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### Review: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Faust the Theologian* (Yale UP, 1995)

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# ARC

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Swanston's performance, he or she will certainly come away having celebrated eternity now!

Paul Laverdure

McGill University

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*Faust the Theologian*. By Jaroslav Pelikan. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-300-06288-5. Pp. xi+145.

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"For my part, I cannot be satisfied, amid the manifold directions of my being, with only one way of thinking. As a poet and an artist, I am a polytheist; on the other hand, I am a pantheist as a natural scientist—and one of these as decisively as the other. And if I have need for one God for my personality as a moral man, that, too, is provided for." Thus spake Goethe, in a letter to Fritz Jacobi in 1813; and thus begets *Faust the Theologian*, the most recent offering of Jaroslav Pelikan.

Pelikan, a rare polymath in these times of specialization, tackles in this exquisite piece of erudition the archetypal polymathic figure of European literature—Faust. Goethe scholarship is a formidable jungle, and *Faust* scholarship its densest part, yet Pelikan enters undaunted, his able prose sustaining the delicate balance between courage and folly. He accomplishes this, in large part, by setting himself a task: to utilize Goethe's maxim as a tripartite typology with which to flesh out a portrait of his most recognizable (and most problematic) character. From the beginning, Pelikan eschews reductionist interpretations of *Faust*—whether Marxist, Freudian, feminist, or (orthodox) Christian—in favor of a 'Goethean' reading; yet one which does not always fall in line with Goethe's own vision of the drama. Pelikan uses Goethe's self-understanding as a hermeneutical tool with which to read *Faust*. The result is not only a provocatively novel reading of Faust (the character) and *Faust* (the play), but also a propaedeutic for a pluralistic theological aesthetics, rooted in Pelikan's interdisciplinary understanding of the "great chorus of theology."

First and foremost, *Faust the Theologian* seeks to make some sense of Goethe's "ungovernable theological problem-child" (Erich Heller), by situating the drama of Faust's fall and redemption within the typology of pantheist science, polytheist art, and monotheist ethics: these being distinct, but interrelated "ways of being" in the world. Pelikan presents a dialectical development of the Faustian character, who begins the drama as a frustrated natural scientist, comes to the realization that a poetic polytheism will fill some of the hollowness of such a stance, and eventually, in spite of Mephistopheles, but with the help of Gretchen (whose "seriousness...prevails over the cynicism of both Faust and Mephistopheles, in the eschatological dénouement of the drama" [15]) reaches redemption by virtue of a "rediscovery" of morality (53). In short, Pelikan transforms Goethe's typology into a set of developmental "stages on life's way," but which differ from Kierkegaard's in being dialectical—each stage sublating the others in turn (24, 89, 91–2). This allows Pelikan to avoid Christianizing *Faust*—even the monotheistic stage involves the polytheistic and pantheistic "ways" (24)—while permit-

ting him, at the same time, to privilege the final *Aufhebung*, in this instance Faust's "salvation" in terms of monotheism/Christianity.

If Mephisto plays Virgil to Faust's Dante, bringing the frustrated alchemist's son out of the abyss of pantheism to an "aesthetic apotheosis," it is the Eternal Feminine, in its three manifestations—the Mothers (pantheism), Helen (polytheism) and Gretchen/Mary (monotheism)—which are his collective Beatrice, leading Faust to eventual "redemption." Pelikan is to be commended for bravely addressing, and giving significant weight to, the troublesome "Eternal Feminine" [*das Ewig-Weibliche*], which, in words Nietzsche found hilariously banal and feminists glaringly offensive, "leads us upward" [*Zieht uns hinan*].

A self-confessed *Unitarier*, Pelikan refuses to separate the two parts of the play (published a remarkable sixty years apart), and thus considers *Faust* as a whole, and as the summa of Goethe's life's-work—as much his testament as the *Maxims* or the autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. One of the great difficulties in dealing with *Faust* is, of course, figuring out how Goethe stands in relation to his writings. A literary figure fated, more than any, to dwell in the shadow of his own overwhelming persona, scholars have tended in the past to identify the man very closely with his "fragments of a great confession" (as he called his *oeuvre*). Pelikan warns against this, arguing that, despite the ubiquitous presence of Goethe in *Faust*, we must avoid too close an identification of the author with the protagonist: following Boyle, he suggests that it is in "the closeness of relationship between the writer and the play, rather than between the writer and the play's principal character, that the special status of *Faust* among Goethe's works is grounded" (5).

Given this stance, Pelikan limns the development of Faust as Theologian, while bypassing the theology (or theologies) of Goethe, his creator. In principle, of course, this is a hermeneutical must; yet another, deeper, problem remains: the relation between Faust and *Faust*. When all is said and done, Faust is a character without much character, perhaps, as critics have argued, because of Goethe's attempts to distance himself from his creation. Faust is certainly a locus for a battleground of ideas, and Pelikan's elucidation of these manifold streams is persuasive. Yet Faust's very "weakness" as an aesthetic creation, his utter lack of character continuity (compared with, say, Hamlet, or even Mephistopheles), means that he can be a vessel rather easily filled. Perhaps Faust is, and remains, as Pelikan argues, a Doctor of Theology, but whether there is any real "development" in Faust (as opposed to the obvious developments, within *Faust*); whether there is anything more to Faust as a "theologian" than this academic title (which, as Pelikan admits, is curiously dropped in *Part Two*), is not so evident.

Pelikan's methodology is that of a "religious critic" (in Harold Bloom's sense)—he is not out to reduce theological matters to literature, or vice versa, but to build bridges, to expand the religious imagination by bringing surprising connections and novel possibilities out of a text that has become, in some ways, all too familiar. The very elusiveness of *Faust*, of course, allows for great freedom of interpretation, but Pelikan sticks closely to the text itself, or, in terms of his framework, to the Goethean typology. This 'phenomenological' perspective—privileging the author's terms and self-description without a corresponding shy-

ness in developing these, perhaps, beyond Goethe's intentions—lends to this work a surprising power and beauty.

Yet, as I have indicated, it does not succeed on all fronts. As a masterfully creative reading (what Harold Bloom would no doubt call a "strong *misreading*"), *Faust the Theologian* delights. As a literary interpretation, in the strict sense, it disappoints, in large part by failing to acknowledge the strangeness and complexity of the drama and its protagonist. One feels that Pelikan, at times, plays Procrustes—stretching the many-faced Faust to fit his own Hegelian understanding of Goethe. Is there any real "moral" development in Faust? Is Faust's apotheosis a parody of gratuitous salvation? Another issue: can Goethe's "seriously intended jesting" account for the ribaldry and innuendo in the play? The scene of "The Mothers," for instance, which Pelikan (following Wilhelm Emrich) calls "the most transcendental scene that Goethe ever attempted" (49), is punctuated by a thinly-veiled phallic allusion, where Mephistopheles hands Faust a throbbing "key," which he proceeds to wield against Helen. Transcendental pantheism, sublimed bad taste...or both?

On the centenary of Goethe's death, in 1932, Spanish critic José Ortega y Gasset posed an open challenge to Goethe scholars, a challenge to reconsider past approaches to the classics more generally. "We must," he suggested, "call the classics before a court of shipwrecked men to answer to certain preeminent questions with reference to real life....Write us a Goethe for the shipwrecked" (*The Dehumanization of Art*, 137–8). Jaroslav Pelikan, a non-Goethe specialist, has answered Ortega's challenge in this work, by drawing out the possibilities of Faust's "development" under the threefold typology put forth by Goethe himself, without submitting to Goethe's self-avowed paganism. *Faust the Theologian* is dedicated to the late Canadian scholar Northrop Frye, who, according to Pelikan, was blessed with the rare gift of "combining literary scholarship and theological scholarship without confusing them" (xi). If there is one person who is able to carry the torch of Frye, it is certainly the author of this essay, which demands to be read—read neither as theology nor literary criticism, but as a work of a new genre, in which illumination, not argument, takes center stage.

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