

Faust I

J.W.Goethe

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Verweile doch! du bist so schn!

This is maybe the most well-known quote to be found in Faust, inadequately translated into English as 'Stay on! thou art so fair!' when a more appropriate one would be 'Linger! you are so sweet.'

What is happiness? Can it be concentrated to just a single moment? Would such a moment of bliss outweigh all misery that has gone before, and is yet to come? If a man has experienced just one moment of pure unadulterated happiness, however brief, would it be enough to justify his life? To show that it was not a superficial farce, but did at one moment touch divinity? And if so does the timing matter? We all tend to view everything in retrospect, and if so would not the moment of death be the ideal moment for a transcending bliss, conceived and expelled through the last breath.

Faust may think so. At least if he is touched by such bliss he is ready to be taken by the Devil. Is not this what lies at the heart of the bargain?

Goethes works invite comparison with that of Shakespeare. James Joyce spoke of the trinity of Western literature as consisting of Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe (in chronological order). If so 'Faust' invites comparison with the dramas of Shakespeare, and being such a unique work of the author, clearly it should be compared with the very best of the old bard. 'Hamlet' versus 'Faust'? The plays of Shakespeare are perennially staged, Faust I believe has only been so once or twice. Conceived in the form of a drama, it clearly is not meant to be performed. Too digressive, too idiosyncratic. And would it work, would it not set an audience to sleep? As drama it does not work, as poetry it is seductive. Smoother than anything Shakespeare ever wrote. Maybe as an Opera it could work after all, although I very much doubt it has been tried as such. The libretto is there, but who would be presumptuous enough to supply the music to go with it?¹

What is it about? The first part? Not much in a sense. There is Faust of course himself introduced by his own rambling soliloquy. He is bored with everything sensing in himself a deep dissatisfaction in his quest for knowledge and understanding. Then there is the pact with the devil, as well as a few distractionary scenes involving common people in taverns, some of those quite funny. The drama is of course his seduction of Margareta (Gretchen), the Walpurgisnacht, the killing (by Faust) of Gretchen's brother, to what purpose never transpires, and in the end the failed attempt to rescue mad Gretchen out of the dungeons.

Faust was an old legend, to whom many before Goethe had been attracted. Marlowe is maybe the oldest example, Lessing another one. Faust turned out to be an obsession of

¹ In fact a few documented stagings of Faust have in fact been made, as well as an operatic version, none obviously having made much of a stir. The form is that of a play, but as a staged play it does not work.

Goethe, the first attempts going back to his early twenties, the conclusion of the last part reached at the very end of his life. The structure is somewhat wooden and stylized, in fact Goethe has been accused by many² of being unable to create characters (except himself), and reading the play one is invariably reminded of puppets and 'Punch and Judy' shows. Such associations are rather natural. Faust as an old legend was apparently often exhibited precisely as a puppet-show. Also Goethe, who claimed to have learned to become a weaver of tales from his mother, who had regaled him with made-up stories of her own; was as a child given a puppet-show, and when the standard repertoire had run out and bored everyone, he decided to make up his own stories and stage them.

So what quotable lines, apart from the above, can one present? the choice is bound to be arbitrary, but what about

*Nichts Bessers, weiß ich mir an Sonn- und Feiertagen
Als ein Gespräch von Krieg und Kriegsgeschrei
Wenn hinten, weit, in der Türkei
Die Völker auf einander schlagen.
Man steht am Fenster, trinkt sein Glaschen aus
Und sieht den Fluß hinab die bunten Schiffe gleiten;
Dann kehrt man abends froh nach Haus
und segnet Fried' und Friedenszeiten.*

Pronounced by an unidentified burger at a tavern scene. Sentiments that are truly appropriate today. Or Faust complaining to Wagner

*Was man nicht weiß, das eben brauchte man,
und was man weiß, kann man nicht brauchen.*

A student complains to Mephistoles about his studies and the latter advises him

*Das kommt nur auf Gewohnheit an.
So nimmt ein Kind der Mutter Brust
Nicht gleich im Anfang willig an,
Doch bald ernährt es sich mit Lust
So wird's Euch an der Weisheit Brüsten
Mit jedem Tage mehr gelüsten.*

The Devil has a few folksy sayings to distribute like the variation below on something quite well-known

*Das Sprichwort sagt: Ein eigener Herd
Ein braves Weib sind Gold und Perlen wert.*

Or when Faust is trying to lay down his atheism to assuage Gretchen he claims

*Erfüll davon dein Herz, so groß es ist.
Und wenn du ganz in dem Gefühle selig bin,
Nenn es dann, wie du willst,*

² Notably H.Bloom in his 'Genius'

*Nenn's Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott!
Ich habe keinen Namen
Dafür. Gefühl ist alles,
Name ist Schall und Rauch,
Umnebelnd Himmelsglut.*

And the complaining about lowered standards of the younger generation has been with us for a long time as exemplified by the author (in a sequence involving a general and a minister) who states

*Wer mag wohl überhaupt jetzt eine Schrift
Von mßem klugen Inhalt lesen!
Und was das liebe junge Volk betrifft,
Das ist noch nie so naseweis gewesen.*

The first part of Faust nevertheless remains a fragment, incomprehensible I believe without the second part, whose incomprehensibility is notorious.

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