

REVIEWS

Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910 by Herbert F. Tucker. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. x + 737 pages. \$60.00. ISBN 978-0-19-923298-7.

The English poet's development, so we have been taught, runs from pastoral to georgic to epic, the last the crowning achievement of his career. The epic form, so we have also been taught, reached its pinnacle with Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and by the nineteenth century was outmoded or even dead, its energy transferred to the novel. We cite Tennyson's "The Epic" to encapsulate the predicament of the Victorian poet –

Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
Nor we those times; and why should any man
Remodel models? (35-38)

– and point to Barrett Browning's comment about what a sensible modern poet should attempt instead:

Their [the poets'] sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, – this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing rooms,
Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles. (*Aurora Leigh* 5.202-07)

To quote Herbert Tucker's summary of this literary history: "The splendor of epic, so the lesson runs, is a glory that *was*."

But is this familiar account true? The ambition of Tucker's *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910* is to disrupt this dubious historical narrative and show, with overwhelming evidence and patient commentary, that epic was alive, well, and flourishing during the long nineteenth century. Tucker's statement of purpose is phrased more modestly as a desire "to cast doubt on the prevailing structure of understanding that is sustained alike by traditionalist and exceptionalist narratives of modern epic history" – the traditionalist position being the narrative of epic demise, the exceptionalist being the story of singular achievement by an extraordinary poet (Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, for instance). Tucker achieves his ambition in 700 pages and twelve chapters (the number no coincidence) – an epic achievement in literary history on the scale of the epic texts he analyses.