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The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh. By Sneharika Roy. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 208 p. ISBN: 978-1-138-06363-1. £115.

Reviewed by Delphine MUNOS

By calling for a reassessment of the epic's role in postcolonial literatures and theory, *The Postcolonial Epic* challenges postcolonial scholarship's traditional overemphasis on the novel genre and offers a fascinating contribution to current discussions highlighting the relevance of generic issues in the literatures of the Global South. In her book, Sneharika Roy traces new affiliations between Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Derek Walcott's book-length poem *Omeros* (1990), and Amitav Ghosh's South Asian saga, the *Ibis* trilogy (*Sea of Poppies*, 2008; *River of Smoke*, 2011; *Flood of Fire*, 2015), with a view to identifying Melville's "notoriously polysemic" classic as a "foundational text for postcolonial epic" (3). Roy is committed to showing how the epic genre, far from restricting itself to being a "genre of place and nation" (24), is uniquely suited to expressing the entanglement between localism and cosmopolitanism in subaltern trajectories negotiating tensions "between place and displacement, nation and migration, roots and routes" (23).

Problematizing Bakhtin's taken-for-granted argument that the epic style is "monologic," that is, "centralising and intolerant of contestation" (6), the introduction to *The Postcolonial Epic* returns to Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BCE) and reads against a critical consensus "tak[ing] Homeric epic as the implicit or explicit generic gold standard" (14). Indeed, Roy is mindful of the ways in which much of the Romantic scholarship on the epic has favoured Homeric over Virgilian epic, resulting in the fact that the genre is perceived to be "a literary fossil incapable of evolving" (7). Turning to Virgilian epic allows Roy to gesture toward a genealogy of the genre thriving on innovation and intertextuality – one that goes from Virgil through Dante, to John Milton, Melville, and Walt Whitman. Equally importantly, for Roy, *The Aeneid* as "national epic" is also a precursor of what she calls "political epic," in that its intertextual features and "national temporality" participate in creating a tension between "national politics and extranational poetics" (18), or between "the centripetal politics of rootedness of epic and the centrifugal forces of uprooted, migratory traditions that produce it" (26). Drawing both on Bhabha's understanding of the nation as a discursive construct and on Glissant's distinction between "excluding" and "participatory" epics, Roy defines the political epic as a "kind of epic typified by enunciative tensions between its political genealogy [...] and its poetics of emulative intertextuality" (16). More precisely, the political epic is perceived by Roy as a genre of "enunciative ambivalence wherein an avowed national politics coexists uneasily with a disavowed migratory poetics" (19). The tensions at play in the political epic allow Roy to envisage the postcolonial epic as a genre similarly innervated by "ambivalence and enunciative splits," yet one that recognizes and embraces, instead of disavowing, "the intertextual temporality of cultural difference" (20). The paradox is that the postcolonial epic is not immune to the fiction of fixity and unity that is expressed through the political epic, thus making it all the more pertinent to envisage the "criss-crossing filigree-work" (19) of the political epic in postcolonial texts.

The Postcolonial Epic identifies three aspects of epic – namely epic imagery, genealogy, and ekphrasis – along which the book's three chapters are organized. The first chapter,

“Rallying the tropes: the language of violence and the violence of language,” explores the ways in which the postcolonial epic problematizes the “differential” realities of colonialism through “multi-directional ‘heterotropes’ as well as self-knotting and negative and hypothetical similes” (27). Drawing on work by Susanne Wofford, Jahan Ramazani and Fredric Jameson, this chapter also focuses on how the postcolonial epic reworks and revises the hegemonic systems of representation at play in classical epic. Entitled “‘History in the Future Sense’: Genealogy as Prophecy,” chapter 2 compares the ways in which Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Walcott’s *Omeros*, and Gosh’s *Sea of Poppies* parody the “Virgilian innovation of presenting a genealogical past as prophetic future” (88), with a view to highlighting how the postcolonial epic redeploys “imperial prophecy” to disrupt political and epistemological hierarchies. Roy concludes that more than just giving new momentum to W.H. Auden’s suggestion that Virgil “get his tenses right” (135), the postcolonial epic self-reflexively uses reversible times and genealogies to resist “forms of imperial or social determinisms” as well as gesture toward “post-imperial programmes of political and cultural change” (135). The last chapter, “The Artifice of Eternity: Ekphrasis as ‘An-other’ Epic,” departs from postcolonial scholarship’s traditional reading of the relationship between image and word. Indeed Roy reminds us that most postcolonial critics have relied on the critical consensus that “the ekphrastic description of a visual object” boils down to “the ‘generic Other’ of the epic’s verbal narrative” (28), which has led them to reformulate the conflict between image and word in terms of a political and discursive binary struggle between colonizer and colonized. Drawing on the Virgilian use of ekphrasis as “an allegory of history for the winners [...] but also for the vanquished,” Roy shows that the postcolonial epic deploys ekphrasis to both “critiqu[e] European art as a marker of hegemony” and “undercut nativist conceptions of a national art ‘emancipated’ from Europe’s yoke” (28). Still, in contrast with the ways in which Virgilian ekphrasis “parades the past as the future” (179), postcolonial ekphrasis is shown to enact a form of “resistant nostalgia,” in that it “masquerades a vanishing, if not already vanished, past as still containing recoverable fragments of a desirable and realisable future” (179). In the conclusion to her impressive book, Roy returns to the contemporary moment and to *Moby Dick* as a precursor of the postcolonial epic, aptly contending that by way of its engagement with “political epic’s strategies of rootedness and conjunction” (184), the postcolonial epic does not only keep in check *Moby Dick*’s nihilism; the genre also backtracks away from poststructuralism’s emphasis on the “flatness” of “commodity culture” and from the postcolonial lure of nativism.

Roy’s argument is dense and sophisticated, the clarity of her prose is commendable and her range of references – from the different versions of the *Ramayana*, through Hegel, through the *Lusiads*, to poststructuralism – is absolutely breathtaking. The conclusion to *The Postcolonial Epic* is perhaps a little cursory, as Roy’s contention that the postcolonial epic expresses a form of “resistant nostalgia” could have been elaborated further (for instance by taking on board Svetlana Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” forms of nostalgia). This very minor reservation aside, Roy’s book will highly appeal not only to scholars working from within the field of postcolonial studies and literatures, but also to academics with an interest in classical epic, comparative literature, and diaspora studies.