
Goethe's Faust: *Poetry and Philosophy at the Crossroads*

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I. Philosophical Poets

In lectures from 1910, subsequently published as *Three Philosophical Poets*, George Santayana provisionally placed Goethe among the philosophical poets. He had no reservation including Dante and Lucretius in this class of poets. Their major works situated them both within the reigning philosophical systems of their day: Santayana viewed Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* as the culmination of antique naturalism, and he regarded Dante's *Divine Comedy* as the embodiment of medieval supernaturalism. Though Santayana unequivocally placed Goethe's *Faust* within the context of Teutonic romanticism, with its idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible and what he called an attitude marked by the "self-trust of world-building youth," still Goethe's "thoughts upon life were fresh and miscellaneous."¹ Santayana found only incidental phi-

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¹ George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante and Goethe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), 128. The section on Goethe in Santayana's book is entitled "Goethe's Faust," thus emphasizing the centrality of a particular work of Goethe's to the philosophical spirit of poetry.

Line numbers from *Faust* appear in parentheses throughout the text. I have relied on *Goethe's Faust*, Parts I and II, edited by Calvin Thomas (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1892-97). In some cases the original German is quoted and the translations are my own. My interpretations have also been influenced by Peter Salm's excellent translation of Part I, first published in 1962 by Bantam Books. I have used the 1985 edition for this essay. The last lines (12104-12111) of the *Faust* story continue to present problems for the translator. I have taken counsel from Paul Wiegand's article "Problems in Translating the Song of the Chorus Mysticus in Goethe's *Faust*

losophies and existential strategies in *Faust*, which he viewed as representative of romanticism's preoccupation with the subjective immediacy of experience. Nonetheless, they encompass a pragmatic charter and philosophical outlook which, it can be said, underpins Faust's redemption.

There is much that is still alive in Santayana's philosophical explication of Goethe's *Faust*, especially Goethe's appeal to the understanding to be derived from phenomena themselves. The phenomenological entreaty to engage things themselves (*zu den Sachen selbst* as Husserl put it or *zu dem Leben selbst* as it appears in Goethe's *Faust*) is the source of one of the philosophical outlooks in Goethe's *Faust*. In addition to Faust's unconventional exegesis, which Santayana explored, there are other instances of Faust's phenomenological prescriptions which signal more than a carefree romantic approach to life. But, it is in Faust's unorthodox interpretation of the first lines of the Gospel according to John that we find the centerpiece of an activism that emerges out of Faust's initial disaffection in Part I, and which culminates with Faust's grand civil engineering project in the final moments of his life in Part II.

Faust's redemption is intuitively abhorrent since there are so many lives that are sacrificed through his alliance with Mephisto. His effort to console the condemned Gretchen with the injunction to let the past remain in the past, and his final project which destroys the endearing couple Baucis and Philemon are each sufficient to question the grace bestowed on Faust. The subject of Faust's redemption has occupied critics from the beginning.² I make no effort to survey the literature, nor do I merely dwell on

Faust's redemption intuitively abhorrent.

II" from *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No 1. (January, 1960), 22-27, which advises the translator to remain true to the actual words and allow the meaning of this very packed verse to emerge. For an understanding of how these last words represent a summation of the positive female imagery in Goethe's *Faust* see William H. McClain's article "Goethe's Chorus Mysticus as Significant Form," in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (January, 1959), 43-49. McClain also offers an explanation for Faust's redemption as a combination of Faust's "*immer höhere und reinere Tätigkeit bis zu Ende*" (from a conversation with Eckermann from 6 June 1831, p. 44 fn. 8) and grace and love from above as embodied in the final words of the Chorus Mysticus. Goethe's elevation of the feminine, then, corresponds to the redemptive value Dante places on the women (Beatrice, Rachael, Lucia) who look down upon him in his hour of need at the beginning of the *Inferno*; when he questions whether or not he is worthy of the spiritual pilgrimage that lies ahead.

² Alfred Hoelzel's "Faust, The Plague, and Theodicy," in *The German Quarterly*, Vol. LII, I, January 1979, addresses the breadth of this research.

Faust turns away from linguistic bonds that hold society together.

Faust's redemption. I only wish to revisit Santayana's insights in order to flesh out the philosophical nature of Goethe's *Faust*.

Santayana prescribed that Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe ought to be measured by the standards that each helped advance. However, for one's own cultivation he recommended taking something from each of their worldviews. Goethe's deliberations lacked the systematic drive of the naturalistic conception of an organismic world, and fell short of the dramatic mythology of a pilgrim's tortured moral journey. Taking something from Goethe's worldview has philosophical value precisely because it is an alternative to the doctrinaire bracketing of reality demanded by the dogmatics of supernaturalism and the clinical spirit of naturalism. Accordingly, it does not conceive truth as the result of a deductive process on the basis of received assumptions. The reproof of philosophy in the opening lines in Faust's study should not be regarded as a refutation of the search for meaning and truth. Rather, it is a challenge to orthodox philosophy with its imprimatur of tradition. While this point is unmistakable, Santayana knew that we could not overlook the eternal perspective that incites Faust's craving for the infinite and the pure activity that he imagines after death (705). Though there is something of Hegel's dialectical enmeshment of the finite and infinite typical of unhappy consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, there is also the appeal of the Spinozistic vantage point of *sub specie aeternitatis* with which Faust is periodically enraptured. In the end, though, the allure of the eternal vantage point loses out to a pragmatism enhanced by the fervor of a *carpe diem* disposition. This distrust of convention is not the methodical Cartesian prescription to call all our received opinions into question, but a nihilistic bravado that embraces even the moment that risks fading into nothingness (719). The distrust of convention, which reaches a nihilistic pitch for Faust, first comes in the form of turning away from the linguistic bonds that hold society together.

II. When Spirits Speak to Spirits

Faust's spiritual experiment conceived of an innovative dialogue with Nature, a relationship in which one must patiently wait for Nature to reveal its secrets. This procedure is an alternative to the invasive manipulations in which life must first be wrenched from Nature before it can be "understood." In the opening "Night" scene, as Faust's vanity is mocked by a grinning skull, he rejects

all the scientific paraphernalia that had promised to open the door onto Nature's secrets. Perhaps in an allusion to his defiance of Newtonian physics, which he thought reduced the world to empty abstractions, Goethe has Faust renounce the instruments that had served his father in a previous era (670-80). He intuits that Nature discloses itself in an act of phenomenological self-presencing, when it pulls back its veil to reveal secrets that otherwise would remain concealed. Faust almost immediately pronounces his frustration with words. To him, they are as useless as so much discarded junk. He envisions, in spite of his despair, the possibility of knowing how the world is held together from within (382-84). The idea of an inner nexus that holds the world together appears repeatedly in the motif of weaving. The metaphor of weaving and the loom is first symbolized in the Earth Spirit who echoes the mythological Fates. The model of weaving also corresponds to Goethe's real scientific investigations in his *Vorwort zur Morphologie* in which he expressed the methodological intention of grasping the totality of a phenomenon through an apprehension of its inner-related living parts.³ This "seeing into" a phenomenon is a melding of thought and sense perception. Goethe was unabashed about the value of this metaphor; he announced in correspondence at the end of his life that he required the symbolism of weaving to represent lived experience.⁴ In Part I of the Faust story this motif appears like a philosophical refrain.

Newtonian physics viewed as reducing world to empty abstractions.

The folly of studying life forms and expressions of life only when they are dead or remnants of the past is dramatized by Mephisto's seduction of the student who has come to see Faust for academic advice. Mephisto's telling promise that he will teach him to know the difference between good and evil (2047) is preceded by a litany of misleading suggestions in which he counsels the student to first eliminate the vital bonds that hold things together (1936-40). The mechanistic worldview presumed by such methodologies is partially the source of Faust's deep frustration, and Mephisto has planted the seeds of alienation in the earnest student. The very things that made Faust vulnerable are presented to the student as the ideal curriculum. The hub of this curriculum, learning to reduce everything to a system of classification and substituting words for

³ Leonard Willoughby, "Unity and Continuity in Faust," in *Goethe, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Victor Lange (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 166.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

*Words can
mislead.*

thoughts, had been the very thing that made Faust yearn to escape to the open fields in order to commune with the vital forces of Nature (414-18). Mephisto, in his flagrant sardonic style, informs the student that such a course of study will rigidly dress his intellectual spirit in Spanish boots, a device used during the Inquisition to break the body and spirit. The regimented way that logic, the subject that is first recommended to the student, controls thought and makes deductive schema seem like necessity is the antithesis of the direct communion with phenomena that Faust seeks. In an extended metaphor of weaving, Mephisto compares logic to a textile mill in which a master weaver ingeniously turns out his masterpiece. One simple movement of the loom, as with the elucidation of a suppressed premise in an argument, effortlessly produces a domino-like effect which appears as a necessary outcome of the initial simple movement (1920-30). When the student questions Mephistopheles' theory that a word can substitute for an idea, he senses the pathological sarcasm which underpins Mephistopheles' dark nihilism. Faust's original self-awareness, it should be said, originates with the insight that he had grown accustomed to relying on language and words as signs of intellectual insight.

The deceitful self-trust of will and volition that mark Faust's search was made possible only when he acknowledged that his words were designed to mask his ignorance. All the disciplines that he had studied resulted in no real profit. Even more depressing is the realization that he cannot presume to correctly know anything, nor can he presume to enlighten his students. He is a joyless shell of a man with a life that no dog would choose.

There can be no argument with Santayana's claim that Goethe, through the plight of the Faust character, offers nothing like a systematic philosophy. For the most part, systematic philosophy is dispassionately inherited and has traditionally upheld conventional worldviews. Goethe's Faust is not only plagued with a resentment that dismisses feeling at home in society; he wantonly abandons the convention of mere words in order to seek a new alliance with Nature. Santayana's characterization of Goethe as a proponent of the immediacy of experience distinguishes his outlook as phenomenological in the sense already described. The doctrine of the immediate circumscribed by this outlook is opposed to both Lucretius' scientific and theoretical grounding of life and Dante's moral foundation of experience. Their schemas,

respectively, entail a behind and a beyond; beneath the surface of all forms Lucretius envisioned the play of infinitely small particles randomly swerving through the void, and Dante's vision was an expression of God's ultimate design for humanity. Santayana's particular characterization of Goethe is embodied in Faust's craving for that ecstatic moment when his barren thoughts would cast off the inarticulateness of words and spirits would finally speak to spirits (424). While Faust's beleaguered spirit appears to dismiss Dante's normative world and Lucretius' theoretical comportment, his apparent nihilism is an emotional premise upon which he will spin new imperatives based on a doctrine of the immediate.

Through his gloom Faust senses that Nature will reveal its secrets on its own terms; they cannot be pried loose with the mastery of language or an alien technique. From the depths of Faust's vexed spirit he realizes that the experience of the sublime is a gift that cannot be hastened by an exertion of the epistemological will or the manipulation of language. The heightened critical attitude that marks him from the first are the stirrings of a rethinking of conventional values that begins with the view that language, conceived as a tool, has no privileged access to truth.

In an anachronistic way Faust might be considered the prototypical philosopher of the future whom Nietzsche christened as an experimenter and branded as anti-dogmatic and ambitious for momentary personal verities. This new category of philosopher is seduced by experiment and temptation as the German word *Versuchen* implies.⁵ He is the liberated thinker who thirsts not for universal truths of the pseudo-free thinkers who are harnessed to a faith, a fatherland or a dogma, but the unattached and independent thinker who embraces the serenity of solitude. He is willing to risk the peril of the abyss beyond culturally inherited antitheses, like the one that occupies Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Dante, whom Santayana regarded as on the highest plane, embraced the perfection that arises with the knowledge of good and evil, but Faust's troubles are eventually relieved in the realization and resignation that nothing perfect will ever accrue to man.

Goethe is the philosophical poet par excellence. His Faust longs to speak the language of the gods, in Santayana's words; and like Santayana, he knew that it would be in a fleeting, inspired mo-

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Gateway, 1955), 48.

ment. Such an effort would not require the rambling pace of an academic treatise. Faust's aspiration for the ecstasy of the moment and the longing for what makes the world cohere are matched by the virtues of Santayana's philosophical poet whose synthetic imagination succinctly captures the range of human reality as "he summons all that has affinity to him in the universe."⁶

Faust's eloquence offers only glimpses of philosophical themes; they are not spun out in any bombastic way. But the magnitude of Faust's crisis lends a philosophical potency to his insights. The acumen of the finest philosopher, according to Santayana, is likewise confined to the fleeting moment. The preponderance of philosophical discourse is insincere; it does not possess the concentrated vitality that extends into our lives and confers a range of meaning. The discursive idiom of the philosopher is subordinate to the resoluteness of true understanding. What is really an accessory to insight is too often taken for philosophical utterance. Only when thinking crystallizes into a precept or principle can it be canonized as philosophical insight and here, Santayana maintains, the poet and philosopher blend.⁷ They converge when they each thrive in the spontaneous cognitive awareness that rises above both the arduous and heavy deliberations of philosophy and the grandiosity of long-winded poetry that is inconsistent with inspiration and inventiveness.

III. The Temporal Depths of Lived Experience

Santayana, in a more tentative way, has charted the same territory that Heidegger, in his later poetic turn, outlined. Skeptical of philosophy's preoccupation with traditional representational language, Heidegger argued for the ontological independence of language. At best we could only be stewards in the domain of language. Like shepherds, Heidegger mused, we really attend the welfare of language, we do not possess it as we might a tool or artifact. Heidegger professed the autonomy of thought and identified the thinker's role as that of a companion who, when visited by thought, may enter into convivial deliberations. This fellowship with thought is an invitation to enter into a kind of apprenticeship whereby some thinkers may unassumingly become masters.⁸ Our

⁶ Santayana, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 13, *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*,

intellectual ambition should be to confine ourselves to a thought long enough that it stands still like a star in the world's sky.⁹ Heidegger's meditation on poetry indicates that poetic expression is blessed in just this way; it has the concentration of meaning that combines feeling, lived experience, and thought, which obtains the radiance of a star. Poetry that thinks, according to Heidegger, is in truth the topology of Being. When this quality of poetry is disclosed, then thinking is free from the dangers that threaten it. They are the positive danger of the singing poet that may distract us, the obfuscating nature of philosophizing, and the sharpest danger, thinking itself, which must contend with itself when it is activated.¹⁰

Conceived as the House of Being in his *Letter on Humanism* (1947), Heidegger viewed language as contiguous with our kind of existence. This position is mirrored in Heidegger's reflection that poetry that thinks is familiar with the locus (*Ortschaft*) of Being. Heidegger's use of the terms *Topologie* and *Ortschaft*, in his meditation on poetic thinking, suggests a familiarity with the contours of Being. This intimacy is the essence of *humanitas*, Heidegger argued, which recognizes the true worth of human existence neglected by classical humanism.¹¹ There is the intimation that poetry ought to supplant philosophy in the later Heidegger, but this is only because philosophy had exhausted old demonstrative forms, having inordinately relied upon the premise that linguistic reality inherently possesses the standard by which lived experience is revealed, reproduced and understood. The medium for all thinking must be language, but when philosophy only puts a spin on previous ideas it denies the impulse that drives poetry (and life); that is, an integration of memory, perception and expectation that generates new expression from within a particular inner connectedness. The old forms of philosophy neglected this internal nexus, and Heidegger looked to the ingenuity and the unself-conscious quality of the poetic imagination to revive the soul of philosophical expression.

*Reality
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consciousness.*

(Frankfurt am Main 1983), 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹ This rendering of human existence was originally set forth in *Being and Time* in which the ecstatic dwelling in the truth of Being is summed up in the care structure of *Dasein* which is equivalent to the internal temporal transcendence that enlivens poetic thinking. See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 210.

From within the inner temporal complexity of consciousness reality is continuously being transformed and any linguistic standard that purports to represent actuality must also possess transformative powers. Poetry, I would add, reconciles the logical fracture between language and world (of experience), when from its source in feeling and the figurative, it always takes on elements of the actual which is situated in the province of the material. The rapport between mind and nature that is created by poetry's familiarity with the corporeal provides the standard by which linguistic representation harmonizes with lived experience.

Goethe himself has left us the most poignant declaration of the commensurability of poetry and philosophy. Much of Goethe's work derives from the substance of his own life, and his actual autobiography attests to the compatibility of poetic and philosophic truths: the title *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is a strong signal of this confluence. Perhaps in an allusion to Goethe, Hans-Georg Gadamer has endorsed a metaphysical account of the hermeneutic structure of experience that is grasped in the title of his book *Wahrheit und Methode*.

Gadamer's professional concern in *Wahrheit und Methode* was to aesthetically conceive of the attainment of truth. As an alternative to scientifically conceived truth, Gadamer's hermeneutics outlines the historically effective nature of all understanding. This correction of scientifically conceived truth, with its neat division between the subject and object of understanding, claims the same metaphysical ground that Goethe staked out. The special attention Gadamer gives to the history and use of the German expression *Erlebnis* draws our attention to this foundation. It is the historical grounding of consciousness through which time is not grasped as a succession of discrete moments, but swells up as an enduring coordination of the past, present and future. This is the nature that is coincident with understanding. Understanding is not just something that is activated when we are confronted with something alien. When what is experienced in the moment automatically progresses beyond the object or reality that activated the experience, as with the depth achieved in poetic expression, then we must acknowledge the expansive temporal reality that generates existence. With Wilhelm Dilthey's seminal analysis of the concept of *Erlebnis* and its association with the poetic imagination, we have the very same outline for what is essential to the creative

psychic nexus. The cooperation of the facets of time appear in the poetic disposition as perception, recollection and reproduction, all blending in a mutual transcending movement in which no one facet remains unaffected by the others.¹² One can appear to achieve a momentary attentiveness in the reality of psychic life, Dilthey argued, but with any awareness of a particular mental state there is simultaneously evoked a sense of duration.¹³ Any way that consciousness is sliced we discover the enduring continuity that constitutes the systematic connection between the store of the past and the momentary formation of practical valuation that blends into future development. This is the articulated psychic structure that is the window onto the infinite and which promotes the vision of totality and completion from the vantage point of the transitory. It is no coincidence that Dilthey's exposition of *Erlebnis* is addressed within the context of Goethe's literary contribution. Gadamer was certain that Goethe's style was instrumental in the emergence of this special term.¹⁴

Time not a succession of discrete moments but an enduring coordination of past, present, and future.

Though this analysis of *Faust* centers on Part I, it is in the final words of the Chorus Mysticus in Part II that perhaps the most philosophical note about life and poetic language is made. These final words sum up the dialectical enmeshment of Faust and Mephisto. They also make Faust's redemption seem plausible. From the beginning, Faust's relationship with Mephisto is marked by the tension between creation and annihilation. Faust's primary aspiration is to finally produce something lasting that he might

¹² Wilhelm Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, in *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Works*, Volume V, edited by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 240-241.

¹³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume VII, *Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart 1979), 324.

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 56. Gadamer remarks that Goethe in *Wahrheit und Dichtung* alerted us to the confessional style of his poetry that corresponds to the world of inner experience conveyed in the term *Erlebnis*. Not all commentators are convinced of this element in Goethe's poetry. Barker Fairley, in "Goethe as Revealed in his Poetry," places Goethe's famous statement from his autobiography in its context, and concludes that Goethe did not give us license for stamping his poetry as self-revelation. According to Fairley, he really wrote it as a "reckoning with himself." See *Goethe, A Collection of Critical Essays*, 11. Fairley does not countenance the autobiographical stamp to Goethe's poetry as Gadamer, Dilthey and Hermann Grimm do, and he does not conceive of Goethe's work in relation to the all important concept of *Erlebnis*. Fairley does admit, however, that poetry was the ideal instrument for Goethe's recording of himself, and this comes very close to the intent of *Erlebnis*.

relish the happiness of the moment; Mephisto is the incarnation of destruction, and he repeatedly wishes that nothing had ever been created. This fundamental polarity drives their relationship. Even though Faust's last words tell us how he has reconciled the tension—i.e., one must earn life and freedom anew each day by activity; passively taking in life does not make us deserving of its merits—Goethe's conclusion suggests that Faust's drive to have the (eternal) moment persist on earth is impossible. As Faust adjusts to the radiance of his heavenly surroundings, the Chorus Mysticus reminds us that "*Alles Vergängliche/ Ist nur ein Gleichnis;/ Das Unzulängliche/ Hier wird's Ereignis;/ Das Unbeschreibliche/Hier ist's gethan;/ Das Ewig-Weibliche/ Zieht uns hinan*" (12104-12111).¹⁵ These famous lines explain that efforts to represent life on earth might best be cast in figurative language: language that by definition is tentative about representing reality because it is so fleeting, language that acknowledges its distance from actuality for it is always saying that reality is 'like' this or 'like' that. The conclusion is that language can never presume linguistically to fix the transitory. Additionally, Goethe declares that life on earth is ill-equipped to perfect our ambition for the infinite and that the Eternal Feminine must grace us before what was indescribable on earth can be actualized. It is the poetic thinker who traverses the figurative landscape of *Gleichnis*; whose rich meaning is suggestive of image, simile, metaphor, allegory, parable, and figures of speech in general.

The final note on the possibility of experiencing an enlightening moment that incorporates the living past and summons the future echoes the ambition that drove Faust from the beginning. It is the underlying philosophical theme that informs the Faust story, and Goethe by no means limited this proposition to *Faust*.¹⁶ This concern for a unifying temporal *Gestalt* may have grown out of Goethe's ceaseless introspection, but, whatever its origins, it shaped a spiritual perspective that he brought to his experience

¹⁵ "What is transitory is but a parable; what is unattainable here on earth, Here above it actually happens, The ineffable, Here is put into action, The Eternal Feminine pulls us upward." (Author's translation.)

¹⁶ Leonard Willoughby in his essay "Unity and Continuity in Faust" points out that Goethe was preoccupied with this idea. (Lange, 176.) This meditation on time could take on conceptual form as in the poem *Vermächtnis: Dann ist Vergangenheit beständig, Das Künftige voraus lebendig—Der Augenblick ist Ewigkeit*, or this unity of the facets of time could resolve into imagery as in the poem *Um Mitternacht*.

of life. It is the fundamental temporal form that defines *Erlebnis* and which distinguishes experience as bound together in a unity that becomes historically one's own, either through the activation of imagination or through actively earning it anew (682-83). Both procedures deny the passive inheritance of tradition and the goal of epistemologically reproducing an objective, aboriginal reality.

IV. Lead Me to Heaven's Silence

Both preludes to *Faust* set the stage for the action that quickly builds momentum in the opening "Night" scene. The wager between the Devil and God, modeled after the Job story, indicates that Faust's temptation originates in a dialectic between cosmic polar opposites.

The post-Jobian quest for the tree of knowledge signifies that God has become enmeshed with the powers of evil and annihilation. Moreover, in the post-Cartesian world, according to Erich Heller, reason could only be conceived as the ground of Being and privy to the mind of God. Such proximity to the seat of existence, following Heller, makes Faust's cry "to know or to perish" the tragic interpretation of Descartes's *Cogito*.¹⁷ The power invested in reason by Descartes would be fortified by modern philosophy's intuition that estrangement from Being only concealed affinities that could be hammered out of grammar (Wittgenstein) or fashioned by poetic rapture (Heidegger). In a sense, the prelude in heaven represents what is before good and evil, for the dialogue between Mephisto and God is what makes real temptation possible. Once the wager is in effect, that is, good and evil become real possibilities. Consequently, Faust's search in and of itself is redemptive; he cannot really lose out to Mephisto if he is only fulfilling inherent cognitive impulses. Mephisto is aware that humanity's groping is encouraged by God's dubious gift of inner illumination. This internal light senses heaven's glow, but it does not always overcome the baser instincts. The theodicy in the prelude in heaven demonstrates the a priori collusion between the forces of good and evil, and is yet another clue to Faust's ultimate salvation in spite of technically losing out to Mephisto.

Man's inner light senses heaven's glow, but does not always overcome the baser instincts.

What we garner from the conversation in the theater prepares

¹⁷ Erich Heller, *The Artist's Journey into the Interior and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1965), 23.

us for the temporal schism that afflicts Faust. As they ponder the fate of their production, we learn that the three characters have different ambitions, to all of which Goethe, as a director, a poet, and a figure with a profound sense of irony, would have been sensitive.

The director wishes to please the multitudes that have flocked to the ticket booth, as if they clamor for the last loaf of bread. He knows they are primed for a spectacle, and, although the play should have some import, above all, it should be pleasing to them. The poet takes offense at the director's realism. He craves the soulful repose in which his verse will begin to percolate; he is all too conscious that he requires divine inspiration. The poet wishes to create something genuine and honest, verse with a wider audience in mind. He solicits the supernatural and wishes to make his mark on posterity.

The high-minded purpose of the poet is mocked by the comic figure who reminds the poet that there is no shame in providing mere entertainment. The comic figure is cognizant of fashions and fluctuating tastes as well as the wider theoretical audience. The poet should learn to balance the potency of creativity's source with popular appeal; the poet should summon the powers of reason, understanding, and passion. Above all, he ought not neglect the necessary crowd-pleasing fun. In the same vein, the director encourages the poet to avoid the larger picture; he ought to serve something up which will appeal to the broadest target and guarantee popularity.

The poet's reproach does not phase the director; he knows all too well that the crowd is composed of disparate parts who, following the show, will go off seeking their individual pleasures. The director sees no need to invoke the muses, and the poet's harangue on the pensive nature of his work is lost on him. The rapture and suffering of creation may satisfy the poet, but this is not fare for the crowd; he ought, the director advises, to try to mystify them with a multi-faceted production.

The poet claims a more reverent role for the artist. As a mediator between humanity and the tumult and disorder of Nature, the poet summons an otherwise discordant humanity into a blessed harmony. The power to interpret the complexity and beauty of Nature is invested in the poet; the poet, as Hölderlin imagined, stands between humanity and the gods.

The comic figure at this point comes into his role as mediator. The poet with his mind on eternity, and the director with the present audience in mind are temporally fractured. Perhaps with a feigned respect for the anguish of the poet, the comic figure recommends that the poet model his story on a tumultuous love affair. Such a story would engage the audience, and likewise make use of the ecstasy that the poet craves. The outline for the Faust story is presented in the comic's admonitions, and the epistemological conundrum that grips Faust is alluded to in the comic's draft for a play. Above all, the poet should strive for the fullness of life and present it knowingly—from within. Mindful of the composition of the audience, the comic enlists the poet in touching the hearts of those who have not achieved self-actualization. It is the growing mind that the poet should touch with a glimmer of the truth. Inspired by the comic's words, the poet craves for the blissful time of his youth when creativity continually renewed itself and the desire for truth burned in his heart. The comic emboldens the poet by establishing the correspondence between God and poetry. He advises exercising his powers to give the crowd only a taste of the complexity of life, a small piece of the truth that will someday satisfy the whole world. To provide a glimpse of heaven's glow, that's the art that enjoins the gods and the poets to sing of how to live. The comic's counsel finds common ground between the restless desires of youth and the solemnity of old age. His solution reconciles the breach between the poet and the director, each set in their respective temporal modes. The impetuosity of youth has its seasons, but the graceful forms of the poet should remain on course to their self-appointed goal. When the seasoned poet meets his obligation, he will only discover that age has not made him witless and infantile but childlike at heart.

*The poet
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ness of life
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The final words of the director make it clear that Goethe has given all three points of view equal footing. None is so extreme that we would patently dismiss it. All three positions are sympathetically represented, and the tension between the director and the poet is nicely reconciled by the comic. Not only are we encouraged to ask what the role of the poet is, but we also must consider the reality of the audience without whom the poem would be incomplete. The dynamic between the director, poet, and clown will become activated in the Faust character, who will be faced with integrating the three positions from within his life. He will not have

the benefit of manipulating a work of literature; he must conquer the drama that surges in his soul. The director's concluding comments foreshadow the condition that will afflict Faust from the start. Anticipating Faust's crisis, the director implores the comic and poet to dispense with their wordy exchange and finally get down to action. If they take their own claims seriously, that they are psychically and spiritually privileged, then they should begin the business of concocting a powerful brew.

The director's existentially conceived plea encourages the poets to resolutely engage the options that face them; putting something off today does not guarantee that it will be accomplished the next day. The director asks that the poet look around and take stock of all that is available. Within the narrow confines of the theater there are adequate materials to successfully represent all of creation. The director's realism contains an element of poetic fire; he conceives of the theater as a microcosm of the universe if the poet can freely travel "from heaven through the world to hell" (242). The course of the poet is cosmically expansive, but he must move with deliberate speed. The resources of the theater are not incompatible with the creative ambitions of the poet. The limitations set by the material world, coupled with the completion envisioned by the poet, are the source of creativity. In Faust's tortured self-consciousness this scheme will realize itself in the way that the self-certainty of individuality is tempted by an intuited temporal grandiosity.

V. Am I a god?

Faust's desperation quickly reaches a hallucinogenic pitch in the opening "Night" scene. He is game for a spiritually charged experience and the glimpse of the sign of the macrocosm foments an awareness of the internal alienation that will soon grip his consciousness. The harmony of the cosmic coherence he senses unfolds before him, but the infinity of Nature remains out of reach. His boastfulness before the Earth Spirit prepares us for the temporally enlivened drama that is to ensue. Even an encounter with the spirit that toils at the loom of time fails to impress him, and we begin to surmise that Faust is ambitious to subdue this transcendence in order to overcome his epistemological despair. But it is through the conflict between Faust and the innocent Wagner that Goethe presents an extended philosophical discussion on time and history.

When Wagner overhears Faust's bickering with the Earth Spirit, he is sure that he has heard a reference to Greek tragedy. Ever on the lookout for intellectual sustenance from the classical tradition, Wagner interrupts Faust's dispute with the Earth Spirit. What follows is an exchange that dramatizes Faust's abiding concern for the immediacy of experience. Wagner's trust in tradition and the conventional tools of speech is a counterpoint to Faust's rhapsody over the primacy of feelings. In his retort to Faust's distrust of words that do not have their source in one's feelings, Wagner, who is keen on improving his elocutionary skills, extols the virtue of looking to former times for guidance. Not only can we gain from the wisdom of the past but we can also glory in the progress that humanity has made. Wagner's appeal to the past is symptomatic of the Enlightenment's inordinate reliance on classical antiquity. Wagner's lines (559) are a recapitulation of Horace's dictum *ars longa, vita brevis* which recommends dependence upon traditional works that have already laid the creative groundwork for writing and thinking. Faust's rejoinder offers a historicist perspective that corresponds to his oratorical advice that one should first tap one's own soul. The past is hopelessly out of reach, like an excursion to the stars. At best, times past are like books that are protected by seven seals. With the obvious biblical allusion, Faust is sure that penetrating the past is not as simple as recalling an event that is over and done with. He makes this clear when he claims that what we casually regard as the spirit of an age is a mixture of the spirit of a contemporary observer and a former time. The past as discrete fact is a heuristic device that must be abandoned if we are to gain an appreciation of how we are grounded in time. Wagner's pragmatic view of history conceives of the unadulterated past with its deposit of edifying maxims and exemplary models and ignores the emotional resonance of the present that drives Faust. Faust's hermeneutic position reflects a lively integration of the past and the present, while Wagner evinces an objectivist posture which upholds a spatial conception of time that will enable the retrieval of discrete historical moments.

*Faust's
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present.*

The contrast between Faust and Wagner reflects the real life struggle between Schiller and Goethe. Schiller's reconciliation of their contrasting personalities came in the form of his *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*. This essay justified the two artistic temperaments found in Goethe and Schiller. Typical of the naive poet, the

character of Faust argues for the validity of subjective reality against Wagner's sentimental dependence on an inherited reality that has already passed the scrutiny of the critics. Faust can dispense with the critics as witnessed in his treatment of the Proctophantasmist in "The Walpurgis Night" scene. He was clearly comfortable with the objectification of the personally constructed reality of the artist; that is, the immediacy of the subjective which caught Santayana's attention. In another reference to a real-life antagonism, Goethe undermines the exaggerated status of the critic who appears in "The Walpurgis Night" scene. The critic will not acknowledge the orgiastic spirit life, even as they dance all about him. His denial was a caricature of Friedrich Nicolai, a contemporary adversary of Goethe's, whose inflated rationality denies creativity until the critic announces the initial efforts of the artist (4150-52). To be creative, that is, first requires the critic's acknowledgment. Goethe's rejection of this precept is captured in the name for his fictional critic, the Proctophantasmist. The designation refers to the prescribed application of leeches for those who believed in the spirit world. In real life, according to Peter Gay's profile of the typical *philosophe*, Goethe referred to Nicolai as *Jesuitenfresser* in an effort to lump him in with the supercilious and self-important *Aufklärer* who demeaned their opponents with their superior book learning. Gay's historical assessment of the arrogant *philosophe* in the "Overture" to his *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* corresponds to Goethe's literary portrait of Wagner, the encyclopedia-minded colleague who would not consider an alternative approach to knowledge and truth.¹⁸

Unresolved tension between universality and particularity is crux of Faust's internal struggle.

Upon Wagner's exit Faust returns to the more compelling meditation that previously seized him, his sense that he was near to eternal truth. The interlude with Wagner displaced his flight to eternity with the dreaded recognition that he was truly confined by the restrictions of his tiny chambers. This oscillation between the boundlessness of the unchangeable and the stifling contingency of his dreary surroundings has made him aware that, whatever magnificence the mind conceives, it will soon be afflicted by the tumult of mundane earthly existence (639). These two worlds are locked in mutual estrangement that beckons consciousness to exalted heights one minute and burdens the mind with the sorrows

¹⁸ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966).

that are the ballast of the temporal world the next. This debilitating polarity is the crux of Faust's inner struggle; it is the expression of the dialectic drama that pervades the ontological realization of universal consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.

The condition of Faust's dirempted self-consciousness finds philosophic expression in Hegel's analysis of unhappy consciousness (*unglückliches Bewusstsein*). Faust's initiative to measure up to the transcendent Earth Spirit is the literary analogue to the compulsion to overcome the contradiction of the alienated unhappy consciousness as described in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In the same way that divided self-consciousness must contend with the mutual recalcitrance of its parts, so too must Faust question the superiority of the spirit world from the ground upon which he stands. In disgust, the Earth Spirit denounces Faust's immodesty, but his encounter with Wagner only strengthens Faust's resolve to reconcile his inner conflict.

In a second exchange between Wagner and Faust we learn more of the divided nature that afflicts Faust. In his ambition to gain that special cosmic vantage point, Faust must acknowledge that the wings of the Spirit, which he craves, will not so easily join with the corporeal. He conceives of the truth that lies concealed by Nature from the vantage point of a soaring eagle. Wagner denies any such longing and knows that the very skies present themselves when he cracks a book; he is unable to identify with Faust's divided consciousness. There are two passions that stir Faust's heart, and each struggles to govern without the other. He is all too aware of his tenacious earthly appetites, but he would give up the choicest worldly delights for a taste of the pedigreed pleasures of sublime ancestral regions. Wagner cannot begin to understand Faust's reflections; he does not long to fly like a bird, and he cannot abide too long in sylvan surroundings. The figurative expression of lofty consciousness is mindlessly interpreted in literal terms by Wagner.

As in the case of unhappy consciousness, there is no real determinant actuality to engage. The notorious instance of the master-slave relationship, in the *Phenomenology*, provides not only an other, but nature, as well, with which one might labor to resolve contradictions. With the Hegelian stages of Skepticism and Stoicism, there is the possibility of a solipsistic retreat within the self. There is no such alternative for the self-incarceration of unhappy consciousness. Faust can only exploit the imperfect unity that is

really flamboyant self-consciousness. Consequently, Faust must grapple with the perplexity of liberating himself from himself, for his consciousness vacillates between god-like proportions and the life of a worm underfoot.

When he experiences the despair of feeling like a worm, he could not be more distant from the titanic self that shamelessly stood his ground with the Earth Spirit. In his poetic meanderings to ancestral heights, he could not be further from the dust-covered shelves that mock his pompous mysticism. At one moment, what strikes Faust as essential to his nature resolves the next into something extraneous and foreign.¹⁹ If the diremption is to be healed for particular consciousness, according to Hegel, then it must await the therapeutic twilight that precedes absolute consciousness in which Reason finally becomes comfortable with the certainty that it is identical to reality. Faust will hammer out his personal solution in the terms of his contract with Mephisto, and it will not include the use of Reason to mediate a relationship with the eternal.

VI. In the Beginning was the Deed

The contract with Mephisto contains emotional conditions that might satisfy Faust's dirempted soul, but he also stumbles upon an intellectual solution with practical ramifications. This intellectual solution to his dilemma represents a radical alteration of the philosophic grounding of Christianity, one that occupied the doctrinal debates of the very first ecumenical council convened by Constantine. Faust fancies a further challenge to the gods in which he will prove by deeds that mortals can match the worth of the gods on high. In a twist on the Hegelian unhappy consciousness, he does not flinch at the resoluteness necessary to disband

*Without
limitations
creative
activity
remains
dormant.*

¹⁹ The enticing unity of unchangeable consciousness and particular, contingent consciousness is essentially defined as relationship in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Therefore, any effort to eliminate one aspect in favor of another is doomed; the indivisible relations between the opposing parts will not countenance dismissing one aspect in favor of another. For the concrete, historical consciousness there is only the prospect of irreconcilable division. However, as envisioned by Hegel, such an experiment with consciousness is more skillfully dramatized in the Trinitarian doctrine of Christianity, especially in the doctrine of incarnation wherein the unchangeable finds historical expression. Obviously these tools are not available to the ordinary human and thus any such aspiration must be sublimated. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by J. B. Baillie, rev. 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 253.

the intrigue between infinity and mortality. He detects the chimera that consciousness inflicts upon itself and scornfully confronts perdition. He ardently rejects the self's miscalculation of itself. There is no rub in this challenge to the tragedy perpetrated by the mind's intuition that it can survey what is beyond its compass. His resignation in the face of the inability to rationally sound the depths of Being, however, does not result in despair or skepticism. The rebuff to reason establishes the utility of limitation without which creative activity remains dormant.

Faust's resoluteness is first witnessed in the opening scene when he senses the ridicule from the instruments that cover his shelves. They were to be the key to truth, but along with the grinning skull on his desk, they only mock his vanity. Teased out of the thought of eternity, he realizes that all that he is heir to—his father's tools, his library, tradition—must first be personally appropriated before they can be of use. Consequently, only that which the moment creates can essentially be his (685). The double bind propagated by unhappy consciousness is denied by Faust in this retreat to the sovereignty of the moment; the dominion of eternity and the gods is impugned when Faust boldly faces dissolving into nothingness. Ironically, Faust becomes distracted by the Easter liturgy which resonates with sweet memories of childhood. His resoluteness in the face of death has been transformed into the recollection of the carefree days of his childhood. Beguiled by nostalgia, he recoils from the possibility of ending all possibilities. The appeal of eternity, which had tantalized and tortured his divided soul, has been displaced by the revitalized and nourishing remembrances of childhood. For the moment, Faust's equanimity summons him back to life; his rebirth is sealed by the coherence of the volatility of the ponderous moment, in which he stepped up to the abyss, and the wistful reminiscences of his youth. Though Faust will fall prey once again to the promise of the ecstasy of an eternal moment, he will remain grounded in his rejection of the divided unity of the unchangeable and the contingent. The limitations that inhere in the temporal circumscription, through which his past reverberates when he confronts his finiteness, illuminates the salutary power of fulfilling possibilities. Steadfastly on the brink of the abyss he yields to his personal limits and cognitively discovers the passage to the liberating practical activity which occupies him in Part II.

In the litany of things that he curses in his study after meeting

Tradition and other inheritances must be personally appropriated to be useful.

Mephisto, there at the top of the list is the self-induced arrogance that the mind can indeed infiltrate what is beyond its range (1590-1595). Anathema to itself, the mind's delusional self-esteem covets solutions to questions it raises but which are beyond its capability. Faust does not possess the clockwork composure of a Kant who unabashedly outlined how reason is inherently attentive to composing experience. Faust will choose to rebuke the venerable philosophic foundation of the Logos upon which western theology and philosophy rest. In an idiosyncratic exegesis he will discover, like the slave in Hegel's master-slave configuration, the transcendent and self-creating powers of work.²⁰

Perhaps anachronistically, but still with equal force, Goethe, through Faust, identifies the transformational critique that Feuerbach and Marx would use to rectify Hegel's panlogism. The maneuver, for Faust, is inspired by a moment of linguistic chauvinism in which, oddly enough, he turns to the scripture for consolation. The passage he selects reflects the drama of his divided self, the dynamic of the irreconcilable poles that have tempted him with a unity, the discord of mind and nature that sense the identity in his constitution. Faust's revision of the opening line of John to "In the beginning was the deed" (*Im Anfang war der Tat*) reflects a preoccupation to which Goethe gave fuller expression in *Wilhelm Meister*.²¹

²⁰ Goethe publicly declared his debt to Kantian philosophy. The finitude of existence that is portrayed in Faust has its epistemological analogue in Kant. Ernst Cassirer cites Goethe's poem *Grenzen der Menschheit* as an expression of the human limitation stipulated in Kant's metaphysics. See Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe*, translated by James Gutmann, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Hermann Randall, Jr., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), 78-79. The message in this poem by Goethe corresponds to the intent of Faust's resignation in the "Forest and Cavern" scene. Goethe's Faust dramatizes the perils that confront anyone bold enough to compare themselves to the gods; his *Grenzen der Menschheit* is lighter in tone:

*Denn mit Göttern
Soll sich nicht messen
Irgendein Mensch.
Hebt er sich aufwärts
Und berührt
Mit dem Scheitel die Sterne,
Die unsichern Sohlen,
Und mit ihm spiele
Wolken und Wind.*

²¹ See Charles Frederick Harrold's study *Carlyle and German Thought 1819-1834* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) in which the reciprocity of renunciation and work in Goethe's work is explored. Harrold remarks in footnote 51 to Chapter VIII that Carlyle's view of Faust's exegesis would be of interest; Carlyle, apparently,

The glorification of action in this exegesis is the ideological thread that connects Faust's romantic pursuit in Part I to the ambitious engineering project at the end of Part II. Each social setting is determined by the relativist realization that what one personally perceives is there to be appropriated. This exaltation of the immediacy of subjective experience is contrasted with the quietism and enslavement associated with projecting a care-taking religious essence onto the heavens. Goethe poetically captures this aspect of Marx's critique in his conversation with Care whose literary legacy was established by Virgil before him. Planting one's feet firmly in the ground (the *Diessigkeit* of thinking according to Marx) is the antidote for the fool who while looking to the clouds blinks and fantasizes his own image (11443-45). It may seem ironic that Faust, who had already learned how distracting the quest for otherworldly spirits can be, has his final conversation with the character of Care. While Care may appear like an apparition, as Mephisto did through the guise of a dog in Part I, Care is not a ghostly presence. Care does not appear after magical incantations. Care is identified as an anxiety-provoking companion (11432) that is synonymous with human experience.²²

Faust's original doubt that eternity can be clearly viewed comes with the moment of revelatory resignation in the "Forest and Cavern" scene. Solitary and sensing deep affinity for all that surrounds him, Faust is presented with a view of himself in which he experiences that perfection will never be the lot of humanity (3217-3250). Through the climactic moment of spiritual resignation, in which Faust's antipathy to Mephisto is heightened, and the praxical resolution of the Johannine text, Goethe offers in dramatic form the same formula of resignation and work that so informed Thomas Carlyle's reading of *Wilhelm Meister*. It is the very prescription for

*Perfection
will never be
humanity's
lot.*

restricted himself to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* in pursuing the theme of renunciation and work in Goethe.

²² See Konrad Burdach's essay "Faust und die Sorge" in the *Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwiss und Geistesgesch*, Volume I, 1923, 1-60. Burdach traces Goethe's character of Care to antique literary sources which are also the basis for Martin Heidegger's conceptualization of *Sorge* in *Being and Time*. While Heidegger extracts the particular form of social concern identified as *Fürsorge* from the antique rendering of Care, Goethe is primarily occupied with *Sorge* as the activating principle of political projects. The destruction of the infamously kind pair Philemon and Baucis certifies that Faust is not concerned with the welfare of even those who are renowned for doing good. His patriarchal ambition is to alter Nature to accommodate a new people.

creativity that is hammered out among the characters in the prologue in the theater, and it is recapitulated in Faust's final credo which claims that freedom and life are deserving of those who daily master them anew.²³

²³ Carlyle compared Novalis's stoical imperative *Selbsttödtung* to Goethe's principle of *Entsagen*. He sensed the moral direction implicit in both these themes. In the *Wanderjahre* Carlyle signaled the ascetic quality of this canon, but he was also concerned with the wider implications for a *Lebensphilosophie*. He quotes the section in the *Wanderjahre* that is actually subtitled *Die Entsagenden* in which Goethe claims that without resignation/renunciation access to life is unthinkable. See Harrold's footnote 52 to Chapter VII. The Faust story is obviously not concerned with the virtue of abstinence but with the recognition of limitations that enable creativity. See Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Volume XXVII (London Centenary Edition, 1899), 39, in which Carlyle lists aphorisms from Novalis's *Fragments*. Novalis claimed that the self-renunciation of which he spoke was a condition for doing true philosophy.