CLUES AND SOURCES

Homer, Vergil, Camões: State and Epic

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Under the heading «Epic-Theory» in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics one reads: «There was no speculation on the proper nature of epic until its usefulness had been questioned.»¹ To this highly suggestive observation it must be added that speculation did not prevent the subsequent production of epics nor the invention of a new «usefulness.» The inclusion of three texts—Homer's Odyssey, Vergil's Aeneid and Camões' Os Lusiadas—may now constitute a practical point of departure. Both Os Lusiadas and the Aeneid are themselves pieces of epic criticism which «speculate on the proper nature» of a genre in the very process of attempting to reproduce it. For Vergil this «nature» is fully embodied in Homer. The task is to reconstitute the Homeric epics so as, in effect, to take up where they left off—such, at least, is the popular account of Vergil's achievement. For Camões, who apparently never read or had access to anything more than a fragment of the Odyssey, the task is nevertheless superficially identical—only now it is the Aeneid which is the template, and what must be reproduced is already a reproduction. Standard contemporary criticism will, using such criteria, classify the Aeneid and Os Lusiadas as «secondary» or «learned» epics, opposed to the «primary» «primitive»—practically speaking, edenic—epics of Homer. The distinction incorporates but goes far beyond the transition from oral to written epic.

But history undermines and exposes this logic of simple precedence and imitation. Neither the Aeneid nor Os Lusiadas are mere aesthetic reproductions. They likewise reproduce explicitly political ideologies which emanate from a set of social relations and consciousness not proper to either the Iliad or Odyssey. Though homologous in places, these two acts of reproduction—the aesthetic and the political, the «imitation» and the adaptation of epicality—appear unable to form a new, synthetic unity which can be simultaneously joined to both perspectives. What thereby strike the reader as both aesthetic and political contradictions in terms in the «learned» epics point to underlying contradictions which the historical materialist will recognize as involving classes, and in an even broader motion, modes of production. The result of «learned» epic production is therefore neither the creation of an entirely «new» epic «nature», nor the reconstitution of the «old,» but rather a process which, if correctly interpreted, will lead to the critical abandonment of the very conception of an epic «nature» and guide us to a more properly dialectical concept of an epic.
relation to other, fundamental facets of existence. This, of course, must ultimately be understood as a relation of ideology to its basis in social life.

With the production of "learned" epics such as the Aeneid and Os Lusiadas, this relation has undergone a radical shift—even, we might say, a revolution. We propose to be quite specific about the force that determines this change. In it, it is possible to see not only the source of political-aesthetic contradiction in the "learned" epics, but also the interpretative—hence ultimately social—ground upon which a certain synthetic epic unity is finally achieved. We refer, of course, to the State.

The oral epic tradition which culminates in Homer and a new written mode of literary production precedes development of the state and remains a purely tribal phenomenon. Homer, especially the Homer who produces the Odyssey, both witnesses and participates in a phase of the state's prolonged and regional birth. The Vergil of the Aeneid as well as the Camões of Os Lusiadas work boldly to extend and transform this primitive and ideological presence, but at the same time that they are so much the children of the state they cannot recall maternal origins and so naturally assume that the state has always existed. It is in fact the state itself which has recruited them to stage its epic, thus mystifying and obscuring its own real history. The real, external, historical presence of the state is, we propose, the critical differentiator in the theoretically weak but empirically valuable "learned"/"primitive" opposition. What we show is that it is the presence or absence of the state which accounts for the superficial appearance of radical but exclusively "formal" and "cultural" differences between the three texts we have chosen to analyze. This presence/absence must be understood not only as denoting the actual state apparatus but additionally the presence or absence of state society and state ideology. A state society may be said to have fully emerged once it has so decisively broken the hold of the tribal relations which precede it that these older ties no longer pose any resistance to its hegemony; likewise, a state ideology only begins to exert itself fully once it has eliminated tribal ideologies from the social consciousness of any and all groups that constitute a material threat to state power. Perhaps the clearest indication that this has taken place is the disappearance of tribal relations, known as such, from the collective memory as a whole.

But there is much more to the relation than this, for it is not merely a question of a crucial but essentially fortuitous meeting of a political and an aesthetic phenomenon, but a case of necessary contact. The state not only stands above the "learned" epic as the principal cause of its formal difference, but is itself the central motivating force for the resolution of an already antiquated form, for the act of "imitation" itself. Augustus personally commissions and oversees publication of the Aeneid. Camões, though not so obviously a draftsman, is at least able to extract a modest pension from King Sebastião in reward for his efforts, something a simple mercenary could not have dreamt of obtaining. It will, of course, be possible to discover instances which are not so blatant (e.g., Dante or Milton). But here it is not the state whose influence has diminished—rather it is an increased congruence of the epic poet's own class and authorial production of ideology with the social and ideological problems already posed by the struggle for state power. This is a congruence from within, for the state has become increasingly capable of interiorizing itself as discrete set of political and even literary motives.

The state appears from the outside to be both a fortuitous encounter and necessary contact. It is, however, revealed from within to be nothing short of a kinship—doubly so, since the inter-relation we propose to uncover and describe here amounts to a common, though not simultaneous, genesis of both the state and the epic in the division of labor. This shall be the major theoretical emphasis of our study. Before we precede to the investigation of this genealogy, however, it must be well understood that the relations we have isolated as externally and internally causative are so isolated only for reasons of analysis and that the relation of state to epic takes, in actuality, the form a concrete and contradictory unity in which the internal contradiction is epistemologically pre-eminent.

The remaining bulk of our study now breaks down in the analysis of three strategic inter-relations:

(I) The inter-relation of the state and the division of labor. Under this heading we shall recapitulate the classic work of Marx and Engels on this topic, augmenting it with what we consider to be its implications for the study of state ideology.

(II) The inter-relation of the epic and the division of labor, under which we shall very generally and schematically undertake the generic derivation of the epic in the concrete historical development of the division of labor.

(III) The inter-relation of the epic and the state. Here we qualify the specific interconnections between particular epics and particular instances of state power and then proceed to make definitive textual interpretations of the three texts at hand.

I

The best account of the inter-relation of the division of labor and the state is to be found in Engels' _Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State_ which remains the crucial theoretical work of Marxism on this subject. In it Engels successfully avoids the abstract derivation of the state in Hegelian notions of the "ethical idea" and the "common" vs. the "particular" interest, etc., and theorizes on the basis of a fully historical-materialist derivation of the state out of the break-up of "tribal society." He shows how new social factors arising from the development of classes and of exchange production (money, usury, commerce, etc.) came into aggravated contradiction with the gentle natural economy.

... The gentle constitution had grown out of a society that knew no internal antagonisms and was adapted only for such a society. It had no coercive power except public opinion. But now a society had come into being that by the force of all its economic conditions of existence had to split up into freemen and slaves, into exploiting rich and exploited poor; a society that was not only incapable of reconciling these antagonisms, but had to drive them more and more to a head. Such a society could only exist either in a state of continuous, open struggle of these classes against one another or under the rule of a third power which, while ostensibly standing above the classes struggling with each other, suppressed their open conflict and permitted a class struggle at most in the economic field, in a so-called legal form. The gentle constitution had outlived its usefulness. It was burst asunder by the division of labor and by its result, the division of society into classes. Its place was taken by the state. (emphasis ours)

Thus the state is called into existence as the practical means of guaranteeing, for the first time, the rule of an appropriating class. This it does through centralization
of public power, division of the populace according to territory, taxation, and police coercion. In brief, the state now begins to more and more consciously supervise that very process from which it springs—the division of labor.

State rule is typically the rule of a single class which has succeeded in dominating all the others but which must concede to a sharpened and constant class struggle the necessity of representing its own interests as the common or aggregate interest. Therefore among all of the state's practical requirements is the need for an ideology which will accomplish this mystification. Marx and Engels specify this ideology as an "illusory community"—that is, not only the elevation but the abstraction and generalization of what are, in fact, not virtues of community at all, but the virtues of private owners. To this we would add only the following: state ideology, in the form of an "illusory community" must, in order to reproduce itself, narrate what amount to the necessary false theories of a) its own origins in the division of labor, b) the origins of the classes in the divisions of labor, and hence c) both the division of labor and value itself. The "illusory community" must have the means to police the productive minds of the human bodies it divides, riding as it does the crest of the development which initially causes their split. It need not look far to find them: wealth, violence (as ideologemes), art, religion, education and even literature, all products of tribal life, are at its finger tips. The state simply is asserted as the ordering principle of a whole set of divisions which have previously led an independent existence outside the supervision of a single appropriating class. The state therefore seeks to infiltrate consciousness as it wills, and thereby undermines the organization of all the modes of activity into an enforced set of hierarchical relations. This theory, as well as the theory of value implicit in the hierarchy of labor it stipulates, is, again, both necessary and false in that it is determined by relations of appropriation. Thus the fact that an Athenian aristocrat has no use for the cooking of his own food and acquires a slave (private productive labor) to cook for him while he produces philosophical treatises must appear to be the natural result of the inferiority of the "craft" of cooking to the "arts" of reasoning. Here we see the principal expression of the labor hierarchy in ideological form—the superiority of intellectual over manual pursuits—wedded to its corresponding social reality: the private ownership of labor.

II

The specialized production of narrative follows upon the division of manual and mental labor. This immediately equips it to reproduce ideology. Narration develops out of the underlying activity common to both telling and accounting. a practice which in turn arises out of the natural economy that produces calendars, genealogies, memoirs, mnemonic accounting, etc. Previous to the division of manual and mental labor production serves as its own narration—the need satisfied by "telling" has not separated from the consciousness of production itself. "Intelllectual in separation from manual labor" arises as a means of the appropriation of products of labor by non-labourers—not originally as an aid to production. Thus, a separate "telling" both follows upon and is itself an appropriation. Human activity meanwhile differentiates and expands to the point of constituting a "story" and creates through this same motion a group of individuals who need to hear it and another group organized to produce it. 

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the Iron Age—manual production becomes single production, but at the same time intellectual labour becomes universalized. Where, let us say, a potter cannot reproduce the consciousness which emanates from hunting or planting the story teller in the process of becoming an epic bard, thanks to the special nature of his raw material, is able to reproduce such consciousness, even including that of potting. This is equipped not only with the special faculty of social memory but also with the capacity to store and prolong such memory, narrative production acquires a unique relation to history. It is when the accumulation of an historical analogue of knowledge becomes the special function of narrative production that it becomes most convenient to call it epic narration. The production of epic narration is thus charged with the mnemonic and oral inscription of not only the major divisions of labor but of their genealogy as well. Here we can begin to account for the generally attested fact that the earliest epic narrations are the incantations of myths which concern the productive deeds, usually creational, of divine beings in animal, semi-human and human form. The fact that these divisions are associated with natural divisions such as earth and sky does not contradict but in fact asserts the epic's essential concern for the major divisions in their historical aspect. Earth and sky only assume independent existences for the hunter, and even more so for the agriculturist, because of and for whom a distinct earth and sky imply a special kind of production. Mythic figures like Ra or Coyote are the hypostatized and ideologized origins of the divisions of labor that have produced the major revolutions in production and human consciousness.

The emergence of well-defined social classes marks the commencement of tribal decline and is, to use Engels' term, the "admission" that the division of labor has entered into contradiction with itself. The phenomenon of inter-tribal warfare, which has previously been witnessed only as a mass undertaking in which an entire society moves to protect or extend itself, now becomes a means for reproducing the wealth and social dominance of a single division in the form of a class. If this class prolongs itself primarily through wars or plunder which require the participation of the other classes, then it also requires a means of legitimizing this activity, both to itself and to its social inferiors. Such a class of course lacks a materialist understanding of its own origins, but needs, at the same time, an idealization of its material practice; thus it inevitably realizes the replacement of a divine or semi-divine god or culture hero with a super-human warrior so as to accomplish this legitimation.

What the critic, historian and vulgarizer of literature normally understand by "epic hero"—a socially powerful male warrior in his prime who enjoys splendid isolation from the popular interests he supposedly embodies—is thus a sort of mechanized skeleton whose divine flash has been eaten away by the demands of a new class order and then surgically replaced by the needs of that same class to propagate a principle of social unity under its control. The need to mythify the origins of the major divisions of labor—a need of the whole tribe—now becomes the need to mythify the more recent origin of a class division, as well as the nature of that class' major activity.

But already the groundwork for contradiction has been laid. The epic cannot undertake the mystification of a major division without also expressing that division. The same process which has elevated warfare for plunder and made it the proper activity for the enrichment of a certain class has not carried along with it a narrative mode which belongs exclusively to that activity and that class. The heroic epic cannot be exclusively derived from heroes. Epic narration has already constituted itself as a separate labor which bears a special social relation
to all the divisions: if a tribal bard sings the mythic story of, say, the discovery and cultivation of corn, that is because such an advance in production and the division of labor has of necessity effected the very nature of work itself and contributed to the enrichment of a class of people as a whole, including the bard. The production of war for plunder may call certain new productive activities into existence—e.g., the engines of siege—but, given its simultaneous and strict class appurtenance, it separates itself from production as a whole, even to the point of retarding it. In order to become epic content, the new warfare must slumber in the narrative production just as it does a neighboring settlement. The heroic epic, unlike the mythic-cultural, must be hired out. The epic poet, who does not himself engage in warfare, becomes a retainer of the new dominant warrior-class; he works for interests which do not coincide with his own and those of the whole people. Every work of literature internalizes in some fashion its own social relations of production. We read those of the heroic epic in the absolutely alienated magnificence, excellence and isolation of the new epic heroes, in whom we perceive the hypostatization of a revolutionary social advance forced to portray itself as the activity of individual combat undertaken for personal prestige and wealth.

To spell specifically of Homer now only requires the addition of two further derivations: the advancement of this class of epic patrons in Attic Greece to duality in a new mode of production based on emerging commodity exchange, and increasing cultivation of large tracts of private property by increasingly large numbers of slaves and poor peasants, as well as on the practice of usurious mortgaging and the extension of writing to the practice of literary transcription along with other social diversifications. The ruling class which Homer serves, and to whose behalf he belongs, must relate as in some way an elevated servant, has taken on a more sedate existence, but still derives value from having and hearing the deeds of its heroic progenitors portrayed. That a need for a written recitative text has arisen implies both a preference and a need of this class for the version of a particular epic bard (Homer) over those of others, as well as an increased intellectual intercourse among its members made possible by their urbanization. Literary writing becomes a means for asserting class control over epic production. Oral epic production continues to supply material for written literary modes but itself formally passes out of literary history as an aesthetic ideology. The class of epic patrons has acquired taste. But as the reproduction of their way of life becomes more and more dependent on the relations established by wealth in the form of land and commerce and less and less on the relations established by the tribe, so have their interests become more and more diametrically opposed to those of their fellow tribesmen: a large mass of slaves and poor peasants. And so, along with first features of taste come first features of the state.

The production of the heroic epic accompanies the split of society into classes and the transformation of the epic itself into a service for hire to a ruling class. But as the ruling warrior nobility of Attic Greece gradually shifts its primary activity from plundering to commerce and a landed exploitation of slave and peasant labor it apparently retains its demand for the episcopization of its warfare phase. On this basis, and because epic production inevitably retains its earthen phase, it has taken on the contradictory of including all the major divisions of labor, the epic poet of Homer's time must confront his task as involving an incipient class critique. The epic poets of Homer's time, much like the demigurges or artisan class of that same period, own their own instruments of aesthetic production and can regard their activity as having a certain class, even professional, privilege. Such a development helps to explain the extraordinary continuity of

oral epic production in Attic Greece from the Doric invasion down to Homer's time—a period of roughly four hundred years. It is also indicated in the rapid institutionalization of the Homeric texts by the rhapsodes and the imitative authors of the Cyclic epics. To explain these developments requires more than just the presence of a single genius.

Homer realizes the potential class-criticism of epic in unsurpassed fashion—this, in our opinion, helps to explain the astounding ability of the Homeric epics to reproduce themselves aesthetically under successively revolutionized modes of production and social formations—albeit not without certain distortions. The Iliad and Odyssey are not the mere narrations of bellicose class exploits and heroic genealogies. They narrate heroics in a way that exposes their alienated character. Their task remains the elevation of a class, but a shift in the perspective from which this elevation is undertaken, a shift towards a more fully class perspective, increasingly distinct from ruling interests, begins to reverse the moral polarity of the original ranking of the divisions of labor in the classic, oral period of heroic epic production. It is not a matter of choosing this new perspective but of its being imposed by the reality of a class divided society increasingly distinct from ruling interests, begins to reverse the moral which means necessarily divided perspectives on virtually everything. This is what lends critical capacity to the epic, a capacity exercised implicitly by Homer in the Iliad—where the exclusive representation of warfare becomes the representation of its estrangement from the other, imported divisions—and explicitly in the Odyssey—where the previously absent divisions now confront the epic hero with a critical force. We may say that the content of the Iliad but especially that of the Odyssey reflects at once the need of epic production to serve the tastes of a wealthy mercantile ruling class, the relative critical freedom guaranteed by an artisanal class position, and the nascent state which institutes these classes. The Homeric poet applies his labor under this given circumstance in which the class he serves requires a critically nationalist treatment of its distant ancestors. This is precisely because it originates from the general ancestral stock from which it must now, nevertheless, be portrayed as separate, i.e., a class: ideology is inverted genealogy.

After Homer the epic passes out of its dominance as a literary mode and is replaced by the chorale elegy and the lyric. The same guild relations that have contributed to the excellence of the Homeric texts now take on the primary job of preserving those texts and completing the cycle. They gradually produce the opposite of excellence. Be it the Anthimachian, the Cholokhar or the little Iliad of Callimachus, epic production becomes an alchemical pastime for a group of professional literati. The demand of wealthy patrons for the epic portrayal of thinly disguised «ancestral» deeds perhaps remains at previous levels—but it is one in which the new written imitative production has transformed into the demand for a mere outward sign of wealth and prestige, an addition to property, i.e., literary production finally as commodity. Meanwhile the last vestiges of the tribal division of labor have all but disappeared, giving way to the strengthened state apparatus of Athenian and Hellenistic empire. Equally important is the rise of new literary modes which partially take over the job of inscribing, chronicling and mystifying the division of labor: historiography and philosophy, Herodotus and Plato.

Epic narration inscribes, genealogizes and mythifies the major divisions of labor which arise out of tribal life. Heroic epic narration inscribes, genealogizes and mystifies a class division which arises out of tribal decline. Both presuppose an aesthetic wholeness (in that they are both unique and comprehensive) in their
rative reproductions of tribal and «heroic» relations and consciousness. Textual Homer appropriates this wholeness as a standard for all subsequent ages, but the social and productive formation which produces him also determines the loss of this wholeness and the subordination of epic to other divisions of literary production and to the state in general. The class divisions of labor that lead to the state also make it necessary that the state assert its control over the different class activities. The more the state undertakes to do this the more it requires the ideological means to inscribe class divisions and the hierarchy of labor in the consciousness of its citizens. The epic has all along functioned as a kind of literary state; the task now is to make the state itself more literary.

III

The theoretical basis has now been laid for an understanding of both state, epic, and their inter-relation through the historically mediating factor of the division of labor. Analysis of this inter-relation reveals a gradual and parallel evolutionary process marked by corresponding revolutions.

What schematically begins as an epic prefiguration of the state (Homer) proceeds to the ancient, slave-holder’s state itself at the peak of its development. Augustan empire, in turn produces an epic (Vergil) which is the purest generic expression of epic’s new political status. With this the ancient state exhausts the limits of its economic and social base and collapses back into the ground of its origin. It has produced no revolutionary class capable of both political conquest of the state and advancing production to new levels. And as goes the state so goes the epic. It is only the rise of the bourgeois state which temporarily revives the epic as a genre which has regained its former elevated status, that is, as a production which compares itself implicitly with pre-state epic (Homer). Epic once again becomes the viable discourse of state ideology. But once again the (bourgeois) state can only appear as an absence (Camões) despite the fact that capitalist relations are burgeoning everywhere.

With the decline of tribal life there emerges the need of mental production to control the division of labor. We find that the epic supplies this need, inasmuch as it remains at this stage the narration of the division of labor itself. At the same time, the tribal need of mental production to control the other divisions establishes itself as a social conscience and consciousness through the epic.

The heroic epic narrates a class division of labor. It is therefore inserted into a class ideology that is not merely the reflex of the «superiority» of mental production, but the mental arm of an elevated class labor (warfare for plunder) which must recruit the labor of the other divisions in a similarly belligerent form. But war is now an alienated activity. Thus the narration of war, at the same time that it must reproduce an alienated social consciousness, must also try to reverse the effects of this alienation by an implicit or explicit call to the other subordinated labors. (This process is still familiar to moderns in the marketing of war in the ideological terms of peace. Within epic itself this can only produce contradiction.)

With Homer the epic enters the space left empty by a still absent state ideology. Again, it is precisely the further development of class society and the epic poet’s acquisition of certain class privileges which enable it to take on this role. As the more orthodox heroic epic, the *Iliad* reveals what we have called class «criticism» of the division of labor in its open portrayal of war as an alienated activity. The «wrath» of Achilles, the «pride» of Agamemnon, the capricious and deadly partisanship of the gods—what many have recognized as the tragic kernel of the *Iliad*—are simply the most salient features of a class critique of an heroic activity which can no longer recruit:

Then looking darkly at him Achilles
of the swift feet spoke:
‘O wrapped in shamelessness, with your mind
forever on profit,
how shall any one of the Achaeans readily
obey you
either to go on a journey or to fight men strongly
in battle?’ (*Iliad*, 1, 148-151)

Thanks again to the epic’s «constitution,» this critique attains a high degree of social objectivity.

But it is in the *Odyssey* that this critique—this powerful epic negativity—receives its fullest, most explicit, if less tragic, expression. It is here that the epic undertakes what it will never again be able to with any hope of success: a return to the mythic and cultural «epos,» that is, an ideological resumption of the tribal division of labor in its holistic relation to the epic. This attempt fails, as it must—but only partly so. For the result is not only epic failure but an epic success in the critical manipulation of a contradiction which assumes the aesthetic form of *anachronism*. The *Odyssey* looks simultaneously backwards to the pre-heroic days of myth and tribal society and forwards to a post-heroic ideology and division of labor which it, however, can only glimpse in the negative form of an absence and a need.

A brief survey of the *Odyssey’s* best known narrative features makes this clear. The geographical center of the epic is Ithaca, the smallest and most primitive of the «realms» that have participated in the Trojan expedition. Telemachus can only refer to Odysseus’ residence on the island as a «house» or «home,» particularly after he has made visits to the «palaces» and «mansions» of Nestor and Menelaus. Despite all its rusticity and, by implication, proximity to the old tribal ways, however, Ithaca has produced an Odysseus who is «the equal of Zeus in counsel» (*Iliad*; II, 169) who «can do anything» (*Odyssey*; 1, 175), who is the «man for all occasions» (*Odysseus*; VIII, 433)—i.e., who is by far the most urbane of the Achaeans, for it is only the city that brings all such skills together. Odysseus the warrior leaves Troy with a suitably large share of spoils, having produced the stratagem that brings the war to a close, but manages to lose it all on the way back, losing in effect his very reason for going in the first place. Restitution is brought about in Phaiakia only after completion of Odysseus’ narration of the famed peripilus, or series of mythological adventures, which take the hero to the outward limits of space and the rearward limits of history. Here Odysseus is clearly given the opportunity of resuming the duties of a tribal culture hero, and of restoring the epic to its previous privileged position with respect to the whole gamut of tribal productions. Odysseus is ideal for this role, «confronted» as Whitman notes, «by no hopeless division in himself; he is equipped, as if by magic, with every skill any situation might require, so that he needs only deliberate ways and means...»

But such resumption is impossible. Odysseus can only regard the mythological world—to be precise, the content of the mythological epic—as a consumer. His «heroi-sm» is much like that of a modern anthropologist:
I took my spear and broadsword, and I climbed
a rocky point above the ship, for sight
or sound of human labor... (Odyssey; X. 145-147)

Moreover, instead of the unalloyed tribal world, he encounters a society
of monsters, i.e., of anarchonists. The hard-tending Kyklopes who should by all
rights provide a model of tribal organization are solitary, asocial cannibals who
have no muster and no meeting/no consultation or old tribal ways. (Odyssey;
X; 14-75). The climactic irony of this epic revisitation comes of course in Book XI
when the shade of Achilles cries bitterly to Odysseus, ‘slight of council’.

Better, I say to break soil as a farm hand
for some poor country man, on iron rations.
than lord it over all the exhausted dead. (XI, 468-70)

Return to Ithaka confronts Odysseus with an even more shocking alienation:
that of his property, including his wife. Odysseus’ flirtation with mythic heroism
has resulted meanwhile in a threat to the amenities of his class position: a
private landed estate including large numbers of cattle, pigs, goats and slaves
(see Book XIV for Eumaios’ outlay of Odysseus’ capital); a cloistered wife; and
the right of primogeniture (‘single sons are the rule’ (XVI, 86) among the
Laertides). For Odysseus’ property is not, after all, tribal, and thus against the
claims laid upon it by the suitors—the anarchonist claims of the members
of the old tribal gens on the property of a deceased gentile—he has no protection
other than force of arms. Conversely, the violent ‘heroic’ resolution of this
contradiction is temporary only and must finally be resolved deus-ex-machina
fashion.

L. A. Post implicitly criticizes Homer for having inserted the family within
the framework of the state in the dull though statesmanlike ending of the
Odyssey... As a representative, along with George De F. Lord, of what we
might call the liberal, bourgeois humanist school of Homeric criticism (as opposed
to the bourgeois Christian school of C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot), Post correctly
identifies this insertion as part and parcel of what he, along with Aristotle, calls
the ‘ethical’ concern of the Odyssey. What he fails to identify is the anarchonist
and social contradiction involved in this insertion. The family (although particu-
larly the extended gentile family, which is anachronized in the Odyssey) is the
ethical center of the tribe, not of the state. To the family is reserved the task of
discharging the displacing power of the family over society as a whole with its own
and of inverting (ideologizing) this relation.

But this displacement and inversion have not been achieved in the Odyssey.
What Post calls the ‘framework of the state’ is precisely the dull, contrived
quality of the ending, the supposed resolution of social contradictions which
transcend the tribe via divine machinery, i.e., a degenerate tribal ideology. The
Odyssey is as practically everyone has noted, a transitional epic, but the transition
is incomplete. In the ‘Epic of Moral Regenerations’ the ‘old code of heroic
warriors’ has been repudiated but no new code has come to take its place. In
the Odyssey, as in no other epic text which follows in the Homeric tradition,
epic expels its heroic-class basis, returns to its tribal ancestry for a replacement,
fails to find it there and finally looks to a new ideology to fill the space of this
failure, an ideology which will resolve a class contradiction in a new way. Thus
the Homeric epic calls for the state, but only through the delineation of its
absence. And in so doing it calls for its own replacement, both by genres which
do not contradict the needs of a new class order of things, and by political
ideology itself.

From this point on, at least in the European tradition which marks its own
historical origins in Hellenic civilization, the fate of the epic is tied to the state,
for it is now the state and not the epic which assumes ideological control of
the division of labor. So long as the class which wields the state apparatus also
wields the state ideology which we have characterized as the necessary false
teory of the division of labor that stipulates its hierarchization, the state can
freely condemn the epic to the scholastic triviality of the Alexandrian empire.
It can also elevate new genres as its ideological litter-bearers—for example, the
dialogues of Plato, in particular The Republic—which must certainly rank as the
state’s crowning literary achievement. The simultaneous literary production of
philosophy, historiography, lyric poetry, tragedy, comedy, etc., may itself be seen
as the division of a unitary epic production. The old contradiction of the heroic
epic persists, but it is the state now that operates as its primary, negative
motivation.

The class exercise of the state, however, is not a simple affair and is itself
liable to contradiction. Engels clarifies this:

Because the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check,
because it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these
classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically
dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the
politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down
and exploiting the oppressed... by way of exception, however, periods
occur, in which the warring classes balance each other so neatly that the
state power as ostensible mediator, acquires for the moment a certain
degree of independence of both.12

To this it is only necessary to add that control of the state may cause splits to
develop within a single dominant class (e.g., Democrats and Republicans), a
phenomenon which has its own peculiar ideological ramifications.

The Aeneid is, among other things, the product of such a split in its most
antagonistic form: civil war.13 Its ideological relation to the state is consequently
of a more urgent and determined nature than is the case with the Alexandrian
epics or the ‘historical’ epics of Naxos and Emnus. In 1st century B. C. Italy
‘civilization is at stake,’ that is, the ability of the dominant land and slave
holding class to manage its own local and overseas affairs has been called into
question by an internal conflict of small versus large land ownership, the latter
represented by the Augustan faction: Conflict centers around not only the
final capture and exercise of state power but the manner in which such
power is to be exercised, republican or imperial, Augustan or the ‘oriental’
program of Antony. The conflict is ‘civil,’ i.e., involves the whole of society in
warring alliances.

Given such conditions it makes more sense to call Vergil the author of the ‘Epic of Success’—success not, in turn, of the epic, but of the new, strengthened,
more highly perfected Augustan imperialist state. In order for the victory of
the Augustan party to endure as more than a blatant usurpation, it must use
its newly acquired state apparatus—the principal prize of civil war—to eli-
minate the conditions of civil war, that is, to effect the reorganization of so-
ciety as a whole without, however, revolutionizing the relations of production.
The division of labor is to be vastly elaborated, but only within the bureaucratic
and military wings of the empire, while the divisions flanking property are to be held firmly in place. So as to appear to be more than a usurpation, the Augustan faction must likewise appear to the various divisions as the manifestation of a theory, not only of the existing organizations and hierarchies of production, but of a new ruling class mission and version of self.

Others will fashion the molten Bronze with more skill (at least I believe this), will carve from the Marble live faces, will plead cases better and sketch out the paths of the heavenly bodies with pointers, and forecast the rising of stars.

You, Roman, remember to govern the peoples with power (these arts shall be yours) to establish the practice of peace, spare the conquered, and beat down the haughty. (Aeneid VI, 855-862)

It inevitably adopts the existing literary means to express this; since there has been no revolution in the mode of production it cannot easily create new ones. As Brooks Otis puts it, Augustus «lets it be known» that he wants an epic. Vergil, in a clear act of class and personal dependence, «volunteers,» but his particular authorship is of decidedly less importance to state-ideology than the genre he is called upon to produce. Epic, although it has suffered a literary division of labor of its own and has become a relic, offers the advantage of binding historiography, philosophy, lyric, etc., to a unitary purpose and of being itself an «elevated» medium. What was 700 years before a capacity for class critique now becomes a means of pre-empting such criticism in all the various generic branches of its production. Vergil’s training had well equipped him to exercise such means.

But why a «Homeric» epic and not merely the Ennius singing of the victory at Actium? Formalism cites the dicta of Horace on this point. But Horace, no less than Vergil, was in the service of Maecenas and addressed his literary theory to the Emperor in epistolary form.

The battle of Actium took place in 31 B.C. Vergil is said to have commenced work on the Aeneid in 29 B.C. It seems rather obvious to conclude that in a mere space of 2-3 years the Augustan junta could not have erased from society all traces of a division which threatened to split the empire itself into two parts. The battle of Actium no doubt remained to be won as ideology.

Thus there would have been a clear advantage in recasting the «heroic» events culminating in Actium in the Homeric idiom: the assassination of Julius Caesar as the murder of Priam, the Antony-Cleopatra alliance as Aeneas’ dangerous dalliance in Dido’s Carthage, Actium and the end of civil war as the Italian Iliad, and finally the invention of an heroic and ancient genealogy in which the newly vanquished forces are portrayed in the ambiguous guise of noble savages. With the additional transformation of genealogy into the prophecy of an imperium sine fine, (see, e.g., the shield in Book VIII) the new Augustan regime could be made to appear as precisely what it was not but desperately wished to be: a naturally given, hence divine form of rule and social order, a new «civilization.» The popular view of the ascension of Augustan power and imperial renewal as the spontaneous overflow of Augustan personality without occasion for class struggle must itself be viewed as the gauge of Vergil’s success in the painting of a moral portrait.

But what the Augustan state above all required of its literary expression was elevation—this is sufficient to explain in turn both the resurrection of Homeric epic and the utterly humorless, ponderous and formalist rigidity of an Aeneid that refuses aesthetic value to any of the divisions of human activity which do not contribute to the elevation of a class ideal. To call the Aeneid (as does Brooks Otis) a «psychological» epic may be correct, but it begs the question of precisely whose psychology? To this we answer: not merely an Augustan, but a state psychology which naturally produces the single emotion which the Aeneid so brilliantly evokes in all of its extensive and epic range: fear. The terror of the sack of Troy and the incessant nauseabund insecurity of Aeneas are the leftovers of the need to unite the highly contradictory elements of a Homeric aesthetic and the cultural inferiority complex of Augustan rule. Such may be expected when the state undertakes to «make civilization poetical.»

Where the contradictions of the Homeric epic could result in a new version of old heroics, it results in the reverse for the Aeneid and the state-supervised epic in general: an old version of new «heroics.» It is now the state which calls for the epic; and a state revolution that is not simultaneously a social revolution, but only further entrenches the rule of a class of appropriators cannot produce new literature and must resort to various forms of literary parasitism. With the production of the Aeneid the state has finally asserted its undisputed ideological rights over the epic. There can no longer be any question of tribal claims to the production or interpretation of epic content, for class and state society have decisively eliminated the basis for any such tribal hold-out. The gens itself has been swallowed up by the «learned» epic where it now functions as one of the principal ideologemes for an inverted state genealogy. In the Aeneid we find, indeed, a fascination with «barbarian» social forms (especially male kinship)—but it is state society’s fascination for a reality it has annihilated and which therefore recedes into the irrecoverable past which calls up such emissions. At the same time, however, we must not forget that the state is driven to appropriate epic content in its increasing need for a literary format.

The transition from Vergil to Camões thus requires that we begin by tracing the development of the state over this historical period. In so doing we discover a retrograde motion which only recovers anything like an Augustan level of development in the Europe of approximately Camões’ time. Engels describes the political-economic basis of this:

During the last years of the republic, Roman rule was already based on the ruthless exploitation of the conquered provinciates. The conquerors had not abolished this exploitation; on the contrary, they had regularized it. The more the empire fell into decay, the higher rose the taxes and compulsory services and the more shamelessly the officials robbed and blackmailed the people. Commerce and industry were never the business of the Romans, who lorded it over entire peoples. Only in usury did they excel all others, before and after them. The commerce that existed and managed to maintain itself for a time was reduced to ruin by official extortion. Universal impoverishment, decline of commerce, handicrafts, the arts, and of the population; decay of the towns; retrogression of agriculture to a lower stage—this was the final result of Roman world supremacy.

The inadequacy of German tribal organization to the task of subjugating former Roman colonies made it necessary for the barbarian chieftains to place themselves at the head of the old Roman administrative bodies as kings. This fact, coupled
with the further inadequacy of slave labor to the cultivation of large, sparsely populated tracts of land, produced, in a relatively short period of time, the conditions for the development of a set of European feudal states. It is within the transition from a loosely defined group of military chieftains to a state-wielding nobility that we must place the development of the medieval national-chivalric epics such as El Cantar de Mio Cid and Le Chanson de Roland, the transmutations of orally produced epics which could only have originated in a tribal division of labor. It is not the state which calls for their production so much as the primitive feudal nationalism by means of which a feudal ruling class protects its landed wealth from the claims of other such "national" classes.

Only with the arrival of new class interests which engage in open struggle for possession of the state apparatus do we again meet the conditions for the production of literary, "learned" epics. These are the same interests that rediscover the literary products of antiquity, including the state-produced epic of the philosophical Vergil (as opposed to the verse formulas of the medieval wizard). Though still nurtured on feudal ideologies and housed in feudal institutions, these interests already specify themselves as bourgeois by their increasing ties to a "free fund" of human labor and their production of the ideology which institutionalizes this new social relation. In the Divina Commedia, to the extent that this is an epic work, bourgeois interests fight each other for the Florentine state; in the mock chivalricus of Ariosto and Boiardo they have predominated in Florence and elsewhere and literally mock the ideology they have vanquished, reducing it to entertainment in commodity form. It is the Renaissance, the bygone days of bourgeois heroes. For it is only now that the division of labor exceeds its past Roman "glories" and produces a new class of individuals who, for all they may reproduce the intellect of the ancients, could never themselves have been produced by ancient social relations—the true bourgeois heroes: the humanists. Naturally, it is the humanists who take up production of the epic along with the task of advising kings and princes on the matter of advanced statecraft.

Nowhere does the bourgeois capture of the state occur without struggle; nowhere does it encounter such resistance as in Spain and Portugal. The reasons for this are many and complex and we cannot do justice to them here. They reduce above all, not to the absence of capitalist relations, but to the prolonged existence of a strong feudal nobility with well entrenched state power—a strength no doubt originating in part in the special demands placed on this class by the activity and results of the Reconquest.

With the growth of commercial empires in the 15th and 16th centuries class struggle for control of the state greatly sharpened, leading to the eventual predominance of the bourgeois merchants and financiers of empire in the Italian states and elsewhere outside Iberia, as well as to the strengthened absolutist state characteristic of the Renaissance. The commercial-imperial successes of Portugal, however, were brought about by a strong crown monopoly in which, to the contrary, a consolidated court nobility exercised both political and financial control. Oliveira Marques describes this process with a careful eye to its contradicitoriness:

The backbone of commercial empires like those of Venice, Genoa, and later, Holland had always been the existence of a strong middle class of enterprising bourgeois, motivated by the prospect of profit and the reinvestment of that profit in new profitable undertakings. Such a middle class... was lacking in Portugal. Instead of private initiatives supported or encouraged by the state, the essence of the Portuguese expansion was a state enterprise, to which private interests or initiatives were applied. Moreover, the Crown had a feudal structure based upon privilege that allowed the nobility and the Church to siphon off a good share of the profits for themselves. Lacking a bourgeois mentality, nobles and clerics preferred to invest their new capital in land, in building... and in luxuries. As a result, the feudal structure of the country... was not essentially shaken by expansion and could endure for centuries. As a result, too, the state faced a permanent lack of capital for the maintenance of the empire and had to appeal to foreign money and initiatives, thus further endangering the growth of a native middle class. 7

To put it briefly: the Portuguese crown aristocracy (the church may be effectively included in this category) could, by keeping the reins of state in its own hands and out of those of the local bourgeoisie, ensure its own enrichment; at the same time, however, the feudal conversion of wealth and the mentality that went along with it guaranteed the weakening of that state and its commercial empire relative to others.

With the inclusion of ideological forces, the situation surrounding the Portuguese state in the late 15th and the 16th centuries grows even more complex. Although a politically and economically strong bourgeoisie was lacking, the strong influence of bourgeois ideas in the form of humanism was not—such ideas were imported in both bodily and printed form along with the various commodities and the banker's capital necessary to the maintenance of the first modern state which faced the task of reproducing its power globally. Thus there could arise a highly unusual situation in which the suppression of the local bourgeoisie politically and economically by means of the state could co-exist with the willing of active ideological struggle of bourgeois and feudal ideas as to the proper theory and practice of the state.

The fidalgos Luis de Camões received his humanist training most probably in the 1530's and early 40's, just in time to endow him with above mentioned contradiction in wholly internalized form. The composition of a Portuguese national epic based on Portuguese imperial feats was, according to Sarraiva, proposed to João II as early as 1491 by the Italian humanist Angelo Poliziano, and was later raised by the local students of humanism João de Barros, Diogo de Telheira and Antonio Ferreira. Thus Camões' acceptance of this task as early as the 1540's demands that we not only put his training to use in the reproduction of the "classical" Vergilian epic, but that he participate in a bourgeois ideological project. More—he must do it in the service of a state ruled by a feudal nobility of which he himself was a practically corrupted, if marginal, member.

Such conditions could only result in the placing of cataclysmic strains on the production and eventual content of an epic. The theory of the division would itself have to be forcibly rent into two contradictory halves and the generic unity of epic thus threatened with a break-up into the various literary modes which it had had the essential job of synthesizing. Os Lusíadas manifests these internal contradictions openly; and it is only at the cost of sustaining them in truly heroic fashion that it manages to insert itself into the generic history of epic.

The split betrays itself on the level of form. Os Lusíadas breaks down into two fundamental modes of discourse: the epic narration itself and a kind of running commentary often but not necessarily based on a separate moral or political aspect of narrated epic deeds. Whether voiced by the author, the narrator, or a character such as "o velho do Rostelo," this disruptive discourse
represents the irresistible pull of the contradictions within state ideology on the narrator himself. The richest example of this is in the final octaves of Canto V11 where the poet is about to produce Paulo da Gama’s audio-visual Portuguese history lesson to Casmal, but breaks mid-line into an extended digression:

Um ramo na mão tinha... Mas, ó cégo
Eu, que cometo, insano e temerário
Sem vós, Ninfas do Tejo e do Mondego... (Canto VII, oct. 78, 1-3)

Invocation immediately shifts to lament in which the poet specifies his own double relation of service to the «Tagides»— «cantando/O vosso Tejo e os vossos Lusitanos» and «Agora o mar, agora exprimentando/Os peregrinos Mavóriços inumanos» (oct. 79, 1-2; 5-6)—; places it within the division of labor—«nua mão sempre a espreita e noutra a pena» (79, 8)—; and points to its alienation— «Agora, com pobreza avorrecida/ Por hospícios alheios degradado» (80, 1-2). In octaves 81 and 82 he commences an invective against the class of epic patrons, «aqueles que eu cantando andava.../...Trabalhos nunca usados me inventaram/Com quem em tão duro estado me deitaram?» (oct. 81, 3; 7-8); and «Vede, Ninfas, que engenhos de senhores/O vosso Tejo cria valerosos, que assim sabem prezar...» (oct. 82, 1-3). He vows not to waste his talents «(favo)» on such thankless «subidos» (oct. 83). And finally in octaves 84-86 he locates them directly within the state apparatus and delivers an orthodoxy humanist critique:

84: Nem creais, Ninfas, não, que fama desse
A quem ao bem comum e do seu Rei
Antepuser seu próprio interesse...

85: Nenhum que use de seu poder bastante
Pera servir a seu desejo feio
E que, por comprar ao vulgo errante
Se muda em mais figuras que Proteo.
Nem, Camenhas, também cuideis que cante
Quem, com hábito honesto a grave, veio
Por contentar o Rei, no ofício novo,
A despir e roubar o pobre povo!

86: Nem quem acha que é justo e que é de direito
Guardar-se a lei do Rei imperante.
E não acha que é justo e bem respeito
que se pague o suor da servil gente;
Nem quem sempre, com pouco experto peito,
Razões aprende, e cuida que é prudente;
Pera taxar, com mão rapace e escassa,
Os trabalhos alheios que não passa.

Saraiva, who also cites this passage, makes the following notation:

...O humanista sustenta uma noção da nacionalidade e simultaneamente de Estado, que estão muito próximas do patriotismo moderno. O Estado, personificado no rei, traduz-se na lei, em princípio igual para todos,

expression de justiça; no seu significado profundo representa a abolição do privilégio feudal.19

Homer, Vergil, Camões: State and Epic

The humanist state-ideology here elicits also recognizes the new classes which have a stake in the abolition of the feudal state (again recognized only in the «Cupid's ball» on man's progress in Canto IX). In «vulgo grante» and «a servil gente»; that is, the dislodged peasantry small urban proletariat (literally «errante» in that period), the incipient bourgeoisie, and the small slave population which then inhabited Lisbon and other cities.

But neither the humanist state nor the oppressed classes that dictate its revolutionary character in its earliest, theoretical stage can find their way into the strictly epic content of the epic. Not only can they not be narrated, their inscriptions require that narration be interrupted and even threatened with an ultimate failure. There is just one class that can claim heroic portrayal, the class which holds state power: «os barões» better known as «o peto Lusitano.»

This class, however, appears to place little or no value on its own epic representation. Thus Camões vows to sing «Aquelas sós... que aventuraram/Por seu Deus, por seu Rei, a amada vida./ Onde, perdendo-a, em fama a dilataram./ Tão bem de suas obras merecida.» (VII, 87, 1-4)—in other words, the military servants of the aicit, principially himself.

In Os Lusíadas the state again calls for the epic, but the «illusory community» that presupposes the epic does not prevail—a fragmented, divided textuality has inflicted both society and narration. The bourgeoise, like the state itself in Homer’s time, can only exist within the epic as a surrounded absence, although in this instance it is marked by departures from narrative continuity. Contradiction within state-ideology itself (something totally absent in the Aeneid) in turn infects the genre of heroic epic and already prophesies its death at the hands of the novel, albeit not a Portuguese one. A further ironic manifestation of this contradiction is to be seen in the flourishing production of historiography based on mercantile expansion (Barros, Góis, Correia, etc.) contemporary or just previous to the production of Os Lusíadas and authored by bourgeois intellectuals without, or less burdened by, the class-contradictions of poor Camões. It is to these works we must look, according to Saraiva, to discover the presence of the full epic personality that has been butchered in the Portuguese national epic. Likewise it is to the humanist himself we must look to find an epic relation to the division of labor. To quote Engels: «The men who founded the modern rule of the bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations.» 29

Analysis has shown that the ideological relation of the epic to the division of labor enters into contradiction with the split of society into classes and that the epic changes from an initially negative and ascendant force in this relation to a declining and subordinate one as the state assumes more and more the superstructural function which epic had previously exercised. The revolutionary bourgeois struggle for state power, like the initial stages of the ancient state, further complicates and aggravates this relation and calls reproduction of the genre itself into serious question.

What remains now is to examine the bourgeois (formalist, «humanist») point of view with regard to the three specific texts and apply our analysis to a more closely perceptual of their clearest differences. Our objective, again, is to replace the unsatisfactory account of these differences as exclusively formal or «cultural»—an historio-cultural or historically ideal— with an historical-materialist accout which focuses on the line of social and ideological development which we have understood to be the state, as it develops out of the division of labor. 20

To both simplify our readily relation to the texts and heighten its immediacy we look for the state where we might least expect to find it: within the most radically subjective «moments» of the three epic heroes themselves: Odysseus,
Aeneas and Vasco da Gama. We thus make an appeal to a certain psychological impressionism, both in its own right and in the effort to expose its various material and ideological bases in the state and division of labor.

To pinpoint Odysseus' radical subjectivity requires that one choose from a wide range of passages and, as it were, distinct mind states of the most subjective hero. Odysseus is, for example, the only one of the three who talks to himself. But Odysseus does more than address his own character; he also reproduces it for an audience, as for example in books VI-XII for the Phaiakian court. Here Odysseus sings his own exploits in a version presumably faithful to the 'truth.'

In the beginning of the second half of the Odyssey, reproduction takes on the additional complexity of alteration. On three separate occasions (in books XII, XIV, and XIX) and to three separate interlocutors (Athena, Eumaeos and Penelope) Odysseus invents the story of his arrival on Ithaka, identifying himself as a native of Crete. Although already disguised as a beggar in the latter two, in each instance he alters the story to fit the needs of the particular deception, a skill for which he receives the praise of undeceived Athena as 'of all men now alive...the best in plots and storytelling' (XIII, 276-277). A comparison of the variants indeed reveals a breathtaking exercise of narratorial skill. Odysseus repeatedly weaves features of his actual experience into the fictive texture, even to the point of including himself as a third person. Here is a hero who has so mastered and known his own subjectivity as to be able to assemble it out of a pack of lies.

We choose to analyze a section of the second variant, told to the swineherd Eumaeos in book XIV. Disguised as a nameless beggar, Odysseus responds to the swine herd's request for an autobiography with an account of his birth to a wealthy Kretan father, Kastor Hylakides, by his concubine and slave, describing how he improved on the poor inheritance left him upon Kastor's death by marriage into a wealthy family. There follows this passage:

My strength's all gone,
but from the husk you may divine the ear
that stood tall in the old days. Misery owns me
now, but then great Ares and Athena
gave me valor and man-breaking power,
whenever I made choice of men-at-arms
to set a trap with me for my enemies.
Never, as I am a man, did I fear Death
ahead, but went in foremost in the charge.
putting a spear through any man whose legs
were not as fast as mine. That was my element.
war and battle. Farming I never cared for,
nor life at home, nor fathering fair children.
I revelled in long shops with oars, I loved
polished lances, arrows in the skirmish.
the shapes of doom that others shake to see.
Carnage suited me; heaven put those things
in me somehow. Each to his own pleasure!
Before we young Akhaianas shipped for Troy
I led men on nine cruises in corsairs
to raid strange coasts, and had great luck;
taking rich spoils on the spot, and even more

The tale continues, taking its fictional hero through the ten years at Troy, a brief
arrival on Ithaka as an impoverished escapee from the slave market.
What strikes one most in this yarn is not so much its plausibility, though
the absence of heroes, but from a shift in the perspective from which they
are viewed. Odysseus as the unnamed Kretan (only to Penelope does he give
his name «Aithon») casts off his dogskin helmet and his weapons and
himself to the mercy of the Egyptian king, leaving his men to be slaught
ished himself on the mercy of the Egyptian king, leaving his men to be slaug

The murder of one Oroslokos is described:

I acted: I
hit him with a spearcast from a roadside
as he came down from the open country. Murky
night shrouded all heaven and the stars.
I made that ambush with one man at arms,
We were unseen. I took his life in secret,
finished him off with my sharp sword. (XIII, 237-243)

Here Odysseus clearly designs his unabashed boast of a killing to impress and
terrify what appears to be a young, impressionable shepherd. And one cannot help but speculate, given such a capacity for rhetorical finesse, whether Odysseus
has not also freely used his powers to his advantage in the narration of his
own true story to the lords and ladies of Phaiakia.

But to return to the passage cited—amidst the narratival interstices of an
infinitely variable discourse on heroics we hit upon an admission in the form of
a psychological coinage: «That was my element... Farming I never cared
for... Carnage suited me; heaven put those things in me somehow,» etc. Sur-

The tale ends with the return to Phaiakia amidst the narratival interstices of an
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for... Carnage suited me; heaven put those things in me somehow,» etc. Sur-

in the division. So my house grew prosperous,
my standing therefore high among the Kretans. (XIV, 174-197)
Aeneas also has a hard-luck story. We mean not the Aeneid itself but specifically books II and III in which the Trojan exile tells to Dido the story of the sack of Troy and his flight in search of a site for its rebuilding. There are indeed other occasions for the conveyance of his subjectivity, as, for example, his painful leave-taking of Dido and his vacillation before the execution of Turnus, but all in all they are relatively few for an epic hero who has been characterized as the most subjective of all and the product of a subjectively style. It is true that these instances have a poignancy for the reader, but without anticipating the argument too much we can explain this quality as the manifestation, not of a heightened subjectivity, but of a subjectivity that has entered into a antagonistic contradiction with objective conditions—a heightened alienation.

Like Odysseus, Aeneas tells part of his own story, though without any clear motivation for altering it. His actions upon the sack and fall of Troy are largely dictated by circumstance in the form of mortal danger, familial duty and divine commandment, so there is little occasion for a psychology of personal predilection. What emerges in books II and III is a dull and «honest» account of the anxiety which is the only emotion his burdens allow him. Aeneas’ most developed statement of this subjectivity comes in book II: Troy’s downfall has been revealed to him in a vision by his mother Venus, and he somehow manages to return to his house where he finds his family still alive. Father Anchises despairis all and threatens suicide, whereupon the outraged son can only respond with a vow to make his final stand against the Greeks and thus achieve his self-destruction in an alternate mode. Wife Creusa points out to him that if such is his will he might just as well stay at home and protect his family. Then comes the double portent of pale fire about the head of Iulus and the shooting star which lands on Mt. Ida, signs which Anchises joyfully interprets as the guarantee of successful flight and the renewal of Troy: Flight thereupon is decided. Aeneas shoulders Anchises and the household gods, takes Iulus in his right hand, and departs with Creusa taking up the rear.

Now all the breezes brightened,
Each sound disturbed me, fearful alike for comrade
And burden, I whom, shortly before, the weapons
Aimed at me or the squads of hostile Greeks
Had not excited. (II, 727-730)

There follows the disappearance of Creusa (her wife’s duty?) and Aeneas’ frenzied search for her which leads him back into the fray, finally ending with her reappearance as a ghost. Throughout this sequence the hero cannot shake the fear that has come upon him. This seems a proper naturalist detail, but its sudden development begs explanation. Where was this fear before the appearance of the portents and the decision to flee the city? Aeneas himself implicitly asks this question but cannot answer it—the transition mystifies him and even makes him a little neurotic. Of course, he is afraid for the lives of his family, etc., but if so, where was this fear while he battled Greeks in the streets? The question goes begging throughout the Aeneid, for it is this fear in variant modes and degrees which remains constantly with Aeneas until his re-entry into war; in book VII, and even then one senses that it is only repressed, not dissipated. That it is primarily a fear associated with an obligation is registered in that its first appearance marks the transition from an Iliadic Aeneas obliged only to die an heroic death in defense of his gens to an Augustan Aeneas charged with the founding of a dynastic empire. This change occasions what is literally the hero’s most extended commentary on his own state of mind. And while its naturalism may persuade us, and many critics as well, this does not exempt it from analysis as a feature of epic characterization and ultimately of ideology. Where Odysseus is both the familiar and master of his subjectivity and is able to reproduce it as both heroic and anti-heroic content, Aeneas is the unwitting victim of his, unable to comprehend it when it forces itself upon his consciousness. To insist, as does Brooks Otis, on Aeneas as the typification of «pietas» or the eventual antithesis of «indignus amor» is not in any way to argue for the «modern» psychological concerns of the Aeneid as somehow more advanced than those of the epic of barbarism, but only for their increased dogmatization in the service of an ideology inherently more fulfilling than that of the Homeric epic.

Of Camões’ Vasco da Gama A. J. Saravia remarks:

O Gama de Camões nem figura chega a ser, de apagado e incaneristico que é. Movese hierâeticamente, como se seguisse um rígido protocólo que lhe tolhe a liberdade de movimentos. Serve apenas para fazer discursos, para recitar os belos discursos de Camões. Falta-lhe inteiramente a presença, e não nos deixa recordação.

From such an epic hero we do not expect much subjectivity, nor do we find it. Anything old Vasco might have to offer recedes from view next to the emphatic, complex, but non-epical personality of the epic poet Luís de Camões. Nevertheless, «o Capitão» does narrate the «terras» and «guerras» of the Portuguese feudal nobility and thus by sheer chronological necessity must arrive at the example of his own deeds. His entry into the catalogue of cantos III-V occurs in octave 77 of canto IV. King Manuel, after waking from his imperialist dream-vision of the two old men rivers Indus and Ganges, calls together a council for the purpose of selecting «a gente que mandar». Gama, in what is his only reference to himself as other than the motorization of its official function, tells it from his point of view:

Eu, que bem mal cuidava que em efeito
Se pusse o que o peito me pedia
Que sempre grandes cousas deste jeito,
Pressago, o coração me prometia,
Não sei por que razão, por que repente,
Ou por que bom sinal que em mi se via,
Me põe o infeliz Rei nas mãos a chave
Deste cometimento grande e grave. (IV, 77: 1-8)

Gama emerges here as the most minimal of subjects: the receiver of a command who must appear to adopt some attitude towards his task. Feudal relations dictate that this be the ceremoniously modest acceptance of the lord’s will—an act, to use Saravia’s term, of protocol. We remind ourselves that Gama is addressing the «king» of Melinde, who remains potentially hostile and must be won to colonial service through an appeal to his own «royal» prerogative. (Imperialists to this day are the loudest defenders of «Third World» «national sovereignty».) But even in this minimal occasion for subjectivity, as it were, a blip in the vassal-lord relation, a coherent psychology fails to assemble itself. Gama, whose «heart has always promised him» an heroic service to his country, can yet not fathom why he should be selected, and is taken by surprise. The subject is custom built to
tive objectivity, but paradoxically, bears no comprehensible relation to it. He either thinks or acts, but cannot do both simultaneously. Gama must be animated. Where action should accompany thought it can only take the disembodied form of divine intervention, as in the case of Mombaça; when thought should accompany action it becomes an abstract mental mechanism such as a reflexido lume do polido/Espelho described in the Vergilian epic simile of octaves 87-88 in canto VIII. Like the Ipotemático máquina do mundo of canto X, Gama’s «juízo» can only fluctuate in a perpetually static motion, an apt analogy for the class vacillation that inflicts the epic as a whole. Possessing neither body nor «soul» inasmuch as he lacks the logic, psychic or other, which binds them together, Gama cannot receive any physical or mental directive from above. Rather than that of a prophet or of a god, he comes from the point of a modern society, thus he is free to exercise the wide, epic range of abilities and strengths with which that rank endows him. He can do anything and never loses a sense of identity or suffer moral retribution. We see this with utter clarity in his straightforward and boastful accounts of «esplêndido» activity—murder, piracy, betrayal, etc.—which modern society would either condemn as criminal or institutionalize as legal under extenuating circumstances of class rule. There are no police to arrest him, no jails in which to throw him, no courts to exonerate him; even a god or two are on his side.

Nevertheless, he does suffer a certain compulsion, and even a retribution. For all his mythological expertise, Odysseus is not a tribal but a class hero. He has something to protect. We have already noted it: private property. For this property he is as likely to be plundered as he is to plunder somebody else’s. That to which he hopes ultimately to return from his western adventures (and which he has seen with his own eyes in Phaiakia where a «levis» is made upon the realm to invest him with wealth) is the same thing which alternately causes him to flee from the older, more civilized, eastern lands, of Egypt, Phoenicia and Kreta: an institution which protects private property and prosecutes its violators. The reader has already guessed the institution we mean. It is the same one which will eventually deprive Odysseus of his individual rights as an epic hero and turn him into the criminal demagogue of Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis.

We arrive at a surprisingly exact notion of how the state determines Aeneas’ subjectivity if we give a modern interpretation to the cognate of his well known epithet: «Pious.» i.e., he has something to hide. Afraid lest he be discovered, he adopts the mask of propriety. Of course, the Aeneas of the Aeneid is nothing but this mask and this fear—which must be hidden remains, for the most part, hidden by means of the pre-emptive censorship exercised by state ideology. This is not more nor less than that which Odysseus is free to reveal: the basis of class rule. The new Augustan ruling class cannot afford an Odysseid treatment of its recent exploits; nor, on the other hand, can it strike their violent character from the social record. Thus, in a clever stroke, it recruits a scholarly pacificist to give the state a fictitious heroic-genelalogic setting and pronounce it a less evil... to «make civilization poetical.» «Pious» Aeneas is class and state-bound Aeneas. He emerges from a Trojan war which has become a world war between «Europe» and «Asia» into a world in which there are no classes (no slave ever appears in the Aeneid despite being by far the most numerous class of the empire) but only «patrins» which either cordially invite each other to share the rule (Dido and Latinus to Aeneas) or fight tragically to the death over it (Turnus). Thus Aeneas does nothing which is not either an Homeric pastiche or an act of civic duty. He can produce no true autobiography, no subjective history, (what, for example, were the circumstances of his birth, his marriage, etc...?) because, like the class he is meant to typify, he has none apart from the state. His fear is simultaneously the insecurity of Augustan rule and the terror which is the duty of a proto-fascist citizen—both a severely alienated state and an alienated subject-ian. It is not the sight of the arms of Pallas but an obedience to class interests which prompts Aeneas’ final act: the carrying out of a state decreed death sentence.

Fundamentally the same ideological demands produce the vague Gama. But we are the class that elevates itself in Aeneas embues him with the new possibility of usurping Gama’s role by impersonation of a class order that, although it will continue to rule in Portugal for some time, has entered its dotage. The fact that it is a politically strengthened nobility under the leadership of individuals like Henry the Navigator that carries out the exploration of Africa, India, Brazil, etc.,
can not exclude the significance of the foreign banker's capital that underwrites the expeditions, of the humanist mentality that argues for its most progressive aspects, nor that of the bourgeois chroniclers who produce a new mode of literature based on first-hand experience of the voyages. The Portuguese nobiliararchical mentality is, finally, unable to «experiment» the task it has undertaken, and so is its hypostatic mannequin, Gama. The state power and aesthetic ideology that commission Camões's epic prevent, despite themselves, the epic subjectivization of one most unusual and complex individual experiences of the Renaissance. No wonder Camões used the texts of Barros and Gôes instead of his own memory to produce his exotic landscapes and demographics — it was simply more convenient, since the class that was to have its rule epicalized could not produce an image of itself under such new conditions. Any possibility of realizing the ideals of the Crusades as anything other than literary content must have vanished along with the belief in Prester John. The replacement of nobiliararchical memory with a bourgeois text must be seen as the implication of Camões's class in a final turn towards a psychological deceptivity.

Gama as hero recedes into the long unbroken line of noble forebears whose catalogue it is his function to deliver. His practical interchangeability as a noun with «o peito Lisitano» is grammatically indebted to a class exercise of state power as old as the nation itself and which has literally come to believe in the myth of its own popularity. The bourgeois advice which at first appears to do it a service at length wakes the nobiliararchical state from its long dream of order, whence the grotesque resort to the Inquisition and counter-reformational mentality. But Gama lacks even this reactionary verse: the delicate epic shell of Os Lusíadas cannot stand such commotion. The narrator himself must address the threat to the feudal state. But, as concerns the state, the narrator is not a reactionary but, as Sarauvá calls him, «um humanista desterrado», both the state's critic and its victim. The reactionary state to which Camões and the fictional Gama return in 1570 is, conversely, the force which deals the last coup to both epic and epic poet:

No mais, Musa, no mais, que a Lira tenho
Destemperada e a voz enrouquecida,
E não do canto, mas de ver que venho
Cantar a gente surda e endurecida.
O favor com que mais se acende o engenho
Não no dá a pátria, mão, que está medida
No gosto da cobiça e na rudeza
Dhua austera, apagada e vil tristeza.

(X, Oct. 145; 1-8)

Camões, who thought to have superseded the division of mental and manual labor as it most afflicted his class («rua mão sempre a espada, noutra a penas»), suffers the split of his personality along exactly the same lines.

The vigorous survival of the Homeric texts and their continuing unsurpassability as written epic literature have already been attributed to the unique historical conditions of their production—conditions which permitted an ingenious Homer(s) to realize himself. This fact can only retain a formal or cultural mystique so long as Homeric scholars and readers persist in mystifying the history of the state, in Attic Greece and in general. Modern humanism's individualism can claim an Odyssean precedent (e.g., Tennyson's «Ithaka») just as feudal or slave-holding «heroism» could, but only by imagining Odysseus as the implicit citizen of a «democratic» republic. Odysseus, however, remains a barbarian on the threshold of «civilization» who still has the opportunity of looking backwards and composing himself out of a tribal panorama. Aeneas is no more his aesthetic equal than Horatio Alger.

In the first heroic catalogue of Os Lusíadas Gama relates one of the incidents in the career of Afonso I:

O grão Rei incansável, ajuntando
Gentes de todo o Reino, cuja usança
Era andar sempre as terras conquistando
Cercar vai Badajoz, e logo alcança
O fim do seu deseja, pelejando
Com tanto esforço e arte e valentia,
Que a foz fazer as outras companhia. (III, oct. 68)

The «gentes» referred to here are, for both Gama and Camões, the same «cavalheiros» who propose the conquest and Christianization of Islam and all Asia. In a novel published in Spain some 43 years later than Os Lusíadas, a well known «cavalheiro» proposes similar measures for the defense of the patria:

«—Cuerpo de tal! —dijo a esta sazon don Quijote.— ¿Hay más sino mandar Su Majestad por público pregón que se junten en la corte para un dia señalado todos los caballeros andantes que vagan por España, que aunque no viniesen sino media dozna, tal podría venir entre ellos, que solo bastase a destruir toda la potestad del Turco? Esténme vuestras mercedes atentos, y vayan conmigo. ¿Por ventura es cosa nueva deshacer un solo caballero andante un ejército de doscientos mil hombres, como si todos juntos tuvieran una sola garganta, o fueran hechos de alfenique? etc.»

The feudal warrior mentality now—43 years later—exists only in the novels of chivalry; and the author of this proposal, for all his patriotic fervor, is judged insane.

NOTES

3. «Out of this very contradiction between the particular and the common interests, the common interest assumes an independent form as the state, which is divorced from the real individual and collective interests, and at the same time as an illusory community, always based, however, on the real ties existing in every familiar conglomerate and tribal conglomerate...»

Although reliance on Hegelian terminology weakens it, this brief analysis, once submitted to the corrective of Engels' historical account in Origin of the Family, reveals the essence of state ideology.


4. We mean «necessary» and «false» in the sense given these terms by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in his discussion of «necessary false consciousness»:

«Necessary false consciousness, is not faulty consciousness. It is, on the contrary, logically correct, inherently incorrigible consciousness. It is called false, not against
its own standards of truth, but as against social existence... Necessary false consciousness, then, is (1) necessary in the sense of faultless systematic stringency ... (2) necessarily determined genetically ... (3) determined genetically so as to be false by necessity ... and (4) necessary pragmatically ... for the perpetuation of the social order in which it holds sway over men's minds.


7 Compare this transformation to that of magic into religion, described by Christopher Caudwell in «The Breath of Discontent,» *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (New York: Dodd and Mead Co., 1949). «The development of classes in society makes magic into religion, and gives religion a characteristic form reflecting the class structure in turn as the form of a specific level of economic production,» p. 32.

8 Here we assume the hypothesis advanced by Cedric Whitman in *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), which locates production of the Homeric epics in 8th century B.C. Attic Greece, either in Athens or within its direct influence (see chapter entitled «Athens, 1200-700 B.C.»).

9 Whitman, p. 296.


12 *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 168.

13 This we maintain even in the face of W. R. Johnson's comment in *Darkness Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) that «great writers are never the products of the times they live in...» and «the only world that Vergil lived in was the poetic one he created...» (p. 135).

14 See Karl Marx «Letter to F. Engels, London, March 8, 1855.»


16 *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 146.


19 Saraiva, p. 179.


21 We might pursue this task from any number of starting points. Perhaps the most obvious would be a simple notational record of features of the state as they both quantitatively and qualitatively appear in the three texts. We have compiled such a record as a preparatory aid to this analysis. But while the results are exceedingly rich they are also so diverse as to prohibit inclusion within the physical limits of this essay. As might be expected, the state and/or its tribal prediction loses a narrated or implied presence only rarely, especially in the two state-supervised epics where political features acquire a great specificity.

22 See chapter 3 of Otis.

23 Saraiva, pp. 182-183.

24 Saraiva, p. 155.