

*FAUST III**The Diabolical Comic*

In an 1850 essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) claims that Goethe’s central literary achievement is his “habitual reference to interior truth.”¹ Perhaps more than any other work from Goethe’s vast oeuvre, *Faust I* has appeared as the preeminent exploration of a titanic and solitary individual, restlessly discontent with the available dimensions of worldly experience. Projected onto the system of oppositions that have come into view over the previous two chapters, we might say that for Emerson the core message of Goethe’s *Faust I* is manifest in the titular hero’s repeated expressions of desire to abandon the earthly sphere and to ascend to the celestial precinct affiliated with the Lord and the Poet. However appealing this line of thought may be, it tells at best half the story. Half, that is, because it does not account for Mephistopheles’s

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Goethe; or, the Writer,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 746–761.

comic presence, without which the play as we know it would not exist. Only by ignoring the traces of the fool is it possible to find the scholar's sublime ministrations, pathos-laden attempts at transcendence, and lethal enchantment with Gretchen constitutionally necessary ways of coping with the human predicament. Ultimately, Emerson is but a single installment in a tradition of readers who have understood Goethe's *Faust* as the elaboration of an emphatic notion of subjectivity, founded upon the incessant striving for self-overcoming, utterly incompatible with the comic tradition of concern in this study. The question that must be posed is, Does Mephistopheles's presence, particularly as a comic force, inveigh against reading *Faust* as a "philosophical testament" to the supposedly ineluctable need, in human knowing and willing, to pass beyond the finite bounds of existence?²

An alternative path of interpretation begins with a remark Goethe made to Schiller during the course of his work on *Faust*: that literary works, and in particular tragedies, are "founded on the depiction of the empirically pathological state of man" (*auf die Darstellung des empirisch pathologischen Zustandes des Menschen gegründet*).³ In general, Goethe rejected the view that the infinite depths of the individual's interiority provided a worthy subject for literary art, in fact claiming such a focus should be regarded as the symptom of a declining literary culture.⁴ If *Faust I* takes its start from a preexisting psychic deformation, rather than from an intact psyche vulnerable to seduction and corruption, then the entire purpose of Mephistopheles's inclusion in the tragedy requires further scrutiny. Indeed, the form of the tragedy that unfolds between beginning and end must be understood as a dramatic

2. George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1910), 152.

3. Letter, 11/25/1797, FA II 4:455. For the emphasis on tragedy, see letter, 12/9/1797, FA II 4:461.

4. This becomes a more prominent theme later in Goethe's life. See the observations on poetry in the collection *Maximen und Reflectionen*, FA I 13:139–140, as well as the famous remarks on the difference between the romantic and the classical on 239 of the same volume. There are also pointed remarks in conversation with Eckermann in FA I 39:169–170.

process, facilitated by Mephistopheles, shaped by a pathological state already present at the outset. It will stand to questioning, over the pages that follow, whether Mephistopheles's strategies for countering Faust's pathological desires do not themselves evince a parallel but different deficiency.

Something along these lines is evident in Mephistopheles's words from the *Prologue*: Faust's "unearthly" pursuits preclude him from ever finding satisfaction (lines 300–307). While superficially compatible with the traditional story line, casting Faust as an apostate occultist, a theme that is artfully exploited in the conjurations of the Night scene, Mephistopheles's characterization also serves to lay out the intrinsically pathogenic nature of Faust's desires. Rather than viewing the mortal-devil coupling as some permutation, however refined, of good versus evil, it is worth asking, in line with the formal principle of "repeated mirrorings," if Mephistopheles's interactions with Faust evince structures that align him with the stage fool. It is, further, worth asking what consequences Mephistopheles's fool-like interventions have for the overarching patterns of significance in the play.

The role of Mephistopheles as a challenge to Faust's "interior truth" is already present in the oldest strata of Goethe's text, the scenes Goethe composed between 1772 and 1775, and becomes only more clearly distilled during later phases of work on the tragedy. In what follows, I begin with the two central Study scenes that introduce the famous pact between mortal and devil and provide a diabolical parody of Faust's pursuit of knowledge.⁵ I shall then turn to the portrait of Mephistopheles that emerges in "Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig," a carefully choreographed scene that establishes essential, but little understood, linkages between Mephistopheles and the stage fool. It is only natural that these scenes should open a window onto Goethe's interest in the tradition of the stage fool, since, at least in part, they belong to the kernel of

5. It makes sense that I would focus in particular on these scenes, as they are among the earliest that Goethe wrote—initially composed in the 1770s and returned to periodically in the ensuing decade, in other words in the immediate aftermath of the material we examined in part 3.

the tragedy composed in the first half of the 1770s as part of his youthful “secret archive.”⁶

It is common to use the locution “scholar’s tragedy” to refer to the failed attempts at transcendence laid out at the start of the play, especially in the Night and Before the Gate scenes. Two distinct aspirations can be gathered from Faust’s extensive speeches and repeated conjurations. The first pertains to the overcoming of the epistemic bounds of human finitude and is typically depicted as freedom from the terrestrial sphere of bodily circumscription, liberation from the shackles of mundane time, and transport to a disembodied spiritual realm. The tragedy’s famous opening scene, for instance, contains three related but distinct attempts to break out of and surpass what Faust perceives as his pitifully limited knowledge and experience. Each involves the seizure of the status of a god, through an impulse that “drives upwards and forwards” (line 1093) and that yearns to escape to “a new colorful life” (line 1121).⁷ Both movements are essential: the removal from the domain of terrestrial limitation and the passage to a life distinct from and beyond this one. The act of corporeal elevation is associated with the assumption of an epistemic standpoint above the ordinary human “sea of error” (line 1065). Thus, Faust envisages more than an enhancement of his ordinary existence, more than the dawning of some knowledge or even wisdom. In fact, he desires to leave behind human terrestrial existence and inhabit the status of a demiurge, thereby assuming a divine vantage point on creation.

Faust’s manic-depressive oscillation drives him to the point of suicide at the end of “Night,” only to be rescued by the Easter chorus. This semantically condensed peripeteia has at its core a redemptive moment of anamnesis (*Erinnerung*, line 781), as the sound of the chorus effects an affective (*mit kindlichem Gefühle*, line 781) and

6. The discussion between Mephistopheles and the visiting student can be found in the earliest draft, the so-called *Urfaust* or *Frühe Fassung*. See FA I 7/1:477–484. It is evident that already at this point, Goethe envisioned a comic parallel between Mephistopheles’s conversation with the student and Faust’s conversation with Wagner.

7. See David E. Wellbery, *Goethes Faust I: Reflexion der tragischen Form* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2016), 73–81.

imaginative restoration to Faust's own youth (*Jugend*, lines 769, 779). Although on one level the scene thereby associates Faust's return to life after near suicide with the passion and resurrection of Christ, it has the more subtle and dramatically significant purpose of revealing the second dimension of Faust's desire to escape human finitude. Beyond his desire to achieve the standpoint of a god, Faust also longs for an escape from what can be called the finitude of a biographical career. He is imbued with a deep sense of diminished possibility—a sense of the fundamental inadequacy of his own individual and therefore limited life-trajectory. He regards his accomplishments as nugatory and, more importantly, his future as lacking any meaningful potential. Faust tragically aspires to overcome the intrinsic limitation of human subjectivity to a single biological life and trajectory through time. His redemption through the recollection of youth points to his desire—crucially reiterated in the Study scenes—to escape from the facticity of *this* life as his *own* and *only* life.

Such a schematic understanding of the opening sequence allows us to recognize Mephistopheles as an all-too-earthly counterweight to Faust. This opposition should not be construed in Mephistopheles's favor; his corrective to Faust's discontent with his this-worldly existence is not purely anodyne. Just as Faust presents a pathological variant of the desire for transcendence of human finitude, so too Mephistopheles one-sidedly advocates the preeminence of the material world and the limitations of human life. It is worth recalling that the separation between the mundane and supermundane spheres plays a structuring role both in the *Prelude on the Theater* and the *Prologue in Heaven*; the relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles presents a further, more nuanced variant of the same opposition.

Whereas the extensive monologues of the opening scenes bring Faust into the clear light of the stage, Mephistopheles's appearance in the main body of the tragedy proceeds by way of an indirect, shadowy, and indeterminate route.⁸ When he makes his first appearance

8. Juliane Vogel, "‘Nebulistische Zeichnungen’: Figur und Grund in Goethes Weimarer Dramen," in *Der Grund: Das Feld des Sichtbaren*, ed. Gottfried Boehm and Matteo Burioni (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012), 317–328.

opposite Faust, after a spectacle of shape-shifting from dog to hippopotamus to elephant, he finally appears in the garb of an “itinerant scholar” (*fahrender Scholasticus*). The costume is remarkable for two reasons: on the one hand, the itinerant scholar is nothing more than the prototypical swindler or confidence man of the early modern period, a cousin to the quack and mountebank; on the other, the outfit makes Mephistopheles into a doppelgänger, albeit a distorted one, of the melancholic scholar opposite him.⁹ But Mephistopheles’s role as country-fair hustler also sets up a paradigm echoed later in “Auerbachs Keller,” when the young drunk men identify Faust and Mephistopheles as carnival barkers (line 2178). Much like the many instantiations of the fool before him, Mephistopheles repeatedly obscures his identity, leaving in place a core indeterminacy that he can cover over with the many masks and costumes he assumes. His first appearance, in particular, shows him not just as a protean master of disguises, but also as a skillful improviser and dissembler, with strong associative links to the town-square performance environment within which the fool originally flourished.

The closest he comes to exposing his identity takes place by way of a functional explanation. He defines himself in terms of a force that “always wants evil and always does good” (*stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft*) (line 1336). This apothegmatic line can be read within a theological paradigm, dictating that the devil Mephistopheles is so malevolent and malfeasant—the proponent of “absolute nothingness” and “enemy of being, the beautiful and the good,” as one interpreter put it—that any action he considers worthy of approbation falls, according to ordinary human understanding, into the category of evil.¹⁰ Indeed, the first Study scene

9. Edward Beever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture Cognition and Everyday Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 190–192.

10. These quotes are translations from Oskar Seidlin, “Das Etwas und das Nichts: Versuch einer Neuinterpretation einer ‘Faust’-Stelle,” *Germanic Review* 19 (1944): 170–175. The same view is echoed in Peter Michelsen, “Mephistos ‘eigentliches Element’: Vom Bösen in Goethes *Faust*,” in *Das Böse: Eine historische Phänomenologie*, ed. Carsten Colpe and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1993), 229–255. Schöne reads the passage similarly in his commentary, FA I 7/2:251.

paints a distinctively negative picture of Mephistopheles's actions, as he identifies himself, echoing the Lord's words from the *Prologue*, as the "spirit that ever negates!" (Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint!) (lines 338–339 and 1338). The repetition of the same description across the two sections of the play, including the use of the almost technical verb *verneinen*, casts this theatrical figure as an agent defined in terms of a distinctive activity. The negating function realized through Mephistopheles is, however, only one half of an opposition, a denial that depends, in essence, on its affirmative complement. This devil displays a keen awareness of his place within an encompassing pulse of growth and decay that, ultimately, limits his impact. Despite all his destructive effort aimed against humanity, he must admit that "not much is done by it" (line 1362) and that "a new, fresh blood always circulates" (line 1372). The discrepancy between Mephistopheles's professedly "negating" nature and his admission of its ultimate futility deserves emphasis, as it complicates one of the most convincing lines of interpretation that the play has attracted over recent decades. Prominent scholars have claimed that Goethe integrates the Job story, beginning with the *Prologue*, in order to render Faust's tragic experience into a test of the goodness of creation.¹¹ If the play should be read as a dramatic theodicy, however, it is striking that the figure putatively responsible for challenging the divinity of creation, Mephistopheles, coyly hints at his own ineffectuality, acknowledging his limited place in a circular movement of creation and destruction.

Mephistopheles's attenuated, structurally integrated destruction fits together with the purpose he repeatedly avows he will fulfill for Faust. Perhaps the single most important recurring theme in Mephistopheles's speeches is his promise that he will show Faust "what life is" (line 1543). The second Study scene is shot through with Mephistopheles's pledges to show Faust "the joy of life" (line 1819), "the wild life" (line 1860), the "joys of the earth" (line 1859); he vows to take him out into the "world" (line 1829) and help him see what "to lead a life" really means (line 1836), and

11. See David Wellbery's study, which I have already repeat cited.

to lead him on a “new course of life” (*Lebenslauf*) (line 2072). In this profusion of statements on earthly life, Mephistopheles draws a line between his own purpose and Faust’s melancholic yearning. Paradoxical though it may sound, his negative and destructive activity actually involves making a display of life—the life of the human here and now, of immanence and finitude—that Faust has sought to escape through his magical ministrations. Mephistopheles’s emphasis on life is ambivalent. On the positive side, it counters Faust’s morbid fixation on an escape from the limitations of his human existence—both his existence as a distinctively mortal (that is, not divine) human knower and doer and his aspiration to escape from the determinate trajectory of his *own* and *only* life. Mephistopheles offers him an escape from his individual biographical career, but in such a way that ultimately denies all possibility for transcending what is materially given.

In an 1818 court masque, a decade after *Faust I* had become a literary hit, Goethe reiterated the life-exhibiting purpose of the devil’s guidance. Recounting the events of the tragedy in compressed form, Mephistopheles challenges the idea that his own penchant for disguise and dissimulation (*Verstellung*) makes him “an evil spirit.”¹² Instead, his accompaniment has the purpose of showing the scholar that he should not waste time on “lunacies, / fantasies and idiocies,” but instead embrace the view that “life / is actually given for living” and that “as long as one lives, one should be lively.”¹³ The relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles is organized by the tension between the devil’s positive purpose of breaking through Faust’s life-negating fixation on overcoming the limitations of his mundane existence, on the one hand, and his radical denial of all manifestations of Faust’s desire for transcendence, on the other.

12. From a masque entitled *Dichterische Landes-Erzeugnisse, darauf aber Künste und Wissenschaften vorführend*. For the relevant passage, see FA I 6:848–849.

13. The crucial passage in the original: “Gequält war er [Faust] sein Lebelang; / Da fand er mich auf seinem Gang. / Ich macht’ ihm deutlich, daß das Leben / Zum Leben eigentlich gegeben, / Nicht sollt’ in Grillen, Phantasien / Und Spintisiererei entfliehen. / So lang man lebt, sei man lebendig! Das fand mein Doctor ganz verständig.” FA I 6:850.

The opposition between Mephistopheles's vitality and Faust's immobility fits within a systematic opposition that is reflected repeatedly throughout the entire text. Recall that the Fool in the *Prelude* first insists on the need to speak to his contemporaneous world (*Mitwelt*), while it is the Poet who seeks the refuge of heavens and eternity (*Nachwelt*). In the *Prologue*, Mephistopheles expresses his affinity with the earth of mortals and his unease with the heavenly sphere. In much the same way, Mephistopheles vows to disabuse Faust of his fixation on the "pain of narrow earthly life" (lines 1544–1545). Faust's sense that "existence is a burden" (line 1570) will be alleviated if he "takes his steps through life" with Mephistopheles as his "companion" (*Geselle*) (line 1646), "servant" (*Diener*), and "vassal" (*Knecht*) (line 1648). Of course, on an immediate level, this affiliation mimics that of the traditional Faust story, in which the devil agrees to serve Faust in this world in exchange for Faust's obedience in the next. However, the pleonastic list of vocations indicates Mephistopheles's dual role as both accomplice and menial, partner and subaltern. In guiding Faust through life, Mephistopheles aims "to rid of lunacies" (*die Grillen zu verjagen*) (line 1534) the melancholic scholar who sees in the present world nothing but deficiency and privation. There are, then, two dimensions to Mephistopheles's activity as Faust's "companion": he asserts his ability to expose the illusions underlying his malcontent, and, perhaps more importantly, he promises to recuse Faust from his suicidal denial of life's worth. Of course, the exact nature of the life the devil offers will still require clarification, but it should be uncontroversial to claim that the Study scenes portray the devil's destructive capacities as yielding salubrious effects. At the heart of the joking relationship between master and servant in Goethe's tragedy lies the promise to disenchant Faust's "unearthly" desires and thereby to restore his sense of life's worth.

Famously, one of the many liberties Goethe took when crafting his own version of the tragedy is the addition of a wager between devil and mortal. It comes about in response to Mephistopheles's vow to give Faust "what no man has ever seen" (line 1674) while "taking the steps through life" (line 1643). One must see that Faust's understanding of this offer is shaped fundamentally by the "pathological

state” of despair, instability, and sense of ontological lack emphasized repeatedly across the opening scenes of the tragedy. It is not forbidden knowledge, but instead the desire to surpass finite human experience that shapes the conditions under which Faust enters into an alliance with the devil. Perhaps the best-known passage of the play begins:

Should ever I take ease upon a bed of leisure,
 May the same moment mark my end!
 When first by flattery you lull me
 Into a smug complacency,
 When with indulgence you can gull me,
 Let that day be the last for me!

Werd' ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen:
 So sei es gleich um mich getan!
 Kannst du mich schmeichelnd je belügen,
 Daß ich mir selbst gefallen mag,
 Kannst du mich mit Genuß betrügen:
 Das sei für mich der letzte Tag!

(lines 1692–1697)

And then he goes on:

If the swift moment I entreat:
 Tarry a while! You are so fair!
 Then forge shackles to my feet,
 Then I will gladly perish there!
 Then let them toll the passing-bell.
 Then of your servitude be free,
 The clock may stop, its hands fall still,
 And time be over then for me!

Werd ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
 Verweile doch! du bist so schön!
 Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
 Dann will ich gern zu Grunde gehn!
 Dann mag die Totenglocke schallen,
 Dann bist du meines Dienstes frei,
 Die Uhr mag stehn, der Zeiger fallen,
 Es sei die Zeit für mich vorbei!

(lines 1699–1706)

These lines have attracted a vast body of critical literature, inciting controversy over the uniformity of the wager (is there one or multiple?), its implications for the play's overarching themes (how does this fit together with the frame wager between the Lord and Mephistopheles?), and its provenance (does Goethe here appropriate Rousseauian or Christological ideas?).¹⁴ For present purposes, it is crucial to notice the extent to which these passages are founded in an acute sense of desperation, which Faust believes cannot be relieved even by Mephistopheles's accompaniment. His proposal presumes, on the most straightforward level, that there can be no passing moment worth holding on to. For Faust, human experience of the here and now constitutes a homogeneous and interminable series of valueless moments, each one identical to the next, and none of genuine worth. He suffers from the sense that time is stale, that its products endure after they have lost their validity, but also from the senselessness of the future.¹⁵ Indeed, the passages in which he foreswears hope (*Hoffnung*, line 1505) and, with surprising emphasis, patience (*Geduld*, line 1506) indicate that Faust's sense of the vacuity of time has robbed him of his ability to project his desires into the future, to see his present activity as a link within a larger causal chain, potentially eventuating in a worthwhile accomplishment. If Faust did not believe it impossible for a human experience to provide him with satisfaction and that his undertakings could achieve valuable results, he would not assert that Mephistopheles cannot show an instant worth holding fast. The overwhelming wish for an absolute experience—one affording insight into the totality of nature and the totality of human experiences—has so consumed Faust that he gambles the devil cannot supply him with any experience that would quell it.

With this framework in place, the contrast to Mephistopheles's avowed purpose comes clearly into view. In all the devil's

14. See Jane Brown, *Goethe's Faust: The German Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 66–84; Karl Eibl, "Zur Bedeutung der Wette in 'Faust,'" *Goethe Jahrbuch* 116 (1999): 271–280; and Gerrit Brünig, "Die Wette in Goethe's Faust," *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 31–54.

15. The relationship to the past is insightfully discussed in Harold Jantz, "The Structure of Time in Faust," *MLN* 92, no. 3 (1977): 494–508.

statements, he promises nothing beyond a trip through life—which is to say, a trip through human life, absent the lofty metaphysical requirements Faust places on experience. The pact sets up an imbalance of expectations, and guarantees that this asymmetry will afford Mephistopheles the role of comic check on Faust's uncompromising desire. After Faust exits the stage to prepare for his peregrinations, Mephistopheles reflects on the aspirations his "companion" projects on their quest. He does so in a way that mixes baleful malice with a good measure of cold realism:

Fate has endowed him with a forward-driving
 Impetuousness that reaches past all sights,
 And which precipitately striving,
 Would overleap the earth's delights.
 Through dissipation I will drag him,
 Through shallow insignificance,
 I'll have him sticking, writhing, flagging,
 And for his parched incontinence
 Have food and drink suspended at lip level;
 In vain will he be yearning for relief,
 And had he not surrendered to the devil,
 He still must needs have come to grief!

Ihm hat das Schicksal einen Geist gegeben,
 Der ungebündigt immer vorwärts dringt,
 Und dessen übereiltes Streben
 Der Erde Freuden überspringt.
 Den schleppe ich durch das wilde Leben,
 Durch flache Unbedeutenheit,
 Er soll mir zappeln, starren, kleben,
 Und seiner Unersättlichkeit
 Soll Speis' und Trank vor gier'gen Lippen schweben;
 Er wird Erquickung sich umsonst erflehn,
 Und hätt' er sich auch nicht dem Teufel übergeben,
 Er müßte doch zu Grunde gehn!

(lines 1856–1857)

On its surface, this passage is a statement of seditious intent and of the ineluctable dissatisfaction their partnership will entail.

Mephistopheles's words reek of malice, to be sure, but also of a sober and accurate estimation of Faust's obsessive striving for an unavailable experience. In this respect, the key juncture in the passage is the final two lines. They state that Faust's ultimate demise, the bondage of biological finitude, is not at all the product of his pact with the devil, but rather issues from the "pathological state" of his desires. Mephistopheles promises to redeem Faust from his suicidal desperation by allowing him to feel what he repeatedly refers to as his most basic humanity. Given that Mephistopheles's vision of the human being focuses particularly on the immanent gratifications of the here and now (*der Erde Freuden*, line 1859), the life he can show Faust is intrinsically partial and deficient. His presence may provide an antidote to the almost monomaniacal focus on the absolute that destroys Faust's capacity to envisage the worth of his own experience, but remains nonetheless limited by Mephistopheles's disavowal of the human being's aspiration to surpass the bounds of the given and finite. In this respect, the fulfillment he can offer Faust expresses Mephistopheles's own "pathological state."

Beyond its thematic content, the above monologue also possesses signal dramaturgical function. Uttered on an otherwise empty stage, immediately after Faust's departure, the quoted lines offer commentary on what has just happened and a forecast of what will subsequently occur. Their function thus differs fundamentally from, for instance, the rapturous monologue at the start of the drama, which provides information pertaining directly to the past and present internal state of the speaker. There is no "inner truth" disclosed in Mephistopheles's remarks: he does not profess anything, and we learn little of his psychological processes or motivational structures. These lines function, rather, much like the closing lines of the *Prologue in Heaven*, when Mephistopheles stands in front of the closed gates of heaven and offers words of praise for the Lord's goodwill. Breaking free from the concatenated sequence of statements that constitutes the ordinary structure of dialogue, Mephistopheles here reframes the dramatic action with information unknown to other characters in the story. The speech is *ad spectatores*, fiction-external for readers or audience members. Such framing operations, which Mephistopheles repeatedly executes

throughout the play, have, as we saw in detail in chapter 3, historically been reserved for the stage fool. Thus two dimensions of Mephistopheles are here drawn into close proximity with the stage fool: his functional role as commentator and his emphatic opposition to metaphysical investments.

The connection between the Fool in the *Prelude* and Mephistopheles surpasses thematic concerns and impacts the interweaving of utterances and gestures in dialogue. The final segment of the second Study scene, as the devil dons Faust's frock and engages an aspiring student who has come to solicit the scholar's services, utilizes this linkage to great dramaturgical effect. In a sequence that clearly parallels and parodies Faust's opening monologue as well as his earlier conversation with Wagner, Mephistopheles uses his facility for thespian simulation to confuse and manipulate his unsuspecting interlocutor. Once again, Mephistopheles appears as a distorted reflection of the scholar Faust; once again, the real significance of this scene can be grasped only if one abandons the search for coherent epistemological or metaphysical positions and instead views Mephistopheles as a comic improviser. Mephistopheles's role is defined by his distinctive linguistic act: negation. In his lengthy back-and-forth with the naive student, Mephistopheles's real accomplishment consists in the way he interlaces plausible recommendations and sententiae with parodic statements that draw on Faust's own previous, sincere avowals. His negation comes in the form of reiteration and distortion. Each discipline that Mephistopheles touches on—logic, metaphysics, theology, medicine—is discounted as a potential source of genuine knowledge. Whereas Faust's desperation regarding the futility of traditional learning stems from his persistent and earnest pursuit of its fruits, Mephistopheles pretends to encourage the student while simultaneously denying the fruitfulness of such an endeavor. Logic, he says, can be useful for developing rigorous classificatory knowledge, but ultimately dismembers and mortifies living things: "Then he has the parts in his hand, / Absent only the spirit that holds them together!" (lines 1938–1939). Metaphysics, meanwhile, offers deep insight into "those things that don't fit into man's brain" (line 1951), and in theology it is most important to "hold fast to words" (line 1990) rather than overly concerning oneself with

concepts and referents. Medicine costs intensive study, but in the end leaves the world “as it pleases God” (line 2014). Disguised as Faust, Mephistopheles playfully evacuates all his scholarly pursuits of significance. In a linguistic tour-de-force, he reiterates Faust’s lamentations concerning the futility of language, his inability to assist others medically, and so on, robbing them of their pathos. This scene, in short, offers a comic double, a caricature, of Faust’s tragic desperation.

The strategy at work in this scene, by means of which Mephistopheles supplies an unvarnished and thoroughly caustic assessment of Faust, could be called *comic redoubling*. And so it is only fitting that, after the comic reiteration of past events, Mephistopheles offers an anticipatory frame for what is yet to come. In contrast to Faust’s conviction that no moment can capture the exorbitant demand he seeks in experience, Mephistopheles encourages the student to “seize the instant” (line 2017), to grab hold of the *Augenblick*. In so doing, he calls attention to the genuine source of Faust’s dissatisfaction: his valuation of the impermanent instant. The vacuity of the moment is not an intrinsic feature of time, but a function of Faust’s estimation of it. Faust assumes a fundamentally life-negating stance when he presupposes that the temporal unfolding of experience lacks any potential significance. The emptiness of experience, the melancholic sense of valuelessness, issues from Faust’s own unstable comportment toward the world. Mephistopheles’s parodic redoubling, meanwhile, points out that a single moment can serve as either a source of desperation or a springboard to action.

Comic reversals like these illustrate an especially important dimension of Mephistopheles’s role in dialogue. Throughout the play but particularly in this scene, his speech evinces an unnerving coincidence of accuracy and impropriety. His mockery of academic disciplines, just like the insistence on the subjective utilization of the instant, does not lack for plausibility. Mephistopheles echoes prominent Enlightenment views and advocates epistemic positions at the center of Goethe’s own scientific investigations in morphology and the theory of color.¹⁶ But it is important to notice that his form of

16. See my essay, Joel Lande, “Acquaintance with Color: Prolegomena to a Study of Goethe’s *Zur Farbenlehre*,” *Goethe Yearbook* 23 (2016): 143–169.

articulation, this parodic ruthlessness, betrays a “cynicism” driven by “being right at the cost of shame.”¹⁷ In his overt commentaries and extended dramatizations, like his conversation with the student, Mephistopheles recasts—which is to say, renders intelligible for a second time, within an altered framework—subjective viewpoints and dramatic events, in a manner devoid of all social pretense.

The profound comic effect of such social impropriety depends on the transgression of communicative expectations.¹⁸ In general, the content and linguistic register of a face-to-face exchange is conditioned by the speaker’s and the listener’s respective sense of what one’s interlocutor anticipates hearing, including the tone and word choice. In order to avoid ruptures in dialogue or, worse, offense, speakers generally accommodate themselves to the speech conventions that they, by means of habituation as well as route imaginative projection, believe the interlocutor expects. Such a conversational approach assumes that one wishes to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of shame that generally follows a breach of decorum—the shame of not having lived up to what one believes the situation, as understood by others, demands. Not so Mephistopheles. Establishing a precedent that recurs again and again in the play, particularly in the seduction of Gretchen, Mephistopheles achieves comic effect by infringing on propriety, particularly sexual propriety, but bereft of the social response of shame. A key instance of this, which previews the seduction episode Faust will soon engage in, is the rather lewd courtship advice Mephistopheles shares with the student:

Especially the women learn to guide;
 Their everlasting ahs and ohs,
 Their myriad woes,
 Can all be cured at one divide.

17. Max Kommerell, “Faust zweiter Teil: Zum Verständnis der Form,” in *Geist und Buchstabe der Dichtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1956), 9–74, here 26.

18. My remarks here have their foundation in ideas first developed by Talcott Parsons and theorized most thoroughly by Niklas Luhmann. The “double contingency” of communication receives its fullest treatment in Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1984), 148–190.

If you adopt a halfway decent air,
You'll lure them all into your lair.

Besonders lernt die Weiber führen;
Es ist ihr ewig Weh und Ach,
So tausendfach
Aus einem Punkte zu kurieren,
Und wenn ihr halbweg ehrbar tut,
Dann habt ihr sie all' unter'm Hut.

(lines 2023–2028)

As before, the comic force of these lines can be gleaned only if one reads them as more than a travesty of romantic love. The relevant backdrop here is the subsequent events in the tragedy—that is, the story of Gretchen's seduction. Mephistopheles is preempting the metaphysical scaffolding Faust will erect around his courtship of Gretchen, reducing love to a matter of erotic prowess and self-presentation. Of course, this contravenes Faust's own belief that Gretchen is a maiden of immaculate beauty, capable of satisfying the very same desires that motivated his dabbling in magic. As the above passage already indicates, his companion Mephistopheles will here too serve as his all-too-earthly antithesis, stressing the corporeal underpinning of their courtship. Perhaps the most caustic comic challenge to the supreme significance Faust assigns to his love for Gretchen comes in the scene "Forest and Cavern," itself a turning point in the tragedy.¹⁹ Mephistopheles appropriates the language and pathos Faust first introduced in the Night scene, with his longing to encompass all of earth and heaven, to penetrate to the inner force driving the eternal renewal of being, and to completely abandon his merely mortal existence (lines 3282–3289). But Mephistopheles's comic redoubling of Faust's spiritual desperation closes with a reference to a climactic moment of "high intuition" that he accompanies with what the stage instruction refers to as just a "gesture," but that one can justifiably suppose should indicate a crude grab of his phallus (lines

19. See Harold Jantz, *The Form of Faust: The Work of Art and Its Intrinsic Structures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 92ff.

3291–3292). If Gretchen's love is pure, Mephistopheles introduces the possibility that ulterior motives, particularly the need for libidinal release, underlie Faust's claims to transcendent experience. Indeed, Mephistopheles's absence of shame, here manifest in his reduction of love to the most fleeting corporeal satisfaction, raises a specter of responsibility that hangs over the remainder of the play. For he introduces the claim that Faust himself, deluded by inhuman desires, infects Gretchen with a love that, as subsequent scenes will bear out, has catastrophic consequences. There is an undeniable truth to Mephistopheles's assertion that Faust "poured into her heart" a "rage of love" that robs her of her innocence and drives her to commit what would have previously seemed to her unimaginably heinous acts.

The purpose of Mephistopheles's comic redoubling is to disclose an alternative comic viewpoint, to switch the frame from serious counsel to subtly licentious ribbing. Accordingly, the alliance between Faust and Mephistopheles supplies the dramatic action with a bifocal lens, with each half shaped by a distinct "pathological state": investment in significance is coupled with divestment of significance, gravity with levity. The consequences of this programmatic duplicity are far-reaching, even after the seduction of Gretchen. In this section, too, Mephistopheles's presence splits everything that transpires into two irreconcilable registers of value, one weighty with significance, the other a parasitic parody robbing it of meaning. Once Faust projects his hypertrophic desires onto Gretchen—and the agency of projection is essential—Mephistopheles employs his role as guide, as the arranger of the events, to expose Faust to comic deflation. In so doing, Mephistopheles preserves two dramaturgical privileges of the stage fool: first, the ability to deliver utterances and gestures that are manifest to the audience but not to Faust; and, second, to stand equally inside and outside the fictional universe, to play guide for Faust and (in his commentaries) for the audience. For this reason, Mephistopheles violates an expectation of theatrical representation: his position within dialogue, indeed within the narrative trajectory, should not be understood in terms of a consistent set of beliefs or desires. That is, his patterns of stage integration

are better understood as reactive than active.²⁰ His utterances are fundamentally situational; they are oriented toward his interlocutor and therefore depend more strongly on the beliefs or desires of his opposite than any core convictions of his own.

A moment before Faust encounters Gretchen, the first stop of the journey through life, “Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig,” can help lend more contour to Mephistopheles’s parasitic relationship to tragic pathos. Although the scene belongs to the earliest strata of *Faust*, Goethe rewrote it in the course of his final phase of work on the play, introducing a subtle and profound meditation on the relationship between Mephistopheles and the encompassing tragedy. The scene can be read as addressing a question that has, by and large, been ignored by the scholarship: to wit, how does Mephistopheles, as Faust’s comic guide, fit with the tradition of the tragic genre that Goethe inscribes his play within? According to the framing remarks made by the devil upon their arrival, the scene has a definite purpose. It should show Faust the conviviality and festivities enjoyed by the *Volk*, helping him to see the potential ease of life (lines 2158–2161). It thereby picks up on themes already introduced in Before the Gate, especially Faust’s desire for reprieve from the misery of his isolation. Beyond what we might call the psychological import of the scene, it also provides valuable instruction concerning Mephistopheles’s role.

In keeping with the tradition of the stage fool, Mephistopheles emerges here as not just the playful trickster, but also the advocate of the play and indeed of tragedy itself. It is worth considering, in a schematic fashion, what happens during the second half of the scene, after Faust and Mephistopheles arrive. The scene contains a song sung by Mephistopheles and a jubilant chorus (lines 2211–2240); the conjuration of wine that is collectively enjoyed (lines 2284–2295); and the promise of the revelation of “bestiality” (2297–2298); and finally a moment of collective near dismemberment in a state of delirium (lines 2316–2321). The scene concludes with Mephistopheles saying that the entire foregoing action had

20. Martin Seel, “Drei Formen des Humors,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 76 (2002): 300–305.

the purpose of demonstrating “how the devil jests” (line 2321). Within the tradition of European tragedy, there is one play that evinces astonishing structural affinities with this scene, namely, Euripides’s *Bacchae*, a play of which Goethe produced a partial translation and that he revered until the end of his life.²¹ Euripides’s tragedy has at its core the arrival of Dionysus—the god of wine and tragedy—and his effort to make a display of his divinity to the city of Thebes. It concerns an episode of collective festivity that culminates in the dismemberment of the king of Thebes, Pentheus, who had displayed profound skepticism toward the god and his rites. The play reaches its high point as the god takes possession of the Theban women, sending them into revelries that confuse the boundary between human and brute.

The structural similarities between “Auerbach’s Keller” and the *Bacchae* are, indeed, striking and can illuminate certain verbal anomalies within the scene. To give one important example, Mephistopheles conjures wine from the table with the words “The vine bears grapes! / The goat horns” (lines 2284–2285). Unless one reads the scene as amassing traces of the tragic genre’s chief avatar, Dionysus, there is no contextual evidence to support the collocation of wine and the goat. But if the scene plays out, in highly compressed form, the plot of the *Bacchae*, then the invocation of traditional elements from tragic and Dionysian iconography makes perfect sense. It should be emphasized that Mephistopheles is far from a Greek god, and his role lacks the gravity of Euripides’s Dionysus. As he says himself, he is making a display of his diabolic jest, not his divinity (line 2321). One of the supreme accomplishments of this scene, particularly of the distorted resemblance between Dionysus and Mephistopheles, is to compel the reader or spectator to question the contribution of Mephistopheles’s comic role to the overarching design of the tragedy, to ask how Mephistopheles’s particular brand of comic destruction fits within the encompassing tragic unity.

21. See Goethe’s letter to Götting of March 3, 1832. The scene he translated and then published in 1827 in *Kunst und Altertum* concerns the moment when Queen Agave awakens from her possession to realize that she has decapitated her own son.

If we see Mephistopheles as contributing something essential to Faust's tragedy, indeed as a quasi-Dionysian guide through and exponent of the tragic, we can lend a more precise shape to the Manichaeism often associated with Goethe and, in particular, with this tragedy.²² Throughout his vast oeuvre, we find a great number of remarks on a fundamental duplicity of the natural world. In a revealing phrase he describes humans as the "spawn of two worlds." In some instances, Goethe depicts this suspension between two domains as a coequality of good and evil.²³ But in others, he asserts that the human being is essentially torn between the real and ideal, between a material existence and an aspiration to the divine. Perhaps the most poignant illustration of this duplicity comes in his autobiography, where Goethe elaborates on a cosmological "myth" of the origin of humankind.²⁴ The story is remarkable because it deals directly with a Lucifer figure, but lacks a straightforward account of the fall. I wish to call attention to five features of this exceedingly complex passage. The first, which has to the best of my knowledge escaped commentators, concerns the context in which Goethe introduces his cosmological myth. His remarks are meant to illustrate his youthful fascination with the "hermetic, mystical, kabbalistic," which he prefaces with the general principle "The spirit of contradiction and the pleasure of the paradoxical is in each of us" (*Der Geist des Widerspruchs und die Lust zum Paradoxen steckt in uns allen*). The phrase "spirit of contradiction" should ring familiar; it is a phrase that Faust, too, uses to describe Mephistopheles (line 4030). There as here, the phrase has surprisingly neutral connotations. As Goethe moves into the myth itself, then, he seeks to lay the foundation for this universal

22. See Karl Eibl, *Das monumentale Ich: Wege zu Goethe's "Faust"* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2000), 107–112. With a strong emphasis on potential sources, see also Rolf Christian Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe: Studien zur hermetischen Tradition des deutschen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 1:111–144.

23. The duplicity has been discussed in Jantz, *Form of Faust*, 60–75. See the discussion of the Lucifer myth in Eibl, *Das monumentale Ich*, 99–101.

24. From the end of the eighth book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, FA I 13:382–385. All the remaining quotations in this chapter are taken from this brief but spectacularly dense myth.

anthropological proclivity. The background positive valuation of contradiction and paradox explains the second crucial feature of the myth, namely, that the “entire power of creation” (*ganze Schöpfungskraft*) behind the material world belongs to the “infinite activity” (*unendliche Tätigkeit*) of Lucifer. Because Lucifer is himself born of the original divinity, he maintains a divine potential through various stages of creation. Third, Goethe asserts that humankind was created as a means to restore “the original connection with divinity.” Finally, because humankind is the product of the original divinity, it is “at once the most perfect and imperfect, the most felicitous and infelicitous creation” (*das Vollkommenste und Unvollkommenste, das glücklichste und unglücklichste Geschöpf*). The human being is a mirror image of Lucifer: both bear an inbuilt potential and remnant of divinity; they are, in Goethe’s recondite vocabulary, “unconditioned” (*unbedingt*). Both, however, are also “limited” (*beschränkt*), because they are derivatives of divinity rather than the divine itself.

The importance of this passage in the context of the mortal-devil relationship in *Faust* is counterintuitive. The myth makes vivid that Mephistopheles cannot be merely reduced to a principle for evil nor indeed a figure with any set of determinate beliefs. Nor should he be identified with Lucifer himself.²⁵ More convincing is to see Mephistopheles as the dramatic agent that brings the “limited” character of the human being to the surface. But he does not illuminate these limitations by way of clear avowals or consistent arguments. Instead, as a theatrical figure following in the tradition of the stage fool, his labor is one of comic distortion and reduplication, of masquerade and parody. His role exposing the “limited” dimension of the human, the *hic et nunc* of bald materiality, makes him the perfect counterpart to a figure whose “pathology” consists in the relentless pursuit of an escape from the very conditions Mephistopheles uses his comic interventions to expose. Far from the embodiment of evil, Mephistopheles is a stage practitioner whose

25. Goethe did consider writing a scene about Satan, though there is no indication that he wanted this figure to be identified with the Lucifer discussed in his autobiography. See Eibl, *Das monumentale Ich*, 117–120; and Albrecht Schöne, *Götterzeichen, Liebeszauber, Satanskult* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993).

strategic interventions do more than point out this or that illusion, this or that peccadillo. They are the practice of revealing the vulnerability of the grandest aspirations to radical diminution. Mephistopheles, to borrow a phrase from Goethe's contemporary Jean Paul, inverts the sublime.²⁶ And yet one must be careful not to paint an overly celebratory picture of the comic devil. Inverting the sublime does not restore a sober-minded view on the world, but rather installs a perspective with its own constitutive distortions. There can be little doubt that Mephistopheles's comic interventions offer a painfully icy reckoning with Faust's most ardent and highest aspirations. They betray a cynicism, to return again to Max Kommerell's term, that offers a deficient insistence on the human being's "limited" nature, failing to recognize that the human also possesses the capacity for being "unconditioned." The devil's jest, the life he shows Faust, is one of codependence between the aspiration to the heavens and the crash down to earth. The possibility that our grandest wishes can be revealed as mere folly is not just a definitive part of Goethe's tragedy, but of his vision of the human being. As he put it, "We attribute our states sometimes to God and sometimes to the devil, and err both times: in ourselves lies the puzzle, we who are the spawn of two worlds."²⁷

26. I believe there is a close relationship between Mephistopheles and Jean Paul's notion of humor as the "inverted sublime" or *das umgekehrte Erhabene*. See Jean Paul, *Werke* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1973), 5:125ff.

27. "Unsere Zustände schreiben wir bald Gott, bald dem Teufel zu und fehlen ein- wie das andere Mal: in uns selbst liegt das Rätsel, die wir Ausgeburt zweier Welten sind." From among the aphorisms collected under the title *Älteres, Beinahe Veraltetes* in Goethe's *Hefte zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt*, LA I 8:361.