

## Faust, Art, Religion

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For insight into the structure and aim of *Faust* one can look to the ‘Prologue in Heaven’. There we are introduced to the main characters of Goethe’s great poem: Faust, the ideal man of European Enlightenment; Mephistopheles, the dark, negative side of reason; and God, the mystical, positive side of reason. In this structure one may see in broad outline the task that Goethe set himself, which was to place the secular ideal of Enlightenment in the same sphere as religion, and to bring to our minds – in a work of the highest poetic quality – characters who can express both the Divine and the deepest interests of humanity.

Goethe’s poem is not a traditional Christian cautionary tale. It does not warn the reader his eternal soul will be lost if he sells his soul to the devil in return for supernatural powers.<sup>1</sup> Faust is thoroughly modern in his search for meaning in life and in his striving for fulfillment. He wants more knowledge, more power, and he is given to melancholy and despair – ‘gloomy weariness’ – when he cannot get what he wants.<sup>2</sup> But it is for his striving, his never giving up, that he is finally saved and his soul carried upward.

Faust achieves salvation not only through God, but also through his own action. In the ‘Prologue in Heaven’ scene, the Lord is supportive of Faust’s striving, his energy and restlessness, and even encourages Mephistopheles to tempt Faust, to goad him on. God gives Mephistopheles the role of challenging Faust, of stimulating and provoking and shocking him, so that he will never escape into peace and quiet, never find a moment so beautiful it can bring him to a ‘total standstill’.<sup>3</sup> So long as he never finds one moment so fulfilling that he will want to stay with it forever, he will frustrate the devil and justify God’s confidence in him.

The difficulty is that Mephistopheles is certain that by provoking Faust he can destroy him. He says that he will distract Faust, lead him ever downward into darkness and confusion, and ‘make him greedy for the dust’ (Sc. 3, line 335). And this is plausible

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<sup>1</sup> On the difference between Goethe’s Faust and the traditional Faust, see Gerhard Kaiser, *Ist der Mensch zu retten? Vision und Kritik der Moderne in Goethes Faust* (Freiberg: Rombach, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. John Oxenford (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913), p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. David Luke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Sc. 3, line 341. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses.

enough. Faust's ceaseless striving for knowledge and power seems totally incompatible with everything good and beautiful. He has in him the negative spirit of Mephistopheles.<sup>4</sup>

But God has no fear of the devil. He says to Mephistopheles: 'You are a type I never learnt to hate' (Sc. 3, line 338). God is able to withstand the negative spirit of Mephistopheles and include it as a subordinate moment or stage of his own activity.<sup>5</sup> We see the depth and breadth of this activity when he addresses the archangels and exhorts them to continue to love 'the eternal Process', for it is 'ever living and forever rich'. God speaks of the negative result of the process – its 'vanishing phenomena' – but knows this negativity to be positive and firm and lasting (Sc. 3, lines 346-8). By virtue of his activity the negative is converted into being. It is in this context that God is able to say, in reference to Faust's restlessness, 'I will soon lead him into clarity' (Sc.3, line 309).

In the remarkable opening scene of the poem, 'Night', we meet Faust, professor and scholar, sitting at his desk in his study. He is disgusted with himself and with his search for knowledge. He has mastered his studies – philosophy, law, medicine, theology – and can make them intelligible to his students, but finds himself cut off from the real world. His 'empty' preaching is not only incapable of 'bettering mankind', but is also useless from the point of view of his own 'worldly success' (Sc. 4, 373-4).

Faust is the very image of European Enlightenment. His mind, his own independent understanding, has led him to reject all claims to supernatural knowledge and authority and to affirm the natural and human world, the limited and finite realm of practical conduct and social success. But the ideal of Enlightenment is not as promising as it had appeared. In pursuing it, Faust has been drawn into more and more abstract spheres of thought, and now at the extreme point – where he can 'take no pleasure in anything' – he turns into his own opposite.<sup>6</sup> He feels the need to abandon his ideal and joyously takes up magic in order that he might finally see and enjoy the 'innermost life' of the world, 'all its seeds and sources' (Sc. 4, lines 383-4).

In relation to magic, Faust transcends the limited standpoint of his enlightened scientific understanding, or rather puts it in the service of his unlimited ambition. The result is not what he expects. He summons the earth spirit, but is caught off guard.<sup>7</sup> The spirit's voice and the sight of its face – surrounded by a flashing red flame – overwhelm him: 'Ah, you are too terrible!', he exclaims (Sc. 4, line 483). The spirit's creativity, its

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<sup>4</sup> This is why in the twentieth century the Faust character became the object of such perverse fascination. See Hans Schwerte, *Faust und das Faustische: Ein Kapitel deutscher Ideologie* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the traditional biblical background to Goethe's vision of God and Satan, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 111; and G. G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> The disintegration of Enlightenment and its transformation into something wholly different was a central theme of early German Romanticism. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Here Faust is shaken to the core. But later, in the 'Forest Cavern' scene, he will praise the earth spirit for having strengthened him: 'Oh sublime Spirit! You have given me, / Given me all I asked for' (Sc. 17, lines 3217-18).

surging energy, ever turning and returning, is too much for Faust to bear. The spirit knows this and vanishes, saying, 'You match the spirit you can comprehend: I am not he' (Sc. 4, lines 512-13).

Faust has now to face his despair. He is not an eternal spirit but a man subject to fear and death. He set out to embrace the earth, to enjoy life in all its fullness, and shrank away from it. He feels crushed, but decides that he is still capable of a noble deed. He resolves to confront death and take his own life, 'to step gladly over this great brink, / And if it is the void, into the void to sink' (Sc. 4, lines 718-19). In his isolation and defeat, Faust is conscious not of things and other people, but only of himself. His learning and ambition appear here as self-destructive, as empty negation.

Yet it is through his suicidal despair, his willingness to acknowledge his own nothingness, that Faust rediscovers his vocation. Just as he is about to drink poison, his hand is checked by the peal of Easter bells. Easter is for Faust a ceremony of rebirth, not just in a Christian but in a secular sense. For the music reminds him of his childhood, of the games he played to celebrate the spring. In an instant, the mercurial and ever active Faust decides not to kill himself and to turn back to the world: 'Now my tears flow, I love the earth once more!' (Sc. 4, line 784).

On the one hand, there is Faust, the thinker, who despairs because he finds himself cut off from life. On the other hand, there is Faust, the thinker, who discovers that he cannot tolerate this condition; he must be at one with the earth. So Faust, the thinker, is not onesided in relation to what is different, after all; he is the unity of thought and life, of self and other, of conscious and unconscious activity. This is indeed a beautiful conception.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as we shall see, the unity is not such that its ground lies in Faust himself. Faust must connect with life, but from the standpoint of his infinite striving and ambition cannot connect with anything finite and particular.

In 'Outside the Town Wall', we see Faust out for a walk in the spring countryside. It is Easter Day, and he is jubilant in the midst of a crowd. This is the conscious, secular side of Faust: 'Here I am human, here it's allowed' (Sc. 5, line 940). Yet, as the day wears on, he is increasingly dissatisfied with himself. His unconscious, spiritual side asserts itself. As the sun sets, Faust wishes he could follow it on its journey through the sky: 'Oh if some wings would raise me, if somehow / I could follow its circuit through the air!' (Sc. 5, lines 1074-75). At the same time, he feels the pull of the earth, his connection with the external world. He says, 'In me there are two souls, alas, and their / Division tears my life in two' (Sc. 5, lines 1112-13). One soul is worldly, the other beyond time and place.

This is a painful insight. By virtue of his learning and sense of independence, Faust is indeed, as Goethe himself said, an extraordinary man, a person altogether beyond ordinary sensibility. But his learning and the independence that comes out of it stand opposed to the ordinary consciousness of the world. It is evident then that Faust is not truly free; he seeks an independence that makes the world – both natural and human –

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<sup>8</sup> On this point, Schiller did much to stimulate and clarify Goethe's thinking about Faust. See Friedrich-Wilhelm Wentzlaff-Eggebert, *Schillers Weg zu Goethe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963).

appear as given, unchanging, absolute. Faust seeks freedom both in himself and in the world, but as a practical construction his independence is something wholly formal. His inner, spiritual soul is opposed to his outer, earthly soul, and the tension is unbearable.<sup>9</sup>

But the two souls – the limited and the unlimited – do ultimately come together as one. The inner, spiritual tendency in Faust conflicts with the outward, worldly tendency. But the conflict between the two tendencies is at length resolved not only in God's activity but in Faust's.<sup>10</sup> We can see how this happens if we examine the difference in outlook between Faust and Mephistopheles, disguised here as a poodle who follows Faust home from his walk.

Back in his study, Faust is as restless as ever but feels exhausted and empty of ideas. He turns for inspiration to the Bible, and tries to render into his own language the opening line of the Greek text of the Gospel of St. John, translating the word *Logos* in a number of ways – first as 'Word', secondly as 'Mind', thirdly as 'Force' and finally as 'Deed' (Sc. 6, lines 1224-1237). Now the spiritual as well as secular implications of all this are huge. Faust is giving us not an arbitrary succession of terms, but rather a concentrated critique of his own onesided, finite understanding. Each translation of *Logos* reveals its own limitation and gives way to the next until we have the real and true as opposed to the external image of a thought.

The primal Deed is the first act of divine creation, as in Genesis, ch. 1, when God says, 'Let there be light'. But the active self, the will, is the essence of all creation, whether divine or human. The willing of the self in action is the creative event both in God's consciousness of the world and in ours.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, it is not 'mind' but the spontaneous freedom of the will that 'sets worlds on their creative course' (Sc. 6, line 1232).

In this reflection on will, Faust overcomes his own onesided understanding and comes to see the external world in its own being and movement. He gives action and creativity an objective form. By contrast, Mephistopheles gives mind and will a thoroughly subjective shape, and so can only oppose them to the external world: 'I am the spirit of perpetual negation' (Sc. 6, line 1338). Whereas Faust's vision of creation brings thought and life together and unites them, Mephistopheles can only divide and oppose and negate.

We see this endless negativity in Mephistopheles' hostility towards the light. He says that he is 'part of the Darkness before man / Whence light was born', and so regards light as a secondary and derivative phenomenon (Sc. 6, lines 1350-51). Light is born from Night, and fights for independence, but is dependent on corporeal bodies. So once matter

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Schegel admired the powerful action that springs from such tension. See his comments on Faust in *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, in *Studium des klassischen Altertums*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna: Ferdinand Schöningh / Zurich: Thomas-Verlag, 1979), vol. 1, p.260.

<sup>10</sup> Schelling makes this point when he compares Goethe's *Faust* to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He says Goethe is more Aristophanic than Dante. See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, 'Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung', in *Schriften zur Identitätsphilosophie 1801-1806, Werke*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1958), vol. 3, p. 576.

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Destro, 'Faust, Johannes und die Geschichte', *Studi Germanici*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1997), 7-23.

is destroyed and all things vanish – as they so richly deserve to – light will disappear and the primal darkness will be restored. Until then, however, the finite realm of material things persists, and, as Mephistopheles so elegantly puts it, ‘this coarse world, this mess, / Stands in the way of Nothingness’ (Sc. 6, lines 1364-65).

Faust, to be sure, shares in this negative spirit. At the beginning of the second study scene, we see that he has again fallen into despair, a deeper despair than earlier when he was tempted to drink poison. Here he is struck by the thought that all things – the external world as such – stand between him and the fulfillment of his wishes. He does not merely question whether he will ever get what he wants. He is certain that the external world is destructive of his ‘active soul’s creativeness’ (Sc. 7, line 1561). And so he is overwhelmed by a feeling of complete hopelessness: ‘Thus by existence tortured and oppressed / I crave for death, I long for rest’ (Sc. 7, lines 1570-71).

So Faust curses everything, existence as such, in a way that resists all consolation. No sweet music or joyful childhood memory will work now to comfort or encourage him. ‘My curse on faith! My curse on hope! / My curse on patience above all!’ (Sc. 7, lines 1605-06). Faust is yearning for release from the constraints of an existence that has in it nothing beautiful or good. It appears to him that between the external world and his inner life and activity there is no connection. This thought prepares him for the contract which Mephistopheles is about to offer.<sup>12</sup>

The pact with the devil is the means by which Faust unifies the conflicting sides of his personality – the positive stage, which is there in the continuing struggle of the two sides and in their mutual relation. The wager is not Faust’s idea, but he defines its terms. The devil will win the bet and make Faust his slave, if ever he should offer Faust something that completely satisfies him. Faust will lose if ever he finds peace and quiet, and for the sake of pleasure ceases to be active: ‘If ever to the moment I shall say / Beautiful moment, do not pass away!’ (Sc. 7, lines 1699-1700).

The wager scene stabilizes the relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles. And its result is positive, because it allows Faust to establish a certain balance or harmony between matter and mind, between the external world and his inner creativity. For this reason, the result of his action will not simply be the annihilation of things and people.

This is not to say that the result is a simple harmony of forces and tendencies. Faust makes it clear that Mephistopheles will not win the bet: ‘You need have no fear that I will break / This bond. To strive with all my energies -- / Just that is what I undertake’ (Sc. 7, 1760). Here Mephistopheles seems out of his element; he does not appear to realize that in accepting the wager he is defeating himself. He assures Faust that he will not be disappointed: ‘Nothing shall limit you’ (Sc. 7, line 1760).

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<sup>12</sup> For this and for what follows I am indebted to Cyrus Hamlin, ‘Goethe’s Faust and the Philosophers’, in *A Companion to Goethe’s Faust: Parts I and II*, ed. Paul Bishop (Rochester, N. Y.: Camden House, 2001), p. 236ff.

But there is irony on both sides. Faust is certain that he can win, because the terms and conditions of the bet, though finite, are infinite. And the devil is certain that he can win, because the terms and conditions of the bet, though infinite, are finite. This is a logic that transcends any 'either-or' attitude.<sup>13</sup>

The pact in its true meaning is not something merely subjective. It elevates Faust above the earlier opposition between the external world and the inner world, transcends the difference between them and establishes a comprehensive, all-embracing point of view. But it doesn't make unity primary or even lay emphasis on it; the pact instead ensures that the difference between the objective and subjective is preserved in the result. In fact, the wager illustrates Faust's tragedy: it dissolves his happiness into a kind of negative activity, in which the different sides of his personality are set in opposition to one another.

That Faust is in the end saved appears to confound all logic. And this would be true if Faust's heaven were a state of simple, undivided harmony and unity – a world of rest that brings his striving for fulfillment to an end. This soothing and calming condition may be close to some traditional Christian views of heaven. But to Faust such a condition could only be one of illusion and deception. For him, the direct and immediate unification of the finite and infinite sides of his personality is neither possible nor desirable. So the heaven he enters into is one in which he is still striving ever upwards.

Faust's heaven is one in which the external and internal sides of his personality pass into one another and turn into their opposites. There is nothing there that is ultimate and stable. Faust's salvation embraces within itself the opposing sides of his personality, but seen now as transitory moments. This salvation is not mysterious or perverse, except from the standpoint of a onesided understanding that resists this kind of disintegration and transition. The angels who carry Faust's 'immortal part' up to heaven put it this way: 'He who strives on and lives to strive can earn redemption still.'<sup>14</sup>

In short, Faust denies the 'Beautiful moment' (Sc. 7, line 1700). A perfect harmony of nature and reason, matter and form, is impossible. The unity of the two sides appears only as a succession of moments. The wager makes the beautiful moment a mere ideal, a vanishing reality.

In the same way, Goethe's poem, just as it is, denies the moment of aesthetic completion. Goethe evidently saw poetry as the highest expression of truth in the modern age. At the same time, he puts into his poetry the most sophisticated thoughts and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Martin Swales, 'The character and Characterization of Faust', in *Companion to Goethe's Faust*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>14</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part Two*, trans. David Luke (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Sc. 23, lines 11936-37.

reflections.<sup>15</sup> So for him a work of art is not just to be savoured and enjoyed, but to be judged also, since it stands within the world of reason and its relations.

Hegel, Goethe's contemporary, spoke of the way in which moderns are 'beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshipping them.' They insist on having a point of view, and bring their judgement and will into all aspects of their experience. 'The beautiful days of Greek art, like the golden days of the later Middle Ages, are gone.'<sup>16</sup> Art as art no longer satisfies. Seen in this perspective, Goethe's *Faust* invites us to think, and to do so not for the sake of viewing and reproducing its particular contents, but for the purpose of knowing what art is relative to our own freedom to create. It is an exemplary work of modern art.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that Goethe wrote *Faust* with a view to expressing some thought or idea. He explicitly denied this. See *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 258: 'From Heaven, through the world, to hell, would indeed be something; but this is no idea, only a course of action.... It would have been a fine thing, indeed, if I had strung so rich, varied, and highly diversified a life as I had brought to view in Faust upon the slender string of one pervading idea.

<sup>16</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion of Hegel's aesthetic theory and his high regard for Goethe in Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 36-7.