

Trinity University

## Digital Commons @ Trinity

---

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty  
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

---

2012

### Faust's Mountains: An Ecocritical Reading of Goethe's Tragedy and Science

Heather I. Sullivan

Trinity University, [hsulliva@trinity.edu](mailto:hsulliva@trinity.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/ml\\_l\\_faculty](https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/ml_l_faculty)



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Sullivan, H.I. (2012). Faust's mountains: An ecocritical reading of Goethe's tragedy and science. In S. Ireton & C. Schaumann (Eds.), *Heights of reflection: Mountains in the German imagination from the middle ages to the twenty-first century* (pp. 116-133). Rochester, NY: Camden House.

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

“Faust’s Mountains: An Ecocritical Reading of Goethe’s Tragedy and Science”  
*Heather I. Sullivan, Trinity University*

Mountains play a major role in Goethe’s *Faust* Part I and II (1808, 1832): in addition to the debates about their formation, economic pursuit of their resources, and military battles in their heights, the tragedy also stages multiple ascents. While the mountain scenes in *Faust* may appear as the typically metaphorical site for encounters with the divine, diabolical, or sublime, they function more as a space of transformation where seemingly transcendental events take on concretely material and earthly qualities. In fact, Faust’s own three major forays up the mountains present such a Goethean transformation; what might have been a heroic climb is instead rendered ironically ambiguous, or even comically focused on bodily challenges and limitations. On his “Walpurgis Night” hike up the Brocken in Part I, for example, Faust acquiesces to Mephistopheles’ complaints about the strain of continuing on foot and the dangers of walking in the dark, and they famously stop half way up and miss the satanic ritual on the peak. Then, in Part II, Faust does not climb up the “High Mountains” in Act IV, but rather is carried there by a cloud -- an anomalous mode of travel that demands further exploration in relation to Goethe’s atmospheric studies on clouds. Once he lands, Mephistopheles joins him and again grumbles about the perils and vexation of contending with mountainous terrain. Finally, Faust is also borne upwards after his death in Act V through the “Mountain Gorges,” though this time by swirling angels, who, not coincidentally, flow upwards much like clouds. Faust’s three mountain ascents are, in other words, either cut short or else they occur with no actual effort on his part as he is transported upwards.<sup>1</sup> Mostly billed as an epic drama of a man who ceaselessly strives (for knowledge, power, or simply for the sake of ongoing action), Goethe’s *Faust* actually

features a remarkably indolent character, at least in terms of his physical experiences on mountains.

In contrast, Goethe himself is well-known for his extensive climbs, particularly his solitary winter ascent of the Brocken in 1777 -- he was the first to accomplish this feat -- and his various adventures in the Swiss and Italian mountains.<sup>2</sup> In fact, many of Goethe's literary, autobiographical, and scientific works refer to his heroic escapades with high-altitude sublimity; he refers to himself in almost superhuman terms when portraying his own mountain ascents such as in his famous poem, "Harzreise im Winter" (Winter Journey in the Harz), which describes his journey up the Brocken. The marked contrast between Goethe's own experiences documented in his writings and his protagonist in *Faust* should draw our attention to how very unimpressive Faust's actual mountaineering accomplishments are despite the proliferation of mountain references and settings in the drama. Besides the abbreviated hike up the Brocken, these references also include Mephistopheles' promise to the Kaiser of vast quantities of gold hidden in mountain lodes ("Bergesadern") which will be the reserves for modern paper money. Additionally, multiple figures debate the formation and alteration of mountains through time, including Mephistopheles and Faust as they stand atop the "High Mountains." Finally, and with much relevance, the last scene in the play is labeled "Mountain Gorges," which is the setting for Faust's third and final ascent. Goethe's geological and meteorological writings shed light on the fact that Faust's mountain experiences -- and his actions more broadly -- play out within the context of larger, uncontrollable forces. Mountains are hence neither symbols of permanence nor of the conquering hero with an unflinching will, but rather of the tenuous, fluid, and constantly changing world around us. While the forces influencing Faust may seem divine, such as the "Lord's" gamble with Mephistopheles and the battle between devils and angels, I argue that they

are primarily physical or environmental factors. This may well be the drama's most radical characteristic: Goethe takes an overtly spiritual tale and reconfigures it as a portrayal of humans grappling with the concrete materiality of their physical environment.<sup>3</sup> As Astrida Tantillo notes, "a scientific, naturalistic understanding of the world replaces a religious one" in *Faust*.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is particularly relevant for an ecocritical study.

By making use of ecocriticism's environmental perspectives and queries into how literature deploys and depicts the physical world, this essay outlines the concrete materiality of Faust's experiences within nature's flows. Previous ecocritical readings of *Faust* include Jost Hermand's assertion that the play is a "green-leaning" critique of modernity, and, conversely, Kate Rigby's condemnation of the play and Goethe himself as advocates of modern development.<sup>5</sup> My work straddles these two views, noting that while the play does not offer a green agenda, it consistently evokes Goethe's science and delineates interwoven landscapes of conflicting human and natural forces. Here, I investigate *Faust* with the acknowledgement that the material realm of nature (especially mountains) is a significant actor on stage, and not just a picturesque metaphor. This approach clarifies Faust's unsuccessful climb up the Brocken and his two wind-borne ascents within the context of his other acts. That is, he uses magical power or Mephistophelean help to seduce Gretchen and Helen, to put on a theatrical illusion for the Kaiser, to guide the war efforts, and even to build a dike against the sea. Yet Faust does not conquer nature's most massive monuments, the mountains, by any magical or other means. On the contrary, his final "act" of ascent occurs only with the help of atmospheric flows drawing him and the angels upwards with the clouds.<sup>6</sup> Hence we gain insights into Goethe's *Faust* through ecocriticism's material emphasis and we see how the play, in turn, is relevant for environmental

thought with its complex vision of our human position within the many interactive forces of nature and culture.

Reading *Faust* through the lens of ecocriticism brings our attention to the drama's frequent references to mountains not just as background or sublime site but rather as central features of Faust's material framework. Kate Rigby's ecocritical study, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*, offers one of the few in-depth discussions of mountains in *Faust*.<sup>7</sup> These she reads in terms of the romantic susceptibility for "Promethean temptation when high (if never high enough) in the mountains."<sup>8</sup> Rigby condemns both Faust and Goethe for wanting to conquer nature, particularly within the drama's final act of building a large dike to claim land from the sea. While she does not pursue the repeated switch in *Faust* from transcendental to physical, Rigby's analysis lays the groundwork for a thorough re-reading of Goethe's radical revisions of nature. Ecocriticism itself has developed from an early emphasis on idealized and pastoral nature into more inclusive work on urban nature, unbalanced, dirty, toxic, brown, and/or queer nature, and has fruitfully joined efforts with environmental justice movements, postcolonialism, postmodernism, posthumanism, and science studies.<sup>9</sup> Particularly applicable for this "material" study of *Faust* is Dana Phillips's work critiquing the tendency in much of environmental rhetoric to seek primarily aesthetic, holistic, or idealized abstractions of nature. Phillips's ecocritical approach is practical, informed by both theory and science, and skeptical. He prefers to avoid views about nature that are laden with heavy-handed "reverence, awe, and piety," for these "are antiseptic responses to nature; one might even say that they are *unnatural* responses, in that they are incompatible with what we know about the earthy flavor, by which I mean to suggest not only the randiness, but the rawness and rankness as well, of most biological processes."<sup>10</sup> Above all, Phillips keeps us on the ground -- no rhapsodizing

about becoming one with nature as if it were primarily pure alpine sublimity and lovely blossoms. Phillips eschews idealized and pious approaches to nature even as he advocates his views from a staunchly environmental perspective. Similarly, I suggest that we approach Faust's mountains without excessive reverence and piety and look at them with a grounded, material stance. Despite his best efforts, Faust remains mired in the "rankness," "randiness," and "rawness" of his natural and material environment.

Since Goethe worked on *Faust* throughout his life, a brief description of his changing perspectives on mountains is essential for following their different meanings in his tragedy. Goethe documents many of his own exhilarating climbs in which he experienced the sublimity of the peaks and the feeling of achieving a superhuman status. Yet, with his dedication to re-opening the Ilmenau mine near Weimar once he began working at the court as an administrator for the young prince Carl August in 1776, his writings in this regard become much more concretely material. He traveled through Germany studying mines, minerals, and mountains, delving into questions about their formation and history. Following the renowned instructor at the Freiberg mining academy, Abraham Gottlob Werner, Goethe found Neptunism's emphasis on gradual developments in water more compelling than the Vulcanist theories that considered sudden disasters and fiery eruptions as the primary causes of changes to the earth's surface.<sup>11</sup> Goethe's work with the mine made such inquiries eminently practical, of course, since he and all mining officials wanted to understand the earth's formations in order to locate valuable material resources. This was the era of the burgeoning industrial revolution in Germany, and the practical discussions of mining, resources, and the earth's development connected to heated debates with serious implications for theology and science alike. During this time early geologists came to realize that the earth had a real material history of eons beyond imagination rather than the 6,000

years suggested biblically. Furthermore, they were beginning to understand that mountains and all other geological formations had been changing and developing through time, repeatedly undergoing major upheavals.<sup>12</sup> This is the “material” context for Goethe’s own fascination with mountains and minerals. Indeed, granite became an obsession for Goethe because he thought it was the oldest solid material that first consolidated out of the cosmic “ur-soup” before the earth’s surface separated into land and sea. He believed he touched the ancient core of the planet when standing atop a granite peak. Goethe’s view of mountains thus developed from his earliest revelry in high-altitude superiority to a practical study of the composition of mountains; but then his perspective changed again toward the end of his life when he began to understand them within the context of air flows, water cycles, and weather patterns.

Goethe’s later meteorological studies had a specific emphasis on mountains because they offered a broader view of the shifting pressure systems. In order to see and understand clouds, he writes that the view from above is essential:

Alle atmosphärische [sic] Erscheinungen haben in dieser Gebirgsgegend einen andern Charakter als im niederen Lande und drücken sich viel entschiedener aus. Nur muß man ... sich entschließen aus der Karlsbader Schlucht heraus zu gehen und die Höhen zu ersteigen, wo man nach dem Egerkreis und den sächsischen Gebirgen hinsieht. Alles was man in der Enge nur einzeln und mißmutig gewahr wird übersieht sich sodann mit Vergnügen und Belehrung.<sup>13</sup>

[All atmospheric phenomena have a different character in this mountainous region than in the lowlands, they present themselves much more decisively. One must only ... decide to go out of the Carlsbad valley and to climb up into the heights, where one looks out

toward the Eger region and the mountains of Saxony. Everything that one can only see individually and with irritation when in the narrow (valley), can then be overseen with pleasure and learning (my translation).]

Furthermore, in his studies of air pressure changes, Goethe concentrated on the more rapid fluxes occurring at high altitudes. He incorrectly believed that the cause of such barometric changes is the “inhalation and exhalation” of the earth, which first draws the air more strongly toward it and then releases it (causing high and low pressure shifts). Through a view from above, he gained greater insight into tumultuous air pressure shifts, the water cycles, and the fluid formations of clouds. As Leland Phelps notes: “Goethe saw the panorama of weather in the Alps as a large scale [sic] battle involving the winds, clouds, and atmosphere. He stated that one tended to overlook the play of natural forces involved in atmospheric processes except when one was surrounded by them in the mountains.”<sup>14</sup> The mountains in *Faust* are thus not surprisingly the sites of battles both atmospheric and military, and they provide essential clues for understanding the play’s significant move into materiality. This materiality represents a participation in nature’s flows, changes, and conflicts that draw us in -- and “onwards,” as in the final word of the play -- whether we recognize it or not. Goethe’s shift in interest from the minerals and the history of mountains towards atmospheric studies marks an important development in his thinking about mountains and science more generally: his earlier polarity of water and fire as the forces shaping the earth’s surface is transformed into a more complex emphasis on multiple *relations* among earth’s attraction (gravity), water flow, air pressure fluctuations, and temperature. Instead of the old Neptunist-versus-Vulcanist debate, he studied the energized interactions of multiple forces in the earth’s atmosphere and thought about how this plays out within human experiences as well.



In *Faust*, we see right from the beginning a desire for the materiality of physical nature. Faust declares in his first monologue a desire to “know” nature (actually, nature’s “breasts”) physically: “Wo fass’ ich dich, unendliche Natur? / Euch Brüste, wo? Ihr Quellen alles Lebens” (How, boundless Nature, seize you in my clasp? / You breasts where, all life’s sources twain) (*Faust* 455-56). This craving leads him to make a wager with Mephistopheles, and then to experience the physical world by flying to a tavern filled with drunk students, visiting the witch’s kitchen where he drinks a rejuvenation potion, and seducing Gretchen. Most relevant for our discussion, he leaves Gretchen after impregnating her and hikes up into the Harz mountains on “Walpurgis Night” with Mephistopheles, yet their climb is truncated. The famously excised scene atop the Brocken describes Satan’s ceremony with a new recruit into the world of sex and money, and it occurs on the very site where Goethe himself ascended the Brocken, alone, in the middle of the winter. There he decided that fate was smiling upon him and leading him to the heady heights of court at Weimar.<sup>15</sup> Most readers believe that Goethe self-censored the scene with Satan due to its controversial nature; he instead leaves Mephistopheles and Faust half way up the mountain where they dance with witches and watch satirical theater. However, there is another practical explanation if we simply listen to Mephistopheles. While he wants to seduce Faust with his devilish offers, he does not wish to expend much physical effort in the process. Their climb has hardly begun when Mephistopheles voices his complaint about how he would rather fly. Since he is the one who prevents Faust from completing this ascent, perhaps it is his reluctance to continue the strenuous hike that ends the heroic quest to reach the top of the Brocken on “Walpurgis Night.” This is one of the key moments where the spiritual world is overwritten by simple physical realities, an example, in other words, of Goethe’s switch from potential moments of sublimity or transcendence to the material body and its surroundings.

Another example of Goethe's bent for shifting from cosmic reflections and claims of sublimity to the material realm, particularly in his discussions of mountains, is found in his 1785 text "Granit II." Here he waxes poetic about standing on a granite peak as the "oldest eternal altar" that connects directly to the vast depths of creation. His soul feels its own sublimity and longs for the heavens -- only to be called back by hunger and thirst to material human needs. Note the abrupt switch:

[H]ier auf dem ältesten ewigen Altare der unmittelbar auf die Tiefe der Schöpfung gebaut ist bring ich dem Wesen aller Wesen ein Opfer. Ich fühle die ersten festesten Anfänge unsers Daseins, ich überschau die Welt ihre schrofferen und gelinderen Täler und ihre fernen fruchtbaren Weiden, meine Seele wird über sich selbst und über alles erhaben und sehnt sich nach dem nähern Himmel. Aber bald ruft die brennende Sonne Durst und Hunger [die] menschlichen Bedürfnisse zurück.<sup>16</sup>

[Here on the oldest, eternal altar that is built directly on top of the depths of creation, I bring the being of all beings a sacrifice. I feel the first, most solid beginnings of our existence, I look over the world's more rugged and gentler valleys and the distant fruitful meadows; my soul is sublime beyond itself and everything, and it longs for the nearer heavens. But soon the burning sun calls back the human needs of thirst and hunger (my translation).]

The sublime transcendence of the soul lifting itself on high while standing atop the ancient granite is interrupted by the material body, much like the seemingly mythological moments in *Faust* that move into descriptions of the flows of physical matter. In other words, where one expects the divine, one finds instead "nature."<sup>17</sup>

Mephistopheles is often the catalyst for the interruptions of potential transcendence. There are, in fact, three occasions in *Faust* when Mephistopheles frets specifically about having to climb or hike. On their first hike on “Walpurgis Night,” he vociferously complains about the strenuous walk in the dark, longing to fly instead of continuing on foot:

Verlangst du nicht nach einem Besenstiele?

Ich wünschte mir den allerderbsten Bock.

Auf diesem Weg sind wir noch weit vom Ziele.

[Would you not have a broomstick rather?

I wish I rode a buck, however tough.

Our route will take us yet a good way farther] (*Faust* 3835-37).

And then he bemoans the dim moonlight, in which he stumbles into rocks and trips over tree roots:

Wie traurig steigt die unvollkommne Scheibe

Des roten Mondes mit später Glut heran,

Und leuchtet schlecht, daß man bei jedem Schritte

Vor einen Baum, vor einen Felsen rennt!

[How drearily the moon-disk’s ragged cinder

Swims up with its belated reddish glow,

And shines so poorly that one risks collision

At every step with crag or rooted snare!] (*Faust* 3851-54).

Faust, on the other hand, keeps marching boldly onwards, wanting to enjoy the thrill of the walk. He keeps asking Mephistopheles why they do not continue upwards to the devilish spectacle above rather than stopping midway to entertain themselves with witches and theater:

Doch droben möcht' ich lieber sein!  
Schon seh' ich Glut und Wirbelrauch.  
Dort strömt die Menge zu dem Bösen;  
Da muß sich manches Rätsel lösen.

[I'd rather be up over there!  
I spy a glow and fumes awhirl.  
There flocks the crowd to Evil-kind;  
There many a riddle should unfurl] (*Faust* 4037-40).

Mephistopheles emphasizes the fact that staying will involve less effort (“Mühe” [ache]) and requests that Faust be kind and remain below. “Seid freundlich, nur um meinetwillen; / Die Mühe ist klein, der Spaß ist groß.” [Be sociable, just for my sake; / It's lots of fun and little ache.] (*Faust* 4048-49). Social entertainment replaces the arduous climb up the mountain in the dark for the apparently rather delicate devil figure.

Mephistopheles similarly laments the physical exertion and mountainous dangers while climbing on two other occasions. During the “Classical Walpurgis Night,” he separates from Faust and the Homunculus, scrambling upwards on his own, across from them, “an der Gegenseite kletternd” [climbing on the opposite side]. Once again he fumes about the strain and the tree roots with distinct echoes of the previous hike, “Da muß ich mich durch steile Felsenstreppen / Durch alter Eichen starre Wurzeln schleppen!” [Here I must toil up stairs of

slanting rocks, / Across unyielding roots of ancient oaks!] (*Faust* 7951-52). And on the third occasion, he complains as he and Faust arrive on the “High Mountains” in Act IV, Faust by cloud-transport, and Mephistopheles with the help of seven-mile boots. Warning Faust of the cliffs’ dangers, Mephistopheles demands to know why they land in the awful heights.

Mephistopheles dislikes the wild landscape, and he prefers the magical strides of his boots over tedious hiking:

Das heiß ich endlich vorgeschritten!

Nun aber sag, was fällt dir ein?

Steigst ab in solcher Gräuel Mitten,

Im gräßlich gähnenden Gestein.

[Now that was rapid transport for us!

But tell me, what are you about?

Debarking in the midst of horrors,

In grimly yawning rock redoubt?] (*Faust* 10067-70).

Mephistopheles stresses his concern, and his fussiness and fatigue limit Faust’s mountain excursions.

Faust’s flight to the “High Mountains” in Act IV has specific connections to both the hike in Part I on “Walpurgis Night” and to his third and final ascent with the cloud-angels from the “Mountain Gorges” in Part II. In the first and second ascents, we see Mephistopheles’ hesitation to climb, his complaints about both the exertion and the dangers, and his concern about Faust’s safety. There are also extensive geological descriptions and discussions in both the “Walpurgis Night” climb and the “High Mountains.” In the former scene, he warns Faust to heed the deep

cracks in the rocks, describing the glowing fire visible in the abyss of the cliffs. This description attests to Goethe's increasing interest in geological forces and mining, though it is described by Mephistopheles as being "Lord Mammon's fabulous palace." As he tells Faust:

Fasse wacker meinen Zipfel!  
Hier ist so ein Mittelgipfel,  
Wo man mit Erstaunen sieht,  
Wie im Berg der Mammon glüht.

[Hold my coat-tail, clutch it tight!  
Here we reach a middling height  
Whence you glimpse a sight astounding,  
Mammon glistening through the mountain] (*Faust* 3912-15).

This sight captures Faust's attention, and he describes at length the glowing light and steaming vapors emerging from below. Rather than gazing upwards at the peak or into the valley, Faust is mesmerized by the glimpse into the mountain's interior. The potentially sublime moment is instead a mix of geological description and ominous evocation of hellish glimmerings.

Wie seltsam glimmert durch die Gründe  
Ein morgenrötlich trüber Schein!  
Und selbst bis in die tiefen Schlünde  
Des Abgrunds wittert er hinein.

[How strangely in the vales it glimmers,  
As of a lurid sunrise sheen,

And probes with summer-lightening shimmers

The deepest clefts of the ravine!”] (*Faust* 3916-19).

As Faust gazes downwards into the depths, Mephistopheles remains the cautious, worrying guide instructing his companion to hold tightly to the cliffs’ lest he plummet into the yawning chasms. It seems Mephistopheles fears that the steep rocks and gleaming lights may lead Faust to a premature fall; it is odd that a devilish figure seeking the soul’s capture in Hell would dedicate so much time to fearful admonitions about avoiding descent into “Mammon’s palace.” It is as if he actually sees the physical risk as a greater threat than the moral gamble with the soul.

Similarly, in the “High Mountains,” during Faust’s second mountain ascent, Mephistopheles worries about his companion’s wellbeing and describes the mountain as the “Grund der Hölle” [pit of Hell] that was deep in the earth until raised up by tremendous volcanic forces. The imagery he uses is once again simultaneously geological and diabolical, so that the reader is confronted with how this seemingly spiritual moment is as much a material description of mountain formation as it is a sublime view of transcendence. Faust and Mephistopheles echo here the debate between Thales and Anaxagoras in the “Classical Walpurgis Night” about whether earth’s surface is shaped primarily by violent, fiery upheavals or rather the long, slow processes of consolidation out of water, views with which Goethe himself struggled for years. Mephistopheles claims to have been there through the entire process, and to have witnessed the wild transformations of the earth’s surface when “down became up.”

Was ehemals Grund war ist nun Gipfel.

Sie gründen auch hierauf die rechten Lehren

Das Unterste ins Oberste zu kehren.

[What was the base one time, is now the peak.

On this the proper recipes are grounded

By which the top and bottom are confounded.

(*Faust* 10088-90).

Standing on high peaks in Goethe's *Faust* provides the reader with *material* insights into earth's historical processes much more than with *spiritual* insights. It is a physical realm that confounds expectations of time and space. In sum, both Faust's first and second mountain ascents share concrete geological details of the earth's active processes, and both these experiences feature Mephistopheles' complaints about hiking, his preference for flying, and, his fears about mountain dangers.

In contrast, the second and third ascents share the significant feature of Faust's cloud-travel. His trip into the "High Mountains" on the cloud demonstrates that in Faust's world, one *can* travel on clouds, physically.<sup>18</sup> Flying is also possible with the help of Mephistopheles' magic mantle and horses. Yet the cloud trips in Acts IV and V present a new dimension, not of magic, but rather of atmospheric processes -- this is where geology joins meteorology. The first misty (rather than mystical) flight into the high mountains after the love story with Helen is, in other words, the preamble for Faust's final ascent with the clouds at the conclusion of the tragedy. It establishes cloud travel as a "real" possibility (rather than just a metaphor for the spirit's journey to the Lord above) and it thereby links Faust's physical acts and movements with the water cycle. Additionally, Act III continues after Faust's and Helen's departure; significantly, it concludes with the chorus of female spirits who refuse to return Hades because they desire to remain on the earth's surface as various forms of water. They transform into mountain streams, the juice of fruits that feed the hungry and make wines for the thirsty, and the creeks bringing life-giving



water to meadows, forests, and to farmers' cultivated fields. The trajectory here moves once again from the mythological (the chorus and Helen) to various forms of water, or from the ephemeral and literary into more concrete and material forms.

Faust's development at this point seems to be the opposite of the chorus: the female spirits of the chorus become part of the water cycles, while Faust decides he must intervene and control the flow of water by building a dike against the sea. Yet his final ascent with the clouds through the mountains at the end of the play demonstrates that he, just like the chorus, becomes part of the water cycles. Believing that he can control the sea water, he dies with the delusion of success. However, his final flight through the mountains occurs as his remains are carried upwards by cloud-like angels whose rising path follows the same swirling motions that Goethe describes in his atmospheric studies. Faust's trajectory hence moves from love story to cloud story, or from mythology to meteorology. Perhaps the play is a "tragedy" as the subtitle claims, because Faust's life is inescapably pushed, pulled, and drawn onwards not only by the "eternal feminine" as in the final line in the play, but also by the "eternal material" such as bodily desire, pregnancies, and the weather flows. He succumbs, unwittingly and ironically, to the very forces against which he dedicates his final battle against the sea.

Before he can vanquish the waves with a grandiose dike, however, Faust must first obtain political support. Hence he joins the wars in the "High Mountains" in Act IV, helping the Kaiser to gain victory. The next step is financing his land development project, which Faust easily receives with the aid of his minions who engage in colonialism, piracy, and murder. This strategy is successful, and Act V of *Faust* features the dike, but also a putrid swamp where there was supposed to be free land. Faust's best efforts to counter nature's mutability fail and he does not realize that his workers, the lemurs, are actually digging his grave ("Grab") instead of channels

("Graben") to drain the excess water. We never learn the fate of this land, but we are witness to Faust's death, the ensuing battle over his remains, and his final ascent into the clouds. The earth-air battle between the devils (wanting to pull Faust into the earth) and the angels (wanting to pull him upwards into the air) begins when Mephistopheles calls his devilish helpers to come and transport Faust's remains to Hell only to watch helplessly as the cloud-like angels emerge from the air, grabbing Faust's remains and fluttering distracting rose petals everywhere. The devils blow fire in order to protect themselves from the lurid blossoms, but the heated air from the burning petals only serves to help the angels as they ascend upwards on the drafts with Faust's remains. Though this victorious flight is usually understood as an affirmation of Faustian striving and forgiveness by God, I read it as being also an ironic enactment of the meteorological battles between the earth and the air that Goethe describes in his analyses of weather. As he writes in his cloud essay describing this conflict: "Die mittlere Region ist die des Kumulus; in ihr wird eigentlich der Konflikt bereitet, ob die obere Luft oder die Erde den Sieg erhalten soll."<sup>19</sup> This final scene in *Faust* contains many precise details of Goethe's "Witterungslehre" (Meteorological Study), of which I mention here only several for the sake of brevity. For example, in both the scientific essay and the play, Goethe describes three air regions through which the water vapor (or Faust's remains) must travel as they ascend; a main consideration in both texts is the air's ability to "carry" water or "elements" upwards; and Goethe presents the movement upwards in both instances as a battle between the earth and the air for preeminence.

The final ascent through the "Mountain Gorges" is famously laden with imagery and terms taken from both the Bible and from Goethe's meteorological studies. Yet the vast majority of readings follow the biblical path and see Faust's flight with clouds as a redemptive ascent to heaven. In such readings, Faust's many deeds are forgiven and accepted as merely the collateral

damage of a heroic and “spiritual” quest that is accepted by God. In contrast, I build on the readings by John McCarthy and Gernot Böhme, among others, who focus on the material and meteorological aspects of this journey (and the play more broadly).<sup>20</sup> The material framework for this scene deserves at least the same amount of attention as the Christian terminology.

Furthermore, with particular relevance for our discussion of mountains, the landscape here is concretely rugged: “Bergschluchten, Wald, Fels,” (Mountain Gorges, Forest, Cliffs). The scenery sets the stage for Faust’s final flight upwards with the misty angels whose qualities are as heavenly as are those of water vapor shifting in shape, size, and content as they progress through the three regions of air (the lower, middle, and upper realm). To assume that this scene depicts only transcendence is to ignore all of the mountain discussions throughout Goethe’s play that enact the transformation from the apparently divine or sublime into the concretely material. As Phillips writes in his critique of American nature writers that nicely resonates here for our study of Faust’s mountains: “But our nature writers [or Goethe scholars, as the case may be] seem to be most comfortable with a view of the landscape taken from on high, even if this view is often blocked by intellectual fogs and a blue haze of religiosity -- such is the meteorology of the intense inane.”<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps harshly put, yet a pragmatically material view requires a steady appraisal of Faust’s murderous deeds and his intense engagement with the natural world. Ecocriticism, in fact, demands responsible acknowledgement of our physical impact on others and the world around us.

To avoid such fogs as Phillips describes when critiquing the easy pull toward religiosity (which in *Faust* typically means accepting murder and piracy as necessary for progress and development), let us note in greater detail how the battle between the devils and angels at the end of Goethe’s “tragedy” is an ironic enactment of what Goethe saw as a battle between the

“Anziehungskraft,” or the pull of the earth on air, and the “Erwärmungskraft,” or warming power that causes expansion, “Ausdehnung.” According to Goethe, all atmospheric interactions are caused by “telluric,” or earthly, not heavenly or astrological, forces. He makes this assertion repeatedly in his weather writings: he must declare “die Hauptbedingungen der Witterungslehre für tellurisch” (the primary conditions of the weather theory to be telluric); these forces emerge from a “veränderlichen pulsierenden Schwerkraft der Erde” (shifting, pulsing gravitational pull of the earth).<sup>22</sup> Claiming the actions of the heavenly planets as a cause for weather is unsupportable. McCarthy also reads *Faust* alongside Goethe’s meteorological essays, asserting that “the entire opus of *Faust* is framed by telluric explanations.”<sup>23</sup> Following McCarthy and accepting that one must seek earthly, not heavenly, causes in *Faust* has significant implications for the final scenes in which the angels and devils battle over Faust’s remains until the former victoriously ascend. In this battle, the devils blow fire and the angels take advantage of the inevitable rising of hot air that also carries Faust’s remains. Mephistopheles rages against the fire (one must note the irony): “Mir brennt der Kopf, das Herz, die Leber brennt, / Ein überteuflisch Element!” (My liver burns, my heart, my head as well, / Some super-devilish element!) (*Faust* 11753-54). The angels, on the other hand, sing happily of the holy flames that rise up and cleanse the air:

Heilige Gluten!

Wen sie umschweben

Fühlt sich im Leben

Selig mit Guten.

Alle vereinigt

Hebt euch und preist,

Luft ist gereinigt

Atme der Geist.

[Sheltered by glows

All-holist, mightiest,

Bliss with the righteous

Living, he knows.

In unison fair

Soar now and quire,

In purified air

May the spirit respire! (*Faust* 11817-24).

And the clouds carry him off, upwards, “Wolkengewande / Tragt ihn empor” (Cloud garments / Carry him upwards)<sup>24</sup> through the mountains as Mephistopheles is left below, bemoaning his loss and brief fall into desire. This experience shares much with Goethe’s description of the changes in air pressure and the impact on water vapor or precipitation in his barometer essay: either the earth draws the water vapor toward itself and precipitation occurs (during low barometric pressure) or else the vapor is “carried upwards” and dispersed (during high barometric pressure):

Hoher Barometerstand hebt die Wasserbildung auf, die Atmosphäre vermag die Feuchte zu tragen, oder sie in ihre Elemente zu zersetzen; niederer Barometerstand läßt eine Wasserbildung zu, die oft grenzenlos zu sein scheint. Nach unserer Terminologie würden wir also sagen: zeigt die Erde sich mächtig, vermehrt sie ihre Anziehungskraft, so überwindet sie die Atmosphäre, deren Inhalt ihr nun ganz angehört; was allenfalls darin zu Stande kommt muß als Tau, als Reif herunter...

[High barometric pressure eliminates precipitation since the atmosphere is able to carry the moisture or to reduce it to its elements; low barometric pressure allows a precipitation, which can often seem endless. In our terminology, we would thus say: when the earth shows its power and increases its pull (gravity), then it overcomes the atmosphere and claims its content, this must then fall to form dew or frost...]<sup>25</sup>

When the atmosphere, rather than the earth, reigns supreme, then water vapor is lifted up, much like in *Faust*, as the titular hero spirals upwards with the angels. Of course, as Goethe notes in virtually every weather essay he writes, any water vapor that rises will eventually return to the earth as precipitation -- this is a true cycle, one that implies a potential return to the earth and not just the linear path “upwards” with a conclusive ending in heaven.

Fittingly, the final ascent in *Faust* has no moment of actual arrival. That is, Goethe excised a concluding scene in which Faust would be tried by Mary and the angels. As J.M. van der Laan writes, Faust “never leaves the earthly confines of the mountain gorges, never rises above the mountain peaks. While there are strong indications that Faust continues to ascend and develop in the afterlife, his passivity, unconsciousness, even obliviousness negate such a conclusion.”<sup>26</sup> Faust does not complete his ascent at the end of Part II, nor does he gain access to the devil atop the mountain in Part I, rather, he’s still moving in both -- spiraling onwards in the one and dancing (and watching theater) in the other. This symmetry of incomplete mountain ascents is relevant for understanding how the play enacts materiality. As Stuart Atkins notes, “if there is a ‘beyond,’ it can only be part of the non-transcendental continuum in which Faust’s mortal existence was lived.”<sup>27</sup> If we consider Faust’s final flight with the cloud angels as an enactment of movement through the three regions of air described in Goethe’s weather studies,

then it is reasonable to assume that he might continue to follow the water vapor, “precipitate” and -- in perfect symmetry -- fall again to earth. Rather than achieving ephemeral transcendence, Faust is rendered material, bodily, and still participating (albeit passively since he is carried by cloud-angels) in earthly flows.

By thus delineating our human strivings within nature’s processes despite Faust’s grandiose and hubristic efforts to the contrary, Goethe’s tragedy is an important document for ecocriticism. Furthermore, Faust’s three mountain ascents -- one by foot, two by cloud -- evoke the landscape of modernity as Goethe sees it with all of its delusions of grandeur and efforts to manipulate and control on a grand-scale the elements around us. Yet these ascents also provide quite modern insights into our material existence. That is, the most ephemeral and transcendent moments in *Faust* abruptly -- or simultaneously -- appear to be the most material. Hence when Faust ascends amidst biblical citations carried by swirling cloud angels, that ethereal moment is also the most concretely meteorological description in the play. Weather and mountains are the cosmic frame in Goethe’s tragedy; they provide access to dreams of divinity that transform before our eyes, like shape-shifting clouds, into material flows.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is one other “ascent” of sorts in the play, when Faust and Mephistopheles are on the “High Mountain” in Act IV of Part II. They decide to help the Kaiser’s war efforts in order to fund Faust’s dike-building venture. Hence, “they climb over the low mountain range” (sie steigen über das Mittelgebirg herüber) (stage directions after line 10296). This climb, however, is actually more of a *descent* from the high mountain, and there is no discussion of it in the play’s dialogue. All German citations from *Faust* are based on: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust: Texte*, ed. Albrecht Schöne, (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1994); English citations are from: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Walter Arndt, ed. Cyrus Hamlin, (New York: Norton, 2001). Additional citations are made parenthetically in the essay with references to the line numbers from the play.

<sup>2</sup> For more details on Goethe’s “impossible climb” up the Brocken, as well as many of his other excursions, see Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age. Volume I: The Poetry of Desire*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Even the “Prologue in Heaven,” when the Lord speaks to Mephistopheles, is framed by nature’s ongoing processes such as the sun’s course across the skies and the eternal struggles between the ocean and cliffs. Jane Brown similarly notes that “Goethe’s modernity would thus seem to lie in his emphasis on nature over the divine order.” Jane Brown, *Goethe’s Faust: The German Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Astrida Orle Tantillo, “Damned to Heaven: The Tragedy of *Faust* Revisited,” *Monatshefte* 99.4 (2007): 455.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Jost Hermand, *Im Wettlauf mit der Zeit: Anstöße zu einer ökologiebewußten Ästhetik* (Berlin: Sigma Bohn Verlag, 1991); and Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> I outline the details of this final ascent in terms of Goethe's weather studies in: Heather I. Sullivan, "Ecocriticism, the Elements, and the Ascent/Descent into Weather in Goethe's *Faust*," *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 55-72.

<sup>7</sup> Considering the number of studies on Goethe's geology and the universal acknowledgement of its reverberations in *Faust*, it is surprising that there is not more discussion of the play's mountains. Even the thorough volume by Wilhelm Emrich, *Die Symbolik von Faust II* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1957), which includes much on geology, has little to say about mountains. Typically, the vast scholarship on both *Faust* and Goethe's geology tends to be either literary or scientific rather than both together. Even the recent and insightful study by Margrit Wyder, "Goethes geologische Passionen: Vom Alter der Erde," *Goethe Jahrbuch* 125 (2008): 136-146, brings in citations from *Faust* but primarily as documentation of Goethe's interest in geology rather than as part of literary analysis. For the most extensive testimony of Goethe's geological themes in literature and science, see Wolf von Engelhardt, *Goethe im Gespräch mit der Erde: Landschaft, Gesteine, Mineralien und Erdgeschichte in seinem Leben und Werk* (Weimar: Böhlau, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred*, 165.

<sup>9</sup> For introductions to ecocriticism, see Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004); *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: The U of Georgia P, 1996); and Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (London: Belknap, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 209.

<sup>11</sup> Many have claimed that Goethe's preference for non-violent and long, slow developments on earth (both geological and political) meant that he was a "Neptunist." His actual position was more complex and involved the incorporation of aspects of Vulcanism into Neptunism. See Gabrielle Bersier, "Goethe's Geology in Flux: Vulcanism and Neptunism in the Translation of Richard Payne Knight's *Expedition into Sicily* and the *Italian Journey*," in *Goethe, Chaos, and Complexity*, ed. Herbert Rowland, 35-45 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001); and Ingrid Dzialas, *Auffassung und Darstellung der Elemente bei Goethe* (Berlin: Ebering, 1939).

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of early geology, the dawning recognition of the earth's immense age, and the ongoing alterations of mountains, see for example: Claude C. Albritton, *The Abyss of Time: Changing Conceptions of the Earth's Antiquity after the Sixteenth Century* (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co., 1980); G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, ed., *The Ferment of Knowledge: Studies in the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980); Nicholas A. Rupke, "Caves, Fossils and the History of the Earth," in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, ed. Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine, 241-59 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); and Heinz-Dieter Weber, ed., *Vom Wandel des neuzeitlichen Naturbegriffs* (Konstanz: Konstanz Universitätsverlag, 1989). Regarding Goethe specifically, see Peter Matussek, ed. *Goethe und die Verzeitlichung der Natur* (Munich: Beck, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Karlsbad, Anfang September 1819," in *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie und Mineralogie*, ed. Wolf von Engelhardt and Manfred Wenzel, 210-12 (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 210.

<sup>14</sup> Leland Phelps, "Goethe's Meteorological Writings," *Monatshefte* 48.6 (1956): 318.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, 299-301.

<sup>16</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Granit II" in *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie und Mineralogie*, ed. Wolf von Engelhardt and Manfred Wenzel, 312-16 (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 314-15.

<sup>17</sup> Many scholars agree that Goethe puts "nature" where God had been before; John Gearey states, for example: "Where an earlier age might have seen God or an unfathomable universal design behind what the eye could not perceive, he saw physical occurrences and physical laws." John Gearey, *Goethe's Other Faust: The Drama, Part II* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 93.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent discussion of Faustian clouds as both physical and spiritual, see Edith Anna Kunz, "'Luftige Welten' -- Zur Poetik von Rauch und Wasserdampf in Goethes *Faust*," *Colloquia Germanica* 39.1 (2006): 43-56.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Wolkengestalt. Nach Howard," in *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie und Mineralogie*, ed. Wolf von Engelhardt and Manfred Wenzel, 214-34 (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 231.

<sup>20</sup> John McCarthy's exemplary study of *Faust* in terms of Goethe's science and chaos theory thoroughly grounds the play in terms of materiality. See John McCarthy, *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature (Goethe-Nietzsche-Grass)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006). See also Gernot Böhme, "'Mir läuft ein Schauer



---

übern ganzen Leib': Das Wetter, die Witterungslehre und die Sprache der Gefühle," *Goethe Jahrbuch* 124 (2007): 133-41.

<sup>21</sup> Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology*, 222.

<sup>22</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Witterungslehre 1825," in *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie und Mineralogie*, ed. Wolf von Engelhardt and Manfred Wenzel, 274-300 (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 300.

<sup>23</sup> McCarthy, *Remapping Reality*, 184.

<sup>24</sup> This quotation from *Faust* is included in the Klassiker edition, but has no numbering (it is inserted between lines 11831 and 32) and follows logically with the final scene's cloud-thematic (as noted in the comments to this edition). See Albrecht Schöne, *Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Faust: Kommentare* (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1994) 776. (My translation, since the Norton edition excludes it.)

<sup>25</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Über die Ursache der Barometerschwankungen," in *Schriften zur allgemeinen Naturlehre, Geologie und Mineralogie*, ed. Wolf von Engelhardt and Manfred Wenzel, 255-64 (Frankfurt am Main: Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 259.

<sup>26</sup> J.M. van der Laan, *Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust* (London: Continuum, 2007), 140.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Atkins, *Essays on Goethe*, ed. Jane K. Brown and Thomas P. Saine (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 316.