Faustus: alone among men

Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus presents a protagonist who sells his soul to the devil for god-like knowledge and power. The tension in Faustus surfaces from the protagonist’s self-damnation, for he is constantly reminded and aware of his numerous avenues to salvation. His fundamental tragedy is that he refuses his humanity. He convinces himself that, by refuting his personhood and selling his soul to the devil, he can become all knowing. Though he gains the magic promised him by the devil, he slowly becomes aware that he is now void of identity altogether. Faustus does not become less human because he has become a god; rather, he becomes less human only in that he denies his place in humanity. He removes himself from the community of man in favor of a commune of soullessness and debauchery. In fact, if conceit and foolishness are what bring about Faustus’ tragic fall, it is the forsaking of his own God-given human soul that enables the fruition of such conceit and foolishness in the first place. Without his humanity and faith to give his life meaning, Faustus is left without purpose for existence, turning to the pleasures of magic and art as substitutes for his lost personhood. In the Prologue, the Chorus explains that pride leads Faustus to discount his theology and turn to magic. Faustus’ life of fruitful scholarship has enriched him with knowledge: “ Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes / In heavenly matters of theology” (18-9). Yet, Faustus finds no contentment with his studies. Though he might “ heap up gold, / And be eternized for some wondrous cure” as a physician, such prospects fail to appeal to him (1. 1. 14-5). He says: Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man. Wouldst thou make man to live eternally, Or, being dead, raise them to life again, Then this profession were to be esteemed. (1. 1. 23-6)His discontent is that he is only “ a man,” bound by the laws of Earth and limited by his finite existence. His mistake, of course, is that he ignores his theology, which tells him that man’s most profound spiritual needs are answered only in Communion with God, be they knowledge of man’s origins or the miracle to, as Faustus says, “ raise [the dead] to life again.” There exists, then, a division in Faustus. On the one side are the desires for knowledge present in all men. On the other side of the division lie the means by which he might gratify those desires: acceptance of his humanity and participation in God’s plan. The wall that separates these parts is constructed of his pride and foolishness. This dissection becomes more apparent when Faustus continues expressing his restlessness and desire: Ay, we must die an everlasting death. What doctrine you call this? Ché sérá, sérá,“ What will be, shall be”? Divinity, adieu! These metaphysics of magiciansAnd necromantic books are heavenly, […] Oh, what a world of profit and delight, Of power, of honor, of omnipotenceIs promised to the studious artisan! All things that move between the quiet polesShall be at my command. (1. 1. 48-59)This may be viewed as the exact moment Faustus refutes his faith and turns to the false promises of magic. He arrives at the conclusion that all men are fated to die by ignoring the most important tenet of his former faith–that the gift of Communion with God is everlasting life. Further, he speaks of commanding all things “ that move between the quiet poles,” a hope borne from his belief that the “ metaphysics of magicians / And necromantic books are heavenly.” If the books of magicians are “ heavenly,” it is still impossible for those texts to be more heavenly than the gospels with which Faustus is aware. Moreover, had Faustus not denied his proper place among men, he would already be in possession of all “ that move[s] between the quiet poles,” for God has granted man dominion over those earthly things. Again, it is denial of his personhood, of his place in relation to other men and God, that precedes his downfall. Once he denies God’s charity and chooses covenant with Mephistopheles instead, Faustus’ hunger for knowledge does not, as Faustus hoped, become satiated. He asks Mephistopheles a series of questions about hell and the universe, until eventually, frustrated with half-answers, he sighs, “ Well, I am answered” (2. 3. 66). Faustus’ frustration becomes apparent: Faustus: “[…] Tell me who made the world.” Mephistopheles: “ I will not.”“ Sweet Mephistopheles, tell me.”“ Move me not, for I will not tell thee.”“ Villain, have I not bound thee to tell me anything?”“ Ay, that is not against our kingdom, but thisis. Think thou on hell, Faustus, for thou art damned.”“ Think, Faustus, upon God, that made the world.” (2. 3. 66-73)The reason, of course, that Mephistopheles cannot answer the most important questions of the universe is that the answers have meaning only with reference and respect to the human condition, as well as reverence for the purview of God. True answers to Faustus’ questions require Mephistopheles to admit that the truth lies with God, not in black magic. Faustus’ theology informs him of this fact, as he laments, “ Think Faustus, upon God, that made the world.” Again, it is his pride that subdues his instinctive faith, preventing him from renouncing his devilish pact and restoring his place among men. However, this is not to say that Faustus does not have moments of doubt. On the contrary, Faustus’ instinctive faith surfaces many times throughout the span of the play. He hungers for something to compensate the loss of his spirit, and in Faustus’ most doubtful moments (moments of hope for the audience), Mephistopheles is there, offering trivial distractions and a momentary fix. As Faustus considers the Good Angel’s promise that it is “ Never too late, if Faustus can repent,” Lucifer intercedes with a fanciful show of the Seven Deadly Sins (2. 3. 79). Though meant as a satirical distraction, their words are significant to understanding the importance of Faustus' denunciation of his humanity: I am pride. I disdain to have any parents. […]I am covetousness, begotten of an old churl inan old leathern bag. […]I am Wrath. I had neither father nor mother. […]I am envy, begotten of a chimney sweeper and anoyster-wife. […]I am gluttony. My parents are all dead. […]I am Sloth. I was begotten on a sunny bank. (2. 3. 110-51)Though each sin exhibits its own individual characteristics, all of the sins share one critical attribute: each sin either has no parents or is illegitimate. They are all like Faustus in that they have been disinherited; they have either been cut off from or rebelled against their patronage. If Faustus is guilty of each of these sins at some point in the duration of his twenty-four-year covenant with the devil, then this passage suggests the cause of such sin. Faustus, in an attempt to be alone among men as a god, has found himself simply alone. Without faith in the human condition, Faustus is truly lost. Indeed, the scene with the Seven Deadly Sins marks a significant transition point in Faustus. The Sins represent the end result of lost personhood, and now, we are to see Faustus' journey through such self-hell. Void of spiritual sustenance, he turns to sin to satisfy his hunger pains. Each event demonstrates the extent of Faustus' loss. At the beginning of Act 3, Wagner says: Learnéd Faustus, To know the secrets of astronomyGraven in the book of Jove's high firmament, Did mount himself to scale Olympus' top, Being seated in a chariot burning brightDrawn by the strength of yoky dragons' necks. He now is gone to prove cosmography, And, as I guess, will first arrive at RomeTo see the Pope and manner of his courtAnd take some part of holy Peter's feastThat to this day is highly solemnized. (3. 0. 1-11)Though he has “ scale[d] Olympus’ top,” the wonders of the universe fail to satisfy Faustus for very long; one must value one’s own place in the universe before the grandeur of that universe might ever be appreciated. Even before Faustus has sufficient time to rest, he wishes to go on another–probably pointless–journey. He and Mephistopheles go to “ see the Pope and manner of his court / And take some part of holy Peter’s feast.” Faustus can only take “ some” part of the feast because he has denied himself Communion with God. He turns, instead, to childish pranks to aggravate the Pope, who implores his Friars to “ prepare a dirge to lay the fury of / this ghost” (3. 1. 75-6). Perhaps, for the first time since his introduction, we are now meant to see Faustus truly as a devil. He has completely forsaken his identity as a man, only to gain nothing and be left with his lesser demons and sins. It is telling that, even in moments of greatest effort, Faustus is unable to fulfill the most menial of his wishes. Nothing he can conjure is real or substantial. At the court of the Emperor, Faustus is asked to raise Alexander the Great and his paramour. Faustus replies: But if it like Your Grace, it is not in my ability to pre-sent before your eyes the true substantial bodies of those two deceased princes, which long since are consumed to dust. (4. 1. 45-7)He cannot raise the “ substantial bodies” of the deceased princes, only their apparitions. After Faustus sells his conjured horse to the Courser, the Courser returns to Faustus:[…] I, like a venturous youth, ridhim into the deep pond at the town’s end. I was no soonerin the middle of the pond but my horse vanished away andI sat upon a bottle of hay. (4. 1. 146-9)The horse Faustus conjured is unreal and cannot even traverse water; the baptism was too much for Faustus’ regressing powers. The horse is unreal. Alexander is unreal. Even Faustus himself is becoming unreal, for the Horse-Courser pulls off one of Faustus' legs. He has bargained away his real soul for something not very real at all. Faustus' sin is at its peak in Act 5, as he foolishly tries to stave the void in his soul. The Old Man, strong in his conviction, once more attempts to save Faustus: Old Man: " Ah, stay, good Faustus, stay thy desperate steps! I see an angel hovers o'er thy head, And with a vial full of precious graceOffers to pour the same into thy soul. Then call for mercy and avoid despair." Faustus: " Ah, my sweet friend, I feel thy wordsTo comfort my distressed soul. Leave me awhile to ponder on my sins." (5. 1. 52-9)Despite this apparent hesitation, Faustus is too far gone. The minute Mephistopheles reacts (" Thou traitor, Faustus, I arrest thy soul." 66), Faustus immediately rejects the notion of a " sweet friend" who might genuinely care to comfort his " distressed soul." He begs Mephistopheles: Torment, sweet friend, that base and crooked ageThat durst dissuade me from thy Lucifer, With greatest torments that our hell affords. (5. 1. 75-7)Faustus wishes punishment for he who truly loves him; he is, at last, at the furthest possible point from salvation. He is now completely dominated by his soullessness, wishing only to avoid pain, having given up on hopes to gain knowledge and crying for Mephistopheles to grant him Helen in order to " glut the longing of [his] heart's desire" (5. 1. 82). In the final scene, Faustus cries out, " Be changed into little waterdrops, / And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found" (5. 2. 115)! He, in his last moments, wishes to escape what he has become. He is not at all repentant, nor is he sorry. He simply wishes his identity vanished, a dramatically fitting conclusion for a man whose tragedy is rejecting his God-given identity in the first place. Rather than accept his humanity as a divine gift, he shrugged it as a burden. Faustus wished to be alone among men as a god. In the end, he was simply alone. Works CitedMarlowe, Christopher. “ Doctor Faustus.” English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology. Eds. David Bevington, et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002. 250-85.