

What is the Genre of *Tacky's Revolt*?

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To those in the room who are conversant with Hayden White's literary school of historiographic theory, or maybe those familiar with Bruno Latour and Étienne Souriau's insight that genre is prepositional—in the sense that it defines or constrains relationships between a reader and a text—the scope and stakes of my remarks are going to be familiar. I am a professor of literature, and have been given the mandate to speak as a literary scholar—and since genre is what happens when students of literature wander into history, I'm going to talk a bit about what kind of narrative is Vincent Brown's book. My remarks are called "What is the genre of *Tacky's Revolt*?" And since we all also know that questions at the beginnings of essays always have answers by the end—or I mean at least usually they do—I'm going to tip my hand: I'm going to suggest that Brown's book is history in the epic mode, which I will argue with very specific reference to epics of both the Eastern and the Western Mediterranean, if I may put it that way—to both the Classical epics of the greater Aegean region, and a tradition of Caribbean historiography which has focused on issues of genre. When we say "epic," we mean to register the way that a local event plugs into a completely different scale of things, activating some larger field of forces or network of causes. Epic is not about individuals; it is about things much larger than any individual person. To sing of arms and the man is to sketch already the relationship between an individual and vast circumthalassic conflict. It is just that in the *Aeneid*, it is the gods who are the inscrutable agents of cause; the agents of *Tacky's Revolt* are the modern pantheon of ideology and its critique—things like national politics or commodity markets, or sugar, the plantation complex, proto-capitalism, and so on. Anyways, this is what I'd like to suggest, over the next ten minutes or so: *Tacky's Revolt* is history-telling in the epic mode.

It helped me, in preparing these remarks, to view Brown's book as part of a genealogy of Caribbean history-writing flowing through CLR James and David Scott, not least because each thinks critically about the relationship between biography and larger, regional narratives. James's *The Black Jacobins* was the 1938 history of the eighteenth-century Haitian revolution, which James structured around the remarkable life of Toussaint L'Overture; the *Conscripts of Modernity* was Scott's 2004 history of Caribbean politics constructed, in turn, around James's career as a historian and a political radical. Like all of us, David Scott argues, James was writing to his own moment, which happened to be the Marxist revolutionary optimism of the 1930's. This was what Scott calls his "problem space," the sum of contemporary conditions that give weight and structure to a historical question—not only that lend weight and purchase to certain kinds of history, rather than others, or even that allow one history to be written (rather than another), but that allow that history to be thought in the first place, as a question I suppose of genre or rhetorical form. James, Scott writes, was writing *romance*; romance offered him—here I'm quoting Scott—"a distinctive cognitive-political vocabulary," where the struggle of a single, magnanimous individual could stand, emblematically and historically, for the struggle to freedom of a whole region or political system. That's one way of linking biography to regional narrative, which is also embedded in Caribbean modernity, and it was right for James in 1938, where careful history could serve as an intellectual's contribution to preparations for an African revolution.

Scott, in his turn, was also writing to his moment; how could he do anything else? And, with the advantage of history's yet longer view, Scott could see how the very struggle for freedom

James cast as a romance might be absorbed into the longer arc of neoliberal capitalism. *The Black Jacobins* is not only, Scott demonstrates, the biography of the scion of the Haitian Revolution, nor even only a way of linking a certain kind of biographical sensibility to the history of a region, but also the record of the closing of a horizon of possibility. This is the familiar Foucauldian twist whereby the very mechanics of liberation produced an involuntary underclass, the same people struggling against slavery becoming, in the modern present, "conscripts to modernity," since the goals of that struggle—political self-determination, free market capitalism, and so on—all along also worked to set up the collapse of post-colonial optimism into the violent dictatorships of the mid-twentieth century. Judge no man's happiness until he be dead, writes Plutarch, which seems like a paradox from the point of view of the exemplary individual, since someone can hardly be happy when they are dead, but makes sense from the point of view of genre, where we can't tell the shape of the whole until we have sketched out the contours of the event. What looked like romance, Scott writes, turns out to be something very different; the right story of the Caribbean is not the heroic struggle towards some end—i.e., romance—but tragedy, wherein the struggle itself, through some ironic transformation, becomes the very mechanism of its own frustration.

Romance and tragedy; each is a genre, of course, and each offers a version of life-writing as history, or, more narrowly, and this is also David Scott's point, the school of history associated with Robin Collingwood and latterly Quentin Skinner. Collingwoodian history reconstructs events by entering the minds of the agents responsible for them; writing a successful history, Collingwood tells us in *The Idea of History*, means recovering the contours of a mental situation with sufficient clarity that the decisions of key individuals make sense. History is akin to "great man" biography; an illusion of interiority and proximity to single persons is this mode's best resource, and we assent to such a history based on how plausible its psychological portraits seem—and how plausible seem therefore the decisions of its key actors. For Brown, however, that's right off the table. Tacky's revolt cannot be about Tacky in this way; it can't even be about Apongo, I mean, in the same way that *The Black Jacobins* is about L'Ouverture. It is going to have to be structured differently, and in a way crafted to speak to our moment. For *Tacky's Revolt* will give us the history of a condition, for which the exemplary life is already a distortion—in Brown's words—a "misshapen story." It is going to have to offer a story that can take up the individual life in order to sketch the outlines of a total system. And the generic resource he hits on, the formal engine of this book and its "cognitive-political vocabulary," is the one genre that takes scale as its special object. Brown has written an epic history; at the risk of overpromising, I might suggest that *Tacky's Revolt* reads like the *Iliad*.

Right from the start, *Tacky's Revolt* asks us to recognize history-work as an act of selection, of one possible narrative mode or one possible genre among others. The very title of the book, Brown remarks, is a deliberate misnomer and politically motivated trick, which is to say, a way of assembling things into a story. "Tacky" probably referred to one real person, if it didn't refer to many; it was certainly an honorific converted to an epithet. But "Tacky" survives in the historical record as part of a sustained strategy to reduce "a regional war against slaveholders" to the narrative of "a local episode," or, to "collapse what turned out to be a complex and confusing process into a symbolic moment in place and time." Tacky might have been a single person, with a single correct story to be told about his life (born in Ghana, forcibly transported to Jamaica, and so on), but "Tacky" served to reduce the total state of warfare that slavery is to the actions of one person at one place and at one time. This is why the Collingwoodian model, or the model advanced differently by James and latterly by Scott, cannot apply, since it shares

outlines with the rhetorical strategies that already and all along sought to minimize the systemic evil of plantation slavery as only the ideas and acts of individuals. When Brown finds the word "Tacky" in the archive, in other words, he knows that it tokens a genre, of a kind of history as life-writing, which buttressed the plantation system in the first place. This, Brown reminds us, was the right choice for a certain set of people at a certain historical moment. For our moment, however, invested as it is in recovering racism as systemic, it is clearly the wrong one.

In the place of romance and tragedy, then, Brown substitutes something else; he writes history as epic. For the sake of time, I'm going to try to convince you with a sort of parlor trick. Take the first page of the book. It reads like an epic invocation:

Wager, also known by his African name, Apongo, was a leader of the largest slave rebellion in the eighteenth-century British Empire. But long before taking his part in the great Jamaican insurrection of 1760-61, commonly called Tacky's Revolt, he had been on a remarkable odyssey.

OK: it's convenient that Brown has called out the *Odyssey* by name. But that's really a distraction—or just a first sign that Brown is finding in epic the formal resources to narrate the mid-eighteenth-century Caribbean plantation system from the point-of-view of the people who suffered it. Not only does each sentence differently connect small to large, which is after all the very work of epic even in casual conversation—linking Wager, first to the largest rebellion, then to an entire Empire; and then, chiasmus-like, back again: where the great insurrection gives way to the individual journey, like sublimity at work, small to large to back again. Collingwoodian histories do the same thing, since their goal is to reduce large-scale events to the decisions of individuals. But each sentence could, in turn, be substituted, *mutatis mutandum*, for the first sentences respectively of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the first, it is "sing to me, o Muse, of the rage of Wager, once known as Apongo, who brought death and destruction to the British Empire"; in the second, it is something like "sing of the wanderings of Apongo, the man of many turns, who was driven far journeys, before the rebellion on the Island of Jamaica." We might say, putting a finer point on it, that Apongo is to *Tacky's Revolt* what Achilles is to the *Iliad*—a present absence who is as much myth as history. What will count, here, is not an illusion of depth psychology, not an individual life (though Brown will gesture towards that in the book's opening pages), and certainly not what Collingwood, one hundred years ago, called the only aim of history—to enter the minds of great men to realize historical events as a series of rational choices—but the recovery of a total, complex situation and the scene of an emblematic conflict. Apongo offers the invitation to that project of reconstruction, in something like the way that the rage of Achilles gives the *Iliad* its beginning, middle, and end.

Much more could be said about epic and globalism, or the natural resonances between epic and Caribbean historiography. A longer version of this essay would, for instance, compare *Tacky's Revolt* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, which similarly harnesses epic form to construct a single, complex narrative about St. Lucia and Caribbean modernity. But let me instead wind up my remarks by pointing to three ways that *Tacky's Revolt* finds history in the epic mode. The first is in its rigorous positioning of parts against wholes, high resolution particulars against low resolution moods or conditions, or, the local against the global. There was a fantasy among eighteenth-century critics and scholars that you could reconstruct all of Troy and its empire just from the *Iliad*, so comprehensive was the knowledge contained by that epic; *Tacky's Revolt* can feel that way too, only, it is the Transatlantic world which is at stake. Just on page 99, the

Kenshur page—that page which the Kenshur ceremony specially isolates for discussion—Brown at least three times brings scales into contact: he notes the shifting alliances which realize "temporary security for some amid continuous warfare for all," such that every local agreement remembers global conflict; struggle and conquest as "stimulating" the "wide availability" of a "common set of symbols and cultural practices"—a kind of paradox of division as initiating a different kind of community; and the "common emblems" which are now the site of new conflict, of the "[fights] over how these would apply in particular circumstances," or a total system of communication realized in its local applications. As in epic, local events resonate outside themselves, and large-scale events are traced in small-scale experiences.

The second is the way that epic opens up cause to seemingly limitless explanation, such that what seems like a perfectly self-contained event—a broken helmet-strap, or, the burning of the topless towers of Troy—advertises in fact to causes that far exceed it: the choice of a shepherd, an apple cast among the revelers of a wedding, the inscrutable motives of the gods, and so on. To explain what seems like a local uprising in Jamaica requires us to know not just about its actors—who turn out to be themselves swept up in greater situations—but about the dispositions of forts on the African coastline, or the commodity markets for sugar, or the conscription practices of the British navy, or the landscape of the Gold Coast, or local conflicts between ethnic groups on mainland Africa, or the Seven Years' War, and so on. Doing history this way means attending to the relationships between things, even incommensurate things; it means finding causes where we don't expect them, and, historically speaking, backing up beyond what we would usually think of as the beginning of an event.

The third is Brown's careful handling of intention. This is what marks this book as a departure from the old way of doing Caribbean history—or, at least, of historiography of the Collingwoodian sort. Rarely does Brown ascribe intention to individuals. He seldom risks speculation on individual mental states. But he doesn't have to. A local event can instead be a description of a total, global situation, and it is telling that when descriptions of mental states do turn up, they tend to turn up at a higher-order level. Persons in *Tacky's Revolt* aren't anxious, fearful, or raging; anxiety belongs to the owner class, fear to a whole town, rage to an oppressed class, and so on. Brown does sometimes zoom in to focus on individuals, but the goal is never to explain history as the effects of their decisions, not, in other words, to reconstruct their mental states; the mental states in this book belong to sectors of the whole system, which can be complacent, enraged, anxious, and so on. Shuffling off the biographical imperative offers Brown—in his words—"an unexpected opportunity to imagine the variety of Apongo's plausible pathways to [and indeed through] the Caribbean, leading to a more searching account of the slave trade's political context." Apongo becomes as it were the name for a distribution of possibilities, or a strategy of sketching "possible worlds," which is what makes Odysseus polytropos his fit double, since the narrative job of each is partly to stitch together the complex world of a sea at the middle of the world.

Let me close with a glance at a nearly contemporary text—as a final short-cut towards signaling what I take to be the generic accomplishment of Brown's book. The case for the novelty and scope of *Tacky's Revolt* becomes all the more clear when judged against Sudhir Hazareesingh's *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*. Hazareesingh promises to "cut through the misty hinterland of postmodernism," to "find our way back to Louverture: to return as far as possible to the primary sources, to try to see the world through his eyes, and to recapture the boldness of his thinking and the individuality of his voice." The accomplishments of *Black Spartacus* are significant, chiefly in digging up new archival finds about its well-known

subject, and it has duly won its own raft of awards. But as the cast of my comments by now should make clear, Hazareesingh's book is a historiographic throwback, a book written from the wrong problem space. It calls itself an "epic life," but there is nothing "epic" about it; *Black Spartacus* is nearly straight Collingwoodian historiography, in which it is the goal of the historian as much as possible to recover the individual's life, putting their decisions in historical context. For all its accomplishments, then, that is not an epic history. For history of the epic sort, we need Vincent Brown's book, which transforms an event into a referendum on transatlantic contact, and which explores the systemic causes for a systemic event.