

“A non-supernatural Faust”: Bertrand Russell and the themes of Faust

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THE WORKS OF Bertrand Russell display strong evidence that he found the themes of Faust significant for our time. Four writings over a period of fifty years—a famous philosophical essay, two novellas, and an autobiographical essay—as well as scattered references employ materials from the story of Faust. More specifically, Russell testified that this legendary figure provided him with a kind of identity when he struggled with contemporary complexities. In Volume II of his *Autobiography*, Russell states:

The period from 1910 to 1914 was a time of transition. My life before 1910 and my life after 1914 were as sharply separated as Faust's life before and after he met Mephistopheles. I underwent a process of rejuvenation, inaugurated by Ottoline Morrell and continued by the War. It may seem curious that the War should rejuvenate anybody, but in fact it shook me out of my prejudices and made me think afresh on a number of fundamental questions. It also provided me with a new kind of activity, for which I did not feel the staleness that beset me whenever I tried to return to mathematical logic. I have therefore got into the habit of thinking of myself as a non-supernatural Faust for whom Mephistopheles was represented by the Great War.¹

But attention to his work reveals that Russell's notion of himself as a “non-supernatural Faust” surely began before World War I and,

¹ (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1968), p. 3.

furthermore, that his conception of the Faust-figure underwent an important shift in meaning during World War II and its aftermath. The use of Faust-themes thus provides one way to follow the development of Russell's ideas in his striving with the issues of our age.

Russell first used elements of Faust in the much anthologized essay "A Free Man's Worship" (1903). Writing shortly after completing strictly expository studies of the philosophy of Leibniz and of the foundations of mathematics, Russell moves in this essay into humanistic subject-matter and more elaborate style, and creates linkages to humanistic literature. For example, he makes allusion to Milton by use of Miltonic syntax; portions of his essay echo the rhythms of *Paradise Lost*, and the familiarity of pattern suggests that the essay is in part a response to Milton's intention to justify the ways of God to men, setting Russell's intention—to question or deny the existence of God—into contrast. Likewise, the essay seems in part a response to Marlowe and Goethe, for it echoes their Faust-dramas in its opening:

To Dr. Faustus in his study Mephistopheles told the history of the Creation, saying:

"The endless praises of the choirs of angels had begun to grow wearisome; for, after all, did he not deserve their praise? Had he not given them endless joy? Would it not be more amusing to obtain undeserved praise, to be worshipped by beings whom he tortured? He smiled inwardly, and resolved that the great drama should be performed."²

Russell's variation on the Faust-theme thus gives the opening monologue to Mephistopheles, who continues with an account that compresses scientific theories of creation and evolution into a few passages that deny the possibility of inherent harmony in the universe because the Creator is wanton:

And God smiled; and when he saw that Man had become perfect in renunciation and worship, he sent another sun through the sky, which crashed into Man's sun; and all returned again to nebula.

"Yes", he murmured, "it was a good play; I will have it performed again". (p. 47)

Like the first soliloquy of Mephistopheles in Goethe's drama, the monologue is an indictment of the Creator, but its purpose is diffe-

rent, not to evaluate man's worthiness as a created being, but to comment on his devilish predicament: the summation of nineteenth-century scientific philosophy is such bitter knowledge that it may properly be put into the mouth of Mephistopheles. If he rejects this vision of the Creator as an unjustifiable God, Dr. Faustus—who is the twentieth-century man in the study—is in a worse situation. Russell's essay turns on this dilemma as he moves from dramatic narration into exposition:

"Such in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. . . . Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving. . . . the outcome of accidental collocation of atoms. . . ." (p. 47)

Brief as it is, the dramatic segment utilizing Faust and Mephistopheles "sets the stage" for Russell's thesis and attracts to that thesis the connotations of the Faust story. Increase of knowledge and scientific progress have opened to twentieth-century eyes a spiritually vacant universe, the vision Erich Heller has called "Dr. Faustus's newly discovered damnation".³ The tiny drama places Russell in the humanistic tradition, taking up the problem of man's relation to the universe where Marlowe and Goethe left off, transposing the question whether man is a creature that merits salvation to the question whether this "outcome of accidental collocations of atoms" can impose meaning on a chaotic universe. Russell works here in highly poetic prose and later judged his style to be too rhetorical. Yet the allusion to Faust suggests that he may have intended, like Goethe, to build on foundations of science a world-view unified by poetry, and the essay stands as a contribution for its time to the Faust tradition.

If Dr. Faustus as a character is merely a referent for the speech of Mephistopheles in the dramatic segment, he is a strongly implied presence throughout the expository remainder of the essay. The embryonic form of the Faust-identity seems to appear here, for in taking up the challenge of the natural world—the problem of meaninglessness—Russell speaks in a Faustian voice, attempting to answer the negative view. Russell uses the drama because he wants a dialogue. He conveys some of the tragic quality of Marlowe's Faustus, for whom the mind was a splendor, by confronting things with

³ "Faust's Damnation: the Morality of Knowledge", *The Artist's Journey into the Interior and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 18. Subsequent references in the text are to this essay.

² *Independent Review*, 1 (Dec. 1903); *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Norton, 1929), p. 46. Page references in the text will be to this edition.

values: "The slave is doomed to worship Time and Fate and Death . . . because all his thoughts are of things which they devour. But, great as they are, to think of them greatly, to feel their passionless splendour, is greater still. And such thought makes us free men. . ." (p. 55). The themes of Faust blend within Russell's perspective: the flux of life; man's transience in contrast to his yearnings for permanence; the lessons learned in the "struggle for private happiness"; and the dualism of contemplation and action: "And this liberation is effected by a contemplation of Fate; for Fate itself is subdued by the mind which leaves nothing to be purged by the purifying fire of Time" (p. 56). What can be a more Faustian aim than the determination to "subdue Fate"—and by the mind?

If Russell speaks as a kind of implied modern Faust in "A Free Man's Worship", he manifests more personal identification in "The Perplexities of John Forstice" a decade later. Just after finishing *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13) with Alfred North Whitehead, Russell turned to fiction. One effort survives, the novella "Perplexities", completed in 1912 but unpublished until 1972.⁴ The central character, John Forstice, is a scientist, a thinker with a passion like Russell's own for abstract thought. While a number of interesting speculations concerning his name offer themselves in terms of contemporary Edwardian personalities, the speculation most interesting is the resemblance of "Forstice" to "Faustus", heightened when the names are presented in full, "John Forstice" and "John Faustus". In addition to the similarity of name, there is some similarity of situation as the story opens. Although not so dissatisfied as Dr. Faustus, Professor Forstice has suddenly become aware, as he finishes a great scientific task, that his learned researches have cut him off from the warmth of life. On a springtime walk, he feels suddenly alive, noticing flowers and the song of birds for the first time in years. Not identical in substance, the passage is a reminder in mood of the Easter walk of Faust.

Although a rationalist, Russell reveals in "Perplexities" his awareness of the dangers of total involvement with activity of the mind. Forstice is a modified Faust, gentle and preoccupied rather than over-confident in his intellectual pursuits, but the "mist of symbols" through which he has come to view even his wife obscures human values as surely as does the hubris of Faust. At the time of writing, Russell was establishing himself as a spokesman for the scientific method, desirous of extending it into his own discipline of

philosophy. Yet, as this work reveals, he saw danger in the single-minded application of the method and the worship of the intellect, expressing here the doubts he did not reveal elsewhere. As befits the age and his own religious beliefs (or lack of them), Russell makes the danger to which Forstice is exposed primarily psychological, not theological: Forstice's "salvation" depends on his ability to integrate the aspects of his personality. But as the story progresses, we discern a deeper dimension. As Heller (to whom I am indebted in what follows) has observed for the writers of other Faust-stories, Russell is ultimately concerned with the link between knowledge and morality ("Faust's Damnation", pp. 15-21).

The first of the three sections of "Perplexities" sets up this concern by means of a characteristic Faust-theme, the awakening conscience. Soon after Forstice's discovery of his dissatisfaction, he attends a garden party, where he meets a number of semi-allegorical figures. One of them assumes a kind of devil-role by taking Forstice out of the garden and into the fields (in Goethe's drama Faust first encounters Mephistopheles during his walk in the open fields), where, in subtle temptation, he leads Forstice to question the possibility of true happiness. Being an empiricist, Forstice wishes to test this idea, but cannot, so he decides to inquire of his wife her ideas on the subject and to ask, for the first time, whether she is happy. He receives the shocking reply that she is dying from an illness she has bravely concealed. The disclosure marks the end of Forstice's existence as an innocent egoist, his expulsion from Paradise. His conscience awakens to the link between knowledge and guilt. Despairing and chastened, Forstice nonetheless discovers in the loss of his wife a new dimension; as he cares for her, his conscience opens to the consciousness of all mankind. The movement of this part of "Perplexities" is similar to the dialectical action of Goethe's *Faust*. The brief speeches of the devil-figure hint at a Mephistophelean role as embodiment of the spirit of negation, one "who works, excites, and must create, as Devil",⁵ for his words have initiated a dialectic of head and heart that has pushed Forstice's inner conflict to a higher level of consciousness.

The method of the dialectic becomes the chief method of development of the second section, but here the dialectic is primarily Socratic, the movement of ideas. Forstice, now in Florence, attends with his friend Forano a meeting of the Amanti del Pensiero, lovers of clear thought. Forstice sets his problem before them: based on his recent experience of human love, he now holds an affirmative view of

⁴ *The Collected Stories of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Barry Feinberg (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bayard Taylor (New York: Modern Library, 1912), p. 12.

life, believing it of infinite value, but his belief is unsupported by reason. From the Amanti he seeks a rational foundation as verification of his new faith. The meeting becomes a forum, in which each voice seems to be a part of his mind, externalizing internal conflicts. The mathematician, Forano (whose name might be a combination of "Frege" and "Peano"), is first to speak, expressing the classic dissatisfaction of the thinker who perceives paradox, seeing the flux of reality around him while yearning for the abstract world of permanence and universals. Response comes from Nasispo, the philosopher, who accepts the beauty of the timeless mathematical world and pushes its search for truth into the larger realm of metaphysics. Nasispo is a Spinoza-voice (evidenced by the anagram of the name); he reaches a synthesis of thought in which Self and Time are transcended in a vision like that of Spinoza, denying the fear of death and the reality of evil by merging all elements in a single joyous vision. Pardicreti, the poet, answers Nasispo in a dynamic effort that combines the visions of Lucretius and Leopardi (Leopardi's poetry—especially "L'Infinito"—was among Russell's favourites). Moving against the failing he sees in both Forano and Nasispo—passivity—Pardicreti sounds a Faustian note:

The Mind of man, almost helpless in the midst of the vast wild world, is the meeting-place and focus of all the processes of the ages. Sense and passion, the mirror and the central fire, strangely blended, at once reveal and transform the world; and as imagination darts the light of passion now here, now there, its sudden rays pierce the astonished darkness of the outer night, and the mirror of sense reveals undreamed-of visions to the soul.

If Pardicreti speaks as the Romantic Hero, like the Faust of Part I of Goethe's drama, he sounds also like the creative striver of Part II: "I do not desire a God: I want a world where there is always something to be done, a virgin forest in which to hew a way, a night to illumine with beacon fires, an infinite chaos with a core of cosmos gradually growing..." (p. 28). The passage echoes the conflict between Mephistopheles, the lover of Chaos whose choice is always the Void, and Faust, the striving builder. The discussion of the Amanti moves next to Chenshoff, the Russian novelist, who stresses the importance of pain as a gateway to mystic insight, expanding upon the same paradox Faust touches on when he welcomes suffering because of its reciprocity with development of the Self. Lastly, the conversation moves to Alegno, who presents the view of the common man, the

claim of the many. At this point, with issues unresolved, Forstice is called home by the illness of his uncle, Tristram Forstice.

Their relationship creates the substance of the third section, permitting the first exploration of Forstice's inner self, that Faust-theme so significant to the twentieth century, by looking deeply into the life and emotions of Tristram, John's alter ego. This "other Forstice" is a man whose heart has ruled his head. He has experienced a life-time of unrequited love for Catherine Belasny (who is modelled on Lady Ottoline's Mother Julian). As Sister Catherine, the Mother Superior of her order at the time of John's meeting with her, she personifies the self-renouncing love that reflects the sustaining aspect of God, a function of woman embodied in Margaret in Goethe's drama. As in that drama, the theme is a culminating one in Russell's novella, an uncharacteristic approach for him. Fifty years later he expressed dissatisfaction with this part of the story, insisting that any publication of the work be accompanied by his judgment that this section is "much too sentimental, much too mild and much too favourable to religion. In all this I was unduly influenced by Lady Ottoline Morrell".⁶ It seems likely, in view of the name and traits of his protagonist, that Russell, in addition to the personal influence of Lady Ottoline, felt also the literary influence of the Faust-dramas, especially Goethe's. Russell appears to be attempting here a similar world-view, an overall structural pattern bringing the fragmented parts of Forstice's life into organic unity. In Forstice's struggle near the end of the work to reconcile an almost unendurable dualism, Russell offers a summation of the problem he and Goethe share with their Fausts: "Day after day, in a passion of thought, the same problem held him; hour after hour, sitting or slowly pacing backwards and forwards, he saw side by side two truths, the truth of science and the truth of vision; struggling to make them combine, he saw them still apart, still mutually destructive, yet still both true". In the last lines of the story Forstice achieves a twentieth-century "salvation", enough integration of the self to permit him to take up his old identity, now deepened and reinforced. It is a lesser resolution than Goethe's, and Russell's syntax shows the difficulty. Nevertheless, it is a resolution that allows Forstice, unlike Goethe's Faust, to go on living: "Very slowly, with much doubt, not without some loss of glory in the vision, he found a kind of possibility of union; . . . with resolute hope he returned to the study and teaching of physics in which the remainder of his days were spent" (p. 41).

Like Goethe, Russell never seemed quite done with his Faust-

⁶ Letter to Anton Felton, Russell's literary executor, 2 April 1968, *Collected Stories*, p. 12.

figure. The figure appears again in *Satan in the Suburbs* (1953), reprinted in the *Collected Stories*. Also different in tone, this novella is a satire that flirts with fantasy. Written when the possibilities of the hydrogen bomb were becoming an obsession with horror for Russell, this novella is a warning in the form of entertainment. The narrator, like Forstice, is a scientist; this time, he is nameless. Interestingly, the “devil”, Dr. Mallako, is also a scientist, a psychiatrist. Russell lays on implications of evil with heavy hand. Names offer connotations: “Dr Murdoch Mallako”, suggesting “murder” and “malevolence”, as well as “Moloch”, the bloodthirsty Canaanite god who required human sacrifice; the suburb, which we might expect to be a “garden”, named “Mortlake”; the very namelessness of the narrator, which seems representative of the modern scientist when he is a spectator rather than a participant in the happenings of his community. Such, at any rate, is the narrator’s situation as his story begins; it is his gradual change from observer to participant in evil that provides the plot, a paradigm of the plight of the atomic scientist, who is, as Heller implies, the essential Faust-figure of our age (pp. 15-21).

One after another, the inhabitants of Mortlake succumb to the evil suggestions of Dr. Mallako in alphabetical order that underscores the universality of their temptations. (Mr. Abercrombie can be seen as “Mr. A . . .”; “Mr. A” + “Mr. B” + “Mr. C” = Everyman.) At first light and mocking, the tone darkens as Dr. Mallako, Mephistophelean as the externalization of the bestial in man, encourages his patients to express their most selfish desires and impulses. Although he leads them, it is the citizens themselves, however, who decide to elevate the irrational over the rational. Gradually, with the release of the irrational into the community, Mallako’s powers grow. With the only “supernatural” events in the story—Mallako’s ability to affect his patients’ minds, especially that of the “haunted” narrator—channelled into abnormal psychology, no restraints remain on man’s bestiality except his reason and self-discipline. When the narrator-scientist dreams of mass-murder (like Faust, he will control the ocean; he will make the waters boil to destroy all life), and when he becomes an actual murderer by shooting Dr. Mallako, the corruption is complete. In this treatment of the theme of temptation the reader senses a return to the older account of Faust’s encounter with the Devil, matters of “salvation” and “damnation”. If he was a “non-supernatural Faust”, Russell saw himself, like the narrator, struggling with the Enemy in a life-and-death battle for existence in the modern world: “I live in Mortlake” is the opening sentence of the

satire. And the Enemy is within, it is each man’s irrationality; thus Dr. Mallako appears in his true Devil’s guise in the narrator’s nightmares. The satire turns on the matter of Dr. Mallako’s identity, for on this question, of course, hinges the sanity of the narrator. Symbolically, Russell leaves the narrator in a mental hospital at the end of the story, waiting. Perhaps Russell wished to recall in his title, *Satan in the Suburbs*, the following speech of Mephistopheles from the second part of Goethe’s *Faust*:

I’d take some town,—a capital, perchance,—
Its core, the people’s need of sustenance;
With crooked alleys, pointed gables,
Beets, cabbage, onion, on the market-tables; . . .
There shalt thou find, undoubtedly,
Stench, always, and activity.
Then ample squares, and streets whose measure
Assumes an air of lordly leisure;
And last, without a gate to bar,
The boundless suburbs stretching far.
'T were joy to see the coaches go,
The noisy crowding to and fro, . . .
And whether walking, driving, riding,
Ever their central point abiding,
Honored by thousands, should be I. (pp. 190-1)

Despite the lack of resolution, the satire contributes a meaningful attempt to define anew the Mephistophelean and Faustian roles.

Thus in a range of works Russell dealt with Faust-themes. By the variation of characterization and emphasis, he modified the significance of the legend from work to work. His use of the Faust-materials permitted him a look into great themes: man’s quickening search for his inner self; new definitions of temptation, of salvation or damnation; the matter of man’s shaken pride in his reason; and man’s quest for meaning in a universe wherein boundaries continue to expand.

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