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The Translation of Faust

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The legend of Dr. Faustus is the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for all the experiences life has to offer. Johann Goethe uses this legend to tell a deeper story—the story of a man who strives to comprehend the supernatural while on earth. His Faust searches for the answers to the questions “Who is God?” and “Who am I in relation to God?” Having already acquired such knowledge as the universities of the world had to offer, the learned Faust turns to the language of the scriptures, ancient Greek, to translate into his native German the truths the prophets knew. Faust assumes that in finding the words to express the nature of divinity, he will find a way to realize that divinity in himself. As his concept of words in the scriptures changes, his perception of the nature of God and his own nature evolves correspondingly.

Faust begins his translation of The Gospel According to St. John on the most literal and earth-bound level and progresses from there:

It is written: In the beginning was the Word.  
Here I am stuck at once. Who will help me on?  
I am unable to grant the Word such merit,  
I must translate it differently  
If I am truly illumined by the spirit.  
It is written: In the beginning was the Mind.  
But why should my pen scour  
So quickly ahead? Consider that first line well.  
Is it the Mind that effects and creates all things?  
It should read: In the beginning was the Power.

Yet, even as I am changing what I have writ,  
Something warns me not to abide by it.  
The spirit prompts me, I see in a flash what I need,  
And write: In the beginning was the Deed!  
(Latham, 1925, 403)

In this passage, Faust first interprets logos as Wort. With such denotations as ‘word’, ‘vocable’, ‘expression’, ‘saying’, ‘promise’, and ‘pledge’, Wort symbolizes Faust’s level of wisdom (Betteridge, 1984). It represents not only his mortal knowledge, gained through the words and sayings of the time, but also his methods for gaining knowledge. To Faust, Christ, or ‘the Word’, is merely the promise of salvation, which the ambitious doctor cannot accept without firsthand knowledge. Faust needs to learn a higher language, a language of experience not transferable in the commerce of mortal words.

In using Wort, Faust defines two entities. First, in personifying the word Wort by equating the Word with a person and not just a name, he allows for the personification of all words and thus paves the way for further lexical manipulations. Words are a tool for defining the self and the supernatural. Wort specifically becomes a tool for understanding Christ and Faust’s relationship to Christ by providing a metaphor of Faust’s understanding of and relationship with the expressions and words of his age. Wort was in the beginning with God; Wort is God. Hitherto Faust’s god had been the stasis of human knowledge—the Wort of his textbooks and
writings had been the beginning and end of his knowledge, as well as his only method for acquiring knowledge. *Wort* forms the boundaries of his world. Now, with the word *Wort* equating to Christ, not just identifying him, Faust can reevaluate the importance of traditional mortal education and its likelihood of effecting his salvation.

Secondly, Faust redefines Christ with the fluidity of an ever-changing language by making Christ a word, and the Word. Faust gives Christ a definition, a part of speech, and an etymology. Christ embodies the Word of God; Christ is himself the saying in the beginning that was good; Christ is the promise of salvation. In all of these, *Wort* is an identifiable and definable noun, a physical manifestation of the abstract, and a part of existential reality. Christ is a divinity existing on a level of human expression, submitted to the arbitrary bartering of human words, a god at the mercy of men. In defining Christ, Faust submits him to the confines of developing language, with etymologies and genealogies reaching backwards in time and with implications, associations, and progeny reaching forward.

With Christ lexified, Faust gives full sway to his ambition. He is a master of words—even a doctor of words. With Christ reduced to the level of human language, manipulated by Faust in a sort of lexical game, Faust easily projects himself as a word also, a noun with a phonetic reality and untested limits of expression. The limitations of his first translation of *logos* are soon apparent as Faust realizes that with his mortal education he has not reached godhood; therefore, he cannot accept that "the Word was God." It is not enough for Christ to be the word, or even the promise of salvation. It is not possible to call on the name of God vocally to receive the holistic knowledge that Faust desires, for his cry to God goes seemingly unheeded.

When Faust realizes that *Wort* does not transcend mortal life and that "the word dies ere the pen record it" (Latham, 1925, 51), he knows he must alter his translation. This is the point in his life when he rejects the confines of accepted knowledge and makes his *Wort*, or pledge, with Mephistopheles. His hypothesis that the mortal *Wort* cannot leap the boundaries of the human paradigm is confirmed when he learns that his word of honor is not sacred to Mephistopheles. He asks, "Is't not enough my spoken word alone sway my life, until the crack o'doom is?" (Latham, 1925, 51). He then pledges his disavowal of the sacred icons of mortality clustered around the physical expression of human thought. Faust rejects Christ as an unreachable authority when he rejects the language of worship. He correspondingly sets himself on a Babel-like climb to godhood by assuming the authority to define Christ as he defines himself.

The next gloss Faust chooses for *logos* is *Sinn*, which carries denotations as varied as 'sense', 'feeling', 'intellect', 'thought', 'consciousness', 'plan', and 'understanding' (Betteridge, 1984). Just as *Sinn* clings to the denotation of *logos* as a secondary definition, Faust still clings to the concept of the intellect of God, reading that *Sinn* was 'in the beginning with God' (Interlinear, 1982). Faust decides that knowing what God knows cannot be accomplished in the university because comprehension is greater than expression. To be Christ is to comprehend all; it is through an understanding of him and his plan that man can be saved, not by his name alone. Christ is now *Sinn*, the plan that dictates the wanderings of human effort.

These denotations for *Sinn* all indicate a more abstract noun, less grounded in existential reality and more in a psychological reality. For this context, the idea of Christ moves from its physical manifestation in the Bible, and specifically in St. John's Gospel, and becomes an encompassing, transcending concept achievable by the thoughtful members of humanity. Words such as 'intellect', 'thought', and 'understanding' trigger a plurality absent in *Wort*, yet inviting in a representation of Christ. The personal and inclusive associations of sense and understanding encourage Faust in his aspirations towards the comprehension of divinity. In becoming the word *Sinn*, Christ takes on a more emotional and sensory nature. Christ is a feeling or experience. Salvation is, therefore, not an expression or a promise anymore; it is something achieved through a deliberate consciousness. Thought has all power now, because it is the instrument of salvation. Faust, to become the *Sinn*, or the Comprehender, must follow the steps that Christ himself followed in his life to learn to understand humanity and the world.

Faust's personal denotation must, therefore, change as he effects the change in the denotation of Christ. He realizes that to gain the intellect of Christ, he must gain knowledge not contained in books and not trapped in mortal language. He must gain the knowledge that is bestowed only by becoming immortal. He bargains with Mephistopheles for a lifetime of these experiences, *Wort* for *Sinn*, a bird's-eye tour of the world, a glimpse through God's eyes. "Think, and more clearly
wilt thou grasp it, seeing life in the many-hued, reflected splendour," calls Faust as he leaves the world behind on a quest to understand (Latham, 1925, 182). He visits taverns, feasts royally, crosses the world, and seduces a young girl. His experiences begin to lead him farther and farther from good, and seemingly farther from God and godhood.

The next sentence of Faust's translation of John 1:1 implies a stronger concept than Sinn, or thought: "All things through him came into being, and without him came into being not even one which has come into being" (Interlinear, 1982). As Faust's life progresses, he realizes that his experiences have still left him on the outside and that having the vision of God is still not being God. His next gloss hints of this knowledge to come, for it has no denotative connection to logos, but is a creation of his own—Kraft, or 'power', 'strength', 'force', 'vigour', 'energy', 'efficacy', and 'validity' (Betteridge, 1984). The comprehension of the infinite is of no use without the power to create the infinite and to be the infinite. Christ himself, who created the world, is the power of creation and the energy behind every living creature. Christ gives validity, Kraft, to an otherwise empty and wandering life, such as the one Faust is living, in search of the divinity.

The varied denotations of Kraft allow its interpretation to be found yet one step further from existential reality. 'Power', 'strength', and 'validity' are abstract nouns that serve to modify and define objects and concepts. They are corollaries of the physical reality, instigators and enablers of action, and adjectives of both existence and coming into existence. The words connote both creation and the ability to create. These are concepts lacking in Faust's attempt to understand through observation the world that has already been created by God. Faust realizes that salvation is not a concept but an ability or a force that he can approximate by his personal power of translation.

With Christ now defined as Kraft, he takes on a more active connotation, a noun with the strength of a verb. Vigorous action is now the agent of salvation instead of transcending thought. As Christ did, Faust must create his own salvation and empower his own translation. In defining Christ, and consequently himself, as Kraft, Faust finds the power to translate retroactively. Faust must be a Creator with Christ as the Validator of his creation.

The power of God is the power to love. This is an ability to transcend the phenomenal world through the power of procreation. Faust's knowledge becomes dynamic when it creates through his love for Gretchen and their union. For Faust, Christ is more than a word or a thought—he is a condition of salvation, and he is empowerment, a power that Faust is eager to assume. Faust is invigorated by the Kraft in him, feeling height and closeness to God, when he tells Gretchen, "Fill thou therefrom thine heart, and when in the feeling wholly blest thou art, call it then what thou wilt!" (Latham, 1925, 118). His lust for the power of God transfers into lust for Gretchen, the strength of which augments his procreative and thus godlike power. Mephistopheles has led him to fornication and murder, but the act of fornication brings him the power of God, which allows him to murder all mortal constraints on his growth. Christ is strength; Christ gives validity.

Abruptly, Faust's mortality arrests his upward flight, as he finds himself powerless to save Gretchen or their baby. He cannot even save the love-energy of their union, as Gretchen glimpses his core of egotism and gasps, "Heinrich! I shudder at thee!" (Latham, 1925, 162). The last step in Faust's translation corresponds with this stage in his life, the realization that even the knowledge and the power of God are not enough to be God—he must perform the saving deeds of God. Now that Faust has learned to create and destroy, he must learn to save.

Instead of just giving and taking life, Faust desires to fulfill the next part of the scripture: "In him life was, and life was the light of men" (Interlinear, 1982). His final gloss for logos is Tat, which is as unfounded denotatively as Kraft, and denotes 'deed', 'act', 'action', 'fact', 'feat', or 'achievement' (Betteridge, 1984). Christ becomes the act of salvation, the deed that redeemed humankind. Salvation, also, is an act, not an expression or a thought or an ability. Instead of Christ just effecting salvation, Faust's new definition declares that Christ in and of himself is salvation.

Tat returns to existential reality, but in a metaphysical way—its denotations indicate actions upon the objects that make up physical space. They are substantized verbs, the results of actions of verbs. The nature of this nominative progression thus illustrates Faust's attempt to divorce himself from mortal, physical reality and become part of the dynamics of eternity.

In taking the definition Tat, Christ immediately becomes a much more physical entity whose strength has been translated into action. His final
cause centers upon one act, one achievement of salvation for all of humanity, one feat achievable only in a physical world. Finally, Christ has become the Savior; Tat literally embodied. Faust aspires himself to be a savior but in the end can achieve no higher than to be an actor in a world already saved, in a play already written.

Recognizing his failure to save Gretchen and fearing that he may not even save himself, Faust chooses to become a savior of men as the next logical step towards godhood by building a city of achievement and freedom. Faust’s city would be “the light [that] shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehendeth it not” (Interlinear, 1982). This is the light for which he strives throughout the play—the light of the transcendence of phenomenal knowledge, the light of God, the light of a pure act of redemption. Faust rejoices in this last translation, claiming, “Deed is all, not glory!” (Goethe, 1936, 328). He knows that he has given up the respect of his fellow humans and the love of Gretchen, as well as the comforting authority of words, the filling passivity of thought, and the exhilaration of power. These sacrifices serve to intensify and sanctify his last sacrifice that brings him back to the God against whom he initially rebelled.

By performing the acts of God, Faust sees that he can receive the forbidden noumenon, the comprehension of all that leads to the power to act as a god. Christ, as his definition proves, is nothing more than the sum of his actions, actions imbued with the power of salvation. Christ is his redeeming sacrifice; he is the only fact. To achieve this validity, Faust must act as well, performing the one deed that can sanctify his earthly efforts and achievements. He must redeem to be redeemed. Once he does, his journey, his translation, and his life are complete.

Faust’s instructions to his workers encapsulate his translation progression:

The night seems pressing in more thickly, thickly,
Yet in my inmost heart a light shines clear,
What I have planned, I must complete it quickly;
Only the master’s word is weighty here.
Up and to work, my men! Each man of you!
And bring my bold conception to full view.
Take up your tools and toil with pick and spade!
What has been outlined must at once be made.

(Interlinear, 1982)

In this speech, Goethe gives yet another microcosm of the spiritual and physical metamorphosis of Faust. It must begin with Wort, or “the master’s word.” The word leads to Sinn, or a “bold conception”, that gives meaning to the word. This in turn depends on Kraft, or the ability to actualize the conception, to “toil with pick and spade.” Finally, the culmination is Tat, the outward and physical realization of the word: “What has been outlined must at once be made.”

Even at the end, Faust never learns that mortal language cannot contain the noumenon, the transcending knowledge of Christ. This knowledge, he assumes, was known by St. John and thus could be known by any mortal with the desire to truly understand. If John understood, and in fact adequately expressed, the truth of the nature of Christ, then that expression should be comprehensible to a doctor of words, a student of humanity, a professor of theology. Faust was all of these, yet could not understand that the nature of Christ cannot be totally expressed through static words.

Goethe uses this parable of human greed, a man trying to buy his way to heaven, as a way to express metaphorically the inexpressible. Written over the course of sixty years of Goethe’s life, Faust is its own story. It contains the struggle of writing about God and speaking about the salvation that is translation to a higher existence. At its core is the true example of transcendence: St. John, receiving his understanding through revelation and struggling to find the words to express this truth. His quest was to use language as elastically as possible. The word he finds for Christ, logos, is the most encompassing word his language had to express the most encompassing truth there could be. Faust’s attempts to reascend John’s transmission are by nature impossible.

Goethe’s commentary is not designed to define Christ or to reach godhood, but to understand and accept the limitations of mortal language. He does not answer the questions “Who is God?” and “Who am I in relation to God?” Instead, Goethe uses language to illustrate the impossibility of understanding these truths through language. Just as St. John must circle the truth, finding metaphors for transcendent reality, Goethe uses Faust as a metaphor for every man searching for truth as Faust’s life circles around this translation of logos. The language of Faust can only be a metaphor for the truth for which it strives to describe.
References


