13

Faust I

Setting the Stage

In the midst of his scathing disavowal of the "frenchifying" tendencies of the reform movement, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing makes mention of the tale of Doctor Faustus as a promising theme for a genuinely German play.[1] It was an idea that Lessing entertained for much of his adult life—from about 1755 to 1775—but which never came to more than a handful of fragments. Lessing's idea for a German tragedy was, in truth, a single moment in a centuries-long tradition of enthusiasm for the Faust legend. English traveling players had first made a theatrical hit of the story, freely adapting a tragedy written by the English playwright Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) that had itself been inspired by the German chapbook *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, anonymously published in 1587. Lessing's turn to the Faust story was historically pivotal. It

1. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Stenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 4:501.

served the strategic purpose of establishing a counterweight to the emphasis that had been placed on the cultivation of culturally alien dramatic themes and forms. Lessing had the hunch that the Faust featured in marketplace puppet shows and theatrical spectacles could also become a German hero.

There can be no doubt that the apogee of the Faust fascination was Goethe's play of the same name, a project he put into print in 1808 but had embarked upon approximately ten years after Lessing's literary campaign against the French.[2] Given the historical proximity of these two authors' interest in Faust, it seems only natural to explore the relationship between Goethe's *Faust I* and the project of literary improvement from the latter half of the eighteenth century. Such a line of inquiry must confront a few points of resistance. Even though it is normal to speak of Goethe's tragedy as a high point in German national literature, this conventional locution does not tell us just how deep the affiliation cuts. Essentially any informed reader would have to admit that Goethe's tragedy is not the expression of narrow-minded provincialism. On the contrary, much of the scholarship over the last two centuries has sought to demonstrate the artistic rank of *Faust* by pointing out how it appropriates and integrates literary traditions extending from ancient Greek tragedy and the Bible to Golden Age Spain and Shakespeare's England.[3] Claims concerning the local specificity of

2. Throughout part 4, I provide the original German in parentheses as well as line numbers from the Deutscher Klassiker Verlag edition, which is cited in the notes as FA I 7/1. Since I support my argument concerning *Faust* with evidence from across Goethe's vast oeuvre, my references include the title of the relevant text as well as the volume of the Deutscher Klassiker Verlag Edition (FA) in which the text appears. Translations longer quotations from Goethe's *Faust* are taken from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy; Interpretive Notes, Contexts, Modern Criticism*, trans. Walter Arndt and ed. Cyrus Hamlin (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

3. On this point, I recommend Albrecht Schöne's introductory notes to FA I 7/2: esp. 11–26. See also Joachim Müller, "Goethes Dramentheorie," in *Deutsche Dramentheorien*, ed. Reinhold Grimm (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1971), 1:167–213, esp. 175–176. Jane Brown's comprehensive and insightful study of Goethe's *Faust* argues that the play should be seen as an attempt to establish a new form of (distinctively worldly and not narrowly German) literature. I have learned much from Brown's book as well as her other essays on Goethe, but do not feel compelled to take such an either-or stance. I also suspect that Brown

the plot seem equally out of place: the eponymous hero, for example, displays no interest in questions of nationhood. His desires head in the direction of the "forces of nature" (*Kräfte der Natur*, line 438); one of his chief ambitions is "to bear the earth's woe and the earth's joy" (*Der Erde Weh, der Erde Glück zu tragen*, line 465). From the opening dialogue in heaven up through the final scene of the tragedy's first part, when words of redemption are spoken by a disembodied divine voice, there is no denying the cosmic scale of Goethe's tragedy. Ultimately, the universalizing impulse evident in the adjective "Faustian"—common to a number of European languages—has a solid thematic basis in Goethe's tragedy.

But there is a more visceral objection to meet. Arguing in terms of national literature risks sounding hopelessly antiquated. Since its publication, the play's protagonist has often been construed as the embodiment of the German "mythological main character" (*mythologische Hauptperson*), as the philosopher Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) once put it.[4] Along the same lines, the venerated poet Heinrich Heine once (1797–1856) declared that "the German people is itself that learned Doctor Faust."[5] Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the hero's tortured quest made him the quintessential embodiment of the German nation's philosophical earnestness.[6] And for the last half century, it has not taken much to associate this sort of identificatory reading with the Faust figure, motivated by a sense of national pride, with the horrific excesses of the twentieth century. For many, it is difficult to celebrate Faust as a German hero without recalling the National Socialist appropriation of the very same figure.[7]

---

ultimately intended to make *Faust* appealing to a larger audience of European literature scholars, not to deny the legitimacy of an argument such as the one I advance here. See Jane Brown, *Goethe's Faust: The German Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

4. Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst,* in *Schellings Werke*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1927), 5:458; quoted in FA I 7/2:37.

5. Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1976), 5:402.

6. For an abundance of references to this theme, see FA I 7/2:39–41.

7. Inez Hedges, *Framing Faust: Twentieth-Century Cultural Struggles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 44–71.

In suggesting a kinship between Goethe's *Faust* and the project of literary improvement, my goal is, ultimately, not to assert some (pernicious or anodyne) nationalistic core to Goethe's literary project. But it is undeniable that the Faust story first began to interest Goethe as he was writing about themes specific to German culture and its history. Among Goethe's prolific writings from the 1770s, the first decade of his literary career, we find a number of texts that, in one way or other, draw on culture-internal resources: *Götz von Berchlingen mit der eisernen Hand* (*Götz von Berchlingen with the Iron Hand*, 1773), which he referred to as "the story of a most noble German"; the famous essay *Von deutscher Baukunst* (*On German Architecture*, 1773); two plays based on the early modern tradition of carnival fairs; and a fragmentary farce entitled *Hanswursts Hochzeit oder der Lauf der Welt: Ein microkosmisches Drama* (*Hanswursts Wedding or the Way of the World: A Microcosmic Drama*, posthumous).[8] Goethe referred later in his life to his earliest work on the Faust story, together with the wildly vulgar Hanswurst farce, as part of a "secret archive" of texts with strong connections to popular theatrical traditions.[9] Even though Goethe's interest in literary drama is most often approached in terms of its universal scope—its potential to mirror the "history of the world," as he noticed in Shakespeare—there are also traces, well into the final decades of his career, of a more circumscribed interest in developing strategies for making art and literature appeal to and improve the entire German nation.[10] For instance, a number of pivotal essays from the time in the 1790s, when he was intensely working on *Faust*, cast cultural differences, founded on regional and climate-based characteristics, as the touchstone for all forms

8. Discussion of *Götz* in letter from 11/28/1771, FA II 1:247.

9. This connection was originally made in the searching essay by Thomas Mann, "Über Goethe's *Faust*," in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1991), 9:581–621. See also FA I 15:923–924. There are striking acoustic and semantic echoes between the farce's incipit and Faust's monologue at the start of the tragedy.

10. Quotation from "Zum Schakespeares Tag," FA I 18:11. Especially interesting in this context is chapter 20 of *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung*, FA I 9:53–55. See also "Zusätze zu Meyers Aufsatz 'Chalkographische Gesellschaft zu Dessau,'" FA I 18:635–637.

of aesthetic production and for the normative assessment of taste in general.[11] At one point, he even goes so far as to claim that the reliance on "alien custom and foreign literature" (*fremde Sitte und ausländische Literatur*), particularly within the educated elite, had inhibited the "German from developing himself as a German."[12]

Of course, none of this evidence supports the view of Goethe as a jingoist. It does, however, give us a sense of the framework within which Goethe developed a fascination with the "puppet-show tale" (*Puppenspielfabel*) of Faust's pact with the devil.[13] Already in his earliest sketches of the play, Goethe seized on the comic form that had established itself around the same time that the Faust story first became a theatrical hit: the fool. That the Faust story provided the occasion for Goethe's most wide-ranging and probing exploration of the fool as a theatrical form is, from a certain point of view, not surprising. For instance, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) responded to his friend Lessing's proposal of a Faust tragedy by skeptically noting that the theatergoing public so strongly associated the Faust story with a comic spectacle that "a single exclamation, o Faustus! Faustus! could make the entire parterre laugh."[14] Up to Goethe's own time, the story was as well known for its insatiably curious alchemist as for the parodic tone of the pieces he appeared in, often alongside an instantiation of the fool. And yet, unlike Mendelssohn, the modern reader rarely points to the comic as the definitive element of the Faust play.

It risks seeming at best exaggerated or at worst preposterous to assert that the tragedy's participation in the project of creating a distinctly German national literature was dependent on its comic

11. Particularly interesting in this respect is "Einleitung in die 'Propyläen,'" which Goethe published in 1798. The paralipomena make clear that he assigned critical importance to the comparison of what he calls "national physiognomies." See FA I 18:457–488, esp. 467 and 476.

12. From the essay he wrote under the title "Literarischer Sanscülottismus," FA I 18:319–324, here 322.

13. See his remarks from his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* FA I 15:451.

14. Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauss (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1974), 11/1:20.

dimension. Some of this issues from the tendency, among casual readers as well as scholars, to focus attention on the eponymous hero at the expense of his idiosyncratically diabolical sidekick. It also issues from the persistent unwillingness among literary historians to acknowledge the resolute persistence of the fool figure, who, as we saw in part 3, figured centrally in the national literature effort. But in order to grasp Goethe's understanding of the theatrical enterprise—an understanding that encouraged his appropriation and transformation of the stage fool within a new dramatic context—it is crucial to acknowledge that he remained a staunch opponent of the schoolmasterly classicizing approach of early Enlightenment reformers, particularly their failure to acknowledge the artistic potential borne by the fool. While the place of Faust within the tradition of German national literature is, admittedly, an almost insurmountably vast topic, the following chapters pick up on the thread that runs through part 3, namely, the claim that the fool proved integral to the literarization projects in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The guiding claim shall be that Goethe constructs the figure Mephistopheles as the projection of the theatrical form of the fool into a new artistic context that at once integrates preexisting aspects of the form and alters them to accommodate the particular literary context of *Faust I*. Not Faust the German hero, but Mephistopheles.

The term *hero* is, of course, not entirely accurate. While Goethe reworks the tradition of stage fool in Mephistopheles into much more than a comic ornament or addendum, allowing facets of the comic form to penetrate to the core of the tragedy's structure, the modifier *heroic* would grossly oversimplify the multiple layers of significance Goethe assigns its diabolical protagonist.[15] An adequate interpretation must attend closely to the nuanced and innovative manner in which the form appears in Goethe's singular literary text, and thus must abandon the synoptic approach that has organized the other chapters of this study. The following

15. Mann, "Über Goethe's *Faust*," 583.

discussion concentrates on a crucial and underappreciated strand that runs through the tragedy that Goethe published in 1808.[16]

Among the fault lines extending from the tradition of the stage fool to the form of *Faust*, perhaps the most underappreciated pertains to the drama-theater dyad. The historically contentious status of the fool in the establishment of a theatrical culture organized around literary drama comes to the fore in Goethe's unusual multiplication of framing devices. Famously, the play opens with the poem "Zueignung," which is typically translated as "Dedication" but bears the connotation of appropriation, or taking possession (of the Faust legend itself, as the poem suggests), followed by two mini-dialogues, *Vorspiel auf dem Theater* (*Prelude on the Theater*) and *Prolog im Himmel* (*Prologue in Heaven*). The *Prelude*, composed in the latter half of 1798, during a phase of Goethe's concentrated work on the tragedy, is as much a preparatory skit *about* the theater as it is a skit performed *on* the theater (i.e., the stage).[17] It is, at once, a self-reflexive statement about how to approach the play and a structurally integral element in it.

The dialogue presents a theater director (*Direktor*) and a poet (*Dichter*), in addition to a third figure whose identity has caused widespread confusion. In English translations, the figure Goethe calls the Lustige Person has been referred to as the Clown (Walter Kaufmann), Player of Comic Roles (Stuart Atkins), Merry Person

16. In addition to Jane Brown's study, which I have already mentioned, I wish to call attention to two excellent studies from recent years that attempt a unified interpretation of the tragedy's two parts: Karl Eibl, *Das monumentale Ich: Wege zu Goethe's "Faust"* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2000); and Johannes Anderegg, *Transformationen: Über Himmlisches und Teuflisches in Goethes "Faust"* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2011).

17. It has been speculated that even though Goethe published the playlet as part of *Faust* in 1808, it was composed either as part of his never-completed project of a second part to *The Magic Flute* or on the occasion of the 1798 opening of the theater in Weimar. See Oskar Seidlin, "Ist das 'Vorspiel auf dem Theater' ein Vorspiel zum 'Faust'*?*," in *Von Goethe zu Thomas Mann* (Göttingen: Vandenhock & Ruprecht, 1969), 56–64. See also Jost Schillemeit, "Das 'Vorspiel auf dem Theater' zu Goethe's *Faust*: Entstehungszusammenhänge und Folgerungen für sein Verständnis," *Euphorion* 80 (1986): 149–166. Both genetic arguments fail, in my view, to see the far-reaching repercussions of the *Vorspiel auf dem Theater* within the work as a whole.

(Walter Arndt), and Comedian (Randall Jarrell). "Clown" comes closest to the pedigree alluded to in the German nomenclature, but only works on the basis of the term's (now antiquated) association with a standard figure from Jacobean and Elizabethan English theater. Each of these translations fails to recognize that Goethe is offering an onomastic wink to the most controversial figure in eighteenth-century German theater, the fool. Gottsched first solidified the locution Lustige Person as a category in the 1730s. He subsumed the many Hanswursts, Pickelherings, Harlequins, Killian Brustflecks, Grobians, and others under the general term Lustige Person, a blanket term that I have translated consistently over the foregoing chapters as "the fool." Despite its initially defamatory connotations, Gottsched's terminology had, by Goethe's time, become common currency, losing some of its critical bite. The historical ambivalences inscribed in the term are important because, beginning already in his earliest youth, Goethe identified the fool as the crux on which the fate of eighteenth-century theater turned. In his autobiography, for instance, he looks back at the decades leading up to his first literary experiments and identifies an utterly simplistic logic at the heart of the reform movement. Making the theater useful (*nützlich*) demanded the imposition of moral rectitude, a standard that supposedly could be achieved only if "the fool (*lustige Person*) was banished."[18] Reform-minded critics and playwrights failed to heed the pleas of the wise few (*geistreiche Köpfe*) who spoke up in the fool's favor, condemning the German theater for the middle third of the eighteenth century—with the major exception of Lessing—to a deplorable existence. More than a late-in-life reminiscence celebrating the author's own redemptive arrival on the literary scene, this passage speaks to Goethe's core convictions about the decisive position of the fool for German theater—both its historical course of development and its present possibilities for improvement.

Goethe's choice to cast the fool in the *Prelude on the Theater* must be understood as a response to the general historical quagmire in which he believed the theater was stuck. For him, the abolishment of the fool demonstrated a misunderstanding of the heterogeneous

18. Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit,* FA I 14:619.

and internally differentiated composition he identified as essential to a successful theater. The following passage from his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung* (*Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*, posthumous), which he worked on between 1775 and 1782 but abandoned incomplete, epitomizes a fundamental feature of Goethe's approach to the theatrical enterprise and can help us grasp the repercussions of the fool's reinsertion. In the novel's rich narrative tapestry, with its many images from and discussions of the contemporary theatrical world, we find the following remark by the protagonist:

> And I even claim that the more the theater is purified, the more it must become pleasing to people of reason and taste, but the more it must always lose of its original effect and purpose. It seems to me, if I may use a metaphor, like a pond, which needs to contain not only clear water, but also a certain portion of mud, weed, and insects, if fish and waterfowl should fare well there.
>
> Und ich behaupte sogar, daß je mehr das Theater gereinigt wird, es zwar verständigen und geschmackvollen Menschen angenehmer werden muß, allein von seiner ursprünglichen Wirkung und Bestimmung immer mehr verliert. Es scheint mir wenn ich ein Gleichnis brauchen darf wie ein Teich zu sein, der nicht allein klares Wasser, sondern auch eine gewisse Portion von Schlamm, Seegras, und Insekten enthalten muß, wenn Fische und Wasservögel sich darin wohl befinden sollen.[19]

According to this suggestive parallel between the theatrical enterprise and a muddy ecosystem, the entire project of theatrical ennoblement stands on an ill-conceived sanitary logic. The hard-and-fast division between pure and impure fails to do justice to the interdependency of multiple different elements needed for a flourishing theatrical culture. The deft subtlety of this metaphor lies in its replacement of a logic defined by the binary division between two classes with one defined by a diversified array of elements, within which no clear rank or privilege can be made out. One crucial result of the faulty binary division, Goethe here suggests, is that the supposedly purified stage can appeal only to the select segment of

19. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung*, FA I 9:100–101.

the population with equally purified values and preferences. The vitality of the stage, however, depends on attracting diverse spectators and arresting everyone's attention. To create this more inclusive audience requires abandoning the entire purified/contaminated division and restoring the less culturally ennobled elements that had, at least in the past, made the theater into a widely appreciated spectacle.

With this inclusive structure in view, let us return to the *Prelude*, with its avowed concern with the fate of the stage "in the German lands" (line 35). The playlet's triangulated configuration—Director, Poet, Fool—allows for the articulation of differing stances toward the drama-theater dyad without installing an internal hierarchy or asserting a definitive viewpoint. It encourages an approach to the play much like the pond from *Wilhem Meister*, a heterogeneous habitat of mutually interacting elements, which cannot be arranged according to the distinction between the pure and impure. With unique conceptual intensity, the *Prelude* addresses what should, by now, be familiar issues concerning the drama-theater dyad, including (1) the nature of the audience as a collective and (2) the relationship between text and performance.

The dialogue shows that attempts to assign a purpose to either text or performance cannot be decided independently of the addressee. The Director, whose primary interest is in securing the play's commercial success, emphasizes the prosaic motivations and unsophisticated expectations that underlie the typical spectator's decision to visit the theater. On the most basic level, his remarks are entreaties to the Poet and the Fool that they ensure the engagement and satisfaction of the audience, but the limitation of his position is indicated by the complete absence of any ethical, epistemic, or metaphysical significance in the theater he envisions. His remarks indicate, rather, that the theater is emphatically for the sake of the collective that experiences it. In the opening gambit of the *Prelude*, he refers twice to the throng (*Menge*, lines 37 and 49), and once to "anyone" (*jedermann*, line 40) and the "people" (*Volk*, line 43). The use of these terms brings three points to the fore. First, the Director establishes an equivalence between the two lexemes *Volk* and *Menge*, in order to describe the constitution of the audience.

Although these terms had historically carried socially pejorative connotations, the Director employs them in an egalitarian sense. His definition fits within the same historical-semantic framework as the following definition from Kant's *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie in pragmatischer Absicht* (*Lectures on Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*), delivered in 1800 and published posthumously, in which I leave the crucial terms untranslated: "Under the word *Volk* (populus) one understands a unified *Menge* of persons, insofar as it [the *Menge*] makes up a *totality*."[20] Kant defines a *Volk* as an entirety of a national-cultural people, made up of a *Menge* or a multiplicity of discrete individuals; in much the same spirit, the Director in the *Prelude* envisions spectatorship as a collective experience, as a ritual that coalesces individuals into a unified group. The theater functions as a space for a collective en masse, devoid of distinctions of education, vocation, or estate, where the group comes together and experiences itself as a unified whole. Since the theater should appeal to the entire group, not a select subset from among it, he calls a performance that is "fresh and new / and with significance, pleasing too" (lines 47–48). He turns to the Poet and the Fool to accomplish the principal charge of a theatrical performance, namely, to please the audience and capture their engaged attention.

The Director's assertion that the spectator's enjoyment is foundational for theater's success stands in clear opposition to the Poet's derision of the crowd and the theatrical setting. He decries the "motley throng" (*jener bunten Menge*, line 59), "the surging crowd" (*das wogende Gedränge*, line 61), which pulls him into a maelstrom and robs him of his "spirit" or *Geist* (line 60). The poet appropriates and denigrates the form of co-belonging celebrated by the Director; for him, a group means absorption into an uncontrolled and undifferentiated medium. Instead of the mundane world of performance before an audience, he seeks the "narrows of heaven" (line 63), confines that are at once sheltered and celestial. The expression of favor for solitary refuge over collective exposure,

20. Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften/Akademieausgabe* (Berlin: Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1917), 7:311.

and in turn for the supermundane over the mundane, condenses a deep conceptual difference. The text here delineates a boundary between the dramatic text and the theatrical performance according to their respective functions and temporal constitutions. The Poet's labor consists in creating a singular and unchanging dramatic text associated primarily with an escape from the terrestrial sphere to the divine heavens. The dramatic product is, in his view, autarkic; it need not feed into a theatrical performance and does not depend upon one for its legitimacy. Whereas the Director solicits the Poet's text for the express purpose of its theatrical realization, the Poet imposes an unbridgeable hiatus between the fixed dramatic text and the ephemeral performance. This privilege of the text over performance is solidified in the Poet's use of one of the key terms in Goethe's lexicon in general and in *Faust* in particular: namely, the *Augenblick*, the fleeting moment as quick as the glance of the eye. Here a polarity emerges between the consuming "violence of the wild instant" (*des wilden Augenblicks Gewalt*, line 70) and the realm of "posterity" (*Nachwelt*, line 74), where the unalloyed truth perdures. The Poet regards fleeting experience as at best nugatory and at worst harmful in comparison with the ecstatic temporality of the celestial sphere. The crowd may coalesce around the fleeting instant, but the Poet seeks refuge in a domain immune to the vagaries of time and the violent impositions of the crowd.

The Fool, finally, appropriates the problem of temporality, but in order to elevate the present moment—the experience of the now within theatrical performance—to utmost importance. If he were to speak of the *Nachwelt*—literally the after-world, the world of posterity—who, he asks in a rejoinder to the Poet, would amuse the shared world of the now, the *Mitwelt* (lines 76–77). The domain of theatrical address is the domain of the present or *Gegenwart* (line 79), a term he invests with a double significance. With this term, he indicates the rapport between performer and spectator within the face-to-face setting, the mutual belonging within the live context of performance. But the term also points to the temporal experience shared by all audience members. Hewing close to the Director's emphasis on theatrical realization as the governing term in the drama-theater dyad, the Fool asserts that the spectators' collective mode of receptivity intensifies their sensory experience. His own powers are similarly enhanced

within the communal theatrical setting, for no human response is so contagious as laughter. The fool "desires a big circle, in order to make it shake with laughter all the surer" (*wünscht sich einen großen Kreis, / Um ihn gewisser zu erschüttern*, lines 83–84).

At this juncture, an initial set of opposing and overlapping opinions pertaining to the status of the audience can be made out. Collective co-belonging stands against the forfeiture of individuality; publicness against seclusion; true lasting poetic value against risible folly in the present; the ethereal against the mundane; and the fleeting performance against the eternal text. With these antinomies in hand, let us turn to a second thematic complex found in the *Prelude*. The playlet also introduces a question that, as I argued in part 2, stands at the center of eighteenth-century debates: What exactly is a dramatic text or a theatrical performance? Again, the text sets up a system of oppositions pertaining to the rapport between stage and audience. The Director elevates the abundance of visual spectacle to paramount importance, asserting that sheer plenty will ensure the satisfaction of each member of the multitude. The following passage gives a fuller sense of the Director's vantage point:

> They like to look, so let them see a lot.
> You give the audience a solid eyeful,
> So they can gape and marvel all the time,
> You'll grip them by sheer quantity of trifle,
> Your popularity will climb.
> Mass calls for mass in order to be won,
> Each ends up choosing something for his own.
>
> Man kommt zu schaun, man will am liebsten sehn.
> Wird Vieles vor den Augen abgesponnen,
> So daß die Menge staunend gaffen kann,
> Da habt ihr in der Breite gleich gewonnen,
> Ihr seid ein vielgeliebter Mann.
> Die Masse könnt ihr nur durch Masse zwingen,
> Ein jeder sucht sich endlich selbst was aus.
>
> (lines 90–96)

Theater is a spectacle; its purpose is to overpower the visual sense and throw the audience into a state of rapture. The Director

assigns the Poet and Fool the responsibility of providing a sufficient quantity of visual elements, for amassing a diversity of elements, a sequence of beads that need not coalesce into a consistent stream. The theatrical object should aim for a multifariousness that accords with, indeed accommodates itself to, the multiplicity of spectators. A welter before the stage calls for a welter on the stage.

The Poet, by contrast, extols an opposing cluster of criteria oriented around his own writerly practice. For him, the audience is not the crucible of the theatrical object, but rather a consideration downstream from the author's production of the dramatic text. The poet enjoys the "highest privilege" (line 135), the "human right, granted him by nature" (line 136). This highly abstract claim achieves its full significance in light of what immediately follows. In a passage that warrants quoting at length, he spells out a conception of the poetic vocation laden with metaphysical implications:

> The while indifferent nature helter-skelter
> Twists the eternal thread upon her spindle,
> When all created things' discordant welter
> Would coalesce into a graceless brindle,
> Who parts the sequence, changeless and perpetual,
> Enlivening into rhythmic ease,
> Who calls the single to the common ritual,
> Where it resounds in glorious harmonies?
> Who lets the tempest's passions rage their maddest
> Imparts grave meaning to the sunset glow?
> Who strews the bloom of springtime at its gladdest
> Where the beloved is wont to go?
> Who braids the insignificant green laurels
> To every merit's honorific wreaths?
> Who firms Olympus? unifies Immortals?
> The might of man, which in the poet breathes.
>
> Wenn die Natur des Fadens ew'ge Länge,
> Gleichgültig drehend, auf die Spindel zwingt,
> Wenn aller Wesen unharmon'sche Menge
> Verdrießlich durch einander klingt:
> Wer teilt die fließend immer gleiche Reihe
> Belebend ab, daß sie sich rhythmisch regt?

Wer ruft das Einzelne zur allgemeinen Weihe?
Wo es in herrlichen Akkorden schlägt,
Wer läßt den Sturm zu Leidenschaften wüten?
Das Abendrot im ernsten Sinne glühn?
Wer schüttet alle schönen Frühlingsblüten
Auf der Geliebten Pfade hin?
Wer flicht die unbedeutend grünen Blätter
Zum Ehrenkranz Verdiensten jeder Art?
Wer sichert den Olymp, vereinet Götter?
Des Menschen Kraft im Dichter offenbart.

(lines 142–157)

Among the many features of this suggestive passage deserving of commentary, I wish to isolate one in particular. The Poet introduces here a symbolic position that also informs Faust's own monologues in the main body of the tragedy. The Poet imagines nature as a prediscursive and internally undifferentiated flow of appearances, a confused mass not unlike the crowd. He asserts his primordial access to a nature that first must be divided up and then enlivened. Nature, to him, is not the object of his imitation or emulation, but rather a domain that comes to intelligibility under his control. The task of the poet is to assign meaning to all that passes before him, including the gods. He imagines himself in a position above ordinary experience, at the point where the chaotic manifold of appearances becomes a world of meaningful particulars. The product of his labor, the dramatic text, provides the indispensable substrate for theatrical performance in a double sense: it is the basis of the discrete entities perceptible on the stage as well as their meaning. The poet thus outlines what one might call an absolute standpoint—one cut off and separated from the world of appearances and by virtue of which each becomes fully concrete and particular. Note also that the nomothetic poet, as the above passage goes on to indicate, reveals a primordial and universal human power (*des Menschen Kraft*, line 157), a power present only derivatively and partially in concrete individuals. It belongs, then, to the symbolic vantage point imagined in these lines that the Poet divides nature up in order to make it meaningful in the first

place and that, in doing so, he discloses in unadulterated form a distinctively human vital power. Thus the Poet claims for himself a universal human capacity or power, by virtue of his elevation to a supermundane vantage point, from which the manifestations of nature achieve order and meaning. The poet's activity is world-disclosing.

The final remarks on the drama-theater dyad are put forth by the Fool. He assumes an intermediary stance, between the metaphysically laden and divinely isolated dramatic text championed by the Poet, and the Director's complete subordination of dramatic design to the audience experience. Appropriating and amending the Director's petition for an internally diverse theatrical object, the Fool pleads for a totalizing representation, a play that draws its resources from human life in its entirety. At the same time, the Fool robs the absolute standpoint outlined in the Poet's remarks of its metaphysical implications. The epigrammatic imperative—"Just reach into the whole of human life!" (*Greift nur hinein ins volle Menschenleben!* line 167)—calls for a portrayal of life in its fullness and diversity, a life devoid of distorting embellishments and false proprieties. Of course, this demand stands in stark contrast to the distilled subjectivity that, as the Poet claims, creates poetry. For the Fool, human life achieves visibility on the stage as a totalizing "revelation" that displays to "each and every person what he bears in his heart" (line 179). Such a complete play transects traditional generic boundaries, proving equally adept at provoking tears as laughter (line 180). To appeal to every person, to be as much a divine manifestation as a visual display, is to encompass the extremes of both folly and sobriety, levity and gravity.

The competing notions of human life that take shape in the exchange between the three figures encourage us to approach *Faust* much like the internally diversified ecosystem described in *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung*. On the one hand, we have a vision of the Poet as the exclusive source of all meaningful divisions, as the sole possessor of a universal form-giving capacity. What reveals itself in the Poet's statements is a creative

energy that is both absolute and universal. By contrast, the Fool advances a vision of the internally diverse theatrical object, in accordance with the diversity of its spectators. Human life must be presented in its mundane completeness, avoiding all sanitary efforts that seek to block what is regarded as prosaic or unsavory. Theater, on the Fool's view, does not have its roots in an abstract humanity or an absolute subjectivity, but instead in the plural dimensions of human life as it is manifested in the *Menge* and *Volk*.

The dialogue thus contains elements that will concern us in the next two chapters. In schematic form these are the following:

1. eternity vs. the present
2. enduring value vs. passing amusement
3. divine vs. mundane
4. fixed dramatic textuality vs. live theatrical performance

The *Prelude on the Theater* is a *prelude about the theater*, which offers up contrasting views of the good of the theater for life and for society; of the dose of seriousness or levity appropriate to the stage; and of the relationship between the poetic and the theatrical vocation. The mythic banishment of the fool in favor of seriousness, dramatic unity, and moral univocity has no place in Goethe's *Faust* project. Instead, his tragedy, as the *Prelude* emphasizes, contains both the high and the low, the earnest and the jesting, oppositions that, moreover, stand in a dynamic, dialogical relationship.

Goethe's belief that such oppositions should not be viewed in terms of a strict either/or, but instead as interdependent poles, emerges forcefully from a little-noticed passage in his essay "Weimarisches Hoftheater" ("The Weimar Court Theater," 1802). According to the essay, treating the theatergoing public as if they were the fickle and impetuous rabble (*Pöbel*) is a pedagogically and theatrically ineffective form of cultural elitism. The genuine task that the theater must confront, he argues, is to progressively improve the standard of taste among audiences, and to work to increase what

Goethe calls their multifariousness (*Vielseitigkeit*).[21] Improvement comes only by way of a collaboration of text and performance, of drama and theater. A flourishing theatergoing public would be one where these two stand in a reciprocal relationship—where the public reads texts before seeing a performance and where spectators feel inspired to go home and consult the text after seeing a staging. In the constellation of the *Prelude on the Theater*, the business of the Director can succeed only with the participation of both the Poet and the Fool. Eternal truths fall on deaf ears unless the audience is kept alert to the present with jests and entertainment. An unorthodox and socially inclusive methodology underlies Goethe's attempt to make a recursive loop out of the theater-drama dyad. The spectator should recognize that the "the entirety of the theater is nothing but play" (*das ganze theatralische Wesen nur ein Spiel sei*), but should not "for that reason take less pleasure in it" (*deshalb weniger Genuß daran zu finden*).[22] Rather, Goethe's *Faust* includes just as much of the Poet's metaphysical grandeur as the Fool's mundane folly. It is, in a formulation from a few months before his death, one of Goethe's "very serious jokes."[23]

21. I am simplifying Goethe's statements in the course of his essay "Weimarisches Hoftheater," where he makes the astonishing remark that the great accomplishment of his directorship in Weimar has been to not treat the theatergoing public (*Publikum*) like the rabble (*Pöbel*). It is important that Goethe does not say here that the rabble does not come to his theater or that he excludes them purposefully, but rather that he has done his best to avoid treating the diverse public according to the basest expectations. His proof of this is that there is an interdependency between theatergoing qua spectacle and reading. FA I 6:846.

22. FA I 6:849.

23. Letter, 3/17/1832, FA II 11:555. Jane Brown uses this phrase in her study, particularly to explain the position of the stage fool, though she neither attributes it to Goethe nor provides a full explication of its significance. See Brown, *Goethe's Faust*, 37ff.