

The Epic and Pseudo-Epic Hero From Babylonia to Back-Bay Boston

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In proto-epic heroic lays it is almost certain that the hero was divine to begin with. In his prehistoric existence, long before the recension of the semi-legendary Babylonian scribe Sin-Leqi-Unninni, Gilgamesh was worshipped by Sumerians and Akkadians as a god of the underworld, as was Orpheus by the early Greeks. But the tendency, especially in the good epics that we have preserved and loved for centuries, is to humanize the hero in three or four steps: The god becomes a man in search of immortality. The successful immortality-searcher becomes a failed one. The failed immortality-searcher forgets that he was ever searching for something so humanly impossible in the first place and settles for the quest for personal fame. Then, finally, in the self-conscious literary epic, like the *Aeneid* (written to celebrate something so un-archetypal as the Pax Romana), the hero becomes more or less selfless and fights for his country and ideology.

Gilgamesh begins as the personification of the sheer nervous energy that made the Sumerians get together and invent civilization in the first place. It is tempting to see in him a microcosm of the psychoanalytic development of human consciousness itself, up to Old Babylonian times. He starts out almost like an animal, a big bull who wants to collect all the females in the herd only for himself. This might be seen as the Freudian stage of megalomaniacal polymorphous

perversion ostensibly observable in infants. Then the gods provide him with Enkidu as a distraction to keep him from veritably consuming Ur and all its people in his incredible vigor. Enkidu (himself literally a man-beast, grazing with the gazelles, and so on) brings upon Gilgamesh him first “anima projection,” or moment of awareness of someone besides the Self and Archetypal Mama. After their requisite fight Gilgamesh falls in love—significantly the homoerotic love of the early adolescent. With the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh becomes the typical second-stage epic hero, obsessed with conquering death. From there, remarkably enough, in this most ancient of epics, he becomes the first home-and-hearth humanist, embodying an ethos surpassing that of the later Homeric tradition.

Beowulf is an even more primitive sort, appropriate to the backwater that engendered him. The famous tensions in his tale between Christian and Pagan ideals were almost certainly added on by whatever scribe(s) set down the recensions we have today. He doesn't die in bed—he grows old only to be killed in combat with the dragon. It must be said, however, that a certain personal development can be ascertained in the fact that, while early in the poem he vanquishes monsters from far-off lands in order to gain fame, at the end he is vanquishing them to protect his own countryside.

Odysseus fits better into the heroic mold of the proto-humanist epic. His main point of growth—camouflaged by a certain ignorance on the Homeric bards' part of the full “quest for immortality” tradition—is his realization that a man must go home again. As a vestigial Gilgamesh-type, Odysseus appears to be less of seacher than one buffeted by the perverse winds of Poseidon; but we are spared a lugubrious story of mere naturalistic victimization a la *Maggie, a Girl of*

the Streets by the presentation of Odysseus as a crafty, resourceful “trickster” type. His wonderful victories over Polyphemous and others are the result of his own superior inner resources. The sheer delight of this epic is perhaps something more along the lines of entertainment than the profundities of the *Iliad*. Odysseus qualifies as one of those truly national heroes by which a people identify themselves. They learn how *not* to behave from tragic figures like Achilles; but they learn what they would like to be from ever-popular rascals like Robin Hood, Tom Sawyer, Zorba and Odysseus.

The *Iliad* is the story of Achilles’ wrath and its purgation. Such a single-minded intention, reflected in the unparalleled circumscription of time, has caused critics from Pope on to express the opinion that the *Iliad* is the greatest epic of all—so great, in fact, as to qualify as something more: tragedy. It has been said that Achilles is atypical of the true epic hero in that he despairs, thus rising to the level of a later type, the tragic hero.

Achilles suffers from the standard central flaw—his intense *hubris* and its resultant petulance, over-sensitivity and stubbornness. This flaw easily subsumes and overcomes his more traditionally heroic traits, his (vestigially divine) physical prowess and courage. When he finally is roused to action by personal love of Patroclus (itself a more complex motivation than mere lust for fame), he slakes his passion in uncommonly *unheroic* ways: he intends not to afford his victim the heroic respect due a worthy opponent, but to mutilate and feed him to the dogs and buzzards. When he prevails upon himself to surrender the corpse of Hector to poor old vanquished Father Priam, it’s another atypical moment, more appropriate to tragedy. Achilles has his moment of truth where he rises to tragic stature and overcomes his

wrath. We almost have Aristotelian catharsis; the only thing missing is his death—foretold, significantly, but not given; for Homer is, after all, working in the comparatively “cheerful” epic tradition.

Aeneas is intrinsically different from Gilgamesh or Beowulf or Odysseus or Achilles, in that he was self-consciously wrought by an individual man, an urbane poet with parchment and pen and an equally sophisticated, literate audience. As such he suffers greatly in the mythopoeic department. Aeneas’s reverberative power is undercut by his final goal, which is the establishment of that historic, tangible, mundane entity called Rome. This may be admirable, but cannot possibly reach as deep into the collective unconsciousness as the goal of conquering death, or of integrating the individual self, or even of repossessing the *Ewig Weibliche* in the form of the mythic wife and hearth. Political and occasional verse tends usually to be terrible, and it is the mark of the first real literary genius of Rome that Virgil was able to do as well as did.

Aeneas wanders in exile on a ship, like Odysseus; but instead of being accompanied by a group of game, rough-and-tumble near-non-entities who can be turned into swine when expedient and who really present no *un*useful complication, Aeneas is saddled with a shipful of people of both sexes and all ages. Even in the extremity of his pseudo-epic quest, this product of civilization is hampered by a certain portable domesticity. The women interfere as women do in the lives of adolescent males, crying and bitching about the loss of the wise counsel of Aeneas’ father; they even set fire to the ships at one point, under the instigation of that big hen-pecker-in-the-sky, Juno.

Virgil failed to understand, or was compelled to forget, that the perilous-water quest is, by its very nature, an adolescent male adven-

ture, and women have no place except as momentary places to have orgasms into. It takes entire generations of illiterate, or semi-literate, performing bards, scops and *guslars*, true heroic poets in the traditional, militaristic sense, to purge a poem of interfering women—or it takes an American novelist, a new American Adam, like Melville or Twain.

This fascinating motif, the journey across perilous waters (full of monsters, storms, *symplegades*, etc.) to the Place of Enlightenment, where, originally at least, the hero becomes a god, extends from *Gilgamesh* to the *Iliad* to *Beowulf* and beyond, in various more or less degenerate and regenerate versions.

Already in *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* we have a proto-humanistic attitude that no longer requires deification of the hero; but some form of enlightenment—even if only a reassertion of basic humanity—takes place. *Gilgamesh* crosses the dangerous water to Ut-napishtim and the (failed) attempt at immortality. Odysseus gets past the seduction-witch and her isle of sensation, past the cyclops and the clashing rocks and Scylla and Charybdis among other perils, to the isle of Alcinous—no longer an immortal, it's true, because of the progressive secularization of the entire tradition, but the possessor of a pair of Hephaestus' fabulous hounds, the owner of a perpetually yielding orchard, and cousin to the Phaeacians (kin to the gods). Here we see the comparative non-intellectualism of Homer as compared to the Old Babylonian author. Where Ut-napishtim is literally an immortal (the statement made by *Gilgamesh*'s failure thereby made all the more pointed and explicit), it seems that Homer isn't really aware that the proprietor of the mythic Place-of-Enlightenment-across-the waters was ever semi-divine in the first place. The pets, orchard and lineage

of Alcinous are vestigial components from an earlier tradition.

Beowulf, while demonstrably having been corrupted in its extant text by the Virgil-loving monks who transcribed it (see, for example, the amazing richness of the courts and of the dragon's hoard—things no Anglo Saxons could ever have experienced except indirectly through continental texts), represents a mythic regression in its perilous-water episode. Searching not for literal immortality but simply the immortality of legend and personal reputation, Beowulf swims through the monster-infested bog (a remnant of the waterfall motif that had a literal significance in the original Scandinavian version) with the relatively short-sighted intention of killing a monster. He brings back no fetishes or totems of deathlessness, but just the gory arm of Grendel.

One has to jump forward in time and westward in space to encounter a literature that expresses this mythos as compulsively and powerfully as these pagan originals.

The irreconciliation with and avoidance of Woman; the quest through uncharted wilderness (which, until quite recently, America still had plenty of, unlike Europe); the passionate attachment to the dark-skinned adept, or guide: these are characteristics of much nineteenth-century American fiction. In all this the neo-Freudian critics tend to see something fully ancient and unparaphraseable and not-so-tacitly homoerotic, as though Americanism itself is a throwback to those halcyon days of human adolescence and the chaste love of two males, the hero and sidekick: Gilgamesh and Enkidu; Achilles and Patroclus. Of course, Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Nigger Jim, snuggling on the *Pequod* and the raft, spring spontaneously to mind. These (perhaps suspect) myths, though uncovered by American critic Leslie Fiedler,

were not invented by America, but presumably received in the United States their newest and most vigorous expression since the rise, stagnation and decadence of European civilization.

Among American perilous-water stories *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby Dick* are important. (The *Leatherstocking Tales* hardly bear mentioning here, not just because the only waters navigated therein are mere forest streams, rainbow trout posing the most monstrous threat, but also because, in the very *consciousness* of his efforts to present his nation with a quasi-Homeric epos, Cooper failed, even more miserably than Virgil before him.) Despite T. S. Eliot's contention that the Mississippi River represents a cannibal god demanding the propitiation of drowned human carcasses, by this late date in the heroic tradition the Mississippi's perils are entirely human, in the form of Huck's Pap and the "Duke" and the various other con-artists and murtherers Huck encounters. The enlightenment is neither a victory over physical dissolution nor a promise of personal fame, but a triumphantly human moral awakening: the famous "All right, I'll go to hell."

Twain himself serves as a personal example of the arrested adolescence of Americanism. Van Wyck Brooks theorized that the hopeless nihilism and solipsism of his final years were brought about by nagging realization that, besides *Huck*, he had not produced any great national epics—which he'd clearly been born with the capability of producing. This failure had presumably been caused by his inability to break away from his "mother figure," prudish, censoring Livvy, and his "father figure," William Dean Howells, who kept urging Twain to produce works "fit for one's maiden aunt" and prevailed upon him to expunge as "too dirty" such finely observed detailed as dogs' tails snapping down in fear over their fundaments. If this is the case, it is

a perfect expression of the early American spirit, resentfully tied to its constraining parent (modern Europe) and not entirely succeeding in its efforts to break away.

This theory of Van Wyck Brooks regarding the psychosexual etiology of Twain's misanthropy has recently been relegated to the status of critical chestnut, and replaced by the newer assumption that Twain deliberately put himself in the hands of such strict parents in order to keep his anti-social impulses under control, perhaps in unconscious trepidation at what happened to a novelist of the previous generation who allowed his dark genius, albeit temporarily, to consume him: Melville. Of course, a willing surrender to parental constraints can be construed as even more drastic regression, beyond puberty and into childhood.

Moby Dick is a monster; in many mythopoeic ways it can be seen as pre-modern, pre-humanistic; thematically it is almost horrifyingly pre-Babylonian. Ahab has no personal reputation he cares to enhance: he knows everybody thinks he is insane. He hates the whale, the effrontery of a Nature that makes him puny by comparison. His quest is to conquer the elements, and this makes him more closely resemble the divine heroes of the presumed Akkadian and Sumerian proto-*Gilgamesh* epics. There is no deliberately pointed failure and reconciliation to his own humanity, as is experienced by our own textual *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric *Odysseus*. They realize that the most a man can do, the best he can do, is to go home and be with his family. But Ahab has never heard of such a sissified, urban, namby-pamby tradition. He wants to assimilate the the whale—and the fact that we see his open-eyed corpse fastened to *Moby Dick*, his arm beckoning as by its own volition, is a strong indication that Melville

himself was feeling such Cro-Magnon impulses in his guts.

Henry James is a much more orderly and specifically definable case. His journeys across the ocean to the Place of Enlightenment are as uneventful and monster-free as a first-class cabin can make them, so his themes are, on the surface at least, quite manageable. His main mythopoeic purpose in life was to express the fundamental dichotomy between America's "sincere crudity" and Europe's "deceitful refinement." It depends upon which book and, to a lesser extent, which phase of his career one examines, whether America or Europe, or both, or neither, prevails. To take one example, in *The Americans*, James presents his epic adolescent Christopher Newman wanting, with typical "American Adam" fervor, to possess Europeanism in the person of his beautiful intended bride; but his enlightenment comes when he learns that her mother (his Ut-napishtim, his Alcinous) has actually committed murder in her efforts to preserve the musty Old-World values of the sanctity of family and the better blood lines.

Later James gives a modified view of the value of his chosen Place of Enlightenment. In *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether has an opportunity to observe Chad's trans-oceanic high-hedonism in comparison to his mother's Back-Bay Puritan death-in-life, and ends by advising the boy to "Live!"—that is, to continue to Europeanize.

In a strictly technical sense, James can be seen as more than just a straddler of the Atlantic fence; he freed American fiction from the explicit "moral purpose" of earlier modes, by purging it, in his early career, of the old omniscient voice. Later on, in his so-called "major phase" a strange, new, purely American omniscience creeps in, as he starts producing his novels through the presumably Homeric technique of oral dictation. The increasing convolution of his style, incredibly

enough, is not the result of a swelling stack of self-torturing drafts on paper, but rather is a verbatim record of his developing style of speech. It has been said that in these later novels he circles continuously around an idea but never alights upon it. In any case, this most "literary" of American novelists ends by employing a pre-literate method that is the technical counterpart of the primeval mythic structures of Twain and Melville. The infamous Jamesian page-and-a-half-long sentences are the prose analogue to the oral poets' long line.

So far, American literature has distinguished itself among other recent literatures by harking back to pubescent states of consciousness and emotion. It has been peculiarly suited to embodying the themes of the various Old-World heroic ages, so long passed. Now that the American wilderness and its aboriginals have been subdued and buried under several layers of human waste and industrial pollution, it remains to be seen whether American literature can begin, like Homer in his greater epic, to approach tragedy.