CONCLUSION

It is both curious and regrettable that the subtlety and idealism which characterised *The Last of The Mohicans* and *Moby Dick* are fast being erased from the epic tradition in America. Most of the epics set in the modern period - *The Wasteland*, *The Cantos*, *U.S.A.* among others - reflect an air of disillusionment, at the cultural situation. However, one aspect which has been preserved by epic writers, no matter to what age or century they belong, is that they deal with contemporary subject matter and present a vivid picture of these times. "The great paradox of the epic," writes B. Wilkie, "lies in the fact that the partial repudiation of earlier epic tradition is itself traditional."¹ We find that the nineteenth century novels of Cooper and Simms are patriotic, but sentimental and it would be more appropriate to refer to them as romance-epics. Dealing with the way of life of the American Indians and their gradual extinction could be the basis of epic writing; "the thousand barbarian tribes by which these woods and wilds were traversed before the coming of our ancestors - their petty wars, their

various fortunes, their capricious passions, their dark-eyed women, their favourite warriors - will like those of Greece, be made immortal on the lips of eternal song. In conformity with Lewis's study of the nineteenth century American epic, Cooper's hero of The Leather Stocking Tales is Adamic and stands out from the multitude of men by virtue of his innocence, ability and unique individuality. The American epic theme of nineteenth century literature often revolves around some conflict or struggle. This is also explicit in The Last of The Mohicans where there is constant tension as the French and the English armies swiftly take over the frontier.

Another aspect of the nineteenth century American epic is the tension between opposing ideas or forces. In Moby Dick we find Ahab representing human forces. He undertakes a geographical journey, symbolic of his internal struggle between good and evil and the role of fate as preordained. We find this theme of journey/quest in the epics of the twentieth century American literature as well. In An American Tragedy, Clyde is bent on a search for some sort

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of satisfaction, materially, and a psychological understanding of himself and his destiny. The despondency of Moby Dick is carried on to the twentieth century epic and may be discerned in An American Tragedy. In the novels of the nineteen-sixties the symbols through which the quest is manifested become increasingly psychological culminating in the kind of complex symbolism of Gilles Goat Boy. George the questing hero, is seen as the American Adam and the process of his quest involves a kind of archetypal fall from innocence.

Homer, writes Kenneth Rexroth, "portrays heroic valor as fundamentally destructive, not just of social order but of humane community." Such is the viewpoint of Melville in presenting Ahab as "a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness," who ultimately seeks his destruction and along with himself drags the crew of the 'Pequod' to obliteration. He represents a section of the American society and treats the material mythically. Joseph Campbell


writes in his study of the 'hero', that, "there is no society any more as the gods once supported...Isolated societies, dream-bounded with a mythologically charged horizon, no longer exist except as areas to be exploited." These "isolated societies" when created are endowed by the fertile imagination of the writer with far greater mythic qualities than the contemporary times allow, thereby producing epic heroes and heroic action. Cooper, in his *Leather Stocking Tales* writes about the virgin forests and their gradual destruction, depriving the dwellers of their homes and corrupting their innocent minds. We see nature being destroyed at the hands of civilization, forests being cleared away for the birth of a new America. After Cooper, when we read *Moby Dick*, we find an America of the late nineteenth century when industry was at the brink of production. By presenting such a massive encyclopaedia on the whaling industry, we are made aware of the initiation of the economic instinct. With the turn of the century, Dreiser presents, a harsher, a crueler society which is a result of industrialization and rigid social stratification. Here is a microcosm of American sophistication and progress.

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where wealth is the measuring rod for happiness. Barth shakes us out of our complacency with bizarre and complex symbols, which represent the modern atomic age. Man's relationship to science and its modern developments are portrayed in a properly evocative and fresh language which expresses that relationship.

Ross Lockridge, a twentieth century writer, noting the air of disillusionment that pervades the times, found that the events and values of twentieth century America were largely inimical to the creation of an optimistic epic. So, he turned for material to the more confident, innocent years of the middle and late nineteenth century as a time when it was still possible to believe in progress and a great future for mankind and the Republic. For Whitman, epic verisimilitude did include a hearty optimism, an unwavering faith in the potential of his land and his fellow men for that was the attitude of his time, but for later epic writers, the complexities of changing moral, ethical and spiritual values in an industrial age are not so easily or simply resolved. Now, in a century which has seen two World Wars, a great national depression, the McCarthy years, and the Vietnam war, it is difficult to peddle wholesale belief in the American system when that system has engaged in profiteering, propaganda, and hypocrisy. It is difficult to believe in freedom of the individual, when that individual is afraid to speak his beliefs, and in the mythic quality of history, when starvation seems imminent.
We may further trace the development of the epic tradition with reference to the four novels dealt with, discerning in them the thread of similarity in the character depiction of the heroes. Natty is shown as a Christ-like figure, and the tragic-comic aspects of his nature equate him to Don Quixote. Like Odysseus, he is widely travelled. Ahab, Melville's hero fighting evil in the form of the White Whale, evokes comparisons with Christ, and Ahab's mania and madness is likened to the madness of Don Quixote. Further, George in Giles Goat-Boy has obvious affinity to Christ and Oedipus as narrated in the last chapter. Each of the novels depict history in some way. The Last of Mohicans depicts the history of the colonization of the West and also a particular historic event, that is, the fall of Fort William Henry. Moby Dick gives a history of the whaling industry and its intricate functioning. An American Tragedy presents the class relations of the early twentieth century and gives us a vivid picture of the nineteen-twenties, while Barth gives us the life history of an individual, simultaneously unfolding the history of mankind. Cooper, in accordance with his theme, attempts to convey, that man's desire to live a new and happy life on the Western frontier is a myth, and he works upon this myth. Melville, associates his whale with various mythic gods to enhance his novel's epic quality. Dreiser deals with the city seducer myth and Barth expands on the wandering hero myth. Generally, these
novelists seem to come to the conclusion that the solution to prevailing problems is love. In Cooper, love takes the form of a deep friendship between Natty and Chingachgook, in *Moby Dick* it is the valued social relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. In *An American Tragedy*, Clyde and Roberta are ideally suited emotionally but material factors disrupt their happiness. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, George is able to find an answer to his quest and realizes that the redemption of mankind and salvation is possible only by understanding the true meaning of love, even though it has become sterile - a fumbling lust of young people.

One of the important attempts to write an affirmative American epic in the twentieth century is Hart Crane's long poem, *The Bridge* (1930). Through the symbol of Brooklyn Bridge, the poem presents Crane's mystical vision of unity in a world of diversity. Like *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge* seeks to define a new myth to fill man's spiritual vacuum in the machine age, and like Whitman, Crane believes that since man cannot escape the increasingly mechanized modern world, he must find a way not only of acclimatizing himself to it, but of celebrating it. *The Bridge* represents Crane's attempt to epicize and celebrate twentieth century America much as Whitman praised nineteenth century America.

The other two major works of this century which demand attention in any discussion of epic, are *The Cantos* (1925-1959) of Ezra Pound and *The Waste Land* (1922) of T.S.Eliot, which are in keeping with the epic tradition of Cooper.
Melville, Dreiser and Barth whose works all have in common a specifically American sense of time and place. In The Continuity of American Poetry (1961) Roy Harvey Pearce defines the difference between the Whitmanian mode and that of writers like Pound and Eliot as a fine distinction between Adamic and mythic poetry. In the Adamic tradition, the artist is concerned with man as an individual, apart from the society around him, while in the mythic mode, the poet becomes more pre-occupied with society, religion and history as absolute values against which man is measured.²

Both The Cantos and The Wasteland embrace events from the past history of other cultures, as they endeavour to unite the cultural ills of America with those of a whole generation of modern men. Pound and Eliot both continue to use the traditional epic motifs - of the metamorphic questing hero and the journey he undertakes to identify man's relationship to society, and the values and characteristics of that society. Both are also concerned with discovering the proper language in which to express that relationship. However, they refuse to simplify the diversity and complexity of the modern age by relying strictly on the limited expressive powers of the American idiom. Instead, in keeping with the international and historic thrust of The Cantos and The Wasteland, the meaning

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of the narrative is indirectly revealed through a melange of technical devices; foreign language borrowings, direct quotations from sometimes obscure earlier works or figures, snatches of popular songs, classical mythology, and even ideographs. This technique allows the artist to suggest implicitly a comparison between past and present in which the present usually comes off poorly. Neither Pound nor Eliot find it possible to express very much optimism about the present condition of mankind nor can either place much faith in the future.

For Eliot, as for Dreiser and Barth, the modern world is an arid wasteland where man has lost touch with the spiritual beliefs which could redeem him from his selfish prison of materialism. He is a bored, lonely figure who waits hopefully for the life giving rain, but fails to realise that, in order to earn the salvation promised by the rain, he must first learn selflessness, compassion and love. Eliot suggests that the possibility of renewal exists not through the exertion of the individual will, but through a fixed belief in an absolute power greater than the self. Although Pound's epic is more concerned with the specifically American culture, than Eliot's, both are, to an extent, apart from the tradition of American epic established by Whitman. However Dreiser and Barth, like Pound dealt specifically with America and the situation could be applied universally, to all such materialistic and scientifically progressive societies. Barth's is a
well-defined and suspenseful narrative laced with enough sex, humour and action to make it eminently readable. Like Eliot and Pound and even Crane, Barth sees in religious values, moral and ethical standards, a desirable and resurrectable means of redeeming, or at least accepting, the present condition.

No such bright faith brightens \textit{U.S.A.}. The three volumes of the trilogy; \textit{The 42nd Parallel}, \textit{Nineteen Nineteen} and \textit{The Big Money} - trace the rise of capitalism, the advent of the first World War, and the growing interest of the working people in socialism and communism. \textit{U.S.A.} depicts the corruption prevalent in American society. There is self seeking individualism and greedy materialism, which is similar to the theme dealt with by Dreiser in \textit{An American Tragedy}. Like Dreiser, the use of thumbnail biographies and newspapers excerpts are the means which allow Dos Passos to join fact and fiction, thus lending credibility to the fictional narrative. There is no single traditional hero figure in the \textit{U.S.A.}; for the real heroes of this epic are the people. The consciousness of the Camera Eye impressionistically records and reveals vignettes of American experience which affect the poet-artist, and also provide a perspective on what is wrong in America. The things that the Camera Eye sees and records are brutality, violence, prejudice, inequality, and anarchism. These are elaborated through a fictional narrative whose various
characters represent the people of U.S.A. The protagonist of Camera Eye begins his voyage of discovery of America as a child, and his earliest perceptions are innocent, literal impressions of events. As he and his mother run from a crowd of Germans who have mistaken them for 'Englishers', he seems to echo Whitman when he sees that "walking fast you have to tread on too many grass-blades the poor hurt tongues shrink under your feet may be that's why those people are so angry and follow us shaking their fists." The Whitmanesque symbol of life, hope, and equality is being crushed and, as the Camera Eye narrator matures, he learns that prejudice and hatred exist everywhere, even in America. The question raised by the Camera Eye is the same as the one evoked by Dreiser in An American Tragedy, and the best that the Camera Eye can do is to recognize the tragic dichotomy in American culture, the gap between the rich and the poor. Even the biographies continue to emphasize the idea of corruption, the idea that America destroys her best minds because her people have turned the concept of rugged individualism into the doctriness of laissez-faire economics and the survival of the fittest.

The writers discussed earlier have dealt with contemporary economic and political issues, mythically

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treated, and thus, contributed to the epic tradition in America. Barth wrote in accordance with the anti-war sentiment which had gained popularity among writers after World War - II. Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* may be taken as one of the representative novels dealing with the anti-war theme. In Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, war represents, for both the Camera Eye personality and the nation, a kind of trial by fire. The nation and artist emerge from it scarred and disillusioned. He is pointing out the futility of war. In *The Naked and the Dead* we are presented with a comprehensive picture of modern warfare in its vast range from individuals to commanding generals. After World War II the novelists turned to the tradition of the wandering hero, of The *Odyssey* style, as war was no longer a current issue. The shift in theme, made ground for a mock-epic style which replaces the serious vein. John Barth is representative of his generation when he acknowledges that copying traditional, heroic patterns must be done a little ironically.® In *The Sot-weed Factor*, the hero, Ebenezer Cooke undertakes a journey to the New World to assume the office of "Poet and Laureate of Province of Maryland," and wishes to write an epic poem, which will out do other epics,

"An epic to out-epic epics: the history of the princely house of Charles Calvert... the whole done into heroic couplets, printed on linen, bound in calf, stamped in gold." He is disillusioned and writes, "a Hudibrastic expose of the ills that had befallen him," and titles the poem, "The Sot-Weed Factor." We see a similar case in Ross Lockridge's Raintree County where the epic bard, the hero, John Wickliff Shawnessy desires to write an epic. John must undertake a quest to discover what it means to be human. The object of the quest is the discovery of the Raintree, for if John can find it, if man can once again return to Eden, to a state of sublime innocence, then his belief in human perfectability is unalterably confirmed. However, in the end, John Shawnessy never writes his projected epic; he arranges the Grand Patriotic Programme, writes a temperance drama, a love poem, and an unfinished play, but none of these are more than echoes of the popular literary conventions of his time. He leaves his epic unwritten as does Ebenezer Cooke fail to write his epic and ends up a clownish figure, despite having true epic qualities: "there was something brave, defiantly human about the passengers of this dust mote who perished for some dream of value.... their behaviour

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was quixotic: to die, 'O risk death, even to raise a finger for any cause was to pen on one's lance with the riband of purpose, so the poet judged and had about it the same high lunacy of a tilt with Manchegan windwills (Sot-Weed Factor, p. 732). In Barth's next novel, Giles Goat-Boy, we meet George, who like Ebenezer Cooke was conceived to be, "a protagonist... who would not be an anti-hero, but who, a little like Don-Quixote, would take on heroic proportions." These characters are raised to epic heights in Ebenezer and Shawnessy nursing the ambition to write a great American epic poem and George to be another Christ, or the "Grand Tutor." They are however treated ironically and the resultant mock-epic is suited to depict the modern world and its intricate ambiguities.

"The cyclical renewal of life is the grand theme of American epic novels. It is a theme foreshadowed in Moby Dick: out of destruction, rebirth; after death, the renewal of life; out of corruption, transcendence; after withdrawl, return." In The Wasteland, the modern materialistic world depicted by Eliot awaits salvation. Eliot is of the view that renewal is possible through love and religion.


Ezra Pound in *The Cantos* is not so orthodoxly religious. He, too, deplores the modern materialist urge to accumulate which reduces human beings to objects unable to love or communicate, but suggests that salvation lies in, among other things, a complete overhauling of modern culture. The poet hero of *The Bridge* is the traditional questing figure of epics whose search, is for a unifying myth, or Absolute, which can lend spiritual significance and the possibility of redemption to the poet on a journey through space and time in which he must undergo both a symbolic death and rebirth and a descent to the underworld as preparation for his final vision. In *Raintree County* to suggest both the personal, and universal plane of experience, Lockridge relies on archetypes of symbolic death and rebirth, and the idea of the hero's night journey or trial by fire to portray John's quest. John is reborn several times in the narrative and each rebirth increases his understanding of man's relation to the earth, his third rebirth in the novel is more historic than symbolic or mythic, and establishes his universality as a particularly American figure and also re-emphasizes the inseparable weaving of the events of his own life with those of the County and the Republic. In Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* we find the same cycle of birth and rebirth in an attempt to discover a new life for modern man. "The scarred hero issues from an abject community and has only moderate chances of doing something noble. His
glory is to be found, not especially in the cause of this or that reform or amelioration, but in the discovery of new life for both community and self; and his deeds, although they do not bring about actual delivery, are symbolical gestures of man's efforts to move in the direction of his yearning.¹² Both U.S.A. and Giles Goat-Boy revolve to a certain extent, around a conflict between the sensitive personality, a man with ideals and views about the way the world should be. Further, U.S.A., You Can't Go Home Again, and An American Tragedy deal with the growing materialism and cynicism of the contemporary world. The artist's victory lies in his refusal to be defeated by the world he lives in. George maintains his vision, though it is one which has been shaped by maturity and experience at the end of Giles Goat-Boy. Even the fact the Vag is back on the highway at the conclusion of U.S.A. is indicative of a kind of stubbornness in the American spirit which will not allow passivity. Both U.S.A. and An American Tragedy reflect particularly American ideas about innocence and experience, though Dos Passos qualifies and tempers Dreiser's epic affirmations with an almost tragic sense of disillusionment, a feeling which is not uncommon in other modern epics, including the epic poetry of Eliot and Pound.

The Adamic myth represents an idealistic longing to regain Paradise, a Paradise which is increasingly difficult for modern epic writers to envision, simply because embracing the myth totally involves a repudiation of the reality of contemporary history. Dreiser and Dos Passos, Eliot and Pound all implicitly deny the validity of the Adamic posture, while Crane and Barth struggle desperately against rational knowledge and historical inevitability to maintain it. The fact that *Giles Goat-Boy* enjoyed a measure of popular and critical attention indicates that Americans would still like to believe in the possibility of regaining a lost Paradise. There seems to be, in the American spirit, an ineffable quality of naivete, or sentimentalism, or perhaps even innocence, which resists negativism, and makes the American still appear to be in some measure, the Adamic figure who believes, in spite of all rational knowledge and historical fact, that tomorrow will be better.