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THE LONG POEM IN ENGLISH ROMANTIC CRITICISM, 1750-1850

DISSERTATION

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By

Robert L. Stilwell, A. B., A. M.

*

The Ohio State University
1965

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of English
VITA

February 15, 1933 Born—Decatur County, Indiana
1957 . . . . . A. B. in English and Comparative Literature, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
1957-1958 . . . Teaching Associate, Department of English, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
1958-1964 . . . Teaching Assistant, Department of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
1964 . . . . . A. M. in Comparative Literature, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
1964-1965 . . . Instructor, Department of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

PUBLICATIONS

Articles and reviews in Saturday Review, western Humanities Review, Arizona Quarterly, Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, Books Abroad, The Explicator, New Mexico Quarterly, and Shenandoah

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Twentieth-Century European Literature
This study deals with the genesis and development of that marked bias, in the theory and criticism of poetry, which during the past two centuries or so has persistently called into doubt the poetic value—and, at its most radical extensions, the viability—of the longer forms of poetry. That the "poem of some length" is widely considered as an anomaly in twentieth-century literature, and that the possibilities of the large-scale poetic work appear to have remained under a more or less continuous attack since the beginnings of the Romantic movement, are today commonplaces of critical assumption and critical history. As general propositions they have hardened into semi-official platitude. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to deny the major importance, for what we customarily recognize as the modern critical mind, of the animus toward which these commonplaces point. Indeed, one is sometimes tempted to conclude that a good many representative long poems of our time have been judged, first and foremost, by their success or failure at coming
to terms with a stern logic that goes back to Mallarmé and Poe, back to Romantic and Symbolist theories of the lyric, back to the historical revolt against the epic and other "poetic Leviathans." Yet there exists no comprehensive attempt to chart the complex and often paradoxical origins of this animus against long poems, in poetic theory and criticism, beginning with its first stirrings during the later eighteenth century and continuing through its dominance of the whole Romantic period.

In the ensuing chapters I have sought to make at least a tentative sounding of some of the materials, patterns, and significances that would need to figure in any such comprehensive treatment. My original design, as it happens, was quite otherwise. I started with the experiment of seeing whether I could analyze the structures of several twentieth-century long poems by the light—or in the half-light—of that celebrated passage from Chapter XIV of the *Biographia Literaria* in which Coleridge declares, among much else, that "a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry." I hoped to try this difficult passage, together with all the Coleridgean theories and dialectic that it crystalizes, on Pound's *Cantos*, *The Anathemata* by David Jones, *Paterson* by
William Carlos Williams, and, for contrast, Helen in Egypt by H. D. It was my growing realization of how many problems this passage from the Biographia raises for the evaluation of the longer poem of whatever period—problems of terminology and method, of holism, of organism, of the very nature of poetry—that furnished the earliest determinant of the form eventually taken by the present study. And when I had gradually become aware of the remarkable frequency with which similar problems had arisen elsewhere in Romantic theoretical and critical writing, both before and after Coleridge, I determined to undertake an account of certain ways in which they had been broached. This is not to suggest that my concerns lie exclusively with theory and criticism. My broadest aim is to trace the whole configuration of pressures against the long poem, from the lifetime of the Wartons and of Herder down to the late formulations of Poe. Thus I frequently consider such matters as, for instance, the emergence of the novel, the various odysseys of "taste," or even the nationalistic pride that sometimes caused nineteenth-century America to mistrust the epic as an effete and aristocratic museum-piece from the Old World. However, my principal focus remains always on the history of theory and criticism, as antagonists—whether
deliberate or not—to the values and possibilities of long poems.

The majority of my materials have been drawn from English poetic theory and criticism during the Romantic period. Not the slightest claim is made for an international perspective. But in order to set English critical developments within a broader context of Romantic developments, I have given some attention to German philology and poetics (e.g., the Wolfian hypotheses on the Homeric poems; the pronouncements of Gorres and the Grimms on primitive song as a norm for poetry, or the organic theories of August Wilhelm Schlegel) and to American critical thought, especially that of Poe and the magazine reviewers of the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. There are also a few glances at French and Italian criticism during the Romantic period (such as the writings of Hugo and Leopardi), insofar as that criticism bears on the subject at hand. For the translations from French and Italian, I am responsible. For German texts, I have relied partly on translations. Whenever possible, I have gone direct to the original critical and theoretical documents and allowed them to speak for themselves. Still, I should like to acknowledge my very heavy obligations to several contemporary works of critical history that,
without becoming implicated in responsibility for my errors, have helped me to unsnarl problems that otherwise would have been far beyond me. These works are The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition by M. H. Abrams; Literary Criticism: A Short History by Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.; Donald M. Foerster's articles "The Critical Attack Upon the Epic in the English Romantic Movement" and "Homer, Milton, and the American Revolt Against Epic Poetry: 1812-1860"; Frank Kermode's Romantic Image; The Symbolist Aesthetic in France by A. G. Lehmann; the chapter "The Possibility of a Long Poem" in On Wordsworth's Prelude by Herbert Lindenberger; Norman Maclean's monograph "From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century"; and, above all, the first two volumes (those covering the period from 1750 to 1830) of René Wellek's A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950. I should add that I also found useful many of the other secondary sources listed in the selective bibliography at the end of this study.
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TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY
To define philosophy and to define poetry are parts of the repertory of the mind. They are classic exercises. This could not be true if the definitions were adequate.

-- WALLACE STEVENS;
"A COLLECT OF PHILOSOPHY"
INTRODUCTION

To delimit the relevance or worth or even the very possibility of the longer forms of poetry, and to regard the short poem as the norm of poetic values, have been characteristic and perhaps essentializing tendencies within modern poetic theory and criticism. These two interlocked tendencies are of quite recent emergence, if we measure them against the twenty-three-hundred-year history of cognitive assumptions about the relative merits of the various orders of poetry. Indeed, they reverse almost every major discrimination of classical and Renaissance poetics and of critical theory during the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries. After Aristotle the codifications of classical poetics and rhetoric had invested the long epic as the sovereign genre of poetic creation, challenged only by tragedy; and this verdict had prevailed, virtually without dissent, from the beginnings of the Renaissance down to the comparatively late Neoclassicism of Pope and Voltaire, of Lessing and Dr. Johnson. Thus as late as 1779, in his Life of Milton, Johnson was still able to report that "By the general
consent of criticks, the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epick poem" and to declare that the achievement of such a work provides the supreme test of the poet's art, since the epic exacts "an assemblage of all the powers which are singly sufficient for other compositions."¹ Nor had it been customary to attack the other, non-epic manifestations of the long poem (e.g., the comprehensive philosophical disquisition after the mold of Lucretius, or the "heroic romance" as cultivated by Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser) through a priori denials that these large modes could be "poetic." On the other hand, theoretical and critical judgments had been prone, at least during the Renaissance and throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to consider all the briefer kinds of poetry (with the important exception of the ode, in its many different sub-species) as distinctly secondary enterprises. As often as not, indeed, theory and criticism were likely to dismiss these "minor" poems as insignificant or trifling or even contemptible, mere "papers of verses." Thus we find Sir William Temple complaining, in 1690, that too many poets of his day have "left off such bold Adventures ["Epick Poems"], and turned to other Veins, as if, not worthy to sit down at the Feast, they contented themselves
with the scraps, with songs and sonnets . . . and elegies, with satyrs and panegyricks, and what we call copies of verses upon any subjects or occasions, wanting either genius or application for nobler or more laborious productions, as painters that cannot succeed in great pieces turn to miniature. 2

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, there had taken place a far-reaching shift so extreme as to reverse almost completely the earlier balance of emphasis. Two sets of late-romantic pronouncements, the burden of which might be duplicated almost indefinitely through quotations from other writers, will summarize the point of view that marks this new orientation. In 1838, in his extended essay-review "Writings of Alfred de Vigny," John Stuart Mill argued that the most authentic poems must be "short poems, it being impossible that a feeling so intense as to require a more rhythmical cadence than that of eloquent prose, should sustain itself at its highest elevation for long altogether" and that with certain rare exceptions "a long poem will always be felt (although perhaps unconsciously) to be something unnatural and hollow." 3 And some ten years later, in "The Poetic Principle," Poe was to set down the most celebrated—or notorious—of all conclusions about long poems. "I hold,"
Poe writes, "that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms." And he continues:

I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychical necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.\(^4\)

As representative expressions of significant Romantic attitudes toward the art of poetry, these pronouncements make it clear that between Johnson and Poe the short poem has become a kind of touchstone for poetic excellence;\(^5\) and the longer forms of poetry have been removed from their former supremacy on the scale of poetic standards. It is true that one finds Mill acknowledging, a few sentences later, that the mastery of a Homer or a Virgil or a Milton can perhaps maintain "at its highest elevation" that "intensity of feeling" which Mill has established as his fundamental criterion for true poetry. Thus he hedges, however grudgingly, on his categorical "impossible." Poe, on the other hand, has pressed his doctrine to its most intransigent limits. Commenting on the \textit{Iliad} and
Paradise Lost, later in the same passage in which the above statements occur, Poe asserts that "the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun" must be "a nullity."

The purpose of this study is to examine the origins and development of this movement, in the normative discriminations of poetic theory and criticism, away from the long poem and toward the shorter forms of poetry. I have sought to isolate a few of the principal sources of this movement, beginning (roughly) with the second half of the eighteenth century, and to describe and evaluate its more important expressions and mutations during the Romantic period. Throughout the ensuing chapters I have focused mainly on critical expressions that tend specifically to attack the long poem, either as idea (in an almost Platonic sense) or in particular. But obviously any critical formulation that establishes the short poem as the richest and purest mode of poetry must constitute, at least tacitly, a disparagement of the long poem; and I have therefore given considerable attention to such formulations. In particular, they are the concerns of my final chapter, which deals with Romantic lyric theory and its implications for long poems. My thesis is twofold. It is, first, that the morphology of Romantic critical
strictures on the longer poem represents a subject of much historical interest in its own right. Whether explicitly (as direct attacks on the idea of the long poem) or implicitly (as special delimitations of poetry in ways that give primacy to its shorter forms), these strictures registered themselves with such force and frequency that to follow them in historical perspective is to follow, simultaneously, a good many of the central strands within the fabric of Romantic critical thought and poetic theory. They provide, to shift the metaphor, a sensitive index to the whole Romantic aesthetic. The second part of my thesis, then, is that an understanding of Romantic critical biases against the long poem should furnish in its turn an understanding of many large tendencies within what we customarily regard as distinctively twentieth-century ways of thinking about poetry. For it seems impossible to deny that such Romantic biases have persisted throughout the later developments of poetic theory and criticism and that, mutatis mutandis, they dominate many critical assumptions of the past fifty years or so. Refined by Symbolist poetics, a theoretical and critical preference for the short poem—together with correspondent strictures on the longer poetic forms—may properly be said to represent a basic strain within many
contemporary pronouncements on poetry and on individual poems. Although at the present time it is most frequently registered only by implication, it has found direct articulation in a number of recent theoreticians and critics, of whom Ivor Winters is among the best known and the most tough-minded. In a fairly late (1956) restatement of his long-held positions, Winters reviews the epic and the long allegorical poem (the latter being exemplified, for Winters, by the Comedia of Dante and The Faerie Queene), prophesying that such major forms will never again be relevant for the transaction of poetry. "The epic and the allegory as I have described them," he writes, "will never, I think, be revived. It is not that we have lost the high intelligence of Dante or of Milton. I think in fact that we have lost certain important parts of it, but those are perhaps recoverable. The reason is that we have lost the literary innocence which made it possible for men of such extraordinary gifts to be satisfied with such unsatisfactory methods." Winters goes on, then, to ask: "... is there a form of literature which is essentially poetic, in which the most powerful and the most sensitive mode of writing [i.e., what Winters defines as "poetic composition"] can be used efficiently throughout?" And he answers his own question in these words: "I believe that there is such a form: the short
poem or, as it is commonly, loosely, and unfortunately called, the lyric poem." My intention is not to trace the continuities of the Romantic alignment in poetic theory and criticism—an animus against the "poem of some length" and a normative prizing of short poems—from Poe to the Symbolist aesthetic and from the Symbolist aesthetic to our own day. A second volume, grounded in Symbolist poetics and in twentieth-century theories of language and structure, would be required if the whole story were to be recited. Nevertheless, I suspect that a study of Romantic critical positions on the long poem can furnish a sort of mirror wherein recent criticism—including much that professes itself anti-Romantic—will recognize many of its own positions on such poems.

Because literary theory and criticism ordinarily manifest themselves as categories of discursive thought, the history of these enterprises is more susceptible to the governance of analysis, and of rational explanation, than is the history of literature itself. This fact gets illustrated when one compares, for instance, the two volumes of Bernard Weinberg's *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* with such a work of literary history as, let us say, the *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* of Ernst Robert Curtius. It is
surely not the slightest reflection on the very great excellences of both these learned works if one concludes that Weinberg's subject-matter lends itself, inherently, to an explicitness of interpretation that the subject-matter of Curtius must forever elude. Nonetheless, to chart the historical configurations of poetic theory and criticism, or even to trace merely one pattern of bias and attitude, is an undertaking that inevitably generates many problems of its own. Assumptions and methods, therefore, should be formulated as rigorously as possible. Accordingly, with the following prefatory remarks I should like to summarize in outline the premises on which I have tried to proceed throughout the present study.

In tracing Romantic critical strictures on the long poem, I have interpreted the term "criticism" very broadly, so as to let it include both what we ordinarily regard as the "practical criticism" of specific poems and, also, speculations about poetry in general. In their *Theory of Literature* René Wellek and Austin Warren define literary criticism as "the study of concrete literary works of art" and literary theory as "the study of the principles of literature"; and these are condensed definitions to which, it seems likely, most critics would assent today. As definitions they point toward large
traditional distinctions between the exegesis and judgment of particular literary works, on the one hand, and disquisitions about the nature of literature on the other hand. Thus when Poe postulates "elevating excitement" as the hallmark of all poetic excellence, he is laboring within the domain of theory; when he turns to the examination of a brief poem by Shelley, his activities come most immediately under the rubric of criticism. Yet Wellek and Warren offer their descriptions only as "a useful distinction." They point out at once that

the methods so designated cannot be used in isolation . . . they implicate each other so thoroughly as to make inconceivable literary theory without criticism. . . . Obviously, literary theory is impossible except on the basis of a study of concrete literary works. Criteria, categories, and schemes cannot be arrived at in vacuo. But, conversely, no criticism . . . is possible without some set of questions, some system of concepts, some points of reference, some generalizations. . . . The process is dialectical: a mutual interpenetration of theory and practice.8

For convenience of exposition throughout the present study, I have for the most part used the words "criticism" and "critic," rather than the words "theory" and theoretician," except when the distinction seems to require emphasis. This is, indeed, the method that Wellek himself has deliberately employed throughout the first two volumes of
his *A History of Modern Criticism*. By the term "criticism," he tells us in the preface to that work, he implies "not only judgments of individual books and authors, 'judicial' criticism, practical criticism, evidences of literary taste, but mainly what has been thought about the principles and theory of literature, its nature, its creation, its function, its effects, its relations to the other activities of man, its kinds, devices, and techniques, its origins and history." For the ensuing study I have tried to give to the word "criticism" something of this large inclusiveness. Yet even here a difficulty arises: the problem, namely, of discerning those points at which so broad a definition of "criticism" blurs into pure aesthetic speculation (at one extremity) or into the expression of mere casual tastes (at the other extremity). For the most part, I have sought to avoid both these poles, although it is clearly impossible to do so altogether. Thus I have occasionally drawn on such sources as the purely speculative aesthetics of Longinus and Kant as well as on pronouncements of "preference" in the letters of Goethe and Coleridge or the conversation of Scott. As a general rule, I consider the most distinguished and enduring critics: those who wielded the most influence in their own time or, more importantly, who seem the most significant when viewed by the perspectives of the
twentieth century (e.g., Vico, who exercised virtually no influence at all during his lifetime). Some kind of rigid selection is obviously necessary if one is to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of idea and opinion. But I have given passing attention to a few relatively minor critics—such as Southey or William Cullen Bryant or Gerstenberg—so as to suggest something of the extent to which the concepts of major writers were being shared and disseminated by lesser writers.

Occasionally I have given space to materials and evidences that fall outside even these broad definitions of "criticism." For instance, in treating the Romantic reaction against the epic I sketch such developments as the apotheosis of Shakespeare as a rival to the classical epic tradition; the emergence of benevolent philosophies, and of doctrines of progress, that viewed epic poetry as "cruel," "immoral," "barbaric," or "aristocratic"; the theories put forward by Homeric philology in Germany, which suggested that the Iliad and the Odyssey were mere patchwork compilations; and so on. In following the Romantic preference for lyric poetry, I have accorded some attention to contemporary psychological theories, to the shift from a mechanistic explanation of the universe to an organic explanation; and to similarly large matters.
Literary criticism is obviously a part of culture and functions within the whole matrix of culture. Therefore, it seems impossible not to glance at these and similar major currents within the intellectual climate of the Romantic period; and I have not written a consistently "internal" history of the critical animus against the long poem. Yet I have tried to venture outside the stricter bounds of critical history only rarely (and that principally in Chapter Four); and I have taken pains to avoid categorical assertions of a cause-and-effect connection between this or that aspect of general history (economic, social, educational, political, philosophical, etc.) and the emergence of particular critical ideas. Generally speaking, I have undertaken to keep critical writing itself as the core of this study; and whenever possible I have tried to examine other factors--e.g., the rising dominance of the novel--principally through the documentations of criticism, rather than through historical sources entirely outside the realms of critical thought.

The cause-and-effect problem in critical history brings forward also the extremely tangled problem of the relation, if any, between poetic theory and criticism, on the one hand, and poetic creation itself on the other hand. There can be little doubt that this relation is at best very intangible. It is true that Romantic theory
favored the lyric poem over the long poem. It is also true that the greatest achievements of Romantic Poetry were lyric—M. H. Abrams has concluded that during the Romantic period the lyric form was cultivated "to a degree, and in a variety of excellence, which was without precedent in literary history"\(^{12}\)—while the majority of Romantic long poems were either artistic failures or, at best, dubious successes. And doubtless one can demonstrate in some cases the influence of the theory on the achievements and the disappointments. Yet we involve ourselves in serious difficulties, serious errors, if we assume the necessary priority of theory and its close authority over poetic creation. It seems better to accept the provisional assumptions typified by Joseph Warton's statement—already, in 1756, an established maxim of the times—that "The precepts of the art of poesy were posterior to practice..."\(^{13}\)

Or as Stanley Edgar Hyman has recently written,

> If we seek to understand literary criticism, not in isolation, but in relation to the poetry that is its subject-matter and perhaps its justification, we would do well to discard the idea that great critics call great poets into being. The true relation seems rather to be the reverse; revolutions in criticism follow after revolutions in poetry, sometimes long after, codifying and consolidating them.\(^{14}\)
In a long-range view, it may be true, as we are sometimes told, that in certain generations it is given to
criticism to prepare the way, through a regeneration of
culture, for the poetry of the next generation; but
literary history also suggests that, more often than not,
there is a great gulf fixed between discursive theory
and poetic practice at any particular time. For instance,
Metaphysical poetry in seventeenth-century England,
Baroque poetry in seventeenth-century France, Spain, and
Italy, flourished during periods when the dominant
poetic theory emphasized a rigid Neoclassical standard
of lucidity and symmetry. Again, when Ivor Winters tells
us that "the short poem reached its highest perfection
in English in the late sixteenth century and during the
first half or so of the seventeenth century," it is
interesting to consider just how little these "short
poems"—Tudor songs, Elizabethan sonnets, the love poems
of Donne, the devotional lyrics of Herbert, and so on—
figure in English poetic theory during this time.
Throughout the present study I have given some attention to
poetry itself, to the forms discovered by both long and
short poems during the Romantic period. But I shall not
try to argue that, say, various theories of discontinuity
and lyrical fragmentation in the long poem dictated the
structure of Blake's late Prophetic Books, of *The Prelude,*
of The Princess or In Memoriam or Maud. Although the Romantic period is exceptional in the frequent compatibility of its theory and its creation, I have assumed, at every point, that poetry is likely to influence theory, rather than the reverse.

My usage of the terms "long poem" and "short poem" requires explanation. It seems obvious that to speak of a given poem as "long" is to employ a term so semantically open that its denotations can never be fixed precisely. Common sense, for all its perfidies, is not always without value; and through common sense one feels that one is in the presence of long poems while reading The Prelude or Don Juan or Eugen Oneigen. Nor will much harm be done if one also considers The Excursion or Childe Harold or The Tale of the Golden Cockerel to be a long poem. But is The White Doe of Rylstone extensive enough to get classified as a long poem? What of Mazeppa or even The Rime of the Ancient Mariner? Here one seems to have moved into that large group of poetic forms that lie on the periphery of the long poem, poetic forms that one may feel prone to designate (with a term of exceptional vagueness) as poems of middling length. The point, of course, is that in any coherent discourse the term "long" will find its peculiar whiteness stained with the dyes of
each user's own understanding; and anyone who undertakes to define its meanings exactly will encounter that category of logical problems which scholastic philosophy emblematized by the disputatic over how many hairs are required to comprise a beard. These would appear to be elementary reflections. And yet this question of requisite length is not totally unimportant, not wholly without meaning: for in a way it has the indirect virtue of sending one back to the questions that do count. Itself vacuous, it reminds one (if such a reminder is needed) that the best means for defining the long poem is to define the inmost structure and spirit of such poems. From trying to do this—from asking not "How long is a long poem?" but "What is a long poem?"—one can escape at least partially from the concern with literal magnitude as measured by yardstick space. The problem will renew its value and partake in the life of poetic theory, of criticism, and of poetry. In the present study, however, my principal concern is simply to examine past conceptions and to draw out, so far as possible, the historical patterns that they form; and in pursuing these aims I have for the most part adopted the simple procedure of trying in every case to reconstruct what the critics or critics under discussion understood by the terms that they
were using. That they often seem to have possessed little clear understanding is a failing hardly confined to their own times.

All the above remarks apply with equal relevance, of course, to my usage of the term "short poem." Common sense will tell that "Der Erl-König" or "To Autumn" is a short poem. Mere yardstick measurements of a more problematical poem, such as "Alastor," issue in trifling or absurdity. And, as in the case of the long poem, I have sought to determine how particular Romantic critics themselves defined "short poem" or "lyric." Between the two last-mentioned terms, I have in general employed the former rather than the latter, since I agree with Ivor Winters that an automatic identification of the short poem with the lyric is likely to raise rather more difficulties than it solves. Neither Greek poetics, with its emphasis on the "radical of presentation" as the differentia of lyric poetry, nor the labors of Northrop Frye in trying to order our contemporary thinking about genre, have as yet broken up the hoary misconception that all lyrics must be "musical," "melodious," "singable," "sweet," and so forth; according to such assumptions a serenade by Müller or Shelley is a lyric, but a poem by Gongora with "tortured" conceits or a scatalogical burlesque by Swift is not. My further reasons for this
choice of terminology—"short poem" rather than "lyric"—are spelled out, to the best of my ability, in Chapter Five, in which I consider the Romantic critical emphasis on the lyric and its effects on the critical concept of the long poem. Here I shall note only that the term "lyric" is almost as treacherous, in the writing of critical history, as is the term "short poem"—although of course one can scarcely make any meaningful statement about Romantic theory without trying to understand the concepts of "lyric" that form the very core of so much of that theory.

Let me also say something, briefly, about the terms "Romantic" and "period" and about my demarcation points, give or take a few years, of 1750 and 1850. The scholarly literature on Romanticism is so vast that many lifetimes would hardly suffice to read everything of importance, let alone try to master it; and the problems of definition are bafflingly complex. I have not entangled myself in this whole immense question of whether and how Romanticism can be defined with any precision; my concerns are with certain tendencies in critical theory to which, technically, the term "Romantic" need not be applied at all. Yet it seems to me an affected pedantry not to use this term, even without defining it, so long as one bears in mind its shifting and elusive nature; and I have
therefore done so, fully aware of the many difficulties involved.

Almost as many problems are posed, for modern literary or critical history, by the concept of periodization, whereby one speaks of a "Romantic period," a "Sturm und Drang period," an "Augustan period," and so on. In historiography, since at least Ranke, periodization has been under continuous fire; and during recent decades its values for literary and critical history have also been searchingly challenged. Throughout the present study I have assumed that the period concept retains at least a practical usefulness; thus I continuously refer to the "Romantic period" and to the "period" of Neoclassicism. No contemporary scholarship, so far as I can ascertain, has ever for a moment suggested that literary periods can be marked off with anything like perfect neatness. To locate the exact point at which the period of Augustan Neoclassicism shades into the period of Pre-Romanticism, or at which the period of Pre-Romanticism becomes the period of Romanticism itself, is rather like trying to locate the exact point on the spectrum at which violet turns into blue. Literary and critical history is simply too dense with contrarieties, exceptions, overlappings, and recalcitrance to permit our carving out
a monolithic period with perfectly straight edges.

Nearly forty years ago, in *Axel's Castle*, Edmund Wilson was warning that

in attempting to write literary history, one must guard against giving the impression that... movements and counter-movements necessarily follow one another in a punctual and well-generalised fashion—as if eighteenth-century reason had been cleanly put to rout by nineteenth-century Romanticism, which then proceeded to hold the field until it was laid by the heels by Naturalism, and as if Mallarme and Rimbaud had then blown up Naturalism with bombs. What really happens, of course, is that one set of methods and ideas is not completely superseded by another; but that, on the contrary, it thrives in its teeth... 17

If we bear all these provisions in mind, however, it seems to me that we need not throw out altogether the term and concept of literary or critical periods. I believe, as René Wellek has been urging for more than three decades, that periodization retains a very real value in studying the history of literature or of critical thought, so long as one avoids both positivism and dogmatism. "In all my writings," Wellek noted in 1963, "I have consistently argued for a period concept which allows for the survival of former ages and the anticipations of later ones. 'Period' demands the dominance (but not the total tight dictatorial rule) of a set of norms which, in the case
of romanticism, are provided sufficiently by similar or analogous concepts of the imagination, nature, symbol, and myth."\(^{18}\)

Finally, the matter of historical periodization brings forward the dates (1750-1850) that define, however flexibly, the chronological limits of the present study. In recent decades, scholarship has more and more come to agree that Romanticism has no clear-cut \textit{terminus a quo} or \textit{terminus ad quem}. The dates of 1798-1830, which still persist in many accounts, are at best a textbook convenience and at worst a pernicious or obscuring fiction. For Germany, to conceive of the Romantic period as beginning during the 1790's is to exclude Lessing, Herder, the whole \textit{Sturm und Drang} impetus in literature and music, and the important earlier work of Goethe, Schiller, and other significant writers. Even for the English Romantic Movement—which of course was never recognized as a programmatic movement by the men who made its literature and established its critical formulations—such a conception means to shut out Collins, Young, Bishop Percy, Macpherson's "Ossian," Chatterton, Gray's "Norse" poems, Cowper, Smart, the Warton's, Bishop Hurd, Burns, Walpole, the ballad revival, a good deal of the early poetry of Blake, and much else. A better case can
be argued for the years around 1830 as a terminal date. In England, all the great Romantic poets and critics except Wordsworth died during the 1820's or the early 1830's: Keats in 1821, Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824, Blake in 1827, Hazlitt in 1830, Scott in 1832, Lamb and Coleridge in 1834; and Wordsworth's great creative years were long past. In Germany, Beethoven died in 1827, Schubert in 1828, Friedrich Schlegel in 1829, Hegel in 1831, and Goethe in 1832. Romanticism as a formal and self-conscious vision had very definitely begun to fade. Not many years were to pass before Balzac would begin his unblinking dissections of society, through novels that affirmed the solid establishment of Realism; and not many decades were to pass before the replacement of the Romantic imagination by science, positivism, and materialism was being claimed on every hand. For the purpose of the present study, I have chosen the years around 1750 as a valid starting point, since that date will allow the inclusion of the *Sturm und Drang* critics in Germany and of Pre-Romantic critics like the Wartons and Hurd in the British Isles--writers who strike me as having laid much of the groundwork for distinctively Romantic theories of the long poem.

The concept of Pre-Romanticism has been rather
widely questioned during the past thirty years or so and is now, I take it, pretty much in disrepute. George Sherburn, for instance, expresses his mistrust of the term "the beginnings of romanticism" as a useful instrument for understanding the years from about 1740 to about 1780; and Ronald S. Crane speaks of "the fairytales about neoclassicism and romanticism in the eighteenth century." I have not, as it happens, made an extensive usage of the term "Pre-Romanticism"; but my own feelings are that the term is useful as a description of certain fairly distinct tendencies that begin to crystalize themselves around the middle of the eighteenth century. As for my selection of a terminal date around 1850, I have thought it best to include certain "late-Romantic" critics, such as Poe, who in a way embody the whole spirit of Romantic theory as it had been accumulating for nearly a century. A great generation of poets and critics passes from the scene around 1830; but it seems difficult not to regard the later 1830's and the whole decade of the 1840's as a strong ebb-period of Romanticism.

Chapter One of this study is meant to provide materials that will serve as context and contrast for those in the later chapters. In this opening chapter
my main concern is to review the traditional balance of emphasis, in Neoclassical criticism, that elevated the epic (and, to a lesser extent, the other species of the long poem) and that tended to neglect or dismiss most of the shorter forms of poetry. I have undertaken to sketch the dominant critical attitude on these matters, from Italian theory in the early Renaissance down to the fresh critical stirrings of the 1750's and the 1760's. The second and third chapters, then, examine some manifestations of the Romantic "revolt" against the epic: Chapter Two treats the gradual collapse of the rigid Neoclassical hierarchy of genres and the ensuing blurring of the concept of "epic" as a form of poetry, and Chapter Three is concerned principally with Romantic critical attacks on the epics of Homer and of Virgil, which for centuries had been esteemed as inviolate norms for poetic aspirations. In Chapter Four the center of gravity is the "rivalry" of other forms of literature, such as the novel or the dramas of Shakespeare, as a phenomenon that drained away much of the admiration that criticism had previously exercised upon the epic and other long poems. And the fifth and last chapter documents some of the implications, for the long poem, of the unprecedented emphasis that Romantic critical theory placed upon the
short poem or upon the lyrical elements within poetry in general.

One further point. The present study, through its very nature, must display an imbalance in its treatment of the history of Romantic poetic theory. Because it concerns itself mainly with the critical bias against the long poem, it gives only occasional attention to critical defenses of such forms. As it happens, there were surprisingly few such discursive defenses during the Romantic period, the majority of them being casual and rather superficial; but there were more of them than the ensuing chapters might suggest. Yet I suspect that after all it is not in the realm of criticism but in the realms of poetry itself—in the great long poems of the past two hundred years or so—that we ought to seek for defense and refutation. In so seeking we may be disappointed, more often than not. The thinness, the merely programmatic substance, of many Romantic long poems and of many long poems that have appeared since the Romantic period—are weaknesses that cannot easily be gainsaid. Nevertheless, I believe that if Malraux is right in speaking about "art's eternal victory over human destiny," then it is still to long poems themselves that we had better look for our best chance of finding silent answers to every critical
denial of the long poem. Blake's Prophetic Books, The Prelude, Song of Myself, Pound's Cantos, Poeta en Nuovo York, several longer poems by Wallace Stevens, Amers, the Odyssey sequel of Kazantzakis: these are only a few works that might, I think, furnish such silent answers, a kind of final Yes.
NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION


5. The passages from Mill and Poe represent only one strain within the Romantic emphasis on the short poem: that strain, namely, which prizes "elevating excitement," "emotional intensity," "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," the quick song-flight of imagination, and similar effects. However, I have treated many other Romantic strains within the final chapter of the present study; and these two quotations will perhaps serve at this point as a kind of shorthand for these other strains.


7. Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1961); Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, *Bollingen Series XXXVI* (New York, 1953). I do not, of course, mean to imply that the materials of critical history respond to a completely positivistic study. Rather, the difference of preciseness to which I am pointing is simply one of degree. In recent decades the very historicity of literature has again and again been
questioned within theoretical discussions. For instance, T. S. Eliot's famous assertion in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—that "The whole of the literature of Europe from Homer has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order"—has been glossed as a denial that literature has a proper history at all; and as early as 1910, in his essay on Joseph Warton, W. P. Ker had made something of the same suggestion about the a-historical nature of literature. One need not engage this vexed problem (a good general statement of its implications is to be found in the concluding chapter of Wellek and Warren's Theory of Literature, second edition) to agree that, granting the possibility of writing literary history, one's subject-matter must be considerably more problematical than that of critical history.


9. René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 (New Haven, 1955), I, v. Wellek's argument for so comprehensive a definition of "criticism" is developed further in the essay "Literary Theory, Criticism, and History" collected in his book Concepts of Criticism (New Haven, 1963), esp. pp. 1-6. Replying to Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, Wellek declares (pp. 5-6) that "Literary theories, principles, criteria cannot be arrived at in vacuo: every critic in history has developed his theory in contact ... with concrete works of art which he has had to select, interpret, analyze, and, after all, to judge. The literary opinions, rankings, and judgments of a critic are buttressed, confirmed, developed by his theories, and the theories are drawn from, supported, illustrated, made concrete and plausible by works of art. The relegation ... of concrete criticisms, judgments, evaluations to an arbitrary, irrational, and meaningless 'history of taste' seems to me as indefensible as the recent attempts to doubt the whole enterprise of literary theory and to absorb all literary study into history."

10. Here, as throughout this study, I use the word "taste" in its common present-day sense as the likes and dislikes, whether emotional or intellectual, whether
substantiated or not, of an individual sensibility. Older understandings of this term tended to let the element of "taste" rejoin criticism as one of its closely reasoned and carefully prepared constituents. In From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth Century England (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), p. 87, Walter Jackson Bate points out that during the eighteenth century in England the premise was widespread that in criticism "Genuine taste, . . . which is impossible to achieve without— in their widest implication— 'reason' and 'good sense,' is a full exertion of mind which perceives the ideal, and which at the same time estimates, in relative proportion to other works of art, the extent and success with which the ideal is communicated in a given production." Until criticism is written by machines, I do not see how the element of "taste," however defined, can be entirely filtered out of the critical act.

11. Compare Northrop Frye's statement in Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 110, that "Social and cultural history . . . will always be a part of the context of criticism." Compare also Wellek's very full discussion of the relations between the history of criticism and the history of culture, in his History (above, note 9), pp. 8-11, esp. p. 8: "Criticism is part of the history of culture in general and is thus set in a historical and social context. Clearly it is influenced by the general changes of intellectual climate, the history of ideas, and even by definite philosophies, though they may not have produced systematic aesthetics themselves."


I know of no contemporary critics who would dispute the general thesis of Hyman's statements in the passage quoted.

15. Winters (above, note 6), pp. 59, 192.

16. This complexity must be apparent to anyone who meditates on Arthur O. Lovejoy's "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" and "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," Paul Van Tieghem's Le Romantisme dans la litterature europeenne, Max Deutsch-bein's Das Wesen des Romantischen or the many other German books that during the 1920's tried to define the essence of Romanticism, René Wellek's "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History" and "Romanticism Re-examined," Morse Peckham's "Toward a Theory of Romanticism" and "Toward a Theory of Romanticism: Reconsiderations," R. A. Foakes's The Romantic Assertion, Henry H. Remak's "West-European Romanticism: Definition and Scope," Albert Gerard's L'Idée romantique de la poésie en Angleterre, George Poulet's Les Métamorphoses du cercle, Harold Bloom's The Visionary Company, Ian Jack's volume covering 1815-1836 in the Oxford History of English Literature, or any among the literally hundreds of other books and articles that undertake to define or describe Romanticism or at least to survey the definitions and descriptions already formulated. After reading widely in these books and other writings, one may be tempted to give up in despair, taking refuge in nominalism or complete anarchy and agreeing with Valery that "Il est impossible de penser sérieusement avec les mots comme Classicisme, Romanticisme ...."


18. René Wellek, "Romanticism Re-examined" in Wellek, Concepts of Criticism (above, note 9), pp. 199-200. Compare the following passages from other essays by Wellek in the same volume: "... a period is a time section dominated by some system of literary norms. Period is thus only a regulative concept, not a metaphysical essence which must be intuited nor, of course, a purely arbitrary linguistic label." (pp. 92-
one must conceive of periods, not as arbitrary linguistic labels nor as metaphysical entities, but as names for systems of norms which dominate literature at a specific time of the historical process. The term 'norms' is a convenient term for conventions, themes, philosophies, styles, and the like, while the word 'domination' means the prevalence of one set of norms compared with the prevalence of another set in the past. The term 'domination' must not be conceived statistically: it is entirely possible to envisage a situation in which older norms still prevailed numerically while the new conventions were created or used by writers of greatest artistic importance."

"... the use of ... period terms ... must, it seems to me, be secured against two dangers: one, the extreme nominalism which considers them mere arbitrary linguistic labels, a tradition prevalent in English and American scholarship, and the other, very common in Germany, of considering such terms as almost metaphysical entities whose essences can be known only by intuition." (p. 224).

More detailed defenses of the period concept in literary and critical history are in Wellek's essay "Periods and Movements in Literary History" in English Institute Annual, 1940 (New York, 1941), pp. 73-93, and in Theory of Literature (above, note 8), pp. 274 ff.


CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND FOREGROUNDS

Before considering the origins and course of modern critical strictures on the long poem, it should prove useful to review some expressions of the high esteem that such poems had received up to the second half of the eighteenth century. In doing so, we may concentrate principally on the epic, which was customarily regarded as the supreme manifestation of such poems—and, indeed, as the supreme manifestation of all poetry. Other poetic forms of major scope had of course entered the debates and deliberations of traditional criticism; and later in this chapter I shall consider what was said about these forms, together with the general admiration in which they, too, were usually held. But it was the epic, the "hercick poem," that along with tragedy provided the main subject for critical theory throughout the Renaissance and well into the age of Johnson and the Wartons. Indeed, for neoclassical
criticism, in 1750 as in 1550, the idea of the long poem was likely to be equated, however loosely, with the idea of the epic or of variations on the epic. There were, to be sure, many important shifts in emphasis, many variations between Italian and French and English theory, many exceptions among individual critical minds. Yet there is also present a discernible continuity, a structure of assumption, that connects the views on epic expressed by, let us say, Vida's Ars Poetica (completed before 1520) with Pope's prefaces to his translations of Homer (1715 and 1726) or Johnson's Lives of the English Poets (1779-1781). After reviewing the course of critical pronouncements on the epic, we shall examine the variable but generally low fortunes of the shorter poetic forms in critical discourse during the period in question.

1. The Prestige of the Epic

There rests the Heroical, whose very name (I think) should daunt all back-biters; for by what conceit can a tongue be directed to speake euill of that which draweth with it no lesse Champions than Achilles, Cyrus, Aeneas, Turnus, Tideus, and Rinaldo? who doth not onely teach and move to a truth, but teacheth and moueth to the most high and excellent truth; who maketh magnanimity and iustice shine throughout all misty fearefulnes and foggy desires; who, if the saying of Plato and Tullie bee true, that who could see Virtue would be wonderfully rauished with the louve of
her beauty: this man sets her out to make her more lovely in her holyday apparel, to the eye of any that will daine not to disdain vntill they understand. But if any thing be already sayd in the defense of sweete Poetry, all concurreth to the main-taining the Heroicall, which is not onely a kinde, but the best and most accomplished kinds of Poetry. For as the image of each action styrreth and instructeth the mind, so the loftie image of such Worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informes with counsel how to be worthy.¹

When about 1583 Sir Philip Sidney set down these words, he was echoing judgments that had already been subscribed to by a majority of Italian and French critics throughout the sixteenth century. In Italy the Ars Poetica of Vida, published in 1527 although written some years earlier, contains one of the earliest Renaissance expositions of such judgments. Modeled quite frankly on the Ars Poetica of Horace, Vida's schematic poem surveys and judges the classical and Renaissance categories of poetry and enthusiastically gives to the epic the highest place in its chain of poetic value. So does Danielle's treatise La poetica (published in 1536), which contains one of the first formulations of what was to become a central element within Renaissance panegyrics on the epic: the argument, as in the passage from Sidney quoted above, that epic poems are most worthy to be revered in that they imitate the exemplary deeds of princes and other noble heroes (what Sidney elsewhere in
his Apology calls "that fayning notable image of vertues"). In the versified Arte poetique of Muzio (published in 1551), the epic is called "Il poema sovrano." Scaliger, in a passage of his Poetics (published in 1561) that was appealed to again and again throughout the quarrels of seventeenth-century genre theory, declared that "In epic poetry . . . all other kinds of poetry have a norm, so that they turn to it for their regulative principles." In the dissertations on Virgil's Aeneid published by Regolo (1563), Trissino (1563), Maranta (about 1564), and Toscanella (1566), the epic is similarly elevated to supremacy among the kinds of poetry. And examples like these could be multiplied almost endlessly. Moreover, for several decades before Sidney's Apology the epic poem had been regarded with equal esteem by French Neoclassical criticism. (By about 1550 the principles of Italian Neoclassical poetics were firmly established in France). The first really notable text in French critical theory, Du Bellay's Défense et illustration de la langue française (published in 1549), calls upon French poets to glorify their nation and their language in the finest of all ways; by composing a great French epic, another Iliad or Aeneid. Du Bellay's Defense had been drafted as the manifesto of the new
Pléiade; and his ideas, both on the epic and on other concerns of culture, language and poetry, were repeated again and again by other French theorists. For instance, the influential Art poetique of Pelletier (published six years after Du Bellay's work) views the heroic poem as an ocean, all other poetic genres being mere rivers by comparison. Ronsard expresses similar opinions in the two prefaces (1572 and about 1584) that he wrote for his Franciade, the epic poem on which he worked for some twenty years, without ever quite finishing it, and which he hoped would win for him the title of the Virgil of France. And, as with sixteenth-century Italian criticism, these specimens of high regard for the epic in French critical theory could be duplicated almost without end. In his pioneering and still-useful study, A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance, Joel E. Spingarn suggested that "the supreme ambition of the Pléiade was to produce a great French epic"; and this ambition was endorsed by many theorists and critics who were not directly connected with the new movement of the 1550's and 1560's.

Seen against these backgrounds, then, Sidney's praise of epic poems as "the best and most accomplished kinde of Poetry" comes relatively late in the history of
Renaissance criticism. Nor did his judgments find concrete expression with much frequency in the Elizabethan critical and theoretical writing that appeared during the next decade or two after his Apology was written. The reasons, as it happens, are not far to seek. In the Elizabethan period, literary criticism was more often than not still groping to disengage itself from its Tudor subservience to rhetoric, philosophy, doctrinal polemic, ethics, and programmatic education—a disengagement that had already been largely effected in Italy and France. Much of the energies of Elizabethan criticism, therefore, were expended on defenses of poetry in general as moral and utile. Indeed, G. Gregory Smith, in the Introduction to his Elizabethan Critical Essays, suggests that for Elizabethan theory "the main interest of Heroic Poetry . . . is that it offers a standing refutation of the charge of wantonness as an inherent defect of poetry ." Again, a good deal of Elizabethan criticism is occupied with specific questions of technique: with versification, diction, pleas for rhyme (or assaults on it), decorum, the establishment of quantitative measures within English poetry, and similar matters; or it entangles itself in semi-personal controversy, such as the exchanges between Greene and Harvey. Also, Elizabethan genre theory itself seems rather
primitive when compared to the codifications of Italian
and French criticism during the Renaissance—a relative
primitivism handily illustrated by the impressionistic,
half-formed, and rather chaotic schemes of genre that
occur early in Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*
(published in 1589). Concrete discriminations of the
forms and kinds of poetry, and their judicious arrange-
ment into a coherent hierarchy, are not yet significant
elements within English critical discourse.

Yet for all this there are admiring references to
the epic poem scattered through Elizabethan critical
writings; and although we do not often find explicit
claims for the supremacy of epic, Sidney’s claims for
that supremacy are by no means completely isolated. Thus
William Webbe, in his *Discourse of English Poetrie*
(published in 1586), speaks of "Heroycall" poems as

that princelie part of Poetry, wherein are
displayed the noble actes and valiant
exploits of puissant Captaines, expert
souldiers, wise men, with the famous reportes
of auncient times, such as are the Heroycall
worke of Homer in Greeke and the heauenly
verse of Virgils Aeneidos in Latine: which
worke, comprehending as it were the summe
and grounde of all Poetrie, are veryle and
incomparably the best of all other.

In Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* the "Heroick"
poem—which Puttenham defines as "long histories of the
noble gests of kings & great Princes entermedling the
dealings of the gods, halfe gods, or Heros of the gentiles, & the great & weighty consequences of peace and warre"--is ranked "of all other next the diuine [i.e., religious poetry] most honorable and worthy." Homer, for Puttenham, is "the father and Prince of the Poets." Sir John Harrington's *A Brief Apology for Poetry* (published in 1591, as the preface to his translation of the *Orlando Furioso*, and heavily influenced by Sidney's *Apology*) emphasizes once again the value of epic poetry as a pattern of right conduct:

... what better and more meete studie is there for a young man than Poetrie? specially Heroicall Poesie, that with her sweet state-linessse doth erect the mind & lift it vp to the consideration of the highest matters, and allureth them that of themselues would otherwise loth them to take and swallow & digest the holsome precepts of Philosophie, and many times even of true diuiniteitie. ... of all kinde of Poesie the Heroicall is least infected with lasciviousness ...  

Campion's "Preface to the Reader" in his *First Booke of Ayres* (published in 1601) reminds his audience that "in music, we yield the chief place to the grave and well invented motet," just as "in poesy, we give the preeminence to the Heroical Poem ... ." And generous praises of Virgil and Homer, and of their epics, occur in Richard Stanyhurst's "Dedication" to his translations from the *Aenid* (published in 1582) and in Chapman's
prefatory matter to the early installments of his translations from the *Iliad* (published in the summer of 1598).

In these and similar texts, then, one can see unmistakably the clear prefigurations of epic theory in seventeenth-century English criticism. Most of the terms on which that later theory exalted the epic poem—grounds such as morality, didactic value, artistic grandeur, and the sanctions of antiquity—are already coming to be marked out. It is not until the second or third quarter of the seventeenth century that English poetic theory participates with Italian and French theory in what might be called the apotheosis of the epic; but from Sidney to Jonson, and from Jonson to Hobbes, there runs a marked strain of high admiration for the poem of major scope and lofty ambition.

In seventeenth-century Italy and France the heroic poem reached new heights of critical prestige. Epic poetry on Christian themes—e.g., the *Moyse sauve* of Saint-Amant, published in 1653, and the *Saint Paul* of Godeau, published in 1654—was immensely popular in the France of the 1640's and the 1650's; and save for a few dissenters the critical theorists, who were often the epic poets themselves, vied with each other in extolling the idea of the "scriptural" epic. The potential glories
of such epics had been pleaded for as early as the
Art poetique of Vanquelin, published in 1605, and Godeau's
Discours de la poesie Chrestienne, published in 1635;
and they were set forth by Desmarests in a voluminous
series of works that includes his Les délices de
l'esprit, La comparaison de la poesie francoise avec la
grecque et la latin, and Defense du poeme héroïque
(published, respectively, in 1658, 1670, and 1674).
Epic poetry on non-scriptural subject-matter, however,
was equally esteemed and became an almost compulsive
subject for theoretical discourse. The writings of
Vossius, Chapelain, Scudery, Mambrun, Boileau, and Rapin
(whose Réflexions sur la Poetique d'Aristotile et sur les
ouvrages des poetes anciens et modernes were translated
by Rymer in 1674, the same year that they appeared in
France) all proclaimed the loftiness of epic poetry. So,
too, did the Apologie pour la poésie héroïque of Le Bossu,
so admired by Dryden upon its publication in 1677. More­
over, the epic became also a kind of obsessive goal for
poetic creation in seventeenth-century French literature.
In the late 1640's, when Hobbes, Davenant, Cowley, and
Waller were associating themselves with the composition
of Gondibert in Paris, they found on every hand poets
who had consecrated themselves to realizing the great
French epic. Chapelain had been at work on his Pucelle
for about fifteen years; Le Moyne had been composing his _Saint Louis_ for almost as long. When La Moyne's epic was at last published in 1651 (the year after Gondibert), it inaugurated a whole series of enormously long heroic poems in French, each with its theoretical or argumentative preface.¹³

Yet the epic reached comparable heights of prestige in English critical theory during the seventeenth century—and this despite that celebrated antagonism between poetry and the general thought of the age, which Basil Willey has traced in his _The Seventeenth Century Background_. In Italy and France the claims of rationalism and philosophy and inductive science had not yet impinged drastically on the domains of poetry. In England, on the other hand, the expository force of an unbroken succession of writers—Bacon and Glanvill, Bishop Sprat and Newton—had pressed a punishing warfare against the "chimerical" nature of certain kinds of poetic language. Much imaginative literature had been set aside as "phantasmal," "illusionary," "uncertain," "misty," "bewitching," and "vicious" (the adjectives, which are representative of much of the thought of the age, come from the often cited excursus on poetic language in Sprat's _History of the Royal Society_, published in 1667—the date, ironically, of the publication of _Paradise Lost_).
From Bacon to Newton the position of poetry was imperilled by an exceedingly complex intellectual development whereby "truth" was more and more claimed as the exclusive province of "philosophy" and of press. Yet as Willey points out, "... it must be emphasized that in the seventeenth century there was one poetic genre which enjoyed such peculiar and special prestige that it was proof against the cold climate of 'an age too late'--the Heroic Poem." Every reader of The Seventeenth Century Background will remember the excellent tenth chapter of that study ("The Heroic Poem in a Scientific Age"), in which Willey summarizes the fortunes of the epic poem against the new scientific and rationalistic spirit of the times:

Only the Bible could claim a greater share of reverence than Homer and Vergil. This was a legacy of the Renaissance, when, as is well known, the desire to emulate the noblest achievements of the ancients had become fused with the patriotic nationalism of the time, and poets in each country had aspired to 'illustrate' their vernaculars by composing in them works worthy to be set beside the Iliad and the Aeneid. ... The ancients had produced their crowning masterpieces in the epic form; Aristotle had canonised it; and Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso had in their several ways raised Italian nearly to a level with the classical languages. Not until a work of equal scope, ordonnance and elevation had been produced in French, for instance, or in English, could those modern dialects claim to have emerged from mediaeval barbarism. Moreover, the subject-matter of epic was normally some great act in the drama of national history, and through it, therefore, could be expressed the
new-found pride of nationhood, and the passion for great doing, which distinguished the Renaissance. Above all, the comparative invulnerability of heroic poetry, even in an age of scientific enlightenment, was due to this, that though it might make use of fiction, though its history might be 'fained,' its object was something as important as Truth itself, namely moral edification.¹⁵

In this summary, Willey has given in brief compass the principal reasons why the heroic poem, alone among all other forms of poetry, remained pretty much unmolested—or at least unviolated—amid the upheavals of seventeenth-century intellectual values. On the enormous prestige of the ancients as an inspiration for the creation of new epics, the testimonies of English critical writing during the century are almost numberless. One example occurs in Sir William Temple's essay "Of Poetry" (published in 1690). For Temple,

... no Man has been so bold ... to question the Title of Homer and Virgil, not only to the first Rank, but to the Supream Dominion in poetry, and from whom, as the great Law-givers as well as Princes, all the Laws and Orders ... may be derived. Homer was without Dispute the most Universal Genius that has been known in the World, and Virgil the most accomplish't. To the first must be allowed the most fertile Invention, the richest Vein, the most general Knowledge, and the most lively Expression; To the last, The noblest Idea's, the justest Institution, the wisest Conduct, and the choycest Elocution ... we find in the Works of Homer the most Spirit, Force, and Life; in those of Virgil, the best Design, the truest Proportions, and the greatest Grace ... Upon the whole, I think it must be confessed that Homer was of the two, and perhaps
of all others, the vastest, the sublimest,
and the most wonderful Genius; and that he
has been generally so esteemed, there cannot
be a greater Testimony given than has been
by some observed, that not only the greatest
Masters have found in his Works the best and
truest Principles of all their Sciences or
Arts, but that the noblest Nations have
derived from them the Original of their
several Races . . . 16

For Sir Richard Blackmore, in the "Preface" to his

Prince Arthur, An Heroick Poem (1695), "To write an Epick
Poem is a work of that Difficulty, that no one for near
seventeen hundred years past has succeeded in it; and
only those two great Wits Homer and Virgil before . . . 

What Homer and Virgil have perform'd with Honour and
universal Applause, I have attempted: What they have
been able, I have been willing to do."17 For the tin-
eared Earl of Mulgrave, in his "An Essay Upon Poetry (1682),
a review of the various forms of poetry must bring us
back, ineluctably, to the epic and to Homer and Virgil:

By painfull steps we are at last got up
Pernassus hill, upon whose Airy top
The Epick Poets so divinely show,
And with just pride behold the rest below.
Heroick Poems have a just pretence
To be the chief effort of humane sence,
A work of such inestimable worth,
There are but two the world has yet brought forth,
Homer and Virgil: with what awful sound
Each of those names the trembling Air does wound!
Just as a Changeling seems below the rest
Of men, or rather is a two legg'd beast,
So those Gigantick souls, amaz'd, we find
As much above the rest of humane kind.
Nature's whole strength united! endless fame,
And universal shouts attend their name!
Read Homer once, and you can read no more,
For all things else will seem so dull and poor,
You'll wish't unread; but oft upon him look,
And you will hardly need another book. 18

What Willey terms the seventeenth-century "passion
for great doing" echoes again and again in English
critical theory and pronouncements of individual taste,
whenever theory or taste concern themselves with the
possibilities of the long heroic poem. Davis P. Harding
points out that in Dryden's famous dictum expressed at
the beginning of the "Preface" to his Aeneis translation
of 1697—"A Heroick Poem, truly such, is undoubtedly
the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to
perform"—Dryden was speaking "not only for himself but
for his century." 19 For Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips,
in the "Preface" to his Theatrum Poetarum (1675), epic
poetry embodies something like the sum of all human
achievement; it must be "the result of all that can be
contrived of profit, delight, or ornament, either from
experience in human affairs or from the knowledge of all
Arts and Sciences . . . ." Its style should be "of a
Majesty suitable to the Grandeur of the subject." 20 And
for the reader of Blackmore's Prince Arthur there is an
ironic wistfulness about this passage from the poet's
"Preface" to his poem:
Admiration is the Formal Object of an Epick Poem: nothing is to be admitted there but as it is admirable; and by this it is discriminated from all other sorts of Poetry. Every kind endeavors to please and delight, but this only attempts to please by astonishing and amazing the Reader. In an Epick Poem everything should appear great and wonderful; the Thoughts cannot be too much Elevated, the Episodes too Noble, the Expression too Magnificent, nor the Action too Wonderful and Surprising. . . . No Riches of Fancy, no Pomp of Eloquence can be laid out too much on such a Work, where the Design is throughout to raise our Admiration. To render the Action the more Admirable, Homer and Virgil have introduc'd the Gods, and engag'd them every where as Partie's; and tho' I cannot say this is Essential and Necessary to an Epick Poem, yet 'Tis evident that interesting Heaven and Hell in the matter does mightily raise the Subject, and makes the Action appear more wonderful. 21

For one more expression of the magnitude of the epic undertaking, the words of Milton in Book Two of The Reason of Church-Government are too well known not to be quoted one more time. When he wrote these words (about 1641), Milton had not as yet chosen between the two great orders of heroic poetry: "that Epick form whereof the two poems of Homer, and those other two of Virgil and Tasso are a diffuse, and the book of Iob a brief, model" of "those Dramatick constitutions, wherein Sophocles and Euripides raigne . . . ." Whichever he fastened on, however, the undertaking would exact a consecration fully commensurate to the noble task. It would be an undertaking
not to be rays'd from the heat of youth, or the vapours of wine, like that which flows at wast from the pen of some vulgar Amorist, or the trencher fury of a riming parasite, nor to be obtain'd by the invocation of Dame Memory and her Siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternall Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his Seraphim with the hallow'd fire of his Altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases: to this must be added industrious and select reading, steddy observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affaires; till which in some measure be compast, at mine own peril and cost, I refuse not to sustain this expectation from as many as are not loath to hazard so much credulity upon the best pledges that I can give them.22

Milton is also the great exponent, in all English literature, of the idea that not until a heroic poem had been achieved in English would the language attain to its fullest dignity. An English epic poem, he declared in The Reason of Church-Government, will glorify the tongue in which it is composed. More than that, it will give to the whole nation a new sense of patriotic identity. Alluding to the apocryphal story that Cardinal Bembo had implored Ariosto to write the Orlando Furioso in Latin rather than in Italian, Milton states his hopes thus:

I apply'd my selfe to that resolution which Ariosto follow'd against the perswasions of Bembo, to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue: not to make verbal curiosities the
end . . . but to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Island in the mother dialect: That what the greatest and choycest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old, did for their country, I in my pro-
portion, with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine; not caring to be once nam'd abroad, though perhaps I could attaine to that, but content with these British Islands as my world . . . . 23

Above all, as Basil Willey points out, the heroic poem during the seventeenth century in England was regarded as being by its very nature an unsurpassed instrument for moral teaching, moral enlightenment, moral inspiration—as an instructor and mentor almost as useful and respectable as experimental science. For Hobbes, in "The Vertues of an Heroique Poem" (prefixed to his 1675 translation of the Odyssey), "the Designe of epics is not only to profit, but also to delight the Reader." But "The delight of an Epique Poem consisteth not in mirth, but admiration." And the "profit" derived from epic poetry is an accession of "Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, by the example of such Great and Noble Persons as the epic poet introduceth speaking, or describeth acting. For all men love to behold, though not to practise, Vertue. . . . For the work of an Heroique Poem is to raise admiration, principally, for three Vertues, Valour, Beauty, and Love . . . ." 24
Edward Phillips, waging still again the age-old battle between the "truth" of epic poems and the "truth" of history, notes that "because the epic poet ought to understand the ways of Heroic vertue & Magnanimity from better principles than those of common and implicite opinion, he hath the advantage of representing and setting forth greater Ideas and more noble Examples then probably can be drawn from know History..."

Moreover,

Heroic Poesie ought to be the result of all that can be contrived of profit, delight, or ornament, either from experience in human affairs or from the knowledge of all Arts and Sciences, it being but requisite that the same Work which sets forth the highest Acts of Kings and Heroes should be made fit to allure the inclinations of such like Persons readers of epic poems to a studious delight in reading of those things which they are desired to imitate.

Blackmore declares that as regards the task of drawing men to an "Admiration and Imitation" of "Gods, Heroes and Extraordinary Persons,"

... above all other kinds, Epick Poetry, as it is first in Dignity, so it mostly conduces to this End. In an Epick Poem, where Characters of the first Rank and Dignity, Illustrious for their Birth or high Employment, are introduc'd, the Fable, the Action, the particular Episodes are so contriv'd and conducted,
or at least ought to be, that either Fortitude, Wisdom, Piety, Moderation, Generosity, some or other Noble and Princely Virtues shall be recommended with the highest Advantage, and their contrary Vices made as odious.

The epic, for Blackmore, is frankly an instrument of didacticism. It gives to men "right and just Conceptions of Religion and Virtue, to aid their Reason in restraining their Exorbitant Appetites and Impetuous Passions, and to bring their Lives under the Rules and Guidance of true Wisdom, and thereby to promote the publick Good of Mankind." Therefore,

'Tis true, indeed, that one End of Poetry is to give Men Pleasure and Delight; but this is but a subordinate, subaltern End, which is it self a Means to the greater and ultimate one .... An epic poet should employ all his Judgment and Wit, exhaust all the Riches of his Fancy, and abound in Beautiful and Noble Expression, to divert and entertain others; but then it must be with this Prospect, that he may hereby engage their Attention, insinuate more easily into their Minds, and more effectually convey to them wise Instructions. 'Tis below the Dignity of a true epic poet to take his Aim at any inferior End. 26

Near the conclusion of his "Preface" to his own unsuccessful epic, Blackmore gives "the Definition of an Epick or Heroick Poem, that those that have it not already may now have a true Idea of its Nature. An Epick Poem is a
feign'd or devis'd Story of an Illustrious Action,
related in Verse, in an Allegorical, Probable, Delightful, and Admirable manner, to cultivate the Mind with Instructions of Virtue."27 Dryden expresses these same commonplaces when he notes in the "Dedication" to his Aeneis translation that "The design of an epic poem is to form the mind to heroic virtue by example; 'tis conveyed in verse, that it may delight, while it instructs."28 The final word, however, should belong to Milton, meditating in 1641 on the great task that finally was to issue in Paradise Lost. His future work, "so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die,"29 will

inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and publick civility, allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune . . . . It will inculcate whatsoever in religion is holy and sublime, in virtue amiable or grave, whatsoever hath passion or admiration in all the changes of that which is called fortune from without, or the wily suttleties and reflexes of mans thoughts from within . . . teaching over the whole book of sanctity and virtue, through all the instances of example, with such delight to those especially of soft and delicious temper, who will not so much as look upon Truth herself unless they see her elegantly drest, that whereas the paths of honesty and good life appear now rugged and difficult, though they be indeed easy and pleasant, they would then appeare to all men both easy and pleasant, though they were rugged and difficult indeed. And what a benefit this would be to our youth and gentry may be soon guest by what we know of
the corruption and bane which they suck in
dayly from the writings and interludes of
libidinous and ignorant Poetasters, who,
having scars ever heard of that which is the
main consistence of a true poem, the choys
of such persons as they ought to introduce,
and what is morall and decent to each one,
doe for the most part lap up vitious
principles in sweet pills to be swallow'd
down, and make the tast of vertuous docu­
ments harsh and sower.30

On all these counts, then, the epic poem was held
in almost reverential esteem in the critical theory and
poetic ambitions of the seventeenth century. There
were, of course, many other grounds upon which the epic
was defended and praised during the age. But the ones
enumerated here are perhaps sufficient to suggest the
degree to which the long heroic poem was regarded, in the
words of Dryden, as "the greatest work of human nature."31
W. P. Ker has summarized thus the history of attitudes
toward the epic poem, down to the close of the seventeenth
century:

The 'Heroic Poem' is not commonly mentioned in
histories of Europe as a matter of serious
interest; yet from the days of Petrarch and
Boccaccio to those of Dr. Johnson, and more
especially from the sixteenth century onward,
it was a subject that engaged some of the
strongest intellects in the world (among them,
Hobbes, Gibbon, and Hume); it was studied and
discussed as fully and with as much thought
as any of the problems by which the face of
the world was changed in those centuries.
There might be difference of opinion about the essence of the Heroic Poem or the Tragedy, but there was no doubt about their value. Truth about them was ascertainable, and truth about them was necessary to the intellect of man, for they were the noblest things belonging to him.32

Finally, it is important to note that this high admiration for epic poetry survived, *mutatis mutandis*, through the age of Pope and well into the time of Johnson and the Wartons. Although tensions within neoclassical theory began to increase during the decades from 1700 to 1750, and although there was manifested a new and often intense interest in the shorter forms of poetry (especially the ode and the ballad), the epic retained for the most part the prestige that had accrued to it during the previous two hundred years or so. At the dawn of the new century, in his *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), John Dennis ranked the epic as first among "The greater poetry," ahead of tragedy and the Pindaric ode;33 and the next four or five decades appeared quite willing to accept, however loosely, this schematization of values. Addison's admiration for the epic form was expressed again and again throughout his series of eighteen *Spectator* papers on *Paradise Lost*.34 Pope's esteem for the epic ran through his "Preface" to his translation of the *Iliad* (1715) and through his two
essays ("A general View of the Epic Poem . . . extracted from Bossu" and the "Postscript") attached to his Odyssey translation (1726). And as late as 1783, when Hugh Blair finally published his influential Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, he was still treating the epic as the highest kind of poetic writing.\(^\text{35}\)

It is true that during the first half of the eighteenth century there arose a strong tendency to narrow down the term "epic" so as to equate it on the one hand with the Ancients, with the classical poems of Homer and Virgil, and on the other hand with Milton's great work. With the exception of The Faerie Queene—the genre and structure of which furnished a dilemma for Thomas Warton\(^\text{36}\) and dozens of lesser critics—the "heroic romances" of the sixteenth century were either neglected or set in a distinctly problematical light. Conversely, the glorification of Homer and Virgil now reached its peak. In his Spectator essay of May 21, 1711, Addison continues the traditional seventeenth-century view of the moral function of epic, appealing to Homer and Virgil as the foremost masters of this function: "The greatest modern critics have laid it down as a rule that a heroic poem should be founded upon some important precept of morality . . . . Homer and Virgil have formed their plans
in this view." To Pope, Homer is "the greatest of poets, who most excelled in that which is the very foundation of poetry." In "fire" and "invention" (the principal criteria by which Pope judges Homer), the Homeric poems are incomparably superior to all later poetry. Virgil may contest Homer's achievements within the realms of artistic "judgment," but Homer "is universally allowed to have had the greatest invention of any writer whatever." By Thomas Blackwell, in his An Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer (1735), Homer is called "the man whose works for many ages were the delight of princes and the support of priests, as well as the wonder of the learned, which they continue to be." Blackwell is concerned to ask regarding Homer: "By what fate or disposition of things has it happened that none have equaled him in epic poetry for two thousand seven hundred years, the time since he wrote, nor any that we know ever surpassed him before." Robert Wood's An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer (1769) glorifies Homer as "the most constant and faithful copier after nature." And Joseph Warton, in his Adventurer paper on The Odyssey (July 24, 1753), makes a fervent plea for Homer's "lesser" epic:
Let the Iliad be ever ranked at the head of human compositions for its spirit and sublimity, but let not the milder and, perhaps, more insinuating and attractive beauties of the Odyssey be despised and overlooked. . . . Homer, in the Iliad, resembles the river Nile when it descends into a cataract that deafens and astonishes the neighboring inhabitants. In the Odyssey, he is still like the same Nile when its genial inundations gently diffuse fertility and fatness over the peaceful plains of Egypt. 41

Donald M. Foerster's summary of the critical standing of the classical epic in the earlier eighteenth century is pertinent here; and although it is meant to apply only to English literary climate, it would seem relevant to most of the literature on the Continent as well. For critics during the earlier eighteenth century, Foerster writes,

the classical epic . . . was regarded as a principal, if not always the supreme, form of literature; as an unsurpassable vehicle of moral instruction, of ageless wisdom lightly cloaked by the exterior of violence and adventure, of sentiments 'whose truth convinced at sight we find.' 42

Although the achievements of Homer and Virgil were held in undiminished respect during these decades, the achievement of Milton in Paradise Lost also came to be acknowledged, with something like a delayed shock of recognition. A majority of critics in the later seventeenth century had regarded Milton's epic rather ambivalently. Even Dryden, despite his warm admiration
for the poem, doubted that Milton had entirely succeeded in creating the long-awaited great epic in English. Addison was more convinced that, aside from certain defects, Milton had produced a masterpiece. In Spectator 267 he gave this injunction to his readers: "If you scruple to give the title of an epic poem to the Paradise Lost... call it, if you choose, a divine poem, give it whatever name you please, provided you confess that it is a work as admirable in its kind as the Iliad." And in Spectator 297 he announces as his purpose to "show there is in the Paradise Lost all the greatness of plan, regularity of design, and masterly beauties which we discover in Homer and Virgil." And in an Adventurer paper on Paradise Lost, Joseph Warton praises "the innumerable beauties" in this poem by "our inimitable bard."

When the Romantic reaction against the epic set in, therefore, it was directed against a genre that had long been widely looked on as the noblest of all poetic orders. The prestige of Homer and Virgil, the emergent reputation of Paradise Lost, and centuries of accumulated tradition—all combined to constitute a formidable adversary for Romantic criticism. Above all, perhaps, Romantic criticism had to contend with what W. P. Ker has
called "the spell of the phantom Epic, the pure idea of a heroic poem." And that criticism did not at once overthrow a poetic norm so impressively enthroned, nor did it do so without profoundly altering the later course of poetic theory and poetic standards.

2. The Other Forms of the Long Poem

The traditional critical attitudes toward the other, non-epic orders of the long poem need be chronicled in less detail since from the Renaissance through the lifetime of Pope these forms enter critical discourse far less frequently than does the epic. Critic after critic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remained content to schematize the genres of poetry without once glancing at those species and sub-species of long poem which elude the traditional classification of epic, drama, and lyric: the philosophical or religious-allegorical poem, as exemplified by Lucretius or Dante or, say, the 

Nosce Teipsum of Sir John Davies; late Greek pastoral romances; semi-didactic meditative idyls like the Georgics and Eclogues of Virgil; the medieval encyclopedic poem (such as the Confessio Amantis of Gower or Lydgate's Fall of Princes); metrical romances like Aucassin et Nicolette or the alliterative Morte Arthure; the longer
works of Chaucer; the countless varieties of Elizabethan verse narrative; the catch-all topographical poem, such as the Poly-Olbion of Drayton; the large-scale satire, such as Pope's Dunciad; and so on. When such long poetic forms did concern criticism, however, they were treated more often than not with considerable favor. For instance, in his Mythomystes (1632), Henry Reynolds finds space to praise in passing Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, the Faerie Queene of "the learned Spencer," and Drayton's "late-writ Polyolbion"—this despite the fact that Reynolds is concerned with demonstrating "the nature and value of true poesy and depth of the ancients above our moderne poets."46

On those occasions when non-epic long poems were attacked by critical pronouncements before the middle of the eighteenth century, it was customarily on either of two grounds (aside, of course, from the particular defects of the poem in question). Of these two grounds the one most commonly and vigorously appealed to was the discrepancy between the Renaissance romance and Aristotle's canons of poetic unity. In the Poetics Aristotle had laid down the precepts that the plot of an epic poem should concern "a single whole and complete action with a beginning, middle, and end, in order that
it may give its own individual pleasure like a single whole picture." But Italian criticism, after its Aristotelian theories had been formulated and made normative, soon discovered that such admired long poems of the Renaissance as the Orlando Furioso or Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato diverged sharply from Aristotle's standards for "unity," at least so far as his somewhat ambiguous usage of the term had customarily been interpreted. The controversy over the "bastard" form of the romanzi, which arose from this discovery, became in Spingarn's words "one of the most important critical disputes of the sixteenth century," a dispute that "in a certain sense may be said to remain undecided even to this day." This quarrel evoked disquisitions pro and con, assaults and apologies, from almost every notable Italian critic of the Renaissance: from Castelvetro, Robortello, Scaliger, Guarini, Fracastoro, and scores of others. The "disorder" of the romanzi was vigorously assaulted by Speroni, Minturno, Trissino, and many other strict upholders of Aristotle. Trissino, indeed, spent twenty years in composing his Italia Liberata (completed by 1548), which he was determined would constitute the first modern epic to accord exactly with Aristotelian standards. On the other hand,
such critics as Cintio, Giraldi, Pigna, Capriano, and Tasso leapt to the defense of the romanzi form. Tasso's Discorsi dell' Arte Poetica (published in 1587) tried to reconcile the epic and the romance; and the precepts of his treatise were put into practice in his own Gerusalemme Liberata. The bitter controversy over this poem, however, merely continued the rivalry between critical advocates of both forms. On its appearance the Gerusalemme was ridiculed by Lionardo and the Florentine Accademia della Crusca; it was defended by Pellegrine, by Tasso himself (in his Apologia), and by many other authoritative critical voices.

In England the critical image of Spenser's Faerie Queene, from its appearance to Thomas Warton's Observations of 1754, was of course profoundly affected by these controversies within Italian theory. For instance, Rymer in 1674 laments the "misfortune" that Spenser had "suffer'd himself to be misled by Ariosto" and had "blindly rambled on marvellous Adventures" in which everything is "fanciful and chimerical, without any uniformity, without any foundation in truth; his Poem is perfect Fairy-land."49 And even Warton, despite his enthusiasm for The Faerie Queene, acknowledges that the over-all unity of the poem is seriously imperfect.
The other count on which non-epic long poems were occasionally censured involves not so much their poetic structure as the "non-poetic" nature of the subject-matter that such poems had elected to "cloak" in verse. Here the exemplar was again Aristotle, who had declared in a famous passage of the Poetics that even if a treatise on medicine or natural philosophy be brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the material; the former, therefore, is properly styled poet, the latter, physicist rather than poet.50

During the Renaissance many Italian critics attacked the romances of Ariosto and Tasso with arguments drawn from this Aristotelian text. Thus Speroni argues that "The romanzi are epics, which are poems, or they are histories in verse, and not poems"; and he consigns them to the latter category.51 In 1632 Reynolds, in his Mythomystes, reports of Daniel's Civil Wars that "some good judgments have wisht, and perhaps not without cause," that the poem had been "somewhat more than a true Chronicle history in rime ... ."52 And Hobbes in 1650 ridicules those who "take for Poesy whatsoever is writ in Verse" and who therefore reckon Empedocles and Lucretius (natural Philosophers) for Poets, and the moral precepts of Phocylides, Theognis, and the
Quatraines of Pybrach and the History of Lucan, and others of that kind amongst Poets, bestowing on such Writers for honor the name of Poets, rather than of Historians or Philosophers. But the subject of a Poem is the manners of men, not natural causes; manners presented, not dictated; and manners feigned, as the name of Poesy imports, not found in men.\textsuperscript{53}

Despite the undeniable importance of these two lines of attack, however, they should be viewed and evaluated. If the heroic romance was widely censured in Italy and England, it also found a thousand eager defenders; Tasso's embattled \textit{Gerusalemme}, for instance, was extolled by one of its contemporary admirers, Paole Beni, as being even more excellent in its design than were the works of Homer and Virgil. When Hobbes finds fault with the Lucretian "scientific" poem, one can balance his reservations with Sir William Temple's praise of the \textit{De Rerum} for its poetic mastery of "the deepest natural Philosophy."\textsuperscript{54} It seems impossible not to conclude that, all in all, the non-epic manifestations of the long poem received considerably more respect than blame from literary criticism during the Renaissance and throughout the seventeenth century: a respect second only to that given the epic and the tragedy. The most significant point to be made, perhaps, is that when such long poems enter the discourses of criticism they do so principally through pronouncements of "taste," rather
than through such conceptual frameworks as were generated by the heroic poem.

3. The Shorter Poetic Orders

It remains, finally, to consider the place customarily given to the briefer forms of poetry in critical theory from the Renaissance to the earlier eighteenth century. That the Renaissance in Italy and France produced a golden flowering of creative activity in the shorter poetic kinds is of course a commonplace. From Petrarch to Ronsard, from Ronsard to the Italian and French lyricists of the seventeenth century, there took place a ceaseless exploitation of short poetic forms. The sonnet, the canzona, the epigram, the song, the madrigal, the sestina, the elegy and satire and paradox—these and dozens of other distinct poetic forms were extensively cultivated and enjoyed. It is equally a commonplace of literary history that this same cultivation and enjoyment lies near the center of Tudor and Elizabethan poetry and continues (under the formidable shadow of neoclassical epic theory) throughout the seventeenth century. Yet despite all this activity there was not much sanction in poetic theory for these "smaller" poems. Of the three recognized ancient genres—epic, drama, and
lyric--Aristotle has least to say about the last, perhaps due to the fragmentary state in which the Poetics has survived. Discussing the attempts of the Italian Renaissance to classify and deal with the poetic kinds, Spingarn writes that during the Renaissance there was no systematic lyric theory. Those who discussed it at all gave most of their attention to its formal structure, its style, and especially the conceit that it contained. The model of all lyrical poetry was Petrarch, and it was in accordance with the lyrical poet's agreement or disagreement with the Petrarchan method that he was regarded as a success or a failure. . . . the real question at issue . . . was merely that of external form.55

And among the hundreds of critics whose documents are studied by Bernard Weinberg in his immensely learned A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance, concern with lyric tends to be distinctly sporadic and ill-formed. Of the place of the short poem in poetic theory in England, M. H. Abrams notes that well into the second half of the seventeenth century such poems had pretty much been regarded as

the unconsidered trifles among the poetic kinds. Their lack of magnitude and of profitable effect, and the very fact that, in lieu of representative [i.e., mimetic] elements, their subject matter was considered to be principally the author's own feelings, consigned them to a lowly status in the scale of the genres. In many critics, the attitude to these poems ran the narrow gamut between contempt and condescension.56
It would be erroneous, of course, to suggest that short poems were seldom or never praised by critical pronouncements during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. Hundreds of examples of such praise could be gathered and arranged from critical writing throughout these periods. In English criticism there is Sidney, for instance. While in his Apology he declares the epic to be "the best and most accomplished kinde of Poetry," he can yet write glowingly of the didactic value of the pastoral poem, defend satire (which "sportingly neuer leaueth vntil [it] make a man laugh at folly, and, at length ashamed, to laugh at himselfe"), and praise "the lamenting Elegiack," which

in a kinde hart would mooue rather pitty then blame, which bewailes . . . the weakenes of mankind and the wretchednes of the world; which surely is to be praised, either for compassionate accompanying lust cause of lamentation, or for rightly paynting out how weake be the passions of wofulnesse.

And in one of the most celebrated passages from the Apology he asks:

Is it the Liricke that most displeaseth the enemies of poetry, who with his tuned Lyre, and wel accorded voyce, giueth praise, the reward of vertue, to vertuous acts? who giues morall precepts, and naturall Problemes, who sometimes rayseth vp his voice to the height of the heauens, in singing the laudes of the immortall God. Certainly I must confesse my own barbarousnes: I neuer heard the olde song
of Percy and Duglas that I found not my heart moved more then with a Trumpet; and yet it is sung but by some blinde Crouder, with no rougher voyce then rude stile . . . .

In Hungary I have seene it the manner at all Feasts, and other such meetings, to have songes of their Auncestours valour; which that right Souldier-like Nation thinck the chiefest kinders of braue courage. The incomparable Lacedemonians did not only carry that kinde of Musicke ever with them to the field, but even at home, as such songs were made, so were they all content to bee the singers of them, when the lusty men were to tell what they dyd, the olde men what they had done, and the young men what they wold doe.57

For another instance, there is Henry Peacham, who in his The Compleat Gentleman (published in 1622) reclaims ancient "song" from the charge of frivolity?

And what were the songs of Linus, Orpheus, Amphion, Olympus, and that dittie Iopas sang to his harpe at Dido's banquet, but Naturall and Morall Philosophie, sweetened with the pleaasance of Numbers, that Rudenesse and Barbarisme might the better taste and digest the lessons of ciuilitie?

Peacham also praises the Psalms, in a passage remarkably anticipatory of Bishop Lowth's influential Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1753), which played so prominent a role in the "lyric revival" of the third quarter of the eighteenth century:

What are the Psalms of Dauid . . . but a Divine Poeme, going sometime in one measure, sometime in another? What lively descriptions are there of the Malestie of God, the estate
and securitie of Gods children, the miserable condition of the wicked! What lively similitudes & comparisons, as the righteous man to a baie tree, the Soule to a thirstie Hart, vnitie to oyntment and the dew of Hermon! What excellent Allegories, as the vine planted in Aegypt; what Epiphonema's, prosopopoea's, and whatsoever else may be required to the texture of so rich and glorious a piece, 58

Finally, by the time of Addison's famous Spectator papers on "Chevy Chase" (May 21 and May 25, 1711), we find critical taste already looking toward the full-scale revival of interest in balladry and in the "lyrical" elements of poetry.

Despite these representative expressions, however, the short poem was more likely to be remarked only in passing. Because critical theory was preoccupied with the epic, with the heroic tragedy, and (somewhat later) with romance, comedy, and tragi-comedy, the briefer poetic forms enter its concerns less frequently and less formally than do any of these other genres and mixed genres. The summary of Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., in their Literary Criticism: A Short History, is to the point here:

The term 'poem' (which since the time of Wordsworth and Keats has meant for us a short piece of verse, characteristically, let us say, an ode or sonnet) meant in Dryden's time per excellence a long story in verse (an epic
or heroic poem) or a drama like an epic. . . .
A shorter poem was likely to be dubbed a 'paper of verses.' Nobody in Dryden's day would have understood (or at least nobody would have admitted understanding) Edgar Allan Poe's typically Romantic thesis that a long poem is a contradiction in terms and that such an apparently successful long poem as Milton's Paradise Lost is really a collection of short poems, intense moments, held together by prose.59

Moreover, if shorter forms of poetry were sometimes praised during these centuries, they were just as likely to encounter scorn or impatient dismissal. In Rapin's Réflexions, as translated by Rymer in the year of its French publication (1674), "A Sonnet, Ode, Elegy, Epigram, and those little kind of Verses . . . are ordinarily no more than the meer productions of Imagination"; therefore, "a superficial wit, with a little conversation of the World, is capable of these things."60 Hobbes excludes from the realms of poetry "Sonets, Epigrams, Eclogues, and the like pieces, which are but Essayes and parts of an entire Poem . . . ." Without its "Amplitude" a heroic poem "would be no pleasanter than an Epigram or one good Verse . . . ."61 When Edward Phillips in 1675 speaks of the "hard fate" of the poet who becomes "a dabler in Poetry," it is apparent that he has in mind both the inept poet and the poet who cultivates minor forms. In mitigation, Phillips points out that we are not all born Heroic
Poets, nor Writers of sublime Tragedy"; and he continues, in a rather moving passage, by noting that there is no Poetical Volume, be it never so small, but it requires some pains to bring it forth . . . and how small a matter is it for never so trivial a Work, before it comes to be condemn'd to the drudgery of the Chandler or Tobacco Man, after the double expense of Brain to bring it forth and of purse to publish it to the World, to have this small Memorial, Such a one wrote such a thing . . . .

And when the Earl of Mulgrave begins his survey of the poetic kinds, he starts at the bottom of the ladder:

First then of Songs, that now so much abound:
Without his Song no Fop is to be found,
A most offensive Weapon which he draws
On all he meets, against Apollo's Laws . . . .

No summary of the fortunes of the shorter poetic forms during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century can neglect the special case of the ode; for of all such shorter forms it was the ode that laid most claim to the favorable pronouncements of critical theory in these centuries. As Norman Maclean points out, the history of the term "ode" is treacherous. His own description of this form -- a particular kind of lyric "massive, public in its proclamations, and Pindaric in its classical prototype" -- is admittedly provisional.

Thus described, however, the ode enjoyed great esteem in
Italy and France during the Renaissance, where it was richly cultivated (partly as a manifestation of the recovery of the classical spirit) and where it received a good deal of critical attention. In 1656, when Cowley published his Pindarique Odes, they not only became, as Maclean observes, "the literary sensation of the early neoclassical period in England": they also focused "more attention upon the lyric of grandiose dimension than it had received since early Greece." Thereafter, for English critical discussion, the ode came more and more to figure as a topic of interest and of controversy. It was essayed by Dryden and by countless lesser poets; and its glorification went hand in hand with new emphases on "fire," "passion," and "sublimity." Eventually, as Abrams points out, there were critical attempts to discriminate the Pindaric and pseudo-Pindaric from "lesser" lyrics and to assign these kinds "a place next to the greatest of the traditional forms." Dennis, for instance, in The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704) places the ode ("the Greater Lyric") third in the hierarchy of genres, just below epic and tragedy.

In general, however, the place of the ode on the scale of poetic values remained ambivalent; and, as might be expected, there soon set in a reaction against the
rhapsodic and often extravagant praise that criticism, in the wake of Cowley, had accorded to the ode. As late as 1779, in his *Life of Cowley*, Dr. Johnson brought down his magisterial wrath on the "Pindaric madness" that, he felt, had deranged the living tradition of English verse. The problem of understanding the critical image of the ode, together with the role played by the form in generating a "lyric revival" and a reaction against the epic, is an exceedingly complex one; and in the second chapter of this study I shall return to the whole subject. But for the purpose of the present chapter we may say that, all factors considered, the ode did not successfully challenge the supremacy of the heroic poem; a majority of those critics who praised it most enthusiastically still kept the long poem at the top of the scale of genres.

An examination of critical theory from the beginnings of the Renaissance to the death of Pope makes possible, then, the following conclusions. The heroic poem, during these centuries, enjoyed an undiminished prestige as the loftiest and noblest order of poetry; the other forms of the long poem, while they entered the concerns of criticism rather less frequently, were in general admired as major products of poetic creation; and the shorter poetic kinds were likely to be regarded as outside
the domain of criticism (rather as Elizabethan drama was so regarded) or to be glanced at with either contempt or condescension. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, there had begun a concerted revision of this traditional balance, a revision of extreme importance for the history of criticism and of the poetry that brings criticism into being. The purpose of the two following chapters is to explore some of the elements within this revision, with particular attention to that long and complicated process whereby the epic poem was overthrown from its position as "undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform."
NOTES FOR CHAPTER I


5. See Spingarn (above, note 2) for a commentary on this simile.


10. Ibid., 17.


15. Ibid., pp. 219-220.


23. Ibid., 236.


26. Blackmore (above, note 17), 228, 229.

27. Ibid., 235.

29. Milton (above, note 22), 239.

30. Ibid.


34. Addison's Spectator papers on Paradise Lost were edited by Albert S. Cook (Boston, 1892).

35. Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (London, 1783), passim but especially Chapter IV.

36. Thomas Warton, Observations on the Fairy Queen, second ed. (London, 1782), passim but especially Section I.

37. Addison, Spectator 70, reprinted in Elledge (above, note 33), I, 18.


39. Thomas Blackwell, An Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer, partially reprinted in Elledge (above, note 33), I, 432.


41. Joseph Warton, Adventurer 75, reprinted in Elledge (above, note 33), II, 705.


43. Reprinted in Elledge (above, note 33), I, 34, 37.

44. Reprinted in Elledge, II, 716, 717.
45. W. P. Ker (above, note 32), I, xvii.


50. Poetics, I, 8.

51. Speroni, Opera, 5 vols. (Venice, 1740), V, 521.

52. Reynolds (above, note 46), 147.


63. Mulgrave (above, note 18), p. 5.


65. Ibid., p. 412. Cf. Abrams (above, note 56), p. 85: "The soaring fortunes of the lyric in English poetry and poetic theory may be dated from 1656, the year that Cowley's Pindaric 'imitations' burst over the literary horizon and inaugurated the immense vogue of the 'greater Ode' in England."


CHAPTER II

THE EPIC IN ROMANTIC CRITICISM (1):
PROBLEMS OF GENRE AND ORDER

The gradual loosening of Neoclassical critical assumptions about the epic poem and its values, together with their replacement by the new assumptions of Romantic criticism, are central developments in the Romantic turning-away from all long poems, whether epic or not. For this reason, and because these developments begin at a quite early stage in the formation of what W. T. Jones has called The Romantic Syndrome, they constitute an appropriate starting place from which to trace the whole Romantic transition away from an emphasis on the longer forms of poetry. Of course, every critical current that militated against the long poem in general—most notably, perhaps, the establishment of the brief lyric flight as the principal norm for poetry—militated also against the epic species. But there were certain tendencies that worked specifically
against the epic genre and only secondarily against other sorts of longer poems. With the present Chapter I wish to consider two of these factors: the dissolution of Neoclassical genre-theory and the extent to which this Neoclassical theory was superseded, in Romantic doctrine and practice, by a new vagueness and nominalism in defining or evaluating the epic poem. In the third chapter, then, I propose to examine the Romantic animus against the classical epics of Homer and Virgil—a specific critical and historical tendency so important that within the present study it claims a centrality of its own.

1. The Decay of Neoclassical Genre-Theory

That there are distinct genres of literature, and that these genres are to be disposed in an elaborate hierarchy according to their intrinsic or potential worth, are two abiding principles in most Neoclassical critical theory. The formal warrant for these principles was of course the assumptions and method of Aristotle, who in his Poetics had applied to the examination of poetry the same procedures that he had used as a biological scientist: the recognition of distinct categories and the classification of such categories according
to their nature (i.e., their end); and Aristotle's treatise, together with the Ars Poetica of Horace, had furnished the classical documents on which Renaissance genre-theory was founded. There was in truth little necessity of formal warrants for discriminating and ranking the genres, if one considers that to make conceptual distinctions and to formulate value-judgments are among the fundamental operations of the human mind. But in Aristotle and Horace the Renaissance found texts marked by intellectual cogency and by the authority of antiquity; and these two texts were followed (and encrusted with commentary) throughout the Renaissance. There were clearly recognizable literary genres—the "species" or "kinds" of literature, as they were usually called; and these genres existed along an ascending scale, from the lowliest to the loftiest. Moreover, such principles, crystallized during the Renaissance, dominate the critical thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; as Wellek and Warren point out, "these are centuries which take genres seriously; their critics are men for whom genres exist, are real."²

There were, to be sure, many contradictions, vaguenesses, conflicts, and other problems within Neo-classical genre-theory. For one thing, the distinctions
between the genres, despite the immense importance attached to this matter, were seldom clearly defined.

To quote once again from the excellent summary of Wellek and Warren,

That genres are distinct—and also should be kept distinct—is a general article of Neo-Classical faith. But if we look to Neo-Classical criticism for definitions of genre or method of distinguishing genre from genre, we find little consistency or even awareness of the need for a rationale. Boileau's canon, for example, includes the pastoral, the elegy, the ode, the epigram, satire, tragedy, comedy, and the epic; yet Boileau does not define the basis of this typology (perhaps because he thinks of the typology itself as historically given, not a rationalist construction). Are his genres differentiated by their subject matter, their emotional tone, their Weltanschauung, or their audience? One cannot answer. But one might say that for many Neo-Classicists the whole notion of genres seems so self-evident that there is no general problem at all. . . . Neo-Classical theory does not explain, expound, or defend the doctrine of kinds or the basis for differentiation.3

In his History of Modern Criticism, Wellek summarizes another difficulty connected with Neoclassical concepts of genre: the fact that Neoclassical criticism was never able to agree on the problems posed by generic innovation and by the appearance of "new" or at least mixed genres:

The ancient table of genres was enormously increased during the Middle Ages, and new genres established themselves in practice
without too much theoretical resistance or even attention. It was rarely clear whether the table of genres was closed or whether new genres could be admitted. In practice hybrids of existing genres or ruleless new genres outside of the table of categories arose and were at least tolerated. The neoclassical scheme was being undermined, however, by the success of genres for which its theory made little or no provision: the novel, the periodical essay, the serious play with a happy ending, and so on. At times, even every early, the whole theory of genres was challenged; but the challenge was usually an argument in favor of a new genre, such as the much debated romantic epic of Ariosto . . . .

Yet other difficulties and tensions for Neoclassical genre-theory were involved with the concept of a hierarchy of kinds. The criteria by which genres were assigned to their proper place in this hierarchy were rarely agreed upon. Some commentators used the measure of "dignity" or "nobility" or ancient precedent, others the measure of "magnitude" or "intensity" or "sublimity," still others the measure of didactic efficacy; most commonly, perhaps, the criteria formulated by each critic represented an amalgam of all these standards. Nor, of course, was the order of the genres on this scale of values ever universally agreed to. Certainly a majority of critical minds would have admitted the epic to the top-most place. But tragedy
was occasionally claimed to be the equal of the epic and perhaps even its superior; and the precise status of all the "lesser" genres furnished a subject for endless critical arguments.6

In spite of all these uncertainties, however, it remains a historical fact that the concept of genres, and of their arrangement into some hierarchy of values, was almost never called into question by Neoclassical criticism. It prevailed throughout the Renaissance and the seventeenth century; and its dominance was diminished only a little during the eighteenth century. The reasons for so unbroken a tradition are not far to seek. There was, as has been noted, the fundamental human activity of making classifications and value judgments; there was the desire for a stable conceptual framework within which to apprehend and evaluate the structure of literature; and there were the powerful sanctions of antiquity. Moreover, the close analogy between the hierarchy-of-genres concept and the concept of a Great Chain of Being is of course apparent and has been frequently remarked. The one was a close reflection of the other. Even as a Scale of Being or Ladder of Life operated within the world of man and of nature, providing both social order and a set of
structural principles by which to comprehend the
organization and workings of the universe, so a similar
scale was said to operate within the world of poetry.
The Neoclassical genre-hierarchy concept, then, was
very tightly connected with major aspects of the whole
world-view, from the Renaissance through the Enlighten-
ment.

It may be seen, therefore, that when the epic poem
was elevated to the sovereign place within this
hierarchy its supremacy was conferred by the pressures
of a powerful tradition. In the Romantic period,
however, these age-old concepts of genre and of the
respective values of the various genres began to loosen
and, very rapidly, to break up almost completely. If
many internal difficulties had been nascent as early as
the Renaissance, such difficulties now started to break
out with widespread force; and a whole series of new
developments completed the reversal of traditional
patterns. The sources of this transition are infinitely
complex; but we can at least detail a few of them,
especially as they bear on the Romantic reaction against
the epic poem.

(1) The movement from a world-view predominantly
static to a world-view predominantly dynamic. The
terms "static" and "dynamic" are as treacherous, as
ultimately unsatisfactory, as are most such over-simplifications. When applied to an entire age, no large abstraction can withstand every test of inclusiveness or exhaustiveness; it becomes a falsification or at least a procrustean bed. Yet the textbook discriminations between Romanticism and earlier ways of looking at the world—discriminations derived, usually, from the famous opening chapters of Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*—are not totally valueless. Much of the thought of the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries was strongly marked by a tendency to view the world as being at least nominally static and fixed; it is impossible to deny that in Descartes, in Bishop Sprat, in Leibnitz and Pope, the structure of things is conceived as more or less rigid and mechanistic. The Romantic spirit, on the other hand, was strongly marked by a tendency to view the world as being organic, changing, growing, living, quick with immanent possibility and immanent becoming. To read a wide cross-section of the scholarship and theory dealing with Romanticism that have appeared since roughly the end of World War Two, one is struck by the extent to which the "dynamic" quality of Romanticism recurs as a kind of common-denominator amid what otherwise is apt to seem a welter of conflicting opinions and disparate attempts at
definition.

As has been noted, in Neoclassical critical practice the discrimination of the genres and the establishment of their place on the hypothetical scale of values were by no means frozen and final. As early as the Italian Renaissance, critics bent to defend the contemporary heroic romances had boldly declared that there were new poetic forms of which Aristotle simply had not known, which he had not anticipated, and which could not be expected to conform even loosely to his precepts. (Such was the line of Giraldi Cintio, for instance, in his Discorso intorno al comporre dei Romanzi of 1549). Theoretically, however, both the differentia of the genres and their ranking were often supposed to be ordained more or less permanently. Thus Romantic critical theory was in part a dynamic revolt against fixity and stasis, against a closed and stiff conceptualization of the kinds of literature and of the respective values of each. For most Romantic critics it no longer seemed self-evident that the epic must remain forever established as the greatest genre and the ultimate standard for poetic form.

(2) A New consciousness of the bewildering variety of literature itself, of its protean and often blurred forms and the problems posed by such variousness and
elusiveness. Neoclassical criticism, at the hands of its wisest and least dogmatic practitioners (e.g., Dryden), was perfectly aware that there existed many forms of imaginative writing with which it was ill-equipped to cope, because it lacked the necessary critical vocabulary, the necessary framework of concepts and questions. More often than not, however, it had tended to solve this dilemma by ignoring such works altogether or by condemning them a priori. But by the Romantic period this awareness had deepened into an acute sense of inadequacy and a determination to find new tools with which to do critical justice to new forms (or to forms previously slighted in one way or another). For instance, Neoclassical criticism was never fully capable of dealing with the novel, save through such counters as fable and character, transferred rather uneasily from theories of the epic and the drama; and even if Neoclassicism had formulated canons for the novel on the examples of, let us say, Clarissa and La Princesse de Clèves, then those canons would probably have possessed only a limited usefulness for any critic who wished to analyze Tristram Shandy or Le Neveu de Rameau. It simply would not do to force new wine into old bottles. Romantic criticism realized
(in a gesture that connects with its dynamism) that
to deal with the infinite multifariousness of literary
art it would need to be open, flexible, questing,
patiently responsive; it could no longer believe that
all literature had to be generically "pure."

(3) **A new mistrust of thinking in tight categories.**
"If you scruple, to give the title of an Epic Poem to
the *Paradise Lost* of Milton, call it, if you choose,
a *Divine Poem*, give it whatever name you please, provided
you confess, that it is a work as admirable in its kind
as the *Iliad.*" These words of Addison (in *Spectator* 267)
may seem remarkable for a critic often taken as the
purest embodiment of Neoclassical critical theory in
Augustan England; yet they are by no means completely
anomalous. Neoclassicism, especially in its late English
embodiments, could be liberal, nimbly flexible, even
good-humoredly tolerant. Even Boileau and Rymer were
not so unbending as they are frequently pictured: in
their formulations "reason" and "nature" ultimately
take precedence over Aristotle himself. Still, it must
be admitted that Addison's casual "give it whatever
name you please" is not quite characteristic of his
age or of Neoclassical criticism in general. Far more
often, such criticism was stamped with a compulsion for
order, with a determination to categorize and label the
literary works on which it operated. When we move to distinctly Romantic theory, however, we find less positivism, less neatness in atomizing the concepts with which criticism functions. Many pressures of the Romantic world-view in general are involved in this new loosening; and here again the standard textbook antitheses between the Neoclassical and the Romantic are not totally useless. In much Romantic thought there was a marked turning

from a satisfaction with sober reason to an indulgence in passion and sensibility; from a confidence in the universality of reason to an emphasis upon the diversity of truth; from a compact, stable society to an unstable, revolutionary society; from a concentration on the general to a search for the minute and the singular; from an adherence to the agreed standards of the age to an eccentric, anti-social disregard of convention . . . .
from the uniformity of behavior to the differentness of men and of their opinions . . .
from a concern with the species to a concern with the individual; from traditional creeds to individual speculations and revelations;
from the ideal of order to the ideal of expansiveness . . . .

Relativism and an innovating spirit of revolt against abstraction and fixity were characterizing elements in this Romantic world-view. And there can be little doubt that, with due allowance for exceptions, they also left their mark on Romantic literary theory when that theory dealt with the problem of the genres and of their respective merits. As early as 1789, the American
poet and critic Timothy Dwight declared that the different "kinds" of poetry "blend or harmonize . . . and can be no more exactly limited or separated than the hues of the rainbow." And by 1823, when an anonymous writer in the *Retrospective Review* attacked Blair and other English late-Neoclassical critics for having "undertaken to fix the number of species" of literature, the dominance of rigid categories and of "purity of genre" had long been overthrown. To many critics the compartmentalization employed by Aristotle and Horace seemed outmoded; to others it seemed a method as dead as Newtonian mechanism; to still others it was simply incomprehensible.

(4) A movement away from the discrimination of genres through formalistic criteria. Neoclassical genre-theory, in both its prescriptive and descriptive veins, had in general inclined to differentiate the genres on the basis of such characteristics as meter, structure, conventions, "size" (or literal magnitude), "shape," and so on. An epic poem or a pastoral elegy had to display certain machineries; a tragedy was expected to contain such and such formal aspects. During the Romantic period, however, there arose a new tendency to think not so much in terms of genres, formally conceived, as in terms of literary "spirit" or "essence."
Critic is m  e s ta b lis h e d  f o r  I t s e l f  an e n t i r e l y  new vocabulary: such concepts as "decorum," "stylistic regularity," and the like gave place to such concepts as the sentimental, the naive, the Gothic, the classical, the primitive, and so on. As early as 1766, in his *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur*, the German *Sturm und Drang* critic Heinrich Wilhelm Gerstenberg had recommended Shakespeare's plays to the Germans with the cry, "Away with the classification of the drama . . . call them Shakespeare's works plays, history, tragedy, tragicomedy, comedy, what you will: I call them living pictures of moral nature." In 1825, in his essay "On English Poetry," Bryan Procter tosses out every tenet of Neoclassical criticism, claiming that it is nonsense to worry about whether a given poem should be described as "an epic or a romance, an epistle or a dirge, an epitaph, an ode, an elegy, a sonnet, or otherwise." All that matters is that the poem be "poetry." The year before, in the extremely important preface to the first edition of his *Odes*, Victor Hugo had also swept away at one stroke the whole traditional notion of genres. Poetry (and all literature, for that matter) is simply to be regarded as either good or bad, true or false, beautiful or ugly. Hugo confesses himself
unable to understand the received dogma that "la 
tragedie interdit ce que le roman permet; la chanson 
tolere ce que l'ode defend, etc."\(^\text{12}\) For many German 
theoreticians and critics in the decades following 
Gerstenberg's pronouncements on Shakespeare, the 
counters cease to become "tragedy," "comedy," "epic," 
"lyric," or "elegy": they become, instead, "objective 
and subjective," "romantic and classical," "naive and 
sentimental," "natural and artificial," and so forth.

To all these tendencies, some revolutionary and 
some gradual, there were so many exceptions that the 
sum of them points toward basic tensions within 
Romantic theory itself. Bishop Hurd, in many other 
respects a herald of Romantic critical attitudes, comes 
out so strongly on the side of "purity of genre" (in 
his A Dissertation in the Idea of Universal Poetry, 
1766) that he seems to deny to prose fiction the dignity 
of being regarded as fiction:

\[
\ldots \text{what are we to think of those novels or } \Roman{romances}, \text{ as they are called, that is, fables } \\text{constructed on some private and familiar subject, which have been so current of late through all Europe?} \ldots \text{as they are wholly } \text{destitute of measured sounds (to say nothing of their other numberless defects), they can } \text{at most be considered but as hasty, imperfect, } \text{and abortive poems, whether spawned from the } \text{dramatic or narrative species it may be hard to say.} \ldots \text{whatever may be the temporary success of these things (for they vanish as}
\]
fast as they are produced, and are produced as soon as they are conceived), good sense will acknowledge no work of art but such as is composed according to the laws of its own kind. These kinds, as arbitrary things as we account them . . ., have yet so far their foundation in nature and the reason of things that it will not be allowed us to multiply or vary them at pleasure. We may, indeed, mix and confound them if we will (for there is a sort of literary luxury which would engross all pleasures at once, even such as are contradictory to each other), or in our rage for incessant gratification we may take up with half-formed pleasures, such as come first to hand and may be administered by anybody; but true taste requires chaste, severe, and simple pleasures, and true genius will only be concerned in administering such.\textsuperscript{13}

Throughout his correspondence with Schiller—much of which is taken up with discussions of genre-theory—Goethe is concerned, even during his most "Romantic" phases, to defend the more or less traditional concept of the genres and of the necessity of keeping them "pure." The dissolution of the received concepts of genre is strongly resisted; and the mixing of the genres is deplored as "childish, barbarous, and tasteless," a tendency "which the artist should resist with all his powers."\textsuperscript{14} The traditionalism inherent in Wordsworth's critical thinking is nowhere revealed more directly than in his preface to the 1815 Poems, in which the care with which he distinguishes the various genres of poetry—the epic, the drama, the lyric, the
idyllium, and so on—would have been worthy of Johnson or Blair. Or consider the divided allegiances of Coleridge with regard to the nation of literary genres. In one of the Shakespeare lectures he declares that "It is absurd to pass judgement on the works of a poet on the mere ground that they have been called by the same class-name . . . or on any other ground indeed save that of their inappropriateness to their own end and being, their want of significance, as symbol and physiognomy." On another occasion, however, he declares it advisable for criticism "to distinguish poetry into different classes" and to judge individual works according to their perfection within their particular genre. In like manner, the necessity of ranking the genres drew ambivalent pronouncements from Coleridge. At times he seems to adopt the typically twentieth-century view that literature exists as a kind of level continuum; on other occasions he appears bent to decide whether the lyric, the drama, or even the widely "discredited" epic should be taken as the supreme genre of poetry. Despite the survivals of Neoclassical genre-theory represented by these instances, however, it is clear that Romantic theory describes a shift away from the older formalistic ways of categorizing literary works, a new emphasis on what was vaguely
referred to as the "inmost spirit" of the works under scrutiny.

(5) A bias, accelerating into an outright revolt, against the Neoclassical rules. In recent decades the old view that the Neoclassical rules were nothing but a dry arbitrary authoritarianism, artificially imposed by dogmatic fiat, has been corrected. One cannot deny, of course, that the letter of the rules was often invoked in a narrow and intolerant manner and that their dominance was often cramping or deadening rather than quickening. Such was the case with the pronouncements of Trissino and Gabriel Harvey in the Renaissance or of Rymer during the seventeenth century; these are critics in whom unexamined dogma triumphs over free-breathing order. But a surprising number of other critics, from Vida to Pope, were quite willing to admit that there were graces beyond the prescriptions of the rules and that the most important function of such rules was to remind writers that, as Goethe remarked in old age, the artist rises to his greatest heights when he works within stringent limitations. Dryden, for instance, will have nothing to do with doctrines that make the rules the only sine qua non for literature; Dr. Johnson's censure of critics who judge by precepts rather than by perceptions is well known; but even
Boileau acknowledges that "genius" can burst the bounds of every "rule."\(^{17}\) Doubtless a majority of Neoclassical critics would have disagreed with the verdict (typically "Romantic") of Joseph Warton: "In no polished nation, after criticism has been much studied and the rules of writing established, has any very extraordinary work ever appeared." But many Neoclassical critics could have subscribed with scarcely a murmur to another passage from Warton:

The precepts of the art of poesy were posterior to practice . . . . A petulant rejection and an implicit veneration of the rules of the ancient critics are equally destructive of true taste. . . . The censure of critical bigotry extends not to those fundamental and indispensable rules which nature and necessity dictate and demand to be observed . . . . But the absurdity here animadverted on is the scrupulous nicety of those who bind themselves to obey frivolous and unimportant laws: such as that an epic poem should consist not of less than twelve books; that it should end fortunately; that in the first book there should be no simile; that the exordium should be very simple and unadorned; that in a tragedy only three personages should appear at once upon the stage; and that every tragedy should consist of five acts . . . .\(^{18}\)

But although Neoclassicism often interpreted the rules with a sweet reasonableness and an unexpected flexibility, there were few Neoclassical critics who did not display at least a nominal commitment to the principles on which they were based: principles of order,
decorum, and a reverence for ancient precedent. It remained for Romantic criticism to break almost completely with the concept of the rules (indeed, according to George Sherburn, it was the rules that struck Romantic critical theory as more deplorable than any other single aspect of Neoclassicism). By the middle of the eighteenth century, "taste" was gaining a firm foothold as one principal standard for critical recourse; by the early decades of the nineteenth century, such moderately conservative critics as Jeffrey—who stubbornly maintained that the "standards" of literature "were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question"—were likely to seem voices from the past.

Therefore, because the rules had burnished a kind of backbone for the whole Neoclassical concept of genres and genre-hierarchy, the Romantic revolt against the rules was still another factor that shook the traditional structure which had given highest prominence to the epic poem.

As noted previously, the foregoing are only a few constituents in the Romantic overthrow of Neoclassical genre-theory; and my account of them is at best a skeletal outline. (Two further elements that counted in this
overthrow—the general rebellion against the authority of the Ancients, and the shift from an emphasis on "imitation" to an emphasis on "originality"—will be considered in the following chapter). But even so sketchy an account may suggest the depth and complexity of the transition from Neoclassical to Romantic ideas about genre and about the respective values of each genre. However involved the sources of this transition, its results seem fairly clear. Neoclassical concepts of genre slowly crumbled, being replaced by a new vagueness and freedom and nominalism and by the characteristically Romantic acceptance of the mixing of the genres; and the Neoclassical concept of a hierarchy of genres slowly gave way to far less rigid manners of evaluating the worth of literary works. New hierarchies arose, of course. The peculiarly Romantic preferences for the lyric, the ballad, or the historical novel are obvious examples of this fact. But the newer scales of value were seldom subscribed to with such commonalty as was the old; authority and the ordering sanctions of tradition disappeared or at least assumed new and attenuated shapes.

In order to demonstrate one specific way in which the loss of Neoclassical governance helped to pull down the epic from its traditional place at the pinnacle
of critical respect, I want to pursue a little the confusions and vaguenesses that mark Romantic definitions of the term "epic." These vaguenesses were very much a result of the factors already outlined, although many other elements were of course involved. Whatever their sources, however, it should become obvious that for much Romantic criticism the situation of the epic was seriously compromised by the fact that during the early decades of the nineteenth century it steadily became more difficult to find agreement on just what the concept of an epic poem meant or should mean.

2. Blurrings of the Concept of Epic: Miscellaneous Poems as "Epics"

Viewed against the long history of critical theory, Romantic difficulties with the term "epic" were hardly novel. The definition of any literary form--the pastoral, for instance, or the novel--must of course elude exact formulation; the appearance of each new work revises, however slightly, the configuration of the abstractly conceived "kind" to which it gets assigned; and the epic "kind" had never, even before the Romantic revival, been fixed with anything like precision. Douglas Bush notes that "Conceptions of the heroic poem in the
Renaissance and later were . . . elastic and comprehensive" and reminds us that Dryden referred even to Denham's Cooper's Hill as an "epic." Earlier critical uncertainties were the issue of many distinct problems. One was the degree to which Italian and French criticism during the Renaissance was perplexed by an obvious overlapping between the "pure" classical epic and the new heroic romances. Some Renaissance commentators endeavored to save the term "epic" as the exclusive property of ancient epic (i.e., the epics of Homer and Virgil) or of modern poems that conformed exactly to the "rules" of ancient epic, as those "rules" had been deduced by Aristotle and by his latter-day annotators. Others were willing to sanction a widening of the term so as to let it embrace both the Homeric or Virgilean models and the newer "hybrid" forms of the romanzi. Thereafter, throughout the deliberations of Renaissance and seventeenth-century genre-theory and extending well into the time of Pope and the Warton's, this debate supplied the focus for endless critical disputation. Were the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, or the Spanish heroic poems of the siglo d'oro to be regarded as "epics"? Almost every Italian and French critic during the sixteenth century took up these questions and committed himself to one or another answer.
Was *The Faerie Queene* an "authentic" epic? Spenser had certainly thought that he was creating a long poem in the full Homeric tradition; amid the immense overnight success of his work he was hailed again and again as "the onlie living Homer"; and even Rymer, secure in his Aristoteleanism, was quite willing to look back to Spenser as having been, chronologically, the first English epic poet. But other critics, during the 1590's and throughout the seventeenth century, found *The Faerie Queene* a romance in the vein of Ariosto and Tasso, while still others were reckoning it a religious and moral work after the mold of the medieval allegorical poem.

Yet this confusion between epic and heroic romance was only one problem that beset the definition of "epic poem" long before the Romantic period. Another was the fact that some commentators, from the very beginning of the Renaissance, made only a minimal distinction between the forms of heroic spirit itself—rather than the particular vessel into which this spirit might be poured—that provides the principal focus for these commentators. Thus Campion remarks, in his *Observations in the Art of English Poesy* (published in 1602), that there are certain meters...
which Nature in our English destinates to the Tragick and Heroik Poeme; for the subject of them both being all one, I see no impediment why one verse may not serve for them both, as it appeares more plainly in the old comparison of the two Greeke writers, when they say, Homerus est Sophocles heroicus, and againe Sophocles est Homerus tragicus, intimating that both Sophocles and Homer are the same in height and subject, and differ only in the kinde of their numbers.24

Dryden occasionally seems to have been more concerned with the "heroical" as a species than with the "heroical poem" and the "heroical tragedy" as its sub-species. And Milton's famous testimonies suggest that for a considerable period he regarded tragic form and epic form as almost identical options for the carrying out of his grand "heroical" design. Bush points out that the Elizabethans made almost no distinction between the "heroical" poem and historical narrative or survey poems like Heywood's 13,000-line Troia Britannica; and he notes the extent to which, throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, such Ovidian narrative verse as Hannay's The Nightingale (1622) or Marmion's Cupid and Psyche (1637) were regarded as "Epick."25

Still another factor that militated against a clear definition of epic during the Renaissance was the widespread agonizing over the question of whether a heroic poem composed about the "Christian marvellous"
should be understood as being properly an epic. This question was raised again and again, from the French "scriptural epics" of the sixteenth century to the age of Cowley and Milton; it was given fresh impetus through the minor critical controversy stirred up by Klopstock's Messiah in the later eighteenth century; and it still flickered in reviews of the spate of "sacred epics" that appeared in early Victorian England. The question, viewed historically, involved both matters of critical theory and matters of theology and rectitude; but the emphasis was likely to be placed most heavily on the latter. In Spenser's lifetime the objections to the "Christian heroick" had arisen principally from doctrinal grounds. The scriptures, it was maintained again and again, formed a complete, absolute, and final revelation of the divine scheme of human history, of life and faith, of eschatology; therefore, they are not a fit subject for the interpretations and embellishments, the imaginative dilations, of poetic fiction. In the seventeenth century this view was vigorously expounded by many critics, of whom Boileau was perhaps the most influential. Poetry, according to Boileau, cannot touch the truths of Christian revelation without grounding them in new particularities or corrupting them through its "enchantments." It was against this whole tradition,
with its mixture of the aesthetic and the theological, that Cowley had to defend his own Biblical epic, the Davideis, by lamenting that for too long the Devil has been allowed to have all the best tunes:

When I consider . . . how many . . . bright and magnificent subjects . . . the Holy Scripture affords and proffers, as it were, to Poesie, in the wise managing and illustrating whereof, the Glory of God Almighty might be joyned with the singular utility and noblest delight of Mankind: It is not without grief and indignation that I behold that Divine Science i.e., poetry, and especially epic poetry employing all her inexhaustible riches of Wit and Eloquence either in the wicked and beggarly Flattery of great persons, or the unmanly Idolizing of Foolish Women, or the wretched affectation of scurril Laughter, or at best on the confused, antiquated Dreams of senseless Fables and Metamorphoses.27

And it was with this same historical tradition, or its variants, that Milton had to come to terms in justifying the construction of his own "heroick song" on the whole divine scheme from creation to day of judgment. If poets were determined to adventure epic poems, then they ought to confine themselves to "secular" subjects: ancient fable, the doings of martial heroes, and so on. This argument helps to explain the historical backgrounds out of which Milton wrote the famous "defensive" lines at the beginning of Book IX of Paradise Lost. The Fall of Man is an argument
Not less but more Heroic then the wrauth
Of stern Achilles on his Foe persu'd
Thrice Fugitive about Troy Wall; or rage
Of Turnus for Lavinia disespous'd,
Of Neptun's ire or Juno's, that so long
Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea's Son;

... ... ... ...

Since first this Subject for Heroick Song
Pleas'd me long choosing, and beginning late;
Not sedulous by Nature to indite
Warrs, hitherto the onely Argument
Heroick deem'd, chief maistrie to dissect
With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
In Battels feign'd; the better fortitude
Of Patience and Heroick Martyrdom
Unsung; or to describe Races and Games,
Or tilting Furniture, emblazond Shields,
Impreses quaint, Caparisons and Steeds;
Bases and tinsel Trappings, glorious Knights
At Joust and Tornement; then marshald Feast
Serv'd up in Hall with Sewers and Seneshals;
The skill of Artifice or Office mean,
Not that which justly gives Heroick name
To Person or to Poem. Mee of these
Nor skilld nor studious, higher Argument
Remaines . . . .

These factors, then--arguments based on the claims of
romance as a true congener of epic, a vague emphasis on
heroic "spirit" rather than heroic "form," and the con-
troversy over the Christian epic poem--are symptomatic
of conceptual vaguenesses about the epic that had set in
long before the Romantic period. There were, of course,
many other factors behind this blurring and confusion:
personal ax-grinding on behalf of particular works that
aspired to be "epic" poems, the ever-present problem of
defining any literary form with exactness, and so on; but
the three elements that I have sketched are surely
among the most important. For all these reasons, there-
fore, we should not be surprised to find Romantic critics
equating the epic poem with "any long narrative in verse."
Boileau had never, in the final analysis, been able to
do much more than describe the epic as "le vaste récit
d'une longue action"; a century before Boileau, the
Pléiade and its spokesmen had taken refuge behind a
definition of the epic poem as

... un tableau du monde, un miroir qui raporte
Les gestes des mortels en differente sorte ... .
Car toute poesie il contient en soymême,
Soit tragique ou comique, ou soit autre poeme.

and in Italian criticism, as early as 1551, Muzio had
thrown up his hands and declared that the epic is
simply

Il poema sovrano e una pittura
De l'universo, e pero in se comprende
Ogni stilo, ogni forma, ogni ritratto. 28

But if critical theory had never been able to define
the epic poem with anything like preciseness and common
agreement, even during those centuries when the "epic
ambition" enjoyed its most intense admiration, it
remained for Romantic criticism to make the term "epic"
far more clouded than it had ever been previously. As
usual, this clouding can be traced to a variety of causes.
One obvious source was that collapse of a traditional hierarchy of genres outlined in the first part of the present chapter. For many Romantic critics a new liberty and independence often verged on a new anarchy. With the loss of traditional authority, the terminology and the very concepts of literary theory, never completely ordered, became even more subjective and more pluralistic. Other sources, equally obvious, were all the earlier vaguenesses and disagreements that I outlined above. The claims of romance and of historical narrative poetry to be classified as epic; log-rolling in behalf of this or that poetic work; even the debate over the Christian mythos as suitable material for epic treatment—all these and much else survived into the Romantic period. Indeed, almost every aspect of the Romantic blurring of the concept of epic had operated in earlier periods; much that at first seems novel is in reality mere acceleration. It is with the particular nature of that Romantic blurring, however, that we must be principally concerned; and we can perhaps best approach this subject by examining the remarkably indiscriminate application of the word "epic" in Romantic critical pronouncements. The poetic objects of these applications divide rather neatly into three categories: (1) the "primitive" heroic poem, the medieval romance,
and the "Oriental" narrative tale of romance and adventure; (2) such hard-to-classify poetic works as the *Divine Comedy*; and (3) such contemporary Romantic long poems as those of Southey and Scott and Landor. After considering these three categories in some detail, we shall glance at some of the Germanic "cosmic" speculations that threatened to dissolve the term "epic" in a metaphysical vagueness almost total. Our materials will be drawn from philology and critical theory, from reviewing and lectures and from the conversations of poets—in short, from whatever seems valid as an index to Romantic premises concerning the concept of an epic poem.

(1) "Primitive," medieval, and "Oriental" long poems as epics. As George Boas and Arthur O. Lovejoy have demonstrated, the term and concept of primitivism have have been complex since pre-Socratic Greek thought; and a detailed understanding of their use in Romantic critical theory would involve the understanding of vast and tenebrous matters. It would involve many large developments of eighteenth-century literary theory and philosophical speculation, such as Vico's epochal conjectures in his *Scienza Nuova* (1725); the many attempts, like those of Thomas Blackwell, to reconstruct Homeric times; the theorizing of the Scottish "primitivists," such as
Ferguson, Monboddo, Duff, and others; and concepts of the "Noble Savage." One would also need to assimilate the Celtic and Norse revivals associated with Macpherson and Gray, Percy and Young; the re-examinations of Hebrew poetry as "primitive" or "elemental" rhapsody; the new cosmopolitanism, both geographical and historical, illustrated by John Brown's collection of specimens of "primitive" poetry from Scotland, Peru, Iceland, ancient Greece, Ireland, China, and North America (in his Dissertation on the Rise, Union and Power, the Progressions, Separations and Corruptions of Poetry and Music, 1763); the philosophical-anthropological-critical glorification of the "primitive" and "folk" elements in poetry, as carried on by Herder, Scott, the Grimms, Gorres, and many other writers; and a good deal more. In the present study it is impossible to deal adequately with these matters. Yet their general outlines are well known; and it is perhaps sufficient to note that, from the convergence of such related activities, there crystallized the Romantic belief that the earliest state of man and of human society, the "earliest morning of the race," had been the best of all possible states. Men had lived naturally, by noble instinct and without the desiccation produced by refined intellectual thought. Their poetry was, par excellence, a spontaneous overflow of powerful
feelings. And they were more heroic than the men of later ages. This syndrome of assumptions is evident quite early in the eighteenth century. It occurs in Vico, in Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-1730), in Joseph Warton's *The Enthusiast* (1740), in the "Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland" (1749) of Collins, and in Gray's "The Bard" (1757). It provides the center of assumptions in Blackwell's *Enquiry on Homer* (1735), in Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1749), and in countless other speculative works of anthropology, cultural and linguistic history, and literary theory. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, a primitivist bias in literary theory sometimes appeared to be on the verge of sweeping all before it. Earlier tendencies were multiplied and accelerated, especially in Germany and the British Isles, until a concern with the normative values of "primitive" poetry came to pervade the critical thought of the time, from Hegel's *volk* concept to Wordsworth's preoccupation with the "elemental feelings" of "humble and rustic life."  

Today, in an age of radical relativism, the word "primitive" can be used only with great wariness, even in its purely descriptive senses. Romantic thought, however, does not in general display our fastidiousness
in its application of the term to poets, to individual poetic works, or to particular strains of style or "spirit" in poetry. The bards of the ancient world; the minstrels of the Middle Ages; various "unlettered" poets, like John Clare or Burns; "savage" singers who uttered their wild poetry in "Chili's boundless forests"—all these makers of poetry could be, and were, gathered under the Romantic rubric of "primitive." On the part of some English critics, partly as a reaction against Augustan "correctness" and "polish," there was even a tendency to regard Spenser and Shakespeare and Milton, even Dante, as "primitive" poets; their work (especially that of Spenser and Shakespeare) was held to constitute a sublimely wild forest behind the plotted gardens of the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries. And the "primitiveness" of Homer, as has long been known, was one of the principal factors that sustained the reputation of his poems amid the Romantic revolt against ancient epic. Because of this looseness in the application of the term "primitive," it becomes exceedingly difficult to keep track of the word in any reconstruction of Romantic critical theory.

What most concerns our present purposes, however, is the fact that Romantic criticism, in its excited rediscovery of "primitive" poetry, began to bestow the
term "epic" on a wide variety of "primitive" poetic works that criticism had never previously considered to be such; and we can describe with some precision the sorts of "primitive" poetry that most often received this accolade. Mainly these were Germanic or Celtic or Scandinavian heroic poems of the early Middle Ages, as codified in later medieval times: the Nibelungenlied, the Irish bardic cycles, the Mabinogion, and so on. In the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, German scholarship initiated its long tradition of hailing the Nibelungenlied as an epic poem, as "the Iliad of Germanic poetry." Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen, Karl Lachmann, Johannes Muller, and August Wilhelm Schlegel were among the many philologists and critics who espoused this view, which inevitably forced its advocates to ignore or explain the obvious disunities and the admixtures of "heroic romance" within the Nibelungenlied.30 Even the folksongs collected by Achim von Arnim as Des Knaben Wunderhorn (1805-1808) were often referred to in Germany as constituting a single epic poem; and later, when the Kalevala was assembled by its scholarly editors from various fragments of old Finnish bardic and folk poetry, it too was very widely
called an "epic" in Scandinavia, Germany, England, and America. So were the Icelandic sagas, as they came one by one to be rediscovered and newly edited; so were the Elder and Younger Eddas (in poetry and prose respectively) and even the Heimskringla. In Germany, at various times, Jakob Grimm translated a number of Serbian heroic lays and presented them, apparently without any challenge, as "epics." From the first translations into England (by Dr. Owen Pughe in 1795) to the completion of Lady Charlotte Guest's famous version in 1849, commentators on the Mabinogion who were uncertain how to designate its tales took refuge in the term "epic." One should note also the widespread tendency to regard even shorter works of "primitive" poetry (especially "primitive" poetry of Germanic or Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon origin) as the remnants of vast hypothetical epics now lost beyond recovery. With a freedom reminiscent of the Elizabethan equation of the epic with the martial, such Anglo-Saxon heroic poems as the Widsith or Maldon or Brunanburg were claimed as epic fragments, as were the originals of Evans's Some Specimens of the Poetry of the Ancient Welsh Bards (1764) and Percy's Five Pieces of Runic Poetry (1763). And we find Jakob Grimm arguing that the Reynard the Fox
tales, which he first encountered in the course of his
marchen collecting, were the fragments of a primeval
epic from that age when men communed freely with animals
and with all nature.\(^{34}\)

Finally, no discussion of Romantic and pre-Romantic
fondness for "primitive" epics can omit the enormous
critical interest stirred up by Macpherson's "Ossian"
translations. In the following chapter I have discussed
at some length the rationale and the historical signifi-
cances of the popularity that these "primitive" poems
enjoyed. But here it should be noted that among the
works that Macpherson attributed to his third-century
Caledonian bard were two "epic poems": Fingal (which
Macpherson published in 1761) and Temora (1763); and
not one participant in the whole "Ossian" controversy,
so far as I can determine, recorded the slightest
challenge to the use of the term "epic" in connection with
these works. The word occurs again and again, with
perfect ease, in the writings of those critics who defended
the authenticity of Macpherson's Ossianic versions (Hume,
Gray, Herder, Jakob Grimm, Hugh Blair, the early Goethe,
Hegel, and many others); but it is used with equal ease
in the writings of those who denounced the whole
business as a gigantic forgery (Dr. Johnson, Friedrich
Schlegel, and a considerable number of others). As is
evident, then, all these indiscriminate applications of the term "epic" did nothing to stabilize its connotations, or its prestige of exclusiveness, in Romantic criticism.

To turn from Romantic concepts of "primitive epic" to Romantic concepts of "medieval epic" is no very radical shift, since the dividing lines between these concepts were by no means always clearly drawn or consistently maintained. The purview of the "Medieval Revival" ranged backward in time from the Elizabethan period (or even from Milton and the German baroque poetry of the seventeenth century) to the dark backward and abysm of time associated with "Ossian" and King Arthur. Thus there was much overlapping between "primitive" and "medieval" categories of literature; and many works customarily regarded as "primitive"—the Nibelungenlied, for instance—are also frequently referred to as "medieval." (That this overlapping worked in both directions is exemplified by the fact that The Faerie Queene was claimed as a "primitive" poem almost as often as it was regarded as "medieval"). Furthermore, for Romantic criticism "Medievalism" was likely to be a protean term not only for the vast blurred sense of historical chronology that it incorporated: it was protean also in the multitude of different elements that
it embraced. Its defining force was not so much historical periodization as a particular "spirit," an identifying **gestalt** of states of mind. "Medievalism" involves or at least touches the new preoccupations with the "Gothic," the picturesque, the sentimental and nostalgic, the supernatural, the "sense of the past"; its embodiments include not only Walpole's Strawberry Hill and the German spectral ballad but also the whole Romantic concern with the remote, the strange, the wonderful. Therefore, all attempts at a single definition of Romantic "Medievalism" must fall far short of matching all the variegated facets of this historical phenomenon.

What most involves our purposes, however, is the point that out of this whole matrix there came a revived interest in the medieval romance, whether written in verse or in prose, and that the critical commentary of the time was more and more prone to extend the once-exclusive term "epic" to these recovered narrative works. Today, despite a tradition of scholarship and definition-making that extends from Joseph Bédier and W. P. Ker to C. M. Bowra's **Heroic Poetry**, there exists no complete agreement as to the formal characteristics of a large number of medieval poems. Should the **Nibelungenlied** and the **Chanson de Roland** be categorized as epics or as
heroic romances? Is the distinction between these two
genres an untenable fiction? The form and literary
conventions of even El Cid are referred to as "epic" only
with a certain tentativeness. It should not be supposed,
therefore, that the critical acumen of the twentieth
century has succeeded in drawing perfectly the fine line
that in many works separates epic from romance. Romantic
critical writing, however, was remarkably prone to
term "epic" a considerable number of medieval (or
"chivalric") romances that had never before been classi-
fied as such. German criticism, especially, was very
free in its descriptions of Wolfram's Parzifal and of
various long Tristan poems as "epics"; and in the elaborate
and rather nebulous genre-theory of Schelling the
"chivalric romance" is classified as at least a sub-genre
of epic and sometimes as a form virtually identical with
the epic. 36 A good many English writers also display
such tendencies; and just how vaguely the epic and the
"chivalric romance" were being discriminated in English
critical thought is perhaps illustrated by two pronounce-
ments by Coleridge. In the second of his 1818 lectures,
"On the General Character of the Gothic Literature and
Art," Coleridge declares that "Charlemagne, in the
beginning of the ninth century, greatly encouraged
letters, and made a . . . collection of the poems of his
time, among which were several epic poems of great merit; or rather in strictness there was a vast cycle of heroic poems, of minstrelsies, from and out of which separate poems were composed. 

And in the Table Talk, under May 12, 1830, Coleridge seems to consider the substance of epic and of "chivalric romance" as virtually interchangeable. "I will engage," he remarks, "to compile twelve books with characters just as distinct and consistent as those in the Iliad, from the metrical ballads, and other chronicles of England, about Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. . . . The same might be done with the Spanish romances of the Cid." In an age when Parzifal or even Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was being placed under the same rubric as the Iliad or Paradise Lost, when Southey could describe Malory's Morte d'Arthur (which he rendered into modern English) as an "epic," it seems obvious that the generic concept of the epic poem, as traditionally formulated and loosely adhered to, had undergone a marked alteration. It had lost some of the referential precision, admittedly far from perfect, that it formerly had possessed.

Less widespread, but nonetheless a significant factor in this blurring was the propensity of Romantic criticism to refer to many Oriental long poems as "epics."
The backgrounds of this propensity are partly the Romantic fascination with all manner of things Oriental, an interest that had been developing since the earliest decade of the eighteenth century. Various travel accounts of China written by Jesuit missionaries, and Galland's French versions of many of the Arabian Nights tales (published in 1708), are among the first major landmarks of the new Orientalism. In France and England, throughout the eighteenth century, there came forth a deluge of translations from the Chinese, the Persian, the Arabic, and other Eastern languages--translations that were avidly read and discussed. Chinese poetry, landscape gardening, and architecture, exotic grafts on the dry order of Neoclassical sensibility, contributed to that eighteenth-century European "Chinoiserie" which prevailed both as a fad and as a formulated strain of taste and aesthetic preference. Persian love-verses and decorative styles, Islamic culture with its mixtures of luxuriousness and magnificence; these were also taken up and widely imitated, especially in England and France (little distinction was made between the Near or Middle East and the Far East of Cathay and India). Taken together, these and numerous other expressions of Orientalism form a minor but persistent force in the taste
of the eighteenth century, a force that stamps Voltaire's satiric Eastern tales, Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas*, and scores of lesser but once-popular works of fiction and poems. The eighteenth-century Orientalism (which, to be more precise, was usually a pseudo-Orientalism that misunderstood or remade its models) is entangled with numberless other trends and enthusiasms of the times. It cuts across primitivist doctrines (Chinese literature, in particular, seems often to have been regarded as the unstudied warbling of noble primitives). It connects with the Gothic, in a large number of specific works: most famously, perhaps, in Beckford's *The History of the Caliph Vathek* (1782), which tinges Oriental splendor and cruelties with horrific elements straight from the Gothic syndrome. It bears a close relationship to the cult of sentimentality; to the general thirst for the sublime, the remote, the wonderful, or the colorfully "exotic," no matter where found in time or space; to the new cosmopolitan spirit of the age; and to many other impulses of taste. As I shall suggest in the following chapter, it can be isolated only imperfectly from the new critical interest in Biblical poetry and especially in the original poetry of the ancient Hebrews, as found in the Old Testament. Yet Orientalism, in the eighteenth century, remains a distinctly recognizable current of
assumptions, of styles, of preferences and particular states of mind. An understanding of it is important for any larger understanding of the age. And such an understanding is equally necessary for a comprehensive approach to Romantic poetry, poetic theory, and criticism; for Orientalism, in one semblance or another, continued to flourish almost unabated throughout the whole Romantic period. In English poetry alone, its workings are impressively widespread. It tinctures the Gebir of Landor (one source of which was an Arabian tale in a book owned by Rose Aylmer) and Southey's "epics" with Eastern settings and subjects, Thalaba the Destroyer and The Curse of Kehama. It runs strongly, of course, throughout Byron's three "Oriental Tales": The Giacur, The Bride of Abydos, and The Corsair. It permeates the lush and perfumed prettiness, the cadenced fountains and the Kashmere rose gardens, of Moore's Lalla Rookh, which became an instant success throughout Europe and went through twenty large editions and many translations before 1840. It is evident in Shelley's The Revolt of Islam. And in Coleridge's vision of Xanadu and the Khan Kubla, Romantic Orientalism gets transmuted, for the one and only time, into really immortal poetry. The whole tradition is still viable as late as the bitter-sweet Cyrenaicism of FitzGerald's Rubáiyát (1859). It dies
with the imitators of the imitators of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879).\(^3^9\)

Against such backgrounds as these, then, it is hardly surprising that Romantic criticism should have explored Oriental poetry both in range and in depth. Nor will it be surprising, for those who have followed the recurrent patterns already sketched in this chapter, that Romantic critics should have begun to apply the term "epic" to all sorts of Oriental long poems, whether in their original form, in translations, or in pseudo-translations. The "discovery" of Eastern poetry had been a result, in one way or another, of all the developments outlined above; but it was also instigated, especially in England and Germany, by the establishment of that great tradition of Oriental philology which was to continue throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It seems unfair to lump this scholarly tradition under the heading of "Orientalism," since the history of this word has come, whether deservedly or not, to be tinged with connotations of the faddish, the recherche, the dilettantish, the "small fleeting episode of taste."

The magisterial English scholar Sir William Jones (1746-1794) was a man who knew at least forty languages, most of them Oriental or Near Eastern, and who possessed a profound grasp of the true offices of human knowledge.
He published translations of poetry from the Arabic and the Persian and a learned Grammar of the Persian Language, and he seems to have been the first English philologist to master Sanskrit.

But Sanskrit studies in Germany, which were initiated by August Wilhelm Schlegel, soon developed formidable scholars fully the equal of Jones in range and powers of erudition. And within both countries a learned interest in Sanskrit soon broadened into an interest in the history and structure and literature of other Eastern languages. Paradoxically, however, it was this tradition of Oriental philology that did as much as anything to encourage the application of the term "epic" to the long poems that came within its scrutiny.

In German philology, especially, the tendency to regard the Baghavad Gita as an epic, the great epic poem of the Hindu religion, was encountered again and again during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Other German philologists speak, rather mysteriously, about vast epic poems of epic cycles once existing in Vedic and Classical Sanskrit, in Ancient Arabic, in Classical and Old Persian, in Assyro-Babylonian. The remarkable theologian and mystical writer on literature, Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), whom Goethe called the greatest man of the modern world, had a profound influence on the
Germanic tendency to search out Oriental long poems and refer to them as epics. This teacher and beloved master of Herder (who shares many of his cosmic speculations about "world poetry" and about the epic) preached a turning to the Orient for the mythos that would bring human happiness, spiritual refreshment, salvation: the human soul must undertake "pilgrimages to Arabia felix, crusades to the East." For Hamann, all true poetry is to some extent sacred poetry; but Oriental and Biblical poetry are especially so. Combined with these ideas and emotions, he expounds a vague theory that exalts the epic, along with fable, as the primal and greatest form of poetry--"epic" being conceived with a nebulosity that verges on the cosmic. And one result of Hamann's influence, as might be expected, was that his followers began to apply the term "epic" to all sorts of long or middling-long Oriental poems. Yet such practice was by no means confined to those who owed their allegiances to Hamann. Görres, in the introduction to his vast speculative book on Oriental mythology, Die Mythengeschichte der asiatischen Welt (1810), discusses a number of "Indian epics" and compares them favorably with the epics of Homer. In England an anonymous writer for Leigh Hunt's The Reflector argues that the Persian poet Ferdusi is an epic poet and that
his epics are fully the equal of Homer's and in some respects superior. And one might multiply almost indefinitely such instances of the freedom with which the term "epic," once reserved for the poems of Homer, Virgil, Milton, and perhaps two or three other contenders, was now being bestowed on Oriental poetic works.

(2) Dante, and such Renaissance poets as Tasso and Camoês, as "epic" poets. Yet the term "epic" was extended much further by Romantic criticism. Not content with according this label to a whole series of "primitive" or "medieval" or "exotic" long poems, many Romantic critics became more and more prone to give the title of "epic" to still another cluster of long poems that critical theory had historically relegated to the peripheries of the epic kind. The Comedia of Dante, the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, the Lusiads of Camoês, and The Faerie Queene will typify, for all their radical disparity, this general group of poetic works; certainly they are the examples upon which Romantic criticism pronounces most frequently. These are poems of major length and comprehensive scope, sophisticated in their art, which were written to be read, not composed for recitation before an aristocratic audience, and which have always proved extremely hard to
classify as to their genre. Before the Romantic period, critical formulations had puzzled over the genres of these works; and save for the case of the Comedia, which no one seems to have been willing to term an epic, there were always a considerable number of critics who championed Ariosto and Tasso, Camoes and Spenser, as "epic" poets. Certainly their long poems partook of strong epic elements or at least displayed the epic ambition. But the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, and The Faerie Queene were more often than not placed in the category of the heroic or allegorical romance; and even the Lusiads, which twentieth-century criticism would be likely to accept as definitely an epic poem, was usually found to contain more elements of romance than elements of epic. It remained for Romantic criticism to reverse the traditional estimates of these poems by claiming them as epics. And it remained, further, for Romantic criticism to enthusiastically add the Comedia—as though for good measure—to its pantheon of the great epic poets of the past.

As Donald M. Foerster has noted, Dante was considered an epic poet by "most of his translators and by many of the scholars and critics in the Romantic period." From its earliest commentators in the fourteenth century down to the late eighteenth century, the Comedia had
usually been classified as an allegorical poem (such
Dante himself seems to have thought it, if the letter
to Can Grande is indeed his) or, even more vaguely, as
simply a "religious" poem. Occasionally, critics bent
to classify had simply given up and accepted the poem,
like the crocodile in *Antony* and *Cleopatra*, as a thing
"shaped like itself." In English Romantic critical
writing, however, Dante's major poem is again and again
spoken of as an epic or at least as a work "of epical
spirit." The tendency to deal in these terms begins with
the first published English rendering of the *Comedia*,
Henry Boyd's dilated paraphrase of the *Inferno* (1785;
Boyd's paraphrase of the entire poem, equally dilated,
was completed and published in 1802). As early as the
1790's, the poetess and voluminous letter-writer Anna
Seward was discussing the *Comedia* as a wholly authentic
epic. However, what might be called the "epicizing"
of the *Comedia* reaches its height only after the com-
pletion of the famous translation by the Reverend Henry
Francis Cary, which came out between 1805 and 1814.
Coleridge, who relied entirely on Cary's version for his
enthusiastic but sketchy 1818 lecture on Dante, does not
term the *Comedia* an epic; but the structure of his
whole disquisition is a point-by-point comparison
between the "beauties" of Dante's poem and those of
Paradise Lost, and it seems obvious that Coleridge at least recognizes many of the epic elements within Dante's poem.

In all English Romantic critical writing, however, it is to Shelley's A Defense of Poetry (written in Italy in 1821) that we must turn for the most incandescent praise of Dante as an epic poet. For Shelley, Dante in the Comedia is one of the three supreme epic poets of the world, the other two having been Homer and Milton. Indeed, in all history these are the only three poets worthy to be given "the title of epic in its highest sense": that is, they are the only epic poets whose "creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion and politics of the age in which they lived, and of the ages which followed it." In its "epic truth," the Comedia "may be considered as the bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient World." The Paradiso constitutes "a perpetual hymn of everlasting Love" and figures forth "the most glorious imagination in all modern poetry." But it is the entire poem, viewed as an epic, that elicits from Shelley his most rapturous admiration. In the Comedia,

Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music
and persuasion, out of the chaos of inharmonious barbarisms. He was the con-
gregator of those great spirits who pre-
sided over the resurrection of learning;
the Lucifer of that starry flock which in
the thirteenth century shone forth from
republican Italy, as from a heaven, into
the darkness of the benighted world. His
very words are instinct with spirit; each
is as a spark, a burning atom of inextin-
guishable thought; and many yet lie covered
in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant
with a lightning which has yet found no
conductor. 

Moreover, Dante was endlessly discussed as an epic
poet in German critical formulations as well as in
English. In his 1803-1804 course of Berlin lectures,
August Wilhelm Schlegel proclaims the Comedia a great
epic poem successfully reconciling poetry with philo-
sophy, the epic fountainhead of all Romantic poetry. The
seamless unity of the poem is indignantly defended against
the view, advanced in the eighteenth century by Bouterwek
and other German critics, that the Comedia is but a
collection of "great scenes" embedded here and there in
long stretches of dross. Schelling, who discussed the
Comedia in great detail, located it firmly within the
epic category of his elaborate and somewhat baffling
genre-scheme. It is an epic sui generis but an epic
nevertheless; and Schelling, like Schlegel, takes pains
to fend off the "disintegrationist" attacks of the
Bouterwek argument. Hegel admits that Dante's poem is
not exactly an epic, by any system of norms; but he nevertheless finds within the poem so many epic qualities that he can compare it with Paradise Lost, greatly to the disadvantage of Milton. In Italy, too, the outburst of Romantic nationalism, coupled with new stirrings of critical activity, produced numerous attempts to claim the greatest of all Italian poems as an epic. By 1825 Foscolo, for instance, was advancing such claims in the long introductory dissertation to his edition of the Comedia; and Foscolo was being echoed by many other critics, in their articles and scattered pronouncements. And in America, as Donald M. Foerster has shown, Dante was almost universally accepted without question as an epic poet. Foerster has assembled a number of American critical references to the Comedia as an epic poem, references that range from the 1790's to the 1860's and that come from writers as diverse as Emerson and James Russell Lowell.

The Romantic tendency to consider the Comedia an epic poem is obviously a more radical development than the tendency to accept Ariosto and Tasso, Camoes and Spenser, as epic poets. In the history of critical writings, as has been noted, there had always existed a persistent if minority viewpoint that claimed the works of these four Renaissance poets as epics.
With Dante's poem, on the other hand, the term "epic" has to be stretched into a very wide comprehensiveness indeed. It will retain a certain denotative value: the Comedia can be said to display a hero, who represents mankind in general and in whom mankind is mythified through a journey into discovery; but one feels, nevertheless, that the "epic" mantel somehow rests unsatisfactorily on the whole poem. For these reasons, therefore, I have documented the Romantic concept of the Comedia at greater length than should be necessary in the case of the Orlando Furioso or the Jerusalemme Liberata, the Lusiads or The Faerie Queene. Each of these poetic works had behind it historical warrants for being regarded as an epic, and Romantic criticism did little more than recapitulate earlier traditions. Yet it is revealing, I think, to note the frequency with which these problematical works were unequivocally called epics by Romantic critical pronouncements. In England the many earlier precedents for considering the Orlando Furioso as an epic rather than a romance—precedents running all the way back into the nebulous genre-theory of the Elizabethan age—were strengthened and confirmed during the last decade of the eighteenth century. When Henry Hallam complained in his multi-volume Introduction to the Literature of Europe (1807).
that it was ridiculous pedantry to deny the name of epic to Ariosto's poem, there were few critics to disagree. The verdict in the case of Tasso was, if anything, more unanimous. Even Wordsworth, despite some misgivings about the use of ottave rime, accepted the Gerusalemme Liberata as a true epic poem with a "high and holy" subject.

With regard to The Faerie Queene it seems impossible to ignore that strong critical strain, initiated largely by Thomas Warton's Observations (1754), which abandoned all pleas for Spenser's poem as an epic in order to glorify it as a great work of the "Gothic" imagination, a work irregular of design but "fertile with fancy." But in English Romantic criticism there was another strain, equally strong, that persistently sought to reclaim The Faerie Queene as a true epic poem. Early in the Romantic period, Bishop Hurd's Letters on Chivalry and Romance (1762) sets much of the tone for these attempts. They receive impressive support in the Essay on Pope by Joseph Warton, who differs with his brother's Observations in claiming Spenser, along with Milton, as the greatest of English epic poets. And a generation or so later, Shelley in his Defense excludes Spenser only from the sovereign company of his three supreme epic poets of the world. Only the Lusiads appears to have been
little known, and therefore seldom claimed as an epic, during the Romantic period.

In German Romantic criticism the situation is virtually the same; a few pronouncements will perhaps serve as a kind of shorthand for countless others. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, expresses little doubt that both Ariosto and Tasso have written epic poems, although he registers considerable antipathy toward their epics; and Hegel, despite his dislike of their "machinery" and "artificiality," uses the term "epic" freely in his descriptions of both the Orlando Furioso and the Gerusalemme Liberata. More surprising, and perhaps more significant, are the frequent admiring references to the Lusiads of Camoes as a great epic poem. In the opinion of Friedrich Schlegel, Camoes has written the finest epic since Homer. German Romantic criticism of The Faerie Queene, which is varied and copious, tends to divide itself into three different lines of assumption. One of these, exemplified by Gerstenberg, proclaimed as the chief glory of Spenser's poem its independence from any formal tradition whatsoever; another; strongly influenced by Thomas Warton and Bishop Hurd, located Spenser's formal art within the traditions of "Gothic" romance. A third line of assumption, however, was concerned to save The Faerie Queene
as a "Nordic" or "primitive" epic poem. The method of Herder in the late 1770's especially in his Stimmen der Volker in Liedern, is perhaps representative of these attempts. Herder works out a concept of "folk poetry" that embraces most of the Old Testament, Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, the Greek Anthology, German balladry, troubadour songs, Minnesang, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Ossian, and even Dante. Armed with so comprehensive a definition, then, he uses an equally comprehensive concept of epic to pluck out The Faerie Queene and place it beside Homer and Ossian as an "epic" poem. In France and Italy, also, there are many critical references to Ariosto and Tasso, Camoes and Spenser, as epic poets. La Harpe regarded the Lusiads, which he translated in the 1770's, as an epic. Madame de Staël in De la Litterature (1800) praises Ariosto as perhaps the greatest modern epic poet. Foscolo acclaims Tasso as the finest Italian poet next to Dante, and the Gerusalemme Liberata as a lofty masterpiece of the epic form; and Manzoni's numerous writings on the problem of "historical" poetry accept Tasso's poem as an authentic "epic."

(3) The contemporary long poem as epic. To consider Dante, Ariosto, Tasso, Camões, and Spenser as having written epic poems is hardly to lapse into an anarchy of
critical standards. At most, such a practice points toward a certain expansion, and perhaps a certain confusion, in manipulating the concepts of criticism; and no irreparable damage is worked upon the prestige of epic by allowing the Lusiads or The Faerie Queene into the same category with the Iliad or Paradise Lost. There remains to be discussed, however, a much more immediate and much more serious compromising of the high place traditionally accorded to epic poetry. This is the compromising that grew from the free tendency of Romantic criticism to apply the term "epic" to a heterogeneous cross-section of the new long poems that were appearing during the Romantic period itself. The welter of Romantic poems hailed as "epics" is remarkable in its quantity; for twentieth-century critical taste many of these works are likely to be all but unreadable; some of them would be artistic failures by any conceivable yardstick of poetic value in any period of literary history. My concern, however, is not with judging these long poems. It is, rather, to suggest how the sheer number of such works, together with their widespread acceptance as bona fide epics, provides a further commentary on the plight into which the concept of epic had fallen within a good deal of Romantic critical writing.
In English poetry the succession of lengthy narrative poems churned out by Southey will exemplify well enough the general order of works to which, more and more, the label of "epic" was indiscriminately given. Closely associated with such luminaries as Wordsworth and Coleridge and Scott, Southey staked his own hopes for enduring recognition on these vast stories-in-verse; and he seems to have been convinced, if we can judge from his letters, that they would ultimately bring him such recognition. At any rate, they came out in a fairly steady succession across some thirty years; stately, ambitious poems, based on immense reading, freighted with history (or at least with learning and antiquarianism), and, by twentieth-century standards of poetic excellence, grossly uneven. Today, embalmed together with Southey's own laborious explanatory notes, they fill many thick volumes in the vast museum of his collected works. Yet Southey's long narrative poems received considerable praise during a good portion of his prodigiously busy life. Before his death, in 1843, they were ceasing to attract many readers; but throughout the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century they were glowingly reviewed, widely purchased, and lavishly praised by their readers. Now, the fact is that Southey himself conceived these poetical works as
epics, published them as such, and never tired of referring to them as "epic" in his conversations and in his letters and other writings; and he found many readers to agree with him, including several major and minor names among his contemporary poets. For instance, Thomas Medwin in his Conversations reports that Byron looked back on Southey's very first long narrative in verse, the Joan of Arc (which he completed in 1793, while still a precocious nineteen-year-old fired by the French Revolution), as an authentic epic poem. Anna Seward declared in one of her letters that this Joan of Arc indeed constituted a "noble epic," although she added that it had been outdone by his even finer epic, the blank-verse Madoc (1805).

More striking for a twentieth-century reader, however, are the several letters of praise that Coleridge addressed to Southey about this "epic" re-creation of the Welsh tradition (found also in Hakluyt and Drayton) that the twelfth-century Prince Madoc of Wales had reached and explored America. One must remember Coleridge's taste for medieval subjects, his exceedingly close friendship with Southey (they were brothers-in-law), and their joint associations in the "Pantisocracy" venture for settling in Madoc's North America. But neither these facts nor Coleridge's notorious dislike of
Virgil (discussed in the following chapter of the present study) can be used as a total explanation for Coleridge's enthusiastic statement that as an epic the Modoc has "fewer glaring faults than the Aeneid."\(^60\) Moreover, one should not forget that although Coleridge often had two sets of opinions on the work of his contemporaries--of Scott and Byron, for instance--it was in his private letters that he customarily expressed his true attitudes, which often differed sharply from those in his public pronouncements.\(^61\) It seems impossible not to conclude that Coleridge really did consider the Madoc a finer epic than Virgil's--just as Hobbes had really believed Davenant's Gondibert to be the greatest epic poem ever written.\(^62\) Only less rapturous was Scott's verdict, expressed in a conversation recorded by Lockhart, that as an epic the Madoc would "assume its rightful place at the feet of Milton."\(^63\) And at one time or another the following long narrative poems by Southey were referred to unqualifiedly as "epics" in the critical notices and reviews of the period: Thalaba the Destroyer (1801), with its amorphous metrical variations; Roderick, the Last of the Goths (1814), which Jeffrey in the Edinburgh Review praised extravagantly as an "epic";\(^65\) and the somewhat briefer A Tale of Paraguay (1825). The only really strong contemporary voice raised
against the march of Southey's epics appears to have been that of Thomas Love Peacock, in his *The Four Ages of Poetry* (which, however, lambasts all poetry and not merely Southey's). Within the present-day "age of brass," poor Peacock complains, "Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has a commonplace book full of monstrosities, strings them into an epic."^66

Another English poem hailed by its contemporaries as a latter-day epic was the *Gebir* (1798) of Walter Savage Landor. This long blank-verse narrative in seven books, recounting the heroic and amatory adventures of the mythical founder of Gibraltar, did indeed contain many characteristics of "traditional" epic; a hero, a style lofty and heavily Latinate (or at least vaguely Miltonic), a descent into the underworld, supernatural beings, and so on. And although the work seems never to have been widely read, being regarded primarily as fare intended for "connoisseurs," its reviewers were almost unanimous in praising it as in every sense a genuine epic, perhaps the finest since Milton.^67 Some reviewers also referred to Thomas Campbell's *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809) as the long-awaited "epic of America"; for
Jeffrey, the Spenserian stanzas of Campbell's romance, with their genteel and polished fastidiousness, added up to an epic that came closer than anything else to "my conception of pure and perfect poetry." 68

Furthermore, at one time or another each of the seven long or middling-long narrative poems of Scott was referred to as an epic, either in contemporary reviews or in other expressions of critical judgment. Today, these poems are usually classified simply as lays or historical stories in verse, influenced by Scott's close familiarity with the metrical romances and the longer narrative ballads of the late Middle Ages; and such would seem to be the best general designation for them. With their bold swiftness in describing hunts and battles, their sentiment and melancholy and picturesque settings, these poetical tales established Scott as undoubtedly the most famous storyteller in verse in all Europe; yet it is difficult to see how they could have been regarded as epics. The term does not seem to mean much if one applies it at once to the Iliad, to Paradise Lost, and to The Lay of the Last Minstrel. But the word "epic" was applied again and again to The Lay of the Last Minstrel: Anna Seward, for instance, praised it as "a truly original epic poem." 69 And at various times one finds the word "epic" used of Marmion, which with its enchantments
and Border warfare appeared in 1808, three years after the *Last Minstrel*; of *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), which appealed to "epic" tastes with its stirring hunting scenes; of *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811), which utilized the same "Gothic" materials that Southey would convert into an "epic" three years later; of *Rokeby* (1813), *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), and *The Lord of the Isles* (1815); and of the last of the series, *Harold the Dauntless* (1817).

Particularly significant of some larger tendencies to which this loose application of the term "epic" points are several remarks by William Erskine, writing in the *Quarterly Review* in the autumn of 1811. Reviewing the newly published *The Vision of Don Roderick*, Erskine first calls the poem an "epic" and then defensively explains his usage of the word by declaring that "...it is enough for us, and it would, we believe, have been enough for Aristotle, that a narrative should have plot, and interest, and action and pathos." If a story-poem displays these characteristics, Erskine argues, then one is perfectly justified in calling it an "epic." With these words we get an explicit statement of an attitude latent within many of the Romantic critical acceptances of contemporary long narrative poems--such as those of Southey or Landor or Scott--as "epics": namely, the
whole Romantic equation, encountered again and again, of narration with epic. The widening progression of acceptance, traced in retrospect, is revealing. It moves from an inclusion of Homer and Virgil, as the only epic poets, to an inclusion of Renaissance epics (e.g., those of Camoes and Milton); it then widens further to allow "primitive" epics (the "Ossian" poems, for instance, or the Nibelungenlied); next it gathers in contemporary long poems of at least nominal epic pretensions, such as those of Southey or the early Romantics in Germany; gradually it loosens much more and allows room for contemporary romances or idylls or lays, such as The Lady of the Lake or Goethe's Hermann und Dorothea; and finally, at its most radical extension, it embraces all poems, of considerable length, that present any sort of story whatsoever. Only a narration, a thread of continuity, a plot-sequence of some kind are required. Sir Egerton Brydges bluntly sums up the latter viewpoint in some 1824 remarks on Byron's verse-tales: "Lord Byron," he writes, "is almost always epic; for his is almost always narrative."

Here is a highly selective but representative list of other long narrative poems in English that appeared during the Romantic period and that at one time or another were referred to as epics (my sources of evidence are
the announced opinions of the poets themselves with regard to their works, pronouncements by critics or reviewers, title pages, published advertisements, or statements in letters or conversations): Joseph Cottle's *Alfred: An Epic Poem* (1801); Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus*, particularly in its second (1809) version as *The Columbiad; The Voyage of Columbus* (1812) by Samuel Rogers, which in its storms at sea, its calling-in-review, and its gods of the New World bears certain resemblances to *The Columbiad*; the popular pseudo-Hebraic poem *The World Before the Flood* (1812) by James Montgomery; the Byronic-Oriental *Safie* (1814) of John Hamilton Reynolds; Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814); the *Hyperion* of Keats (published in 1820 and presumably regarded as an epic because of its "Miltonic" echoes, vast perspectives, and gigantic god-figures); Campbell's *Theodric: A Domestic Tale* (1824) and *The Pilgrims of Glencoe* (1842); Robert Pollock's best-selling history of mankind in blank verse, *The Course of Time* (1827); John Abraham Heraud's *The Descent into Hell* (1830) and *The Judgement of the Flood* (1834); the unfinished *Nepenthe* (1835) of George Darley; and the famous "farthing epic," *Orion* (1843), by Richard Henry Horne—which Poe declared to be a far greater epic poem than *Paradise Lost.*

It should be subjoined that during the Romantic
period the term "epic" was also liberally applied to many of the new "dramatic poems" of the time. These were works (usually in blank verse and almost always of phenomenal length) that were written to be published and read but which contained extensive passages conceived dramatistically, with dialogue and stage-directions; they are among the first precursors, so far as I can determine, of that mixture of epic narration and heroic drama which Hardy was to employ for The Dynasts. Cottle's Alfred: an Epic Poem, listed above, is one of these poetic works; in a defensive preface to the reader, Cottle explains that dramatic scenes have been used as a kind of surrogate for the "machinery" of earlier epics. Other such "dramatic poems" called "epic" during the Romantic period include the grandiose The Omnipresence of Deity (1828) and Satan (1830) of Robert Montgomery, works that their poet seems to have regarded as answering with a vengeance the seventeenth-century question of whether the "Christian Marvellous" was suited to epic treatment; the equally gigantic Joseph and His Brethren (1824) of Charles Jeremiah Wells; the "cosmic epic" Festus by Philip James Bailey, which appeared in 1839 but which was progressively expanded across more than fifty years, until in its 1889 edition it had grown to fifty-two scenes and more than forty
thousand lines; four cloudy works by Henry Hart Milman: Fazio (1815), Faust (1820), The Fall of Jerusalem (1820), and Belshazzar (1822); and the Rienzi (1828) of Mary Russell Mitford. With most of these works, obviously, Romantic concepts have got off into a tendency to refer to closet-drama, so long as they happen to treat grandiloquent or "spiritual" themes, as "epics."73

Such readiness to consider contemporary narrative or dramatic poems as "epic" was not, of course, confined to the critical writings of English and American Romanticism. In Italy The Bard of the Black Forest, by the early nineteenth-century poet Vincenzo Monti, was sometimes regarded as a true epic poem; among those critics who praised and defended it as such was Foscolo, who had conceived his own long poetic work, Grazie, as at least a "mixed" epic.74 In France, Chateaubriand had planned his historical narrative poem Les Martyrs as an epic; and in his own critical formulations he takes endless pains to defend the work's "purity of genre" as an epic, citing for support dozens of literary theoreticians in a progression back to Aristotle.75 However, it was not until the 1830's and the 1840's that the concept of "epic" in French theory and poetic practice began to dissolve into metaphysical or mystical abstraction. Pierre-Simon
Ballanche in various writings, and Lamartine in *La Chute d'un Ange*, expoit nebulous mythological theories of the epic poem as a cosmic Grand Synthesis capable of transforming into sentience every atom of the universe. Vigny projected a cycle of titanic "epic" poems on eschatological subjects, among them an epic on the Last Judgment and another to be entitled "Satan Sauve"; *Eloa* and *Le Déluge* are the only long poems that emerged from Vigny's scheme, although he left scattered notes for other parts of the cycle and on his theoretical concepts of the "mystical epic."

It remained for Victor Hugo, however, to outdo Ballanche and Lamartine and Vigny and to put to shame even Southey's ambitions of converting the mythologies of the whole world into epic poems. *The Légende des Siècles, La Fin de Satan, Le Sacre de la Femme, Le Satyre,* and *Dieu* have been called the most "Romantic" long poems ever written. A more concrete generalization, however, is that of René Wellek, who declares that within these "epics" by Hugo

all the romantic convictions and themes are summarized: organic, evolving nature, the view of poetry as prophecy, the view that symbol and myth are the instruments of poetry. . . . within these "epics" Hugo marshalled all the possible arguments for the romantic view of nature, for man's continuity with nature, the great scale of nature, and the final perfection of man.
But no matter how one describes the substance of Hugo's long poems it is difficult for twentieth-century readers to conceive of their being called "epics." They are philosophical-mystical-narrative poems, scattered with vast eerie perspectives and peopled with gigantic supernatural forms. Drawing on mystical visions from the Pythagoreans, the Platonists, various Cabbalists, Spinoza, Swedenborg, Catholic mysticism, and half the mythologies known to man, they attempt a colossal synthesis that will hymn the panpsychism and spiritual pantheism of the universe and that will prophesy the ultimate reconciliation and harmony of all things. Poetic form, in these works, is constantly on the verge of dissolving into Theosophy. Yet Hugo himself regarded these poems as "epics"; and they were again and again referred to as such by contemporary critics and reviewers, many of whom used them as illustrations for their own nebulous definitions of "epic" form.77

Finally, it should be noted that in German theory and criticism, from the first stirrings of the Sturm und Drang movement to the death of Goethe, these same general tendencies to welcome contemporary poetic works as "epics" were going forward on as many fronts as in the British Isles and France. The German patterns, in fact, are in
many respects almost identical with those in English critical writings. Most importantly, one finds a parallel willingness to bestow the term "epic" on virtually all new narrative poems of extensive or even moderate length, provided some kind of recognizable story-line seems present. Especially favored were lays, or swiftly-told metrical romances, like Burger's or Scott's or Monti's: tales with battles and dashing adventures and, often, a spectral darkening. Also, "sacred epics," more or less after the pattern of Klopstock's *Messiah*, were welcomed with a largesse equalled only by that of English reviewers who accepted without question the epic claims of a *Joseph and His Brethren* or a *Fall of Jerusalem*. Many writers denied all epic qualities to Klopstock's problematical poem and to its numerous successors; but a good many others acknowledged it as an epic, including some who lamented its artistic shortcomings. 78

German criticism was especially confused, however, by a class of poetic works that for some reason appears to have been far more prevalent in German Romantic poetry than in any other. This is that large class of works which includes, however loosely, such diverse forms as Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* and the once-popular *Luise* of Johann Heinrich Voss, and which German critics during
the Romantic period were prone to designate as "pastoral epics," "epic pastorals," "epic idylls," "idyllic epics," or "domestic idylls." The innumerable poetic works to which these terms were applied are mixed forms for which it is not always easy to suggest exact equivalents within English Romantic poetry. By imagining Wordsworth's *Michael* or *The Excursion*, the *Isabella* of Keats, or some of Leigh Hunt's romantic narratives, as they would read if grafted with elements from the classical traditions of epic and pastoral, one might get some idea of the nature of the German "pastoral epic," "epic pastoral," "epic idyll," and "idyllic epic." (German critics and theoreticians tried to maintain careful distinctions between these four terms, and their distinctions are not quite the mere verbal quibbling or logic-chopping that twentieth-century critical thought might take them to be). The most discussed work within this general category, and perhaps its masterpiece, was probably Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*, which incited the spilling of much ink by critics and other commentators who were bent to determine its genre. August Wilhelm Schlegel, praising Goethe's poem as "a perfect work of art in the grand style" ("ein vollendetes Kunstwerk im grossen Stil"), defends it as an epic, using the terms of his own private
theories of Homeric epic. Schelling, with his elaborate and vague genre-schemes, and even Hegel, in his literary writings, are also willing to grant many epic qualities to *Hermann und Dorothea*; Hegel, for instance, finally decides to call the work "a classical idyll with an epic background."

On the other hand, a number of other critics and periodical reviewers either denied all "epic" characteristics to the poem or else lost themselves in puzzled despair over its genre or sub-genre. And this same disagreement tended to mark discussions of the many minor works that appeared under the strong influence of *Hermann und Dorothea*. There was controversy, also, over whether "epic" qualities might enter into the German "domestic idyll." There were poetic narratives, permeated with middle-class sentimentality, that often derived their subject-matter from romantic love, from marriage and family life, from Constable-like landscapes, from cottages with twining roses in summer and glowing hearths in winter. (The once-popular *Luise* of Johann Heinrich Voss, which Wordsworth appears to have known and admired, is among the best known examples of this "domestic idyll" sub-genre, although a great many others also found a contemporary popularity). As a form, or at least as a set of conventions, the "domestic idyll"
seems to have attained at least a minor popularity in English poetry and critical favor during the Romantic period: in such a work, for instance, as Campbell's *Theodric: A Domestic Tale* (1824), which caused Jeffrey to break down in tears of sentimental emotion. In prose fiction its closest analogues are perhaps the opening and concluding chapters of Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and certain of the less hectic passages in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*.

That it was possible to discuss some of these "domestic idylls" as "epics" is symptomatic enough of the plight into which the concept of the epic poem had fallen in German Romantic thought. Equally symptomatic, however, are critical arguments that manipulate such counters as "idyllic epics" and "epic pastorals," "pastoral epics" and "epic idylls." To encounter such arguments is to find oneself plumb in the midst of that famous "mixing of the genres" which is so often cited as one distinguishing stamp of Romantic literature, theory, and criticism. Such a mixing, of course, is at least as old as the Renaissance, when the epic began to mingle with the romance, when Italian poets began to write tragi-comedies, and when critical theory found itself confronted with works that Polonius describes as "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." Yet there can be
little doubt that the Romantic period accelerated this mixture of the genres to a degree totally without precedent. It appears in the epistolary novel; in those English "dramatic poems" of the 1820's and 1830's that were mentioned above--long poems that shift from narration to scenes laid out with stage-directions and dialogue and that then revert to narration; in a freedom, not equalled since the sixteenth century, to blend prose with verse; in the scenario-like pages, with marked speeches for each character, that appear throughout Peacock's satiric fictions; in the "theatrical interludes" of Moby-Dick; and in countless other tendencies and instances. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find German Romantic poets creating mixed works and German Romantic critics developing hybrid terms with which to discuss those works. By the 1790's, that cross-pollination of the genres which Goethe so deplored (and immeasurably helped to further, with his own works from Werther and Hermann und Dorothea to the First and Second Parts of Faust) was well under way. And it seems unlikely that the particularity and stature of the epic--as a concept, as a genre, as a spirit--were much clarified or enhanced by the widespread introduction of such critical terms as "epic pastoral" and "idyllic epic."

The preceding discussion has followed Romantic
critical concepts of the epic as they extended in ever-widening circles until at last almost any sort of long or medium-long poetic work could be included. What generalizations can be drawn from these tendencies of Romantic criticism to accept all sorts and conditions of poetic works as "epics"? The mixed lists of works recited within the previous pages may indicate sufficiently the almost incredible variety of poetic works that by the early 1800's were being seriously regarded as epic poems or that were at least clamoring to be so recognized. "Primitive" or Oriental poems, rhymed philosophical systems, and interminable verse narratives on Biblical subjects—these jostle with medieval and Renaissance romances, Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, and the *Comedia* of Dante; loose critical usage has dumped together the *Nibelungenlied*, *Gertrude of Wyoming*, and the *Légende des Siècles*, under the same rubric with the epics of Homer and Virgil and Milton. It is obvious, of course, that most of the poems on which Romantic criticism was willing to bestow the term "epic" have little in common, either among themselves or with such poetic works as the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*. But what generalizations, to ask it again, can be made about the indiscriminate application of the term "epic" within Romantic criticism? And what conjectures, if any, can be
framed about the repercussions of such application?

One evident generalization, I think, is that the exceedingly free usage of the word "epic" during the Romantic period helped to diminish the traditional prestige of Homer and Virgil, who in most Neoclassical critical estimates, from the early Renaissance through the Age of Pope and Voltaire, had figured as the supreme and sole epic poets of the world. In the chapter that follows, I have pursued in some detail the shaky fortunes of classical epic at the hands of Romantic criticism. Here I shall only echo Foerster, who observes, of the early nineteenth century, that "In a world so full of 'heroic' poems [i.e., poems that were claimed to be "heroic"] , Homer and Virgil ... could no longer be considered the unopposed rulers; there were rivals and pretenders on every hand." A much broader and more important generalization, however, is that for Romantic critical writing the very concept of epic, as an organ of critical knowledge, had become so attenuated in meaning and value as to be seriously compromised. Many thoughtful critics must have wondered whether the term "epic" meant very much if it could be applied equally to the Iliad and to Mrs. Mitford's Rienzi. Viewed totally, the welter of poetic works to which the term "epic" was being given are so disparate
that one would have had to wrench the word beyond all recognizable identity in order to let it cover all such works. Not all of them have a hero (or even a principal figure), few display a unified action (some display no action at all), and the majority of them are far removed from deeds of great (as distinguished from pretentious magnitude. It seems impossible to doubt that for many such critics the term "epic," bestowed indiscriminately on a grab-bag of unrelated works, was likely to lose altogether its referential meanings and, therefore, its value for both criticism and literature.

That dissolution of strict terminology called for by Timothy Dwight in 1789, that recognition that genres "blend or harmonize . . . and can be no more exactly limited or separated than the hues of the rainbow," had been achieved with a vengeance. A new democratic freedom, a new individuality whereby the term "epic" could be accorded to almost any work that the critic chose, had arrived. And the resultant tangle of conflicting opinions, definitions, and claims, often verging on anarchy or even chaos, constituted less a fruitful debate than a puzzling and discouraging haggle. "Take but degree away, untune that string,/And, hark, what discord follows!"

Another, related factor arises from a fundamental assumption in cognitive thought, whether critical or not:
the assumption that the scarcity and exclusiveness of a
ting are constituents in the inherent value of that
thing. Without doubt the rather awesome exclusiveness
of Homer and Virgil—two epic luminaries with but
three epic masterpieces between them—had loomed large
in conditioning the traditional reverence that was
paid to them and to their works. Among critics in the
vein of Dryden and Addison, Voltaire and Shaftsbury
and Lessing, it was perfectly possible to speak of
the six or seven great epic poets of the world without
yielding to an excess of relativism: Milton, Tasso,
Camoës, even Dante, and perhaps one or two other poets
might be painlessly added to the sacred pantheon of
Homer and Virgil. During the Romantic period, however,
every floodgate was opened and "epics" became perhaps
too plentiful, too cheap, too common and easy.
Traditionally there had prevailed a tacit assumption
that the epic poem appeared only once (or at most twice)
within each age of human history, which age it epitomized
forever. Now epics were being discovered and praised
with monotonous regularity; the world seemed full of
them; and if they were not exactly a dime a dozen, they
might at least be had for a farthing. It had also
been assumed, traditionally, that to create an epic
poem was the consecrated achievement of a poet's entire
lifetime (compare Virgil's twenty-year polishing of the
_Aeneid_ or Milton's eloquent accounts of his virtually
life-long preparation for the "epic task"). Only
Homer had produced two epics. Now Southey was grinding
out an epic poem every two or three years; and Scott
was producing almost yearly a new narrative-in-verse
that would invariably be hailed as an epic. (Nor does
it seem likely that, so far as bewildered or jaded
critical tastes were concerned, the intrinsic mediocrity
of so many of these new "epics" did much to further
critical interest in the epic form). 

It should be emphasized that not all critics
responded to the new confusions surrounding the term
"epic" by becoming soured on the very concept of epic
poetry. Some critics simply acceded to these confusions
by taking refuge in a meekly vaporous nominalims that
allowed almost any poem of extended or moderate length
to be styled an epic, so long as it displayed the
reasonable facsimile of a narrative and was cast in the
"Grand Manner" (however defined); for such critics it
was an easy next step to discard the stipulation of
narration and to drowse over the irksome task of assaying
the "Grand Manner." Other critics, perhaps out of
a "democratic" or "progressive" spirit, welcomed the
loosening of the hinges of the older epic concepts.
Thus Dwight, arguing in America in 1789 for a liberalizing of such concepts, rejoices that critics are finally realizing their error in confining the term "epic" exclusively to works like the Iliad and the Aeneid; in reality, all narrative poems are "epics," and an understanding of this fact will issue in a new richness and variety of possibilities for poetry and for critical thought.

Finally, still other critics made intensive attempts to salvage order from the chaos of terminology all about them. Some went back to late Neoclassical conceptions of the epic (those of Pope, for instance, or of Blair and Lessing and Johnson) to determine heuristically whether anything might be still usable. Others (particularly the major German critics and theoreticians) undertook to set their houses in order by discriminating the "Classical" (or "objective") epic strain from that of the "Romantic" (or "subjective") epic. But all these attitudes and enterprises issued, more often than not, in a further compounding of confusions. Our final conclusion must be that the traditional prestige of epic poetry, so far as that prestige had been determined by exclusiveness and by close exclusion, was seriously blemished by Romantic criticism. If we survey the actual referents for which that criticism used the term
"epic," we find such a muddle of radically disparate works that no verbal definition can compel them into unity; and if we analyze the valuations implied by each separate application of the term, we encounter such vagueness that it becomes almost impossible to determine what a given critic regards, conceptually, as an "epic." The plenitude—the surfeit—of works called "epics," and the near-solipsism in the manipulation of terminology, have devalued epic coin within Romantic critical concepts. It is little wonder that Longfellow, turning over in his mind the subject of Hiawatha, should have muttered that the word "epic" had been "of late so much abused."88

3. Blurrings of the Concept of Epic: The Germanic "Cosmic" Speculations

Thus far I have stressed the extreme and baffling diversity that marks those long or middling-long poems for which Romantic criticism made free with the term "epic." The only conceivable common ground joining all such poems is that they are all poetic forms or at least aspire to such status. The Bhagavad Gita and the Chanson de Roland are identifiable structures of
language, however one may judge their artistic excellences; so is Dante's *Commedia*, whatever its genre; and so are Barlow's *Columbiad* and Heraud's *The Judgement of the Flood*, however crude or bathetic or even sub-literary. I wish, however, to conclude this chapter on Romantic blurrings of the concept of "epic" by considering a critical development that cuts itself free from all moorings in concrete works and that drifts into such abstraction that it threatens, at times, to escape completely the possibility of a meaningful conception of epic form. This development consists in what I earlier termed the Germanic "cosmic" speculations about epic; speculations that appear as early as Hamann and Herder in the 1770's, that are elaborated by such important philosophers and critics as the Schlegels, Gorres, Arnim and Brentano, Schelling, Kleist, Hegel, and the Brothers Grimm, and that occasionally seem ready to engulf all other ways of discoursing about the idea of epic. Such speculations are by no means confined to German Romantic theory. Vico anticipates them early in the eighteenth century; and their later analogues are to be found in the cloudy grandiloquence of Shelley's definitions of the *epic* and the *epic poet*, as well as in the vast and tenebrous visions of French epic theory during the 1830's and 1840's. But it is in
German critical and aesthetic thought, during the Sturm und Drang movement, that they first appear in full force. And it is in German theory, criticism, aesthetics, philosophy, philology, and cultural history, during the high tide of the Romantic period, that these speculations about the epic attain their most nebulous and metaphysical openness.

If we step back far enough from Romantic critical writings, we shall see that they constitute a mixture of profound insights and brilliant reasoning, on the one hand, with wandering abstraction and breathless rhapsodizing on the other. Of these characteristics the first two require no illustration. The last two can be examined in the following passage, which comes not from an 1870 gift annual but from Shelley's A Defense of Poetry:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life. It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things; it is as the odour and the colour of the rose to the texture of the elements which compose it, as the form and the splendour of unfaded beauty
to the secrets of anatomy and corruption. What were Virtue, Love, Patriotism, Friendship; what were the scenery of this beautiful Universe which we inhabit; what were our consolations on this side of the grave, and what were our aspirations beyond it,--if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?89

Here--in such phrases as "the root and blossom of all other systems of thought"--poetry loses its identity almost completely, becoming a gigantic mystical spirit that animates every particle of the universe. Such apostrophes to poetry, usually brought forward as conceptual definitions of poetry, occur in the critical writings of all the major Romantic literatures. French Romantic theories of poetry, at least in the hands of such practitioners as Chateaubriand or Ballanche or Lamartine, are hard to distinguish from theories of Nature, of mystical religion, of the soul itself. In the prose-poem catalogue with which Poe concludes "The Poetic Principle," the effects of poetry become interchangeable with the effects of all the "picturesque" or "sensuous" or "haunting" things in the world that provide suitably poetic subject-matter: deep wells by starlight, avenues of dark and gloomy cypresses, the perfume of roses in autumn, and so forth.

German Romantic criticism, however, is likely to seem
unparalleled in its habits of speaking so vaguely about poetry that conceptual meanings, and poetry itself, stand on the verge of abdicating. (I should add that German Romantic criticism also strikes me as quite untouchable in its deep insights and its powers of close intellectual analysis). Instances of this vagueness are many and various. They occur in the more emotional and rhapsodic outbursts of Herder and the early Goethe. They confuse passages from the writings of great speculative philosophers and aestheticians like Kant and Schelling, passages in which verbal counters often melt from one private ambiguity into another even more obscure. They mark the scores of separate attempts to convert poetry into a porous synthesis of philosophy, metaphysics, art, morality, epistemology, and cultural history. They are found in most of the conceptual schemes whereby "the only true poetry" (however defined) gets equated with "Romantic poetry" (however defined). One of the most fascinating expressions of this metaphysical vagueness is the concept of "poetry without form."

Shelley and other English Romantics had spoken cryptically about the great cyclic poem composed by the life of Nature and by the life of the whole human race since the first man—a concept that answers "Nothing" to the question "What then is not poetry?"—and Hugo and other.
French Romantics had swept out the whole notion of literary genres. But in Germany Bettina Brentano (the wife and collaborator of Arnim) was calling for "a direct revelation of poetry, without the firm limits of form, which would impress the mind more quickly and more naturally." And Heinrich von Kleist was proposing that "Language, rhythm, euphony . . . are real, though natural and necessary, obstacles; and poetry, in respect to them, must aim at nothing else but making them disappear." Nowhere, however, is the metaphysical bent of German Romantic criticism more strikingly obvious than in discussions of the concept of epic. We have already seen that German critical thought shared the general Romantic laxness in applying the term "epic" to all manner of works, from the Nibelungenlied, the "national epic," to Hermann und Dorothea. At one time or another, moreover, almost all the major German critics formulated and expounded his own private (not to say idiosyncratic) scheme of the genres; and these schemes often defined the epic in novel, arbitrary, and confusing ways. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, propounds an abstruse definition of the epic as a literary form that begins "not at the beginning" and ends "not at the ending," thus being infinitely continuable at either terminus; epic
is also a poetic structure in which each book, each scene, each passage, each line, even each word or particle of a word, possesses a separate life and inner identity of its own (this atomistic concept provides, of course, still another analogue of Poe's later theories). And Schelling, in his voluminous theoretical writings on the epic, exposit mystical generalities on the differentia of the form (its "stasis," its yearning toward both the infinite and the finite, its transcendence of subjective consciousness, and so on) and works out an intricate system of epic sub-genres—the idyll, the elegy, the didactic poem, and the satiric poem—reminiscent of the cycles and epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy. The extremities of vagueness, however, can be grouped into two general tendencies: one that dissolves the term "epic" into a mystical and mysterious description of hypothetical cycles of "prehistoric" poetry, and another tendency that dissolves it into a description, equally mystical and mysterious, of some great universal poem destined to appear in the remote future. With the triumph of the "organic analogy" in German theory, many writers began to postulate an Urpoesie: a poetry from which all later poetry had descended, just as all living plants were taken to have descended from a single Urpflanze; and more often than
not this dimly conceived original poetry was equated with the epic. Hamann, for instance, identifies epic as the primeval mythos or poetry of the human race; and both Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm are confident that the "self-composing" poetry of primitive man, at the dawn of history, can best be described as "epic." Gorres and Jakob Grimm, as has been noted, speculated on the Knaben Wunderhorn folksongs and the Renard the Fox folktales as the surviving fragments from colossal epic cycles that existed in the dim Nordic past.\textsuperscript{92} It is clear that within these conjectures, and scores like them, "epic" as a term has become more or less a standard label for the hypothetical "dawn poetry" of the race.

Simultaneously, however, the term "epic" was being appropriated as the label for another, equally nebulous conception: the Germanic dream of a titanic long poem that must someday appear and that would provide, upon its appearance, a poetic summa of the modern world. In those moments when he spoke at once with the voice of the scientist and the voice of the poet, Goethe foresaw the advent of a great "epic" that would crystallize modern scientific thought, even as the De Rerum of Lucretius had undertaken to crystallize the science and metaphysics of the classical world. Schelling declared that each
new age ought to compose its own Divine Comedy, its own "universal philosophical epic." He predicts the arrival of "a new Homer," who will fashion a vast poem from the new physical science, the new Naturphilosophie, and thereby create "the final great epic that will realize the identity of philosophy and poetry." And Hegel on two separate occasions suggests that "there is still one great topic left for the moderns: a world epic . . . with 'Humanus' [which Hegel seems to have conceived as Scientific Man] as its hero."93

For our present purposes we need not judge the validity—as philology and folklore, as history and anthropology, as literary theory and abstract prophecy—of all these German trends. But we must agree, I think, that such trends have set completely awash the term and concept of "epic." In the seventeenth century the "epic idea" might haunt the poet and the critic as an "unbodied ghost"; but critics could point to its incarnations in the poems of Homer and Virgil, and a great poet could hope to give it concrete embodiment through the signature of a Paradise Lost. With these German Romantic developments, however, the word "epic" seems to have been freed from all referential values, through being connected with too various an assortment of
referents. Forced to define both *The Lady of the Lake* and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, then expanded to define mystical hypotheses and metaphysical conjectures, "epic" gets lost altogether. And I think it undeniable that a term thus damaged must lose, at least temporarily, something of whatever prestige it may once have carried.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER II


3. Ibid., pp. 219-220. See also the chapter "Neo-classicism and the New Trends of the Time" in Wellek’s A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 (New Haven, 1955), I, 12-30, especially p. 21: "The actual grounds of classification of the genres were extremely various and often quite obscure or purely practical. Formalistic criteria of a simple external kind, such as recognizable verse form, stood next to criteria which were based on a ranking of subject matter or moral effect."


5. See Ibid., p. 20: "the exact rationale by which genres were assigned to their place on the hierarchy was not clear. Was it dignity of subject matter? mere size and effort involved? intensity of effect?" From Aristotle to Dr. Johnson, from Horace to Blair, such questions as these were never threshed out to the satisfaction of anything like a majority of critics.

6. See below, Chapter IV, for a discussion of tragedy as a rival to the epic.


9. The Retrospective Review, VIII (1823), 149.

10. Heinrich Wilhelm Gerstenberg, Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur, ed. Alexander von Wellen (Stuttgart, 1890), p. 112: "Weg mit der Classification des Drama... Nennen Sie diese plays... history, tragedy, tragicomedy, wie Sie wollen..."


14. Goethe, letter to Schiller of December 23, 1797, in Werke, the "Weimar edition" (Weimar, 1887-1920), Part 4, XII, 383-384: "Diesen eigentlich kindischen, barbarischen, abgeschmackten Tendenzen solte nun der Künstler sus allen Kräften widerstehn ... ."

15. Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London, 1930), I, 196; Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism, ed. Raysor (London, 1936), 170. In the latter passage, Coleridge continues by arguing that "speaking generally, it is far, far better ... instead of fault-finding, to say a given work of literature belongs to such or such a class--thus noting inferiority in the sort rather than censure on the particular poem or poet. We may outgrow certain sorts of poetry (Young's Night-thoughts, for instance) without arraigning their excellence proprio genere."

16. See Wellek, History (above note 3), II, 179-180, for a useful discussion of Coleridge's thoughts on the hierarchy of genres.


25. See Bush (above, note 21), pp. 350-351.

26. One of the best studies of the whole problem of the "Christian marvellous" as a subject for epic poetry in the seventeenth century is still that in Basil Willey's The Seventeenth Century Background: The thought of the Age in Relation to Religion and Poetry (New York, 1934), especially Chapter X, "The Heroic Poem in a Scientific Age."


28. See Spingarn (above, note 22), pp. 212-213, for a discussion of these passages from, respectively, Vauquelin and Muzio.

30. See Wellek, History (above, note 3), II, 39, for remarks on the treatment of the Nibelungenlied in German Romantic criticism and scholarship.

31. See below, pp. 126-128, for remarks on the tendencies of German Romantic writers to claim gatherings of brief "folk" poems as epics.


33. See below pp. 189-190, for a discussion of the Romantic longing to infer the existence of primitive "epic-cycles" lying outside the Greek and Roman literary traditions.

34. See Wellek, History (above, note 3), II, 285. I have been unable to obtain Jakob Grimm's work Reinhart Fuchs (1832) and rely, therefore, on Wellek's summary of Grimm's thesis: "The epic, fairy tales, local legends, folk songs, even animal fables are . . . looked at as hallowed relics of the divine youth, the golden age, of humanity. Grimm argued vigorously for considering the Renard stories as remains of a genuine old epic cycle of primitive antiquity when men lived with animals and recognized their human features as a matter of course."

35. The standard pre-Romantic and Romantic line on Spenser as a "primitive" poet is laid down in the opening section of Thomas Warton's Observations on the Faerie Queene (1754, 1762), in which the youthful Warton glorifies Spenser's poem--his "wildly-warbled song"--as "the careless exuberance of a warm imagination and a strong sensibility." Sections I and X of Warton's epoch-marking study are reprinted in Elledge (above, note 13), II, 764-782.


37. Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism (above, note 15),

38. Ibid., p. 405.

40. See below, pp. 126-127.

41. Johann Georg Hamann, Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur, ed. Alexander von Weilen (Stuttgart, 1890), II, 210-211. See Wellek, History (above, note 3), II, 179, for enlightening comments on the Orientalism of Hamann.

42. The Mythengeschichte der asiatischen Welt is discussed by Franz Schultz, Josef Görres als Herausgeber, Literaturhistoriker, Kritiker (Leipzig, 1902), passim.


45. The Letters of Anna Seward (Edinburgh, 1811), VI, 302-303. I owe this reference to Foerster's article cited above.


50. Foscolo also published two important essays on Dante in the Edinburgh Review: XXIX (1818), 453-474, and XXX (1818), 317-351. Foscolo's understanding of the term "epic" is somewhat unclear and has been a matter of critical dispute.


55. Schlegel, Sämtliche Werke (above, note 54), VIII, 67.

56. See below, pp. 128-129, for a discussion of Hegel's epic theory.


58. Ugo Foscolo, review of Wiffen's English translation of Tasso's Orlando Furioso, in the Westminster Review, VI (1826), 404-445, passim; Alessandro Manzoni, Del romanzo storico (Milan, 1845), passim.

59. Thomas Medwin, Conversations of Lord Byron (London, 1824), 247-248. It is possible, of course, that Byron was speaking sarcastically about the work of the "vulture" whom he pilloried in The Vision of Judgement. There is nothing to indicate, however, that Byron's remark, though it may have been grudging, was not meant in complete seriousness.


61. See Wellek, History (above, note 3), II, 184.

62. Thomas Hobbes, "Answer to Davenant," reprinted in Spingarn (above, note 23), II, 65: "... I never yet saw Poem that had so much shape of Art, health of Morality, and vigour and beauty of Expression as this of yours."


64. Medwin (above, note 59), 247.

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67. On Landor's Gebir, Coleridge made a remark of wide implication and striking interest: "What is it that Mr. Landor wants, to make him a poet? His powers are certainly very considerable, but he seems to be totally deficient in that modifying faculty, which compresses several units into one whole. The truth is, he does not possess imagination in its highest form—that of stamping il piu nello uno. Hence his poems, taken as wholes, are unintelligible; you have eminences excessively bright, and all the ground around and between them in darkness." This passage, in which I have added italics to the last thirteen words, comes from Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism (above, note 15), p. 432; it occurs in the "Table Talk." To this pronouncement on Gebir one should compare the famous statement in Chapter XIV of the Biographia Literaria: "... a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry." Another relative comparison, of course, is to the opening excursion on long poems in Poe's "The Poetic Principle."

68. Jeffrey (above, note 65), II, 422. Again, only Peacock seems to have had an acerb comment on Gertrude of Wyoming, which was to go through nine large editions by 1825. "... Mr. Campbell," he snorts, "presents us with a Pennsylvania epic ... formed on the same principle as Mr. Southey's epics, by extracting from a perfunctory and desultory perusal of a collection of voyages and travels, all that useful investigation would not seek for and that common sense would reject." And Peacock continues, with every stop pulled: "These disjointed relics of tradition and fragments of second-hand observation, being woven into a tissue of verse, constructed on what Mr. Coleridge calls a new principle (that is, no principle at all), compose a modern-antique compound of frippery and barbarism, in which the puling sentimentality of the present time is grafted on the misrepresented ruggedness of the past into a heterogeneous congeries of unamalgamating manners, sufficient to impose on the common readers of poetry, over whose understandings the poet of this class possesses that commanding advantage, which, in all circumstances and conditions, a man who knows something, however little, always possesses over one who knows nothing." Peacock (above, note 66), p. 20.
69. The Letters of Anna Seward (above, note 45), VI, 226.

70. William Erskine, review of Scott's The Vision of Don Roderick in the Quarterly Review, VI (October, 1811), 223. Once again, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Foerster (above, note 44) for this quotation and for the one documented in the follow-note.


72. Poe devoted a twenty-five page review to the "farthing epic," retailing a blow-by-blow summary of the plot, quoting literally hundreds of lines, and hailing Horne as "a man of high, of the highest genius." Among Poe's comments on Orion the following are typical: "... of the beauties of this most remarkable poem, what shall we say? Here we find it a difficult task to be calm. And yet we have never been accused of enthusiastic encomium. It is our deliberate opinion that, in all that regards the loftiest and holiest attributes of the true Poetry, 'Orion' has never been excelled. Its imagination... is of the most refined, the most elevating, the most august character." "'Orion' will be admitted, by every man of genius, to be one of the noblest, if not the very noblest poetical work of the age. Its defects are trivial and conventional--its beauties intrinsic and supreme." One passage is called "magnificent" and "unparalleled"; of another, Poe declares that "There is nothing more richly, more weirdly, more chastely, more sublimely imaginative, in the wide realm of poetical literature." See "Horne's 'Orion'," reprinted in The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Edward Woodberry (Chicago, 1895), VI, 262-267.

73. The satiric-epic or mock-epic tradition in early nineteenth-century poetry and criticism is exceedingly complex; and although I have not engaged it in my discussion of Romantic narrative poetry, it requires at least some notice. For the sake of space, I shall concentrate on Byron's Don Juan (1819-1824), which is certainly the most noteworthy Romantic mock-epic in any language, although there were many others (such as the King Arthur by "William and Robert
Whistlecraft," which appeared in 1817). Thomas Medwin tells us that in the same conversation in which Byron accepted Southey's Joan of Arc and The Curse of Kehama as genuine epic poems, he also remarked: ". . . if you must have an epic, there's Don Juan for you. I call that an epic; it is an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the Iliad was in Homer's." (Medwin, above, note 59, p. 246). And Stanzas CC-CCII in Canto the First of Don Juan read as follows:

My poem's epic, and is meant to be
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,
New characters; the episodes are three:
A panoramic view of hell's in training,
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,
So that my name of Epic's no misnomer.

All these things will be specified in time,
With strict regard to Aristotle's rules,
The Vade Mecum of the true sublime,
Which makes so many poets, and some fools:
Prose poets like blank-verse, I'm fond of rhyme,
Good workmen never quarrel with their tools;
I've got new mythological machinery,
And very handsome supernatural scenery.

There's only one slight difference between
Me and my epic brethren gone before,
And here the advantage is my own, I ween
(Not that I have not several merits more,
But this will more peculiarly be seen);
They so embellish, that 'tis quite a bore
Their labyrinth of fables to thread through,
Whereas this story's actually true.

In the Appendix to the present study, I suggest that the appearance of parodic form does not necessarily provide an index to the attitude of the age—or even of the parodist himself—toward the form being parodied; and perhaps this is the safest generalization that can be made about Don Juan and all other Romantic parodies of the epic. For the purpose of the present study, it is with such a generalization that I should like to rest. However, a detailed examination of the mock-epic impulse within Romantic
poetry, and of critical and theoretical attitudes toward that impulse, should prove of considerable value; and the fact that no such examination exists, so far as I am aware, points toward a comparatively minor but still important gap in our understanding of the whole Romantic period.

74. See Wellek, History (above, note 3), II, 269.

75. Ibid., II, 236. In recent decades Chateaubriand seems to have become the chief exhibit for contemporary critics who would point to all that was most vaporous and pretentious in Romantic poetry. In 1959, in a particularly vicious review of Kazantzakis' Odyssey sequel in its English translation, Louis O. Coxe complains that "There is something oddly old-fashioned about this poem Kazantzakis', something that suggests another time and place. Something of the young Goethe, perhaps, or Chateaubriand. Put another way, the work is conceived in a Romanticism that perhaps never was--certainly no longer is. Lacking the antiquarian flavor, the quality of a sensibility no longer viable in its totality however universal by fits and starts, the poem seems to jar on the contemporary ear when it is loud (as it usually is) or to suggest to the modern mind uncomfortable visions of an obsolete Grand Synthesis about to precipitate itself. . . . the poem . . . strikes me as irrelevant. Not a new departure nor a daring experiment, but simply a kind of nostalgia for the days of the grand style and the picaresque epic. And this after years of experiment and achievement in the construction of narrative!" And the review concludes: " . . . this Odyssey may well be taken as proof that a long poem is no longer possible. I cannot share any such notion. It proves only that the romantic approach to a long poem is not workable. Has it ever been?" ("A Romantic Failure," Poetry, XCV, 3 December, 1959, 179, 181). There is no recourse against such impressionism.


77. In The Epic in Nineteenth Century France (London, 1941), passim, Herbert J. Hunt has analyzed many of the nebulous critical theories of epic poetry that arose in French literature and theory during the first half of the nineteenth century.
The German critical debate over the "epic" qualities of Klopstock's Messiah produced an immense bibliography. Among those who chose up for or against the existence of such qualities were Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, Schelling, the Grimms (who argued that the literary epic is a contradiction in terms, since true epics can never be written but must grow up organically, like the plant from the seed), the Schlegels, and Hegel.


Donald M. Foerster finds an anonymous American writer in the New York Literary World, VI (June, 1850), 535, fretting over whether he should call Hermann und Dorothea a "Pastoral Epic or an Epic Idyll." See Foerster's valuable article "Homer, Milton, and the American Revolt Against Epic Poetry: 1812-1860," SP LIII, 1 (January, 1956), 79.

Foerster (above, note 44), 436.

Quoted in Foerster (above, note 81), 78.

We must be extremely wary, however, in suggesting that within Romantic criticism the devaluation of epic poetry is directly connected with the mediocrity of so many Romantic long poems that were acclaimed, or at least brought forward, as "epics." Such a connection seems obvious to be sure; but its establishment involves many problems of assumption and method. Most difficult, perhaps, is the problem of critical point-of-view. Today most critics would find Southey's Madoc or Campbell's "epics" pedestrian and all but unreadable; but we must remember that these works were very widely praised by contemporary critics. The same critical intelligence that was to produce the Biographia Literaria could judge Madoc better than the Aeneid; and so sharp an intelligence as Jeffrey's could come close to thinking Campbell the greatest living poet. We speak of the faded drabness of "religious" epics during the 1830's and 1840's; but
these works were often praised by responsible
criticism upon their appearance. My purpose is not
to engage the whole question of the mutability of
taste and of whether it is possible to establish
permanent and universal criteria for the critical
evaluation of poetry—criteria that will remain
ever the same, like fixed points of recourse, and that
can be applied with equal justice to an ancient
Greek lyric and a medieval Easter carol, to a poem
by Marvell or an ode by Keats, to a Rilke sonnet or
Ash Wednesday. (One might maintain, for instance,
that Southey's "epics" strike us as shambling only
because we have come to measure them against the
"hard, dry" verse so favored by criticism today). I
happen to think most Romantic "epics" unsuccessful
by any conceivable standards of criticism. But we
must not make a facile correlation between the
quality of these "epics" and the general tendency
of Romantic criticism to devalue the epic as a genre.
I have argued that the sheer plenitude of such "epics"
played a role in this devaluation: but if we turn to
Romantic criticism for disillusioned complaints that
the poorness of contemporary "epics" has cheapened
the former nobility of the epic concept, we shall
find such complaints to have been comparatively rare.
There simply is not much evidence that Romantic
criticism abandoned in disgust the concept and worth
of epic poetry because they found contemporary "epics"
disappointing: Romantic criticism, indeed, was more
likely to admire such "epics." Thus the statement
that the present note seeks to amplify is meant only
as a generalization, applicable to only a minority
of critics during the Romantic period: to Hegel's
despair over Klopstock's Messiah, to the few French
critics who bemoaned Chateaubriand's "desecration"
of past epic glory in his Les Martyrs, to Peacock's
similar charges against Southey and Campbell.

In all fairness, moreover, it should be noted
that not all Romantic "epic" poems are destitute of
qualities that even present-day criticism can find
admirable. Sometimes these qualities are sustained
over impressive stretches, as in the "epics" of Hugo--
long poems that suffer, I think, less from objective
defects than from our contemporary distaste for
"cosmic" speculations and Grand Syntheses. Hugo's
"epics" seem mainly the victims of shifting tastes,
rather than the victims of carefully formulated
critical standards. But criticism today could also
sort out many fine if briefer passages from other
Romantic "epics." Fleeting excellences are scattered
throughout even the 40,000-line Festus of Bailey; and if one gets lines like these in Horne's "farthing epic":

From above, 
While passing, Time the rock touched!—and it oozed Petrific drops—gently at first—and slow.
Reclining lonely in his fixt repose,
The Great Unmoved unconsiously became
Attached to that he pressed; and soon a part Of the rock. There clung the excrescence, till strong hands,

Descended from Orion, made large roads, 
And built steep walls, squaring down rocks for use.

--one is at least nominally rewarded in coming across lines of the quality of these (lines hardly great yet hardly mediocre) from Book I of Landor's Gebir:

But I have sinuous shells, of pearly hue Within, and they that lustre have imbibed 
In the sun's palace porch; where, when unyoked, His chariot wheel stands midway in the wave. 
Shake one, and it awakens; then apply 
Its polished lips to your attentive ear, 
And it remembers its august abodes, 
And murmurs as the ocean murmurs there.

I am not, of course, suggesting that any Romantic "epic" or pseudo-epic is impressive as a whole, if viewed by twentieth-century critical judgments. If they live at all for readers and critics today, it is through their impressive moments: what Coleridge, in discussing Gebir, called brightnesses amid expanses of darkness. (This characteristic of so many Romantic long poems is discussed in detail in the last chapter of the present study). I do wish, however, to emphasize that many Romantic "epics" found an enthusiastic reception at the hands of con-temporary critics and reviewers.

85. Timothy Dwight (above, note 8), p. 463.

86. Twentieth-century semanticists and logicians are in general agreed that every definition is to some extent "verbal" as well as "real," that this duality is part of the factuality of language-use, and that we must somehow make the best of it if thinking and communication are to be possible at all. But as
W. T. Urban points out in *The Intelligible World* (New York, 1929), p. 124, "There is a sense in which the distinction between verbal and real definition is a valid one. . . . There comes a point at which such variation ceases to be merely inconvenient and unpragmatic; it becomes unintelligible. It leads to a *contradictio in adjecto*, in which intrinsic incompatibility between the subject and predicate of the defining proposition destroys the meaning by an implicit denial." Romantic critical writing, in its anarchic usage of the term "epic," seems to me to have been in acute danger of reaching this impasse.

87. The sheer number of Romantic long poems that asked to be regarded as epics, and the frequency with which Romantic criticism wielded the word "epic" as a term of praise, suggest very strongly that the general concept of epic must still have retained considerable prestige: that during the Romantic period the idea of an epic, no matter how conceived, was still a haunting and beckoning abstraction in something of the same way that it had been such throughout the seventeenth century. My point, however, is that the term was bestowed so frequently, and so indiscriminately, that its prestige gradually came to be tarnished. I know of no instruments for measuring exactly the prestige that a given literary term carries with it at any given time; but my distinct impression is that the prestige of the term "epic" is distinctly lower in 1830 than it was in, let us say, 1780 or 1800.


91. Schelling (above, note 36), V, 646-671.


93. On Goethe see Wellek, History, I, 212. Schelling's pronouncements are scattered throughout the pages cited in note 91 above. For Hegel see his Sämtliche Werke (above, note 49), II, 235 and III, 358.
CHAPTER III

THE EPIC IN ROMANTIC CRITICISM (2): REACTIONS AGAINST HOMER AND VIRGIL

The animus of Romantic criticism against the classical epics of Homer and Virgil is so historically complicated, so important as an index to the spirit of the whole Romantic reaction against all epics and all long poems of whatever sort, that it requires detailed consideration. Actually, of course, the adverse judgments of Romantic criticism with regard to Homer and Virgil can be separated only nominally from many other critical developments of the period. These judgments are enmeshed, for instance, with such ramified historical phenomena as the doctrine of progress, the victory claimed by the Moderns over the Ancients, changing standards of manners and of morality, religious trends, the new democratic spirit, revised estimates of myth, deep-rooted pressures from science and from Utilitarianism, various hard-to-analyze shifts of "taste," and much else. Such judgments point us back, moreover, to the currents
already traced in the preceding chapter: the dissolution of the Neoclassical scale of genres and the new fluidity of the term "epic," together with everything that these currents involve in their own right. Finally, Romantic critical attacks on Homer and Virgil ultimately have to be viewed as a part of the frequently encountered Romantic mistrust of all epics, all long poems. It will prove necessary, therefore, to examine many of these larger matters; and it will not be altogether possible to avoid some recapitulation of materials already discussed in the previous chapter. So far as possible, however, I propose to concentrate principally on a number of developments within Romantic criticism that have to do specifically with the two ancient poets and with their epics.

1. Traditions and Tensions

As already seen, from Vida in the early 1500's to the essays of Joseph Warton during the 1750's the epics of Homer and Virgil were customarily regarded as the supreme exemplars of the supreme genre of poetry. Aristotle, Plutarch, and a host of other authorities from classical antiquity had praised the Homeric poems as summits of art. The Middle Ages had reverenced Virgil as a kind of secular saint and had opened the Aeneid at random to find texts for the very conduct of life. When
Renaissance criticism addressed itself to its first and most fundamental enterprise—which was nothing less than the justification and affirmation of imaginative literature—it took the Homeric and Virgilian epics as the primary exhibits available for its discourse. And throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries this unparalleled admiration continues almost without abatement. Homer and Virgil were acclaimed as the ultimate masters of literature and their epics as the greatest of all poetic works.

It is true, to be sure, that there were many exceptions to this critical estimate, many tensions within its structure and its history. For one thing, there were always dissenters: critics who gave their praise to heroic tragedy as the most sublime of genres, who mistrusted the "fabling" of ancient epic, or who disvalued Homer and Virgil for a variety of other reasons. For another thing, it was not necessarily assumed that the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid constituted a sort of eternally closed circle, a select company-of-three into which no later epic could ever hope to deserve elevation. To be sure, some critics held that the three great epics of classical antiquity had attained to a grace beyond art that would forever prevent the appearance of anything but
the most distant rivals. Far more commonly, however, the abiding aspiration of Italian and French Neoclassicism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and of English critical writing during the seventeenth century—was that a modern heroic poem should be created that would be fully worthy of a place beside the three ancient masterpieces.¹ Ambitious poets like Chapelain, Scudery, and Davenant, ambitious and great poets like Milton and Dryden, were alike haunted—to use the admirable phrase of W. P. Ker—by "the spell of the phantom modern epic." The heroic poem, Ker points out, was for the seventeenth century "an unbodied ghost"; and no poet could be entirely sure that this spirit might not at long last descend upon him and inspire his art to fashion "the habit of its earthly life."² The immortal trilogy of classical epics had not defined an everlasting final word, so far as the epic possibility itself was concerned. At any time, the trilogy might become a tetralogy. Thus, at the same time that the heroic poems of Homer and Virgil were regarded as incomparable achievements of wisdom and art, lodged in the Realms where the Eternal are, they also seemed to beckon later poets to try their own epic enterprise. And there inevitably ensued a certain amount of critical bickering over the rival claims of modern epics, a certain eagerness to hail this or that new work
as the long-awaited congener of Homer's and Virgil's achievements. With alacrity, many Renaissance critics took up this new genre and gave to its major achievements—such as the Orlando Furioso, the Gerusalemme Liberata, The Faerie Queene—a place at least equal to that of the epics of Homer and Virgil. The verdict of the Italian Renaissance commentator Paolo Beni already cited—that Tasso's poem surpasses Homer's and Virgil's "not only in dignity, in beauty of style, and in unity of fable, but in every other quality that may be said to constitute perfection in poetry"—was by no means exceptional.³

Another earlier tension is to be observed in the intense rivalry that critical theory instigated between the ancient epics themselves: a rivalry that had its formalized beginnings before the close of the quattrocento in Italy and that was still being strenuously contested near the end of the eighteenth century. In critical writings there went forward, from decade to decade, a sort of perpetual choosing-up of sides, between the Homeric poems on the one hand and Virgil's epic on the other.⁴ In the Italian Renaissance, as Spingarn pointed out nearly seventy years ago, the tendency of critics was to deduce the laws of the epic poem almost exclusively from the Aeneid and to establish that work as the perfect
exemplar of what all epic poems ought to be. In sixteenth-century France, and for the Neoclassical critics associated with the courts of Louis XIII and XIV, the reputation of the Aeneid flourished so strongly that it was almost always taken as the only norm for epic productions. The paradigmatic value of the Aeneid within Tudor and Elizabethan poetry and critical thought has often been remarked (Gavin Douglas, Surrey, Phaer and Twyne, and Stanyhurst were among the scholars and courtly poets who translated Virgil's epic, in whole or in part). W. P. Ker notes that Milton and Dryden appear to have conceived the abstract form of the epic almost exclusively in Virgilian terms (Dryden's glowing admiration for Virgil runs like a ground-bass throughout his prefaces and critical essays and is of course attested to by the major work of his final years, the Aeneas translation). Indeed, the seventeenth century in Italy, France, and England seems almost invariably to have regarded the Aeneid as a worthier pattern for "imitation" than was either the Iliad or the Odyssey.

Yet Homer also had powerful partisans, from the beginning of the Renaissance onward. His Greek was translated into Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, and (through Chapman's magnificent version) into English. The Elizabethans were profuse in their praise of Homer as the
"Kings of Poets" who, in Sidney's words near the conclusion of his Apology for Poetry, had sealed up for mankind "all knowledge, Logick, Rethorick, Philosophy, naturall and morall." admiration for Homer also runs strong throughout the seventeenth century, from Hobbes to Boileau, despite the immense prestige of Virgil. And eighteenth-century Neoclassicism clearly reverses the dominance of Virgil over Homer that had marked earlier periods. The Aeneid had never been popular in German literary criticism; and when the long tradition of Baroque poetics died out early in the eighteenth century, it was upon Homer, rather than Virgil, that the emergent German Neoclassicism seized as its model. Voltaire and Johnson gave their approval to Homer over the claims of the Latin poet; and Pope's advice to literary critics in his Essay on Criticism includes the following injunctions:

Be Homer's works your study and delight,
Read them by day, and meditate by night;
Thence form your judgement, thence your maxims bring,
And trace the muses upward to their spring.

Clearly, then, the growing compulsion to choose either Homer or Virgil did little to enhance the concept that both poets and their epics transcended the mutability imposed by mortal judgments. Instead, there ensued an endless argument in which one poet was praised at the
considerable expense of the other. In the treatises of such Renaissance critics as Pelletier and Capriano and Ronsard, Homer is attacked for his "superfluous exuberance ... loquaciousness ... occasional indecorum, and ... inferiority in eloquence and dignity," while the Aeneid is simultaneously established as the surpassing model for all poetic works.10 William Webbe's Discourse of English Poetry (which was published in 1586, some thirty years after the treatises of Pelletier, Capriano, and Ronsard) notes that Virgil "performed the very same in Latin which Homer had done in Greeske, or rather better ... ."11 In the prefatory matter affixed to the 1598 installments of his Homer translations, Chapman indignantly takes note of the comparison "between Virgill and Homer." After declaring that the famous set-pieces in the Aeneid (e.g., the forging of arms for Aeneas) are "nothing" when compared to corresponding set-pieces from Homer, Chapman continues:

... whosoever shall reade Homer throughly and worthily will know the question of the comparative greatness of Homer and Virgil comes from a superflciall and too vnripe a reader; for Homers Poems were writ from a free furie, an absolute & full soule, Virgils out of a courtly, laborious, and altogether imitatorie spirit: not a Simile hee hath but is Homers: not an inuention, person, or disposition, but is wholly or originally built vpon Homericall foundations, and in many places hath the verie wordes Homer vseth: besides, where Virgill hath had no more plentifull and liberal a wit then to frame twelue
imperfect bookes of the troubles and
trauailes of Aeneas, Homer hath of as little
subject finisht eight & Tortie perfect. And
that the triviall objection may be answerd,
that not the number of bookes but the nature
and excellence of the worke commendeth it—all
Homers bookes are such as haue been presidents
ever since of all sortes of Poems; imitating
none, nor ever worthily imitated of any.

Having disclaimed any intention of being "a malicious
detractor of so admired a Poet as Virgill," Chapman
resumes:

... the maiestie [Homer] enthrones and the
spirit he infuseth into the scope of his
worke so farre outshine Virgill, that his
skirmishes are but meere scramblings of boyes
to Homers; the silken body of Virgils muse
curiously drest in guilt and embroidered silver,
but Homers in plaine massie and vnvalued gold;
not onely all learning, gourement, and wise-
dome being deduc't as from a bottomlesse foun-
taine from him, but all wit, eleganie, dis-
position, and judgement.12

These passages, properly glossed, furnish a paradigm for
most of the defenses of Homer (and most of the attacks on
Virgill) from the Renaissance to Dr. Johnson. For Henry
Peacham, however, writing in 1622, Virgill is "the King of
Poets, whom Nature hath reared beyond imitation, and who
aboue all other onely deserueth the name of a Poet . . . ."13
Davenant, in his Gondibert preface, seems to prefer
"unimitable Virgill" to Homer, whom Davenant suspects of
representing a dead-end for poetry.14 Davenant's master
Hobbes, however, clearly gives the nod to Homer; in his
exposition of the seven "Vertues" of a heroic poem, Hobbes finds the Greek poet superior in almost every case. And such rival claims as these might be multiplied indefinitely.

One final point should be made concerning earlier factors that worked against the generally accepted supremacy of classical epic. This is simply the point that almost every critical pressure against Homer and Virgil that today may seem uniquely a development of Romantic criticism had in one way or another been presaged, on a narrower scale, as far back as the Renaissance or the seventeenth century. If Coleridge found the mythological "machinery" of the Aeneid an encumbrance, so had Bacon (although for somewhat different reasons) early in the seventeenth century. If a battery of Romantic critical pronouncements attacked the Iliad as "barbaric" or "immoral," Cotton Mather had already fulminated against Homer's poem as having "set open the flood-gates of wickedness to break in upon the world"; and even Milton evidently accepted the charge, as ancient as Plato, that Homer had "written undecent things of the gods." A questioning of the relevance of classical antiquity, a mistrust of "servile imitation," a skepticism toward the received notion of three "Universal Modells" laid up in some vague eternal realm—these and many other tendencies of Romantic
critical thought can be found abroad centuries before the Romantic movement itself had got under way. We are once again brought back to the baffling problem of defining the distinctive newness, the originality, of major critical shifts.

Despite all these earlier tendencies and stirrings, however, two facts need to be born steadily in mind. One is that before the Romantic movement a critical admiration for the epics of Homer and Virgil formed as dominant a consensus as the entire history of criticism and taste can show. Only the enthusiasm for Shakespeare, strong in English critical currents since the seventeenth century and in German critical currents since the later eighteenth century, can lay claim to a comparable tradition of enduring respect. The second point, however, is that by the middle of the eighteenth century there had set in the early stages of an important and far-reaching metamorphosis, a metamorphosis that was to be fully realized within the next few decades by most of the major and minor spokesmen for distinctly Romantic ways of thinking about poetry. If Bacon had announced the death of myth (and thereby, implicitly, the death of the classical epic), Coleridge did likewise—but Coleridge's pronouncements were backed by the whole critical spirit of his time. If Blackmore in 1695 could rather doubt
that the Greek epics were on every count "well accommodated to this Age," the early nineteenth-century American critic and journalist Parke Godwin spoke for a legion of other writers when he wondered about the relevance, to the modern world, of Homer's "wrangling, squabbling, concupiscent, and very often dirty gods." 18

The attitudes of Romantic criticism toward the classical epics of Homer and Virgil are by no means unprecedented; but in the intensity and persistence of its animus against those epics, the Romantic age is quantitatively different from any earlier period. What were some of the sources of this difference?

2. The Wolfian Hypotheses on Homer

One frequently overlooked element in the Romantic revolt against the classical epic was almost certainly the new "separatist" criticism of Homer— as that criticism arose in German philology toward the end of the eighteenth century and rapidly spread to other countries— together with various related movements in philology, historical scholarship, antiquarianism, and what today might be called literary anthropology. In 1795 the German classical philologist Friedrich August Wolf (1753-1809) published one more volume in that unending stream of books and essays
on Homer that was produced by Germanic scholarship during the second half of the eighteenth century. Wolf's book, powerfully buttressed with learning, was entitled Prolegomena in Homerum; and his principal design in it was to set forth the thesis that the two epics attributed to Homer had in reality been composed piecemeal, as a series of separate shorter poems by various hands, and had been gradually fused together through collective and progressive recensions and accretions. Now, it happens that in the immensely long history of Homeric scholarship this thesis was not altogether original. The very codifiers and scholiasts at Alexandria had voiced uncertainty as to the single authorship of the two epics attributed to "Homer," and few of these ancient commentators claimed that either poem was entirely the work of a single poetic intelligence. Introducing the early installments of his Homeric translations (the Seauen Bookes of the Iliades of Homere, 1598), Chapman accepts the uniform authorship of Homer but doubts that Homer arranged the books of his two epics in the order in which they had come down to the Renaissance. "... I have," Chapman claims, referring to a tradition already ancient,
one calde the battaile fought at the fleete, another Doloniades, another Agamemnon's fortitude, another the Catalogue of ships, another Patroclus death, another Hectors redemption, another the funerall games, &c. All which are the titles of seuerall Iliades: and, if those were ordered by others, why may not I chalenge as much authority, reserving the right of my president?  

In 1664 the Abbe d'Aubignac, in his Conjectures académiques, had fluttered French Neoclassicism by accepting this same ancient tradition: it was quite true, the Abbe maintained, that both the Iliad and the Odyssey had been patched together out of a number of independent chantes (perhaps not all the work of a single poet) that had been collected and arranged by Lycurgus at Sparta during the eighth century B. C. Moreover, Wolf's general arguments had been independently arrived at by a number of his scholarly contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Thus Wolf's philological and anthropological conclusions about the Homeric epics and about the putative historical existence of a "Homer" owed much to older traditions and to the spadework of his predecessors and colleagues. They were no more and no less original, as propositions, than were Darwin's evolutionary theories in 1859. The great historical distinctions of Wolfe's Prolegomena, however, were that the volume constituted the first truly substantial and truly thoroughgoing presentation of such conclusions during the eighteenth century; that for all
its cross-grained passages its author was a comparatively clear expositor; and that, finally, as with *On the Origin of Species* or Renan's *Vie de Jesus*, the peculiar combination of time and place and intellectual milieu was "right" for the appearance and reception of his work.

Because of these three factors (and particularly because of the last) the influence of the *Prolegomena in Homerum* was immense; and in at least two major respects the Wolfian theories exercised a far-ranging effect on the critical status of the classical epic during the Romantic era: (1) they cast grave doubts on the received image of Homer himself as a kind of demigod, the earliest and still the greatest fountainhead of poetic creation; and (2) they did damage to the integrity and wholeness of the Homeric poems, as that integrity and wholeness had previously been understood and admired. They very name of Homer, for centuries a kind of talisman, was challenged as a historical fiction; what Keats some twenty years later was still able to conceive as "deep-brow'd Homer," ruling his "vast expanse," had been in reality an aggregation of bards and minstrels. And his Olympian epics, regarded for so many centuries as tutelary achievements by a single unapproachable presence, were actually products of the scissors and the paste-pot. To
phrase the matter in these ways, of course, is to register
the extremities of conclusion to which the Wolfian
arguments were pressed by those who accepted them. But
even Wolf's more conservative advocates admitted that
such conclusions might inevitably follow from his learned
dialectic.

In a long chapter of his study *The Mirror and the
Lamp*, M. H. Abrams has traced the extent to which
Romantic criticism was permeated with, and animated by,
an interest in the biography of the poet. Abrams suggests
that one of the crucial differentia between Romantic
criticism and the critical systems preceding it lies in
this: that the poet, in Romantic theory, "has moved into
the center of the critical system and taken over many of
the prerogatives which had once been exercised by his
readers, the nature of the world in which he found himself,
and the inherited precepts and examples of his poetic
art."20 It is obvious that an interest in the author
himself, and a tendency to divine his characteristics
from the evidence of his work, had always been latent in
earlier critical practice. (He who would become a great
epic poet, Milton had declared, must first make himself
his own most perfect poem). It remained, however, for
Romantic criticism to convert such interests and tendencies
into a predominant part of the critical act. Abrams sorts
out three categories within this pursuit of the biographical elements resident in works of literature, pointing out that each of them played an important role in the critical schema of the Romantic period:

The first type is primarily an investigation of literary causes: tel arbre, tel fruit, as Sainte-Beuve, its famed exponent, put it—the attempt to isolate and explain the special quality of the character, life, lineage, and milieu of its author. The second type is biographical in aim: it sets out to reconstruct the author as he lived, and uses the literary product merely as a convenient record from which to infer something about his life and character. The third . . . claims to be specifically aesthetic and appreciative in purpose: it regards aesthetic qualities as a projection of personal qualities, and in its extreme form, it looks upon the poem as a transparency opening directly into the soul of its author.21

In all three of these types of biographical exegesis—exegesis as a means for gaining access to the creator of the work under scrutiny—Romantic criticism refined its speculative instruments to a fine sensitivity. Literary works were eagerly analyzed as an index to their author's personality, his character, his emotional and moral nature; each poem came to be viewed as a garment in which its poet had clothed his soul—as "a fragment of a great confession," to use Goethe's well-known phrase. "Where it is worth the trouble," Herder had written as early as the 1770's, "this living reading, this divination into the soul of the author, is the sole mode of reading,
and the most profound means of self-development"; and, as Abrams notes, the assumption behind this typical expression "swept everything before it in applied criticism for more than a century." The Schlegels, Hazlitt, and Carlyle deduced clues to the personality and biography of Shakespeare from his plays. Coleridge spoke for literally hundreds of major and minor Romantic commentators on Milton when he wrote that the poet "himself is in every line of Paradise Lost" and that, therefore, the reader should understand that

In the Paradise Lost—indeed in every one of his poems—It is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve—are all John Milton; and it is a sense of this intense egotism that gives me the greatest pleasure in reading Milton's works.

This Romantic bias for the biographical element in criticism was summed up by one of its foremost practitioners; and his words, written in 1827, could be taken as one epigraph—the age will support many—for the period from about 1770 to the 1850's. For "the best of our own critics at present," Carlyle notes in "The State of German Literature," the abiding question "is a question mainly of a psychological sort, to be answered by discovering and delineating the peculiar nature of the poet from his poetry."  

Now, the concerns of Romantic criticism with recovering
the personality of the poet had not neglected what might have seemed, for such concerns, the most recalcitrant of texts—the two Homeric epics. It is true that German theory, in formulating its distinctions between the "objective" and "subjective" modes in poetry, had taken the epic (by which was meant, usually, the epics of Homer) as the genre that reflected most perfectly the former style. The personality, the "inmost heart," of Shakespeare or Milton or even Dante might be descried within their works; but it might be supposed that no texts could be more free of the poet's own character than were the Iliad and the Odyssey. Aristotle had praised Homer for saying little in propria persona; Schiller, the Schlegels, and Goethe praised his hard and unflinching objectivity; for Coleridge, influenced as usual by German theory, "There is no subjectivity whatever in the Homeric poetry"; and for Henry Crabb Robinson

The epic is marked by this character of style—that the poet presents his object immediately and directly, with a total disregard of his own personality. He is, as it were, an indifferent and unimpassioned narrator and chronicler.

Developments in German and English poetic theory had tended, thus, to erect the Homeric epics into the last citadel of the purely objective in poetry, of the text without
impress of author; Homer was regarded as having refined himself out of his creations, like the ideal artist whom Stephen Dedalus was to imagine. Yet many other Romantic critics had approached even the Homeric citadel for the purpose of ciphering out the elusive character of great Homer himself. As though tempted by the sheer difficulty of the challenge, commentators vied with one another in speculating on what the man Homer must have been like. These commentators appear to have hoped that the question of Homer's character, like the song sung by the Sirens or the name taken by Odysseus when he hid among women, might not lie beyond all conjecture; and the boldest of their conjectures often read like Caroline Spurgeon's psychographs of Shakespeare's most trivial likes and dislikes.²⁷

Against this whole tradition, therefore--this tradition in which the appreciation of the literary work depends more or less closely on an understanding of its author--the Wolfian hypotheses struck a telling blow. If the "separatist" criticism of Homer was right, then the more far-fetched reconstructions of Homer's character would perforce collapse as nonsense; but even the more conservative attempts to describe Homer the man--attempts closer to the mainstream of that biographical criticism which even today retains a certain intellectual
respectability—would have to be drastically revised. Acknowledging the truth of Wolfian arguments would mean that one had to be content, as was Coleridge, to accept "Homer" as "a mere concrete name for the rhapsodies of the Iliad."28

An acknowledgement of Wolf's theories led also, for many critics, to a stern re-examination of the consistency, unity, and completeness of the Homeric poems. Since the ancient scholiasts, the contradictions and other inconsistencies within the Iliad and the Odyssey had been known and pointed out. Viewed objectively, most of these inconsistencies and contradictions are, as it happens, relatively unimportant: a minor warrior in the Iliad is slain but later, without explanation, is mentioned as fighting on the battlefield; in the Odyssey the beard of Odysseus is described at one place as brown, at another place as black; and so on. Despite the comparative slightness of these flaws, however, Romantic critics found more and more fault with Homer's "nodding." Thus Robert Jamieson calls attention to the many "incongruities" within the Homeric poems;29 a number of commentators emphasize the apparent disparity between the announced theme of the Iliad and the actual substance of the poem;30 and an anonymous American critic, writing in the North American Review, laments...
that neither of Homer's epics provide "those indications of artifice and of a plan elaborated with minute exactness, which we find in modern epics." Besides these alleged lapses of artistry, the ancient questions of interpolations and "incompleteness" were revived by Romantic critics who accepted the Wolfian hypotheses. Again and again, it was claimed that many passages in both the Iliad and the Odyssey were "corruptions"; the ending of the Iliad was much disputed; and the view of Aristarchus on the ending of the Odyssey— that its "true" conclusion should come at line 296 of Book XXIII— received widespread endorsement. It is little wonder that in 1815, less than twenty years after the appearance of Wolf's Prolegomena, Thomas Mathias should have lamented that philology and criticism have stripped from Homer "his best parts, his affecting episodes, his battles, his shield, or his games" and have assigned these achievements to bands of "forgotten troubadours."

For Homer's critical reputation the impact exerted by the Wolfian hypotheses differed, of course, from country to country. Previously I noted the well-known fact that a critical preference for Homer over Virgil, or for Virgil over Homer, tended to manifest itself rather neatly along national lines. In Italy and France, from the early Renaissance to the close of the eighteenth
century, it was Virgil who was more often regarded as the greatest poet—as, indeed, the greatest of all poets. In these countries, therefore, Wolf's theories brought about no radical re-assessments; they merely served, when they were noted at all, to strengthen and confirm the already secure position of Virgil—at the further expense of the Homeric epics. Leopardi in Italy and Madame de Stael in France were virgually alone in the enthusiasm with which they accepted and disseminated the Wolfian arguments. In Germany, England, and Scotland, however, the situation was far different. Whereas Virgil had always remained a distinctly secondary figure in German philology and criticism, Homer had usually been studied and praised as one of the supreme poets of the world. The magnificent traditions of classical philology in Germany, which were already well under way in the eighteenth century and which were to attain their finest flowering during the next, had been founded more particularly on Greek than on Latin; and in German criticism it was only with the advent of the Sturm und Drang movement and its complicated aftermaths that the new popularity of Ossian and Shakespeare began to offer serious competition to Homer's lonely eminence. Thus it was in Germany that the Wolfian arguments wrought
perhaps their most forceful effects. Upon the appearance of the *Prolegomena* its propositions were at once debated at almost every level of German literary activity: in philology, in theory and criticism, in reviewing, in university teaching, in the conversations of the salons, and elsewhere. They received a powerful endorsement from Friedrich Schlegel, who eagerly used them as substantiation for his own theory that the structure of all epics consists in a nexus of smaller poetic members, each possessing its own internal life and independent unity; and they deeply impressed August Wilhelm Schlegel, even though his extensive writings on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* betray a certain hesitation to accept Wolf in toto. Hegel, on the other hand, although much impressed with the Wolfian thesis, came finally to reject it: "However much an epic expresses the cause of a whole nation," he wrote, "the people itself as a totality cannot compose, but only individuals." And there were few classical scholars, few philosophers of art, few critics and reviewers who did not at one time or another feel the necessity of taking sides in the dispute over Wolf's hypotheses.

Wolf's Homeric studies also left a profound impress on critical thought in England and Scotland. In the English theory of the epic it is clearly Virgil who
predominates throughout the seventeenth century. The peculiar greatness of Homer--usually said to consist in his "sublimity" and "invention"--was of course always recognized and proclaimed; but the peculiar greatness of the Aeneid--usually said to consist in its "regularity," "polish," "decorum," and "judgement"--were prized even more highly. By the eighteenth century, however, the balance had been pretty much reversed, with Homer now dominating the discourses of English criticism and almost unanimously preferred over Virgil. (Within Scottish critical writing, and among the Scottish "primitivists" in particular, Homer's reputation had always been extraordinarily high). And when a knowledge of Wolfian theories began to spread to the British Isles, they created something of a sensation. Both the Edinburgh Review (in 1803) and the Athenaeum (in 1811) devoted lengthy, rather non-committal summaries to the "new Germanic ideas" on Homer; but the fact that Wolfian arguments had reached England within two or three years of their publication is indicated by the spirited defense of Homeric unity contained in the letters of Charles Fox for the year 1798. Wolf's theories were discussed, in conversation and in letters, by Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey; and we have the testimony of
Henry N. Coleridge that all three poets looked with favor on such explanations of the origin of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the case of Coleridge, however, there is no need to rely on external evidence; for he became probably the most enthusiastic and outspoken "separatist" among all the major English Romantics. On one occasion he wrote, "Indeed, I doubt the original existence of the *Iliad* as one poem"; and on another occasion he makes the really sweeping statement, "Of course there was a Homer, and twenty besides. I will engage to compile twelve books with characters just as distinct and consistent as those in the *Iliad*, from the metrical ballads and other chronicles of England, about Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table." A review, sometimes attributed to Hazlitt, declared that "that artificial fabrication of a continued fiction which critics like Bossu have ascribed to Homer so gratuitously" would have been quite impossible. In the preface to his *Popular Heroic and Romantic Ballads* (1814) Jamieson admitted that the Homeric poems were mainly "a methodised, corrected, and new-modelled anthology" of miscellaneous poems by various bards. Thomas Campbell, in some lectures delivered during 1812, acknowledged the powerful persuasiveness of the Wolfian ideas, as did Charles Elton, who concedes in his *Specimens of the*
Classic Poets (1814) that Wolf's explanations greatly complicate "the difficulty of identifying these collected rhapsodies as the productions of one and the same individual. That other bards may have contributed with Homer to form the Iliad will not appear wide from probability, if the nature of the bardic institution be considered."^40 The debate was also joined by Mathias, in his Observations on the Writings and on the Character of Mr. Gray (1815), and by Richard Knight's Prolegomena ad Homerum (1816). Gilbert Wakefield wrote in 1817 that it was "irreconcilable at once to reason, to history, and to experience" to regard Homer as having sprung up without influencing predecessors.^41 These examples from English and Scottish critics could be multiplied many times over.

One point of extreme importance should be made with regard to the new "disintegrationist" critiques of Homer that were precipitated by Wolf and his advocates: For many Romantic critics and shapers of taste, a "separatist" account of the origins of the Homeric epics worked to enrich rather than damage the stature of the poems themselves. By the 1770's there had got under way, almost simultaneously in Germany and the British Isles, that complex of critical enthusiasms which glorified "primitive" or "folk" poetry and which delighted
in regarding the people and their bards as picturesque and elemental makers of poetry. In Germany, at the time that the Wolfian arguments appeared, the intellectual air was thick with Herder's "organic analogy" and the Herderian concept of a universally present "natural" poetry, with Schiller's preference for "naive" over "sentimental" poetry, with the literary anthropology of the Schlegels and the Grimms, with the elaborate attempts of Görres to demonstrate that the only essential unity of "primitive" epic poetry was the unity of the "mythic." It seems reasonable to conjecture that even had Jacob Grimm never heard of Wolf's theories he would still have been able, with his concept of the Volk who had unconsciously generated songs during the lost childhood of the race, to write the following observations in a letter:

Folk poetry arises from the mind of the whole; what I mean by art poetry arises from that of the individual. That is why ancient poetry cannot call its poets by name; it has not been made by one or two or three, but is the sum of the whole. . . . It seems to me unthinkable that there should ever have been a Homer or an author of the Nibelungen. History proves the distinction also by the fact that no civilized nation is able to produce an epic, and has never done so.42

Throughout the British Isles, also, the decades before and after the appearance of Wolf's theories were a time
in which many critics had ample reasons for welcoming such a "folk" interpretation of the origins of Homeric epic. These were the decades that saw the work of the Wartons, Gray, Collins, Percy, and Hurd, the sensational successes of the Ossian poems, the "Rowley" forgeries of Chatterton, and the whole "ballad revival" and cult of medieval minstrelsy; and many critics of the time would naturally have been eager for an explanation that would disclose the Homeric poems as the work, not of a sophisticated and magisterial presence but of untutored folk-poets. In both Germany and the British Isles, then, an acceptance of Wolf's hypotheses did not necessarily lead to hostile criticism of Homer. Plenty of critics felt, on the contrary, that to claim the Olympian works of "Homer" as accretive productions, sprung up originally as the rhapsodies of minstrels or folk poets (or as the spontaneous creations of the folk themselves), was to enhance immeasurably the appeal of the poems themselves.

But although many writers found in Wolf's Homeric studies both a vindication of their own critical predilections and the impetus toward a new admiration for Homer's epics, there were scores of others who found themselves perplexed and disillusioned by the implications of Wolf's work. As I have briefly pointed
out, the Wolfian theories and an intensive interest in their implications did not spring up from barren fields. Such theories had long been struggling to structure themselves; and the interest that they attracted was in part provoked by many other intellectual and emotional reactions against the authority, even the artistry and authenticity, of Homer and other Ancients. Nevertheless, Wolf's book, perhaps as much as the labors of any other single writer, helped to precipitate the dissection of Homeric epic in the Romantic period—a dissection that was to be fought over all during the later nineteenth century, by the "separatists" and the rival "unitarians," and that has by no means been conclusively settled even today. By clouding the single identity of Keats's "deep-brow'd Homer"; by questioning the unity of what had come to seem the supreme examples of epics; by coalescing or energizing a large number of other, related tendencies within the age's attitudes toward classical epic—in all these ways, Wolf's theories, and the whole "separatist" movement in philology and criticism, helped to dislodge the classical epic as the loftiest genre of poetry.
3. Didacticism, "Morality," and the Epics
of Homer and Virgil

While critics, philologists, and reviewers wrangled over the new "disintegrationist" investigations of Homer, there went forward two other lines of critical transformation, separate yet interlocked, that tended not only to militate against the Homeric epics but also to indict the inherited estimate of Virgil's Aeneid. I refer to those tendencies, materializing about the second half of the eighteenth century and reaching a peak during the first decades of the nineteenth, which called into doubt the didactic offices of poetry and which frowned on the "moral content" of classical epic. Both these tendencies can be traced back to the very beginnings of critical thought; thus we shall again find that to pursue distinctively Romantic attitudes is to deal with acceleration rather than with total innovation. But we shall also discover, again, a powerful difference, of degree and of quantity, between Romantic pronouncements on these matters and the scattered animadversions of older criticism.

The Horatian formula that poetry should be as much utile as dulce lies, of course, near the center of
ancient and Renaissance poetics. In such figures as Milton and Dryden, and in the major and lesser figures of French and Italian criticism, this formula prevails throughout the seventeenth century. And it endured, with only little diminishment, down to the middle of the eighteenth century. Dr. Johnson is a good representative of late Neoclassical attitudes toward the didactic functions of literature. Johnson is certain that "moral truth," figured forth through artistic exemplification, is the most important constituent in the value of a literary work. In Rambler, No. 4 (March 31, 1750), devoted to "the moral duty of novelists," he lists among the supreme obligations of the novelist the task of teaching readers "the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence." Good and evil should not be so bound up together within a fictional character that the reader is led, through the appeal of the character's admirable qualities, to forget "the abhorrence of the character's faults." This "fatal error" of calculation on the part of novelists is manifest in all fictions that

confound the colors of right and wrong, and instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art that no common mind is able to disunite them. ... Vice ... should always disgust, nor should the graces of gaiety or the dignity of courage be so united with it as to reconcile it to the mind.
Whenever it appears, it should raise hatred by the malignity of its practices, and contempt by the meanness of its strategems, for while it is supported by either parts or spirit, it will be seldom heartily abhorred. . . . It is therefore to be steadily inculcated by novelists that virtue is the highest proof of understanding and the only solid basis of greatness, and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts, that it begins in mistake and ends in ignominy.

And in the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare, Johnson makes his famous statements about the amorality of Shakespeare:

He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. . . . He makes no just distribution of good and evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This is a fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time and place italics added ."44

Confronted with making a choice between utile and dulce, between prodesse and delectare, at least a few Neoclassical critics would have maintained that pleasure was the first or even the sole aim of poetry. Expositions of this view are found, for instance, in those who would have saved philosophy and ethics and all "learning" as the province of discursive writing exclusively, while
admitting poetry as a purely hedonistic adornment of life, akin to lute pieces or the stylistic decorations of secular architecture. (Scarcely any critics attempted to go to the opposite extreme and strip away all delight from poetry: for it was obvious that such a position would at once obliterate all the differentia of poetry, as they were then conceived, and render poetry indistinguishable from the mere statement of precepts). The great majority of Neoclassical critics, however, were convinced that at least the principal objective of poetry was edification (usually emphasized as moral edification). "The poets are physicians of manners," declared Vossius, expressing an assumption almost universally subscribed to by those who were concerned with the nature of poetry and who were unwilling to banish "the poets" altogether. By no means all Neoclassical critics would have stated the pleasure-instruction dichotomy in the simplistic metaphor of Lucretius, who had described his verse as mere honey with which he had sweetened the rim of the goblet containing his bitter doctrines. Many critics were perfectly aware that so crude a schematization of "content" and "attractive ornamentation" was finally untenable. Yet some such explanation, more subtly refined, remained as
the basis of most Neoclassical theory: Poetry furnishes "moral utility," embroidered more or less incidently by delight. This view was implicated by every discussion of Aristotle's concept of catharsis, from the first commentaries by Robortello, Maggi and Lombardi, Vettori, and Castelvetro, during the Italian Renaissance, to John Dennis and other eighteenth-century "moral effect" critics. It animates the Ramist logic, which appealed back to Classical rhetoric for a division between moral precept and added embellishment. It occurs in almost every "defense of poesie" drafted to fend off Puritan tractates or the merciless objections of Baconian science. It is the premise of poets and critics who claim that satire improves men and society, and it is distilled into Molière's placet on Tartuffe: "Le devoir de la comédie est de corriger les hommes en les divertissant." Finally, it dominates most eighteenth-century aesthetic discussions of the good, the true, the useful, and the beautiful in works of literature. It inspires, in brief, almost every Neoclassical judgment about the primary nature of poetry: and it does so because these are almost always judgments on the primary aim of poetry, which in turn is usually interpreted as the effect of poetry on its audience.
In no aspect of Neoclassical critical theory, however, is the heavy emphasis on "moral utility" more marked than in pronouncements on the ends of epic poetry. I know of no Neoclassical critical formulations that ignore altogether the terms in Pope's "Be Homer's works your pleasure and delight." (Those writers who came closest to doing so, or who at least came closest to minimizing the pleasures of epic poems, were perhaps the Tudor Humanists--Ascham, Elyot, and others--in their educational treatises recommending that young scholars be "put to school" with the epics of Homer and with Virgil's Aeneid as vessels of moral instruction and civil training). On the contrary, many Neoclassical critics take pains to underscore the pleasurable elements within epic poetry, lest those qualities be lost to sight. Hobbes, for instance, in the pre-fatory dissertation to his Homeric translations ("The Vertues of an Heroique Poem," 1675), hastens to proclaim that "the End and Designe of the epic Poet . . . is not only to profit, but also to delight the Reader." But by far the majority of Neoclassical writings on the epic placed their heaviest emphasis on the exemplary, educational, or otherwise didactic aspects of epic. As early as 1564, in an attempt to establish catharsis as an element not confined to tragedy but present also
in the epic, Minturno argues that epic "purgation" constitutes a kind of homeopathic "cure" for the readers of an epic poem. Passages from Sidney's remarks on the epic in his Apology for Poetry have already been cited: for Sidney, epic poems "not onely teach and mové to a truth, but teacheth and moueeth to the most high and excellent truth." Such poetic works "maketh magnanimity and iustice shine throughout all misty fearefulnes and foggy desires"; they "instructeth the mind," "inflameth ... with desire to be worthy," and "informeth with counsel how to be worthy."

Le Bossu describes the purpose of the epic as "moral instruction disguised under the allegory of action," and he appears to have conceived the process of epic composition as first the choosing of some moral truth and then the working out of a fable by which the moral truth and then the working out of a fable by which the moral truth was illustrated or "figured."

Milton, in his accounts of how his "grand design" first grew upon him, stresses again and again the moral utility of his projected work: he had early resolved, he records, to produce a heroic poem for "the honour and instruction of my country," a work "teaching over the whole book of sanctity and vertu"; he would create poetry "to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu and
publick civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune." For Milton "the main consistence of a true poem" resides in the poets' choosing "such persons as they ought to introduce, and what is morall and decent to each one."\[49\] It was upon such grounds as education, instruction, "pious edification," and so on that the epic poem on the "Christian Marvellous" was most often defended throughout the seventeenth century. And from Dryden on the Aeneid to Dr. Johnson on Paradise Lost, it is the "feigning of noble virtues" or some other variation on didacticism (in the descriptive rather than pejorative sense of the word) that figures most prominently in normative discussions of the epic genre.

By the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, however, critical theory had sharply altered many of these Neoclassical ways of looking at the epic and, of course, at all poetry. The supremacy of didactic value as a criterion of poetry had begun to undergo severe scrutiny and, at a number of points, to crumble away. It would be easy to suggest that this revisionism constituted a profound and almost total rejection of the older emphases on didacticism and "moral utility" in poetry. One could collect and mount an
entire gallery of pronouncements from the Romantic era that seem the very antithesis of Dr. Johnson's "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better."

Less than six years after the death of Johnson, Kant in the Critique of Judgment (1790) was impressively dividing the realm of the aesthetic object from the worlds of morality, "usefulness," and scientific or discursive knowledge, proclaiming that art provides not textbook instruction, not moral education (at least in any of the Neoclassical critical senses), but "interesseloses Wohlgefallen" ("disinterested satisfaction," as the concept-term is usually translated). Within another decade or two, Blake was proclaiming himself "a literalist of the Imagination"; Coleridge was writing that a poem proposes "for its immediate object pleasure, not truth"; and Keats was complaining of Wordsworth's poems that "we hate poetry which has a palpable design upon us." But although these and hundreds of other pronouncements in the same spirit seem at first glance to contrast sharply with Neoclassicism and its orientation toward didactic standards for poetry, the cleavage is not so simple or so complete as it appears to be. The above quotations from the English Romantic poets can be matched with other, contradictory pronouncements by the same writers, torn with equal
abruptness from their original contexts. Blake, for instance, says explicitly that he has set out to create and express a "system" whereby men can cast off forever their "mind-forged manacles"; he announces that his poetry will "cleanse the doorways of perception," and he speaks incessantly of his poetic "task":

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity.

If Coleridge remarked to Mrs. Barbauld that his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had "too much" moral, he also appears to concede in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia Literaria* that the "immediate purpose" of a poem may be "the communication of truths." If Keats tells Shelley bluntly that the latter's poetry contains too much quasi-mystical teaching, there are other passages in Keats's letters--even the late ones--which suggest that he would not have agreed completely with the proposition that a poem should not mean but be. And for good measure we may add a few bits from Wordsworth; his assertion in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that each of his poems "has a worthy purpose" and is meant so to work upon the understanding of the reader that he will be "in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened.
and purified"; the declaration in his defense of Burns that poetry should be employed "to please, and to instruct"; the famous passage, so much admired during the Victorian period, from a letter written to Sir George Beaumont early in 1808, in which Wordsworth claims that "Every great Poet is a Teacher" and that he wishes "either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing"; and finally the call in Book Three of The Excursion for a poetry that can be used "In framing models to improve the scheme / Of Man's existence, and recast the world." It therefore seems a mistake to conclude facilely that Romantic theory and criticism and poetic practice differ radically from Neoclassical standards of didacticism and moral efficacy. For we not only find that Romantic theory draws back, for the most part, from taking Poe's or Mallarme's final step into Angelisme thereby severing poetry not only from all moral value but from all referential meanings whatsoever; we also find some of the best Romantic theory drawing back even from such a comparatively moderate formulation as Poe's "Fallacy of the Didactic."

But in Romantic theory there had taken place major modifications in older conceptions of the uses of poetry. One way to describe these modifications, I believe, is by suggesting that although most Romantic
criticism retains (sometimes very strongly) the conviction that poetry can "work its will" upon its readers, the nature of the transaction and of its contents is now conceived of in a different manner. For Romantic theory and practice, poetry may teach--indeed, does teach--but the definition of "teaching" has to be constructed in a very liberal and comprehensive spirit.

From the Iliad the seventeenth century might draw maxims and exempla and images by which to live; and such recourse illustrates well enough, I think, what we might regard as the traditional Neoclassical concept of poetry as a teacher of mankind. But when we read Keats's sonnet on first experiencing Homer in the Chapman translation, or when Keats records that while reading the Iliad he found himself shouting beside Achilles on the battlefield at Troy, we are entitled to feel that Keats has been "taught" by Homer, in a different way, albeit as powerfully as were Neoclassical generations. Keats has been "educated" through his experience of the Homeric poem by means of the expansion of his perceptions.

One way of describing the difference is to say that the "lessons" which Keats has learned from Homer are perhaps not deeper, but at least less susceptible to paraphrase, than were those read out of Homer by Neoclassical critics. Indeed, it is not quite accurate to speak about Romantic
concepts of the "lessons" to be derived from poetry. Some admirable remarks by M. H. Abrams, in a discussion of Wordsworth's poetic theory, might be applied to a good many other Romantic theories of poetry: "In contrast to Johnson," Abrams points out, "Wordsworth maintains that, instead of telling and demonstrating what to do to become better, poetry, by sensitizing, purifying, and strengthening the feelings, directly makes us better." For many of the best Romantic critics and theorists, poetry maintains a "design" upon its readers; but it is a design that can jump the circuit of doctrine and paraphrasable assertion (although these qualities may be present) and bring, as Coleridge expressed it, "the whole soul of man into activity." If we imagine the range of critical theory as a continuum, with Marxist and Tolstoyan theory at one extremity and the tradition of Mallarmé and Cassirer at the other, we shall, I think, find that much of the best Romantic theory falls somewhere around the middle between the two terminal points, but somewhat closer to the latter extremity than to the former. For the Schlegels and Wordsworth, for Coleridge and Mill, for Goethe and De Quincey, poetry furnishes men with knowledge and inspiriting power—a knowledge and power transcending that conferred by science, by expository discourse, or
This major realignment between Neoclassical and Romantic concepts of the uses of poetry was a major factor in the sinking reputations of Homeric and Virgilian epic during the Romantic era. For nearly twenty centuries the "moral utility," the didactic and exemplary values, of the three great epic poems of Antiquity had been central factors in the high critical esteem that they had enjoyed. Now, however, critics were refining new viewpoints from which to approach the "teachings" of poetry. They were coming to prize less and less the rigid lessons that could be read out of the Iliad or the Odyssey or the Aeneid; while not necessarily weary of the didactic approach to poetry, they came to feel, some of them, that "Frost at Midnight" or Songs of Innocence or "Der Erlkonig" were equally valid subjects for such an approach. And one result was that Homer and Virgil were more and more regarded as dusty masters, while their epics were read less and less frequently. Poetry, it was widely held, should surprise by joy and bring thoughts that lay too deep for tears; if it wished, it might elevate the human spirit through furnishing legislation, acknowledged or unacknowledged, for the world; but discussions of the exemplary and didactic nature of Homer's and Virgil's epics struck
many critics as dead, dry, scholastic, and unsubtle enterprises.

Ironically, the fact that some Romantic critics did continue to evaluate poetry through its "effect" was a factor that also worked strongly against the traditional prestige of Homer and Virgil. The dispute over the "moral content" of the Homeric epics goes back at least as far as Plato, who in Book III and Book X of the Republic had set forth his intransigent critique of Homer's "scandalous" depiction of the gods. The alleged immorality of the Aeneid was denounced even on its appearance in Augustan Rome and was vehemently condemned by the early and medieval Church (whose hostility was of course merely one expression of its mistrust of the blandishments inherent in all pagan poetry). Throughout the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, moreover, there were plenty of commentators who frowned on this or that moral aspect of Homer's poems or of the Aeneid (often as a means of championing one poet over the other). During the Romantic era, however, the complaints against the morality of Homer and Virgil grew to a chorus of unprecedented loudness. These complaints were voiced both by critics who embraced the "new" Romantic modes of approaching poetic effect and by those who
retained strong vestiges of the older, more direct conception of "morality" or "didactic usefulness": they occur in Goethe and Coleridge as well as in Jeffrey and Hazlitt. None of them can outdo Parke Godwin's censure, which I have already cited, of Homer's "wrangling, squabbling, concupiscent, and often very dirty gods." But time after time one gets, in Romantic critical writing, very severe doubts about the edifying quality of the Homeric poems and the Aeneid. Thus Joseph Cottle criticizes the morality of the Iliad because within it "one human being ferociously mangles another." Madam de Stael deplored what (as might be expected) she regarded as the shamefully low status that Homer had granted to his female characters. Chateaubriand tried to demonstrate that the character of Milton's Adam is in every respect morally superior (more "majestic and noble") to Homer's Odysseus, that of Voltaire's Lusignan, in Zaire, morally superior to Homer's Priam. William Cullen Bryant, while at work on his translation of the Iliad, remarked the poem's "monotony of carnage" and complained that the deeds of Homer's gods and warriors were so "detestable" that he was "sometimes half tempted to give up them and Homer altogether"; Whittier mutters about the "brawny butcher work" in which the Greek heroes take delight; James
Russell Lowell speaks of the Homeric Olympians who "lobby and log-roll" for their favorite mortals; and in South Carolina, William Gilmore Simms ridicules the conduct of Homer's characters by comparing them with the Choctaws and Cherokees of his native regions. Finally, Hazlitt, in commenting on *Paradise Lost*, may have had the Homeric epics at least obliquely in mind when he praises the absence (sic) of "contentions, disputes, wars, fightings, feuds, jealousies" in Milton's poem.

The *Aeneid*, as I have noted, seems never to have been much admired by German criticism; but in English critical judgments its standing throughout the seventeenth century was near the very zenith of poetic achievement, and as late as Johnson its prestige remained extraordinarily high. During the Romantic era, however, English and Scottish criticism began to attack the "morality" of Virgil's epic with surpassing energy. Instead of constituting a kind of secular scripture (as the Middle Ages had sometimes maintained), and instead of ranking among the three or four greatest heroic poems of all time (as critics from Vida to Blair had believed), the *Aeneid* was now condemned as a moral failure. In particular, the character of Aeneas, as it manifested itself through his words and conduct, was severely
criticized as an unfit "model" for readers of the poem to follow in their own lives. Aeneas's "abandonment" of Dido after his dalliance at her court, his arrogance, his "ostentatious self-righteousness" in following the decrees of Fate, his "ruthlessness" in warfare—all these putative flaws figure in the many criticisms of Aeneas as a paradigmatic hero. Charles Elton declares that the "faultless character" of Aeneas "is in the mouth of every school-boy; it is everywhere but in the poem itself." His devotions to the gods of Troy and Italy are not "sincere" but resemble the devotions of a monk "hugging his images of saints, and counting his beads." And Charles Butler calls Aeneas "worse than insipid:—he disgusts by his fears, his shiverings, and his human sacrifices; and, in his interview with Helen, while Troy was on fire, he is below contempt." Many were the contemporary writers who echoed these sentiments, finding Virgil's hero cowardly, benighted, and afflicted with all sorts of other weaknesses.

Moreover, almost as many assaults were directed against the morality of Virgil himself as against that of his epic. The "character" of Homer had not, of course, escaped the ministrations of those eighteenth-century critics who regarded poetry as a revelation of the poet's own inmost being or who operated through
reconstructing his biography and historical milieu. As was noted in our discussion of the Wolfian hypotheses, Homer had long presented the most impregnable resistance to these critical methods, because of the almost perfect "objectivity" of his poetry and because so little was known about "Homer times"; but a few critics had censured Homer for the "amoral" or "bloodthirsty" elements within his poetry, and a few others had commiserated with him for having been born into a "barbarous" age. These reservations about the "character" of Homer were negligible, however, when compared with the widespread attacks on that of Virgil. (One reason was perhaps the fact that more was known about the life of Virgil than about that of any other major poet of classical antiquity). The sovereign Latin poet, the secular saint, the prophet of the birth of Christ, the great moral teacher, the guide of Dante, was now pointed to as a pagan after all, a servile flatterer of the Emperor Augustus, a sycophant who had hypocritically composed the Aeneid to further his own material and social ends, and a pederast besides. John Keble, in his influential Lectures on Poetry (delivered at Oxford between 1832 and 1841), is perhaps typical of those commentators who indicted Virgil for a want of "sincerity" in the creation of his epic: the whole substance of the
poem, according to Keble, "seems the outcome of a duty and a task, rather than the spontaneous flow and impulse of the poet's inmost heart."60

Today most writers on literary theory would agree that "sincerity," "the true voice of feeling," and the presence of "the poet's inmost heart" cannot fruitfully enter into the evaluation of poetry. A concern with these factors transfers the act of criticism from the poem to the psychology and moral character of the poet, besides imposing the quite impossible task of trying to recover and calibrate the specific degree of "sincerity" that a given poem contains. Yet the criterion of the poet's "sincerity" plays a divisive role within the vocabulary of Romantic criticism. For instance, Wordsworth--whose most celebrated description of poetry is echoed by Keble's "spontaneous flow and impulse of the poet's inmost heart"--can affirm that it is "comparatively of little importance, while we are engaged in reading the Iliad, the Aeneid, the tragedies of Othello and King Lear, whether the authors of these poems were good or bad men"; but Wordsworth can also accept the verses engraved on churchyard headstones as true poetry, because of their "sincerity."61 At any rate, the supposed lack of "sincerity" in Virgil's glorification of Roman destiny was again and again brought
forward as evidence of his shameless expediency as an artist: an expediency that not only explained the alleged coldness and rigidity of the Aeneid but also unfavorable reflections on Virgil himself.  

Similar ends were served by a renewed critical attention to the much-discussed "imitativeness" of the Aeneid, which had been a focus of attack and defense for eighteen centuries. Chapman and other Renaissance advocates for Homer had accused Virgil of stealing wholesale from the Iliad and the Odyssey; Young and the Warton and other eighteenth-century champions of "original composition" had devalued the Aeneid as a pallid, mechanical, and sterile copy of Homer; on the other hand, Italian and French criticism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—as well as most English criticism from Jonson to the death of Dryden—glorified Virgil's consummate mastery over the art of imitation: if Homer was indeed Nature, so the argument ran, then Virgil had excelled at imitating and polishing the best parts of Nature.

With many Romantic critics, however, the Virgilian imitation was likely to be spoken of as outright plagiarism (inexpertly done at that), an immorality offensive, even shocking, to present-day creative and critical standards. In Lecture X of his 1818 lectures,
Coleridge mysteriously alludes to Virgil as the "copyist" of Theocritus, by way of contrasting such "copying" with the poetry of "the free imitator, who seizes with a strong hand whatever he wants or wishes for his own purpose and justifies the seizure by the improvement of the material or the superiority of the purpose to which it is applied." And in the Table Talk, under May 8, 1824, Coleridge asks bluntly: "If you take from Virgil his diction and metre, what do you leave him?" Shelley in his Defense of Poetry excludes Virgil from the company of the three great epic poets in human history, largely because he had "effected the fame of an imitator." In Germany, Hegel dismissed the Aeneid as artificial, contrived, stale, and cold. Foerster doubtless overstates the case when he concludes that "almost every American of the first half of the nineteenth century turned against Virgil . . . because his epic lacked the qualities so highly prized by all Romantics, originality and sincerity . . . ." Yet there can be little doubt that Jones Very (whom Foerster quotes) was speaking for many American literary men of the period when he scorned the Aeneid as "a lunar reflection of the Iliad." Rousseau and Wordsworth and even Shelley might express admiration for
Virgil's epic poem, and Jefferson might rise before
dawn to read passages from the original Latin: but it
seems impossible to deny that the Romantic period in
general marked a low ebb in the critical reputation of
the Aeneid and of Virgil himself. The Roman poet's
"morality"--which encompassed his private conduct, his
dubious artistic ethics that allowed him to be a
flatterer and a mere copist, and the moral content of
the Aeneid itself--was attacked so effectively that it
does not seem to have recovered until the mid-Victorian
period (witness the flowering of Virgil-studies in the
great European universities, with particular attention
to studying the "beauties" of the Aeneid, and Tennyson's
late sonnet on Virgil, "Wielder of the stateliest
measure / Moulded by the lips of man").

Romantic theory managed, then, to catch the epics
of Homer and Virgil in a sort of pincers-movement.
On the one hand, the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid
were vigorously assaulted by those critics who had
grown weary of didacticism in literature, of poetry
designed to hold up a mirror for virtuous conduct or
for "inspiration," and who believed that tutelary
poems, at least in the traditional senses of that con-
cept, possessed no relevance to the poetic and critical
temperament of the new age. On the other hand, many critics who held fast to the older standards and prized "exemplary" poetry now came to feel that the three Classical epics perhaps furnished the wrong "examples." The voice that speaks throughout Byron's *Don Juan* can only loosely be subsumed under the heading of criticism; but Stanza XLI of Canto the First, part of the sequence of stanzas that comment on Juan's education, will perhaps summarize a good many Romantic feelings toward the edifying qualities of Homer and Virgil:

His classic studies made a little puzzle,
Because of filthy loves of gods and goddesses,
Who in the earlier ages raised a bustle,
But never put on pantaloons or bodices;
His reverend tutors had at times a tussle,
And for their Aeneids, Iliads, and Odysseys,
Were forced to make an odd sort of apology,
For Donna Inez dreaded the Mythology.

4. Classical Epic and the Idea of "Progress"

Didacticism and morality were far from being the only counts on which the epics of Homer and Virgil were disparaged within Romantic critical thought. Instead, they merely point toward a much larger theme, one that winds throughout the whole Romantic era and that gathers within its scope not only concepts of didacticism and
morality but a bewildering number of other topics, developments, and intellectual and emotional forces. This larger theme is an acceptance of the idea of progress in human affairs, of the concept that throughout history mankind has advanced steadily out of barbarism into civilization and that this evolutionary process is still continuing and will go on doing so. Clearly the "progressivist" theories of the Romantic era are in turn involved with the whole Romantic shift away from Neoclassical assumptions that human life and destiny are more or less fixed and frozen into a rigid stasis. In certain respects these Neoclassical assumptions were by no means so monolithic as some textbook accounts might lead one to believe. During the period from 1500 to 1750 on the Continent, or during the Augustan period in England, it was not necessarily believed that men, society, and the human race had reached a point of development beyond which it would be impossible to move. The Renaissance teems with utopian projectors, from More and Campanella to Bacon and the manifestoes of the Royal Society; and Gibbon, perhaps the most commanding of the late Augustan historians, could find in the testimonies of history a sure demonstration that with each decade mankind was reaching new heights in
morality, virtue, enlightenment, and intellectual powers. Romantic thought immeasurably increased every earlier tendency to view the universe as dynamic and growing and--above all--as continually improving. Not only were the older mechanistic and static world-pictures replaced with new organic conceptions, but these organic conceptions usually envisioned a definite purposeful growth or progress on the part of the human race. Man's mind and spirit were said to be advancing on a worldwide scale: Hegel and Godwin, the earlier Wordsworth, Shelley throughout his brief life, Hugo throughout his very long life, Emerson, Whitman--these were among the numberless writers who held and expounded this viewpoint or variations on it. Through such poetical visions as the third act of Prometheus Unbound, through expositions as diverse as Paine's The Rights of Man, Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Emerson's Nature, there runs the optimistic theme that in the physical universe, in history, and in the human mind or soul there operate powerful forces which make inevitable a progress toward perfectibility.

With reference to Homer and Virgil, Romantic criticism again and again sets forth the doctrine that the present is a period kinder, gentler, more enlightened, more decent, and more humane than the worlds depicted
within the Homeric poems or the Aeneid. This doctrine animates those critical pronouncements, of which I have reproduced only a tiny sampling, in which the morality depicted within Classical epics gets censured. It animates the anonymous writer in the North American Review in 1817 who tosses out Homer’s works because "the world has gradually become better informed and more enlightened—other occupations besides the military have been introduced into society, and other views are generally entertained of war by judicious men"; the South Carolina writer Thomas S. Grimke, turning in disgust from the "bloodthirsty, unforgiving, intolerant spirit" displayed by the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid, represents this same attitude; and Whitman, although he learned much from translations of Homer, could still predict that the great poems of the future will be free of "the glorification of the butcheries and wars of the past" and of "any fight between Deity on one side and somebody else on the other."^69 "We look back on the savage conditions of our ancestors," Thomas Warton wrote approvingly in his History of English Poetry (1774-1781), "with a triumph of superiority."^69 And in 1801, in the introductory matter to his edition of Milton’s poetical works, H. J. Todd bluntly declares
that "no barbarous age has ever yet seen the birth of a great poem." Such expressions, and the hundreds in similar vein, obviously grow out of the Romantic faith in mankind's moral, ethical, and cultural progress; more particularly, many of them reflect the various "Benevolent" philosophies of the Romantic period, especially in England: an emphasis on kindness, mercy, and liberal humanitarianism, which was repelled by Hector's being dragged about the walls of Troy or Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors.

Another respect in which the present was held to be superior to archaic Greece or Virgil's Rome was the obvious fact that civilization, for some eighteen hundred years, had been evolving under the Christian dispensation. All three of the great Classical epics predated the advent of Christian light into the world; a number of critical writers, therefore, began to cast severe doubt on the religious relevance, if any, of Homer's and Virgil's epic poems. (I should like, temporarily, to postpone a discussion of the extent to which the "poetic" value of the Bible was claimed to be superior to that of Classical epic; for the present, I wish to concentrate only on claims for the "spiritual" superiority of the Scriptures.) Such claims were shaped
by a wide variety of impulses and assumed many different expressions. Backed by centuries of tradition, they are commonplaces in the sermons, tracts, and other writings of orthodox Protestant religionists: the Puritans and "Enthusiasts," for instance. In America they are set forth by such minor literary figures as Charles Newcomb (who writes that the Homeric epics are of dubious worth because "the Bible has developed the spiritual faculties of mankind in those who . . . live under its influence") and Edward Everett (who dismisses the Iliad and the Odyssey as "cold, watery, and unquickening" with regard to "all that concerns the spiritual nature of man"). In France, Chateaubriand drew up voluminous contrasts between Greek poetry (including Homer's epics) and "Christian" poetry, almost always to the disparagement of the former: Christianity, according to Chateaubriand, confers a virtue and a spiritual nobility that are usually lacking in poetry of pagan Antiquity. And about 1806, in the "Preface" to his late Prophetic Book Milton, Blake writes that "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer . . . , which all men ought to contempt, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible; but when the New age is at leisure to Pronounce, all will be set right, & those
Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously &
professedly Inspired Men [i.e., the apocalyptic writers
of the Scriptures] will hold their proper rank, & the
Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of
Inspiration."73

De Tocqueville's aphorism that democracy "gives men
a sort of instinctive distaste for what is ancient"
points toward another factor in the rebellion against
Homer and Virgil: in America especially, but also in
the British Isles and Revolutionary France, many readers
and liberal critics came to identify the Classical epic
as an aristocratic and even anti-democratic form of
poetry. Madame de Staël's discussions of Homer's epics,
in De la Littérature, are marked by her customary low
regard for most literature that does not contain
Republican and otherwise liberal sentiments.74 In his
various manifestoes calling for the coming of the Great
Poet of America, Emerson repeatedly emphasizes that
this poet will far transcend Homer, who is, among other
things, "too literal and historical."75 Other American
writers, however, are far more outspoken than Emerson
in denouncing the lofty epic poems of Homer and Virgil
as pernicious, feudal, anti-democratic, hierarchical,
unpatriotic, or otherwise out of place in the new
Republic. For James A. Hillhouse, writing about 1839,
the "Epic Muse" must forever be a stranger to a land like America, where "one happy neighborhood represents every other" and in which one finds everywhere "the well-ordered government, the quiet, moral, intelligent community." Edward Everett calls it "degenerate and ungrateful" for an American "to hang with passion upon the traces of Homer and Virgil." Grimké, in 1831, asks indignantly: "What though my country may never produce a Homer or a Virgil? Yet have we already brought forth men greater and better, wiser and more valuable . . . ." A writer in the North American Review in 1820 seems to have caught the spirit of many of his countrymen—their pride and defensiveness, their patriotism and hopes—when he posed the question: "Why should we rouse the ancients from the sleep of two thousand years, to instruct us how to live under political and religious institutions so essentially different from theirs?" Neither Homer nor Virgil, it was widely felt, could really speak for, or to, the American in the New World.

Connected at some points with the new democratic spirit, or at least with the general ferment in politics and in social thought, was the commonly held idea that the epic no longer possessed any relevance because the present times were at least as heroic as the epic past,
and probably more so. For many critics, and for more readers, the deeds of Aeneas seemed pallid indeed when set beside contemporary events and aspirations: the Revolution in America and the widespread feeling, following the War of 1812, that the New World stood poised on the threshold of great and stirring enterprises; the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars, which together left few corners of Europe untouched with flames; the intellectual excitement represented by Emerson's demand that the present age enjoy its own revelation of the universe; the upheavals throughout Europe during the 1840's, culminating in the watershed year of 1848; and all the other commitments and struggles that made the times through which men were living seem the very pivot of history. As George Steiner has noted, these decades of ferment and expectation "bestowed on daily life the stature and resplendence of myth" and "vindicated with finality the supposition that in observing their own times artists would find themes in the grand manner." And Steiner continues:

The happenings of the period from 1789 to 1820 gave to men's awareness of contemporaneity something of the freshness and vibrancy which Impressionism subsequently gave to their awareness of physical space. The assault of France upon its own past and upon Europe, the brief course of empire from the Tagus to the Vistula, heightened the pace and urgency of experience even for those who were not directly involved.
What had been to Montesquieu and to Gibbon themes of philosophical inquiry, what had been to the Augustan and Neo-classical poets situations and motifs drawn from ancient history, became to the Romantics the fabric of daily life. A world that had known Danton and Austerlitz did not think it necessary to look to mythology or the ancient past for the raw materials of poetic vision.

It would be grossly incorrect, of course, to suggest that all readers and critics found the Homeric epics and the Aeneid insipid by contrast to the historical now in which they were caught up. The hectic flux of the times drove Jefferson back to the Iliad as to a fixed point in a riven world; and Matthew Arnold, sensible of every "cry of agony and revolt" since the French Revolution, could still lift up Homer as among "the five or six supreme poets of the world." Life during the Romantic era remained life; and although there were many critics who sought to speak of life itself as poetry, there were many others who believed still that history and human culture could be understood only through the governance of poetry. Nevertheless, in the critical and sub-critical expressions of the Romantic period one frequently encounters the idea that the shape and substance of Classical epic are dead, irrelevant, or at least insignificant, when compared with the tumult and premise and heroic action of the present.
Progress in morality, ethics, humanitarianism, religious concepts, democracy, and the rights of man, and the sense of present-day excitement—these are a few of the counts on which Romantic criticism turned away from the epics of Homer and Virgil, dismissing them as outmoded forms, as relics or mastadons from the past. Another argument, used by a number of Romantic critics, was that the modern world simply knew more than was known in Homer's archaic Greece or Virgil's Augustan Rome. Even if men were not wiser and more virtuous now than in the ancient past—and to some it seemed self-evident that they were—then at least they knew more in the modern era, if only because there was infinitely more to be known. In science, in psychology, and in the understanding of human nature, the present was proclaimed as in every respect an improvement on the ancient world. The vistas of knowledge conquered by science—from the new astronomies and anatomies of the Renaissance to the new geophysics and biologies of the 1830's—seemed unmistakable proof that man's stores of knowledge had vastly improved. In Chapter Two we saw how such German critics as the Schlegels, Goethe, and Schelling anticipated the coming of a great scientific epic poem—an epic which would transfigure not the traditional substances of myth and religion but the new
cosmic insights furnished by science. In America, Everett foresaw the advent of new epic poets who would outdo Homer and Virgil because they would create their epics in times "when knowledge shall be universally diffused"; Legare alluded to the prevalent idea that older epic poetry had become obsolete because of the rapid increase of "the materials of thought" throughout the modern world; and Whitman issued his famous (or notorious) invitation for the Old World Muse to migrate to the New and take up her abode among the kitchenwares and other products of modern technology and mechanical skills. 81

Progress was also widely claimed in the "philosophical science" of psychology, which often meant the study of the rather nebulous subject of "human nature." The radical progressivist William Godwin, for instance, states in 1803 that the workings of the human mind were grasped only dimly during the primitive times in which Homer lived and composed; and almost no one was willing to defend the timelessness of Virgil, the modernity of his understanding of human kind, his "psychological" relevance for the new world now dawning or already dawned. 82 A writer in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1817 decides that the heroes of Homer and Virgil are forced to combat only "external enmity, treacheries, and
wrath," whereas the heroes of modern literature are divided against themselves and must struggle with their own "wishes, prejudices, principles, and passions."

Literary interest has now "gone within" and is the more interesting for having done so: "The march of human thought has been slow, but its effects are sufficiently perceptible, and the most trivial of novelists does not weave his flimsy web of fiction without bearing testimony to the progress we have made."83 Within all such comments as these, one can see a culmination, with regard to the epics of Homer and Virgil, of that critical strain which begins with Bacon's scientific exegeses of myths and fables and which is firmly fixed by the early eighteenth century, when Walsh bluntly warned Pope that for poets and critics alike the age of myth was irrecoverably past. They are comments by critics who would not quite have gone over to Bishop Sprat in the seventeenth century and who did not quite go over to the side of the Benthamites in the early nineteenth century, but who would not lament, with Keats, that the new burden of scientific knowledge had made "The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade." There is substantial evidence, moreover, that such critics were speaking for a large segment of Romantic critical thought with regard to Classical epic; science and positivism,
it was widely believed, had lifted men into an enlightenment far beyond that of Homer and Virgil.84

Some remarks by Coleridge, dating from a year or two before his death, seem at first glance merely bizarre or idiosyncratic; but upon closer inspection one sees that this is so because of their anachronism. "The destruction of Jerusalem," Coleridge observed on April 28, 1832,

is the only subject now remaining for an epic poem; a subject which, like Milton's Fall of Man, should interest all Christendom, as the Homeric War of Troy interested all Greece.

... there would be a greater assemblage of grandeur and splendour than can now be found in any other theme. As for the old mythology, incredulus odi; and yet there must be a mythology, or a quasi-mythology, for an epic. ... I schemed it at twenty-five; but, alas! venturum expectat.85

These notes from Coleridge bring us near the heart of one of those questions by which poetry, poetic theory, and critical writing were riven throughout the whole Romantic period: the validity of myth, and particularly of Classical myth, amid an age freighted with knowledge derived from science, positivism, Utilitarianism, and other sources outside poetry itself. Goethe, André Chénier, Landor, Shelley, Leopardi, Keats, and even Wordsworth (in the Virgilian Laodamia and Dion) transmuted Classical mythology into authentic Romantic poems. These
poets and a good number of others drew, to use Coleridge's term, on "the old mythology." Moreover, Goethe and Schelling and many other German critics wrote voluminously on what they regarded as the enduring aesthetic relevance of the Greek gods and of Greek mythology in general. Far more often, however, poets and theorists alike maintained that Classical myth was dead and that incredulus odi constituted the best epitaph for the whole burden of Greek and Roman mythological imaginings. Viewed totally, the role of Classical myth was relatively minor within the greater Romantic poetry; among the indisputable masterpieces of English Romantic poetry, for instance, it is difficult to name more than seven or eight poems that figure materials from Greek mythology: the Hyperion and Lamia of Keats, Shelley's Adonais and Prometheus Unbound, and perhaps a very few others.

Similarly, poetic theory and criticism generally take a dim view of the mythological elements in both Classical and modern poetry, no matter how transfigured those elements might be. Uneasiness about the mythology in the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid—an uneasiness that goes back at least to Milton, Cowley, Hobbes, and Davenant—settles into a denial that the "Greek machinery" retains any relevance whatsoever for the contemporary
world. Many poets, of course, still recognize myth as among the three or four great differentia of poetry—perhaps the one supreme differentia, since it can encompass Imagination, Nature, and Symbol; but they seldom turn for their inspiration to the fund of mythos upon which Homer and Virgil had drawn. A major poet like Blake created his own mythological system ("We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations," Blake proclaims in the "Preface" to Milton); a second-rate poet like Southey appropriated, without assimilating, tags and scraps of Oriental or Near-Eastern mythologies; and third-rate poets, especially during the 1830's and 1840's in England, churned out epic poems that proved the futility of Coleridge's hope that the Christian mythos might be converted into great poetry during the Romantic period. Many critics and theorists, furthermore, hold fast to myth as a criterion—perhaps the most important criterion—for poetry; but Schelling seems almost alone, among the major Romantic critics, in his admiration for Classical mythology as a still-relevant spirit for poetry. Far more typical are Hegel's proclamation that the contents of Homer are dead, Goethe's hopes for a "matter" of modern science that will replace the "matter" of Troy as the inspiration of future epics, or the various
attempts by Coleridge and his German masters to dis- solve the concept of "myth" into a synonym for a con- struct of symbols identifiable with poetry itself.

One other factor must be noted in any consideration of how the Romantic idea of "progress" worked to the detriment of the epics of Homer and Virgil: a good many Romantic critics appear to have felt that the very art of making poetry had somehow "progressed" or "improved" since archaic Greece or Augustan Rome. This feeling, indeed, is perhaps the most important factor of all, since it implicates, in one way or another, each of the other "progressivist" attitudes that I have been examin- ing. It seems most useful, however, to discuss this factor in my final chapter, which explores the role of a distinctively "Romantic" poetry in the decline of Homer and Virgil, of all epics, and of the very possibility of the long poem.

We are left, then, with the conclusion that very many Romantic critics found the epics of Homer and Virgil to be separated by wide gulfs from the incomparable modernity of the Romantic period itself. The two ancient poets had simply lived too long ago: since their times, civilization had immensely bettered itself in wisdom, intelligence, philosophy, religion, morality, ethics, technology and science, humanitarianism, education, art,
and the refinements of manners and of daily living—in short, in almost every respect. To be sure, this Romantic spirit of progressivism, this assumption that excellence resided not in the oldest but in the latest age, represents only one aspect of the thought of the era. The fact is, of course, that on the whole matter of "progress" the Romantics spoke with two conflicting voices. Every primitivist, every philosopher of "human nature" who subscribed to the visions of Vico and Rousseau, every chronicler of literary history who subscribed to Schiller's Naïve and Sentimental Poetry or to Hurd's "decay of imagination" concept, stands outside the "progressivist" currents in Romantic thought, at least to some extent. Yet in general the notion of inevitable progress, inevitable enlightenment or perfection, remained a powerful component within Romantic criticism; and it animates many critical assaults on the epic poems of Homer and Virgil.

We may briefly note a few other elements that contributed to the low status of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and Virgil's Aeneid during the Romantic era. One of the more significant of these was the hunger to believe in cycles of poetic culture independent of the whole Graeco-Roman tradition: to rediscover the Germanic or Nordic past, to charm to life again what Scott in
The Lady of the Lake called the "Harp of the North."
This hunger is evidenced by the eagerness, sometimes almost frenetic, with which in Germany the Nibelungenlied (and even the Knaben Wunderhorn folksongs) were accepted and glorified as epics or as fragments of gigantic epic-cycles: August Wilhelm Schlegel, for instance, compares the Nibelungenlied to the Iliad and finds the former to be an infinitely more sublime work of art. It is evidenced also by the phenomenal popularity of the "Ossian" prose-poems, which swept over northern Europe to what was perhaps the most frantic burst of acclaim in the whole history of literature. Gray rhapsodized about the discovery that the epic Muse had descended upon "the cold and barren mountains of Scotland," even as she had descended upon the mountains of Homeric Greece; and Napoleon carried Càrthon onto the battle field even as Alexander the Great had carried the Iliad. Amid all this ascendent admiration for German or Celtic or Nordic "epics," the prestige of Homer and Virgil almost always suffered: "There will be times," cried Herder, "that will say: let us close Homer, Virgil, and Milton, and judge from Ossian." Another formidable rival for the epics of Homer and Virgil was Paradise Lost—until it, too, began to go down under the critical attack against all
epic poems, not merely Homer's and Virgil's. Many are the Romantic praises of Milton at the expense of the ancient epic poets: he had created, after all, the great Christian poem of the modern world, if one excepted Dante (who appealed deeply to many Romantic critics through his "passion" and his "cosmic vision" but who was often suspect because of his "Popery" and his other vestiges of "medieval darkness" within his poem).

Finally, the epics of Homer and Virgil were compromised by that cheapening of the term "epic" which I have traced in the preceding chapter: a dilation that allowed both Homer and Henry Hart Milman the title of "epic poet"; and they had to contend with all sorts of rival genres (such as the novel and the ballad). It is with these translations and rival genres, as they bear upon the decline of all epics and all long poems, that the ensuing chapter concerns itself.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER III


4. Of only less importance was the rivalry that critical theory instituted between the two Homeric poems themselves. From Scaliger to Werner Jaeger, the critical operations of classical scholarship have usually chosen the *Iliad* as a greater poem than the *Odyssey*; but the latter poem always found many strong advocates who would award it first place at the expense of the *Iliad*. That this battle was still being fought as late as the 1750's is demonstrated by Joseph Warton's *Adventurer paper on the Odyssey*. See above, p. 36.

5. See Spingarn (above, note 3), pp. 107-108. The veneration for Virgil as almost everyone is at least vaguely aware, goes back through the Middle Ages to Augustan Rome itself, when the *Aeneid* was post-humously acclaimed and when Caecilius began to establish the work as the literary center of the school curriculum. Of all pagan poets it was Virgil whom the Church Fathers were most reluctant to condemn. (The *Aeneid* was that jeweled book with which Saint Jerome, as he tells us, could not bring himself to part until he saw it, in a dream, turned to a mass of writhing vipers). By the beginning of the Middle Ages---indeed, as early as the time of Augustine and Lactanius---the famous Fourth Ecologue was being widely read and interpreted as a prophecy of the advent of Christ, a conscious or unconscious analogue to the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. And throughout the medieval period the *Aeneid* was reverenced as a work containing "lessons" only less worthy of contemplation than the lessons
of scripture itself. After all, Virgil had described the universe as created by a benign Father, rather than (as Lucretius had it) by the chance collocation of atoms; his epic was both lofty and chaste; and his hero might be interpreted as a type of the man who unswervingly obeys the dictates of a divine voice, instead of following his own desires. The Middle Ages took special pleasure, too, in perpetuating the legend that Saint Paul had wept at Virgil's tomb; and although he was clearly a pagan, unluckily born before the Incarnation, Virgil was sometimes prayed to, even as Erasmus was to frame a petition to Sancta Socrates. Dante's ambivalent love for Virgil's art, a love even stronger than his sense of Virgil's final status as an "enlightened pagan," is so famous as to require no comment here. But it might be noted that Dante's attitudes toward his "guide and master" typify the divided attitudes of the Christian Middle Ages toward the pagan literature of classical antiquity, and above all to Virgil.

6. In their Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1957), p. 161, Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., point out that "What is called 'Virgil Worship,' the elevation of Virgil over Homer or the narrowing of the epic model to Virgil alone--flagrant instances of which appear in Vida's verse Art and, perhaps the most notorious, in Scaliger's Poetics--was a nationalistic rather than a strictly critical phenomenon. Still, the resulting debate lasted long, in England for instance, from Chapman's Preface to the Iliad in 1598 (defending Homer against Scaliger of course) to the essays and clubbable conversations of the eighteenth century--where we find Dr. Samuel Johnson also on the side of Homer."


8. Davis P. Harding writes that between Homer and Virgil "it was generally conceded in Milton's day that Virgil made a more suitable model than Homer.... although Homer was believed to excel in his vivid narrative and in the intensity and variety of his emotional effects, Virgil was regarded as the more finished craftsman; the Aeneid, men thought, possessed fewer artistic blemishes and moreover a structure which lent itself more readily to effective imitation. Also the Aeneid had been studied much more closely.... it had the most important place in the
grammar-school curriculum. If Milton could safely presuppose a close, working knowledge of any one poet, that poet was Virgil. But he could not make a similar assumption in the case of Homer. He could assume a certain familiarity with the main outlines of the Homeric story and some knowledge of episodic detail, possibly derived from translations, but in the average reader no such exact verbal knowledge as he could assume in the case of Virgil."


10. Spingarn (above, note 3), p. 211. See also pp. 210, 212, and 219 for excellent summaries of the critical attitudes toward Homer and Virgil in sixteenth-century Italian and French criticism.


12. Smith, II, 298-299. A page or so later, Chapman launches into a wonderfully venomous denunciation of Scaliger, perhaps the most famous (or notorious) of Virgil-worshippers during the sixteenth century: "But thou soule-blind Scaliger Chapman writes, that neuer hadst anything but place, time, and termes to paint thy proficiencie in learning, nor euer writest anything of thine owne impotent braine but thy onely impalsied deminuacion of Homer (which I may sweare was the absolute inspiration of thine owne ridiculous Genius), neuer dist thou more palpably damn thy dressy spirit in al thy all-countries-exploded filcheries, which are so grossely illiterate that no man will vouchsafe their refutation, then in thy sencelesse reprehensions of Homer, whose spirit flew asmuch aboue thy groueling capacitie as heauen moves aboue Barathrum."


15. See "The Vertues of an Heroique Form," reprinted in *ibid.*, II, 67-76.


17. A striking passage from Davenant's Gondibert preface will perhaps represent this questioning, mistrust, and skepticism, as found in a thoroughly Neoclassical document. In reviewing "those quarrels which the Living have with the Dead," Davenant announces that he will "begin with Homer, who though he seems to me standing upon the Poets famous hill, like the eminent Sea-mark by which they have in former ages steer'd, and though he ought not to be removed from that eminence, least Posterity should presumptuously mistake their course, yet some (sharply observing how his successors have proceeded no farther than a perfection of imitating him) say that, as Sea-marks are chiefly useful to Coasters, and serve not those who have the ambition of Discoverers, that love to sail in untry'd Seas, so he hath rather prov'd a Guide for those whose satisfy'd Wit will not venture beyond the track of others, then to those who affect a new and remote way of thinking, who esteem it a deficiency and meanness of minde to stay and depend upon the authority of example." Homer is also censured for "too frequently intermixing such Fables as are objects lifted above the Eyes of Nature; and as he often interrogates his Muse, not as his rational Spirit, but as a Familiar, separated from his body, so her replies bring him where he spends time in immortal conversation, whilst supernaturally he doth often advance his men to the quality of Gods, and depose his Gods to the condition of men." Spingarn (above, note 13), II, 1-2.


22. Ibid.

23. Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London, 1851), pp. 92-93 (May 12, 1830); the second passage comes from ibid., pp. 267-268. To these pronouncements should be added the celebrated passage in Chapter XIV of the Biographia Literaria in which Coleridge develops his argument that "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other."


25. Coleridge, Table Talk (above, note 23), pp. 93-94 (May 12, 1830).


27. A remarkable pre-Romantic instance of the attempt to recover the historical personality of Homer is to be found in Thomas Blackwell's An Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer, published in 1735. Blackwell reconstructs the world of Homeric Greece and tries to deduce "what reception [Homer] met with upon his arrival, in what condition he found things, and what dispositions they must produce in an exalted genius and comprehensive mind." The following passage, more or less typical of Blackwell's tone and method, might be taken for pure Caroline Spurgeon: Homer "took his plain natural images from life; he saw warriors and shepherds and peasants such as he drew, and was daily conversant among such people as he intened to represent; the manners used in the Trojan times were not disused in his own; the same way of living in private and the same pursuits in public were still prevalent and gave him a model for his design, which would not allow him to exceed the truth in his draught. By frequently and freely looking it over, he could discern what parts of it were fit to be represented and what to be passed over." To do all these things, Blackwell's readers were told, constituted "Homer's first happiness." The first two parts of Blackwell's Inquiry are reprinted in Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, N. Y., 1961), I, 132-147. See Lois Whitney, "Eighteenth-Century Primitivistic Theories of the Epic," MP, XXI, 3 (1924), 337-378, and the chapter on Blackwell in Donald M. Foerster, Homer in English Criticism (New Haven, 1947). On later attempts to derive the historical personality
of Homer from his epics, see the section entitled "The Key to Homer's Heart" in Abrams (above, note 20), pp. 256-262.

28. Coleridge, Table Talk (above, note 23), p. 93 (May 12, 1830).


30. See Donald M. Foerster, "The Critical Attack Upon the Epic in the English Romantic Movement," PMLA, LXIX, 3 (June, 1954), 442, for a number of examples of commentary on this subject.


33. For the ambivalent attitudes of Madame de Stael toward the Homeric question, see the discussion in the chapter "Madame de Stael and Chateaubriand" in Rene Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 (New Haven, 1955), II, 216-231. The Zibaldone, or commonplace books, of Leopardi are thick with quotations from, and approving comments on, the writings of Wolf, Muller, and other German "separatist" critics of Homer. Leopardi's concepts of the epic as a constellation of lyrics, concepts that owed much to Wolf, are discussed at some length in the sixth chapter of the present study.

34. Quoted from Wellek (above, note 33), II, 329. Hegel was, as Wellek points out, one of the few German critics who were willing to defend the unity of the Homeric poems, even in the face of the new "disintegrationist" movement. Hegel also rejects the view that an epic poem should be, by its very nature, a poem without a fixed beginning or a definite ending.

35. Cited by Foerster (above, note 30), 439.

36. Poems by Hartley Coleridge, With a Memoir by His Brother (London, 1851).


43. The scholarly literature on Homer is as vast as that on Dante, and Shakespeare, and it would require pages simply to list all the discussions that in the past hundred and fifty years have dealt with the question of Homeric "authorship." A useful concise summary of this question may be found in the Introduction to George Stainer, ed., *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*, in the "Twentieth-Century Views" series (New York, 1961).


45. Here I have in mind principally the scattered references to Homer and Virgil in Elyot's *Book Named the Governor* and Ascham's *The Schoolmaster*: these works fall, however, on the periphery of literary criticism.

46. Reprinted in Spingarn (above, note 13), II, 67. Hobbes hastens to note, however, that the heroic poem furnishes its readers with "profit" in the form of "accession of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude."

47. Reprinted in Smith (above, note 9), I, 179.


51. Romantic critical theories of the kind of knowledge or power furnished by poetry are discussed in some detail in the final chapter of the present study.

52. Compare Sidney, in his Apology, as a representative Neoclassical critic following Aristotle on the differentia of poetry and philosophy: "The Philosopher sheweth you the way, hee informeth you of the particularities, as well of the tediousnes of the way, as of the pleasant lodging you shall haue when your journey is ended, as of the many by-turnings that may diuert you from your way. But this is to no man but to him that will read him, and read him with attentius studious painfulnes." (Smith above, note 9, I, 171).

53. Joseph Cottle, preface to Alfred: An Epic Poem (Newburyport, 1814), p. 22. For this pronouncement, and for those cited in notes 56 and 57 below, I am obligated to Foerster (above, note 30), passim.

54. Madame de Staël, Oeuvres complètes (Paris, 1820), IV, 87-88. In Lecture III of the 1818 lectures, Coleridge states that "The Greeks, except, perhaps, in Homer, seem to have had no way of making their women interesting, but by unsexing them . . . ." See Coleridge (above, note 37), p. 37.


57. Quoted in Foerster (above, note 30), 444.

58. Quoted in ibid., 445.

59. Charles Butler, Reminiscences (New York, 1825), I, 12. For this reference, and for the one recorded in note 58 above, I am again obligated to Foerster's article.
60. Keble's Lectures on Poetry, 1832-1841, translated from the Latin by E. K. Francis (Oxford, 1912), II, 375-377-378, 393. Keble very neatly expells Virgil from the company of great masters of the epic poem and then goes on to suggest that Virgil really would have preferred to be so expelled: "In fine, gentlemen," he declares (p. 393), "Virgil—if I interpret him aright—will withdraw from any claim to a primary rank in the proud hierarchy of Epic poets without regret, indeed, joyfully and gladly . . . . For he has plainly declared that all the world of affairs, and especially of military affairs, is alien to him, and that not without disgust does he engage in it."


62. Henri Peyre's Literature and Sincerity (New Haven, 1962) surveys some of the historical backgrounds of the idea of "sincerity" as a yardstick for literary merit.

63. Coleridge (above, note 37), pp. 176, 402. Of all the major English Romantic poets and critics, none displayed a more intransigent dislike for the Aeneid than did Coleridge.


65. Hegel, Seküntliche Werke, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart, 1928), III, 370-371, 414-415. Vittorio Alfieri, an Italian critic and tragic actor who was roughly a contemporary of Hegel's, accused Virgil of being personally "corrupt" because he had accepted patronage. See René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 (New Haven, 1955), I, 136-137. Alfieri's judgment—in which republican sympathies have intruded upon the evaluation of a poet and his work—is typical of the remarkable extent to which, throughout the Romantic period, adverse criticism of the Aeneid was generated by extra-literary matters.

67. Quoted in ibid., 89, from Jones Very, Essays and Poems (Boston, 1839), p. 16.

68. Quoted in Foerster (above, note 66), 93-94.


71. Quoted in Foerster (above, note 66), 92-93.


73. This dictum by Blake falls, of course, on the periphery of criticism: one must weigh it with an understanding of Blake's extremely private conception of the Scriptures, and there is also the fact that it occurs within an imaginative rather than expository work.

74. Madame de Staël, De la Littérature, reprinted in Oeuvres complètes (Paris, 1820), IV.

75. Whitman's attitudes toward the epics of Homer and Virgil, as expressed in his prose writings, are contradictory, shifting, volatile. Sometimes the ancient epics (especially the Iliad and the Odyssey) are praised; in other places, Whitman mistrusts them as obsolete or as contrary to the democratic spirit.

76. These pronouncements, with their bibliographical sources, are quoted in Foerster (above, note 66), 83.

77. On the "epic paradox" in early nineteenth-century America—the paradox that no great epic poem could be written in a world so full of the materials for such an epic—see the second chapter ("Toward an American Epic") in Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, 1961), especially the discussion of Barlow's Columbiad.

78. George Steiner, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism (New York, 1959), pp. 22-23. Steiner writes in this same passage that "One could assemble an anthology of crowded and passionate hours to show how during the Romantic period the
very rhythm of experience mounted. It might begin with the anecdote of how Kant was delayed in his morning walk, once and once only, on being informed of the fall of the Bastille and go on to that wonderful passage in The Prelude in which Wordsworth tells of hearing the news of the death of Robespierre. It would include Goethe's description of how a new world was born at the battle of Valmy and De Quincey's account of the apocalyptic and nocturnal coach rides when the mails tore out of London with the bulletins from the Peninsular War. It would portray Hazlitt on the verge of suicide when hearing of Napoleon's downfall at Waterloo and Byron conspiring with Italian revolutionaries. Such an anthology could appropriately close with Berlioz's account, in his memoirs, of how he escaped from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, joined the insurgents of 1830, and conducted them, extempore, in his arrangement of the Marseillaise."

79. In the Oxford lectures On Translation Homer (delivered in 1861 and 1862), Jefferson's deep admiration for Homer and Virgil, both as poetry and as counselors, is a commonplace that can be documented within any good biography; it grew even stronger during the last decades of his life, upon his retirement from the White House to Monticello.

80. Compare T. S. Eliot's famous aphorism in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Included in The Sacred Wood): "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know."

81. For the pronouncements by Everett and Legare, I am once again indebted to Foerster (above, note 66), 82. Foerster also cites Everett's suggestion that modern astronomy and cosmography have prepared the way for a far greater poetry than the epics of Homer and Virgil. According to Everett, the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid, "will be as nursery tales when compared to this universal scientific poetry of the future.


83. Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, II (December, 1817), 269-270.
84. The "mythological machinery" of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid had been declared an encumbrance by Voltaire as early as 1727, in his Essay upon the Epic Poetry of the European Nations from Homer to Milton; and Dr. Johnson in his Life of Waller had flatly stated that "of the ancient poets, every reader feels the mythology tedious and oppressive." It was the distinctively Romantic critics, however, who affirmed most strenuously the "dead hand" of the mythological elements within Homer and Virgil. See, for instance, the correspondence between Schiller and Goethe dealing with Homeric epic.


86. On this whole subject of the "death of a literary work, the comments of a contemporary American critic are interesting. In Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory (Evanston, Ill., 1959), p. 189, Edwin Honig remarks that "Like a tree, which is constantly affected by its surroundings the work of literature is always gradually dying. Yet even when "dead," it may still be beautiful, much as the Iliad and Odyssey, which although no longer believed as myth, are still read as literature.

87. In German Romantic critical writing it is Schelling, after his "conversion" to Catholicism, who most persistently expounds the necessity of using the Christian mythos as the animating world-view for modern poetry. Schelling also recognizes, however, the possibility of creating other mythologies for poetry: Don Quixote, Goethe's Faust, and many of Shakespeare's figures are regarded as truly "mythological" achievements. See Schelling, Sämtliche Werke, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (1856-1861), III, 442, 446.


89. Herder, Sämtliche Werke, ed. B. Suphan (Berlin, 1877-1913), IX, 543.
The developments discussed in Chapters Two and Three represent those tendencies in Romantic critical thought that were expressly inimical to the epic poem. In directing our attention now to the claims that Romantic criticism advanced in behalf of "rival" forms of literature, we begin to encounter pressures that worked not only against the epic but against all poems of major scope. Throughout the present chapter my design is to trace the shift of emphasis, in Romantic criticism, from the traditional preoccupation with the longer forms of poetry to a preoccupation with two other literary genres: the novel (including the romance), and the drama. It will of course be necessary to give some attention to the creative history of these forms, both before and during the Romantic period. The intrinsic qualities of the Waverley novels or of the novel of sentiment in the tradition of Goethe's Werther, cannot be entirely divorced from the study of how
critical admiration moved in the direction of such works. But the radical question of creative preferences remains ultimately unanswerable: we cannot hope to explain completely why poets choose to cultivate the ode rather than the epic, the short lyric instead of the extended narrative poem. On the other hand, by examining the documents of criticism itself, we should be able to follow rather closely the sources and directions of major revolutions in critical preference. We can expect, ordinarily, that critics will set down their principal reasons for ranking the ballad above the epic, that they will try to explain why the historical novel, as written by Scott or Manzoni, rather than the long narrative poem on a historical subject, impresses them as "the fittest form for the present age."

Today many critics and general readers may experience some difficulty in understanding the major importance that critical theory, from Aristotle to Matthew Arnold, traditionally attaches to judging and evaluating the different genres of literature. It is not the conception of genres itself, nor the usefulness of such a conception for criticism, that is likely to seem questionable. The radical monism of Croce's Estetica, which would dissolve together the generic categories historically applied to literature, has received a certain assent during the past
five or six decades: by Croce's Italian disciples, by Joel E. Spingarn in America, by Sir Herbert Read, and by a number of other critics. Still, a majority of recent critics appear to agree with the conclusion of Wellek and Warren in their *Theory of Literature*: that Croce's denial of the existence of literary genres, "though intelligible as reaction against extremes of classical authoritarianism, has not done justice to the facts of literary life and history."¹ Most twentieth-century genre theory has inclined, more and more, to emphasize that few works of literature are "pure" representatives of their genre: that the novel, for instance, almost always partakes of elements from the romance, and vice versa; but the number of critics willing to let go completely of the concept of genres, and to deal simply with "literature" rather than with kinds or types of literature, has remained comparatively small.²

What is likely to seem questionable in traditional critical theory is the enterprise of trying to establish the ascendancy of one genre over another. Present-day critical thought, even that which seeks most carefully to preserve distinctions of genre, is unlikely to feel that much aesthetic insight would result from weighing the greatness of the novel against, let us say, the greatness of the drama. To do so seems an arid exercise in
speculation and impressionism that leads nowhere; criticism simply has too many important things to do. Thus recent genre theory has inclined, almost always, to be descriptive rather than judicial; indeed, the past few decades have even seen strong attempts to exclude "evaluation" altogether from the act of criticism, not only with regard to the genres but to individual works. This is not the place to engage the pros and cons of these vexed problems within aesthetic thought: the existence and differentia of genres, the place of evaluation within criticism, and so on. What does involve our purpose, however, is the fact that the whole history of criticism, from the Ancients down to the later nineteenth century, is among other things the history of an almost unbroken concern with discriminating and evaluating the different genres of literature. The Renaissance and seventeenth-century idea of a scale of genres—a scale on which kind D is regarded as being inherently superior to kinds A, B, and C—involves a "competition" among the genres, as that "competition" was conceptualized and instigated by the critical formulations of the period. To proclaim this genre as greater than that one seemed a task obviously implicated in the practice of criticism and perhaps its most essential justification. The arts of literature might themselves be silent; but the workings
of Neoclassical critical theory played off the different genres of literature in a kind of perpetual tournament; the epic kept its honors but was constantly forced to defend itself against the heroic tragedy, while the heroic romance and the Great Ode trained hard and finally challenged both the champion and the top contender. With modifications, this same concept of "competition" seems to have prevailed throughout the first half of the eighteenth century: in Augustan critical writings, in Voltaire and Diderot, and in such German aestheticians as Baumgarten, Johann Elias Schlegel, and Bodmer. Its presence, moreover, remained strong throughout the Romantic period as well: for much Romantic criticism, as I indicated in my second chapter, simply substituted its own calculus of genre-values for that of Neoclassicism, with the added difference that Romantic criticism was less authoritarian—or more anarchic—in its formulations. During the second half of the nineteenth century it was still widely regarded as an enterprise of much importance for criticism to discern the greatest genres, the genres of middling value, and those of only trifling worth: such assumptions occasionally color, for instance, the critical writings of Arnold and some of the Oxford Lectures of A. C. Bradley,
as well as the work of many of the German commentators on Shakespeare and Goethe. And today, when Ivor Winters calls the short poem the most "poetic" of all literary forms, or when Frank Kermode appeals for us "to restore the long poem to the centre of creative and critical activity," these critics are also speaking out of this tradition of choosing and ranking.

The intent of the present chapter is to offer some evidence of the extent to which other genres drained from Romantic criticism much of the high esteem that traditionally had been given to the epic and to other forms of the long poem. We must, however, avoid drawing too facilely a correlation between a critical neglect of the long poem and a transfer of critical approval to some other literary form. To see why this should be so, consider the connection between the emergence and development of the European novel, as written by its masters during the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries, and the decline of a creative, critical, and popular interest in epic poems. It has long been a commonplace, vaguely assented to but seldom scrutinized, that the dissolution of the epic as a viable form for the transaction of poetry was somehow closely related to the appearance and ascendancy of the novel; and of course this is at least
partly true. What makes necessary a caution in accepting this relation, however, is the historical complexity behind that phenomenon which Ian Watt has named *The Rise of the Novel*.\(^5\) That the novel, however, we define its differentia, began to take shape amid profound transformations in the structure and the very spirit of European culture, few would deny. These transformations involved diverse aspects—psychological, social, philosophical and intellectual, economic, political—of the whole ecology within which literature exists. A number of historical factors, as Watt points out, were implicated in the emergence of the eighteenth-century English novel (and, to some extent, in the emergence of the eighteenth-century European novel): a new curiosity about the phenomenological world and about the behavior of men amid the thickets of society; the spread of literacy and the growth of a self-conscious reading public amid the middle and lower classes; the availability of new psychological vocabularies; the emergence of a distinctly middle-class concern with social and moral values and with the particularity of everyday life; a mounting interest in transcriptive "realism" in literature; a new taste for "sentimentality"; and numerous other elements.
Obviously, therefore, this complexity makes it difficult to demonstrate that the novel itself was a direct and concrete force in diminishing the traditional prestige of epic poetry. For it happens that most of the historical factors usually regarded as having contributed to shaping the novel-form also acted against the epic, without necessarily doing so specifically through the novel. Thus the increasing prominence of middle-class attitudes might conceivably have caused a widespread turning away from the "aristocratic" genre of the epic, regardless of whether the novel stepped forward to provide a more congenial correlative for such attitudes (attitudes that the novel may or may not have helped to generate in the first place). Thus again, many readers recently enfranchised by the "new literacy" were unlikely to have been drawn toward elevated and difficult epic poems, even if there had been no Clarissa or Waverley for them to take as their own.

Similar general problems in causal discrimination hedge all attempts to analyze precisely the role played by other genres in the waning of the long poem in critical regard during the Romantic period. It is impossible, for instance, to understand the glowing critical regard for ballads without exploring the whole ambiance that made possible the "ballad revival."
Despite these problems, however, there is powerful evidence that in certain important respects these other genres did affect the critical stature of the epic and of the long poem in general. We can never be certain that the rising esteem for this or that "new" normative form played a direct role in depressing the critical fortunes of "older" normative forms. Too many of the pressures that generated the currently popular genres were also militating against the long poem through other channels than those of the rival genres themselves; when Alfred North Whitehead declares that every constituent of a historical period participates in the life of every other constituent, he is pointing to a hard factuality that faces any attempt to untangle the history of criticism. Nevertheless, on the most general level it should be possible to suggest many strong correlations between the lifting up of one form and the decline of another. For convenience of exposition, I shall proceed topically, without seeking to establish the chronological order in which rival genres came to challenge the long poem within Romantic criticism.
l. The Novel

In dealing with the criticism of fiction during the Romantic period, it is customary to adopt a defensive tone of condescension, of apology. Romantic critical writings on fiction are generally dismissed as desultory, impressionistic, thin-blooded, and almost totally in-consequential. For at least two reasons, however, this dismissal seems to me unjustified; and I should like to offer these reasons before proceeding to an account of what Romantic criticism made of the novel in relation to the long poem.

Today it is a commonplace that the "great" criticism of fiction did not appear until the second half of the nineteenth century, when it began to speak with sovereign power in Flaubert's correspondence and in Henry James's seminal essay "The Art of Fiction" (1884). In those letters in which Flaubert meticulously records his consecration to the possibilities of the novel as an art-form, in James's affirmations that the stature of fiction is fully comparable to the stature of poetry, one gets an aesthetic that differs, at least in its degree of intensity, from most earlier discourses on fiction. One gets, more precisely, the conception of the novel as poesis, the novelist becoming a kind of saint of art
(compare James's phrase, "a sacred trust") who lavishes upon his productions every scrupulous care for their fitness and finish and artistic perfection. Through this conception Flaubert saves fiction from the slovenliness of a Dumas (who signed his name to something like a thousand novels), from the encroachments of bourgeois philistinism, and from that collapse into mere reportage which the Goncourts seemed to welcome; and James saves fiction from the pitfalls of the trifling and the second-rate, establishing it as the greatest of the arts and as the most "immense and exquisite" criticism of life.

Since this conception of its variants have permeated so much twentieth-century thinking about the nature of the novel, it is easy to feel that Flaubert and James invented, almost at one stroke, the first really mature criticism of fiction. In no sense do I wish to deny the inestimable value of the whole Flaubert-James tradition in the criticism of fiction. Especially as refined by James in his late meditative prefaces to his own works, its instruments for dealing with the novel as art are perhaps our best resources for dealing with the modern novel-as-poetry: with late-period James, with Ford Madox Ford and Joyce and Virginia
Woolf, with Proust and Mann and Hermann Broch. However, I do wish to suggest—and this is the first of my two points—that the great importance of the Flaubert-James tradition should not be allowed to overshadow all criticism of fiction before the 1850's. This earlier criticism is by no means so impressive as the criticism of poetry that was being written at the same time. Between 1750 and 1850 we shall find in the critical writing on fiction nothing like an Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung or a Biographia Literaria. Indeed, we shall be more likely to find much that seems primitive and insignificant, ephemeral and wrong-headed. But I believe that a fair amount of Romantic criticism of fiction is not without relevance and penetration, even when set against the admittedly far more subtle achievements that came somewhat later.

This belief brings me to my second point; too often, those who dismiss all Romantic criticism of fiction as negligible have tended to base their conclusions almost exclusively on English critical writing. I can claim only a superficial acquaintance with the fiction-criticism, and the theoretical formulations on the novel, that appeared in the other Romantic literatures; but my impression is that English criticism and theory
are much inferior to German, and probably inferior to French and Italian. English criticism achieved at least some distinctions in its dealings with fiction; amid a welter of casual pronouncements of "taste"—by Wordsworth and Coleridge, by Scott and Hazlitt—the major periodicals such as the *Edinburgh Review* often published long critical essays on fiction that displayed high standards of acuteness and solid argumentation on the part of their authors. But I know of nothing in English Romantic writing on the novel that equals in intellectual power the treatises of Novalis and Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel in Germany; and in Italy, Manzoni's *Del romanzo storico* explores problems of the historical novel that do not even seem to have occurred to English critics. For both these reasons, then, it seems to me worthwhile to examine the criticism of the novel during the Romantic period, as that criticism bears on the critical estimate of the long poem.

Let me begin by offering a few annotations to the familiar thesis that it was the novel, more than any other literary form, that was regarded during the Romantic period as the obvious inheritor of the whole epic tradition. Certainly there is abundant evidence
that many Romantic critics considered it to be such. René Wellek has noted that the tendency to posit some sort of connection between the novel and the epic had already got under way before the middle of the eighteenth century and that "the 18th-century decline of interest in conventional epic theory is . . . reflected by a growing interest in the novel as an art form," until "classical epic theory more and more becomes a purely academic subject." Moreover, we may remember that as early as 1742 Fielding had called Joseph Andrews a "comic epic poem in prose." During the Romantic period, however, there is a marked acceleration in the critical tendency to pronounce the novel as the logical and fully worthy successor of the "outmoded" epic. "Novels . . . may be viewed as forming the real modern epic," wrote a periodical critic in 1834; and his sentiments were expressed by literally dozens of other writers. It is true that critics of the period did not often refer directly to novels as "epics," even in the loose usage with which one is beset in Sunday book-reviewing today ("an epic novel of heroic proportions"). The OED lists no figurative or transference application of the word "epic" in English before 1831. Yet there seems to have been a prevalent notion that fiction represented a latter-day inheritor of, or improvement on,
the epic. This general notion was expressed most commonly, as might be expected, in connection with those fictions that partook most heavily of the romance, of melodrama, or of the tale of high adventure: Chateaubriand's romances; the crowded gallery of Scott's historical novels; the Gothic stories of Mrs. Radcliffe, Charles Maturin, Ludwig Tieck, Clara Reeve, "Monk" Lewis, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Charles Brockden Brown, and a host of other writers; the fictions of Jeal Paul; some of the forest and sea tales of Cooper; and similar works. Thus Jeffrey praised the Waverley novels of Scott as "casting sensibly into the shade" all epic poetry of recent centuries."9 However, some critics and reviewers seem to have felt with Madame de Stael that the novel of sentiment--Clarissa, Rousseau's Julie, Werther, or The Man of Feeling, for instance--promised equally much for the future of literature. Particularly significant are the disquisitions of such German figures as Novalis, the Schlegels, and Hegel, and some of the polemical writings of Stendhal. Novalis, for instance, sets forth an elaborate metaphysical theory which declares the novel, along with the Marchen, to be the principal and primary genre of all literature.10 Both August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel (the latter especially in his remarkable "Letter on the Novel")
envision the Romantic novel of the future as a genre that will embrace all other genres of literature in a titanic synthesis.\textsuperscript{11} Hegel acknowledges the novel as the "middle-class" successor to the now-dead epic.\textsuperscript{12} And Stendhal appears to have regarded the novel as the supreme literary form for the new century, the only form commensurate with his moment of history and with times to come.\textsuperscript{13}

It is difficult to isolate common denominators within the great mass of Romantic critical writings that attempt to establish the novel as the successor to the epic poem. One of the closest approximations to a shared assumption, perhaps, is a sense that something has happened to the structure of society and of culture, to the texture of living, and to the makeup of the audience for literature—a "something" which, working through a complex of separate developments, has caused the epic to become outmoded and has raised up the novel as its replacement. "The main tradition of the European novel," George Steiner has written, "arose out of the very circumstances that had brought on the dissolution of the epic . . . ."\textsuperscript{14} If we ask what these circumstances were (Steiner does not enumerate them), we are likely to be told that they involve that putative fragmentation of culture which, so the semi-official
story runs, has riven our post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment world. Recent stern reappraisals have proposed that this fragmentation has been overemphasized (perhaps to the point of obsessive distortion) by twentieth-century philosophy, theology, psychology, and sociology; that much twentieth-century literature and critical theory (e.g., *The Waste Land* and the doctrine of the "dissociation of sensibility") has exaggerated the cacophony of our contemporary situation; and that the traditional unity, purportedly lost now, may never have existed at all.

Yet it seems reasonable to suggest at least this: that a great many critics during the Romantic period believed, rightly or wrongly, that theirs was an age less unified and communal, more individualistic and private, than previous ages had been. Schelling, for instance, argues a thesis that was to be annotated by Yates and Eliot more than a century later. For Schelling the modern world is fragmented because its history lacks one great "generally valid event" comparable to the Trojan War: a "generally valid event" of such centrality, such universal recognition and response, that to treat it in an epic poem would bind together the whole of society with a sense of mutual identity and common
Critics might deplore this loss of unity; they might look back longingly to the "monolithic" Middle Ages (as William Morris, Henry Adams, Gilson, and Eliot were to do later) or to the discipline of Neoclassicism (as Jeffrey, and Goethe in his anti-Romantic phases, seem to have done); they might seek order in Catholicism, as Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel did. On the other hand, of course, there were many critics who rejoiced in the new emphasis on the individual, the new fluidity of society and culture. Whichever course they took, however, most critics of the Romantic period seem to have felt that the novel, for better or for worse, had very definitely superseded the epic as a form commensurate to the times in which they lived. They acknowledged, however grudgingly, that there had taken place a shift that required not so much the ceremonies of a public and communal literature as the transactions of a more private literature; and in certain hard-to-define respects the "experiencing" of a novel is far less public, far less communal, than the "experiencing" of an epic. As George Steiner has phrased this distinction,

In its natural mode an epic poem addresses itself to a rather close-knit group of listeners; the drama, where it is still alive and not merely an artifice, is intended for a collective organism—a theatrical audience.
But a novel speaks to an individual reader in the anarchy of private life. It is a form of communication between a writer and an essentially fragmented society, an 'imaginative creation,' as Burckhardt put it, 'read in solitude.' To inhabit a room of one's own, to read a book to oneself, is to partake in a condition rich in historical and psychological implications. These have direct bearing on the history and character of European prose fiction. They have given it numerous and determining associations with the fortunes and world view of the middle classes. If we may say of the Homeric and Virgilian epics that they were forms of discourse between poet and aristocracy, so we may say of the novel that it has been the primary art-form of the age of the bourgeoisie.16

One reason why the epic had traditionally been regarded as a "public" or "communal" form was of course its radical of presentation. From Virgil to Milton, the epic had been predominantly "literary" or "secondary" (to employ a hoary distinction that in recent decades has been called sharply into question). The Aeneid and the Lusiads and Paradise Lost were composed, deliberately and explicitly, to be read on the page. Yet the orphic or bardic tradition, the concept of recitation before a royal or aristocratic or at least ceremonial audience, has penetrated so deeply into our notions of the epic poem that they probably can never be entirely removed. When we approach even the most "literary" of "secondary" epics, we are seldom free of residual images of Homer reciting a book from the Iliad at some regal
banquet, or of lines from *Beowulf* being declaimed in the royal hall. Another reason for considering the epic as a public utterance is perhaps equally obvious. One of the essential aims of an epic poem, it is generally agreed, has always been the mythification, or at least the glorification, of an entire race or an entire culture. Virgil's *Aeneid* was specifically meant to furnish the great epic of the Roman nation and people: a work that would confirm in its readers or auditors an awareness of a mighty past and a golden future, an abiding sense of patriotic and cultural identity. The heroes of *Beowulf* and *El Cid* seem intended as epitomes of their races, as rallying points for collective admiration and collective unity. The *Lusiads* of Camoes commemorates the odysseys of a whole people. Milton's noble ambition was to create the great epic poem that would be "an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Island . . . ." And these same general aims—grandly schemed but artistically unrealized—animated the scores of attempts to create "national" epics in Italian and French literature during the Renaissance. For various complicated reasons, however, the novel does not ordinarily seek to confer this sense of national or cultural identity and unity. There are no "national"
novels; and although we sometimes hear that *I promessi sposi*, *Moby-Dick*, or *War and Peace* is the "national" novel of its literature (the fact that all three of these novels contain strong elements of the epic form is hardly a coincidence), such designations are mainly a manner of speaking. We have to conclude that for many critics during the Romantic period the novel commanded favor precisely because it did not seek to impose order on a whole culture but spoke, instead, to individual readers amid "the anarchy of private life."^17

Another respect in which the novel struck Romantic critics as the logical successor to epic poetry—a respect connected with the whole broad theme of cultural transition—has to do with radical shifts in the tastes, and the very structure, of the reading public. There arose, for instance, a progressive tendency to prefer circumstantial verisimilitude in narrative literature: a fidelity to the observable surfaces of the phenomenological world, a carefully minute analysis of psychology, a concreteness and density in the presentation of society's workings. With regard to all these qualities, the stately and aristocratic epic seemed to many readers to be totally wanting. But the novel was different. Before giving some representative pronouncements from Romantic critical writing, let me turn still again to
George Steiner's remarks on the distinguishing characteristics of the novel:

The novel arose not only as the art of the housed and private man in the European cities. It was, from the time of Cervantes onward, the mirror which the imagination, in its vein of reason, held up to empirical reality. Don Quixote bid an ambiguous and compassionate farewell to the world of the epic; Robinson Crusoe staked out that of the modern novel. Like Defoe's castaway, the novelist will surround himself with a palisade of tangible facts: with Balzac's marvellously solid houses, with the smell of Dicken's puddings, with Flaubert's drug-counters and Zola's inexhaustible inventories. Where he finds a footprint in the sand, the novelist will conclude that it is the man Friday lurking in the bushes, not a fairy spoor or, as in a Shakespearean world, the ghostly trace of 'the god Hercules, whom Antony loved.' The main current of the Western novel is prosaic, in the exact rather than the pejorative sense. In it neither Milton's Satan winging through the immensities of chaos nor the Weird Sisters from Macbeth, sailing to Aleppo in their sieve, are really at home. Windmills are no longer giants, but windmills. In exchange, fiction will tell us how windmills are built, what they earn, and precisely how they sound on a gusty night. For it is the genius of the novel to describe, analyze, explore, and accumulate the data of actuality and introspection. Of all the renditions of experience that literature attempts, of all the counter-statements to reality put forward in language, that of the novel is the most coherent and inclusive.

Time and again, in Romantic criticism, one finds expressions of a preference for such "renditions of experience," such "counter-statements to reality," at the expense of the epic and of the long poem in general.
"On ne plus atteindre au vrai que dans le roman," Stendhal wrote in his private copy of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, recording with approval a remark made to him by Destutt de Tracy. James Beattie, in his long dissertation *On Fable and Romance* (1783), after praising Cervantes, Defoe, Richardson, Marivaux, Le Sage, and Smollet as masters of the novel, declares Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and *Amelia* to be perhaps the most perfect novels in the world. "The fable of *Amelia* is entirely poetical and of the true epic species," Beattie notes; and of *Tom Jones* he declares that "Since the days of Homer the world has not seen a more artful epic fable." Beattie sees the modern novel as the heir to the classical epic tradition and perhaps, in some respects, an improvement on its exemplars. On the other hand, James Russell Lowell expressly praises Fielding for having had the good sense to write novels instead of epics: for realizing that "since the epic . . . ceased to be recited in the market-places, it had become an anachronism." Another American writer, Edwin P. Whipple notes approvingly that the novel, on the strength of its delineations of character, has taken the place of the epic poem. In Germany, as I have already noted, most of the major theorists and critics—the Schlegels, Goethe, Novalis, Jakob Grimm,
Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel—recognized the novel as the great normative genre of the future, replacing the epic once and for all.

Finally, there is the large and complex matter of the new increase in literacy, the enfranchisement (especially in the British Isles) of a wide spectrum of "Common Readers." A detailed study of the reading habits of this new audience would take us farther and farther from the domain of literary criticism, which must remain our central focus. In his discussion of the reading public for which the great English novels of the eighteenth century were written, Ian Watt points out the comparative expensiveness of a copy of Tom Jones or even of Robinson Crusoe: and Arnold Kettle, in his A Study of the English Novel, uses his Marxist viewpoint to demonstrate essentially the same fact: that throughout most of the eighteenth century, novels remained costly luxuries for the poor who wished to read. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, fiction had become much more accessible: all but the destitute could afford a copy of a new Waverley novel, for instance. And it seems impossible to doubt that the new mass audience, when it read "seriously," did not turn to the lofty and perhaps intimidating epic poem. It might turn to the metrical
narrative, as is suggested by the huge sales of Scott's efforts in this form; but the popularity of the novel eventually prevailed over even the non-epic poem (before 1820, dwindling financial returns had caused Scott to abandon the writing of extended narrative poems and to begin catering to the public demand for novels). The modern novel, a reviewer declares in 1827, has found immense popularity with all sorts and classes of readers: and it has succeeded because it represents "an accommodation of the ancient epic to the average capacity of the numberless readers of modern times." 23

One is led to conclude, then, that during the Romantic period the pressures of the age and the formulations of criticism raised up the novel as a powerful rival for the epic and, by progressive stages, for the long poem of whatever kind. The critical formulations, as I have indicated, are of uneven distribution; but their sheer bulk is striking, 24 and there was scarcely a major or minor critic of the whole Romantic period who did not at some time record his judgments on the novel as the successor to the long poem—or at least as a disguised form of the epic, in which the older genre was updated and otherwise improved upon. 25
2. The Drama

The role of the drama in diverting Romantic critical interest from the long poem was perhaps as formidable as that of the novel. For one thing, dramatic form had a far more extensive history of critical prestige than did the upstart novel. Indeed, of all the genres of literature it was the drama, and particularly the drama in the condition of heroic tragedy, that had most tellingly challenged the supremacy of the epic within Neoclassical theory, from the end of the fifteenth century to Dr. Johnson's prefatory essay to his edition of Shakespeare's plays. For the concerns of Neoclassical criticism with the drama, the primary authority and point of recourse was, as usual, the Poetics of Aristotle. In Section V of his treatise, Aristotle had asserted that "tragedy has everything that the epic has, but the epic has not everything that there is in tragedy"; and the final surviving section of the Poetics, which addresses itself to the question "whether epic or tragic imitation is the better," had come out squarely on the side of tragedy as the supreme species of poetry. These were powerful sanctions; and throughout the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries they proved embarrassing stumbling-blocks for those Italian and French critics who were bent to proclaim the epic as the noblest genre of literature: so much so, in fact, that efforts to refute Aristotle's conclusions make up a considerable portion of the ocean of critical writing on the genres that was produced in Italy and France during the 1500's and the early 1600's. All in all, the epic clearly seems to have retained its primary over heroic tragedy in critical theory during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. Yet it was often hard pressed. A stream of critical pronouncements praised the "nobility," the "moral grandeur," or tragic form. Sidney, at the dawn of English critical writing on the drama, praises "the high and excellent genre of Tragedy" in terms hardly less glowing than those that he bestows on the epic poem. For Sidney, the exemplary powers of tragedy teach, "with sturring the affects of admiration and commiseration," the "vncertainty of this world"; they "maketh Kingses feare to be Tyrants, and Tyrants manifest their tirannicall humors." In Webbe's Discourse of English Poetrie (1586) and Puttenham's The Arte of English Poesie (1589), in the stringent Neoclassical tradition of critical writing that extends from Jonson to Hobbes and Rymer, the drama is recognized as at least the equal of
the epic and perhaps its superior. There is no need to summarize the high esteem in which tragedy is held by Dryden or to quote more than the opening words of Milton's brief "Preface" to Samson Agonistes in 1671: "Tragedy, as it was antiently compos'd, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems; therefore said by Aristotle to be of power, by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purg[e] the mind of those and such like passions, that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated." And after the 1630's or the 1640's the canons of French Neoclassical criticism began to be formulated almost exclusively with reference to tragedy. Throughout the first three quarters of the eighteenth century, moreover, the prestige of tragic drama remained at this same high level. Dennis occasionally seems ready to award tragedy the "throne" occupied by the epic poem. Diderot and Lessing pay almost no attention to the epic: for them the drama dominates all the other forms of literature until it comes to seem the only form; and Voltaire is always willing to set tragedy beside the epic, either for "sublimity" or for "correctness."
The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.

And again:

The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connexion of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form. And it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. 28

Shelley's high praise of the drama was paralleled by the Grimms, who glorified dramatic form as a medium of elemental truth; by the lecture of Hazlitt On the Characters of Shakespeare's Plays; by Schelling's praise of "Romantic" and "Religious" tragedy, as exemplified respectively by Shakespeare and Calderon; by Stendhal's two pamphlets brought together as Racine et Shakespeare; by Kleist's conviction that Greek and Shakespearean tragedy might be synthesized into the great art-form of the future; by August Wilhelm
Schlegel's lectures at Berlin from 1801 to 1804 and by his Vienna Lectures on Dramatic Art and Poetry (delivered between 1809 and 1811); by Hugo's and Vigny's choice of the theatre as the arena in which to put Neoclassicism to rout; by Lamb's commentaries in Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets; by the correspondence that passed between Goethe and Schiller and Schelling; by the young Italian critics such as Giovanni Berchet, Ludovico di Breme, Ermes Visconti, and Silvio Pellico; by Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare and De Quincey's scattered essays on the drama; by Beethoven's preference for Fidelio as the most important of all his works and by his projection, during the final months of his life, of an opera on Goethe's Faust; and by Wagner's visions of the musical theatre as a temple for the enactment of the most solemn and divine mysteries of the soul. Throughout the whole Romantic period, in brief, critical interest in the possibilities of the drama seems to have flamed up almost everywhere.

All this is so well known as to be scarcely worth summarizing still another time; but the extent to which these critical hopes for the drama dried up an interest in the epic and the long poem has been
documented far less adequately. As it happens, perhaps half the theorists and critics who praise the dramatic form do so at the expense of these other orders of poetry. In Germany, from Lessing's Hamburg Dramaturgy to the death of Goethe, the art of the theatre is constantly said to be more "poetic" than the art of the epic. Hegel, for example, declares the epic outmoded and dead, immeasurably inferior to tragedy: the latter form, for Hegel, constitutes the supreme kind of poetry, because it represents a synthesis of the lyric with whatever remains viable in the epic, and because tragic conflict yields itself to analysis in terms of the Hegelian thesis-antithesis--synthesis dialectic. Goethe finally concluded that the epic could no longer be written and gave up his projected Achilles; but the potentialities of dramatic form absorbed his creative and speculative energies throughout his life. Schopenhauer, in his writings on aesthetics and in his critical pronouncements, always placed the drama at the pinnacle of his elaborately drawn up scale of genres, above the epic (which it absorbs and transcends). The tradition of Shakespeare idolatry in Germany, which begins with Gerstenberg, Wieland, and the Sturm und Drang movement, furnishes its own wealth of texts in which Shakespeare is made the norm of the drama and the
drama the norm of all poetry. Many critics felt that their age was without a "modern" or "Romantic" epic (Klopstock's Messiah was coolly and often derisively regarded, and the status of Paradise Lost in German criticism remained rather ambivalent, despite considerable expressions of admiration); in Shakespeare's plays, on the other hand, theorists and commentators could point to great dramatic forms that seemed the purest distillation of the whole Romantic spirit of the times. Taste now preferred the "passion" of Shakespeare's tragedies to that "cold objectiveness" which had formed the bedrock criterion within eighteenth-century admiration for the Homeric epics. The key conceptual term, of course, was "Romantic," rather than mere chronological "modernity." What mattered was the antithesis to the "Classical": thus a primitivist like Herder, who appears to have regarded Shakespeare as a kind of Nordic bard, could exalt the plays as timeless works of art. It was in terms of the contrast between "Classical" and "Romantic" that the Schlegels and Schelling found Shakespearean tragedy superior to the epic (even the epics attributed to Ossian).

In English critical writing, of course, Shakespeare's plays were exploited even more extensively as poetic works transcending all epics and all long poems of any
description. The recorded praise of Shakespeare had begun as early as the tributes affixed to the First and Second Folios and had continued throughout the seventeenth century in miscellaneous comments by Thomas Fuller, Lady Margaret Cavendish, and a host of other literary figures; the authentically great criticism, of course, had begun with Dryden and been carried on through Pope, the Wartons, Bishop Hurd, and Dr. Johnson, to such good minor commentators as Morgann and Mackenzie in the last decades of the eighteenth century. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, the apotheosis of Shakespeare had long been completed; the canon and its text were at least tentatively established; Garrick's commemorative festivals had met with huge success; the plays were being read and performed on every hand, in versions either faithful or "improved," and had already become surrounded with more critical elucidations than could be fathomed in a long lifetime. De Quincey's rapturous eulogy, at the conclusion of his essay on the knocking at the gate in Macbeth, is not untypical of the preponderant English attitude toward Shakespeare: "O mighty poet! Thy works are not as those of other men, simply and merely great works of art, but are also like the phenomena of nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers, like frost and snow, rain and
dew, hail-storm and thunder . . . ."

Against the backgrounds of such living and intensive interest, then, it is not surprising that many commentators should have concerned themselves with establishing the supremacy of Shakespearean drama against whatever vestiges of admiration the epic poem might retain. Coleridge, William Godwin, Hazlitt, and Anna Seward are only a few among the many writers who lift up Shakespeare as greater than any epic poet: in language, in characterization, in mastery of "human nature," in "poetic spirit," and in all sorts of other respects. But the quickening of an interest in the drama was by no means centered exclusively on Shakespeare or even on the Elizabethan drama in general; and the more theoretical and generalized discussions of dramatic form often issued in even more forceful downgradings of the epic. Coleridge, speaking as a "progressivist," takes infinite pains to demonstrate that the drama evolved from the epic and is therefore an improvement on the "older" genre. Borrowing the distinctions of Schiller and the Schlegels, he finds the epic "objective" and "Classical," whereas the drama is "subjective" and "Romantic." "In the drama," according to Coleridge, "the will is exhibited as struggling with fate," and there is displayed "the lofty struggle between
irresistible fate and unconquerable free will . . . ."\textsuperscript{32}

And in 1823 an anonymous writer in Jeffrey's \textit{Edinburgh Review} makes two points that within the next decade or so were to become commonplaces: an epic "is addressed to a more limited class, and necessarily affects our sympathies less forcibly; for a Drama is an embodying of the present, while an Epic is only a shadow of the past . . . ."\textsuperscript{33}

In \textit{Paradise Lost}, of course, the art of the long poem put forward a powerful counterclaim to the eminence of the drama within English Romantic criticism. If praises of Homer were comparatively rare (Shelley, Keats, and De Quincey being perhaps the most important exceptions), and if praises of Virgil were even rarer, Milton's epic commanded the respect of almost every major critic of the time. Throughout the eighteenth century, from Addison's series of \textit{Spectator} papers to the death of Dr. Johnson, \textit{Paradise Lost} was almost always admired as a classic of the language. Many of the canons of the Pre-Romantic "movement" had been formulated on Shakespeare and Milton, even more than on \textit{The Faerie Queene}; for the Wartons, for Young, for Bishop Hurd, Shakespeare and Milton are the greatest English poets, because of their "sublimity" and "pathos." There is no value in choosing between the two poets: either is
co-equal with the other. During the first decade of
the nineteenth century, moreover, the critical stature
of Paradise Lost remained extraordinarily high: one
need only allude to Shelley's Defence, to Coleridge's
1818 lectures, to De Quincey's excursus on "the
literature of power," and (on the periphery of criticism)
the annotations and miscellaneous jottings of Blake,
Burns, and Wordsworth. With the exception of Coleridge,
who mixes reservations with his generally high estimates,
most of the strictures on Paradise Lost come from
relatively minor critical writers. Nevertheless, Milton's
poem was perhaps the only epic that managed to hold its
own when set against the rival art of the drama. And
even this triumph was somewhat tempered by the fact that
for every adverse comment on dramatic form there were
perhaps three comments on Paradise Lost that agreed, more
or less, with Dr. Johnson's remark: that Milton's epic
is "one of the books which the reader admires and lays
down, and forgets to take up again."

For a tangled complex of reasons, however, it was
American critical thought that most frequently
championed the drama at the expense of long poems. Partly,
no doubt, the self-consciously democratic spirit of the
new nation was behind many pronouncements that elevated
dramatic form and, concurrently, devalued the epic.
(De Tocqueville, one remembers, had seen "the love of the drama" as an emotion most at home in democratic societies). The epic, as I briefly noted earlier, was looked upon with suspicion by many American writers, who associated it with the courtly and the aristocratic. Moreover, despite the many expressions of admiration for Paradise Lost, Milton's epic could not count on maintaining its prestige through an appeal to those feelings of national identity which played a role in its English popularity. To many American critics, Paradise Lost was suspect because of its "grand manner" (a verdict set down by Lowell, for instance) or because it seemed "outmoded" in its relevance for a modern and progressive nation (Poe, for instance, ridicules the poem's "snakes" and the gunpowder used during the war in Heaven).

Political and sociological considerations, however, cannot account for more than part of the American critical preference for the drama. Emerson, for instance, thinks that "the austere muse that casts human life into a high tragedy" rises above "the art of the epic poet, which condescends more to common humanity, and approaches the ballad." And Jones Very, echoing not only his Concord master but also Margaret Fuller and a number of the New York literati, observes that within the modern world there has steadily taken place a diminishing of
of "epic" interest, and the final emerging of that interest in the dramatic" which Very sees, approvingly, as the prevalent literary taste of the nineteenth century. 35

The often-remarked aspiration of Romantic poets to create a great poetic drama—and the almost universal failure of that aspiration—lie outside the concerns of the present study. Yet the very force and frequency of this aspiration are of central concern to an understanding of how the Romantics tried to bring forward the drama as a counterstatement to the long poem; and while we must concentrate on critical thought rather than on imaginative enterprises, at least a few words should be said about this desire of Romantic poets to become pre-eminent in the creation of dramatic forms. By every cannon of twentieth-century artistic judgment, most of the notorious "closet dramas" of the Romantic period seem unsuccessful, both as poetry and as creations for what Shelley called the living theatre. But the sheer number of such works is significant of how powerfully the idea of a theatre appealed to Romantic poets. Goethe's Egmont, Wordsworth's The Borderers, Coleridge's Osorio (later entitled Remorse), Byron's Werner and and Sardanapalus and the two "Venetian" tragedies, Keat's King Stephen and The Cap and Bells—almost every major
poet of the Romantic period either projected or produ-
duced at least one of these "closet dramas." But
if criticism could find little to admire in contemporary
creativity for the theatre and the closet, it had
Greek tragedy and the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama to
look to; and it used these bodies of poetry to good
advantage when it sought to argue the supremacy of
dramatic form to that of the long poem.

Why, it may be asked, should the novel and the
drama have drained so much critical favor from the
art of the "poem of some length," when such poems (in
their incarnation as the epic) had previously been able
to exist more or less symbiotically with other
literary forms? One answer, I suspect, is that from
the Renaissance onward this symbiotic existence was
not quite so harmonious as it may appear. A more useful
answer, however, is that during the Romantic period
the claims of these "rival" forms were merely one element
out of many others that were working with equal pressure
against the idea of the long poem. In their con-
junction, or at least in their historical contemporaneity,
each of these elements sharpened and lent force to all
the others. Whatever the reasons, however, I think it
impossible to deny that by the first decades of the
nineteenth century Romantic critical thought had definitely begun to raise up the novel and the drama and to affirm their supremacy, for the new age, over the long poem.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV


3. Allen Tate is enunciating a critical principle widely accepted in our day when he remarks that "There is no competition among poems." See the essay "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" in Tate's The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays, 1925-1955 (New York, 1955), p. 173. Tate's proposition that works of literature do not "compete" with one another finds its immediate sanction in that reaction against the evaluative compulsions of older judicial criticism, and in that vision of the domain of literature as a seamless continuum, which have been expounded by a large number of modern critics. Impressive attempts to exclude "evaluation" from criticism can be found, to cite only three significant examples, in T. S. Eliot's essay "The Perfect Critic," reprinted in The Sacred Wood (New York, 1930), and in Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (above,
note 2) and The Well-Tempered Critic (Bloomington, Indiana, 1962). On the other hand, however, equally impressive attempts to prove such exclusion finally untenable have been made by such theorists as I. A. Richards, René Wellek, Ivor Winters, W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., Austin Warren, and many others. My main point, however, is that to regard evaluation as outside the provinces of criticism is an aesthetic stance almost never encountered before our own time.


6. The history of prose fiction, unlike the history of poetry, is not paralleled by a long and distinguished tradition of theoretical and critical literature. Before the eighteenth century, indeed, it was hardly paralleled by any theoretical and critical tradition of any sort. The ur-novels of seventeenth-century French and English literature; Elizabethan prose narrative, from the arcadian romances through Hakluyt's voyage-accounts to Deloney's "novels"; Don Quixote and its precursors in Spanish fiction; the novellas of Boccaccio--none of these works was accompanied by theoretical sanctions or even by much critical commentary. In some respects, the first really significant body of theoretical writings on fiction is to be found in the essays that Fielding interspersed throughout Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones (1742 and 1749).

7. René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950 (New Haven, 1955), 1, 122. Wellek points out that by the middle of the eighteenth century "The novel still labored under the suspicion of being a mere waste of time, a frivolous and even pernicious amusement. Many critics are definitely embarrassed in dealing with it. . . . Henry Fielding, as a practicing novelist, tried to combat this attitude by arguing that the novel is an epic in prose. Tom Jones closely parodies devices and procedures of the Homeric convention. Fielding's excellent plotting and Richardson's sentimental morality helped to raise the novel in critical estimation."


11. See Wellek (above, note 7), II, 6, 13, 14, 19, 33, 57, 63, 69, 72.


13. See, e.g., Jean Marsan's edition of Stendhal's Le Rouge et le noir (Paris, 1923), I, 389. Detailed comments on Stendhal's hopes for the future of the novel--his hopes, more precisely, that the novel would become the great genre of the nineteenth century--are to be found in Gina Raya's Stendhal (Modena, 1943), Harry Levin's The Gates of Horn (New York, 1962), and Wellek (above, note 7), II, 250-252.


17. In English Romantic criticism, especially, the writers who praised the novel on such grounds were likely to be those who looked back with condescension on Augustan literature as having been public in its rhetoric, self-consciously social in its forms (satire, for instance, or the Pindaric Ode), and sterile in its ceremonial "correctness."

18. Steiner (above, note 14), pp. 19-20. Steiner continues by pointing out that "There are, of course, types of fiction to which these generalizations
do not apply. On the confines of the governing tradition there have been persistent areas of irrationalism and myth. The great bulk of the Gothic ..., Mrs. Shelley's Frankenstein, and Alice in Wonderland are representative instances of rebellion against prevailing empiricism. One need refer only to Emily Bronte, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Poe to realize that the discredited daemonology of the (pre-scientific) era had its vigorous afterlife. But in the main the European novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was secular in outlook, rational in method, and social in context."

I have not engaged in the problem of the distinctions between the novel and the romance, as they were drawn by critics during the Romantic period. For the sake of convenience (at the expense of exactness) I have for the most part used the term "novel," perfectly aware that it has to be stretched almost beyond recognition if applied alike to Peacock's fictions, the romances of Scott and Chateaubriand, Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, Clarissa, Tristram Shandy, and La Nouvelle Heloise. Representative discussions of romance and novel are to be found in Clara Reeve's The Progress of Romance (1785), John Moore's "A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romance" (1790), and Hawthorne's preface to The House of the Seven Gables (1851). Helpful twentieth-century discussions are in the "Introduction" to Richard Chase's The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, N. Y., 1957) and Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (above, note 2), especially the "Fourth Essay."


21. James Russell Lowell, Democracy and Other Addresses (Boston, 1887), p. 84. I owe this citation, and the quotation from Edwin P. Whipple documented by note 22 below, to Donald M. Foerster's article "Homer, Milton, and the American Revolt Against Epic Poetry: 1812-1860," SP, LIII, 1 (January, 1956), 81, 87. Foerster makes the important point that in
the United States after about 1820 or 1830 many critics had given up all hope that their country would ever produce a great epic poem but still managed to console themselves by "pointing with pride to the novels of Cooper" and, a bit later, to the novels of Hawthorne and Melville. See Foerster, p. 87.


23. The Quarterly Review, XXXV (March, 1827), 519.

24. How striking becomes evident if one selects a half-dozen novelists—Cervantes, Rousseau, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, and Goethe, for example—and pursues the discussions of these novelists through a respectable sampling of Romantic critical writing. Herder, Schiller, La Harpe, Blair, the Schlegels, Madame de Stael, Hazlitt, Schelling, Novalis, Tieck, Jean Paul, Jeffrey, Coleridge, Foscolo, Chateaubriand, the Grimm, and Gorres—praise for Rousseau and Richardson, analyses of Cervantes and Fielding, technical discussions of Goethe and Sterne multiply within the pages of these critics and their contemporaries.

25. E. M. W. Tillyard has studied the relations between the epic and the novel in English literature, with a heavy stress on the continuity between the two forms. In The English Epic and Its Background and (particularly) The Epic Strain in the English Novel, Tillyard argues that "by the nineteenth century the real course of the epic had forsaken the traditional verse form for the novel." In the latter book he undertakes to trace the "epic kind"—which he identifies principally with "a communal or choric quality"—within such English novels as Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, Rob Roy, The Heart of Midlothian, Nostromo, Middlemarch, and Ulysses. In his essay "Is Verse a Dying Art?" Edmund Wilson develops the thesis that the twentieth-century novel—particularly Ulysses and A la Recherche du temps perdu—represents the modern equivalent of the epic. By far the finest analysis of this whole relation, however, seems to me to be the long second chapter of George Steiner's Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (above, note 14), which demonstrates the remarkable correspondences between the novels of Tolstoy and the epics of Homer.
26. It is true that the Poetics names Homer as "the great exemplar of high poetry," as a surpassing master of "unity of fable," as a poet among whose many virtues is the fact that "more than any one else he has taught other writers the correct way of telling an untrue story." The Homeric epics, moreover, are repeatedly cited as models worthy of all praise. Yet the fact remained that Aristotle's discrimination of tragedy as the greatest of all genres was ultimately at variance with the position of those Renaissance critics who were committed to championing the epic; these critics had, therefore, to justify their positions. For instance, Trissino in 1561 argues that although Aristotle may well have been right in preferring tragic to epic form, Homer and Virgil are nevertheless greater than any tragic poet. Strozzi in 1594 undertakes to disprove point-by-point the grounds of Aristotle's preference. And in France, especially after the critical discussion of the drama had been intensified by Corneille's Le Cid in 1636, there were almost as many attempts to maintain in the priority of the epic against the rival claims of heroic tragedy.


33. Quoted in Foerster (above, note 31), 437.

35. Quoted in Foerster (above, note 21), 87.

36. German drama, in its flowering with Kleist, Goethe, and Schiller, achieved an artistic success beyond that of English attempts at a "poetic drama" during the Romantic period. Many critics, however, would doubtless agree that the finest achievements of "dramatic" poetry during the period are to be found in Goethe's Faust and Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: forms that seem closer to the "dramatic Poem" than to "closet drama" or to such works for the theatre as Schiller's plays. See Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's Prelude* (Princeton, 1963), p. 120.
CHAPTER V

THE LONG POEM AND ROMANTIC THEORIES OF POETRY

During the autumn of 1827 the Italian poet and critic Giacomo Leopardi set down an aphorism that might be taken, in retrospect, as epigraph for a good many of the theoretical attitudes toward poetry that were developed or sharpened throughout the Romantic period. "The endeavors of poetry," he confided to the running soliloquies of his Commonplace Books, "desire by their very nature to be short" ("I lavori di poesia vogliono per natura esser corti"). The immediate sources of Leopardi's observations would seem to have been his own private and public understanding of poetry as dartings of fancy, the quick song-flight that would trace a brief iridescent curve before falling again into silence. For Leopardi the lyric represents the summit of poetry ("La lirica si puo chiamare la cima il colmo la sommita della poesia"), the primal—and therefore eternal and universal—mode for the making of poems ("genere, siccome primo di tempo, così eterno ed
Hence he could declare, perforce had to declare, that the norm of poetry resides within the short poem. But the larger ambiance of Leopardi's pronouncement, the historical matrix within which it needs to be considered, was the whole Romantic emphasis on the short poem—whether "lyrical" or not—as the purest manifestation of poetic creation. A comparatively late Romantic, as was his somewhat younger contemporary Poe, Leopardi was simply furnishing one more expression for ideas that had long been gathering force amid the critical climate all around him. For if it is a commonplace that Romantic poetry was pre-eminent in its cultivation of the shorter forms of poetry, it is equally a commonplace that this pre-eminence was paralleled by an almost unbroken preference for such forms on the part of Romantic criticism and theory.

My design in the present chapter is to explore several of the ways in which this preference for the shorter poetic forms diminished the critical prestige of the long poem during the Romantic period. It is obvious, of course, that the apotheosis of a particular kind of poetry is an act that must imply, by its very nature, some devaluation of all other kinds of poetry. So it was, for instance, when the epic was exalted by criticism and theory during the Renaissance and the
seventeenth century; so it was with Hulme and Pound and Eliot when they argued for the establishment in English of a hard, dry, Neoclassical verse. But I should like to annotate this truism by considering a number of respects in which, either explicitly or implicitly, Romantic concepts of poetry reduced the "poem of some length" to the status of a form not only secondary but unsatisfactory and, perhaps, absurdly impossible. There was much in the very structure of the times that focused interest on the short poem rather than on the poem of major scope. One factor, expressed again and again by the artisans of criticism when they mingled aesthetic judgment with sociology, was a sense that the modern world simply lacked the time to read long poems. "In the present state of society," declared a reviewer of Barlow's Columbiad in the Edinburgh Review for October, 1809, "we require, in poetry, something more natural or more impassioned, and, at all events, something less protracted and monotonous than the sober pomp deliberate stateliness of the epic." My central topic, however, will be the pivotal formulations of criticism and critical theory during the Romantic period, rather than contemporary notations of the general temperament of the age—although it will be impossible to avoid giving at least some attention to
such extra-critical testimonies.

1. From Imitation to Expression

We may begin with some Romantic concepts of poetry and of the poet, as those concepts bear on the values and the very possibility of the long poem. A recent writer on Wordsworth, Herbert Lindenberger, has compactly restated an assumption shared by many poets and critics throughout the Romantic era: the assumption, namely, that there had taken place a more or less radical transition "from a concept of poems as imitations of established structures to a concept of poems as self-expressions of the individual poet, with the consequent narrowing down of the province of poetry from a wide variety of discursive forms to those few forms which could aspire to the condition either of the dreamlike or the impassioned lyric." That the greatest among the Romantic poets undertook to transfigure poetry as imitation into poetry as expression is a proposition scarcely exhaustive or inclusive. Put thus baldly, it leaves out of account too many large and difficult factors: the various complex meanings of "imitation" and of "expression," the extent to which the one concept may implicate the other, and so on. But the proposition
will suffice to remind us that at least some of the major Romantic poets appear—judged by their own critical pronouncements and by much of their creative performance itself—to have held a characteristic sense of mission, of consecration, in which the "expressive" functions of poetry, however those functions might be defined, were paramount.

To the question of what these Romantic poets thought of poetry as expressing, they of course furnished varying and often contradictory answers. For one thing, when they pushed the expressive theory of poetry to its furthest extensions (as a good many of them did, at one time or another), they converted it into what seems less a theory of expression than a theory of creation. To express something implies the pre-existence of that something, however transformed it may become through the poetic act of expression. But some Romantic poets strove, in certain of their poems and discursive utterances, to pass beyond this concept of the poetic process. Blake would purge the whole universe with the flames of poetic vision and re-create it through the imagination. Wordsworth would illuminate the world, as the "Peele Castle" lines declare, with a gleam that never was on sea or land. With the closing lines of "Kubla Khan," Coleridge fixed an image of the poet as sorcerer, as one
who had drunk the milk of the paradise of imagination. Shelley caught one of his creative metaphors—perhaps his grandest—from the mythic theme of Prometheus, from the story of the Titan who had wrought violence against the gods themselves to bring down light to men. At times Emerson hoped that the poet might be identified with Merlin, Whitman that the poet might become a bard and, ultimately, be mistaken for a god; and Poe's divine Israfel is related both to Coleridge's magician and to Mallarmé's angel.

But for our purposes these radical extensions of Romantic theory have only an occasional relevance. The conclusion that creation per se cannot be long sustained, and must therefore issue in brevity, does not seem to have been drawn very often. Indeed, Leopardi would appear to have been the one major figure of the period who explicitly propounds such a conclusion. Again and again, Leopardi emphasizes that poetry is creation and that it is not and cannot be imitation. "The poet imagines: the imagination sees the world not as it is . . . it fabricates, invents; it does not imitate . . . the poet is a creator, an inventor, not an imitator" ("Il poeta immagina: l'immaginazione vede il mondo come non e . . . figne, inventa, non imita . . . il poeta creatore, inventore, non imitatore"). And
again and again (often, it would seem, generalizing from his own poetic practice), Leopardi laments the impossibility of maintaining, for more than a short flight, the burden imposed by poetic creativity. In his own case—and the implication is that the same trials beset all poets—he confesses that it would be easier for water to flow from the trunk of a tree than for a single verse to flow from his brain ("se l'inspirazione non mi nasce da sé, più facilmente uscirebbe acqua da un tronco, che un solo verso dal mio cervello"). 6

The aspect of Romantic expressive theory that most sharply implicates the long poem, however, is the concept that poetry expresses the deep feelings and emotions of the poet himself; a concept phrased most famously, perhaps, by Wordsworth's descriptions of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and "a selection from the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation italics added." For more than a century and a half, now—beginning with the periodical reviewers, Blake's annotations, and Coleridge's letters and the critique in the Biographia Literaria—these Wordsworthian descriptions have been analyzed and argued. It seems safe to suggest that they have become the most famous commonplaces of the whole Romantic era. Yet they possess uses as one index to what a number of Romantic
poets, at many important moments of thought, believed themselves to be attempting. They provide statements, however problematical, of one of the Romantic aesthetics for poetry. For there can be little doubt that certain Romantic poets regarded themselves as creating a new poetry of emotional "freshness" and "directness," in which the poet, as a man speaking to men, could pour out the deepest feelings of his heart. It was a poetry to be set against what these poets saw as the "metallic" poetry written during the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries. In English the foils of this new poetry became, willy-nilly, all earlier poems that could be judged "ornamental" or somehow "artificial": in particular the "dry," "witty," and "sterile" poetry of Pope and Dryden and their imitators, and the "contorted" or "conceited" verse produced by the Metaphysical tradition. For Germany the objects of reaction were principally the "filigreed" poetry of the Rococo, the "tortured" or "clotted" poetry of the Baroque, and the balanced restraint of the eighteenth century's new Hellenism, as instigated by Winckelmann and Lessing. In France, when Romanticism finally established some of its causes, the old order became the Neoclassicism of Corneille and Racine and of three centuries of commentators on Aristotle and Virgil. There is scarcely
need to direct attention here to all the problems raised by such terms as "ornamental" or "sterile," "clotted" or "filigreed." But I have taken these terms, and the others employed above, from Romantic critical literature; and there can be no doubt, I think, that they register the feelings of a good many Romantic poets toward the poetry that they found to be the complete antithesis of their own.

But what were the significances for the longer forms of poetry when Romantic theory and practice articulated themselves along these lines? For one thing, such aesthetic preferences help to define the revolt against "imitation," the Aristotelian mimesis, in most of its Neoclassical senses. As is well known, what might today be termed a "photographic" imitation—either as trompe-l'oeil reproductions of "Nature" or as the exact copying of Ancient classics—had played little part in the central traditions of Neoclassicism. It is also well known that even the most liberal endorsements of imitation were being questioned by the middle of the eighteenth century. Of Young's 1759 Conjectures Upon Original Composition (in which it was declared that "We read Imitation with somewhat of his languor, who listens to a twice-told tale: Our spirits rouze at an Original"), Boswell records that Dr. Johnson "was
surprized to find Young receive as novelties, what he [Johnson] thought very common maxims." By the early nineteenth century, however, the break with older emphases on imitation was almost complete. The lyric, which had always been the genre that most eluded traditional mimetic theories of poetry, was established as a kind of standard form for poetic creation. And criticism came, therefore, to surrender even further its interest in such long narrative forms as the epic, which traditionally had been judged in large measure by their success or failure as the mimesis of a plot, an action. For example, the reviewer of Barlow's Columbiad quoted above (page 2) doubts "whether any long poem of the Epic character will ever again be popular in Europe," because there is "so much of imitation about them." More and more, criticism came to echo the poetics of Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Keats and Shelley, which Earl Wasserman has described as a conviction that

No longer can a poem be conceived of as a reflection or imitation of an autonomous order outside itself. The creation of a poem is also the creation of the cosmic wholeness that gives meaning to the poem, and each poet must independently make his own world-picture, his own language with language.7

But an even more important consequence for the long poem, and especially for its standing in critical
estimates, arose from the new poetic emphasis on emotional expressiveness and on "spontaneity." The problem of what the Romantics understood by "spontaneity" presents numerous difficulties; but in general it seems to have implied some kind of cleavage between impulse (or, more broadly, emotion) on the one hand and the ordering intervention of the reflective faculty, of the form-giving cognitive intellect, on the other. (For some Romantic poets, such as Byron, the notion of something like outright improvisation is also present).

This hypothetical division represents a quite ancient theme, running back through Herder's theories of folk-creativity, through Renaissance concepts of the poet as a kind of madman or entheos, all the way to Greek disquisitions on the art of the rhapsode. One manifestation of its more radical extensions, from the Victorian backwaters of Romanticism, can be examined in the "Spasmodic" verse published during the early 1850's by such poets as Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith. The Romantic poets and theorists were never quite able to stabilize their concept of this division or to defend their claim that "spontaneity" could exist independently of the rational intellect. Schiller was never able to explain how his "naive" poets could make their poetry
directly from "Nature," without any intrusion of the intellective faculties. Hazlitt could not define exactly his distribution of the creative act between inspiriting "gusto" and the hard pains of rewriting. And against Keats's statement that poetry must come "as naturally as the Leaves to a tree," we may set the heavily revised and interlined manuscripts of "The Eve of Saint Agnes" and the "Ode to a Nightingale." But although the whole accretive testimony of Romantic poetics and psychologies remained unable to systematize the dichotomy between emotion and intellect within the creative process, or to vindicate (at least in criticism) the supremacy of the former to the latter, the fact does remain that such terms as "natural," "spontaneous," and so on figure prominently within the vocabularies of Romantic poetic theory. The emphasis falls heavily upon "unmediated vision" (instanced, one might feel today, by Blake's Songs of Innocence or by Wordsworth's poems in which the heart leaps up at hearing the song of the cuckoo or beholding a rainbow). And there seems to be a curious connection, whether illusory or real, between the "spontaneous" expression of emotion and the literal magnitude, the sheer length, of a poetic work. We tend, sometimes, to assume that "spontaneity," or the golden moments of emotion, cannot be sustained at any great length with poetry; and this
assumption appears, moreover, to have operated within a good many critical pronouncements during the Romantic period. Wordsworth's emphasis on the "essential passions," Leopardi's conviction that poetry consists "essenzialmente in un impeto"—all such criteria, it was widely held, simply precluded the more prolonged forms of poetry. Such forms came to seem, when measured against such absolutes, fundamentally insincere; for if passions, sorrows, joys, and lyrical outbursts were always concentrated and transient in "real life," then they must, so the logic ran, display a similar concentration and transience within poetry. (It was this logic, more than any other tendency, that perpetuated within Romantic theory the Neoclassical emphasis on the sincerity of the poet, an emphasis most frequently substantiated through reference back to the famous maxim of Horace: "si vis me flere, dolendum est / Primum ipsi tibi").9 Within the formulations of Romantic criticism, such an argument was turned particularly against the epic. As Donald M. Foerster has noted, "an appeal to standards of "spontaneity" and "sincerity was almost entirely responsible for the universal antagonism towards Virgil and for the charges that Milton was too deliberate in the use of his immense erudition, . . . too conscious in his adoption of a poetic style. The
epic poem, because of its inordinate length, appeared to be a poor vehicle for the expression of sincere emotion. However, the long poem of whatever sort, whether epic or not, was equally vulnerable to the criteria of "spontaneity," "sincerity," and emotional expressiveness. Consider, in this connection, the witness of Keats, in the famous letter explaining why he had finally abandoned Hyperion: it was, he records, his inability to "make the division properly" between "the true voice of feeling" and "the false beauty proceeding from art" that brought him to a hopeless impasse within what was to have been his longest poem. There is no evidence that Keats conceived "the true voice of feeling" in such terms as to equate it directly with lyric brevity; but such an equation seems to hover behind a good many pronouncements within Romantic theory and critical writing: pronouncements for which Keats's choice of epithets—"false" and "true"—was at least loosely analogous. It was almost, indeed, as though Dr. Johnson's verdict on "Lycidas"—"where there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief"—had been bent to declare that where there is leisure for length, there is little authentic feeling.

When it affirmed the supremacy of the lyric mode, as it came increasingly to do, Romantic theory and
criticism were of course motivated by (and, in turn, motivating) a complex of other developments in poetic creativity, in literary standards, and in the general thought of the age. The transition, as the title of M. H. Abrams' book symbolizes it, from the view of poetry as a mirror to the view of poetry as a lamp; the turning from dry-eyed reason and discursiveness to a revived delight in the shaping powers of the liberated imagination; the profound shift away from mechanistic and and static concepts of the universe to a new organic and dynamic concept, together with the parallel shift that emphasized poetry not as stasis but as living organism; fresh interests in psychology and in various theories of sentiment and of the emotions; concerns with the private and personal and subjective, rather than with the public and ceremonial and objective; a new emphasis on poetry as introspection, confession, an unlocking of the poet's heart—all these large currents were implicated, however remotely, in the Romantic preference for lyric forms at the expense, sometimes, of all others. Implicated also are most of the more immediate developments that I shall consider later in the present chapter. Nevertheless, one point seems reasonably clear: that for many Romantic critics the construing of poems as what Lamartine called "sighs or cries of the soul" seriously
compromised the values of the more extended or more "monolithic" orders of poetry. And it is only a little less clear that, for a number of poets concerned to create a longer poetic form, their own impulses toward the lyric--conceived as the quick and "spontaneous" expression of "sincere" emotion--presented extraordinary tensions and formal difficulties. For instance, we have the testimony of Keats, already mentioned, that "the true voice of feeling" was powerfully implicated in rendering hopeless his struggles with the Miltonic-epic forms of Hyperion. Scott's The Lady of the Lake and Shelley's Prometheus Unbound may seem less a narrative poem and a dramatic poem, respectively, than collections of lyrics. Also, to cite only one more example out of many, it might be argued that the "songful moments" and "spots of time" within Wordsworth's Prelude sometimes threaten to disintegrate the entire work into a number of great lyrical points, interspersed with discursive or narrative or didactic passages.

2. "Intensity" and Longinian "Sublimity" as Norms

A tendency to confine poetic value to the expressive or emotional qualities of poetry, together with an assumption that such qualities cannot be sustained through a poem of extensive length, was closely paralleled by
another development that worked to focus Romantic critical preferences on the shorter lyric flight at the expense of the long poem. I refer to the distinctively Romantic variation on the general concepts of "sublimity" and "intensity," particularly as these inter-related concepts had been worked out by the eighteenth-century Longinian tradition in aesthetic thought. The immense vogue and considerable influence of Longinian poetics during the eighteenth century has been chronicled and studied by a number of investigations during recent decades. The *Peri Hypsous* (or *On the Sublime*, as the treatise attributed to "Longinus" was usually designated from about the middle of the seventeenth century) played a significant role in the defences of "original genius" and "original composition" throughout the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century. As early as Addison, it was cited as a sanction for those great poets who are capable of transcending mere "scrupulous and exact conformity" to the Neoclassical rules and of thus seizing a grace beyond the reach of "art." Longinian ideas figured in much of the revived interest in the Old Testament as the "sublime" poetry of the ancient Hebrews (Longinus had included Genesis I, iii as a locus of "sublimity"). But perhaps the most important concept that Longinus offered to Romantic
critical theory was that the summit of poetry is to be discovered in brief unsustainable moments of supreme emotion, of ecstasy and transport. True sublimity, according to Longinus, consists in the rapturous burst of lofty and vehement passion, rather than in any of the effects attainable through sustained craftsmanship. Such bursts come like "a thunderbolt or flash of lightning"; they are marked by "speed, power, and intensity"; and their duration—both as regards their literal magnitude and the temporal experience of their fullest potency by any given auditor—is always brief and usually momentary. 14

For the most part, those critics and theorists who discussed "sublimity" during the eighteenth century rested content with individual "sublime" moments as they shone forth from a larger and less "sublime" poetic structure. Pope, in the "Postscript" to his Odyssey translation (1726), equates the language of the gods in epic poetry with "sublimity"; but he goes on at once to point out that both decorum and the aesthetic experience of the reader make it impossible to maintain the texture of an entire epic poem at so lofty a pitch. Decorum requires "a variation of style in epic poetry... so as to distinguish between that language of the gods proper to the muse who sings and is inspired and that of
men who are introduced speaking only according to nature." And the aesthetic experience is best served by variation, by setting sublime passages against the foil of passages less elevated: "To read through a whole work in [the sublime] strain is like traveling all along on the ridge of a hill, which is not half so agreeable as sometimes gradually to rise, and sometimes gently to descend, as the way leads, and as the end of the journey directs." Similar ideas were developed more philosophically by Pope's contemporary Francis Hutcheson, in his *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725). According to the Hutchesonian aesthetics,

The figures which excite in us the ideas of beauty seem to be those in which there is uniformity amidst variety. There are many conceptions of objects which are agreeable upon other accounts, such as grandeur, novelty, sanctity, and some others . . . . But what we call beautiful in objects, to speak in the mathematical style, seems to be in a compound ratio of uniformity and variety; so that where the uniformity of bodies is equal, the beauty is as the variety; and where the variety is equal, the beauty is as the uniformity.

Another pertinent passage from this same section of Hutcheson's *Inquiry* is his exposition of the ancient paradox that discord is a necessary co-ordinate of harmony: sweet sounds cannot be known without a knowledge
of harsh sounds;

In the art of music there is indeed observable in the best compositions a mysterious effect of discords. They often give as great pleasure as continued harmony, whether by refreshing the ear with variety, or by awakening the attention and enlivening the relish for the succeeding harmony of concords (as shades enliven and beautify pictures), or by some other means not yet known. Certain it is, however, that they have their place and some good effect in our best composition.16

But if eighteenth-century aesthetics and poetic theory was for the most part willing to retain the ancient concept of "golden" poetic moments that flashed out of humbler stretches within a poem, many Romantic critics became less and less interested in doing so.17 Shelley, for instance, recognizes that the process of poetic composition consists largely in providing "the intertexture of conventional expressions" as "an artificial connexion" between glowing points of true poetic inspiration; but he is far from happy that such should be the means by which poetry has to be created.18 A number of Keats's scattered pronouncements on poetry stress his creed that "the excellence of every art is its intensity" and that a poem should be a seamless whole in which "the very letters and points of characterized language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty."19 The aphorisms of Joubert maintain again and again that the greatness of poetry resides exclusively within its high
enthusiasm, its fires of intensity. What has happened is that concepts of poetry, in their more extreme formulations, have moved beyond Arnold's "The Study of Poetry" (1880), with its "touchstones" of "high poetic quality": these extreme formulations seem to require that the texture of the whole poem maintain the supernal height of intensity that Arnold was to locate within brief passages or even single lines. As Herbert Lindenberger has summarized this development, "In the course of the early nineteenth century, the Longinian demand for intensity had gradually been narrowed down to the point where it was no longer satisfied by individual moments of elevation embedded within a larger structure, but, rather, insisted that the only proper business of poetry was the exclusive cultivation of these moments." In Section 4 of the present chapter I shall have more to say about this prizing of the incandescent moment, the flight of highest lyric intensity. For our present purposes, however, the representative texts ought to speak for themselves. They set a hard and perhaps impossible task for poets who would create a long poem capable of satisfying their exactions; and they invite skepticism, on the part of critical thought, toward the worth and even the possibility of the poem of major scope.
3. The Psychology of Poetic Effect

In the critical history of the Romantic period, the reciprocity between normative claims for emotional expression and similar claims for Longinian intensity is demonstrated by the passage from John Stuart Mill, cited at the beginning of this study, in which Mill equates poetry with Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and then goes on to declare that all true poems must be short, "it being impossible that a feeling so intense ... should sustain itself at its highest elevation for long together ... ." Longinian theory, both in the Peri Hypsous and its most essentially Romantic variations, does not necessarily delimit "sublimity" or "intensity" to passages expressive of emotion. The argument of Longinus's treatise makes it clear that sublimity in poetry may be achieved, at least occasionally, largely through the sublimity inherent within the poet's conceptions or subject-matter: such appears to be the assumption by which, for instance, the Hebrew verse "And God said, Let there be light: And there was light" is cited as a sublime utterance. Yet the element of emotion remains very strong within Longinian theory and the uses to which the Romantics put it; and Mill's concept of intense feelings, expressed at their "highest elevation," points toward the common
ground between the Wordsworthian and the Longinian doctrines.

This common ground was shared, however, by a third development within Romantic critical theory: a development related to both Wordsworth and Longius, yet sufficiently different in its emphasis to warrant separate consideration. This is that development which shifts the focus of critical evaluations to the effect of the poem upon the emotions of its readers. Clearly a concern with the workings of poetry upon its audience is one co-ordinate of almost all poetic theory, at least down to the end of the nineteenth century; it is certainly a part of almost every major formulation within poetic theory during the Neoclassical period; but before the Romantics, such a concern almost always takes as its theme the moral effect of poetry, rather than its more strictly psychological effect. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, there gradually emerged a tendency on the part of some critics to define "true poetry" almost exclusively in terms of its operations as an aesthetic stimulus for the emotions; and it is this tendency, in its implications for the critical stature of the long poem, that I wish to consider now. Its central documents, which come from the late 1840's, are of course Poe's "The Philosophy of
Composition" and (especially) "The Poetic Principle."
What Poe had to say in these two celebrated essays has become encrusted with commentary, and his propositions have been refined—and ridiculed—by many later poets and critics. Still, it will perhaps be profitable to go back to Poe's original words and see, insofar as we can recover it, what his meaning was. It is expressed most completely in "The Poetic Principle," since this final lecture in criticism includes, and develops much more fully, the remarks on emotional effect that Poe had made earlier in "The Philosophy of Composition."
Despite the considerable familiarity of Poe's assumptions, it may not be amiss to summarize in some detail the pertinent sections. (They occur as an aside, a preliminary digression, before the main concerns of the lecture, which are to describe the function in verse of such matters as "The Poetic Sentiment," "The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty," "The Heresy of the Didactic," "Taste," "Conscience," "Reason," and much else).

Poe begins, it will be remembered, by setting down as a thesis his "somewhat peculiar principle" that "the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms." He proceeds at once, then, to ground this thesis in a definition of the office of poetry and of the
norm of poetic value: "I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. "But," Poe's argument goes on,

all excitments are, through a psychal necessity, transient. The degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags--fails--a revulsion ensues--and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

There follows, then, the famous discussion of Paradise Lost:

There are, no doubt many who have found difficulty in reconciling the critical dictum that the 'Paradise Lost' is to be devoutly admired throughout, with the absolute impossibility of maintaining for it, during perusal the amount of enthusiasm which that critical dictum would demand. This great work, in fact, is to regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems. . . . After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical pre-judgment can force us to admire. . . . It follows from all this that the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun, is a nullity:--and this is precisely the fact.23

About Poe's attempt to disintegrate the long poem into a series of shorter poems, each of them con-
stellated, somehow, between stretches of non-poetry, there is hardly anything fundamentally new (I shall discuss a number of far earlier attempts in the following section). But I have quoted these passages at some length because they summarize the psychological emphases of a good deal of Romantic thinking about poetry, as those emphases militate against the possibility of the longer forms of poetry. A long poem, according to Poe, is an impossibility, because the heightened excitement, the "effect" on the reader, cannot be maintained for any very considerable period of time: and therein lie the differentia of Poe's theory and of the complex of earlier developments in Romantic theory and criticism that can be said to reach a culmination of sorts in "The Poetic Principle." Unlike critics committed to the Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" as a norm for poetry, Poe's concern is not with whether the poet himself can sustain the spontaneous expression of his emotion. (In all his critical writings, indeed, Poe has remarkably little to say about the poet). Again, unlike critics committed to the Longinian norms of "sublimity" or "intensity," Poe's judgments about the intrinsic quality of poetry are almost completely inferential. Instead, the primary burden of inadequacy, of ultimate failure in providing
for the possibility of the longer forms of poetry, gets transferred from the poet, and from the art of the poem, to the "psychal" functionings of the reader himself.

Basically, Poe's line of argument is generated by the highly problematical assumption that poems have no independent existence apart from the experience of their readers and that the poem is identical with, and can be judged only by, that experience. Poe is right, to be sure, in his understanding that poetry is apprehendable only through the experience of its readers. But more debatable, surely, is his attempt to expand this understanding into a total equation of the poem with the reading experience itself. Poetry, for Poe, hardly seems to have had an objective existence at all, if we judge exclusively from the "doctrine of effect" passages in "The Poetic Principle." However, to draw on René Wellek and Austin Warren, whose Theory of Literature constitutes a strong twentieth-century refutation of this view, "The experience of reading will never be commensurate with the poem . . . . The psychology of the reader will always remain outside the object of literary study--the concrete work of art--and is unable to deal with the question of the structure and value of the work of art." Even the greatest works of art--the last quartets of Beethoven, say, or "Lycidas"--can pall on individual listeners or readers; but to use
such individual reaction as a yardstick of aesthetic value is to enter a hopeless morass of subjectivity and even of physiological concepts. As Wellek and Warren point out, "anarchy, skepticism, a complete confusion of values is the result of every psychological theory, as it must be unrelated either to the structure of the quality of a poem" (p. 135). What are longeurs for one reader of poetry may not be so to another, may not be so to the same reader at another time. Criticism must get outside the psychological reactions of the reader, so far as possible, and examine the poem in its objective existence as form.

My principal design, however, is not to criticize Poe's "doctrime of effect" but simply to assess its importance, within the history of Romantic critical theory, as a stricture on the possibility of long poems. One aspect of that importance, as I have noted, is that one gets in "The Poetic Principle" the strongest and most radical of all Romantic attempts to identify the poem with its "effect" upon its readers—that "effect" being, according to Poe, not Wordsworth's "rectification of men's feelings" but a hedonistic (or, perhaps better, a Cyrenaic) elevation of the soul through excitement. Of more significance for our present purposes, however, is the fact that Poe's statements, and the whole progression of theory that they epitomize, complete a three-
pronged critical and theoretical attack on the possibility of sustaining a major poetic work. Emotions become shrill or run dry; "sublimity" and "intensity" exist only fitfully; now the responses of the reader himself--no matter how "emotional," "sublime," or "intense" the poem--are circumscribed by equal brevity: we nod, after half an hour, over Paradise Lost; we fall asleep over the Aeneid. And Poe's concern to demonstrate our frailty in the transaction of reading our inability to be continuously "excited" by long poems (and hence their dubious existence, in a phenomenological sense), was shared, implicitly or explicitly, by a considerable number of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, from Gorres in Germany and Leopardi in Italy to De Quincey and Keble in England.

4. The "Lyricising" of the Long Poem

If the poet's emotion, the poetry's "intensity" or "sublimity," and the reader's responsiveness seemed incongruent with the concept of a "poem of some length," then it remained for Romantic theory and criticism to formulate conceptual frameworks with which to describe, or at least to apprehend, the structure and substance of works that distinctively laid claim to being such poems. To this challenge there emerged a wide range of responses,
most of which, however, were in one way or another concerned with disintegrating longer poetic structures, through explaining them as compounds of shorter poetic structures. Such a general assumption seems, indeed, to have marked a good deal of the poetic creation of the age, when poets冒险ed a work of major length. In an often-cited passage from his letter to Benjamin Bailey of October 8, 1817, written while he was finishing *Endymion*, Keats records his views on the uses of an extended poem:

I have heard Leigh Hunt say and may be asked—why endeavor after a long poem? To which I should answer—Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander to where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer? Do not they like this better than what they can read through before Mrs. Williams comes down stairs? a Morning work at most.25

This conception of the long poem as a kind of woods, in which one may wander and in which scattered flowers can be gathered, seems not totally removed from the practice, whether intentional or not, of a number of Romantic poets who essayed the longer poetic forms. If we look at the major Romantic long poems themselves, we shall have to conclude that they possess considerably more unity than do such "mixed" eighteenth-century works as Thomson's
The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence, Blair's The Grave, Young's Night Thoughts, Akenside's The Pleasures of Imagination, or Cowper's The Task. Nor do they manifest the later nineteenth-century transition to extended poems collocated from distinct parts: Tennyson's The Princess, significantly subtitled "A Medley," which rather resembles a versified novel strewn with exquisite lyrics; In Memoriam, closer perhaps to an extended song-cycle than to a long poem; Idylls of the King, really a set of twelve related poems; The Ring and the Book, really a strongly unified set of dramatic monologues; and other works more or less similar in their configuration. Yet it seems difficult not to conclude that many Romantic long poems—The Prelude and Hyperion, for instance, or most of Lamartine's more extended works—are characterized by a certain unevenness. They are marked by a conflict between lyric impulse, on the one hand, and an aspiration toward large and comprehensive form on the other hand. At the beginning of this century, A. C. Bradley called attention to the fact that

... much of the most famous narrative poetry of the Romantic period is semi-lyrical in form, as a moment's thought of Scott, Byron, and Coleridge will show. Some of it (for instance, several of Byron's tales, or Wordsworth's White Doe of Rylstone) is strongly tinged with the lyrical spirit. The centre of
interest is inward. It is an interest in emotion, thought, will, rather than in scenes, events, actions, which express and re-act on emotions, thoughts, will. It would hardly be going too far to say that in the most characteristic narrative poetry the balance of outward and inward is rarely attained.26

My principal concerns, however, lie with the formulations of Romantic theory and criticism, rather than with the examples of Romantic poetry itself. And here it is possible, I think, to discriminate two central tendencies within the general attempt to account for the structure of long poetic works:

(1) An argument that all long poems consist in a more or less unbroken series of lyric poems. Under this heading may be fathered, however loosely, the numerous attempts by Romantic criticism to save the essential poetic identity of the longer poetic forms, while minimizing or denying their identity as single, unified poetic constructs. As early as the 1760's, for instance, one finds the French critic Jean-François Marmontel doubting the value of regarding the Iliad as a single poem: rather, according to Marmontel, it is more useful to consider it as a "polyp," of which "each part, once cut off, is itself a polyp, fully living and articulated."27

When the Wolfian hypotheses on the Homeric poems appeared
and established themselves within German philological studies, they furnished a rich fund of concepts on which critics could draw to demonstrate the "atomistic" structure of other long poems besides Homer's. The "separatist" doctrines of Wolf were drawn on individually by Karl Lachman, Friedrich von der Hagen, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and other writers, each of whom used them to display the Nibelungenlied as a composite of separate Teutonic ballads. Wolf's theories also helped to feed the theories on epic that were formulated by Friedrich Schlegel, who argued that all "primitive" epics, of whatever nationality or historical period, must be approached as works collocated from smaller members, each possessing its own independent life, its own identity and organic consistency; and they had a strong impact on Jakob Grimm's concepts of the accretive composition of early epic poetry. In Italy they were accepted, and applied again and again, by Leopardi, who undertook to deny the very possibility of the epic—whether Homeric, Ossianic, or any other—as a distinct genre of poetry. For Leopardi the "true" epic consists in a chain of brief songs and, thereby, is reducible to the condition of lyric: "The epic," he writes, "insofar as it conforms to nature and true poetry, that is, consists of short songs like the Homeric and Ossianic poems and
of hymns, etc., rejoins the lyric." Also, it might be
pointed out that a concept of the long poem as a
collocation of separate lyrics emerges from Poe's bias
toward the psychological "effect" of poetry. Poe is
quite willing to concede that Paradise Lost may be con-
sistently "poetic" in its every line—as is shown by
his thesis that Book II seems insipid if read after
Book I, but wholly admirable if read before it; his
thesis, however, is that the "poetic" qualities can be
apprehended only in small measures at any given time.

(2) An argument that all long poems consist in
passages of genuine poetry, interspersed with passages of
an inferior or non-poetic quality. A remark by T. S.
Eliot, in his essay "From Poe to Valéry," may serve to
point us back, by its very contrariety, toward the
various tendencies of Romantic criticism that partake in
this general argument. "In a long poem," Eliot writes,

some parts may be deliberately planned to be
less 'poetic' than others; these passages may
show no lustre when extracted, but may be
intended to elicit, by contrast, the signi-
ficance of other parts, and to unite them into
a whole more significant than any of the parts.
A long poem may gain by the widest possible
variations of intensity.29

Eliot's willing acceptance of "the widest possible
variations of intensity" was not, however, an essentializ-
ing characteristic of a good deal of Romantic criticism.
Coleridge, it is true, had made and endorsed such an acceptance, out of his conclusion that intensity, or "pure theory," could not be sustained at any great length. Some kind of foil was required for the more distilled or supernal passages of poetry, the only stipulation being that the contrasting material should be "in keeping" with those passages. "... a poem of any length," Coleridge declares midway through Chapter XIV of the Biographia Literaria,

neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry. Yet if an harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry; and this can be no otherwise affected than by such a studied selection and artificial arrangement, as will partake of one, though not a peculiar property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written. 30

Far more common, however, are complaints that the admixture of "non-poetic" passages destroys the organic wholeness of long poems and compromises their right even to be called poems at all. Such was the view, for instance, of a great deal of Dante criticism in eighteenth-century Germany, especially of that German criticism which followed Friedrich Bouterwek's disparagement of the Comedia as a kind of gallery in which beautiful pictures alternate with pictures of tasteless drabness. 31 Such
was the view of Thomas Musgrave, the English critic and translator, who in 1826 found a kind of cold comfort in the fact that a long poem could at least be enjoyed for its "beautiful or interesting passages," although readers were seldom interested in working their way through its whole bulk; and Musgrave's views were paralleled in America by such writers as Hugh Swinton Legare, who concluded that if Paradise Lost and the Comedia possess any merit, it must reside in their lyrical qualities; for they are at best amalgams of lyrics and "drab" passages.32 In Germany, in his treatise "On the Interesting" (written in 1821 but published only posthumously, in 1864), Schopenhauer had declared that all long poems must inevitably be dull and thin-blooded in patches, because they must consist, by their very nature, of "high moments of inspiration" with dead lapses in between.33 And such pronouncements might be multiplied many times over.

There was, thus, a widespread and concerted tendency, on the part of aesthetics and criticism during the Romantic period, to conceive of long poems as works that must, a priori, consist in a nexus of poetic fragments, rather than existing as a "single" poem. Deep and besetting problems—problems of holism, of configuration, of semantics, of the structure and the very nature of
poetry--were raised by such a conception. Moreover, these problems were resolved only imperfectly, I think, by those Romantic writers who had raised them in the first place. But the documents in which they raised them are obviously of historical interest, historical importance; they comprise, indeed, a pattern of attitude that justifies the use of the term "the disintegration of the long poem."
TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have examined some of the ways in which Romantic critical activity exercised itself on the idea (in an almost Platonic sense) of the "poem of some length." The celebrated "revolt" against the long poem during the Romantic period expressed itself in many forms, of course; and the present study has dealt with only a comparatively small number of these manifestations. Numerous important developments were left unexplored: the "ballad revival," from the early eighteenth century to the lifetime of Scott; the holistic tradition in aesthetics, which runs back at least to Plotinus and that certainly shows itself in Coleridge and in many German Romantic critics; and so on. My hope, however, is that I have considered at least a representative cross-section of factors in the Romantic critical animus against long poems.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER V


2. Ibid., I, 243; II, 1283.


5. Leopardi (above, note 1), II, 1183.

6. Leopardi, Le lettere, ed. F. Flora (Florence, 1949),


8. But compare Wordsworth's letter of December 22, 1814, in which he carefully explains that "my first expression in the writing of poetry I often find defective; and it is frequently true of second words as of second thoughts, that they are best." Also the letter of November 22, 1831, in which Wordsworth declares that the "composition of verse is infinitely more of an art than men are prepared to believe; and absolute success in it depends upon innumerable minutiae," and the letter of September 23, 1827, in which he says that "The logical faculty has infinitely more to do with poetry than the young and the inexperienced, whether writer or critic, ever dreams of . . . ." I quote from Wordsworth's Letters: The Middle Years (Oxford, 1939), II, 614; Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, ed. Nowell C. Smith (London, 1905), p. 243; and Wordsworth's Letters: The Later Years (Oxford, 1939), I, 275. In his own practice, Wordsworth appears to have made almost Yeatsian revisions of his own poems.

9. Whereas mimetic poetry might be judged through its achievement in imitating the "exterior" world of men, events, and "Nature," lyric poetry, being the
"imitation" of emotion, could be judged against the conjectured "sincerity" of the poet.

10. Donald M. Foerster, "Homer, Milton, and the American Revolt Against Epic Poetry: 1812-1860," SP, LIII, 1 (January, 1956), 98. A preference for lyric form seems to lie near the center of many Romantic critical attacks on particular epic poems: e.g., Friedrich Schlegel's and Jakob Grimm's low estimates of the Gerusalemme liberata as "sentimental" rather than "naive" (i.e., "lyrical"), August Wilhelm Schlegel's strictures on Paradise Lost, and Hegel's arguments that Homer's epics are not "lyrical" enough. For a further discussion of the "lyricising" of epic poems within Romantic theory and criticism, see Section 4 below.


12. An acute analysis of the lyric emphases of Romantic poetry, as they bear on the problem of creating a long poem, is A. C. Bradley's Oxford lecture "The Long Poem in the Age of Wordsworth," published in Bradley's Oxford Lectures on Poetry, second edition (London, 1909), pp. 177-205. Accepting at least provisionally the thesis that during the Romantic period "the whole poetic spirit of the time was lyrical in tendency," Bradley writes as follows: "It may be suggested . . . that the excellence of the lyrical poetry of Wordsworth's time, and the imperfection of the long narratives and dramas, may have a common origin. Just as it was most natural to Homer or to Shakespeare to express the imaginative substance of his mind in the 'objective' shape of a world of persons and actions ostensibly severed from his own thoughts and feelings, so, perhaps, for some reason or reasons, it was most natural to the best poets of this later time to express that substance in the shape of impassioned reflections, aspirations, prophecies, laments, outcries of joy, murmurings of peace. The matter of these might, in another sense of the word, be 'objective' enough, a matter of general human interest, not personal in any exclusive way; but it appeared in the form of the poet's thought and feeling. Just because the more objective form of utterance; and for the same reason it was especially important that he should be surrounded and penetrated
by an atmosphere of wide, deep, and liberal 'criticism.'" (pp. 184-185).

13. E.g., Josephine Miles, Eras and Modes in English Poetry (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 15-17, 48-99, and Samuel Holt Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England (New York, 1935), pp. 10-28 and passim. As their titles indicate, however, these two studies are confined mainly to English critical theories and poetic practice. The influence of Longinus in France and Italy, and to a lesser extent in Germany, has not, so far as I can ascertain, been adequately studied.

14. I quote from the translation of Longinus published by William Smith in 1739, which had gone to its fifth edition by 1800 and which was the standard translation during most of the eighteenth century following its publication. An excellent concise summary of Longinus's concept of "sublime" intensity is to be found in M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York, 1953), pp. 132-135.


16. Partly reprinted in ibid., I, 349-375. The passages quoted are on pp. 357 and 362 in Elledge; both come from Treatise I, Section 11.

17. Cf. Abrams (above, note 14), p. 133: "'Intensity,' which has since the Romantic period come to rival, and sometimes to supersede, older terms like 'nature,' 'truth,' and 'universal' as a first-order criterion for poetic value, would appear to be a romantic development from the tradition of Peri Hypsous. Romantic variations on Longinian precepts declared that by a stroke beyond the reach of art 'poetry, as such' expresses a mode of feeling which is all but ineffable; that its primary appeal is not to the judgment, but the sensibility; and that its effect is suggestive and hypnotic, leaving the reader in a state of mind resembling a dream. Reference of poetry to supreme moments of
unsustainable feeling and imaginative impetus made it common for romantic theorists to focus upon the short and incandescent passage as the manifestation of poetry at its highest."


20. *Les Carnets du Joseph Joubert*, ed. André Beaunier (Paris, 1938), II, 595, 604, 661. It should be noted, however, that the papers of Joubert (1754-1824) were not published until 1838 and thus had only a limited effect upon French critical thought of his time.

21. Lindenberger (above, note 4), p. 101. It is worth pointing out, however, that the qualities of the sublime were used to attack the longer forms of poetry as early as the various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century disquisitions on the Pindaric ode and on sacred poetry. For instance, Isaac Watts in the "Preface" to his *Horae Lyricae* (1706) complains that the epics of Cowley and Blackmore are hopelessly bereft of the truly "sublime" elements of poetry. "These gentlemen," Watts writes, "in their large and labored works of poesy, have given the world happy examples of what they wish and encourage in prose . . . . If shorter sonnets were composed on sublime subjects, such as the Psalms of David and the holy transports interspersed in the other sacred writings, or such as the moral odes of Horace and the ancient lyrics, I persuade myself that the Christian preacher would find abundant aid from the poet in his design to diffuse virtue and allure souls to God." And later in the same "Preface," Watts records his Longinian judgments of Milton, with an amusing anticipation of Poe: "His Milton's works contain admirable and unequalled instances of bright and beautiful diction, as well as majesty and sereneness of thought. There are several episodes in his longer works that stand in supreme dignity without a rival; yet all that vast reverence with which
I read his Paradise Lost cannot persuade me to be charmed with every page of it. The length of his periods, and sometimes of his parentheses, runs me out of breath." Watts's "Preface" is reprinted in Elledge (above, note 15), I, 148-163; the passages quoted here come from pp. 157 and 161.


28. Leopardi (above, note 1), I, 1226.


30. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. John T. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), II, 11. Compare Coleridge's verdict on Landor's Gebir: "you have eminences excessively bright, and all the ground around and between them in darkness." (Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor [Cambridge, Mass., 1938], p. 432). Evidently the drift of Coleridge's stricture on Landor (it occurs as a remark preserved in the "Table Talk") is that Landor has not kept the "remaining parts" in the proper relation to the "poetic" parts: "the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry . . . ."
31. See Rene Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950* (New Haven, 1955), II, 80, for an exposition of Bouterwek's concept of the *Comedia* as a "picture-gallery." I have been unable to examine the *Geschichte der Poesie und Beredsamkeit*, in which Bouterwek gave the fullest development of his theories.

32. See Foerster (above, note 8), 79, 85.

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