Epic did not end with Melville’s *Clarel* in the United States, but it changed quickly and drastically.¹ As epic merged more completely with what Edward Mendelson calls “encyclopedic narrative,” the representation of an entire cultural moment through the lens of science, writers who engaged epic were faced with the choice of becoming more staunchly “literary,” reaching back to a heritage of earlier authors to substantiate their work, or of engaging a wider public through exploiting the rising popular interest in technology, new media, and the complex social patterns of an urbanizing nation. The visuality that had been so crucial to the prospects of early American epics evolved through epic painting into increasingly visual (instead of, or as well as, linguistic) manifestations of epic storytelling through the panorama, the cyclorama, big-budget Broadway productions, and eventually film. The revolutionarily wide interpretations of epic in the generation of Emerson and Longfellow had opened the possibility that epic might not be only a matter of literature after all—epic belonged, at least potentially, to virtually all forms of cultural expression, as Ernest Bloch’s symphonic piece *America: An Epic Rhapsody* (1928) would suggest. To get a sense of when this change
happened and what that change actually amounted to, let us return briefly to Melville and the early posthumous reception of *Moby-Dick* as a case in point.

**The Melville Revival as Antinarrative Turn**

Melville's experiments with epic went largely unrecognized, or at least unremarked on, for most of his life. A few contemporary reviews of *Moby-Dick* did identify Melville's authorial ambitions, but either in the half-mocking of George Ripley's scare quotes (“The present volume is a 'Whaliad,’ or the Epic of that veritable old leviathan”) or with William A. Butler's approximation of Ishmael's casting about for adequate terms to describe his observations: “[W]e do not know how we can better express our conception of his general drift and style in the work under consideration than by entitling it a prose Epic on Whaling.”2 After Melville's death, however, critical declarations of *Moby-Dick*’s epic status proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic. An anonymous reviewer in the New York *Critic* in 1893 rhapsodized on the book’s “witching power” and what it meant for its subject: “The undreamt poesy lying in the lives of Nantucket whalers in the fifties has for once received epical treatment, and the result is a marvellous Odyssey of adventure.” J. St. Leo Strachey echoed Butler in the London *Spectator* in calling *Moby-Dick* an “epic of whaling,” while Canadian critic Archibald MacMechan shrewdly described the book’s blended genres in 1899: “This book is at once the epic and the encyclopaedia of whaling.”3 These reviews as a group showed the slippage of the word “epic” as it moved from a mock meaning to a mere element within a mixture of forms—but the nascent Melville Revival would show that the word could be taken to even greater lengths. In the pages of the 17 November 1900 issue of the London magazine *Literature*, an anonymous reviewer critiqued the choices made in Sampson Low's *Famous Novels of the Sea* series, first by attacking the literary merits of William Clark Russell and James Fenimore Cooper and then by elevating one choice to its own shelf: “But of all these six books the one, the only one, which is supremely great and undoubtedly a work of genius is Herman Melville’s ‘Moby Dick.’ And it just as surely has no claim to be in the collection at all. It is not a novel. It is hardly a story. It is an epic, and a most astounding epic too. The human hero is nothing to the great white whale which dominates the intense and imaginative narrative. . . . And the book is an encyclopædia.”4 Epic without story? The evolution of the term had at this point opened the semantics of epic to an almost limitless extent, and critics commenting on epic’s fate in the twentieth century waver between denying the epic
label altogether, as with Mendelson’s theory of encyclopedic narrative, and suggesting that the word has become meaningless. Yet McWilliams also comments on the sense in which the modernist masterworks of Pound, Williams, and Crane work as epics: “Not only are they an outgrowth of the epic as Wordsworth and Whitman had redefined it; they often create in us the awe, literary as well as thematic, associated with the genre.” The “astounding epic” that the Literature critic saw in *Moby-Dick* indicates how epic had changed to accommodate the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, and *The Bridge*: the word had changed from having a primarily literary valence to having a primarily aesthetic one. A new psychological category in the experience of art was emerging in the late nineteenth century, a kind of extended or narrativized sublime, that would render epic both invisible and hegemonic in the reception and consumption of artistic work in the twentieth century.

The growth of epic as an aesthetic concept had in fact been occurring for over a century, dating back to art theorists such as Jonathan Richardson and Joshua Reynolds, who compared history painting and the Grand Manner to epic poetry. Benjamin West’s concept of “epic painting” as the telescoping of several narratives into a single canvas opened up the possibilities of the tightly structured genre of the history painting. By the height of Melville’s career in the 1850s, the moving panorama allowed viewers to experience their own odyssey without the fatigue of travel, and the cyclorama provided a virtual reality experience in which the viewer had no direct connection with the outside world: the special exhibit halls built to display cycloramas (the word originally applied to the buildings, not the canvases) were circular, admitting outside light for viewing the canvas through skylights invisible to the viewers in the center of the building. Epic in the visual realm could effectively remove viewing subjects from material reality through the illusion of perfect mimesis on a colossal scale.

The technology required to provide such visual marvels as the moving panorama and the cyclorama should prompt a comment at this point on the role of technology in American culture following the Civil War. As Joel Dinerstein has recently argued, not only is the idea of technology itself “a *white mythology,*” but the very cultural practices by which technology is employed in modern America link technology and whiteness into a future-oriented narrative designed to forget the multiracial present—or worse, the racist past. The tendency of aesthetic epic to draw attention to the technology that created it, particularly in film, made the wonder of the experience the real story, such that the lack of context for the story, such as the disappearance of the Civil War from *Gone with the Wind*, was not only excusable but almost expected. As I will show later in my discussion of John
Epic in American Culture

Huston’s adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*, the story behind the film, not behind the story it portrayed, often became the most important context for the audience’s reception. The encyclopedic narrative tradition articulated by Mendelson might be said to do similar work for literary epic in the twentieth century, as the research required for a book such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* became a key expression of the author’s ambition to meet the challenge of earlier epic writers, as well as an important element of the audience’s reception of such a text.

Following the Civil War, two publishing phenomena placed literary and visual epic side by side in the national consciousness through appeals to encyclopedic completeness. The first, a series of translations of European masterworks, began appearing from Fields and Co. in 1867, with Longfellow’s translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; translations of Homer (by Bryant), Goethe (by Bayard Taylor), and Virgil (by C. P. Cranch) followed, the last seeing print in 1874. While Boston’s elite literary publishing house sought to reestablish American ties to the Western canon, the Appleton brothers of New York produced a project, first through the *Appleton Journal* and later through a subscription book in parts, that would draw on European ideals of the picturesque to celebrate the territory and the accomplishments of the once again United States. Picturesque America eventually filled two heavy volumes with over nine hundred illustrations, both woodcuts and fine steel engravings, displaying the wonders of American scenery both natural and urban. William Cullen Bryant, as the ostensible editor of the collection, lent prestige to the project; one of the most respected poets of his day, his translations of Homer came out in the Fields series in 1871–72, just before the publication of the first half of *Picturesque America* in 1872. In his preface to the collection, Bryant emphasized the variety of the American landscape and the opportunity for American artists to explore and “conquer” the many views still unknown to the majority of Americans.

The book amounted to a guide for tourists of the picturesque, a more leisurely, contemplative type of tourist compared with those of the rising middle class that had little time to devote to sitting for hours staring at a single vista. While focusing on this more privileged form of tourism, the book emphasized the tourism industry’s greatest ally following the Civil War: the railroad. Descriptions of Northern California included plans for a railroad linking the Sacramento and Columbia rivers; the cross-country rail trip was hailed as the ideal approach to Yosemite, a site still inaccessible by train; and the skyline of Washington, D.C., was framed by the view from rail cars arriving from Baltimore. The assumed audience is from the Northeast, where the New York–based Appletons tended to
focus their marketing, but the nationalism of the work is unmistakable. The col-
lection ends with Washington, D.C., remarking on the “liberal expenditures” and
“newly born pride in the government” that had only recently made Washington a
prestigious and picturesque city. After touring the great public buildings between
the White House and the Capitol, the text concludes with a journey south of the
city down the Potomac to Mount Vernon and the series of forts “familiar to the
history of the war of rebellion.” The closing sentence emphasizes the “Southern
clime” that Washington inhabits, revealing both the scars of the war and the in-
sistence that had appeared throughout the text that the nation had embraced
each of its regions—the capital can even be Southern. Virtually all of the images,
whether of cities or of remote locations, include humans, a convention of pictur-
esque art designed to give variety to the composition, but also emphasizing along-
side the text the work that the human presence infuses into the territory: America
is great because Americans live in it, view it, and improve it.

*Picturesque America* is a remarkable Reconstruction text in that it dramatizes
Reconstruction as an imaginative and aesthetic undertaking more than a physi-
cal and economic one. The *Iliad* that the Civil War represented for Emerson be-
came in *Picturesque America* an episode in a larger *Aeneid* of national progress.
However, the spectacle and the scars of the war could not be put away easily. One
of the most popular of the circular panoramas, or cycloramas, of the postwar
period was French-born Paul Philippoteaux’s *The Battle of Gettysburg*, which
depicted Pickett’s Charge in a 360-degree round. Displayed in Boston starting in
1883 and toured around major eastern US cities for years following, *Gettysburg*
brought to mass audiences the wonder and the carnage of the war. One of the
most profound meditations on the spectacle of the war also appeared from the
Appletons’ presses ten years after the cyclorama’s heyday: Stephen Crane’s *The
Red Badge of Courage*.

All Episode (Again), from Crane to Huston

Immediately recognized on its publication in 1895 as a formal and mythic tour
de force, Crane’s brief novel would help make up the core of the American novel
tradition described by myth-and-symbol critics such as Richard Chase and Les-
lie Fiedler. Yet Crane’s attraction-repulsion attitude toward the grand story of the
war manifests itself in the book’s subtitle: “An Episode of the Civil War.” By call-
ing his work an “episode,” Crane highlights both the miniature and the fragment
in his work by invoking a popular late nineteenth-century periodical genre, the
fictional episode, a genre marked by its small scale and its ephemeral existence as text. And this generic marker has great implications for reading *Red Badge*’s engagement with the epic tradition: while Homer’s *Iliad* might itself be regarded as an episode, as it narrates only a brief slice of the Trojan War’s chronology, Aristotle’s principles of epic unity emphasized the completeness of epic works. Hector visiting Andromache is an episode because it draws the reader away from the main action; the *Iliad* is not an episode in this sense, because it draws the reader’s attention to a central moment in a larger narrative. *Red Badge*’s subtitle suggests two competing conclusions: either this new sort of war story is not an epic but fundamentally a fragment of one, or this sort of story is in fact representative of the epic tradition and thus we must reconsider that tradition as a series of episodes, digressions—that, like Babbalanja’s “Koztanza” in *Mardi*, it is “all episode.”

Crane’s *Red Badge* is certainly all episode, for despite its remarkable narrative economy, the entire story revolves around not so much the actions as the thoughts of Private Henry Fleming of the New York 304th Infantry. One way of understanding the novel is a meditation on mood, as versions of the Homeric *menos* (battle-rage), sympathy, and hate interact with the stress and trauma of modern warfare; in other words, while the text’s marking as “episode” tracks with Susan Stewart’s notion of the miniature as a metaphor for interiority, the battle in *Red Badge* is not between blues and grays at Chancellorsville but between the tiny interiority of Fleming and the gigantic monstrosity, the appalling extravagance of the modern war machine, where cannons become dragons and smoke-shrouded troops become ghouls. This is *Paradise Lost*’s conflict pushed to its most extreme. Jones Very had argued that Adam was the battleground, not the hero, of Milton’s poem, but in Crane the hero and the battleground collapse into the same character, even after the battle is over.

The aftermath reflections at the end of *Red Badge* have sparked perennial controversy among critics; the strangely optimistic resolution to Henry Fleming’s traumatic experience does not seem to fit the psychological realism that Crane so famously sustains throughout his narrative, and the ideology at the end seems eerily similar to that which Fleming expounds at the start of the story. I quote from the last page at length in order to situate Fleming’s thoughts in the final narrative frame:

So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed. He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquility, and it was as if hot plowshares were not. Scars faded like flowers.
It rained. The procession of weary soldiers became a bedraggled train, despondent and muttering, marching with churning effort in a trough of liquid brown mud under a low, wretched sky. Yet the youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him, though many discovered it to be made of oaths and walking sticks. He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover’s thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace.

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds. (98)

The central question that has troubled critics in this passage is whether Crane is being ironic. As previous discussions in this study have shown, the dichotomy between sincerity (epic) and irony (mock-epic) had broken down decades before Crane’s career, as in Walden’s “battle of the ants” episode and Melville’s use of heroism and satire in Moby-Dick. The biblical opening of the passage quoted above (“So it came to pass”) connects with the moralistic, summational tendency of modern epic while signaling the transient nature of this type of narration—the Youth’s resolution comes to pass, not to stay. In the Heraklitean universe of Red Badge, where no one can cross the same Rappahannock twice, that Fleming can return to his earlier idealism means not that he has learned nothing, but that he has learned too much. The Civil War marked the beginning of American medical research into the impact of battle on soldiers; “soldier’s heart” was just one name for a variety of conditions that would later be labeled “battle fatigue,” “shell shock,” and “post-traumatic stress disorder.” Another common diagnosis for Civil War veterans was a condition known as “nostalgia,” the acute longing for familiar surroundings that did not carry a sentimental connotation until the early twentieth century. The image of the smiling Fleming in the midst of a grumbling, miserable regiment as the landscape dissolves back into the fluid oblivion that opened the novel is not so much an image of unearned optimism as it is a symptom of nostalgia, a first step toward the madness exhibited by the wounded man who sings an improvised nursery rhyme, “Sing a song ’a vic’try, / A pocketful ’a bullets” (38), as an attempt to fuse together the coherence of his early memories with the traumatic disruption of his recent experience. The “prospects of clover tranquility” that make “scars fade like flowers” do not actually make the scars disappear—those prospects merely screen the scars from Fleming’s consciousness. Those prospects, which inspire “a lover’s thirst,” reenact the vision of futurity
that dominates so many of the post–American Revolution epics, most of all Dwight’s *Conquest* and Snowden’s *Columbiad*, two texts haunted by violence between neighbors and the terrible loss of family to the national cause. *Red Badge* is completely devoid of cause; at no point does either narrator or character reflect on the reasons for the war, the context that surrounds the violence. All that remains is the trauma of loss, and the prospect that from the nation’s beginnings had been grafted into the epic has been exposed for what it undoubtedly is by the end of the Civil War: a coping mechanism. The language of the American prospect-epic finally overrides the alternative (naturalistic, impressionistic, photographic) ways in which Fleming tries to understand his experience in *Red Badge*, but only as a way of compensating for the loss of the self. Connecting his thoughts to the imagined community of the prospect-viewing nation is Henry’s one means of continuing, but he no longer connects either with his own memory or with his comrades’ experience. Epic has won narrative primacy at the end, and it is dragging Henry Fleming Hector-style in its wake, almost as if the turn into an epic prospect mode was an inevitable outcome of the story.

The problem of epic’s inexorable presence in war stories haunted Crane’s *Red Badge*, but even more so John Huston’s 1951 film adaptation of the book. Coming off a wave of successes both as a war documentary director for the Army Signal Corps and as a Western film director for Hollywood, Huston proposed to MGM an adaptation of *Red Badge* in the midst of the Korean War and the Red Scare—the difficult politics of the story, which Huston’s original screenplay preserved, split the studio, ultimately leading to the forced retirement of Louis B. Mayer, the film’s most vocal opponent. Huston planned his film as both a meditation on the nation’s attitude toward war and a departure from the larger-than-life epic formula of the Hollywood epic, especially the myriad World War II films that had appeared in the years since Pearl Harbor. Rejecting the star system that had driven MGM’s production philosophy for twenty years, Huston cast the new actor Audie Murphy, the boy-faced son of a Texas sharecropper who had played roles such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James on film, but who was nationally famous as the most decorated Army soldier in World War II. The role of Wilson, or the Loud Soldier, went to Bill Mauldin, who had never acted before but had also gained fame as one of the lead cartoonists for *Stars and Stripes* during the late war. Huston’s further directing choices were also unconventional; he shot the film in black and white in order to evoke Matthew Brady’s photography, and the original cut of the film opened with an unidentified sentry (Murphy) having a moonlit conversation across a river with an unseen enemy picket. After Huston left for
Africa to begin production on *The African Queen*, Dore Schary, the producer who had originally fought for *Red Badge*’s life, radically overhauled Huston’s first cut in an effort to make the film more marketable.

Most drastic among Schary’s alterations was editing out half of the footage in Huston’s version of the film, about an hour’s worth of material, in effect reminia-turizing *Red Badge* to the point where it hardly worked as a feature film: the final running time was sixty-nine minutes. The night sentry scene moved to the night before the battle, when Murphy’s character could be readily identified and contextualized, and the new opening for the film involved a voice-over and a book whose pages showed both the credits and a portrait of Stephen Crane. The voice in fact conflated the book and the film to such an extent that the very writing of the book by “a boy of twenty-two . . . made [Crane] a man,” in a process seemingly identical to the process by which Fleming became not just a man but an everyman, one whose story merely echoes those of “many frightened boys who went into a great Civil War and came out as a nation of united, strong, and free men,” a claim underscored by the brass arrangement of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and the close-up shots of soldiers’ faces accompanying the narration. Various bits of narration, added by Schary to make the narrative easier to follow, are explained at the end of the prologue as being “quotes from the text itself.”

Schary’s original hope had been that a film based on Crane’s novel, already a canonical favorite of the academy, would be a prestige piece for the studio, and the voice-over’s main purpose seems to be building and pointing to the canonicity of the book in order to lend the film as much cultural capital as possible—with perhaps a bit of Lincolnian glory mixed into a depiction of a “great Civil War.”

Much of what Schary cut from Huston’s version dealt, predictably, with the dark side of war. Several minutes of close-ups showing Murphy’s frightened face, for instance, were cut, as Schary believed that audiences would reject seeing a decorated war hero playing a frightened boy. Portraying Murphy as a virile warrior was, as Huston intended, next to impossible, however; lacking the towering presence of the John Wayne of *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) or *Fort Apache* (1948), Murphy comes across as an unlikely hero—somewhat like Fleming, but nothing like what MGM hoped to sell to the American public. The bitter final speech and death of the Tattered Soldier, which had shocked preview audiences, also disappeared from the final version. One sequence that does remain, however, introduces a moment of strident mock-epic into a film whose producers desperately tried to render an epic: the train of wounded, in which a nostalgic soldier sings a manic rendition of “John Brown’s Body” in place of “Sing a song ’a vic’try.” The
Epic in American Culture

orchestral score was not in Huston’s version of the film, and its heavy reliance on “Battle Hymn” as a motif places the soundtrack under the ominous shadow of a mad soldier screaming, “John Brown’s body lies a-molderin’ in the grave.”

The most climactic use of the “Battle Hymn” motif appears at the end of the final charge, when Fleming’s regiment overruns a Confederate unit and captures their battle flag. The flag in the book is a prize ferociously sought by Fleming and Wilson, who race for it, but in the film the soaring brass grinds to a halt as Fleming wistfully, even sadly walks alongside the Confederate color-bearer in his tortured last steps. While the Union flag that Fleming now carries had to be pried earlier from the dead color-bearer’s hands, in this case the youth gently takes the flag just as his enemy dies, as if receiving a passed baton. In perhaps the strangest moment in the film, Fleming holds the Confederate flag sideways, so that its shadow provides shelter to its dead former bearer as the cloth fills with the breeze. Wilson, who seized the flag in the book, gently takes the flag from Fleming and furls it slowly as the orchestra strings play “Taps.” As the two flagpoles—the upright Union and the horizontal Confederate—intersect each other, they form a cross on the field to Murphy’s right, in a scene that finally unites North and South through the cost of death. The scene might be interpreted as a filmic version of Lincoln’s Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses, but Huston’s interest in the psychology of war continues in the next scene to show that North and South have not yet united. A series of shots depicts Confederate prisoners seated on the ground, surrounded by calm, concerned Union soldiers. Immediately after this sequence, we see Fleming and Wilson also sitting on the ground, surrounded by a ring of their comrades, one of whom relates what he heard the colonel saying about the two young heroes. Though triumphant in his leadership during the charge, Fleming has become so detached from his regiment that he occupies space reserved for outsiders, and he shows that he is not a prisoner only by getting up and walking out of the ring without a word. After confessing his desertion to Wilson, he learns that many of his fellow soldiers behaved in the same way, and he finds redemption as the final narration reads from the conclusion of the novel. Epic takes over Huston’s film as the organizing principle, against the director’s wishes; the Hollywood epic was in fact on the way to gaining primacy over the documentary as newsreels disappeared from American film-watching experience over the next decade. Huston’s Red Badge has long been famous for what it could have been, but of particular interest to this study is what it is: standing in the middle ground between wartime documentary and large-scale epic, mimicking Matthew Brady’s photography while invoking the primacy of the
book over the picture, *Red Badge* is a prime example of the permeability between high art and popular entertainment. Yet the story of *Red Badge*, both as literature and as film, represents only one major strain in the new directions epic took in the post-Reconstruction United States, the prevalence of the fragment or episode. The next section explores an opposing but related strand, that of the populist work that prepared the aesthetics of epic for mass consumption.

**Ben-Hur** and Beyond: The Epic and Postmodern Populism

By the time Crane’s *Red Badge* appeared, another work of historical fiction had already reconceptualized the popular possibilities of epic in a very different vein. When Lew Wallace published *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* in 1880, he had lived through the horrors that Crane would later describe, having served as a Union officer at such gruesome engagements as Fort Donelson and Shiloh. Through painstaking yet highly romanticized researches, Wallace composed *Ben-Hur* with an immense historical and geographical backdrop, synthesizing the epic of the Roman *imperium* with the biblical epic of the Messiah. Wallace casts the Christ story as a world event; the opening chapter of *Ben-Hur*, “The Desert,” cinematically pans from an immense mountain on the edge of the ancient territory of Ammon to the journey of the three wise men, first from their respective countries to a desert rendezvous, and then to the manger at Bethlehem. Using the character of Judah Ben-Hur as the lens for these near-global events, Wallace works firmly within the tradition of the historical novel, but the spectacle of encyclopedic detail often threatens to overwhelm *Ben-Hur*’s moralistic focus. The message of the work—Wallace had initially undertaken the project in answer to an acquaintance’s expressed doubts regarding Christ’s divinity—disappeared into its medium, as copies sold by the hundreds of thousands and the New York firm Klaw and Erlanger spent nearly as many dollars backing a Broadway adaptation, complete with an on-stage chariot race with actual horses. *Ben-Hur* became an industry unto itself, so much so that when the Kelem Company produced a thirteen-minute film adaptation of the novel, Wallace’s heirs and Klaw and Erlanger successfully sued for damages in a case that went all the way to the United States Supreme Court and established the precedent that guaranteed authors film adaptation rights to their works.

What seemed to set *Ben-Hur* apart was not so much its story as its scale; the encyclopedic research that stood behind the highly descriptive writing attracted readers familiar enough with Roman history and the Bible to appreciate the
story, but whose entertainment dollars went increasingly toward panoramas, cycloramas, and other large-scale visual media. And scale was a major element of both the production values and the marketing for MGM’s two film versions of Ben-Hur, Fred Niblo’s 1925 silent version and William Wyler’s 1959 widescreen adaptation—the latter a cinematic myth unto itself. The combination of overwhelming materiality, as in the 1925 picture’s touted “Cast of 125,000!” and the association of that materiality with a spiritualized backstory made Ben-Hur even more an epic on screen than on the page, just as epic became more and more aestheticized—and more material—during the rise of film. By the zenith of the Hollywood historical epic in the late 1950s, extending a sense of wonder across an expansive narrative had become the primary defining characteristic of “epic.” While The Red Badge of Courage served to miniaturize that wonder into extreme interiority, the phenomenon of Ben-Hur helped to diffuse epic into a site for extreme projection into the world, overwhelming the individual out of self-awareness as the multisensory power of the film carried its audience along. The latter is exemplified today through the seemingly endless spatial and temporal sweep of Gettysburg, or of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, a project often compared to Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelungs and assailed by critics not least for its violation of Alfred Hitchcock’s maxim that length of a film should be limited by the endurance of the human bladder. Film epics, by pushing such biological limits as Hitchcock wryly cited, have ironically come closer to the experience of reading an epic, an experience not usually confinable to a single sitting or recitation. Contrary to critical consensus, epic has not died; it has diffused so far and so successfully that it is no longer visible as a purely literary concept. And as this study has shown, it has hardly been purely literary at any point in its American history.

Ralph Ellison’s Other Ancestor

Yet the literary remained important in the development of epic through this period, and perhaps the most successful integration of epic techniques into an American novel in the twentieth century is Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. Published in 1952 (between the release of Huston’s Red Badge and Wyler’s Ben-Hur), Invisible Man has long stood in the uneasy critical territory between white modernist aesthetics and African-American vernacular, and the tense racial politics of the 1940s and 1950s have continued to play themselves out in assessments by critics as diverse as Kenneth Burke, Houston Baker, Alan Nadel, and Arnold Rampersad. And as Ellison himself argues in his essay “The Shadow and the
Act,” those politics are themselves the result of the unresolved trauma of the Reconstruction that played itself out most explicitly in American film culture. However, though an accomplished cultural critic, Ellison strongly self-identified as a novelist, and in that context he continually engaged, both in *Invisible Man* and in his later essays, with those he called his “ancestors.” The list of those ancestors echoes the canon of novelists of Chase and Fiedler, along with several transatlantic names: Melville, Twain, Crane, Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce, Eliot, Malraux, and Dostoevsky are among the most cited names both by Ellison and by his critics, but as I have shown in my study of Melville, an older, more complex web of intertexts lies behind Ellison’s ancestors. The genealogy of *Invisible Man* traces all the way back to Homer, and critics, though aware of the many references to Homer that appear in Ellison’s novel, have made little of Greek epic’s presence in a modern African American work of prose fiction. While Keith Cartwright has pointed out that many of the motifs in *Invisible Man* are traceable, through the Creole culture that shaped the Oklahoma of Ellison’s youth, to the Islam-inflected Sunjata epic tradition of Senegal and its environs, I focus here on Homer to show how Ellison creatively addresses the problem of inheriting a literary tradition tainted with moral stains that troubled American writers as early as Joel Barlow.

The novel’s opening statement, “I am an invisible man,” resonates with Odysseus’s self-identification as “Nobody” in his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus, yet this refusal to share one’s name—a refusal that leads Cartwright to declare that Ellison’s work “is no epic”—is also a refusal of genre and technology. In explaining his invisibility, the invisible man says that he is “not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe,” or “one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms.” The double entendre of Poe’s “spook,” both the ghost in the story and the Southern slave culture outside, rejects the Gothic with its pathologization of the racial Other, but the other alternative, an “ectoplasm,” is an odd one. The word “ectoplasm” refers more to the special effects used to make ghosts glow on film rather than the ghosts thus depicted, already calling into question the role that film technology plays in hiding the Other, as he will critique the role of technology in erasing identity at the Liberty paint factory and in the lobotomy scene. But this sequence of denials is also in response to the invisible man’s suffering of rejection at his Tuskegee-like college. In chapter 5, after the invisible man has unintentionally introduced the white trustee Mr. Norton to the incestuous Trueblood and the too-frank Negro veterans of the Golden Day, he attends what he knows will be his last chapel service before his inevitable expulsion from
the college. The trustees and other officials attend the service as well, and an opening hymn precedes the keynote speaker, as yet unknown to the invisible man, a “man of striking ugliness” who wears “black-lensed glasses” (117–18). The speaker spins a tale, set to the cadences of black preaching that the invisible man assumes as an authoritative form, about the history of the school’s unnamed Founder, of his decline, and of his legacy through the school. Though the speech is clearly designed to inspire, that inspiration must come through catharsis. The invisible man notices the copious tears of his neighbors, even while he wrestles with his own emotions, a blend of the proper catharsis with a nauseating nostalgia for what he is about to lose: “For the first time the evocation of the Founder saddened me, and the campus seemed to rush past me, fast retreating, like the fading of a dream at the sundering of slumber. . . . And I watched with a sick fascination, knowing part of the story, yet a part of me fighting against its sad inevitable conclusion” (123, 125). The story of the Founder is familiar to the speaker’s audience to the point of cliché, yet the very inevitability of the end creates a tension intensified for the invisible man through knowing that his own demise in the college’s eyes is mere hours away. The full import of the story’s performance and reception emerges only after the speaker’s name is known, a name that a fellow student implies with a look that the invisible man should have known already: “Reverend Homer A. Barbee, Chicago” (123). The obvious connection with Homer’s traditional description—the excessive ugliness, the blindness, the theatricalized inspiration—reveals why this story matters. The invisible man hears the story of a heroic past no longer accessible to its audience, any of its audience, but he is the hearer most painfully aware of the gulf between heroic story and present failure. Homer stands at the beginning of the invisible man’s story, but only as an ancestor so far removed that he can only be pushed away, as Davenant shoved off from his sea-marke to seek for new territory. Lighting out for the territory was one of Ellison’s favorite tropes from Twain (he referred throughout his life to his home state of Oklahoma as “the territory”), and light out the invisible man must if he is to make his own story.

Throughout Invisible Man, modernist and surrealist techniques bump up against folk vernacular and jazz idioms, and one of the most jarring instances of this collision occurs late in the novel during the riot spurred by Ras the Destroyer. The Afro-Caribbean Ras, having dropped his earlier moniker of “the Exhorter,” has moved from fighting words to a fighting stance in a progression connected to single combat scenes in the Iliad. Yet this single combat borders on the absurd, as Ras appears on horseback, “dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian
chieftain; a fur cap on his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders” (556). And Ras has set out to fight only an abstract “white man,” rather than an actual rival—until he comes across the invisible man, his previous rhetorical opponent in the neighborhoods of Harlem. The invisible man, now on the run after being betrayed by the Communist Party that had made him a spokesman, exchanges words with Ras and the crowd before the Creole orders his followers to kill the invisible man and launches a spear at him as a warning shot. The invisible man, when he sees that he has run out of rhetoric, throws the spear back and thereby throws the scene into utter chaos: “I let fly the spear and it was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again, watching it catch him as he turned his head to shout, ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws” (559–60). The spear thrust through the cheek is a standard death wound in the *Iliad*, and here it elevates the fight between the invisible man and Ras to mythic proportions echoing back to both Greece and Africa. Yet the juxtaposition of a Homeric trope in the midst of surreal horror “more out of a dream than out of Harlem” (556) also renders the heroic absurd; the invisible man’s throw is a lucky shot, not the determined blow of a warrior, and no one gains any ground through the conflict.

In fact, the scene precipitates the invisible man’s descent underground, a descent that would involve a pantheon of ghosts in Homer’s world but in the invisible man’s Harlem involves walks in dank sewers, stolen electricity in abandoned basements, and protests of his difference from “ectoplasms.” Ellison’s twin accomplishments of reintroducing Homeric devices into a workable contemporary poetics and repudiating Homeric authority as useless in the world of the postmodern novel typify the epic impulse in postwar America. Barlow’s and Snowden’s love-hate relationships with epic find a kind of redemption in *Invisible Man*, as epic finally settles into a larger tapestry of literary traditions, aesthetic effects, and above all experiences of racial and social identity. And one of the strange phenomena in the history of the epic impulse appears in Ellison’s own *Nachleben*. Myriad African American writers since Ellison have had to wrestle with *Invisible Man*, and many have done so openly. Yet I am not aware of a single instance of a writer engaging Ellison as a way of getting to the epics, either Sunjata or Homeric, that stand behind his achievement. The epic impulse throughout this study has been shown to lead authors to take on Homer and his successors in a range of ways, but from World War II on that same impulse continues while the classical or canonical figures that stood behind earlier uses have now faded into a
kind of intertextual background noise: Thomas Pynchon takes on not Homer and Virgil but Melville and Madison. And this tendency appears outside literature as well, as the next section shows.

From Lower Frequencies to Higher Bandwidth: Epic Technology

Two last examples highlight both the prevalence of epic in contemporary media culture and the possibilities for engaging epic from a postmodern standpoint. Significantly, both take their inspiration from Thomas Cole, who by the late twentieth century had moved from a transnational experimenter in combining pictorial genres and defying the conventions of the Grand Manner into an exemplar of an American Grand Manner just as formidable—and to postmodern artists just as suspect—as the aesthetics of Diderot’s grand machines. The first of these examples stands in the space of modern epic, an internationally presented work designed to speak for a nation: Ed Ruscha’s Course of Empire (2005). Ruscha, like Cole, has become an icon in American art, but like Cole, his work’s resistance to easy classification has frequently made his work a flashpoint of aesthetic and cultural politics in the post-1950 American art world. Trained as a commercial artist in the 1950s, Ruscha “has been characterized as doing Pop art . . . conceptual art . . . Abstract Expressionism . . . surrealism . . . [and] social realism.” What-if Ruscha’s school or lack thereof, his work became nationally representative when he was selected to present a new work for the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, a recurring exhibition intended to present the state of art in (mainly Western) nations at an international venue. While Ruscha did not choose the title for his work, Course of Empire, until after he had started working on it, numerous critics commented on the appropriateness of such a subject for the Venice Biennale: “Under the conditions of globalization, the founding contradictions of the Biennale—on the one hand, the propagandistic interests of the nation-state; on the other, the critical projects of the avant-garde—have clearly shifted from latency to manifest urgency.” Considering not only that the US Pavilion followed a neoclassical architectural scheme that was almost universally described as Jeffersonian, but also that two lead sponsors of the Pavilion were the US State Department and Lehman Brothers, Ruscha as a leading American artist could hardly have avoided either critique of or implication in the imperial politics that several commentators believed automatically disqualified any American artist from winning first prize at the Biennale.
But while Ruscha had taken his title from Cole, little in the visuality of his (what else?) five-canvas series suggested the dramatic sweep of Cole’s 1836 series. Ruscha based his five color air-brushed pictures on a five-canvas black-and-white series that he had done in 1992 titled Blue Collar. That earlier series had presented mottled Los Angeles sky hovering over the tops of five fictional structures (including a telephone booth) in various states of use and disuse in industrial LA. Blue Collar had been typified by a kind of documentary nostalgia, as it mimicked monochrome photography while highlighting the painterly material of the air-brushed canvas. In Course of Empire, Ruscha returned to each of the Blue Collar structures, showing changed signs (one of them in ersatz Chinese), boarded windows, raised barbed-wire fences around condemned property, and a blank power pole and a tree branch that had replaced the frame that the telephone booth had occupied before the rise of cell phones. The series was a record of the passing of (fictional) time, emphasizing the “social realism” that Joan Didion praised in his work in the catalog’s foreword while also idealizing the industrial landscape even at the level of fake brand names and made-up Asian characters. This series was about history, about the international, about the local, about the state of art as social commentary—but it was also about the tradition of the “Two Coles” still trying to coexist in an art world that had never been ready to view “pure” landscape and “fanciful” imagery as congruent or even compatible.

Why Cole? Ruscha had resonated with the emotional tone of the older Course of Empire series, but the serial structure and the unique capacity of the visual series to develop and articulate ideas seem to have been most valuable to him; in the catalog, Ruscha commented, “I think the nickel dropped when I realized these [Cole’s] pictures were actually this artist’s vision of his concept. I was looking at them individually at first and, well, they’re far greater as a group of works than they are individually.” The “grand epic upon canvass” that James Fenimore Cooper had seen in 1853 had been rediscovered as a way to present big ideas in a high-stakes venue. Conceiving of his own Course of Empire as a series also moved Ruscha to reconceive his earlier, disjointed group as having a certain kind of aesthetic and historical unity, sustained retrospectively by his new work. This unity became clearest in the installation scheme. Leaving the central rotunda of the C-shaped US Pavilion empty, Ruscha installed Course of Empire on one side and Blue Collar on the other, such that viewers had to walk between the two series without being able to keep visual contact with the series they were leaving behind, thus requiring the viewer to “file an image in memory in order to compare it with its ‘look-alike.’” In other words, forgetting and remembering become
Figure 20. Elliot Anderson, *Prometheus Bound*, 2007.

Courtesy of the artist.
mutually constitutive functions, and the sustained narrative of the series is immediately reorganized by the individual viewers’ associations, reflections, and forgettings. Looking at the passage of time also means looking again at Cole and his original audiences, too; the anxiety of postmodern uncertainty and guilt over multinational capitalism and imperialism finds expression through the tradition of an early transnational critic of the Industrial Revolution and the economies of art that it set into place. Ruscha’s *Course of Empire* has rarely been exhibited in the United States, and the fate of this series raises another question about the complications involved in creating a national tradition (like that of Longfellow’s *Evangeline*) that will connect with international audiences and then trying to sustain that tradition among the nation’s own audiences.

One way of approaching this last problem is to focus further into the local, which our second example does through a surprising application of digital technology. In a 2007 exhibit at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, new media artist Elliot Anderson presented what amounts to a meditation on the relationship between the ideology of Hudson River School landscape painting and contemporary tourist photography. The pieces composing the exhibit, titled “Average Landscapes,” were constructed from a computer program that searched the Internet for tourists’ posted photographs using keywords from the titles of the de Young’s nineteenth-century landscape paintings. The collected photographs were then overlaid and averaged by a computer graphics program and projected onto lightboxes, revealing multilayered but surprisingly close approximations of the de Young’s nineteenth-century images of Yosemite, Lake George, and Yellowstone. Included in Anderson’s exhibit was a piece based on Cole’s *Prometheus Bound*. The main composition of the painting consists of a mountain range, with a few trees in the foreground rhyming with a sole male nude figure fastened to the most prominent peak; a lone vulture soars upward from the trees as the dawn glows behind it, and a single star signifying Jupiter’s vigilance over the rebellious Titan hangs in a dark blue sky. Anderson used keyword searches for “Prometheus” to produce four separate images to mimic Cole’s composition (fig. 20): a compilation of images from the Hubble Space Telescope in place of Jupiter, a juxtaposition of images of raptors and jet fighters in place of the vulture, a blend of mountain images strikingly similar to Cole’s mountains, and an array of male nudes taken largely from images on the website for a gay male erotica publishing house called Prometheus Books. The fragmenting and reiterating of Cole’s *Prometheus* splits the epic into an ever-repeating series of Kodak moments, incoherent and yet all-encompassing—mythmaking through encyclopedic inclusion
rather than narrative exclusion. We have seen this tendency increase throughout this study, as epic has become more a way of seeing the world than a form for describing that world. Such may well be the future of epic in the American experience; whether such a future ultimately renders epic bound or unbound remains to be seen.