

Thomas Carlyle's Review:

'Faustus: from the German of Goethe.
London. Boosey and Sons, 1821, 8vo pp.86'

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The author, in the second part of his treatise, enters into a similar detail of the improvements on Lord Stafford's estates in Staffordshire and Shropshire; but for these, as well as for some curious documents relative to Sutherland, and for designs, plans, and descriptions of farm-offices, given in the Appendix, we must refer the reader to the work itself.

ART. II.—*Faustus: from the German of Goethe.* London. Boosey and Sons. 1821, 8vo. pp. 86.

THE title-page of this work excites expectations which the work itself is very little calculated to fulfil. It is no translation of *Faust*; but merely a pretty full description of its various scenes, interspersed at frequent intervals with extracts of considerable length, rendered into clear and very feeble blank verse, —generally without great violence to the meaning of the original, or any attempt to imitate the matchless beauties of its diction; —the whole intended mainly to accompany a series of plates illustrative of *Faust*, which have lately been engraved by Mr. Moses from the drawings of Retsch, a German artist. “The slight analysis, drawn up as an accompaniment to Retsch’s Outlines, being out of print, the publishers felt desirous to supply its place with a more careful abstract of *Faust*, which, while it served as a book of reference and explanation for the use of the purchasers of the plates, might also possess some claims to interest the general reader. With this view,” &c.

We entertain no prejudice whatever against this “more careful abstract.” It seems to be a solid inoffensive undertaking, founded on the immutable principles of profit and loss, and is accomplished quite as well as could have been expected. But we have felt mortified at seeing the bright ærial creations of Goethe metamorphosed into such a stagnant, vapid *caput mortuum*: and we cannot forbear to caution our readers against forming any judgment of that great foreigner from his present representative; or imagining that “*Faustus*” affords even the faintest idea of the celebrated drama, the name of which it bears. An avowedly prose translation of the passages selected, would have been less unjust to all parties. It would have enabled the author to express the sense of his original with equal graceful-

ness, and far more precision, without inviting such of his readers as know the genuine Faust to institute comparisons so distressing,—or leading such of them as do not know it to form so erroneous an estimate of its merits. According to this plan, it seems impossible that any stanza like the following,—

“ Bin ich der Flüchtling nicht? der Unbehauste?
Der Unmensch ohne Zweck und Ruh?
Der wie ein Wassersturz von Fels zu Felsen brauste,
Begierig wuthend nach dem Abgrund zu *,”

could have been transformed so miserably as into

—“ Oh! am I not

The fugitive—the houseless wanderer—
The wild barbarian without an *object*?
Or like a cataract that from rock to rock
With eager fury leaps *heralding ruin!*”

Poetical license, and the trammels of verse, are all that can be pleaded in extenuation of this and a thousand such unhappy failures. There are others for which a humbler plea must serve. “*Hör' auf mit deinem Gram zu spielen,*” the author knows full well, cannot mean, “O! learn to dally with your misery”: nor, on reconsidering the matter, will he fail to discover that “*alle sechs Tagewerk*” signifies the universe, not “a whole week's business;” or that—

“ Und dann die hohe Intuition—

Ich darf niht sagen wie—zu schliessen—”

cannot be translated by

—“ And then the high

The wondrous intuition?—I dare not
Proceed.”

If such inaccuracies as these had been avoided; if the book had borne a humbler title, and been sober prose in shape, as it is in substance,—though it could not have interested, it would not have offended “the general reader;” and purchasers of Retsch's *Outlines* would have taken it with them not the less,—which is nearly all the circulation it has any right or chance ever to obtain under any form.

Perhaps we are too severe on this slender performance: but the sight of it renewed our wish to see Faust in an English dress; while the perusal of it mocked all such anticipations. A suitable version of Faust would be a rich addition to our literature; but the difficulties which stand in the way of such an un-

* This simile is fast degenerating into what Voltaire called *un Suisse*,—a simile ready to move at any one's bidding. We have met with it repeatedly of late, both in poetry and prose,—in Manfred, Anastasius, The Apostate,—not to speak of others. Byron and Hope spin it into a fine allegory, each in his own fashion: Mr. Sheil, by introducing *frost* into his cataract, has contrived to illustrate very forcibly some doctrines of Martinus Scriblerus on the Art of Sinking. *Du sublime au ridicule il n'y a qu'un pas.*

dertaking amount to almost an absolute veto. The merits of a good translation, especially in poetry, always bear some kindred, though humble, relation to those of the original; and in the case before us, that relation approaches more nearly to equality than in any other that we know of. To exhibit in a different tongue any tolerable copy of the external graces of this drama,—the marvellous felicity of its language, and the ever-varying, ever-expressive rhythm of its verse, would demand the exercise of all that is rarest and most valuable in a poet's art; while the requisite familiarity with such thoughts and feelings as it embodies, could not exist but in conjunction with nearly all that is rarest and most valuable in a poet's genius. A person so qualified is much more likely to write tragedies of his own, than to translate those of others: and thus *Faust*, we are afraid, must ever continue in many respects a sealed book to the mere English reader.

Certainly, it is not with the hope of doing much to open it, that *we* have taken up the subject. But if we can succeed in describing—though we cannot pretend to exhibit—any of the characteristic features of a work so generally famous, our efforts will not perhaps prove unacceptable to many who know it only by name: and for ourselves, *Faust* is so great a favourite with us, that a few hours can scarcely be spent more agreeably than in lingering amid the endless labyrinths of thought, to which a fresh perusal of it never fails to introduce us.

Goethe is likely to figure in after ages, as one of the most remarkable characters of his time; and posterity will derive from this tragedy their most lively impressions, both of his peculiar excellencies and defects. *Faust* was conceived while its author was passing from youth to settled manhood,—a period of inquietude in every life,—frequently, as in his case, of a darkness and despondency but too well suited to furnish ideas for such a work. It was executed when long culture and varied experience had ripened his powers; and under a splendour of reputation, which admitted the most confident, even careless exertion of them: its object is to delineate whatever is wildest and most mysterious in the heart and the intellect of man; and its chief materials are drawn from the heart and the intellect of the writer. In perusing it, accordingly, we seem to behold the troubled chaos of his own early woes, and doubts, and wanderings,—illuminated in part, and reduced to form, by succeeding speculations of a calmer nature,—and portrayed by a finished master, in all its original vividness, without its original disorder. In studying the scenes of *Faust*, we incessantly discover marks of that singular union of enthusiasm with derision; of volatility

with strength and fervour; of impetuous passion, now breaking out in fiery indignation, now in melting tenderness, now in withering sarcasm, with an overflowing gaiety, not only sportive and full of the richest humour, but grotesque to the very borders of absurdity, or beyond them,—which appears to belong exclusively to Goethe. In *Faust* too, we trace the subtle and restless understanding, which, at one period or another of its history, has penetrated into almost every subject of human thought; the sparkling fancy, and, as a necessary consequence, the boundless command of language and allusion—to clothe and illustrate, as if by enchantment, all the conceptions of a most capricious, though lofty and powerful imagination.

Qualities so exquisite have long placed Goethe at the head of German poets; and given him a kind of literary autocracy in his own country, to which nothing with us bears any resemblance. Unlimited power is said to injure the possessor of it; and here, as in more important instances, it has produced its natural effect. Goethe has suffered, as well as profited, by the want of criticism; and traces of his having written for a much too indulgent public, are visible in *Faust* no less than traces of his wonderful genius. There is a want of unity in the general plan of the work, and there are numerous sins against taste in the execution of it. We do not allude to any of the three superannuated *unities* of Aristotle, or the French school: but there is not in *Faust* that unity of interest, which we are taught to expect in every work of fiction. The end has too slight a connection with the beginning, the parts with each other: and the general effect is more than once entirely suspended by the insertion of certain incoherent scenes, which it would not be easy to admire anywhere; and nowhere—it might seem at first view—more difficult than here. They resemble the *dissecta membra* of wit and satire, much more than wit and satire themselves; and though not without some gleams of meaning independently of the local and ephemeral topics to which they refer, they are given out in so raw a state of preparation as would undoubtedly expose them to very brief and harsh treatment from any critic but a German one. It were unfair, however, to deny that this strange mixture of pathos, and horror, and drollery, acquires, on reflection, a secondary beauty, sufficient to cancel much of its original rudeness and apparent incongruity. *Faust* is not constructed on the common dramatic principles, or at all adapted for theatrical representation. It seems to aim at holding up not only a picture of the fortunes and feelings of a single character, or group of characters; but at the same time, a vague emblem of the great vortex of human life; and in this point of view, its heterogeneous

composition and abrupt variations, even its occasional extravagance, have a subordinate propriety, as significant of the vast, and confused, and ever-changing object, which the whole in some degree is meant to shadow forth.

The "Tragical History of Doctor Faustus," by Marlow, is grounded on the same tradition with this play of Goethe's; but the two pieces have little else in common. The genius of Marlow was of a kind very dissimilar and very inferior to that of Goethe; and the structure and plan of his "Tragical History" point to an age, with many of whose feelings and opinions we are fast losing all sympathy. Marlow's play derives its chief interest from delineating the gloomy and mysterious connection of man with the world of spirits: and presupposes a certain degree of belief in magic and apparitions. He has, in fact, done little more than cast into a dramatic form the story of the "Devil and Doctor Faustus," which used so powerfully to harrow up the soul in the childhood of our grandfathers, and which still produces a pleasing, though far milder effect, on the more sceptical urchins of the present age. The characters are not more happily imagined, than the incidents which are intended to display them. His demon is a paltering rueful craven, whom we feel much readier to pity and despise, than to hate or fear. Faustus himself has few qualities to interest us. He is animated indeed by a boundless thirst for power and pleasure; but it is power and pleasure of the lowest sort that he covets. His anticipated delights are corporeal; and he longs for the pomp and circumstance of authority,—scarcely at all for the bold energies which serve to earn it, and, as exercising which, it is alone, or chiefly valuable, to a high mind. He hopes that

"As Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords,
So shall the spirits of every element
Be always serviceable to us three:
Like lions shall they guard us when we please,
Like Almain Ritters with their horsemen's staves,
Or Lapland giants trotting by our sides.
Sometimes like women or unwedded maids,
Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows
Than have the white breasts of the Queen of love."

It is less the uncertainty of human knowledge, than the limited emoluments of a Wittenberg Professorship, that disgusts him; and he concludes a mad bargain with the devil, bartering his everlasting happiness against four and twenty years of sensual enjoyment, and of vulgar power; which he uses in a way worthy of the bargain,—in playing conjuror's tricks to irritate the Pope or amuse the Emperor, in cheating jockies, and eating loads of hay; and when the hour is come, he falls prostrate before his fate, with a frantic terror analogous to the brutal inso-

lence with which he had spent the days of his prosperity. Marlow's work is not without some touches of the sublime, and many passages of a luxurious beauty; but it never could affect the reader deeply, as a whole, and its power of so affecting him is lessening daily.

Goethe's conception, both of Faust and Mephistophiles, bears not only far more relation to the habits of a refined and intellectual age, but is also far more ingenious and poetical in itself. The introduction of magic is but accessory to the main result: it is intended merely to serve as the means of illustrating certain feelings, and unfolding certain propensities, which exist in the mind, independently of magic; and the belief we are required to give it is of the most loose and transient nature. Indeed, if we can only conceive that an assemblage like his *dramatis personæ*, so discordant, and so strangely related to each other, has been formed by any means, the author appears to care little whether we believe in it at all; and throughout the play, glimmering indications frequently become visible of the ridicule with which the characters themselves, whatever they profess in public, inwardly regard the whole subject of *diablerie* in all its branches. Nor does Faust's misery, at any period of his history, spring from so common a source as the dread of his future doom; "this sun shines on all his sorrows," and it would hardly alleviate them perceptibly, if the hereafter were to be for him an everlasting blank. Mephistophiles, too, is a much more curious personage than formerly. "The progress of improvement," as he himself observes, "has been so considerable of late, that it has extended even to the devil—the northern phantom with horns, and tail, and claws, being no longer visible upon earth." He is a moral, not a physical devil; and the attributes of his character harmonize with the rest of the intellectual machinery by which Goethe undertakes to work upon our feelings. It is machinery of a much finer and more complex sort than that employed by Marlow; the management of it is infinitely more difficult; but the effect which he makes it produce is also much more ennobling, and reaches much farther into the mysteries of our nature.

Faust is first presented to our notice, seated at his desk, in a narrow Gothic chamber, dimly illuminated by his solitary lamp. Surrounded with all the materials of study, he is meditating on the vanity and utter worthlessness of all they can lead him to. In early life, he has entered upon the search of truth with the fearlessness natural to his ardent temper, solicited by such an object; spurning those consecrated barriers which, though they tend to repress the freedom of thought, often serve also to con-

concentrate its exertions, and thereby increase its results—he has attempted to penetrate the most secret recesses of physical and mental nature: he has now examined all, and nowhere found one satisfactory conclusion. From each keener effort to divine the essence of things, his mind has returned back more faint and full of doubt: and when philosophy, in all its departments, is explored to the utmost limits of human research, Faust finds himself as ignorant as at the outset. Words will not satisfy him, and of real existences he cannot gain the knowledge. There are no first indubitable principles to guide him; and still the universe, study it as he may, appears before him a dark entangled riddle, the meaning of which, if it have any, is impenetrably hid from men. Nor is it to *know* only that he strives; the sensibilities of his heart have been embarked in this undertaking as well as the faculties of his intellect—he would *feel* as well as understand; and he cherishes vague and vehement longings for some unspeakable communion with the great powers of nature, whose magnificence expands his soul, while their mysteriousness confounds and reels it.

Faust's natural and acquired endowments are high, but his ideas of excellence are vastly higher. All that he *can* appears as nothing in comparison of what he *should*; and this enormous disproportion between what he is, and what he aims with such intense volition to become, forms a never-failing source of agitation to his mind. He has gifts which would bear him forward triumphantly to the acquisition of every thing that man is permitted to acquire; but all will not satisfy, if he cannot overstep the limits with which nature itself has circumscribed him.

Meanwhile, those secluded struggles, in which the flower of his days is already spent, have estranged him from the cheerful ways of men. Immured in his closet, among books and instruments, and all the dead machinery of art, he has long ago forsaken the sunny fields of life; friendship, and love, and worldly preferment, have alike been sacrificed at the shrine of science; and science has requited him with vain delusions and baseless chimeras. The spirit which longed to mingle with the cherubim, and explore the darkest arcana of the universe, is shut up within the narrow cell of a college, and reduced to conduct a few boys through the juggling sophistry of scholastic learning. Nor does the magic, to which, in the bitterness of his disgust, he has devoted himself, avail him any thing. The beings whom he summons from the vasty deep, refuse to admit him to their fellowship. He shudders and sinks when the “flaming countenance” of the spirit of the earth, is turned towards him, and finds

himself too justly reprov'd for vain glory in imagining that his nature could be raised to a level with it.

Cheated of this forlorn hope, Faust abandons himself to utter despair—he has no longer an object upon earth, and still no rest. The sources of feeling are changed into sources of self torment; the acuteness of his sensibility, and the force of his will, serve only to augment his sufferings; his superhuman attainments lift him above human sympathy; he envies the sluggish happiness of those around him, still more than he despises the materials of it. His heart is stung to madness, when he thinks of what he is, and what he wished to be—“an equal of the gods?” exclaims he, “I am an equal of the worm, which crawls through the dust; which, as it lives and feeds upon the dust, the traveller's step annihilates and buries.”

In this tumultuous agony, his eye lights on a phial of poison, and one lurid ray of joy breaks in upon him, as he determines on self-murder. There is a stern pathos, a wild grandeur in the feelings with which he surveys *this* undisputed proof of human knowledge, this essence of all kind/sleepy juices, by which the pangs of humanity are to be quieted at once and for ever. The lofty hopes of another world dawn upon him, where the soul's ethereal essence shall no more be clogged and cramped by its bodily fetters—where its lordly feelings shall no more be blighted and confounded in the low turmoil of earth. The stream of life is carrying him nearer and nearer to the great ocean; the mirror-wave is glancing at his feet; new day beckons him to brighter shores. He knows the fearful risk, but there is no alternative; he must boldly turn his face away from this terrestrial sun, and venture through that pass “around whose narrow mouth all hell is flaming,” whithersoever it may lead. The cup into which he has now poured the poison, recalls to memory his father's house, and the festive nights in which a *different* use was made of this old relic. One last paroxysm of awakened sympathies!—but he dashes them away, and the cup is at his lips. At this instant, the choir assembled in the neighbouring church to celebrate the Easter Festival, commence their hymn in worship of our Saviour. Its simple tones, and the solemn warning which the words address to mortals, toiling in this vale of tears, arrest the hand of the suicide; the remembrance of many happy days of pious childhood breaks through that of the agitated and unhallowed scenes which have succeeded; his seared and tortured heart is melted into natural feeling; “tears flow; the earth has back her son.”

But Faust's miseries are suspended only for a time. Next

day we find him in company with his amanuensis, Wagner—a quiet gerund-grinder, a collator of manuscripts and speculator on classical affairs, “the poorest of all the sons of earth,”—whose phlegmatic character and dull pursuits are strongly contrasted with the fervid temperament and unearthly longings of his master. They wander about the fields, now covered with lively groups of the city population, high and low, come out to enjoy the holiday, and make merry according to their respective inclinations. Faust rejoices to find himself “a man among men”; but as evening approaches he falls into his usual reveries; pours out his eloquent impassioned aspirations over the setting sun; and returns home to solitude and gloom as before. The world again appears to him a mournful prison-house, in which a thousand cares are let loose to prey upon the heart, and mock all its higher purposes. He knows not whither to turn for comfort or instruction. The New Testament occurs to him, and he eagerly determines to translate it into his native language, and study it more attentively than ever. But a difficulty stops his progress at the very threshold. “In the beginning was the word,” is a statement which he cannot comprehend, and no alteration he can make on the passage will render it intelligible to him.

In the midst of this perplexity, an evil spirit, Mephistophiles, appears to Faust, and counsels him to lay aside all such vain speculations, to go forth into the world, and enjoy those real pleasures with which its votaries are rewarded. With cold malice, he leads Faust's imagination to contemplate the hopeless barren disquietudes of his actual condition. Faust admits that he has no hope; that, day or night, his anguish never ceases; that existence is a burden to him; and death his only hope. “And yet,” rejoins the demon, with a spiteful apathy worthy of him, “a certain man one night did *not* drink out a certain liquor!” Faust's heart is cut by the remembrance of all that he has suffered, and the anticipation of all that he has yet to suffer,—he breaks forth into a bitter and indignant malediction upon life and every thing connected with it.

“Wenn aus dem schrecklichen Gewühle
 Ein süß bekannter Ton mich zog,
 Den Rest von kindlichen Gefühle
 Mit Anklang froher Zeit betrog;
 So fluch' ich allem was die Seele
 Mit Lock-und Gäukel-werk umspannt,
 Und sie in diese Trauerhohle
 Mit Blend-und Schmeichel-kraften bannt!
 Verflucht voraus die hohe Meinung
 Womit der Geist sich selbst umfängt!
 Verflucht das Blenden der Erscheinung

Die sich an uns're Sinne drängt!
 Verflucht was uns in Träumen heuchelt,
 Des Ruhms, der Namensdauer Trug!
 Verflucht was als Besitz uns schmückelt,
 Als Weib und Kind, als Knecht und Pflug!
 Verflucht sey Mammon, wenn mit Schätzen
 Er uns zu kühnen Thaten regt,
 Wenn er zu müssigen Ergetzen
 Die Polster uns zurechte legt!
 Fluch sey dem Balsamsaft der Trauben!
 Fluch jener höchsten Liebeshuld!
 Fluch sey der Hoffnung! Fluch dem Glauben!
 Und Fluch vor allen der Geduld * !"

The tempter now changes his tone. Having worked his victim up to the proper pitch of fierce and desperate scorn for all his earthly lot, he proceeds to set before him the boundless joys he may still secure, by listening to advice and accepting assistance from *him*. Faust hears him—but contemptuously: "How can a wretched fiend," he asks, "comprehend or find enjoyment for the lofty mind of man?" "Yet if it could be so—if I shall ever lie at ease upon this bed of torture; if thy delusions shall ever once cheat me into self-complacency, once betray me with enjoyment; if I shall ever say* to any moment, Linger! thou art sweet!—then cast me into fetters, then hurl me down to ruin: I shall not refuse to go. The great spirit of the earth has spurned me: Nature veils herself from my examination: can the future world be worse than this? Living here, I am a slave;

* We are sorry, that to most of our readers, instead of those beautiful verses, we have nothing to shew but the following very dim and distorted image of them:

"Tho' from my heart's wild tempest

A sweet remember'd tone recovered me,
 And all my youth's remaining hopes responded
 With the soft echo of joys long gone by,
 Yet do I curse them all—all—all that captivates
 The soul with juggling witchery, and with false
 And flattering spells into a (this) den of grief
 Lures it, and binds it there. Accursed be
 All the proud thoughts with which man learns to pamper
 His haughty spirit—cursed be those sweet
 Entrancing phantoms which delude our senses—
 Cursed the dreams which lure us to the search
 Of fame and reputation—cursed all
 Of which we glory in the vain possession,
 Children and wife, and slave and plough—accursed
 Be Mammon, when with rich and glittering heaps
 He tempts us to bold deeds, or when he smooths
 The pillow of inglorious dalliance—
 Accursed be the grape's enticing juice—
 Cursed be love, and hope, and faith—and cursed
 Above all cursed, be the tame dull spirit
 Which bears life's evils patiently."

