

HOUSTON GERMAN STUDIES

Gertrud Bauer Pickar

Series Editor

The Age of Goethe Today

Critical Reexamination and Literary Reflection

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and
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to Goethe's Faust"

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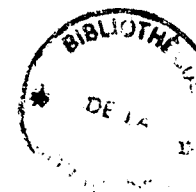


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Concerning Illustrations to Goethe's

*Faust*¹

PETER W. GUENTHER

In modern times, illustration has been in a twilight: in the introductory art history textbooks, illustrations are hardly mentioned, and literary criticism has either neglected them or has simply listed the illustrations as part of the book but never as part of the text. The reasons are manifold. The time when Goethe spent afternoons in conversations with friends looking through the portfolios of his own collection or those brought to him has long passed. Graphics hang now on the walls and print collectors (who are unfortunately still a minority) concentrate on single works. Books with illustrations are usually more expensive, they require better paper and are frequently considered "collector's items," thus losing a possible popularity. While we still believe that children's books ought to be illustrated, prose and poetry in illustrated editions have become rare—especially in editions of famous writers of the past. Illustrators are frequently considered lesser artists since they are bound to a text, an attitude which accentuates the "freedom" of the artist from any limitation to his imagination. (These are the last remnants of the battle against the academic productions especially of the later nineteenth century.) If an acknowledged artist makes illustrations they are then valued apart from the text or the suspicion is voiced that the commissions were accepted primarily for financial reasons.

This denigration of the importance of the illustration to a text is certainly based on the examples of the last century, when many illustrations hardly deserved this term. The illustrations to Goethe's *Faust* are no exception. While no other literary work has called forth so many attempts to illustrate the text,² the descriptions or criticisms of these illustrations were usually considered unimportant as far as the literary work was concerned. And yet: illustrations echo the developments of the arts, repeat their styles, and accept the new technical means.³ They are thus not only comments and references to the times of their production but also, and more importantly, they are interpretations of the text as it was read and understood at this period. It is a common experience when opening an illustrated book that the time-lag between the production of the illustration and the viewer/reader's own becomes immediately apparent. The conclusions are rarely drawn: illustrations can provide the basis for a reception assessment frequently more

precise and enlightening than contemporary literary reviews. The approach to illustration does, however, require a certain amount of historical-technical understanding.

The earliest form of illustrated books was the Block-Book, in which text and illustration were cut into the same woodblock; most of these were produced in the first half of the fifteenth century. The woodcut techniques were consistently improved and a short while later the illustrations were cut into the block which had the same height as the type (once moveable letters had been developed) and thus provided the large numbers of illustrated books in the sixteenth century. The importance of the single print or the portfolio (for instance: Albrecht Dürer) need not be emphasized. Chronologically, the next medium was the engraving, which made use of a metalplate that was less vulnerable, permitted finer lines, and gave the artists greater freedom. It is still considered a master's medium. The earliest engravings are dated in the latter half of the fifteenth century. To these two *intaglio* techniques was added a third in the first half of the sixteenth century: the art of etching. All three techniques are still used but lithography (invented 1798) has become the dominant modern technique, since it permits the most direct transference of an artist's drawing by mechanical means. Book illustration was enhanced in the nineteenth century by the wood-engraving technique, permitting the first illustrated newspapers and magazines, which in turn furthered the development of ever more sophisticated mechanical/technical transmissions of images, which were consequently also used in book illustration. The character of the different graphic techniques varies greatly and the artist's choice is therefore of great importance. The "soft" work on a lithograph against the "hard" work on a woodcut or even an engraving will influence not only the style but also the form-structure of the work. The technical quality of the illustrations in books can also vary greatly, and access to the originals is nearly a necessity in evaluating the contributions of an artist.

Apart from these technical developments, book illustration underwent considerable changes not only in parallel to the dominant styles in the other visual arts but also in regard to its functions in relationship to the text. Earlier illustrations usually concentrated on the scenes that were, in the eyes of the artist, significant for the development of the story. These selections usually caused no problems, but the form of the interpretation of the scenes did gain in importance. It was and is on this basis that the evaluation of the artist's sensitivities to the text as well as of his/her capabilities is made. To translate a text into a visual form is fraught with difficulties. The text, especially in poetry, is complete in itself and does not seem to require an interpretation. While this appears to be a truism, its fallacy is easily proven especially in view of Goethe's *Faust*. No other work of world literature has evoked so many and such detailed interpretations, and the

illustrators over the past two hundred years have changed their interpretative approaches as much as the textual interpreters.

The earliest important illustrations to the first part of Goethe's *Faust* were the *Umrisszeichnungen* (contour drawings) by Friedrich August Moritz Retzsch (1779-1857), which Goethe saw in 1810 during his stay in Dresden, where he also visited the artist. These were made into engravings and published in 1816 (with reworked and added plates in several editions). The *Umrisszeichnung* had become popular through John Flaxmann's pure line illustrations to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (first published in Rome in 1793), which were admired in all of Europe for their neo-classical approach. Retzsch's illustrations, which followed this example, also gained popularity, and copies were made in England and in France. Goethe preferred them to the depictions by Peter von Cornelius, the first drawings which he had seen in 1811 and greatly admired, although he later found the depictions too "old-fashioned Germanic." Goethe retained his preference for clear line-drawings all through his life. Both Retzsch's and Cornelius' series of illustrations had a great influence on the performances of *Faust* on the stage: the sixteenth century costumes, the semi-gothic architecture, and the restricted spaces dominated the stage-designs for a long time. Only the twentieth century freed itself from these images, and modern stagings of the plays have in turn influenced the illustrators.

The simplicity of the line-drawings by Retzsch, regardless of the various flaws, was by far more succinct than Cornelius' works, which tend to be carried away with details that do not contribute to the overall impact of the illustration; the costumes, the architecture, the restricted spaces, and the exaggerated gestures distract from the overall view. The far greater achievement were the lithographs by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), which were published in 1818 and which prompted Goethe to admit that the artist had surpassed his own conception in several scenes. Delacroix had been inspired by a musical version of *Faust* in the Drury Lane Theater in London in June of 1825 and these lithographs were his first venture in the field of illustration. The edition (with a portrait of Goethe as frontispiece) was not financially successful, and the stones were later passed to various publishers. The difference in the quality of these prints in the various editions is remarkable. A comparison of these early illustrations clarifies two aspects of illustration in general: a) the mastery of the medium as a requirement, and b) the power of the artist to interpret a text. Retzsch's lines are the result of contour drawings translated into engravings, while Delacroix used lithography, a medium that gave him a multitude of greys and pure black and thus a far greater expressive power. The difference between the neo-classicistic and the romantic approach cannot be better demonstrated. Delacroix does not simply create an image of particular scenes, he interprets the character of Faust, gives

Mephistopheles a truly demonic appearance, and creates scenes of frightening tensions and implications of impending doom. There is no question that he must have seen Retzsch's and possibly also Cornelius' works, since he used some of their compositional devices. A comparison of the depiction of the scene "Nacht. Offen Feld," where Faust and Mephistopheles ride by the execution hill, makes the qualitative difference obvious and accentuates the interpretative power of a great artist against that of a minor one.

Later illustrations to *Faust* were not of the same caliber. Gustav Schlick (1804-1869), Engelbert Seibert (1813-1905), Gustav Nehrlich (1807-1840), and many others followed their predecessors, choosing mostly the same scenes and retaining the stage-like designs. None of these prints comes even close to the power and interpretative imagination of Delacroix's depictions. Only Paul Konewka (1840-1871) contributed in 1866 a new vision by using the form of the silhouette for some of the leading characters in important scenes. Alexander Liezen-Mayer (1839-1898) published a *Faust-Cycle* in 1878 which became very popular and echoed the contemporary staging of the play. It is the most bourgeois of the many cycles made in this period and could be found in editions of Goethe's works well into the first years of the new century.

Closer to the theme of this Symposium and therefore more important are the illustrations to *Faust* in the twentieth century. In one of the most problematical periods in German history, the time after World War I, artists rediscovered the art of illustration and many chose *Faust* as theme. Parallel to it went a new love for the book as a work of art.⁴ The large nineteenth century books with their velvet covers, gold edges, and usually poor color reproductions had given way to a new type of book frequently with individually designed bindings, hand-made paper, and new typographical fonts. In short, some books were made into applied works of art, based on the underlying concept that books that were treasured for their contents ought to have a form that would echo the value accorded the text. It was primarily this type of book in which the important illustrations were to be found, although cheaper editions could follow later.

Of the many outstanding illustrations to *Faust* in the twentieth century, only a few can be mentioned. Chronologically the first was Ernst Barlach's *Walpurgisnacht* published in 1923 by Paul Cassirer. In twenty woodcuts the great sculptor created a vision of the scenes on the peak of the Brocken which went far beyond the text. In these outstanding expressionistic prints the individual characters and their actions are presented as fascinating and grotesque beings. The impact of the dramatic power of these woodcuts is due to the distortion of the forms and the abbreviations which make the whole interlude appear like a nightmarish vision. Although some scenes show a great sense of bitter and sarcastic humor, the series of prints (the last of Barlach's woodcut series)

depicts images that in their forcefulness were not paralleled by any other illustrator. The gifted writer and dramatist Barlach (cf. Carls, Reutti, and Schult) was able to translate--in the true sense of the word--Goethe's words into images that match their source. While the forms are tied to the Expressionist idiom, they are an independent statement and thus parallel the power of invention inherent in the text. No other artist has chosen to illustrate only the *Walpurgisnacht* scenes. The imagination required to give Goethe's concept an adequate form was met by Barlach's own sensitivity and the use of the sharply contrasting black and whites of the woodcuts.

Nearly the opposite to Barlach's works are the illustrations to *Faust II* by Max Slevogt (1868-1932), made between 1924 und 1926. The book, published with 510 lithographs and eleven etchings in 1927 in Berlin by Bruno Cassirer, is the most comprehensive work of illustration for this drama. Slevogt had been offered a commission to illustrate *Faust II* in 1918, which he had initially refused; under the influence of a severe illness, however, he finally accepted. Slevogt is considered one of Germany's few Impressionists, although his ability to use many techniques and media makes this designation rather meaningless. "The eye sees what it looks for" was his maxim. He was very successful as painter and as an outstanding illustrator, using texts ranging from *Ali Baba* (1903) to *Macbeth* (1927) with the *Iliad* and novels of James Fenimore Cooper in between. His great technical skill permitted him to use the transfer-process in lithography not only to insert his illustrations on top or bottom of the page but also to surround the text with his figures and scenes. There are many pages on which only a hand-drawn arabesque appears (sometimes filled with small figures), due to the fact that the text did not provide him with an image which permitted an illustration. In general, Slevogt selected those texts that offered themselves to illustrations because the words described precisely those forms or scenes that the artist could find in his own inner vision. There are many "references" in Slevogt's work that are as hidden as are the poet's in the text. Emperor Maximilian and Raphael's "Triumph of Galatea" appear in the prints, as well as various portraits, which add to the wealth of the concepts and images. Slevogt exemplifies the type of illustrator who requires the descriptiveness of the text in order to create a convincing image. His works are therefore more an accompaniment to the text than a revelation of new insights and interpretations. Regardless of this dependency, however, Slevogt was able to provide the text with an additional dimension and thus proved himself to be a master of illustration.

Another outstanding illustrator was Josef Hegenbarth (1884-1962) (cf. Löffler) who had first become known as a painter of everyday scenes and especially of animals, which he endowed with a remarkable dignity rarely seen. Primarily, however, he was known for

his drawings and his graphic works which appeared regularly in journals like *Jugend* and *Simplicissimus*. He preferred the medium of drypoint, the drawing on a metal-plate with a steel needle, which gives the lines an added richness. In 1961 and 1963 the two *Faust* volumes appeared, illustrated with a multitude of images that were on one hand very close translations of the text and on the other free associations and images that added the artist's interpretations. The drawings with a fine pen were accentuated with strong black washes and are basically realistic in form, with the costumes and gestures translated into modern times. They provide the viewer with a freedom rarely found in such text-related images, in which humorous and even grotesque commentaries on the follies of man stand beside deadly serious, demonic, and frightening scenes. The two volumes show a great sensitivity in regard to the relations between the type--the *Faust-Antiqua* used for the first time for these volumes--and the drawing style of Hegenbarth.

One of the great modern artists who illustrated *Faust II* was Max Beckmann (1884-1950). In 1943/44 he worked on this commission for Georg Hartmann in oppressive circumstances in Amsterdam. He had emigrated in 1937 when the Nazis had dismissed him from his teaching position and declared his works "degenerate." The Nazi troops had occupied Holland, and the dangers of the war surrounded the artist when he worked on this challenging task, just after having completed illustrations for the *Apocalypse*. The series of pen-drawings as illustrations of *Faust II* is one of the outstanding and complex works of the twentieth century. While the illustrations follow the text, they also interpret it in a modern idiom, which requires as much concentration on the illustration as on the text. The unity becomes evident when especially the larger of the drawings are analysed and compared with the text's message. It is almost necessary to be aware of the paintings on which Beckmann worked during this period (as well as earlier ones of which he used certain forms again) in order to see that the illustrations are really more than that--they are adequate parallels. As in most modern works of art, there are hints to identifiable personal experiences, self-portraits are used to characterize certain figures in specific contexts; and references are made that make a reading of the artist's diaries, letters and articles indispensable. The situation in which the drawings were made must be kept in mind, when the complex iconography is confronted. Beckmann's visual references to religious-mystical concepts, his incorporation of images rooted in texts other than Goethe's and his very personal vision to see in *Faust* the human drama in its most complex form, make these drawings truly contemporary translations of the text.

This much too abbreviated summary tries to provide the impetus to begin again to look at the various illustrations of *Faust* as a means of reviewing the reception that the tragedy received by various artists through the years. Each of the illustrators sought an

adequate form for images, as well as concepts, which the text provided. It is enlightening to see that shift of emphasis over the years. The different depiction of Faust and of Mephistopheles alone clarifies the varying interpretations. The selection of specific scenes is equally enlightening. What was most important to the early illustrators became secondary to the contemporary masters. The last four modern artists mentioned represent four completely different artistic styles: not only did they each chose a medium that appeared to them to be the most adequate, but they also created images that even seem to contradict each other. Only a very careful approach to the selection, the form, and the chosen medium of these illustrations for a common text can provide insight to the modern artist's challenge to make an "old" text again as modern as it deserves and requires. It would be a challenge to take the illustrations as a starting-point instead of the text. Such an approach would force a re-reading with the emphasis on the visual clues and signals the poet has given. Under the guidance of the illustrator an insight could be gained which would add a further dimension to our understanding and experiencing of one of the great works of world literature.

University of Houston

NOTES

1 A small exhibition of 145 illustrations to Goethe's *Faust* was displayed in the Brown Room of the M.D. Anderson Library in conjunction with the "Age of Goethe Today" Symposium. It was designed to contribute to a renewed recognition of the value of the illustration as an additional tool for an understanding of the changing interpretations and as another means to view the reception of a text.

2 The catalogues of the most important Goethe collections in Frankfurt, Leipzig, and Weimar provide ample evidence.

3 It is true, however, that the knowledge of the technical means is not wide-spread and requires a familiarity with the development of the graphic arts rarely taught in courses on literature or even in art history.

4 This development had a parallel in the various issues of print portfolios. They were often sold numbered, signed, and printed on special paper, but were also available on cheaper paper with or without the signature of the artist.

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Parody from Beyond: Plenzdorf's

Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.

and Eighteenth Century Parodies of Goethe's

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers

UTE BRANDES

In a letter of 21 October 1774, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi relates to Goethe his enthusiasm for *Werthers Leiden*. Placing himself with the author on the side of "genius" vs. the cold rationalist critics, he anticipates the novel's reception:

Aber zum Henker . . . wie werden sich . . . die Schurken von Recensenten bey dieser Erscheinung gebärden? Rasend möchte ich werden bei der blossen Vorstellung so eines Kerls, der mir meinen Werther ausgräbe, um ihn auf das *Theatrum anatomicum* zu schleppen, ihm das Haupt öffnete, und das Herz, und alle Muskeln und Nerven besichtigte, die Gebeine ablösete, siedete, mit Drath wieder an einander heftete, und ein schneeweißes, künstliches Skelet davon herstellte; das Messer hier könnt' ich dem Hund in die Brust jagen! (Müller 211)

Indeed, Jacobi could scarcely have foreseen that *Werthers Leiden* was to become one of the most closely scrutinized bodies on the "Theatrum anatomicum" of German literary criticism and scholarship. The work, written at a time of rapidly changing literary and social conventions, soon produced an unusually broad range of critical response. This eighteenth century reception can be placed in roughly four categories. First, a few literary critics appreciated the work on its own terms, most notably among them Friedrich Blankenburg, who pointed to Goethe's aesthetic consistency in the narrative development of a passionately sensitive and subjective protagonist. However, Blankenburg's insight "der Dichter ist nicht verbunden, uns immer ein *sittliches* Ideal zu geben" (Müller 186), went directly against the dominant literary conventions of the times. New readers, thus far familiar mostly with devotional literature, also began to devour Moral Weeklies and didactic middle class novels. This second group of recipients was accustomed to identify with the moral stance of literary protagonists and therefore promptly misunderstood Goethe's work as an apology for suicide. In their involved and, at times, fatally naive