TRITHEMIUS, CUSANUS, AND THE WILL TO THE INFINITE: A PRE-FAUSTIAN PARADIGM

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Of past figures whose reported exploits have moved from the historical arena to the arena of legend and even of myth, one of the more intriguing is a certain Doctor Faustus († ca. 1540). That metamorphosis from historical to legendary status, notably illustrated by the Lutheran-authored Faustbuch of 1587, had already begun during its subject’s own lifetime. Initially construed as a demonically inspired sorcerer, Faustus subsequently passed through a series of further metamorphoses no longer holding to the relatively one-dimensional image earlier projected.

Already with Christopher Marlowe, who was given access to an English translation of the Faustbuch, the Faust legend had become transmogrified from a series of superficial cautionary tales about the dangers of magic into a deeper dramatic “tragedy” in which its central protagonist’s occult interests were no longer so easily slighted. The simple religious conflict between the righteousness of faith and the unrighteousness of demonically incited sorcery had now become revamped into a conflict between two opposing versions of how one can best be put into touch with a realm of the spirit transcending the limitations of nature: one through demonic assistance and the other through Christian faith. Migrating to the age of the Enlightenment, with a writer like Lessing enhancing the tragic framework within which the Faust legend could flourish, it was most famously picked up by Goethe and transformed into a foremost prototype of the Romantic drive to transcend the finite limits laid down by the classical heritage.

Further passing into the modern age, it is above all the Marlowe and Goethe takes on the Faust legend that have had the most durable impact on the contemporary western mind. In this form the Faust image has been adapted to the ballet stage by Heinrich Heine and to the opera stage by Berlioz, Gounod and Boito; it represented for Kierkegaard a tormented “apostate of the spirit” epitomizing the existential disjunction between the finite and infinite domains; it has been utilized as a historical metaphor by Spengler and Toynbee, the former replacing the famous Dionysian-Apollonian antithesis with a Faustian-Apollonian antithesis and the latter associating Faust with the Yang side of what he conceived to be a Yin-Yang dynamic of history; it served Thomas Mann, in his novel Doktor Faustus, as an allegorical motif symbolizing a cor-
relation between genius and psychic alienation; and, as illustrated by a recent study applying the Faustian theme to a number of literary heroines, it has even impacted on the modern feminist movement. In sum, the image of Faust has evolved from one of a mere demon conjuror into a protean-like metaphor for a heroic-like drive to surpass the bounds of finite mediocrity¹.

**Faustus and Trithemius**

Faustus, as it happened, was not alone among Renaissance magicians to furnish the modern world with a striking Renaissance paradigm pitting an occult pursuit of the transrational infinite against the finite limits of human reason. He was notably anticipated by the Benedictine abbot Trithemius (1462-1516) of Sponheim and Würzburg², who, responding to a query by an acquaintance cognizant of his burgeoning reputation in the same area of arcane interests as attracted Faustus, offers us the first documented evidence of the historical personage behind the Faust legend in the form of a highly unflattering epistolary portrait of its subject. Having by chance spent a night at the same Gelnhausen inn as Faustus during the year 1506, Trithemius, in the relevant letter marking this fortuitous intersection of the two magi, portrayed his fellow itinerant in highly unflattering terms.

Puffing himself up as ‘a fountain of necromantics’ (fons necromanticorum) Trithemius charged, Faustus in truth was nothing but ‘a vagabond, an utterer of vain repetitions, and a wandering monk’ deserving, not of admiration, but of ‘chastisement by whipping’. Boasting ‘that if all the volumes of Plato and Aristotle, with all their philosophy, completely perished from the memory of man, he by his genius, as if he were another Ezra the Hebrew, could restore them with an even more superior elegance’, Faustus, in Trithemius’ opinion, ‘being ignorant of all good letters, ought rather to be called a fool than a master’. To be sure, the main thrust of this portrayal is one that appears to present
