



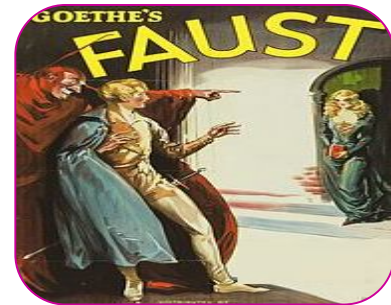
RELOCATING ' FAUST ' : A COMPARATIVE READING OF SELECTED EUROPEAN TEXTS ON THE LEGEND

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ABSTRACT

The Faust Legend proves to be a very popular theme among creative writers for centuries. Its universal appeal leads it to lend itself to an abundance of interpretations; as a result, it does not only survive as a well-known legend capturing the popular imagination for more than four centuries, but also has undergone generic and thematic transformations many a time. Writers of different epochs across all geographical boundaries have tried their hands to re-write the same story from their own different perspectives and presented it in many different formats. Every such time the story thus in a way has been re-created. Whenever, it is thus re-written, what we get is quite obviously not the same thing as



the old legend from the sixteenth century; rather we are then presented with what one may call a kind of ' palimpsest ', a new writing superimposed on the (partly) effaced impression of the previous one(s). Naturally such a process always leads to create layers of writing, where the signification of the topmost layer always becomes bound to include within it the effect of the erased writing(s).

My paper proposes to read three major European texts on Faust (that by Christopher Marlowe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann), as three different palimpsests of the same old legend of Faust. All the three text mentioned here are, no doubt, widely different in their significations. Save they are all derived from the same legend, as it was put forward by the Spies Faustbuch of 1587 and its first English translation by a certain Englishman with the initials P.F., there is, in fact, hardly any similarity between them either in the perspectives used to deal with the theme, or the impressions they seek to create in the readers or the audience. They present three widely varied versions of the same theme. They remained always pinned at their origin, but at the same time the very process of re-writing has made them undergo a change that offers them always a new signification.

KEY WORDS : *Faust, Soul, Devil, Christian, Rewriting, Intertextuality.*

INTRODUCTION

If we look back at the original legend of the sixteenth century, what do we see there? It is in a nutshell the story of a man, who despite his scholarly excellence in many streams of knowledge remains dissatisfied and falls victim to the allurements of the Devil. In search of more as well as magical power he himself calls on the devil for his aid. Mephistopheles, the representative of Hell, appears to him in response to his call and leads him to a bargain of his soul. In return of twenty four years' service and assistance from Hell in doing whatever he will, he has to forfeit his soul and indulges in all kinds of voluptuous worldly pleasure, extensive travel through various regions of earth as well as spheres of the world and boastful displaying of miraculous power in many places including the imperial court. In the process he becomes irrevocably corrupt and at the end is most horribly carried off to Hell.

Johann Spies, the pious publisher of Frankfurt am Main, who in 1587 brought out the first complete version of the legend, clearly betrayed his purpose in the long title of the book. The last part of the title declares

without the least ambiguity his pious motive: "...er [the protagonist] *endlich seinen wohlverdienten Lohn empfangen*" [... he finally received his just deserts ']. He further announced that the tale was published "... as a terrible instance, abhorrent example and hearty warning to all arrogant, over-confident and godless men" (translation mine). Any one going through the pages of this original German tale can affirm that it is nothing but a Christian cautionary tale in the garb of a prose morality fiction. The hero is portrayed there as nothing but a most abominable roguish villain, whose horrible end and final damnation seem absolutely just and deserved. This obvious Protestant bias of the tale persists even in its first English translation by P. F. Although it can hardly be called an exact translation, the main story-line is maintained all the same. The scholars are now quite certain that this translation (the *English Faust Book* or *EFB*) worked as the direct source for Marlowe in writing his celebrated play, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*.

II

Anyone acquainted with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* would surely agree that in the main drama is also a tragedy of sin. Many eminent critics like James Smith, J. C. Maxwell, and Helen Gardner have demonstrated with cogency and clarity that Marlowe wrote the play in accordance with the Christian doctrine. In keeping with the doctrine, curiosity and ambition are depicted here too as dangerous cravings, causing the ultimate downfall of the protagonist. The drama, as all those above critics have sufficiently analysed it to point out, investigates not only the nature of sin and damnation of the protagonist, but also subtly proceeds to get this theme across to the audience. Thus far it goes quite well with the notion of that 'terrible instance 'and 'hearty instance 'so loudly proclaimed by Spies. Only here it is a case of a bit toning down. Moreover, the main story-line, as we get in the *EFB*, is also followed more or less faithfully in the play.

Yet the difference between the play and source it drew on is also quite apparent. It has now been re-told in a dramatic format. This generic transformation quite naturally and necessarily leads to a kind of change in theme. The extensive travel of the hero, that is put so much emphasis on in the legend as it is told by P. F., is now reduced to something only reported, as we have it, for example, in what the Chorus says at the end of Act II. So the topographical description of Faustus' travel, which is an additional attraction, must also have contributed greatly to the popularity of the legend among contemporary readers, is rather pushed into background. Instead, the whole focus is now concentrated now on the figure of the hero himself. The drama opens with Faustus sitting his study and speculating on what vocation will suit him best. The following soliloquy as well as the other subsequent ones, the speeches and asides of the hero unfold RATHER " a spiritual warfare and conflict of ideas " (Clemen 238) going on within him and tearing him from within. Surely we see here a markedly individual figure with the entire characteristic fluctuations and contradictions.

The very genre of drama necessitates a concrete presentation of everything through characters and action. So, as Marlowe re-wrote it as a drama, the prose narrative of the *EFB* had to undergo a conversion. For instance, the mortal fear and agony the hero suffers at the very last hour of his life pronounces itself out on stage through the famous last soliloquy uttered by him. This invests the character not only with an intense individuality but also plays a crucial role in winning our pity in favour of the protagonist. Just this happens also in the long opening soliloquy of the play. Instead of supplying an outright choice in favour of necromancy, the hero is portrayed here as a man trying out different vocation in search of superhuman knowledge and power. His youthful arrogance drives him to rebel against all traditional modes of thought and feeling. This creates rather an image of him, by no means entirely devoid of glory. In the very opening scene when he gives utterance to his irrepressible cravings for knowing everything unknown and enjoying a superhuman power and delight, it betrays a dream cherished by all Renaissance people:

"O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
Is promis'd to the studious artisan!" (I.i.52-54)

Marlowe, in fact, thus portrayed his hero rather as a glorious "Renaissance malefactor ", but "with an empathy "lacking in his counterpart in the source (Atkins 578). With the progress of action, we notice, on the other hand, a sense of hesitation and irresolution in all his actions, which gradually gathers its force. This leads him towards his prefigured doom. The cautionary prose tale of the legend thus we see in the process slowly turns

into a tragedy. In place of outright aversion, we can hardly deny feeling also an attraction to and sympathy for its hero. He remains, in keeping with the legend, a personification of the pride of self-will and avid curiosity, but a lofty sense of Renaissance aspiration also gets infused in him, transforming him rather into a different personality. In the process he comes to embody the spirit of Renaissance in his limitless aspirations as well as their limitations.

In order to externalize the ongoing inner conflict of the hero, moreover Marlowe had recourse to the native morality technique of the period. This becomes quite apparent in the introduction of such figures as the Good and Bad angels. It is indeed possible to interpret all the different characters in the play, including not only the two Angels, but also the Old Man, the Seven Deadly Sins or even Helen, as parts of the protagonist himself. In a sense, even the various circumstances and events in the play function as mere objectifications of his own spiritual state as well as what is going on inside his mind; yet the drama refuses to abound itself merely within this allegorical perimeter of a contemporary morality play. In place of a universal human conflict between good and evil so characteristic to such a play, it is rather the individuality of the hero himself that is always brought to the fore. Obviously this creates a new nuance we hardly meet with in the exemplary moral tale of its source.

He is again much more willfully wicked than his model in the legend. He himself initiates the bargain of his soul in the play, while in the EFB version of the legend Faustus is tempted into it by Mephistopheles; thus instead of a general warning for every Christian, as the EFB as a cautionary tale suggests, here the notion of free will, personal choice and responsibility for what is going to happen is further brought to the centre of concern. All these make the Marlovian hero a much more forceful and complex character, who wins our pity as a victim of his own intellect.

III

Goethe, on the other hand, transformed the essentially Protestant cautionary tale we meet with in *Historia* into a symbolic drama of his own. He saw the traditionally figure of Faust in light radically different and made of him rather a gigantic and restless figure, in a headlong drive towards truth. With an indomitable intellectual curiosity and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, the traditional figure of the notorious necromancer turned for him into rather a figure of the lonely individual, "seeking the meaning of life and the maximal realization of its possibilities" (Atkins 579).

In the very Prolog im Himmel of Part I of his *Faust* der Herr (the Lord) declares: "*Es irrt der Mensch, solang er strebt.*" (317). This strikes the very keynote of the play by Goethe. It is to keep on striving, which is all important, even if in doing so some false steps are inevitable. The hero is thus put here in constant striving. Mephistopheles too is attached to him chiefly in order to keep him ever so. He strives through "a wide variety of representative human experiences" in order to reach "full self-realization" (Atkins 579), as far as it is possible for one to achieve in this finite world. So, the Faust-figure is used here rather as a vehicle to express both man's aspiration to infinitude and the ultimate realization of his own finiteness. Such a scheme as this is bound to give birth to a virtually new protagonist and just that we encounter in Goethe's *Faust*.

So is Goethe's Faust, "a restless spirit, dissatisfied with the inadequacy of the world and society" (Kline 9), running always after newer experiences in search of the supreme fulfillment that a man can ever achieve. The pact with hell in the traditional tale of the legend thus also gives way in this play to a wager: if Faust becomes ever satisfied by any sense of pleasure or having achieved all he wishes for, he will gladly give away his soul to Mephistopheles. But that is the moment of the supreme fulfillment, the very aim he strives for all his life. Reaching that is tantamount to reaching salvation for him. So it is a wager that Faust can never lose. His love affair with Gretchen, a Goethean addition, exposes on the other hand the essential selfishness of such a Romantic search for truth. The restless hero leaves her to continue his drive towards the supreme truth, but the innocent girl is left behind to bear the consequence of their love. For the violation of the accepted social and moral laws she is condemned to death, from which, despite all his desperate effort, the hero fails to screen her. So part I of the play ends with a revelation of how the greatness and exploratory nature of Romantic search for the ultimate fulfillment inherently bears within it also a destructive capability. The part II of the play continues the probe in order to find a solution of this basic existential dilemma that Romanticism entails.

In part II of the play we encounter again virtually a different protagonist, rejuvenated and fresh. He is still restless in search of truth, but as he is now quite aware of its blinding nature, attempts to grasp at it only through refractions (4709-27). As in the source text in the *Historia*, he too now visits the Emperor's court, performs many miracles there and the evocation of the spirit Helena at the end of Act I drives him into rapture; but in between

these we observe many other scenes like those of the Carnival or the Walpurgis Night, which suspending the linear flow of the action creates rather the impression of a montage of “ lingering coexistence “ (Constantine XXVII) of various images, lyrical passages, dance, music-making and many fantasies. The flow of action is thus many times driven to a kind of pause, giving the play an episodic structure and showing thereby some traits of what Brecht has later defined as epic theatre. Moreover, this poetic closet drama of Goethe foregrounds a ballad-like structure that that mixing traits of various genres within it in its totality rather exemplifies the “ progressive universal poetry “ of Schlegel (Constantine XXX), which we are by no means to meet with in the *Historia*.

The lyrical drama of Goethe provides us through the hero's search for Helena, an emblem of the ideal beauty and feminine perfection, also a glimpse of the classical world, a rather carnal antithesis to the ethereal and intellectual world of the Romantics. The hero thus in this play strives on towards a symbolic totality of experience and his failing merely foreground the human impossibility of grasping all and everything one might want in this world; so the drama ends rather with the salvation of such a man, in direct opposition to the end we see in the *Historia* version of the legend.

IV

The same old theme of selling one's soul to the devil recurs in the last great novel of Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus: Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, Erzählt von einem Freunde*. It embodies rather a return to the *Historia* version of the story; even the very title of the novel is so designed as to deliberately remind the readers of the long title of the old chapbook of 1587.

The novel is complex in structure. Keeping always in background the continually darkening gloom awaiting the entire German nation as World War II was approaching its end, it narrates an attempted biography of the gifted composer Adrian Leverkühn being written by his life-long friend Serenus Zeitblom. This gives rise to two narrative lines here, running simultaneously from the very first. The biography of his departed friend, what the narrator intends to narrate becomes often interspersed with the devastating reports of war, what he cannot help letting through his pen. This turns the narrator himself into an integral part of the narration. As the war advances on the heart of the country, these two narrative lines more often cross each other, even one overlapping the other. The motif of Faust with all its sinister significance lingers from the very beginning behind the first narrative that the narrator consciously undertakes to tell. But soon the reader becomes conscious that at another level it gradually also provides a more suitable parallel to the other. The imminent fate and a sense of finality of its destruction that the entire nation faces at the end of the war and the story of Leverkühn, breaking down into a final mental collapse thus gets connected through a subtle link. A pessimistic gloom engulfs us as the novel ends. We are faced with a road leading to nowhere. This reflects exactly the German psyche at the end of the war. Never before is the legend of Faust perhaps used to explore such a profound psychological depth, encompassing the feeling of an entire nation at a particular point of time.

What we have discussed above makes it perhaps sufficiently clear that all the three texts we are concerned with here, howsoever different they may appear in their dealings with the theme and effects they produce on the readers or the audience, are basically three non-original re-writings of the same theme – the legend of Faust. The contemporary French critic Gerard Genette has described all such non-original re-writings of some earlier texts as “literature in the second degree “, i.e., a new text derived from a previous text. This presents an aspect of textuality, which he has termed as ‘hypertextuality’, the fourth type of his five-part schema of the new mapping of general poetics that he has termed ‘transtextuality’. In the present context, all the three Faust-texts, whether those are by Marlowe, Goethe or Mann, constitute nothing but three different hypertexts that all use as their hypotext the same legend of Faust, as one finds it in the *Historia* of 1587 or its first English translation by P. F. Gent. This hypotext remains always definitely traceable at the bottom of all of them as the major source of what they ultimately intend. It is only with their constant reference (whether by complying with or showing departure from) to this source that these later works succeed to gather their own specific significations. The altered significations that these later texts certainly demonstrate, moreover, must always include also an effect of erasing the earlier text, thereby providing us such widely variant versions of Faust. This is what Genette calls the effect of palimpsests, which all the three Faust-texts discuss above obviously exhibit.

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