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The Redemption of Eve: Joseph Smith and Goethe's *Faust*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin & tr. Walter W. Arndt, Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (W.W. Norton & Co.: New York, 2000 [orig. pub. 1832])

By Terryl Givens

I.
Literature, being more imaginatively expansive than theology, was the first to recognize the impossibility of the predicament.

Perdition, ultimate loss, lies on either side as Eve considers her options in the Garden. She stymies the infinite expansion of selfhood, thwarts her own soul's insatiability, murders her own human potential. Or she violates the bonds of filial regard, alienates herself from her God and Creator, and defies the divine. The question is not *if* she will transgress, but how. Not *if* she will choose the Good, but *which* Good she will embrace, and which she will shun.

The voice of religious orthodoxy, beginning with the simple premise of a universe in peaceful equilibrium, must perforce assume, in C. S. Lewis's formulation, that obedience to God would ultimately have proven obedience to the best in human nature. Any *felix* in the *culpa* deriving from humankind's sin attaches to the sublime act of Christ, not the perfidious act of Eve. The fall was a catastrophe. A mitigated catastrophe, but a catastrophe nonetheless, and an

evil—being committed against Love and Perfection personified—of such infinite, unspeakable betrayal that the universe itself could not contain it; the evil of Eve's primeval gesture overflows itself into generations millennia removed, children and children's children yet unborn. The original sin was a straightforward choice of the ultimate evil over transcendent good.

But literature, insofar as it may treat of the human qua human, in a universe free of moral judgments and theological imperatives, sees a very different scenario. What it sees in the Adam and Eve story is the primal human predicament. And it is a fundamentally tragic predicament. Which means, the human finds himself in a world not of equilibrium, but of cosmic conflict, where the alignments are not the simple alignments of Good and Evil, or ones where neatly sequestered alternatives attach to neatly opposed choices. In this universe, supreme virtues clash and collide; absolute values array themselves in dramatic contestation.

This is the universe revealed in Genesis, when not viewed through the narrowing prism of religious convention.

“Ye shalt not eat of it.” (Gen. 3:3)

“Your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as the gods,

knowing good and evil.” (Gen. 3:5)

“God hath said, ye shall not eat of it.” (Gen. 3:3)

“The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise.” (Gen. 3:6)

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Obedience *was* an incontestable good.

The tree *was* good for food, it *was* pleasant to the eyes, it *did* make one wise.

II.

Perhaps the earliest literary type in Western literature (especially if we find Eve its first incarnation), certainly the most pervasive, is Faust. Faust's dilemma is not just another vexing human predicament. It is *the* human predicament. (Of course, this presumes the anti-orthodox reading of Genesis I have proposed. Which is, again of course, the reading the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price give us of Genesis). Faust is just a middle-aged Eve, with a long life in the garden and a few diplomas to show for it.

How long were Adam and Eve in the garden before Satan's address? Narrative compression should not be mistaken for an indication of brief duration. Long enough to be sated, surely. Faust has acquired all the learning his garden has to offer. He knows every tree, shrub, and garden path. Like Eve, he has seen the same sun rise over the same grassy hillock on countless winter morns and summer daybreaks, while listening to the same dutiful companion (Faust has his Wagner) recite the same litany of another day's chores under the same cloudless skies. Like Eve, Faust faces the same two sets of alternatives. Soul-starvation, or God-alienation. Or put in positive terms: Knowledge, wisdom, and the soul's unfettered ascent, or a different kind of assent—to God's dictates.

All versions of Faust begin as literature and end as theology.

They start in soul-agony, and end in moralistic over-simplification. Emblematic of this trajectory is the first English translation of the German *Faustbuch*. However compelling we find the doctor's initial dilemma, the English title betrays both the protagonist's final disposition—and his offense against orthodox morality. It is titled, "the damnable life and deserved death of Faustus." We may pity Faust's difficulty, but right and wrong define the options.

But change is in the wind. Christopher Marlowe's reworking shows a greater appreciation for the impossibility of the Faustian predicament, a tentative recognition of the sympathy due our own race. "The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus," he tellingly recasts the title. Dr. Faustus conveys the pathos of what it means to be Eve in a claustrophobic garden: Logic, medicine, law—the entire medieval curriculum he has mastered. His narrow study, like the boundaries of Eden, fits only "a mercenary drudge . . . too servile and illiberal for me." So finding his only road to self-actualization is the path of sin, he takes it. Nevertheless, even Renaissance humanism bows to the imperious limitations of religion. This Faust, alas, ends in the same fires of hell as all other Fausts.

In 1832, the greatest man of letters of Joseph Smith's era, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published *Faust: Part II*. Inspired by Goethe's guiding genius, this version gives the human condition its first full due. Faust is the same man, consumed by titanic passion, insatiable appetite, unconquerable will. Even more fully realized in his person, is the

faint sense that in suffering the constraints of mortality, he is suffocating a soul with roots in the heavenly realms:

Two souls, alas, are dwelling in
my breast,
And either would be severed
from its brother;
The one holds fast with joyous
earthy lust
Onto the world of man with
organs clinging;
The other soars impassioned
from the dust,
To realms of lofty forebears
winging. [lines 1112-1117]

But this Faust labors in a mortal sphere presided over by a God who is most emphatically not the God of Genesis. Devoid of jealousy, incapable of gratuitous tyranny, this God fully acknowledges the impossibility of Faust's dilemma. Following his oft-rehearsed script, Goethe's Faust chooses to transgress the limits of law, rather than succumb to the safety of stasis. He leaves a sobering trail of destruction in his wake: broken hearts and shattered lives lie scattered about him. At the bitter end, as his eyes close on his mortal sojourn, and devils rush in to seize his soul, God intervenes. "Faust is saved," the voice from heaven proclaims. "He ever sins, who ever strives."

Did Goethe have Eve in mind? It doesn't matter. Because in Faust's redemption, we clearly see Eve's redemption as well. For Faust's choice is, of course, Eve's choice. And Eve's song, is Faust's song:

And in that day, Adam blessed
God and [said] . . . Blessed be
the name of God, for because
of my transgression, my eyes
are opened.... And Eve...heard

all these things, and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption. (Moses 5:10)

Literature, being more imaginatively expansive than

theology, was the first to recognize the impossibility of the predicament. Until now, even treatments of Faust, that most iconoclastic of literary types, began as literature, but end as theology. Goethe's Faust, like Joseph Smith's Eve, breaks free of theology, because the

imagination behind their creation is more artistic than priestly.

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