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THE MODERN EPIC: “SYMPHONIC” EPIC - HUGO AND TOLKIEN

O ÉPICO MODERNO: ÉPICA “SINFÔNICA” - HUGO E TOLKIEN

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ABSTRACT: This article sets out to show that despite the myth of the death of the epic modernity has given birth to texts of this very literary genre. To that purpose, I argue that the epic exists not only as a “work of art”, but also as a register, and even as an action. In that sense, we can say that the conditions of the epic action have changed from the canonical to the modern epic: whereas the canonical works functioned on a polyphonic system, it is a symphonic system that allows modern epics to respond to the challenge of a world of disenchantment. The study of such works as *Notre-Dame de Paris* [*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*] or *The Lord of the Rings* highlights the role of images in the symphonic functioning of modern epics. Indeed, through the work of the image, such texts display the wide sensitive richness of the world, making this wealth more visible than ever, and therefore drawing the world from its ordinary insignificance. Thus, the contemporary epic texts reveal to the reader what Tolkien calls the “deep enchantments” of the world and invites him to see the real world as something truly alive and full of meaning.

Keywords: modern epic; symphonic epic; *Notre-Dame de Paris*; *The Lord of the Rings*.

RESUMO: Este artigo mostra que, apesar do mito da morte da modernidade épica, a modernidade deu origem a textos desse gênero muito literário. Para esse propósito, argumento que o épico não existe apenas como uma “obra de arte”, mas também como um registro, e mesmo como ação. Nesse sentido, podemos dizer que as condições da ação épica mudaram do épico canônico para o moderno: enquanto as obras canônicas funcionavam em um sistema polifônico, é um sistema sinfônico que permite que os épicos modernos respondam ao desafio de um mundo do desencanto. O estudo de obras como *Notre-Dame de Paris* [*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*] ou *The Lord of the Rings* destaca o papel das imagens no funcionamento sinfônico dos épicos modernos. De fato, através do trabalho da imagem, esses textos exibem a ampla riqueza sensível do mundo, tornando essa riqueza mais visível do que nunca e, portanto, extraindo o mundo da sua insignificância ordinária. Assim, os textos épicos contemporâneos revelam ao

leitor o que Tolkien chama de "encantamentos profundos" do mundo e convida-o a ver o mundo real como algo verdadeiramente vivo e cheio de significado.

Palavras-chave: épico moderno; épico sinfônico; *Notre-Dame de Paris*; *The Lord of the Rings*.

Introduction

Over the last two centuries, a specific literature interested in fantasy and images has known a spectacular development. Some of these works are linked with the epic tradition, especially the medieval one, but also with a larger and perhaps more vague approach to the epic, now understood as a wide narrative, where notions of group values and heroism are relevant. This is particularly the case of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* [*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*] and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Both texts share many features traditionally associated with the epic genre, for instance their superlative scope, their reflection on the values of the individual and the community, and also battles, length and blurred limits of written texts linked to an oral tradition.

Yet such link between epic and imagination in the modern period raises questions because we are used to thinking that this epic is dead. As demonstrated by Cédric Chauvin, the « *modern paradigm* » draws its origin from German Romantics who took for granted that, to us modern readers, the epic could not but appear as an archaism, a dead genre¹. Such a conception is grounded on the idea that the works belonging to this literary genre have to be an expression of the truth of the time in which they were written. However, unlike archaic societies, powerfully anchored to myths (of which epics were the narrative counterpart), Western modernity would be alien to beliefs and rites. Instead, it would be characterised above all by a deep mistrust of the gods and magic that inhabited past times, as well as of any holistic explanation of the world. Modern society would then be essentially disenchanted. Hence the fundamental problem raised by the resurgence of the epic through works like Hugo's and Tolkien's can be understood: how can there still be epics in these disenchanted times?

The hypothesis here is that *Notre-Dame de Paris* or *The Lord of the Rings* are not simply strange phenomena that are difficult to reconcile with such a diagnosis on modernity: they tend instead to constitute a new form of epic. And this implies that they first remedy modern disenchantment. Therefore they perform, as archaic texts do but with different means, an "epic work". That is, where a polyphonic pattern enabled archaic texts to fulfil their function of putting forward new political organisations, as demonstrated by Florence Goyet², modern epics are what we will call here "symphonic": the various voices that can be heard are not in discordance,

¹ CHAUVIN, Cédric. **Référence épique et modernité**. Paris : Honoré Champion, 2012.

² GOYET, Florence Goyet. **Penser sans concepts : fonction de l'épopée guerrière**. Paris : Honoré Champion, 2006.

but they strengthen one another and eventually give the reader the impression that the world makes sense.

More than voices, these literary texts use imagination and fantasy in a specific way of treating images. The “work” through which they make new meanings appear is not based on the mere multiplication of voices, dialogue between author, narrator, story-teller or receiver, as was the case with canonical epic, but is based on a play on visual images. What gives the necessary depth to such a work, acting as a counterpart to the multiple meaning-levels in polyphonic systems, is a capacity of these images to become animate, to come to life and to show that what usually seems insignificant and trivial can have an autonomous existence and be meaningful.

Such use of imagination unifies the epic beyond the phenomenon of fragmentation affecting its structure, themes and register. It allows the epic to fulfil its function of “working” society from inside – that is, both to offer new meanings of the world and to make them possible in the imagination of modern receivers, since these readers may adhere more spontaneously to the faculty of imagination than to the “voices” of discursive intelligence.

A first metaphor belonging to grammar will help us understand how the epic can thus be extended to modern texts. Within the grammar of the way the literary work is received, the epic functions as a “noun”, but also as an “adjective”, and eventually as a “verb” (I). A second metaphor borrowed from mechanics will give light to the way in which this “epic-verb” is stopped and obliged to develop other means when its functioning is altered by the phenomenon of disenchantment of the word (II). The image which is new mode of work of the epic-verb as symphonic rather than polyphonic, offers a reply to the challenges raised by modernity (III).

The grammar of the genre: text, register and epic work

Three functions of the genre may be distinguished, which are part of a common “grammar” used for the writing of the epic, its production and its efficiency. Such an analogy between the epic production and the structure of a sentence provides a synthetic wording for these “functions” of the genre: the epic is at once “noun”, “adjective” and “verb”.

First, the epic work presents itself as a “noun”: it appears to be a masterpiece capable of erecting itself into a model for understanding and writing other texts. Nonetheless, given the evolution of world-views, the “adjectival” dimension throws light on the epic in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such production is torn between the explosion of the epic into one register among others and the holistic resistance of the genre. Finally, more fundamentally, if the epic can accommodate these contradictions, it is because it also bears a dynamic “verbal” dimension,

which does not exclude frailty and relativism, but carries them to such an intensive degree that they partake in the operation of transformation and in the performativity of the epic.

1. A monstrous genre? The epic as a noun

a. A challenge for literary theory

The epic seems to amplify the problems of definition typical of literary genres: it is the object of a huge amount of theory, while the productions themselves are extremely varied and therefore shatter the too constraining definitions. Within the theoretical discourse on literary genres, the epic is constantly mentioned as an example of complex enunciation patterns. The epic can be oral or written, be read or performed, have an identified author or only interpreters. It is also noted for the difficulties in the establishment of the text, which can have several versions and raise the question of authenticity³.

The consistency of the epic corpus also raises problems. The existence of an extensive canon gives the word “epic” a number of references and avoids its complete dispersion into a multiplicity of productions claiming the title. Yet the homogeneity of the whole remains threatened by the very weight of such masterpieces, which are so different and often tend more towards autonomy than to federate lineages. Moreover, the wide amplitude of space and time concerned as well as the variety of formal, thematic and tonal realities involved (from verse to prose, from political power to family intrigues, from individual to collective questions, from description to tragedy) give the genre a real scope but one whose consistency is difficult to grasp. Such richness and vastness of the epic field makes it difficult to hold a unified discourse on this genre, and yet it also requires it in order to throw light on such a strange use of the designation for such a variety of productions. The flexible writing process and the autonomy of the mode of representation would then appear as two criteria capable of characterising the genre.

b. Criterion 1: the widening of the redactional framework

If some masterpieces like *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *The Lord of the Rings* differ from epics of the oral tradition in that they are the written production of well-identified authors (rather than stories passed on from one story-teller to another and continually renewed within the concrete conditions of a poetic, often publicly held, performance), their writing and editing system, by its complexity and originality, offers a plasticity that could meet, in its own way, that of traditional epics.

³ See for instance DERIVE, Jean. *L'Épopée : unité et diversité d'un genre*. Paris: Karthala, 2002.

Thus, Victor Hugo inserts his books within broader frames. In the Preface of *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (1866), the author presents *Notre-Dame de Paris* as the first stage of a trilogy, comprising also *Les Misérables* (1862) and *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, gathered around the theme of fatality. Such extension of individual texts networked to form a single major masterpiece is amplified by the Preface of *La Légende des siècles*, in 1859, which links the collection to “two other poems, nearly finished at the time of writing this, and which are on the one hand the resolution, on the other hand the crowning *La Fin de Satan* and *Dieu* » (« Préface », p. 558). Hugo contemplates the possibility that a work might be complete in itself as the fruit of a long gestation and composition, besides being inserted within a cycle. *La Légende des siècles* has three versions: *Première Série* (1859), *Nouvelle Série* (1877) and *Dernière Série* (1883). Each collection can be read separately but is structured within an open masterpiece, apt to receive indefinite extensions.

Tolkien’s production also develops into open and expanding networks: *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) is at first presented as the sequel of *The Hobbit* (children’s story of 1937) and is supposed to have a prequel, the “Silmarillion”, which the editor refuses in 1937 and 1950, but which is already consistent enough to serve as a background to the published narrative. Each of these works, and especially the “Silmarillion”, whose (unfinished) writing stretches from 1916 to 1972, is rewritten many times and gives rise to many drafts and sketches, posthumously published under the title *History of Middle-Earth* by the authors’s son, Christopher Tolkien, whom his father entrusted with the task. Adding to this complex redactional and editorial process, the book finds further developments in a remarkable number of annexes, maps, indexes, genealogies and commentaries.

c. Criterium 2: autonomy of the mode of representation

If, like many oral epics, *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *The Lord of the Rings*, far from being closed systems, exceed their own limits and open on ever wider sets, such texts also partake in the tendency of epic works, underlined by Auerbach, to create their own mode of representation⁴.

Notre-Dame de Paris, like *La Légende des siècles* in its way, are part of the Romanticism of their time and easily find their place in the history of nineteenth century literature. And yet, for instance, the description made by Mallarmé of the relationship between Hugo and the “verse crisis” shows him as an isolated author, “monument of this desert”, paragon of past times which he ends up personifying alone, since he “was verse itself personally”. Therefor regular poetry

⁴ See AUERBACH, Erich. **Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature** [1946]. Translated Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

can only “wait with respect until the giant who identified it to his tenacious and firmer hand came to be missed”⁵. More specifically, Bertrand Marchal draws a list of the “historical and literary anachronisms”⁶ of a book subtitled “Small Epics” [*Petites épopées*].

Romanticism is familiar with this type of representation of the poet and his work, which despite its being of oxymoric and antithetical formulation, is part of an aesthetic movement of his time. It is more difficult to find Tolkien’s place in a literary history where “modernity” is not so congenial to encompassing systems capable of including a work of the negative, and so far from the flexibility of Romanticism. Isabelle Pantin thus demonstrated the difficulty met by Tolkien’s work to come within the scope of a contemporary literary movement, so that the author appears as “the creator of an isolated monument”⁷, more readily associated to the Middle Ages or else to Romanticism rather than to the production of his time⁸. The link between his work and the *fantasy* genre that immense unfaithful posterity of the author has been long debated⁹.

In this context, *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *The Lord of the Rings* can be compared if and only if we give up any factual relationship between both and introduce variety into an operating procedure to reflect on the epic beyond traditional criteria. This way, it is possible to understand the functioning of such literary works, which are so monstrous that they seem to invade the whole production of an author – and even his life – and touch fields so various and fundamental that they seem inexhaustible. These books provide an image of the epic as a peculiar, “explosive”, invasive object, which is part of a tradition in a specific manner. Namely, they become an autonomous reference, by each book creating its own literary field. They are therefore difficult to set into the literary context of one time, being themselves out of the ordinary.

The epic seems to present two properties: a tendency to exponential increase (both in its editorial system and in its reception) and an aptitude to produce its own interpretative lineage. This would be the specific way in which an epic settles itself as a masterpiece. Indeed, the history of the epic consists in a string of masterpieces meeting this description. It becomes complex to figure out a genre likely to contain several works characterised by such an

⁵ MALLARMÉ, Stéphane. *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*. Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 2003, p. 248.

⁶ MARCHAL, Bertrand. *Livre, qu’un vent t’emporte...* In : GUYAUX, André et MARCHAL, Bertrand (ed.). **Victor Hugo : La Légende des siècles (Première série)**. Paris : Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2002, p. 7.

⁷ PANTIN, Isabelle. Tolkien et l’histoire littéraire : l’aporie du contexte. In : DEVAUX, Michaël ; FERRE, Vincent and RIDOUX, Charles (ed.). **Tolkien aujourd’hui**. Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2011, p. 366.

⁸ Nevertheless, note on that subject HONEGGER, Thomas and WEINREICH, Frank (ed.). **Tolkien and Modernity**. Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2006.

⁹ See for example BESSON, Anne. Fécondités d’un malentendu : la postérité de Tolkien en *fantasy*. In : **Tolkien aujourd’hui** (actes du colloque de Rambures, 13-15 juin 2008), Michael Devaux, Vincent Ferré and Charles Ridoux (ed.). Valenciennes : Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2011, p. 197-209.

exponential and polarizing process, which tends to make any pre-existing frame explode and which proposes its own original pattern. But this paradoxical chain is precisely what is called the genre of the epic.

2. A register: the epic as an adjective

Adding to this “nominal” dimension of works that impose themselves and reorganize the literary field around them, an “adjectival” aspect appears while the nineteenth century undergoes a process of fragmentation: the epic takes refuge in an epic *register* able to coexist with other generic modes within the same literary work¹⁰.

a. A scattering?

Several registers can converse and thus define themselves in relationship with one another within one singular text whose organisation, outline and affiliation become a matter of dominant allowing for hesitations. Massively influenced by the phenomenon of fragmentation into generic modes which characterises modernity, the works of Victor Hugo and J.R.R. Tolkien host such a dynamic meeting of genres. Exchanges develop between registers that are not simply juxtaposed but whose clash gives rise to new potentialities through shifts and transgressions, syntheses and transformations.

The very configuration of the collections tends to become the trace of such scattering, multiplying within each piece owing to the fragmentation of registers. Many works by Victor Hugo and J.R.R. Tolkien, whether in prose or verse, long narratives or short legends, are affected by the tension between a tendency to dispersion and the effort of their authors to reconcile these hybrid forms with a global meaning, for instance through an aesthetic pattern of contrast, which could create a relationship – albeit a contradictory one – between the elements, rather than scattering them.

Thus, diversity is an important principle of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where it can take the form of contradiction between the sublime and the grotesque, but also of Tolkien’s *Legendarium*, in which it presents itself as a scattering process that shapes the history of the peoples in Middle Earth¹¹. To respond to the risk of shattering the works into pieces through this fragmentation of registers, the authors develop various aesthetics of contrast, articulating elements together to maintain a unity in variety.

¹⁰ See Cédric Chauvin, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹¹ On this question: FLIEGER, Verlyn. **Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World** [1983]. Kent (Ohio): Kent State University Press, 2002.

b. The horizon of totality

Confronted to the indefinite diversification and to the tendency to use generic modes and registers, the presence of the epic – even as the epic *register* – reveals a tension towards a principle of unity in diversity, of inversion of the scattering into an increase process.

The principle of increase can appear in the treatment of wide issues and important stakes that are the common horizon of the various pieces; or it can take the shape of a constant presence of the epic register through the combinations with a variety of generic modes; or else it may be a pattern of contrast articulating heterogenic positions; or, last, it can consist in a unique inspiration joining together dispersed images. Authors multiply strategies to respond to the phenomenon of fragmentation, which is linked to the loss of a significant worldview, so that, paradoxically, the scattering of genres into hybrid registers has become the means of expressing totality itself. Modern epic thus regains the prerogatives of the antique one, except that the latter mirrored a harmonious society, while the former makes use of multiplicity and hybridization.

3. “Epic work”: the epic as a verb

Characterizing the epic both as a noun and as an adjective, as the whole and the part of a book, appears to be contradictory. Such pattern gets still more complex once we consider that the epic also has a verbal function.

a. The contradiction between the noun and the adjective

Paradoxically, the genre brings together on the one hand masterpieces capable of organising afresh the literary field around them, and on the other hand, a mere register scattered among others within a work. To reduce the contradiction between two schemas apparently irreconcilable, literary history traditionally interprets them as two successive patterns. Yet, *Notre-Dame de Paris* or *The Lord of the Rings*, which should fall chronologically in the second category, actually correspond to both. Therefore, the contradiction between them cannot be solved by the chronological distinction only. We must look for a way in which these works may belong to both at a time.

b. The verb as solution

A third element helps to understand the question: the epic has first and foremost a verbal dimension, it fulfils a function. It is therefore possible to conceive the nominal and adjectival aspects otherwise than as contradictory or alternative patterns, we can to re-establish a syntax articulating them, a link which does not consist in succession or substitution but in

complementary contribution within a dynamic process. Indeed, if the subject of the verb is the noun, the adjective qualifies the latter, modifies the conditions in which it can carry out the process without replacing it by some hybrid grammatical form.

If the bursting and scattering, symbolised by the adjectival qualification of the noun, alters the conditions in which the epic can fulfil its function, the question is to know what means the genre develops to achieve it. This function lies, as Florence Goyet has shown, in the transformation of a reader and, with him, of the surrounding world. Thus, it consists in a literary relationship with something outside literature. In *Notre-Dame de Paris* or *The Lord of the Rings*, this transformation takes place through a specific use of images.

In the case of canonical epics, this epic work was based on polyphony: according to F. Goyet, “*the fundamental features of the epic lies there [...], in this ‘epic work’, which confronts opposite conceptions and thus allows listeners to get a notion of the possibilities available to them*¹².” But modern epics do not share the same characterisation: in a period affected by disenchantment, such work is performed by images which, appealing to the reader’s sensitive perceptions, give to the epic a verbal dimension. The epic becomes symphonic.

The mechanics of the genre: the literary work, its reception and the real

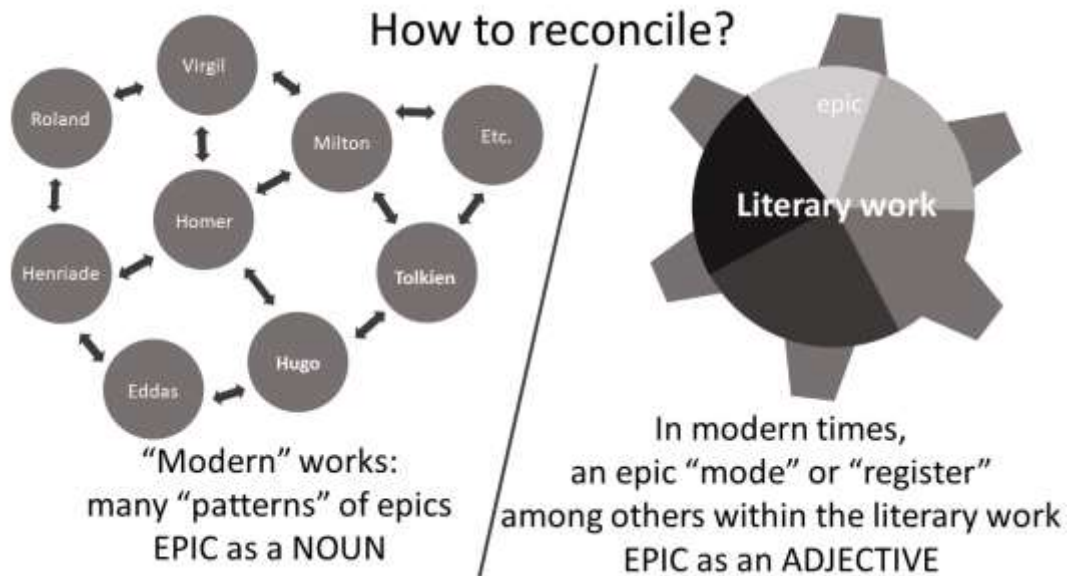
1. The epic facing the disenchantment of the world

The grammatical metaphor offers the means to think a syntax of the different “natures” (in the grammatical sense) of the epic (nominal, adjectival and verbal); yet, the way both the universe of the epic and the real world set themselves into motion is best rendered by a mechanical metaphor.

a. The disenchantment of the world as an explosion

In mechanical terms, one can represent the two initial schemes, corresponding to a definition of the epic either as a noun or as an adjective, in the form of a perfect disc in one case, and of a wheel serrated in the other. The latter would indeed have “burst” under the effect of the “disenchantment of the world”.

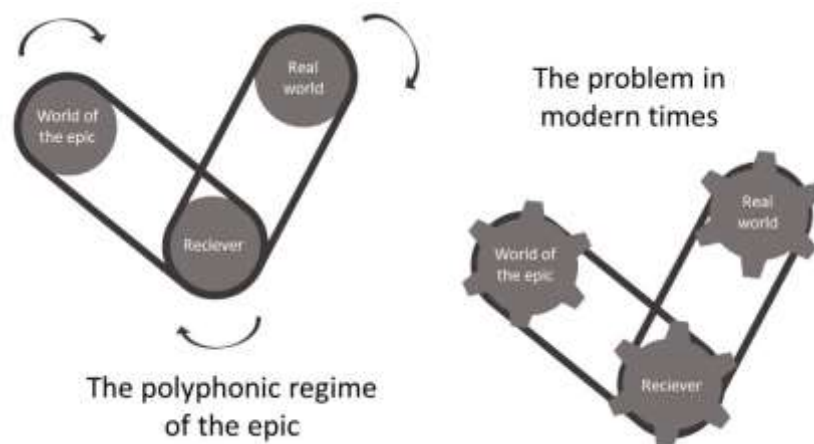
¹² GOYET, Florence. Le “travail épique”, permanence de l’épopée dans la littérature moderne. In : LABARTHE, Judith (ed.). **Formes modernes de l’épique ; nouvelles approches**. Peter Lang, 2004, p. 263-280; 275.



Literary works are not the only ones to undergo this phenomenon of bursting; it also affects the reader’s whole perception of reality. Given the difference between their shapes, these wheels cannot be set into motion in the same fashion. And yet we know such movement to be the very function of the epic.

b. Limits of the polyphonic forms in the epic work

If one represents the epic work carried out by the “polyphonic” regime within the traditional conditions of the epic by a movement of transmission belt between the epic and the real world via the receiver, it appears that the bursting of these same entities in the modern era no longer allows such circulation.



The epic can then work only if it sets up another process. The mechanical metaphor offers the image of the gears of the serrated wheels, which implies a rapprochement of the elements involved in the epic operation, and two levels, two different depths at which they get a grip on one another.

2. From the “polyphonic” regime to the “symphonic” regime of the epic

Following the thread of a third, musical, metaphor, one can distinguish two regimes of the epic: the “polyphonic” regime; and another regime, which, by contrast, could be called “symphonic”.

a. The operating mode of polyphonic epic

If, for F. Goyet, war, which is traditionally at the core of the epic genre, is the “*metaphor*” of a crisis experienced by the contemporary society, the epic provides its audience with “*means*” to apprehend it that are specific to its type of narrative. Such means are not of a conceptual kind that would allow to build a reflection on this crisis: “The understanding is done in and through the narrative. This narrative has the charge both of accounting for the radical confusion of the world and of drawing bright perspectives in it¹³.”

The reasons for such an option in favour of narrative rather than concepts can be construed in two different ways. The first one comes down to thinking that intellectual methods and instruments, such as historical, philosophical or legal sciences, were not yet developed at the ancient and medieval epochs of canonical epics. In this historical perspective, the epic genre respond to such absence, offering the means of another kind of apprehension of what is at stake in contemporary times. This manner of “thinking” is qualified both of “*dark*”, “*deep*” and “*effective*”, but it would fade away in times when other, more conceptual, methods are able to assume reflection on the crisis.

b. The crisis of the polyphonic regime

However, one could propose another interpretation: these means are not operative for new crises, or for certain crises involving these very methods; the epic thus continues to offer some space where tensions can be expressed, and new possibilities can be explored. This is what happens in modern times. Although the conceptual tools no longer lack, there is indeed a crisis, a pervasive doubt touching all meaning that seems definitive, and thus touching the “voices” expressed in polyphonic epic. Such a conception assumes that, in general, modern authors and

¹³ GOYET, Florence. **Penser sans concepts : fonction de l'épopée guerrière**, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

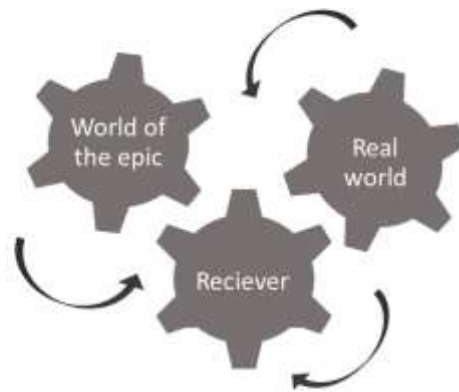
readers do not trust these tools to say something profound, effective, human, true. In response to this specific crisis of a certain modernity, for which the world is not only confused, but meaningless, the epic then uses a specific language made of images.

Indeed, in texts like *Notre-Dame de Paris* or *The Lord of the Rings*, in order to be effective, the epic work, *i.e.*, the production of a “thought without concepts”, plays on two levels: before being able to problematize the possible meanings so as to bring out a new one, these “epics” now undertake to ensure the possibility that there be any meaning at all. Only then can the polyphonic function of the epic be deployed, once the foundation of meaning has been established by the images. With the “symphonic” regime of the epic, the question is less to unravel one meaning between different voices, than to make apparent the meaningful richness of these voices. To that purpose, this regime gives life to images; and its way to make visible that the world makes sense is to show the links that unite events, things, the world, by producing the narrative of their adventures.

3. Symphony and “deep enchantments”

It is now possible to complete the “mechanical” scheme previously drafted and thus solve the apparent paradox of the presence of epic works in a disenchanted world.

The symphonic
regime of the epic



...which allows the polyphonic regime to work.

The mechanical metaphor offers the image of the gears of the serrated wheels, which implies a rapprochement of the elements involved in the epic operation, and two levels where

they can be gripped, at two different depths – that which is prone to bursting related to disenchantment and that of imagination, on which can operate the “deep enchantments¹⁴”.

The three metaphors – grammatical, mechanical and musical – collaborate to the description of a complex reality: in order to realize its function as a verb, the epic displays in a symphonic way the wide sensitive richness of a world which appear full of meaning. This allows a “clutch” of the literary piece on the reader’s imagination, opening it to the possibility of meaning. Polyphony, the dialogue between different voices, or the confrontation of divergent positions, can then function and make new senses of the world emerge.

The introduction of this second regime is a means of resistance to the surrounding disenchantment. Yet, such a world song is not a reactionary withdrawal to a past world deemed preferable. Nor is it the immobilized expression of the world as it stands. This song is dynamic: under the symphonic regime, it is at once exploration of the riches and possibilities of the world that usually escape the perception, setting in motion of the reader (and through him of the real world), and preparation of the reader to the possibility of meaning. And then, as a polyphony, it is the active search for new senses, within the work and in a constant exchange with the reader and its background of experiences. The epic can be both noun, adjective and verb, because it is this song with very subtle functioning.

The effectiveness of images: metaphor and transport

In modern epics like *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it is the use of visual images that performs this “symphonic” work, by mobilizing the reader’s affectivity. Paul Ricœur has highlighted how the metaphor produces a semantic innovation, by shifting the word that fulfills the function of comparing away from its usual reference¹⁵. He draws attention mainly to the creative potential of these images; but this creative potential knows various degrees, depending on whether the object compared to acquires an autonomy from the object compared, remains a mere “figurative” meaning of the latter or “trans-figure” it, provoking lasting metamorphoses, for example of characters.

1. When the images come to life

The comparison between the images of *Les Misérables* and those of *Notre-Dame de Paris* shows more precisely the specificity of a certain type of use of metaphors, when, going beyond their dimension of figures, they carry out the transport that their etymology announces.

¹⁴ TOLKIEN, J.R.R. *The Book of Lost Tales* [1983], vol. 1, Christopher Tolkien (ed.). London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991, p. 71.

¹⁵ RICŒUR, Paul. *La Métaphore vive*. Paris: Seuil, 1975, p. 311.

It is then the literality of the images, and their richness of meaning, which is explored. In this case, the images are offered to the sensitive perception of the readers, thus allowing them to regain some immediacy in the apprehension of the world and, hence, easier adherence to the representations proposed by the work.

a. Victor Hugo: from the mask to the monster

The appearance of Quasimodo at the beginning of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in the contest to become the Pope of the feast of fools, thus exceeds the “as if” mode, the metaphor that gives itself as such, and tends to confer autonomy to the object used for the comparison. Indeed, what the assistance of the Hall had first taken for a “mask” is actually the character’s real face:

But then the surprise and admiration were at their height. The grimace was his face. Or rather his whole person was a grimace¹⁶.

Through the chiasmus, we explore the possible shift from the simple metaphor to the literality of the image: if the face and its grimace can become a metaphor of the whole person, it is because the assimilation between grimace and face is real and complete. Indeed, the verb *be* signifies an identity, in the most radical sense. And in such an identity lies the only possible explanation for the reaction of the crowd.

There are many examples of the way the images in *Notre-Dame de Paris* become literal and make the reader penetrate into a universe regulated by its own laws, where men become “*living monsters*”, so far as to be confused with the “*stone monsters*” from the facade of Notre-Dame during the assault of the cathedral. These metaphors create a particular mode of representation within the epic, which tends to make visible, to elucidate all that constitutes its universe.

In contrast, in *Les Misérables*, the metaphor never fully realizes the “transport” that its etymology announces. It happens that Victor Hugo gives such a force to the vision that it becomes capable of transforming the real, of revealing what is usually unseen. Thus, the gaze of Jean Valjean discerns or makes visible the sewer grate which will allow him to carry the body of Marius away from the street:

By dint of staring, something vaguely striking in such an agony began to assume form and outline at his feet, as though it had been a power of glance which made the thing desired unfold. A few paces distant he perceived, at the base of the small barrier so pitilessly guarded and watched on the exterior, beneath a disordered mass of paving-

¹⁶ HUGO, Victor. **The Hunchback of Notre Dame** [*Notre-Dame de Paris*, 1931]. Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood [1896]. Auckland: Floating Press, 2009, I, 5.

stones which partly concealed it, an iron grating, placed flat and on a level with the soil¹⁷.

The “power” of vision caused by the proximity of the barricade reaches here its maximum, so that it makes visible what remained hitherto hidden. The look of Jean Valjean deciphers the real and reveals what was already there but remained unseen. However, this emergence keeps to the “as if” mode¹⁸: it is a mere matter of drawing attention to an element which an attentive observer can always see, even if it usually goes unnoticed. Moreover, if the discovery of this underground passage comes as a revelation of real importance within the story, it is not meant to express anything of the deep being of things.

The vision of the sewer grate gives way to that of the tunnel itself, where the character successively undergoes a state of blindness (V, 3, 1), of glare, of dilation of the pupil. In this underground universe, the character can, “*with straining ears, and dilated pupils, wat[ch] the disappearance of that phantom patrol*” (V, 3, 2) which he meets on his way. Such universe proves conducive to the emergence of the fantastic, and yet these evocations still remain explicit metaphors, without giving an independent life to the reality described:

A damned soul, who, in the midst of the furnace, should suddenly perceive the outlet of Gehenna, would experience what Jean Valjean felt. It would fly wildly with the stumps of its burned wings towards that radiant portal (V, 3, 7).

If it evokes infernal images for an instant while offering an elucidation of the emotions and the behavior of the character, the passage remains in the conditional, expressing the unreal, and does not further explore the literality of the metaphor. Behind the fantastic figures, which take the form of figures of rhetoric (metaphors or oxymorons), are hidden characters as prosaic as Thenardier, “bourgeois who had missed his vocation” (V, 9, 4): “He seemed to walk with the velvet paws of a tiger. A moment later, that hideous providence had retreated into the invisibility.” (V, 3, 8)

b. J.R.R. Tolkien: of trees and their “confidences”

If the end of the chapter of *Notre-Dame de Paris* dedicated to the assault of the cathedral sketches the metamorphosis of stone statues into moving beings, this phenomenon of animating elements that are usually motionless is at the heart of the construction of Tolkien’s

¹⁷ HUGO, Victor. **Les Misérables** [1862]. Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood. London: Glasgow, Collins, 1955, V, 1, 24.

¹⁸ See ROMAN, Myriam et BELLOSTA, Marie-Christine. **Les Misérables, roman pensif**. Paris: Belin, 1995, p. 165-167.

imaginary world. Comparing the mode of writing in *The Lord of the Rings* to that of a work such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* shows two different functions of epic visibility.

Indeed, *War and Peace* explores precisely the phenomenon in which an inanimate being gives the impression of coming to life. The Old Oak that Prince Andrew Bolkonsky discovers on his way seems to start talking; far from being anecdotal, his presence and physiognomy become the object of meditation. The oak is immediately presented as a "monster", first because of its "huge" size with regard to two units of measurement: birches and human beings. Paradoxically, its "monstrous" character comes from the unprecedented synthesis between tree and man, brought to the maximum of old age. The description of the tree in *War and Peace* under the guise of an old man, of a giant, shifts imperceptibly from the metaphor of "scars" and "injuries" in its bark to a more serious understanding of these humanizing adjectives and the development of an anthropomorphic description: the oak has "arms", but also moral characteristics such as contempt¹⁹. Its "fingers" are "claw-like" and closer to that of witches thus giving a new meaning to the word "monster": it does not refer only to its extraordinary size, its strange shape, its hostile character, but also to its potential connection with a magical staff.

The Old Oak recalls the ambivalent anthropomorphism of the Hurons or the Ents (the Man-trees) of *The Lord of the Rings*, or the hesitation between man and animal, or even mineral, in the description of Quasimodo. As with Tolkien's Ents, this oak is given a tirade in direct speech: "— Spring and love and happiness!... he seemed to say. How are you not yet tired of this lie, which is always the same, stupid and absurd!" (Ibid.). If the narrator tells the Oak replica, he takes care to modalize his remark ("He seemed to say"): The words come from Prince Andrew's imagination and not from an imaginary being that would acquire autonomy and a life of its own. The narration thus sketched of a story of the tree quickly aborts, and the tree does not go as far as to be animated. The image remains a narrative tool and does not become the object of a narrative in its own right.

When the scene is repeated six weeks later, Prince Andrew, taking the same route, looks for the oak: the tree has become a tree again. If the arrival of spring has transformed the oak, such an evolution is above all symbolic: it reflects the change that occurred in Prince Andrew by his meeting Natacha Rostov, the tree constituting a mere *figure* of his state of mind before and after this encounter. It has indeed provoked a new reading of the most significant moments in the character's existence and an intense experience; however, the Old Oak does not acquire an autonomous life. It does not walk and speaks only with the words lent to it by Prince Andrew. It

¹⁹ TOLSTOY, Leo. **War and Peace** [1869]. Translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude. Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2016, 1, II, 3, I.

remains the direct projection of the character's feelings, unlike the trees described by J.R.R. Tolkien.

The Ent Fangorn (or Treebeard), who meets the Hobbits Merry and Pippin, has common points with Prince Andrew's Old Oak. He shares with him the anthropomorphic dimension: great age, excessive size, body and arms, speech power, feelings. Moreover, both trees give an impression of depth and the feeling that the world makes sense.

However, both scenes are different. Before being *seen*, the first appearance of the Ent is *heard*. The Man-tree addresses the two Hobbits lost in the forest. The description of his entrance associates the word and the gesture of the tree, who lays on the shoulders of the hobbits "*a large knob-knuckled hand*"²⁰. The physical contact with the Hobbits and their complete passivity distinguish this episode from that of the meeting between Prince Andrew and the Old Oak, in which the dialogue was played in the imagination of the character and the tree remained motionless, a frozen image of a desolate old age.

Tolkien's oak comes to life and delivers precisely the "*confidences*" expected without success by Prince Andrew. It is this life of the image that distinguishes the two modes of vision. Paradoxically, the meeting takes place in a more "real" way, since it does not take place in the imagination of the Hobbits but outside it. The image which, as in *War and Peace*, is based on the synthesis between man and tree, becomes animated, it speaks and moves. Thereby, it contributes to the making of a world governed by its own laws. This world can be described as imaginary, in the sense that it is made up of images put into motion; yet, this imaginary world does not remain in the imagination of the characters but acquires a reality of its own. The description explores the wide potential of an image which combines man and tree, determining precisely its physiognomy, going into detail about the difficulties in distinguishing the materials that constitute the "appearance" of the Ent. However, there is no distance between this rich and developed external aspect (what can be perceived), and the very being of a character who is essentially "image". Speaking about Tolkien's characters, whose affiliation to a definite people (such as Hobbits or Elves) replaces a thorough psychological analysis, C.S. Lewis wrote: "*These imaginary beings have their inside out: they are visible souls*"²¹.

And yet the impression of distance remains, the feeling of a mysterious depth persists. In Tolkien's writing, the image makes both impressions coexist, that of an appearance that reveals what is hidden in the ordinary world, and that of an immensity that still withdraws behind the appearance. This double aspect of the image has the effect of arousing in the reader

²⁰ TOLKIEN, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* [1954-1955]. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002, III, 4.

²¹ LEWIS, Clive Staples. *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982, p. 89.

the impression that the world has meaning: a sense not only manifest, but also still much deeper, that the appearance does not exhaust but of which it gives some feeling.

In *Les Misérables* or in *War and Peace*, the narrator's or characters' look is sometimes brought to its maximum of "visionary" intensity: the metaphors and images seem to animate. Sometimes they absorb something of the human to which they are compared, in a dynamic process of anthropomorphic transformation (in the case of the Old Oak for example), but this is generally only transient. "Apparitions" are more of an optical effect than the result of real transformations, although they can create real existential experiences. The transfiguration remains in the "as if" mode. On the contrary, in *The Lord of the Rings*, expressions such as "behold" or "lo" are preferred to comparison tools like "as if". Above all, Tolkien's work, like Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, knows a more radical phenomenon of animating metaphors: the latter acquire a life of their own, associating the object compared to the one it is compared to in the single image of a "monster" – no matter whether beautiful or ugly, notwithstanding any pejorative connotation, since it does not correspond to the ordinary laws of the world. Exploring the literality of the image thus allows the deployment of a meaningful world.

2. Setting the reader into movement

The use of images "exteriorizes" the world of the literary work, offers the readers all the elements of it. The sensitive mode of apprehension thus required may then be able to come back to the epic regime as described by Staiger as a result of Hegel and which many consider to be incompatible with the perpetuation of the genre as soon as it becomes self-conscious, and *a fortiori* in the context of a modernity generally associated with the rise of critical approach of things.

a. From the emotion of the character to that of the reader

This is not the place to study neuropsychological theories which show²² that perception is experienced as more "immediate" than cognition, since it gives a less constructed and elaborated relationship to things. It is enough for our purpose to sketch the way in which the image thus animated by the epic mode of vision is intimately linked to the emotion of the reader and tends to restore an impression of immediacy and facilitate spontaneous adherence. The study of the trouble felt by La Esmeralda upon her meeting with the recluse of La Tour Roland gives the means to understand better this phenomenon and the way in which the literary image

²² See for example LEDOUX, Joseph. **The Emotional Brain**. Londres : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998; or PHILIPPOT, Pierre. **Émotion et psychothérapie**. Wavre: Éditions Mardaga, 2007.

acts on the reader and can provide an impression analogous to the one produced by a real situation.

In this perspective, we will interpret this episode as mirroring within the book the effect that this type of images has on the reader who “attends” the scene. Thus, while the “*lean and bony fingers*” of the recluse close on La Esmeralda’s arm to prevent her from fleeing and condemn her to a certain hanging, the narrator notes that this embrace was “*more than a chain, more than a fetter, more than a ring of iron, it was a living pair of pincers endowed with intelligence, which emerged from the wall*” (XI, 1). Now, the violent image of the “*a fleshless arm [...] stretched from an opening in the wall, and held her like a hand of iron*”, an image literally capable of seizing her and intensified by a context of imminent death, creates an emotion in the Gypsy which is conveyed by a dizzying accumulation of images in her mind:

She fell back against the wall exhausted, and then the fear of death took possession of her. She thought of the beauty of life, of youth, of the view of heaven, the aspects of nature, of her love for Phoebus, of all that was vanishing and all that was approaching, of the priest who was denouncing her, of the headsman who was to come, of the gallows which was there. Then she felt terror mount to the very roots of her hair [...]²³.

The emotion produced in the character unfolds into a kaleidoscope juxtaposing positive and negative images that still amplify the original fear.

This close link between images and emotions is first described as an inner device of the character, the way in which she perceives and feels what happens to her: images are initially provoked by the vision and vivid experience of a strongly emotional scene. Once this contact is made, the process continues in the character’s imagination, where such images echo and develop.

b. From the image of the text to the reader’s imagination

At the end of the paragraph, however, the emotion described is no longer an image for the young girl: she feels it in her flesh. But the description of this perception does constitute a visual image for the reader, that of a fear that one could physically locate, and which diffuses in the body in a movement of ascension up to the precise point of “*the very roots of her hair*”.

This episode shows in the case of La Esmeralda the link between image and emotion, the first expressing the second and provoking it. In doing so, the narrative offers powerful images, while mirroring how these create an emotion in the reader. For La Esmeralda as well as

²³ HUGO, Victor. **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, *op. cit.*, XI, 1.

for the reader, the external images initiate an inner movement of imagination, which then extends and amplifies beyond the starting emotion.

Hugo's writing, capable of activating what Bachelard calls "*new images*²⁴", is the very example chosen by the author of *Earth and Reveries of Will* as a meeting place between the inner image and the literary image:

[...] In the spirit and glowing of literary images, the ramifications multiply; words are no longer mere words. They do not end in thoughts; they have the future of the image. Poetry deploys the meaning of the word in a network by surrounding it with an atmosphere of images. It has been shown that most of Victor Hugo's rhymes roused images; between two words that rhyme happens a sort of obligation of metaphor [...] (*ibid.*).

If we extend this analysis to the prose of *Notre-Dame de Paris* or perhaps to the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien, it appears that it is through the meeting of words that the image unfolds and that the dynamic contact between the imaginary of the work and that of the reader is realized. Such images become a place of restoration of immediacy in the relationship with the World. It is by a specifically epic demand of externalizing the universe into perceptions, that this work is carried out. Through such a process, the reader finds again the impression that life provides, and he opens up to a change in his representation of the world.

Conclusion

However, one can object that the use of images as a means of a performative connection from the literary work onto the reader is a global trend in recent literature. Indeed, "fantasy" literature knows a wide development, and yet many of its achievements are in no way epic. In short, is there in this images-work an epic specificity?

It seems that the symphonic regime, which exists of course elsewhere, finds in the epic its maximum effectiveness: familiar with the superlative, the absolute degree, the epic appears as a magnifying mirror of literature. This is also noted in the epic way of endorsing the functions of noun, adjective and verb with all possible intensity. The "grammatical" functions that it fills are indeed those of any literary work, but the epic presents a particularly intense achievement of them: it is thus impossible to circumscribe its "nominal" identity as a masterpiece, which escapes any exhaustive characterization, goes beyond its own borders to spread throughout the creation of an author, and only builds itself as a model in a complex relationship of conquest of its predecessors as of its posterity (in relation to which, nonetheless, it still retains its originality).

²⁴ BACHELARD, Gaston. *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté : essai sur l'imagination de la matière* [1948]. Paris : José Corti, 1988, p. 11.

Similarly, one can understand the “adjectival” bursting of the epic as an exponential explosion, whether in its never-ending process of widespread destruction or in the multiplication of its new shoots. Finally, the active function of the epic “verb” can be construed as a performativity of language that transforms the world through the mediation of a whole network of means, through a deployment of all auditory and visual perceptions capable of striking the reader’s imagination and thus to set it in motion.