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Faustus on the Edge of the Universe

In the slang of the early 2020s, an 'edgelord' is, or was, 'someone who intentionally expresses opinions that are likely to shock or offend people, especially on the internet, as a way of making others notice or admire them'. As of summer 2023, the term has not yet made its way into the *OED*—the definition above is from the online *Cambridge Dictionary*—but further explanations and examples can be found on webpages such as urbandictionary.com, or on Merriam-Webster's 'Words We're Watching', which surveys 'words we are increasingly seeing in use but that have not yet met our criteria for entry'. As their unnamed lexicographer explains, 'The word has taken hold to refer to one who makes wildly dark and exaggerated statements (usually on an internet forum) with the intent of shocking others. There is usually a tone of nihilism to such remarks, the kind that might be flagged by a counselor as anti-social behavior.'[1]

By this definition, Marlowe's Faustus is clearly an edgelord. He has a knack for pithy, outrageous soundbites, whether summarising Christian ideas about salvation as '*Che serà, serà*' (1.1.49), referring dismissively to 'vain trifles of men's souls' (1.3.63), or rejecting divinity as 'Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile' (1.1.111).[2] Nor is it only orthodox religion that he attacks with what he intends to be devastating takedowns: this is a character prepared to tell a devil to his face that 'hell's' a fable' (2.1.130), and that he should stop complaining about 'being deprivèd of the joys of heaven' (1.3.86). Mephistopheles needs to man up: 'Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude, / And scorn those joys thou never shalt possess' (1.3.87-88).

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[1] 'edgelord, *noun*', Cambridge Dictionary (online), accessed 29 June 2023; 'Doing the Work of the "Edgelord"', Merriam-Webster, 'Words We're Watching' (online), accessed 29 June 2023.

[2] Except where indicated, references are to the A-text as given in Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus: A- and B-texts*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

My opportunistic, and perhaps already obsolescent, use of the word 'edgelord' in this context is just one example of a recurrent critical tendency to reach for spatial metaphors when discussing the language and behaviour or Faustus, or of other Marlovian characters, or of Marlowe personally. Harry Levin's *Christopher Marlowe: The Overreacher* (1952) takes its title from the term that George Puttenham used to English the rhetorical term *hyperbole*: 'the Over reacher, otherwise called the loud lyer'.[3] However, it is clear that Levin means to apply it not only to Marlowe's style but also to his protagonists' 'ethos of living dangerously, between alternatives of aspiration and sedition', which he illustrates with the words of the Guise in *The Massacre at Paris*: 'That like I best that flyes beyond my reach'.[4] More recently, the word 'transgress' and its derivatives have frequently been applied in Marlowe criticism, as in the titles of Jonathan Dollimore's 1984 chapter '*Dr Faustus* (c. 1589–92): Subversion Through Transgression' and Clare R. Kinney's 2000 article 'Epic Transgression and the Framing of Agency in *Dido Queen of Carthage*'. It also appears in the text of numerous works including Emily Bartels's *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe*, which notes the 'obsessive desires to transgress or transcend' felt by his plays' characters, and Leah Marcus's 1989 article on *Faustus*, which finds 'the magician at the extreme edge of transgression'.[5] To transgress is, literally, to pass over: the transgressor, like the overreacher or the edgelord, makes for the boundary and steps beyond it. For Marlowe's protagonists, this does not mean merely verbal

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[3] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie, 1589* (Menston: Scolar Press, 1968), p. 159.

[4] Harry Levin, *Christopher Marlowe: The Overreacher* (London: Faber, 1961 [1952]), p. 42. Levin quotes from the Oxford edition of C. F. Tucker Brooke, lines 99-104.

[5] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [1984]), p. 109; Clare R. Kinney, 'Epic Transgression and the Framing of Agency in *Dido Queen of Carthage*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 40.2 (Spring, 2000): 261-76; Emily C. Bartels, *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 21; Leah S. Marcus, 'Textual Indeterminacy and Ideological Difference: The Case of *Doctor Faustus*', *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., 20 (1989): 1-29 (5).

outrageousness. Invariably, they are drawn to forms of behaviour that exceed accepted norms, be that Tamburlaine's defiance of taboos against rebellion, regicide, and blasphemy, Edward's elevation of his male lover to a position of political authority, or Faustus's own rejection of God in favour of Lucifer.

In Marlowe's works, this figurative boundary-crossing frequently has a literal analogue: as Lisa Hopkins notes, 'Marlowe was a playwright fascinated by walls', from the besieged cities of *Tamburlaine* through the fortified island where *The Jew of Malta* is set to 'the walls of York' and of Tynemouth in *Edward II*.[6] Her discussion of *Faustus* in the first chapter of *Renaissance Drama on the Edge* notes the protagonist's ambition to have spirits 'wall all Germany with brass' (1.1.90) and his desire to be conducted 'within the walls of Rome' (3.1.22), but other examples might be added, such as his plans to 'make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg', another kind of border fortification (1.1.91), and to 'join the hills that bind the Afric shore / And make that land continent to Spain' (1.3.119-10), thereby in effect walling off the Mediterranean. The epithet he uses for Amphion is 'he that built the walls of Thebes / With ravishing sound of his melodious harp' (2.3.28-29). And even his fascination for magic seems motivated in part by a delight in drawing lines between things, as when he rhapsodises on his 'necromantic books', 'Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters— / Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires' (1.1.52-54). This fascination is visually enacted onstage in the third scene when Faustus is shown drawing the magic circle from within which he conjures Mephistopheles, an image that is memorably depicted on the title page of the B-text.

Faustus's obsession with physical and visual boundaries is accompanied by a recurrent intellectual and imaginative impulse to go to the limits of things—or at least, what he believes are their limits. The play begins with him wanting to 'sound the depth of that thou wilt profess' and 'level

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[6] Lisa Hopkins, *Renaissance Drama on the Edge* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 20-23; Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. by Charles R. Forker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 2.2.165.

at the end of every art' (1.1.2, 4), and that word 'end' has appeared a further four times by line 18. When speaking of the power he hopes magic will give him, his thoughts extend to the still limits of the created universe: 'All things that move between the quiet poles / Shall be at my command' (1.1.58-59). And the plans he has for his spirits involve them going to the bottom of the sea or the ends of the earth:

> I'll have them fly to India for gold,
>
> Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
>
> And search all corners of the new-found world
>
> For pleasant fruits and princely delicates. (1.1.84-87)

The fact that the corners he refers to are merely a poetical fiction, as John Donne acknowledges when he writes of 'the round earth's imagined corners' in one of the Holy Sonnets, only underlies the extent to which Faustus is compelled to identify ends of things whether they exist or not.[7]

This chapter is about what happens when the compulsion to find boundaries and limits is faced with things whose limits are invisible, unverifiable, or otherwise problematic. In particular, I am concerned with the boundary between the universe and whatever may lie beyond it—a question that links the astronomical and religious themes so obviously central to *Doctor Faustus*—and the boundary between this world and hell, a topic that Hopkins touches upon and which is also discussed by Kristen Poole in her book *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England* in the context of early modern debates concerning the location, and the existence, of purgatory.[8] Faustus, I will argue,

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[7] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A. J. Smith, corrected ed. (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 311 (Divine Meditations, 7).

[8] Hopkins, p. 114; Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 95-135.

is troubled by the ambiguity of these boundaries, in a way that is echoed both in his, and his critics', desire to identify a boundary of another sort: the point at which his damnation becomes inevitable.

When, not long after signing his soul away to Lucifer, Faustus is driven by the spectacle of the heavens to 'repent / And curse thee, wicked Mephistopheles, / Because thou hast deprived me of those joys' (2.3.1-3), he distracts himself from despair by quizzing his interlocutor about 'divine astrology':

> Tell me, are there many heavens above the moon?
>
> Are all celestial bodies but one globe,
>
> As is the substance of this centric earth? (3.2.34-37)

In response, Mephistopheles provides a detailed account of the structure of the universe and the motions of heavenly bodies beginning with a summary of the geocentric system still generally accepted in Marlowe's day:

> As are the elements, such are the spheres,
>
> Mutually folded in each others' orb;
>
> And, Faustus, all jointly move upon one axletree,
>
> Whose termine is termed the world's wide pole.
>
> Nor are the names of Saturn, Mars, or Jupiter
>
> Feigned, but are erring stars. (3.2.38-43)

This episode has two analogues in Marlowe's source, *The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* (the so-called *English Faust Book*), neither of which is quite like what happens in the play. On the first occasion Faustus complains to Mephostophiles [sic], 'when I confer *astronomia* and *astrologia*, as the mathematicians and ancient writers have left in memory, I find them to vary and very much to disagree; wherefore I pray thee to teach me the truth in this matter.' Rather than giving an answer, Mephostophiles gives a promise to do so in future:

> I will teach thee the course and recourse of ♄, ♃, ♂, ☉, ♀, ☿ and ☾, the cause of winter and summer, the exaltation and declination of the sun, the eclipse of the moon, the distance and height of the poles and every fixed star, the nature and operation of the elements fire, air, water, and earth, and all that is contained in them.[9]

Evidence for Mephostophiles' at least partial fulfilment of this promise comes three chapters later, when the *Faust Book* claims to reproduce a letter from Faustus to his former schoolfellow recounting a 'voyage which I made into the heavens' (although it begins and ends at night, so could conceivably have been a dream). This includes a description of the sun, which Faustus is able to view through a protective cloud, and its position in the firmament:

> we think that the sun is very little: no, it is altogether as big as the world […] and we think that the sun runneth his course and that the heavens stand still; no, it is the heavens that move his course and the sun abideth perpetually in his place. […] It is the axle of the heavens that moveth the whole firmament, being a chaos or confused thing.

Faustus's account of the sun abiding 'perpetually in his place' may sound like the basics of a Copernican system, but in fact what he has in mind is rather stranger, as is clear from his analogy:

> like as thou seest a bubble made of water and soap blown forth of a quill is in form of a confused mass or chaos, and being in this form, is moved at pleasure of the wind, which runneth round about that chaos and moveth him also round: even so is the whole firmament or chaos, wherein are placed the sun and the rest of the planets, turned and carried at the pleasure of the spirit of God, which is wind.[10]

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[9] *The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592*, ed. by John Henry Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 114. The symbols stand for Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon.

[10] *English Faust Book*, p. 125.

Within this firmament 'methought every planet was but as half the earth […] and methought that the earth was enclosed in comparison with the firmament, as the yolk of an egg within the white'.[11]

The *Faust Book*'s vision of the universe not as an orderly system but as a 'confused mass or chaos' moved by the spirit of God has affinities with the Calvinist notion of the universe summarised by Kristen Poole as 'one that is perpetually being created, one that is malleable and contingent, and always deeply depending upon an ever-present Creator.' Rather than being governed by any 'set of physical laws', even one established by God himself, this is a universe of 'radical contingency', one that could fall apart at any moment if not for divine providence.[12] Marlowe's play, however, departs from this cosmology entirely. In place of the homely images of the soap-bubble and the egg, Mephistopheles reasserts the conventional model then widely accepted by learned opinion that has the planets moving in concentric orbs around a central earth. This model, as S. K. Heninger demonstrates, goes back via Plato's *Timaeus* to Pythagoras, and far from assuming a confused or chaotic universe it posits one that is 'divinely ordered' and harmonious—in Timaeus's words, 'round, in the shape of a sphere, equidistant in all directions from the centre to the extremities, which of all shapes is the most perfect and the most self-similar'.[13] One reason behind Marlowe's decision to ignore his source text in this regard may derive from his own educational background: one can readily imagine the Cambridge MA ignoring the vernacular cosmology of the *Faust Book* in favour of something more intellectually respectable. But Mephistopheles' account of the universe as a concentric sequence of spheres 'Mutually folded in each others' orb', namely 'the seven planets, the firmament, and the empyreal heaven' (2.3.60-61) also presents God's creation as a series of boundaries between earth and heaven

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[11] *English Faust Book*, pp. 126-27.

[12] Poole, p. 145.

[13] S. K. Heninger, Jr., *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1974), p. xii; *Plato with an English Translation*, VII: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles,* trans. Rev. R. G. Bury (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam's Sons, 1929), pp. 61-63.

in a way very much in line with Faustus's own preoccupations. It has a kind of visual counterpart in Faustus's own magic circle, which contains 'Figures of every adjunct to the heavens, / And characters of signs and erring stars' (1.3.11-12) in a pattern that can be read as offering a simplified map of the universe.

The contours of this map are, however, up for debate. In the B-text, Mephistopheles' line about the planets and firmament is followed by a further question from Faustus:

FAUSTUS But is there not *coelum igneum et crystallinum*?

MEPHISTOPHELES No, Faustus, they be but fables. (B-text, 2.3.60-61)

Although one must beware of the temptation to cherry-pick which lines specific to the B-text one wants to be Marlowe's own rather than the work of later revisers, in this instance there is a good argument for doing so, namely the way Faustus's question logically follows on from Mephistopheles' enumeration of the spheres. As Francis R. Johnson explains, his enquiry reflects the addition by post-Pythagorean astronomers of further spheres to those containing the planets and fixed stars, including a 'sphere of elementary fire below the moon', and a '*coelum cristallinum*, or crystalline sphere' that 'rotated at a uniform rate about the poles of the zodiac'.[14] This sphere was positioned between the firmament, which contained the fixed stars, and the *primum mobile*, the outermost sphere whose daily rotation explained the apparent diurnal movements of these and the other heavenly bodies that are, in fact, caused by the rotation of the earth. The movements of the *coelum cristallinum* accounted for the precession of equinoxes, a phenomenon first observed in the second century BC whereby the position of the fixed stars appears to move by tiny amounts in relation to the ecliptic (the annual path of the sun through the heavens, according to geocentric cosmology). In having Mephistopheles discount the *coelum cristallinum*, Johnson shows, Marlowe reflects the arguments of sixteenth-century astronomers such as Agostino Ricci (Ricius) that the movements of the stars and planets could be

[14] Francis R. Johnson, 'Marlowe's "Imperiall Heaven"', *ELH*, 12.1 (Mar., 1945): 35-44 (37); 'Marlowe's Astronomy and Renaissance Skepticism', *ELH*, 13.4 (Dec., 1946): 241-54 (246).

explained with reference to the movement of their own spheres, without further spheres having to be hypothesised. Like Ricci and those he influenced, such as the more widely printed Oronce Finé, Marlowe also discards the *primum mobile*, having the other spheres turn of their own accord rather than through any movement transmitted from this outermost sphere: instead, as Mephistopheles confirms, every sphere has its own 'dominion or *intelligentia*' (A-text, 2.3.57).

Johnson ascribes Marlowe's adoption of the ideas of Ricci and Finé to the playwright's sceptical outlook: 'To a mind such as Marlowe's, with a natural inclination to embrace unconventional in preference to orthodox views, the dissenting tradition, typified by Ricius and Finé, would have a special appeal.'[15] However, the discussion of the spheres that takes place between Faustus and Mephistopheles is, as has already been noted, consistent with the interest in edges and boundaries that Hopkins identifies both in the play and elsewhere in Marlowe's works. Faustus seeks information about the series of spherical divisions that lies between him and heaven, and is told that two of them do not, in fact, exist, while the *primum mobile*, understood to be the outermost sphere, is ignored altogether. Both the subdivisions and the edge of the created universe turn out not to be where Faustus thought they were.

The fact that Faustus's question about *coelum igneum et crystallinum* responds to Mephistopheles' full list of the 'heavens or spheres' as 'the seven planets, the firmament, and the empyreal heaven', is one reason for thinking it Marlovian rather than a later addition. A second reason is the way Mephistopheles' answer, 'No, Faustus, they be but fables' echoes Faustus's earlier line 'Come, I think hell's a fable' (A-text, 2.1.130; simply 'I think hell's a fable' in the B-text). There is a pleasing symmetry between the two remarks, one of which relates to the unknowable reaches of the heavens (in the astronomical sense) and the point at which they might meet heaven (in the religious sense), the other of which expresses doubt about another location which Faustus has not yet seen; 'Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind', as Mephistopheles grimly comments (2.1.131).

[15] Johnson, 'Marlowe's Astronomy', 254.

And as with the two characters' discussion of 'divine astrology', their dialogues about hell are preoccupied with questions of space and of borders.

Faustus's first reference to hell as a location during his initial encounter with Mephistopheles is a characteristic piece of bravado:

> This word 'damnation' terrifies not him,
>
> For he confounds hell in Elysium.
>
> His ghost be with the old philosophers! (1.3.60-62)

'Confounds' is a striking and ambiguous choice of word. If Faustus had confounded hell *with* Elysium it could have been read as a synonym for 'confuses', albeit in a way that would have implied an unusual degree of self-deprecation on Faustus's part. But to confound hell *in* Elysium gives a spatial location to the act of confusion, as if Faustus were consciously trying to superimpose one place over the other—perhaps with the aim of confounding hell in another sense, that of escaping damnation. By deliberately misreading hell as Elysium, Faustus tries to make it into a more congenial classical underworld like the Virgilian one he alluded to when he boasted of having 'made the flow'ring pride of Wittenberg / Swarm to my problems as the infernal spirits / On sweet Musaeus when he came to hell' (1.1.116-18). Or, more likely, the classicisation of hell is a rhetorical way of expressing disbelief in it: the tone of 'His ghost be with the old philosophers' sounds dismissive rather than anticipatory. This reading would be consistent with Faustus's later assertion that 'hell's a fable': hell is a fable, in the same way that the events of the *Aeneid* are a fable.

This scepticism persists into what Faustus apparently intends to be the 'Gotcha' moment in his dialogue with Mephistopheles:

> FAUSTUS And what are you that live with Lucifer?
>
> MEPHISTOPHELES Unhappy spirits that fell with Lucifer,
>
> Conspired against our God with Lucifer,

And are for ever damned with Lucifer.

FAUSTUS Where are you damned?

MEPHISTOPHELES In hell.

FAUSTUS How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

MEPHISTOPHELES Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. (1.3.71-78)

Rather than boxing Mephistopheles into a logical corner and obliging him to admit that there is no hell, or that its inhabitants can come and go as they please, Faustus's question 'How comes it then that thou art out of hell' merely reveals that his own understanding of hell is essentially spatial, and therefore limited. By contrast, Mephistopheles' reply 'clearly suggests that hell is a state of mind rather than a physical location', as Hopkins puts it:

Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God

And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,

Am not tormented with ten thousand hells

In being deprived of everlasting bliss? (1.3.79-82)[16]

And yet, Mephistopheles' account of hell as being a state of deprivation rather than a location does not altogether dispel the jolt that a theatre audience may experience on hearing him tell Faustus 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it'. Until Mephistopheles explains further, a legitimate reading of the line is that Faustus's conjuring has somehow transported him to hell, or made hell co-extensive with the grove where Faustus presumably stands. Furthermore, hearing the line spoken in performance can prompt the uneasy feeling, in one of the less rational bits of one's mind, that Faustus's Satanic ritual has somehow turned the playhouse itself into a hellish space: the appeal of early modern anecdotes recounting how 'one devell too many' appeared on the stage can be readily

[16] Hopkins, p. 114.

understood, especially given antitheatricalists' accusations that playhouses were already 'sathans synagogue' in any case.[17] An understanding of hell as purely psychological proves as simplistic as an understanding of it as purely spatial; instead, hell in *Faustus* slips between the two, on the boundary between two different types of boundary-making.

This ambiguity persists when Faustus returns to the topic of hell after signing the bond with Lucifer in an exchange that seems to be prompted by the article giving Lucifer and Mephistopheles 'full power to fetch or carry the said John Faustus body and soul, flesh, blood, or goods, into their habitation wheresoever'. That 'wheresoever' once again raises the question of hell's location, a concern reflected in the fact that Faustus does not ask Mephistopheles what hell is like but rather, 'where is the place that men call hell?':

MEPHISTOPHELES Under the heavens.

FAUSTUS Ay, but whereabout?

MEPHISTOPHELES Within the bowels of these elements,

Where we are tortured and remain for ever.

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed

In one self place, for where we are is hell,

And where hell is must we ever be.

And, to conclude, when all the world dissolves,

---

[17] See Paul Menzer, 'The Devil and *Doctor Faustus*', in *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade*, ed. by Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 214-27, p. 220, citing Sylvanus Urban, 'Minor Correspondence: J. G. R.', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 189/xxxiv (1850), 234; Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), sig. L7v.

And every creature shall be purified,

All places shall be hell that is not heaven. (2.1.120-30)

Poole rightly states that 'Mephistopheles's description wanders from identifying a specific location, to paradoxically proclaiming that hell is limitless, to asserting that it is more a state of mind, to positioning it within a language of essential elements and alchemical purification'.[18] Even the first line turns back on itself: the explanation that hell is to be found 'within the bowels of these elements' teeters on the edge of the straightforward statement that hell is in the bowels of the earth, a conventional but by no means universal opinion among sixteenth-century Christians, but does not say so outright. The phrase 'within the bowels of these elements' can be read as meaning much the same thing given that the earth's position in the cosmos was understood to be within the centre of things, as far as possible from the heavens within a spherical universe. As the eighth-century Byzantine Photius had written in his biography of Pythagoras, 'below the Moon there is very little order. Necessarily, therefore, our planet contains all evil things, since it serves as the sink of the whole universe. It is the inevitable cesspool for those things which settle in the lowest place'.[19] Such a location might seem hell's natural position, and Photius's image of a cesspool highlights the scatology buried beneath the commonplace term 'bowels of the earth'. But Mephistopheles' words also imply that to be among the elements, to be made up of elements, is somehow to be in hell, as if the post-apocalyptic future when 'All places shall be hell that is not heaven' has already arrived. Mephistopheles' speech dissolves the boundary between hell and everywhere else 'under the heavens', between present and future, in a way that Faustus finds hard to accept. His response, 'Come, I think hell's a fable', reflects an unwillingness to accept that a real phenomenon can have this kind of existence, can be at the same time everywhere and somewhere and nowhere in particular, and he responds to Mephistopheles' contention, 'I am an instance to prove the contrary, / For I am damned and am now in hell' with the

[18] Poole, p. 45.

[19] Heninger, p. 120, citing Photius, *Myriobiblon* (Rouen, 1653), col. 1315.

same literal-mindedness: ‘Nay, an this be hell, / I’ll willingly be damned here. What? Walking, disputing, etc.?’ (2.1.139-43).

Like the dialogue about astronomy, Faustus’s conversations about hell can be seen as reflecting contemporary disagreements about its nature and location. Poole cites Andrew Willet’s *Synopsis papismi* (1592), which summarises the Catholic position on the topic as being that ‘The place where damned spirits are tormented … is about the centre of the earth, the lowest of all places, and nothing lower then it’. From a Protestant perspective, Willet does not deny ‘that God hath prepared, and that there is a place of vnspeakable torments ordained for the deuill and his angels, and all damned soules: but that this place should be in the center of the earth, the places alleadged [in scripture] prove not’.[20] However, Faustus’s resistance to believing the evidence placed before him—that there is a hell, as Mephistopheles can confirm from experience—does not so much position him on one side of a sectarian debate, as reinforce the way he is characterised within the play. To some extent, this is as a sceptic, and perhaps as delusional; but it is also as someone who wants there to be clear boundaries between things and who is disconcerted by more fluid spatial relationships such as the one Mephistopheles describes.

This desire for boundaries extends beyond the spatial, however: it can also be seen in the beliefs about salvation that propel Faustus into selling his soul, and that prevent him from extricating himself from his contract with the devil. In their Revels edition, David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen complain that ‘The desire of orthodox critics to know precisely when Faustus is damned can take on at times the exaggerated dimensions of a dispute about theology rather than a play’; but this desire only reflects an obsession with this topic that is evident within the protagonist himself.[21] This begins as early as the first scene, where his abjuration of divinity for magic is presented as a response of his notoriously partial conflation of biblical texts to reach the conclusion that ‘we must sin, / And so consequently die. / Ay, we must die an everlasting death’ (1.1.46-48): if damnation is inevitable, why

[20] Poole, pp. 101-2, citing Andrew Willet, *Synopsis papismi* (London, 1592), pp. 607-8.

[21] Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, p. 19.

not indulge in forbidden practices? Faustus's theology is contradicted by Mephistopheles when he explains that he appeared in response to Faustus's conjuring only '*per accidens*':

> For when we hear one rack the name of God,
>
> Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ,
>
> We fly in hope to get his glorious soul,
>
> Nor will we come unless he use such means
>
> Whereby he is in danger to be damned. (1.3.47-52)

Note that 'in danger': Faustus may be risking damnation, but it is not yet a certainty, and indeed if it were Mephistopheles' appearance would be pointless. This is something that Faustus is determined to ignore, responding to Mephistopheles' explanation that 'the shortest cut for conjuring / Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity / And pray devoutly to the prince of hell' with the words 'So Faustus hath / Already done' (1.3.53-57). Even if it is not yet too late to avoid damnation, Faustus wants it to be: he wants already to have crossed the line that makes it inevitable, ignoring any evidence to the contrary.

This pattern recurs in the scene in which Faustus signs his contract with Lucifer. At the start of 2.1 Faustus states 'Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned, / And canst thou not be saved' (2.1.1-2), along with a determination to 'be resolute' (2.16). However, the Good Angel's injunction to 'leave that execrable art', and indeed that of the Evil Angel to 'think of honour and wealth' (2.1.15, 21), seem to indicate that all is still to play for, and while Faustus feels that he has already 'hazarded' his soul for Mephistopheles, the devil's insistence that 'thou must bequeath it solemnly / And write a deed of gift with thine own blood' (3.1.33-35) again suggests that the fate of his soul is in the balance but not fully determined. Faustus's words on signing the deed, '*Consummatum est*. This bill is ended, / And Faustus hath bequeathed his soul to Lucifer' (2.1.74-75) once again express a belief that it is now too late, even a desire that it should be so; but the writing that appears on his arm, '*Homo, fuge!*' (2.1.77) is meaningless unless the possibility of flight is a real one, even if Faustus is unsure where can fly to. Obviously, the objection can be made that the opportunity to repent is only theoretical, not

real, a possibility that is highlighted when Faustus starts to rue his decision after looking up at the heavens:

> GOOD ANGEL Faustus, repent yet, God will pity thee.
>
> EVIL ANGEL Thou art a spirit. God cannot pity thee.
>
> FAUSTUS Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?
>
> Be I a devil, yet God may pity me;
>
> Ay, God will pity me if I repent.
>
> EVIL ANGEL Ay, but Faustus never shall repent.
>
> FAUSTUS My heart's so hardened I cannot repent. (2.3.12-18)

This is ultimately, however, a question that the play asks rather than one to which it supplies a definitive answer. Even if the matter of Faustus's salvation was decided 'before the foundations of the world were laid', in the words of the seventeenth article of the Church of England, indications are repeatedly given that repentance is possible, whether in the form of calls to do so from the Good Angel and the Old Man or that of warnings against doing so from Lucifer and Mephistopheles.[22] The play positively encourages its audiences to speculate about when Faustus crosses the line that makes damnation inevitable, only to deny them a clear answer on the topic. This process of eliciting a desire only to frustrate it may explain the inclusion, among the additions of the B-text, of speeches from Mephistopheles and the Good and Bad Angels before Faustus's final soliloquy that do seem, in fact,

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[22] 'Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsell, secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankinde, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour.' *Articles of Religion: Agreed upon by both Houses, and the principall Divines thorough all England and Wales, for the avoiding of diversities of Opinions* (London, 1642), sig. B1r.

to draw this line. ‘’Tis too late. Despair, farewell!’ says Mephistopheles (5.2.102), and even if one reads these words as intended to prevent a repentance that is still technically possible, the speeches of the Angels seem to put the matter beyond doubt:

> GOOD ANGEL O Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me,
>
> Innumerable joys had followed thee.
>
> But thou didst love the world.
>
> EVIL ANGEL Gave ear to me,
>
> And now must taste hell’s pains perpetually.
>
> * * * * *
>
> GOOD ANGEL And now, poor soul, must thy good angel leave thee.
>
> The jaws of hell are open to receive thee. (B-text, 5.2.104-7, 119-20)

The author of these speeches does what Marlowe studiously avoids doing until the very end: marking a point beyond which any action on Faustus’s part becomes futile, so far as salvation is concerned.

When that end comes about, though, it is noticeable that Faustus’s thoughts turn back to those cosmic edges discussed earlier in this chapter: ‘Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven, / That time may cease and midnight never come!’ (A-text, 5.2.68-69). The celestial spheres here serve as a kind of clock, recalling the observation of Timaeus that the heavenly bodies ‘came into existence for the determining and preserving of the numbers of Time’.[23] However, they also represent the boundary between the created universe and the heaven beyond it to which Faustus will not be admitted. This notion of the spatial limits of the universe equating to the border between salvation and damnation is made explicit in the *Faust Book* when Mephostophiles responds to one of Faustus’s questions about hell:

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[23] Plato, p. 79.

> hell is a valley, into which the damned souls fall: for so soon as the soul is out of man's body, it would gladly go to the place from whence it came, and climbeth up above the highest hills, even to the heavens, where being by the angels of the first *mobile* denied entertainment (in consideration of their evil life spent on the earth) they fall into the deepest pit or valley which hath no bottom, into a perpetual fire which shall never be quenched.[24]

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Faustus's final impulse to salvation is articulated in spatial terms: 'I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?' (5.2.77).

In bringing together a temporal limit—the midnight at which Mephistopheles is due to appear—with a spatial one—the heavenly sphere that marks the boundary with heaven, and whose turning marks the moment of that midnight—the final scene of *Faustus* shows that the borderlines that preoccupy its protagonist are not simply analogous but connected. A fascination with the edge of the universe is also a fascination with the edge of temporality, and with the edge of salvation; the heavenly bodies whose location in the celestial spheres so concerns him are also the 'stars that reigned at my nativity, / Whose influence hath allotted death and hell' (5.2.89-90). In bringing the 'edgelord' Faustus into contact with a boundary that even he cannot transgress, one that is simultaneously spatial, temporal and soteriological, the play takes to its logical conclusion the perception that there is 'a profound imagined connection between physical and spiritual edges', investigating the territory where those edges are one and the same.[25]

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[24] *English Faust Book*, p. 109.

[25] Hopkins, p. 1.

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