

# Epic Consciousness: A Possibility for Epic Expression in Post-War American Literature During the Age of Late Capitalism

Safwa Yargui

**Abstract**—This research is about the quest for a post-war American epic poem in the age of late capitalism. This paper explores the possibility of an epic poem in the context of post-war late capitalist America, despite the prevailing scholarly scepticism regarding the existence of epic poetry after Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the possibility of a post-war American epic through the argument of epic consciousness by distinguishing the scholarly views on the impossibility of an epic poem and the counterargument of epic consciousness which contends that American epic poetry is possible. Epic consciousness provides a significant nuance to the reading of the post-war American epic by focusing on the epic's responsiveness to late capitalism, via various language forms; cultural manifestations; and conscious distortions of late capitalist media-related language; in addition to the epic's conscious inclusion of the process of writing a post-war epic that requires a direct engagement with American-based materials. By focusing on interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, this paper includes both socio-cultural literary theories as well as literary and epic approaches developed by scholars that respectively contextualise the late capitalist situation and the question of post-war American epic poetry. In examining the role of consciousness, this paper aims to suggest a re-thinking of the post-war American epic that is capable of self-commitment, for the purpose of achieving a new sense of epic poetry in post-war late capitalist America.

**Keywords**—American epic, epic consciousness, late capitalism, post-war poetry.

## I. INTRODUCTION

EPIC consciousness refers to the epic's inclusion of directions for writing epic poetry, notably through the quest for new epic materials and the acknowledgement of the difficulties epic poetry encounters as a result of late capitalist changes in the perception and creation of culture, literature, and poetry. In the context of American poetry, epic consciousness focuses on the distinctiveness between American epic poetry and the Indo-European epic tradition, and thus emphasises the importance of a uniquely American form and subject matter, underscoring their significance to the development of national American poetry. In this respect, the epic relies on American materials; most notably people, dialect, and the environment to successfully renew its structure for a new American epic with American-centred materials – which is the reason for constantly referring to the process of writing epic poetry.

Late capitalism is regarded as a hindrance for the post-war

American epic principally because it represents a new socio-economic and cultural environment that is responsible for taking over social, cultural, and poetic expression through the emergence of new mass media, culture industry, entertainment agencies, and language systems, among others. These forms of cultural and literary commodification might further address the transformation of the epic into mass-consumed popular generic forms, such as the epic film. Most scholars: Bakhtin [5], Bernstein [22], Hainsworth [13], Innes [8], Lukacs [4], McWilliams [21] have focused on the difficulties – if not the impossibility – of writing a post-war epic, principally due to the socio-economic and cultural changes that separate the classical epic world from the modern. However, this study challenges these scholars' views of the impossibility of the epic and contends that the epic is conscious of post-war late capitalism as an impediment to its expression. This research seeks to provide a more technical understanding of the post-war American epic by offering a scholarly background on the overall idea of epic consciousness. It highlights that epic poetry is possible within the post-war American context via the concept of epic consciousness, which offers a renewed possibility of reading the post-war American epic which acknowledges the epic poetry writing process and the challenges it encounters within post-war late capitalist America – all for the ultimate sake of reminding itself of the purpose of achieving a unique American epic expression despite the difficulties imposed by late capitalism. This paper accordingly aims to demonstrate that the epic is responsive to post-war late capitalist challenges through its consciousness, upon which it builds new epic materials to ensure its continuity within the post-war American context.

## II. METHODS

The interdisciplinarity of this study entails a focus on both cultural and literary theories in order to approach the selected texts and the concept of epic consciousness. The conceptual framework of this study therefore draws upon a variety of twentieth century and post-war cultural theories including principally, but not exclusively, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1]; Guy Debord's *The Society of Spectacle* [2]; Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [3]; Georg Lukacs's *The Theory of the Novel* [4]; and Mikhail Bakhtin's

Safwa Yargui is with the University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom (phone: 00447783835009; e-mail: Safwa-anfel.Yargui@hud.ac.uk).

*Dialogic Imagination* [5] – to name only a few. Furthermore, this paper focuses on major twentieth century theoretical discussions of post-war American poetics, American epic poetry, and the overall socio-cultural and artistic changes during the post-war period. These theories include mainly, but not exclusively, Ezra Pound's "make it new" approach, William Carlos Williams's "variable foot", and Charles Olson's "Projective Verse". This range of literary and cultural theories aims to provide a significant context to the question of the post-war American epic under late capitalism. The reason for building upon these literary and cultural theories is also to achieve a sense of epic consciousness in the context of post-war late capitalist America. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that this study's central argument of epic consciousness is based on a specific definition of the term. This paper provides a contextualised overview of epic consciousness along with some previous uses of the term, which were employed in very dissimilar contexts to this study's and focuses on a reading of epic consciousness within the post-war American context.

### III. EPIC CONSCIOUSNESS: A HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

In tracing the tradition of the epic, Johns-Putra [6], Merchant [7], Innes [8] have all addressed the epic's (self) consciousness, sometimes referred to as (self) reflexivity which dates back to ancient epic texts. Johns-Putra maintains the epics' "self-awareness" starting from the Homeric tradition when she points to Achilles's interrogation of the heroic code in the *Iliad*, and the recitation of the *Odyssey* at the court of the Phaeacians by Odysseus [6]. Johns-Putra also respectively mentions Virgil, Ovid, and Dante as having consciously included epic characteristics respectively ranging from the adaptation of Homeric plot by Virgil, Ovid's playful allusions to the epic in *Metamorphoses*, and Dante's utilization of the epic in accordance with the demands of the late medieval period in *Divina Comedia*. In *The Epic*, Paul Merchant refers to the acknowledgement of historical importance in triggering such epic "awareness", and, like Johns-Putra, he recalls Odysseus's speech: "*Odyssey* 8, where the Phaeacian bard Demodocus sings, at the request of Odysseus in disguise, the story of the Trojan Horse, an episode in which Odysseus himself played a prominent part" [7]. Merchant also believes that *Beowulf* follows a similar pattern: "[i]n the Old English *Beowulf* there is a similar awareness of historical perspective on the part of the poet, which in this case takes the form of a nostalgia for the glories of the past" [7]. Innes includes Renaissance epics, notably Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, as containing a conscious reference to Virgilian nationalistic epic, but situated within the context of the Elizabethan Age: "he [Spenser] recuperates the Virgilian classical models of poetic development from eclogue and pastoral allegory to epic narratives of nationalist heroism" [8]. Innes also notes the epic's self-reflexivity in British Romantic poetry, primarily through the poet who is considered "the hero of his own epic, and the call of his imagination will be his epic journey" [8]. Innes places Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion* in conjunction regarding their belief in the prominence of the poet

for the epic, whereas he puts Byron's *Don Juan* in a different Romantic tradition [8]. Richard Lansdown describes *Don Juan* as a conscious "comic epic", explaining that: "[b]y stanza six, Byron had already explicitly associated his new tale with epic practice ('Most epic poets plunge in "medias res"'); in stanza 200, he committed himself further, though humorously ('My poem's epic ...'). The poem shuffles unceasingly thereafter as regards its own status as mock-performance or epic in earnest" [9].

In a highly satirical and comic tone, Byron's [10] epic interrogates itself and explicitly includes epic features that attest to its consciousness:

I WANT a hero: an uncommon want,  
[...]  
Brave men were living before Agamemnon  
[...]  
But can't find any in the present age  
Fit for my poem (that is, for my new one);  
So, as I said, I 'll take my friend Don Juan.  
Most epic poets plunge 'in medias res'  
(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),  
And then your hero tells, whene'er you please, [...]  
That is the usual method, but not mine—  
My way is to begin with the beginning [10].

The epic's auto-attribution attests to the consciousness of both its ancient tradition ("hero"; "Agamemnon"; "in medias res"), as well as the lack of epic materials ("can't find any in the present age/Fit for my poem"). In starting the poem by overtly addressing heroism, Agamemnon, and Horace, Byron breaks with the ancient epic tradition in which Heroism and in media res action were prominent parts of the poem, while explicitly stating that these do not fit at the time he is writing his poem. Byron, henceforth, explains his desire for a new epic tradition that is distinct from what he considers as "the usual method" [10].

In *Milton's Logical Epic and Evolving Consciousness*, Walter J. Ong assesses the epic nature of *Paradise Lost* and contends the discontinuity of the epic in the Romantic period; thus, like Bowra, he ends the tradition abruptly after Milton: "it was by Milton's time impossible – and it remains today impossible – to organize epic in the old way anymore" [11]. Ong explores Milton's use of logic, the conscious repartition of epithets, and the formulation of his conscious purpose throughout *Paradise Lost*, which seems to contrast with Homer, whose poems, Ong maintains, "had been organized largely through the unconscious" [11]. Ong claims that epithets, for instance, become consciously used contrary to the old epic tradition when the organization of epithets and other epic poetry devices were employed in a way that neither acknowledged their use, nor any other epic materials. Ong is hence employing consciousness with a double meaning: firstly, through the poem's turn towards logic and the importance of the conscious mind. Secondly, the reference to the epic's self-consciousness maintained through the auto-attribution of epic materials (namely orality, heroism, the quest).

Thomas Greene reiterates the point of consciousness in *Paradise Lost*, but notes that it is more related to content than

to form: “[i]n the poignant last lines of the poem [...] the courage of Adam and Eve is qualified by an almost childlike hesitancy which the faltering verse rhythms underscore. The quietness and pathos of the close make a pointed, self-conscious contrast with the traditional epic” [12]. Like Ong, Greene contends that, whether intentionally or not, consciousness drives away the epic from its traditional discourse, yet Ong is more explicit regarding the point of consciousness when he declares that: “the epic tradition [...] does register a rise in consciousness, and it is this rise which destroys the tradition. For the epic mode had originated in and registered the less consciously, but beautifully, organized noetic economy of primary oral cultures” [11]. The more the epic reflects upon its tradition, Ong explains, the more it demonstrates its distance from an ideal past and its awareness that it is estranged from it; and it is precisely this consciousness that Ong, as well as Greene, identify as betraying the epic nature – which is seen to have traditionally developed spontaneously and unconstrained to auto-reflect, unlike the modern epic.

It is important to note, however, that while Ong and Greene, and other scholars, advance that consciousness is the chief criterion of the failure of the modern epic, this paper argues the absolute reverse, and disagrees with Ong’s and Greene’s claims. Firstly, the claim that Homeric epics are built upon the “unconscious” construction of epic materials could be refuted as Johns-Putra, Merchant, and Innes, among others, offer some instances of the epic’s self-conscious references within the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, while Hainsworth directly addresses *Paradise Lost*, maintaining that: “[t]o read *Paradise Lost* is to realize how self-conscious epic poetry is. There is no epic poem that does not confront its predecessors; the themes that recur in the epic – heroism, the nation, the faith—are evolving ideas; and the idea itself is cumulative” [13]. Hainsworth thus considers the epic’s (self)-consciousness as part of the genre from the beginning of its tradition, and along with other epic characteristics, for instance, heroism and the community, which are not static, the consciousness of the epic also evolves over time to embrace new forms and subject matters.

Secondly, Milton’s focus on rational knowledge and the prioritisation of the mind, instead of previous epic traits of physical-based heroism, do not necessarily make the epic conscious, but more likely to be directed towards new materials. In this regard, the turn towards internal action in *Paradise Lost* could be seen as a generalised claim. For instance, if we examine Voltaire’s *Henriade* and Robert Southey’s *Joan of Arc* – to cite only a few poems published after *Paradise Lost* – we find that they revolve around the historical figures of Henry IV of France and Joan of Arc, respectively, and it is clear that both poems emphasise external action and conflicts rather than internal thoughts. This means that Ong’s and Greene’s focus on *Paradise Lost* within the context of seventeenth century England seems a restricted scope to affirm that consciousness is detrimental to the genre, and that epic poetry after Milton focuses on internal instead of external action. In this respect, it is important to maintain that even though consciousness is regarded as unsuitable for Milton’s epic, it is fundamental to the post-war American epic which, as previously highlighted,

constitutes not only a completely different space and time, but a different epic tradition (as shown through Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and American epic poetry’s focus on turning away from Homeric themes of war and violence).

The belief that consciousness is fatal to the epic is also underlined by Paul Fleming. Fleming builds upon Lukacs’s *Theory of the Novel* and contends that the age of the epic has ended at the time of its theorisation: “in its totality of meaning, the age of epic is a pre-theoretical mode of being devoid of searching, looking, concealment, abysses. Therefore, the theory of the epic doesn’t belong to the age of the epic” [14]. Fleming principally recalls Lukacs’s theorisation of the epic, which he considers unlikely, maintaining that his theory of the epic serves to explain the theory of the novel, as the epic, for Fleming, cannot coexist with theory and philosophy: “the age of epic can never enter thought for the simple reason that its theorization obliterates the characteristics that constitutes it as epic: rounded totality and plenitude of meaning” [14]. Among these characteristics, Fleming cites the ancient Greek age of “blessed [...] totality, immanent meaning, and answers without questions” [14]; hence, in originating in such a “blessed” and homogenous totality, any form of questioning would disturb the balance of its self-evident and self-explanatory world. In this respect, Fleming refutes the idea of epic consciousness; he argues: “the age of the epic explicitly has no seeking, no philosophy, no questions (only answers), and therefore no theory, not even its own” [14]. The formulation of both external and internal (epic’s own) theories opposes the main foundation of the genre, according to Fleming, for, in being conscious the epic manifests traits of exploring and seeking its materials – as shown, for instance, in *Don Juan* through which it acknowledges its past tradition, and searches for a present hero and action – while these specifically underrate the epic genre through its search for itself and its constituents. Lukacs also implicitly addresses the impossibility of the epic to reflect upon itself: “[t]he ‘should be’ kills life, and an epic hero constructed out of what ‘should be’ will always be but a shadow of the living epic man of historical reality, his shadow but never his original image, and his given world of experience and adventure can only be a watered-down copy of reality, never its core and essence” [4].

By focusing on instructing itself the way it should be, the epic, for Lukacs, fails to grasp its “essence” and to actually be. The consciousness of the epic is accordingly, for Lukacs, a hinderance for the genre, as it divulges its incapacity, rather than possibility, of expression. Fleming [14], Ong [11], and Greene [12] hence agree with Lukacs in affirming that the modern epic consciously builds on ancient epics, revealing its desire to reflect upon ancient materials at the expense of a renewed version of itself. Furthermore, Fleming positions Lukacs’s concept of the epic (as originating in pre-rational times) in conjunction with Edmund Husserl’s concept of the “life-world”. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl defines the “life-world” as a “naïve”, “self-evident” universe, which is “prior to all theory” [15]. The analogy of Husserl’s “life-world” with Lukacs’s vision of the grounded totality of the Greek world, as

pre-theoretical, forms the basis of Fleming's "epic consciousness": "[p]aradoxically, the lack that the epic represents for us is fullness itself: of meaning, of totality, of life. The age of epic is in Hegelian fashion also a form of consciousness, a mode of being that is explicitly non-theoretical, non-philosophical, non-questioning, and to some degree non-thinking" [14].

As a precursor to Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel*, Hegel places the epic above all forms of poetry in *Aesthetics*, for it originated in the time of Greek organic totality, and so offers a rich, simplified, and unambiguous account of its socio-historical context [16]; Gary Shapiro maintains: "[t]he epic is appropriately the simplest form of major poetry because its approach resembles the impersonal, spectatorial attitude of history. The epic poet seems simply to describe a world in his song as the naive historian or chronicler narrates a series of events" [17].

In building on Hegel's description of the epic, Fleming's point of epic consciousness could be explained as follows: for being non-theoretical, non-philosophical, the epic offers a plain and uncomplicated narration of events which forms a sort of consciousness. Consciousness, for Fleming, departs from the sense of being aware; it is rather "a mode of being" inherent to the epic's self-explanatory nature and its repudiation of theory, and like Husserl's concept of the "life-world", it is "a zone in which all is always already answered" [14]. Fleming further notes that: "there is nothing 'to grasp' [...] in epic consciousness" [14], reiterating the point of the self-evident nature of the epic.

The way Fleming describes epic consciousness does, however, suggest a passiveness and indifference to the external world; for this reason, this paper disagrees with Fleming's epic theory, notably because his theory does not explore, in any way, the responsiveness of the epic to external events, but reiterates the idea of the epic being immune to thought and questioning. Furthermore, the reference to Hegel's epic age as "a form of consciousness" associated – once again – with the absence of thinking and questioning is not quite accurate to what Hegel points out in *Aesthetics*; Hegel argues: "[e]pic [...] says *what* is there, *where* and *how* deeds have been done, and therefore, of all kinds of poetry, needs the greatest breadth and definiteness of the external locality" [16]. The epic answering "what", "where" and especially "how" rather requires a long search and implies a self-awareness which has constant recourse to thinking and reflexion.

#### IV. EPIC CONSCIOUSNESS: THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

Arguably, most cited critics who address epic consciousness point to the European epic tradition while they either omit or deal with the American epic only superficially; Johns-Putra includes Pound's and Hilda Doolittle's "Homeric allusion[s]" [6] in *The Cantos* and *Helen in Egypt* respectively, maintaining the epics' self-consciousness, which, in the case of Doolittle revises Homer's epics rather than adheres to them. Merchant refers to Pound's references to Greek and Latin classics, the importance of Italian medieval epics, notably Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Chinese history, and his famous motto to "MAKE

IT NEW" [7] in *The Cantos*, indicating *The Cantos*' conscious epic task of innovation within modernist poetry. Merchant also cites William Carlos Williams's well-known phrase, "No ideas but in things", which he interprets as Williams's attempt to include various details in *Paterson* – perhaps attesting to the consciousness of the epic of the richness of the city of Paterson [7], and its commitment to include as much detail as it possibly can. Innes cites only Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* as an American epic, which, despite the engagement of the poem with the classics, and American history (principally the American Revolutionary War), the poem is criticised for its lack of "cultural centrality" [8]. Quint describes Barlow's epic as "anxious about the continuity of a kind of classical epic awe in a modern era increasingly skeptical toward poetic fictions, vest[s] that awe in personifications of the victimized" [18]. In the case of Barlow, the consciousness of his epic seems to betray its anxiety to reflect upon its ancient subject matter, which Quint believes is unsuccessful.

The scholars often associated with the continuation of American epic poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are mainly, but not exhaustively, J. P. McWilliams, James E. Miller, Roy Harvey Pearce, Jeffrey Walker, and Michael Andre Bernstein; all attest to the consciousness of the genre in American poetry. Miller includes chapters on Williams and Olson but insists that the consciousness of the epic started with Whitman: "the poet [Whitman] keeps prodding himself, reminding himself of his epic role. In the second major movement [...] the epic voice becomes loud and even strident" [19]. Likewise, Pearce shares a similar point: "Whitman's conscious philosophical intention, the form of the poem, its movement from the picture of the envisioning poet, to a series of catalogues and narratives of what he envisions [...] then finally to the realisation of the source of envisioning power – all this demonstrates a poet sufficiently conscious of his own commitment" [20].

While both Miller and Pearce maintain the determination of Whitman for his epic role, the epic's own involvement within the poem is similarly invaluable. Pearce further notes that American epic poetry fosters national awareness: "[e]stablishing the pattern of continuity will in turn perhaps be a way of seeing what poetry has 'done' in America – and so of becoming increasingly self-conscious of one aspect of our national self-consciousness. For surely the history that our poetry has made is the history of ourselves, or our consciousness of ourselves" [20].

Pearce [20] emphasises the significance of epic poetry in forming a national American identity, which is the reason why writing an epic was considered of national importance. The conscious epic is, then, associated with the American epic strife, on the one hand, and the need for that epic to account for Americanness, on the other. The epic, therefore, needs to be conscious of its role in maintaining a "pattern of continuity" and its national-scale importance – recalling Miller's point about the lifetime ambition to write long, open-ended poems as being typically American. McWilliams similarly points to the importance of consciousness for the American epic, maintaining that the entire epic tradition is based on

consciousness: “we must acknowledge that the word “epic” describes a tradition founded, not only upon change, but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities” [21]. McWilliams cites Frederick Turner’s search for heroism in *The New World: An Epic Poem*, yet he focuses more closely on Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as containing more conscious references to the American epic.

While Miller, Pearce and McWilliams situate the start of epic consciousness in the nineteenth century with Whitman (and with Melville for McWilliams), epic consciousness, according to Bernstein starts with Pound. In *The Tale of the Tribe*, Bernstein traces the origin of the phrase “the tale of the tribe”, which Pound attributes to the epic: “[...] Pound took over the notion of *Sagetrieb* [...] Pound’s fundamental conception of an epic poem was precisely the *Sage* (literally “saying” or “speech”) of his own historical era, the [...] (speech, or tale) of a tribe that had itself inherited all of man’s previous legends and accomplishments as constitutive elements of its own consciousness” [22].

It is important to recognize that Pound’s conception of the epic suggests the *inherent* consciousness of the genre, one that reflects on the speech of the tribe and transmits its stories and accomplishments – which might further point to the idea of the oral tradition of the genre and the epic’s purpose of transmission. Yet, in reflecting upon Pound’s “make it new” dictum, Bernstein advances that: “[o]ne of the dominant goals of *The Cantos* [...] is just such a quest for the necessary structure of a new epic, a structure that would emerge in the literary articulation of the poem itself” [22]. It is important to recognise the importance of innovation within the American epic – one that recognises the ancient epic characteristics while actively seeking renewed American-centred materials.

In this respect, it is important to note that epic consciousness has not been the subject of numerous scholarly debates; the scholars cited here are the main – but not exhaustive – pioneers of the concept within the American context. Nevertheless, their use of epic consciousness either focuses on European epic texts with brief allusions to American poems or it does not reflect the precise meaning of epic consciousness that this paper attempts to highlight. Based on this lack of studies on American epic consciousness within the post-war period, the present research aims to contribute to the scholarship on post-war American epic poetry through the argument about epic consciousness. It prioritises epic consciousness in the post-war American context, diverging with the cited critics in two major points: first, the evaluation of epic consciousness within the context of late capitalism – for despite having been tackled by some scholars, epic consciousness has not been assessed with regard to late capitalism. Second, epic consciousness seems left out by most critics who explore the American epic, whereas this paper builds upon the American epic’s desire to break from traditional epic forms in favour of a unique American national epic expression, as a significant part of the argument of epic consciousness. That is, the focus on the consciousness of the post-war American epic contributes to offering a renewed definition of the epic genre within the post-war American context and with regard to late capitalism.

## V. EPIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND LATE CAPITALISM

The term late capitalism was popularised by Ernest Mandel in his eponymous PhD thesis, maintaining that the age of late capitalism “acquire[s] a new dimension” in a number of domains: “[l]ate capitalism thus constitutes *generalized universal industrialization* for the first time in history. Mechanization, standardisation, over-specialization and parcellization of labour, which in the past determined only the realm of commodity production in actual industry, now penetrate into all sectors of social life” [23].

While the former stage of capitalism (monopoly) involved, for Mandel, the innovation in industrial mechanization and the concentration of production, he maintains that late capitalism registers a universalization of industry on a global scale, which specifically targets social life [23]. Jameson also agrees with Mandel, notably in situating late capitalism as the third stage in the evolution of capitalism, and in being a new economic system that came into prominence after World War II. Jameson also notes the emergence of “new forms of business organizations (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage”, which are “fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism” [1] – noting the shift towards a new age in capitalist development. Late capitalism encompasses changes in various domains; Jameson cites industry, the banking system, trade and the stock market, media, shipping and transport, computerisation, and globalization, among others [1].

In “Late Capitalism”, Albenaz Azmanova explains that: “[u]nder the impact of industrialization and rise of consumerism, the concerns of efficiency that are central to the dynamics of economic production and administrative rule (of money and power) start to penetrate the cultural system” [24]. The number of cultural theories that emerged in the twentieth century attest to the significant impact of late capitalism on culture; Adorno and Horkheimer, among other members of the Frankfurt School (Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin), address these forms of socio-cultural changes, and criticise the roles of mass culture in the shaping of contemporary society. In *Capitalist Epics*, David Cunningham maintains the power of late capitalism in the modification of social relations: “[...] it is precisely global capitalism rather than either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat which seems to drive any revolutionizing of ‘the whole relations of society’” [25], suggesting late capitalism’s changing of the class system.

The reason for referring to these gradual changes in society and culture is fundamental because, given the focus of this research on the socio-cultural effects of late capitalism on the epic, these theorists address the major modifications of society leading to changes in culture and literature. In addressing these changes, this section offers a comprehensive account of the initial impact of the transformation of social life on cultural production, as well as art and literature, which would lead to significant changes in the poetic composition and perception of the epic by the public. In addition, the epic would witness the emergence of generic forms of the genre, such as epic fantasy, with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as a notable example, as well as epic movies and games. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin

explains that works of art are in their nature “reproducible” through time, and maintains that its final stage is owned by “third parties in the pursuit of gain” [26], which, he argues, has to do with the “decay of the aura” of works of art in the age of mass-produced commodities: “it [is] easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life” [26].

It is particularly important to reflect on Lukacs’s claim of the unlikelihood of the epic to adjust to the modern socio-economic structure here; Lukacs further uses “organic” as the description for the age of the epic, and explains that the modern age is “infinitely large” and unsuitable for the epic [4]. Cunningham comments on Lukacs’s implication of capitalism in *The Theory of the Novel*: “if we are to revisit *The Theory of the Novel*, it is perhaps – against the grain of Lukacs’s own rereadings – not as an epic of the bourgeois ‘people’, but as a displaced account of ‘the system of capitalism itself’ that the latter’s engagement with the novel’s impossible epic form is best understood today” [25].

The impossibility of the epic adjusting to the capitalist system is explicitly addressed by Cunningham as the main trigger behind Lukacs’s *Theory of the Novel*; in a similar sense, Cunningham also explains that Benedict Anderson’s “print-capitalism” suggests the appearance of the novel as “the first modern-style, mass produced industrial commodity” [25], while the epic could not enter this categorisation, given its elevated literary position. Cunningham acknowledges capitalism as a significant challenge for the epic, given its commodification and commercialisation of culture, art, and literature. As previously underlined, Lukacs, and other twentieth century scholars were decisive in placing the epic in pre-capitalist times, and specifically pointed out to the impossibility of the epic to cope with the modern complex capitalist world and its modification of the genre. Innes [8], Johns-Putra [6], Quint [18], among others, point to the generic uses of the word epic, and explore the epic film as a significant contemporary development of the genre. In his examination of the movie *Prometheus*, Michelakis, for instance, acknowledges the range of meanings encompassing the word epic in contemporary culture [27]. Nevertheless, in addressing the various domains in which the term epic can be used other than poetry; the significant changes in the social and cultural formations that trigger various mass consumed versions of the epic; as well as the different scholarly discussions that contest the possibility of epic poetry, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of the epic in a verse form, which represents a dedicated epic project for a number of poets (including Pound, Eliot, Crane, Williams, Olson, and Dorn), alongside these new epic forms.

This paper specifically evaluates the development of the epic poem per se in the post-war American context and adheres neither to the theories of the impossibility of an epic verse form within the modern age nor the transformation of the genre into a commodified product of popular culture. The epic is the lifelong struggle of some American poets who attempt to offer a committed American epic poem, despite the overwhelming

presence of the late capitalist culture. In the process, the epic would inevitably refer to the culture industry, media, advertising, pop culture and other late capitalist aspects, yet its consciousness of these would allow it to dissociate itself from products of the culture industry and focus on the ultimate purpose of epic renewal. Williams confirms: “the artist cannot ignore the economic dominance in his time” [28]; he also notes: “[l]et me insist, the poet’s very life but also his forms originate in the political, social and economic maelstrom on which he rides” [29].

The development of the meaning and subject matter of the post-war American epic is, henceforth, dependent on late capitalism. For this reason, this research relies on consciousness as a fundamental concept, which advances that these social, economic, and cultural changes within the poems are not threats – because they constitute an extensive change from the ancient epic criteria – but are part of the fast-paced development of late capitalism. While it has previously been maintained that the epic during the age of late capitalism is mostly referred to through its generic forms, notably epic films, fantasy, and science fiction, most scholarship omits an evaluation of the implications of late capitalism on epic poetry. Hence, besides seeking only to highlight the impact of late capitalism on epic poetry, this paper addressed this lack of scholarly search which has poorly directed the question of epic poetry to late capitalism, while it has not referred in any way to consciousness as an important criterion of the post-war American epic in the confrontation of late capitalism. This paper therefore demonstrates that the conscious epic poem actively differentiates itself from the overall products of late capitalism and enables the epic to focus on new epic materials for the advancement and redefinition of post-war American epic poetry.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the post-war American epic can be read through the concept of consciousness. The primary characteristic of epic consciousness, it was contended, concerns the reference to the process of writing an epic, which is considered here as a significant part of the post-war American epic. Most scholars, including Lukacs [4], Bakhtin [5], Hainsworth [13], McWilliams [21], among others, have focused on the challenges, if not the impossibility, of writing a post-war epic, owing to significant socio-economic and cultural changes that have created a divide between the classical epic world and the modern world. However, this paper counterargued the prevalent notion that the epic is impossible in the post-war American context, by focusing on two objectives: first, to demonstrate that the epic is knowledgeable of these socio-economic and cultural changes. This research evaluated the post-war American epic with regard to the changes in the American society and culture, principally through the emergence of late capitalism. These changes in the perception and production of culture, art, and literature within these advanced mass consumer societies were specifically examined in terms of the American epic’s consciousness of the considerable challenges late capitalism posed to the

composition and perception of the post-war American epic poem.

Second, and more importantly, it was argued that American epic poetry is conscious that it needs to develop a renewed form of epic expression appropriate to the post-war American context. This paper placed significant emphasis on the distinctiveness of the American epic, which demonstrates different characteristics from the traditional Indo-European epic, most notably through the theme of the importance of American identity and democracy; free verse that represents American freedom while rejecting European epic constraints and sophisticated language; the focus on American language and people's speech patterns; and the overall creation/redefinition of an American epic and poetic tradition that is completely separated from the European.

This paper provides a new reading of the American epic based on the concept of epic consciousness; and in doing so, it demonstrated that epic consciousness offers a nuanced idea of the epic. Whereas some critics (Lukacs [4]; Bakhtin [5]; Quint [18], among others) have argued that it is impossible to write an epic in poetic form after the epic has been encroached upon by new forms of media and entertainment, and/or that the epic is no longer a viable form within the socio-economic context of the modern world, this paper formulates the idea of epic consciousness to argue the exact opposite. It is precisely because of the epic's awareness of the conditions of late capitalism and its attendant media ecology that epic becomes possible as an experimental form in post-war America. This argument has the potential to make a valuable contribution to current research, as ongoing discussions (Bryant, Blanton) revolve around whether the epic, in order to be relevant to contemporary forms of entertainment, should be reshaped and redefined to adapt to new media forms.

In this regard, epic consciousness might be regarded as a technical term that provides a focused understanding of the post-war American epic by offering a renewed reading of the post-war American epic through which epic poems, such as *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, *The Maximus Poems* direct attention to themselves – as epic poems – refer to epic forms, and the challenges they encounter within post-war late capitalist America – all for the ultimate sake of reiterating the ultimate purpose of achieving a unique American epic expression. The different situation of post-war late capitalism compels the epic to adjust itself to the new and to update its materials – hence its continuous quest for new forms.

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