

Shades of Discipline. On Power, Resistance, and the Faustian Response in Education

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Abstract

The classic drama Faust, by Goethe, lends itself to interpretational manoeuvres in many different thought spaces – psychological, political, and philosophical. But its very starting point is educational. It begins when the mythical Dr. Faust ventures to escape his narrow field of disciplined knowledge, in order to expand his experience of knowledge and life. In this article, Faust’s ‘original act of resistance’ is framed within a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power, in an attempt to shed light on more contemporary forms of resistance and ‘anti-discipline’. The article ends with an argument for the need to differentiate our understanding of the links of causation between discipline, resistance, knowledge and production, and points to certain themes in the Faustian drama that may contribute to such an understanding.

Keywords: Goethe, Faust, resistance, power, Foucault

Introduction

Disciplinary power, as theorized by Foucault (1977/1995; 1980a; 1980b; 1983), is indeed a marvellous thing. Reaching far beyond the principles of rigour and regulation that we attribute to military cadres, penitentiaries and school examinations, it stands out as society’s productive force par excellence. Emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries as a successor and a refinement of the sovereign power of the monarch, it had – first and foremost – to guarantee that the productivity of the individual was thoroughly linked to the productivity of the collective; not only in terms of industrial production, but also in military and medical practices. This was, as Foucault showed, a threshold into capitalistic modes of production that could not be crossed under the token of sovereign power. It could not be accomplished as an order decreed from above; radiating from the top-heavy power of the king; only with a more subtle power, avoiding direct resistance. This is what discipline promised to deliver, in the form of a Panoptic abstract machine: regulation, self-regulation, in the name of profit – of State as well as Self. It could not prosper unless the individual made subject was successfully linked to power’s own continual preservation;

unless service to Self was made synonymous with service to State; unless the subject's service to power – to some degree – involved the subject's claim to power.

These are indeed no small feats. In the matrix of disciplinary power, all of the above and many other polar opposites must be welded together. This is the key to its survival; the reason for its being self-reproductory rather than self-defeating like the sovereign power of the monarch. Accordingly, in modern society, production does not contradict repression; control does not preclude liberation; normalization does not prevent differentiation. Discipline offers the possibility to encompass all; closing circuit upon circuit of economically rational action while linking each level of human performance to the next, from the motivations and movements of individual man, to the macro performance of state economy.

The seminal work of Foucault was, of course, a piece of genealogical research on the history of modern discipline. But we need not search in vain for even more current progressions of disciplinary power. Ample opportunities for study are, as many international educational researchers have pointed out, offered by today's trends in educational policy – leaning significantly in favour of standardized assessment and examination, accountability, high-stakes-testing, and comparison in the context of international data sets (Goodson, 2010; Ball, 2003, 2006; Benveniste, 2006). In practice, this ongoing calibration of educational systems has involved the adjustment to neoliberal and neoconservative political agendas; and more often than not, it is an adjustment being engineered by deployment of disciplinary and panoptic modes of power as well (Apple, 2004, 2005; Perryman, 2006; Webb, Briscoe & Mussman, 2009). This is no less true in the Swedish context. In resonance with global trends, Sweden now operates an educational system that clearly forges neoliberal ideals of decentralization with more neoconservative ideals of state-controlled curriculum content and calls for order and discipline in educational environments (Larsson, Pérez Prieto & Löfdahl, 2010; Lindblad, Johanneson, Ingolfur & Simola, 2002; Lindblad, Lundahl, Lindgren & Zackari, 2002).

The road towards a seamless integration with neoliberal/neoconservative visions of our educational future may not, however, be completely straightforward. In the context of teaching and education, it has for instance been suggested that resistances towards discipline and panoptic power may be seen in the ways teachers produce results and fabrications to satisfy the inspection regimes despite personal disagreements with their justifications (Ball, 2003; Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009); in tendencies towards collective resistance and increased teacher union activity (Bushnell, 2003); and in the way pre-school children construct withdrawal strategies for creating hidden, secluded spaces (Skånfors, Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2009). It has even been suggested, from the viewpoint of sociology

of education, that drug-oriented countercultures among young people serve the purpose of resistance to education's narrow focus on performativity and measurement (Fletcher, Bonnell & Rhodes, 2009).

In the light of such indications, our responsibilities as researchers, practitioners and philosophers of education to understand and recognize the blindsides of disciplinary power stretch far beyond the calculation of discipline's supposedly profitable outcome. In fact, they may stretch as far as to reviewing discipline for its potential to contribute to a culture of resistance that runs counter to the very aims that disciplinary educational policy sets for itself: transparency, performance maximization, and predictability. It is this prospect of discipline turning into its own inversion that beckons us towards increased awareness of its possible outcome. Left unattended, the 'shades of discipline' have every chance of becoming the fertile soil of what Baudrillard (1994) called the "objects' resistance" – the subject's refusal of a valid subject position, "of meaning and of the spoken word" (p. 85) as well. The consequences of having this prospect developing its full potential in the context of educational systems are only too easy to imagine.

Where to begin the analysis? The possibilities are numerous. For instance, further investigations along sociological-theoretical dimensions are necessary; just as empirical research will be equally valuable – mentioning observations of resistance in digital domains as an example (Munro, 2000; Juris, 2004; Hope, 2005). This article, however, will take on a more vintage character as we take resource in a narrative myth that touches upon many of the pro's and con's of discipline and education – the classic drama of Faust, by Goethe (1832/1952). A long time in the making for Goethe, it was born on the threshold between the 18th and 19th century – quite contemporary with the consummation of modern disciplinary power. To the extent that discipline today shares a common ground with discipline in Goethe's day – and this article will argue that it does – the drama of Faust may still be able to teach us a lesson or two regarding the force field that discipline exerts on intellectual produce, and the shades that unfold at the points of intersection.

Attempting to take this lesson, the article begins by aligning itself with Fornäs' (1993) conviction that any analytic of resistance in late modernity must be framed within a highly contextualized setting. Arriving at a set of statements, or categorizations, regarding the general nature of resistance would be a daunting task – from any theoretical perspective – although the work of Fornäs (1993) as well as that of Vinthagen (2005) are excellent attempts in this direction. This article will satisfy itself with the single theme question: what can the drama of Faust teach us regarding reactions of resistance, and anti-discipline, in contemporary educational settings?

Breaking the Thread of Thought

When, in the beginning of Goethe's *Faust*, we first meet with the learned doctor, it is by the apparition of a man whose joy in the pursuit of knowledge has long vanished. The hour is late, and in his dusty gothic chamber with books, rolls, scripts, bones and instruments, his weariness of wordy wisdom comes to a critical mass as he, the esteemed man of intellect and enlightenment, offers himself to any force that could promise to bring him nearer to a more direct experience of life and truth. The trade of teaching, and his pursuit of knowledge, has ended in a complete misrecognition of its profit – for himself as well as for his students: “I do not imagine I know aught that's right; / I do not imagine I could teach what might / Convert and improve humanity. /.../ No dog could live thus any more!” (Goethe, 1832/1952, §371-376). The only solution in Faust's mind is a complete reversal of his quest for knowledge. But in spite of his experience that “all learning's long been nauseous” (§ 1749), he does not want to terminate his search for truth altogether – instead he longs to expand it. And he confesses:

... I have turned to magic lore,
To see if through the spirit's power and speech
Perchance full many a secret I may reach,
So that no more with bitter sweat
I need to talk of what I don't know yet,
So that I may perceive whatever holds
The world together in its inmost folds,
See all its seeds, its working power,
And cease word-threshing from this hour.

(§ 376-385)

As it happens, by way of magic, the (somewhat elusive) character *Mephistopheles* hears his call and answers it. Promising Faust the full cup of this life in exchange for the next, the anaemic academic readily takes Mephistopheles to be his guide. It is not before long, however, that Faust finds Mephistopheles' guidance to be of the dubious kind. Entangled in the consequences of taking his desires to a full expression, he realizes that he has invited catastrophe. It was not for the lack of knowledge, though, that Faust joined forces with the Adversary; nor for the lack of self-discipline, or for the lack of cultivation of a rational mind. It seems, rather, that in Goethe's version of the Faustian legend, we find a variation of the ancient proverb ‘the brighter the light, the deeper the shadow’. Dr. Faust, the intellectual, indeed found his escape route from reason's light, but he climbed it with so much vigour, that the fall into shadow was inevitable. He swung in the opposite direction, but he went too fast – or perhaps, he just went too late. Rationality and

learnedness could not help him from his mistake – on the other hand, they ushered him towards it.

But what, then, was Faust's original mistake – if ever there was one? This question has every potential to lead into unanswerable ponderings, or worse, into one-dimensional analysis. But if we want to address the prospect of having Goethe's drama contributing to a late modern understanding of anti-discipline, we do need to probe the reasons behind Dr. Faust's acute reaction of anti-intellectualism. Why is it that he, suddenly, longs so much to be "[d]ischarged of all of Learning's fumes" (§ 396)? Perhaps we do well to lend an ear to Mephistopheles himself, as he analyzes the setting in which he finds Faust:

Bah! what a place of martyrdom!
What kind of life is this you lead?
Boring the youngsters and yourself indeed!

(§ 1835-1837)

Visiting Faust in his study room, Mephistopheles decides to offer the doctor a temporarily relief by taking on his consulting duties; and as a first contribution, he counsels a new student, freshly arrived at the scholarly threshold. Upon entering, the new adept displays some due hesitation regarding the nature of his new environment:

Within these walls the lecture hall,
I do not like it here at all.
It is a space that's so confined;
One sees no green nor any tree,
And in the halls with benches lined,
Sight, hearing, thought, all go from me.

(§ 1882-1887)

Entering the realm of mind and science, the student has realized, paradoxically necessitates the temporary suspension of sensory experience – at least the surroundings do nothing to enhance perception of 'sight, hearing, thought'. Mephistopheles, with a biting irony, seizes on this apprehension of the student – but counters it with firm reassurance and well-aimed advice on his future study career. By way of introduction, the student is encouraged to undertake a first study of logic, "That you henceforth may more deliberately keep / The path of thought and straight along it creep" (§1914-1915). What

Mephistopheles knows and what the student only senses, is what Foucault only much later (1977) subjected to a power analysis – that discipline's first manoeuvre is the partition of time and space. Introducing the appropriate timetable for learning, Mephistopheles decides to deliver it with yet a portion of irony:

Then you'll be taught full many a day
What at one stroke you've done alway,
Like eating and like drinking free,
It now must go like: One! Two! Three!

(§ 1918-1921)

The counsel of Mephistopheles is equivocal; while recommending the disciplinary method for gaining knowledge, he cannot help himself from criticizing it. Something, he suggests, must be lost in translation, since “[w]ho'll know aught living and describe it well, / Seeks first the spirit to expel” (§1936-1937). Following the method, Mephistopheles assures the student, he will be granted “the component parts in hand [but lack], alas! the spirit's band” (§ 1938-1939). This is a deficiency and an element lost, that for Mephistopheles clearly comes with an over-confidence in language's ability to convey truth. Once again, this makes for ambiguous recommendations:

You take five lectures daily - understand?
And when the clock strikes, be on hand!
Be well prepared before the start,
With paragraphs well got by heart,
So later you can better look
And see he says naught save what's in the book

(§ 1956-1961)

This, in his most sarcastic moment, is the analysis that Mephistopheles makes of the teacher's role in Faust's academic ranks – that of an automaton confined to saying 'naught save what's in the book'. Gleefully, he does nothing to hide his disbelief in the disciplinary method's chances to mend for this lack of spirit in the art of teaching, and it is perhaps only fitting, that his last advice to the student is the reminder that "...all theory is grey, / And green the golden tree of life" (§1937-1938).

So this is the predicament of Faust – as Mephistopheles, and Faust himself as well, agree to describe it. But what of Mephistopheles? Who is he to offer magic deliverance to the dreaded doctor? Is he not malevolence itself? His actions certainly betray a mean streak in his character, but it is clear that the part he plays is not devilry through and through – he is, after all, "Part of that Power which would / The Evil ever do, and ever does the Good" (§ 1335-1336). To the extent that he personifies malevolence, Janz (2011) suggests, it is to the same extent that it already exists, potentially, in Faust.

Differentiating the picture further, we may consult Jung's analytical-psychological interpretation, where Mephistopheles becomes the personification of all the parts in Faust's psyche that he repressed in his pursuit for rational truth (Jung, 1971; 1981). Meeting Mephistopheles, Faust encounters the shadow side of his own character, all that the rational function is not; in Jungian terms, emotion, intuition, and perception. The power invoked, at least initially, is precisely what allows Faust to expand his self in these directions as well; to amplify his rapport with the material world, and to initiate a learning trajectory that – despite its lamentations – may have been Faust's only remaining route back to himself.

This journey towards wholeness of character was a theme that interested Goethe very much, in his natural-scientific endeavours as well as in his fictive writing (Tantillo, 2010). Possibly, he would have agreed with Jung that the journey carries an element of risk – at

least judging by the manner in which he plots it for Faust. Reaching for the experience that he lacked, reclaiming the desire that he desired, Faust had indeed to make a rather substantial sacrifice: that of his intellectual over-indulgence. This sacrifice was not made under total persuasion – rather, he gladly volunteered: “In depths of sensuality / Let us our glowing passions still!” (§1750-1751). All this, his tutor promised to bring: “happiness, success with women, property and power – all in place of knowledge” (Janz, 2011, p. 34). The beginning was easy: “Quick, then! Let all reflection be, / And straight into the world with me!” (§1828-1829).

The Faustian Response as Resistance

Attempting to recast the Faustian response as an analytic for resistance in a contemporary context, we turn to another interesting interpretation of the drama, namely that of Lukács (1946/1981). Like many other commentators, Lukács emphasizes the contradictory nature of Mephistopheles – highlighting the fact that Goethe makes him reminiscent of a ghost from medieval times and at the same time a symbol for the augmenting forces of production in capitalist society. In this perspective, Faust shares his predicament with society at large, taking part in industrialization’s common confidence in discipline as the prime mover of production. As Hawkes (2007) puts it: “[w]hat magic is to Faust the individual, money is to Faustian society” (p. 162). This interpretation appears well founded, especially considering the second part of the drama, where Faust removes himself further and further from the naïveté of his dealings with magical powers, and becomes power hungry in the more worldly sense instead – a man of *realpolitik* (Tantillo, 2010). Mephistopheles, in this interpretation, takes on an even more explicitly ambiguous character, since he becomes the personification of materialism and productivity while being its own harshest critic.

As Faust proceeds, heeding the advice from his new mentor, the results of his actions seem to testify to the very same ambiguousness. And in the end – despite the fact that some outcomes of his work may have been benign – it was only Grace that could save him from paying his debt to Mephistopheles for all eternity. The central question remains however – did he manage to come any closer to the golden tree of life, and could he still any of his glowing passions in the process? Despite Mephistopheles’ words of encouragement, Faust never succumbed to hedonism, or indulged in the brews and brawls of the local tavern – his inclination for passion was more on the romantic side (Lukács, 1946/1981). That discussion is, however, a theme well beyond the range of this paper. What is more apropos for us, is whether we can argue that Faust’s initial response of reluctance towards his scholarly setting can be interpreted as an act of anti-disciplinary resistance.

If so, it is certainly not an outgoing practice of resistance against the institutional educational setting; rather it is an act of resistance aimed at Faust's own one-sidedness of character. On this point, it seems to resonate with Baudrillard's (1994) notion of the objects' resistance – but it is not a perfect accord since we have no reason to believe that Faust makes a total dismissal “of meaning and of the spoken word” (p. 85). He does, however, contend that the manner in which meaning and the spoken word are mutually associated in his scholarly space, makes for a far too narrow experience of life. His resistance, consequently, involves the claiming of a cultural and actional free space (cf. Fornäs, 1993), one that is also non-metric (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

Perhaps it is only appropriate, that Faust's resistance to discipline is no less ambiguous than disciplinary power itself. We know that in the Foucauldian sense, discipline produces agency while repressing it; normalizes subjects while encouraging their progress of differentiation – all in accord with a rhythm dictated by the demands of production. Baudrillard (1994) may be right when arguing that this is a system that make us “like children faced with the demands of the adult world /.../ simultaneously required to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive, inert, obedient, conforming objects” (p. 85). Resistance, accordingly, takes on the same double character as well, and the nature of its effect must therefore be evaluated from a plurality of different perspectives. Faust's resistance, for example, certainly put an end to his conformity and submission to a narrowly confined intellectual setting; making him consciously free to engage in more worldly affairs – but on the other hand, it led him to the absolute, although postponed, obedience to Mephistopheles instead.

It seems that by resisting, he only ensnared himself deeper in existential debt – not unlike the ‘lads’ in the classic sociological study by Willis (1977), whose resistance to education proved to be the very means to their proper adjustment to labor. It is interesting however, to entertain the thought that Mephistopheles' temporary permittance of power, allowing Faust to break away from the metric space of scholarly life and to “substitute experimentation for interpretation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 167), is what allowed him material success as well. Discipline's reverse, not its affirmation, seems to be what granted it. As for Goethe, he gave no final answers regarding the right's and wrong's of Faust's line of action – he left it to us to weigh the benefits of Faust's material gain against the losses of his moral descent.

Conclusions

Through a hole in the wall of literary history, we have peeked into the gothic chamber where the mythic Dr. Faust decided to substitute one excess for the other – his burnt-out passion for knowledge in exchange for a fuller, albeit riskier, experience of sensuous life. Discipline, seizing upon the intellect and subjecting its activity to the “one, two, three” of metric space and time, cast the doctor into an orbit stranger than he could ever have predicted. Perhaps the question of whether the sorrows and delights of the journey occurred thanks to, or in spite of, the disciplines in education will remain unanswered for yet some time.

Turning to a more pragmatically oriented question, we would like to know what educationalists today, witnessing the continual transformations of discipline, can learn from the Faustian response and its consequences? For starters, we can conclude that if we want to use Faust’s predicament and solution of choice as a critical resource in relation to discipline, it has nothing to do with criticizing the order-keeping aspects of disciplinary power. The approach needs more nuance than this, and we need every resource to achieve it. Moving from black and white, to the shades in between, the drama of Faust may serve this purpose as a reminder of the consequences of having the mechanisms of discipline stretching too far into the intellectual-productive fields of human beings – and the possible reactions that may occur as dammed-up desires to substitute experimentation for interpretation occur within, or without, educational contexts.

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