

THE METAPHYSIC OF MIST:
FAUSTIAN SHADES
IN MATTHEW SHIRFIELD'S
ELEMENTAL *DIRGE*

"I AM the mist, the impalpable mist"
Carl Sandburg¹

If there is anything that distills Matthew Shirfield's unsettling revisioning of Faust's tragedy, it is arguably that his *Dirge's* Faust appropriates Mephistopheles's metamorphic might. Unlike Goethe's Mephistopheles, however, Shirfield's Faust never changes into a black poodle, for he clearly prefers to mutate into mythical beings like Mephistopheles does when he transmutes into the hermaphroditic hag Phorkyas while copulating with Thessalian witches. Shirfield's is, in fact, a fallen Faust, a damned spirit shrouded in ashen atmospherics, whose elemental plight pales from inky black to ghostly grey to misty white. The perfect palette, one would say, for a Faust whom Shirfield converts into a Mephistophelean shade, and whose spiritual

1 Carl Sandburg, "The Mist", in *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950) p. 75.

malaise he constantly tethers to ambient emptiness. Hence Shirfield's twilight zone of cloud, fog, mist and smoke whose immaterial materiality mirrors the *horror vacui* of Faust's soul. Consequently, what Shirfield's Faust leaves in his misty trail impels us to contend with metaphysical nothingness.

Consider, for instance, Shirfield's series of stunning ink drawings entitled *Journey Through the Halls of Hell* where Faust and Mephistopheles establish their Hadean kinship by transmuted into silhouetted Lilliputian figures trudging along a serpentine labyrinth, thereby evoking Milton's Satan's mutating descent from a radiant archangel to a slithering snake. Like Satan and Mephistopheles, Faust loses that sense of grandeur which Dante and Virgil radiate in Shirfield's pastel drawings of their infernal trajectory in the *Dante: Vie Smarrite* exhibition (2021). There is indeed nothing of what George Steiner terms "scholastic 'Magnificence'"² in Shirfield's Faust, for he darkly dwindles to Mephistopheles's shrunken stature. But Shirfield's evocation of the parodic disdain which Goethe's *Faust* (1808/1833) lavishes on academic hauteur, and which the artist appropriates in his *Self-Portrait* as a tragic clownish graduate, is only half the thematic point. Equally crucial, in fact, Shirfield refrains from setting this series' *vie smarrite* in a specific Maltese location as he does, for example, in *Ars Moriendi* (2021) where he imbues the art of dying with his art of resurrection by making the Dwejra Window rise again, Phoenix-like, from its rocky ashes while bathing it in the hopeful light gleaming on the *Inferno* pilgrims. No such hope breaks, however, in the *Halls of Hell* series, for Shirfield transcends his haunting charcoal visions of *Tal-Maqluba* (2021) as Dante's misty Hades and abstracts Faust's nether region into a nebulous state that mutates its crooked way to wreaths of sable stains misted to cypress wraiths. What Shirfield's *Halls of Hell* series incarnates in its realm of haze, where Van Gogh's arboreal flames pale into ashen shades, is really "any-space-whatever"³ as Gilles Deleuze

2 George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) p. 72.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 2001) p. 111.

conceives it, a spectral spatiality where “[t]he shadow extends to infinity”.⁴ Shirfield’s Faust might as well howl with his Marlovian counterpart: “Oh, no end is limited to damned souls” (5. 2.181),⁵ or better still, with Marlowe’s Mephistopheles: “Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it” (1.3.76),⁶ for since, like Lady Macbeth’s, his “Hell is murky” (5.1.34),⁷ it is concurrently everywhere and nowhere in its misty manifestation. Indeed, everything in Shirfield’s hell reeks of the impalpability of mist for, unlike the Böcklinesque *Inferno* pilgrims in Shirfield’s charcoal *Voyage* (2021), his acrylic Charon-Faust ferries himself across the Styx of his *Halls of Hell* to an Isle of the Dead that is not there. Plying these Hadean waters is indeed like trying, Eliot-like, to “connect nothing with nothing”⁸ for, donned like Poe’s Red Death, with his scarlet robe bleeding a kindred ethos of emptiness, Shirfield’s Charon-Faust inexorably drifts into the nothingness of mist. So does Shirfield’s Icarian Faust whose Stygian pinions, cloned from those of his dark *alter ego* in *Wings of Torment*, diffuse into misty paleness, a process that reaches its metamorphic exaltation in the *Hubris* Faust whose vaulting pride evaporates into a foggy flight. As in Marlowe, in fact, so in Shirfield: mistiness is of the essence for, true to the Marlovian Faustus’ plea,

O soul, be changed into little water drops,
And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found.
(5.2.195-196)

4 Ibid., p. 112.

5 Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, edited by J. B. Steane (London: Penguin, 1986). All quotations from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (in parentheses within the text) refer to this edition.

6 Ibid.

7 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, edited by Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1970).

8 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1961) p. 62.

Shirfield creates his fiendish Faust's soulscape in terms of mist, or cloudy water droplets, thereby granting him that elemental yearning upon which Marlowe's Faustus hinges his astrologically fallacious apostrophe:

You stars that reigned at my nativity,
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,
Now draw up Faustus like a foggy mist
Into the entrails of yon labouring cloud.
(5. 2.167-170)

Truly, just as Marlowe's foggy Faustus is his own star of ill-omen, so does Shirfield's Faust stalk himself in the *Halls of Hell* in the guise of the three lurking Fates for, like them, he is the offspring of Nyx, the deity of mist. Hence Shirfield's eerie cypresses blotching his hellish halls, their ominous insubstantiality hinting at the vacuity of Faust's misty spirit.

A similar mist afflicts Goethe's Faust who states in his 'Night' soliloquy "Clouds gather over me" (1.468) while lamenting "I know I know nothing" (1.371).⁹ As with Goethe's Faust, in fact, so with Marlowe's and Shirfield's, hell springs from the nihility within, for theirs is likewise the knowledge of mist, or what Massimo Verdicchio labels "the knowledge of the impossibility of knowledge".¹⁰ What the Faust of Shirfield's *Halls of Hell* shares, in fact, with Friedrich's *Rückenfigur* is the latter's facial obscurity, for his is Mephistopheles's darkest cloud of unknowing and, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, he strays "[a]lone, alone, all, all alone" (1.232)¹¹ into the vapours dense of utter hopelessness. In Shirfield's aesthetic, as in Coleridge's,

9 Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, translated by David Luke (London: Folio Society, 2005).

10 Massimo Verdicchio, "Faust and Dante: Knowledge and Allegory", *Neohelicon* 39, no. 1 (2012): p. 33.

11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, edited by William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997).

damnation is an experience of infinite isolation. What Steiner claims about Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c.1592), that it epitomises absolute tragedy as "the performative mode of despair [...sinning...] against the Holy Ghost of hope",¹² is equally applicable to Shirfield's Faustian vision, for its overreacher likewise looms as an aeromancer soaring solely in hopeless feathers. Hence Shirfield's depiction in *Kilba Infernali* of Faust's perdition, his hope steaming out of his clutching claws and voracious mouth in swirling dense mists of bluish tints that congeal him into a seething Cocytus demon. Evoking Mann's glacial Devil, chilling Leverkühn with his "icy draught",¹³ Shirfield's ravening Faust unleashes his frigid self into the brimstone blues of a Munchish screaming rage. What this Faust radiates in his loneliest loneliness is a cold-hearted mist that pervades so many of Shirfield's riveting works. Mist is indeed thematically crucial in Shirfield, for the foggy, smoky and cloudy ways in which it repeatedly surges in Faust's psyche tinges him with the intermeshed blackness, greyness and whiteness of his Mephistophelean illogic, thereby attesting to his elemental Hades as an impalpable manifestation of Nietzsche's concept of the damnation of eternal recurrence. Faust's is a mistiness that, like Derridean spectrality, permeates everywhere perpetually: "always there [...] even if [it] does not exist, even if [it is] no longer, even if [it is] not yet".¹⁴

The Haunting Dirge offers, in fact, another evocative example, for it is Faust's foggy soul that smothers its radical rendering of Christ's Passion into a crucifixion of ashes. But Faust manifests beyond the mists suffocating Shirfield's unholy procession, for his *Reaper* portrait, crowned with a literal skull cap, lurks in the statue bearers' skullish heads, just as these banshees' keening reverberates with his rapacious ululation. Echoing Leverkühn's final wail, these bearers' dirge is nothing but a requiem for a death without rebirth

12 George Steiner, *No Passions Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber, 1997) p. 140.

13 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1948) p. 226.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 176.

since, as for Marlowe's and Mann's, there is no salvation for Shirfield's Faust. No spiritual catharsis manifests in Shirfield's ubiquitous haze for, like Mann, he refrains from crediting art with any of the redemptive powers which Christianity attributes to Christ's sacrifice. As the bardic voice of Keats' 'To a Nightingale' would have cried: "But here there is no light" (l.38),¹⁵ for Shirfield deprives his Faust of even his Marlovian counterpart's sanguine delusion:

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
 One drop would save my soul, half a drop.
 (5.2.156-157)

Significantly, *The Haunting Dirge* is elementally ashen for, envisioned looming against an empyrean of nubilous whiteness in grey spiky vapours, what Faust's crucified Christ bleeds is a bloodlessness of mist hinting at no hope of redemption. Faust's is a passion of thorny ashes. Hence the *Walpurgis Festa* series where, like Marlowe's Faustus who burns "Apollo's laurel bough" to cinders ('Chorus', l. 2), Shirfield's counterpart scorches his ambience in a fireworks eruption that eclipses the *Walpurgisnacht* will-o-the-wisp invoked by Goethe's Mephistopheles. It is as if, inspired by Milton's Satan, Shirfield's devilish Faust cannot but bark "Mist be thou my Light", for he vents his satanic angst into the climatic *Totentanz* of a vaporous white cloud whirling, floating and drifting over silhouetted skeletons celebrating his eternal damnation. No Goethean Chiron clatters to facilitate Faust's flight to this cloudy *danse macabre* since he manifests as its spirit incarnate. This nightmarish effect is more thematically subversive than that of Barlach's 1923 woodcut vision of Goethe's Mephistopheles as Mount Brocken, for it is

¹⁵ John Keats, *Poetical Works*, edited by H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

the apotheosis of Shirfield's Faust's Mephistophelean gift of dissolving into the nothingness of cloud, smoke, fog and mist. *The Dirge* is a lonely lament for a lost soul which Shirfield annihilates, if I may rephrase Marvell's famous words, to a misty thought in a mistier shade. Spellbound by Faust's spectral plight, we dissipate into the spiritual strain of his metaphysical haze.

Saviour Catania

31st August 2024

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