

THE FAUST MYTH

Religion and the Rise of
Representation

David Hawkes



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For Simten Gurac

Magic disintegrates the individual.

—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,
*Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹

To say is to do: that is today's motto.

—Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, *Devil on the Cross*²

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Introduction: Selling the Soul

I

Today's world is ruled by signs. This is no wild postmodernist theory but an empirically observable fact. Money, which is nothing more than a system of signs, has over the last four centuries mutated into an independent, self-generating power that dictates the policies of nations and the lives of individuals. Technology allows the reproduction of images on a scale undreamt of before the twentieth century. In politics, the manipulation of images has long obscured discussion of substantive issues. The power of autonomous signification defines our era's philosophy, psychology, linguistics and, above all, its economics. All of these disciplines, in their postmodern forms, privilege what linguistics calls the "performative," rather than the "denotative," aspect of signs. They all assume that signs do things, that the objective world is constructed for us via the realm of representation, and that there is nothing real that exists outside signification. They rarely pause to consider the ethical ramifications of this assumption, however, and that is what I intend to do in this book. My argument is that the notion of the performative sign corresponds with remarkable precision to the Judeo-Christian concept of the Satanic, and that, if this is true, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Western world has sold its soul to Satan.¹

That statement would have seemed eccentric to many intellectuals of the last century, who often took the naively literalist view that Satan "does not exist." They meant by this that there is no ruddy individual with horns and hooves, goatee and widow's peak, who makes it his business to tempt and betray the human race. But this figure was only ever a symbol, a pictorial aid to the imaginations of the uneducated, and when we turn our attention to the philosophical and psychological tendencies which that symbol represents, we find that they are more powerful today than ever before. It is often said that the twenty-first century is a "post-secular" age and recently, in the wake of the dramatic resurgence of religious forces in the political arena, many thinkers have returned with a new gravity to theological concepts and categories once dismissed as obsolete.² The mood was captured by Stanley Fish in a July, 2005 interview with the *Chronicle of Higher*

Education: "When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion."³

This return to religion entails the acknowledgment that theology never disappeared, but rather went underground, so that originally theological concepts continued to influence the ostensibly secular discourse of the early modern world. As Julia Lupton argues, "secularization and Christianization are bound up in a dialectic that raises what it cancels; hence what we generally call 'secular literature' is actually Christian literature in a displaced but heightened form."⁴ This book examines the origins of the Faust story in an overtly religious environment, but also its "afterlife" in the world of Enlightenment and modernity. I suggest that Faust provided the increasingly secular world of the sixteenth through twentieth centuries with a mythological means of ethically evaluating both the rise to power of autonomous representation, and the closely related phenomenon of the death of the human individual, subject, or "soul." Before turning to the myth itself, it will therefore be necessary to define these terms.

The concept of the "performative sign" was catapulted into philosophical prominence by J.L. Austin's *How to do Things with Words* (1962), by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Austin in his famous essay "Signature Event Context," and by Derrida's subsequent angry exchange with J.R. Searle in the pages of *Glyph* and *Limited, Inc.* This conversation has become a notorious instance of the tendency of Continental and Anglo-American philosophers to talk past each other, and it has also achieved a quasi-political significance. The inheritors of Derrida frequently identify themselves with a variety of radical causes, especially various forms of identity politics, while the disciples of Austin and Searle usually claim that their thought is disinterested and apolitical. Derrida implies, and his followers loudly insist upon, an ethical dimension to the debate about the performative sign. This dimension is either absent from or unconscious in the thought of Austin and Searle, and this accounts for the grumpy bemusement with which the participants in this debate regard each other's positions.

Austin distinguishes between "constative" statements, which address themselves to an objective state of affairs that is assumed to be extra-linguistic ("the house is blue"), and "performative" statements, which in themselves constitute an objective effect ("I now declare you man and wife"). Unlike constative statements, performatives are not either true or false, but either successful or unsuccessful ("felicitous" or "infelicitous" in Austin's terms). This distinction depends upon the

context in which the utterance takes place, and on the subject position of the person who makes the statement. "I now pronounce you man and wife" or "this country is at war with Germany" will be infelicitous speech acts unless they are said by the appropriate official in the appropriate circumstances. What the performative does not depend upon, however, is the conscious intention of the speaking subject. The couple will be objectively married after the priest declares them so, even if he should subjectively intend them to remain single. Similarly, if I say "I promise to marry you" while secretly determined to remain a bachelor, the statement is neither false nor infelicitous. We may think that the words constitute either a true or a false description of an "inner" state or "intention," but in fact the promise has been effected by the mere recital of the phrase. There is no inner state, no immaterial spirit, no conscious or autonomous subject—no soul—in the realm of the performative.

What is more, as Austin proceeds to consider the various ways in which performative statements can be infelicitous, the opposition between performative and constative begins to break down. He finds that constative statements can be felicitous or infelicitous as well as true or false: "When we issue any utterance whatsoever, are we not 'doing something?'"⁵ In the book's early chapters, Austin assumes that most speech acts are constative, and that performative speech acts are rare, anomalous exceptions. By the end, however, he has been led to the conclusion that, while all constative speech acts are also performative, not all performative speech acts are constitutive. When I say "the house is blue" my statement is simultaneously either true or false and either felicitous or infelicitous; but when I say "I promise to marry you" only the latter polarity pertains. The category of the performative, and the opposition between felicitous and infelicitous, turns out to be more fundamental than the category of the constative and the opposition between true and false.

Derrida interprets Austin's reluctant prioritizing of the performative as implying the demise of such basic metaphysical concepts as the external objective referent, the conscious speaking subject and the logical opposition between truth and falsehood. The fact that all constative statements are performative but not all performatives are constative is held to demolish the Western metaphysics of presence, which Derrida dubs "logocentrism." Truth, in Derrida's view, is a textual "effect," imposed by what Nietzsche called "a mobile army of metaphors,"⁶ and this argument involves the status of truth in political ethics. To advocate any form of "logocentrism" is often viewed as politically reactionary and even ethically reprehensible, and the

category of the performative acquires an aura of subversion and freedom. In much postmodernist rhetoric, the performative becomes a liberator, come to burst the chains of intentionality and to loose discourse from the repressive constraints of essentialist subjectivity. This rhetorical (for it is not logical) association of the performative with liberation is the major reason why analytic philosophers see Derrida's interpretation of Austin as a monstrous distortion.

Since Plato, philosophers have usually assumed that language is a medium via which the thoughts or ideas of a prelinguistic subject are communicated. Using this medium, the subject makes statements about the objective world, and depending on whether the subjective idea corresponds to the objective situation, these statements may be either true or false. As Derrida points out, however, Austin's category of the "performative" disrupts these metaphysical assumptions:

Austin had to free the analysis of the performative from the authority of the *value of truth*, from the opposition true/false, at least in its classical form, occasionally substituting for it the value of force, of difference of force (illocutionary or perlocutionary force). . . . The performative is a "communication" which does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content guarded by its own aiming at truth.⁷

In Derrida's view, however, Austin has not recognized the radical implications of his own discovery. What Austin claims of performative utterances—that they produce effects rather than describe situations, that they can be felicitous or infelicitous rather than true or false, that they do not derive their meanings from the intentions of a prelinguistic subject—all of these are, according to Derrida, true of language in general, and therefore of human experience as a whole. Our experience of the world is made possible by, as well as expressed through, a generalized, differential system of signification that Derrida calls "writing." Derrida thus arrives at the Nietzschean position that there is no doer behind the deed, and that truth, consciousness, ideas, and the subject itself are effects of the differential play of signification. Every thing is a sign, and all signs are performative. Derrida's critique of Austin follows the same logic as his deconstruction of Saussure, in which the signified is relegated to the status of a mere function of the free play of signifiers. In both cases, as in postmodernist philosophy as a whole, the objective world dissolves in a sea of representation.

At this stage, the slightly stuffy analytics of Austin explode into a radical manifesto for ideological revolution, the destruction of Western philosophy, and the abolition of any and all hierarchical

oppositions. Derrida's Dantesque rhetoric soars into the firmament of revolutionary ardor, as the insurrection of the performative frees the Other from the Bastille of dialectics. Quite suddenly, it seems that we are no longer talking about cold philosophy:

An opposition of metaphysical concepts (for example, speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must . . . practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system. . . . For example, writing, as a classical concept, carries within it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is these predicates . . . whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a "new" concept of writing which also corresponds to whatever always has *resisted* the former organization of forces, which has always constituted the *remainder* irreducible to the dominant force which organized the—to say it quickly—logocentric hierarchy. (329–330)

Derrida here gives his rhetoric a political and ethical coloring that was immediately picked up by younger philosophers and, especially, literary critics who were searching for theoretical ammunition in the struggles against racial and sexual discrimination that dominated Leftist discourse during the 1970s and 1980s. The linguistic category of the performative suddenly found itself burdened by an immense freight of ideological baggage. To the horror of Austin's Anglo-American successors, people began to suggest that performative speech-acts were somehow morally superior to constative ones. In his reply to "Signature Event Context," J.R. Searle took Derrida to task for his unwarranted assumption that Austin's description of infelicitous performatives as "parasitic" on the felicitous involved an ethical hierarchy:

Derrida supposes that the term "parasitic" involves some kind of moral judgment; that Austin is claiming that there is something bad or anomalous or not "ethical" about such discourse . . . [but] nothing could be further from the truth. The sense in which, for example, fiction is parasitic on nonfiction is the sense in which the definition of the rational numbers in number theory might be said to be parasitic on the definition of the natural numbers, or the notion of one logical constant in a logical system might be said to be parasitic on another, because the former is defined in terms of the latter. Such parasitism is a relation of logical dependence; it does not imply any moral judgment and certainly

not that the parasite is somehow immorally sponging off the host (does one really have to point this out?).⁸

The history of philosophy in the thirty years since Searle wrote these words has definitively answered his final question in the affirmative. In fairness to Derrida, Austin seems to have had some inkling that his theory might be used to subversive effect. He points out that his categorization of speech-acts is “quite enough to play Old Harry with two fetishes which I admit to an inclination to play Old Harry with, viz. (1) the true/false fetish, (2) the value/fact fetish” (151). “Old Harry” is Edwardian slang for Satan, and Austin was naughtily proud of the whiff of sulphur attending his genteel challenge to the binary oppositions of classical epistemology. But he can hardly have foreseen the deluge of radical nihilism that has flooded through his modest chink in the dyke of Western metaphysics.

Anti-logocentrism stakes its claim to the ethico-political high ground on its alleged theoretical contribution to identity politics. The empirical, social effects of binary oppositions such as male/female, white/black and straight/queer are held to refute Searle’s insistence that the dialectical process by which one term of an opposition is defined by means of the other has no ethical or political consequences. Derrida’s deconstruction of Austin’s constative/performative binary, it is claimed, reveals the arbitrary nature of such polarities and thus facilitates their overthrow. In recent years, the philosopher most closely associated with the politics of the performative has been Judith Butler. The reasoning behind Butler’s deployment of the concept runs as follows:

If gender attributes . . . are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. . . . As performance which is performative, gender is an “act,” broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. . . . Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent.⁹

In this book, I want to question this assumption that the predominance of the performative is ethically beneficial and politically liberating.

I will argue that, since the sixteenth century, the myth of Doctor Faustus has provided an arena in which the performative sign has been defined as a magical, and thus Satanic, phenomenon. Advocates of the performative are quite correct to note that its rise to power has impaired the coherence of the unitary, rational human subject. Far from finding this a cause for celebration, however, the Faust story describes this process as the alienation, and ultimately as the death, of the human soul.

The alienation of the soul is a historical fact, as well as a philosophical concept. Although the idea of the soul mutates and evolves through various historical manifestations, it is consistently understood as the *essence* of a living individual. But the antiessentialist philosophies of the late twentieth century have discredited the intellectual concept of an inherent human essence, while the forces that drive our everyday lives have gone a long way toward extinguishing it empirically, so that many people no longer experience themselves as having a soul at all. In this sense the decline of belief in the soul is itself a form of alienation: the concept of the soul, once indispensable to any theoretical or personal thought about the human subject, has become alien to mainstream philosophy, psychology, and to many people's everyday experience of the world. Not since ancient times have such modes of thought as materialism, skepticism, pragmatism, and empiricism been so triumphant within the academy, nor have they come so naturally to the popular mind, and these schools have throughout history been formidable opponents of the concept of the soul. The main purpose of this book is to find some reasons for the demise of the soul as an intellectual concept, and also as an object of everyday experience, by showing how the Faust myth connects the performative power of representation to the soul's alienation. As a further preliminary, then, we must ask what is meant by the "soul," and how it can be conceived as "alienated."

II

The early history of the soul reveals three distinct but overlapping oppositions. One is initiated by the recognition that individual human beings possess an essence, something that defines their identity and distinguishes them from others. This recognition leads to a distinction between this essence and the perceptible appearances in which it is manifested (Aristotle refers to these as the "substance" and the "accidents" respectively). A related concept of the soul arises from the

recognition of a distinction between subject and object. From the fact that we have experience of ourselves, human beings deduce the existence in us of something that is experienced (an object) and something that experiences (a subject), and the soul is often identified with the latter pole of this opposition. By the time of Plato, a third conception of the soul had emerged, characterized by its immaterial or spiritual nature, and contrasted with the material flesh of the body. These dichotomies (essence/appearance, subject/object, spirit/flesh) are not mutually exclusive, of course, and much ancient thought shows the influence, in varying degrees, of all three conceptions of the soul: as substance, as subject, and as spirit.

The earliest distinction seems to be between essence and appearance. The Hebrew Bible uses the word *nephesh* to refer to the essence of a living individual. The verb "to be" is transitive: we not merely *are*, we are *something*. *Nephesh* is used to refer to the self, the person: it designates essential identity, whether human or animal. It is not a property of an individual, it is not something that belongs to a person, *nephesh* is what an individual is. The very act of recognizing a *nephesh*, however, separates the knower from the known, and thus also initiates the division of the human being into subject and object. For human beings, though not for animals, the *nephesh* is an object of experience, as well as a subject that experiences. The phrase "a man is his soul" simultaneously unifies and distinguishes between subject and object: hence Job can declare that "My soul is weary of my life (10:1) and Jonah can recall how 'my soul fainted within me' " (2:7).¹⁰ In this sense, the Old Testament term most commonly translated as "soul" refers to the totality of an individual being's subjective power considered as an objective essence. The notion of the soul is thus produced by an act of objectification, but this act also produces the idea of the subject, so that the term *nephesh* can also refer to the subject that experiences. This split within the soul, whereby it becomes both the knower and the known, is the seminal form of alienation, in the sense that the soul becomes other to itself.

One of the soul's basic properties is its inconvertibility. It is a unique essence, and so cannot legitimately be exchanged with anything else. It can, however, be made artificially equivalent to other things by a sinful act of human thought, and this process has conventionally been described as "selling" the soul. The idea that the soul must not be "sold" emerges almost simultaneously with the concept of the soul itself. In the Biblical phrase, the soul must not be "made merchandise,"¹¹ or conceived of as equivalent to anything other than itself. Any act of exchange assumes an equivalence between the objects being

exchanged, and to posit such equivalence between essence and appearance in the case of the soul threatens its very existence, since the soul is defined precisely as essence distinct from appearance. To sell the soul is to kill it and, as the idea of soul as substance blended with the notion of soul as spirit, the sale of the soul was often figured as an act of objectification.

The opposition between a spiritual soul and a material body is elaborated most thoroughly by Plato. Since the soul is defined against the body (the body is the soul's "other"), Plato understands the soul's alienation as consisting in its orientation toward the body. Such an orientation is alien to the soul's nature, since the body is what the soul is not. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates compares the soul to a chariot pulled by two horses: one winged, noble and obedient, the other earthbound, base and insolent. These represent a division within the soul, the good horse standing for the *logos*, or rational element, and the bad horse standing for *epithumiai*, the desires and passions. Only the *logos* is immortal, the *epithumiai* perish along with the body they serve. Plato indicates that souls that follow their *logos* will be rewarded after death, while those that are ruled by their *epithumiai* are to be punished. Here, the soul's alienation is internal: by allowing its appetitive element to dominate its rational side, the soul behaves unnaturally, and in that sense becomes alien to its own nature.

The *Republic* differs from the *Phaedrus* by posting a tripartite, rather than a dualistic, division within the soul. Socrates still identifies the rational element as the highest, but he divides the lower element discussed in the *Phaedrus* into two. He mentions the principle of emotion, and also a yet lower principle that "is denoted by the general term appetitive, from the extraordinary strength and vehemence of the desires of eating and drinking and the other sensual appetites which are the main elements of it; also money-loving, because such desires are generally satisfied by the help of money." (580e)¹² In fact, Socrates comes close to saying that this appetitive part of the soul *is* the desire for money: "If we were to say that the loves and pleasures of this third part were concerned with gain, we should then be able to fall back on a single notion; and might truly and intelligibly describe this part of the soul as loving gain or money" (581a). The self-alienation of the soul, the activity whereby it violates its own nature, is effectively equated with the lust for money. Elsewhere, Socrates attacks the Sophists for commodifying their teaching, and claims that the fact that they sell their art for money produces in them the view that truth is not rational but rhetorical. In the *Protagoras*, the practice of selling

wisdom is said to pollute the soul:

... knowledge is the food of the soul; and we must take care, my friend, that the Sophist does not deceive us when he praises what he sells, like the dealers wholesale or retail who sell the food of the body; for they praise indiscriminately all their goods, without knowing what are really beneficial or hurtful: neither do their customers know. . . . In like manner those who carry about the wares of knowledge, and make the round of the cities, and sell or retail them to any customer who is in want of them, praise them all alike; though I should not wonder . . . if many of them were really ignorant of their effect upon the soul; and their customers equally ignorant. . . . (313c)

Given the domineering influence of money over our own society, is not surprising that postmodern philosophers, following Derrida, express considerable sympathy for the Sophists. Socrates's advocacy of reason over rhetoric is frequently presented as an authoritarian ruse designed to impede the free market of ideas and establish a monopoly on truth. Many postmodernists observe that his privileging of reason over passion and appetite logically leads to other hierarchies, especially that of the soul over the body. And it is certainly true that the *Phaedo* presents the proper relation between the pair as one of domination: "When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve" (80a). The distinction between essence and appearance is here refracted into an opposition between soul and body. Because the soul is essence, say Socrates, it "resembles the divine," and the divine is "that which naturally orders and rules," while the mortal is "that which is subject and servant."

Historically, the taboo on selling the soul appears to reflect a deep rooted fear of slavery, which was a constant threat to the peoples of the ancient middle east. In slavery, the essence of an individual is indeed sold. The Israelites' experience of bondage in Egypt and Babylon became their definitive trope for describing the condition of "sin," and the association between slavery and sin is fundamental to both Hebrew and Greek conceptions of the alienated soul. To be a slave is to have one's *nephesh* translated into financial terms, as in Exodus 21:21, where a master is allowed to inflict a fatal beating on a slave on the grounds that "he is his money (*keceph*)." The slave is not an independent essence but an externalized part of his master's identity: a property. The ancient world understood that a human being's essential nature is violated when he is "made merchandise." The Hebrews and the Greeks concurred that to be made merchandise