

## Introduction

If Goethe rewrote *Faust* in postmodern America as a rock opera, he might have created something like *Beethoven's Last Night*. Though *Beethoven's Last Night* is set in the romantic era and features well-known romantic characters— namely the fictional Mephistopheles and nonfictional Beethoven— the conflict is based on post-modern conceptions of evil. In particular, the rock opera explores the fear of the destruction of culture— specifically by removing from the public conscious significant works of human achievement in the arts. Though critics still debate when postmodernism ended and the contemporary period began, it's clear that Paul O'Neill was influenced by those ideas when he wrote the story for *Beethoven's Last Night* in the year 2000. Paul O'Neill imposes a post-modern ideologies on a romantic archetypal story to most effectively illustrate that evil is overcome through the self-transcendence of human existence.

The 'self-transcendence of human existence' is a phrase taken from *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Frankl's postmodern ideas were largely shaped by his experiences as a Holocaust victim and survivor. He says, "I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche."<sup>1</sup> Goethe's *Faust* references this idea, since Faust's soul is saved because he's learned to love others. *Beethoven's Last Night* explores the theme of self-transcendence on a deeper level. Whereas Faust only sees a vision of a better world built on human achievement,<sup>2</sup> Beethoven can potentially bring good into the world through his music and compassion. However, he must overcome Mephistopheles to do this. This paper will explore how O'Neill, while drawing from the romantic heritage of Goethe's *Faust*,

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#. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 115.

#. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (1832), II.

gives new meaning to overcoming evil by inserting post-modern philosophies. There are three parts to this argument: how O'Neill draws upon the romantic tradition of Goethe's *Faust*, how O'Neill makes Mephistopheles more dangerous by feeding on post-modern fears, and how Beethoven overcomes Mephistopheles through self-transcendence.

### **Romantic Mephistopheles**

To effectively represent evil, O'Neill needed to create a Mephistopheles more dangerous than Goethe, while remaining loyal to the conventions of the archetypal Faustian villain. This is why both are born from the same evolution of devil representation as described by Joakim Reinhard. "The medieval tempter is never an intellectual tempter," Reinhard says, "He is either a bully or a lewd clown, and soon becomes an intolerable bore to those compelled to read his antics."<sup>3</sup> He continues by saying that during the Reformation the devil became clever, therefore posed a greater threat to those he sought to ruin.<sup>4</sup> Goethe's Mephistopheles, following this tradition, uses lies, illusions, sophistry, flattery, gossip, and dreams in pursuit of his goals rather than force.<sup>5</sup> The "intellectual tempter" was particularly developed during World War II with *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. This is the literary background that O'Neill worked with when creating his Mephistopheles.

Like Goethe's Mephistopheles, O'Neill's uses intelligence and trickery to gain power over his victim. Audiences recognize this in him shortly after his first appearance, when Beethoven asks for enough time to finish his Tenth Symphony. "Mephistopheles looks at the

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#. Joakim Reinhard, "Goethe's Mephistopheles," *The Sewanee Review*, 5, no. 1 (Jan., 1897): 80–94, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27527918>, 83.

#. *Ibid.*, 84.

#. Jeffery Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1990), 159.

manuscript and then with seemingly uncharacteristic generosity, offers to give him as much additional time as he needs, but only if he will tell him what parts he plans to add or change.”<sup>6</sup> He only gives Beethoven this chance, because he knows that Beethoven is bluffing and wouldn’t really make any changes to his masterpiece. Once he calls Beethoven’s bluff, the composer falls deeper into despair. The devil’s intelligence makes evil difficult for the hero to overcome.

In some ways, O’Neill’s Mephistopheles seems more true to the romantic view of the devil than Goethe’s. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan became a hero in his own right through his defiance. Following Milton, writers such as Byron gave the devil a certain regality. Reinhard lists Goethe as an exception. “While Goethe allowed [Mephistopheles] to retain all the cunning which had fallen to his lot since the days of Luther, he deprived him of every trace of majesty.”<sup>7</sup> Majesty, however, is very much present in O’Neill’s Mephistopheles. At his first arrival, audiences read “His presence causes all the other spirits to shrink silently back to the corners of the room.” To Beethoven, he introduces himself as a “God of second chance.”<sup>8</sup> He is described in Fate’s contract as “Lord of Darkness and first fallen from the grace of God,” equating himself with Satan, rather than as a servant of the devil.<sup>9</sup> O’Neill’s descriptions are enhanced by Greg Hildebrandt’s illustrations, showing Mephistopheles to be tall, slender, and elegant. O’Neill chose this romantic depiction of Mephistopheles because the influence of Milton and

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#. Paul O’Neill, “Beethoven’s Last Night Story,” *Trans-Siberian Orchestra*, last modified April 11, 2000, [www.trans-siberian.com/news/title/beethovens-last-night-story](http://www.trans-siberian.com/news/title/beethovens-last-night-story).

#. Reinhard, “Goethe’s Mephistopheles,” 84.

#. Paul O’Neill, John Oliva, and Robert Kinkel, “Mephistopheles,” *Beethoven’s Last Night*, performed by John Oliva, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Atlantic Records, CD, 2000.

#. Paul O’Neill, “Beethoven’s Last Night Story.”

romanticism are still present in contemporary portrayals of the devil, where evil is expected to be seductive and charismatic.

### **Postmodern Mephistopheles**

O'Neill was able to create the framework of a dangerous villain by drawing on traditions established by the Reformation and the romantic period as a starting point, but what makes Mephistopheles truly horrifying are his post-modern qualities. Consider the largest difference between Goethe's Mephistopheles and O'Neill's: his goal. In *Faust*, he wants Faust's soul. In *Beethoven's Last Night*, he wants Beethoven's music. He never had claim to Beethoven's soul, and he never asked for it. His one and only desire was to take Beethoven's music out of existence, particularly the Tenth Symphony. He was even willing to give up his claim to another soul in order to obtain and destroy Beethoven's Tenth Symphony.

It is critical to this discussion to understand how Mephistopheles' attempt to delete Beethoven's music relates to postmodernism. One of the anxieties of this era related to the destruction of culture. Landmark postmodern works such as *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451* capitalize on that fear. In *1984* a totalitarian government censors and rewrites history, and in *Fahrenheit 451* books are illegal. *Brave New World*, a book published in 1932 that depicts a culture devoid of Shakespeare, acts a precursor to this postmodern school of thought, which was largely influenced by WWII. Hitler, still considered one of the greatest and most terrifying villains in history, didn't just kill millions of people; he attacked cultural heritages by targeting the arts. He conducted a systematic confiscation of monuments, artwork, furniture, photos— everything that represented human achievement and cultural memory. The destruction of these artifacts created voids in both personal and cultural memory.

This tension reveals insight into O'Neill's work. Robert Edsel's book, *Monuments Men*, explores the efforts of individuals to preserve works of art during WWII at the risk of their own lives. Among these men was George Stout, an American Art conservation specialist and museum director. He declared, "These monuments are not merely pretty things, not merely valued signs of man's creative power. They are expressions of faith, and they stand for man's struggle to relate himself to his past and to his God."<sup>10</sup> Destroying works of art would break that connection to one's cultural heritage and to deity. This is the kind of evil that Mephistopheles hopes to accomplish by removing Beethoven's music from the world. Not only would Beethoven suffer by losing relationship with his musical history and with deity— especially through the Mozart and the muses— but future generations and cultures will be more disconnected from their heritage and God as well.

It should be recognized that O'Neill's postmodern Mephistopheles is not a deviation from Goethe's Mephistopheles so much as a fulfillment of the devil's potential for evil as outlined in *Faust*. He hates creation and seeks to counter it, saying "all things, come the Void/ Called forth, deserve to be destroyed: / 'Twere better, then, were naught created."<sup>11</sup> But whereas in *Faust* he endeavors to destroy souls one at a time, in *Beethoven's Last Night* he attempts to erase Beethoven's music. In succeeding with this, he would deprive millions of souls, present and future of "the greatest musical piece ever created... the voice of God."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, he can do so without committing himself to his victim's service, as he did in *Faust*. His ambition, therefore,

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#. George Stout, *Protection of Monuments: A Proposal for Consideration During War and Rehabilitation*, pamphlet, 1942.

#. Goethe, *Faust*, II.

#. O'Neill, "Beethoven's Last Night Story."

extends farther than Goethe's Mephistopheles while remaining true to the character's fundamental goal— to destroy things created.

Goethe's Mephistopheles also poses less of a threat than O'Neil's because of his weaker understanding of the value of man's struggles. He notes man's misery and wretched state. When the Lord asks, "Find'st nothing right on earth, eternally?" he replies, "No, Lord! I find things, there, still bad as they can be."<sup>13</sup> And yet, it was Beethoven's trials that lead him to produce such great music. This is particularly noted when Fate takes Beethoven to his past and he asks her to take the pain of his mother's death and abusive tutor from his childhood, she says that doing so would take away the inspiration that led him to compose his Sixth Symphony. Similarly, when he asks her to remove his deafness from his life, she responds that "Before his deafness his career was more concentrated on live performance than on composing. The Muses of music had always been speaking to him, but it was only after he became deaf that he could clearly hear their voices."<sup>14</sup> Mephistopheles recognizes the power of Beethoven's music born of torment. That's why he tries so hard to rid the world of it, even if that meant loss of the orphan girl's soul. When Goethe's Mephistopheles is disguised as a poodle, he growls at Faust's singing, to which Faust replies, "Snarl not, poodle! To the sound that rises, / The sacred tones that my soul embrace, / This bestial noise is out of place."<sup>15</sup> Yet this passive objection is nothing so sinister as O'Neill's Mephistopheles' desire to remove music from the memory of mankind.

In summary, by combining postmodern fears and the romantic character of Goethe's Mephistopheles, O'Neil creates the ultimate rock opera villain. Like his romantic counterpart,

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#. Goethe, *Faust*, I.

#. O'Neill, "Beethoven's Last Night Story."

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Mephistopheles is an intellectual temptor who uses his trickery and reason to achieve his goals, making him hard to outwit. He has all the grandeur and majesty of a romantic devil, and yet he is more dangerous to Beethoven because of his postmodern motivations. After World War II, people grew to fear beings or organizations that destroyed human culture and achievements. This is the fear that embodies Mephistopheles. Unlike Goethe's Faust, he recognizes that trials enable humans to create things of value. Mephistopheles is a destroyer. Not content with merely obtaining a soul, O'Neil's Mephistopheles targets the composer's music. By removing Beethoven's work from existence, he would tear millions of souls both present and future.

### **Overcoming Mephistopheles**

Mephistopheles is a powerful force of evil, but Beethoven is able to overcome. Audiences might argue that it was not Beethoven's merit that enabled him to overcome, but Fate's intervention by creating a loophole within the contract. It must be pointed out that Fate knew all along that Mephistopheles was lying about having claim on Beethoven's soul, yet she does not mention it until after Beethoven was out of danger. Instead, she allows Beethoven to struggle. In fact, she tempts him. Faced with damnation, Beethoven "confronts Fate for having dealt him such a cruel hand in life. Taken aback by his accusations, she offers to review his life with him and to change anything that he wishes."<sup>16</sup> She gives him the opportunity to erase his trials from his life, but that would result in the loss of his music— which is Mephistopheles' objective. In that respect, she is like God in *Faust*, who "not only tolerates but ordains the evil that Mephistopheles plans."<sup>17</sup> By tempting Beethoven, Fate allows him the opportunity to consciously choose to keep

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#. O'Neill, "Beethoven's Last Night Story."

#. Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*, 161.

his music in the world. Yet unlike Mephistopheles (in either Goethe or O’Neil’s work), Fate hopes that Beethoven will ultimately succeed against Mephistopheles.

Beethoven overcomes evil through self-transcendence. In reference to “the self-transcendence of the human experience,” Frankl explains, “The more one forgets himself— by giving himself to a cause to serve another person— the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.”<sup>18</sup> Beethoven is not immediately inclined to forget himself. His song, “What Is Eternal,” expresses what he stands to lose personally. He clearly cares for the wellbeing of his soul, but also can’t stand the thought of losing his music, “To give one’s whole life/ And find Nothing’s / Remembered.”<sup>19</sup> Though he hopes his life will have a lasting impression on the world, his concern is not yet for other people. While he is only worried about himself, he is not ready to confront Mephistopheles.

Beethoven’s journey with Fate allows him to forget himself and give himself over serving others. It is only after he decides not to let her take away his childhood trials or his deafness that Fate shows him a vision of musicians from the past who inspired him and musicians who will be inspired by him in the future. She also shows those who are touched, consoled, and transformed by his music. O’Neill offers as examples a widow finding peace in the “Pastoral Symphony” and a cripple forgetting his pain by listening to “Ode To Joy.”<sup>20</sup> Now, not only does he know he can’t change his past, but he cannot let Mephistopheles erase his music. After Mephistopheles offers

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#. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 115.

#. Paul O’Neill and Robert Kinkel, “What is Eternal,” *Beethoven’s Last Night*, performed by Jody Ashworth, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Atlantic Records, CD, 2000. This song references *Faust* when Beethoven says “If I could see someone/ Who’s been there before me/ And traded his soul/ for a moment of glory.”

#. O’Neill, “Beethoven’s Last Night Story.”

his second deal, Mozart's spirit, whom Beethoven encountered during his trip through his past, is able to keep him from succumbing. With these first two trials, Fate was able to help him overcome.

Mephistopheles' third deal is the most significant, because Beethoven must rely upon his own compassion. Fate offers him no visions or interventions this time. Like God in *Faust*, she is confident he will be able to resist Mephistopheles' temptations.<sup>21</sup> Beethoven tries to talk himself out of saving the girl in the song "Who Is This Child." His rationals are all based on her connection (or lack thereof) to him: he does not know her, he is not responsible for her, other children will replace her, she means nothing to him, there is a limit to being kind, and it will lead to his destruction. The critical question in the song, one that he tries to avoid but ends up singing in the chorus, is "What does she mean to me?"<sup>22</sup> She means nothing to him personally, but he is able to forget himself in order to take care of her needs. Only after he makes this decision does Fate secure the safety of his music and the child's soul in the contract. His choices and his compassion, enable him to conquer Mephistopheles.

Beethoven's ability to overcome evil through self-transcendence fits the cosmological view that Goethe adopted when writing *Faust*. He described how Lucifer and his followers lost their connection with divinity through self-absorption, from which the material world. It would have ceased to exist were it not for God's mercy on the world. Humanity is caught in between God and Lucifer, love and selfishness.<sup>23</sup> Hence, characters like Faust and Beethoven are given to

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#. Goethe, *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven.

#. Paul O'Neill and John Oliva, "Who is this Child," *Beethoven's Last Night*, performed by Jody Ashworth, the Transiberian Orchestra, Atlantic Records, CD, 2000.

#. Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*, 157–158.

struggle. The Prologue in Heaven expresses that God approves of this tension. Adversity allows humans to create and become stronger by overcoming. Russel notes that despite Mephistopheles' intelligence and skillful manipulation, "he is a fool, for he fails to grasp that the reality of the cosmos is the power of love."<sup>24</sup> It is significant, therefore, that Beethoven and Faust are able to overcome evil through love, the very thing that Mephistopheles can not comprehend as a disciple of selfishness.

### **Conclusion**

By raising the stakes in an archetypal Faustian bargain, O'Neill's story inspires greater hope in overcoming. There is more at risk than Beethoven's soul because Mephistopheles is driven by the post-modern conception of evil, that is, to make millions of people present and future suffer by destroying art and culture. In this respect, he's more dangerous than in Goethe's *Faust*, but Beethoven is still able to overcome that evil. Even in his greatest state of agony, Beethoven is able to forget himself and triumph through his compassion. *Beethoven's Last Night* is a story of hope and self-transcendence.

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21. Ibid., 159.