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FAUST I: "NACHT, OFFEN FELD"

After the prose scene *Trüber Tag* and before the prison scene we have the short scene *Nacht, offen Feld* consisting of only six lines:

FAUST, MEPHISTOPHELES, auf schwarzen Pferden daherbrausend.

FAUST. Was weben die dort um den Rabenstein?

MEPHISTOPHELES. Weiss nicht was sie kochen und schaffen.

FAUST. Schweben auf, schweben ab, neigen sich, beugen sich.

MEPHISTOPHELES. Eine Hexenzunft.

FAUST. Sie streuen und weihen.

MEPHISTOPHELES. Vorbei! Vorbei!

The weird scene is also found in the *Urfaust* in substantially the same form. The large majority of commentators see in the *Hexenzunft* a pack of witches or spectres that are crowding around the place of execution stirring a cauldron and performing magic rites. One of the first reviewers of *Faust*, K. A. Böttiger, called attention, in 1809, to a well known passage in Bürger's *Lenore* where spectres, presumably the spirits of executed criminals, are dancing around the rack at the place of execution:<sup>1</sup>

Sieh da! sieh da! Am Hochgericht  
Tanzt' um des Rades Spindel  
Halb sichtbarlich, bei Mondenlicht,  
Ein luftiges Gesindel.—

Commentators generally recognize a certain influence of this passage upon the scene in *Faust*. Düntzer furthermore called attention to the witches in *Macbeth* and to the old popular superstition that witches are wont to congregate and to dance around the gallows, two suggestions that have since been repeated many times.

The scene has frequently been represented by artists. The illustrations invariably follow the usual interpretation showing a crowd of witches or spectres engaged in weird motions and incantations. The best known illustrations of the scene are those by Cornelius, Retzsch and the Frenchman Delacroix. Goethe was strongly impressed with the work of Delacroix, which was published in connection with Stapfer's French translation of the first part of *Faust*. In *Kunst und Altertum* VI, 1 (1827) he writes: "Zwei Probe-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Braun, *Goethe im Urteil seiner Zeitgenossen*, III, 221.

drucke (of Delacroix's illustrations) liegen vor uns, die auf das Weitere begierig machen. Der eine stellt die auf Zauberpferden in der Nacht am Hochgerichte vorbeistürmenden Gesellen dar, wo, bei aller der entsetzlichen Eile, Fausts ungestüme, neugierige Frage und eine ruhig-abweisende Antwort des Bösen gar wohl ausgedrückt sind." (Weim. ed. Vol. 41 (2), 234). In the following year he refers again to Delacroix's illustration of the scene (*ib.*, VI, 2, 391): "Vorzüglich geistreich endlich, . . . scheint das Blatt geraten, wo Mephistopheles und Faust auf Zauberpferden am Hochgericht vorübersausen. Das Feuer, der Geist, der Ausdruck, womit der Künstler diese wilde Szene dargestellt, wird zuverlässig den Beifall der Kenner und Kunstrichter erhalten." Eckermann reports the following remark of Goethe regarding Delacroix's illustration of this scene: "So muss man doch gestehen, dass man es sich selbst nicht so vollkommen gedacht hat."<sup>2</sup>

Friedrich Förster, the historian and Goethe's friend, relates in his autobiography a conversation he had with Goethe regarding the scene (December 1827 or beginning of 1828): "Ich erlaubte mir gegen die Darstellung von Cornelius die Bemerkung, dass er unmöglich die tiefe Bedeutung der Dichtung hier verstanden habe. Der Dichter, so schien es mir, habe wohl im Sinne gehabt, den Rabenstein, auf welchem am nächstfolgenden Tage Gretchen ihr Haupt auf den Block legen sollte, durch blumenstreuende Engel weihen zu lassen. Statt dessen gibt uns Cornelius einen Teufels- und Hexenspuk, womit Mephistopheles Faust belügen und betrügen will und deshalb mit "Vorbei! vorbei!" eiligst mit ihm davon reitet. "Mich haben," bemerkte Goethe, "die beiden vortrefflich galoppirenden Reiter auf den schnaubenden Rossen so in Anspruch genommen, dass ich die Szene auf dem Rabenstein noch nicht mit Bedacht angesehen habe; Sie mögen wohl das Richtige getroffen haben."<sup>3</sup>

It is true, Förster's accounts of his conversations with Goethe contain errors and inaccuracies, Minor calls him "very unreliable" (*Goethes Faust*, Stuttgart, 1901, I, 227), nevertheless we are not justified in assuming that in reporting Goethe's reply Förster simply drew upon his imagination. Goethe's statement in Förster's

<sup>2</sup> *Gespräche*, Nov. 29, 1826.

<sup>3</sup> Förster, *Kunst und Leben*, Berlin, 1873, p. 37; Grif, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen*, II, 2, *Faust*, p. 423.

account, that his attention had been held by the galloping horsemen to the exclusion of the scene around the Rabenstein, finds a certain support in the fact that in discussing Delacroix's illustration both in *Kunst und Altertum* and in his conversation with Eckermann Goethe only speaks of the galloping horsemen and does not refer to the figures around the place of execution. On the other hand Goethe's approval of Förster's interpretation is worded very cautiously and can certainly not be claimed as clear and final evidence for Goethe's own understanding of the scene.

The interpretation must be sought in the scene itself and in its context. Three commentators only, so far as I can see, mention the possibility, which to Förster was a certainty, that the *Hexenzunft* is not a crowd of witches but a company of good spirits. Loeper (Berlin, 1879) says: "Wollte man gute Geister annehmen, so würde in dem dann ernsthaft zu verstehenden 'Streuen und Weißen' die Vorausverkündigung liegen, dass Gretchen, wenn auch 'gerichtet,' doch 'gerettet' sein werde." Minor (*Goethes Faust*, I, 227) considers it hardly probable that Goethe wished to have the place of execution consecrated by good spirits because Gretchen's soul is to be saved. Goebel (*Goethes Faust*, N. Y., 1907) refers to Minor but expresses the belief "that we are justified in assuming that the spirits who are "consecrating" the place are *good* spirits." No attempt has ever been made to analyze the scene in detail.

Faust and Mephistopheles on magic horses are hastening to the city where Gretchen is imprisoned to set her free. Faust is in a solemn mood. He is deeply conscious of the tragic fate awaiting Gretchen, he is filled with bitter resentment against Mephistopheles who has concealed from him Gretchen's condition and has deceived him with the insipid pleasures of the *Walpurgisnacht*. The sight of the mysterious figures moving about the place of execution increases the solemnity of Faust's mood, it fills him with awe but also arouses his curiosity. This feeling of awe is clearly reflected in the words which Faust uses in referring to their motions and activities: *weben, schweben, neigen, beugen, streuen, weißen*. Mephistopheles on the other hand refers to the same activities sneeringly as *kochen und schaffen*, the figures themselves he calls a *Hexenzunft*, and then urges himself and his companion to hurry past the place.

Faust applies to these figures terms some of which are in themselves full of poetic force, indeed, *weißen* has a distinctly sacred

connotation. *Weben* is used by the Earth-spirit l. 503: "Webe hin und her," cf. also ll. 395, 1119. The verb in this meaning was practically obsolete in the eighteenth century, it was kept alive and intelligible only by its use in the German Bible, especially the passage Acts 17, 28: "in ihm leben, weben und sind wir." Adelung says in his *Wörterbuch*: "Einige neuere Schriftsteller haben dieses veraltete Wort wieder in die witzige Schreibart einzuführen gesucht." He gives quotations from Hagedorn and Herder. During the Storm and Stress period the word was felt to be a poetic term just as today. If Faust had seen witches, he would not have referred to their motions as *weben*, he would have used a less poetic word. Nor would he have applied the term *weihen* to witches. Adelung after referring to the literal meaning of *weihen* as used in connection with ecclesiastical rites, especially in the Roman Church, gives three figurative uses of the word "in den edleren Schreibarten": 1. Gott und seinem Dienste bestimmen. 2. Eine gewisse Ehrwürdigkeit, Heiligkeit erteilen, ehrwürdig machen. 3. Zu einem vorzüglichen Gebrauche bestimmen, widmen. Sein Leben dem Dienste seines Vaterlandes weihen. It is difficult to see how such a word could be used of witches. *Schweben* is used repeatedly in *Faust I*, cf. ll. 394, 428, 475, 702, 1097, 1501; prose scene l. 50. Though the word might certainly be applied to the hovering about of witches, it is used in *Faust*, when not referring to objects or birds, to express the motions of spirits that to the speaker at least appear friendly and beneficial, or as in the prose scene, spirits that mete out deserved punishment. As for *streuen*, Minor (*l. c.*) refers to the angels in the second part scattering roses and to l. 11947: "Böse wichen als wir streuten," but the word might also be applied to witches. *Sich neigen*, *sich beugen* are terms that imply dignity, even solemnity, qualities which are not characteristic of witches.

Several commentators have recognized the solemn character and poetic import of Faust's words and the inappropriateness of applying these terms to the doings of witches. They have tried to solve the difficulty by assuming a parody of church ceremonies. Loeper says: "Parodie kirchlichen Brauches: das Weihen von Wasser und Rauchwerk, das Streuen von zauberischen Kräutern"; Strehlke (*Wörterbuch zu Faust*, s. v. streuen): "Sie streuen und weihen, darin liegt eine Verspottung des kirchlichen Gebrauchs"; Erich Schmidt (*Jubiläumsausgabe*, XIII, 342): "Die Hexen brauen und

scheinen kirchliche Bräuche der Messe (Verbeugungen, Weihrauch, Sprengen) zu parodieren." The witch in the *Hexenküche* may indeed be said to "parody" church ceremonies, but the atmosphere of that scene is not weird but grotesque, satire is an essential element of it, the reader is not filled with awe but is amused, repelled and annoyed just like Faust himself. Our scene however, brief as it is, is one of the most powerful and impressive scenes in the poem, its atmosphere is profoundly mysterious and awe-inspiring. There is no room for parody or satire in such a scene. Faust moreover is a man "der weit entfernt von allem Schein, nur in der Wesen Tiefe trachtet." He uses elevated language because what he sees is noble and elevated and Mephistopheles uses scurrilous language (*kochen und schaffen, Hexenzunft*) because he wants to persuade Faust that he is mistaken about the figures, that they are not noble spirits but witches.

There is here the same difference in the attitude of the two as in the *Walpurgisnacht* when Faust recognizes in the phantom the form of Gretchen while Mephistopheles insists that it is Medusa. In the *Walpurgisnacht* Mephistopheles fears that the vision and thought of Gretchen may arouse the better nature of Faust, hence he lies to him, just as he had lied to him for a similar reason in the second scene in the Study when he had called the chorus of invisible spirits "die kleinen von den Meinen" (l. 1627). For whatever interpretation may be given to these spirits, they cannot possibly be the minions of Mephistopheles. It should be remembered also that Faust's penetrating spirit recognized at once the mysterious nature of the poodle in the scene *Before the Gate* while Wagner saw only a common dog. But just as Faust was not mistaken about the poodle, so he cannot be mistaken here about the mysterious figures and their doings.

Faust's first question "Was weben die dort um den Rabenstein?" is curtly dismissed by Mephistopheles who pleads ignorance. Faust then answers his own question by describing the motions of the figures in the solemn terms discussed before. Mephistopheles now realizes that Faust perceives the true meaning of the figures and their doings, he is alarmed, it is high time to turn Faust's thoughts into other channels, he gives a clear but lying answer calling the figures witches. Faust seems to pay no attention to this answer. Absorbed in the contemplation of the mysterious scene he continues describing what he sees, to himself more than to Mephis-

topheles. This time he uses a term with a sacred connotation, *weihen*. And now Mephistopheles is seized with impatience and terror, his efforts at misleading Faust have failed, the only course left for him is to get himself and his companion as quickly as possible away from this hateful scene.

If the figures around the place of execution were witches, as Mephistopheles maintains, it would not be clear why he is in such a hurry to get past the place. For the exclamation "Vorbei! Vorbei!" is addressed to himself as well as to Faust. Mephistopheles is at home in the company of witches, why should he shun them here? Faust is deeply interested in the doings of these mysterious figures, he shows no fear and no desire to get away. It is Mephistopheles who feels uncomfortable, but his fear and hurry are intelligible only on the assumption that the mysterious figures represent good spirits whose presence is repugnant to him as well as dangerous. The situation is somewhat parallel to the scene *Landstrasse* in the *Urfaust* where Mephistopheles hastens his steps and casts down his eyes, as he and Faust pass the cross along the highway.

It cannot have been the poet's intention, as has been suggested repeatedly, to lead Faust past the place of execution in order to remind him of Gretchen's fate. Faust knows exactly what fate is awaiting Gretchen. That is made perfectly clear in the opening speech of the preceding prose scene. During the whole ride he can have had only one thought, that of saving Gretchen from death at the hands of the executioner. Hence it is inconceivable that Mephistopheles should hope or try to keep Gretchen's approaching execution concealed from Faust by giving evasive and lying answers.

If the scene were simply to indicate Gretchen's approaching execution, it might still be called a masterpiece of poetic presentation, but it would be unsatisfactory from the dramatic point of view, for it would simply repeat in action what Faust had indicated in words in the preceding prose scene. It would contain no element of development. But the scene does advance the action: it presents to us good spirits consecrating the vile place for the reception of a human being that has been purified and made holy through suffering and self-renunciation; it adumbrates the salvation of Gretchen. And that is what Mephistopheles wants to conceal from Faust, what he does not want to admit to himself, for it demonstrates his impotence and failure. This interpretation also disposes of the assump-

tion that the scene is influenced by Bürger's *Lenore* or the witches in *Macbeth*.

It may not be amiss to quote Luther who expresses a related thought in theological terms when he says in a sermon on the second article of the Confession (Jena ed. VI, 76 b): "Denn wo ein Christen ligt, Da ist gewislich ein rechter Heilige, und macht die Stat auch heilig, Gott gebe, si sey geweihet oder nicht. Ja ob es gleich auff der Schindleich oder unter dem Rabenstein were."

If we consider the scene as it stands in the *Urfaust*, we arrive at the same interpretation. To be sure we cannot refer to the parallel in the *Walpurgisnacht*, as that scene did not exist then even in Goethe's imagination, but the arguments from language and context remain the same. In the *Urfaust* no voice from above expressly proclaims the saving of Gretchen's soul at the end. Our scene pointing as it does to Gretchen's redemption may have been one of the reasons why Goethe omitted the voice in the first version. When he put it in later, it was not to indicate any change in Gretchen's fate, but to guard against a misunderstanding of Mephisto's words: "Sie ist gerichtet."

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## REVIEWS

*The Infinitive in Anglo-Saxon.* By MORGAN CALLAWAY, JR., Washington, D. C.: Published by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1913.

*Studies in the Syntax of the Lindisfarne Gospels. With Appendices on Some Idioms in the Germanic Languages.* By MORGAN CALLAWAY, JR. [Hesperia: Supplementary Series, No. 5.] Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1918.

Some years ago, Victor Henry, in a review of Professor Callaway's earlier studies,<sup>1</sup> called their syntactical method "robuste." This vigorous word aptly describes these later volumes, wherein thousands upon thousands of examples of two most elusive constructions, culled from practically the whole of Old English Litera-

<sup>1</sup>*The Absolute Participle in Anglo-Saxon*, 1889, and *The Appositive Participle in Anglo-Saxon*, 1901; see *Revue Critique d'Histoire et de Littérature*, 1901, pp. 285-286.