

Self-referential rhetoric in goethe's faust essay

Literature



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The first conversation between two human beings occurs in act I, scene II and its chief concern is effective rhetoric. Faust summoned a spirit in the previous scene and this passionate exchange has stirred the interest of Wagner, his assistant, who comes knocking on Faust's door in the dim lamplight. Having been wholly absorbed by this foray into the occult, Faust is understandably perturbed by the interruption and privately blames the spirit's disappearance on Wagner's knocking (though the spirit vanished before any knocking was heard). Wagner, dressed in nightcap and gown, eagerly hungers for learning, misinterpreting Faust's words with the spirit as the declamation of Greek drama. A strong character trait of Wagner's is his tendency to rely on what he has heard or been taught. "And I have heard asserted that a preacher / Might wisely have an actor for his teacher" (lines 520-21) exemplifies this. Faust conceals his disappointment well, making only one indirect reference to his feelings on being interrupted: "Yes, when our parsons preach to make grimaces, / As here and there a not uncommon case is.

" (522-23). Throughout the rest of the scene Faust stays focused purely on the subject of rhetoric and his annoyance is not made apparent. Faust is the teacher, and Wagner the student. It soon becomes clear that Wagner is troubled by the mastery of rhetoric. He speaks of his plight, "shut up from all mankind, / [..

.] / [...] / How may he hope, with nicely tempered skill, / To bend the hearts he knows not to his will?" (525-29). This is ironically similar to Faust's own situation and though he is a master of many subjects (including rhetoric) he has begun exploring the occult in an attempt to satisfy his soul.

Faust responds, " What you don't feel, you'll hunt to find in vain. / It must gush from the soul, possess the brain," (530-31). His advice is for Wagner not to fret over this disconnection with the outside world. It is more important that one feel what he is saying. To take other's ideas will never lead to successful rhetoric. Truly moving speech " flow[s] warm from human heart to heart. " (540-41). This stanza is self-referential in that Faust himself is hunting for something to make him feel good and his own brain has been possessed by the spiritual.

The fact that Faust lives by his words is a positive one and points to his salvation. " But the delivery is a chief concern / In Rhetoric; and alas! here I have much to learn. " (542-43).

Wagner uses Rhetoric with a capital " R", speaking of the rules set forth by ancient critics. Faust then asserts that honesty is more important than holding fast to any " critic's rule" (547). Paradoxically, Faust's dedication to honesty is a rule in itself. Well-crafted speech, if shallow, cannot be refreshing. Next, Wagner complains of his pains and how difficult it is to master an art so large during the course of such a short life. Faust's reply is that one's learning is never finished, but continuously pours forth from himself, and not another. Wagner then supposes that it is wise to know the lessons of past masters and then continue on, higher. Though Faust agrees, he amends an analogy to clarify his meaning: " My friend, the ages that are past / Are as a book with seven seals made fast;" (573-74).

Then, condescendingly, he says " the spirit of the age" (575) is nothing more than men recording " their own thoughts" (577) and reflections. This

representation of an era, Faust finds little value in it, it makes him sick even, for the writers of such epochs are but puppeteers. This particular rant seems to be the most deeply self-referential, for Faust is a play and Goethe is doing just what his character Faust belittles. In response to Faust's cynicism, Wagner declares, " But then the world! – the human heart and / mind! / Somewhat of this to know are all inclined.

(585-87). Faust then compares himself to other truth-seekers whose voicing of sight had them " burnt and crucified" (593). Abruptly, he ends the debate.

Wagner says goodnight gratefully, confessing that he is hungry for more " learned talk" (596) and tomorrow will pose more questions. He is enthusiastic and has learned much, but he wants more – he wants complete mastery. The way that each character speaks coincides with what they actually have to say about rhetoric. Wagner is a bit of a sycophant, flattering Faust at the end in hopes of learning more from him. Throughout, he claims that effective rhetoric can be studied and learned through other masters. His explicit quest to develop his oratory skills is a sure sign of his amateur status. Every statement that he makes is either something he has been told by another or a concern he is struggling with.

Faust, an apparent master of rhetoric and also a teacher to Wagner, speaks such that his words reflect his lessons, and thusly, the rhetoric is self-referential. Faust's words pour forth from him. He is not searching.

He is sure of himself. Even when it seems he has no respect for rhetoric he clearly explains his true meaning without difficulty. He is a cynic; an unhappy master still on the path to soulful satisfaction.

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He is speaking with Wagner of rhetoric, but still has the spirit on his mind. His tone and his thoughts reveal his belief that fine oratory can "at best" (582) amount to a puppet-show, mere amusement, however, Faust's own mastery of rhetoric is important in that it allows him to voice these beliefs. In this way, Faust is a bit of a contradiction.