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Elmira Bazregarzadeh

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CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S DR. FAUSTUS: A NIETZSCHEAN ÜBERMENSCH

Elmira Bazregarzadeh

PhD Student of English Language and Literature at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch
(IRAN)

eli.b1988@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The notion of the Renaissance Man of the sixteenth century inextricably interwoven with its emphasis on man's individuality and human's potentials is an issue that is closely related to the core of the Elizabethan Renaissance tragedies and more importantly to Christopher Marlowe's "The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" (1604). Similarly, the hero's, Dr. Faustus, self-selective, passionate quest for gaining absolute power through knowledge is reminiscent of the Nietzschean tragic hero, i. e. the *Übermensch*. Hence, the main objective of this research paper is to render a Nietzschean examination of the aforementioned play in order to reach the conclusion that Dr. Faustus's actions and his ultimate downfall in the end can be taken into account as a Dionysian rebirth achieved through an effort of will.

Key Words: Omnipotence; *Übermensch*; Will; Individuality; Nietzsche; Dr. Faustus

1. INTRODUCTION

Like some other works of Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), his "Tragical History of Doctor Faustus" (1604) centers on the recurrent issues regarding the insatiable aspirations of its overreaching protagonist, Dr. Faustus. Set in the sixteenth century Elizabethan Renaissance milieu, the play is an emblem of the stereotypical Renaissance Man, taking as its core issue the emphasis on the capacities and capabilities of the ambitious individual to gain the upper hand, representing the example of "of the widespread influence of humanism throughout England and across class lines" (Crane, 2000, p. 25). Equally, the individual's quest for self-improvement and self-transcendence sheds light on the Renaissance humanists' focus on Man as a "source of infinite possibilities, ideally developing towards a balance of physical, spiritual, moral, and intellectual faculties" as a counter notion to the medieval ascetic Christian doctrine viewing the individual as a "miserable sinner awaiting redemption from a pit of fleshly corruption" (Baldick, 1990, p. 117).

Marked with the revival of art and literature of the time and accompanied by the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era, Elizabethan Renaissance was the bedrock of the emergence of great men of literature, among whom the name of Christopher Marlowe is eye-catching. His greatness stems from his literary productions that were celebrated by his fellowmen on the one part and distinguished his position as the leading Elizabethan tragedian of his time on the other part. Despite the turmoil of his lifetime, he spent "the greater part of his life in formal education, and what he learned informs his plays at every level. To a very considerable extent, Marlowe presented himself as a scholar-dramatist, and his plays offered their [Elizabethan] audiences knowledge as well as entertainment" (Hopkins, 1962, p. 82). His being reputed as the father of English tragedy was partly due to his engagement and introduction of "blank verse into tragedy" and at the same time his "characterization helped develop Elizabethan concept of tragedy as a way of exploring key moral issues of the Renaissance" ("Dr. Faustus", 1998, p. 80).

Marlowe's employment of themes related to "ambition and Machiavellianism" (ibid) in his works may be justified as a conscious attempt to humiliate the role of religion in his characters' lives and bear witness to his atheist attitudes. With regard to the atheist beliefs found in Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus," there emerges the notion of Nietzschean rejection of religion and his proclamation "God is dead" (qtd. in Sedgwick, 2009, p. 30). Taking this issue into consideration, the writer of this short paper intends to bring to light the interrelations between Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* so as to depict that Dr. Faustus's thirst for knowledge and omnipotence illuminates Nietzsche's aphoristic saying which goes as, "The individual should be consecrated to something suprapersonal-that is what tragedy demands" (qtd. in Hadaegh, *Pragmatic Action*, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, the main issues and concepts that will be dealt with throughout this paper are the ones that have to do with the Nietzschean reading of the abovementioned play which bring about the main outcomes that will be presented in the concluding part and firm Nietzsche's position up as the philosopher "who can see things others cannot" (Haase, 2008, p. 4) and create a tie between Nietzschean *Übermensch* and Dr. Faustus.

2. DISCUSSION

On reading Nietzsche and his emphasis on Apollonian/Dionysian binary, one may wonder what the real purpose of life is. Such inquiries into the depth of life and its purpose made the eminent German philosopher, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), dedicate his life to studies and researches in this regard. His preoccupation with the concepts of truth and life makes it clear that "he has something important to say about truth" (Clark, 1990, p. 15). Nietzsche's claim of the death of God and his subsequent reputation as "the theorist of nihilism" (Childs, 2000, p. 57), should not be defined negatively, arguing that he was a pessimist. According to Clark, "As Nietzsche says, he is certainly one of the great nihilists of the nineteenth century, but his aim is to defeat this nihilism in order to return to 'some-thing'" (1990, p. 4). Part of the difficulty in interpreting Nietzsche is that his main intention was to be "the philosopher of Eternal Recurrence, and thereby Eternity" (Löwith, 1945, p. 273). Nietzsche's struggle for being timeless results in his casting doubt on the classical and Christian belief in "an eternal order" (ibid) and giving rise to his conception of the need of the philosopher to "transcend the human-all-too-human standpoint and look at things from beyond humanity" (ibid, p. 275). This standpoint is the one Marlowe's Dr. Faustus is trying to achieve, i.e. the "automaton" (ibid).

Having mastered all the boundaries of earthly, human knowledge, "The fruitful plot of scholarism graced" (Marlowe, 2006, i. 16), Dr. Faustus now aspires to reach more and satisfy his passion for supreme power. Like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, what Faustus longs for is "... a world of profit and delight/Of power, of honour, of omnipotence" (ibid, 54-5). As an ideal Renaissance Man he claims, "All things that move beyond the quiet poles/Shall be at my command" (ibid, 56-7). Thus, the only possible means of resolving his obsessive concern with transcendence over the world of humanity is practicing necromancy, in that "A sound magician is a mighty god" (ibid, 62). The reference to the word god is worthy of notice here owing to the fact that it shows Faustus's rejection of any belief in an almighty God and creates a tie with Nietzsche's doing away with the concept of God. What purpose lies behind Marlowe's characterization of Faustus as such here may be linked to the point that the long-lasting Christian doctrines of the time forced people not to "look upon Christian doctrines and church-history in a free and impartial way" (Pearson and Large, 2006, p. 12). Thus, skepticism and confusion of thought resulted in "realizing that totality of Christianity is grounded in presuppositions" (ibid). Therefore, for Nietzsche as well as Marlowe and his character "the existence of God, immortality, Biblical authority, inspiration, and other doctrines will always remain problems" (ibid).

When Faustus calls Valdes and Cornelius over, he mentions:

Philosophy is odious and obscure,
Both law and physics are for petty wits;
Divinity is the basest of the three,
Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile.

'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me. (Marlowe, 2006, i. 106-10)

For such a well-educated scholar what need shall there be to lead him to such thoughts? Answering this question and solving this conflict is possible if we concentrate on how Nietzsche's "prophet of the highest rank of being," Zarathustra, turns the Christian belief in "a progressive history" based on the notions of "an absolute beginning and end" on its head and renders the "idea of an indefinite progress from primitive backwardness to civilized progressiveness" (Löwith, 1945, p. 278) in return.

Where the Good Angel enters on Faustus and warns him about the outcome of his decision saying:

O Faustus, lay that damned book aside,
And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul,
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head;
Read, read the Scriptures; that is all blasphemy. (Marlowe, 2006, i. 704)

The Bad Angel replies:

Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art,
Wherein all nature's treasury is contained;
Be thou on earth as Jove in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements. (ibid, 74-7)

These contradictory viewpoints and the reference to the word soul play an important role in Marlowe's tragedy so much so that Faustus shows his interest in this practice as a means of cheering up his soul whereby such ardour behooves him to "... have these joys in full possession" (ibid, 152). As such, Faustus's longing for supremacy requires him to pass over the existing boundaries of Christian logic, whose main guideline is that man is a sinner by nature and should seek redemption through suffering. To do so, "he must completely abstract from his own and from the nearest wider circle on to far-reaching ones" (Pearson & Large, 2006, p. 13). Read like this, Faustus's renouncing God and turning to Mephistophilis is an effort to reach the self-overcoming state through which he turns to the ideal, self-developing Nietzschean individual.

Faustus's conversation with Mephistophilis over submitting his soul to Lucifer in exchange for "... four and twenty years" living in "all voluptuousness" (Marlowe, 2006, iii. 91-2) and Mephistophilis's referring to his "being deprived of everlasting bliss" (ibid, 80) echo Christian doctrine of sin along with Nietzschean rejection of such

thoughts in his proclamation of the death of God, especially where Faustus replies, "Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude, / And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess" (ibid, 85-6). As put forward by Hitchcock, "For Nietzsche, the most important thing about the death of God is what must die with him, namely, the Christian conceptions of human sinfulness, fallenness, and indebtedness" (2008, p. 25). Following this attitude what Nietzsche intended to do was to "free people from bondage to a slave morality according to which life is lived in hopes of some future, other-worldly reward" (ibid). In line with this, what Faustus attempts to do is achieving the sense of "completeness and fulfillment" (Stull, 1990, p. 444), even if he has to sign the deed and mention "Faustus gives to thee [Lucifer] his soul" (Marlowe, 2006, v. 69) and guarantee his pact with Lucifer.

Marlowe's characterization of Faustus in the first scene as a learned scholar, having mastered logic, law, medicine, and divinity, is in juxtaposition with his zealous soul that leads him to turn a blind eye on divinity and the acceptance of "Christian freedom and community" (Stull, 1990, p. 456). Opening the Bible, Faustus reads:

If we say that we have no sin,
We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.
Why then belike we must sin,
And so consequently die. (Marlowe, 2006, i. 42-5)

For Nietzsche, Christianity impedes individuals' ability to "function and flourish" (Solomon and Higgins, 2000, p.88). As Solomon and Higgins explain, the Christian principle "obstructs one's view of the real world, addles one's ability to see the real forces at work in one's life, and destroys one's ability to recognize how best to address them" (ibid). Closely related to this point is Nietzsche's rejection of "Christian self-subjection," the result of which is "a brilliant strategy for mastery" whose product is "slavery" (Pippin, 1996, p. 273). A good case in point showing Faustus's disbelief in the Christian afterlife is when Faustus and Mephistophilis have a discussion about being doomed to hell and Faustus casts doubt on the existence of any suffering, claiming, "... These are trifles and mere old wives' tales" (Marlowe, 2006, iv. 134).

Nietzsche's attempt to free people from the yoke of Christianity pertains to his emphasis on the necessity to create one's own values. As he argues in *The Gay Science*, "But we, we others who thirst after reason, are determined to scrutinize our experiences as severely as a scientific experiment-hour after hour, day after day. We ourselves wish to be our experiments and guinea pigs." (qtd. in Kaufmann, 1974, p. 253). Such notion is verifiable if only that individual is "a man who has overcome himself by accepting voluntarily what cannot be otherwise, thus transforming an alien fate into his proper destiny" (Löwith, 1945, p. 279). Furthermore, as he mentions in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, self-overcoming serves as the basis of the destruction of "Christianity as a dogma" by way of its "morality" (qtd. in Kaufmann & Hollingdale, 1989, p. 161). In terms of Nietzsche's thoughts, then, Faustus's conscious rendering of his soul to Lucifer is a mark of his being viewed as an embodiment of the Renaissance Man and the Nietzschean tragic hero. In order to "compensate for his inferiority complex," Faustus struggles to achieve "godlike superiority" (Stull, 1990, p. 456).

Parallel to Nietzsche's focus on nihilism there emerges the concept of "meaninglessness" in so far as "the need for a meaning and purpose to the universe has hitherto been humankind's greatest problem" (Pearson & Large, 2006, p. 310). As Nietzsche states in *The Will to Power*, nihilism is defined as, "The highest values devalue themselves" (qtd. in Kaufmann, 1968, p. 9). What hinders us from questioning the Christian absolute is, in Nietzsche's opinion, the result of a belief in the Christian moral hypothesis. In a similar argument, Nietzsche helps us see in our mind's eye what happens if "truthfulness" stands in the way of dogmatism of Christianity as follows:

But among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective-and now the recognition of this inveterate mendaciousness that one despairs of shedding becomes a stimulant. Now we discover in ourselves needs implanted by centuries of moral interpretation-needs that now appear to us as needs for untruth; on the other hand, the value for which we endure life seems to hinge on these needs. This *antagonism-not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves-results in a process of dissolution. (ibid, p. 10)

Indeed, Nietzsche's main purpose here is to show the role of self-realization as a prerequisite to rebirth.

Turning this motif to Dr. Faustus's situation, we can identify Faustus as a symbol of Dionysian tragic hero in view of the fact that "Being 'Dionysian' for Nietzsche meant being strong and courageous" (Robinson, 1999, p. 8). As one of the recurring topics in Nietzsche's exploration of Apollonian/Dionysian binary, we witness Nietzsche's taking side with the Dionysian hero's "drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess" (Geuss, 1999, p. xi). Thus, what Stull regards as the "Adlerian system" of striving, defined as "humankind's quasi-religious quest for perfection" (1990, p. 445) is relevant to Faustus's attempt to "ascribe image of God to himself" (Hadaegh, "Regressive Progression", 2009, p. 62). Having Mephistophilis at his disposal, Faustus commands him as such:

Now by the kingdoms of infernal rule,
Of Styx, Acheron, and the fiery lake
Of ever-burning Phelegethon, I swear
That I do long to see the monuments

And situation of bright-splendent Rome.

Come therefore, let's away. (Marlowe, 2006, vii. 43-8)

Reference to “the kingdoms of infernal rule” exemplifies the Apollonian/Dionysian clash in Faustus’s character. Prior to that he addressed Mephistophilis and said, “When I behold the heavens, then I repent,/And curse thee wicked Mephistophilis./Because thou hast deprived me of those joys” (ibid, v. 177-9). “It is precisely the tension between the two of them [Apollonian & Dionysian] that is particularly creative” (Geuss, 1999, p. xi) and frees Faustus from overvaluing the “‘Apollonian’ nature at the expense of his ‘Dionysian’ qualities” (Robinson, 1999, p. 8) so much so that he states, “Here Faustus, try thy brains to gain a deity” (Marlowe, 2006, i. 63).

Examined in the light of Nietzschean speculations, Marlowe’s “Dr. Faustus” can be explained as “a dark satire” (Well, 1977, p. 6) where we see the journey of the hero from a state of conflict to the attainment of “a greater being” (Hadaegh, “Regressive Progression”, 2009, p. 59). In the same manner, the play is considered as a “satiric tragedy of knowledge” (Well 1977, p. 6) in that it showcases the hero’s transcending “into a higher being through entering into the state of ecstatic self-loss” (Hadaegh, “Regressive Progression”, 2009, p. 59). Being the product of the Elizabethan England, the play centers around such themes as “Social mobility and anti-Catholic sentiment,” (Scott, 2008, p. 5) echoed thoroughly in the character of Faustus. Faustus’s “never-ending pursuit of knowledge,” his “revolt against God’s authority,” and his “seeking for earthly life” (Zhao, 2015, p. 5) pertain to Nietzschean ideas inasmuch as “individuals are redeemed through immersion into the Dionysian eternal essence which rests on an underlying substratum of suffering” (Hadaegh, “Regressive Progression”, 2009, p. 60).

Nietzsche’s attack on Christianity as “a ‘herd morality’” originates from the belief that it [Christianity] “attracts and produces people who are pessimistic and timid” and hinders humanity from “evolution and the eventual production of the new and superior kind of human being” (Robinson 26). With reference to such views, Faustus’s saying “Damned art thou Faustus, damned; despair and die!” (Marlowe, 2006, xii. 39) sheds light on his hesitation, which is directly related to Christian values, leading to “pessimistic nihilism” (Robinson, 1999, p. 27). Had it not been the realization and celebration of the Dionysian part of his character, Faustus could not have reached “the longed for higher self” (Hadaegh, “Regressive Progression”, 2009, p. 61).

3. CONCLUSION

In order to close this short argument it can be concluded that Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus is a Nietzschean Übermensch in that he is presented as a conscious individual in search of unconditional superiority. His rejection of divinity and inclination of black magic enable him to satisfy the fire of his desire for ascendancy and sovereignty: “Why Faustus, hast thou not attained that end?/Is not thy common talk found aphorisms?” (Marlowe, 2006, i. 18-19). As Booker claims, “Magic is not in itself important but as a means through which Faustus’ own peculiar potentiality for greatness may operate” (qtd. in Hadaegh, *Pragmatic Action*, 2009, p. 70). Setting his heart on rising to the absolute whole likens Faustus to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra in the sense that “the acceptance of the eternal recurrence requires a standpoint beyond man and time” (Löwith, 1945, p. 283). Faustus’s perseverance in pursuit of knowledge and power is, thus, an evidence for his being marked as one of the “utilitarian-minded individuals of the Renaissance” (Hadaegh, *Pragmatic Action*, 2009, p. 54). Equally, necromancy helps him “not simply to become famous on earth but to create eternal life within time –an art that forms the ultimate blasphemy against the Christian God” (Cheney, 2004, p. 16); for the same reason he is regarded as the ideal Renaissance Man and a Nietzschean Übermensch.

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