

Faustus and the Promises of the New Science, c.1580–1730

From the Chapbooks to Harlequin Faustus

CHRISTA KNELLWOLF KING



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Chapter 1

Introduction: Radical Explorations of Faustus

The Faustus legend has been popular in various generic guises and thematic transformations for almost five hundred years. It began as an oral tale about the provocative actions of a fictional character modelled on medical doctors, pharmacists, alchemists, quacks, experts in natural magic and performers of fairground spectacles. While not all of these historical characters possessed special knowledge, all of them challenged established beliefs in one form or another. It goes without saying that such personages aroused much talk and gossip, and the tales which surrounded these figures found their way into broadsheets and lampoons depicting Faustus as a petty criminal who could also draw on the sympathies of the public.

Within a short time the Faustus typology established itself in the popular imagination and inspired writers throughout the ages to imagine a version of the myth that would capture the most urgent concerns of their particular period. Its enduring presence in western culture proves that it was easily recognized as an invaluable tool for examining the thoughts and actions of characters who were extraordinary because they either excelled in their intellectual faculties and artistic gifts or simply in the power of their imagination. Since all of these special skills harboured at least a certain potential for wielding power over others, specially gifted intellectuals were always taken to pose a threat to social stability. The resulting need to contain the danger gave rise to nebulous notions of transgression, the exploration of which became a major task of the Faustus tale.

Historical Faustus Figures

Deciding the question of whether Faustus really existed and what he might have been like is of only marginal interest for this study. Rather than follow the elusive steps of an individual, it explores the overt and implied meanings of the stories about this legendary hero. For the purposes of this study it is nevertheless relevant to point out that the fictional Faustus draws on several personages who lived around the same time as Martin Luther. Several travelling scholars appear to have adopted the name Faustus. Johann Sabellicus, who lived around 1480–1540 and travelled

Germany under the name of Georg Faust, became particularly famous.¹ This historical character left behind a trail of offences and frequently had to leave town in a hurry. His bragging, together with his taste for staging sensational spectacles, elicited a great deal of public interest and extraordinary feats were ascribed to him. His infamy was notorious.² Descriptions of his evil deeds gave impetus to the growth of the Faustus legend, which in turn helped to consolidate the period's increasing sympathy for characters that subverted authority. In the Faust Books, Faustus' first name is a variant of John. As William Rose points out, there was a historical character who called himself Johann Faust.³ The fictional John Faustus may be modelled on his historical namesake. However, I would suspect that the Faust Books' choice of first name is primarily a means of alluding to key figures in the life of Christ: John the Baptist and Saint John of the Gospels. The decision to call the hero of the chapbooks John would reinforce the resemblances between Faustus and Christ, which I will discuss at length in the next chapter.

A striking precursor to a figure such as Sabellicus is found in a contemporary and memorable opponent to Aurelius Augustinus, the patron of Martin Luther's monastic order:⁴ Faustus of Milevis. Living in Numibia, North Africa, around 350–400 AD, Faustus of Milevis was a key protagonist of Manichean theology. He taught a rationalist interpretation of the Bible, embarked on an uninhibited interpretation of its individual books and questioned the authenticity and ethical import of certain passages. Luther, by contrast, was strongly opposed to an unguided approach to the biblical text, despite having translated the Bible into the vernacular.

The writings by Faustus of Milevis do not survive but Augustine quotes him extensively in his refutation of Manicheanism. A special feature in Milevis' theories concerns the reasonableness of human nature. For example, he said: 'I look upon myself as a reasonable temple of God'.⁵ As a young man, Augustine

1 See, for instance, Ingrid H. Shafer, 'Pacts with the Devil: Faust and Precursors', accessed 8 February 2007, <http://www.usao.edu/~facshaferi/FAUST.html>.

2 For a detailed account of historical responses to this Georg Faust, see Philip Mason Palmer and Robert Pattison More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition: from Simon Magus to Lessing* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966).

3 Rose, William, ed., *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor Faustus*, s.l.: George Routledge and Sons, 1925. Mason and Palmer, *Sources of the Faust Tradition*, also document the existence of a Johann Faust (pp. 86–7); beyond this, they demonstrate parallels between Faustus and Paracelsus (pp. 94–5).

4 For a discussion of Luther's philosophical and cultural context, see Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

5 See Philip Schaff's edition of the controversy between Augustine and the Manichaeon Faustus, *The Early Church Fathers: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4: The Anti-Manichaean Writings* (New York: The Christian Literature Publishing, 1890); Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed 23 August 2006, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf104.html>), Book 20, p. 253. See also Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, 'Faustus von

had been attracted to the Manichean philosophy. His face-to-face encounter with Manichaeus and some prominent members of his movement, however, left him bitter and frustrated, so that he angrily attacked this strand of Christianity. Although initially fascinated by the North African ascetics, Augustine was discomfited by the arcane symbolism of Manicheanism. In particular, he responded indignantly to its polytheistic tendency and objected to its pantheistic adoration of sun, moon and other cosmic bodies. Augustine also indicted the Manichaean sect for its self-centredness and lack of humility. He energetically objected to the Manichaean decision to worship the God of the New Testament while decrying the God of the Old Testament as an arbitrary tyrant, because such an attitude either challenged the supposedly divine authority of the Bible or implied the existence of multiple godheads.

It is important to remember that the teachings of Augustine played a prominent role in Luther's life. While caught in a thunderstorm in 1505, Luther vowed to become a monk, and he chose the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt because this order offered the best resources for pursuing his dogmatic studies. When he heard about a scholar, who travelled Germany under the name of Faustus, his in-depth familiarity with Augustinian theology must have led him to interpret the motives of this character in the light of the controversy between Augustine and the North-African Faustus.

Since the chapbooks present their religious outlook through the lens of the cautionary tale, it is impossible to say whether they aimed to revive the Manichean philosophy. Even if the author of a (lost) original Faust Book was inspired by Faustus of Milevis, this does not mean that he (or she?) must have admired everything about the North African ascetic teacher. A sixteenth-century intellectual who wished to give voice to a positive understanding of the physical world, would in all likelihood have been inspired by Milevis' comment that 'your religion resembles ours in attaching the same sacredness to the bread and wine that we do to everything'.⁶ Even if the Faust Books do not directly advocate the pantheistic outlook of the Manicheans, the worship of the 'divine luminaries' of sun and moon fits well with the sixteenth-century chapbooks that describe the life of Faustus. Moreover, the Manichean idea that it is possible to refine and perfect the self through rational application of morality provides an exciting backdrop to a revisionary understanding of sin and damnation.

Whoever was responsible for writing Spies' Faust Book (or its lost precursor) may easily have been aware of the fourth-century Faustus. The name Faustus could

Mileve', *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (1990), accessed 12 February 2006, (1990), http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/f/faustus_v_m.shtml. Also see Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz's entry on 'Aurelius Augustinus', *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (1990), accessed 15 February 2006, http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/a/augustin_au.shtml, which contextualizes a variety of philosophical developments, or 'heresies' like Manicheanism, Donatism, and Pelagianism.

6 *The Anti-Manichaean Writings*, Book 20, p. 253.

serve as a pointer to the Manichean beliefs that humankind was the epitome of creation. But there are also other points of reference for the arguments in favour of the innate dignity of mankind. One of the most powerful assertions of the human ability to attain a divine frame of mind is Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486):

Then Bacchus the leader of the muses, in his own mysteries, that is, in the visible signs of nature, will show the invisible things of God to us as we philosophize, and will make us drunk with the abundance of the house of God. In this house, if we are faithful like Moses, holiest theology will approach and will inspire us with a twofold frenzy. We, raised to the loftiest watchtower of theology ... shall be prophets, his winged lovers, and finally, aroused like burning Seraphim, filled with divinity, we shall now not be ourselves, but He himself who made us.⁷

A similarly daring celebration of human aspirations can be found in the poem that introduces Giordano Bruno's *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (1584):

Henceforth I spread confident wings to space;
I fear no barrier of crystal or of glass;
I cleave the heavens and soar to the infinite.
And while I rise from my own globe to others
And penetrate ever further through the eternal field,
That which others saw from afar, I leave far behind me.⁸

Bruno said about himself that he despised those who are incapable of grasping the sublime and metaphysical dimensions of the infinite. His self-confident description of his achievements and his elitist contempt for inferior minds also resembles Faustus' attitude towards himself and his fellow beings.

But of course, the sixteenth-century Faustus was not merely a proponent of a rationalist type of Christianity; his main claim to fame was that he practiced magic. The Christian type of magician, Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim, who had himself argued that the unaccountable appearance of marks in the shape of the cross had been the trigger for the plague, decried Faustus as a charlatan. The Abbot's letter to the court astrologer of the Electoral Palatinate indicts this Faustus for his unhallowed teachings:

7 Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 14.

8 Quoted in Barbara Howard Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: the Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 6. The reference is to *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought*, ed. and trans. Dorothea Waley Singer (New York: Abelard-Schulman, 1950), p. 249.

... he deserves to be flogged so that he cannot dare to continue teaching despicable things which contradict the Holy Church. What else are the titles, which he has assumed than signs of a highly foolish and nonsensical spirit, which prove that he is a windbag rather than a philosopher? He accordingly appropriated the following titles which he thought to deserve: Magister Georg Sabellicus, Faustus junior, originary source of necromancers, astrologer, second in the rank of magicians, chiromancer, aeromancer, pyromancer, second in the rank of hydromancers. Just consider the foolish audacity of this man! ... I crossed the path of this man a few years ago ... When he heard about my presence he fled from the hostel; nobody could persuade him to introduce himself to me. The records of his foolish acts, which, as I note, he sent to you, had also been passed on to me ...⁹

Trithemius goes on to say that this Faustus junior had claimed to possess the entirety of human knowledge and that his own supernatural skills were even superior to those of Jesus. The Abbot concludes his tirade by reporting that, to top it all, Faustus was guilty of pederast abominations.¹⁰

A magician and necromancer calling himself Faustus also crossed Luther's path in 1533. In the context of discussing the dangers of black magic, Luther's *Table Talks* mention the following episode:

As a necromancer by the name of Faustus was mentioned one evening, Doctor Martinus said finally: 'The devil does not use the service of the magicians against me; if he had had the power and the might to harm me, he would have done so long ago. He has certainly many times held me by the head but he has nevertheless had to let me go. ... He has sometimes given me such a hard time that I did not know whether I was alive or dead. He has also driven me into such desperation that I did not know whether there is a God. ... But I have fought him with the word of God. Otherwise there is neither help nor counsel ... if God does not help us. ...'¹¹

Consistent with Luther's fixated belief that the devil is the agent behind all extraordinary events,¹² he describes the travelling magician as an instrument of the devil. But the *Table Talks* do not connect this historical Faustus to the Faustus legend and there is no reference to a pact with the devil.¹³ Luther's description shows that he connects Faustus so strongly with the devil that they have almost

9 'Introduction' to GFB, p. XVIII. For an account of Abbot Trithemius, see p. XVIII, cf. pp. XVI–XX.

10 For a full reproduction of Trithemius' letter, see Palmer and More, *The Sources of the Faust Tradition*, pp. 83–7.

11 Martin Luther, *Tischgespräche* (Table Talks); in: *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1964), note to vol. 1.1059.

12 Cf. Oberman, *Luther*, pp. 154–7.

13 The *Table Talks* indeed discuss a pact with the devil but the hero of this particular anecdote is an unnamed wild, young fellow. See Luther, *Tischgespräche*, vol. 6.6809.

become identical. It does not surprise us, therefore, that Luther refused to have any dealings with his contemporary Faustus.¹⁴

When we compare these historical descriptions of an arrogant megalomaniac and charlatan with the characteristics of the hero of the Faustus legend, we notice a significant discrepancy. It is true that some parts of the chapbooks describe Faustus as someone who likes to impress large audiences with spectacles and silly pranks. In the first two parts of the German and English Faust Books, which are the main focus of my discussion, however, he comes across as an introverted, almost reclusive scholar who only interacts with his amanuensis and his supernatural visitors. His role as a teacher dominates the last part of these Faust Books but his raucous behaviour clashes with his solitary exploration of heaven and hell. Although he is living in a buoyant circle of students and fellow scholars his early musings about the nature of the world concentrate on the landscape of his mind. They describe the inner world of a sensitive scholar in a state of isolation unaffected by his sociable environment.

Even though Faustus is portrayed as a man of the world in the last third of the German and English Faust Books, he interacts less with other people than he does with Mephostophiles and other visitors from the spirit world. It almost seems out of character that Faustus addresses his final lamentation to a group of students to whom he speaks with a great deal of familiarity: 'My trusty and well-beloved friends, the cause why I have invited you into this place is this: Forasmuch as you have known me this many years, in what manner of life I have lived ...' (EFB 177). His choice of words implies that he has been in close contact with a circle of students for his whole life. It is telling that his more public role is elided from the early parts of the narrative. The interest of the literary sections, which have undoubtedly been written at a later stage, revolve around an individual who thinks and acts at a distance from his surroundings. But the egotistic emphasis of these early sections describes a modern character who ponders the nature of the universe on his own instead of discussing it with his fellow scholars.

New Ideas about Human Nature

The Faustus legend, then, portrays a scholar who objected to every sort of restraint. He was undaunted in his examination of all aspects of creation – including heaven and hell – seeking to explain them according to his own intellectual powers. As I will argue in this book, the legend embarked on an uncompromising investigation of sacred and secular matters through its portrayal of a character who wanted to experience and enjoy all aspects of his contemporary world. Numerous stories about his adventures with conjurors, demons and devils emerged during the early phases of modernity and have continued to be written right into the present. In spite of

¹⁴ For further references to Faustus, see Luther: *Tischgespräche*, vol. 2.1425; vol. 3.3601; vol. 4.4450 and 4.4857.

striking differences in the story's narrative pattern and thematic emphases between its origin in the sixteenth century and later adaptations, it continued to provide a framework for expressing the preoccupations of a particular age. The sixteenth-century Faustus stories were also enmeshed with the establishment of empiricism and the associated successes of scientific experimentation. Closely interwoven with the origin and general spread of the early Enlightenment, my discussion of representative versions of the legend reveals the passions, intellectual curiosities, spiritual cravings and moral dilemmas of a period of reorientation and change.

The radical aspects of the age of Enlightenment have provided the focus for recent influential studies of the period.¹⁵ Beyond confirming that early modernity brought forth groundbreaking ideas concerning human existence and destiny, these studies describe it as a period that has been riven by heated conflicts over the definition of human nature. Contests over proper conduct, acceptable living conditions, and freedom of conscience were embedded within a powerful desire to discover the true nature of the self. Michel Foucault famously describes the preoccupation with the self as one of the prominent changes in the psychological outlook of early modernity, yet he cautions that 'the meticulous rules of self-examination' emerging in the seventeenth century called into existence new forms of social control.¹⁶ The painstaking and perpetual self-analysis required by early-modern ideology implanted its social norms in the conscience of the individual, who then became the guardian of the state's moral principles.

The individual who strives for self-knowledge is seen as having internalized the instruments of social control. Yet it cannot be denied that an equally important reason for the introspective gaze was to fathom the hidden potentials of the self. This emphasis on introspection might have evolved as a consequence of realising the dangers of being open about one's convictions. Talking about the blossoming of creative energy in Renaissance Italy in spite of rampant despotism, the nineteenth-century critic Jacob Burckhardt argues:

Despotism ... fostered in the highest degree not only the individuality of the tyrant or Condottiere himself, but also of the men whom he protected or used as his tools – the secretary, minister, poet, and companion. These people were forced to know all the inward resources of their own nature, passing or permanent; and their enjoyment of life was enhanced and concentrated by the desire to obtain the greatest satisfaction from a possibly very brief period of power and influence.¹⁷

15 See Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981); and Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

16 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 19. Also compare his *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

17 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1944), p. 82.

A social environment poisoned by mistrust, fear and abuse enticed scholars to become creative in order to obtain property and social position, but it also forced them to think about the nature of intellectual integrity. The withdrawal into the self may have started as a defensive mechanism against despotic abuses, but the struggle for intellectual survival nevertheless generated unexpected energies. Someone who is embedded in a stable social environment may remain in a state of unreflected wellbeing, but an oppressive environment challenges its inhabitants to muster their 'inward resources' in order to escape from its debilitating violence. This is why culture and art flourished under the despotic rulership of Renaissance Italy. Although living in a less explosive environment, northern-European intellectuals similarly objected to the forces of control and pushed for new political and personal experiences.

It took a while before the quest for one's inner resources became a major concern. In the Romantic period, Coleridge was an eloquent voice to advocate such an approach to the self. He also pointed out that there was a wide discrepancy between human potential and what was realized of it in an actual state of existence:

They and only they can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar; those only, who feel in their own spirits the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucrum for antennae yet to come. They know and feel, that the *potential* works *in* them, even as the *actual* works *on* them! In short, all the organs of sense are framed for a corresponding world of sense; and we have it. All the organs of spirit are framed for a corresponding world of spirit; though the latter organs are not developed in all alike. But they exist in all ... [original emphasis]¹⁸

In spite of differentiating strongly between the sensitive poet and ordinary minds, Coleridge claimed that all should strive to realize their abstract potential so as to overcome the gaping gulf between real and ideal states of existence. He may have been one of the first to express himself in these terms, but the Aristotelian differentiation between form and content had already emphasized the discrepancy between realized and unrealized potentials. What is new is that Coleridge defines the self in terms of potentialities, claiming that the vital energies of human existence should be employed in achieving ideal states of existence even if these are ultimately unattainable.

By contrast with the Romantic emphasis on exploring and utilizing one's capacities, the late medieval world was hostile to innovations that endangered the established order, and Church authorities made every effort to suppress increasingly vigorous challenges to received definitions of human nature and

¹⁸ S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), I.xii, p. 241–2.

social roles. Traditionally, the Christian church encouraged a certain range of well-defined quests in the form of pilgrimages and other circumscribed religious practices and rituals.¹⁹ However, it attached the most serious warnings to anything that aspired to go beyond its traditional boundaries. Unless the study of the self and the world were conducted as a means to gain spiritual humility, it was decried as sinful self-indulgence. Medieval doctrines cast a long shadow over subsequent centuries and the Calvinist idea that the self was endowed with dangerous qualities survived into the not-so-distant past. A.D. Nuttall illustrates how questions about human nature formed in the competing camps that argued either for humanity's inherent goodness or its inherent depravity:

from magicians, Platonists, and Hermetists came the idea that human potential was limitless: man could ascend into the firmament of knowledge and become divine; from Calvin and the Reformers came the contrary idea that human capacity was zero: man is totally depraved, naturally damned, deprived of all initiative, whether for moral or intellectual good. Those who escape hell are saved not by merit but by the inscrutable Grace of God.²⁰

Orthodox Protestant theology, particularly Calvinism, severely condemned the craving for knowledge, quoting the biblical precedent of Adam and Eve's fall from grace as a potent reminder that the inquisitive propensities of the self had to be curbed.

Natural philosophical investigation, on the other hand, endorsed the positive outlook of hermeticism, valorising the original and 'natural' human qualities because they had been made by God. According to medieval cosmology, the term nature was more or less synonymous with God's creation and it only gradually came to be understood as a part of the oppositional duality of nature and culture. As Enlightenment thinkers strove to emancipate human experience from theological control, nature became further and further removed from its implied creator. The stylistically masterful contests of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between soul and body, then, dramatize not merely the tensions between spiritual and worldly satisfaction but also the strongly diverging views on the natural qualities and propensities of the human being. The prominence of these conflicts in contemporary culture also demonstrated that the worldly contestant was a powerful character who pointed eloquently to the violence with which his claims were suppressed.

The task of exploring the self was gradually made a priority during the eighteenth century and became a prerequisite of Romanticism. But how did this emphasis emerge and develop? During the sixteenth century, all aspects of nature

19 Cf. Christian K. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

20 A.D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 25.

began to be studied and explored. The great masters of map making, Abraham Ortelius and Gerhard Mercator, were able to represent geographical space with unprecedented accuracy,²¹ and the systematic exploration of psyche and mind became an equally urgent objective. Excitement over the remarkable descriptions of the landscape and peoples of the new world reinforced the idea that internal spaces harboured similar mysteries and promises as the world at large. Progress in the understanding of human anatomy, moreover, was a further incentive for the exploration of emotional and intellectual capacities.²²

Early modernity valued analogical thinking and took for granted strong resemblances between microcosm (self) and macrocosm (world). Christian pilgrimages had also emphasized the symbolic similarities between the experience of unfamiliar places and the experience of self. In strict terms, a pilgrimage followed closely prescribed rituals so that the believer could attune to the sacred quality of the destination and attain a state of mind that was appropriate to the pure reception of the divine spirit. The objective of the spiritual journey was to exclude all worldly distractions so that the believer could become one with the sacred object in the process of experiencing its qualities. The underlying requirement of an effacement of self, however, contradicted an increasingly powerful emphasis on spiritual experience.

The imaginative space of the medieval world was subdivided into three realms: heaven, hell and earth. These spaces were associated with particular parts of a medieval church and there were rituals designed to confirm their respective meanings.²³ After the Reformation, however, mystery plays, religious pageants and rituals disappeared as instruments for guiding the believer in the experience of the sacred.²⁴ While the late medieval world was characterized by a loss of images and rituals, it nevertheless retained the core metaphors of Christianity: heaven and hell. In an intellectual climate cultivating the pure unmediated experience of abstract ideas, contemporary thinkers set out to explore their meanings and relevance in a climate of ever-expanding knowledge about the material world.

People have always tried to expand the knowledge of their period. They have always – to a greater or lesser degree – tried to gaze across boundaries to answer questions considered either unanswerable or dangerous. And of course, people have always travelled. Some set out to satisfy their cravings to see foreign lands

21 See, for instance, Charles Bricker, *Landmarks of Mapmaking: An Illustrated Survey of Maps and Mapmakers* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1976).

22 An important example is William Harvey's physiological discoveries, *The Circulation of the Blood*, trans. Kenneth J. Franklin and Andrew Wear (London: Everyman, 1990).

23 Cf. for instance Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France, the Late Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

24 For a discussion of the representation of the sacred in the mystery plays, see John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

while others aimed to conduct business in foreign parts of the world. Some were mortally afraid to leave their domestic realms, fearing – justifiably – that their journeys would be hazardous and that they would never come back; others spent huge sums on chasing after the mysterious treasures of fable and myth. Many travellers of medieval Europe crossed the ‘Spanish Frontier’ in order to have access to the exquisite works of Arab scholars in fields such as medicine, astronomy and botany.²⁵

Early modernity also kindled an attitude towards curiosity that gave new impetus to the perennial desire to see the lands beyond the horizon. A static world view, according to which all necessary knowledge was contained in the Bible and in traditional lore, was being replaced by the idea that the future harboured vast stores of hitherto unexplored knowledge. It became a moral imperative to harvest these stores for the good of humankind. By the time Francis Bacon propagated the advancement of knowledge as the principle of his society and culture, it had become permissible to ask, inquire and speculate. It would not take long before it became the intellectual’s duty to take part in the process of expanding existing boundaries.

The icon prefixed to Bacon’s *Novum Organum* (1620) portrays two ships sailing through the columns defining the boundaries of traditional knowledge: *non plus ultra*. One ship is on the point of disappearing on the horizon while the other is shown re-entering the traditional realms, carrying a rich store of information and goods (Figure 1). Here geographic exploration features as the most palpable icon of progress, symbolising the period’s tireless efforts to achieve technological improvements and advancements in the understanding of nature. Bacon indeed pursued the project of collecting all branches of knowledge under the principles of a *first philosophy*, a ‘common parent of all knowledge’, as Jerry Weinberger describes it, which demands that the axioms of every branch of investigation should be deduced from observed data.²⁶ Of course, Bacon’s all-embracing method of investigation was an ideal, and by no means described how things were done in practice. His attempts to establish a hierarchy of all branches of inquiry nevertheless encouraged a rational approach to all questions of human concern.²⁷

That people wanted to observe and judge for themselves was characteristic of the period. But Bacon drew a rigid line between scientific observation and religion. In the preface to the *Great Instauration*, he says:

25 For a discussion of the cultural boundary between Arab Spain and Christian Europe, see Peter Linehan, ‘At the Spanish Frontier’, *The Medieval World*, eds. Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson (London: Routledge, 2001).

26 Cf. Jerry Weinberger, *Science, Faith, and Politics: Francis Bacon and the Utopian Roots of the Modern Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 246.

27 Cf. Sachiko Kusukawa, ‘Bacon’s Classification of Knowledge’, *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

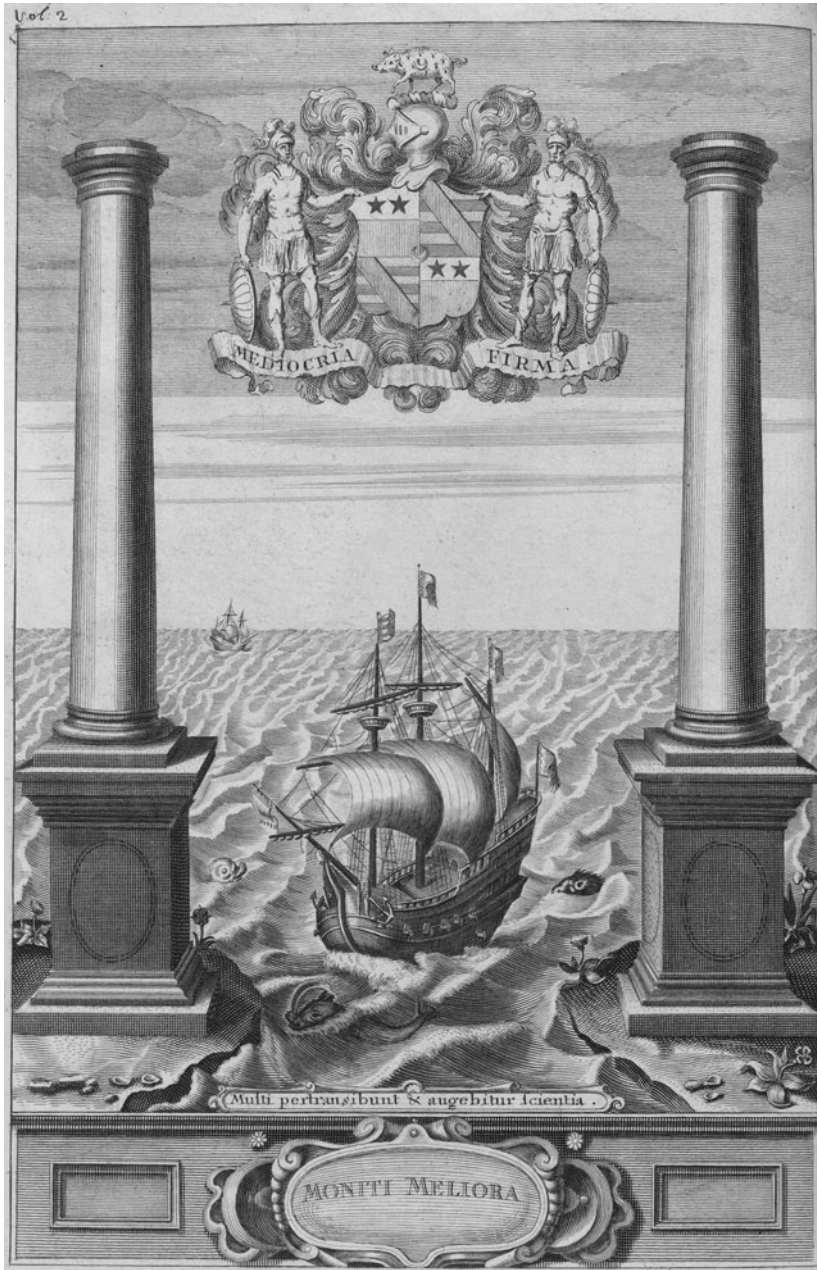


Fig. 1

Francis Bacon, *Instauratio Magna*, or *Novum Organum*, (1620) frontispiece from an eighteenth-century edition of *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, London: M. Gosling, 1730.

My first admonition (which was also my prayer) is that, in things divine, men should confine the sense within its proper sphere. For the sense, like the sun, opens the face of the terrestrial globe, but shuts and seals up the face of heaven. On the other hand, in flying from that evil, they should not fall into the opposite fault, as they certainly will, if they think that any part of the investigation of Nature must be excluded, as if by any interdict. For it was not that pure and spotless natural knowledge, by which Adam gave names to all things according to their kind, that was the origin and occasion of the Fall, but that ambitious and headstrong greed for moral knowledge – of telling good from evil – so that man might desert God and make his own laws, that was the ground and manner of his temptation.²⁸

Bacon defended the wish to expand the existing perimeters of knowledge. He also implicitly refuted the argument of the second commandment, which condemns as sinful the desire to conceive an image of that which is outside one's immediate field of experience: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' (*Exodus*, 20.4). His argument relies on the assumption that Adam must have been created with a special kind of divinely sanctioned knowledge in order to give the right names to God's creatures. He therefore distinguishes between a pure and an impure craving for knowledge. By proposing a 'natural knowledge', located in prelapsarian times, Bacon is defending himself against the accusation of heresy. Within one and the same passage, however, he commits the logical inconsistency of arguing that the scientific method should steer clear of religious issues while referring to the Bible to prove the existence of a natural, God-given knowledge. With a great deal of hermeneutic liberty he implies that the famous fall from grace may have buried the original and pure human knowledge. He then allows himself to speculate that this knowledge is still alive and, with proper endeavour, might be brought back to the surface.

Probably the most famous passage of *Novum Organum* is the discussion of the 'idols of the mind' where Bacon argues for the existence of ways and means of counterbalancing the distortions clinging to an uninformed perception and interpretation of the world.²⁹ His utopian description of an ideal society, *The New Atlantis*, then, proposes a careful schooling of the senses by means of which sensory deceptions should be minimized. The House of Solomon, the academy of this utopian society, boasts 'perspective-houses', 'sound-houses', etc., devoted to the comprehensive understanding of sensory perception. The triumphs of their inventiveness are 'houses of deceits of the senses; where we represent all manner of feats of juggling, false apparitions, impostures, and illusions; and their fallacies'.³⁰

28 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum, with Other Parts of the Great Instauration*, trans. and ed. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), p. 15.

29 Bacon, *Novum Organum*, 1, §§46–68.

30 Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, ed. Arthur Johnston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 243–5.