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Faust

First Part

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



Translated and with an Introduction by Peter Salm
New German-English Edition



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Part I
by **Johann Wolfgang**
von Goethe

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Revised Edition
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and Notes by Peter Salm

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FAUST

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Before he was thirty, Goethe had proven himself a master of the novel, the drama, and lyric poetry. But even more impressive than his versatility was his unwillingness ever to settle into a single style or approach; whenever he used a literary form, he made of it something new.

Born in 1749 to a well-to-do family in Frankfurt, he was sent to Strasbourg to earn a law degree. There he met the poet-philosopher Herder, discovered Shakespeare, and began to write poetry. His play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) made him famous throughout Germany. He was invited to the court of the duke of Sachsen-Weimar, where he quickly became a cabinet minister. In 1774 his novel of Romantic melancholy, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, electrified all Europe. Soon he was at work on the first version of his *Faust*, which would finally appear as a fragment in 1790.

In the 1780s Goethe visited Italy and immersed himself in classical poetry. The next decade saw the appearance of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, his novel of a young artist's education, and a wealth of poetry and criticism. He returned to the *Faust* material around the turn of the century and completed Part 1 in 1808.

The later years of his life were devoted to a bewildering array of pursuits: research in botany and in a theory of colors, a novel (*Elective Affinities*), the evocative poems of the *West-Eastern Divan*, and his great autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*. In his eighties he prepared a forty-volume edition of his works; the forty-first volume, published after his death in 1832, was the second part of *Faust*.

Goethe's wide-ranging mind could never be confined to one form or one philosophy. When asked for the theme of his masterwork, *Faust*, he could only say, "From heaven through all the world to hell"; his subject was nothing smaller.

Aeschylus

Aristophanes

Anton Chekhov

Euripides

Dante

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Alexandre Dumas

Gustave Flaubert

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The Brothers Grimm

Homer

Victor Hugo

Henrik Ibsen

Franz Kafka

Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

Gaston Leroux

Niccolo Machiavelli

Thomas Mann

Plato

Edmond Rostand

Sophocles

Marie-Henri Beyle de Stendhal

Leo Tolstoy

Ivan Turgenev

Jules Verne

Virgil

Voltaire

INTRODUCTION

A man who called himself Faust, or Faustus, lived in the early part of the sixteenth century and left his traces in cities like Erfurt, Leipzig, and Wittenberg. We have the testimony of Martin Luther, for example, who in the context of one of his "Table Talks" (1536-7) incidentally referred to Faust, his contemporary, as a conjurer and necromancer who was wont to refer to the devil as his brother-in-law. In the mid-sixteenth century, about ten years after Faust's death, Philip Melanchthon, Luther's close friend and adjutant, spoke of Faust with a mixture of awe and fervent repugnance:

Once upon a time [Faust] intended to put on a spectacle in Venice and he said that he would fly into the heavens. Soon the devil took him away and pummelled and mauled him so terribly that, upon coming back to earth, he lay as if dead. But this time he did not die. (*Faust, eine Anthologie*, Reklam, Leipzig, n.d., p. 16, translation mine)

There are other bits of documentary evidence, but while Faust's goings-about are not ascertainable in detail, the legends proliferated and in due time began to envelop the scanty verifiable facts. Whatever contributed to the object lesson in the necromancer's reprobate life was worthy of being singled out and enlarged upon for the benefit of pious souls who lived in hope of salvation.

Magic and alchemy were related endeavors, and their practitioners inspired both awe and suspicion; awe because they could produce near-miracles in their vials, alembics, and retorts. They were, after all, in pursuit of ancient and persistent dreams: transmutating base metals into gold, discovering the elixir of eternal youth, achieving human flight, finding panaceas for the plague, and, finally, the dream of possessing superhuman wisdom. There were reports that the alchemists Paracelsus and Agrippa had performed feats that came close to attaining those wondrous goals, reports that, along with other fanciful tales, often became transmuted into Faustian lore.

On the other hand, the alchemists and necromancers were regarded with suspicion because to bring about their marvels in

the laboratory they “obviously” had to resort to black magic and hence had to be motivated by evil purposes, much like the powerful “evil scientist” of our day as he appears in animated cartoons on Saturday morning television. In the sixteenth century, an age of great religious turmoil and fervor, the alchemist-magicians were seen as tampering with the divine order of things. They furtively took minerals, crystals, and waters out of God’s nature and carried them off into their laboratories and, by compounding, boiling, distilling, and filtrating, forced them to minister to their dark purposes. They were “speculating the elements,” illicitly prying into deeply hidden mysteries. In our own century, rather more tolerant of scientific probings into nature’s inmost recesses, Thomas Mann put to good use a tenacious ambiguity still embedded in the language. In his novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947), he has the narrator play on the common root in the German words *versuchen*, meaning to try or test, *Versuch*, experiment, and *Versuchung*, temptation—all by way of evoking the alchemists’ suspect trade. Here is the passage in English:

But the enterprise of experimenting on Nature, of teasing her into manifestations, “tempting” her, in the sense of laying bare her workings by experiment . . . that all this . . . was itself the work of the “Tempter,” was the conviction of earlier epochs. (Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, New York, 1960, p. 17, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter)

Surely where there is temptation, the devil, or Mephistopheles, cannot be far behind. After all, Jesus himself, having been led into the wilderness by the Evil Spirit, had to confront three temptations, and three times he stood fast against their lure (Luke 4: 1–12).

The stories that were circulating about Faust were excellent raw material for the newly established printing shops. It should not be forgotten that during the sixteenth century printers were on the lookout for new, preferably sensational stories that might be offered to the public. After Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type, the books printed during the remainder of the fifteenth century were largely of a religious nature: editions of the Bible, collections of religious songs, and prayer books. But print-

ing presses constituted a big investment and became economically interesting only if they were also used for nonreligious ends. There were the medieval legends about Virgil, the Roman poet and author of the *Aeneid*, whom the Middle Ages had endowed with superhuman wisdom and prophetic powers; and much entertainment was found in the rude tricks perpetrated by the arch-prankster Till Eulenspiegel. The printers produced cheap, pamphletlike chapbooks and hawked them at street corners and country fairs. The hair-raising episodes in the life of the mighty conjurer Johann Faust, who in the end paid in full for his impious life, quickly captured the imagination of people looking to be both entertained and edified. The first Faust book, marketed by the printer Johannes Spiess in 1587, was a popular and financial success, which soon spread to the north of Europe by way of an English translation. It appealed powerfully to Christopher Marlowe, who was moved to compose *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* sometime between 1588 and 1593. Marlowe's drama, in turn, became the basis for puppet and marionette shows that were given at various communal festivities, a ready market for slapstick versions of the damnable life of Faust.

In his autobiography, Goethe noted that "the important puppet fable [of Faust] continued to echo and buzz many-toned within me" (*Poetry and Truth* II, 10). While Goethe's and Marlowe's dramas arose from the same folklore, there is a spiritual and emotional distance between them that reflects a seismic shift in cultural history. To be sure, in one respect all the stories—the puppet-theater versions and the crudely written *Faust* chapbooks—were alike: in order to acquire limitless riches and power, Faust had succumbed to the blandishments of the devil; for twenty-four years Mephistopheles would do Faust's bidding, after which he would collect his soul to be roasted in Hell. It was a plot made to order to be a warning not to do as Faust did—not to reach for powers that lay beyond one, not to "speculate the elements"—but to rest content with the approved answers that were provided by the Scriptures and by the inspired and approved ancient philosophers.

To the eighteenth century, however, the interpretation of the Faust story in the dim light of old biases and medieval superstitions must have seemed quaintly picturesque, superannuated,

and irrelevant to the sensibilities of modern man. Faust's chafing at his human limitations could no longer in itself be regarded as sinful. A new pride in the grandeur of the individual, fed by a rekindled confidence in the capacity of human reason to unravel nature's mysteries, made it possible to see in Faust not only the sinner but also a representative example of what is noble and divine in man: an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and an inborn need to explore—by spiritual as well as sensuous means—the limits of human potential. Indeed at the end of the second part of Goethe's drama Faust has earned the right to divine Grace.

In 1773, as a twenty-four-year-old law student at the University of Strasbourg, Goethe sketched out the first doggerel verses of the opening monologue of *Faust*—intentionally “bad” verse, a reminiscence of the puppet theater. From then on—though with many interruptions—the ever-growing poetic edifice of *Faust* remained Goethe's chief preoccupation, running like a red thread through an immensely productive life.

A momentous Goethean departure from the old legend occurred in Goethe's version of the transaction between Faust and Mephistopheles. The traditional twenty-four-year contract was done away with and transformed into a wager. Faust says to Mephisto:

If ever I should tell the moment:
Oh stay! You are so beautiful!
Then you may cast me into chains,
then I shall smile upon perdition!

(1699–1702)

In his long life as a scholar, Faust has reached the melancholy conclusion that he will never know what is truly worth knowing, that he would be blinded by the light of truth, and must therefore be resigned to live with mere reflections and counterfeit images. Since he has little faith in even the devil's ability to satisfy his craving to the full, he is confident—though by no means cheerfully so—that he will win the bet. He fully expects that he will continue to live as he lived before, not truly advancing beyond the condition that made him say in the opening monologue:

yet here I am, a wretched fool,
no wiser than I was before.
.....

I don't pretend to know a thing worth knowing.
I don't pretend that I can teach,

(358-72)

Faust's prospects are grim. Despair and the idea of suicide are ever his close companions.

But suppose that Faust were to lose the wager and that through Mephisto's machinations he indeed were to experience the supreme Moment, the incomparable, all-encompassing pinprick of time. In that case, for a single instant of usurped divinity, Faust would look upon even hellfire as trivial punishment. The stakes of the wager—no doubt by design—are not what they seem to be at first sight. They require "speculation" in the alchemical sense, meaning intellectual probing and testing. As it turns out, an accounting of who won or who lost is not finally at issue in *Faust*. All is secondary to the quest for the transcendent Moment. It is Faust's irrepressible striving to extend the human potential and to break through the restrictions inherent in human nature that finally tips the balance in favor of Faust's salvation, even though, in legalistic terms, he may have lost his bet with Mephisto.

The first part of the drama, *Faust I*—offered in this volume in an English translation as well as in the original German—sparkles in its manifold poetic modes and impresses us with a substantial integrity. It stands on its own dramatic feet without *Faust II* and is frequently performed, even though it leaves the hero's destiny and the outcome of the wager in abeyance. At the end of our play, one sees Gretchen lying on her prison pallet uttering, Ophelia-like, deranged shreds of truth that pierce Faust's inmost being. She is guilty of murdering her illegitimate baby, whose father is her seducer-lover, Faust. We, as readers of the play, know that Gretchen was moved by love alone and was driven to despair by love. Having seen her despised and humiliated by her own people, we are relieved to see her find mercy in God's eyes and grateful for a hint that she will be given a luminous place in Heaven. Faust, on the other hand, must continue to live, bound to a minion of Hell and inextricably enmeshed in Evil.

The modes and moods of Goethe's dramatic discourse are never for long the same or reliably predictable. There is the solemn and metrically uniform celebration of divine majesty manifested in the rolling planetary spheres of the "Prologue in Heaven," immediately followed by the irregular, doggerel-like verses of the opening monologue. Shakespearean blank verse is never far removed from medieval hymnic chants. Strictly composed four-foot stanzaic lines may still echo in our minds when, near the drama's end, we reach the ragged and harsh shreds of prose in "Gloomy Day—Field." It is apparent that we must not look to verse forms as such to provide us with any unifying principle in *Faust*. The mood may shift from high seriousness to levity, from profound sentiment to callousness, from optimism to despair, oscillations that seem almost instantaneous, like an alternating current. They soon reveal themselves as important reflections of the theme or content of the drama; for are not the ambivalences and paradoxes inherent in human existence—and the absence of absolutes—important aspects of Faust's frustration and are they not near the source of what Goethe explicitly named a "tragedy"?

Even before the "Prologue in Heaven" ends, the vision of celestial magnificence is suddenly cut short by the ironic colloquialisms of Lucifer-Mephisto:

From time to time it's good to see the Old Man;
I must be careful not to break with him.
How decent of so great a personage
to be so human with the devil.

(350-3)

And a bit later, when we witness Faust bemoaning his painfully futile encounter with the Earth Spirit, there is a knock on the door. It is Wagner, his disciple and assistant, who had listened to his master's outcries as they echoed through the corridors. As a devotee of traditional scholarship and loyal defender of the sanctity of venerable texts, he says upon entering the study:

Excuse me, but I heard your declamation;
was it a passage from Greek tragedy?

I should like to profit from such elocution,
(522-4)

Wagner radically misjudges his master. By his ludicrously inappropriate reference to the travails of Faust's soul, he reveals himself—through an ironic shaft directed at the audience—as a prototypal philistine.

Often there is no temporal sequence of contrary positions, but a simultaneous presence of mutually exclusive polarities. Consider the following: when Faust tells Mephisto that he is bent on a life of all-encompassing experience beyond the reach of ordinary men, Mephisto answers mockingly:

Make your alliance with a poet,
and let that gentleman think lofty thoughts,
and let him heap the noblest qualities
upon your worthy head:

(1789-92)

The lines are deceptively simple. Actually they contain multi-leveled ironies. The poet with whom Faust is to ally himself here stands for a person who conjures up empty illusions of the kind Faust continuously creates for himself. The reader realizes—perhaps in a double-take response—that the images of Faust's fantasy are indeed the stuff of poetry and are constitutive elements of the *Faust* poem itself. It is a case of involuted paradoxes: Mephisto, the no-nonsense materialist contemptuous of poetic imagination, scoffs at Faust and recommends that he make himself over into a dramatic character—only in this manner could he hope to find fulfillment. It is a provocation directed not only at Faust but at the reader-spectator as well. And it is the *Faust* drama—itself a poetic battleground between poetry and anti-poetry—that continuously generates provisional answers to Mephisto's challenge. After all, acting counter to Mephisto's corrosive stance is our realization that Faust need not bother himself to make an "alliance with a poet." Surely, in his case such a step would be redundant. For the public, on the other hand, Mephisto's suggestion may be only partially ironic, because it is aware of the "as if" condition of the stage. Mephisto's

radical critique opens unsuspected avenues into our minds and nerve centers. We are compelled to measure the distance between fantasy and quotidian reality and "get inside" the process of poetic transformation. We might indeed take upon ourselves a share of Faust's own frustration:

Two souls, alas, dwell in my breast,
each seeks to rule without the other.

(1112-13)

as we come upon the one explicit and unironic expression of Faustian ambivalence.

While a diversity of approaches to the *Faust* poem have, over the approximately century-and-a-half of its existence, produced indispensable insights, critics with an all too single-minded perspective tended to obscure values that are accessible only to a different optic. The poem's philosophical problems—for example, those having to do with the nature of truth and of cosmic governance—have been explored perhaps more intensively than any other aspect. Psychological analyses of the characters have been carried out, as well as researches dealing exclusively with the rich field of Faustian imagery. We are fortunate in having comparative studies dealing with the literary and spiritual influences that went into the composition of both parts of the poem. A considerable body of evidence also has been marshaled in support of the proposition that a far-reaching analogy exists between Goethe's vision of life-forms in the earth's flora—such as dicotyledonous plants—and the principles governing the structure of *Faust*.

When all is said and done, however, the simple question, What is *Faust* about? is still capable of eliciting fresh responses, if only for the reason that by looking for meaning we are implicitly searching for some underlying coherence or for a metaphor that might convincingly convey a sense of structure. To find textual confirmation for one's own intuited image of unity in *Faust* is the exhilarating reward of devoted study. Certainly, even after only a fleeting acquaintance, one must ask the question: What is it that keeps Faust dissatisfied, even though he has mastered all the academic disciplines of his day? Why could he not be

proud of his accomplishments and have faith in human progress like his redoubtable assistant Wagner? At least part of the answer may be found in the most concentrated symbol of Faust's imperious need: the all-encompassing Moment, the *Augenblick*, that is the subject of the wager with Mephisto and the thematic undercurrent of the entire drama. To experience, in a single instant, the succession of events that mark our existence in time is equivalent to eliminating time altogether; it means an existence in a continuous present tense. As temporal creatures, nervously feeding a shortening future into a lengthening past, we attribute to the gods a timeless mode of being and an existence in total simultaneity. Therefore Faust's craving for the "highest moment" really amounts to the ultimate *hubris*; he is reaching for more than mere superiority among men—more than Macbeth, who would be king, and more than Oedipus, the incomparable solver of riddles who *was* the king and came to know it too late. Faust reaches for divinity and is "hell-bent" to burst out of his imprisonment in temporality.

Since Goethe's death, in 1832, the Faust story, through its various transmutations, has become one of the central myths of the Western world. The theme fascinated composers like Wagner, Schumann, Berlioz, Gounod, Boito, and Mahler, all of whom created important operatic or orchestral scores inspired by Goethe's drama. American writers have recently paid renewed attention to the earlier chapbook accounts. Stephen Vincent Benét's play *The Devil and Daniel Webster* and the musical comedy *Damn Yankees*, transposed from a novel by Douglass Wallop, were successful Broadway productions and continue to be popular on stage and on television. Intellectually more demanding and ambitious are Thomas Mann's last big novel, *Doctor Faustus* (1947), whose plot parallels the pre-Goethean story, but which also contains unmistakable imprints of Goethe's *Faust*, and the 1981 motion picture *Mephisto*, loosely based on a novel concerned with the career and questionable morality of a German actor-director who achieved fame in his role of Mephisto. The film is a remarkable directorial accomplishment by Istvan Szabo.

The headlong strides in the natural sciences and in technology, the imperious reach for nature's inmost secrets by twen-

tieth-century "speculators of the elements" operating in computerized laboratories, the thrust toward man-made velocities that seemingly approach the impassable limits this side of omnipresence—can these not be seen as assaults on hitherto forbidden realms? In our day the search for the *Augenblick* is proceeding with increasing intensity. According to the Gospel of Luke, Satan showed to Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world in an instant of time" and then offered them to him; and it is not difficult to see in this second temptation a prefiguration of the Faustian wager, a "harking forward" to late-twentieth-century technological wizardry.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

To make great poetry accessible by translation is a joy as well as a harsh discipline. The joy is of the kind that follows the completion of any difficult piece of work. The discipline and harsh constraints flow from the peculiar forces at play. On the one hand, there is the obligation to remain as close as possible to the original text and to avoid "irresponsible" departures from it. From that point of view, each recasting or remolding of the poet's carefully chosen phrases can be judged to be a little betrayal.

The position at the other extreme has its source in the conviction that a good or faithful translation is only very rarely a literal transfer, that it is rather the transmigration of feeling, form, and thought from the imprecisions of one language to the quirks and coincidences of another.

It is important to give heed to both contrary impulses without entirely submitting to either, maintaining, wherever possible, a delicate balance between them. I have striven toward an ideal of a vital, rhythmic, American idiom so that the general impression might be similar to what a German reader might receive from the original. By relinquishing rhyme and strict meter, except in the interspersed songs and ballads, I gained the freedom to be more faithful to sense and spirit than I could otherwise have been. I believe that a consistent adherence to all the details of prosody cannot be sustained in a work of the scope of *Faust* without doing violence to natural diction. Moreover, it has for some time been clear to me that a German rhymed line is not necessarily rendered most felicitously—or most faithfully—by an equivalent English rhyme. Such a translation easily suffers from a jingling quality that may vitiate or even falsify the mood of the original.

The language of this translation is meant to be neither archaic nor wholly colloquial. Instead I tried to steer an intermediate course, in the hope of conveying a sense of the poetic immediacy and continual urgency of the German text.

This Bantam *Faust* was first published in 1962, reissued in 1967, and now—more than twenty years after its first appearance—is being granted a new life. It is not very often that translators are given a second chance, and it is strangely il-

luminating—when reviewing the earlier version—to be conveyed into one's own past and, as it were, to come face-to-face with one's translating persona of an earlier day. There is a nervous “hello” and also a firm “good-bye.”

I feel inwardly connected to all those readers who came to *Faust* by way of my English version, and I am now tentatively confident that the changes in this new edition will further contribute to the understanding and enjoyment of one of the world's supreme poetic works.