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Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism (Modernist Literature and Culture)

C.D. Blanton

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The history of the epic-ranging from the heroic narratives of cultural origin found in Homer and Virgil to the tumultuous theological and political conflicts depicted by Dante or Milton-is nearly as old as literature itself. But the epic is also made and remade by its present, adapted to the pressures and formal necessities of its particular cultural moment. Examining modernist poetry's epic turn in the years between the two World Wars, C.D. Blanton's ambitious study charts the inversion of what Ezra Pound called "a poem including history" into a fractured and hollowed form, a "negated epic" that struggles not only to acknowledge the distant past but also to conceive its immediate present.

Compelled to register the force of a larger historical totality it cannot directly represent, the negated epic reorients the function of poetic language, trading expression or signification for concrete but often buried reference, remaking the poem as an instrument of dialectical reason in the process. *Epic Negation* turns first to T. S. Eliot, productively pairing *The Waste Land* with *The Criterion*, the literary review it announced in 1922, to argue that Eliot's journal systematically realizes the editorial and critical method through which modernism's epochal poem sought to think its moment whole, developing a totalizing account of interwar culture. Dividing the epic's critical function from its style, *The Criterion* not only includes history differently, but also formulates an intricately dialectical account of the crisis facing bourgeois society, formed in the image of a Marxism it opposes.

World War II's approach serves to organize the second half of Blanton's study, as he traces the dislocated formal effects of a serial epic gone underground. In the tense elegies and pastorals of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, lyric forms cryptically divulge the determining force of unmentionable but universal events, dividing experience against consciousness, what can be said in a poem from what cannot. And, finally, with H.D.'s Trilogy-written under bombardment in a terse exchange with Freud's famous rewriting of biblical history in *Moses and Monotheism*--the poetic image itself lapses, consigning epic to the silent historical force of the unconscious. Uniquely conceived and deftly executed, *Epic Negation* transforms our understanding of modernist poetics and the concept of epic more broadly.

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