



Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez

Franco Moretti

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“Take *Faust*, what is it? A ‘tragedy’, as its author states? A great philosophical tale? A collection of lyrical insights? Who can say. How about *Moby-Dick*? Encyclopedia, novel or romance? Or even a ‘singular medley,’ as one anonymous 1851 review put it? ... ‘It is no longer a novel,’ T.S. Eliot said of *Ulysses*. But if not novels, then what are they?”

Literary history has long been puzzled by how to classify and treat these aesthetic monuments. In this highly original and interdisciplinary work, Franco Moretti builds a theory of the modern epic: a sort of super-genre that has provided many of the “sacred texts” of Western literary culture. He provides a taxonomy capable of accommodating *Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Nibelung’s Ring*, *Ulysses*, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *The Man Without Qualities* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

For Moretti the significance of the modern epic reaches well beyond the aesthetic sphere: it is the form that represents the European domination of the planet, and establishes a solid consent around it. Political ambition and formal inventiveness are here continuously entwined, as the representation of the world system stimulates the technical breakthroughs of polyphony, reverie and leitmotif; of the stream of consciousness, collage and complexity.

Opening with an analysis of Goethe’s *Faust* and the different historical roles of epic and the novel, Moretti moves through a discussion of Wagner’s *Ring* and on to a sociology of modernist technique. He ends with a fascinating interpretation of “magic realism” as a compromise formation between a number of modernist devices and the return of narrative interest, and suggests that the west’s enthusiastic reception of these texts (and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in particular) constitutes a ritual self-absolution for centuries of colonialism.

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