

The Epic Circle

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The Epic Circle

*ALLEGORESIS AND THE WESTERN EPIC TRADITION
FROM HOMER TO TASSO*

Zdenko Zlatar

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The Epic Circle
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Illustration on page 45: the Dendera Zodiac [from Jean-François Champollion, *Monuments de Egypte et de La Nubie*, vol. 4, (Paris 1844.), pl.CCCXLIX]

All quotations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* are from Mark Musa's translation of Vol. I: Inferno, Vol. II: Purgatory, Vol. III: Paradise (Indiana University Press, republished by Penguin, 1984-1986). The commentary found in the three volumes is by Mark Musa.

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Preface

In Canto IV of his *Inferno* Dante, guided by Virgil, enters the first, the outermost circle of Hell where those who had been born before Christ are condemned for eternity simply because they did not know Christian faith. In this first circle Dante and Virgil are met by a small group of poets, including Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. Dante calls this small group "the noble school of the master singer of sublimest verse" ¹ (*la bella scola di quel signor del altissimo canto*). Commentators, such as Mark Musa, are divided on whether by the phrase "the master singer" Dante meant Homer, whom he had already referred to as "leading the three as if he were their master" and as "sovereign poet", or Virgil, whom Dante called in Canto I "light and honor of the other poets". It was from Virgil that Dante took "the noble style that was to bring me honor". In Canto II Dante addressed Virgil thus: "You are my guide, you are my lord and teacher" (*Tu duca, tu signore, e tu maestro*). Regardless of whether Dante meant Homer or Virgil, according to another commentator, that of the translator of the so-called *California Dante*, Allen Mandelbaum, "Dante considered epic poetry, 'the song incomparable', to be the noblest genre". ² Dante is accepted as the sixth of the group, and thus joins *the epic circle*.

The two studies offered in this book were written in order to find out how *the epic circle* functioned in the Western literary tradition from Homer to Tasso. The first study, *Lectura Dantis apud Gondolam*, shows how an epic poet, in this case a Slavic one, Divo Franov Gundulic (1589-1638) "read" Dante who, in turn, had already "read" Virgil. Thus a "reading" of any work that belongs to a well-defined tradition, such as the epic one, reflects Renato Poggioli's dictum that "every great work of art, even the most lucid, is a kind of hieroglyphic." ³ But it differs with Poggioli when he goes on to say that "the key to decipher it lies hidden in the work itself". Instead I agree with Gian Biagio Conte that "a text can be read only in connection with, and in opposition to, other texts. These texts form a grid through which the text is perceived..." ⁴ The

¹Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Vol. I: *Inferno*, translated by Mark Musa (Penguin, 1984), 103-104.

²*The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980), 351.

³Renato Poggioli, "Tragedy or Romance? A Reading of the Paolo and Francesca Episode in Dante's *Inferno*" *PMLA* 72 (June, 1957), 341.

⁴Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, translated and edited by Charles Segal (Ithaca, 1986), 29.

second and much longer study, *Allegoresis in the Western Epic Tradition from Homer to Tasso*, was written to substantiate Conte's Claim that "a literary work cannot exist outside this system". It takes issue with the notion of *imitation* as the dominant mode of "reading" the text, and argues that it is *allegoresis* that has provided the first and the most enduring school of literary criticism from Antiquity to the end of the Renaissance and the early Counter-Reformation, the age of Divo Gundulic. The second essay is designed to justify the approach taken in the first; but the first forms a version of my "reading" of Gundulic's *Osman* which served as a pretext for writing the second. Thus the two studies are complementary and are intended to show how a particular epic must be "read" within the context of the *epic circle* that it belonged to according to the prevalent tradition of which it was a part; and how this tradition was itself defined and determined by the number of texts which alone formed the *epic circle*. The two studies represent two halves of the circle, and lead into each other.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who made the publication of this study possible, in particular: Associate Professor Soumyen Mukherjee who has constantly encouraged me to have it published, and took a keen personal interest in seeing it readied for the press; Professor Michael Wilding who read the longer essay, made a number of comments, and recommended it for publication; Professor Suan Dorsch, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who made the university grant toward the cost of its publication available; and last but not least, my research assistant, Mrs. Elizabeth Mitford, who proofread and formatted the book.

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*Leva dunque, lettore, a l'alte rote
meco la vista, dritto a quella parte
dove lun moto e l'altro si percuote*

*e li comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte
di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama,
tanto che mai da le l'occhio non parte.*

Look up now, Reader, with me to the spheres;
look straight to that point of the lofty wheels
where the one motion and the other cross,

and there begin to revel in the work
of that great Artist who soloves His art,
His gaze is fixed on it perpetually.

Dante, *La Divine Commedia*,
Paradiso, X, 7-12