

## Faust's Deliberations

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* is a tragic play. It was published in two parts: *Faust: der Tragödie erster Teil* [*Faust: The Tragedy Part One*] and *Faust: der Tragödie zweiter Teil* [*Faust: The Tragedy Part Two*]. The play is a so called "closet drama", meaning that it is meant to be read by a solitary reader, or sometimes in small groups, rather than performed on stage. Closet dramas were particularly popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Faust* is Goethe's most famous work and is considered by many to be one of the greatest works of German literature.

The original legend of Doctor Faust (16<sup>th</sup> century) describes Faust as a Roman Catholic who dissented from the evangelic word of God and defied the authority of God, striving for wealth and supernatural power and knowledge. To achieve that Faust sold his soul to the devil and when the contract was fulfilled the devil pulled him down to hell.

Goethe (Johann Wolfgang, 1749–1832) started to work on his *Faust* when he was 25 and finished writing it a few months before his death, which means that he had worked on *Faust* for 58 years. The fundamental characteristic of Goethe's *Faust* is the dichotomy of Faust's consciousness and the cognition that our mind, "this reflection of the celestial light", cannot lead man to any deeper knowledge. Unfortunately, man uses his mind solely to be the greatest animal of all known.

Man is torn apart between the pleasures of this world and his ardent desire for the goods of the other world. A further characteristic of Goethe's *Faust* is the collapse of rationalism and the understanding that our mind cannot solve the essential transcendental and metaphysical truths.

Goethe believed that the secrets of the universe would remain eternal secrets. This was also the conviction of the renowned German physiologist Emil Du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), which belief he expressed in the famous saying – *ignoramus et ignorabimus* – [we don't know and we shall not know]. These thoughts tore apart Goethe's soul and he conveyed all his sorrows to Faust's soul.

The story of *Faust* inspired a great deal of literature and music and is considered to be pertinent to the field of science and very much in tune with some modern thinking. Arthur Schopenhauer praised Goethe's portrayal of Gretchen and her suffering as exemplifying one of the ways to sanctity.

In our thoughts we are with Faust. He is old and aware that the end of his life is very near. He used it tirelessly in an attempt to find the truth: who are we, where are we going, what is this world around us, what does endlessness mean, what finality? There are no answers and Faust is endlessly sad. In our thoughts we are with him.

It is night. Faust is alone in his study. It is a typical Gothic chamber, high-vaulted, rather narrow. Faust is

restless in his chair by his desk, writing his "life testament":

"Habe nun, ach! Philosophie (verse 355)  
Juristerei und Medizin  
Und leider auch Theologie  
Durchaus studiert, mit heissem Bemühen.  
Da steh' ich nun, ich armer Tor!  
Und bin so klug als wie zuvor;  
Heisse Magister, heisse Doktor gar,  
Und ziehe schon an die zehn Jahre  
Herauf, herab und quer und krumm  
Meine Schüler an der Nase herum —  
Und sehe dass wir nichts wissen können!" (verse 365)

I've now studied Philosophy  
And Jurisprudence, Medicine,  
And even alas! Theology  
All through and through with ardour keen!  
Here now I stand, poor fool, and see  
I am just as wise as formerly.  
Am called a Master, even Doctor too,  
And now I've nearly ten years through  
Pulled my students by their noses to and fro,  
And up and down, across, about,  
And see there is nothing we can know!  
(translated by G. Madison Priest)

Faust is now an old man. Death is near and the life bravery has almost vanished. Faust's eyes are full of tears. The following verses convey the feelings of an old man:

"Ein Schauer fasst mich, Träne folgt den Tränen, (29)  
Das strenge Herz, es fühlt sich mild und weich;  
Was ich besitze, seh' ich wie im Weiten,  
Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten." (32)

Awe binds me fast; tear upon tear falls burning,  
My stern heart feels a gentle, tender thrill;  
What I possess as if far off I'm seeing,  
And what has vanished now comes into being.  
(G. Madison Priest)

Faust's youth has gone but he sees it in his dreams, in his wishes, his memories and this will be so until his last breath.

Faust is confronted with death. Where does death come from? Goethe sees it as coming from far-away because it takes death our whole life to come to us. Here is Goethe's exciting description of that moment:

"Es ziehen die Wolken, es schwinden die Sterne (11395)  
Dahinten, dahinten! von ferne, von ferne,  
Da kommt er, der Bruder da kommt er, der – Tod." (11397)

The clouds there are moving, and cover the stars!  
Behind us, behind us! From far, oh, from far,  
He's coming, our Brother, he's coming – he's Death.  
(G. Madison Priest)

Goethe associates the coming of death with the arrival of a brother, who wishes us only good.

Death does not intrigue only Goethe but all of us, and also the miller Sima in the Croatian opera *Ero s onoga svijeta* [*Ero from the other world*]. He sees in the work of his mill the work of human heart, and is afraid to stop his mill even for a second, because when the heart stops, life passes away and death comes, and he sings sadly.

Very strange is this human heart. It is well known that the heart can almost stop and then it might recover and work well for years. If the heart stops, why did it stop, let's say, at a quarter to midnight, why not at a quarter past midnight? This has been the topic of many medical discussions with no conclusive answer.

Let us return to Faust. Why tears in his eyes? Tears are a sign of weakness and he was always a proud man. But now Faust feels death as the final collapse of all his expectations and hopes, and a memento of the unassailability of the final truth which he had tried to find all his life.

According to a Buddhist story, Gautama Shakyamuni had plunged into Nirvana denying all his feelings. Swallows built their nest in his motionless palm. They flew away in the autumn and they returned in the spring. But they did not return one spring. And the great Stoic started to cry for the swallows. Such is the human heart. It cannot not love, and who would know whether these tears, this human weakness, like that of Faust, is a real weakness or the greatest human strength.

Goethe died in his eighty-third year. He finished writing Faust at the last moment, about three months before his death. The last verses in this lovely work are most probably the last verses of his life. Here are these verses:

"Das Ewig Weibliche (12310)  
Zieht uns hinan." (12311)

This eternal feminine  
Is pulling us forward.

The verse is uttered by Chorus Mysticus. No one expects such a verse and therefore it appears very frank. The verse is often quoted.

It is exciting that this truth was recorded by the dying Goethe, a good connoisseur of the secrets of the human soul, and these secrets occupied all his life energy and deliberations. Words like *Vaterland* [homeland] we shall in vain try to find in his verses. National subjects did not occupy his mind.

### Epilogue

In Goethe's time the speed of light was known with high precision. Nowadays, it is known that the speed of light (c) in the vacuum is 299 792 458 m/s. An approximate

value of 300 000 km/s is usually applied. The speed of light was important for the science of those days.

Since Goethe's time many new discoveries have been made and great scientific progress has been achieved. New stars have been discovered. *E.g.*, the star Antares is a huge star, about 700 times the diameter of our Sun, 10 000 times brighter, about 500 light years away (for comparison, our sun is about 8 light minutes away from us, and our moon only 2 light seconds).

These new discoveries, though impressive, have not brought in essence anything fundamentally new that would compel the old Faust, were he alive, to change his final agnostic statement: "We can know – nothing!"

Goethe lived at a time when his ideas may have been derived from the so-called "Enlightenment", which formed an essential part of the thinking of the founding fathers of Goethe's generation. They, too, were mostly agnostic. There is no doubt that Goethe was also an agnostic though in Goethe's writing there is no reference to God or an afterlife.

Goethe was prior to all a scientists and he could only accept allegations that were proven scientifically. One excepts this attitude after reading the first verse of the *Prologue* in which Goethe describes his study of world theologies as a waste of time.

No doubt Goethe was an ardent agnostic. But, agnosticism is unacceptable to science. It ignores the possibility of improvement of scientific achievements with time. The answer of opponents of agnosticism might be that what Faust could not solve in his lifetime science might solve in the far future. It appears that many researchers believe that future science might offer answers to, at least, some fundamental Faust's questions.

*Note* – This paper is an essentially altered extension of the article that was recently published under the title *Goethe i Faustovski jadi [Goethe and the Woes of Faust]* in the Croatian journal *Priroda* **9** (2007) 47–49, in the Croatian language.