what the Renaissance

theorists such as Tasso and Sidney regarded as the moral value of the epic. But, typical of Romantic criticism, Schiller's argument shows awareness of the limitations that underlie the longing for an ideal. At the same time, the fact that Schiller assigns this quality not specifically to the epic but to sentimental poetry in general signals the epic's waning prominence among kinds of literature.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche casts light upon another aspect of the epic's cultural importance. He argues that Greek tragedy originates in the synthesis of the Apollinian healing power of dreams and illusions with the Dionysian impulse for the destruction of individuation and return to the primordial oneness of existence. Because he focuses on the early Greek civilization, the epic here designates only the Homeric poems. Following Schiller's notion of naive poetry, Nietzsche further speculates on it by correlating naive sensibility with the Apollinian culture. According to him, the Homeric epos exemplifies the Apollinian art before Greece was invaded by the impetuous force of Dionysian rites. As a piece of naive art, it embodies "the highest effect of Apollinian culture" that must have overcome "an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering" by way of "the most forceful and pleasurable illusions."²⁸ Nietzsche thus interprets the Olympian gods as the reflected images of the Greeks transfigured in a higher sphere of beauty. He assumes that, through this mirroring, the mortals feel deserving of glory in life; in turn, leaving life, especially leaving it early, causes real pain to the Homeric heroes, as we witness in the words of Achilles' shade. Grief here "becomes a song of praise" of existence worth living through (43). Homer as "the Apollinian naïve artist" (48) is "unutterably sublime" because of his "consummate immersion in the beauty of mere appearance" at the moment of the complete victory of "the Hellenic will" over "its artistically correlative talent for suffering and for the wisdom of suffering" (44).

In this sense, Nietzsche thinks that, from a collective viewpoint, Homer "bears the same relation to this Apollinian folk culture as the individual dream artist does to the dream faculty of the people and of nature in general" (44). Accordingly, echoing Vico, Nietzsche regards "the dreaming Greeks as Homers and Homer as a dreaming Greek" (39). By this mirroring, the poet is kept from identifying with his creatures. As a result, "the power of the epic-Apollinian" is so marvelous that "before our eyes it

transforms the most terrible things by the joy in mere appearance and in redemption through mere appearance" (83). For instance, the angry Achilles remains no more than an image to the poet, and he enjoys the hero's angry expression "with the dreamer's pleasure in illusion" (50). Because Homer "visualizes so much more vividly" than bad poets who "talk so abstractly about poetry" (64), Nietzsche defines the style and form in the Homeric poems with such words as "clarity," "firmness," and "precision" (66, 67, 73).

From this point of view, tragedy is "epic in nature" as far as the chorus "ever anew discharges itself in an Apollinian world of images" and emits "a dream apparition" in the form of the dialogue (65). Objectified thus on the stage, Dionysus wearing a mask of "an erring, striving, suffering individual" speaks "as an epic hero, almost in the language of Homer" (73, 67). As "the objectification of a Dionysian state" of dismemberment causing "the agonies of individuation," however, tragedy "represents not Apollinian redemption through mere appearance but, on the contrary, the shattering of the individual and his fusion with primal being" (65, 73). In this respect, tragedy is "separated, as by a tremendous chasm, from the epic" (65).

In a word, Nietzsche conceives of the epic as a lucid image-product of an Apollinian dream-illusion that disguises the essentially horrible nature of existence, in order to provide a contrast to tragedy that discloses it with the Dionysian "frank, undissembling gaze of truth" through recourse to the projective mediation of Apollinian art (74). Nietzsche also thinks that the spirit of tragedy voiced to perfection by Aeschylus and Sophocles has departed when Euripidean inflammatory drama of "[c]ivic mediocrity" and Socratic cold reasoning of "[o]ptimistic dialectic" took over "Dionysian ecstasies" and "Apollinian contemplation" (77, 92, 83).

The question then is whether the epic can be viewed as a literary form of such a "naïve," cheerful nature totally devoid of Dionysian insight into the mystery of life. Nietzsche's idea of the epic is doubtful even if the discussion concerns only the Homeric poems, not to mention the epic tradition after them. Nietzsche here seems to be philosophizing, to the advantage of tragedy, what Goethe says about the difference between epic and tragic writers: the former appeal to the imagination of the audience whereas the latter should visualize everything, including narrated events, to create far more vivid impressions on the audi-

ence. But, reflecting Aristotle, Goethe also says that the epic and tragedy deal with the different aspects of the same topics and worlds, suggesting that, thematically, there can be tragic elements in the epic and vice versa. Furthermore, as we shall see shortly in our discussion of poetic approaches to the epic, Hegel argues the tragic quality in the epic. Although relative optimism might be an element that marks off the epic from tragedy, the epic certainly does not lack the "terrifying view of the world" and the "susceptibility to suffering" in Nietzsche's own terms. His contribution to our discussion of the philosophical nature of the epic, however, lies in his emphasis on the epic's therapeutic power over mortal anxiety *de profundis*.

With the ever growing importance of the novel, it is inevitable for twentieth-century criticism to attempt establishing a generic identity for it in relation to the older, existing genres, especially the epic. *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) by Georg Lukács is a prominent example of such an attempt. Lukács admits the transgeneric nature of contemporary literature, saying that "[a]rtistic genres now cut across one another, with a complexity that cannot be disentangled."²⁹ Still, he points out the traits of the epic in relation to drama (tragedy), the novel, and the lyric.

According to Lukács, what the epic represents is not simply the Aristotelian unity of action but "the extensive totality of life," in contrast to drama that gives form to "the intensive totality of essence" (46). Because the world functions as "an ultimate principle," the epic cannot go beyond "the breadth and depth, the rounded, sensual, richly ordered nature of life as historically given" (46). Therefore, epic forms "can never of their own accord charm something into life that was not already present in it," and the "indestructible bond with reality *as it is*" decisively distinguishes the epic from drama (47). Lukács here emphasizes the comprehensiveness of life the epic should exhibit as well as the historically circumscribed reality that should bar irrational elements from the epic's subject matter. In terms of character, the character in drama is "the intelligible 'I'" who can psychologically embody the normative force of the "should be," whereas the character in the epic is "the empirical 'I'" in whom "it remains a 'should be'" (47–48). Since "[t]he 'should be' kills life" (48), or in Nietzsche's terms, moral force is "a will to negate life,"³⁰ the hero in drama carries out "the symbolic ceremony of dying" (48), but the hero in the epic must live to fulfill his given situation. Lukács

thus acknowledges the epic hero's dilemma between moral perfection and human nature that resists it. Echoing Vico's argument about the epic of virtue as belonging only to philosophy, Lukács agrees that if an epic hero is created at the dictate of moral force, he cannot but be "a shadow of the living epic man of historical reality," and his world "a watered-down copy of reality" (48).

Continuing his comparison between the epic and tragedy, Lukács says that the subject and the object are clearly distinct from each other in the epic, as they are not in drama, for the totality of life can appear only as what the object reveals. On the one hand, in the great epics, the "life-mastering arrogance" of the subject is "transformed . . . into humility, contemplation, speechless wonder at the luminous meaning which . . . has become visible to him, an ordinary human being in the midst of ordinary life" (50). On the other hand, because the notion of totality is not transcendental in the epic, the object of some epic forms can not be the totality but only an autonomous fragment of life. In such cases, "the subject confronts the object in a more dominant and self-sufficient way" (50). Lukács calls such basically lyrical works "minor epic forms" (50), including the short story and lyric-epic forms. The lyricism of the short story consists in the "pure selection" of a segment of life (51). The lyric-epic forms show "not the totality of life but the artist's relationship with that totality" when "the artist enters the arena of artistic creation as the empirical subject in all its greatness but also with all its creaturely limitations" (53).

But when the subject alone dominates existence, the objective world collapses while the subject also becomes a fragment and is "lost in the insubstantiality of its self-created world of ruins" (53). Exceptionally, such "creative subjectivity" is found in a great epic (53). The subject is then able to enjoy "the grace of having the whole revealed to it" as long as it modestly functions as "a purely receptive organ of the world" (53), because "the totality of life resists any attempt to find a transcendental centre within it, and refuses any of its constituent cells the right to dominate it" (54). An obvious example is Dante's trilogy with its central figure enjoying the providential favor that shows him the entirety of the universe. But if the subject is far removed from the empirical reality of life and "becomes enthroned in the pure heights of essence," an epic cannot be created, for "the epic is life, immanence, the empirical" (54). In this sense, for Lukács, Dante's *Paradiso* appears as less epic.

As to verse, although Lukács admits it not to be a "decisive genre-defining criterion" (56), he recognizes considerable significance in it as indicative of the true nature of epic and tragedy. In tragedy, verse is "sharp and hard, it isolates, it creates distance," and it places the heroes "in the full depth of their solitude" (56). Tragic verse also exposes any triviality in the writing. Close to the Nietzschean concept of epic cheerfulness through Apollinian mirroring, epic verse contrastingly creates the distance of "happiness and lightness," because the verse lets loose "the bonds that tie men and objects to the ground" (57). Heaviness as a triviality of life is eliminated in the epic, while the triviality of lightness is heterogeneous to tragedy. Therefore, the epic with its verse ought to "sing of the blessedly existent totality of life" (58). Lukács' discussion of the epic and drama is thus distinct in pointing out the presence of lyricism in some epics, recognizing the *Divine Comedy* as a major epic though in a modified sense, and regarding verse as an important, but dispensable element of the epic. His view of epic verse as liberating people from earthly bondage, which is a deliberate contrast to the seriousness of tragic verse, parallels Nietzsche's notion of not only epic cheerfulness but also the therapeutic power of the epic over mortal miseries.

Since verse is not a decisive genre-delimiting factor, Lukács considers the epic and the novel "two major forms of great epic literature" (56). He defines the novel as "the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). In relation to this point, Lukács thinks that the detachment created by epic verse is not decisive but tentative as a liberating force. The lightness in the epic is "a positive value and a reality-creating force," only if all the restraints of terrestrial heaviness have already been cast off while people do not forget "their enslavement in the lovely play of a liberated imagination" (58). Lukács thus revises the Nietzschean concept of the epic by laying stress on the severity of mortal existence that underlies the lightness of epic verse as well as on the need to have mortal constraints constantly in mind. When that kind of lightness is no longer provided in the epic, verse is replaced by prose that can take in "the fetters and the freedom, the given heaviness and the conquered lightness" with its plastic flexibility and its rhythm-free austerity (59). For instance, "the disintegration of a reality-become-song led, in Cervantes' prose, to the sorrowful lightness of a great epic, whereas

the serene dance of Ariosto's verse remained mere lyrical play" (59). Lukács here considers *Orlando Furioso*, which diverts itself in the frivolity of imagination, less an epic than *Don Quixote*, which, though humorously written in prose, maintains a sad, steady gaze at reality. This criterion that hinges on mortal gravity can be used to distinguish the epic from romance.

Lukács argues that what essentially distinguishes the epic from the novel is how each genre approaches the world that it represents. The epic shows "a totality of life that is rounded from within," whereas the novel attempts "to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life" (60). Therefore, "the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivised as the psychology of the novel's heroes" who are "seekers" (60). If the goals of the search or the way to them are "given in a psychologically direct and solid manner," this "givenness" implies crime or madness (60–61). In comparison, the epic, along with tragedy, has little to do with crime and madness. The world of the epic is either a "perfect theodicy" or "a purely childlike one" in which a violation of social code entails perpetually exchanged revenge (61). The only insanity the epic comprehends is the "language of a superworld that possesses no other means of expression" (61). It is obvious, then, that what Lukács has in mind as typical of the epic proper does not go much beyond the first two segments of the *Divine Comedy* and the Homeric poems.

In terms of central figures, the individual hero in the novel is "the product of polemical self-contemplation by the lost and lonely personality" (67). He is estranged from the rest of the world because he frames "[t]he autonomous life of interiority" at the time when individuation has made "an unbridgeable chasm" between people (66). In contrast, the epic hero is, "strictly speaking, never an individual," because his world is "internally homogeneous" (66). Therefore, individuality in the epic is a matter of "a balance between the part and the whole, mutually determining one another" (66). Lukács further asserts that, in such a communal organism where one cannot detect sharp, qualitative differences among people, significance is placed quantitatively upon a suprapersonal social unit such as a nation or a family. The epic hero must be a king to bear "the weight of the bonds linking an individual destiny to a totality" (67), and he is never a lonely figure in this linkage. On the one hand, Lukács thus expresses the importance of the communal dimension in the epic. On the other hand, recalling Aristotle's notion of the epic (and tragic) hero as a

high-ranked figure, Lukács' idea reveals again its limited scope based on the classical models. At the same time, this idea contradicts his view of the *Divine Comedy*, in which Dante as the central figure is an exile and does not belong to the ruling class, rendering Dante's poem an exceptional case of the epic.

Finally, according to Lukács, the episodic nature of the epic, including the *in medias res* beginning, as well as the inconclusive ending, is symptomatic of the genre's indifference to architectural composition. Loosely related to the central plot, an introduced episode "does not endanger the unity of the whole and yet has obvious organic existence" (68). With his rigorously architectural composition, Dante is once again a great exception. In spite of his work's "perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic," his characters are "already individuals, consciously and energetically placing themselves in opposition to a reality that is becoming closed to them" (68). They are no longer "the organic part-unities" of the older epic but "hierarchically ordered, autonomous parts" (68). Because of this integration of epical and novelistic elements, Lukács locates Dante as a transitional writer from the epic proper to the novel, thereby reiterating his view of the *Divine Comedy* as a great epic only in a modified sense.

As a whole, Lukács' discourse on the epic and the novel is significant in four main respects. First, it presents the epic as a category that, defying conventional demarcations, comprehends the novel in the broad sense. Then, the epic can certainly be a transgeneric concept. Because of Lukács' narrow understanding of typical epics, however, the epic is actually contrasted to the novel with such features as the self-enclosed entirety of life and the homogeneity of inner life. This inherent dichotomy foreshadows the reversed comprehension of the epic by the novel, which eventually happens in the general perception of genres as the novel gains enormous popularity. Second, Lukács' consistent stress on "the extensive totality of life" that the epic is supposed to exhibit points to the extremely broad, nonfanciful dimension of the epic world. But the question largely remains how such comprehensive understanding of life should be presented. Third, if the transgeneric epic should present "the extensive totality of life" with an increasingly novelistic mode, this poses a serious problem concerning the central figure: how to reconnect the individuated, lonely figure to the rest of the world without allowing the epic hero to insubstantiate the objective world with his dom-

inant "creative subjectivity." Lastly, unlike most theorists since the Renaissance, Lukács candidly, if reservedly, deals with the epical standing of Dante's trilogy, thereby rendering his definition of the epic more intelligible.

The philosophical debates of the epic thus center on two issues. One is the existence of an epic of war versus an epic of peace. The epic of war has been predominantly foregrounded in both practice and theory, while the epic of peace only remains potential in the arguments that oppose bellicose mentality. At the same time, however, it is generally held that epic production was discontinued a few centuries ago. In effect, this meant a general rejection of war-oriented epic, which had dominated the genre, as unsuitable for modern civilization. I will argue that, in reverse proportion to the decline of war-oriented epic, the urge for realizing an epic of peace has been steadily growing. Second, the debates tend to confer significance of the highest kind upon the epic for presenting a cultural model, providing humans with a remedy for their fundamental anxiety, or revealing a far-reaching view of life in its wholeness. But the legitimacy of such generic prominence cannot go unquestioned when the genre was actually eclipsed by the emergence of other genres, especially the novel. I will try to reestablish the significance of the epic in recent times by proposing a broad concept of the epic that comprehends conventional generic domains.

Poetic Approaches to the Epic

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, "a poetic approach" implies an analysis of features intrinsic to the epic as a literary mode. By nature, a poetic approach tends to be normative in the specifics of epic creation. The most influential example is found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which, while refuting some of Plato's arguments about poetry, Aristotle makes a number of important references to the epic, which he compares with tragedy. Aristotle does not regard verse as an essential element of poetry, and he consigns the elements of rhythm and harmony to a secondary position. Accordingly, he states that "Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common but the metre, so that it would be right to call the one poet, the other physicist rather than poet."³¹ Likewise, he argues that "[t]he work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it" (9.2).