**Review: *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* by Herbert F. Tucker**

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The gavel of literary historical judgement has long pounded into us the idea that, after Milton, 'the epic impulse left poetry for the novel'. Yet Herbert F. Tucker's *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* reminds us that such an idea about epic poetry, like others we have about literary history, remains 'too smooth to be true.' The book chronicles the works of numerous major, minor, and middling nineteenth-century British poets who continued to answer the ancient muse well into the industrial age.

But Tucker's *Epic* is more than a curio cabinet of dead literary anachronisms. True to his subject, he narrates epic's vicissitudes through the century as though it were a battle landscape, in analogy-rich language with no middle flight, where epic poems can be airlifted in and out of cultural embargoes. Here the many switchbacks between the Enlightenment and modernism are mapped as 'an historical continuum,' which seems daring amid our modernity that decries over-arching or unifying narratives. Indeed, aware that he writes amid the selfsame cultural valorisation of the fragmentary that had a hand in dislodging the epic from its pre-eminence, Tucker feels compelled, in an introductory chapter, to apologize for the epic scale of his book in advance.

Such an apology, stated or implied, is typical of poets who have the cheek to simultaneously acknowledge the current zeitgeist and, at the same moment, keep an eye on the broader picture of their civilization's perceived continual unfolding. This paradox becomes a key trait of epic throughout the book, which cites late eighteenth century claims that the Iliad succeeds because it paradoxically represents 'those feelings, which are common to every age and country,' and yet also 'the character of the times.' According to Tucker it is largely by this means that poets achieve the very idea of epic, namely to 'tell a sponsoring culture its own story, from a vantage whose privilege

transpires through the successful articulation of a collective identity that links origins to destinies.' Epic responds to both systems in process as well as the story of the system itself, dialectically engaging with its culture by reflecting it, representing it, and, as if from on high, issuing normative prescriptions for it. Thus upheavals in science and society in the long nineteenth century in Britain – the rise and fall of Napoleon, revolution and invasion scenarios, inter-class hostilities, trains and telegraphs, electricity and empire, the second law of thermodynamics – all challenged epic poets to stay both current and within the tradition. Blake, Scott, Byron, Tennyson, both Brownings, Eliot, Morris and a host of others manage to pull this off and thus maintain cultural relevance in their time and beyond.

Yet crucial to its value are the little-known poets who inhabit this book by the score. We might remain unsurprised to hear how Blake's epics of the 1790s radically recast the American and French Revolutions into conflicting mythic visions of still-clashing versions of recent history, or how the 'realm-extending, norm-policing, centralized bureaucracy of the Round Table' of Tennyson's *Idylls* summon Victorian Britain's ambivalent attitude to its fast-growing empire. Yet Tucker is always saying more, and his appraisals of lesser-known works register some lower-lying literary topographies, giving us context better to see (or question) the canonical summits as such, or generally to comprehend the polyvocal tumult of the literary-historical landscape. Blake, for instance, is better understood in the context of the kindred works of his lesser-known contemporaries. Unlike Blake's *America: A Prophecy*, James Brown's *Britain Preserved* cheers the British side in the American Revolution and waxes defensive about thus dressing up yesterday's news in the grandiose trappings of epic. Joseph Cottle and Henry Pye choose to re-tell such Georgian era events, and the onset of the Act of Union, through their respective competing epics narrating the 900-year-old events of the life of Alfred the Great. Blake's reportage, next to these and others, succeeds in making events of yesterday's news seem 'reverse-telescopically remote' and fraught with mythic presence.

While Tucker's reappraisal of many of these forgotten works simply reaffirms the canon, he at times redeems and rehabilitates with admiration some few neglected authors

who, many simply because they dared to delve into the epic genre, have long been consigned to an epic-sized blind spot in our collective literary memory. Yet his net is cast so widely, taking in such strangely exotic catches as *The Viking: An Epic* by Zavarr (the nom de plume of William Bennett) or Hannah Tapfield King's *An Epic Poem: A Synopsis of the Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, that one is bound to think that he has overlooked more standard fare. For instance, one might question why he left out James Thomson's oft-anthologised *The City of Dreadful Night* for the reason he gives, that it did not follow a narrative or storyline, when several of Blake's admittedly hazy-plotted visions are given due ink. A clearer taxonomy separating out epics from pseudo-epics might have been useful, but it would have also admitted a thousand generic 'long poems' into an already epic sized tome.

But indeed, this question of what constitutes an epic pervades Tucker's *Epic*, which shows how epics themselves have tried to answer it by way of centuries of repeated self-reinvention. Tucker repeatedly logs the stresses and strains in the idea of epic in the face of many upheavals in British society and culture, which caused epic to reassess or temporarily lose its grounding. In the face of Britain's several nineteenth century identity crises, such as the lead-up to the Peterloo Massacre, epic accordingly evinced a similar identity crisis, becoming on occasion 'para-epic.' Similarly, as the nineteenth century became increasingly a story or 'hyper-myth' about imperial, technological or evolutionary progress, epic occasionally became hard pressed to do anything but simply follow suit and patriotically showcase civilisation's moralizing or proselytising improvement. In such circumstances the epics that pitted themselves against their epoch and maintained their traditional relation to the tragic, such as the Miltonic 'Temptation and fall' narrative of Southey's *Madoc* or the Victorian transvaluations of Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*, offered a prescription for their civilization's own continuance or perhaps even amelioration – paradoxically by questioning ceaseless progress itself.