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Goethe—"Voilà un homme!"

By Francis Neilson

THE PAST SUMMER Great Britain and the United States celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the author of "Faust." This event was one of the few signs of the return of wisdom in the cultural sphere. No matter what has happened in the past thirty-five years to blot from our memory the real debt we owe to Goethe, it is to be hoped the celebrations will go far toward re-establishing the relationships that united European people in all that was best in philosophy, literature, and art. So far as we are concerned, it is our humble duty to associate with the name of the great German poet that of Bayard Taylor, who gave to the English-speaking world the worthy translation of "Faust," with voluminous notes of inestimable value.

How strange it is to look back some two generations and read once more the chorus of praise rendered by English and American authors to an artist who lived and worked in the days of their fathers. To be extolled, as he was, by so many of the highly cultured critics of that extraordinary period —rich in poets—is a unique experience.

When one reads the tribute penned to him in that fascinating work, "The Maclise Portrait Gallery," it does not seem possible that the world of men could go mad and forget so soon the illustrious past. To be reminded, as we are in this essay, of the many famous authors in America and in England who paid homage to Goethe is something of a shock to those of us who have lived through the wars of the twentieth century.

Dr. John Robertson, who wrote the article upon him in *The Encyclopædia Britannica*, says:

> . . . Of all modern men, Goethe is the most universal type of genius. It is the full, rich humanity of his life and personality—not the art behind which the artist disappears, of the definite pronouncements of the thinker or the teacher—that constitutes his claim to a place in the front rank of men of letters. His life was his greatest work.

In the field of state politics, studied so little by many of his biographers, he stands out as a statesman of unusual character. In the theater, he was a master of the dramatist's craft, a thorough journeyman of the technique of the stage, and an eminent *régisseur*. Few have grasped the fact that he was a political economist of exceptional merit; in the sphere of science, he

was a predecessor of Darwin, and his investigations into botany and anatomy yielded some contributions that are now considered to be surprisingly original. His mind was universal in scope. Fearlessly he entered realms of thought that were forbidden to many of his famous contemporaries. To be influenced by Kant and Schiller meant much to Goethe; but to be accepted in so many fields of learning was rare to one whose reputation was made as a poet.

The Importance of "Faust"

DESPITE THE ADVERSE CRITICISM of the second part of "Faust," which came from such Goethe scholars as Hayward, Lewes, and many lesser lights, it must be remembered that the "Helena" fantasy was written long before he set to work upon the final scenes of the tragedy. Indeed, in 1828, Carlyle wrote a review of it that runs to more than fifty pages in the "Critical and Miscellaneous Essays." It was the incorporation of this scene in "Faust" that mystified so many of the German and English critics. But, somehow, Carlyle saw in it a work of eerie imagination and wrote:

> . . . It is wonderful with what fidelity the Classical style is maintained throughout the earlier part of the Poem; how skilfully it is at once united to the Romantic style of the latter part and made to reappear, at intervals, to the end.

However, the acrimonious debate that arose when the second part was published in its entirety is now forgotten, and Bayard Taylor himself nearly eighty years ago could say:

> The early disparagement which the Second Part of *Faust* received is only in our day beginning to give way to an intelligent recognition of its grand design, its wealth of illustration, and the almost inexhaustible variety and beauty of its rhythmical forms. . . .

It may not be amiss to point out that the end of the second part of "Faust" is the culmination of the thoughts expressed in the early scenes of the first part. In the Prologue in Heaven, the scheme is subtly announced by the archangels Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael:

> The ocean-tides in foam are breaking,
> Against the rocks' deep bases hurled,
> And both, the spheric race partaking,
> Eternal, swift, are onward whirled!
> And rival storms abroad are surging
> From sea to land, from land to sea,
> A chain of deepest action forging
> Round all, in wrathful energy.
> There flames a desolation, blazing

Before the Thunder's crashing way:
Yet, Lord, Thy messengers are praising
The gentle movement of Thy Day.
Though still by them uncomprehended,
From these the angels draw their power,
And all Thy works, sublime and splendid,
Are bright as in Creation's hour.

It is in the Prologue, also, that we learn something of the condition of the world of man, and the description given to the Lord by Mephistopheles might be served as an indictment now of the wreck man has made of his heritage.

He portrays the depravity of the fallen creature thus:

The little god o' the world sticks to the same old way,
And is as whimsical as on Creation's day.
Life somewhat better might content him,
But for the gleam of heavenly light which Thou has lent him:
He calls it Reason—thence his power's increased,
To be far beastlier than any beast.
Saying Thy Gracious Presence, he to me
A long-legged grasshopper appears to be,
That springing flies, and flying springs,
And in the grass the same old ditty sings.
Would he still lay among the grass he grows in!
Each bit of dung he seeks, to stick his nose in.

The Lord asks:

Hast thou, then, nothing more to mention?
Com'st ever, thus, with ill intention?
Find'st nothing right on earth, eternally?

And Mephistopheles replies:

No, Lord! I find things, there, still bad as they can be.
Man's misery even to pity moves my nature;
I've scarce the heart to plague the wretched creature.

Then comes the test of the power of the devil to triumph everlastingly over the soul of man. The Lord selects Faust for the purpose, and the wager is made as to who will win him in the end. Mephistopheles describes his victim as one frenzied, reaching to the fairest stars, to the highest raptures, and unable to subdue the tumult of his breast. However, the Lord says:

Though still confused his service unto Me,
I soon shall lead him to a clearer morning.

Sees not the gardener, even while buds his tree,
Both flower and fruit the future years adorning?

The Dominant Motif

In the monologue which opens the drama, Faust submits himself to searching self-examination and decides that all his learning amounts to a "rummage in empty words." Suddenly his dejection is pierced by a flashing inspiration, and he cries, "Fly! Up, and seek the broad, free land!"

It is important to mark this exclamation because it is a keynote which must be kept firmly in mind all through the two parts of the drama, and it leads to the great culmination that is reached in the final scene of the second part. It is remarkable that so many of the poet's greatest admirers have missed this dominant motif and have said so little about the meaning of the triumph of Faust proclaimed in the death speech which closes the tragedy. Even so thorough a disciple of the poet as Bayard Taylor fails to give the slightest inkling of an understanding of the victory Faust attains at the end.

The first part of the drama is fairly well known. But how seldom one finds a student who has given close study to the second part. Perhaps it is the romance of Margaret in the earlier section that grips the mind, and when she passes from the scene it is not easy to revive an interest in the sublime finale of the tragedy. And, yet, the poem is incomplete at that stage. For in the second part, the turmoil of the world is laid bare, and the spiritual struggle of Faust is the test he must survive if Mephistopheles is to lose his wager. Those whose souls have been bruised by the horror of events in recent years cannot afford to neglect reading Part II, particularly Acts IV and V. There is scarcely a problem of universal importance that is not dealt with in these scenes.

Faust and Mephistopheles are present at the court where the Emperor is surrounded by his chiefs-of-state. He has been told that the earth is his; indeed, he compares his reign to a tale from "A Thousand and One Nights." The High Steward says: "Things can't in Heaven more cheerful be." And as for the armed forces, the General-in-Chief announces:

Arrears of pay are settled duly,
The army is enlisted newly;
The trooper's blood is all alive,
The landlords and the wenches thrive.

But how has all this good fortune come about? It is so miraculous that the Emperor himself feels a little disturbed at such a change. The Chancellor then explains the magical fiscal trick of issuing paper as a temporary device to save the State from bankruptcy:

In my old days I'm blest, and most content.
So hear and see the fortune-freighted leaf
Which has transformed to happiness our grief.
"To all to whom this cometh, be it known:
A thousand crowns in worth this note doth own.
It to secure, as certain pledge, shall stand
All buried treasure in the Emperor's land:
And 't is decreed, perfecting thus the scheme,
The treasure, soon as raised, shall this redeem."

Just a few strokes of the pen, a wide distribution of the paper in payment of wage, and the trick is done! Yet, the poor old Emperor is so puzzled about it all that he asks:

And with my people does it pass for gold?
For pay in court and camp, the notes they hold?
Then I must yield, although the thing's amazing.

This scene describes our own present situation. Indeed, the satirical passages of statecraft and political thievery are worth serious study, for there was not a fiscal trick played then that is not being played by all States now.

It is in the fourth act that we find the theme of the archangels in the Prologue of the first part taking hold of the mind of Faust:

The Sea sweeps on, in thousand quarters flowing,
Itself unfruitful, barrenness bestowing;
It breaks and swells, and rolls, and overwhelms
The desert stretch of desolated realms.
There endless waves hold sway, in strength erected
And then withdrawn,—and nothing is effected.
If aught could drive me to despair, 't were, truly
The aimless force of elements unruly.
Then dared my mind its dreams to over-soar:
Here would I fight,—subdue this fierce uproar!
And possible 't is!—Howe'er the tides may fill,
They gently fawn around the steadfast hill;
A moderate height resists and drives asunder,
A moderate depth allures and leads them on.
So, swiftly, plans within my mind were drawn:
Let that high joy be mine forevermore,
To shut the lordly Ocean from the shore,
The watery waste to limit and to bar,
And push it back upon itself afar!
From step to step I settled how to fight it:
Such is my wish: dare thou to expedite it!

Soon are heard the drums of war, and in what follows the art of statecraft is laid bare with merciless clarity; hate and war, as we have known

them in our day, appear in fierce habiliments, differing little from those that have haunted us. This extraordinary scene ends with a comment by Mephistopheles which we should ponder deeply:

> Firm in transmitted hate they anchor,
> And show implacably their rancor:
> Now far and wide the noise hath rolled.
> At last, the Devils find a hearty
> Advantage in the hate of Party,
> Till dread and ruin end the tale:
> Repulsive sounds of rage and panic,
> With others, piercing and Satanic,
> Resound along the frightened vale!

After the battle is fought, the Emperor and Archbishop discuss the matter of the division of the spoil. It differs little from what took place after World War I. Those who had helped to win the victory for the Emperor are to be rewarded according to service rendered:

> You I award, ye Faithful, many a lovely land,
> Together with the right, as you may have occasion,
> To spread them by exchange, or purchase, or invasion:
> Then be it clearly fixed, that you unhindered use
> Whate'er prerogatives have been the landlord's dues.
> When ye, as Judges, have the final sentence spoken,
> By no appeal from your high Court shall it be broken:
> Then levies, tax and rent, pass-money, tolls and fees
> Are yours,—of mines and salt and coin the royalties.

Acts IV and V must be read, for it is almost impossible in an essay to describe even a small part of the subjects dealt with or to show how the mighty aim of Faust survives all the bitterness of his thwarted life. That the idea of the vast plan lives through it all and comes to development is something of a miracle, and here the master poet's art of sustaining the interest in scenes of great complexity reaches the very apex of craftsmanship.

The beginning of the last act introduces Faust-Goethe as the Wanderer meeting Baucis and Philemon. In these two short scenes we have a glimpse of a past that the poet never forgot. The sylvan peace and contentment and simple trust of gentle souls in the goodness of God are so genuine in feeling that even the skeptic must be touched by their beauty. Again the prophetic strain of the mighty plan is struck, and Philemon describes the future state envisioned by Faust:

> Where the savage waves maltreated
> You, on shores of breaking foam,

See, a garden lies completed,
Like an Eden-dream of home!
Old was I, no longer eager,
Helpful, as the younger are:
And when I had lost my vigor,
Also was the wave afar.
Wise lords set their serfs in motion,
Dikes upraised and ditches led,
Minishing the rights of Ocean,
Lords to be in Ocean's stead.
See the green of many a meadow,
Field and garden, wood and town!
Come, our table waits in shadow!
For the sun is going down.
Sails afar are gliding yonder;
Nightly to the port they fare:
To their nest the sea-birds wander,
For a harbor waits them there.
Distant now, thou hardly seëst
Where the Sea's blue arc is spanned,—
Right and left, the broadest, freest
Stretch of thickly-peopled land.

This is placed like a bright beacon to lighten our way through the dark passages of spiritual stress and physical pain that we encounter in the supreme struggle which ends in the death triumph.

The glories of kingdoms and of empires are the talismans of Mephistopheles. The personification of Evil describes the ancient imperial way of going about the business ruthlessly:

Free is the mind on Ocean free;
Who there can ponder sluggishly?
You only need a rapid grip:
You catch a fish, you seize a ship;
And when you once are lord of three,
The fourth is grappled easily;
The fifth is then in evil plight;
You have the Power, and thus the Right.
You count the *What,* and not the *How:*
If I have ever navigated,
War, Trade and Piracy, I vow,
Are three in one, and can't be separated!

But he surfeits Faust with the attractions of these baubles that bring to him only the spirits of Want, Guilt, Necessity, and Care:

What though One Day with rational brightness beams,
The Night entangles us in webs of dreams.

From our young fields of life we come, elate:
There croaks a bird: what croaks he? Evil fate!

Blinded by Care, who breathes in his face, and conscious that night is deepening about him, he cries:

Up from your couches, vassals, man by man!
Make grandly visible my daring plan!
Seize now your tools, with spade and shovel press!
The work traced out must be a swift success.
Quick diligence, severest ordering
The most superb reward shall bring;
And, that the mighty work completed stands,
One mind suffices for a thousand hands.

The Triumph of Faust

THEN, OLD AND TOTTERING, he rejoices to hear the clattering spade. The turbulent waves will be thrust back, and notwithstanding the skepticism of Mephistopheles who scorns the idea of a moat to protect the land and predicts that it will prove to be *a grave*, Faust rises to his soul's height and proclaims:

Below the hills a marshy plain
Infects what I so long have been retrieving;
This stagnant pool likewise to drain
Were now my latest and my best achieving.
To many millions let me furnish soil,
Though not secure, yet free to active toil;
Green, fertile fields, where men and herds go forth
At once, with comfort, on the newest Earth,
And swiftly settled on the hill's firm base,
Created by the bold, industrious race.
A land like Paradise here, round about:
Up to the brink the tide may roar without,
And though it gnaw, to burst with force the limit,
By common impulse all unite to hem it.
Yet! to this thought I hold with firm persistence;
The last result of wisdom stamps it true:
He only earns his freedom and existence,
Who daily conquers them anew.
Thus here, by dangers girt, shall glide away
Of childhood, manhood, age, the vigorous day:
And such a throng I fain would see,—
Stand on free soil among a people free!
Then dared I hail the Moment fleeing:
"*Ah, still delay—thou art so fair!*"
The traces cannot, of mine earthly being,

In aeons perish,—they are there!—
In proud fore-feeling of such lofty bliss,
I now enjoy the highest Moment,—this!

The end of this death triumph is like an echo of the declaration given by Faust in Act I of the first part, when the terms of the wager were settled:

When thus I hail the Moment flying:
"Ah, still delay—thou art so fair!"
Then bind me in thy bonds undying,
My final ruin then declare!
Then let the death-bell chime the token,
Then art thou from thy service free!
The clock may stop, the hand be broken,
Then Time be finished unto me!

And so at the end, when Faust dies, the memory of the thought that came to him when he made the wager startles us:

Mephistopheles.

No joy could sate him, and suffice no bliss!
To catch but shifting shapes was his endeavor:
The latest, poorest, emptiest Moment—this,—
He wished to hold it fast forever.
Me he resisted in such vigorous wise,
But Time is lord, on earth the old man lies.
The clock stands still—

Chorus.

Stands still; silent as midnight, now!
The index falls.

Mephistopheles.

It falls; and it is finished, here!

Chorus

'T is past!

Mephistopheles.

—Past! a stupid word.
If past, then why?
Past and pure Naught, complete monotony!
What good for us, this endlessly creating?—
What is created then annihilating?
"And now it's past!" Why read a page so twisted?
'T is just the same as if it ne'er existed,
Yet goes in circles round as if it had, however:
I'd rather choose, instead, the Void forever.

Bayard Taylor tells us in a note that it was a favorite maxim of Goethe that no man can really possess that which he has not personally acquired. This idea approximates the Justinian definition of property, and no doubt the poet saw clearly the difference between land—the created source of all wealth, man's subsistence—and the produce gained by his labor for his well-being.

In understanding this, we realize what the aged Faust intends to convey when he says:

> He only earns his freedom and existence,
> Who daily conquers them anew.

It is wonderful to see how Goethe is in agreement with the same ideas expressed by Byron and Shelley; and that his thought upon this fundamental question differs little from that of Leibnitz and, later, Kant.

Eckermann tells us that in 1831 Goethe said:

> Let men continue to worship Him who gives the ox his pasture, and to man food and drink, according to his need. But I worship Him, who has filled the world with such a productive energy, that, if only the millionth part became embodied in living existence, the globe would so swarm with them that War, Pestilence, Flood and Fire would be powerless to diminish them. That is *my* God!

Here he is one with the pagan toiler who raised an altar at which he might worship the Author of his being and give thanks for the source of his subsistence. This yearning for action and fruitfulness runs through the whole tragedy as a cosmic strain of melody courses through the heavens, giving joy to the stars. The Faustian spirit is expressed dynamically in the desire for more and still more knowledge, and acts like a tonic stimulating effort to mightier aims. This is the physical Faust—Man in actuality; but the spiritual Faust—poet and sufferer—is not defeated by the titanic physical forces of the world.

How beautifully Goethe blends the symbolism of the soul's high yearning to reach the Godhead with the storm and stress of worldly endeavor! The profound mind of the poet conceives the laws of nature as an attribute of divine justice, which should regulate the ordinances of life. The good tidings may be expressed in a line—subsistence for body and elevation for soul. Hence, a free soil for a people free, with war banished and pestilence subdued. A nobler theme can scarcely be imagined, and if we have stressed this motive of the sublime tragedy more than others have done, it is because we find in it so much that concerns the affairs of our world at this hour. May the hope go forth that the celebrations will mark a revival in interest in Goethe's work in which students will find stores of practical knowledge too long hidden from the victims of the State.