

Ben Hewitt, *Byron, Shelley, and Goethe's Faust. An Epic Connection. Studies in Comparative Literature*, 33. London: Legenda, 2015. Pp. 196. £55 (hb). ISBN 9781909662414.

As its title indicates, this study examines the relationship between Part One of Goethe's *Faust* (hereafter *Faust I*) and selected works of Byron (notably *Cain*, *The Deformed Transformed* and *Don Juan*) and Shelley (in particular *Prometheus Unbound*). Ben Hewitt is, however, not primarily concerned with 'influence' in the sense of logging specific cases of textual similarity and then worrying about possible causalities. Nor does he simply 'compare' different texts: he is concerned, rather, to locate these texts within a historical dynamic and to examine the way that they articulate responses to each other and to other texts and cultural developments. He uses the word 'triangulation' to describe his analysis of the shifting relationship between different approaches to literature and ideas adopted by these three authors, and this allows him to introduce into the discussion later texts, such as Part Two of Goethe's *Faust* (hereafter *Faust II*), which was only published after the deaths of Byron and Shelley, or the perspectives offered on the central themes of the study by, for example, Nietzsche and Freud.

These central themes revolve around the term 'epic', which appears in the title and is used in a rather special way to refer to the literary formulation of a philosophical attitude: whereas the tragic in principle reflects an engagement with insuperable contradictions in the human condition, often but not necessarily located within a religious framework, the epic is digressive and embraces a potentially unlimited experience of the world. The tragic is based on and reinforces acceptance of a framework, whereas the epic is less closed and can provoke activity, even political activity. The terms 'tragic' and 'epic' do not therefore refer primarily to questions of genre as such, and the modern epic (looking forward to Brecht's 'epic theatre') refers to an experimental, often difficult kind of literature, not merely the bloodless descendant of Homer and Virgil. Developing Franco Moretti's distinction, Hewitt argues that Goethe's original conception of *Faust*, as evidenced in the so-called 'Urfaust' draft of the play, was tragic, but that the relativising, ironising additions in the final version of *Faust I*, the prefaces, the 'Walpurgisnacht' scene and the last lines, represent a shift in the direction of the epic, one that was extended in *Faust II*. Goethe's *Faust* is therefore a staging-post in the emergence of the modern epic, playing a crucial role in the evolution of second-generation Romantic writing in England.

This fundamental shift in attitude was articulated and developed in different ways by Byron and Shelley, who were both responding to *Faust* through the figure who casts the longest shadow across this story, Mme de Staël. In *De l'Allemagne* she provided a formulation of the critical response to *Faust I* that helped to turn it into a site of contention over literary, moral and religious propriety. She could not deny her admiration for Goethe or the many beauties of the text, but she was disturbed by the irony, the lapses of taste and above all by the prominence of Mephistopheles whose scepticism, she felt, undermined the kind of moderate post-Enlightenment, post-Bonapartist values she strove for, 'vertu, dignité de l'âme, religion, enthousiasme' (quoted, 48).

It seems that Byron's engagement with *Faust I* was first stimulated by *De l'Allemagne*, and his reading of Goethe's play was – to use that inadequate word – 'influenced' by Mme de Staël in the sense that he was provoked to embrace precisely the scepticism and the improprieties that she criticised. His Lucifer in *Cain* is a reworking of Goethe's Mephistopheles and embodies the same ambivalence towards rationality, but *Don Juan* in particular epitomises Byron's turn towards the epic, becoming gradually more digressive, the narrator becoming more distanced and the text becoming more political,

drawing the reader into an active intervention in the world that even Goethe in *Faust II* cannot manage without the residual tragic overtones which echo through Act V.

Shelley's fundamental response to *Faust I* was similar to Byron's, but Shelley used a shift towards the epic not in order to dismantle myths, as Byron did, but to create myths – myths that would be socially transformative. His reservations about *Faust I* were not based on Staël's ideas of propriety and religious orthodoxy but by ideas he associated with Plato and Dante. Shelley thus deployed the idea of love in order to negate the tragic view of the world that he found still too intact in both Byron and in *Faust I*, and this is of course the conclusion that Goethe, too, reached (though not without a certain ambivalence) in the final Act of *Faust II*.

This is not the first study of the relationship of Goethe's *Faust* to English Romantic writing, but it is an original contribution in its own right by virtue of the particular texts it focuses on and the wide-ranging, complex picture that emerges. 'Triangulation' proceeds by constructing a web of interlinking perspectives, and the shifting ground of the argument does not always make for ease of reading, but the material is carefully assembled, and the twists and turns of the discussion are full of valuable insights.

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