



Excerpt from: A LIRA DOURADA E A TUBA CANORA, 2007

[The golden lyre and the melodious tuba]

translated from the Portuguese by Mick Greer

THE EPIC, *THE LUSIADS* AND ANTHOLOGICAL READINGS

The epic poem, as Aristotle explains in *The Poetics*, has a structure which is differentiated from the structure of a tragedy in that it is made up of various stories (*systema polymython*). In other words, its structure is capable of receiving diverse parts (*mere*) which, in their succession or juxtaposition, shape the poem's narrative (See *The Poetics*, 56a 12). The plot (*logos*) of the epic, as in the case of *The Odyssey*, is not, in itself, long and can be summarised in a few lines. This general scheme, however, which is 'proper' (*to idion*) to the poem itself, can be drawn out through episodes (*epeisodia*) which must be appropriate (*oikeia*) to the plot (*op. cit.*, 55b 14-15) and, consequently, not lead to a "story of episodes" which are both unrealistic and unnecessary, as it happens in the poems of bad poets (*op. cit.*, 51b 33ss). If, in tragedy, the term 'episode' has a strictly technical meaning – a complete section of a tragedy between two complete choric songs – in the epic, episodes are relatively autonomous units in terms of the narrative. This makes it possible to prolong, extend or develop (*parateinein*) the plot, creating an organic or appropriate relationship with it, in the Aristotelian sense of the word; or a fatic, accessorial or occasional one. The relation of the episodes to the plot was at the origin of the heated debate within European poetics in the 16th and 17th century concerning the unity of tragic and epic action.

The sheer amount of textual material in the epic poems – generally running to thousands of lines – and the relative structural autonomy of the episodes taking place within them explains why, for many centuries, readers have found it difficult or tiring to read entire epics and have therefore frequently opted to read them in a sort of anthological way, choosing the most important, suggestive or beautiful parts. The *neoteric* poets of the Hellenistic period – Callimachus and Theocritus – and the Roman poets who were their conscious heirs – Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus and Ovid – dismissed the long poem – "big book, big evil", in Callimachus' famous lapidary condemnation – and made an apology for the poem as short, graceful, delicate, formally elegant and well-crafted. They thus established a tradition in western poetry that, as much in terms of *mimesis and inuentio as in dispositio and elocutio*, condemned the epic poem, that long and magniloquent production of heroes and their warlike deeds. Instead, they exalted the concise, technically refined poem, concerned with seduction, Epicurean joy and the torments of love, as was the erotic elegy. The *epyllion*, a reduced or diminutive epos – etymologically-speaking –, was a creation of the Alexandrine



neoteric poets and the Latin *poetae novi* to establish a kind of compromise with the epic tradition. It is a short epic in hexameters, the characteristic metre of the epic, full of erudite references and cultured allusions, well-crafted in form and with a mythological theme, generally amorous.

This poetic tradition, hostile or at least resistant to the long epic poems, was eclipsed for many centuries during the literary megaperiod stretching from the Renaissance to the end of Neoclassicism. Indeed, the Renaissance and Mannerist poets, predominantly Aristotelian, changed the hierarchy of the poetic genres established by Aristotle, setting epic rather than tragedy at the top. The high social position of the epic heroes, such as kings, princes and great lords; the importance and exemplary nature of the actions depicted; the grandeur of the religious, ethical, political and social ideas incorporated in the heroes; the complexity of the poetic dispositio, the wealth and splendour of the *elocutio*; the vast range of religious, philosophical, historical, cosmographic and mythological knowledge invested in the construction of the epic universe; the incomparable prestige of the Graeco-Latin models within the genre, Homer and Virgil particularly; the social and cultural quality of the audience, of the implied and real readers: all these justified the primacy attributed to the epic in the hierarchy of literary genres.¹

Romanticism, despite being the origin of the irreparable decline of the Graeco-Latin epic, which had been canonically consecrated from the Renaissance to Neoclassicism – a decline as much due to poetic as to social and political reasons, on which Hegel wrote memorable pages of aesthetic, anthropological and sociological analysis – continued to admire and cultivate the long poem. This was almost always narrative, with a religious, philosophical, humanistic or historical theme, and took the place in the genealogical system left vacant by the classical epic: Goethe's *Faust*, Wordsworth's *Preludes*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Byron's *Don Juan*, Lamartine's *Jocelyn*, Espronceda's *El Estudiante de Salamanca* and *El Diablo Mundo* and Almeida Garrett's *Camões* are just a few examples.

Nevertheless, at the heart of Romanticism, with its aesthetic made up of various tensions and contradictions, there was a poetic orientation which radically condemned the long poem and that would enjoy much good fortune in later poetic theory and practice, from Baudelaire to Symbolism and into Modernism. What I have in mind is the doctrine put forward by Edgar Allan Poe in *The Poetic Principle*, an essay on poetics in which Poe argues that the value of a poem lies in the extent to which it stimulates a sense of the sublime within the reader. As this sensation is, by its very nature, psychic and brief, a long poem (using 'poem' in the strictest sense) does not exist. The expression "a long poem", therefore, should be considered a contradiction in terms.

¹ On this subject, see Andrea Battistini and Ezio Raimondi, *Le figure della retorica. Una storia letteraria italiana*, Turin, Einaudi, 1990, pp. 13 ff; Siegbert Himmelsbach, *L'épopée ou la "case vide". La réflexion poétologique sur l'épopée nationale en France*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1988, passim; Klára Czürös, *Variétés et vicissitudes du genre épique de Ronsard à Voltaire*, Paris, H. Champion, 1999, Ch. I; Daniel Javitch, "Italian epic theory", Glyn P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 3, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 205-215.



The target of Poe's criticism is the epic, as becomes obvious when he quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Adopting a poetic position which today we would characterise as revealing a pragmatic-communicational conception of literary phenomenon, Poe stresses that Milton's poem can only be considered poetic when, setting aside unity – the vital requisite for all works of art –, it is read as a series of minor poems equivalent to the episodes of Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian poetics. If some reader, with a view to preserving the unity of the poem, undertakes to read it sequentially, with no temporal or textual discontinuity, the result will be constant alternation between excitation and depression. In other words, the reader will be exultant during a passage when true poetry is recognised, and frustrated in another passage, when confronted by the most abject insipidity. From all this, Poe deduces that the final effect – aggregate or absolute – of even the best epic ever to see the light of day, is zero. And after considering that there are a number of good reasons to believe that *The Iliad* is made up of a number of lyric poems, Poe takes up a stance of unequivocal rupture, stating that “The modern epic is, of the supposititious ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation” and that “the day of this artistic anomaly is over”.²

We could say that Poe's criticism of the long poem and, more specifically, of the epic, legitimised the anthological reading of epic poems.³ Theoretically speaking, this legitimisation was reinforced by the aesthetics of Benedetto Croce, with his famous distinction between *poetry* and *literature* and the correlative effect of ‘lyricising’ poetry, which had such a broad and profound influence in the first half of the 20th century.⁴ In the light of Croce's aesthetics, the epic is an enormous *literary* factory, a product of civilisation, of the thinking and ideas of a historical period, with some islands of *poetry*, which are the episodes where the poet's voice, the *lyrical* gives unique and unrepeatable expression to a unique and irreproducible intuition.

In terms of literary practice, the programmes and anthologies adopted in secondary teaching created the norm – and we could say the natural habit – of reading epic poems anthologically. Only in this way could the “literary dinosaur” and the “undigested archeopoetry” into which the epic had transformed or deteriorated, in the irredeemable process of obsolescence or fossilisation announced by Poe, be pedagogically and didactically tolerated and assimilated by teachers and students.⁵

In addition to its strictly pragmatic justification (the enormous length of ancient and modern epics would always make it unfeasible to read them in full in a school context), and its co-validation

² See Edgar Allen Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p. 72.

³ In terms of poetics, Poe legitimised the *pour morceaux choisis* reading of the epic, but it is clear that numerous readers were doing it well before him. Chapelain, author of a soporific epic poem, *La Pucelle* (1656), had already complained about such reading practices (See Siegbert Himmelsbach, *op. cit.*, p. 238).

⁴ Benedetto Croce formulated and established the distinction between *poetry* and *literature* in various texts within his vast body of work, but his mature work *La poesia* (1936) provides the most detailed analysis of this terminological and conceptual distinction.

⁵ The expressions “literary dinosaur” and “undigested archeopoetry” are from Daniel Madelénat, *L'épopée*, Paris, P.U.F., 1986, p. 12.



in terms of aesthetic judgement – as Poe had argued, only some parts of an epic are able to give an authentic experience of reading poetry –; the strategy of anthological reading gives the authors and policy makers of school programmes, as well as teachers in general, a broad capacity to manipulate the meaning of poems that, even if archaic and perhaps even archaeological, still have a central place in the literary canon and, more widely, in what could be called the universe of the symbolic power of a language, culture, people or nation.

The Lusiads, inevitably, has not escaped the general fortune of the long epic poems. Readers, over the centuries, have canonised the most suggestive, beautiful, lyrical or dramatic episodes in the canonical poem – the Counsel of the Gods, Venus’ encounter with Jupiter, the story of Inês de Castro, the Old Man of Restelo, Adamastor, the Twelve of England, the Sea Storm, the Isle of Love – implicitly or explicitly sending a large part of the portentous construction of octaves which the poem is into the sphere of the non-read or even unreadable. The principle of reading literary texts as aesthetic fruition formulated by Edgar Allen Poe and accepted by the Impressionist critics and a large number of those currently formulating contemporary literary theory and criticism,⁶ justifies this distinction between aesthetically significant and neutral parts of texts. The canonical status of many literary works is also manifested by how quotable they are, by their aptness to have excerpts removed or collected which then take on a life of their own, often in the form of ingenious or gnomic sayings. *The Lusiads* is, from this perspective, eminently quotable and ideal for anthologies, which successive school programmes have institutionalised and successive generations of teachers and students have put into practice. Its aim is, to some extent, a form of quotation, long quotation, within the anthological framework, tending to cease being a sequence or segment and becoming a discrete text, in the technical sense of the word.

The anthological reading of *The Lusiads*, like any other epic, even if its architecture is ostensibly paratactic, raises the central issue of all hermeneutics: the analysis, consideration and knowledge of how the part relates to the whole and how the whole relates to its parts: the problem of the hermeneutic circle.⁷ On the other hand, from a poetics’ perspective – a perspective which hermeneutics cannot disdain, much less forget, because it has an indelible relationship with the ontology of the poem – anthological reading, as Poe recognised, creates tensions and conflicts with the requisite unity of a work of art and, more specifically, with the Aristotelian principle that the epic structure should “centre upon a single action, whole and complete, having a beginning, a middle and an end, so that like a single complete being, the poem may produce its own special kind of pleasure” (*The Poetics* 59a 17-21).

⁶ If in Impressionist criticism, aesthetic fruition has a significant psychological component, in the stylistic and the New Criticism, the aesthetic fruition is centred on the beauty of forms. In Post Structuralism, even as a reaction to the technical and mechanical reading models of Structuralism, anthropological, imaginative and cognitive-emotional aesthetic factors become dominant in the experience of fruition.

⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer’s fundamental study, “Du cercle de la compréhension”, *La philosophie herméneutique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1996, pp. 73-83.

