

## “The Blindness of Faust: Goethean Science in a Warming World”

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### Intro:

- my work as an ecocritic within the burgeoning new field of the Ecological Humanities (<http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org/>)
- ‘ecocriticism’ concerned with interrelationship between works of human culture (literary and other kinds of texts) and the more-than—human world (including natural and built environments, ecology, the body, non-human others), as a potential referent, but also as a context and enabling condition of their production and reception – i.e. a practice of reading from a perspective of ecological concern (see Kate Rigby, “Ecocriticism”, <http://www.asle.org/assets/docs/ECOCRITICISM+Rigby+article.pdf>)
- Ecological Humanities seeks to traverse “the great divides between the sciences and the humanities, and between western and other ways of knowing nature” (see handout)

### “Ecological Existentialism” and Goethean science

- Leading figure in Australia: anthropologist and ecocultural theorist, Deborah Bird Rose – cf. new book *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* – advances a philosophy of “ecological existentialism”, understood as a “kinship of becoming”: “no telos, no deus ex machina to rescue us” but “on the other hand, the rich plenitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time and interspecies complexities of life on Earth” (44) “Ecological existentialism” emphasises connectivity rather than aloneness, and “enjoins us to live with the dynamics, and to pour our love into this unstable and uncertain Earth”
- Much of what Rose envisions here in terms of an ecological existentialist rethinking of the human condition was prefigured within Romantic natural history and natural philosophy around 1800, and perhaps nowhere more presciently than within Goethean

- science – embraced botany, geology, osteology, chromatics, meteorology, and history and philosophy of science – invented study of plant and animal morphology; discovered human intermaxillary bone, shared with other mammals, and proving, to his delight, our close kinship with other creatures
- RS profoundly influenced by Spinozan monism - challenged Cartesian dualism : spirit and matter, God and nature, body and mind inseparable (Schelling: “nature” as “visible mind”, mind “invisible nature”)
  - Matter not composed of inert atoms bouncing off each other mechanistically, but dynamic – informed by chemistry, magnetism, electricity (Ritter: discovery of electrochemistry as foundation of life) – dynamic quality framed by Goethe in terms of polarity and intensification/augmentation (Steigerung) as counterposing forces of attraction and repulsion, expansion and limitation engendered new forms and constellations
  - Cf Schelling: “productivity” as inherent to matter – hence, emergence of living organisms from inorganic matter and of consciousness within more complex organisms, notably humans
  - Natural systems unstable and self-transforming “metamorphosing” (to use one of Goethe’s favourite words), changing over time, forming new patterns – cosmos, geology, hydrology, climate, biology
  - ‘biology’ coined in Romantic period – all living things as evolved and evolving (cf. Charlotte von Stein to Knebel: Goethe thought Herder’s work on the Philosophy of the history of Mankind, 1784) “makes it probable that we were first plants and animals; what nature will make of us will remain unknown to us: Goethe expends much profound thought on these things”; later review of a work on comparative osteology from 1821) endorsed hypothesis that today’s sloth descended from extinct megatherium
  - Like Charles Darwin’s grandfather, Erasmus, postulated evolutionary emergence of life in Earth’s primeval waters – new take on an ancient notion, attributed in Faust Part Two to the figure of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Thales, who advises the disembodied “Homunculus” concocted in Faust’s old colleague Wagner’s lab in a delightful parody of Francis Bacon’s prefiguration of test-tube babies in *The New Atlantis*, to “seek the beginnings of creation” in the sea and thus to “Move onward by eternal norms/Through many thousand thousand forms,/And reach at last the human state”
  - Humans not only evolved from and kin to other creatures, but also interconnected with them and our shared environment

- Cf. Goethe's botanical studies: in 1780s began to shift from Linnean taxonomy to consider connections between species variation and distribution and such factors as soil, climate and topography"
- Key concept: mutual affectedness or interrelationality: "All things in nature work incessantly upon one another; we can say that each phenomena is connected with countless others just as we can say that point of light floating in space sends its rays in all directions" – cf. A v Humboldt: nature as an all-encompassing "interlinkage, not merely in a linear direction but in a complex netlike mesh"
- Implied necessity of different way of doing science: contra Bacon's *natura torturata* – "Nature will reveal nothing under torture"; "The phenomena must be freed once and for all from their grim torture chamber of empiricism, mechanism and dogmatism"
- Phenomena to be viewed respectfully, from as many different angles and perspectives as possible (not with a pre-formed hypothesis, but with an openness to the unexpected), in context, rather than in isolation, and with an awareness of the situatedness and hence contingency of ones own knowledge (cf. Schelling experimentation as a question addressed to nature that has a hidden a priori judgement: experimentation as a production of the phenomenon): Goethe: "every act of looking turns into observation, every act of observation into reflection, every act of reflection into the making of associations; thus it is evident that we theorize every time we look carefully at the world. The ability to do this with clarity of mind, with self-knowledge, in a free way, and (if I might put it so), with irony, is a skill we will need in order to avoid the pitfalls of abstraction and attain the results we desire, results which can find a living and practical application."
- Also implied new view of human subjectivity and agency - all individuals actually composite: Goethe: "No living thing is unitary in nature; every such thing is a plurality. Even the organism that appears to us as an individual exists as a collection on independent living entities" i.e. individuation contingent upon connectivity; we are not the authors of our own existence, although our choices might play a part in shaping it, and nor are we in control of the effects of our actions: Goethe: "The weave of our lives and influences is made of various different threads, in that the necessary, the random, the involuntary and the purely desired – each with the most different form and each not often able to be differentiated – delimit eachother."

## The blindness of Faust

- Read in relation to Goethean science and from the perspective of Rose's ecological existentialism – and at a time of unprecedented global ecological imperilment – *Faust* can be seen as an exploration of modern man's tragic blindness to uncertainty and connectivity cf. Heather Sullivan in *Ecocritical Theory*: "F portrays the illusions of those in the weave who see only their own unidirectional impetus"
- G. takes the legendary figure of the Renaissance necromancer and turns him into a prototypical modern in Promethean mode – this transformation begun by Marlowe, but Marlowe remains true to the legend and has Faust lose his soul to the devil – scandalously, Goethe's Mephistopheles loses his bargain, having become comically distracted by lust for the cute boy angels at the moment of Faust's death, while Faust himself is apparently redeemed, but in a manner that also emphasises the failure of his flawed quest for mastery – in death, his "immortal part" is drawn passively and inertly onward as a choir of voices appeal to the divine feminine, "Holy Virgin, Mother, Queen, Goddess" to "pour out her mercies" upon him.
- F. at start of F1 shown to crave knowledge "of Nature's forces/That bind the world, all its seeds and sources/And innermost life", but not the kind of knowledge that can be found in the lab – rather to be sought experientially – when M. appears (initially in the guise of a little black poodle), he offers him the kinds of pleasures that his forbears had sought, but G's F. seeks not the fulfilment of his desires but a state of perpetual longing and hence striving – "food that leaves me still unsatisfied" "A game that I can never win" – terms of the pact are that M. gets his soul if he ever rests content "If I ever lie down in sloth and base inaction,/Then let that moment be my end!/If by your false cajolery/You lull me into self-sufficiency,/If any pleasure you can give/Deludes me, let me cease to live!"
- Drama of F's self-realising through perpetual striving has three main stages: F. 1 – mortal love - magically rejuvenated, he seduces impregnates, and abandons a pretty village girl, Gretchen – hearing that she is to be executed for infanticide, he and M. rush to her prison to free her, but arrive just as she is committing suicide – M.'s gleeful anticipation of making off with her soul disappointed by a divine voice from on high, declaring that she is saved. First

- challenge to the illusion of control or unidirectional agency that M. has sold him – in fact shown to be an illusion to begin with by double framing device – prelude in the theatre (F. as creation of playwright and theatre director) and prologue in heaven (F. as object of Job-like bargain between God and Mephistopheles)
- F. 2 – F. embarks on lover's quest of a higher order – seeks bodily union with an ideal – Helen of Troy, legendary embodiment of perfect female beauty, again, magically restored to life, and even becomes mother of their child, Euphorion, who nonetheless proves incapable of earthly existence – flies too close to the sun and, when he dies, H. too returns to the dead
  - Grief-stricken, F. is overcome by a kind of nausea towards all that he views as limiting his ambitions, and so sets his sights on defying the elemental power of the sea:

Landward it streams, and countless inlets fill;

Barren itself, it spreads its barren will;

It swells and swirls, its rolling waves expand

Over the dreary waste of dismal sand;

Breaker on breaker, all their power upheaved

And then withdrawn, and not a thing achieved!

I watch dismayed, almost despairingly,

This useless elemental energy!

And so my spirit dares new wings to span:

This I would fight, and conquer if I can.

My soul shall boast/An exquisite achievement: from our coast

I'll ban the lordly sea, I'll curb its force,

I'll set new limits to that watery plain/

And drive it back into itself again.

I've worked out every detail, and I say: this is my will, now dare to find a way.

(Act IV, 10212-10230)<sup>i</sup>

- Having been granted a large tract of land by the local ruler in return for providing magical assistance in a battle against a rival for the throne, F. finally morphs into that archetypal modern man and agent of modernisation: a development engineer
- F's dyke-building scheme is shown to come at a considerable cost: it is funded by pirate raids on ships bringing home the plunder of empire; it is being carried out by ruthlessly exploited labourers; and it necessitates the elimination of everything that stands in its way, including the home of two native shore-dwellers, Philemon and Baucis: "The old couple must give way!/I chose that linden clump as my/Retreat: those few trees not my own/Spoil the whole world that is my throne./From branch to branch I planned to build/Great platforms, to look far afield,/From panoramic points to gaze/At all I've done; as one surveys/Fram an all-mastering elevation/A masterpiece of man's creation//I'd see it all as I have planned:/Man's gain of habitable land" (11239-11250).
- Faust is nonetheless shocked and chastened when hears of the death of the old couple. Blinded by the allegorical figure of Care, in an apt concretisation of his metaphoric blindness to the price of his Promethean quest--that is, his failure to care and to take care--he dies dreaming of the "brave new world" of "free people" who he hopes will one day inhabit his "inland paradise" wrested from sea and swamp (Act V, 11561-1158).
- In Goethe's subversively avant-garde rewriting of the Faust legend, Mephistopheles is comically foiled in his attempt to make off with the errant hero's soul by his erotic attraction to the androgynous angels who cheat him of his prize, and we are left to ponder the mystery of Faust's redemption by means of something that Goethe refers to in his famous last line as the "eternal feminine" (Act V, 12110).<sup>ii</sup>
- The human desire for transformation and self-transformation is affirmed, but disregard for the being of others and disrespect for the unfolding of a physical world that is not of human making, and potentially resistant to human makeover, is disclosed as tragically blind.<sup>iii</sup> Meanwhile, nature's resistance to human mastery is signalled by Mephistopheles, who foretells the ultimate failure of Faust's engineering schemes in the face of the greater power of the

elements: “Do what you will, my friend,” he observes in an aside, “You all are doomed! They are in league with me,/The elements, and shall destroy you in the end.” (Act V, 11548-11550). Yet it is not evil, but eros that has the last word, and this too is figured as coming from beyond the self, indeed beyond the human: Faust might be redeemed on account of his continued striving; but he is said to be saved, despite himself, by a “Love beyond/Time” (Act V, 11964-11965) that is quite definitely not of his own creation or at his disposal.

- F’s canals and dykes are both metonymic of the flawed project of human domination of nature and metaphoric of the delusions of sovereign selfhood and unidirectional agency
- His “last great project” is to drain the swamp that surrounds the mountains’ base, poisoning, as he sees it, all he has achieved thus far. But it is possible to read this swamp as itself evidence of the illusoriness of his colonising project of disciplining the water and draining the land. In the scientific lit. that he consulted when writing this last act, he learnt about a phenomenon known as “hydrological terrorism” i.e. the creation of canals that then became colonised by water-plants and thereby reverted to swamp – in other words, at the very moment that he is endeavouring to extend his control over the land, other-than-human agents are undoing his earlier efforts.
- A couple of centuries on, and we are witnessing what might well be considered hydrological terrorism on a global scale, as the world’s fossil-fuelled economy continues to pump out greenhouse gases that are already to cause seas to rise, the weather to grow increasingly unruly, and the climate to alter in ways that could well bring down very the technological civilisation that had set its sights on the domination of nature.
- The contemporary lesson of F., it seems to me, is that in facing this unprecedented crisis, which also threatens to bring about a major extinction event, unravelling the intricate mesh of Earth’s remarkable biosphere, it would be perilous in the extreme to persist with our blind belief in the possibility of human mastery. Instead, we need to recognise the limits of our knowledge and the multiplicity of dynamically interacting agencies that are continually weaving and reweaving the conditions of our earthly existence: for this, we will need not only a “gentle” or “delicate” empiricism”, as Goethe referred to his scientific method, but also delicate technologies, oriented not towards continued ruthless exploitation, whatever the cost, but towards sustaining conditions

consistent with the continued flourishing of more-than-human life on this amazing, if unstable and unpredictable, planet.

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26. J.G. von Goethe, Faust. Part Two, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

28. Luke translates das ewig Weibliche as “eternal Womanhood.”

29. For an extended, and somewhat more critical, reading of *Faust* in relation to Goethean science, see Kate Rigby, “Freeing the Phenomena: Goethean Science and the Blindness of Faust,” ISLE 7.2 (2000): 24-42. See also Gernot Böhme’s ecophilosophical reading: Goethes Faust als philosophischer Text (Kusterdingen: Die Graue Edition, 2005).