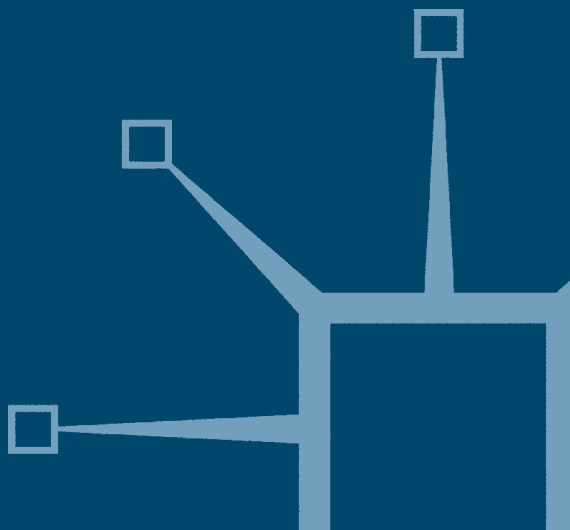


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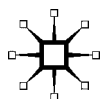
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*For my mother,
with love and gratitude*

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Introduction: What is the Epic?

This book seeks to describe the history of the epic in Western culture, ending with evocations of the epic in literature and film in the English-speaking world. In order to do so, it must first ask the obvious question: What is the epic? Unfortunately, however, there is no equally obvious answer. Ours is an age in which 'epic' describes not just the likes of the *Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost*, but a bewildering range of texts, in the loosest sense of the word. The label 'epic' is applied today to contemporary novels, Hollywood blockbusters and rock songs, as well as 'real-life' events: sporting contests, corporate takeovers, political elections, court cases.¹ At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the epic, or at least the label 'epic', is ubiquitous. How, then, do we deal with this ubiquity? We could presume that the label has become useless in its frequency, merely an overexposed and imprecise adjective suggesting size and significance. Or, intrigued by the polysemy of the word, we could look more closely at it, for it reveals two things. It suggests a modern or, more accurately, postmodern fascination with the epic, and a need to invoke it in all kinds of texts and situations. It also suggests an accumulation of definitions, a piling on, as it were, of different meanings from different points in the epic's history. Thus, the epic's efflorescence today is, first, an intriguing moment in its development and, second, a reflection of that development; that is, a reflection of past moments. Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to investigate fully the plurality of responses, both past and present. In other words, rather than searching for a single definition of the epic, it is more fruitful to move beyond definitions. Instead of throwing up our hands in despair over the epic's apparent indeterminacy, we could attempt to engage with that very indeterminacy.

It is easy to think that the problems of defining the epic lie primarily with the epic itself. After all, a simple definition of the epic would have to account

for the endless variations displayed by all the texts currently considered epic, even if we restrict ourselves to the literary canon. Yet, to attempt a detailed definition, adding as many features as possible to the list, is to render it unwieldy and, what is more, potentially self-contradictory. For example, the simple definition of the epic as a long heroic and nationalistic poem would include Virgil's *Aeneid* but exclude Dante's *Divina Commedia*, while the reference to heroism would subsume the Homeric epics but might create problems for *Paradise Lost*. Inversely, to scale down the definition and to work with just one or two prerequisites is to cease to have a definition at all. For example, to define the epic simply as a long poem is to rely on a single and therefore useless criterion, since length is a feature of many works of literature not considered to be epics. The fact is that so many of the characteristics we associate with epic – great length, awe-inspiring heroism, nationalism – are traits that the form has displayed at some times but not at others. The fact is that epic itself is changeful and indeterminate.

To understand fully the indeterminacy of the epic, we must look beyond the epic, to the issue of genre. This is because the question of what the epic is, and indeed the very validity of that question, is based on larger problems about genre and how it functions. The difficulties faced in defining the epic are not peculiar to the epic at all, but are to be faced in defining any genre, and in defining genre itself.

Genre has long been conceived as a hierarchical system, a taxonomy of categories, a collection of boxes to be filled with texts. Such a view is based – very loosely, as Gérard Genette has shown – on the writings of Plato and Aristotle.² Plato stipulated that a work of art can be represented in one of just three ways, while Aristotle's *Poetics* discusses literature according to whether it is epic or tragic. When genre theory arose in earnest in the Renaissance critics, first in Italy and then in France and England, these ideas enabled a tripartite scheme of literary divisions – epic, tragedy and comic – with the possibility of various subdivisions.³ More significantly, they facilitated the interpretation of genres as fixed and separate literary forms, which prevailed at least until the end of the neoclassical age. With the onset of Romanticism, though, generic rules, with their implications of generic purity and uniformity, were largely rejected. Yet even the Romantics, who challenged so many of the hierarchies and taxonomies of their predecessors, retained a pseudo-Platonic-Aristotelian sense of generic intrinsicity, the idea that a genre could be distilled to its essence.⁴ As Jean-Marie Schaeffer has shown, this meant that the Romantics preserved the notion of fixed and timeless definitions for given genres, as well as maintained a simplistic model of texts 'belonging to' these ideal genres.⁵

These two closely related assumptions – that a given genre is a fixed entity and that it offers a set of criteria for texts – have, as we have seen, their share of inconsistencies. For one thing, those criteria are not as easily applied in practice. More worrying than the issue of applicability, however, is the question of authority. The existence of unchangeable generic criteria smacks of prescriptivism, of the suffocation of authorial (or textual) autonomy and the penalisation of originality. Generic criteria would seem, in other words, to be inimical to literature itself. To conceive of genre as fixed criteria is to do the notion of genre itself a disservice, opening it up to charges of pernicious narrow-mindedness. And such charges have indeed been made, most recently by Jacques Derrida, who describes what he calls the ‘law of genre’ thus: ‘as soon as genre announces **itself**, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity’.⁶ For Derrida, genre imposes limits, but literature necessarily takes place just outside these limits; thus genre ‘put[s] to death the very thing that it engenders’.⁷

Derrida’s criticism, however, is a little late in coming, as it fails to consider that the idea of genres as fixed criteria became increasingly outmoded in the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is no longer possible, or desirable, in conducting a genre-based analysis such as this to ignore developments in genre studies of the last half of the previous century. Such recent developments have their basis in the writings of European formalists and structuralists in the early twentieth century. Though distinct in many ways, formalist and structuralist attitudes to genre are properly discussed together, since, as David Duff helpfully notes, ‘the distinction between the two methodologies is especially hard to preserve in the area of genre theory, which almost by definition partakes of both’.⁸

One important conceptual breakthrough owed to formalism and structuralism is the application of Saussurean linguistics to genre studies. Saussure’s notion of *langue* and *parole* – *langue* referring to the system of language and *parole* to the individual utterance – is easily adaptable to the relationship between genre and text. Structuralist genre studies, such as the work of Tzvetan Todorov, foreground the way an agreed system of signs enables communication to take place.⁹ It reminds us, in other words, that genre provides a shared set of rules to facilitate both the production and the interpretation of a given text, just as an agreed linguistic system of signs enables communication to take place. Another significant development in this direction is the work of E. D. Hirsch, which presents genre as a kind of middle term between *langue* and *parole*. For Hirsch, language contains numerous types of utterances; genre is a type of utterance and is therefore

contained by *langue* but governs the interpretation of *parole*.¹⁰ The difference between Hirsch and Todorov is not a profoundly conceptual one – Hirsch simply preserves the idea of *langue* as an overriding language system rather than using it as a convenient analogy for genre. What both approaches share are the emphasis on genre as an aid to communication and the reminder that there can be no understanding of a text without generic expectations to serve as a foundation for that understanding. In other words, genre, rather than establishing a set of rules, provides a theory of what a text is, for both authors and readers, which forms the basis for a *contract* between them.

Another important contribution made by Russian formalism to the study of genre is the notion of the evolutionary or, more accurately, revolutionary nature of literature and hence of genre. It must be noted, however, that it was the European Romantics who first emphasised the importance of historicity to studies of genre – it was Hegel, for example, who pointed out that literature, and genres with it, was capable of evolution. Yet, Hegel's theory of generic evolution is also a theory of generic organicism; it is about texts becoming, developing into, achieving generic fulfilment.¹¹ It therefore preserves generic intrinsicality. Generic revolution, on the other hand, foregrounds change as fundamental to genre and precludes generic intrinsicality. In the twentieth century, historicist theories of genre have vacillated between these evolutionist (or organicist) and revolutionist concepts of genre. To the former belongs Northrop Frye's highly stylised paradigm of generic development as a complex cycle of stages.¹² Also evolutionist, though less extreme, is Alastair Fowler's hypothesis that genres live and decay over a brief period of time, which presupposes relatively coherent and stable genres – after all, for Fowler, incoherence and instability are what bring about generic death.¹³ More flexible and revolutionist are the recent writings of Hans Robert Jauss and Ralph Cohen, who describe genres as open, unpredictable and constantly changing. For Jauss, 'the conflict between the authoritative generic norm and the immanent poetics [of a text] can become precisely the motive force that keeps the historical process of the genre moving'.¹⁴ In other words, generic change is propelled by the disparity between conservative canonical forces and a radical text, and is thus a matter of revolution rather than evolution. According to Cohen:

[Classifications] are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes. Such groupings are always in terms of distinctions and interrelations, and they form a system or community of genres. The purposes they serve are

social and aesthetic. Groupings arise at particular historical moments, and as they include more and more members, they are subject to repeated redefinitions or abandonment.¹⁵

Significantly, this is not so very different from Derrida's insistence that literature and genre occur at the very moment of the collapse of generic boundaries – what Derrida labels 'degenerescence'.¹⁶ What is important is that this historicist and revolutionist genre theory, instead of forbidding experimentation as inimical to genre, recognises it as central to genre. In other words, the approaches taken by Jauss and Cohen enable the idea that genre, far from being fixed, is itself a *process*.

These conceptions of genre – as *contract* and as *process* – challenge the idea that genre and text relate to each other simply as whole and part. To think of genre as theory, for example, is to think of the utterance or text (*parole*) as received and understood by referring to past utterances or texts of that type or genre (*langue*). Each of these utterances or texts does not necessarily possess identical characteristics to every other; they simply resemble each other in a chain. The analogy most usefully invoked, then, is that of Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances', according to which members of a group can display any number of a given set of features.¹⁷ The idea of genre as process, as temporally determined, reiterates this. The 'whole' and its 'parts' are unstable. Certain textual characteristics may meaningfully contribute to a genre in one epoch but not in another. They are tangentially, not intricately, linked. In Jean-Marie Schaeffer's words:

The different texts that we integrate into a genre are often linked by simple 'family resemblances' in Wittgenstein's sense: they do not all necessarily share the same recurrent characteristic or characteristics, but a given text shares some characteristics with some of its 'congeners', some other characteristics with other 'congeners'. Thus a text p shares the bundle of traits A with texts q and r; q in turn shares traits B (different from A) with s, which, furthermore, shares part of traits A with q and r; r in turn, in addition to the A traits that it shares with p, shares other traits C with it and with s, etc. In other words, a genre is far from forming a univocal class; it is formed of several networks of partial resemblances that, through a process of overlapping, form the literary genre in its historical variability.¹⁸

The idea of genre as both process and contract may appear to be self-contradictory, however, if we consider that a contract must be temporally

stable in order to be binding. The contradiction is especially acute if we focus on the author's (or text's) generic intentions rather than the reader's generic expectations. In other words, if we imagine that the author's (or text's) meaning can be truly appreciated only if a certain kind of interpretation is made, regardless of the reader's historical position, then the contract can never change or evolve. Certainly, this is inherent in Hirsch's formulation of genre as theory, specifically of genre as contract. Hirsch insists on the existence of fixed, 'intrinsic' genres, positing these as the only way to ensure textual determinacy and hence interpretative validity. Yet, there is a way to resolve the contradiction. We could imagine a contract that can change, by focusing on the reader's, rather than the author's, side of the equation. This is what Jauss does with his approach of 'rezeption Aesthetik', that is, the aesthetics of reception. For Jauss, the contract that is genre is shaped by the reader's expectations. This suggests that there is more than one contract, not as many as there are readers, but certainly as many as there are groups of readers. And this suggests that the contract can and will change over time. For Jauss, indeed, genre's historicity and its contractual nature are causally linked – genre evolves because of its social dimension.¹⁹

What, then, of an analysis of epic as a genre? If genre is a shared set of expectations and if that set itself changes over time, then a discussion of the epic should ask the following questions: What were the expectations – both productive and interpretative – at the time of writing of a certain text? What major changes have taken place on the interpretative side of that equation, as new texts appear? To ask these questions is not to seek a single definition of the epic, but to understand it, and indeed to understand any genre, as a totality that exists both across time and between textual producers and interpreters.

For all this, though, it must be borne in mind that this totality of genre is being understood and analysed from the critic's vantage point, that is, from the present time, from our place at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In other words, this study is primarily concerned with what we understand the epic to be at this point in time, and how that understanding has been shaped by productive and interpretative moments in past time. The epic, as far as there is such a thing, is the accumulation of texts and of ideas over time, with some ideas maintained and others shed. Thus, we must take into account the authorial intentions as well as the critical receptions of specific texts, which constitute the contract that is genre. But because the generic contract is subject to change, we must keep track of the nature of that change, comparing any contractual moment with the moments that have come before. The ultimate aim is a comparative analysis of generic

development, almost a series of snapshots, in the belief that this is all that can be said about what the epic has been and therefore is.

Our discussion of the epic will begin with the earliest known epic – the epic of *Gilgamesh*. Dating in its oral form to 2000 BC, *Gilgamesh* contains that element that we perhaps most closely connect to epic – heroism. For *Gilgamesh* sets out, as so many subsequent epics do, a narrative of great and courageous deeds against the backdrop of watershed historical and even prehistorical events. Though considerably little is known about the precise connection between the literature of the ancient Near East and the ancient Greeks, it is possible to acknowledge *Gilgamesh* as a forerunner to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and therefore to see how epic heroism becomes consolidated in the classical Greek tradition. The Homeric poems precede the very concept of the epic, and hence define it. Such is the case with the earliest epic theory, inaugurated by Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is only with Virgil's attempts to emulate Homer in the *Aeneid*, and thus to translate the Homeric poems into a Roman context, that the epic tradition begins in earnest.

Virgil casts a long shadow over the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Crucially, however, the pre-eminence he enjoyed in the Renaissance (something very like the pre-eminence enjoyed by Homer among the ancient Greeks and Romans) is tempered by an anxiety over his pre-Christian, even unchristian, provenance. The Homeric conventions consolidated by Virgil, particularly the heroism displayed by Aeneas, find themselves modulated to a Christian sensibility. The search for a Christianised form of heroism is what motivates, for example, the spiritual and autobiographical tendencies of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. But, more importantly, the pagan origins of epic come face-to-face, in the Renaissance, with the Christianised form that is the medieval romance. The ensuing battle between epic and romance manifests itself in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The result is the allegorising of the epic form, as it seeks to accommodate romance elements and Christian mores within existing epic conventions. Thus, the knightly quest of romance comes to provide an alibi for narrating the Christian soul's progress towards heaven. The allegorical romance-epic of the Renaissance is soon overturned, however, by the direct Christianising impulse of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Eschewing the indirectness of allegory, Milton turns the epic into a vehicle for nothing less than divine truth.

Where epic is concerned, however, *Paradise Lost* is not the only watershed event to take place towards the end of the Renaissance. Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, often deemed the first novel, constitutes an important moment in the history of the epic, not least because of its determinedly anti-epic drive.

It is a direct ancestor of the 'comic epics' of the eighteenth century, most notably Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, and hence of the modern novel. It is, in other words, an important instigator of the split between epic and novel that takes place at the start of the eighteenth century.

If *Don Quixote* heralds one path taken by epic – the innovatory impulse that eventually turns into the novel – then *Paradise Lost* signals another, more conservative trajectory. Milton exerts a strong influence, both positively and negatively, over epic attempts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As if paralysed by Milton's formidable transformation of the epic into the prophetic, the majority of epic activity in the eighteenth century takes the form of translation and parody, and, although it produces landmark epic translations and mock-epics by the likes of John Dryden and Alexander Pope, it could be argued that it results in very little real innovation.

It is in the nineteenth century that Milton's prophetic example provides the inspiration for a distinctly Romantic form of truth-telling, that of self-development. A need for an everyday anti-epic heroism, a heroism of the self, that had manifested itself in Fielding's Cervantine novels, now emerges in the Romantic epics of Wordsworth, Keats and Byron, with their emphasis on the poet-hero and his quest for poetic power. The question of selfhood – more specifically, the question of how self-development occurs in tandem with social demands – becomes the focus for Victorian epics. Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning purports to reconcile self and society in *Aurora Leigh*, the tension between the two, and indeed the instability that inheres in selfhood, haunts a range of late nineteenth-century works in the epic tradition, from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*.

Such an awareness of the polyvalence of subjectivity is, in the twentieth century, the defining characteristic of epic. Modernist poets invested in an interpretation of epic – derived from a perhaps misplaced nostalgia for the classical – as a comprehensive expression of an age. The epic becomes, in the early twentieth century, a vehicle for conveying the increasing confusion, fragmentation and slippages in perception that constitute the Modernist ethos. The Modernist epic may be the expression of the age, but that age is construed as lacking in unity and coherence, and, potentially, lacking in heroism. This new form of epic has persisted throughout the twentieth century, emerging in recent works such as Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Tom Paulin's *Invasion Handbook*.

Finally, in the twentieth century, the name of epic occurs in conjunction with another art form – film. The final chapter in this history considers the development of what is the distinct but related genre of epic film. The form

undergoes its own generic trajectory from early historical film to increasingly extravagant demonstrations of spectacle and special effects first in the mid-twentieth century and then at the beginning of the twenty-first. None the less, the links between literary epic and epic film are evident in a shared concern with heroism and grandeur of scale. The epic film, this book argues, is a manifestation of the epic impulse in contemporary culture whose significance cannot be ignored.

The study of any genre, then, is a study of generic change; in the case of epic, it is necessarily a survey and analysis of the innovations and imitations that have gone into the creation of a long line of influence. In its stated aims, this book therefore differs substantially from long-standing pillars of epic scholarship, such as C. M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* and E. M. W. Tillyard's *The English Epic and Its Background*, which demonstrate an anxiousness to establish strict boundaries between epic and non-epic texts.²⁰ Such traditional studies have given rise to some simple commonplaces of epic criticism, whose usefulness, in the face of the complexity of generic behaviour, is sometimes limited. One such commonplace is the insistence that the epic has ceased to be a relevant art form, given the increasingly sophisticated and individualist worldview that comes about in the modern era. Tillyard, for example, suggests that the epic tradition 'expired at the end of the eighteenth century', to be replaced by the novel.²¹ Such a view is also found in the theories of the novel of the Marxist critic Georg Lukács and the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin.²² Certainly, it recognises the impact of historical shifts in thought on the epic, but is unfortunate in its refusal to pursue the relationship between modern works and the epic tradition that precedes them, even when they show every intention of participating in that tradition.

Another standard of traditional epic criticism – one that this book does not challenge implicitly – is the concept of primary versus secondary epic, the former defined as oral or primitive and the latter as literary. Such a distinction is a valid one, for it allows us to differentiate between the many vast oral narratives that have occurred in cultures around the world and the tradition made up of mostly literary texts that we tend to call 'epic' in the Western world. It is, however, a simple distinction that makes it easy to gloss over the complexity of the genre of epic. Furthermore, while distinguishing between the two types of epic, this assumption can have the opposite effect of grouping a vast number of quite varied texts under the umbrella term of 'epic'. It therefore fails to take account of the importance of influence and reception in the formation of genre. Such forces are the primary objects of study in this book; for this reason, a certain tradition of epic – largely literary – will be the focus here.

This study is the logical culmination of relatively recent studies of epic, which are concerned not with prescribing but with describing, specifically with exploring some of the inter-textual influences and changes that have gone into making the epic what it is. That epic persists into the modern era – a possibility pointedly denied by Tillyard's and Bowra's surveys – was amply demonstrated by such works as Thomas M. Greene's *The Descent from Heaven* and Thomas Vogler's *Preludes to Vision: The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane*.²³ Of late, epic scholarship has also shown the changes at work in epic from antiquity onwards. David Quint's *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* and Colin Burrow's *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* are two fine examples of this, which examine shifts in emphasis in the epic from antiquity to the Renaissance.²⁴ Quint traces the influence of Virgil's construction of imperial ideology while Burrow examines the changing emotional make-up of the epic hero. Some scholars have usefully reminded us, moreover, that polysemy lies at the very heart of classical epic: Susanne Lindgren Wofford has demonstrated how epic texts such as Homeric epics and Virgil's *Aeneid* set up possibilities for interrogating the epic's heroic code even as they help to construct it, and D. C. Feeney's exhaustive account of classical epic after Homer shows the richness and variety of epic constructions of gods and mortals in antiquity.²⁵ It must be pointed out, however, that I know of no single study that contemplates a range of generic changes in the epic from antiquity to modernity, ending with a contemporary medium such as cinema. None the less, two books must be mentioned as important landmarks in epic scholarship: John Newman's *The Classical Epic Tradition* chronicles the epic tradition from Homer to film within the strict parameters of the influence of the classical Greek critic Callimachus, while Paul Merchant's *The Epic* is an excellent – though now somewhat outdated – introduction.²⁶

The premise of our examination of epic, that it is essential to explore the terrain rather than stake out its boundaries, presents a final problem. The selection of texts implies criteria for selection, and the existence of criteria implies a definition of the epic, but this study rests on the notion that there is no fixed definition of epic. It must be conceded here that a selection of texts will always precede a full-length discussion of genre, and, to some extent, a set of criteria will precede that selection.²⁷ These criteria exist *a priori* to the analysis and, in this case, consist only of the contemporary critical consensus about what texts are to be labelled epics.

This does enable, however, another tautology. This study aims to shed light on our current understanding of the epic by examining a series of texts, but that series will have to be selected based on our current understanding

of epic. The sticking point is the misperception that the aim of this study is a definition, an explanation, a revelation, of the epic. It is therefore possible to refute any charges of inconsistency and tautology by refusing to think of genre and text – the idea of the epic and the epics in question, or the epic as we understand it now and the epics of the past – as two sides of an equation and therefore two components in an unbreakable circuit. That is, the objective here is mere description of texts and textual relationships, with no ensuing discovery of the genre in question. This neutralises the problem that there has existed *a priori* to this analysis enough of an idea of what that genre is in order to select those texts.

In outlining the rationale for the selection of epic texts discussed here, a word must be said about the choice of editions and/or translations. All non-English texts are quoted in English, from easily accessible, but reliably accurate translations. This policy has the advantage of simplicity and consistency, as the texts discussed come from a wide range of languages and cultures. Similarly, all texts are cited from relatively up-to-date, scholarly editions, whose details are made explicit in the notes.

To sum up, this study will not seek to explain or to reveal or to discover the essential epic at all; nor will it attempt to catalogue comprehensively all the texts that have come to be designated as ‘epic’. But it will analyse a certain complex network marked by plurality and indeterminacy. That is what the epic is. That is as close as we can get to asking, and answering, that vexed question, ‘What is the epic?’

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The Classical Age: Beginnings

By predicating the epic on the notion of influence and inter-textual dynamics, we can trace the genre along a retrospect of influence to the eighth century BC – that is, to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer. Even then, it must be borne in mind that these Greek epics, which we attribute to Homer, were not composed in a vacuum. They were the result of an oral tradition of narratives telling of the creation of the world and of significant events in early human history. They are comparable – indeed, intimately related – to a body of stories circulating in the neighbouring Near East, among them a narrative often thought of as the earliest recorded epic: the epic of *Gilgamesh*. We begin our history of the epic, then, with *Gilgamesh*, before addressing Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Homeric influence would of course extend well beyond later classical Greek literature and thought into the age of the Roman Empire, when Homer's monumental achievements inspire, primarily, Virgil's *Aeneid*. Virgil's conscious and often meticulous imitation of Homer is the generic genuflection that establishes the epic as a living genre in the first place. Further innovation follows, and would comprise works such as Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

To trace the epic to Homer, and tentatively to *Gilgamesh* beyond it, is to discover that the epic begins as a narrative of heroic action played out against a backdrop of divine intervention. The tendency to treat 'epic' as synonymous with 'heroic poetry', therefore, has an historical justification. As Walter Ong points out in his influential discussion of orality, heroic action is central to oral expression in its function as history, precisely because it facilitates the retention of this history:

Oral memory works effectively with 'heavy' characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public...not for

romantic reasons or reflectively didactic reasons but for much more basic reasons: to organize experience in some sort of permanently memorable form. Colorless personalities do not survive oral mnemonics.¹

The heroic element of epic poetry is perhaps its primary defining characteristic. As the epic evolves, however, this feature becomes subject to generic change. Indeed, as more and more secondary characteristics and tropes begin to gather around the genre, they affect its heroic core. The heroism of epic, then, remains in some respects essential to the genre, but the manner in which that same heroism is defined and represented is naturally subject to change. Therefore, in addition to discussing the simple evolution of the epic genre in the classical age – the composition and reception of early epic texts – this chapter will also chronicle the development of the genre's central feature: the epic hero.

The epic of *Gilgamesh*

The story of *Gilgamesh* originates in the Near East region of Mesopotamia, in present-day Iraq. Versions of *Gilgamesh* circulated over two millennia, from 2200 BC to about 200 BC.² They first occur orally and are eventually committed to writing, in both Sumerian and Akkadian, the two languages of the region. If an historical Gilgamesh existed at all, he lived around the time of the early Sumerian city-states, that is, roughly about 2800 BC. Sumerian oral poems heroicising him were probably sung as court entertainments from 2200 to 2000 BC. Sumerian writing dates from at least 2600 BC and Akkadian writing from at least 2300 BC. There is evidence that the Sumerian songs of *Gilgamesh* were written down by 2000 BC. By the eighteenth century BC, there existed a single integrated *Gilgamesh* narrative written in Akkadian. The standard text now published and read as the epic of *Gilgamesh* is an Akkadian text dating from about 1100 BC, by which time it had been augmented with a prologue. Discovered in the royal libraries in the citadel of Nineveh, it is termed the Nineveh text (the civilisations at both Sumer and Akkad having been subsumed under the Babylonian Empire since the eighteenth century BC, it is alternatively referred to as the Standard Babylonian Text). Unlike other versions of the tale, this standard text has a name attached to it – *Šîn-liqe-unninni* – which identifies the author as a priest, and presumably a scholar and scribe who revised and redacted an earlier version of the narrative as he wrote it down. Based on eleven tablets of cuneiform Akkadian, the fragmentary standard text is necessarily informed by much editorial guesswork. A twelfth tablet, based on one of the earlier

Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, but relation of which to the main body of the poem is in doubt, is usually appended to modern editions.³ Versions of *Gilgamesh* occur somewhat later in several other languages of adjacent civilisations, such as the Hittite and Ugrit. Such wide circulation attests to its widespread popularity in the Near East.

The *Gilgamesh* stories, and hence the integrated narrative of *Gilgamesh*, are part of a cycle of creationist stories, set within a wider context of what Johannes Haubold terms 'an Akkadian history of the world'.⁴ These stories include *Enuma eliš*, which details an Akkadian cosmogony, and hence chronicles an early part of this history, and *Atrahasis*, the narrative of which relates the story of a deluge involving the Noah-like figure Uta-napishti. The gods instruct Uta-napishti to build a boat and put in it every living thing. All these stories are predicated on, and must be read in the context of, a coherent mythological vision of creation and early humanity.⁵ *Gilgamesh*, then, offers the story of an heroic individual whose exploits take place within this established cosmological paradigm.

The poem tells how Gilgamesh's tyranny over his people prompts them to pray to the gods for salvation. The gods respond by creating the wild man Enkidu to challenge Gilgamesh. The pair ultimately become companions, however, and engage in several heroic adventures, including a perilous journey to the Forest of Cedar to kill the monster Humbaba (or Huwawa) and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven. The Bull had been sent in punishment by the goddess Ishtar, whose proposal of marriage Gilgamesh had rejected. In this last adventure, however, Enkidu is killed. A distraught Gilgamesh sets off again, this time to the edge of the world to discover the secret of immortality. Here he encounters Uta-napishti who, as the only mortal to survive the divine deluge, has alone been able to discover the secret. Gilgamesh, however, does not attain the knowledge himself. Instead Uta-napishti's words seem to imply a criticism of Gilgamesh's lack of appreciation of his status and would appear likewise to chide him for neglect of his kingly duties:

Said Uta-napishti to him, to [Gilgamesh:]

'Why, Gilgamesh, do you ever [chase] sorrow?

You, who are [built] from gods' flesh and human,

whom the [gods did fashion] like your father and mother!

'[Did *you*] ever, Gilgamesh [*compare your lot*] with the fool?

They placed a throne in the assembly, and [*told you,*] 'Sit!'

The fool gets left-over yeast instead of fresh ghee,

bran and grist instead of [*best flour*.]

'He is clad in a rag, instead of [*fine garments*,]
instead of a belt, *he is girt* [*with old rope*.]
Because he has no *advisers* [*to guide him*,]
His affairs lack counsel . . .

'Have thought for him, Gilgamesh . . .,
[*who is*] their master, as many as . . .?

(X.266–79)⁶

More importantly, in a passage that anticipates a truly Homeric apprehension of the transitory nature of our own existence, Uta-napishti's words insist on the inevitability and inscrutability of death:

'No one at all sees Death,
no one at all sees the face [of Death],
no one at all [hears] the voice of Death,
Death so savage, who hacks men down.

'Ever do we build our households,
ever do we make our nests,
ever do brothers divide their inheritance,
ever do feuds arise in *the land*.

'Ever the river has risen and brought us the flood,
the mayfly floating on the water.
On the face of the sun its countenance gazes,
then all of a sudden nothing is there!

'The abducted and the dead, how alike is their lot!
But never was drawn the likeness of Death,
never in the land did the dead greet a man.

'The Anunnaki, the great gods, held an assembly,
Mammitum, maker of destiny, fixed fates with them:
both Death and Life they have established,
but the day of Death they do no disclose.'

(X.304–22)

Uta-napishti then challenges Gilgamesh to remain awake for seven days, a trial that Gilgamesh fails almost immediately. Before he leaves, Uta-napishti ensures that Gilgamesh is ritually cleansed and dressed, and tells him of a plant of

eternal youth growing under the sea. Gilgamesh attempts to obtain this but fails. Still distraught, Gilgamesh returns to his kingdom and the poem ends.

The death of Enkidu, and the subsequent solitary journey of Gilgamesh, arguably render the epic much more appealing to many modern readers – readers who look to define the ethic of heroism within the context of individual achievement, judgement and physical prowess. Yet, the text does not make explicit just how much of a resolution these events and the conclusion represent, for life after Gilgamesh's return is not depicted. Certainly, the significance of Gilgamesh's quest has been foreshadowed by the poem's Introduction, which tells us that the hero of the poem 'learnt of everything the sum of wisdom. / He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden, / he brought back a tale from before the Deluge' (I.6–8). Yet, the precise nature of the lessons Gilgamesh learned remains unclear. Gilgamesh's one action after his return and just before the poem's conclusion is to give Uta-napishti's boatman, Ur-shanabi, a detailed description of his city's foundations. That these words are a repetition of an earlier description of Uruk which occurs in the Introduction seems to lend them some undefined significance, but hardly present a summative conclusion, though they raise tantalising questions. Why, for example, are they repeated as precisely and as clearly as they are? Is their repetition simply formulaic or are they meant to be understood as a crucial demarcation of the degree of knowledge – or lack thereof – attained by the hero? Only the apocryphal twelfth tablet, a version of an earlier Sumerian tale of 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld', brings an uneasy closure to the text. This story, in which Gilgamesh converses with Enkidu after Enkidu's death and discusses his experiences in the netherworld, allows a vague dénouement by including a reunion of sorts between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well as by demonstrating Gilgamesh's attainment of secrets of the afterlife and therefore underlining the knowledge he has gained from his adventures.⁷

The nature of Gilgamesh's 'sum of wisdom' is a puzzle indeed. It is tempting to read the text teleologically, paying special attention to the lesson finally learned by Gilgamesh. Thus the insistence by various scholars of the text that the point of the poem lies in its conclusion and that it narrates a growing acceptance of mortality. Donald Mills, for example, suggests of Gilgamesh that 'First he defies [death] in true heroic fashion when he confronts Huwawa, then he denies it both in his excessive grief for Enkidu and the journey to Utnapishtim. Finally, by accepting its inevitability, he recognizes that it is an inseparable part of life.'⁸ For Mills, such a trajectory represents 'the beginnings of a new kind of heroism, one based on an awareness of mortality'.⁹ Unfortunately, the burden of a socially aware and socially

responsible heroism sits somewhat uncomfortably on the ambiguous *Gilgamesh*. As Benjamin Ray's reading suggests, the poem's conclusion is so obscure and indefinite as to be almost perfunctory, and the real meaning behind Gilgamesh's 'sum of wisdom' lies in his obtaining of it.¹⁰ The poem ends simply with Gilgamesh's realisation that his constant questioning and questing must end. What appears to have been of real importance is that he has engaged in such questioning and questing in the first place. Indeed, the Prologue to the standard text calls on its reader to approach the tablet-box in which the text is presumably kept and to 'read out/the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through' (I.27–8). As with Akkadian wisdom literature in general, Ray suggests, *Gilgamesh* calls on its audience to 'question conventional wisdom and think for themselves'.¹¹ I would argue, however, that the Prologue is not as heavily didactic as Ray insists, and not as easily read as Gilgamesh's message to future generations. What is evident is the text's insistence on means rather than ends – on extraordinary and courageous action rather than simple quest and attainment as the true measure of its 'tall, magnificent, and terrible' (I.37) hero.

Teleological interpretations of *Gilgamesh* are difficult to avoid, thanks to, as Haubold puts it, 'the unlikely resemblance it bears to Greek epic and its European-looking preoccupation with death and the human condition'.¹² This same perceived resemblance brings us to the question of the link between *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics. It is eminently sensible, no doubt, to draw lines of cultural influence from the Near East of the second millennium BC to ancient Greece in the first millennium. Archaeological evidence supports the notion of commercial and cultural exchange, and there are various possible intermediaries, such as the Phoenicians, who straddled the Near East and the Mediterranean in terms of both their position as seafaring traders and their geographical position in what is present-day Lebanon.¹³

None the less, a direct link between the Akkadian and the Greek narratives is still an area of much speculation. In further support, many scholars point to a number of thematic, structural and narrative parallels between the texts, such as the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and that between Achilles and Patroklos, or the power dynamics that underlie Ishtar's attempted seduction of Gilgamesh and Kalypso's and Circe's relationships with Odysseus.¹⁴ Yet, Haubold rightly warns against 'parallel-hunting' for its own sake.¹⁵ Such an activity is particularly dangerous when it leads to fanciful impositions of Greek-style techniques of plotting and characterisation on to a stubbornly inconclusive text such as *Gilgamesh*, such as when Sarah Morris suggests that Gilgamesh 'acquir[es] wisdom and self-knowledge

through trials and travels' as Odysseus does, or 'progress[es] from heroic to tragic' in much the same manner as Achilles.¹⁶ In the absence of concrete proof of a genetic link between *Gilgamesh* and Homer's epics, the caution that Haubold urges must also be exercised when applying the label epic to *Gilgamesh*. If, after all, we allow that the label pertains not merely to lengthy heroic poems, but to texts that participate in the generic game of influence and innovation, the only way to contextualise *Gilgamesh* within the epic genre is to assign it an originary and primal, formative position. Such a position, it must finally be conceded, cannot be so easily allocated.

None the less, as Haubold demonstrates, there is room in which to discuss the link between Akkadian and Greek heroic narrative, for each finds its place within a 'history of the world'. That is, *Gilgamesh* on the one hand and the Homeric epics on the other belong to a broader collection of stories presenting Akkadian and Greek versions of, respectively, how the universe was created and how humanity was established. It is the way in which a cosmological myth system informs heroic narrative in each case that is of particular interest here. Both the Akkadian and Greek 'histories of the world' imagine a moment between the creation of the world and the present time of the audience when courageous deeds of superhuman ability could be carried out, when heroic men played out their actions in the company of gods. It would seem that if any link is to be established between *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric poems, it is in the way that the cycle of creationist narratives found in the Near East forms part of a broad base of influence for the Greek cosmogony that underpins Greek epic and its celebration of a heroic age of extraordinary action.

Homer

The Homeric epics emerge from a corpus of Greek heroic poetry, what the Greeks themselves called 'song', a collection of narratives composed orally by anonymous singers over centuries.¹⁷ It is this body of song that corresponds to Haubold's notion of a 'history of the world', consisting as it does of a cosmogony as well as a cycle of stories around the watershed historical event of the invasion of Troy, asserted by later Greeks themselves – and tentatively by modern archaeology – to have taken place in 1200 BC. The Greek cosmogony was outlined by the Homeric contemporary Hesiod in his *Theogony* and *Catalogue of Women*, while Trojan stories materialised not only in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but in the so-called *Epic Cycle* of lost epics also attributed to Homer, which includes the *Nostoi* – the homecomings from Troy of all the major Greek warriors. We can therefore imagine the Homeric

epics to be a selection and refinement of existing heroic song into more or less integrated narratives. As Andrew Ford's analysis shows, the Homeric poet – or, more accurately, poets – conceived of this epic material as emerging from a 'larger realm of interconnected stories'.¹⁸ Ford suggests that the poet would have imagined his epic subjects spatially and, moreover, would have arranged these spaces sequentially.¹⁹ This sequence of epic themes comprehends, chronologically, the creation of the world and gods, the creation of men and the heroic deeds of godlike men, ending well before the present day of its audience. According to Ford:

The paths of song are very extensive, but they do not go on forever: the continuum of stories pulls up at a time somewhat short of the present. ... The epic poet, then, is essentially a poet of the past, not a poet of heroes or gods in particular. For his past he may turn, as Homer does, to the noble heroes who fought beside gods at Troy, four dark centuries before his day; or he may move further back in time, to even earlier themes, to the women who, mating with gods, founded the great royal lines, as Hesiod does, in a *Catalogue of Women*.²⁰

It must be borne in mind that the realm of stories from which the epics were composed was a body of oral narrative. The Homeric poems too were essentially oral. The content of the Homeric poems themselves, as well as that of Hesiod's work, suggests that such narratives would have been recited by an *aïodos*, a singer. The examples of the bards Phemios and Demodokos (who appear in Books I and XIII, respectively, in the *Odyssey*) imply that the *aïodos* would have performed at feasts, where, ideally, he would have received an attentive audience.²¹ Indeed, who can forget that much of the *Odyssey* is recited by Odysseus himself at the court of the Phaiakans? Achilles too is present at one point in the *Iliad* as a kind of bard. These self-reflexive descriptions of bards refer us to an itinerant Homeric poet, whose skills result in the rewards and company of noblemen – an artisan who would have occupied a special place in society. Indeed, this space exists somehow outside society, for while the bard's invited participation in the noble ritual of gift-exchange sets him apart from ordinary craftsmen, the restriction of his role to recipient rather than donor places him well beneath noblemen.²²

However, the question of the orality of the Homeric poems is complicated by the coincidence of their composition and the invention of writing in Greece. The Greeks of the fifth century thought of Hesiod and Homer as close contemporaries; we know that Hesiod lived around 700 BC and that