

PREDRAG CICOVACKI

College of the Holy Cross,
Worcester, Massachusetts

The Role of Goethe's *Faust* in Dostoevsky's Opus

Dostoevsky never failed to appreciate Goethe's greatness as man and artist. He included the German poet in the short list of authors he considered to be required reading, usually placing him alongside Shakespeare. Of all of Goethe's works, *Faust* made the most profound impression on Dostoevsky. He read it in German for the first time when he was seventeen. While most of his Russian contemporaries had a negative view of *Faust II*, Dostoevsky knew and appreciated both parts of this work. He made explicit and implicit references to Goethe's *Faust* in several of his novels, most notably in *Crime and Punishment*, *Devils*, *The Adolescent*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The most frequently made connection between Goethe and Dostoevsky concerns Faust and Ivan Karamazov. Ivan is called "a Russian Faust," but also "a Russian anti-Faust."¹ One phrase points to the similarities between the two characters, the other touches on their differences. Although of crucial significance, this connection has been insufficiently understood. For this reason, my central preoccupation in this essay will be with the nature of striving which motivates Faust – more generally, Faust's striving as a symbol of Western civilization – and Dostoevsky's reaction to it. After some preliminary consideration in Section I, I will concentrate on what I call "the curse of Faust" – the tension between our endless striving toward the highest ideals and values, and our continually frustrated efforts to realize them. How did Goethe and Dostoevsky attempt to resolve this paradoxical tension that almost

¹ André von Gronicka, *The Russian Image of Goethe*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 117-21.

defines our human condition? Was Dostoevsky's resolution close to the spirit of Goethe, or did he turn away from his great predecessor?

I

Goethe denied that there is one single thought that captured the spirit of his *Faust*, but many commentators trust that the essence of this masterpiece is contained in the idea of human striving (*Streben*).² The three basic questions with regard to Faustian striving are: What drives this striving? Is it restrained in any way? Toward what is this striving directed?

Faust's striving – perhaps all human striving – is driven not only by a sheer animal impulse to sustain existence, but also by a profound confusion with regard to human identity and goal of our existence. Faust initially believes that he is God-like. With his numerous gifts and enormous knowledge, Faust feels that he is even more God-like than other people. Yet his existence is empty and he is completely devastated when told by the Spirit: “*Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst, Nicht mir*” (You equal the spirit you comprehend, Not me”; *Faust* I, 512-13).³

Toward what is this search for identity ultimately driven? Faust is the symbol of humanity striving toward self-realization. In Goethe's words, “Above all the virtues one thing rises: the ceaseless striving upward, the struggle with ourselves, the insatiable desire to go forward in purity, in wisdom, in goodness, in love.”⁴

This striving assumes two fundamental forms: the search for all-encompassing knowledge of the world (“Faust proper”), or, more radically, the project to reshape and – ultimately – gain mastery over the world (Faust as Prometheus). Ivan is possessed by this striving in both senses. What drives his striving is what he calls “indecent thirst for life,”

² For further discussion, see Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1960), 51-59, esp. 53. See also John Armstrong, *Love, Life, Goethe: Lessons of the Imagination from the Great Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 383-421. According to Erich Heller, “Goethe was possessed by two overpowering and paradoxical intuitions: that man's *being* was definable only through his incessant striving to *become* what he was not yet and was yet *meant* to be; and that in thus striving he was in extreme danger of losing himself through his impatient and impetuous ignorance of what he was”; “Faust's Damnation: The Morality of Knowledge,” in Heller, *The Artist's Journey Into the Interior* (New York: Random House, 1959), 31-32.

³ I will rely mostly on Walter Kaufmann's translation: *Goethe's Faust*, Parts I and II (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

⁴ Quoted from Albert Schweitzer, *Goethe: Five Studies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 57.

and he claims to be striving toward justice, toward a world in which there will be no suffering of the innocent. Ivan himself is a Faust proper, but when change is needed, he has the Grand Inquisitor (in his thoughts) and Smerdayakov (in his surrounding).

Ivan also has his Mephistopheles, the devil who visits him in his chamber. Yet Ivan's devil appears not before Ivan's adventure, not to strike a deal with him and get him out of his study, as was the case with Faust, but after the main course of events in the novel has already taken place. Ignoring for the second the relevant theological implications of this difference, we can say that the presence of the devil means, minimally, that Dostoevsky, like Goethe, recognizes the unfathomable duality of human nature. When Faust says that, "Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast" (*Faust* I, 1110), this is primarily intended as the reflection of his relationship with Mephistopheles. Ivan could say the same thing as Faust, although this duality does not square well with his "Euclidian mind." Something else, however, is of more importance here; even if not for Ivan, then surely for Dostoevsky and his message to his readers.

Dostoevsky already explored the relationship of Faust and Mephistopheles in two novels: *Crime and Punishment*, and *Devils*. In the former, Raskolnikov is the striving Faust, and his Mephistopheles is Svidrigailov. As in Goethe's work, the Mephistophelian is the spirit of negation. When he first appeared in Raskolnikov's garret, if asked the question: "Who are you?" Svidrigailov could have characterized himself – with the original Mephistopheles – as: "Part of that force which would/ Do evil evermore, and yet creates the good" (*Faust* I, 1336-37). Yet the significant deviation from Goethe's *Faust* begins already in this work: Raskolnikov is saved – not by his Mephistopheles, who commits suicide, but by his Gretchen, Sonia.⁵

In *Devils*, the relationship of Faust and Mephistopheles is further modified. Stavrogin is Faust and Peter Verkhovenski is his Mephisto-

⁵ According to von Gronicka, *op. cit.* (132-33), "By the time [Dostoevsky] turned to his first masterpiece, Gretchen had replaced Mignon as model and inspiration, Gretchen the injured and insulted innocent, the self-sacrificing victim of a selfish lover to whom she gives herself body and soul. Sonia Marmeladova, the heroine of *Crime and Punishment*, is Dostoevski's Gretchen – of course, not as a mechanical copy of Goethe's figure, but as a typically Dostoevskian 'variation' on and amplification and intensification of salient traits of the model. Gretchen's naiveté reappears in Sonia as a child-likeness belying her eighteen years, as an innocent girlishness that Dostoevski explicitly singles out as an 'especially characteristic trait'. Sonia's love for Raskolnikov and her willingness to share his fate, to 'follow [him] everywhere – into exile I will go with you', are a typical "*Steigerung*" of Gretchen's self-surrendering love for Faust."

pheles. At the end of the novel, Peter is on the run while Stavrogin is not saved but commits suicide. More importantly, the real devil is not Peter – although he does represent the spirit of negation – but Stavrogin. Because his tutor, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovenski, raised the fatherless Stavrogin to aspire toward the highest ideals, the young Stavrogin is extraordinarily gifted: physically and mentally. He is strong enough to wrestle a bear, but also fearless. Stavrogin is the man who dares to do whatever he wishes to do; he is the superman Raskolnikov dreamt of.

As the end of the novel reveals, Stavrogin is also a human cripple. With his perverted gifts and the influence he exerts on others, Stavrogin and those around him like the biblical herd of swine succumb to self-destruction (Luke 8:32-37). Even if the “great idea” of his teacher Stepan Trofimovich – who compares himself with “the pagan Goethe” – will not help them, on his deathbed Trofimovich realizes that the highest idea is presented through the love and humility that Jesus preached.

In the character of Stavrogin Dostoevsky clearly formulated for the first time why the ideal of Faust is the central puzzle – and not just the central preoccupation – of Western civilization. The real dangers, Dostoevsky came to believe, are not the petty devils of negation, which may or may not end up serving the good. The real problems are those who believe that they are putting their lives, efforts, and dreams in the name of progress for all, in the name of liberation of their society, or even all humanity. As the old proverb goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”⁶

Although this message is delivered with force in the *Devils*, it is presented even more impressively in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan is an improved version of the Faust–Devil figure, for he retains more humanity than Stavrogin, who defiles himself and anyone around him in numerous ways. Ivan also possesses a stronger desire to live and will not attempt to escape reality by committing suicide. In the section, “Ivan’s Nightmare” (Bk. XI, Ch. 9), Ivan’s devil also distances himself from Mephistopheles: “I am probably the only being in all nature who loves the truth and wishes

⁶ According to Fritz Strich, “The Faustian striving, which Goethe’s western European mind saw as an effort to reach God, seemed to the Russian mind the exact opposite.... It was the inevitable climax of that European deification of man begun by the Greeks, continued in European Humanism, intensified in Faust, Napoleon and Byron, and culminating in the idea of the superman.... [Dostoevsky] wished to lead [the European mind] towards Christ, the God made man, not to the man made God, to the man who seeks not to exalt but to humble, not to rule but to serve, not to assert himself but to be broken; who seeks to be not the master but the loving brother of all men”; *Goethe and World Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971), 287-88.

nothing but good.” Yet the loathsome duties imposed on him by his “office” and “status in society” demand that he eschew the good and do “his dirty work ... to destroy thousands that one person may be saved.”

At the end of Goethe's work, and after “thousands” are destroyed, Faust is saved. The phrases that Dostoevsky's devil uses: “dirty work” and “to destroy thousands that one person may be saved,” clearly display Dostoevsky's dissatisfaction with Goethe's conclusion. Why exactly is Faust saved?

With many commentators, Dostoevsky could have taken for the central justification of Faust's salvation Goethe's famous lines: “*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen*” (“Who ever strives with all his power, We are allowed to save”), sung by the angels, “floating through the higher atmosphere, carrying Faust's immortal part,” (*Faust II*, 11936-37). According to Walter Kaufmann, there was no place in Goethe's world picture for hell and damnation.⁷

Dostoevsky would not find this viewpoint convincing. If there is no hell and damnation, there should be no heaven and salvation. More importantly, Dostoevsky was not satisfied with Faust's unrestrained striving. Even if that striving does not lead to many brutal and immoral deeds, as Faust's striving certainly does (remember for example the fate of Gretchen), striving itself is not sufficient for salvation. It is not that Dostoevsky opposes striving as such – the criticism of Faust is important precisely because striving is such an essential part of human nature – but that even well-intended striving does not suffice for salvation. If it were otherwise, Prince Myshkin would be the first one to be saved.

If not the character Faust, then at least his author Goethe may have agreed with this point. Although this distinction is not made in the drama *Faust*, in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* Goethe clearly differentiates between an unrestrained and unlimited (“Romantic”) striving, and a restrained and limited striving (“Man cannot be happy until his unconditional striving limits itself”; Bk. 8, Ch. 5). In *Faust*, Goethe had his main character focus on something that Ivan is not good at: deeds and actions. Faust takes as his motto “*Im Anfang war die Tat!*” (“In the beginning was the deed”; *Faust I*, 1237). Against Faust, Dostoevsky reinstates the original version from John's Gospel (1:1): “In the beginning was the Word” (*Slovo*) (Bk. XI, Ch. 9). The Faustian glorification of the self-assertive “*Tat*” is anathema to Dostoevsky. He recognizes in it the very root-source of the decline of Western civilization, the devil's

⁷ See Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, 61-76. See also Strich, *op. cit.*, 330-33.

temptation leading mankind to its doom. When there are no limits to our striving – more precisely: where no such limits are respected – it makes not much difference whether we are merely thinking about or acting on our unbounded aspirations. (Although he was far away when it occurred, Ivan recognizes that he is Smerdyakov’s accomplice in the murder of his father, Fyodor Karamazov.) Thus, the Faustian striving, which Goethe saw as a noble effort to approximate God, was to Dostoevsky its moral opposite. Such striving leads not to justified pride but to toxic hubris; not to Christ but to the Antichrist; not to salvation, but only to self-destruction. This is why Dostoevsky could not accept the divine vindication of Faust. The fate of Ivan should have been visited on Faust – Ivan’s fate is the correction of Goethe’s Faustian mistake.

Dostoevsky believed that Goethe’s mistake was not accidental but rather symptomatic of a more general trend unfolding in modern Western civilization – turning away from religion and God. Goethe begins his work with a “Prelude in the Theatre,” alluding to the “Prologue in Heaven” of the Book of Job. The rest of Goethe’s work mostly ignores the unfolding of the biblical tale. Yet, according to Dostoevsky, it is the conclusion of the Book of Job that should have provided the decisive limitation for our striving. In the course of the narrative, Job is possessed by his striving – for justice – no less than Faust and Ivan. Yet when he hears “the Word” – “the voice from the whirlwind” – Job puts his hand to his mouth and speaks no more; he concedes that he will be quiet, comforted that “he is dust.” Job is then rewarded, not only by a rare opportunity to hear the voice of the unnamable, but his previous status, riches, and family are restored and multiplied. Job is the antithetical figure to Faust; Job, not Faust, should, according to Dostoevsky, be our model for self-realization, the ultimate goal of our striving. For the Job-inspired Dostoevsky, the path that leads to self-realization is that of self-transcendence, not that of Faustian self-assertion.

If Ivan is not saved, as Faust should not have been, is anyone else saved in Dostoevsky’s last novel? It is quite possible that, in the initial planning for *The Brothers Karamazov* and its sequel, which Dostoevsky announced in the “Author’s Preface,” he thought that Alyosha will be saved. The reason why Alyosha is not saved in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that – literally speaking – he was not lost. After the death of Father Zosima, we get a hint from Dostoevsky of what would have happened to Alyosha. With the help of his own Mephistopheles, Rakitin, Alyosha almost strikes a pact with the devil, but is saved by Grushenka and her

“onion.” (Father Zosima’s life story may well be another intimation of how Alyosha will be lost and saved.)

If Alyosha is excluded, there is one option open: Dmitri. The eldest brother struggles with the Karamazov’s “indecent thirst for life” far more than Ivan and Alyosha. From the beginning of the novel he behaves as if he has already signed his pact with the devil. As the events unfold, he comes as close as possible to shedding human blood – of his real father, Fyodor, and the man who raised him like his father, Grigory.

No less than Faust, Dmitri is confused about his identity. In the same section of the novel in which he compares himself to an insect, Dmitri cites Schiller’s “Ode of Joy” and the first line of Goethe’s poem “*Das Göttliche*” (“The Godlike”): “*Edel sei der Mensch*” (“Be noble, O man”). In that same section, Dmitri reveals his profound perplexity over the “broad” nature of man and the contradictory nature of beauty – the beauty of the Madonna and the beauty of Sodom. His poetic soul comes to appreciate what Ivan’s Euclidean mind could never accept – the unity of the opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and the paradoxical character of human existence. In the darkest moments of his soul, Dmitri ascends to what Dostoevsky considers the greatest wisdom of life and the only path toward salvation: the path of self-transcendence. Dmitri’s newly found attitude toward Grushenka is an illustration of the motto of the entire novel, taking us back to the biblical wisdom of John’s Gospel (12:24): “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but it bringeth forth much fruit.”

When all his deeds directed toward winning Grushenka’s heart fail, Dmitri’s determination to remove himself out of the way of Grushenka’s happiness turns everything around and brings Dmitri into the embrace of his beloved. Like Job, who finally accepts the greater wisdom of God and the fate intended for him, Dmitri’s acceptance of his faith and his willingness to “fall into the ground and die,” “bringeth forth much fruit.” Dmitri is saved, he is given another chance. Not Faust’s “*Tat*” but the biblical “*Slovo*” should light the path of our striving, of our thorny road toward self-realization.

II

In presenting Dostoevsky’s religious views, we should never overlook his personal struggles: To believe or not to believe? In his writings, we can find statements such as: “All my life I have been searching for God,” as

well as those that assert: “I am the child of my time – I will die with doubt on my lips and uncertainty in my heart.” His literary characters are also divided between Ivan and Alyosha, i.e., between a Faustian rebel who displays an incessant striving, always probing the boundaries of the permissible, and a child-like believer who relies on trust and patience – in whom the elements of resignation dominate. His literary characters put God on trial, but – like the famous prisoners at Auschwitz – they will also pray to this very God after finding him guilty.

As we present in a philosophical manner the alternative patterns of man’s relationship toward God, we can distinguish between the following possibilities: the skeptical-nihilistic tradition (which for Dostoevsky culminates in the pronouncement: “Without God, everything is permissible”), the humanistic-secular conception (in which the demystification of the world is coupled with an attempt to master it), and the religio-metaphysical conception (in which some kind of transcendent or transcendental force is recognized as playing a central role).

I have argued elsewhere that this last conception, the religio-metaphysical, has primacy over the other two in Dostoevsky’s life and work.⁸ It is of essential importance for him to recognize the element of inscrutability in the world. In this point, Dostoevsky is close to Goethe, but should we understand this element of inscrutability in the manner of *Faust*?

To answer this question, let us discuss several similarities and dissimilarities in the views of the two authors. Among their fundamental similarities, we can list the following three. First, Goethe and Dostoevsky do not think of God as transcendent in a sense of being totally separated (or separable) from His creation. In the works and opinions of these two authors, there can be no strict separation of God and man, or of God and nature.

Second, Goethe and Dostoevsky understand reality in a dynamic way. They think of the world in terms of forces, in terms of an almost air-like and spirit-like energy (which the Greeks called *pneuma*) that permeates all of reality. To carry this metaphor to the extreme, they could be tempted to say that God is a verb, not a noun. Or, alternatively, they would certainly be prompted to say that life should be understood as a verb, not as a noun. To live means to struggle, to suffer, to strive. To live is to strive. Both Goethe and Dostoevsky are essentially interested in the religio-metaphysical aspects of such striving.

⁸ Predrag Cicovacki, *Dostoevsky and the Affirmation of Life* (South Bend, In.: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010).

Third, both Goethe and Dostoevsky reject the modern conception of truth as human creation. Quite to the contrary, truth should be understood as a recovery of a kind. (Goethe: "*Das Wahre war schon längst gefunden.*") They hold similar views with regard to values: we do not create values but have to rediscover them always anew.) They both believe that God's creation is not finished, that human nature is not fully determined by God or any other force, that human beings should strive to complete their own development.

The major differences between Goethe and Dostoevsky emerge over the question of how exactly human development is to be completed. But before we focus on these, let us first underline the importance of one fundamental tension in human nature, which is equally important to both authors, and which could be called "the curse of Faust." This "curse" can be presented in the form of a Kantian antinomy, where the thesis is: Strive toward the highest ideals (and values), while the antithesis says: No highest ideals (and values) can ever be realized.

A philosopher like Kant, or a psychologist like Freud, would feel an urge to find a resolution to this kind of perplexity, whatever that resolution may be. (Kant argues that the thesis is true in the transcendental sense, the antithesis in the empirical; Freud is convinced that we should abandon the striving advocated by the thesis as childish and harmful.) Unlike a philosopher or a psychologist, an artist can resist this temptation and stay with both sides of the unresolved tension. This is what happens with Goethe and Dostoevsky. There is no question that both of them take the thesis very seriously and believe that it should never be abandoned. No "reality check," no "practical realism" should prevent us and dissuade us from striving toward the highest. Nonetheless, in this leaning toward the highest some major differences between the two authors are revealed.

The first of them deals with individual versus collective striving. In Goethe, there is little or no sense of the spiritual homelessness of collective humanity that permeates Dostoevsky's works. Faust's striving is described in individual terms: he has no parents, no wife, no children, and no brothers. Ivan has brothers and a father; he also despises them and is ashamed of them. Ivan wants to be like Faust – alone and self-sufficient. Yet he cannot stand his own loneliness. Can Ivan, like Raskolnikov, find someone he can trust? Can he find his own Sonia? Who is Ivan's most faithful confidant? As in the case of Faust, this party turns out to be the devil.

This is a major reason for Dostoevsky's suspicion toward Faust (and Ivan). Furthermore, does Faust love anyone? Does he ever feel pity? Does he believe in anything? Faust does not seem to hear the voice of conscience. He has no feelings of love. He has no sense of compassion. He is like Ivan's Grand Inquisitor: he wants to help people he does not truly know and does not care about.

What kind of love is this, Dostoevsky seems to ask? If Ivan cannot love his father and his brothers, how can he, or his Grand Inquisitor, love those repulsive, weak, beastly creatures called human beings? Why should anyone love these creatures and sacrifice oneself for their happiness? If Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor are right in their vision of who human beings are and what their nature is, instead of loving such worthless creatures, why not destroy them? Why not bestow upon them the perpetual peace of a graveyard (which Ivan wants to visit when he escapes from Russia)? Would that not lead to even more happiness for the chosen ones? Those brave, gifted, and smart ones could then have the entire world for themselves.

Dostoevsky has another important concern: Is striving toward the highest ideal also the striving toward God? His answer appears clear: not necessarily so. So, no for Faust, or Ivan, or the Grand Inquisitor; but yes for Job, yes for Zosima, yes for Alyosha. For Goethe, this religio-metaphysical striving is directed toward self-perfection, toward the full development of our humanity. For Dostoevsky, the emphasis is on self-transcendence, on self-devotion. The central quest for Dostoevsky, at least in his last novel, may be hidden in the novel's title: How to become a brother? Is the idea of brotherhood even possible without accepting the idea of the common father – God?

Both Goethe and Dostoevsky warn against the exaggerated intellectualism of the Western tradition. Yet Dostoevsky is concerned not only about the overestimation of the intellect, but also with the growing desire for decisive human intervention in the world. Dostoevsky's greatest fear is associated with the Faust-like striving of the Western man, for such striving seduces him to dream of usurping the role and power of God. This is why Dostoevsky is convinced that, by saving Faust, Goethe underestimates the dangers of this Faustian striving: since it is not guided by love or compassion, it cannot be directed toward God or the brotherhood among men. This is why Dostoevsky has so many problems with Faust's emphasis on *Tat*: what we manage to master are the forces of separation, of disintegration, of destruction. We still know very little about the process of healing and growth, about caring and constructive

force. We still do not know how to become and live like brothers. We have yet to learn how to become our brothers' keepers.

In striving and through striving, we are trying to become more than we already are and what we have been. In this process, there is a real danger that, in search for more and in soaring toward the new, we lose what we already have – our ties with the past and with the tradition, with our family and brothers, with our real and symbolic mothers and fathers. More than Goethe, Dostoevsky is convinced that without conscience and compassion, without love and trust, there is no possibility of redemption and rebirth. Like Ivan, Faust does not deserve salvation. The God of *Faust's* Prologue has already made up his mind to save Faust.

And yet, just when we think we understand Dostoevsky's final position, doubt reemerges once more. In *The Brothers Karamazov* God is not a character, but an ambiguous shadowy presence, troubling the minds and hearts of virtually all of Dostoevsky's protagonists. Dostoevsky knew that Ivan should not be saved – Ivan failed as his brothers' keeper. Yet he also knew that Ivan's discontent with regard to the suffering of the innocent cannot be silenced: How can we be guilty of not being our brothers' keepers when God Himself allows the meaningless suffering of the innocent and is not the keeper of His own children?

Dostoevsky admired Goethe throughout his life, and many of his works present a continuous dialogue with his great predecessor. After struggling with his *Faust* for about six decades, Goethe finally finished his masterpiece shortly before he died. When at last he completed the second part of *Faust*, Goethe sealed the manuscript, to avoid the temptation to revisit or revise it again. Perhaps Dostoevsky was less fortunate than his German counterpart. His death came before he could even start the second part of his most monumental drama, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky himself was not fortunate to bring his work to completion and find at least a temporary ending for his own ceaseless striving. But perhaps we as readers are better off without that closure. There is some uncanny association between closure and death on the one hand, and life and struggle on the other. What makes us human, what makes us alive, is not so much a closure or a destination. It is our journey, our struggle, our striving. Despite our continuous search for the meaning of life, what our journey and our struggle and our striving are about is the experience of being alive. That is why the conclusion of *Faust* seems not quite in line with the rest of the great drama. That is also why neither Ivan nor Alyosha can be the true hero of Dostoevsky's masterpiece. If that drama has the hero, it can only be Dmitri Karamazov.