Histrionic Nationality: Implications of the Verse in *Faust*

Benjamin Bennett

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IN MY BOOK ON *FAUST*, twenty-three years ago, I made the point that by leaving, in the finished text, exactly one scene in prose, Goethe contrives to draw our attention in a special way to the fact that the work as a whole is in verse. If there were no prose scenes, then verse would simply be the work’s stylistic medium, to be questioned (if at all) primarily with respect to the traditions it might inhabit or evoke. If there were a number of prose scenes, then the same sort of questioning would be directed at the “alternation” of verse and prose, and of course the comparison with Shakespeare would arise. But the presence of only one prose scene, one obvious anomaly, draws our attention to the work’s verse as such, and provokes the question: why is the work in verse to begin with, what role does the verse, as such, have in its meaning?

I attempted an answer to that question on a very general level, starting from the quality of verse “as an imposed artificial order in language,” and arguing—on the basis of specific textual features, especially in the Gretchen plot—that “it is only a short step from the idea of verse as an artificial order in language to the idea of language itself as an artificial order imposed on our presumed immediate perception of reality.” The argument thus quickly moved away from the realm of style and rhetoric and toward that of more or less abstract philosophy. In particular, from the hypothesis that “contact with the real” is a central concern in *Faust*, I concluded: “The drawing of our attention to the verse as such reminds us that our inability, as an audience, to make contact with the real is a direct result of the communicative process we are involved in.”

I do not intend to retract that argument now. In fact, I think I can add another dimension to it, and to the idea of “the real” that it presupposes, by taking the obvious next step and asking about the significance of the specific kinds of verse that are used in *Faust*.

I will begin by suggesting a general theorem about verse drama in the age of Goethe. It is a theorem that many people will be instantly inclined to challenge; and it certainly requires at least a great deal of development before it tells us anything useful about the period as a whole. But I think it is generally valid, and it certainly helps us with *Faust*. I contend, namely, that in German drama of the second half of the eighteenth century, and a bit beyond, the form of verse can be regarded very rarely, if ever, as an organic or integrated
element of the poetic conception. It is always *added* to the work’s basic conception; it has in fact practically a *histrionic* quality, comparable to the artistic additions made by actors when a play is performed. And *Faust*, in my view, is a principal instance. The one anomalous prose scene that peeks out from under the large garment of verse shows that verse to be precisely the garment it is—not the work’s body, so to speak.

To the extent that the concept of evidence even makes sense in relation to so general an assertion, the first pieces of evidence that come to mind are Goethe’s own *Iphigenie auf Taurus* and *Torquato Tasso*. In *Iphigenie auf Taurus* we possess the complete play in prose, to which the form of verse was later added. In the case of *Torquato Tasso* we do not have a complete prose version, but we know that substantial portions of the play were drafted in prose and circulated before the final text in verse was written. Goethe himself, in an entry from the *Italiänische Reise* dated 16 March 1787, parallels *Tasso* to *Iphigenie* with regard to the radical “Operation” that he must now carry out on the play’s earlier version (WA 31:54); and in a later entry, from 30 March, he makes it entirely explicit that that operation on *Tasso* included the replacement of “poetic prose” with the “rhythm” of verse (WA 31:82–83).

Perhaps a more interesting case, however, is suggested by Lessing when he writes to his brother, on 17 December 1778, about *Nathan der Weise*, “Meine Prose hat mir von jeher mehr Zeit gekostet, als Verse. Ja, wirst Du sagen, als solche Verse!—Mit Erlaubnis; ich dächte, sie wären viel schlechter, wenn sie viel besser wären.” Is it really possible that Lessing, as this letter suggests, has *deliberately* clothed his poetic conception in bad verse, in verse whose quality would be recognized as inferior by critical readers such as Ramler and Mendelssohn, whom he mentions in the same letter?

The supposed blank verse of *Nathan*, in any case, is really quite dreadful. On practically every page one finds instances where it is obvious that the author is pedantically counting syllables in order to make his meter come out right. What Lessing describes to Ramler (with tongue in cheek—one certainly hopes) as the occasional “oriental tone” of his play (letter of 18 December 1778) is in truth only the clumsy and repetitive syntax produced by his versification. And if we ask why Lessing should want to create this effect, at least one answer suggests itself immediately. The verse, in its inadequacy, conflicts violently with the idea of “a dramatic *poem*”—which is what the play calls itself in its subtitle—and so operates constantly to unmask the work’s more fundamental *polemical* tendency. The play thus refuses to be dismissed as a mere play. The verse produces—for sensitive readers or hearers—something very close to what Brecht calls alienation, in both its effect and its purpose.

I mention *Nathan* also because there is an important parallel case, if perhaps a less obvious one, in Goethe. I mean *Torquato Tasso*, where the blank verse—although competent, and certainly not clumsy—is also markedly rigid and tedious, with very little rhythmic variation and not much in the way of rhetorical flow to break up its clanking from one line to the next. The comparison with *Iphigenie*, where the verse is generally more fluid and sinewy, makes it obvious—if we needed persuading—that Goethe does what he does in *Tasso* intentionally. Even where the verse does tend to become rigid
in *Iphigenie*, in the long stichomythic passages for example, we shall tend to receive this quality as belonging to the formality or ceremoniousness of the Greek tragic form being parodied—whereas in *Tasso* the world of formality or ceremony is always imagined as clearly separate from the pretended *intimacy* of the actual dialogue, with which the rigidity of the verse simply clashes. Goethe, it seems to me, is doing almost exactly what Lessing does in *Nathan*: clothing his conception in verse that is meant to be recognized as defective, or at least as a source of disharmony in the effect of the whole.

Indeed, there is one point in *Tasso* where the fictional world seems to include a kind of consciousness of the inadequacy of its rendering in verse. We are already inclined to read Antonio’s speeches in the last scene of Act 1 with a definite critical suspicion, as soon as we recognize how gross a misrepresentation he gives of the state of Italy under Pope Gregory XIII. Our listening is therefore sharpened when he delivers his scene-ending praise of Ariosto (709–41); and we therefore cannot fail to recognize that a great deal of what he finds in Ariosto is also present in the text we are now reading or hearing. “Zufriedenheit, Erfahrung und Verstand / Und Geisteskraft, Geschmack und reiner Sinn / Für’s wahre Gute” are certainly all evident in *Tasso*—at least as themes, if not realities. The “Zauberspiel der Amoretten” is represented by Tasso’s habit of pinning love poems to trees, and “Schalkheit” appears in Alphons’s bantering with the ladies. There are plenty of “erhabne Sprüche,” and of course “Wahnsinn” is always lurking in the background. The only thing missing in *Tasso*, and therefore conspicuous by its absence, is precisely what makes Ariosto Ariosto, the charm and gracefulness of his expression, especially his verse.

And if we reflect for just a moment, it must occur to us that there is no real excuse for this lack. In *Iphigenie* the blank verse is relaxed several times by the introduction of other meters, which reminds us perhaps of the choral odes in Greek tragedy. In *Tasso* nothing would have been easier than to break up the monotony of the blank verse with pieces of Tasso’s poetry, either translations or original German poems put into his mouth. Would early audiences not have expected this, and is the disappointment of this expectation not part of the play’s intent? Tasso’s poetry is not only not heard, it is apparently not even read in the play’s fictional Ferrara. No one alludes to a single actual passage; and when the *Gerusalemme Liberata* is turned over to Alphons, he receives it with two very curious lines of verse, which certainly do not express either enthusiasm or appreciation: “So halt’ ich’s endlich denn in meinen Händen, / Und nenn’ es in gewissem Sinne mein!” (393–94). Even in, say, T. S. Eliot, we would be disturbed—would we not?—by a line of poetry containing the phrase “in a certain sense.”

Once we have come this far, it is not hard to understand why Goethe writes *Tasso* as he does. The cramped, constrained, often constipated quality of the verse mirrors the qualities of constraint, concealment, suspicion, dissimulation that characterize all of the personal relations among the characters. Does this mean that the verse operates organically in the work’s meaning after all? Not unless a way is found to subsume instances of quite radical negativity under the concept of the organic. The verse in *Tasso* operates by creating disturbance, disharmony, disappointed expectations, effects that not
only interfere with our sense of the work’s wholeness, but are also strictly contingent—dependent on the sensibilities of an audience—not rooted as necessities in the work’s verbal or conceptual structure. The verse, that is, clearly creates the impression of being added to the work, and so, as I have said, receives a histrionic function. It operates as a single huge stage direction. All the actors have to do is speak the lines as written in order to create exactly the impression of hidden personal tensions that the plot requires.

The path from *Tasso* to *Faust* is an easy one. If even as simple and compact a structure as *Tasso* has room in it for a histrionic addition in its verse-form, then surely the much more open structure of *Faust*—which at times seems as much a publicistic or theoretical endeavor as a work of art—does not exclude a similar use of verse. And if, on the hypothesis that verse-form operates histrionically in *Faust*, we now ask exactly what might be performed by the various types of verse employed there, the answer is obvious. Verse in *Faust* performs not personality but nationality.

Certainly this is true in the prologues and in part two. The *ottava rima* of the first two prologues and Faust’s *terza rima* in the “Anmuthige Gegend” (4679–727) evoke a poetic Italy, the latter specifically Dante. The tendency toward five-beat rhyming verse in the court scenes of act 1 has a British feel to it, perhaps especially a Byronic feel; there are moments where Byron’s satirical version of the heroic couplet is heard clearly enough. The ancient Greek trimeter with which Erichtho introduces the “Classische Walpurgisnacht” (7005–39) is picked up by Helen at the beginning of act 3, and is then supplemented, in the rest of the act, by a number of other Hellenic and quasi-Hellenic forms, plus blank verse, rhyming verse, and rhyming stanzas. The blank verse in which Faust first encounters Helen (9192ff.), before he teaches her to rhyme (9377ff.), is perhaps British in the sense of alluding to the widely held opinion (not, strictly speaking, Goethe’s own) that Shakespeare, as a “naïve” poet, represents a practically unique bridge between ancient and modern sensibility. In act 4, the whole imperial-military action is articulated by a shift in verse form. Echoes of the five-beat rhyming verse of act 1 culminate, in the scene “Auf dem Vorgebirg,” in a long passage of dialogue (10345–502) in quite regular Byronic couplets. The regularity crumbles, however, when the Emperor relinquishes responsibility for the battle and Mephistopheles and Faust produce their mighty men (10503–36). And after the battle is won by unsavory means, the balance of the act (10549–11042) is written in the strict couplet-rhymed Alexandrines of French classical tragedy and comedy. The shift, however one interprets it, is from verse that smells British to verse that smells French. And act 5, finally—which in its wild variety includes yet further doses of Byronic rhyming (11402–19, 437–52, 563–72)—opens with a scene (exactly 100 lines long) in the trochaic meter of Spanish Golden Age drama (11043–142).

These examples are from the prologues and part two. But even in part one, there are a number of instances where verse clearly performs nationality. The most significant piece of unrhymed verse in part one is certainly Faust’s blank-verse monologue in “Wald und Höhle” (3217–50), which seems to me to have the same British feel as the five-beat forms in part two, except that here—given the scraps of nocturnal imagery and the sense of an internal
struggle on matters more or less religious—we shall probably be reminded of Young rather than Shakespeare. And the Alexandrines that crop up in the versifying of part one often suggest Frenchness. This is especially noticeable in what one would expect to be the arch-German atmosphere of “Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig.” Siebel and Frosch speak in Alexandrines when disagreeing about love-songs (2103–4). Frosch expresses his German patriotism in Alexandrines that obviously undermine it:

Wahrhaftig du hast Recht! Mein Leipzig lob’ ich mir!
Es ist ein klein Paris, und bildet seine Leute. (2171–72)

And Mephistopheles introduces with an Alexandrine—“Statt eines guten Trunks, den man nicht haben kann” (2186)—the topic of wine, which calls forth a whole series of Alexandrines, culminating in Brander’s:

Ein echter deutscher Mann mag keinen Franzen leiden,
Doch ihre Weine trinkt er gern. (2272–73)

Lines in which he is mocked by his own verse.

Assuming, then, that my thesis—that verse in Faust performs nationality—is worth discussing, at least two obvious questions arise. Even if I were to augment my examples by as many more again, I would still have accounted for only a small part of the work. What about all the verse left over? And I have spoken only of foreign nationalities. What about German?

I think these two questions answer each other. If we consider only dialogue and leave aside the stanzaic passages (songs and aphorisms), the preponderance of verse in Faust is an extremely free but recognizable Knittelvers—not exactly Knittelvers as most people would define the term, but close enough to give that impression. There is a certain amount of controversy about what constitutes true Knittelvers—especially true “free” Knittelvers, as distinct from the “strict” syllable-counting type. David Chisholm, who has done the best existing work on Goethe’s Knittelvers, starts out with the basic criteria of the “four-stress line” and rhyming by couplets, but then goes on to develop what turns out to be an important distinction between Knittelvers and simple “iambic tetrameter.” Yet even he calls our attention to the fact, for example, that “in ‘Hans Sachsens Poetische Sendung’ . . . over 60% of the lines are iambic tetrameter.”4 My own description of this state of affairs would be that the text simply is in Knittelvers, that there is enough obvious Knittelvers in it to settle the matter for practical purposes. Indeed, I would go even further and assert that even where (as often in Faust) there are three- and five- and six-stress lines mixed in, and even where (as in Faust) the couplet scheme is often lost, still: as long as there is a reasonable proportion of recognizable Knittelvers, a reasonable amount of “bumpy” irregular rhythm, and a reasonable level of vulgarity in diction and content, one is perfectly justified in speaking, as I have, of “extremely free” Knittelvers, or at least of a strong gesture in that direction. Goethe himself supports me in this view when he writes in the Divan:

Du blendest mich mit Himmelsklarheit,
Es sei nun Täuschung oder Wahrheit,
Genug ich bewundre dich vor allen.
Um ihre Pflicht nicht zu versäumen,
Um einem Deutschen zu gefallen,
Spricht eine Huri in Knittelreimen. (WA 6:259)

These verses remain self-reflexive—they are what they talk about—even though the couplet-rhyming is dropped.

But that little stanza from the “Buch des Paradieses” also alludes to another important fact about Knittelvers—that it is regarded as uniquely and characteristically German. Certainly Goethe regards it thus. Among the unpublished “Zahme Xenien” there is even one where Knittelvers is drolly resented as a kind of German self-imprisonment.

Ein ewiges Kochen statt fröhlichem Schmaus!
Was soll denn das Zählen, das Wägen, das Grollen?
Bei allem dem kommt nichts heraus,
Als daß wir keine Hexameter machen sollen,
Und sollen uns patriotisch fügen,
An Knittelversen uns begnügen. (WA 5.1:144)

And in Über Kunst und Alterthum, in 1821, there is a remark (with sample translation) on Byron’s Don Juan, in which we read, “daß der Deutsche, um drollig zu sein, einige Jahrhunderte zurückschreitet und nur in Knittelreimen eigentlich naiv und anmuthig zu werden das Glück hat” (WA 41.1:248). Surely Goethe must have Faust at least in the back of his mind here—not only because of the general association with Byron, but also because the form of Don Juan, which he imitates in translating, is the same ottava rima he had used in the Faust prologues. And surely, therefore—if we agree in general that verse performs nationality in Faust—we shall agree that Knittelvers is there the principal verse marker of German nationality.

Does it follow now, since at least the idea or impression of Knittelvers is so pervasive in Faust, that the poem presents itself as fundamentally German, while also using verse forms from time to time that gesture in the direction of other nationalities? It is certainly true that the non-German verse forms in Faust are not really those forms themselves, but only gestures in their direction. Especially the stress-accented German versions of Greek and French forms, we know, sound nothing like their originals; and even blank verse is prevented—mainly by German syntax—from developing in German the same predominantly four-beat rhythms that characterize it in English. But is the situation of German verse in Faust any different? The characteristic German verse form is identifiable as Knittelvers, yet there is not a great deal of true or actual Knittelvers in Faust—Knittelvers as Goethe had written it in the Jahrmarktsfest zu Plundersweilern, in “Pater Brey” or “Satyros” or “Hanswurts Hochzeit.” What we have in Faust, rather, is a constant gesturing in the direction of Knittelvers, comparable to the gesturing at foreign verse forms. Native and foreign verse forms in Faust, considered as national markers, are thus treated in exactly the same way, reduced to the status of gestures, with no sense of their somehow being filled with the authentic national life in question.
What are the larger implications of Goethe’s procedure here? The most obvious one is the idea that all nationality, including one’s “own” nationality, is fundamentally gestural or histrionic, not an inborn or ingrained determinant of one’s being. Nationality is always ultimately an affectation, never an element of one’s unalterable character. Nor should it be surprising to hear this view attributed to Goethe. For if the contrary were postulated, then very serious problems would attach themselves to the idea of inter-cultural communication. The notion of a Walpurgis Night for the denizens of classical antiquity would then be not witty, but merely preposterous, as would the project of a “West-östlicher Divan” or the even broader project of “Weltliteratur.” And the very relaxed attitude toward vast historical separations that is expressed in the essay “Antik und Modern,” or in the letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt of 22 October 1826 about “Helena,” would be unthinkable.

But we must be careful not to burden this reasoning with conclusions that it cannot actually bear. One thing, for instance, that is not implied by the use of verse in Faust is any doubt concerning the existence or operation of national identity. Goethe expresses his views on this matter with perfect clarity to Eckermann.

Und wiederum ist für eine Nation nur das gut, was aus ihrem eigenen Kern und ihrem eigenen allgemeinen Bedürfnis hervorgegangen, ohne Nachäffung einer anderen. Denn was dem einen Volk auf einer gewissen Altersstufe eine wohltätige Nahrung sein kann, erweist sich vielleicht für ein anderes als ein Gift. Alle Versuche, irgendeine ausländische Neuerung einzuführen, wozu das Bedürfnis nicht im tiefen Kern der eigenen Nation wurzelt, sind daher töricht, und alle beabsichtigten Revolutionen solcher Art ohne Erfolg; denn sie sind ohne Gott, der sich von solchen Pfuschereien zurückhält. (part three, 4 January 1824)

National identity not only exists; it maintains itself on a level of self-anchored constancy comparable to that of God.

What is implied by the verse in Faust, then, has nothing to do with national identity as such. It has to do only with national identity from the individual’s point of view. In particular, the prosodic performance of nationality in Faust shows that however powerful and inexorable the identity of a nation may be in itself, it has no determining effect upon the identity of any actual individual. Nationality, for an individual, is always histrionic, hence a matter of free choice. That I am born in a particular place and time implies only that a particular nationality is available to me as a role or costume, in whatever way I choose to put it on. But my person, my mind, my activity, is in truth never governed by that nationality.

This is a very tricky and far-reaching distinction, and includes, among others, the suggestion that every nation—every “Volk,” whether or not organized as a state—has a life of its own that need not have much to do with the lives of individual members. Questions of language are obviously central in this problematic area—where shall the life or identity of a nation be more completely manifest than in the peculiarities of its language?—especially the idea of a mother tongue. Goethe is in general not at all reluctant to use the expression “Muttersprache.” For him, as for most of us, there is one language in which
we are most comfortable, usually the language of our early childhood. What Goethe denies—if the implications of the verse in Faust are as I have suggested—is the idea that that language is therefore somehow viscerally involved in us, specifically that it has shaped our character so as to give us a radically deeper understanding of it than is ever available to a “non-native” speaker. 

How can we possibly articulate the issue of an individual’s relation to the language he or she is most at home in? How can even our initial statement of the question avoid including as an assumption: either that the language belongs to the individual, or vice versa? One way out of this dilemma is to talk about the individual’s situation relative to several different languages—which brings us to Goethe’s well-known essay on “Übersetzungen” at the end of the Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständniß des Westöstlichen Divans.

If I simply deny the language of my childhood—as from time to time a generation of Jews denies Yiddish—my situation does not say much about how that language operates as my mother tongue. But are there different possibilities within the scope of an affirmative relation to my language, differences that might mark that relation as basically histrionic? It seems to me that the scheme of three types of poetic translation in Goethe’s essay represents exactly such a system of differences. The translator who makes a “simple-prose” version (WA 7:235)—in which “alle Eigenthümlichkeiten einer jeden Dichtkunst” are completely missing, and which is content to evoke a foreign content “mitten in unserer nationellen Häuslichkeit”—is a writer who simply accepts the limits of the native language. The “parodistic” translator (WA 7:236), by contrast, “wie er sich fremde Worte mundrecht macht, verfährt auch so mit den Gefühlen, Gedanken, ja den Gegenständen, er fordert durchaus für jede fremde Frucht ein Surrogat das auf seinem eignen Grund und Boden gewachsen sei.” Such a translator, in other words, asserts the inherent poetic spirit of the native language. And the third and most daring type of translator is the one who attempts to make the translation “identical to the original” (WA 7:237). This translator—who, in insisting on the character of the original text, “gibt mehr oder weniger die Originalität seiner Nation auf”—can therefore be said to undermine and transform the very nature of the native language. This is the type of effect that Goethe ascribes to the Homer translations of Voß: “welche Versatilität unter die Deutschen gekommen, welche rhetorische, rhythmische, metrische Vortheile dem geistreich-talentvollen Jüngling zur Hand sind” (WA 7:237).

There is plenty of room for discussion about how good a theory of translation this essay develops. But it is hard to deny that the three basic types, along with whatever mixtures one might postulate, constitute a veritable palette of histrionic possibilities for any individual with respect to his or her supposed mother tongue and so support the idea of a basically histrionic relation to the trappings of one’s nationality. We can perhaps go even a bit further in this direction if we look at the last paragraph of the essay.

Warum wir aber die dritte Epoche auch zugleich die letzte genannt, erklären wir noch mit wenigem. Eine Übersetzung, die sich mit dem Original zu identificiren strebt, nähert sich zuletzt der Interlinear-Version und erleichtert höchstlich das
Verständniß des Originals, hiedurch werden wir an den Grundtext hinangeführt, und so ist denn zuletzt der ganze Cirkel abgeschlossen, in welchem sich die Annäherung des Fremden und Einheimischen, des Bekannten und Unbekannten bewegt. (WA 7:239)

Clearly suggested here, though not quite explicit, is the idea that all understanding is a form of translation, hence that when understanding avails itself of only the one language in which the original text is written, it merely denies itself thereby the scope and perspective that another language might offer. Whence it follows that there are no grounds whatever for denying non-native speakers the possibility of an equal, if not a better understanding, than native speakers, of the “mother tongue.”

This argument of course does not demonstrate my basic point about the verse in Faust. But it does remove some of the discomfort attaching to the consequences of that point. And especially by way of the third type of translation, it does suggest the possibility of what I have called “contact with the real,” in the sense of experience beyond the predetermination of language.

Am I suggesting, finally, that the use of verse forms to show nationality as mere gesture belongs to the basic conception of Faust? Of course not. There is no basic conception of Faust. The work was reconceived over and over again in its long genesis. What I am suggesting is that at a certain point in that process—perhaps in the mid-1790s, alongside the critical view of nationality in texts like “Literarischer Sansculottismus”—Goethe recognized certain fortunate possibilities in the work already done (perhaps especially the treatment of Knittelvers) which then grew together with possibilities for future work to produce the formal aspect of the whole text that I have spoken of, along with its implications.

The University of Virginia

NOTES


2. We know from diaries and letters that in 1780 and 1781 Goethe showed parts of at least two acts of Tasso to a number of people, including Charlotte von Stein, Barbara Schultheß, Lavater, and Knebel. As far as I can tell, however, documents from this early period give no information about the work’s form. Only later (from Italy) do we learn that it had been in prose.

3. Byron’s ubiquity in Part Two should not surprise us. From 1816 on, he had, in Goethe’s view, more or less appropriated Faust, especially with his Manfred. See e.g. Goethe’s letters to Eichstädt (4 June 1816), to Knebel (13 October 1817), to Boisserée (1 May 1818). And when Goethe writes to Wilhelm von Humboldt (22 October 1826) that the 3,000-year historical scope of Faust ends with the fall of Missolunghi, surely he is thinking more of Byron’s death than of the Greek-Turkish conflict.


6. The question of the mother tongue in the whole historical period is taken up in my *The Dark Side of Literacy: Literature and Learning Not to Read* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008) 74–75.