

THEATER

OF THE

AVANT-

GARDE

A

Critical

Anthology



Yale University Press
New Haven & London

EDITED BY
BERT CARDULLO

AND
ROBERT KNOPF

1890-
1950

To
Richard Gilman and Arno Selco
who taught us to love theater in all forms

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Designed by James J. Johnson and set in Electra Roman & Gill Sans type
by Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, PA.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Theater of the avant-garde, 1890–1950 : a critical anthology /
edited by Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-300-08525-7 (cloth) — ISBN 0-300-08526-5 (pbk.)

I. Drama—20th century. 2. Experimental drama—History
and criticism. I. Cardullo, Bert. II. Knopf, Robert, 1961–
PN6112 .T42 2001
808.82'911—dc21
00-043891

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence
and durability of the Committee on Production
Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on
Library Resources.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Atom and Eve

A Consideration of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*



More intellectually accessible than much of Gertrude Stein's early work, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) blends her unique approach to language and structure with universal themes, which for her included feminist ones. The play represents a transition between the two periods in Stein's oeuvre that Donald Sutherland has established: "The Play as Movement and Landscape, 1922–1932" and "The Melodic Drama, Melodrama and Opera, 1932–1946."¹ In *Doctor Faustus* Stein uses identifiable characters and attributes specific dialogue to them, but the language exhibits all the idiosyncrasies of her earlier work—lack of punctuation, multiple identities for major characters, disembodied voices, punning, non sequiturs, and repetition. As Michael Hoffman writes, Stein's "language now focuses on something other than its own structure; she shifts from [that] concern to such traditional literary problems as those of moral value and human identity; but she still maintains throughout the play a style readily identifiable as her own."²

Although several essays have been published on Stein's drama in general, and on *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in particular, few attempts have been made to connect her plays with other avant-garde work of the period. Aside from its formal similarities to the European avant-garde—in particular to the Dadaist and Surrealist drama being written and produced in early twentieth-century Paris—and that avant-garde's much smaller dramatic offshoot in the United States—*Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is important for its explicit violations of the three fundamental elements of conventional or traditional drama, as described in the introduction to this collection: psychology, causality, and morality or providentiality. Rather than merely mimic the techniques of the Dadaists or Surrealists, Stein disrupts this triad even further than either E. E. Cummings in *Him* (1927) or Thornton Wilder in his allegedly avant-garde *Our Town* (1938), thereby establishing herself as the foremost dramatist of the early American avant-garde.

In *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, not only has Gertrude Stein replaced spiritual uncertainty about the existence of God with the secular amorality of modern technology; she has also replaced the psychoscientific certainty about personality that is integrated yet developing with the inability of humanity either to comprehend itself or to evolve. In this play, all the characters are reduced to the same frustrating inability to understand the world or act in it. Marguerite Ida—Helena Annabel (the central female character, whose dual names and fluctuating identity mark her as a kind of composite woman) cannot defend herself against the man from over the seas; the devil cannot control Doctor Faustus

(even long enough to convince him that he has a soul); Faustus cannot regulate the lights once he has created them, and at the end of the play he fails to convince Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel to accompany him to hell. Neither the dog nor the boy has any power over his own life; they are manipulated by Faustus—and ultimately killed by him.

Like Wilder's *Our Town*, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* thus investigates the triumph of technology and the role of God in modern life. But rather than offer romantic nostalgia and spiritual redemption to a Depression-weary and wary American public, in the form of isolation—and isolationism—in a quaint New Hampshire town of the turn of the century, Stein portrays the impotence of human beings without God, without morals, and without a real sense of themselves. Indeed, in an almost Absurdist fashion, Stein's characters revel in their own frustration and ignorance. Faustus' frustrations with the world culminate in his desire to "go to hell," which neatly returns the play to its theological question—does Doctor Faustus have a soul? Paradoxically, Mephistopheles informs Faustus that he cannot enter hell without a soul, and Faustus has sold his. And, considering Stein's dismissal of traditional Judeo-Christian theology as well as conventional dramatic suspense, it should come as no surprise that she begins her play after the central religious crisis—Faustus' decision to sell his soul to the devil for knowledge—which in Goethe's or Marlowe's dramatization of the Faust legend serves as the turning point.

In order to enter hell, in any event, Faustus is told that he must commit a sin. When he asks, "What sin, how can I without a soul commit a sin," Mephistopheles peremptorily replies, "Kill anything" (116). Faustus then kills his companions, the boy and the dog, and descends into hell, where he wants to go in order to escape the reality that he himself has created through his rejection of God in favor of technology. But, for Stein, the term "hell" describes that very technological reality (or nightmare): "Any light is just a light and now there is nothing more either by day or by night just a light" (91). The unrelenting light can be read as a modern analogue to the eternal fires of hell. This technological light has the capacity, with its heat and radiance (neither warm and nourishing like the sun nor gently haloed like candlelight), to overwhelm all other forms of light and, like the hell of theology, every type of faith.

Living in Europe during the 1930s, Stein thus reflects the anxiety of a continent only recently recovered from the first mechanized world war, yet now poised on the brink of a second, whose technological devastation and human destructiveness would beggar the imagination. Like other avant-garde writers of her time, she suggests that life cannot be completely understood, and she avers that no God exists to create moral order or to prevent humankind from self-extinction through technology. Again, like so many other avant-garde writers, Stein has lost faith in the traditional patriarchal God, but she has also lost faith both in unconventional feminine spirituality and, paradoxically, in the potential of any individual without absolute faith. Faustus' "individual quest," after all, ends in murder, despair, and chaos. And the grim attitude that permeates Stein's *Doctor Faustus* will continue after World War II in the works of such writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco, who saw human-

By Sarah Bay-Cheng. Published here for the first time.

¹ Donald Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein: A Bibliography of Her Work, 1951* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1976), 207.

² Michael J. Hoffman, *Gertrude Stein* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 85.

kind's trust in a higher power as having been betrayed by the human folly—the hellfire of the Holocaust and atomic obliteration—of the last great war.

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See also Robinson, in the General Bibliography.

Doctor Faustus Lights the

Gertrude Stein

ACT I

Faust standing at the door of his room, with his arms up at the door lintel looking out, behind him a blaze of electric light.

Just then Mephisto approaches and appears at the door.

Faustus grows out.—The devil what the devil what do I care if the devil is there.

Mephisto says.

Doctor Faustus.

But Doctor Faustus dear yes I am here.

What do I care there is no here nor there. What am I. I am Doctor Faustus who knows everything can do everything and you say it was through you but not at all, if I had not been in a hurry and if I had taken my time I would have known how to make white electric light and day-light and night light and what did I do I saw you miserable devil I saw you and I was deceived and I believed miserable devil I thought I needed you, and I thought I was tempted by the devil and I know no temptation is tempting unless the devil tells you so. And you wanted my soul what the hell did you want my soul for, how do you know I have a soul, who says so nobody says so but you the devil and everybody knows the devil is all lies, so how do you know how do I know that I have a soul to sell how do you know Mr.