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America--No Second Troy: A Study of Early American Epic

The relation of Americans to the classical epic tradition goes something like the habitual climax of *Indiana Jones* or *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider* films: the maverick archaeologist going into a secret temple that has stood inviolate for thousands of years and then, 15 minutes later, the temple collapsing behind them as the hero or heroine escapes unharmed with some precious piece of loot. This motif is coupled in the American popular imagination with the frequent Hollywood blockbuster destruction of known ancient world monuments, from the Parthenon to the Pyramids, by freak natural disasters or alien invaders (as in *Independence Day, The Day after Tomorrow, or 2012*). Why such vehemence to destroy the emblems of the distinctive identity of other nations? Why can't Americans and epics get along?

It is indeed a curious fact in the world of genres that the United States is a nation without a national epic, in the sense of a single, widely-acknowledged, long narrative poem of exemplary deeds that has been canonized both by scholars and the common folk as distinctly representative of the core character and values of their nation. The fact has been noted by practically every seminal scholarly study of the American epic in the field—Roy Harvey Pearce's 1959 'Toward an American Epic',[1] Michael André Bernstein's making a case for Ezra Pound in his 1980 *The Tale of the Tribe*,[2] and James E. Miller's 1981 studies on Whitman's 'Personal Epic',[3] among others—despite their different priorities or theoretical approaches. That is not to say that there are no works (that can be) defined as 'American epics'. In his overview of the genre from Aristotle to Cecil Bowra, John McWilliams in *The American Epic* notes the inconclusiveness of a definition 'that will suit even those few texts that centuries of readers have agreed to call epics', and justly concludes that 'we must acknowledge that the word "epic" describes a tradition founded, not only upon change, but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities', while its definitions 'are largely determined by the critical assumptions of their age'.[4] However, and even ceding McWilliams's point that the epic transformed in America into different genres (mainly prose), it is notable that while other nations sport one, at the most two national epics (as in the case of Greece or India), the United States must

either claim a collective hundred-or-so, or none that is truly its *one national item*. While the phrase 'American Epic' readily pops up in academic course descriptions or literary discussions in reference to any number of novels—from Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Philip Roth's Zuckerman books—no single text is claimed as taking precedence over the rest. These novels may indeed serve, as Gilbert Adair very rightly observes, the epic-like function of the valorization of the collective image of a people within the context of an ethnic imperialist agenda, yet none of them stands out as required reading across American high-schools for being a representative national text.[5] The same goes for the few canonized poem candidates for this category: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1855 *Song of Hiawatha*, Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Ezra Pound's 1915-62 *Cantos*, or William Carlos Williams' 1963 *Paterson* might function as epics by virtue of one or more features (heroic content, long narrative form, broad cultural compass), but none of them can claim the title of *the* American epic.

There are possible explanations for this phenomenon, or, if you will, for the American innovation upon the norm of the *one* representative text. One could well argue that the vastness of the American land, the diversity of its experience and its constituent peoples, is such that cannot allow a single voice to encompass and define the American identity. This would explain the richness and liveliness of the American folklore tradition (which is mythmaking on a limited scale via self-contained stories) rather than the creation of an American mythology, which presupposes a single network of widely interconnected tales. It could also be said that, while an epic may take centuries to become assimilated into the bone culture of a nation as its representative charter narrative, the founding of America in the 17th-18th century on an agenda of newness and egalitarianism did not allow for such a luxury. America, that new national construct, acquired what it could term a core identity that allowed philosophers or thinkers like Hector St John de Crèvecoeur to ask 'What then is the American, this new man?'[6] well in the 18th century; by then, however, the bourgeois and polyglossic novel had already killed the aristocratic epic, as Bakhtin has so aptly argued in his 1941 essay 'Epic and Novel' ['Эпос и роман (О методологии исследования романа)'].[7] Besides, classical heroism had so long ago been ousted in favor of a more composite political and less patrician model of humankind (favored especially by, among others, the intellectual father of the American nation, Benjamin Franklin), that there was no possibility of an epic mentality taking root. Hence,

Richard Gray's observation that the Whitmanesque epic, that would set the tone for Modernist attempts at redefining the genre in the U.S., is essentially a 'Romantic epic' that would 'create a hero rather than celebrate one', 'a representative, democratic person who discovers his or her identity and values in the course of writing, on their own and on our behalf'.[8]

Those observations, however, run counter to two facts. First, there *are* epic poems that were composed at the time of the conquest and exploration of the American continent—or even much later, like Elias Lönnrot's Finnish *Kalevala*, in the 1830s-40s—that did attain the status of a national epic. The most famous example for the American continent is perhaps Alonso de Ersilla's *La Araucana*, a long narrative poem with features borrowed from both the classical and medieval epic traditions, written between 1569 and 1589 as a chronicle of the victory of the conquistadores over the native Mapuche Indians, which became Chile's national epic.[9] Second, it was the ardent desire of the American literati that they should not be deficient in comparison to other nations as regards a national epic, which was after all a matter of cultural pride. As McWiliams writes, both literary figures like Philip Freneau and fathers of the nation like John Adams wished for an American Homer to rid them of their lack and vindicate the status of America as the teleology of the Western cultural, material, and intellectual process.[10] James David Hart quotes a couplet by 'a proud citizen' of the American Age of Reason summing up this spirit (that would later be stated more forcefully by Emma Lazarus on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty): 'Europe shall mourn her ancient fame declined | And Philadelphia be the Athens of mankind'.[11] Epics came with a value nurtured by all the traditions of the various nations that peopled America and ingrained in their everyday thinking even as a stock metaphor. In his monumental chronicle of the conquest of the Aztec empire, the *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* [*Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, 1632], Bernal Díaz del Castillo compares the destroyed city of Tenochtitlan, the formerly-marvelous Mexican capital, to the wrecked Ilium in the phrase 'here stood Troy' ['aquí fue Troya'].[12] As proof of that desire for the epic we have a number of poetic creations, modeled after classical and medieval paradigms, written in the early stages of American literary history as candidates for the coveted position. Among them the most notable, though even those are recalled today purely for historical purposes, are Michael Wigglesworth's 1662 Puritan extravaganza *The Day of* Doom,[13] which sold incredibly well despite its absolute lack of literary merit;

Timothy Dwight's 1785 *The Conquest of Canäan*,[14] with which we shall deal below; and Joel Barlow's 1807 *The Columbiad*,[15] a poem which, as Larry Kutchen notes:

> has long been regarded warily or condescendingly as perhaps the baggiest of American literature's own great 'baggy monsters'—those imperial long poems proliferated in the Revolution's wake among a small group of elite writers [. …] laboring to represent the new republic as, fundamentally and fatally, the renovated telos of patriarchal western history.[16]

So why did those efforts fail to the point that '[t]he words "American Epic" are presently associated with soporific poems of the early republic, with the modern verse epic originating in Whitman and/or Pound, and with nothing in between'?[17] It is the claim of this chapter that the particular American enterprise to establish a single national epic poem in the classical tradition failed, while other offshoots/genres succeeded, not because it could not adapt or adopt the epic form or its war-related themes; in fact those early poets did so with quite a bit of informed ingeniousness. The problem lay with the ideology through which such form and theme were to be handled, especially as regards the heroic ethos and the classical warrior code.

In its classic form, the heroic code encompasses the attitudes of the representative national hero(es) in a state of combat and includes traits such as physical excellence in terms of both beauty and battle prowess, supreme valor, leadership charisma among the aristocratic peers and honorable conduct towards a foe against whom, nevertheless, the hero must be somehow victorious, even if it means embracing a tortuous or prematurely fatal course in life. It also entails the quest for a fame that endures after death, and that is tied to the fundamental capacity of the hero—as defined by Joseph Campbell, among other myth analysts—to offer his compatriots (and to a greater extent, humankind) a so-called 'ultimate boon'.[18] The acquisition of such a physical or mental boon, however, must necessarily trespass into the path of hubris, since no human can bestow it and therefore the aspiring hero must transcend the limits of humanity and dare the realm of the gods—and their ensuing displeasure—to secure it. By definition, then, a hero is transgressive in the eyes of the gods.

American ideology, however, true to its Puritan origins, at the time the so-called 'Hartfort' or 'Connecticut wits' like Dwight and Barlow attempt their poems, is

not ruled by the classic definition of the heroic code, but by the Miltonic one. Milton's code replaces this defiant, Promethean streak in the hero with the meek realization of a person's 'impotence of mind' though 'in body strong',[19] and self-humbling 'absolute subjection'[20] of the Christian martyr to his divine Master, as spelled out in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Sometimes shocked, as McWilliams points out, by the un-Christian vanity, wrath or pride of a hero like Achilles, or the anthropomorphic pettiness of the gods, '[i]t was to Milton, then, that Americans would look, not for the form of epic, but for the master spirit who had combined heroic grandeur with Christian ethics'.[21] While Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* can be seen as, according to the Romantics, the perfect example of the classical heroic warrior,[22] Milton's Samson or Adam must aspire only to 'justify the ways of God to man'[23] by acting as intermediaries between human knowledge and divine will. They are exulted only through surrender and abasement, the acceptance of their human and mortal limits, and the deferral of all glory to the Almighty God, the only possible purveyor of any universal boon.

Furthermore, in the absolutism of monotheistic religions, it is almost impossible to maintain what is another fundamental trait of the heroic warrior ethos as delineated above, namely the noble attitude towards the opponent. This attitude stems both from the aristocratic universe of the epic, where clashes are not so much between armies as between single and singular warrior-kings, or noble knights dueling versus hand-picked champions of the foe, and also from the understanding that the nobility of the enemy is directly proportionate to the glory gained by the hero in defeating him/her. It is precisely this formulation of the enemy as a worthy peer and a brother that grants classical heroism, for all its bloodiness and childish narrow-mindedness, its tragic dimension: where the clashes of bored and vain immortals pit hapless humans against one another, there is unspeakable pity at the sight of two worthy and excellent humans driven to waste each other's life for a Helen (or, worse, for her simulacrum, as Euripides' homonymous dramatic version of the story goes). Yet when the human conflict is part of the eternal, inexorable, and preordained will of a God who favors one side only, when the tragic human struggle against the gods surrenders to the typological Biblical blueprint that must and will be carried out for America to become the universal 'New Jerusalem', the enemy is reduced to nothing more than Satan's instrument, a mere impediment, a savage, or a heathen, and must be treated with the same definitive severity that all sin and God-opposers in the Bible are.

Added to the above is also the fact that, in the fabulization of the settling of the American land that is operant in journals, diaries, letters and narratives while the very process of colonization is taking place, the available native opponents could not eventually be worked into a *bona fide* heroic conflict narrative due to white prejudice. This is quite ironic, considering that as early as in 1815 William Tudor, the editor of *The North American Review*, and his collaborator Walter Channing both noted the failure to produce an American epic in the classical vein and also indicated that the appropriate material could only come out of Native American legends.[24] Columbus, Thomas Harriot, John White and other initial explorers treat the native Americans they encounter with good will, yet cannot avoid considering them as inferior and patronizing them, given that the Natives were either astoundingly non-violent, like the Tainos, or markedly inferior in weapon technology, and did not present generally a real problem to the encroaching settlers. The noble exchange of warrior vows, for example, between Diomedes and Glaucus in Book VI of the *Iliad*, which, as Byron Harries's argument goes, can occur precisely because the two share a common language, code, gods and noble ancestry, 'a common understanding of their destiny',[25] could never happen when Native cultures encountered by the first settlers were so different from their own. They were so wholly Other, in religion, appearance, habits, conduct of living, values, technology, universal understanding and gender practices, that their battle-practices either invited derision and bafflement, or abject terror (as in the case of del Castillo's description of Aztec cannibal sacrifices in Chapter LVI). It is precisely this utter Otherisation of the Natives (faithfully and graphically rendered, among others, by the outraged Bishop of Chiapas, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, in his 1552 *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* [*Breuissima Relación de la Destruyción de las Indias*]), that allowed the inhuman practices of the Christian *conquistadores* upon them to become so horrible.[26] This attitude towards the Natives was, as history teaches us, unfortunately adopted by the Anglo settlers of the north American continent with escalating prejudice (culminating, though not ending, in the genocidal acts of 'Manifest Destiny', the 'Trail of Tears' and the Massacre at Wounded Knee). The Christian joy and Thanksgiving gratitude for the Native benefactors that helped the Pilgrims survive their first harsh winter, as indicated in William Bradford's diaries, is soon marred by the bias indicated by the popular use of terms such as 'savages' and 'the heathen' for the Natives throughout,[27] and summed up tellingly by Cotton and Increase Mather's titling of the settling of the American

continent as ‘A People of God settled in those, which were once the Devil’s Territories’.[28] The Puritans and later settlers were unable or unwilling to reconcile their sense of strict typological dogma and divine mission of settling this new Paradise with the un-Christian semi-naked inhabitants that were already enjoying that Eden guilt-free. Thus while the aforementioned *Araucana* by Ersilla became a national epic precisely because it elevated the Native Mapuches and their chief, Lautaro, endowing them with classical noble values and warrior virtues and lamenting their mistreatment by the Spaniards, the Anglo-American poets miss the opportunity to depict an *inter pares* confrontation so as to create an epic of the settling of the American land. The Civil war of 1861-65 made an equally bad subject because there the warring parties were too similar, and the strife not against a distinct enemy, but a veritable brother, which significantly lessened the value of the ‘boon’ earned. That left as a suitable epic topic only the 1775-1783 American War of Independence, which brings us to Timothy Dwight’s 1785 11-book poem, *The Conquest of Canäan*.

Dwight, the grandson of the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards and a prodigious youth himself, became involved in the war of Independence before following his natural calling to a career of preaching and then an effective, if religiously conservative, Presidency of Yale. He wrote both poetry and prose, and his *Conquest* is considered one of the first best-sellers in the literary history of America. Today, however, only his epistolary prose collection, *Travels in New England and New York* (1821-22) still garners some scholarly cultural interest. Judging from his combined experiences, he would appear to have been a prime candidate for the creation of a new American epic combining the Puritan ethos with the heroic code. The structure of *The Conquest of Canäan* functions on such two levels, the religious and the military: on one level, it is the verse retelling of the Biblical victorious war of the Israelites, led by Joshua, against the inhabitants of Ai, who had become the Promised Land’s inhabitants while the Israelites were under Egyptian rule. On a second level, it is a typological allegory of the successful war waged by General George Washington, the Commander-in-chief of the Continental Army forces and later first President of the United States, to whom Dwight dedicates his epic.[29] The two major fights of the Israelites are made to match Washington’s campaign against General William Howe’s British colonial army in 1776 which involved the famous winning stratagem of crossing the Delaware River in New Jersey and vanquishing the British forces at Saratoga and Yorktown, eventually leading to the capture of New

York in 1783. Dwight's epic, the online version of *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* tells us:

> owes its style to Pope's Homer and much of its method and imagery to Virgil and Milton. The epic as a whole is what might be expected when the poet's purpose is 'to represent such manners as are removed from the peculiarities of any age or country, and might belong to the amiable and virtuous of any period, elevated without design, refined without ceremony, elegant without fashion, and agreeable because they are ornamented with sincerity, dignity, and religion'. […]. Though intolerably verbose, the poem contains purple passages which lift it to the level of the average eighteenth-century epic […]. With a noble disregard of congruity, *The Conquest of Canaan* is, withal, distinctly patriotic, with its union of 'Canaan and Connecticut' and its allusions to contemporary persons and events.[30]

The ironic jabs in the above evaluation are, unfortunately, not undeserved. As the following close reading of passages in the poem shall show, in trying to combine all traditions, the classical and the Protestant, the Biblical and the contemporary historical, and the courtly romance with pious lay philosophy, Dwight—a weak poetaster at his best—fails to excel in any one of them. The resulting work expresses the patriotic sentimentality of his day without any lasting literary merit, yet can tell us a lot about the miscarried miscegenation of classical heroism in the States.

In his introduction to the poem, Dwight claims it explicitly as epic, and in fact as 'the first of the kind, which has been published in this country'.[31] He also implicitly sets himself as a new Homer or Virgil, when claiming that

> It may perhaps be thought the result of inattention or ignorance, that he chose a subject, in which his countrymen had no national interest. But he remarked that the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* were as agreeable to modern nations, as to the Greeks and Romans.[32]

Dwight adds to that his invocation of the Aristotelian 'entire Unity to the Action' in making the Canäanite hero, Jabin, the focus of his epic (though in fact such focus is not sustained, as he joins the action only in Book VI), as well as the concept of the plausible lie in changing the order of the events.[33] Even Dwight's shift of focus from

Moses, the religious leader, to Joshua, the military leader of the Israelites, suggests an epic turn, reinforced by an opening invocation in Book I to a Muse who is none other but George Washington:

> 1 The Chief, whose arm to Israel's chosen band
> 2 Gave the fair empire of the promis'd land,
> 3 Ordain'd by Heaven to hold the sacred sway,
> 4 Demands my voice and animates the lay.

It soon becomes evident, however, that the Miltonic spirit prevails in the poem, and the warrior ethos (that exists also in the Bible) is replaced with hagiographical images of Christian martyrized suffering, thus removing the poem from the spirit of its supposed root genre. In an interesting reversal of Homeric masculinity, for example, instead of the helmeted Hector accidentally making his infant son Astyanax cry with fear in *Iliad*, VI, it is now the warriors who are introduced in Book I as crying at the sight of their babies:

> 19 Pierc'd with deep wounds the groaning warriors stood;
> 20 Their bosoms heav'd, their tears incessant flow'd;
> 21 Their sons unburied on the hostile plain,
> 22 Their brothers captiv'd, and their parents slain.
> 23 The tender father clasp'd his lovely child,
> 24 That thoughtless-sporting innocently smil'd,
> 25 To his fond arms with soft endearments leapt,
> 26 Gaz'd on his tears, and wonder'd why he wept.

The juxtaposition of infant (hence angelic) innocence that comes with a sort of invulnerability to both bodily and emotional grief, on the one hand, and adult human woe and wounds, on the other, underlines even further the rift between the Heavenly and the secular condition. Thus war is made to seem ungodly while in the classical epic there is often not only divine sanction but a mirroring involvement as well (*theomachia*). The groaning, wounds and tears furthermore recall more Milton’s fallen *Samson Agonistes* than the classical hardy epic combatants, whose battle prowess is all the virtue they need. Speaking of wounds, a great incongruity between the classical

heroic ethos and the Israelite-American warrior in Dwight's epic lies in the treatment of the fatal wound and death of a combatant. As Nicole Loraux observes in *The Experiences of Tiresias*, the warrior's body in the Homeric texts is practically eroticized at the moment of its violent death, and the descriptions of bronze weaponry slowly penetrating the white exposed flesh and organs of the virile body are dwelt on with almost gleeful detail by the poet.[34] This is in congruence with the status of the single warrior, who as a noble or a king deserves special mention at the hour of his death, especially inasmuch as this honorable death in battle shall secure for him his share of post-mortem fame. As Erich Auerbach has shown in his essay 'Odysseus' Scar', Homeric digressions in the form of overly extended metaphors or detailed descriptions of the origin and passage through time of things or people serve not only to maintain a delicate tension between lyricism and action that marks the great art of the poem, but also, in juxtaposition to a Biblical reading of the world as mere surface phenomenon to God's grander design, attributes lasting beauty and significance to the ephemerality of human experience.[35] Such a focus on the beauty of death also reflects the standard mode of epic warfare that generated the heroic ethos, i.e. the face-to-face or chariot-to-chariot duels of heavily armed warriors that supposedly turn the tide of a battle. This immediacy of danger and conflict is what rendered archers like Paris a despised combatant category, since they shot from afar and did not face danger up close and personal, but also what gave the classical epic its tragic and lyrical appeal, as the focus on the lone warrior as a personality right before his hour of mortal trial engages the audience's emotional involvement and interest within a cosmic schema involving human identity.

In Dwight's vision, however, such focus is not only absent, it is not even allowed. Protestant *litotes*, forbearance and humility, on the one hand, forbid any dwelling on personalized suffering and death as a marker of individual glory, finishing off warriors summarily, as in the following examples: 'Swift hurl'd, his javelin sought the hero's side, | Pierc'd to the heart, he groan'd, and gasp'd, and died' (i. 71-72); 'With lifted hand, he drove th' avenging blade, | And plung'd proud Ardan swift to endless shade' (iii. 753-54); or when even the great focal heathen hero, Jabin meets his end in two simple lines, with 'Then with swift wheel, through Jabin's yielding side | Rush'd his keen blade, and pour'd the sable tide' (xi. 949-50). The encapsulation, moreover, of the death scene inside a rhyming couplet makes it appear ludicrously quick when juxtaposed to the delay, for example, of the fall of the warrior's body, effected through

Homeric techniques akin to filmic slow-motion or Eisensteinian montage, or through medieval moribund soliloquies of uncommon length. This kind of death reserved for the Israelites' opponents may well match the swift and humbling modes of Divine vengeance in the Bible—and indeed we note that the word 'swift' is repeated in all the passages as if stereotypically—but in an epic context simply diminishes the opponent's value that is necessary for upholding the heroic ethos. Even when Joshua/Washington verbally defeats his internal opponent, Hanniel, in Book III, the rhetoric agon is reminiscent more of political or pulpit discourses than the angry or insulting warrior exchanges (as with Achilles against Agamemnon in the *Iliad*, or Satan against the battling archangels in *Paradise Lost*). Moreover, the episode ends not in a wild rush of warrior-like sentiment, as in the equivalent Iliadic scene of kingly Odysseus besting the low-born, demoralizing agitator, Thersites, but in this anticlimactic restoration of Protestant propriety: 'The hero ceas'd: a faint applause was heard, | And half-form'd smiles around the plain appear'd' (iii. 815-16).

On the other hand, warfare is now waged as a matter of tactics involving massive battalions of troops, and victories are secured via stratagems, not valor necessarily. Not one specific duel is mentioned in Book III, which recounts the first battle between the defenders of Ai and the Israelites. Thus Dwight's Joshua-Washington cuts a rather absurd figure, as at one moment he struts thundering with his physical presence in the field of battle like an epic warrior, but at another—or most others—he simply stays back and directs his lieutenants to do the actual dirty work for him, as a good modern general would. The one character who dares a free Homeric rush at the enemy, unsanctioned by the general's commands, is the traitorous and sly Hanniel, a character that in Dwight's epic represents the Tories and all those 'Benedict Arnolds' who secretly aided the British enemy. Hanniel in his otherwise valiant rush in Book VI is shamed and wounded, prompting his rescuer Joshua to the following moralizing speech:

245 While Joshua thus—Hence taught, ye warriors, know,
246 Wild, headstrong wishes guide to certain woe,
247 In peace, laws only claim a righteous sway;
248 In war, one voice commands, the rest obey.
249 Proud disobedience Heaven consigns to shame;
250 The path of duty leads alone to fame.

251 He spoke—With awe the silent squadrons heard,

252 The precept reverenc'd, and the teacher fear'd;

The sermon-like admonition, so incongruous to a battle environment, defuses the energies of the epic scene and drains the life out of a conflict situation of potential heroic pathos. Verbs like ‘reverenc’d’ and ‘fear’d’ belong to a congregation, not a confrontation. The pulling away from individual warrior effort, through which glory and honor are gained, to a mere mass movement of pawns under ‘one voice’ may reflect the model of Heavenly obedience to the One God, but fails to stir or reflect the sense of a dangerous and unpredictable melee. Religion murders action.

In Books VI and XI, however, where the two major battles against Ai and their Canänite allies, respectively, take place, Dwight wisely chooses to return to the classical model, and fills the action with long similes. Nevertheless these, unlike their Homeric counterparts, do not serve to distract from the gory spectacle, but are much shorter and utilitarian in providing to-the-point descriptions of the deeds. The deeds themselves consist of a series of personalized duels between the enemy kings or braves and the Jewish heroes, which provide the necessary close-up for the endeavor to acquire significance. Yet, once again, the emotional or moral impact of the warrior ethos is usurped by the importance of tactics, as the culmination of the action in the decisive battle focuses on the stratagem of Joshua to lure the enemy forces away from their advantageous riverside position (an echo of Washington’s own crossing of the Delaware), an action perceived immediately by his opponent Jabin/General Howe as the clincher to the victory.

The engaging focus on the glory and death of the individual warrior is further undermined by the systematic deprecation of the enemy in Dwight’s epic, a treatment classical epics reserve only for low-born characters, and only rarely (hence the shock value of Achilles’ defilement of Hector’s corpse). Although Dwight has his hero proclaim, ‘From dovelike foes what warrior hopes a name? | So cheap the purchase, victory scarce is fame’ (viii. 705-06), all Canäanite warriors and their allies, as well as all internal opponents of Joshua’s plan, are maligned as cowardly ambushers or cold killing machines, boastful or brutish, and, most importantly, ‘heathen’ (which is the stock appellation of the faceless enemy in this epic), or downright satanic. During the first big battle of Book VI, Oran, one of the two Ai heroes, commits several of the seven deadly sins even at being described:

132 Their forms majestic cloath'd in golden pride.
133 Wrapp'd in blue mail, insufferably vain,
134 With cruel front, that frown'd a stern disdain,
135 Around, dark Oran cast a sanguine eye,
136 Wav'd his broad shield, and dar'd th' avenging sky.

Carmi, his beautiful and brave son, is nevertheless portrayed from the start as overly ambitious and narcissistic (vi. 167-74). Likewise, ‘Ludon, the Hivites' prince’, stands ‘[a]ll rough with gold, and gay in barbarous pride’ (vi. 391-92). As for Jabin, the Hazor king, his warrior excellence by the classical heroic code, summed in the two lines at the end of the following excerpt from Book VII, is marred by a not-so-subtle reference to the un-Christian coldness of his genius:

477 He Hazor's realms with mighty sceptre sway'd,
478 And his proud nod unnumber'd hosts obey'd.
479 A genius vast, with cool attention join'd,
480 To wisdom fashion'd his superior mind:
481 No scene unnotic'd 'scap'd his searching view;
482 The arts of peace, and arts of war, he knew;
483 To no kind wish, or tender tear, a prey;
484 But taught by keen discernment equal sway:
493 With firm, fierce bravery forc'd his foes to fly,
494 And gave one law—to conquer, or to die.

Dwight further undermines Jabin by having his appearance preceded by ‘vast Madonians, wrapp'd in barbarous gold’ (vii. 472) on the one side and on the other followed—and even briefly eclipsed—by the haughty giant Jobab, whose ‘horrid form’ is ‘Involv'd in death, and cover'd o'er with blood: | Like some vast wave’ (vii. 664-65). Even Jabin’s greatest triumph, the killing of the Achilles-like Jewish hero Irad, is stripped of its heroic ethical glamour in two ways, the first of which is having Jabin portrayed in Book VIII as Satan exuding hellfire:

319 Great Jabin stood, and o'er the bloody field

320 Rais'd the broad terrors of his flaming shield;
321 His grimly brow, all blacken'd o'er with dust,
322 Frown'd like a storm, and froze the trembling host;

This (and many other Satan-like jabs later on) again move the epic from the heroic to the Miltonic vein, where it is notable that in the battle scenes in Heaven the otherwise too-sombre poet lapses even in scatological humor to belittle Satan as a warrior-adversary.[36] In addition, a second element of defamation, so contrary to the heroic duel tradition, is having the killing blow delivered not by Jabin to the exposed Irad in Book VIII, but by some unseen coward who steals both warriors' glory:

353 From some base arm unseen, in covert flung,
354 Through his white side a coward javelin sung,
355 He fell—a groan sad-murmur'd round the host,
356 Their joy, their glory, and their leader lost.

Adding to the ignominy of a death by an unseen hand (with no genealogy), its encapsulation in a 'swift' heroic couplet further rushed by its asyndeton second line reduces individual human fate, whose focus grants epic conflict its tragic appeal, to an inconsequential dot within the immensity of Divine planning. Thus reduced, all warriors, friend or foe, cease to matter and hence the epic code loses its potency.

The debasement of the enemy is also indirectly achieved by a telling conflation of epic with American mores, as the heathens are also portrayed as Native Americans on several occasions. In Book IV, the standard white settler nightmare of captivity, torture and rape by the Natives, immortalized in the narrative of Mary Rowlandson among others, is realized when the Jewish maiden, Mina, is seen ''Twixt two rough savages, whose hungry eyes | Lower'd death, and ruin, o'er their helpless prize' (iv. 1333-34). The forest where the wandering Mina is captured displays all the negative qualities given to such places by the American folk imaginary, who saw in it the Devil's stronghold (recall Washington Irving's 'Young Goodman Brown') and the sanctuary of his unholy children, the native peoples: seductive at first, it soon becomes a place for the howling wolf and the rapacious villain (iv. 263-96). The motif of Mina's kidnapping is repeated later on in the same Book with a different helpless victim, a Jewish boy, Helon (iv. 595-96), who meets a swift death as well, allowing

for one more round of revenge by his father on the nameless and insignificant band of kidnappers (iv. 620-36). Shifting the damage inflicted by the enemy on non-combatants suggests the devious and un-warrior-like nature of enemy, demoting them further, and again juxtaposes massive tactical army movements (that win the day) to spasmodic motions like the kidnappings. In fact, the entire Helon episode, besides valorizing fatherly love, serves no organic purpose whatsoever in the larger epic besides underscoring the didactic admonition never to stray into the forest. The native synecdoche, the forest, even plays on its role independently in Book VII, where it becomes the rallying point for the ambushing forces of Jabin’s army, and finally is set on fire to prevent the Israelites from pursuing their enemies and securing an early victory.

However, the most final and even shocking display of un-ethical (by classical epic standards) enemy devaluation comes in Book III, when the Jewish hero Irad explains to his betrothed, Selima, that Christian mercy in war is not warranted, as the enemy opposes God’s plan, and therefore even the innocent babies in the besieged city must be squashed like the satanic vermin they are before they hatch into warriors:

> 273 Should then these infants to dread manhood rise,
> 274 What unheard crimes would smoke thro' earth and skies!
> 275 What hosts of demons sin's dark realm would gain!
> 276 How hell gape hideous round Canäan's plain!
> 277 This sea of guilt unmeasur'd to prevent,
> 278 Our chosen race eternal Justice sent,
> 279 At once the bright possession to reclaim,
> 280 And 'gainst its victims point the vengeful flame,
> 281 Thus crimes their due and dire reward shall know;
> 282 Thus God be witness'd sin's unchanging foe;

It is part of the warrior code to respect the adversary’s status as a family man, especially as a son; in *the Iliad*, Priam invokes Achilles’ own aged father to soften the warrior’s heart, while the killing of Astyanax by Pyrrhus in the narratives of the sacking of Troy (both earlier and tragic renditions) condemn it as a savage act as much as they praise Aeneas’ carrying of Anchises. Here, however, with the foes reduced again via word-choice to demons from Hell, and seen from the telos-

encompassing perspective of God’s plan, their humanity and the potential it carries for pathos is forfeit. Dwight even secures his hero from the charge of cruelty by having later on, in Book IV, the voice of God himself sanctions such extreme measures by virtue of his absolute authority:

> 49 Of Judah's race, a wretch, by madness driven,
> 50 With impious hand, hath dar'd the wrath of Heaven:
> 51 Stones shall his house destroy, and flames devour;
> 52 I am commands; let all his sons adore.

Consequently, when the poet attempts a Homeric overture and shows the occasional pitying of the slain foe, like the Canäanite Carmi does for aged Hezron who reminds him of his father (vi. 481-88)—or Irad does for his foil, Carmi, when he kills him in turn later on (vi. 534-40)—the pity is short lived and immediately diverted with ‘He spoke; and fiercely wheel'd his bloody sword, | Sprang to the fight, and many a hero gor'd’ (vi. 489-90). There is in Irad no recognition of the enemy as a person cast by fate as an opponent, with equal rights to life in his own private realm, as in the classical warrior code, but a solipsistic musing on what a pity it is that this person opposed God’s plan. Similarly, when Irad pays tribute to Ai, which is now burning like a second Troy, a throng of foes bursts out of the treacherous forest to remind him that his pity is misspent and against God’s will, so he springs back into action like Achilles (vi. 137-68). The tragic vanity of human mortality that appeared as the culminating piece of wisdom in epic philosophy, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to the last lines of the *Iliad*, is therefore stripped of its importance when compared with the eternal plans of the immortal god that brook no pause for reflection. War, a cold and inhuman business at best, is further dehumanized by having the human perspective and pathos of the warrior removed from it.

Ultimately, then, Timothy Dwight’s epic is not so much an epic as a hellfire sermon in verse, for the final blow to the warrior code is given by Jehovah himself, making an apocalyptic appearance to steal the show in the closing battle scene of the poem. The anthropomorphic gods become involved in *theomachiae* alongside, or against, the human warriors, but without single-handedly changing the course of the battle, maintaining thus the focus of the classical epic on the human warrior plane. However, this one God’s will is adamant and unchanging from the start, directing his

human pawns like the ultimate general. He frequently appears as a series of paranormal phenomena (clouds, thunderous sound) to sanction Israel's course, and in Book III the victory of the Israelites, despite Joshua and his army, is, in fact, due to a divine thunderstorm that scares the Canäanites away. So with the final battle in Book XI, Joshua's triumph over Jabin in single combat is immediately overshadowed—literally—by a storm of hail and an angelic fiery beam that smite the remaining Ai army and secure the field for the Israelites. Yet the supremacy of God over warrior ethics in this epic is not limited to the narrative facts. After the demoralizing death of Irad, in Books IX and X an angel guides Joshua to a vision of futurity, with America featuring as the natural heir to, and universal teleology of, the Christian empire. Although the same device exists in Milton, from whom Dwight apparently borrows it, in *Paradise Lost* the angel desists from showing Adam the whole vision of the future, as his human mind supposedly is not ready yet for such vast knowledge or certainty. Dwight has no such qualms, as he is weaned by the Puritan vision of 'the City on a Hill' sustaining the grounding principle of his American nation as a beacon and an example to be spread to other nations. This is why in Book IV the friendly Gibeonites restore the captured maiden Mina to the Israelites—in direct reversal of the Trojan attitude towards Helen—with the sole request of being allowed to partake of the Israelites' one true religion. This action and the ensuing alliance of the two tribes provide the impetus for later military action, but also foreshadow the American nation's politico-religious teleology, as seen, for example, in Book II:

755 Then o'er wide lands, as blissful Eden bright,
756 Type of the skies, and seats of pure delight,
757 Our sons, with prosperous course, shall stretch their sway,
758 And claim an empire, spread from sea to sea:
759 In one great whole th' harmonious tribes combine;
760 Trace Justice' path, and choose their chiefs divine;
761 On Freedom's base erect the heavenly plan;
762 Teach laws to reign, aud save the rights of man.
763 Then smiling Art shall wrap the fields in bloom,
764 Fine the rich ore, and guide the useful loom;
765 Then lofty towers in golden pomp arise;
766 Then spiry cities meet auspicious skies:

Having therefore effaced not just the warrior as hero, but General Washington himself as the prime mover, or even the Aristotelian organic unifier of this action—which, after all, is repositioned as a mere blink in the aeon-long continuity of the divine plan —Dwight effectively sabotages the value of his own first American epic as such, since the term epic suggests a monumental and defining moment in *human* history. This self-undermining goes beyond his individual merits as a poet and becomes a failed discourse with the genre's defining traits and the promise of meaning and affective strength these traits hold for all who use it. Dwight does not even 'justify the ways of God to man', as Milton attempts to do, for his Puritan God owes no justification at all to man. In the battle between Jehovah and the classical muse for ownership of the American literary Canäan, the second Commandment still stands: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'.

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