

MODERN VERSIONS OF THE FAUSTUS MYTH: RAVENHILL'S *FAUST (FAUST IS DEAD)* AND MEMET'S *FAUST*²

Tzvetan Todorov, a literary critic, has referred to modern Western culture as Faustian. His diagnosis has been confirmed by a number of contemporary playwrights who resort to the Faustian archetype to describe the combination of tremendous technological advancement and profound moral failure that characterizes our modernity. Two recent plays, directly influenced by Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus – Faust (Faust is Dead)* by Mark Ravenhill and *Faustus* by David Mamet – will be the subject of this paper.

Key words: the Faustus myth, the Faustian archetype, forbidden knowledge, soul

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In Ravenhill's version of *Doctor Faustus*, one of the most resonant of Marlowe's lines, „this is Hell, nor am I out of it”, becomes a synonym for the life in the contemporary America – the world drained of feelings, steeped in consumerism, thoroughly controlled by mass media. It is to this Unreal City, where all reality is virtual, that the hero, the visiting French philosopher, feels

¹ mkostic76@gmail.com

² This paper is an extract from the author's MA thesis “The Faustian Motif in the Tragedies of Christopher Marlowe”, defended under the supervision of prof. Lena Petrovic, at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, in 2009.

properly at home. The author of the postmodern, anti-humanist work *The End of History and the Death of Man*, is a modern Faust, briefly enjoying his post mortem existence among the generation of numbed, disoriented American youth. One of them, Pete, is drawn to Alain by the latter's air of authority. As we follow them on their 'educational journey' across America, we become aware of ironic reversals in relation to Marlowe's original. Marlowe's Faustus is in Hell because he has sold his soul to the Devil; Pete is ready to sell his own soul to escape the Hell he is trapped in. He is ready, that is, to compromise what integrity he has left in exchange for a direction he hopes to get from the older man. Instead of offering hope for guidance out of the inauthentic existence, Alain thrusts Pete deeper into it. Thus, although Pete does not really fit in the theory of multiple sexualities, propounded by his Alain, he is nevertheless seduced by his 'mentor'. He is also instructed to accept his abuse as a 'transaction', that will eventually guide him to spiritual illumination that Pete, beneath his pretended coolness, secretly covets. In the meantime, the boy is to watch what is happening through his camcorder, as a TV spectacle; in that way he will be spared not only the natural revulsion but any feelings whatsoever. The teacher's abuse of his disciple is thus not only a physical one. The rape of Pete's mind is suggestive of the kind of the verbal indoctrination to which the contemporary youth are subjected. The result is an obliteration of the natural emotional impulses and needs, and of pervasive confusion as to what one's sexual or any other identity is. Pete's quest for an adequate father figure thus involves a lot of experimentation, mistakes, suffering, but is not ultimately successful. Rejecting Alain's cruel nihilism, Pete ends by embracing the equally hopeless alternative – he returns to his biological father, a software magnate, and his solution to the problem of excessive structuring of the individual – which is electronically controlled chaos. He has created a program involving the use of most famous world's masterpieces whose purpose is the very opposite of what those works of art were meant to achieve – to keep one's perception, as fragmentary and disconnected as possible, and thus eliminate all painful awareness of the kind of the world one lives in. While embracing this dispersed consciousness, Pete also, paradoxically, hopes to exchange the disc he has stolen from his father for a vast sum of money which will buy him something he has been denied all his life - new, „totally real experiences“.³

³ Ravenhill is just one of many modern authors who criticize the American life style for its emotional atrophy and consumerism. This is how, for example, Adrienne Rich, a contemporary American poetess, describes the spiritual condition of contemporary American citizens:

We see daily that our lives are terrible and little, without continuity, buyable and saleable at any moment, mere blips on a screen, that this is the way we live now... We become stoical; we hibernate; we numb ourselves with chemicals; we emigrate internally into fictions of past and future; we thirst for guns; but

The use of Chorus represents one of the most important aspect of *Faust (Faust is Dead)* since, appearing at crucial points as in Marlowe's play, it provides an insight into the conditioning process whereby children, naturally endowed with moral perception, are turned into dehumanized, indifferent subjects. The earliest memory this collective voice recalls is of a seven-year-old boy who could not sleep „because of all those bad thing going on” in the world. He was „crying night after night. . .because the world is such a bad place”. His mother promised him that „it's gonna get a whole lot better”. He taught himself „to cry in a special way that means she wouldn't hear him ever again”. The child evolves into a teenager who smashes the window of a store to get himself a VCR. His mother's reproach that he should have gone to the food store instead is totally illogical to the boy. „What is the point of having something to eat if you do not have anything to watch while eating it?”, he asks himself. The following stage of his development is overseen by the Minister of a local church, another dangerous surrogate father, who, deciding not to lag behind the modern tendencies, installs a terminal and modem in the church. The fact that mothers, who have raised the funds for the terminal, begin to lose their children to the Internet is explained by the Minister as one of the Lord's mysterious ways which leads towards a brighter future. For a moment, the Chorus also speaks in the voice of Donny, Pete's Internet friend, a disturbed boy, who cuts his flesh with a razor, the pain being the only way he has of feeling anything. When this way of proving to himself that he is alive ultimately fails, he commits suicide. The Chorus speaking in Donny's voice recalls a childhood memory – gulping cherry slush from the slushie machine in the store where his mother worked. After the sudden removal of the machine, Donny developed symptoms of 'pathological' aggression, first towards the teachers at school and then against his own body - he leaves bloody razor marks on his body, hoping that one day Jesus will explain why he does this to himself.⁴

At the end of the play, the voice of the Chorus becomes the voice of the adult who is looking for the signs that the world is getting better, as mother promised it would, but perceives that the world has neither ended nor become better and discovers that he does not feel a thing about it:

as a people we have rarely, if ever, known what it is to tremble with fear, to lament, to rage, to praise, to solemnize, to say *We have done this, to our sorrow; to say Enough; to say We will, to say We will not.*

The only way to 'recharge desire' and 'put numbed zones into feelings' is, according to Rich, to 'lay claim to poetry', 'to read and write as if your life depended on it', which is, as a solution to the postmodern condition, totally disregarded by Ravenhill's heroes, though not by Ravenhill himself. (Rich 1993: 20)

⁴ Although Donny remains ignorant of the causes of this horrific act, Ravenhill, Rebellato writes, assures the readers that “cutting is a desperate way of making contact with reality, pain stimulating a body numbed by the delirium of consumer pseudo-choice and mediation on every level.” (Rebellato 2001: xvi)

It's just going on, on and on and on. And I wonder if I should feel something about that. But – you want the truth? – I don't feel a thing... And I wonder what made me that way. (137)

How capable the system is of neutralizing any attempt of authenticity is ultimately demonstrated by the fact that Donny's suicide, meant to be a kind of rebellion, is turned into a marketable commodity – his and Pete's idol, the rock star Stevie makes a song about Donny's suicide, and it is now showing three times an hour on MTV.

The play ends in another suicide – Alain's. He is first shot by Pete who has realized the importance of Alain's part in Donny's decision to kill himself. Horrified with the image of Donny's corpse, Pete fires at Alain which is the last thing he does before he finally returns to his father. Alain is, however, not dead, but seriously wounded. At the end of the play, he decides to refuse medical help and dies.

Ravenhill's rejection of post-modern hedonism, represented by Alain, can be compared to Erich Fromm's criticism of radical hedonism. Starting from a dilemma – to have or to be? – Fromm concedes that there is nothing wrong in determining happiness as the source of life; what is wrong is the definition of happiness as the satisfaction of any desire or subjective need a person may feel (*radical hedonism*), since, defined in that incomplete way, in contemporary society, based on the existential mode of having rather than being, it does not lead to harmony and peace but to egotism, selfishness and greed. As a consequence of people being conditioned to have only selfish and possessive desires, there appears an atrophy of emotional life: we become alienated both from ourselves and other human beings. Acts of cruelty take place not because people are driven by innate aggression, but because they no longer have or feel any emotional bond to other people. The way out, according to Fromm, of this state of 'constant disequilibrium' is to achieve the unity of the fully developed human reason and love. By becoming fully human, „man will arrive at the experience of oneness... - oneness within man, oneness between man and nature, and oneness between man and other man" (Fromm 1977:314). In this manner, which looks back to the teaching of Ficino, Mirandolla and Bruno, modern man might transcend his narcissistic position and „escape the hell of self-centredness and hence self-imprisonment" (Fromm 1977: 315).

Ravenhill's characters, unfortunately, do not manage to escape the prisons of their selfish selves otherwise than by suicide. Yet, if we agree with Lionel Trilling, when he observes that death destroys the man, but the idea of death saves him from the omnipotence of culture, we might find in the way Donny and Alain voluntarily end their lives the final desperate affirmation of precisely

those values their society systematically try to deny them.⁵ If, as already noted, the impact of Donny's suicide is neutralized by being turned into a TV show, Alain's death, caused by the despair beneath his cruelty and hedonism, is a clear indication of his moral ascent beyond his real life prototypes,⁶ but equally too beyond his literary predecessor, Marlowe's Faustus.

David Mamet is another contemporary playwright who draws on the Marlowian tradition. As already discussed, Marlowe's Faustus, an eccentric, lonely, poor, bachelor scholar, unsatisfied with legitimate education he has acquired, sells his soul in exchange for ultimate knowledge that will accomplish his unlawful ambition. Unlike him, Mamet's Faustus is a domestic bourgeois and a respectable philosopher/scientist, in the prime of life, healthy, wealthy and blessed with the devotion of a beautiful wife and child – both of whom he tends to ignore for his work. Yet he shares his XVI century prototype's chief trait, his tragic egomania.

It seems at first that this modern Faustus is only eager to get things right. „I fear failure, I sicken of success,“ he confides to the mysterious magician who has arrived to provide the entertainment for a child's party. Faustus has just finished his *opus magnum*, in which he claims to have reduced the secret of life to a mathematical equation - he believes he has the power and omniscience to put forth an overreaching view of the world based on periodicity. In other words, Faustus claims that all natural phenomena (the recurrence of draught, famine, fire etc.), including the processes and stages in man's life (conception, first love, betrothal, marriage), can be abstracted and boiled down to a number. The number is „the secret engine of the world“, the modern Faustus claims. This concept reminds us of another mathematician/philosopher, Pythagoras, who discovered that number was the foundation, the essence, of all phenomena, including music.

⁵ See Lionel Trilling, „Freud: Within and Beyond Culture“, in Lena Petrovic, *Literature, Culture, Identity: Introducing XX century Literary Theory*, p. 265

⁶ It did not escape the notice of critics that Ravenhill's Alain, a French philosopher whose main ideas rest on the recognizable post-modern slogans of the death of man, the death of the real and the death of the progress, is actually an amalgam of the French philosophers Michael Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. (Rebellato 2001: xiv) Significantly, the title of Alain's book also refers to the postmodern anti-humanist orthodoxy; in fact, it is a reflection of Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). In his book, Fukuyama proclaims that „what we may be witnessing nowadays... is the end of history: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.“ (Fukuyama 1992). Thus Fukuyama, celebrates the 'American-style' democracy as the only 'correct' political system that all other countries will only be happy to follow. Ravenhill, on the other hand, tells the truth.

But number, for him, unlike for Mamet's Faustus, could not be abstracted from things, „it was not a pure disembodied Platonic idea transcending the earthly existence. It was always inherent, in music and dance as rhythm, in sculpture as proportion, in geometry as ratio, and in ethics as a sense of inner harmony, perfectly attuned, with the singing cosmos”. (Hamvas 1994: 254)

That the modern Faustus's conception of periodicity lacks the ethical dimension, e.g. that it is divorced from the knowledge of the soul, is quite obvious from the very beginning of the play. The 'tragic doom' of Faustus's family is anticipated in the gift given to Faustus by his son. It is an incomplete poem:

Heavy heavy the hired man
Weary, how weary the willing hand
One for the Heart, One for the Head
One for the Lad who tarries abed...
Three swift swallows in the summer sky...
Gone in the twinkling of an eye.
What mystic light, illumines the night
A father's care... (13)

The poem describes the innocent child's view of the modern dysfunctional family. The feminine principle is embodied in the Heart – his mother/the soul - who provides him with love and affection, unlike his father, who is an embodiment of the Head or reason, and is drained of any emotion towards anyone but himself. Significantly, the boy is seriously ill, „he has a cold upon his chest” which indicates, as Ted Hughes would suggest, that until these two contrary principles are equally combined, the child's life is in a mortal danger. This is the first warning that the stubborn Faustus is given. However, he disregards it. He never manages to find enough time to visit his sick child, although he constantly reminds himself of this obligation: „I was to go to him. I have forgotten.”

Thus, Mamet's Faustus joins in the tradition of over-reachers: his desire for knowledge is similar to the one that animates Marlowe's Faustus. Although he discovers the ultimate truth about the world, the goal that Marlowe's Faustus also strives for but does not achieve, soon it becomes obvious that knowledge is not his only or ultimate ambition. Like Marlowe's Faustus, he has secondary motives. He secretly yearns for scholarly fame, and admits it quite frankly to his friend Fabian. As it turns out, he is essentially small-minded and self-absorbed, upset because his book has received bad reviews. It is this petty vanity of the academic that in the end proves stronger than any other need or impulse: he neither desires, nor is capable of love.

Although Magus, Mamet's Mephistophilis, warns him from the beginning of their dispute that „the greater the mind, the more ease in its misdirection”, Mamet's Faustus is too proud and assured of the revolutionary quality of his

work. Magus admonishes Faustus that the secret engine of the world is regret – he advises him „never to do that which might engender it”, thus anticipating Faustus’s future condition. However, Faustus remains resolute, a striking feature reminding us of Marlowe’s Faustus. Like Marlowe’s protagonist, he too is for the most part unable to understand the consequences of his actions and his own responsibility for them. Magus repeats his warning once again, reminding Faustus of his family and the claim that they have on him. It is a legitimate claim, Magus insists; however, Faustus is more willing to be the only possessor of the Secret Knowledge of the world, preferring to indulge in ‘the burden of his loneliness’ than enjoy the company of his family. His wife, suggestive of Marlowe’s Dido, reminds him that he can find an answer and spiritual fulfilment in „the love for a child which seeks nothing for itself”. But he remains deaf to her appeals till the end of the play.

In Mamet’s version, the pact with the Devil takes form of a bargain in which his Faustus, accused of plagiarism through the manipulations of the demonic Magus, consents to wager and finally sacrifice the lives of his wife and child because he wants to prove the accuracy and authenticity of his work. Like Marlowe’s Tamburlaine and Barabas, who also turn against their children, he remains impervious to any sense of guilt or feeling of pity.

In Act II, Faustus, lonely but unchanged, encounters his old friend Fabian at a crossroads. His friend is old, sightless and walking with a stick. He is bitter at the desertion of Faustus that, years ago, led to the death of his child and wife. Faustus can hardly believe the passage of the years. Locked in eternal disputation with the Devil, time, for him, has passed in an instant. He realizes that his wife committed suicide, takes a glimpse of her in the underworld and then, for a brief, bewildered and desperate moment of unlocked feelings, he begs for the intercession from his angelic child in heaven. Neither can recognize him, but the child, in his goodness, agrees to take his case before God and the angels. At one point the child seems to remember his previous life, and although it is a memory of pain, he gives Faustus another chance to be saved – the son urges his faithless father to complete the poem for him. „Why do you hesitate?”, he cries. But Faustus, again locked in the prison of his scholarly pride, and convinced that he has finally won a victory over the great Magus („I am become as God”, he triumphantly exclaims), misses his chance, and the Heavenly gates clang shut. There is no welcoming chorus of Heavenly angels for him. The modern Faustus, just like his predecessor in Marlowe’s version of the legend, is eternally damned.

Another, related elaboration on the Faustus’s theme can be found in David Duncan’s article *Return of Dr. Faustus Presents Important Ethical Lessons for Scientists*. The article was inspired by the performance of Mamet’s *Faustus*. In Duncan’s opinion, Mamet’s greatest shortcoming in this play is his failure

to update the Faustian legend for the sharp edge of the new technology and represent Faustus as a modern scientist in a laboratory:

Instead of jumping into the dramatic possibilities of carbon dioxide emission or genetic super-races, Mamet rather blindly places the good doctor in a past that looks vaguely Edwardian, with a scientific discovery that is equally murky, something about all existence being explained by a single mathematical equation he has just devised. Love, hate, bravery, disease, even God - everything is explainable by numbers, Faustus says to his wife and later to his friend Fabian, waving a page containing the all-encompassing equation. It's a shame that Mamet didn't dress up Faustus in a white lab coat holding up a computer print-out filled with a sequence of As, Ts, Cs and Gs - letters of genetic code. This, too, is an equation, or code, unraveled by modern scientists to offer what is essentially a digital explanation of life, containing clues about the mechanisms of love, hate, bravery and disease. (Duncan 2004)

Thus, Duncan, appalled at the way modern scientists believe that they can tread the Faustian line and not destroy the humanity, warns the readers, in Marlowian fashion, against the probability of even more horrible diabolical bargains that will arise unless the contemporary technological craze is checked by the recovered sense of responsibility:

Think of Pandora's Box and Robert Oppenheimer's horror at unleashing the awesome power of the atomic bomb. And think biotech, with the unraveling of DNA sequences and other molecular knowledge and technologies that may provide us with a fabulous new power for good or evil...I have already written in this column about stem cells and cloning, which I'm optimistic will one day cure disease, but this science also could create a Faustian Hell of cloned super-humans and pseudo-human drones grown for spare hearts and brain cells. Our technological society ripples with other potential Faustian bargains, from potential genetic fixes to extend lifespan, which may overpopulate the planet, to global warming caused largely by our insatiable appetite for fossil fuels. (Duncan 2004)

Yet, Mamet's apparent failure to bring Faustus up to date in every technical detail, does not, in my opinion, diminish his play's contemporary significance. Both Ravenhill and Mamet offer powerful restatements about the destructive power of science or philosophy when they are divorced from conscience. They criticize this divorce in terms of its most devastating consequences: the suffering of children. Thus they ask us, with renewed relevance and urgency, to re-examine our conceptions of knowledge: to

distinguish more clearly between the kind of knowledge that ensures merely power and profit, and that which makes for more freedom, justice and sanity.

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Milena M. Kostić

MODERNE VERZIJE MITA O FAUSTU NA PRIMERU DRAMA FAUST (FAUST JE MRTAV) MARKA REJVENHILA I FAUST DEJVIDA MEMETA

Rezime

Književni kritičar Cvetan Todorov je mišljenja da je moderna zapadna kultura zapravo faustovska. Ovaj stav potvrđuju mnogi savremeni autori koji koriste faustovski arhetip u svojim dramama kako bi opisali kobnu kombinaciju tehnološkog napretka i moralne izopačenosti koja karakteriše moderno društvo danas. Predmet ovog rada čine dva savremena komada nastala pod uticajem Marlovljeve renesansne verzije ovog mita - *Faust (Faust je mrtav)* Marka Rejvenhila i *Faust* Dejvida Memeta.

Ključne reči: mit o Faustu, faustovski arhetip, zabranjeno znanje, duša.

