

*MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW* (Alexander Gillies, Leeds): *Natur- und Fabelreich in Faust II*. BY KATHARINA MOMMSEN. Berlin: de Gruyter 1968. X + 255 pp. – The publication, in close proximity to one another, of works on Goethe's *Faust*, three major commentators is something of an event. [W. H. Bruford, *Goethe's Faust. I Scene by Scene. An Interpretation of Forms and Content*. London 1968; Eudo C. Mason: *Goethe's Faust. Its Genesis and Purport*. Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press; London: Cambridge University Press] ...

Dr Mommsen's work is marked by great clarity and directness of presentation. The book starts by facing the much debated question ›How real is Helena in Act III of Faust II?‹ Deciding that she is not real, it proceeds to demonstrate convincingly that it was Goethe's knowledge of the *Thousand and one Nights*, about which Dr Mommsen published a very distinguished treatise in 1960, that enabled the poet to contrive the meeting between Faust and Helena: the latter being an art of otherworld princess of the spirit, Faust corresponding to the lovesick eastern prince who can only be cured of his sickness if he attains his desire; Mephistopheles playing the role of Scheherazade, or magic storyteller, who acts as part in the story which he stage-manages. Helena is thus no more than a creature of fancy, dream role, magic. The ancient world cannot be recaptured as a reality; it belongs to the realm of poetry; and how much of it can in fact be conjured up in any subsequent epoch depends upon the person who does the conjuring. Faust must therefore himself become part of the world of poetry and magic in which he seeks his ›cure‹, and he is guided from one stage of his search to another by one ›instructor‹ after another until he finds Helena in the realm of Persephone. She was, states Dr Mommsen, to be released, in the scene that Goethe never wrote, so that she might live again, only on condition that she stayed in Sparta; since she violated this condition when she accompanied Faust to Arcady, her return to the shades was unavoidable. Mephistopheles is, however, not only Scheherazade, he is also, he is also a kind of Perseus who helps Faust to gain Helena from the Underworld; for there is no doubt that she is gained by means of magic and not by any natural process. At every point, the unreality of the whole Helena experience is brought out by Dr Mommsen. In contrast, the Homunculus section demonstrates how life as a reality may be acquired. For Homunculus is not tempted into the realm of fable; he is prepared patiently to submit to the age-long process that natural evolution demands. The *Klassische Walpurgisnacht* may thus be regarded as an advance commentary upon the Helena-tragedy. Even the seemingly extraneous geological dispute on Vulcanism and Neptunism is relevant; for, in Goethe's view, Vulcanism represents violence and artificiality, Neptunism naturalness. So too are the Cabiri; for they are shunned by Homunculus as artificial creatures. If there were any doubt left concerning the unreality of Helena, the illusoriness of all Mephistopheles's gifts is found to be stressed again and again in Act IV. To experience classical antiquity is, moreover, not only an impossible achievement, it may also be dangerous and tragic. Dr Mommsen comments:

»Gegen allzu illusionäre Hoffnungen, Hellas heute und hier, plötzlich real erleben zu können, setzt Goethe nun die Mahnungen des Faust II. In der Kunst, in der Dichtung mag Helena sich allenfalls noch herbeizaubern lassen. Sollte aber ein ganzes wirkliches Leben wieder entstehen, das nach Art und Rang der Welt entspräche, aus der Helena stammt, so bedürfte es eines solchen Von-vorne-Anfangens, wie die Homunculus- Handlung zeigt.«

Art, however, can never give up the search for beauty; the artist alone can recreate Greece, but his recreation will be art and not reality:

»Anders aber steht es mit der Kunst. Sie hat nach Goethes Glauben stets die Aufgabe, höchste Schönheit wieder zu beschwören. Sie sollte nie aufhören, wie Faust nach Helena zu suchen und ›das Leben im Fabelreich‹ zu finden. Dem Künstler, dem Dichter ist es aufgegeben, die Antike lebendig zu erhalten in jenem Reiche des Scheins, über das er Herr ist. Er hat damit das oberste Leitbild der Menschheit zu bewahren. Entzüge er sich dieser Aufgabe, so drohte verloren zu gehen, vergessen zu werden, was für den Menschen so wichtig ist wie das tägliche Brot, will er sich nicht selbst aufgeben.«

In face of this striking contribution, *Faust* studies can hardly be the same any more.