

MANFRED and FAUST

Before he was charged with plagiarising *Faust*, Byron was casual in his acknowledgement that he had known it (at least, from one source) when he wrote *Manfred*. On April 4th 1817 he wrote to Samuel Rogers:

I furnished Lewis with “bread & salt” for some days at Diodati – in reward for which (besides his conversation) he translated “Goethe’s Faust” to me by word of mouth ...¹

However, when Murray told him that the *Edinburgh Review* had defended him against plagiarism, he wrote, on October 12th 1817 (it is the same letter in which he announces the completion of *Beppo*):

Many thanks for the Edin[burgh] R[evue] which is very kind about Manfred – and defends its originality – which I did not know that any body had attacked. I *never read* – & do not know that I ever saw – the “Faustus of Marlow” and had & have no Dramatic works by me in English – except the recent things you sent me; – but I heard Mr. Lewis translate verbally some scenes of *Goethe’s Faust* (which were some good & some bad) last Summer – which is all I know of the history of that magical personage ...²

By strange coincidence, Goethe himself, on the very next day, October 13th 1817, having received a copy of Byron’s play, wrote to Knebel:

The most amazing event for me was the appearance a day or two ago of Byron’s Manfred, presented to me by a young American. This strange and gifted poet has completely assimilated my Faust and derived the strangest nourishment from it for his hypochondria. He has used all the motifs in his own way, so that none remains quite the same, and for that reason alone I cannot sufficiently admire his mind. The remodelling is so complete that very interesting lectures could be given about it, as well as about the similarity with the original and the dissimilarity from it; although I certainly do not deny that the sombre glow of an unlimited, abounding despair becomes tedious in the end. Yet the displeasure felt on this account is always mixed with admiration and respect. As soon as our ladies, who are passionate devotees of Byron, have devoured the work, you shall have your share in it.³

Ten days later Byron is hearing the accusation more frequently, and is getting angry about it. He writes to Murray on October 23rd 1817:

An American who came the other day from Germany – told Mr. Hobhouse that Manfred was taken from *Goethe’s Faust*. – The devil may take both the Faustus’s, German and English – I have taken neither.⁴

Over two and a half years later, on June 7th 1820, he sums it all up as he would have Murray remember it, in words already quoted:

His [Goethe’s] *Faust* I never read – for I don’t know German – but Matthew Monk Lewis in 1816 at Coligny translated most of it to me *viva voce* – & I was naturally much struck with it; – but it was the *Staubach* & the *Jungfrau* – and something else – much more than Faustus that made me write Manfred. – – The first Scene however & that of Faustus are very similar.⁵

1: BLJ V 206.

2: BLJ V 268.

3: *Briefe*, xxviii, pp. 277f, tr. and quoted Butler, *Byron and Goethe*, Bowes and Bowes 1956 p. 33.

4: BLJ V 270.

5: BLJ VII 113.

The tale of his indebtedness continued, and seems to have been very popular among his American visitors, as well as Goethe's:

... I mentioned Goethe's comparison of *Faust* and *Manfred*: and Byron observed, evidently in earnest, that he deemed it honour enough to have his work mentioned with Faust. As to its origin, Lord B. said that some time before he had conceived the idea of his piece, Monk Lewis had translated to him some of the scenes and had given him an idea of the plan of the piece.⁶

In fact, Byron had already, in late 1821, admitted that there was another source of information about *Faust*, which no-one had hitherto mentioned:

"The Germans," said he, "and I believe Goethe himself, consider that I have taken great liberties with 'Faust'. All I know of that drama is from a sorry French translation, from an occasional reading or two into English of parts of it by Monk Lewis when at Diodati, and from the Hartz mountain-scene, that Shelley versified the other day. Nothing I envy him so much as to be able to read that astonishing production in the original ..."⁷

The "sorry French translation", from which, however, Byron would have known *Faust* Part I in clear outline, and in second- or third-hand but fairly accurate detail, dates from as early as 1813, when Murray published de Staël's *de l'Allemagne*, first in French and then (as, simply, *Germany*) in English. This uncredited translation figures as No. 83 in the 1816 sale catalogue of Byron's library.⁸ Between pages 181 and 226 of the second volume there is an entire chapter on *Faust*, giving the following sections of the play, in a lumbering English version of de Staël's French prose versions. Byron may of course have read – and kept – the original French: he refers to it in a note to line 179 of *The Bride of Abydos*, I. It is interspersed with de Staël's own commentary, done from a classicist viewpoint – regretting Goethe's barbarism and irregularities, but conceding the fecundity of his genius, and so on:

After an introduction describing Faust in his study, including a line which anticipates the very opening of *Manfred* ("A solitary lamp enlightens this gloomy retreat") de Staël translates the first scene from 502 to 514, and 614 to 784: the contemptuous speeches of the Earth Spirit, *In Lebensfluten, im Tatenstrum ... du begreifst, / Nicht mehr!* (see below) then Faust's soliloquy on human limitation which it inspires; the address to the phial of poison; the Easter chorus; and Faust changing his mind about suicide: from *Ich, Ebenbild der Gottheit ... to ... die Erde hat mich wieder!*

A paraphrase-description of the *Hexenküche* scene, and the remotest allusion to Auerbach's Cellar: de Staël claims there are no precedents in French drama by which to judge such material (though see *De l'Allemagne*, Hachette 1959, III 83n., for an alternative perspective).

The *Studierzimmer* scene from 1993-2000, prefaced by a paraphrase of Mephistopheles' soliloquy *Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft*; a paraphrase of his scene with the Student; a brief snatch of dialogue between Mephistopheles and the Student from *Doch ein Begriff ... to kein ... Iota rauben*: a paraphrase of Mephistopheles' mockery of learning.

An account of the start of the relationship between Faust and Margarete, then the scene in Marthe's garden, from 3419 to 3458 – the dialogue between Margarete and Faust on his lack of religion, from *Lass das, mein Kind!* to ... *Umnebelnd Himmelsglut*.

6: *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, ed. M. A. DeWolfe Howe, New York 1908, I 148ff: quoted Butler, *op.cit.*, p. 74: diary entry for May 22nd 1822, Leghorn). *H.V.S.V.* (p. 292) gives the last clause as "... and had given him an idea of its plan".

7: Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell pp. 141-2

8: CMP 234.

The *Wald und Höhle* scene, opening speech from 3217 to 3250; that is, Faust's soliloquy on his simultaneous insatiability and satiety, from *Erhabner Geist ...* to *... verschmacht ich nach Begierde*. Then a paraphrase (out of sequence in the usual text – de Staël used an early printing: see Hachette edn., III 105n) of the deaths of Margarete's mother and brother, then the two closing speeches of *Wald und Höhle*: Faust's *Im Höttchen auf dem kleinen Alpenfeld ...* and Mephistopheles' *Wies wieder siedet, wieder glüht!*

Next, the *Dom* scene in its entirety – the Evil Spirit and Margarete in the Cathedral, with the *Dies Irae* as accompaniment.

After a tight-lipped general description of the *Walpurgisnacht* scene, de Staël translates it from 4183 to 4210: that is, the dialogue between Mephistopheles and Faust about the vision of the suffering Margarete.

Finally, the entire closing scene, from 4423 to the end of the play, between Faust and the insane Margarete on the eve of her execution.

de Staël's translations are indeed not entirely accurate, even lexicographically: she assumes, for example, that the *Meerkatzen* in the *Hexenküche* scene are a mixture of monkey and cat.⁹ Nevertheless, *Germany* would have given Byron some idea of the shape of Goethe's play – though hardly of its idiom. Here, for example, is the speech of the Earth-Spirit to Faust in the first scene:

In Lebensfluten, im Tatensturm
Will ich auf und ab
Wehe hin und her!
Geburt und Grab,
Ein ewiges Meer,
Ein wechselnd Weben,
Ein glühend Leben:
So schaff ich am sausenden Webstuhl der Zeit
Und wirke der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid ...

Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst,
Nicht mehr!

And this is how in which it filters through into the English translation:

“It is for us to plunge into the tumult of exertion, into those eternal billows of life, which are made to swell and sink, are impelled and recalled, by man's nativity and dissolution: we are created to labour in the work which God has ordained us, and of which Time completes the web. But thou, who canst conceive nothing beyond thine own being, thou, who tremblest to sound thine own destiny, and whom a breath of mine makes shudder, leave me! Recall me no more!”¹⁰

Byron might have been impressed by some of de Staël's comments:

There is an infernal irony in the discourses of Mephistopheles, which extends itself to the whole creation, and criticizes the universe like a bad book of which the Devil has made himself the censor.¹¹

No belief, no opinion, remains fixed in the head after having listened to Mephistopheles; and we feel disposed to examine ourselves in order to know whether there is any truth in the world, or whether we think only to make a mock of those who fancy that they think.¹²

9: De l'Allemagne, Hachette edn., III 82n.

10: *Germany*, II 186.

11: *Ibid*, II 182.

de Staël's classicist temperament will allow little reference to the play's irony and jokes; she omits all reference to the songs – even those of the heroine – and merely hints at the three increasingly depraved scenes of riot and sensuality through which Faust is guided. Above all, the pact with Mephistopheles is seriously understated; there is no reference to the imagined moment in which Faust anticipates absolute pleasure: no reference to the famous line “Verweile doch, du bist so schön!”

How much more did Lewis' *viva voce* translations three years later tell Byron? “... some scenes of Goethe's Faust (which were some good & some bad)” is all Byron was prepared to recollect, and as most scenes from *Faust* – taken independently – are rather “good”, it is hard to know which ones he's talking about. *Manfred* is not notable for irony, jokes, or scenes of riot and debauchery, so Lewis was perhaps as reticent about the earthiness and humour of *Faust* as was de Staël: but Byron would only have appropriated what it suited him to appropriate. We may assume that Lewis did translate one important section which de Staël omits. At the start of Act III, Manfred says:

There is a calm upon me –
 Inexplicable stillness! which till now
 Did not belong to what I knew of life.
 If that I did not know Philosophy
 To be of all our vanities the motliest,
 The merest word that ever fooled the ear
 From out the Schoolmen's jargon, I should deem
 The golden secret, the sought “Kalon,” found,
 And seated in my soul. It will not last,
 But it is well to have known it, though but once:
 It hath enlarged my thoughts with a new sense,
 And I within my tablets would note down
 That there is such a feeling. – – Who is there?¹³

It is an obvious reference to the ecstatic moment anticipated by Goethe's hero; except that no-one has created it for Manfred, and he has to pay no automatic price for it.

E.M. Butler interprets Goethe's instant assertion of creative plagiarism, in the letter to Knebel, as a sign of his vanity, as well as of his “hasty and feverish reading”, and counter-asserts Byron's more complete originality.¹⁴ But I wonder if this really is the case: few works of art are conceived without creative debt to previous ones – certainly not *Faust*, for instance, as Byron said, continuing the conversation with Medwin quoted above. Acknowledgement need not entail shame, particularly if the sub-text has been ingorged and “remodelled” as fully and imaginatively as is the case here.

It seems to me that Goethe was correct in his reaction, in that Byron takes themes from *Faust*, and re-renders them with a view to distillation, interiorisation and economy. Instead of the need for a tempter to encourage the protagonist to fall, he presents Manfred as fallen from the outset, on his own initiative and without the intervention of any third party: “Thou did'st not tempt me, and thou could'st not tempt me,” he says to the demon at III iv 137. Manfred is too arrogant to make anything as demeaning as a pact, with powers of any sort – as he asserts indignantly, at III iv 113-14. Instead of the seduction and ruin of a normal innocent (which takes up a large part of the play's action) he presents the carnal transgression, firstly as more extreme, though apparently just as fatal, and secondly, as with the previous theme, as being accomplished – again, with the help of no vulgar intermediary – before the play starts. The guilt of the protagonist is

12: Ibid, II 197.

13: III i 6-18.

14: Butler, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

more powerful for being contained in the past, and thus more unambiguously irredeemable – as well as being less squalid. Astarte, unlike Margarete, had no children; and although Manfred states (I i 20, II ii 120-1) that he has killed people, the circumstances are vague, and his victims cannot, obviously, include the brother of the girl he has seduced, for that is him. He is, as it were, his own Valentin, as he is his own Mephistopheles, and would in any case have despised the assistance of a mere devil in killing anyone, where Faust does not.

Most importantly, Manfred's spiritual transgression, his search into the mysteries, is not the result of middle-aged intellectual surfeit. He has not exhausted the conventional sciences, never having tried them. His is a wilful quest after forbidden knowledge which he has pursued, without assistance, from youth. Bored as one could easily imagine him being, as Faust is, by the study of jurisprudence or medicine, one cannot actually imagine him having devoted himself to such disciplines in the first place. His imagination and curiosity are, in addition, less limited by a historically-determined culture than Faust's, for it is never clear at what period we are to imagine him as living; and, as an aristocrat and landowner, unlike the academic Faust, he is not circumscribed by the need to research along seemingly respectable lines, teach, and so on. He enjoys complete liberty to define his own spiritual role – is an amateur in the proudest sense of that word – and has, in terrestrial terms, only himself to blame for his doom.

E.M. Butler writes that Byron's originality differs from Goethe's

... in its much stronger affirmation of man's mastery over his own fate. The ethical triumph is the triumph of the unconquerable spirit of man, symbolized in the figure of a direct descendant of the mighty magicians of old who had power over the spirits and were in no way subject to them.¹⁵

One need not disagree; but to say that there is no creative debt is to imagine "creative debt" as indicating imitation only: what Byron did was think carefully about Goethe's example, and determine to do the opposite, with the same ideas and themes.

The clearest example is *Manfred* II iv – the Hall of Arimanes – in which the influence is often pointed out of three scenes from *Faust: Auerbachs Keller*, the *Hexenküche*, and *Walpurgisnacht*. All four scenes dramatise the protagonist's attendance at depraved festivities of one kind or another: however, several contrasts are notable. Firstly, the bestiality and squalor of the *Faust* scenes (of which, as I have suggested, Byron may only have gathered a remote impression anyway) compares strikingly with the magnificence of the Hall of Arimanes. Secondly, where Manfred dominates and virtually orders the action in II iv (see section below on Shakespeare) Faust is, in Auerbach's Cellar and at the Witches' Kitchen, a spectator only, in the *Walpurgisnacht* scene only goes so far as to dance with one of the younger witches, and has his attention readily distracted – by the image of Margarete, a part translated by de Staël, and indirectly inspiring Manfred's confrontation with Astarte. Thirdly, no supernatural powers of authority appear in any of Goethe's orgies (apart from Mephistopheles, Faust's infernal tour-guide) where Byron's scene is presided over by the almost-silent Arimanes, the Principle of Evil himself. The Globe of Fire on which he is throned could have been placed in Byron's mind, not just by *Vathek*, the traditionally pointed-out source, but also by the great ball which *die jungen Meerkatzen* roll forward at line 2401 in Goethe's *Hexenküche* scene. Their chant as they play with it (*Das ist die Welt: / Sie steigt und fällt / Und rollt beständig ...*) trivialises the universe and its turmoils, where the Globe of Arimanes conveys a grandeur even on the destructive powers of life – an effect which Byron probably wants. Not only is Evil magnificent in *Manfred*, but the protagonist is its equal, where in *Faust* he is its plaything.

Southey mocked this quality in Byron's play, when he wrote that Manfred "met the devil on the Jungfrau – and bullied him".¹⁶ Byron, quoting Southey's sarcasm, was jovially unrepentant ("Mr. Southey ... has apparently in his political life not been so successful against the great

15: Ibid.

16: CMP 90.

Enemy”): what he was never prepared fully to acknowledge was the fact that his confidence in the concept derived in part from his understanding of the different depiction of evil in Goethe’s play.

Byron, in partly modelling his drama on Goethe’s, loses much of Goethe’s tonal and theatrical variety: but the two works, one written over decades and the other over a few months, still complement each other.