

Faust II

J.W.Goethe

October 8-11, 2014

Verweile doch, du bist so schön. Those words in Faust I have known for over forty years, and they have made an impact on me, and returned over and over again, as the lines of some hit song, to my mind. Now at last I encounter them in context, and hence for the first time earn the right to quote them. As is well known, those words constitute the admission of Faust, that he has indeed achieved that moment of bliss that Mephistopheles had promised, and thus the latter won his bet, and can claim Faust and bring him down to hell. But at the last moment the devil is deprived of his triumph, his prize is snatched away from him, and carried by the angels to heaven above, with the words *Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen* and the verse in which those two lines appear, is according to Goethe himself, the key to the salvation of Faust (against all odds?).

As is well-known the legend of Faust became an obsession of Goethe. He tried his hands at it already as a very young man producing a so called *Ur-Faust*, simple as well as primitive, compared to later attempts. A more polished version was eventually published, with the need for a second concluding one. Late in life, prompted by his secretary and conversation partner Eckermann¹ he overcame his inertia and produced the second part. It was finished just before his death, and published posthumously. After its completion, Goethe felt that his mission in life had been accomplished, and what ever remained of it was a pure gift cleansed of any remaining obligations.

What is so great about Faust? The second part was considered by many to be incomprehensible, a confusing addition to the first. Gradually taste underwent a development brought about by influential critics such as Eliot and Gide, and nowadays, the second part is thought of as the superior. Jung refers to it as springing out of the deepest recesses of Goethe's mind, and thus filled with powerful archetypes.

Reading it, it is not easy to make head or tail of it. The nature of which seems to be more of a self-indulgent dream than a regular narrative. One is thrown in the thicket of things, where a dense fog seems to reign. One is overwhelmed by mere verbiage, however beautiful and seductive, and cannot make head or sense of what is going on. The poetry makes you want to read it aloud, in fact it is hard not to do it. When so doing you are caught up in it, it comes to life, if not necessarily to sense. It is like music, it lulls you down, without any real understanding. You may be emotionally moved, but hardly intellectually, unless you are a music critic as in the case of regular music. In particular it is very hard to make out a plot. Momentous things may happen right in front of your eyes, but you notice nothing, as you nod, reading through, with a mind wandering, while the heart beats the rhythm.

Thus ones attitude towards Faust is bound to be somewhat mixed. It is considered to be one of the gems of world literature, and thus you approach it with veneration, both out

¹ See previous essay in this volume!

of respect for a venerable tradition and because of the undoubtable intelligence of Goethe himself, as he comes across, in his own factual writings or in the eyes of say an Eckermann. You are however baffled by it. You seem to be unable to intellectually take its measure. It seems just to be words heaped on each other, occasionally forming entities of great beauty, even of common sense, only to retreat again into obscurity. You are in a big fog. This intellectual bafflement is of course disturbing. Either someone is trying to put the wool over your eyes, and almost succeeding, or you must admit defeat. You are not clever enough to enjoy it properly, you are not experienced enough, to see the obvious, maybe you are even too emotionally shallow to appreciate the struggle that finds triumphant expression. The latter explanation, wounding as it may be to your vanity, nevertheless is the easiest one to accept. It entails a promise, the promise that the world is after all bigger than you think, that there are things in it, beyond your reach, and thus holds out the possibility that you may expand further. The other explanation, flattering as it maybe to your vanity, is a very sad one, and also very disturbing. We need our heroes, we need to feel that the world is large, and that there is much in it that we do not understand.

There is charm. The way that Goethe does not follow a plot, but indulges his personal whims. Anything is given a voice, even inanimate entities. This makes it all dreamlike and joyful. I am in particular thinking of the harvesting scenes, or whatever, in the first act, which makes me think of some of the paintings by Goya, in fact a rather exact contemporary of Goethe². Did they know about each other? Goethe achieved fame rather early with his *Werther*. This is the kind of association you get when you are reading, making your mind wanders, while you read on, mechanically. But as noted it is very hard to make out what is going on. Beautiful Helena is introduced with much fanfare just out of antiquity, much to the enjoyment of Faust. But what does he really enjoy? Is there consummation of any kind? You have to read carefully to find out. And how does it all end? It just ends apparently, in subsequent acts there is no reference to her. Much is made of Faust reclaiming land from the ocean, or leading armies. But you need to read carefully to notice, and had you not been warned by commentaries, you surely would have missed it. Are you stupid, or are you just too careless in your reading? You cannot read *Faust* as you do a novel. You have to read slowly, read over and over again, and more to the point, return to the work over and over again, just as did Goethe. In a way you should treat it more as a sacred text than as a classic³. Each line has significance. But once again, if you are going to read it so closely, why not devote your energies to something more fruitful? You should not have to become a Faust scholar to read Faust, unlike the case of Goethe, you should not make it the purpose of your life. And now we are back again to the perennial question. The question of what to make of it.

The poetry is beautiful and once in a while some formulation catches your attention. Examples such as *Wer kann was Dummes, wer was Kluges denken/ Das nicht die Vorwelt schon gedacht -.* or *Nur der verdient die Gunst der Frauen,/Der kräftigst sie zu schützen weiß..* Or *Wer im Frieden/Wünscht sich krieg zurück,/Der ist eschieden/m Hoffnungsglück.* Or Fausts exclamation *Herrschaft gewinn'ich, Eigentum!/Die Tat ist alles, nichts der Ruhm.* Or further on *Daß sich das größte Werk vollende,/genügt ein Geist für*

² 1746-1828, as opposed to Goethe's 1749-1833

³ Cf previous essay on Borges

tausend Hände. The selection is basically random, the result of fortuitous returns to attention. Clearly, as in the plays by Shakespeare, the work can be mined for the beautiful expression.

Still the central part of Faust is his redemption, which in true Lutheran spirit, is not the result of Faust own deeds, but due to divine grace. By this we make Goethe a true Lutheran, with his emphasis on the work ethics, the need to do and strive for perfection. The most moving lines are probably at the very end, as they need to be.

*Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche,
Hier wird's Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ist's getan;
Das Ewig-Weibliche
Zieht uns hinan*

To learn poetry by heart is an excellent pedagogical method of improving your feel and mastery of a language. To learn Faust by heart, would of course be overdoing it. But you would have at your disposal a riches of beautiful lines to draw on. In the past it would have been a social asset, now I fear a sign of insanity.

The real charm of the Faust is that it is a hodgepodge, not unlike the Bible. Thus not so much a polished artistic expression, as an inspiration for such, be it in the form of further artistic efforts or critical commentaries. Just like the Bible, it is not to be necessarily read from cover to cover, but to be dipped into, from time to time.

October 12, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se