

Faust: Body versus Spirit

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The concept of good and evil and humanity's ever-changing interpretation of it have occupied and indeed dominated much of ancient and modern literary thought. Throughout the millennia of recorded history, humankind's opinions as to what constitutes right and wrong have swayed to and fro, like so many trees bending in the winds of the latest philosophical vogue. Yet, the notion that the human spirit occupies a higher plane of existence than that of the body, and is therefore closer to the ultimate truth and goodness of the Creator, has been around as long as humankind itself and remains intact, for the most part, even to the present day. As a consequence, actions that purportedly nourish and edify the eternal soul are generally considered virtuous and good, while those that cater to the base desires of temporal flesh, corrupt and evil.

Part one of Goethe's *Faust* is a literary work that was instrumental in successfully drawing into one aggregate whole these conflicting concepts of spiritual and carnal fulfillment, heretofore treated in more individualistic contexts. As he strives to resolve his perception of life within the framework of the limited knowledge and abilities mastered by man, Faust's path to salvation is continually fraught with detours. Thanks to the panoply of worldly temptations conjured-up by Mephisto, Faust, in his search for ultimate contentment and truth, effectively becomes Goethe's personification of the struggle between terrestrial good and evil.

As the drama unfolds, Faust is in his study contemplating the true meaning of life. Goethe paints a portrait of a man who, even though he has attained credentials and renown in the most prestigious academic disciplines of the day and distinguished himself among his peers, "stand[s] no wiser than [he] was before" (Goethe 43). Faust is restless and discomfited by his inability to apply his knowledge to unlock the enigma of human existence. He believes, in spite of all his earthly erudition, his intellect will never be allowed to soar above the limits imposed by his physical being, and that, for all the effort he has expended in attaining it, scholarly achievement is of little consequence to man or beast. An attempt to utilize magic in its place is no more successful, and after contemplating suicide, Faust finally regains his complacency as he overhears tidings of the Easter season.

Although he admits to Wagner that his desire for spiritual nirvana is counterbalanced by a penchant for earthly delectation, Faust manages to effectively resist the machinations of Mephistopheles up until the time he ingests the witch's elixir of youth. Outside the city gate, he revels in the hustle and bustle of the populace, for "here [he is] man, and claim[s] man's element" (Goethe 62). Wagner, on the other hand, states his distaste for the common element while playing the role of sycophant to Faust's emaciated ego. Still in the grasp of disillusionment, however, Faust contracts with Mephisto to exchange his soul for a

taste of ultimate satisfaction, dubious as he is of it ever coming to pass. A trip to Auerbach's Cellar and the sorcery of Mephisto bring him no pleasure. Only an appeal to his more prurient desires and, with the witch's succor, the promise of fulfilling them with a rejuvenated physique finally start Faust on his downward moral and ethical spiral.

Margareta now enters the drama and immediately functions as the standard against which the depths of Faust's moral disintegration is to be measured. Faust's crimes are characterized not so much in terms of his actions for and of their own sake, but rather as his lack of consideration regarding the devastating effect they have on the pure and innocent Gretchen, their child, and the members of her family. The few subsequent pangs of conscience which Faust displays at various moments in the drama manage to be neatly expunged, for the most part, by Mephisto. During his licentious dance with a witch at the bawdy, satanic conclave on the Brocken, though, Faust is finally shocked back into some semblance of propriety and only then insists that Mephisto help rescue Gretchen from prison. She refuses to comply, however, determined to do her penitence and await the mercy of the Almighty.

The first part of *Faust* ends thusly, with the fate of only one character determined. Because of Faust's abrupt if not total return to moral orthodoxy, neither his wager with Mephistopheles nor Mephisto's with the Lord can be reconciled. His destiny is as yet unresolved, while Margareta, by proclamation of the Lord, "is redeemed on high" (Goethe 197). As the poem closes, her anguished ecstasy, so poignant and profound, is as yet lost on Faust, and it will fall to Goethe in the second part to facilitate the triumph of good over evil and bring him to his eternal salvation.

Works Cited

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von. *Faust: Part One*.
Ed. Philip Wayne. London: Penguin, 1949.