



Goethe's Faust and European Epic: Forgetting the Future (Studies in German Literature Linguistics and Culture)

Arnd Bohm

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Goethe has long been enshrined as the greatest German poet, but his admirers have always been uneasy with the idea that he did not produce a great epic poem. A master in all the other genres and modes, it has been felt, should have done so. Arnd Bohm proposes that Goethe did compose an epic poem, which has been hidden in plain view: Faust. Goethe saw that the Faust legends provided the stuff for a national epic: a German hero, a villain (Mephistopheles), a quest (to know all things), a sublime conflict (good versus evil), a love story (via Helen of Troy), and elasticity (all human knowledge could be accommodated by the plot). Bohm reveals the care with which Goethe draws upon such sources as Tasso, Ariosto, Dante, and Vergil. In the microcosm of the "Auerbachs Keller" episode Faust has the opportunity to find "what holds the world together in its essence" and to end his quest happily, but he fails. He forgets the future because he cannot remember what epic teaches. His course ends tragically, bringing him back to the origin of epic, as he replicates the Trojans' mistake of presuming to cheat the gods. Arnd Bohm is Associate Professor of English at Carleton University, Ottawa.

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