



Diana Livesey (Rose, PPE 1958) Prize

Competing loyalties: Faust - the saga of a Nietzschean tragic hero or an Oxford essay crisis?

*"In me there are two souls, alas, and their
Division tears my life in two"ⁱ*

Although if one is planning to barter one soul in a pact with Satan, the possession of another may not seem an entirely unattractive prospect, this line uttered by Goethe's legendary scholar is often deemed by critics to be the very essence of Faust's tragedy. For whatever exterior forces are in play throughout the work - be they the Devil disguised as a poodle, the odd figure from Greek mythology, a few witches or the occasional potion-brewing baboon - Faust's epic saga is ultimately a battle within himself; a battle in which Mephistopheles really only cheerleads from the side. Within Faust exist two competing personas and the entire drama can be reduced to the competition of these two entities for dominance over him, and to Faust's irreconcilable loyalty to each of them. The list of wild and wonderful names that academics have put forward as possible identities of these two personas is enough to both astound and terrify all those of us whose knowledge of "Neoplatonism" or "Manichean principles"ⁱⁱ is a little hazy. If we really want to attach *Faust* to an established thought or theory, then Nietzsche is probably the simplest and most comprehensive option. Though *The Birth of Tragedy* did not appear until 1872, over 65 years after the publication of *Faust*, Goethe's hero provides us with an anticipatory example of the theories Nietzsche was to discuss, most particularly the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Put briefly, this is the theory that inherent in every human being is the coexistence of two conflicting personas: one which embodies the elements of Apollo, Greek god of Reason and Truth, and another which resembles in character Dionysius, God of wine and fornicationⁱⁱⁱ. On the one hand, Faust is the Apollonian scholar, a man of reason and logic, of rational and sound morality. On the other, he surrenders himself to the Dionysian lures of seduction and intoxication. Since he is unable to reconcile the two, they are in constant competition throughout the play, and this imbalance is ultimately responsible for the tragic events of the story. But even this is to reduce Goethe's masterpiece to dryly academic terms which do injustice to his brilliant drama which combines the tragically passionate with great humour, infused with the witty commentary of Mephistopheles, whose scathing yet charismatic critique of human nature renders him more an eighteenth century Oscar Wilde than an embodiment of the Satanic.

*"And so often at the dead of night,
Has the lamp on my desk burned still bright,
And then above parchment and volumes do I see
You, cheerless friend, arisen to me."^{iv}*

So Faust addresses the moon, lamenting yet another sleepless night spent in secluded study. In the literary world it is a legendary scene, yet should we dare to consider it out of its context as the pillar of the German literary canon, we might



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see that it is actually a rather mundane one, one which is probably repeated a thousand times over every night, in the city of Oxford alone. For the number of Oxford students who have not had the moon appear to them hours before the inspiration for their essay due at nine the next morning, I am able to count on one hand (and those few rare specimens cannot be of any real use in consideration of a story about the soul of a scholar, for such extreme organisation is surely at the expense of some degree of humanity). Of course, the disillusionment with academia of Goethe's hero has been accumulated over ten long years of a life of dedicated and exclusive scholarship. For the average Oxford student, I would estimate this is achieved within the ten weeks or so that constitute Michaelmas term of the first year. Indeed, it was during this time, on such a night, that I first picked up Faust -it had reached that stage where even this giant of German literature seemed like light entertainment in comparison to my essay. I was instantly captivated.

In this first scene we see a man who is the master of the Apollonian; he has studied and conquered numerous disciplines and his intellect and knowledge surpass that which can be represented by bureaucratic positions; "I've more sense, to be sure, than the learned fools/The masters and pastors, the scribes from the schools"^v. Yet he is not content with his role as an academic "Superman"^{vi}, to coin another term from Nietzsche. Isolated in his dark and musty room, he longs to "flee into the open land"^{vii} and to surrender the mastery of his mind over to nature. His language is steeped in Dionysian imagery with references to wine and "deep mysterious music"^{viii}. Yet it was certainly not for its adherence to Nietzschean philosophy that I found such affinity with Goethe's hero. For what is Faust's dilemma other than an essay crisis on an epic scale (admittedly one with a rather more sombre conclusion than a sleepless night and a tutorial survived solely by the consumption of consecutive cups of coffee)? Perhaps not quite an Apollonian "Superman", the average Oxford student will nevertheless feel an immediate affinity with Faust's surroundings (really a generic description of any Oxford library), the lateness of the hour and the feeling that, despite all the secondary reading, "Here I sit, poor silly man, No wiser than when I began."^{ix} Isn't his great torment really only that desperation felt by all students who sit penned in by books in the library when others are out enjoying themselves? Those who desire to fling aside the essay and venture out onto the wide open High Street, glowing "already from wine so new"^x, or whatever was on offer at Sainsbury's. For both it seems a hopeless case. Faust cannot obey both his rational mind, which advises him not to forsake the academic world of which he is master to seek one of which he knows nothing, and his burning desire to be seduced by the pleasures of the outside world: he contemplates suicide as his only option. Similarly, the student cannot satisfy both commitment to academic achievement and their wish to partake in the lively and enticing activities of their peers: again death, either through gradual expiration in the library or through greeting your tutor without an essay at the tutorial, seems a preordained tragedy.



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Just at this moment, the dog that has accompanied Faust into his study metamorphoses into the Devil - an interesting progression and probably one of the greatest moments of dramatic climax the German stage had ever seen. But who is Mephistopheles really, other than that friend who pops their head round your door to announce that all your friends are going to the Turf, and you should come for just a few hours and "take a break" from the essay you've only just begun? This comparison is hardly far-fetched when one considers that Mephistopheles literally does take Faust to a pub - not the Turf but the Leipzig Tavern! I would argue that Mephistopheles is not the Devil in the religious sense of the term, but merely a seductive voice of his inner consciousness that inflames an already burning conflict of loyalties within Faust. He is an incarnation not of the Satanic, but of procrastination - the devil of every student.

Faust never manages to reconcile his competing loyalties throughout the course of the play. He oscillates wildly between a dry life of study devoid of human contact to one in which he seeks only to satisfy his lustful desires without stopping to apply any rational morality to the situation, and the result is the destruction of others' lives and the embitterment of his own. But what of the predicament of the Oxford student? How are they to overcome the conflicting loyalties that accompany that dreaded essay crisis? Perhaps there is an instance when the Devil actually has a valid point to make: "When scholars study a thing, they strive/ To kill it first, if it's alive;/ Then they have the parts and they've lost the whole/ For the link that's missing was the living soul."^{xi} Our conclusion therefore? "Let fancy's choirs all sing, and interweave/ Reason, sense, feeling, passion - but by your leave,/ Let a good vein of folly still run through it!"^{xii}

Rosanna Forte (Modern Languages, 2011)

Endnotes

ⁱ P 35-36 of David Luke's translation of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust Part One*, 1987, Oxford University Press, New York

ⁱⁱ Terms of Hans Bayer in: *Goethes Faust. Religiös-ethische Quellen und Sinndeutung* (Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts 1978) , cited by J.M van der Laan in *Faust's Divided Self and Moral Inertia* (Monatshefte, Vol 91, No 4, 1999) p 454

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872)

^{iv} My own translation of the original text by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Scene 1, "Nacht"

^v David Luke's translation of *Faust Part One* p. 15

^{vi} Friedrich Nietzsche *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* 1885

^{vii} David Luke's translation of *Faust Part One* p. 18



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viii *Ibid* p 20

ix *Ibid* p 15

x *Ibid* p 18

xi *Ibid* p 58

xii *Ibid* p 58