

# Mephisto —A Fragment

It is not a little strange that, in their pivotal phases, the plots and misdeeds that coursed through Germany during her tormented prelude to war had already been, *mutatis mutandis*, foretold with an accuracy that is nothing short of eerie in the second part of Goethe's *Faust*.

The significance of *Faust Part Two* as a titanic fresco of modernity is an undisputed tenet of scholarship: therein Goethe conjures imaginary landscapes tenanted by species issued from medieval bestiaries. And these landscapes, Man (Faust), possessed by the Devil (Mephisto), proceeds blindly to savage, alter and transform with the use of technique and business investment. In *Faust*, economics is portrayed, and feared, as the continuation by other means of some dark alchemy.<sup>1</sup>

But beyond the allegories, the poet's superhuman prosody, and his human dread of amoral tech-business, there lies in this opus, sown through endless streams of clear visions, a story, or rather, a mold, in which History, so it appears, is condemned to pour the sludge of men's living experience, whenever they, in droves, persevere along the stray path—that is, whenever such men show to favor the truck with demons over a decent existence. With a prescience of one hundred years—Part Two was

completed in 1831— Goethe could have very well been telling the tale of the Third Reich.

The First Act of the second part of the tragedy, which is truly Mephisto's play rather than Faust's, opens with a hectic scene in the throne-hall of the Imperial Palace.<sup>2</sup> The Kaiser, besieged by throngs of stewards and retainers, who afflict him with a buzz of dismal reports on the condition of his empire, asks for his buffoon -to seek solace in his jests. 'Where's my Fool?' he wails. Rumor has it that the jester fell down the stairs -dead or drunk nobody knows. A Junker in the crowd notices that stealthily and with surprising quickness, another presence has insinuated itself at court. Mephisto (literally 'he who shuns the light') has arrived. Striding on towards the throne, he introduces himself with a riddle: 'What is accursed and always welcome?...'. The Emperor having no time for charades bids the new 'fool' take place at his left instantly, while the swarm is heard muttering: a new Fool means new trouble.

There follows the train of the Imperial Cabinet, wrapped in a scroll of terrible news. 'Illegality and crime', laments the Chancellor, 'have become the law of the land -it's all a bad dream'. 'Horrible feuds', irrupts the Commander-in-Chief, 'are fragmenting the State; the Parties are useless, the burghers have locked themselves behind doors, while powerful knights minister justice alone. The soldiers of fortune demand to be paid, and the monarchs abroad are utterly indifferent'. 'Subsidies shall not be forthcoming',

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<sup>2</sup> From the Greek *me-fos-to-phileo*.