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“Den Göttern gleich ich nicht”: The Nature of Faust’s Salvation

Garold N. Davis

Den Göttern gleich’ ich nicht! Zu tief ist es gefühlt;
Dem Wurme gleich’ ich, der den Staub durchwühlt . . .

I am not like the gods! Feel it I must.
I’m like the worm that burrows through the dust . . .

(Lines 652-53)

On seeing one’s cherished philosophy (or theology) echoed and artistically enhanced by a highly respected writer, one feels a sense of satisfaction. This satisfaction may derive from the slightly smug attitude that all great minds independently reach the same conclusions, or from the more humble attitude that all truth ultimately descends from the same source. In either case, a piece of great literature that fits appropriately into a gospel context is a triple blessing. One enjoys the aesthetic pleasure and intellectual enrichment great literature always provides, and, in addition, one may experience that blessed mood one often longs for (but does not always receive) while participating in the more direct forms of spiritual communion: worship, prayer, or pondering the scriptures.

Goethe’s Faust is such a piece of literature. Not even the sacrament meeting favorite, Wordsworth’s “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting . . . ,” can match it for conveying the dynamics of God’s creative purposes and man’s ultimate destiny. Unfortunately, Goethe’s Faust is for most Mormons a book with seven seals.

At a recent lecture on German culture the speaker announced to a trusting Mormon audience his intention to trace the main threads of this great German masterpiece, but he did not deliver as promised. What the audience received instead was an outline of the legendary Faust, with fragments of Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus.

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1 Quotations in English are from the George Madison Priest translation, available in the Britannica Great Books series (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952).
thrown in. Those of the audience who did not know better left the lecture convinced that Goethe had written a longish drama in which the protagonist, Faust, makes a pact with the devil, sells his soul for wine, women, and if not song, at least plenty of money, and is finally dragged screaming down to hell. I was disturbed. Goethe deserves better treatment.

There are many literary works that involve a pact with the devil and in which the pact-maker is finally dragged off to hell, but Goethe’s Faust is not one of these. In Goethe’s masterpiece, which was not hastily thrown together—indeed it was sixty years in the making—there is no pact with the devil, and at the conclusion Faust is not dragged off to hell; on the contrary he is welcomed by hosts of angels into the realms of heavenly bliss. For the benefit of those whose knowledge of Goethe’s Faust is faded, or was gained originally by hearsay, here is a short summary of Faust’s movement through the drama.

Faust, in a state of depression after several unsuccessful attempts to understand the mystery of existence by means of traditional academic knowledge, determines to try magic. Following a humiliating confrontation with the Earth Spirit, his depression deepens, and he decides to dare an understanding of life by a suicidal transcendence. At the fateful moment, as he raises to his lips a chalice filled with poison, a Chorus of Angels sings of the Resurrection and a Chorus of Disciples emphasizes that the meaning of life is to be found on this earth. Faust is persuaded to reject suicide and pursue his quest in life, rather than in death. As a consequence of an intriguing wager with a daemonic and nihilistic spirit, Mephistopheles (more about this wager later), Faust throws himself into a maelstrom of experiences which combine good elements and bad, success and tragedy.

His initial attraction to the young and innocent Gretchen develops into a meaningful and understanding love, but leads to the death of Gretchen’s mother, her brother, her baby (fathered by Faust), and finally to Gretchen’s own death. Faust’s subsequent union with the beautiful Helen (in Part II of the drama) unites the classical elements of Greece and Germany, but the union ends with the tragic death of their son Euphorion and the return of Helen and Euphorion to Hades. Faust’s desire to perfect the extent of his large oceanside estate by resettling an old couple leads to their death. Finally, after all of these (and many other) experiences, Faust, now an old man blinded by Care, receives an inner light which transforms itself into a great inner vision. At this point Faust falls dead and Mephistopheles steps forward to claim his victim. He is frustrated, however, as angels, strewing rose petals of
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divine love, drive off Mephistopheles’ assisting devils and ascend with the immortal Faust where he is welcomed into the heavenly realms by Gretchen in company with the mater gloriosa, the Queen of Heaven.

In all earlier literary versions of the Faust legend, Faust is damned. Goethe’s Faust is saved, but not even the contemporary critics could ask Goethe why. Goethe refused to allow the completed manuscript to be published until after his death. We must find the justification for Faust’s salvation in the text.

In a passage underscored by Goethe himself as vital to an understanding of Faust’s salvation, the angels ascending with Faust explain (11934–41):

Gerettet ist das edle Glied
Der Geisterwelt vom Bösen,
Wer immer strebend sich bemüht,
Den können wir erlösen.
Und hat an ihm die Liebe gar
Von oben teilgenommen,
Begegnet ihm die selige Schar
Mit herzlichem Willkommen.

Lo! rescued is this noble one
From evil machination:
“Who e’er aspiring, struggles on
For him there is salvation.”
And if to him Celestial Love
Its favoring grace has given,
The Blessed Host comes from Above
And welcomes him to Heaven.

The idea of salvation because of a determined striving, a refusal to give up, even a faith that urges one onward, is certainly a noble sentiment, and one that has been praised by readers of Faust for a hundred and fifty years. But it will not do if it is left to stand alone. Though it may answer why Faust was saved, there is a complementary question which goes beyond the question of why: to what end was Faust saved? What is the nature of Faust’s salvation? Surely Goethe would not bring Faust on this imperiled journey and then at the end leave this question unanswered. Surprisingly, however, it seems that this very question has eluded the critics. It is as if Goethe had seen Faust safely into a heaven without telling us what kind of a heaven he had seen Faust safely into. But Goethe did not do this at all. He has left a clear linguistic trail, and by following this trail we will have a glimpse into Faust’s heaven.
REJECTION AND INSIGHT

Faust, in his quest for understanding, conjures up the Earth Spirit (Erdgeist), only to find that he cannot bear the presence of this powerful spirit who appears in flames of fire. The Earth Spirit rebukes Faust's terror (491–93):

Wo ist die Brust, die eine Welt in sich erschuf
Und trug und hette, die mit Freudebeben
Erscholl, sich uns, den Geistern, gleich zu heben?

Where is the breast that in its self a world created
And bore and fostered it? And that with joyous trembling
Expanded as if spirits, us, resembling?

With this mocking rebuke, Goethe begins the forging of a chain of linked passages that leads Faust, if not directly, at least ultimately, to the transcendent state with which the drama closes nearly 12,000 lines later. The linking word in this chain is gleich, which in various forms occurs 142 times throughout the drama. Gleich and the verb gleichen are related to (and rhyme with) the English like, in the sense of similar, but in most contexts in German the word is closer to the English equal or alike. The related Gleichung means a mathematical equation. Gleichnis is a parable, allegory, or simile. In the context of Faust’s conversation with the Earth Spirit the word is used both by Faust and the Earth Spirit with its biblical connotations, suggesting particularly the passage in the first chapter of Genesis: “Laßt uns Menschen machen, ein Bild, das uns gleich sei.” (Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.)

In this sense, Faust declares himself to be in the image (likeness) of the Earth Spirit (500):

Ich bin’s, bin Faust, bin deinesgleichen!

'Tis I, I’m Faust, I am thy peer!

and claims a closeness to this spirit of creative activity (511):

Geschäftiger Geist, wie nah fühl’ ich mich dir!

Thou busy spirit, how near I feel to thee!

The Earth Spirit, however, in a passage seminal to an understanding of Faust’s salvation, sharply rejects Faust’s claim to equality (512–13):

2More correctly “creative spirit.”
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Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst,
Nicht mir!

Thou art like the spirit thou canst comprehend,
Not me!

The Earth Spirit disappears and Faust shouts his objection into the empty study (516–17):

Ich Ebenbild der Gottheit!
Und nicht einmal dir!

I, image of the Godhead!
And not even like to thee!

But his objection is pointless. The Earth Spirit does not reply. Faust has learned that he can commune with this creative spirit but has learned also that he is not the equal of the spirit because he does not comprehend him. With brilliant irony, Goethe has allowed Faust his clearest insight into the nature of the mystery and at the same time has sunk him into the depths of despair because this insight has not yet reached the level of true comprehension. Faust has glimpsed the mystery but cannot fathom it. He laments that he, created higher than the angels (Ich, mehr als Cherub) and hoping to enjoy the creative life of the Gods (schaffend, Götterleben zu genießen), is thrown down by the thundering words, "Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst" (Thou art like the spirit thou canst comprehend). What a rejection! In the soliloquy which follows, Faust can only utter the despairing words (652):

Den Göttern gleich' ich nicht!
I am not like the gods!

THE MEANING OF THE LOGOS

Turning to the next stage in Faust's development, we find him in his study where he opens the Greek New Testament and turns to the Gospel of John as a logical continuation of his determination to understand the nature of the creative, active life. He begins to translate (1224):

Im Anfang war das Wort!

In the beginning was the Word.

For the reader who has followed carefully, the reason Faust turns to the Gospel of John should be obvious. Faust has intimations that the mystery of the universe is related to a creative activity. John begins his Gospel of Christ with a statement of the creative nature of the Word,
and thus parallels the first line of Genesis: “In the beginning God created . . .” As Faust works through a translation of this first line of John’s Gospel he is perplexed. The Greek Logos is a powerful word with many connotations, especially connotations of creative power. Can “word” possibly bear the weight of this passage? To solve this dilemma, Faust takes his translation of the Logos through four stages: Wort (word), Sinn (meaning), Kraft (power), and finally concludes with the famous line (1237): “Im Anfang war die Tat!” (In the beginning was the Deed!)

The idea that Faust is a man of action and activity has become almost a platitude, primarily because of this translation scene. Many critics, however, have failed to see that Faust’s translation is not a rejection of “word” in favor of “deed” as a proper translation of Logos. What Faust (Goethe) gives us is a process by which the Word moves through stages until it arrives at the stage of the creative act in which the potential of the Word is finally realized. The Word is ineffective until one understands the meaning of the Word (Sinn). This understanding will then lead to activity if one has the power (Kraft) to transform this understanding into action. But each of these stages of progression remains only a potential until the final stage is reached—that of the creative act (Tat).

Faust’s comprehension has moved upward to a higher level, and he understands now that the meaningful life must be a life leading to a creative act. What he does not yet realize is that this activity must be directed, purposeful, and beneficial to others. Nevertheless, Faust has identified a goal, and this becomes a challenge to Mephistopheles, who, in the scene following, enters into a very intriguing wager with Faust.

THE WAGER: “VERWEILE DOCH, DU BIST SO SCHÖN”

In the wager scene (which is often wrongly referred to as the “pact” scene, although no pact is made), Faust hedges his bet as no gambler has ever done. Mephistopheles suggests a pact. He is willing to be Faust’s servant here on earth if Faust will render the same service to Mephistopheles in the beyond (wenn wir uns drüben wiederfinden). Faust rejects the idea of a pact and counters with the offer of a wager, which contains three conditions (1692–96). If Faust should ever turn to a satisfied indolence (beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen), if Mephistopheles can ever flatter Faust into a sense of self-satisfaction (mich schmeichelnd je belügen, daß ich mir selbst gefallen mag), or if Mephistopheles should ever be able to deceive him with pleasure
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(kannst du mich mit Genuß betrügen), then that will be Faust’s final day, time will end, and he will gladly go to hell in chains. The identifying sign of surrender, the indication that Faust has lost the wager, will be Faust’s statement of contentment with the static moment. If Faust should ever express his desire for a given moment to remain as it is, for the movement of time to cease, should he ever say to any moment (1700), “Verweile doch, du bist so schön!” (Ah, linger on, thou art so fair!), then Faust will have lost the wager, and his soul in the process.

This is the wager Faust offers, and, as I suggested, the wager is hedged. Faust has already learned that to become like the Earth Spirit, a creative spirit, he must comprehend this spirit. What he has comprehended so far is that the way to creativity is through activity. The conditions of the wager are the antithesis of meaningful activity: indolence, self-satisfaction, pleasure, a static, nonprogressive existence. It is, by the way, highly ironic that the very conditions which a popularized version of orthodox Christianity sees as heavenly bliss are for Faust the conditions of hell. But if Mephistopheles can demonstrate to Faust’s satisfaction that this static type of life underlies all existence, then Faust’s concept of activity will have been wrong, life will not be progressive, ongoing activity, and this, for Faust, amounts to a damnation anyway. Faust will lose the wager if Mephistopheles can prove all activity to be meaningless. On the other hand, should Faust ever fully comprehend the active, creative nature of the Earth Spirit he will then be not only like this creative spirit, he will have become a creative spirit himself. Mephistopheles will have lost.

OPPOSITION

As the drama continues, Faust’s search for meaning becomes a struggle of the positive against the nihilistic. Faust is active, searching, experimenting, and Mephistopheles is attempting to divert this activity into meaningless or destructive directions. On their first meeting, Mephistopheles identifies himself and his activity (1338–44):

Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!
Und das mit Recht; denn alles, was entsteht,
Ist wert, daß es zugrunde geht;
Drum besser wär’s, daß nichts entstünde.
So ist denn alles, was ihr Sünde,
Zerstörung, kurz das Böse nennt,
Mein eigentliches Element.
I am the Spirit that denies!
And rightly too; for all that doth begin
Should rightly to destruction run;
'Twere better then that nothing were begun.
Thus everything that you call Sin,
Destruction—in a word, as Evil represent—
That is my own, real element.

A fact that has eluded many commentators as well as casual readers of Faust is that from this point of the wager onward Mephistopheles does very little to induce Faust to indolence, self-satisfaction, or even pleasure. More often than not, Mephistopheles prevents Faust from being able to express the fateful words of the wager: “Verweile doch, du bist so schön” (Linger on, thou art so fair). He knows he cannot divert Faust’s energy from the active life. His goal, then, is to pervert this activity into a nihilistic, meaningless activity. Love must be perverted into lust, motherhood must be perverted into infanticide, creative activity into destructive activity, the Word of creative power into the Deed of negative power. Such is the configuration of activity into which Faust throws himself, with the help of Mephistopheles.

Frequently in the text this configuration is symbolized by sarcastic parodies of Faust’s striving to become like the gods, and two of these parodies use the key word, gleich. The first involves Mephistopheles himself; the second, the sea god Nereus.

Dismally out of his element in the “klassische Walpurgisnacht” scene of Part II, Mephistopheles finally finds himself at home with the ugliness of the three Phorkyads (who have among them one eye and one tooth which they exchange for seeing and eating). Mephistopheles, wanting to resemble their ugliness, is advised that he should close one eye, let his fang (tooth) show, and he will resemble them (gleichen) perfectly (8022-25):

Drück du ein Auge zu, 's ist leicht geschehn,
Laß also fort den einen Raffzahn sehn,
Und im Profil wirst du sogleich erreichen,
Geschwisterlich vollkommen uns zu gleichen.

Press one eye to—quite easily it’s done—
And of your tusks show only one;
At once you will attain our profile meetly
And sisterly resemble us completely.

A second mockery of Faust’s aspiration to equate himself with the gods is expressed by the sea god Nereus. On hearing the approach of Thales and Homunculus, Nereus, in words echoing the Earth Spirit, exclaims
that men are creatures striving to reach the gods but damned to resemble (gleichen) only themselves (8096–97):

Gebilde, strebsam, Götter zu erreichen,
Und doch verdammt, sich immer selbst zu gleichen.

These creatures would be gods by sheer endeavour,
Yet damned to be like their own selves forever.

"IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED":
THE THEME OF CREATIVITY

Central to Faust's quest, and ubiquitous throughout the drama, is the theme of creativity. The first of three preludes to the work is a "Zueignung," a dedicatory poem, in which we find the poet in the artistic process of creating a drama, relenting to the insistence of the imaginary characters who demand that they be given form. In the second prelude, the "Prelude on the Stage," Goethe has presented a humorously ironic variation on this theme as a theater director, an actor, and a poet discuss the type of play that should be written—after the crowd has filled the theater and is waiting for the curtain to go up. The third prelude, the "Prologue in Heaven" (with echoes of Job 1:6–12), opens with the trio of archangels, Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael, singing of the Lord's creation which still stands as splendid "as on the first of days." The "Prologue in Heaven" also introduces the function of evil in the creative process. The Lord explains that man has a tendency to a state of ease, a noncreative state, and that there must be an opposing force to stir him into continual activity (340–44):

Des Menschen Tätigkeit kann allzuleicht erschlaffen,
Er liebt sich bald die unbedingte Ruh;
Drum geb' ich gern ihm den Gesellen zu,
Der reizt und wirkt und muß als Teufel schaffen.

Mankind's activity can languish all too easily,
A man soon loves unhampered rest;
Hence, gladly I give him a comrade such as you,
Who stirs and works and must, as devil, do.3

The creative process is not always positive. Creativity is sometimes perverted by evil, as in the case of the love of Faust and Gretchen, which leads eventually to insanity and infanticide, or as in the instance in Part II when Mephistopheles leads the empire into bankruptcy and civil war through the creation of unsupported paper money.

3The rhyme scheme chosen by the translator requires the verb do. The German verb schaffen actually reads "and must, as devil, create."
The creation of life becomes the central focus of Act 2 of Part II. Faust's assistant, Wagner, has created a little man (Männlein) in a test tube, but only in the form of pure intelligence, a spiritual creation. Homunculus, as he is called, wants to receive a physical existence. Long sections of Act 2 are dedicated to a debate between two Greek philosophers, Thales and Anaxagoras, over the process by which life comes into existence. Anaxagoras argues for instantaneous, cataclysmic creation, while Thales argues for a natural, evolutionary development (fifty years before Darwin). In a marvelous concluding scene, Homunculus, with the help of the sea gods Nereus and Proteus, breaks his vial and disperses himself into the ocean where he will go through a natural, evolutionary development into physical existence.

Beginning with Act 4 and continuing through Act 5, there are frequent and important symbolic references to the separation of land and water—one of the first acts of creation—and this theme culminates in Faust's final vision of the creative act.

COMPREHENSION AND DEATH

At the end of Faust's life, his final tragedy brings about his final comprehension. Faust lives in a great palace on the seacoast and rules over vast tracts of land. His domain is, however, flawed by the presence of an old cottage and a small chapel belonging to the old couple Philemon and Bauchis. Faust instructs Mephistopheles to resettle the old couple. Instead, Mephistopheles burns them to death in their cottage. Faust, as the master, knows that he must bear the ultimate responsibility. In this moment of distress Faust laments his connection with magic. He realizes that his constant activity has been so often misdirected because it was not performed with his own natural powers and the powers of nature. In a poignant soliloquy Faust realizes that he is not a free man as long as he is subject to the power of magic. His goal now is to act independently of magic, and only then will human activity have meaning (11403–07):

Noch hab' ich mich ins Freie nicht gekämpft.
Könnt' ich Magie von meinem Pfad entfernen,
Die Zauberşprüche ganz und gar verlernen,
Stünd' ich, Natur, vor dir ein Mann allein,
Da wär's der Mühe wert, ein Mensch zu sein.

My way to freedom I have not yet fought.
Could I all magic from my pathway banish,
Could quite unlearn its spells and bid it vanish
Nature, could I face thee, in thy great plan,
Then were it worth the pain to be a man.
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Whereupon, Faust is immediately confronted by Care (Frau Sorge).

The scene is an inner room of Faust’s palace. It is midnight. Faust’s first inclination is to use his artificial, borrowed magical power to reject Care, but remembering his desire to reject magic and act independently, he makes one of his most important and profound decisions: he renounces the power of magic (11423): “Nimm dich in acht und sprich kein Zauberwort” (Take care and say no word of sorcery).

Although Faust is able to dismiss Care, she inflicts blindness on him before she departs. Now, having rejected magic and having rejected Care, the blinded Faust sees for the first time— with an inner vision. Faust’s final vision is one of the great passages of the drama, and of literature. Pertinent to our purposes, Faust’s final vision represents symbolically the culmination of meaningful human activity. The visionary scene is symbolic of the activity of God creating for the benefit of mankind, and Faust now understands that, similarly, the meaningful life is a life engaged in a creative activity for the benefit of humanity. For the first time, Faust’s creative activity is purposeful. He plans to separate the land from the water, drain swampland, and prepare a place for the colonization of a free society. Faust, emulating God, will become a creator for the benefit of a race of free humans who will live out their lives in a daily struggle to maintain their freedom.

Several references in this visionary scene allude to the first creation and the Garden of Eden. Faust refers to his proposed creation as a new earth, and as a paradise. Faust now understands the meaning of existence. By creating (“In the beginning was the Deed!”), Faust symbolically emulates God, and in the process of emulating him, comprehends him, and consequently becomes more like him (“Thou art like the spirit thou canst comprehend”).

Faust’s quest is nearly ended, but we must not misunderstand, as Mephistopheles did. The creative activity seen by Faust is an anticipatory vision of the future. Faust, confident that he has now acquired the comprehension demanded by the Earth Spirit, the comprehension which would make him the equal of that creative spirit, feels that he could say to such a future moment, “Stay, thou art so fair.” Goethe is describing here a configurative pattern. Faust sees the most lovely moment in the future, but this moment is a creation of the mind that has not been realized by the creative deed. When that future moment is realized, Faust’s vision will have gone far beyond that moment to an ever higher and more lovely moment. The upward cycle will be unending. Mephistopheles, nihilist that he is, does not comprehend this eternally creative progression. As Faust speaks the fateful words of the
wager, he falls to earth in death, and Mephistopheles, exultant and apparently triumphant, steps forward to claim his victim and issues his final mocking denial of the creative by reciting the final words of Christ on the cross (11594): "Es ist vollbracht" (It is finished). He is contradicted, however, by the words of a chorus stating that Faust's death is not an end but a transition. Mephistopheles angrily retorts (11598–603):

> Was soll uns denn das ew'ge Schaffen!
> Geschaffenes zu nichts hinwegzuraffen!
> "Da ist's vorbei!" Was ist daran zu lesen?
> Es is so gut, als wär' es nicht gewesen,
> Und treibt sich doch im Kreis, als wenn es wäre.
> Ich liebte mir dafür das Ewig-Leere.

Of what avail's perpetual creation
If later swept off to annihilation?
"So it is past!" You see what that must mean?
It is the same as had it never been,
And yet whirls on as if it weren't destroyed.
I should prefer the Everlasting Void.4

TRANSCENDENCE AND TRANSFIGURATION

To his great dismay, Mephistopheles must stand helplessly by as angels ascend into the "higher atmosphere" (höhere Atmosphäre) with the immortal Faust. Where did the wager go wrong, Mephistopheles would like to know. There is evidence in the text, but a passing reference to an important poem by Goethe will be helpful. In the poem "Selige Sehnsucht" (Blessed Longing), Goethe traces the image of the caterpillar who passes through death in the cocoon to emerge into a new life as a butterfly. The butterfly, now desiring an even higher existence, flies into the light of the candle and passes through death in the flame. Goethe's final cryptic commentary is powerful and pertinent:

> Und so lang du das nicht hast,
> Dieses, Stirb und Werde!
> Bist du nur ein trüber Gast
> Auf der dunklen Erde.

As long as you do not understand this:
Death and Becoming,
You are only a confused guest
On this dark earth.

4Ewig-Leere is more properly "Eternal Emptiness," to parallel and contrast with the final Ewig-Weibliche, "Eternal-Womanly" (12110).
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Had Mephistopheles understood "death and becoming," he would not have been so confident as he stepped forward to claim Faust's soul. The pattern suggested by this little poem, and the pattern ubiquitous in Goethe's work, especially in Faust, is that of death and transfiguration to a higher realm, sphere, or level of understanding and being. Faust, anticipating the highest moment of creative activity, speaks the words of the wager, but only in reference to a future event. When the highest moment finally arrives, it will not have become a static culmination but only a stage for an even higher moment. Through "death and becoming," Faust progresses eternally upward. As he grows from stage to stage, through new steps of comprehension, he becomes more like the gods.

The culmination and fulfillment of the Earth Spirit's pronouncement, "Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst," comes at the culmination and fulfillment of Faust's earthly existence. His final mortal comprehension results in his death and subsequent transcendence of the earthly, but also results in a new, immortal level of comprehension.

In the final scene (so majestically set to music by Gustav Mahler), Faust is surrounded by various heavenly beings as he ascends from the earth. In his apotheosis, Faust remains clearly but decidedly in the background. He speaks not a word. The focus is on the heavenly beings surrounding the mater gloriosa, the Queen of Heaven. Within this heavenly host is "a penitent woman, known formerly as Gretchen," who approaches the Queen of Heaven with the request that she be permitted to lead and instruct the newly arrived Faust. The words of Gretchen forge the penultimate link in the chain of "comprehension equals likeness." Faust, surrounded by the Choir of Spirits, is scarcely aware of himself, scarcely aware of the newness of life, because he is no longer in contrast with his environment. He has become like (gleicht) the holy host surrounding him (12084–87):

Vom edlen Geisterchor umgeben,
Wird sich der Neue kaum gewahr,
Er ahnet kaum das frische Leben,
So gleich er schon der heiligen Schar.

Girt by the noble choir of Heaven,
Himself the new-come scarcely knows,
Scarce feels the fresh life newly given
Ere like the holy throng he grows.⁵

⁵Perhaps better translated "He is so much like" or "He so resembles the holy throng."
At the beginning of his quest, the earthly Faust quivered in fear before the Earth Spirit. Through long development that included much suffering, Faust has finally understood the nature of the Divine. The meaningful life is the life that is engaged in creative activity for the benefit of mankind. With this comprehension, Faust transcends the earthly and is now transfigured to the likeness of the holy beings who surround him.

The ultimate link is secured by the final Mystical Chorus. Doctor Marianus, adoring and prostrate, addresses the *mater gloriosa* and concludes his address of adoration with the worshipful title: Virgin, Mother, Queen, Goddess (Jungfrau, Mutter, Königen, Göttin). It is particularly significant that Goethe has added to the traditional tripartite address (Virgin, Mother, Queen) the further stage of Goddess, thereby emphasizing the creative life and completing at last the four-stage cycle first announced with Faust’s translation of “In the beginning was the Word.” Finally, the Mystical Chorus closes this chain of “comprehension equals likeness” by revealing that all things transitory are but a symbol (Gleichnis) of things heavenly (12104–05):

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis . . .

All earth comprises
Is symbol alone.

The vision of Faust as colonizer is symbolic (“gleich”) of God as creator. The heaven to which Faust then ascends is not a static place of rest, not a terminus, but a new life of divine, ongoing, creative activity. He is one stage further from the despairing lament “Den Göttern gleich ich nicht.”

Angels Bearing the Saved Soul by Moritz Retzsch