

Doctor Faustus and the Literary System: A Supplementary Response to Paul Budra

PAUL YACHNIN

In his stimulating analysis of "bibliophilia" in *Doctor Faustus*, Paul Budra argues that Faustus' fatal error consists in his failure to recognize that the meaning of a text, particularly sacred text, lies neither in the text itself nor in the reception of the text but rather in some metatextual ground of meaning accessible only by following out a "complex dialectic of faith" enacted between the text's sustaining *logos* on the one side and the reader on the other. In the present supplementary discussion, I want to consider *historically* some of the important questions that Budra's approach opens up for us. This historicization of Faustus' bibliophilia requires a metatheatrical analysis of the play, an inquiry in terms of the literary system in which Marlowe wrote rather than in terms of the story of Faustus' damnation—in terms, that is, of the play in the world rather than the world in the play. What, then, might we say are the historical and ideological reasons for the play's interest in the problematics of interpretive stability, in the desirability of literary power, and, finally, in the tragic punishment consequent upon that desire?

Budra is right to insist that Faustus is a bibliophile, and that critics have paid too little attention to the centrality of books in the play. But it seems less arguable that Faustus loves books merely as material objects, as if his chief sin were avarice; on the contrary, what Faustus seems to desire most from books is their *power*, so that his chief sin is (as Budra allows) satanic pride, a desire for power unconstrained by natural limitations. That he seeks such power in necromantic books seems related, as has long been recognized, to the Baconian dream of power through knowledge which eventuated in the promotion of scientific and technical discourses to their dominant positions over so-called literary discourses in modern Western culture. The dream

of power through knowledge contributed to the splitting of the universe of writing into "powerful" technical writing on the one hand and "powerless" literary writing on the other (whereas pre-modern culture equalized all kinds of discourse as essentially subservient to scripture—the only writing in which power was seen to inhere); the fact that the scholar Faustus dreams of power makes *Doctor Faustus* itself a scene of splitting, an anxious enactment of the guilty desire on the part of literary culture to appropriate the power of words which had once belonged exclusively to scripture, but which at that historical juncture appeared—at least to Marlowe—to be available to any writer. (In this regard, we can note that Shakespeare's implicit claims about the power of poetry are far more modest than Marlowe's;¹ Shakespeare emphasizes the indeterminacy and instability of writing, the externality and changeability of literary meaning, whereas Marlowe seems to want poetry to perform the tasks of transformation, hypostatization, and transcendence, tasks which Shakespeare persistently reveals as unsubstantial.)

The power of writing in this Marlovian view depends upon its capacity to influence the reader in purposeful ways, to *change* the reader permanently while being itself unchanged, but writing's capacity to influence the reader depends fully upon its capacity to produce and to go on producing its own meaning as univocal, stable, present, and originary in the sense that meaning is seen to transcend and to be unconstrained by the language in which it is embodied. Since even the meaning of the Bible was beginning to be revealed by the interpretive debates of the Reformation to be always already in language, always already constituted by the particular conditions of its verbal transmission, the Marlovian fantasy of literary power came to be expressed in terms of what Budra (citing William Barrett) calls the "illusion of technique," the idea that the power of words may be authenticated by virtue of their immediate and unvarying effects upon the reader. It seems inevitable that this fantasy should come to be figured by necromantic writing. Such writing, it should be added, is always potentially damnable because it claims to possess the originary power of the divine word. For this reason, we can say that Faustus' claim that "Negromantick bookes are heavenly," that they provide "a world of profite and delight, / Of power, of honour, and

omnipotence," that a "sound Magitian is a Demi-god" (1.1.77, 80-81, 89) represents, and in addition to Faustus' damnable ambition, Marlowe's own guilty dream of literary power.

I have already suggested why in general in the Renaissance literary power was desired but was acknowledged to be unattainable. Inheritors of the jeopardized myth of divine presence in scripture, Renaissance writers aimed anxiously to present the originary voice seen to be behind representation. That is the burden of Sidney's first sonnet, which seeks to evade the problem of re-presentation by virtue of its appeal to originary and authentic meaning: "Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart and write." For Marlowe, writing for the commercial theatre in the 1590s, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that poetry was subject to actors' interpretations, elisions, and interpolations, subject to the interpretive practices of multiple audiences, and that even when such dramatic poetry was published, its authority continued to be subverted by both the social degradation of the quarto format and the imperfections introduced by publication itself. The fact that there exist two widely different plays called "Doctor Faustus," both published after Marlowe's death, and that we continue to talk about Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as if such a unitary text existed, attests to our persistent need for a myth of presence in order to stabilize the text's authoritative meaning and its supposed attendant power.

But why should the desire for literary power be guilty? Why should it be punished symbolically by the dismemberment of the overreaching magician? How does such tragic punishment serve to defer the realization that poetic meaning is always already in language and history and so never originary or powerful in itself? The answers, I suggest, depend upon seeing how Western culture invested itself completely in the power of the Bible, how that power was subverted by Reformation interpretive controversies which left the desire for presence in writing intact but which disallowed the satisfaction of that desire. Guilt then gripped culture by virtue of the shared but undisclosed knowledge that the divine "word" comprised only Hamlet's "words, words, words." In this view, Marlowe's play (itself multiple rather than unitary) can be seen both to disclose and to occlude the textuality of meaning. Faustus/Marlowe can be seen to

be laying claim to the divine power of the word in the only possible way, by challenging the authority of the originary word itself (thus undermining, of course, the possibility of satisfying his own ambition). Moreover, the punishment for necromancy, Faustus' body like the language of the rebels at Babel, like the text of Marlowe's play, dismembered and scattered, adduces difference itself as the mark of unity, the powerlessness of the body/text in the face of divine wrath/history as the very mark of the transcendent power of the word.

University of British Columbia
Vancouver

NOTE

¹For a discussion of the Elizabethan theatre's increasingly influential representation of poetry as powerless and as subject to the constitutive power of the interpretive community, see Paul Yachnin, "The Powerless Theatre," forthcoming in *ELR*.