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The Legend of Faust

Preamble





The Faust legend derives from a chapbook, the *Faustbuch*, published in Frankfurt in 1587. Penned by an anonymous author, it tells a story based on various contemporary tales of errant magicians and alchemists. In the *Faustbuch*, these figures were presented as a single character, Johann Faust, whose pivotal act was to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for occult secrets and powers. The story was subsequently dramatized in England by Christopher Marlowe; his play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, appeared in 1604. Marlowe's play was then absorbed back into Germany where, in many different adaptations and versions, it entered the repertoire of itinerant theatre companies and even fair-ground puppet shows. It was this folk tale that inspired Goethe's famous play, *Faust*, published in two Parts, the first in

1808, the second after the author's death in 1832.¹

In Goethe's play, Faust is an eminent university scholar in early middle age who has grown disenchanted with his cloistered, excessively intellectual way of life and longs to experience the full range of human passion and power. He is a man with a modern consciousness—he has undergone the Copernican Revolution in philosophy as well as science and has the breadth of knowledge that came with the 18th century Enlightenment. But in Faust this expanded consciousness is at odds with the social and economic conditions of his provincial German world, which is still basically feudal. Faust lives in a small town in which the people exist in pious ignorance, their conditions cramped both architecturally and spiritually. Faust's mental expansion has isolated him from these people but has brought him no compensations because it is abstract: he longs to develop himself experientially to fill the expanded world of his intellect. He wants not only to know everything but to experience everything, to become everything, to actualize within the compass of his own being every human possibility. In this he embodies not only the old dream of the magus but the restless striving of the modern condition.

At the start of Part I, Faust is a reclusive scholar; by the end of Part II, he has become, literally, a property developer. He has understood that in order to actualize himself he has to re-fashion the external world—only in a world in which the old, closed feudal order has been physically and psychologically broken down will human beings be free to expand themselves to their full potential. In the demolition of the old order however, many things and people are sacrificed: whoever and whatever stands in the way of Faust's will to self-expansion is cut down.

The play opens with a Prologue in Heaven. The devil, Mephistopheles, is complaining to God about the base corruptibility of humankind. God states that there is at least one

¹ Michael Beddow, *Mann: Doctor Faustus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

individual, Doctor Faust, who is so upright and high-minded as to be incorruptible. Mephistopheles wagers that he could lead Faust astray; God, confident of Faust's integrity, accepts the wager.

In the first scene, Faust appears in his dingy medieval study, despairing over his lack of connection with the sources of life; indeed he is contemplating suicide. As he leafs through an old book of alchemy, he happens upon an occult symbol of the Earth Spirit, and, calling it up, idly challenges it with the arrogance of a modern consciousness. Then, in an effort to throw off dejection, he steps outside to mingle with the crowd celebrating Easter in the town. When he returns, refreshed, he is followed by a large black dog.

Indoors, the dog turns into the figure of a man whose appearance and attire are suggestive of a travelling scholar. Urbane and wry in manner, not to say downright sardonic, this is of course Mephistopheles, who has used Faust's moment of meddling with occult energies to gain entrance into the Doctor's world. As a personality, Mephistopheles is not without insight into human motives, at any rate the baser ones. Altogether he presents as not unlikeable, except on those occasions when his true underlying coldness and carelessness are revealed.

Faust and Mephistopheles strike a deal: Mephistopheles will show the disaffected scholar everything life has to offer. He will supply Faust with the means necessary—money, speed and know-how—to achieve this end, on one condition, that Faust's soul be delivered into his possession at the moment of death. Faust adds a further condition to justify the pact in his own eyes, namely that if at any moment he should become comfortable and content, inclined to give up his attitude of striving, then, in that moment, his life should end. With this condition Faust reassures himself that it is a loftier goal than mere egotism that drives the otherwise unseemly pact.

So Faust and Mephistopheles embark together on the great adventure. The first connection with the sources of life that Faust seeks is that of eros. He notices a pretty young girl

in town, only fourteen years of age. Her name is Gretchen. She is innocent, modest, devout, embodying in her very person the small village world of the medieval order. Out of nostalgia for this world—the world of his own childhood—Faust becomes infatuated with Gretchen. By use of magic, the scheming Mephistopheles gives him access to the girl's little household, and soon she is in love with the apparently worldly, wealthy stranger who leaves her expensive gifts and opens up her heart and her horizons. Faust seduces Gretchen, but then retreats from the intensity of her ardour and longing. A series of personal catastrophes rapidly befalls the girl, triggered though not intended by Faust. Her brother, mother and illegitimate baby too, when it is born, are all killed, and she herself is imprisoned and executed, a victim, not only of Faust's lust and the baleful influence of Mephistopheles' interventions, but of the ignorance and prejudice of the feudal order.

Gretchen is the first sacrifice at the altar of Faust's hunger for life. Not being a callous man, Faust grieves for her, but only briefly. He is not deterred from his quest. In the second half of the play, replete with classical allusions lost on most twenty-first century readers and written decades after the first half, the plot becomes allegorical, the scene of Faust's quest opening out dramatically in time and space. Together with Mephistopheles, he roams ancient landscapes of battle, sorcery, empire and thought, inserting himself into founding dramas, contriving to marry Helen of Troy, consorting with sirens and sphinxes, conversing with philosophers, engaging in large-scale speculations on the cosmos and the human condition. Such is his ambition that he seeks to embody, or absorb into his own being, the entire sweep of Western civilization. Towards the end of Part II however, the play shifts back from allegory to Faustian psychology. Stale and sated after having pursued experience on such a grand scale, Faust is enjoying a quiet moment with Mephistopheles. He is indulging in a romantic little reverie on nature—contemplating the “towering swell” of the sea—when suddenly he becomes unaccountably angry at what he sees as its wasted power!

“There wave on wave, by hidden power heaved,
Reigns and recedes, and nothing is achieved.”²

Reinvigorated by a sudden new horizon of aspiration, Faust conceives a plan to tame the ocean—specifically to reclaim and drain a whole coastal region and develop it into a modern housing complex where multitudes of people—refugees from the claustrophobia of the feudal order—can live free and expansive lives, all enjoying the material and social conditions necessary for further self-growth.

Faust is, in other words, beginning to appreciate that emancipation, the freedom to fulfil one’s own potential, requires not only an inner commitment, such as he undertook in his transaction with Mephistopheles, but a rearrangement of external conditions. The entire material context of life has to be reorganized. With characteristic energy, Faust takes it upon himself to effect this reorganization, using the underhand, Mephistophelean means on which he has come to rely. A large labour force is deployed; labourers are driven hard. The huge coastal construction site is artificially lit at night so that work need never pause. There are many industrial deaths and accidents. Nevertheless, people come from far and wide to settle the site, and Faust is held in high regard for the opportunities he affords for a modern way of life.

Although he is finding himself more fulfilled in this large-scale economic and social enterprise than in any of his previous, more personal adventures, there remains an obstacle to Faust’s ambition. At the edge of the great reclamation site is a dune that has eluded purchase. On the dune stands a grove of linden trees, and in the grove nestles a humble cottage occupied by an elderly couple, Baucis and Philomen. They exemplify all the sturdy, unromantic virtues of the pre-modern order: piety, fidelity, constancy, kinship and familiarity. Faust has tried to negotiate with the old couple—he has offered them new accommodation in the housing complex—but, like

² Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Faust: Part Two*, trans. Philip Wayne (London: Penguin, 1959), 221.

indigenous people everywhere, they are dwellers in the land, lovers of home, and they have stubbornly refused to budge. As people in the way of progress however, they have to go. Faust arranges for Mephistopheles to remove the couple forcibly, but, as usual, Mephistopheles' carelessness brings catastrophe in its train: Baucis and Philomena are not merely evicted but burned to death in their cottage.

Faust is horrified. He had not meant for Mephistopheles to murder the old couple. Thenceforth he is haunted by "care"—what we today would call depression—and afflicted with blindness. But even now his energy is not spent: relentlessly he drives himself and his workers to finish the job.

At last the housing complex is complete. The old, closed order has given way to a new, modern era. Having succeeded in his mission, Faust finally acquiesces in death. But although Mephistopheles has long since won the wager with God, he is not rewarded nor is his pact with Faust upheld. In a scene set amongst angelic choirs, Goethe, indulgent towards his hero, has Gretchen reappear to snatch up Faust's promised soul and deliver it safely to Heaven instead. Faust is redeemed—by the "love" of the long-dead child who was the first casualty of his appetite for life. Women, Goethe seems to imply, love, and by their love condone, men like Faust, even if such men ruin and betray them, because at a deeper level such hunger for life honours the life force—and hence eros—more truly than any merely moral posture can. This is the implied greatness of the Faustian life—not a moral greatness but the greatness of a destiny dedicated to the life force itself.

Goethe clearly identifies closely with his ambiguous hero—his own life was also lived with ferocious energy on a grand scale and, it must be said, privately littered with the discarded hearts of young females. But Goethe does not gloss over the tensions at the core of the Faustian pact. Without the dubious *deus ex machina* at the end of the play, Faust would apparently have been abandoned to the black hag, Care, his basic attitude having delivered up only an ultimate emptiness. It is by no means clear that Goethe had really finished with his protagonist by the time of his own death. Part

It was nominally completed at the very end of the author's life, and published posthumously, but there is an abruptness and arbitrariness about the way the play is brought to a close that suggests that time had simply run out for Goethe.

The figure of Faust was subsequently absorbed wholesale into the European imagination, with little attention to Goethe's own apparent irresolution and ambivalence. Faust was seen as a prophet of progress, latterly of development. He consorted with the Devil, yes, but for honourable motives. His ambitions brought grief to others, but their grievous fates were the price of expanded horizons and enhanced human potential—in a word, of progress. Everything that stands in the way of progress must fall. Everything that can further it—such as nature, now rendered as natural resource—must be subordinated to it. Progress, latterly development, is a new normative standard that transcends conventional notions of morality and religion.

This is indeed what Goethe wrote. But it seems unlikely that he would be proud of the outcome of the Faustian experiment today, with the natural world in abject retreat before the armies of industry brandishing their triumphal ideology. Goethe himself was a devotee of nature and a passionate critic of the mechanistic, externalizing model of science. According to his own alternative model, living things are to be understood first and foremost in terms of their inner impulse to “increase their own existence,” their conativity, the striving and aspiration which animate all beings. This striving, this deep-down impulse—the *ur-phenomenon*—is the ultimate and only source of the Good. It is surely for this reason that Goethe has Faust embody such striving. In unshackling Faust from antiquated moralities while giving his appetite for life free rein, Goethe was presumably intending to represent Faust as honouring nature at its source. To give expression to the thrust of nature in one's own being was presumably, in Goethe's view, to be truer than any overlay of reason or scriptural morality could be to the ultimate Good. The entire action of the play was, we might remember, a consequence of Faust's initial invocation of the Earth Spirit. It was to the

Earth Spirit that Faust turned for relief from his disaffection with a civilization based on reason, creed and convention: “all theory...is grey, but green is life’s glad golden tree.”³

In Goethe’s science moreover, the outward forms of particular living things are explained not in terms of the cogs and wheels of constituent mechanisms but rather in terms of the influence of physical context. Every being is born into a particular set of physical conditions that, like the surrounding pieces of a jigsaw, determine the specific shape that its own striving for existence will take. Faust accordingly grasps that neither he nor others can increase their existence—fulfil their potential—unless the constraining material conditions of the feudal order are dismantled in favour of a new, more open—more modern—groundplan.

But the discordances at the end of the play suggest that already, even within the terms of the story, something was awry in Goethe’s schema. The veritably epochal discordances that have accumulated in the actual roll-out of modernity suggest a catastrophic flaw in the founding narrative. Faust, the developer, has turned on Goethe, the devotee of nature, inaugurating an era of environmental holocaust. Mephistopheles, inadvertently invoked in the real world by Goethe’s act of authorship just as he was inadvertently invoked in the play by a disaffected Faust, seems to be winning the day.

The details of Goethean science and philosophy have long since been forgotten, except by a handful of scholars, but the figure of Faust, complete with flaw, continues to inhabit, and exert directive force on, the Western imagination. In order to tackle the flaw it might be necessary to interrogate story with story. Story can have a taproot in mythical sources that will impart to it a logic, rigor and pattern-based form of insight, not to mention invocational efficacy, unavailable to mere analysis. Narrative logic may, in other words, yield insights and possibilities different from those available to reason, while story genuinely rooted in mythical sources may catalyze consequences unimaginable to reason.

³ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Faust: Part Two*, trans. Philip Wayne (London: Penguin, 1959), 221.

Against this background of reflection then, let us re-launch the Faustian story, here, now, in the early 21st century. All that is required to do so are the right questions. If Faust reappeared in contemporary society—a society that has undergone two centuries of social and material development—how would the story play out? What would such a contemporary figure want? He would already possess everything the original Faust in his ascetic cloister lacked—affluence and total mobility; celebrity and worldly influence; religious choice; sexual freedom and the availability of women—though women, it must be noted, now also partake of that same freedom and enjoy those same opportunities. What, in these changed circumstances, could the devil offer him? The only thing a 21st century Faust would lack would be his soul. Would he miss it? Does soul even exist? What is it? If it does exist, it is of course the one thing Mephistopheles cannot bestow. Would Faust still need this thing called his soul? If so, from whom or what could he retrieve it? What, in a word, would Faust desire?



So let's take up the tale again. Professor Marcel Marianus is a highly successful academic in the American academy. The son of a German diplomat father and a Brazilian artist mother, he has "everything": the dark and sultry looks of his mother, the urbane intelligence and charm of his father, the finest mind that a protracted American/German postgraduate education can produce, academic prestige and even media celebrity. He is sought-after and influential. Although he is courted by his female students, and occasionally succumbs, he is smart enough to want his satisfactions to be of the highest order, so he values his marriage to a sophisticated and beautiful fellow academic, and tries not to jeopardize it. She is a professor of architecture with a high-powered career of her own. They share a polished and well-scripted intimacy, but this is an intimacy premised on mutual ambition. Neither

would linger if the other were to cease serving their self-interest. We join Marcel as he is easing into a new position as a philosophy professor at a small but elite private university, Westin College.