Nothingness on the Move:

A Discussion of Goethe's *Faust Part 1*

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In the world inhabited by Faust, movement is a metaphysical fact: it is an expression of divine will over creation. There are, however, negative consequences to an existence governed by motion. The most prevalent of them is a feeling of nothingness and nihilism. This essay will discuss the relations between movement and such feelings in Goethe's Faust.[1] It is my thesis that the assertion of his will to life, the acceptance of his own limitations, and the creation of new personal values are the tools that will ultimately enable Faust to escape nihilism.

Metaphysics of Motion

Faust lives in a world in which motion is the main force behind existence. During the Prologue in Heaven, three archangels give speeches in praise of the Creator, emphasizing how the world is in a constant state of movement. Raphael states that the movement of the Sun is a form of worship: "The sun proclaims its old devotion / [. . .] / and still completes in thunderous motion / the circuits of its destined years" (246-248). For Gabriel, the rotation of the earth brings movement to all the elements upon its surface: "High cliffs stand deep in ocean weather, / wide foaming waves flood out and in, / and cliffs and seas rush on together / caught in the globe's unceasing spin" (251-258). Michael, on the other hand, focuses on the metaphysical implications

[1] Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von. and David Luke. *Faust. Part One* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

of motion: "The tempest raging / [. . .] / their chain of furious energy. / [. . .] / It spreads destruction on its way— / But we, thy messengers, O master, / revere thy gently circling day" (259-266). Despite the destruction it causes, movement is part of creation and the product of divine will. It is, therefore, inherently holy. This is the opinion of God himself. He states that "Man is too apt to sink into mere satisfaction, / a total standstill is his constant wish" (340-341). In a world where movement is a divine metaphysical fact, stillness is wicked. Instead of seeking motionless contentment, God wants people to "love [. . .] the eternal Process, which / is ever living and forever rich" (346-347). In other words, movement is sacred, and embracing it a form of piety.

The metaphysical notion of a universe comprised of movement was popular at the time of Goethe. Arising out of Newtonian physics, the clockwork universe theory conceived the cosmos operating like a machine: God created existence, wound it like a clock, and then left it to function on its own. Creation is, thus, similar to a perfect engine that, once put in motion, needs no further attendance. A similar idea was propagated by Baruch Spinoza: "nothing [. . .] can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them. For whatever occurs does so through God's will and eternal decree."[2] The philosopher Spinoza believed that God does not need to interfere with the world. As the result of divine creation, the world inherently mirrored godly perfection. The God of Goethe's *Faust* also operates according to the conceptions of Spinoza. My argument is simple: God never does personally intervene in the action of the story—he never even appears in

[2] Spinoza, Baruch De., Shirley, Samuel. and Feldman, Seymour. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2001. Print. (p.73)

the book any more after the Prologue in Heaven. All the choices made by the characters come from their own personal volition. They are fully responsible for every single one of them.

According to Max Weber's account of modernity, scientific rationality has rid the world of supernatural elements.[3] It has caused human existence to lose transcendence and, ultimately, to become disenchanted. The same phenomenon occurs in Goethe's *Faust*: deprived of divine interference, the world in which the story takes place also becomes disenchanted. A speech by a baboon in the Witch's Kitchen chapter illustrates this point well: "The world is this ball: / see it rise and fall / and roll round and round! / Its glass, it will break, [. . .] / hear the hollow sound! [. . .] / 'I'm alive' it sings. / [. . .] / You must die, like all things! / It's made of clay; / clay gets broken" (2402-2415). The baboon has a significantly disenchanted standpoint. First, the world is equated to an object: a glass sphere. Second, there is mention of neither God nor transcendence anywhere. There is movement, but nobody is there to cause it: the ball—and, consequently, the world—is empty inside. It is feeble. It could break at any time.

The Problem of Nihilism

Mephistopheles is certainly the most nihilistic character in Goethe's *Faust*. He holds an extremely cynical—and completely opposed to God's—view regarding the metaphysical nature of motion. For him, movement is empty and devoid of significance: "Despite all I've undertaken, / this solid lump cannot be shaken— / storms, earthquakes, fire and flood assail the land / and sea, yet firmly as before they stand! / [. . .] / I've buried millions—they're no sooner underground / than new fresh blood will circulate again. / So it goes on; it drives me mad. The earth, / [. . .] / it germinates a thousandfold" (1365-1376). Mephistopheles has tried it all to give little planet

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[3] Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Earth a shake. He always failed. Every time, "the ever-stirring, wholesome energy / of life" (1379-1380) animating the world renewed what had been destroyed. The experience of the world's constant movement has a negative effect on the devil. Instead of being conducive to worship, such as with the three archangels of the Prologue, movement drives Mephistopheles to embrace nihilism and to accept meaninglessness as the axiom of existence.

Faust as well resents the limitations imposed on him by a world of constant motion: "In me there are two souls, alas, and their / division tears my life in two. / One loves the world, it clutches her, it binds / itself to her, clinging with furious lust; / the other longs to soar beyond the dust / into the realm of high ancestral minds" (1112-1117). Faust knows that the inevitable endpoint of life is death. This knowledge tears him apart: one side drives him to attach himself with fury to mundane experiences: lust, love and so on; the other desperately wants transcendence and meaning. Faust wonders about the existence of the gods: "Are there no spirits moving in the air, / ruling the region between earth and sky?" (1118-1119). He feels the need for more and yearns to be lifted from the fate of a certain demise and to soar to a higher realm. He even summons the gods to come to rescue him from disenchantment: "Come down then to me from your golden mists on high, / and to new, many-colored life, oh take me there!" (1120-1121). The tragedy is that, living in a world in which God does not intervene, Faust will never find the meaning for which he thirsts. He is doomed to a life deprived of transcendence. As his existential crisis deepens, he realizes that he is condemned to a life of endless desiring: "Oh now I feel this truth, that for mankind / no boon is perfect. [. . .] / Thus from my lust I stumble to fulfillment, / and in fulfillment for more lust I languish" (3240-3250). Faust feels unable to escape the limitations imposed on him by a world of movement. He acknowledges that neither

transcendence nor contentment is accessible to humankind. There is no way out: lust demands fulfillment and once it is fulfilled, more lust arises. Life is nothing but an endless cycle of unfulfilled desire that is bound never to get anybody anywhere.

A Movement of Self-Affirmation

There are two possible outcomes for Faust after this realization. One is to accept the pointlessness of it all—that the eternal movement of existence turns human striving into folly—and, like Mephistopheles, just give up. Choosing to do so, he would embrace the meaninglessness of existence and be paralyzed in the face of a constantly changing world. Although he does look into the abyss of the human condition and contemplates the meaninglessness of striving in a world ever consumed by motion, Faust takes a positive stance in the face of nothingness. He chooses to acknowledge the force that pushes life forward and to assume his place in the movement of the world: “Let us plunge into the rush of things, / of time and all its happenings! / And then let pleasure and distress, / disappointment and success, / succeed each other as they will; / man cannot act if he is standing still” (1754-1759). Faust desires to affirm his own existence, and to dive into the flow of life in order to experience the whole spectrum of his possibilities. For him, movement is the embodiment of life’s struggle to impose itself on death and annihilation.

Faust has the same metaphysical standpoint as God. He recognizes that man cannot exist in stillness and must be constantly on the move. Movement is the expression of Faust’s desire to live. In the words of Arthur Schopenhauer: “Before us, certainly, remains only nothingness. But what resists this disintegration into nothing, our nature, is simply only the will to life, and we

ourselves are that will, just as the will is our world."[4] Indeed, what Faust does is to assert his will on life. It is irrelevant to him that human striving will inevitably amount to nothing. He is here now. He is alive now, and while he is in this state, he will take his fill. As long as Faust musters a breath, he will continue to strive.

A corollary of Faust's affirmation of his will to live is the acceptance of his own limitations. Despite his desire for universality and to incorporate within himself the experience of all humankind, this undertaking is impossible. As Mephistopheles puts it: "Such totality / is only for a god; perpetual light / is God's alone [. . .] / [. . .] you'll find / you men must live with day and night" (1780-1784). The universality of experience is not available to humans; it belongs to the realm of the gods. Humans are limited beings, and they must operate within their limitations. Any attempt to do otherwise is bound to meet with failure. Mephistopheles continues: "You are just what you are. Do what you will; / wear wigs, full-bottomed, each with a million locks, / stand up yards high on stills or actor's socks— / you are what you are, you'll be the same man still" (1806-1809). The message of the devil is clear: humans can only be human; Faust can only be Faust. This truth is inescapable. Despite all his yearning to become a universal being, Faust needs to acknowledge that universality is fundamentally impossible. It lies outside of his all too human capabilities. He must, therefore, resign himself simply to being Faust.

There is yet a third step that Faust must undertake to completely escape the threat of nihilism: he must do away with old values and create new ones that fit not only himself and his own experience, but also the reality of the world of motion that he has embraced. Friedrich Nietzsche articulates this idea with a metaphor of tablets: "There is need of a new nobility that is

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[4] Schopenhauer, Arthur, David Berman, and Jill Berman. *The World as Will and Idea: Abridged in One Volume*. London: J.M. Dent, 1995. Print. (p. 261)

the opponent of all rabble and everything despotic and writes anew on new tablets the word 'noble.'"[5] The German philosopher Nietzsche wants humans to break the tablets containing the old laws and customs of the past and to write new ones better adapted to a world in the process of reinventing itself. Faust does exactly that. Upon being asked whether he believes in God, he answers: "It is what all men say, / all human hearts under the blessed day / speak the same message, each / in its own speech: / may I not speak in mine?" (3461-3465). Faust has no use for the traditional tablets of religion, he wants to create his own. He is not lacking in piety; rather, he just wants to abandon the established forms of worship and to praise God in his own personal way.

Conclusion

We have seen so far that motion has a metaphysical nature: it is an expression of divine will and the inescapable condition of creation. However, much like in Spinoza's view, the God of Goethe's *Faust* does not intervene in the world. The consequence is the disenchantment of human experience—illustrated by the image of the world as a hollow glass-ball. We have also seen the lack of transcendent meaning and the sense of nothingness that ensues from disenchantment. Despite Mephistopheles being the poster character for nihilism, Faust also contemplates the meaninglessness of existence and comes very close to succumbing to nihilistic despair himself. From that point, I have attempted to prove that the only possible salvation for Faust is through a movement of self affirmation comprised of three elements: first, a positive assessment of his life and will to live; second, a recognition of his personal limitations, which entails renouncing the lust for universality and the acceptance of his own possibilities; and third,

[5] Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Graham Parkes. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print. (p. 176)

the abandonment of old values and their subsequent replacement by new ones better adapted to the demands of Faust's reality. Movement, therefore, is the only way that one can truly be alive. No matter what one desires, one must strive for it; no matter what one wants, it can only be found in motion. The ultimate lesson we should learn from Goethe's *Faust* is that the good life can only take place with the acceptance and embrace of the ever moving world of becoming.

It is true that the movement of Faust's self-affirmation carries on into the second part of the story. A full discussion of such movement demands deeper investigation and exceeds the capacity of the present essay. Nonetheless, I can now conclude that the resolution of Faust's story as well as the fundaments of his final escape from nihilism are already demonstrated in the first part of the tragedy.

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