from C. Spivack (ed.) Merlin versus Faust: Contending Archetypes in Western Culture (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1992)

MERLIN AND FAUST IN TWO POST-WAR POEMS

Robert Bagg

One

In central Italy in 1944, Corporal Richard Wilbur relayed the order through his walkie-talkie to his unit's gunners to bomb the ancient Monte Cassino monastery from which the Germany army dominated the valley where the allied army was bogged down. Though the obliteration of the monastery did little military good, it remained for Wilbur as a resonant moment. The war flowed through him personally; his voice relayed earth shattering power. Wilbur soldiered on in '44-45 through Italy and France and was in Alsace at war's end. Infantry Private Karl Shapiro fought the Japanese on the islands of the South Pacific. Both poets wrote memorably of their comrades killed in the war; both focussed their poems on the ironies experienced after battle, and what dangerous new meanings war gave to their sense of ordinary life.

Wilbur's poems about landmines left for children to stumble on (p. 343), the "iced and ashen" eyes of an SS Officer (p. 348), a postbattle snowfall in Alsace (p. 347), and the potato and its flower"/a/wkward and milky and beautiful only to hunger" (p. 346), may now be better known than Shapiro's descriptions of an amputee (p. 65), a dying soldier (p. 104), and a conscientious objector (p. 120)[1] But Shapiro's vivid and formal war poems won him early fame and a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *V-Letter and Other Poems*, published in 1944.

The continuity each poet felt with the tradition of war poetry comes through clearly in the learned allusions each makes and the poetic forbears each invokes. World history and a mental library went to war with each of these two ambitious young non-commissioned officers. But affecting as it is, their war poetry may finally be less significant than the poems they wrote about the more elusive experience of surviving war and looking back on it. These retrospective poems were no less literary than their war poems, differing from those of immediate reportage and reaction, however, in offering myths to organize a less personal, more collective experience. Both poets want to discover what the war meant. In two exemplary poems, both chose magicians as central figures. Wilbur chose Merlin and Shapiro, Faust.

I would like first to look closely at each poem, then venture some general comments about each poet's choice of magicians, their mythopoetic methods, and the complimentary nature of the figures of Faust and Merlin.

Two

In Karl Shapiro's *Selected Poems*, "The Conscientious Objector," a sympathetic view of those who went to jail rather than fight (perhaps addressed to Shapiro's contemporary, Robert Lowell, imprisoned in a New York City jail for a year), directly precedes the poem I wish to discuss, "The Progress of Faust." (Shapiro, p. 121) The juxtaposition suggests that Shapiro had come to a less chauvinistic, more philosophic sense of war as an evil in which no participant escapes guilt. He writes of the C. O., "you who saved neither yourself nor us/Are equally with those who shed the blood/The heroes of our cause. Your conscience is/What we come back to in the armistice." **The armistice.** The implication is that war continues, interrupted by finite declarations of peace.

If Shapiro now sees war as a doomed bargain, in which we trade pieces of conscience for victory, Faust the quintessential soul-seller becomes the relevant figure to embody that aspect of the western mind which seeks dominance at any cost, even at the ultimate cost of losing the possessors their very souls. "Faust" becomes in Shapiro's poem not a timebound Renaissance quester, but an undying and recurring sage, addicted to pleasures

"intellectually foul." His own history, a large part of our own, becomes "The Progress of Faust." "Progress" is both a triumphal tour and a series of ironic metamorphoses. Neither Germany nor the U. S. is absolved. The poem begins:[2]

> He was born in Deutschland, as you would suspect,
> And graduated in magic from Cracow
> In Fifteen Five...

It ends 440 years later:

> Five years unknown to enemy and friend
> He hid, appearing on the sixth to pose
> In an American desert at war's end
> Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose.

In between Shapiro shows Faust as a kind of missionary exciting Europe with his disdain for good and evil, for the sanctity of life, for our traditional checks on the arrogance of science and reason:

> His frequent disappearances are put down
> To visits in the regions of the damned...
>
> /U/nregenerate and in Doctor's gown,
> he would turn up to lecture at the fair
> And do a minor miracle for a fee.
> Many a life he whispered up the stair
> To teach the black art of anatomy.
>
> He was deaf to angels as an oak...
>
> He went to London and crashed through the floor
> In mock damnation of the playgoing folk...
>
> He met Sir Francis Bacon and helped draft
> "Colours of Good and Evil"...
>
> ...On Reason's throne
> He sat with the fair Phrygian on his knees
> And called all universities his own...
>
> Then back to Germany as the sages' sage
> To preach comparative science to the young...

What makes Faust a compelling and sympathetic figure in all versions but especially in Marlowe's and Goethe's plays, is the agony and remorse Faust endures in the act and aftermath of selling his soul for those foul intellectual pleasures he cannot refuse. Shapiro shows him publishing "penny poems about his sins,/In which he placed the heavy emphasis/On the white glove which, for a penny, wins."

In Germany, "for a secret formula" he paid "another fragment of his soul" and then was expelled from the Third Reich, taking with him the knowledge to turn loose the power in the atomic nucleus. It is Faustus who bridges the "frontier" between evil Europe and morally pure America. His "tolerance" gets him expelled from the Third Reich and causes the breaching of the Rhine; his magic gets him hired by those in charge at Los Alamos. America buys into Faustus' war-shortening, humankind-haunting intellectual magic. It is a necessary transaction, but one which marks the common bond reconnecting the U. S. with her roots in morally compromised Europe. It was a politically brave poem to write in an era of national self-congratulation. Shapiro's fellow citizens, believing they had honorably concluded a just war against monstrously evil opponents, would not see the Faustian bargain the Bomb (or fully understand its creator's, Robert Oppenheimer, own ancient allusion, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" spoken as he saw the first mushroom cloud explode in New Mexico) for some decades. For a student of the Faust myth, the poem demonstrates the myth's uncanny scope. It is not only the lone intellect who is vulnerable to the temptations of powers "intellectually foul," but civilization itself.

Three

Richard Wilbur in "Merlin Enthralled" is not preoccupied with coming to terms with overarching warguilt, but with the essence of lost power, which he imagines as lost mystery and magic in the figure of Merlin. The burden of "The Progress of Faust" is that unappeased intellect is with us always; the burden of "Merlin Enthralled" is the loss we endure when magical intellect goes from us, on its own errand of personal fulfillment.

Arthur and his knights are Wilbur's mythical representatives of fighters who have lost the exhilaration of their vocation. When Merlin unaccountably disappears, they look for him "aimlessly riding,/Leaving their drained cups on the table round." As Donald Hill remarks, "The drained cups are a perfect symbol for finished careers, connoting as they do not only end, but an end of lives lived completely and heroically" (Wilbur [Twayne:1967], p. 118).

What links Shapiro's vision with Wilbur's is first the sense that war contains a kind of magic possessed by the victors. But unlike Faust's Merlin's magic seems morally unshadowed. While Merlin is among them Camelot is glorious. Camelot is in fact the creation of Merlin's imagination. When Merlin leaves them, the knights lose a world where magical events are a daily occurrence. Says Arthur to Gawen:[3]

...Remember when this hand

Once haled a sword from stone; now no less strong
It cannot dream of such a thing to do.

Though Wilbur's poem is in texture more subtle and allusive than Shapiro's, it is less morally wary in seeing empowering magic as a positive good only. No Faustian doubts trouble the surface of "Merlin Enthralled." Its central narrative is Niniane's conquest of the sorcerer who has imagined her.

That Siren's daughter
Rose in a fort of dreams and spoke the word
Sleep, her voice like dark diving water;

And Merlin slept, who had imagined her
Of water-sounds and the deep unsoundable swell
A creature to bewitch a sorcerer,
And lay there now within her towering spell.

Slowly the shapes of searching men and horses
Escaped him as he dreamt on that high bed:
History died; he gathered in its forces;
The mists of time condensed in the still head

Until his mind, as clear as mountain water,
Went raveling toward the deep transparent dream

> Who badè him sleep. And then the Siren's daughter
> Received him as the sea receives a stream.

The Niniane story, told here with the consummate vowel-magic and rhythm-magic Wilbur possessed at the height of his own powers, is a parable of the self-bewitching imagination. Merlin, the career magician, has created a world in which reality is regularly enhanced and transcended. The hand clothed in samite which lifts the sword, Excaliber, from the deep is only the most spectacular example of the power he confers. Though Merlin's powers are superhuman, he himself is not, and he is vulnerable to what he has unleashed. His own creation, Niniane, has learned enough of his tricks to enthrall him, and condense him into her watery dwelling place. The parable is also, of course, of Merlin's human desire, which takes precedence over his role as the master of history's ceremonies: "Fate would be fated; dreams desire to sleep." The result is that without Merlin to imagine it, History dies, the men of the round table are forsaken. Imagination as Merlin wields it is not more controllable than Faust's imagination. Yet, the Merlin myth gives us perhaps less catastrophic, more humanistic, and it should be said, a more pagan scenario. Imagination rises within the man, it serves his people, its danger and its natural end is self-bewitchment; the effect on his fellows is to abandon them in a world without wonders. The Faustian imagination makes a bargain which trades moral health for power over other human beings and over nature, and its flourishing is invariably followed by either damage to people and to the Faust figure himself or herself. Both myths are true and we must use them to interpret what Yeats has called "the music of what happens."

Four

The Faust/Merlin contrast as Wilbur and Shapiro embody it in the 1950's is clear enough. We are Faust when we yield to and regret our ravaging supernatural power; we are Merlin when we use the power in ways that are pure enhancement of our human duties. Good magic takes its toll also. But Merlin escapes not by damnation, not by self-condemnation, but by dissolving himself in the natural world:

> "And then the Siren's daughter
> Received him as the sea receives a stream."

The tragedy for those left in their wake in each case differs instructively: what Faust bequeaths is painful and ineradicable, what Merlin bequeaths is his absence and the regretful memory of his gifts.