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The most robust considerations of epic's relation to modernity – one thinks immediately of Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin – have understood it to be primarily an *ancient* category. Christopher Phillips insists upon epic's *national* dimension. For fantasies of the nation, and of epic as the form “that would make the monumental task of civic reeducation more feasible” (11), are never far from Phillips's focus. At the same time, however, this is a book less about epic *tout court* than about what Phillips calls the “epic impulse”: “a form of reading, with superlatively extensive annotation in the form of an ‘original’ work” (14). The epic impulse is, for Phillips, already a modern mode of engagement with literary tradition: the book is not so much a response to the likes of Lukács and Bakhtin as it is a study of what Lukács, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), called “second nature”.

A literary second nature, the epic impulse is most often a self-conscious response to Homer or Virgil, or perhaps Milton – this is overwhelmingly the case in the eight main chapters of Phillips's book, which cover the long period stretching from early US epic to Melville's *Clarel*. But the epilogue considers what happens when, as Phillips puts it, epic is absorbed to the point of “invisibility.” The first question here is *how* epic might become invisible, and Phillips argues (through a sustained reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) that much of the work was done through the displacement of the basic canon. Phillips suggests that Ellison's epic impulse cites Sundiata and Homer without allowing the reader easy evidence of the citation. The result, as when a writer like Thomas Pynchon “takes on not Homer and Virgil but Melville and Madison,” is, according to Phillips, a generalized “intertextual background noise” (300).

But then, we might ask, which is it? Have the classical texts themselves been invisibly woven into these novels, or have they been displaced by a new, national canon of references? Until the appearance, in the epilogue, of this claim for a properly historical transformation of the literary field, one sees US literary history not as a displacement of the canon, but instead as the canon's complete diffusion into the literary atmosphere. Indeed, Phillips's book is strongest in its combination of historical breadth and fine-tuned attention to textual detail, so that epic is at times reconceived as a pre-eminently *minor* category, precisely the kind of material that can achieve complete cultural blanketing. (This is perhaps most impressive in Phillips's readings of Sarah Wentworth Morton and Lydia Sigourney, in which the miniaturization of epic grandeur produces much of the poetic effect.)

Critics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US literature will find Phillips's book to be a great mine of information, and literary historians with an appreciation for critical movement across genres, forms, and media will find here a book that earns its near four-hundred-page length through painstaking attention to the range of cultural production that touches upon the epic. For literary historians thinking through the relationship between form and history, Phillips's book is both a fellow traveller and something of an uncertain ally. On the one hand, *Epic in America* reconstructs its

central category in a way that enables real progress in the analysis of the circulation and transformation of literary units at a scale other than that of the genre or the text. Phillips argues, after all, that the epic impulse is so complete in its penetration of literary culture that it can be identified in the end only by its apparent absence, the thorough “encyclopedic inclusion” toward which (as Northrup Frye also suggested) epic tends (303). On the other hand, such unlimited diffusion also destabilizes the category of epic – even of epic impulse – to the point where a sympathetic formalist might also wonder if perhaps a little more attention to what lies outside the epic mode might be useful. And yet perhaps this particular version of literary-historical grey-on-grey yields an old-fashioned Lukácsian lesson. For as Hegel, Lukács’s forebear and the greater student of epic, wrote in his *Philosophy of Right*, “When philosophy paints its grey on grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known.” In *Epic in American Culture*, Phillips has done more than any other historian of American literature to show how the wearing out of literary form is also just another name for tradition.

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