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Epic Modernisms

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Epic Modernisms

VÁCLAV PARIS, *The Evolutions of Modernist Epic*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
£76.00/\$95.00 hardcover; £40.53/\$71.49 ebook.

Hamid Farahmandian

Václav Paris's *The Evolutions of Modernist Epic* explores intersections between modernist literature and evolutionary theory, offering a nuanced analysis of key texts through the trope of the epic narrative and its associated thematic inquiries into identity, alienation, and the nature of reality. This book is structured into six distinct parts, beginning with an introduction that establishes the groundwork for the detailed analysis that ensues. Paris applies this innovative approach to several pivotal works of modernist fiction, including James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, exploring how these texts challenge and redefine notions of evolution, history, and narrative form while unravelling their themes and narrative complexities with precision. By exploring a varied selection of texts and authors, Paris provides a view of how modernist writers grappled with evolutionary concepts such as biological and group identity, everyday life and survival, and the evolving understanding of the human species, and incorporated them into their literary works. Through an exhaustive study of narrative techniques, character development, and thematic elements, Paris uncovers the profound ways in which modernist literature engaged with the scientific and philosophical dialogues of its era, such as Darwinian evolution, offering readers a deeper insight into the intellectual currents that shaped this pivotal period in literary history.

In the introductory chapter, Paris focuses on setting the stage for the book's evolutionary context, particularly highlighting the concept of the "eclipse" of Darwinism and its implications within modernist thought. This chapter serves as a foundational framework, outlining the key themes and objectives that will be further explored and analysed in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 1, the analysis then turns to Stein's *The Making of Americans*, which sees the author dissect Stein's narrative techniques and stylistic innovations. The discussion revolves around Stein's portrayal of human evolution and societal development, offering insights into how her unique approach to storytelling contributes to a reimagining of history within the context of modernist epic literature. Through its detailed examination of Stein's work, the chapter furnishes readers with a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in depicting evolution within a literary framework, for example how Stein challenged reductive Darwinian narratives in national historiography and reimagined evolutionary science through her innovative prose.

Moving forward, the book's second chapter, "Joyce's Atavism and the New Ireland", covers *Ulysses* and shows how Joyce's utilisation of atavism sees ancient cultural traits resurface in a modern context, offering—and challenging—cyclical models of history and identity. This highlights the enduring forms of cultural identity that prevailed amidst the dynamic changes of early 20th-century Ireland; Paris considers the tensions between these forms of identity and the evolution of a "New Ireland" shaped by profound historical, political, and socio-economic transformations. Examining *Ulysses*'s intricate narrative structure and character development, Paris unpacks how Joyce challenges traditional notions of Irish identity through reinterpretations of ancient Irish myths and cultural

symbols in contemporary settings, reflecting on their relevance amidst Ireland's changing socio-political landscape. Paris suggests that Joyce uses narrative techniques to critically examine Irish historical progress, questioning conventional narratives and exposing complexities through nuanced character portrayals and narrative innovations. By analysing Joyce's engagement with evolutionary concepts like cultural atavism, Paris presents inventive perspectives on how modernist writers grappled with themes of evolution and cultural transformation. For instance, Paris examines how Joyce's incorporation of mythological motifs in *Ulysses* offers an exploration of cultural evolution that blends ancient archetypes with innovative narrative strategies to reflect the complex and contradictory experience of modernity.

Chapter 3, "Survival of the Unfittest on the Eastern Front: *The Good Soldier Švejk*", shifts its focus to survival and adaptation during World War I and emphasises the persistence of cultural elements that challenge traditional hegemonies and redefine the notion of epic in modernist literature by embracing populist and atavistic qualities over bourgeois norms. Paris shows how, through a satirical lens, Hašek navigates themes of Czechoslovak ethnic identity and political satire and highlights the challenges of survival amidst historical upheaval. Paris argues that Hašek's examination of evolutionary nationalism demonstrates the impact of historical events in shaping individual and collective identities. This thematic exploration aligns with the broader conception of epic as not only depicting heroic narratives but also encompassing the resilience of ordinary individuals and the evolution of cultural identities in response to historical circumstances, thereby expanding the genre to reflect diverse human experiences and societal transformations.

Chapter 4, "Comparing Tales of the Tribe: *Macunaíma* and *Orlando*", conducts a comparative analysis of two novels that have been regarded as key texts of respective Brazilian and English literary modernism: Mario de Andrade's *Macunaíma* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. This chapter juxtaposes the cultural and political contexts of Brazil and England to explore the diversity and richness of modernist literature across different national contexts. It showcases how both works reimagine historical narratives and challenge conventional notions of evolution and nationhood. Paris highlights how Andrade and Woolf both reimagine historical epic narratives—Andrade through a playful blend of folklore and satire in *Macunaíma*, and Woolf through the fantastical transformation of gender and time in *Orlando*. Paris suggests that both authors use the epic narrative format strategically, incorporating elements of folklore and historical reflection to critique and reshape national identities. He notes similarities between Woolf and Andrade in their experimental narrative styles and their bold reimaginings of cultural histories. However, he also points out their differences: while Andrade pioneers a sort of hybrid Brazilian cultural identity through *Macunaíma*'s adventures, Woolf explores gender fluidity and hybrid literary forms in *Orlando* in order to challenge comfortable English notions of evolution and nationhood. The focus on "tales" to which the chapter's title gestures allows Paris to underscore how both novels employ epic narratives to explore and subvert cultural, political, and historical themes in their respective contexts.

The afterword, "Beyond the Eclipse", encourages thoughtful reflection on the ongoing evolution of literary and intellectual discourse beyond historical paradigms, such as the linear progression from Darwinism to Neo-Darwinism. It exposes some of the complexities inherent in modernist literature's engagement with evolutionary theory, by challenging entrenched narratives that overlook or simplify periods like the "eclipse of Darwinism". For instance, the book argues against the historical paradigm that dismisses this eclipse period as merely a brief interruption in the steady march of evolutionary thought. Instead, it advocates for a nuanced understanding that recognises how modernist authors creatively responded to and reshaped evolutionary concepts during this critical phase, contributing to a richer tapestry of intellectual inquiry and literary expression.

The book stands out for its interdisciplinary approach, seamlessly blending literary analysis with approaches drawn from evolutionary theory and cultural studies. Paris demonstrates a

commendable command of historical context and textual analysis, making complex concepts accessible to a wide range of readers interested in modernist studies, literary theory, and cultural history. The writing is clear and erudite, guiding readers through the intricacies of Joyce, Woolf, and other modernists' narratives and their links to evolutionary thought. The book's meticulous attention to detail and nuanced arguments contribute to its scholarly rigour and establish it as a significant contribution to the field of New Modernist Studies. It offers an innovative, comparative theory of the modernist epic across global contexts that promises to enrich Joyce Studies, particularly through its examination of how Joyce's narrative techniques and themes intersect with evolving ideas about biological evolution and social Darwinism in early twentieth-century literature.

It is important to acknowledge that the book's dense theoretical discussions may present challenges for readers wanting more simplistic discussions of modernism and its texts. Whilst Paris generally maintains accessible writing, certain sections may necessitate careful revisiting to fully grasp the nuances of his arguments. Additionally, a more expansive exploration of the reception of these modernist epics across diverse cultural contexts could enhance the depth of the analysis and broaden its relevance.

Overall, *The Evolutions of Modernist Epic's* interdisciplinary approach, scholarly depth, and comprehensive analysis make the book a rich and valuable resource for anyone interested in exploring the intersections between literature, science, and culture during the modernist era.

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