

THE FAUSTIAN JOURNEY

The Meaning of Goethe's Epic

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IN a work which took a lifetime to compose, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe created in his *Faust* one of the great moral myths of modern literature as well as a masterpiece of art, and though it makes great intellectual demands upon any audience, the *Faust* play is far from being merely an erudite piece of writing. So concerned is it with the fundamental issues of man's moral identity that it escapes any esotericism once we penetrate beyond its necessarily difficult surface and find, once again, the archetypal problems of mankind presented in just another, yet how magnificently unique, version of the archetypal myth.

During its long genesis in Goethe's mind, the *Faust* story evolved from the rather simple tale of mediaeval magic and witchery and the rather simple tale of a man's melodramatic conflict with the good and the bad in the world—evolved from that into a complex statement that sums up, as it comes to an end, the entire scope of Goethe's philosophical humanism as he at last understood it, even within himself. It is in this sense, then, an intellectual autobiography of Goethe; but to the extent that you and I share in the humanity of Goethe, the *Faust* becomes our biography too or, indeed, the biography of everyman. It transcends by far its German origins, transcends its historical setting of Napoleonic wars and European revolutions, transcends its place in strictly literary and cultural history. All the accidents and circumstances of its creation are left behind as we comprehend the great possibility of truth within its thesis, the great universality within its representative plot, as we indeed find it a mirror in which we see ourselves.

Many readers, however, make an initial mistake concerning the meaning of *Faust*. Many readers make the mistake of thinking that the central conflict in this play is between Mephistopheles and Faust and that the great wager of the play is the one which Faust makes concerning his soul. Although there is such a conflict and wager in the drama, the more important wager is the one between God and Mephistopheles concerning the nature of man. The great conflict is between the positive and negative forces of the world. And if we fail

to understand this conflict and wager, we are in danger of misunderstanding and misinterpreting much of the subsequent action and symbolism.

God, in the "Prologue in Heaven," takes the position that man, at his best, retains his vision of paradise and his quest for it in spite of all hazards or diversions; and even at his worst, man is never totally devoid of the celestial light. Mephistopheles, on the other hand, in a rather skeptical manner argues that given free reign he, Mephistopheles, could seduce man from his seemingly inherent wish for paradise and could bring the eternal quest of man to a close with some quite earthly and mundane satisfactions. So a wager is made. The suspenseful question becomes, Will man be satisfied with anything else than paradise? Will he give up his yearning for God? Will he let the fire die within him that is a part of his immortal inheritance? And Faust is chosen as the specimen in this experiment, for Faust is a learned man devoted to the great possibilities of human experience. Thus Mephistopheles enters the life of Faust with seductive intentions, and Goethe's great moral and metaphysical idea begins to reveal itself.

Actually, from the very first of the drama, Mephistopheles finds himself in a most disadvantageous position—he who always wills the bad and always works the good in spite of himself—for Mephistopheles must lure Faust into calling some moment in his human existence the golden moment, must lure Faust to the point that Faust will cry out to the passing moment, "Ah, delay—thou art so fair!" Yet, if that moment has anything of God in it, has any thought of heaven in it, then it will truly be a state of paradise for Faust and Mephistopheles will have lost. This immediate and pathetic dilemma of Mephistopheles is Goethe's comic statement on the inevitable triumph of good and truth and beauty in the world of man. Mephistopheles hopes of course by leading Faust down paths of "bad means toward good ends," to pre-corrupt any goal which Faust may reach and if possible to make sure that goal has nothing of divine nature in it.

To engage Faust in following such paths,

Mephistopheles makes that second wager and bargain of the play, the more popular one, in which he agrees to serve Faust in this world if Faust will serve Mephistopheles in the other. Of course, this bargain is almost meaningless since Mephistopheles is not the devil in the first place—he only comes in that disguise—and since he really does not care what happens to Faust's immortal soul as long as it is proved to God that mankind is not all that God thought it was. Faust's own willingness to enter into this compact is based upon his desire to become superman, but Faust's desire to become superman has nothing or at least little to do with the central issue of his own nature. Mephistopheles only takes advantage of that false or incidental desire of Faust to lure him on. Faust never could become superman; Mephistopheles knows that. Faust's desire is only his confused understanding of his inherent wish to have paradise. He certainly does not become superman in this play. He becomes anything but that.

This then is the complex situation when the drama of *Faust* begins. Faust, an everyman who thinks he can become superman, makes a bargain with what he thinks is the devil but who really isn't, to find a golden moment—a moment which Mephistopheles hopes will be so lacking in dignity and virtue that it will dupe man, leading him away from God; but a moment which God hopes—and knows—will be golden only if it partakes of eternal values.

ON THE LITERAL level of *Faust*, we find the Faustian journey, a journey which everyman makes in search of the golden moment in life—that moment which will be so rich and self-contained and satisfying, that we will cling to it and cry out to it, "Hold, thou art so fair!" Such a quest presents, however, a two-fold problem. First, man must determine the nature of the ideal moment, and second, he must determine how to achieve it. All that man knows at the beginning, or indeed for certain at any time during his life's quest, is that he has a basic desire for some mysterious state of being. It is, as Faust himself says, that

"glorious dream" for "in each soul is born the pleasure of yearning onward, upward, and away when over our heads, lost in the vaulted azure, the lark sends down his flickering lay, when over crags and piny highlands the poising eagle slowly soars, and over plains and lakes and islands the crane sails by to other shores." The glorious dream then, as revealed in a golden moment of experience within time and place—that is the goal which Faust desires. His initial error, of course, is his assumption that he must be a superman to have this golden moment, and truly it is only when he gives up pretensions toward being superman that he achieves the golden moment which wafts him, on the arms of death, into a state of paradise. Faust, typically Everyman, confuses the nature of his existence—life is a dungeon to him and he thinks, because he is not a god or superman, that he must necessarily be lacking in godliness or the possibility of achieving the godhead. We hear him cry out, in his initial confusion and despair, "I am not like the Gods! That truth is felt too deep; the worm am I, that in the dust doth creep." Yet, even when we conceive ourselves as worms or quintessences of dust, because there is the glorious dream we strive forward, employing any device which may come along, even if it is the device of the devil and false knowledge and bad means to a good end.

As something of a trial run, Mephistopheles takes Faust first to the cellar of Auerbach and offers Faust the drunken conviviality of youth as a possible meaningful experience. Of course, Faust is bored and refuses such an experience, as Mephistopheles had supposed he would, but which he offered anyway just to be sure there is no mistake as to what sort of man this Faust is. After this little prologue of experience, Mephistopheles and Faust go to the Witch's kitchen, that microcosm of a foolish world, where Faust regains his youth and wherein, in the magic mirror, he beholds the feminine form of beauty which becomes the imagery of his goal. Unidentified, the feminine form, beheld here in a foolish world, becomes the particular object of Faust's quest. From this point on the quest takes place in earnest.

The Faustian journey and quest is divisible into three parts: the first part in which Margaret or Gretchen is representative of the goal; the second part in which Helena is the representative; and the third part in which the establishing of the kingdom by the sea is the epitome of what Faust is seeking—the goal in all cases being the glorious dream as made manifest in a fair moment in time and place. And in all parts, of course, it is beauty which is the

nature of this goal. Margaret is beauty of person, Helena is beauty of thought and art, and the kingdom by the sea is the result of beauty in action.

In each of these isolated quests, however, Faust fails. And for several reasons. One, the bad means used to achieve what might have been good ends. Two, Faust's own mental confusion as to what the nature of beauty, man's having it, and the proper use of it are. Faust himself passes judgment upon his journey and his quest when near the end of the play he says, "I only through the world have flown: Each appetite I seized as by the hair; what not sufficed me forth I let it faire, and what escaped me I let go; I've only craved, accomplished my delight, then wished a second time, and thus with might stormed through my life."

Any one of the quests might have led to the golden moment for Faust if the two great fallacies in his quest had not been present. Certainly Margaret's love of Faust, in spite of all its tragic consequences, leads her into heaven, and the same might be true for Faust save that Mephistopheles makes sure that Faust fails to comprehend the full meaning of his relationship with Margaret, and makes sure also that bad means are used to achieve the beauty of Margaret. Mephistopheles makes sure that Margaret's brother, mother, and child all die in Faust's pursuit of her, and he makes sure, whenever Faust begins to envision any godliness in Margaret, that lust and animality are dragged across the foreground of any otherwise idyllic picture. But the question arises, why should Mephistopheles do all these things? Doesn't he want Faust to accept some experience as golden and wonderful? Why does Mephistopheles spoil and ruin Faust's chances of reaching the goal? Mephistopheles does want Faust to say, "Ah, delay—thou art so fair!" but he wants him to say it about an experience that includes falseness and ugliness and lack of value. Mephistopheles would have been delighted if Faust, when he finally won Margaret under such circumstances, had declared that moment the fairest and highest. But Faust cannot do this, for he is plagued inside himself, his confidence will not let him rest. Rather he has a great psychological reaction of guilt and sorrow, anything but happiness. He rushes to the prison to rescue Margaret, but such is not possible. We commit people to a prison easier than we release them. Our consciences are not so easily salved. Rather Margaret ascends into her own paradise, and all that Faust has is the voice of his own conscience echoing through the prison-halls of his own mind, crying "Henry! Henry!"

The second part of the general quest is

more of an intellectual or mental one than was the first part. Helena, a mythological figure beyond time and place, becomes the object of Faust's search; and rather than beauty of person, Helena is representative of beauty in general or absolute beauty. Faust's pursuit of her, though less tortured than his pursuit of Margaret, is ultimately as unsatisfactory, and again for essentially the same reasons. Although Faust finally comes into the presence of absolute beauty, and though he finally unites with her to beget Euphorion, he can never really possess Helena—many men have tried before him as we know from the account she gives of her life with Theseus and Menelaus and Paris and Deiphobus and the like. At last she leaves Faust, more devoted as she is to her child—art—than to her husband—mankind. It is a misunderstanding or even a lack of knowledge concerning beauty in the world that proves a fallacy in this second phase of Faust's quest.

And in the third part of the general quest, the second fallacy—that of bad means to a good end—proves destructive of Faust's finding the fair moment. In this third desire, not for beauty in person or beauty in idea, but beauty in action—what Faust himself calls spiritual beauty—Faust might have found his golden moment save that in building his little paradise on earth he uses brute force and brash cunning, represented by Mephistopheles and his Three Mighty Men, to drive out Baucis and Philemon, the last barriers of his seeming happiness. But again, what Faust devises for himself, as he did with Margaret, is not happiness but the sense of guilt and despair that spoils the possibility of any golden moment. He tries to blame Mephistopheles for all the failures, but Faust knows that even though Mephistopheles has been instrumental, it is Faust himself, in his acceptance of Mephistopheles, in his own ignorance, in his own superman illusions, who has made impossible his achieving a truly fair and worthwhile hour in life.

As the play comes to an end, Faust finds himself anything but a superman—he is aged, broken, weary, blinded by care. He has reached so many times to possess beauty—beauty of person, thought, and action—but finds he has never really had beauty at all. Something is all askew. He cries out his wish that he had never sought at all, had never had the glorious dream, had never known the vision of the feminine form. And thus, the *Faust* story if concluded here would have been a great tragedy, as the play by Christopher Marlowe in English literature certainly is. It would have been a great didactic drama pointing out to man his foolishness and his weakness

Continued page 32

individual or merely psychical I, but that I who can see in the other its inner and living character. Or: Imagination lives in an original unity, in an essential kinship with a beloved image of the world, which in turn expresses what the imagination is and does. It is the moment when the interplay of all faculties, as Kant calls it, becomes event. The impact of occasions, the freshness of intuition, the warmth of feeling, intellectual and moral values, play together to produce the totality of an ideal whole—which is the poem. The poet finds himself in his imagined world and the world in turn expresses and contains his self. "Objects" are freed from their conditions and are transfigured or "saved" in being imaginatively recreated. "The poet," says Goethe, "gratefully gives back to nature a truthful image of a second nature which is felt, thought, and filled with human significance."

7. *Levels.* The levels of linguistic meanings in the poem are complemented by the levels of imagination. The poetic symbol needs both the clarity and mastery of the linguistic medium as well as the reach and richness of imagination. Both scales start with the physical sound through which all other levels are made to appear.

The first level of imagination makes visible the image of natural and social scenes, milieus, moods, together with the image of persons, their movements, deeds, plots, long range actions and conversations. Beyond this level the entertaining literature does not rise.

The second level of imagination makes visible the inner character, the intelligible essences of events and persons. Corresponding to essential and inner character-motivations is the destiny, the understandable coherence of their interactions. We are not merely entertained, but get involved ourselves.

The third level of imagination gives us the feeling that we have here a world-mirror, in which nothing human is absent. These are the enduring world poems belonging to world literature and to all ages and races. They are the appearing wholeness and totality of life.

The totality of all levels is philosophical. The work of imagination gives metaphysical guidance and orientation. Ultimate world views are contrasted and embraced in that aesthetic love which is the counterpart to a mature dialectical unity of opposite world views. But the philosophical poets express it in terms of the preceding levels, in the language of life itself.

The nature of reality is made manifest in the poetic symbol of imagination.

Faustian Journey . . .

Continued from page 25

and his inabilities. Also, it would have been a cynical drama, because Mephistopheles would have won his wager with God; Mephistopheles would at least have reduced man to despair if not to the ignominy of accepting an artificial paradise. But Goethe knew, or at least believed, something truer about mankind and so the play has not quite ended yet.

For even after the failure of all these quests, there is a little of that old inner light remaining, and Faust feels within himself, even in spite of any wish to the contrary, the inner knowledge, the glorious dream of a state of paradise, and so he turns in his outer darkness to the men around him, asking them to continue the good works which, under different circumstances, might have led him to his fair moment. He asks that the good works continue, not in order that he may possess any beauty at all, but that he may have helped give beauty into the world as a legacy of his having been at all. If the fair moment cannot be for him, he at least still believes it can be for others.

Listening to the digging of what he thinks is the foundation for the dykes to ward off the sea, but which is actually the digging of his grave, Faust so broken and so deceived suddenly knows what the fair moment really is. It is not possessing beauty at all. It is not being superman at all. It is a giving, a creation, not for his sake but for the sake of others. Free of false quests at last, free of false techniques and bad means to an end, Faust at last alone, without Mephistopheles at all, completes the quest and cries out in that vigorous moment of charity, "I now enjoy the highest Moment—this!" And he falls dead upon the earth.

Mephistopheles can only scorn such an event—that is, Mephistopheles in the guise of the devil can only scorn. What was wrong with Faust anyway, heralding as he did the "latest, poorest, emptiest moment" as the fair and golden one? But Mephistopheles really knows, as Faust had learned, that it is not the poorest and emptiest moment; it is the only true moment and only rich moment he had ever had. Faust had learned what Goethe himself said another time, we should not expect happiness from this life; we should only do good; happiness, if we have it, is a by-product and not a goal. The fair moment is not in having beauty of person or beauty of idea or beauty of action—it is in the giving, not the having at all.

THUS THE QUEST is ended and Mephistopheles does not win the divine wager. He didn't have a chance from the

beginning. He loses because Faust could not possibly accept as fair and golden any moment which resulted from a false quest and a false journey. And if we do accept, if Faust accepts, if Everyman accepts a moment that is at the end of the true quest and the true journey, then he has not substituted something less than paradise itself—he has only opened the door into eternal values.

Carried up through the landscape of heaven, Faust finds himself at last in the presence of the genuine model for that feminine form he envisioned so long ago. It is the Mater Gloriosa, the image of perfect and enduring beauty. Goethe has used, of course, in all his work the feminine form as the symbol of man's highest goals. Other symbols have been used in literature to express this abstract idea, but Goethe is in the tradition of what Robert Graves calls the White Goddess, the tradition of using woman as the great symbol of divine influence in the life of man. It is not so much, of course, the symbol of the female, as it is the symbol of the feminine, the gentle, the gracious that is being used. The Glorious Mother of the Universe includes within her identity, we may suppose, the personal beauty of Margaret, the universal beauty of Helena, and the great spiritual beauty of herself. Envisioning her, but not knowing her, Faust or Everyman comes at last to her, when he is able to make the good journey in the good way through life.

The dramatic epic *Faust*, begun as early as 1775 and not finished until 1831, is one of the intellectual and aesthetic masterpieces of world literature. It is, in essence, the story of paradise regained. It is a companion piece with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Voltaire's *Candide*. These three works, put together, tell the great archetypal story of mankind, of you and me—the loss of heaven, our journey through the world, our eventual coming again into heaven—that abiding story of mankind, whether we think of it as a literal story, a metaphysical one, or a psychological one. Adam and Eve lost paradise and created and came into a harsh world; *Candide* journeys through the harsh world and adjusts to it the best he can; Faust goes beyond the adjustment and fulfills the dream, coming at last into a state of paradise that Adam and Eve had lost.

But what is paradise, what is heaven, what is it we would regain? The definitions and descriptions vary indeed. For Goethe heaven, wherever it may be, within us or without us, is not a having, but a being. It is not a static condition but a dynamic one. When Goethe was a young man he had written on the walls of his hunting lodge those famous words, "Über allen Gipfeln is Ruh," "Over all the hilltops is

peace." And that is where heaven is. It is always over there, beyond all the hilltops. It is in our very going over those hilltops in a search and in a quest. Even Faust, as the curtain falls, is not seated in a golden chair in paradise; rather he is following the "woman soul which leadeth us upward and on." Faust, or Everyman, or you or I—as Goethe believes—in a state of paradise is reaching out in that eternal quest that is never done, reaching out and reaching up and reaching on.

"Saturday's no fun anymore"

IT sure used to be, though. Up early—even before the sun hit the window sill. Then tip-toe into Dad's room to wake him up. Sometimes it isn't easy.

He's up now. Careful not to wake Mom. Now you're dressed and in the kitchen where you and Dad whip up a swell breakfast together. Doesn't the coffee smell good? And the bacon frying . . . the hot rolls. A real man's breakfast.

"What'll it be today, Tommy?" Dad asks. "Want to toss a ball around? How about a ride out to Blue Lake? Bet the trout are jumping. You call the shots, son. It's your day."

That's the way it was. The way you thought it would always be. You're not supposed to cry because you're a big guy now. But when you ask "why" no one knows how to answer you. What's cancer anyway? Why did it take Dad away?

For little lads like Tommy—with fun in their hearts and a glove in their hands—cancer deals a cruel blow. Today, because of cancer, there are more than 160,000 children who have to learn to live without a father.

Yet there is hope. Hope for a final, certain cure for cancer. The men and women in our research laboratories are working night and day toward this end. But they need your help. Badly.

There has never been enough money to carry on all the research that needs to be done. Can you afford to remain indifferent to this enemy that strikes 1 out of every 4 Americans?

We need your support. Give generously.

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The Golden Age . . .

Continued from page 23

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