

There's Very Little Room for Gretchen

GOETHE'S FAUST. Part I and Sections From Part II. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. 503 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$4.50.

By STEPHEN SPENDER

THIS is the best translation of "Faust" that I have read. Printed, on the right hand page, parallel with the German text on the left, it passes a simple test. One can turn from the German to the English, without too much of a jolt. I could even, over stretches, read passages of the translation that I know very well in the original without discovering anything that seemed lacking in the German.

Why is Walter Kaufmann so successful? For two reasons, I think. First his version has a rhythmic drive which is very close to Goethe's; second, he transmits a very important quality about the language of "Faust": that it is packed with material of every kind—information, ideas, wit. These are all communicated with immense energy and a warmth of imagination, which, except in some of the very erudite parts of the second part (of which only the first and last scenes are here given) never succumbs to pedantry or showing off.

In his Introduction, which, though interesting, tends to be a bit too much on the defensive, Mr. Kaufmann, professor of philosophy at Princeton, puts his finger on the all-embracing quality of "Faust," its raciness, which he has succeeded in rendering so well.

"Perhaps the last quality which most people associate with 'Faust' is its overflowing humor, which runs the whole scale from the benign to the sardonic, including in between the raw, the witty, the subtle, and Olympian malice * * *. 'Faust' manifests an overwhelming disrespect for etiquette and almost every thinkable propriety, including the established canons of poetic form."

THE operative word here is "overwhelming," and Mr. Kaufmann conveys this sense of a torrential flow. Other translators almost inevitably check the flow to convey the wit. A subtler trap is to make pauses to establish the lyricism; thus Louis MacNeice's brilliantly poetic version tends to subdivide into separate poems, each of them successful in itself. What is required is, despite the fact that the rhymes enclose passages, and the rhythm shifts from scene to scene, to convey the dynamism of a single-mindedness which includes all such pieces and changes.

In fact, though Goethe disliked Beethoven's music, the style of "Faust" is very much that of Beethoven's symphonies. A Beethoven score shows the writing to be chinky: some passages are black with quavers all through, others almost white

In addition to his translations from the German, Mr. Spender, the English poet, edited "Great Writings of Goethe."



Lithograph by Eugene Delacroix. Faust.

with long chords; there are tremendous transitions and great pauses. Yet the sweep of Beethoven's idea carries the whole thing along. And with Goethe also, the idea predominates.

It remains difficult to say what kind of a work "Faust" is. On the face of it, it is about a man who sold his soul to the devil. Faust, of course, does this. Mephistopheles does, both in his theology and his behavior, represent evil, which is something that Goethe has a nose for (his student scenes, for example, are extraordinarily successful, because they give the sense of the really macabre temptations, the abyss of damnation, by which high-spirited youth is surrounded). The difficulty is Faust himself. Mr. Kaufmann notes: "Faust leaps out of the book. He was quickly hailed as the incarnation of the German character and influenced German historiography, philosophy and self-interpretation."

My difficulty here is that I do not see how a character can be wholly convincing and yet can "incarnate" a nation's character. Yet Faust is convincing, and, paradoxical as this may seem, I think he is so because he scarcely has a character at all. His force rests on the fact that he is an "ego." An "I" does not have to have a lot of external characteristics, he simply has to exist, as you and I exist, without ever having to be persuaded by our external characteristics that we do so. The reader is simply let in to Faust's desires and glory and contempt and finds them an immensely realized version of his own inner passions and thoughts, just as he finds with the "I" of Wordsworth's "Prelude," or of Proust.

Approaching Faust with the sympathy of identification, one scarcely asks whether he does anything very bad or not. We are convinced that he could be much worse than ourselves to the degree that he is much greater. In fact we do not judge him, and we don't really believe that God will do so either, because he is employed in the task, sanctified ever since the Renaissance, of what Henry de Montherlant calls "noble self-cultivation." In fact, Faust has taken out a poetic license, and the more fool Gretchen, we feel, for not realizing this.

If you judge "Faust" as the tragedy which it partly sets out to be, it is, I cannot help thinking, a failure; but, in fact, so little of it actually carries out the intention of telling the story of Faust's bad behavior, that we willingly judge it by the double standard of what it does and what it doesn't do.

Where it succeeds marvelously is in giving us a portrait of an isolated mind which invents its own world. We believe in everything which is an aspect of Faust's own personality. Thus Mephistopheles is his opposite; Wagner is the don he might have become. Faust rejects in himself evil and pedantry, because he is an animator. His natural condition is to be alone, when everything he touches becomes alive, when every thought he has acquires a voice independent of him, and conducts a dialogue with him.

So the true situation of "Faust" is one which proliferates new and ancient forms of life out of the intellectual imagination. In such a world there is very little room for Gretchen; in fact, in Part One, it is ages before Goethe even manages to get her on to the stage, and then only because Faust has had a vision of her in a mirror given to him by one of the inmates of a witches' kitchen on the previous night.

Mr. Kaufmann emphasizes that Goethe is a modern. Any reader who doubts Goethe's relevance today should read the first of the conversations between Faust and Wagner, which is almost a warning to modern poets. But the wider sense in which "Faust" is modern is in anticipating "Ulysses" and "Finnegans Wake," those two other great books about a world which is both real—as it is the product of a marvelous and aware intelligence—and completely created—in that it is entirely surrounded by the mind of its creator.

Joyce, one might say, got his Gretchens out of his system in "Dubliners" and "Exiles." However he did not have that sense that everything, however "dark," had nevertheless to be rendered into the terms of the mind of the cultivated reader, which was Goethe's politeness in his dealings with the world. Goethe remained an exile in his own country, and that he did so is the world's gain.

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