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Witkacy and Ghelderode: Goethe's *Faust* Transformed into a Grotesque Cabaret

The farce, realistic and surrealist, trivial and yet transfigured, is an essential expression of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's (1885–1939) *The Beelzebub Sonata*¹ and Michel de Ghelderode's (1898–1962) *The Death of Doctor Faust*.² Damned or redeemed, tragical or travestied, noble, foolish, or darkly sinister, the figure of Faust has been the basis for endless representations ever since Johann Spies in Frankfurt am Main in 1587 compiled a chapbook *Historia von Doktor Johann Fausten* based on the puppet plays presented throughout Europe and England. Thus from its first beginnings the Faust myth became a rich intermedial source for puppet theaters and also Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1604), a play with grotesque renderings of hell as well as burlesque slapstick. But it was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1806, more than any other writer, who was respon-

¹ S. I. Witkiewicz: *The Beelzebub Sonata* [in:] idem: *Beelzebub Sonata: Plays Essays, and Documents*, ed. and trans. D. Gerould and J. Kosicka, New York 1980, p. 21–65. Further references will appear within the text.

² M. de Ghelderode: *The Death of Doctor Faust* [in:] *Michel de Ghelderode: Seven Plays*, Volume 2, trans. G. Hauger, New York 1964, p. 95–150. Further references to the play will appear within the text.

sible for endowing Faust with human longing to penetrate the essence of being itself, and his poignant Gretchen episode soon became the source for many variations, among them Charles Gounod's popular opera (1859), whose plot reduced Faust's existential quest into a lyrical rendition of sentimental longing, seduction and abandonment. By the time of Witkacy's *The Beelzebub Sonata* and Michel de Ghelderode's *The Death of Doctor Faust*, both written in 1925, endless variations on the Faustian theme had proliferated in plays, novels, and operas.

What distinguishes Witkacy and Ghelderode's variations is that the Faust myth and the character's yearning to experience the joys and sorrows, "what to all mankind is apportioned"³ had become trivialized, as if the possibility of "striving" is no longer possible in an age in which philosophy, art movements, as well as ideological "isms" serve as self-serving chatter to augment individual sophistication. Carl Schorske observes that the bourgeois transformed his "appropriated aesthetic culture inward to the cultivation of the self, of his personal uniqueness."⁴ The inner world of an artist like Istvan is thwarted by convention, as Witkacy's precursor, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, expressed in *A Letter to Lord Chandos*, "The abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course [...] these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi."⁵ Similarly, Istvan expresses the desire to transcend to capture "the absolute isolation of every single individual" in his compositions, but comes to the realization, "I write notes the same way I'd write figures in a ledger" (W 25). Both Ghelderode's and Witkacy's anti-heroes reflect the tendency towards narcissism and a hypertrophy of feelings. Witkacy's Istvan fears squandering the preciousness of his "feelings" before the "diabolical rabble" (W 42) that wants to appropriate his genius. And Ghelderode's Faust while strutting about in various attitudes "like an actor" questions, "And why this desire for the absolute, this perpetual, sublime, and puerile drivel of the soul" (G 100).

It is evident from both Witkacy and Ghelderode's subtitles to their plays that theirs is a project of subversion, for Ghelderode's play is subtitled "A Tragedy for the Music Hall" and Witkacy's "What Really Happened in Mordovar." In their separate projects of deformation, the Faustian myth appears as old goods suitable for either a music hall or a grotesque rendering of the salon in Mordovar, Witkacy's jab at the "murderous" conditions

³ J. W. Goethe: *Faust A Tragedy*, trans. W. Arndt and ed. C. Hamlin, New York 2001, p. 47.

⁴ C. E. Schorske: *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York 1981, p. 9.

⁵ H. von Hofmannstahl: *The Letter of Lord Chandos*, [in:] *Hugo von Hofmannstahl: Selected Prose*, New York 1952, 129–141, p. 133–134.

that consume Istvan's creativity. In Witkacy's play the Faust legend has deteriorated to the extent that its only remnants are the grandmother's tale of strange happenings at Mount Czikla where supposedly the entrance to hell is located and where a composer had once attempted to make a pact with the devil. Instead he came to a bad end and was found hanging outside the supposed entrance to hell, a plot that will be replicated within the play. As Daniel Gerould aptly observes, Istvan "is acting out a pseudo legendary drama in a world of sham and plagiarism."⁶

Though Ghelderode's plot and character are still somewhat related to Goethe's tragedy, in Ghelderode's burlesque Faust has become a bad actor stuck in the eternal replaying of his solipsistic role. Ghelderode introduces calculated incongruities of time and space that are immediately evident in the play's basic setting: "a city of the past and of the future in Flanders: in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries simultaneously" (G 98). With the aid of the Mephistophelean Diamatoruscant Faust replays the plot of seduction and abandonment of Marguerite. In addition to the mocking variation of Goethe's plot, Ghelderode's emptied out triad of characters are mirrored by bad actors enacting the same plot both on the stage of the music hall.

Witkacy's Istvan, a name out of a clichéd Hungarian operetta, is yet another variant from his entire oeuvre of frustrated "striving" artists attempting to create in the climate of the pretentious and murderous Mordovar circle with its contempt for originality, what Istvan calls "the howling dog reaction [...] whether you play him Beethoven or Richard Strauss - he howls because his feelings are stirred up by the sheer noise of the sounds" (W 42). Like so many of Witkacy's blocked wannabe artists, Istvan who feels within him "a spatial-auditory vision of sounds which [he] cannot capture in duration" (W 41), unless he is shocked into creation by Beelzebub. But even Beelzebub is plagued with the same desires as everyman, "who missed his calling in life" and dreams that someone else will incarnate his ideas - ones he doesn't know himself (W 26). Despite his lack of skills he "feels" a sonata inside himself "like a huge charge of explosives for which there is no fuse or match" (W 35), and he intends to harness Istvan's talent in order to realize his ambition to become the pianist of his "Beelzebub Sonata."

In both plays the Mephistophelian character has been deprived of his most of his powers of negation. As Diamatoruscant in Ghelderode, though he retains some of Mephistopheles' hauteur in his red suit, he nevertheless makes an adjustment to middle class values and wears cuffs and a bowler hat. In fact he appears to be more of a theatrical "illusionist" in the style of

⁶ D. Gerould: *Witkacy: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer*, Seattle 1981, p. 260.

Goethe's Mephistopheles as a trickster in Auerbach's Tavern than a sinister devil. In Witkacy's derision of the diabolic he is a Brazilian planter with a lengthy quasi-aristocratic name, Baltazar de Campos de Baleastadar. He is also an impresario, who, in the mock fun-house hell decked up in black and red "demonic frippery" (W 38) suddenly acquires a tail, and to add to this "third-rate demonic effect" (W 40), he produces fake horns with a pump in his pocket. All these effects transform him into Beelzebub the master of the cabaret "fixed up as a comparatively fantastic hell" (W 38) where appropriate perverse examples of insatiability are, if not incarnated, then talked about a great deal. Not only do both playwrights undermine the potential of a twentieth-century Faust figure and its attendant Mephistophelean character, but they also mock Naturalism in the theater, and in Witkacy's play even the possibility of Pure Form.

Gerould comments that for Witkacy, "Pure Form was a theoretical gesticulation, a polemical stance,"⁷ as can be determined from the model that Witkacy considers to be the essence of Pure Form begins with these words, "Three characters dressed in red who come on stage and bow to no one in particular [...]," and the assemblage of images he presented in this model led him to speculate that, "if the play is seriously written and appropriately produced, this method can create a work of unsuspected beauty [...] all in a uniform style and unlike anything which has previously existed."⁸ Witkacy's attempt to create a new language for drama that dispensed with convention was an undertaking that could never be perfectly realized, for what he ultimately found that talking about it was not the same as creating it in words or stage images. It is no wonder that Witkacy mocks himself by putting the critique of Pure Form in the mouth of the Baroness, the most conventional of his characters: "[...] that insatiability for form: that constant acceleration of the fever of life! Even in total seclusion, even reading only the Bible and drinking milk, one cannot isolate oneself from the spirit of the times" (W 58). As Gerald Genette observes, "Self-pastiche as a genre can consist only of self-imitations," a practice that Witkacy extended into a mocking self-caricature.⁹

Thus, despite his desire for penetrating beyond the usual theatrical forms, Witkacy can only provide discourse about it, and consequently *The Beelzebub Sonata* is as much propelled by the twin engines of debate on the

⁷ D. Gerould: *Introduction: Witkacy and the Creative Life*, [in:] *The Witkiewicz Reader*, ed. and trans. D. Gerould, Evanston 1992, 1–33, p. 4.

⁸ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Czysta Forma w Teatrze*, ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1977, p. 77–78.

⁹ G. Genette: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans Ch. Newman and C. Doubinsky, Lincoln 1997, p. 125.

role of the artist in society, as it is by the somewhat deformed plot of a pseudo Faustian legend about a musician who wanted to create "the kind of sonata that Beelzebub himself might have written!" (W 31) All of Witkacy's characters are inauthentic, and the contrived Mordovar legend propels the happenstance of the appearance of Rio Bamba who announces the arrival of Baleastadar. From then all characters are doomed to act out "tangled web of a new ultrasurreal possibility." And even though the plot has been set into motion, the characters themselves question their role, as for example, when Baleastadar appears dressed in the frippery of the demonic of black cape and hat he protests, "I don't feel the slightest bit like Beelzebub" (W 39).

The action of Witkacy's play is symmetrically arranged with Act I taking place in the modestly furnished living room of Grandmother Julia located on the less fashionable shore of the lake. Act II enacts hell as cabaret already envisioned by the Grandmother's tale and located in the very same subterranean vault of Mount Czikla. Act III represents Witkacy's experimentation with the interpenetration of pluralities of existence, for he conceives a series of curtains that ultimately reveal the salon as hell. The action of the first layer is a narrow strip in the forefront in Baroness Jackals salon where she and Istvan's aunt are knitting by a fireplace and discussing that Baron Jackals might be arrested for having murdered Hilda; as a factor of simultaneity the parting curtain reveals Hilda in a black ball dress informs them that Beelzebub Sonata is already being talked about "perhaps even in Budapest" (W 60). At the utterance by Istvan's aunt that art doesn't need "perversionalism" (W 60) the curtain is drawn and the entire hell from Act II is visible lighted in deep red.

Intertextuality is the basis of Witkacy's fricassee of self referential topics and characters that pervades all of his plays, novels and theory of Pure Form; in *The Beelzebub Sonata* his familiar themes and recurring discussions on the conflict between creativity and the social constraints imposed by both the salon and the cabaret, insatiability, Hilda – the demonic woman, marriage and its deadening impact on the creative spirit, the mechanization of the creative force, its appropriation by performers, the possibility of achieving Pure Form, etc. are given a new airing, albeit in a more or less the same context of the philistine salon. Not that Istvan in his wavering between a conventional middle class life and a life devoted to art represents a strong counter voice, for though he wants to compose a sonata that may be transformed in a way no one has ever heard before, all he seems to accomplish is to "jot down notes on the staves the way a book-keeper jots down figures in his ledger" (W 31). Indeed it seems that Witkacy is mocking his own endeavors, for Istvan's realization that the experience of artists have been

“transported into another dimension, and that’s why their biographers are concerned with these details to a ridiculous extent” (W 30) seems to allude to the preoccupation of Witkacy’s public more with his buffoonery than with his art.

There is no other recourse but to sell one’s soul to a fake Beelzebub or to yet another red-haired demonic woman from Witkacy’s stable, who just happens to be an opera singer from Budapest. But as is usually the case in Witkacy’s oeuvre, Hilda the demonic woman is not as dangerous as the “cuttlefish” variety of seeming innocent pretty girls like Christina who shift their affections from one character to another all on the same page or wherever the “tremendous gale” casts them. For the moment she’s switched from the snob Baron Jackals who’s rejected her fearing a “misalliance,” but suddenly it is discovered that Istvan in the arbitrary rise and fall of status in the salon has been elevated in rank to a count. Thereby, in “cuttlefish” fashion she entices Istvan to return, “Back there in our dear peaceful Mordovar – those peaceful evenings of ours” (W 49–50) when they played fourhanded piano. Istvan realizes that if he had married her he would never have been an artist. “For me you’re only the theme for a macabre minuet which will be second part of my sonata” (W 50). Once both Jackals and Istvan become “corpsed,” even though Jackals needs to be re-killed once he becomes a rather boring and nice corpse, and despite the fact that Christine has also been corpsed, she becomes Baleastadar’s groupie accompanying him on his world wide tour as the “Paganini of the piano” performing Istvan’s “Beelzebub Sonata.” The legend that the grandmother recounted has been fulfilled; Istvan, a kaput little artist, is seen hanging by his suspenders from a pine tree with Mount Czikla in the background. Baleastadar’s conclusion as he points to the heap of compositions Istvan left behind, “We won’t squeeze anything more demonic out of them” (W 64).

The Beelzebub Sonata is infused by mental somersaults as Istvan, in a kind of Dionysian frenzy, attempts to compose music that will produce a metaphysical shudder. That Witkacy is serious about his project is evident in the epigraph to the play, a misquotation from Beethoven, “Musik ist höhere Offenbarung als jede Religion und Philosophie,”¹⁰ misquoted once again in his novel *Insatiability*. Witkacy tellingly substitutes Beethoven’s original “Weissheit” with “Religion,” for part of Witkacy’s esoteric quest is to recreate

¹⁰ L. Beethoven: *Letter to Bettina*, 1810. “Musik ist höhere Offenbarung als alle Weissheit und Philosophie. Wem sich meine Musik auftut, der muss frei werden von all dem Elend, womit sich die anderen Menschen schleppen.” Philos.-website.de/autoren.

the forgotten religious shock and wonder that Greeks must have felt when they first saw Dionysian spectacles. Rather than revelation through wisdom, Witkacy is more interested in the metaphysics of religion, for within the dialogue Istvan echoes Beethoven's epigraph, "Religion, just as much as philosophy, is an intellectually inspired working out of certain feelings which I call metaphysical" (W 30).

But what kind of composition is this "Beelzebub Sonata" described by Istvan as "the formal spatial conception in music" that he is in the process of composing at the end of Act II, a composition that even the rather philistine Baron Jackals is listening to "in a state of ecstasy," and one that propels Rio Bamba and the Grandmother to dance a fantastic dance at the first chords of the wild music. Of course they might just like to dance, for they also dance a fashionable shimmy, a dance that Baleastadar puts down as "so hopelessly night club-cabaret, so tasteless" (W 50).

Given Witkacy's epigraph from Beethoven and his mention in Pure Form in the Theater that Beethoven's musical expressiveness was quite likely considered dissonant by Haydn¹¹ that it might be Beethoven's *Tempest Sonata* in D Minor Op. 31 with its 2nd demonic movement, the very same sonata that Strindberg thought about in his *The Ghost Sonata*. It is possible that Witkacy may also be referring to Karol Szymanowski who corresponds to the erotically charged Putricidis Hardonne in Witkacy's *Insatiability*; Witkacy's description of Szymanowski's career seems to be a cynical projection of his own status: "The entire world of contemporary music had become bent on his destruction. He was barred from concerts, virtuosos were discouraged from performing his works by persons alluding to all sorts of imaginary difficulties."¹² While Gerould has proposed Schonberg's *Second String Quartet*, I'm in favor of Szymanowski's *Second Piano Sonata* Op. 21. This speculation is supported in Witkacy's *Insatiability* when he describes the effect of Szymanowski/Putricidis music, "This was art, not the sort of thumping performed by blasé prestidigators, or intellectual inventors of new sensual thrills for hysterical females [...] And so full was this music that it operated at first through the sensorium [...] in order to gain access to that secret underground where it abode in reality, inaccessible to cheap or sentimental breast-beaters."¹³ In contrast, Baleastadar who played, "magnificently with gestures typical of a frenetic pianist" (W 64), may never gain access to interpret "that secret underground" of Istvan's Beelzebub Sonata.

¹¹ S. I. Witkiewicz: *Czysta Forma w Teatrze*, op. cit., p. 67.

¹² Idem: *Insatiability*, trans. L. Iribarne, Urbana 1977, p. 46.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 161.

Ghelderode much like Witkacy had distinct opinions about music that he integrates into the very action of the play. While Witkacy appears to be more interested in a romantic and modernist musical composition to serve contextualize the *Beelzebub Sonata*, Ghelderode is more interested in contemporary music akin to that of the Les Six, a group of young French and Swiss composers (comprising Poulenc, Milhaud, Auric, Durey, Honegger and Tailleferre), who embraced melodies and sounds that were considered more appropriate for music halls than for concert halls: "I very much enjoy fair-ground cacophonies," Ghelderode comments, "orchestrations, street organs, mechanical pianos, not forgetting nostalgic accordions." The writing of *The Death of Doctor Faust* he explains was accompanied by a tune from the fair, "a sort of Renish dance that a Limonaire organ played doggedly not far from my window."¹⁴ Consequently snippets of a sort of Brechtian *Gebrauchsmusik* pervade his play.

Both Witkacy and Ghelderode attempted to shatter all traces of illusion-creating drama in order to reveal the transparency of the theatrical world. While Witkacy's *The Beelzebub Sonata* represents the last stage of his twenty-two known plays, Ghelderode's *The Death of Doctor Faust* was one of his early plays, and the first one to be staged. Unlike Witkacy's extensive treatise on Pure Form, Ghelderode left few reflections on the formal properties of his over sixty plays, and only in his Ostend Interviews did he provide reflections on the sources of his art, among them his collection of marionettes and puppets: "All these effigies thrill me by the fact of heir somewhat magical nature, and even though flesh and blood actors can weary me and often disappoint me, marionettes, because of their natural reserve and silence, manage to console me."¹⁵ He insists – akin to Heinrich von Kleist – that marionettes have the potential to reveal a theater in its pure and savage state. In addition, Ghelderode maintains that for him a theatrical work does not exist without the "sensuousness proper to the plastic arts," for like in his contemporary James Ensor's paintings of low women, clowns, and crowds of sinister down – and outs, there is nothing glorious about Ghelderode's *Faust*, his devil *Diamotoruscant*, nor his servant-girl *Marguerite*.

What distinguishes Ghelderode's *The Death of Doctor Faust* are elements of grotesque burlesque in the construction of both characters and plot, for he simultaneously looks back to the tradition of the early comic puppet theatres and looks forward to a postmodern theater with looping interpolations of other media: film, popular music, ballet and the music hall. Ghelderode is

¹⁴ M. de Ghelderode: *The Ostend Interviews*, [in:] idem: *Michel de Ghelderode Seven Plays*, Vol. 1., trans. G. Hauger, New York 1960, 1–26, p. 9–10.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 23.

striving to create simultaneity of action, and to achieve his goals he assembles a number of “happenings”, among them a scene of a Loudspeaker, which reports bizarre news, a Prophet who wanders about reporting the “End of the World” and crowds that cheer on or boo all events. Much like his contemporary Jean Cocteau who in his play *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921) crosses the border between drama and ballet, with fantastic effects such as speaking Telegraphs and a Loudspeaker, Ghelderode too crosses intermedial borders with inclusion of a film projection, a radio announcer, and even ballet sequences. The different media depend on and refer to each other, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of Ghelderode’s particular communicative strategies as constituents of a wider cultural environment. At the same time, all the elements provide an internal critique of media’s power to over-stimulate and influence the public.

Though seduction and abandonment are part of the plot of Ghelderode’s *The Death of Doctor Faust*, the subtitle, “A Tragedy for a Music Hall” hints at an intermedial clash, for the music hall does not lend itself to Gounod-like lyrical expressions of either tragedy or sentimental longing. In his “remake” of the bare bones of Goethe’s Gretchen tragedy Ghelderode’s Faust is transformed into a clown stuck in the eternal replaying of his greatly reduced role. His Faust no longer strives for the absolute; instead he struggles to find himself, a self that is curiously at odds with the traditional self-aware Faustian personality. Indeed Ghelderode’s character wallows in a middle class version of an identity crisis as he moans and yawns, “Weariness, weariness [...] a whole century of songs. It is dark, dirty and vulgar!” (G 100) Unlike Istvan, he is not pondering the big questions about metaphysics or choices between life and art. Instead he is imprisoned into a role from literature, for according to him, “Humanity is dying from literature” (G 100). The tawdry stage where even the “darkness is faked” and a cacophony of sounds and flashing neon intrude on his dusty sixteenth century study decked out with the “appurtenances of bygone scientific sentimentality,” of the endless representations of the same into which he’s been immured. As he comes to the conclusion that whoever scripted him, made him “incomplete, unfinished” (G 100), he breaks out of the sixteenth century tawdry theatrical world, and the next time we see him he has entered the twentieth century “Tavern of the Four Seasons” at carnival time wearing his centuries old costume. He is greeted by Diamotoruscant: “So you are Faust! Who would not know you? You have been put in novels, in plays in operas” (G 112).

In Ghelderode’s *mise en abyme* structure, the Gretchen tragedy is simultaneously enacted on the stage of the music hall by bad actors, and this mock-Pirandellian setting allows for dialogue between characters and ac-

tors. In fact, the stage actors playing Faust and Marguerite are nameless and replicate the plot, for they too, inspired by the roles they're playing are having a love affair. In fact they believe that their acting is more authentic than reality. For example, the actor playing the devil mocks Diamotoruscant as a "music-hall artiste," for though he's a "fake devil" he takes his art seriously. "Watch me," he exhorts Diamotoruscant with gestures-poses-blazing eyes with tremolos, "How dark it is! – as in a criminal's soul!" "Not bad!" Diamotoruscant comments cynically, "What captivating acting." And while Diamotoruscant cheers the actor on to even greater histrionic excesses, the crowd having had enough of the fake devil's overacting demands, "Slaughter him! Curtain! Boo! Boo!" (G 119–121)

What disappears in Ghelderode's farce is Goethe's Gretchen's moving plight, for she is transformed into "a little servant girl" who on her afternoon off hopes to hook up with someone "interesting" at the music hall. Indeed she's soon set up by Diamotoruscant to meet the venerable scholar Faust who has wandered out from the sixteenth century, and who, as is scripted, takes the girl to a cheap hotel. With a perverse interest in the goings on in the hotel, Diamotoruscant chats up the Barker of the cinema across from the hotel. The Barker's spiel exhorts the passersby to experience the melodramatic romance of everlasting illusion in the cinema, "A tragic love story where fate plays a part beyond words. Pathetic. Moving. Boxes five franks. Virtue punished and vice rewarded! A family show! Highly educational!" (G 123) Even Diamotoruscant is seduced into entering the cinema and emerges "weeping bitterly," and despite the Barker's assurance, "Calm yourself [...] it's not real," the poor devil succumbs to "the power of imitation" (G 126).

The seeming tawdry plot that appears in cinematic representation connects to Faust's clumsy seduction of Marguerite in the cheap hotel across the square. And while the Barker keeps up his spiel announcing, "Throbbing drama of sin and remorse" (G 124), Faust, once he's had the girl, wants nothing more to do with her. Despite Faust's pleas to respect his status as a scholar, the hysterical girl cries out of the window to the booing crowd spilling out of the cinema that she's been violated, "I'll shout if I want! You're a swine, in spite of your theatrical costume and fine airs! You lied to me! You talked to me about springtime and your joyless soul! You talked so well that I believed you! And you showed me a horrible, painful thing, me a young girl" (G 127). When the over stimulated crowd spilling out of the cinema hears about the innocent girl's "violation" it rushes to kill Faust. Fortunately he is saved by the wit of Diamotoruscant who deludes the crowd into thinking that what they assumed was reality is actually a clever ploy to advertise

the production of "Faust" to be performed that night and every night in the local tavern.

In his treatment of the bare bones of Goethe's by now over-familiar plot Ghelderode has a great deal of freedom to create an intermedial spectacle. For example, when Marguerite in despair has thrown herself under a tram, Ghelderode pulls out all sorts of stage effects, a newsreel presenting all twenty three pieces of her body being pulled out, newsboys rushing about announcing the very same news, and an almost instant court trial that condemns Faust. Immediately in balletic style the hunt for Faust is conducted by a patrol of gendarmes with huge bearskins and wooden sabers. They proceed in balletic movements to take three steps forward and two back, "making headway in this manner" as they halt, mark time, turn about and go off in another direction" (G 137).

At the same time, Ghelderode uses frequent interruptions of stage actions with magnesium flashes, the appearing and disappearing spoke of a merry-go-round, an electric sign that flashes, UNIVERSE FOR SALE OR TO RENT, searchlights, lightning, fireworks, cinema placards and flashing screen images. Musical fragments also intrude into the action as ironic comments on the action. For example, an orchestra plays in four-part harmony an old tune in a minor key to accompany Marguerite's entrance into the tavern; when Faust appears on the scene, it breaks off suddenly. The aural world of the play is quite noisy with sounds of a hurdy-gurdy from the town fair, the Loud-Speaker blaring sensational news, loud banging from the mise-en-scene being constructed for the performance of the bare bones production of *Faust* on the music hall stage, the Barker's spiel for the love story unfolding in the cinema, newspaper boys hawking the latest scandals such as the abandonment of Marguerite by the dirty Doctor Faust, the instant replay by newsreel announcements of the crime and its trial, and the crowd cheering and egging on whatever version of the same plot that appears on the movie screen. Strokes of gongs, drums, and booms from airplanes add to the cacophony of intruding sounds of the fairground carrousel. Some of the dialogue is amplified to sound as if the words come from the deep well of history by way of phonograph recordings. When we come to the conclusion of the play we recognize that Ghelderode has totally undermined any vestige of poignancy, for when the "authentic" Faust has shot himself at play's end, the orchestra plays a funeral march "in a rapid, nay frenzied rhythm, in the style of Offenbach" (G 150).

In addition to introducing dazzling sound effects and choreographed sequences, Ghelderode, like Witkacy, also pays a great deal of attention to the visual world of his play, and though not a painter himself, he draws simulta-

neously from the visual and grotesque Flemish tradition of painting from Hieronymus Bosch and his contemporary Ostender James Ensor, and many of Ensor's paintings of crowds in grotesque masks costumed like clowns reappear in Ghelderode's play as rather ghoulish representations. The visual intertextuality between Ghelderode's drama and Ensor's paintings is evident from the his notation in the opening prologue that his Faust "is to appear to the spectator as a clown to whom a tragedian's role has been entrusted" (G 99). In the First Episode taking place in the Tavern of the Four Seasons, the customers appear with "painted faces, like dummies, in traditional attitudes," and like automatons, they all get up together, "make disjointed gestures, stagger" (G 104). Intruding randomly on the scene Three Maskers appear, "one in a yellow peplum and with black plumes on his head, the second clad in a silver shroud and wearing a crown of sham jewels, and the last all pink, smug, and bloated;" Ghelderode's notation for staging reads (Copy James Ensor's maskers) (G 109). Once Marguerite turns up in the Tavern they surround her with threatening gestures. However, unlike Ensor's paintings, none of Ghelderode's invasions are static representations, for these images are constantly in motion, for example "a stream of ugly-faced people come out of the cinema" (G 129), and "maskers, peaceful or boisterous cross the scene," while passers-by "with various gaits, a phantom cab, everyday supers- -seamen, black coated workers, lonely men, prostitutes, etc." (G 122) provide a visual spectacle. In fact the scenes are so busy with the simultaneity of happenings that the intentionally banal dialogue becomes only one aspect bridging traditional drama and Ghelderode's spectacular world.

Ghelderode's solution to the problem of simultaneity of imagery and dramatic text is to write many scenes on two columns on one page, at times concurrent dialogue between the putatively real characters and those rehearsing their scene on the tavern stage, at other times juxtaposing pantomime scenes to the melodramatic dialogue in the opposite column. For example, on one side of the page the actress Marguerite, the actor playing the devil and the actor Faust flee from the crowd pursuing them speak their lines fraught with suitably frantic desperation amplified by "phonograph voices." Juxtaposed on the same page a corresponding movement occurs, for a crowd enters "with balletic movement," among them the cinema Barker reading a newspaper with a question mark bigger than himself, three judges with convict's faces, a medical expert with a giant syringe, and an executioner with a huge ax accompanied by strong men and quacks from the fair, profligates and women with expressive and variously colored countenances. In the meantime above their heads the cinema reports the sensational and gory news that Marguerite was pulled out from underneath the tram in

twenty-three pieces, while simultaneously the judges in court take out those very same pieces, "head, arms, heart, hands, etc. thighs are taken out! Admiration by the men, who try to touch!" (G 140) The body is carted out, and the screen lights up again to show confusion in the court. When this scene empties out a solitary image of Death, "skipping, with a huge scythe listens at Faust's door, then "goes off like a ballet dancer" (G 148) is added to the assemblage of Ghelderode's Bosch-like grotesquerie. It is no wonder that the actor playing Faust responds to these threats and suddenly leaps onto the other column of the page wherein he's done in by the crowd, "Kill him! Monster" (G 146). The executioner waves his ax, and the actor is borne away. Only a solitary newsboy gallops past, shouting the latest news presumably the latest account of Faust's capture and death, but he cannot be heard.

It is inevitable that the supposedly authentic Faust and the actor Faust must collide. Ghelderode, however, is not interested in presenting a Pirandellian philosophical debate between reality and theater, but more in producing the effect of a slapstick puppet play that totally undermines the "tragic death" aspect of Ghelderode's title. Unlike in the medieval puppet plays or Marlowe's tragedy no hell opens up to swallow Faust, for instead of a moral, we are left with a musical joke, a galloping funeral march in the style of Offenbach. His is not a theater of ideas, but of images, for as Ghelderode insisted, "I've never written a piece a these and I never will. The theatre is an art of instinct and not of reason. The playwright must live only by vision and divination, relegating reason to an auxiliary position. Any topical idea or fad is slavery. [...] Art cannot be subjugated to any system of ideas." He cautions against a theater wherein poetry is "announced by placards," for without "its obsessional or possessional power, its marvels" the theater disintegrates and "crumbles away."¹⁶

While Witkacy's attempts to undermine the political and social metanarratives taking place in Poland within his plays diverge from Ghelderode's metatheatrical approach, both playwrights are very much united in their theoretical quest for something akin to Pure Form in the theater. What both Witkacy and Ghelderode created in their plays is the attenuation of what Walter Benjamin refers to as the "aura" of a work of art, for both have detached the Faust myth from the domain of traditional interpretation. Presumably, to paraphrase Benjamin, both playwrights without necessarily intending it, "issued an invitation of far-reaching liquidation"¹⁷ of vestiges of the unity and coherence of Naturalism in the theater.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 11.

¹⁷ W. Benjamin: *The Work of Art in Mechanical Reproduction*, [in:] idem: *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, New York 1969, 217-251, p. 221.

Abstract

The farce, realistic and surrealistic, trivial and yet transfigured, is an essential expression of both Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *The Beelzebub Sonata* and Michel de Ghelderode's *The Tragic Death of Doctor Faustus*. Both plays were written in 1925, and the subtitle of each play informs that we are at a great distance from Goethe's transcendent drama, for Ghelderode's play is subtitled "A Tragedy for the Music Hall" and Witkacy's "What Really Happened in Mordovar." This paper explores the deformation of any traces of Goethe's tragic *Faust*, as each playwright situates his play in a grotesque cabaret. In both plays the Mephistophelian character has been deprived of his powers of negation, and instead as Diamotoruscant in Ghelderode's version produces cheap tricks akin to those of Goethe's "Witches Kitchen" in the music hall. Not only do both playwrights ridicule the potential of a twentieth-century Faust figure, but they also mock Naturalism in the theater and in Witkacy's play even the possibility of a Theatre of Pure Form.

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