

Faust:
My Soul be Damned for the World

Volume II

By
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Faust: My Soul be Damned for the World
Volume I

“See ye that I have not laboured for myself only, but for all that seek out the truth.”

(Ecclesiasticus 24:47)

CHAPTER 5

GOETHE AND FAUST:

STRIVING FOR TRUTH SHALL SET MEN FREE	9
IN THE BEGINNING	10
GOETHE'S UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES	37
THE NOVICE ADVOCATE AND PROMISING AUTHOR	80
THE PRESERVATION OF THE URFAUST	116
GOETHE: MINISTER OF WEIMAR	170
THE SECRET SOCIETY	181
THE LAND OF THE LEMON BLOSSOMS	206
THE POET RETURNS	248
THE DOGS OF WAR	275
A GOLDEN ALLIANCE	291
COMPLETING THE 'GREAT LACUNA'	375
THE LONG DELAY	401
THE PROVIDENTIAL ASSISTANT	443
INSPIRATION LEADS TO ACTION	451
HELENA SUMMONED TO TERRA-FANTASIA	486
BRIDGING THE NEW LACUNA	561
THE PHANTASMAL QUEST FOR HELENA	659
THE FINAL MISSION	718



SELECT CHRONOLOGY OF J. W. VON GOETHE	809
❖ EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES: 1749–1756.	809
❖ THE SEVEN YEARS WAR: 1756–1763	811
❖ THE LEIPZIG YEARS: 1765–1768	814
❖ THE CONVALESCENT YEARS: 1768–1770	816
❖ CONTINUATION TO STRASBOURG: 1770–1771	816
❖ THE PRE-WEIMAR PERIOD: 1771–1775	819
❖ THE WEIMAR YEARS: 1775–1786	826
❖ THE JOURNEY TO ITALY: 1786—1788	830
❖ THE RETURN TO WEIMAR TO THE PUBLICATION OF FAUST, PART I: 1788 — 1808	833
❖ AFTER FAUST PART I TO FAUST PART II: THE FINAL YEARS: 1809 — 1832	841

Chapter 5

Goethe and Faust:

Striving for Truth Shall Set Men Free

The tragedy of *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, arguably one of the greatest masterpieces of European literature, was a Herculean labour of love that virtually spanned the lifetime of one of Germany's most celebrated authors and poets.* Writing the first draft when in his early twenties, Goethe worked sporadically on *Faust* until he completed the last scene of the entire drama eight months before his death at the venerable age of eighty-two years. The evolution of this work spanned several major creative periods, beginning with the turbulent Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) movement through to the refined age of Weimar Classicism, and just broaching the Romantic era. Goethe progressed *Faust* in a time of dynamic political and cultural upheaval, from the nadir of the Age of Enlightenment that culminated with the American and French Revolutions, continuing through the Napoleonic Wars and the first glimmer of German nationalism. Not only was his *Faust* influenced by these ages of literary and historical change, throughout his life, Goethe energetically studied diverse disciplines; art, music, philosophy, history, law, alchemy and occult mysticism, medicine, anatomy, mineralogy, and botany, to name just a few. He contributed to the world of science with his groundbreaking theories on colour, the biology of plants, and his discovery of the intermaxillary bone in the human skull, which was previously thought to exist only in animals. Goethe's personal life, his search for happiness and fulfilment, also played a major part in the transformation of the traditional legends portraying the soul-tortured scholar, Dr. Faustus — with Goethe's unique inclusion of Margareta, a fully developed love story is introduced for the first time, making it one of the most haunting facets of this powerful drama. His vast experience in life was a bountiful source of inspiration that he readily shared with the world, producing works that were cornucopias brimming with never-ending provisions for contemplation as he once explained:

“Then they come and ask, ‘What idea I meant to embody in my *Faust*?’ as if I knew myself and could inform them. [...] It would have been a fine thing, indeed, if I had strung so rich, varied, and highly diversified a life as I have brought to view in *Faust* upon the slender string of one pervading idea. [...] I am rather of the opinion, that the

* **Editorial Policy:** this study is presented in British spelling. Material with brackets, [], or braces, { }, indicates editing or comments made by the author, with the exception of stage directions unless indicated otherwise. Bibliography printed in Volume I.

more incommensurable, and the more incomprehensible to the understanding, a poetic production is, so much the better it is.”¹

In the Beginning ...

Goethe was born on August 28, 1749 in the free imperial town of Frankfurt on the Main to a prosperous and influential family from the upper middle class. His father, Johann Caspar Goethe (1710–1782), a lawyer by profession, later procured the rank and title of imperial councillor in 1742.² This honourable position, however, was not his original ambition, for he offered his professional services to obtain an office that he desired in the city council, and was willing to work without a salary for this privilege, albeit he expected this office to be granted automatically without the formality of a council election. When the council refused, he vowed never to accept any office in service to the city. At any rate, with his new Imperial title, he now deemed these positions beneath his social status. At the age of thirty-eight he married the daughter of the chief magistrate, Katharine Elisabeth Textor (1731–1808), his junior by twenty-one years.³

The Goethe family had six children between the years 1749 and 1760, however, only Johann Goethe, and his sister, Cornelia, his junior by one year, survived the myriad of childhood diseases that plagued the eighteenth century. Goethe briefly mentions this sad period in his autobiography:

“I neither escaped the measles, nor chicken-pox, nor any other of the tormenting diseases of childhood [...]. While on the subject of these family diseases, I will mention a brother about three years younger than myself, who was likewise attacked by that infection [smallpox], and suffered not a little from it. He [Hermann Jacob[‡]] was of a tender nature, quiet and capricious, and we were never on the most friendly terms. Besides, he scarcely survived the years of childhood. Among several other children born afterwards, who like him did not survive long, I only remember a very pretty and agreeable girl, who also soon passed away; so that, after the lapse of some years, my sister and I remained alone, and were therefore the more deeply and affectionately attached to each other.”⁴

¹ Goethe to Johann Eckermann, May 6, 1827. John Oxenford, trans., *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1883). Reprint: (Elibron Classics Series, Adamant Media Corp., 2005), pp. 258–259.

² Albert Bielschowsky, William A. Cooper, trans., *The Life of Goethe: Volume I, 1749–1788. From Birth to the Return from Italy*, (1908), Reprint: (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), p. 12.

³ Ibid. p.13.

[‡] Ibid. p. 15.

⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, John Oxenford, trans., *The Autobiography of Goethe. Truth and Poetry: From My Own Life, Vol. I* [Books I–XIII] (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), p. 25.

Although not on “friendly terms” with little Hermann, his death in January 1759 at the tender age of six years was a tremendous shock to the young Johann, yet his reaction to this tragedy was an example for those with eyes to see. When his mother observed that Goethe did not shed a single tear, she reproached him for his apparent lack of grief and asked if he had not loved his brother. Immediately, he ran to his bedroom and from under his bed retrieved a bundle of handwritten papers, page after page filled with school lessons and various fairy-tales that he had compiled, and showing them to her he said: “I did all this to teach my brother.”⁵ The wisdom of innocents — love also consists of action.

Goethe’s earliest memories of childhood featured the family home that belonged to his paternal grandmother. Situated in the Grosser Hirschgraben, it was a gloomy, multi-storied “old house” of medieval character with “many corners”, and its design was a source of horror for him and his sister.⁶ Terrified at night, they were nevertheless compelled to sleep alone in a strict pedagogic effort to stamp out their childish fears. When they attempted to escape from their solitary confinement and seek the company of the servants, their father would frighten them back to their beds by playing the house ghost with his dressing gown turned inside out, which Goethe criticised as an irrational method: “The evil effect of this any one may imagine. How is he who is encompassed with a double terror to be emancipated from fear?”⁷ His mother, on the other hand, employed a better method: “She managed to gain her end by rewards. It was the season for peaches, the plentiful enjoyment of which she promised us every morning if we overcame our fears during the night. In this way she succeeded, and both parties were satisfied.”⁸

Notwithstanding the ominous character of their dwelling, the décor arranged by his father in a particular anteroom helped to lighten the atmosphere for Goethe: here in this ‘sanctuary’ his father displayed a series of engravings depicting the city of Rome, and in this special room he also kept a small collection of artefacts that he brought back from his Grand Tour of Italy c. 1739.⁹

“There I saw every day, the *Piazza del Popolo*, the *Colosseum*, [sic.], the *Piazza of St. Peter’s* and *St. Peter’s Church*, within and without, the castle of *St. Angelo*, and many other places. These images impressed themselves deeply upon me, and my otherwise very laconic father was often so kind as to furnish descriptions of the objects. His partiality for the Italian language, and for everything pertaining to Italy, was very decided. A small collection of marbles and natural curiosities, which he had brought with him thence, he often showed to us; and he devoted a great part of his time to a description of his travels, written in Italian, the

⁵ *Life of Goethe, vol. I*, p. 15.

⁶ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I*, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 4–5. Also, *Life of Goethe, vol. I*, p. 11.

copying and correction of which he slowly and accurately completed, in several parcels, with his own hand.”¹⁰

Goethe also had a favourite niche in the ‘garden-room’ situated on the second storey overlooking the city ramparts and a beautiful verdant plain. During the summer, Goethe used this room for his study periods, often taking respites to observe the phenomena of Nature and the daily life of their busy neighbours and fellow Frankfurt citizens:

“[...] it early excited within me a feeling of solitude, and a sense of vague longing resulting from it, which, conspiring with the seriousness and awe implanted in me by Nature, exerted its influence at an early age, and showed itself more distinctly in after years.”¹¹

These periods of reflection were a blessing to the ever-active child. His father had meticulously mapped out the course of his children’s education, and did not believe in wasting a precious moment that could be put to instructive use, constantly deterring them from the temptation to indulge in indolence.¹² He taught them personally, only sending them to private tutors when it became absolutely necessary. One example of his tenacity is displayed by his customary reading aloud to the family to pass the dark winter nights, however, their father insisted that once a book was started, regardless of size, it was to be finished that same season to the despair of the listeners. Goethe remarks, “I still remember one such winter when we thus had to work our way through Bower’s *History of the Popes*.⁺ It was a terrible time, as little or nothing occurs in ecclesiastical affairs can interest children and young people. Still, [...] so much reading remained in my mind that I was able, in after times, to take up many threads of the narrative.”¹³

Eventually, the children attended private classes taught to a number of the neighbouring children, although Goethe admits these semi-private scholastic affairs were of no particular benefit to him; “This learning in common did not advance me; the teachers followed their routine; and the rudeness, sometimes ill-nature, of my companions, interrupted the brief hours of study with tumult, vexation and disturbance.”¹⁴ In all, Goethe’s early education was all-embracing as Albert Bielschowsky relates:

“Hardly any of the more important realms of knowledge, hardly any of the nobler accomplishments, were neglected. The most important ancient and modern languages, — vis., Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, English, and Italian, — history and geography, religion, natural sciences,

¹⁰ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹² *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I*, p. 20

⁺ Bielschowsky notes this edition was printed in eleven volumes, the first four appeared in 1756, and the fifth in 1762; “Even if the father made them study through only the first four volumes, nevertheless that was making no slight demand upon the sprightly wife and children.” *Life of Goethe, vol. I*, n. 12, p. 420.

¹³ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I*, p. 118.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 22.

mathematics, drawing, music, dancing, fencing, and riding were included one by one in the boy's education. Facility in German, nowhere the object of systematic study in those days, was acquired by the writing of compositions [...] and by reading contemporary poets."¹⁵

Goethe proved to be a brilliant pupil and a budding young poet. His rapid advancement instilled paternal pride in his father, who without delay, formed plans for his son's higher education—that it should follow in his path and culminate with a career in law followed by a Grand Tour of Italy—thus he could hardly wait to send his son to college and see his ambitions fulfilled.

Despite this demanding schedule, the children often found time for various amusements. Their grandmother, who lived with the family until her death in 1754, enjoyed entertaining her grandchildren, indulging their whims and craving for treats. She arranged one particular surprise, which remained forever in Goethe's memory: the construction of a small puppet theatre for Christmas Eve, 1753.¹⁶ The microcosmic theatre seemed to him a 'magical' window veiled by a mystic curtain that opened to reveal the biblical story, *David and Goliath*.¹⁷ Entranced by this miniature dramatic presentation, it gave him his first "taste for the theatre", as he would later admit in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796).¹⁸

After the death of their grandmother, Goethe Sr. decided to renovate the family home. As terrifying as the old house seemed to Goethe and his sister, they were nevertheless thrown into dismay at the rapid change their familiar environment underwent:

"To see the rooms in which they had so often been confined and pestered with wearisome tasks and studies, the passages they had played in, the walls which had always been kept so carefully clean, all falling before the mason's hatchet and the carpenter's axe [...] all this produced a commotion in our young heads that was not easily settled."¹⁹

When the roof was partially removed, it was arranged that the children would stay with friends of the family and be admitted to a public school. As disagreeable as this situation was for the children, who were used to a secluded lifestyle, Goethe and his sister experienced a certain degree of freedom that they had never known before. Goethe relates that it was about this time he began to explore his native city, gradually extending his excursions in all directions.²⁰

Frankfurt on the Main in those days retained the sombre atmosphere of the Medieval ages with its city walls, ramparts, gates and towers separating the older sections from the relatively

¹⁵ *Life of Goethe, vol. I*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Year according to Bielschowsky, *Ibid.* p. 38.

¹⁷ I.e., according to Goethe in his *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796). Reprint, Eric A Blackall and Victor Lange, eds., trans., *Goethe, The Collected Works, Volume 9* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 7–11.

recent developments, all encompassed by moats. Inside were numerous twisting streets winding their way to or from the various monasteries and castellated houses that looked like small fortresses. The children found numerous places to explore, especially when they had won the favour of the keepers employed at the city buildings. The Council House was a favourite haunt, here they could wander through the vaults underneath the main halls, visit the session chambers, and view the Imperial election chamber with awe. On one or two occasions, their permissive guide would relate the histories associated with the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire who were represented in the various paintings adorning the halls, augmenting and enhancing their knowledge of Imperial history as related to them by family and friends who would nostalgically recall the most recent coronations. At one time, a singular privilege was granted to the children, they were permitted to gaze upon the original document of the Golden Bull (1356) during a special exhibit arranged for a group of distinguished visitors.

The renovations were nearly completed and their father's prized book and art collections were finally being rearranged in their new surroundings, when a natural disaster encroached upon Goethe's sense of peace and contentment with the world. On November 1st, 1755, a great earthquake destroyed the thriving port-city of Lisbon, a tragedy that threw Europe into a state of shock and disbelief. Goethe writes:

“[...] an extraordinary event deeply disturbed the Boy's peace of mind, for the first time. [...] the earthquake at Lisbon took place, and spread a prodigious alarm over the world, long accustomed to peace and quiet. A great and magnificent capital, which was at the same time, a trading and mercantile city, is smitten, without warning, by a most fearful calamity. The earth trembles and totters, the sea roars up, ships dashed together, houses fall in, and over them, churches and towers, the royal palace is in part swallowed by the waters, the bursting land seems to vomit flames, since smoke and fire are seen everywhere amid the ruins. Sixty thousand persons, a moment before in ease and comfort, fall together, and he is deemed most fortunate who is no longer capable of a thought or feeling about the disaster. The flames rage on, and with them rage a troop of desperadoes, before concealed, or set at large by the event. The wretched survivors are exposed to pillage, massacre, and every outrage: and thus, on all sides, Nature asserts her boundless capriciousness. [...] The Boy [...] was not a little staggered. God, the Creator and Preserver of Heaven and Earth, whom the explanation of the first article of the Creed declared so wise and benignant, [sic.] having both the just and the unjust a prey to the same destruction, had not manifested Himself, by any means, a fatherly character. In vain the young mind strove to resist these impressions. It was the more impossible as the wise and scripture-learned could not themselves agree as to the light in which such a phenomenon should be regarded.”²¹

²¹ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry*, vol. I, pp. 18–19.

Goethe was not exaggerating, the details of this particular earthquake are horrific. According to modern research, the initial quake would have registered close to 9 on the Richter scale and rocked the city for three to six minutes, opening up huge fissures in the streets fifteen feet wide. Many survivors rushed to the docks to avoid the crumbling buildings, only to be swept away forty minutes later by a massive tsunami. The remaining buildings fell prey to the ravages of fire that burned for five days. In the end, nearly eighty-five percent of the city was destroyed. Thieves and murderers who escaped the jails, in addition to the looters, roamed the streets of Lisbon. Law and order ceased to exist as those who remained fought and scrounged to survive. The death toll for Lisbon alone has been currently estimated between 10,000 to 100,000. The coast of southern Portugal was also badly hit, while shockwaves were felt as far away as Finland and the Caribbean, a ten-foot tsunami struck Cornwall in southwest England and Galway in the west of Ireland.

In addition to the human toll, the cultural impact was also enormous. The new opera house in Lisbon, only six months old, burned to the ground. The royal Ribeira Palace mentioned by Goethe was destroyed and with it went the royal library containing 70,000 volumes, the royal archives, plus many famous works of art by Rubens, Titian and Correggio. Many churches were reduced to rubble, while the most gruesome tragedy occurred with the destruction of the Royal Hospital of All Saints, hundreds of patients who could not be moved in time burned to death. After these shocking reports, a number of the Enlightenment philosophers began, like young Goethe, to question the widely held belief in a kind and loving God who watched over humanity but who could simultaneously allow atrocities such as this to occur on the feast of All Saints Day. Voltaire was one such sceptical individual and challenged the idea proposed by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz that God permitted evil in order to demonstrate or enhance the existence of good. However, Jean-Jacques Rousseau used this event for more positive reflection, declaring this was a sign mankind should not be cramped in cities where danger threatened but must return to a natural state of existence. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, also affected by this event, began to form his theories on aesthetics. In his research, Kant proposed new ideas on how earthquakes were formed, mainly by gaseous pockets building up under the earth that eventually explode with the pressure, which of course have been proved incorrect, although his theories were the first serious studies of seismology in Germany.

All of these arguments would affect Goethe and his work. Looking into the future for a moment, Goethe, unlike Voltaire, did not remain sceptical of God's loving providence despite all the evils in the world and obviously concurred with Leibniz's philosophy in this regard, for we find as he reviews this event from hindsight in his autobiography, he describes this earthquake and the ensuing aftermath as the *work of a demon*:

“So complicated an event arrested the attention of the world for a long time: and, *as additional and more detailed accounts of the extensive effects of this explosion came from every quarter*, the minds already aroused by the misfortune of strangers, began to be more and more anxious about themselves and their friends. *Perhaps the demon of terror has never so speedily and powerfully diffused his terrors over the earth.*”²²

²² Ibid. p. 19. Italics added.

We further detect Goethe may not be referring only to the fear of natural catastrophes when he uses the word ‘explosion’, but also to certain political tensions exacerbated by the event.

After the earthquake, the Portuguese Prime Minister, Sebastião de Melo, was approached by the despairing citizens wondering what was to be done. He succinctly replied: “Bury the dead and take care of the living,” and actively set out to organize the relief and reconstruction efforts. He made a detailed study of the earthquake’s force, asking the survivors about the duration of the tremors, in which direction they travelled, and on which side buildings tended to fall. He agreed with King Joseph I that the whole city needed to be rebuilt on a new plan with superior materials, and designed the earliest earthquake-resistant structures in Europe: using wooden models of his *avant-garde* buildings, their seismic resistance was tested by marching the army around them.

However, the Prime Minister, a particular favourite of the King who had brought about numerous reforms in the country, acquired many enemies among the old aristocracy for they viewed him as an insignificant upstart, the son of a mere country squire. Although many of his secular reforms were positive, such as the formation of primary and secondary schooling, and the first attempt to introduce quality controls in wine production to name a few, there were other innovations, particularly the tax reforms, not to mention his success in lessening the powers of the Inquisition and the Church by attacking the Jesuit order, that caused the political tensions to increase.

After the earthquake and his impressive reconstruction efforts, the King granted Melo further powers, giving him an opportunity to become a powerful dictator, a decision that further irritated the nobility. Apparently, the nobility finally planned to remove the ‘corrupt’ king who insisted on lavishing this commoner with authoritarian powers to the detriment of the aristocracy. Three years after the earthquake, Joseph I was wounded in an assassination attempt as he returned home from a visit with his mistress, a Marchioness from the noble Távora family, circumstances that also implicated the Duke of Aveiro in the attack. Melo’s hand fell hard and fast: the conspirators were quickly executed following a quick trial, while the Jesuits were expelled from the country and their assets confiscated. Women and children were not spared, every person implicated in the Távora Affair were dealt with, finally breaking the power of the old aristocracy. The King was pleased with Melo’s efforts and granted him several noble titles, eventually raising him to the rank of Marquis of Pombal in 1770. He remained the true governing power behind the throne until the death of Joseph I in 1777. Hence, this earthquake was not only a natural disaster, but also brought several political factions to the fore, creating seismic shifts in the balance between secular, aristocratic and ecclesiastical power in the process. These momentous events of the time will have a profound bearing on the development of Goethe’s dramas, including *Faust*, as we shall later discover.

Returning to Goethe’s childhood, we see that simple amusements helped to distract him from these tragic events that rocked the world. When he and Cornelia were not whiling away their free hours rambling about Frankfurt, they enjoyed reading the popular *Volkschriften* (Folk-books) and chapbooks that appeared in print, the forerunners of modern magazines. These cheap, mass produced periodicals included a medley of entertaining features: reprints of Medieval romances, ghost stories, fairy-tales, heroic adventures, ballads, historical narrations, and other similar items, as Goethe relates:

“We children were so fortunate as to find these precious remains of the Middle Ages every day on a little table at the door of a dealer of cheap books, and to obtain them at the cost of a couple of *kreutzer*. The *Eulenspiegel*, the *Four Sons of Haimon*, the *Emperor Octavian*, the *Fair Melusina*, the *Beautiful Magelone*, *Fortunatus*, with the whole race down to the *Wandering Jew*, were all at our service, as often as we preferred the relish of these works to the taste of sweet things.”²³

Scholars have proposed Goethe was first introduced to the legend of Dr. Faustus via these publications. Following the Thirty-Years war, two final *Faustbook* series circulated in Germany, thus bringing to a conclusion the primordial era of Faustian literature. The first of these was a new edition of Widman’s text edited by Nicolaus Pfitzer, a physician from Nuremberg, and printed in 1674.²⁴ This was republished several times until the year 1726.²⁵ The second series, also a revision of Widman’s book, features the earliest condensed narration of Faust’s story. Entitled the *Faustbuch des Christlich Meynenden*, the first dated copy hails from the year 1725. This was reissued several times, the last known reprint is cited as 1797.²⁶ It was from this last *Faustbook* that chapbook printers culled the tale of the sorcerer for their own profit. It is probable Goethe bought such a chapbook, or, as Palmer and Moore speculate, he may have acquired one of the later editions of the *Faustbuch des Christlich Meynenden*.²⁷ Of interest, Henry Jones notes that Pfitzer’s *Faustbook* “[...] contains the germ for Marguerite in Goethe’s *Faust*, Part I.”²⁸ David Luke confirms this information, for he states there is a “[...] passing mention, in the 1674 chapbook, of a ‘very pretty but poor servant-girl’ whom the doctor loves but because of his satanic contract cannot marry.”²⁹ Rose, on the other hand, relates this story is incorporated in the *Christlich Meynenden*: “It is important in that it contains the germ of the Gretchen episode in Goethe’s drama. Faust tries to seduce a servant-girl, but she is proof against temptation and he offers to marry her; Lucifer, however, dissuades him and gives him Helena instead.”³⁰ Fundamentally, this story featuring the servant girl and Faust’s frustrated love in these *Faustbooks* is an extension of the devil’s refusal to allow Faust to avail of the sacrament of matrimony as seen in the earlier texts, and not necessarily the introduction of a romance to the original legend. Nevertheless, if Goethe did obtain a copy of either of these books, this episode obviously impressed him.

²³ Ibid. pp. 24–25.

²⁴ Philip Mason Palmer and Robert Pattison More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition: From Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1966), p. 131.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Henry Jones, ed., *The English Faustbook: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), n. 53. p.76

²⁹ David Luke, ‘Introduction’, in *Oxford World’s Classics—Goethe. Faust: Part One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xvii. {Henceforth, *Faust, Part One*}

³⁰ William Rose, ed., *The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus: 1592*. Reprint; (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 41.

This early introduction to Faust, in all probability, was enhanced by a number of books he read as a child. Bielschowsky observes in one school textbook mentioned by Goethe, the *Orbis Pictus* by Amos Comenius, an intriguing picture illustrates the chapter entitled ‘On Divine Providence’:

“Goethe could see a man who is addressed by an angel on the left, while on the right the devil seeks to throw a noose around his neck. A little farther to the side stands a magician in the centre of a circle. As the artist probably had Faust in mind, young Goethe may also have thought of the popular magician.”³¹

We suspect his fascination with the character of Helen was also augmented by his introduction to the Trojan legend via the library of his aunt and uncle. He discovered a prose translation of the classic tale by Herr Von Loen entitled *Homer’s Description of the Conquest of the Kingdom of Troy*, and later progressed to the classics by Virgil.³²

Naturally, the edifying purpose of the Faustian legends was not lost upon Goethe who was raised a Christian in the Protestant Church. Goethe admits the method used to impart religious instruction to him and his sister was “[...] nothing but a kind of dry morality: ingenious exposition was not thought of; and the doctrine appealed neither to the understanding nor the heart.”³³ From an early age, he observed that this desiccated catechetical method may be the primary cause for the emergence of numerous religious denominations, i.e. Separatists, Pietists, the Moravians, etc., and deduced that people were seeking a closer union with God through Christ than “[...] seemed to them possible under the forms of the established religion.”³⁴ Goethe consequently desired to approach the Deity on a personal level, secretly conducting an adoration service in his newly remodelled room:

“Things of this sort naturally made an impression on the Boy, and led him into similar states of mind. In fact, he came to the thought that he might immediately approach the great God of Nature, the Creator and Preserver of Heaven and Earth. [...] The way he took to accomplish this was very curious.

The Boy had chiefly kept to the first article of Belief. The God who stands in immediate connexion with nature, and owns and loves it as his work, seemed to him the proper God, who might be brought into closer relationship with man, as with everything else, and who would take care of him, as of the motion of the stars, the days and seasons, the animals and plants. There were texts in the Gospels which explicitly stated this. The Boy could ascribe no form to this Being; he therefore sought Him in His works, and would, in the good Old Testament fashion,

³¹ *Life of Goethe*, vol. I, n. 14, p. 420.

³² *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry*, vol. I, p. 29.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 30.

build Him an altar. Natural productions were set forth as images of the world, over which a flame was to burn, signifying the aspirations of man's heart towards his Maker. He brought out of the collection of natural objects which he possessed, and which had been increased as chance directed, the best ores and other specimens. But the next difficulty was, as to how they should be arranged and raised into a pile. His father possessed a beautiful red-lacquered music-stand, ornamented with gilt flowers, in the form of a four-sided pyramid, with different elevations, which had been found convenient for quartets, but lately was not much in use. The Boy laid hands on this, and built up his representations of Nature one above the other in steps, so that it all looked quite pretty and at the same time sufficiently significant. On an early sunrise his first worship of God was to be celebrated, but the young priest had not yet settled how to produce a flame which should at the same time emit an agreeable odour. At last it occurred to him to combine the two, as he possessed a few fumigating pastils, which diffused a pleasant fragrance with a glimmer, if not with a flame. Nay, this soft burning and exhalation seemed a better representation of what passes in the heart, than an open flame. [...] At last [the sun] glittered above the roofs, a burning-glass was at once taken up and applied to the pastils, which were fixed on the summit in a fine porcelain saucer. Everything succeeded according to the wish, and the devotion was perfect. [...] Every one regarded [the 'altar'] only as a well-arranged collection of natural curiosities. The Boy knew better, but concealed his knowledge.” (Goethe)³⁵

However, the following day, the young, eager 'priest' would be taught a lesson in humility. Impatient to repeat his 'service', he set alight the pastilles, but in his haste did not place them on the porcelain saucer: the smouldering oblation burned into the lacquered quartet stand and destroyed a number of the ornamental flowers “[...] as if some evil spirit had disappeared, [and] had left their black, ineffaceable footprints.”³⁶ Goethe learned a valuable lesson: “[...] the accident might almost be considered a hint and warning of the danger there always is in wishing to approach the Deity in such a way.”³⁷

Obviously, Goethe's inclinations towards pantheism developed at a very early stage in his life. Goethe admits that the initial sections of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the mythic accounts of supernatural transformation had thoroughly engrossed his imagination.³⁸ In the very first book, the ancient poet describes the classical Roman and Greek version of the Creation of the world from the black void of Chaos with the appearance and formation of the four elements, continuing with the emergence of the human race, followed by the pagan account of the deluge with the

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 30–31.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 31.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 23.

myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha.³⁹ As we have seen previously in Chapter 3, the *Metamorphoses* was one of the many classic texts proscribed to Marlowe's generation at Cambridge as part of their (anti-Catholic) theology course, displaying that the pagans corroborated sacred Scripture: a programme that often produced an adverse result and inadvertently encouraged scholars to inquire into the validity of a multi-cultural, pantheistic 'world-religion' not confined to an established Christian Church.* Evidently, Goethe too entertained these same questions; for the present, however, it would appear he was content to publicly attend the Protestant church of his fathers following the devotional disaster that ruined the finish-work on his red-lacquered 'altar'.

Not long after the renovations to the family home were completed, a new source of turbulence would affect their lives and the peace of Frankfurt: the Seven Year's War (1756–1763). In 1748, Prussia annexed the territory of Silesia, which had remained under the dominion of the Austrian Hapsburgs since 1526. Austria, in the following years sought an alliance with France, Spain, Saxony, Sweden and Russia with the intent to wage war on Prussia to regain their lost possession. However, Frederick II, King of Prussia, did not elect to use diplomatic channels to avert the growing threat. Supported by his ally, Great Britain, he marched upon Saxony without warning with an army of 60,000 men, defiantly opting to publish a manifesto⁴⁰ justifying his tactics in protecting Prussia's territorial rights to Silesia rather than announce an official declaration of war.

The earliest effect of this political event that Goethe experienced was the discord that erupted within the family circle. He and his father supported the intrepid Frederick II as the model of the heroic ideal, while other members, including his beloved grandfather and uncles, championed the Hapsburg claims. Disputes were rife between family members and relations, extending to public scenes when opposing factions met on the street, reminding Goethe in hindsight of the feud between the Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*.⁴¹ For the first time, he experienced the disagreeable consequences of entertaining party spirit, which had "[...] an injurious effect upon the Boy, as it accustomed him to separate himself from beloved and highly-valued persons." (Goethe)⁴²

In contrast, there was one positive outcome resulting from this impending threat of combat in their vicinity. The children were obliged to stay at home, and to ensure they were entertained, they were allowed to play with the puppet theatre, which their late grandmother had bequeathed to them.⁴³ We may assume, from the information we glean in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, that their father denied them this toy until then, lest it proved to be a source of idle distraction providing no practical benefit; "Your father is always saying, 'What's the use of this?' [...] How often have I been reproached for giving you that wretched puppet theatre for Christmas [...]. It gave you that taste for the theatre!"⁴⁴ The children learned how to produce the

³⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Reprint, A. D. Melville, *Oxford World's Classics—Ovid: Metamorphoses*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

* I.e. In *Faust: My Soul be Damned for the World*, vol. I.

⁴⁰ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry*, vol. I, p. 32.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 33.

⁴² Ibid. p. 34.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 35.

⁴⁴ *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, pp. 2–3.

first puppet play they had seen in 1753, and were permitted to invite the neighbours' children to view their miniature production. They quickly tired of this one play, and began to make new costumes for the marionettes and produce extensive works, "[...] which were indeed on too grand a scale for so narrow a stage," Goethe writes, also admitting he used his skill in geometry to design many pasteboard sets that were never constructed.⁴⁵ Soon, they outgrew this little theatre and attempted to form a 'theatrical' company with the other children. According to *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe read every play he could lay his hands on with a view to use them in future productions, particularly those "[...] in which I thought I would myself have particular success."⁴⁶ We may reasonably assume that it was during this time Goethe discovered the puppet version of the Faust legend, which he would later mention in his autobiography: "The significant puppet-show fable of the latter [*Faust*] resounded and vibrated many-toned within me."⁴⁷ We do not know which particular marionette play he discovered. Bielschowsky mentions one production where Helena transformed into a Fury⁴⁸ therefore it is possible Goethe acquired a copy of a puppet version adapted from the various Faust plays entitled "Unfortunate Learning"[†] that were occasionally performed in Frankfurt.

Soon, the war engulfed the peaceful city. On January 2, 1759, French troops overpowered the city escort and laid claim to the town. The citizens were compelled to house lodgers from the French army by billeting that proved to be an uncomfortable burden, particularly for Goethe's Prussian-biased father. The uninvited guest assigned to the Goethe home for the next year and a half was the King's Lieutenant, Count Thoranc, a native of Grasse in Provence.⁴⁹ In spite of this disagreeable situation, the Count proved to be a gracious enemy and took pains to ensure he did not inconvenience the family beyond what was absolutely necessary for his requirements. Observing the house was newly renovated, he refrained from nailing his military maps up to avoid any damage to the newly papered walls, also ensuring that his officers behaved in an orderly manner and did not put the family to unnecessary expense. He expressed his keen interest in art, and hearing about a picture collection in the house, he politely requested permission to view these treasures, as Goethe relates:

"He took extreme pleasure in these things, behaved in the most obliging manner to my father, who accompanied him, and when he heard that the greater part of the artists were still living, and resided in Frankfurt

⁴⁵ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I, p. 35.*

⁴⁶ *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, p. 14.*

⁴⁷ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I, pp. 356–357.* Goethe mentions this phrase in conjunction with events occurring in 1770, but he could have seen the puppet play in his childhood. Rose proposes Goethe did not see the Faust puppet-play until he attended the university in Leipzig, but Rose does not quote any source from which he bases this observation. (See *Damnable Life and Deserved Death of [...] Faustus, p. 53.*) In addition, I have not discovered any other source to date that supports Rose's statement.

⁴⁸ Bielschowsky, *The Life of Goethe, Volume III. 1815–1832. From the Congress of Vienna to the Poet's Death* (1908). Reprint (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), p. 250.

[†] See 'Chapter 4: The Transition Years' in *Faust: My Soul be Damned for the World, vol. I.*

⁴⁹ *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry, vol. I, p. 65.*