

Alexander Pushkin's "Scene from Faust"

translated by Alan Shaw

Pushkin's "Scene from Faust" was published in 1828, twenty years after Goethe published the first part of his *Faust*. Goethe, nearing eighty at the time Pushkin's poem appeared, was the undisputed king of European letters.

Pushkin's relation to Goethe is a matter of some controversy. He didn't read German, but he would have seen translations of Goethe's lyrics made by his friend and mentor the poet Vasily Zhukovsky. Pushkin probably read in French the admiring writings of Friedrich Schlegel and Mme. de Staël that established Goethe's European reputation.

He obviously knew *Faust*. In his scene, the character of Mephistopheles, the Gretchen story, and the verse form, all point to Goethe specifically, not just to the Faust legend as a whole. But Pushkin's Faust is Byronic. He suffers, not so much from an insatiable desire for knowledge and experience, as from pure spleen. Or in Pushkin's plainer terms, *skuka*, boredom. But a truly monumental boredom, a black hole of boredom that devours everything in sight.

Byron himself was influenced by Goethe's *Faust*, as Pushkin noted, not uncritically (here in Tatiana Wolff's translation):

English critics disputed Byron's dramatic talent; I think they were right. Byron, so original in *Childe Harold*, in *The Giaour*, and

in *Don Juan*, becomes an imitator as soon as he embarks upon drama. In *Manfred* he imitated *Faust*, replacing the crowd scenes and the [witches'] sabbath with others which he considered more elevated; but *Faust* is among the greatest creations of the poetic spirit. . . .

Byron knew nothing of Pushkin. Goethe could have known of him through mutual acquaintances like Zhukovsky or the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, and could have seen German or French translations of some of his poems, but if he did, there is no record of it. Some have suggested that he not only read Pushkin's scene, but that it actually influenced the second part of *Faust*. That seems unlikely.

We could read it as either a critique of, or a tribute to Goethe, or Byron, or both. What's most striking in it, as in so much of Pushkin, is its extreme compression. In this, it anticipates, and even excels, the "little tragedies" that Pushkin would write a few years later—*Mozart and Salieri*, *The Miserly Knight*, *The Stone Guest*, and *A Feast During the Plague*. In one of his priceless notes to *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov informs us in passing that "there are those" (he does not say he is one of them) who prefer Pushkin's little scene to the whole of Goethe's *Faust*.

The meter and rhyme scheme of this translation follow the original, with occasional use of half rhymes.