

FAUST'S PATH OF STRAYING

"God contracts and expands and unto Him shall you be returned." - Koran II: 245

"When our daughter, still very young, asked Jung: "tell me Mr. Jung, you who know everything, which is the shortest path for my life?" Jung burst in laughter and answered: "The shortest path? Going astray." - Doctor Tauber*

"It is by Error that Man can advance to Truth." - Helvétius

"In this drama the poet [...] has so beautifully presented all the possible stages of human development that a more perfect accomplishment of art is unimaginable."
- Muhamed Iqbal**

Faust the seeker and Goethe the finder

While in Odysseus' journey of return and in Dante's pilgrimage through the three "extra-terrestrial" worlds we may unquestionably speak of a path, the series of episodes in the Faust poem emphasize more a straying from the path than the sense of progress toward salvation. Because of this it seems more fitting to speak of an "adventure" than a "pilgrimage" or "way." In this the book resembles not only medieval romances, but the revolutionary anti-romance that was Don Quixote in which the hero, like Faust, leaves magical thinking behind as the book approaches its end. But Don Quixote is not a poem, and thus not part of my subject here. No country has harbored greater reverence for one of its writers than Germany has toward Goethe. Emil Ludwig remarked that if you were to weigh all English literature against Shakespeare's work -- whatever the extent of the love and veneration given to Shakespeare, the rest of English literature would be considered as weightier than Shakespeare alone; yet (Ludwig remarks) if Goethe is weighed against all the rest of German literature, Germans between the time of Goethe and his own would generally not doubt that it is Goethe that weighs more. Today this has changed. The descendants of the Nazi German generation have consciously or unconsciously wanted to dis-identify from the values of their parents and grand-parents, and the old veneration toward the German classics -- particularly Beethoven and Goethe -- has come to be regarded as old fashioned by the Rock and Punk loving and New Age oriented German youth. (Even the conservative Swiss have been influenced by this change in German taste. Yet for

the older generation it is still as it was. Some years ago, when I told the seventy year old co-founder of Gestalt Therapy, the German born and educated Laura Perls that I was reading Buber's German translation of the Pentateuch, she retorted: "I read Faust." I don't think that anybody could utter a comparable statement in the Spanish speaking world. Even though Don Quixote ranges there preeminent among the world classics, no one would say: "I don't read the Five Books of Moses, I read Don Quixote." Goethe's Faust became among the Germans a sort of bible, and that gives it a unique position in all world literature, since not even Dante's Commedia - the most annotated of all world poems -- achieved a similar status.

Some have been critical of Goethe -- notably Ortega y Gasset and T.S.Eliot. The latter has said that "of Goethe perhaps it is true to say that he dabbled in both philosophy and poetry, and made no great success of either." Yet whatever Goethe's personal shortcomings, I think Priestley is right in saying that we cannot help feeling, as his contemporaries felt, that "there is an element in Goethe that represents more than the sum total of his accomplishments" and that "it is as if Goethe had performed a double act of creation, creating his works within the larger containing-act of self-creation."

I agree with Priestley when he sees him as an "Olympian, calm and smiling sage, the culture hero arriving from some remote high civilization on the German scene." Today we can only conjecture how much Goethe owed the Rosicrucian's -- of whom he was an initiate -- this spiritual evolution. It is true, of course, that Goethe's keen interest in alchemy during the years before writing Faust turned to disappointment, and no doubt he must have been disappointed in many individual alchemists and Rosicrucians. Yet as we contemplate the idea that Faust may be not only a fiction or a work of self-expression but a record of a universal process and of events along the timeless path of human transformation, it seems significant that he was keenly aware of traditional symbolism on the journey in the Christian and Greco-Roman cultures and in the realm of hermetic-gnostic esotericism.

As I set out to take my readers on a guided tour of Faust as an expression of the universal pattern of human unfoldment rather than an elaboration on the legend of Dr. Johannes Faustus (who lived in Germany in the middle ages) or simply a mask for Goethe's personal experience. I want to remark that what makes it difficult to speak of Faust as a tale of the quest is that only at the beginning of the book Faust appears as a seeker, for very soon his longing for communion with the universe is transformed into a lusty and destructive longing for intensity. Paradoxically, however, his perversion is only nearly tragical: as in a tale of pilgrimage, Faust reaches the sumum bonum in the end; and thus, in spite of being called a tragedy,

the work is "comical" -- in the same sense as Dante's *Commedia*. Of course Faust (and also Mephistopheles) are in Goethe (just as Margaret and Helen are embodiments of Goethe's *anima*) but the work would not have had its universal appeal if it were not that Faust also represents the human individual (particularly in our so-called Faustian Western world).

More specifically, I expect to be showing Faust to constitute an in-depth study of the experiences of "expansion" and "contraction" in the mind that we have become acquainted with in mystical theology, in myth and the work of his predecessors. It would at first seem that the story of Faust is that of a degenerate quest, a quest in which the pilgrimage was side-tracked, and yet ended well in spite of it having been practically abandoned or transformed into something else. But even if we do not speak of the Faust drama as a "tale of the quest" we can regard it as another version of the "tale of the hero." I think that even if Faust's story is one of wager rather than that of a quest, these are alternative ways of conveying truths about a single human developmental process, a psycho-spiritual transformation of the individual through a psychological death and a spiritual rebirth. And let us note that Faust progresses along his journey driven by the attraction of the eternal feminine, just as Dante -- his predecessor -- moved onward in response to the heavenly attraction of Beatrice.

Surely it is the obscurity of Faust that has contributed to the scant understanding of the poem as an allegorical eschatology. Gounod's opera -- "*La Damnation de Faust*" -- would perhaps not have come into being if not for this obscurity -- for even at the end of "*Faust I*" it is not obvious that Faust is damned -- only that Margaret is saved -- as (led by Mephistopheles) he continues on his journey. It is the much lengthier "*Faust II*" -- written by Goethe some 40 years later and near the end of his life -- that tells us the most about salvation. The poem as a whole is quite literally the story of one who descends (twice) into a hellish "night" before coming to the eternal light. Every book that tells this universal story tells it in a different manner, perhaps we may say that it has been written precisely to illuminate the process from a different angle; for if everything has been said, why, save for this, does it deserve to be said again? Every time that the process of human unfolding is given authoritative expression, the endeavor is supported in personal experience, so that new facets of it are contributed to our common legacy of knowledge. We may ask, then, what is the specific contribution of Faust to our view of spiritual evolution. What is there in it that has not been said before? Let me address the issue briefly now before going into details.

It is here not only the matter of a descent into hell -- a falling to rise and a way-in

that becomes a way-out --, not only a journey through personal guilt and a process of regression in the service of a progression; more extremely -- and perhaps more sincerely -- this process is presented as a demonization. The traveler on the path (as the title I have given the chapter emphasizes) is not only a seeker of the divine or a pilgrim, but intrinsically a misguided seeker, driven by a fervent aspiration of the highest and by the devil as well. That the "dark night" entails a condition and experience of harmfulness St. John of the Cross makes plain by dedicating a substantial part of his "Dark Night of the Soul" to the cardinal sins, yet we may say that Goethe goes beyond St. John in the idea that the evil complicating the spiritual path (Faust is made responsible for the death of Gretchen and her family) is inseparable from (and intrinsic to) the process of salvation. Even though Faust vividly depicts the essentially guided nature of the process of inner evolution -- from certain point onwards, the novelty of Goethe's emphasis is in showing us that even the inner guide or inner master has (from the point of view of human conventions at least) a devilish character. It may be that he has been sent to us as a tempter and he is at the same time an angel -- but certainly not simply an angel, and at least an angel that we distort into a devil. Perhaps in our cosmopolitan age we might call him a "wrathful deity" -- in analogy to the ego-annihilating personifications of enlightenment in the Tantric traditions, inasmuch as Mephistopheles tells us of himself that he brings about good by intending to return everything to nothing.

The devil in heaven

I skip the dedication and the prologue at the stage at the very beginning of Goethe's drama: a conversation between the poet, the comic and the stage director. Let us start with the play proper, the beginning of which takes place (as everything) in heaven. After the three archangels, Raphael, Gabriel and Michael sing in chorus of the "works, unfathomably splendid" of the creator and their glory, Mephistopheles makes his appearance in a mood of comedy and tells the good Lord that of suns and worlds he knows nothing to say: "I only see how men live in dismay."

The vision of a generalized wrongness in human life and human affairs has become common today, after Freud's courageous indictment of the universal neurosis of mankind, Marx's exposure of generalized exploitative unlove throughout human history and the critical situation of our species as we approach the second millennium. Though the notion of a fallenness of mankind from its original condition is present in every spiritual tradition -- and particularly in the story of Genesis at the beginning of the most important book of the West -- is it that we are becoming more Mephistophelian as we become more self-critical? Yet it seems to

us that the perspective presented by Goethe's Mephisto is more that of a man of wisdom than of the ordinary human being. Only the enlightened, the saints and the prophets have used comparable language: "I only see how men live in dismay." Mephistopheles' diagnosis of the human condition is one that only modern thinking has been its own through voices such as Teilhard de Chardin and modern critics of linear thinking:

His life might be a bit more fun,
had you not given him that spark of heaven's sun;
He calls it reason and employs it,
resolute To be more brutish than is any brute.

But accusation is an attitude foreign to the archangels, who only sing and praise creation. The word "diabulus," Latin for devil, means accuser and we are here in face of the paradoxical situation of an accusation which contains a truth not revealed by appreciation and compassion. Like the pillars of mercy and severity in the Kabbalistic map of the cosmos or Tree of Life, the archangels and Mephistopheles seem to embody a balance in the economy of the universe, both in the service of the Lord. The spelling out of this Goethe provides by echoing the beginning of The Book of Job. Just as a wager between the devil and Faust will constitute the crux of the plot on earth, in this prologue it is a matter of a wager in heaven. The Lord asks Mephistopheles whether he knows Faust, his servant. Mephistopheles, who does, remarks: "He serves you most peculiarly, I think."

The Lord agrees for Mephistopheles to try to clasp him and "withdraw his spirit from his primal source and lead him down" if he can grasp him. "A good man in his darkly aspiration remembers the right road throughout his quest." Before we are confronted by the first scene, thus, we already have been introduced to the existence of Faust as a seeker: one who in his faithfulness to his search for the divine is willing to give up the satisfaction of worldly pleasures. Yet at the same time we have been invited to see in Faust's zealous seeking for "unearthly meat and drink," and in the spiritual ferment that "drives him far" a certain derangements, the foolishness of setting impossible demands. ("He demands the fairest star," says Mephisto to the Lord). He is one that adopts in face of the world an attitude of seeking what is not that precludes satisfaction in what is. This discontentedness is not the ideal state of a pious servant of God, but the human imperfection of someone who still has a transformational journey to undergo. It is, then, paradoxical that Mephisto -- the tempter -- in making Faust interested in the carnal aspect of existence (beyond what seems the negation of a spiritual attitude) becomes effective guide toward what Faust needs at the moment, and one who acts much as a contemporary psychotherapist would, in reconciling an individual who

is alienated from his body, feelings, emotions and instincts to his earthside nature.