



Christopher Bernard

## Faust Closes the Books on the Modern Age

### I. Faust Stalks the Streets of Katowice

The last time I was here, it was the Middle Ages.  
(“Hey—the ‘middle’ of what?”—You might well ask!)  
I rode the hump of an old woman  
as she went in to town to market her vegetables  
on a cart between her dog and her chickens.

The children of the streets were not kind to her,  
though they had something they have no more:  
a future. For I was bringing to them the future,  
full of wealth beyond belief, power mightier than God’s,  
and the first whisper of a darkness, toward which it raced:  
the shadows beneath my cloak clutched the night like gold.

For now we know what we were in the “middle” of,  
and what was before us, and what behind:  
behind us was this: tomorrow’s hopes,  
going back long before barbarians and Achaeans,  
to the savannahs of our cradling, and African home.  
Before us was this: a loss like the wind—  
before us was this: the beginning of the end.  
I am the modern magician of the end,  
I whose name in your crude tongue means “Fist,”  
as I ride upon the back of your children.  
At the time we were only humiliating an old woman.  
Now we have finally reached our destination.  
And now we shall destroy everything.

## 2. Faust Takes an Aperitif in Paris

Ah yes—those were the days. Promising days,  
you must admit! (Though the Dubonnet  
was not so sweet, *n'est-ce pas?* I'd try  
the Cinzano; it still tastes fresh! Unless  
you like a drink that tastes like a summer soldier's army boot?  
In that case, you must take the Fernet!)

Where was I? Oh yes! *That* Paris! Well, our leaders  
at least *pretended* they knew we might have a prob  
of maybe roasting the world up like a burnt turkey  
with spoiled gibleet gravy and bad wine  
and a rancid pumpkin pie to make one die.  
Well, *all* of us, really. And so they agreed  
to keep the numbers down—not two—just one  
and a half degrees (Celsius, don't you know),  
to keep Greenland, the glaciers of the Alps,  
Rockies, Andes, Himalayas, Antarctica,  
to say nothing of the entire Arctic, from melting till  
London, New York, St. Petersburg, Shanghai,  
Hong Kong, to say nothing of Miami,  
the Solomons, Seychelles, Maldives, Palau,  
and Venice—well, Venice is done for  
whatever we do! Bye, bye! “Venice, Venice—  
when they marble walls  
Are level with the ocean, there will be . . .”  
etc., etc., as Byron opined so presciently—  
till all those glorious, and inglorious, places,  
those sonorously named and misnamed spaces,  
sink beneath six or seven meters  
of sea water.

They really made me feel—  
those leaders of the world—that maybe I  
had failed somewhere. Hadn't I  
drilled them hard enough? Had I spared the rod  
and spoiled the brat? Had I failed  
to beat the natural altruism out of their souls?  
Had I unleashed them on the world not quite  
clever, vicious, greedy, “*après moi, le deluge*” enough,  
in spite of everything I had done,  
to say nothing of “Santa's little helpers”: Machiavel,  
Nietzsche, Max Stirner, Ayn Rand, Margaret Thatcher, etc., etc., etc.?

But not to worry. They had even me fooled!

I forgot my very first lesson: perfect the lie!  
Always keep handy a vial of crocodile's tears!  
And promise them *anything*! The people will believe  
whatever you solemnly promise, as long as  
you hunch forward in a little stoop, speak hesitantly, modestly,  
but with jaw clenched with purpose, and  
pinch your eyebrows  
in that hang-dog sincerity look memed all over my greatest  
contemporary invention: the internet! (It was not Al Gore,  
but Faust who invented that infinitely malleable  
prison of the human mind!) Look now!  
How many years later?  
Nothing of any use has been done!  
Cheaper solar panels? A few more forests of windmills?  
Recycling in cafes?  
Pah!  
We're right on track to break through 3.5 degrees (Celsius!)  
by 2050! The Sahara will extend from Oran to Brazzaville!  
The methane claths in the tundra will start popping like a teenager's pimples!  
The northern polar ice cap will soon be free of ice by late September!  
And then—it's off to the races!

I knew I shouldn't have worried.  
But you know me: Nervous Nelly even at the best of times.  
I never believe the worst until I see it.  
And now I see it plain.  
Temperatures are breaking all records on the Champs-Elyseés!  
The rain, when it comes at all, is sulphuric acid in the main!  
And the Seine is as warm as a summer day in Spain!

*Garçon, garçon!* We're done with Dubbonet, Cinzano, Fernet!  
It's now time to uncork the Veuve Cliquot and drown ourselves in Champagne!

### 3. Faust Visits the Tivoli Gardens

So much fun! Look! The Star Flyer! The Demon!  
Aquila! The Elf Train! The Chinese Pagoda!  
The Dragon Boats! Fata Morgana! Tilta-Whirl!  
The Sky Dive! The Plunger! The End of the World!  
I always shed sixty years whenever I come here.  
Buskers! Bangers! Lights! Night carnival of the cities!  
It's Walpurgisnacht for Mom and Dad and the kiddies!

I haven't had so much fun since Charles  
nearly fainted when I brought Hell  
to dance half naked around his throne—  
those demons can *work* it—man, What A Thrill!  
That song keeps going through my head,  
though my memory made up the second verse of it:  
“Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen,  
*Life is there but a dream . . .*”

The Little Mermaid, stolen once—or was it twice?—  
and replaced each time with a sadder face,  
as though she knew there was no more time,  
droops so beautifully on her stone.

I almost wish I had not come  
to Denmark, where all princes come  
who mutter poesy while the murderers dance  
at the foot of earth's darkening throne,  
and life is no longer a dream.



Wait—let me take a selfie  
with Alcatraz in the background!  
Too late! We've already swung up Russian Hill!

and up  
Over and around  
and down  
and upside down  
(I'd swear!)  
then down  
down  
down  
and ~~spun around~~

so we can do it all over again!

Now this is my favorite invention—yes!  
Faust invented the cable car,  
as well as everything in the Musée Mécanique,  
the Camera Obscura, and Laughing Sal,  
and Irish coffee, and sour dough,  
and ferries, and foghorns, and suspension bridges—  
and the noirest city in the deep movie fog—  
and don't get me started on Silicon Valley!

But this is the one I love most of all.  
It matches exactly  
the surge and fall of Father Time.  
Otherwise the City of Saint Francis  
my polar opposite is:  
it believes, no matter the piling up  
of disappointments  
into the Angel of History's junkyard,  
that man is fundamentally good,  
and woman even better,  
it's just those nasty Republicans (fundamentalists,  
Nazi-sympathizers, white supremacists, et al.)  
who ruin everything—  
forgetting  
that Republicans, fundamentalists, Nazi-sympathizers, white supremacists, et al.  
are also  
men  
and women:  
it's quite incorrigible!

That city believes in its heart it can

*save the world from itself*—and me!  
Imagine! [A list of current and impending  
global disasters follows here.  
We will not trouble the reader with  
what they have read no doubt once too often.  
Nor with our hero's tasteless gloating.  
Just read "world-ending catastrophe" and continue.]  
Such children! So hopeful! So clever! So blind!

If the entire world were like San Francisco,  
you and I, my dear Mephistopheles,  
would have very slim pickings indeed.

But never will they acknowledge this  
little, uncomfortable, nasty fact:  
that they are humanity's spoiled children.  
Their way of life is an anomaly,  
an aberration of place and time,  
a perfect climate (ah!) in a perfect geography,  
a perfect historical piece of luck,  
and a conveniently placed silver mine  
found by humans just when they needed it.  
San Francisco the opposite of Death Valley is:  
the Golden Mountain, as it was called by the wistful Chinese.

Let them dream. It is charming to watch them march  
up and down the streets, shouting slogans and smiling,  
convinced, if they just dream hard enough,  
they will save the earth.  
Such innocence! Such sweetness! Such folly!—Oops!  
There goes the cable car grip  
as it locks on the cable! Hold on! And it's up, up, up—up!  
Look! The Golden Gate Bridge! The sun blinding off the Pacific!  
History is peaking with us! What a spectacular view! You can see the world!  
We will soon be at the top of everything—  
then

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and the screams of all humanity will tell  
that we are being hurled to hell.

## 5. Faust Takes Command of the Titanic

. . . as only seems fitting, as I  
was a prime instigator (not to be  
violently vulgar) of the birth of this epoch:  
the final act of the Tragedy of Man  
(and of Woman too, to be fair) that began  
a few short centuries ago,  
and now  
promises to end with a fitting whimper:  
a planetary desert covered with beetles  
and oceans of pond scum after the methane comes.

What Faust began with my bargain with the devil,  
Titanic ends in the frigid seas:  
bookends of myth for modernity—  
between great minds like Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes,  
Newton, Kepler, Locke, Mandeville, Smith,  
and my favorite sage,  
Tycho Brahe of Lüneburg on one end,  
and on the other,  
geniuses like Lenoir, Edison, Einstein, Frederick Hayek, Edward Teller —  
those gods of our age  
who prepared what we now know was always the end,  
as man (helped by his better half)  
took his fate in his hands,

and, with the power of a god and the wit of a fool,  
prepared to destroy everything in his world.

I started it all,  
in my study, with my philosophy  
(whoever said philosophy was a waste of time?  
The entire modern world came from a philosopher's brain:  
[he bows] my own!),  
on my puppet stage when I toured all of Europe,  
with my veiled, lovely Helen  
and my pact with Satan,  
and my miraculous deeds,  
power, wealth, antiaging,  
beauty, glamour—the bomb  
I must modestly admit I was, as I led  
science, invention, capital markets and wars  
to conquer Nature and remake it for Man  
(and Woman too).

We rejoiced in my power:

I was, and am, the machine that drove  
what we quaintly call the modern (who would have guessed  
those appalling conservatives and reactionaries were right  
about quite a few things? “Modernity is a pact  
with the devil! You mark my words: it'll turn out  
something awful in the end!  
And then you'll be sorry!”): that curious  
and volatile blend  
of cleverness, will power, false humility to nature  
(like a player who only pretends as he flirts  
while he drives toward conquest and dominion), arrogance  
and desire gone round the bend with greed,  
a drive toward absolute power  
that can only lead to absolute annihilation  
(a Greek tragedy where all mankind is the tool  
to show the hubristic is the ultimate fool),  
and a blindness toward himself that his very success  
deepens to a darkness that can't be washed out,  
a darkness deep as the blackness behind the stars,  
an ignorance of himself that ticks like a bomb  
toward the Samson shout that will bring down the temple  
and raise over his head a monument of trash  
obscene as the plastic gagging a sea monster  
as blameless as the seafoam.

I am that blind man.

Which is to say I have taken command  
of the Titanic. I am a little ragged,  
I admit, and wear somewhat outlandish clothes,  
to be toffing about on the HMS bridge,  
giving orders I barely understand, but the owners  
seem hardly to notice, or even approve  
as I scorn the cries from the watch of a shape  
that looks, they claim, like an iceberg on the horizon.  
But *I* know it is nothing. A bit of sea fog, a cloud  
with no more substance than my phantom Helen  
or the other conjuring tricks I took  
across the bankrupt market towns of Europe  
still bleeding from the Thirty Years' War,  
or the Peasants' Rebellion, or the Black Death,  
or the fires of London, the burning of witches  
and heretics, the Albigensian crusade,  
or the tortures of man and nature put to proof  
to give up their secrets to help mankind gather  
the fardels with which to burn down the world.

But look, the moon breaks  
above the ship's black row of smoke stacks,  
and the sea all around us gleams with its light.  
And there, bearing down on us, huge as the hills,  
the one hill of ice my magic can't kill,  
nor my pride nor my wit nor my power nor my will.

Satan, you have come. My name on that white writ  
is signed, and sea, earth, sky are blackened now and for ever with it.

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Christopher Bernard is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. His most recent book of poetry is *Chien Lunatique* (2017, Regent Press); his new novel, *Meditations on Love and Catastrophe at The Liars' Café*, will appear later this year.

Image from: *Faust, A Tragedy* (J. W. von Goethe; illustration by Lynd Ward) (FirstFolio.com)