

AMERICAN FAUSTS

Dragoș Avădanei

Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: With one devil that is dark, ugly and frightening and another devil that is a soft-spoken stranger in a handsome buggy, and from one "Faust" that is a horrible wretched man to another one who is a decent but unlucky fellow, the Americans (i.e. Washington Irving—"The Devil and Tom Walker" and Stephen Vincent Benet—"The Devil and Daniel Webster") projected the old German legend onto the new capitalistic patterns of the New World. The famous contract no longer includes provisions regarding unlimited knowledge, but stipulates only the possibility of accumulating wealth rapidly and also allows using the devil for the new Fausts' evil purposes (like getting rid of a termagant wife or even having the devil himself punished by jury trial in the end).

Keywords: Faust, Kidd, Irving, Benet, devil, contract, trial

If two stories are titled "The Devil and Tom Walker" and "The Devil and Daniel Webster" (written more than a century apart, i.e. 1824 and 1936) they are bound to be not only similar, but also closely connected in their "deep structure" as it were. So, before we notice the differences—which are not few and also highly significant—let us highlight the similarities, which are first given by their common source/s and then by the fact that they are sustained by certain historical(-legendary) antecedents.

Before even reading them one can conveniently guess that the legend of Faust—and the various other Fausts derived from it—is their common inspiration. This classic German legend includes a thirteenth-century Theophilus version, several sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stories about a certain D. Johann Faustus (at least eight books between 1593 and 1725), a Dutch tale about a pact between man and the Devil (early sixteenth-century) and a Polish folklore narrative of Pan Twardowski; there also existed a real-life character, Dr. Johann Georg Faust (c. 1480-1540)—magician and alchemist with a degree in divinity (n. b.) from Heidelberg, and another one (?), Georgius Faustus (from the Latin "favored" or "auspicious") Helmestentensis, an astrologer and chirmoancer of Ingolstadt. In all of these the story is that of the dissatisfied schollar or intellectual (which is not the case of our American heroes), the ambitious person who surrenders moral integrity in order to gain access to unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures for a delimited term.

Rather more interesting for our American examples is Johann Fust (c.1400-1466), the buisness paertner of Johann Gutenberg (c. 1395-1468), whose printing press becomes essential in the success of the Reformation and, implicitly in the birth of America and its new deomcracy (see *infra*). This Fust is the rich burger of Mainz who gives Gutenberg a load of 800 guilders (and another one later), who, in his turn, pledges his printing equipment as security. There finally is a trial (see the Benet story), at the end of which Gutenberg loses all his rights in his presses, his type, his premises and the sheets already

printed of the famous Bible. The print/Devil connection has proved worth pursuing with echoes as late as 1836, for instance, when Thomas Carlyle (in his Sartor Resartus) creates a character named Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (which is both “devil’s dung” and “devil’s print), underlying once more the relationship between print, magic, and the Devil. The fated loan is there in the Irving “Tom Walker” story.

Of the many European topological transformations the German legend went through, Washington Irving and Stephen Vincent Benet could/will/might have known The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, first published in 1608, eleven years after its author’s death (Christopher Marlowe, 1564-1593); again, the story of a scholar who has reached the end of every subject he has studied (logic, medicine, law, divinity) and thus, through Mephistophilis, strikes a deal with Lucifer for twenty-four years during which he would be able to do anything in exchange for damnation; Marlowe illustrates here the Calvinist doctrine of predestination (he took part in the Cambridge Calvinist scholars’ disputes as a student there in the 1580s), according to which Faustus’ damnation is first willed by God, then by Satan, and finally by himself (so, once again, Faustus and Protestantism and America, plus the non-Americanizable—it seems—frustration of the scholar who is sick with the limitations of human knowledge, so he has to appeal to magic).

Also absent in the two American Fausts is Goethe’s main theme—the quest for the true essence of life—in his 1808 Faust (preceded by the Urfaust of 1790 and followed by the revised edition of 1829, which Irving will have missed anyway). Like Marlowe’s, Goethe’s Faust also has an assistant in Wagner and has an arrangement with Mephistopheles, which materializes in a contract signed with blood; and then there is also Margaret/Gretchen, which the American authors also metamorphosed into their respective heroines (either good or bad). And, leaving both Irving and Benet behind, the German legend moves on into such other masterpieces as Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus of 1947 (with Adrian Leverkühn striking a Faustian bargain for creative genius for twenty-four years again) or Mikhail Bulgakov’s 1967/1939 The Master and Margarita (with its own “Gretchen” and Satan in the form of Professor Woland). And so, again and again, over hundreds of years and vast spaces, pride, temptation, loss of humanity, the interplay of good and evil, innocence and guilt, courage and cowardice...

All or many of these themes appealed to the American imagination (in the making, more or less), and with a Washington Irving’s interest in German legends and other European folklore (see, for instance, his “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”... among the better known ones), all that was needed consisted in a new source of the hero’s dissatisfaction rather than the limitations of human knowledge, and in a society of burgeoning capitalism that was money. And since money has often been associated with the devil, Washington Irving (1783-1859) had to look for another historical-legendary source, which he found in Captain William Kidd.

Like most pirate stories, that of the Scottish captain born in Dundee (1645-1701) wavers between having him as a legendary pirate and an unjustly vilified privateer, between a seaman involved in a handful of skirmishes and a sailor who spent most of his life in a long and desperate quest to clear his name. So there is no question of “the most authentic old story” as Irving would have it and as he had accustomed his readers in most of his other works where history and fiction come together.

Still, in spite of all legends, Captain William Kidd was a real historical figure who was sent on a mission by King William III to catch pirates, then became a pirate himself and attacked the French island of Mariegalante or captured enemy privateers from which he looted enough gold to make a fortune, then settled in New York and befriended many prominent people, next sailed again around the Cape of Good Hope and through the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb at the southern entrance of the Red Sea... Anyway, while in New York City Captain Kidd deposited some of his treasure on Gardiner’s Island and then was lured into Boston by a rival (n.b., so he could have hidden another part of his

lootings in the neighborhood for someone like Tom Walker), got imprisoned and was sent to England for questioning by Parliament. Here he stood trial before the High Court of Admiralty for charges of piracy and murder, was sent to Newgate Prison, found guilty on five counts and hanged on 23 May, 1701 at "Execution Dock," Wapping, in London. His story subsequently sent people on treasure hunts in Nova Scotia or Long Island and provided the subjects for such narratives as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug," Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, Nelson B. DeMille's Plum Island and, obviously, Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker," based on the assumption that Kidd had buried a good portion of his treasure just outside Boston before being captured in 1699 and sent to Stone Prison. Just outside Boston, i.e.

"A few miles from Boston, in Massachusetts.../where/...there is a deep inlet winding several miles into the interior of the country from Charles Bay, and terminating in a thickly wooded swamp, or morass. On one side of this inlet is a beautiful dark grove; on the opposite side the land rises abruptly from the water's edge, into a high ridge on which grow a few scattered oaks of great age and immense size. Under one of these gigantic trees, according to old stories, there was a great amount of treasure buried by Kidd the pirate. The inlet allowed a facility to bring the money in a boat secretly and at night to the very foot of the hill. The elevation of the place permitted a good look out to be kept that no one was at hand, while the remarkable trees formed good landmarks by which the place might be easily found again. The old stories add, moreover, that the devil presided at the hiding of the money, and took it under his guardianship; but this, it is well known, he always does with buried treasure, particularly when it has been ill gotten. Be that as it may, Kidd never returned to recover his wealth, being shortly after seized at Boston, sent out to England, and there hanged for a pirate."

This remarkable beginning of "The Devil and Tom Walker" comes from its author's belief that such realistic details of rural life in America could be worked memorably into fiction, to which was added his skill at evocative re-creation of history. And Washington Irving—a close contemporary of Daniel Webster's incidentally—explains ("The Author's Account of Himself," The Sketch-Book, 1820):

"My holiday afternoons were spent in rambles about the surrounding country. I made myself familiar with all its places famous in history or fable. I knew every spot where a murder or robbery had been committed, or a ghost been seen. I visited the neighboring villages, and added greatly to my stock of knowledge, by noting their habits and customs, and conversing with their sages and great men. I even journeyed one long summer's day to the summit of the most distant hill, from whence I stretched my eye over many a mile of terra incognita, and was astonished to find how vast a globe I inhabited." (Norton I, p.808)

This "rambling propensity" is illustrated by these very Tales of a Traveller (1824)—where our story was included—, all of them yarns of the supernatural clanking with the ghostly machinery of romantic gothicism, showing first of all his readings in German romantic literature and folklore. Tom Walker is not a good man by any means; he is, instead, a "meagre miserly fellow," a greedy and selfish wretched character, unhappy with his nameless termagant hateful wicked wife, living in Boston "about the year 1727" (in fact, the details describing the financial collapse refer to the harsh economic circumstances and insolvent difficulties that occurred in 1739-40). Tom offers his soul to Old Scratch, a "master of the Salem witches" (see Judge Hathorne and the Salem trials of 1692 reference in the second story) who puts his signature as a black print (n. b.) on this American Faust's forehead, so that he could do the Devil's work, i.e. usura. As Tom's wife (much worse than him) offers herself for the contract in his stead, she puts her silver teapot and spoons in an apron and goes to meet the Devil, but finally gets lost in the forest and "nothing but a heart and liver" are found tied in her apron. Here one may find it worthy remembering that when Kidd visited Black Island in 1699 he was hosted by Mrs Mercy

(Sands) Raymond and, for her hospitality, she was bid to hold out her apron, into which Kidd throws gold and jewels until it was full; after her husband died, she moved with her family to New London, Connecticut where she “got enriched by the apron.”

Having happily got rid of his wife, Tom opens a broker’s shop in Boston and gradually becomes the richest man in town, extorting bonds, foreclosing mortgages and driving merchants to bankruptcy. Waxing old, however, and becoming a religious man, he plans to cheat the black man, i.e. Old Scratch, out of the conditions of their contract. But the “black giant” on a black horse comes for him anyway and “away they galloped in the midst of a thunder storm.” Here, in the end, like all the way through, the unreliable narrator is not sure of any truth to the story, which remains “an authentic old legend” itself so that Stephen Vincent Benet (1898-1943) could draw from it much of his inspiration for his “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (to which he also wrote a sequel, “Daniel Webster and the Sea Serpent”).

Here is an entirely different beginning, pointing to other differences between the two stories based on the same legend, but written in two different American historical contexts (Benet’s was published in 1936, so over a hundred years after Irving’s):

“It’s a story they tell in the border country, where Massachusetts joins Vermont and New Hampshire.

Yes, Dan’l Webster’s dead—or, at least, they buried him. But every time there’s a thunderstorm around Marshfield, they say you can hear his rolling voice in the hollows of the sky. And they say that if you go to his grave and speak loud and clear, Dan’l Webster—Dan’l Webster! the ground’ll begin to shiver and the trees begin to shake. And after a while you’ll hear a deep voice saying, Neighbor, how stands the Union? Then you better answer the union stands as she stood, rock-bottomed and copper-sheathed, one and indivisible, or he’s liable to rear right out of the ground. At least, that’s what I was told when I was a youngster.”

So irony, tongue-in-cheek, unreliability, fiction and history mixed together again; only we are one hundred years later, so the progress from one story to the other may also be an indication of the progress in American democracy. In Irving’s time, as democracy is unripe and not strong enough, the Devil appears as all too powerful and easily wins in the end; in Benet’s twentieth-century full-fledged democracy—that also managed to prove its worth through a long and bloody civil war—you do not just sign a contract and then get what you think is due to you; you need to go through a trial, and where there is a trial there must be a judge (famous or infamous or both), a jury (made up of all sorts of persons, mostly infamous), an accuser (i.e. the Devil), a defendant, and an attorney. And where there is need for a lawyer, why not invite the greatest one in American history; and that, of course, is Daniel Webster. Which also requires that you place your story sometime before the middle of the 19th-century, as Webster died in 1852. So the early 1840s will do just nicely, as at the end you (the author) want to introduce some fortune telling announcing a death in 1848—among other things.

Moreover, as has been seen above, the setting will have to be that of New Hampshire or thereabouts, i.e. the cradle of American democracy (the first of the colonies to break away from Great Britain, the first of the US states to have its own constitution on Jan 5 1776, the state of the nation’s first contest in the presidential primaries, and the state whose motto is “Live free or die”; consequently, the devil will have to be defeated and ridiculed.

So our new Faust—a good man this time—is Jabez Stone of Cross Corners, New Hampshire, “plagued with undedging bad luck”; no wonder he finds himself swearing that “this is enough to make a man want to sell his soul to the devil,” embodied here by a stranger also known as Mr. Scratch (not

just Old Scratch as with Irving). Wishing to get out of the deal after ten years (ten plus three additional ones that he bargained for in the meantime), Jabez Stone asks for a compromise (which Webster so much fought for, i.e. the compromise to stave off the sectionalism that threatened war between the North and the South in the 1840s), that Mr. Scratch will not agree to. In the trial Jabez Stone and Webster—his hired lawyer—win and the devil is humiliated: “And he hasn’t been seen in the state of New Hampshire from that day to this.”

The title character of our second story (who, obviously, is not Jabez Stone, the new American Faust) makes it necessary that we go back to the famous statesman in the previous century, in the decades preceding the Civil War, i.e. Daniel Webster (1782, in New Hampshire, of course—1852). He was the most prominent conservative and a thoroughgoing elitist of his time, the 14th and the 19th US Secretary of State, member of the House of Representatives for ten years, senator from Massachusetts, with three attempts and failures to become President..., all in all, forty years in national politics, when he took part in 223 key US Supreme Court cases, negotiated international treaties, gave “the most eloquent speech ever delivered in Congress” (his reply to Hayne of South Carolina in 1830), and was considered the leading constitutional scholar of his generation. He ended his anti-Hayne speech with “Liberty and Union, now and for ever, one and inseparable.” To match elements mentioned in the story, he was known to have been indulging in the passions and appetites of gambling and alcohol (“I never left a jug or a case half finished in my life.”)

The Bener story also refers—as we have seen—, implicitly, to the compromise of 1850, when Webster gave his famous Seventh of March Speech, then fiercely attacked by the abolitionists. It was then that Webster was described (by journalist Horace Mann) as “a fallen star! Lucifer descending from Heaven...” (another devil therefore), or as “Ichabod” by John Greenleaf Whittier (the “inglorious one,” see Samulel 4 in the Bible, plus our own paper on the subject in Hermeneutic Challenge...).

And so Benet has Satan conjure up the damned souls of twelve villains from American history to serve as a jury in the case of Satan vs. Jabez Stone, with Danile Webster as an attorney for Stone and Judge John Hathorne (1641-1717) presiding. One cannot help noting that this more recent devil (in contrast with Irving’s dark, ugly and frightening one) is polite, refined, and a “soft-spoken dark-dressed stranger” who drove up in “a handsome buggy.” As to the jury, it includes: Thomas Morton (b. 1578), a rival of the Plymouth Pilgrims, who founded the settlement of Merry Mount and came to be described as the “Lord of Misrule” and maintained a “School of Atheism” (in Puritanic colonies!); the Indian Chief Metacomet, better known as King Philip and the war of 1675-78 (his head was displayed on a pike outside of Fort Plymouth for two decades); Pirate Edward Teach (b. in Bristol in 1680), a privateer and pirate, killed and beheaded in 1718; Simon Girty (1741-1818), a loyalist, turncoat and renegade; Walter Butler (b. 1747), another loyalist killed in 1781 and scalped by the Oneidas; and Reverend John Smeet, an imaginary character, plus five unnamed jurors. As for Judge Hathorne (great-great-grandfather of Nathaniel Hawthorne), he remained in history for the 1692 witch trials that he conducted sadistically and cynically (see also, among others, Arthur Miller’s The Crucible).

Defendant Jabez Stone and Daniel Webster win, but the story does not end before Mr. Scratch offers to tell Webster’s fortune in his palm (future-in-the past, as it were): his failure to ever become president, the death of his two sons in battle (Webster had five children, of whom Daniel Fletcher, a Union colonel, died at 44—1862—in the Battle of Bull Run, and Edward, a major, had died at 28—1848—in the Mexican American War), that after his 1850 speech “some will call /him/ Ichabod” (see supra), and that the US will remain united after all.

And thus Stephen Vincent Benet re-creates for his twentieth-century audiences (he adapted the story into a folk opera, “Scratch,” in 1938, and collaborated in the writing of a screenplay adaptation in 1941, “All That Money Can Buy,” followed in 2001 by another movie, “Shortcut to Happiness”) a

historical-legendary-fictional character who, besides his accomplishments in 19-th-century American politics, also talks Latin to his farm hands or wrestles with his ram Goliath (for whose merciless horns he prepared Mr. Scratch in the end), and has two horses for his carriage called Constitution and Constellation; but, above all, in the trial, he gives a great speech about how wonderful it is to be human and an American and talked “about things that make a country a country, a man a man,” or about “the failures and the endless journey of mankind,” so one jury member can justly say that “even the damned may salute the eloquence of Mr. Webster.

No wonder then that the Devil is defeated in this American Faust story, an echo of the previous one where the Faust becomes some kind of devil himself (whereas Daniel Webster is more than a devil); the Faustian model—a deal with the devil in order to gain knowledge and wealth—is reduced to the gaining of money. The evolution is from a horrible character and a wretched man (Tom Walker), who is happy when his wicked wife is gone, to an unlucky good man (Jabez Stone) with a decent wife and children. And there is a parallel metamorphosis in the devil—from dark, ugly, and frightening to a soft-spoken stranger in a handsome buggy. The two American Fausts and the two American devils—i.e. the purely legendary characters—are both eclipsed in the reader’s mind by the real historical character of Daniel Webster. In this perspective, the gaining of knowledge that both authors ignore seems to be compensated for by the democratic pragmatism of the new world: rather than succumbing to the devil, the new Fausts either identify with him or reduce him to ridicule. As the second story makes quite clear, Scratch has been present at all the worst events in American history; still, all Americans, like “the good people of Boston” in the first story, “had been so much accustomed to witches and goblins and tricks of the devil in all kinds of shapes from the first settlement of the colony, that they were not so much horror struck as might have been expected...” from Europeans, for instance (who had created all these before the Americans even came into being).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartlett, Irving H., Daniel Webster (1978) online edition;
Daniel Webster Estate, <http://www.danielwebsterestate.org>;
Faust full text, English translation from Project Gutenberg in a modern design;
Faust in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition (Cambridge, CUP);
Irving, Washington (1824), “The Devil and Tom Walker,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?>;
Killing time without injuring eternity... analysis of “The Devil and Tom Walker” website;
Laan, J. M. van der et al., (ed.), The Faustian Century: German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and Faustus (Camden House, 2013);
Marlowe, Christopher, Doctor Faustus, ed. Sylvan Barnet (Signet Classics, 1969);
Pirates: William Kidd web pages; and Online Encyclopedia...;
Ruickbie, Leo, Faustus: The Life and Times of a Renaissance Magician (The History Press, 2009);
Stephen Vincent Benet at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database, <http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/fg.cgi...>
The Devil and Daniel Webster at the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title...>
The Devil and Daniel Webster web pages;
The Norton Anthology of American Literature, I-II, ed. by Nina Baym et al. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989/1985/1979);
The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, 1616 quarto online;
Washington Irving, “The Devil and Tom Walker” Short Story at About.com Classic Literature;
Zacks, Richard, The Pirate Hunter. The True Story of Captain Kidd, <http://books.google.com>.