Colin Joseph O'Brien

AVENUES IN TO Literature

Avenues into Literature

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DEDICATED
to
My Father
(Late Dr. A.P. O'Brien, Ex-Professor
Banaras Hindu University)

Foreword

I have great pleasure in recommending Dr. C.J. O' Brien's book entitled *Avenues into Literature* which is a collection of various topics on different forms of literature. A youngman from a prominent, though a small state of India, i. e. Orissa, has made a bold attempt to express his ideas in different essays which will be of great help and interest to the young students of literature. Although it is first attempt of Dr. O' Brien in the field of literary criticism in a limited way, it expresses his genuine interest in English literature as well as his intense desire to acquaint the young students with some of the literary topics which aim at giving a critical insight into some of the important problems of English literature.

The book appears to be particularly designed for Indian students, and I hope it will serve some purposes of those students who are really interested in English literature. Dr. O' Brien has expressed some of his views and critical comments and they do deserve serious consideration of all thoughtful Indian students.

I wish allsucc ss to Dr. O' Brien in his bold attempt in getting this published.

Professor and Head of the
Post-Graduate Deptt. of
English Ravenshaw
College-Cuttack.
(M.Q. Khan)

Preface

Literature deals with the values of life. These values are reflected through various forms of Literature—Poetry, Drama, Fiction and Criticism, belonging to different centuries.

> "Each century, as we look back on it, has its own shape and quality, but the seventeenth century overlaps into the eighteenth, the eighteenth into the nineteenth, the nineteenth into the twentieth, the stream is continuous, indivisible, yet each stretch of water has it unique character".[1]

All the articles deal with the varied forms in the garb of various topics of literature.

Finally, I must conclude by thanking my esteemed Professor, Dr. M.Q. Khan of Ravensvaw College, Cuttack, for enlightening me and going through the manuscript.

English Department,

Salipur College,
(Utkal University)
ORISSA.

C.J. O'BRIEN

1. *Fifty years of English Literature*, 1900-1950 by R.A. Scott-James, published in 1951, 167, page 1 (Longmans).

Contents

1

Christopher Marlowe : Dr. Faustus

The text of Dr. Faustus raises more problems than that of any other of Marlowe's works. The play scored an immediate success, received many performances between 1594 and 1597, and the title role became a favourite of Edward Alleyn, the most famous of early Elizabethan tragedians, who had created the heroic style of acting in the part of Tamburlaine. The earliest surviving edition, published in 1604 by Thomas Bushell, contains some 1,500 lines and is referred to by editors as the 'A' text (A1). In 1616 John Wright who had meanwhile acquired the copyright published a new version of the play which runs to about 2,100 lines and is now known as the 'B' text or B1. The additional materials relate almost entirely to the scenes in the middle of the play which describe Faustus' achievements at Rome and in Germany. The theory elaborated by W.W. Greg, the most eminent of modern Marlovian editors, is that the 'A' text is an abridged reconstruction, probably made from memory of an earlier text, and that it is the latter which has come down to us as 'B'. Nevertheless from a literary, as distinct from a textual point of view, a number of critics regard 'A' (even when the texts closely resemble one another) as a finer and therefore more characteristically Marlovian work than 'B'. Professor Greg has produced a parallel text edition which prints 'A' and 'B' on

opposite pages and provides the most satisfactory method of studying the play. The present study refers to Professor John Jump's edition in the 'Revels plays series' (Methuen). This is mainly based upon 'B', uses modern spelling and follows the example of A1 and B1 in arranging the play as a succession of scenes, instead of imposing an artificial five-act division as Greg and Boas have done. Professor Jump's arrangement of the scenes is grouped as follows :

Scenes 1— 4 correspond to Act I Scenes 1—4
Scenes 5— 7 correspond to Act II Scenes 1—3
Scenes 8—10 correspond to Act III Scenes 1—3
Scenes 11—17 correspond to Act IV Scenes 1—7
Scenes 19—20 correspond to Act V Scenes 1—3

The date of composition of *Dr. Faustus* has been much disputed. At first it was generally believed to have been an early work, written immediately after Tamburlaine. Subsequent research has tended to the view that this was Marlowe's last play written in 1592, barely a year before the poet met his death, stabbed in a tavern brawl. This conclusion upon the development of the more flexible type of blank verse in which Faustus' final speeches are written, and partly upon the probability, cogently argued by W.W. Greg, that the play's principal source, an English translation from the German entitled *The History of the Damnable Life of Dr. Faustus*, was not published until 1592. There are important differences of detail between the English and German versions of the story, and it is always the English source which Marlowe follows. It is well worth studying the relationship of *The Damnable Life* to the play, both for the resemblances (the dramatist frequently borrows episodes, ideas and whole phrases), and for the dissimilarities, which often illuminate the originality of Marlow's conception. Other modern scholars, however, such as Kocher, Mahood and Steenan consider that the play shows many more affinities to the heroic dignity of *Tamburlaine* than to the bitter and deflating mood of *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II* and in the absence of conclusive evidence, support the earlier date of composition.

The authorship of the play presents yet another unsolved problem. The conception is undoubtedly Marlowe's, but the execution is uneven in quality and inconsistent in its details : not only does the writing alternate between sublime poetry and indifferent hack work in verse or prose, but the character of Faustus as displayed in the Wittenberg scenes is quite different from that of the mischievous miracle worker and practical joker at the Vatican or the Imperial Court. In effect the passages which show clear evidence of Marlowe's hand occupy less than half of the play. These are Scenes 1, 3, 5 and the first part of 6 (roughly up to the appearance of the Seven Deadly Sins), the first part of 8 (which describes the approach to Rome), Chorus 1 and 2, the last three scenes and the epilogue. The remainder comprises most of the prose scenes of comic relief, played by Wagner, the scholars and their servants, and the central section of the play (scenes 8-18) which represents Faustus' adventures on his travels. Some of these scenes are in prose, others in a straightforward, sententious and distinctly pedestrian blank verse that lacks the speed, the resonance and the imaginative power which distinguish Marlowe's poetry at its best. The most likely candidate as co-author is generally considered to be Samuel Rowley, an actor and journeyman writer who collaborated with many of the playwrights of his time : a case has also been made out, less convincingly, for the collaboration of Thomas Nashe.

Whatever the nature of the collaboration, the writing of the play presents curious blend of old and new dramatic styles and conventions. The metrical flexibility and imaginative depth of Faustus' speeches in the final scene point forward to the use which Shakespeare was to make of the soliloquy in his great tragedies. On the other hand such devices as the 'pastime' of the Seven Deadly Sins (Scene 6), or the appearance of the Good and Bad Angels, look back to the staging of the medieval morality plays. The characterization also follows the conventions of the medieval rather than of the Elizabethan theatre, with the exception of Faustus and Mephostophilis. The other actors in the drama are personifications of abstract qualities or historical puppets

rather than characters in the Shakespearean sense, while the blending of crudely farcical interludes with serious speculations on the subject of redemption of damnation is likewise characteristic of the medieval taste for juxtaposing the highest with lowest.

The story of Dr. Faustus, a German scholar who was believed to have sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for the enjoyment of supernatural powers, originated in the early sixteenth century. But the theme of the legend, the human impulse to seek out forbidden knowledge and transcend the limits of mortality, is one of the oldest in the mythology of mankind. It occurs especially often in Judaic literature, first of all, of course, in the fable of the Tree of knowledge and the disobedience of Adam and Eve. It reappears with the story of Simon Magus, a sorcerer who tried to purchase from the Apostles the power to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost, who conjured up the spirit of Helen of Troy, and was killed when his attempted flight to Heaven was frustrated by St. Peter. Jewish literature is likewise the source of the idea of a pact made with the Devil to obtain magical powers, as also of the details of the ritual which Faustus employs to summon up the spirits of Hell. And, from another point of veiw, the suspicion that intellectual curiosity is sacrilegious and evil has persisted ever since the triumph of Christianity exalted divine revelation over human science. In the sixteenth century (and indeed later) the distinction between science and magic was by no means clear : to the popular mind the scientist and the magician resembled each other in that each had acquired a degree of control over the elements and thus to some extent emancipated himself alike from the Commandments and from the laws of nature.

In any event it was no coincidence that the legend of Dr. Faustus came to birth in Europe when it did. The play echoes the widespread conflict which was taking place at this time between the traditional faith of Christianity and the sudden and intoxicating awareness of human capacities which were becoming evident on every hand in the discovery of new worlds, new arts, new sciences. It was Marlowe who first perceived the dramatic possibilities of the story

which is a natural extension of his first study in human ambition and self-sufficiency, *Tamburlaine*. In this play he explores the desire for a god-like power over the life and death of others. In *Faustus* his theme is the desire for knowledge which in the eyes of his protagonist (again, like Tamburlaine, a humbly born self-made hero) far exceeds the authority of the ruler.

> All things that move between quiet poles,
> Shall be at my command : Emperors and Kings
> Are but obeyed in their several provinces.
> But his dominion that exceeds in this
> Stretches as far as doth the mind of man (I. 55-59)

and in this quest Faustus is remorselessly spurred on by the typically Marlovian sentiment that 'peril is the chiefest way to happiness'.

At the same time this powerful impulse towards self-reliance is offset by a crushing sense of fatalism. The celebrated Renaissance boast 'Men can do all things if they will' is followed by total disillusionment when humanity discovers its limitations. It is between these extremes of exultation and despair that the action of Dr. Faustus is plotted. A sentence from *The Damnable Life* indicates the spiritual trap in which the hero is caught.

> Dr. Faustus was even pondering with himself how he might get loose from so damnable an end as he had given himself, both of body and soul : but his repentance was like to that of Cain and Judas, he thought his sins greater than God could forgive, and here upon rested his mind.

In this context it becomes necessary to remember the difference between the modern attitude to this theme and that of Marlowe and his contemporaries. The modern reader, influenced no doubt by Goethe's and other authors' treatment of the subject, is perhaps primarily moved by curiosity : he is interested in the hero's psychology, he wishes to know what

gratification of the intellect, spirit or senses Faustus received from his twenty-four years of supernatural power. Marlowe's interest, by contrast, is primarily religious : he is concerned with Faustus' gradual estrangement from his salvation. In other words, the tragedy hinges upon Faustus' inability to repent (which is caused by his despair), and it is to this theme that the playwright again and again returns.

Dr. Faustus' opening soliloquy shows him at the returning point of his career. He has mastered the philosophy, the learned professions, the experimental sciences of his day but, as he ponders the nature and purpose of his studies, he rejects every one in turn. He chafes against the accepted limits of intellectual and spiritual discipline. 'Settle thy studies', begin : these terms suggest an impatient desire to embrace a new and radical choice which will change the whole purpose and direction of his mental processes—in a word : 'begin to live'. He finds no ideal of service in the practice of medicine, or of justice in the study of the law. These professions seem to him mere drudgery, because no amount of proficiency in them can exempt him from the unwelcome reminder

> Yet art thou still but Faustus and a man

Lastly he turns to divinity, not in a spirit of humility but rather as the subject most worthy of his intellectual powers. But this too he dismisses by a deliberate distortion of the text of the Bible. The first quotation : 'The reward of sin is death', taken from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, VI, 23, should be followed by the words, 'but the gift of God is eternal life', and the second, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves' (1st Epistle of St. John, I, 8) by the words, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins'. These texts on the subject of redemption would have been known by heart to many of Marlowe's audience, who could not have failed to notice the sophistry of their omission. By suppressing them, Faustus takes the first of his wilful steps away from his salvation.

The appearances of the good and bad angels at this point, and at later intervals in the play, mark the various

phases in Faustus' temptation. He succumbs at once to the lure of wealth and power, and when at the end of Scene 1 he joins forces with two German magicians, Valdes and Cornelius, he has already chosen a course of intellectual degradation which will frustrate the very search for knowledge for which he is ready to barter his soul.

In Scene 3 Faustus pursues temptation a step further and succeeds in conjuring up the Devil Mephostophilis. This brings together the two personages whose interaction dominates the entire play. Man is directly confronted with the representative of evil (whom he has summoned on his own initiative) and Marlowe draws a sharp contrast between the characteristics of the two. Faustus is arrogant and overconfident in his newly-found skill in magic. He imagines Mephostophilis to be his personal attendant, 'full of obediences and humility'. Mephostophilis makes it clear first that he owes no obedience to Faustus:

I am a servant to great Lucifer

And may not follow thee without his leave and secondly that he has come not because of the power of Faustus' spells, but because he seems a promising candidate for damnation. Faustus on the other hand remains oblivious of his peril, boasts that he has no fear of hell and urges Mephostophilis to learn manly fortitude. His egotism blinds him to Mephostophilis' suffering, which consists not of the crude torments of traditional hell-fire, but of the anguish of the soul which is severed from God.

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it. Mephostophilis on the other hand is quite unlike the satanic tampter presented by Goethe or Gounod. He does not attempt to lure his victim: it is Faustus who arrogantly despatches him with the offer of his soul:

Go bear these tidings to great Lucifer

More than any other Elizabethan play, *Dr. Faustus* relies upon the soliloquy. Much of Faustus' own role consists of

solitary meditation, and many of the lines which, technically speaking, are delivered by other characters, could be regarded as the voice of conscience or temptation. The opening of the fifth scene marks the next stage on Faustus' downward path. He has now fallen into despair, a state of mind in which the victim rejects consolation and prevents himself from seeking deliverance. Faustus has turned his will and his understanding upside down. The trust and resolve of which he is still capable are to be diverted from God and devoted to the Devil:

When Mephostophilis shall stand by me

What power can hurt me? Faustus, thou art safe. The 'glad tidings' which he impatiently awaits from Lucifer turn out to be the demand that he shall write a testament to sign away his soul. This he does, in spite of the warning he receives when his blood refuses to flow and the words '*Home, fuge*' (Fly O man!) appears on his arm. He seals the bargain with the blasphemous quotation '*Consummatum est*', the last words of Christ on the Cross.

The pact completed, Faustus is free to pursue his quest for knowledge and for pleasure. His first request again betrays the superficiality which is his besetting weakness. Because he is wanton and lascivious, he asks for a wife. But this demand, since marriage is a sacrament, Mephostophilis cannot fulfil and he is obliged to explain that what Faustus really wants is a mistress.

At the beginning of the sixth scene Faustus experiences yet another crisis of conscience and is torn between a lingering desire to repent and his terror of the consequences if he does so. Here with the lines:

Have I not made blind Homer sing to me
Of Ariadne's love and Oenon's death?
And hath not he, that built the walls of Thebes
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp
Made music with my Mephostophilis?

Why should I die then or basely despair? (VI 26-31)

Marlowe touches upon another important facet of his hero's

character, which he shares with Tamburlaine, a love of beauty, a power of imagination and an ability to express it in words, qualities which in Faustus' case produce a fatal tendency to invest sin with heroic illusions. Faustus as it were hypnotizes himself and succumbs to temptations which he, not Mephostophilis, has conjured up.

In the dialogue which follows concerning astrology and meteorology (VI 35-75) Faustus has not extended his knowledge far before he is abruptly halted in his enquiry

Now tell me who made the world? to which Mephostophilis refuses point blank to reply, since devils are prohibited from naming God. This provokes a final rebellion from Faustus, so serious that, for once, the Good Angel is allowed the last word, and Faustus' prayer:

> Ah Christ my Saviour, my Saviour
> Help to save distressed Faustus' soul

produces the immediate entry of Lucifer. This is in a sense the point of no return in the play, the last occasion on which Faustus might have summoned the strength to redeem himself. As it is he is paralysed by the horror of Lucifer's appearance and at once promises to renounce his salvation.

In the central section of the play, (Scenes 7-17) the tension is noticeably relaxed. The battle for Faustus' soul has been fought : what follows is a diversion in which he enjoys his (largely illusory) gains. Marlowe's hand is only occasionally traceable, and in general these episodes may be regarded as following a scenario which he may have outlined, but allowed to be executed for the most part by others. The impression created by the two central characters undergoes a decided change. Mephostophilis has become the genial, worldly wise boon companion, while Faustus oscillates between youthful high spirits, love of mischief, and occasional premonitions of his approaching doom.

With Scene 18 and the opening of the fifth act the vanities of Faustus' miracle-working grand tour are behind us, and Marlowe's mature style re-appears as the play moves