

THE EMBODIMENT OF NEGATION IN THE *SCHERZO STRUMENTALE* FROM THE OPERA *MEFISTOFELE* BY ARRIGO BOITO

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SUMMARY. This article examines the musical and dramaturgical characterization of Mephistopheles in Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele* (1868), with particular focus on the *Scherzo strumentale* from the *Prologue*. Drawing on Boito's own writings and the *Disposizione scenica*, the study explores how the composer constructs the figure of Mephistopheles as the embodiment of universal negation — the eternal No opposing Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. The analysis traces the musical means by which Boito portrays this spirit of denial: the disruptive rhythmic patterns, the major-minor harmonic dualism, the staccatissimo articulation, and the sarcastic vocal writing that together define the character's identity. The article also addresses the philosophical and literary dimensions of the Faust-Mephisto relationship, arguing that Boito conceives Mephistopheles not merely as an external force of evil but as an organic counterpart to Faust, whose denial paradoxically generates knowledge and moral growth. The study situates Boito's opera within the broader European cultural context of the second half of the 19th century, highlighting the composer's innovative synthesis of music, text, and stagecraft in his representation of the Mephistophelean archetype.

Keywords: *Mefistofele*, Boito, *Scherzo Strumentale*, Negation

The confrontation between light and darkness, between good and evil, has preoccupied the worlds of philosophy, literature, and the arts for centuries. A vast area of this confrontation has inspired, in various forms, the evolution of the Faustian myth from the Renaissance to the present day. In this evolution, the opera *Mefistofele*, composed by Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) and strongly influenced by European cultural trends in the second half of the 19th century, adds important nuances to the theme of the fatal pact.

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Boito, as the sole author of the musical composition and libretto, argues in *Prologo nel teatro*³ that the subject is inexhaustible because it is universal and eternal. Although the work is based on Goethe's literary work, an important aspect that paves the way for the interpretation of an essential component of the Faustian myth in the opera is the condensed presentation of the character Mephistopheles, who is of equal importance to the main character, Faust. Thus, Boito explains: "Just as Faust's type is inexhaustible, so is that of Mephistopheles. Mephistopheles is as old as the Bible and Aeschylus. Mephistopheles is the serpent in Eden, he is Prometheus' eagle. Mephistopheles is the doubt that generates knowledge, he is the evil that generates good. Everywhere you find the spirit of denial, there is Mephistopheles. Job has a Mephistopheles called Satan, Homer has one called Thersites, Shakespeare has one called Falstaff... Mephistopheles is the incarnation of that eternal *No* in the face of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness."⁴ Boito's description of the Mephistophelean character is valuable because it can provide the key to his own interpretation of the Faustian myth.

The Mephistophelean figure has appeared in human culture since ancient times, which demonstrates its fundamental nature. With the first Faust came the first Mephisto. Also, just like Faust, he appears in many forms. These are shaped by the Faustian traits of the character he supports, and from this we can conclude that the Faust-Mephisto relationship is organic, interdependent. For Faust to exist, Mephisto is needed, and for Mephisto to exist, Faust is needed. Mephisto's dominant trait is the spirit of denial, but he is also "the doubt that generates knowledge, the evil that generates good."⁵ Ultimately, through his actions, Mephisto helps Faust choose the right path, giving the impression that he is helping him get back on the right track, even if, at first glance, this seems paradoxical.

³ *The Prologue in the Theatre* is a relatively short dialogic text, approximately six pages in length, which, although dense and concentrated, provides essential information about the way Arrigo Boito relates to the Faustian myth. The characters involved are a Theatre Critic, a Spectator, and the Author. The text, which was not designed for stage performance, has a clearly explanatory purpose: the composer intended to anticipate and clarify certain aspects that he assumed the audience would discuss after the performance. For this reason, the prologue takes on a controversial tone. It contains both questions that readers of the libretto or spectators of the opera might raise, as well as the answers that the author himself wished to provide. Thus, Boito took advantage of the publication of the libretto two months prior to the 1868 premiere to offer, through the *Prologue in the Theatre*, a presentation of the reasons that led him to undertake the creation of this unconventional opera.

⁴ Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele, Opera in un Prologo e cinque atti da rappresentarsi al R. Teatro della Scala*, Milano, Ricordi, p. 36-37.

⁵ Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele, Opera in un Prologo e cinque atti da rappresentarsi al R. Teatro della Scala*, Milano, Ricordi p. 36.

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Mephistopheles' influence can be viewed from two main perspectives. On the one hand, we can see Mephisto as a separate, external entity that tries to influence Faust and lead him down the desired path. On the other hand, Mephistopheles can be conceived as part of Faust's inner world. It is possible to consider him a representative of Faust's repressions, which appear at the turning point the hero experiences at the beginning of the work, either as his shadow or, from a manichean perspective, as Faust's dark half. Although this interpretation – psychological, we might say today – was not widespread at the time of the opera's appearance, the seeds of it were present. An early stage of this approach can also be found in the romantic way of relating to the inner universe of the human being, with its various levels, such as, for example, the situation of the double, called *Doppelgänger* in German. *Doppelgänger* initially consisted of the supposed existence of an identical double of a person, but then it also took on the meaning of the existence of an inner double, a hidden side. It is important to note that, throughout the work, multiple perspectives on the relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles are presented. Boito conceptualizes the essence of the human being as driven by a profound thirst for universal and eternal knowledge, drawn to the moral dualities of existence, and engaged in a continual search for absolute and ultimate spiritual fulfillment.⁶

The analysis will now turn to the moment of Mephistopheles' first appearance in the performance, prior to the pact he establishes with God. He makes his own presentation in the *Prologue* that precedes the work, a fragment in which, through the entwinement of music with dramaturgical elements, the composer manages to reach the metaphysical background of the birth of the Universe. The music of the *Prologue* evokes a sense of cosmic resonance, within which the forces of Good and Evil emerge through a profound and intense confrontation, later finding expression in the characters of the opera. The fragment dedicated to the appearance of Mephistopheles is the *Scherzo strumentale* whose bouncy orchestral introduction, full of sharp humor, prepares the appearance of the devil.

The importance of this section lies in the fact that it introduces the character who gives the work its name and dominates the entire performance. He is supported by a musical portrayal that reflects key aspects of his characterization, elements that can be recognized throughout the musical piece, especially in moments where the presence of evil is suggested. An example of such a fragment is presented below. The following bars are taken from the opening of the orchestral introduction.

⁶ Edoardo Buroni, *Arrigo Boito librettista, Un'indagine linguistica tra testo poetico e testo musicale*, Università degli Studi di Milano, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Dipartimento di Filologia Moderna, 2008-2009, p. 112.

Allegretto
♩ = 144

p secche

p

Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 1-4.

Mephistopheles' entrance is accompanied by a radical musical contrast to the ecstatic atmosphere emanating from the forces of Good at the end of the first part of the *Prologue*. The auditory backdrop against which the character makes his appearance induces the energy of universal negation, through a mysterious play of shadows and sound "sparks", starting with a perfect, harmonic fifth, executed in a rudimentary, repetitive rhythm (anapest formed on beats 1 and 2) by horns and bassoons, followed by a response from the flute and piccolo with a short sound in the high register. The orchestral density for this moment composed in *F major* is considerably reduced, and the indications for the instrumental attack becomes *secche*, *staccatissimo*, in the short, fast melodic passages also constructed from perfect intervals. The fleeting transitions from the wind instruments to the string instruments draw the orchestra into a subtle game of contrasts. Repeated accents on the third beat, in a 3/8 meter, together with the *tenuto* marking on the second beat, contribute to the disruption of the order normally imposed by the ternary meter.

The third beat stands out prominently also because it is taken over from the horns and bassoons by the piccolo and solo flute; the high notes, adorned with short appoggiaturas, flicker delicately yet piercingly, anticipating the flashes of satanic fires that are encountered repeatedly, such as the flames along the road to Mount Brocken in *La notte del Sabba*.

The instrumental dialogue then shapes a lively figuration that comes to a halt in an open, ascending passage, interrupted on a weak beat with a questioning character. This figure is repeated sequentially, giving rise to a series of successive leaps in the opposite direction, accompanied by a contrapuntal line built from alternating descending and ascending scalar motifs.

⁷ All musical examples are taken from Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, *Opera in un Prologo e cinque atti da rappresentarsi al R. Teatro della Scala*, Milano, Ricordi.

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E.g. 2



Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 9-12. from A

The musical material presented in this way conveys a sense of disorder, while the *staccatissimo* articulation lends an apparently light, almost humorous character to the musical discourse; upon closer inspection, however, profound sarcasm emerges. This rhetoric suggests a breaking of order, a forcing of boundaries both in the structure of the microcosm and the macrocosm.

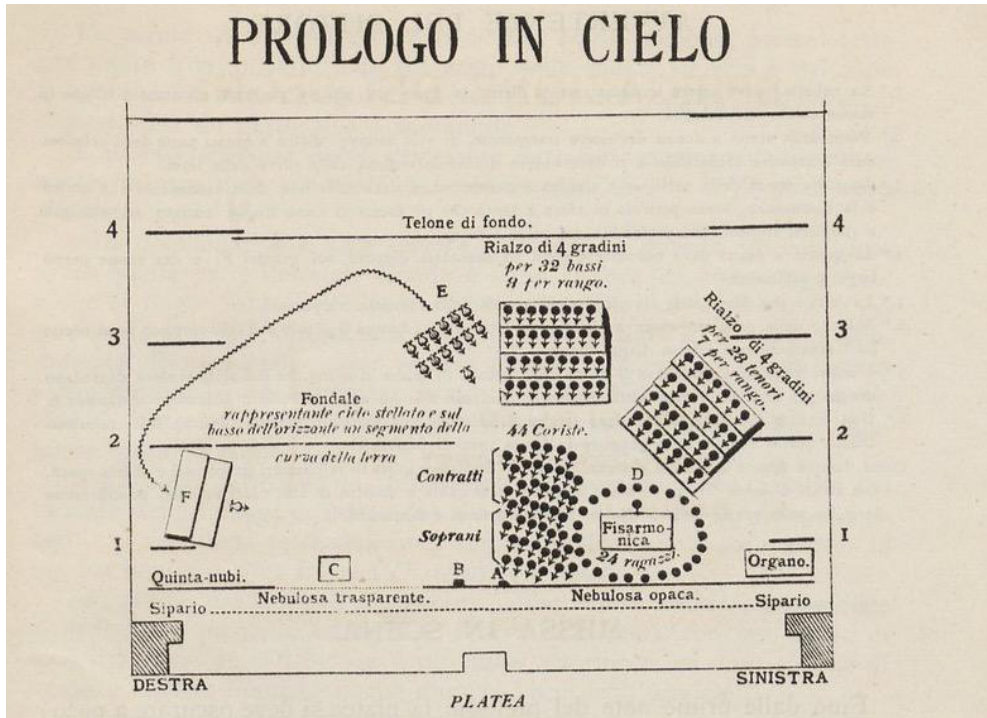
When Mephistopheles appears, the harmonic play repeatedly oscillates between major and minor with the tonic on the note A. The placement on the major chord at the end of the phrase seems like a joke, because it comes after a suspense created by the pauses that seem to stop time in its tracks. The harmonic content of this oscillation is part of the dualism that represents one of the threads with which Mephistopheles' garment is woven, and such a musical moment was chosen for his entrance on stage.

E.g. 3



Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 21-24. from A

His profile can be glimpsed in the darkness, alone and loving this solitude. Mephistopheles' relegation to the shadows during the glorification of God by the Heavenly Phalanxes appears to be consistent with one of the possible etymologies of his name: *mé fotofilés*, meaning enemy of light.



Giulio Ricordi, *Disposizione scenica per l'opera Mefistofele di Arrigo Boito*, Ed. Ricordi, p. 5.

The *Disposizione scenica*⁸ accurately determines the location where the character will appear, raised one meter above the stage with the aid of a trapdoor. Mephistopheles appears in the center of the space created by the image of the nebula, slightly to the left (point C in the drawing above), creating the impression, at first, of a phantom emerging from darkness. The uncertainty created by the apparent harmonic and rhythmic indecision, as well as the semi-darkness, contribute to Mephistopheles' lack of contour in the first moments of his appearance. In the same line of thought, Boito wants him to be static, almost immobile, with only a few facial expressions revealing his thoughts during the dialogue that follows.

⁸ *Disposizione scenica* is a volume of over one hundred pages in which the composer meticulously records detailed instructions regarding the stage arrangement of the set, the characters, and the crowds, as well as their attitudes and appearance.

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The short orchestral introduction preceding the moment of his appearance contains many of the elements that characterize the protagonist's behavior, including the mocking style in which he will deliver his speech. The relaxed atmosphere shifts with the terrifying expression of the diminished seventh chord built on the seventh scale degree, followed by the dominant seventh chord of *D major*, which appears simultaneously with Mephistopheles' first ironic reply, imitating the Heavenly Phalanxes. Here too, in this satanic recitation of a religious text, we can observe an aspect of the dualism that characterizes Boito's thinking and work. Also, as we learn from the *Disposizione scenica*, Mephistopheles is dressed in a black cloak, similar to those worn by clergy, on whose hem he steps firmly, a gesture that highlights his contempt for sacred symbols. The auditory effect created by the descending intonation of a major third – starting from the fundamental of the diminished chord on the seventh scale degree to the fundamental of the dominant chord (*D major*) – by the ponderous, weighty bass voice gives a deeply derogatory meaning to the manner of address.

Mephistopheles stares intently at the bright upper part of the nebula, uttering his first words after entering the scene: *Ave, signor*. These words come as a mocking echo to the praise of God offered by the angelic voices that preceded him.

E.g. 5

MEFISTOFELE (coi piè fermi sul lembo del suo mantello)

Lento

A - - ve, Si - gnor.

Lento

mf

a piacere

Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 25-28. from A

Mephistopheles sings the first part of the monologue, accompanied by the familiar musical motifs that contributed to the preparation of his appearance. He takes up the playful atmosphere created by the orchestra and, adding a touch of irony, apologizes for the lack of elevation in his language and appearance, which cannot be compared to that of the Cherubs. The section is written in

D major, in 3/8 time signature. The vocal line is full of vigor and, due to its instrumental character, impresses with its bravura. The lively and energetic theme, taken from the *scherzo strumentale*, develops through the sequential-ascending repetition of the first phrase, at a distance of a fourth, thus giving strength and vitality to this moment. The interrogative rhythmic-melodic motifs, with their downward arc, beginning and ending on the weak beat, enhance the metrical accents in the following measures, attributing determination and a fighting spirit to the character. The mocking tone of Mephistopheles' speech is very well highlighted at the end of this part when, by means of a *rallentando* that seems to stop time in its tracks, the word "high" – which coincides with the *D* sound, the highest note so far – the irony of the cherubim being suggested by the major-minor dualism in this section.

E.g. 6

M

leggermente rall. *a tempo* *rall.* *a tempo*

che in-ghir-lan - da i cri - ni degli al - ti che - ru - bi - ni;

leggermente rall. *col canto* *a tempo*

Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 41-44. from A

Also, in contrast to those who praised God in a musically balanced speech, Mephistopheles sings ironically in twenty lines of paired rhymes, the alternation between hendecasyllabic lines and seven-syllable lines creating a sense of imbalance.

*Ave, signor, perdona se il mio gergo
 Si lascia un po' da tergo
 Le superne teodie del paradiso;
 Perdona se il mio viso
 Non porta il raggio che inghirlanda i crini
 Degli alti cherubini:*⁹

⁹ Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologo, 4 atti ed Epilogo, Milano, Ricordi, 1944, p. 8.

An interesting aspect of Mephistopheles' response to the heavenly song is that he sarcastically asks for forgiveness three times, as a counterpoint to the one reciting *Kyrie eleison*. Boito later used this technique of distorting liturgical aspects in the development of the character Iago in Verdi's opera *Otello*, for which he wrote the libretto.

Mephistopheles also apologizes for the fact that he might "let out a whistle." This is an element that Boito introduced in his opera, as it is not present in Goethe's work. While Goethe's Mephisto limited himself to verbal sarcasm, Mephistopheles' whistling adds a more pronounced note of irony and even impertinence to the character. It is a gesture that amplifies the insult and emphasizes the defiant attitude.

Moreover, he must possess the artistry of a master rhetorician, as "the linguistic and metalinguistic aspects are an essential part of the character."¹⁰ His persuasive tactics often hinge on insinuating, versatile language, coupled with rigorous argumentation. In this vein, Mephistopheles hypocritically apologizes for his "jargon", which he presents as inadequate when measured against the elevated discourse of heavenly beings. The same applies to his whistling: though he frames it as a flaw requiring apology, it functions as a calculated instrument of manipulation.

Whistling is also a form of protest that lends itself perfectly to the spirit of denial. Boito explained the role of whistling as early as 1864 in the *Figaro* magazine, where he shows that whistling is a manifestation that humans have had since ancient times, have now, and will continue to have as long as they exist: "... women learned it from the song of the first nightingale, men from the hissing of the snake, and Joseph, Moses, Samson, David, and Job were all actors who were more or less whistled at... No one should be surprised then that the whistling of our first parents has come down to us and that today it deafens us in our theaters with such vehemence that until the last day that two human lips exist, whistling will exist on earth..."¹¹ He then justifies the existence of whistling as a counterbalance to applause: "If we have two loud palms to applaud the wonders of beauty, it is fair and honest that we have a pair of lips to whistle the clumsiness of ugliness."¹² Even if the context here is not his work *Mephistopheles*, the ideas can be applied exactly.

Glory, O Lord, forgive if my poor speech, / Falls short of the sublime / The heavenly Hymns
the choirs sing above; / Forgive if my face fails to display / The radiance that crowns the
golden hair / Of the high cherubim (it.) [tr. n.].

¹⁰ Edoardo Buroni, *Arrigo Boito librettista, Un'indagine linguistica tra testo poetico e testo musicale*, Università degli Studi di Milano, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Dipartimento di Filologia Moderna, 2008-2009, p. 149.

¹¹ Piero Nardi, *Arrigo Boito, Tutti gli scritti*, A. Mondadori Editore, 1942, p. 1113.

¹² *Ibidem*.

As for laughter, it is clearly not something befitting heavenly beings. Although Mephistopheles provokes them, they will not stoop to his level to laugh or mock him, as this would constitute a victory for Mephistopheles.

Mephistopheles then continues, minimizing both the importance of man and of the Earth, over which man considers himself master. The orchestra plays a melancholic waltz in *B flat major* – a moving and warm melody, performed by the low strings. The waltz seems like a sigh, a distant echo of joys and deeply human dramas, gathered in a bouquet whose richness of events, ideas, and feelings Mephistopheles tramples decisively and emphatically. He recites harsh, devastating verses, *recto tono*, repeated in rhythmic formulas that require metrical alternation. The mocking text is based on hemiola and, in contrast to the *legatissimo* of the melody sung by the orchestra in *pianissimo*, the singer attacks each note *tenuto* and with force. At this point, Mephistopheles says proudly, pointing to the curvature of the Earth: *Il Dio piccin, della piccina terra*¹³. He also compares man to an insignificant insect, but one that shows “superb vanity” when it sings its “trill in the grass.”

As for the “trill”, it presents a particularly intriguing element. In the older Faustian legends, Mephistopheles’ arrival was foreshadowed by the sound of jingling, which signaled his impending presence. Boito adopted this auditory motif to mark Mephistopheles’ appearance, employing the jingling effect in the orchestra – specifically through the flute and piccolo – during the character’s first entrance. The trill, in a sense, echoes this jingling, and by attributing it to the human figure in this passage, Mephistopheles imbues it with sinister connotations, aligning it with the forces of Evil. The orchestral accompaniment disrupts the waltz and now merges with Mephistopheles’ discourse, depicting the erratic leaps of an insignificant insect – a cricket. Rapid sixteenth-note figures, spaced by repeated ascending octave intervals and returning to the third, trace the hesitant, faltering path of the tiny creature in contrast to humanity. The orchestral depiction continues with two trills, drawn both from the sounds of nature and from the Faustian legends. These trills serve as an auditory bridge between the natural world and the supernatural, reinforcing the character’s diabolical presence.

What Mephistopheles attacks with fervor is one of the most precious human attributes: Reason. Boito gives this moment special importance in the *Disposizione scenica*, asking the soloist to use all his vocal power, like thunder, starting from the moment when he labels man as “conceited dust”, in order to strongly emphasize that Reason is what makes man consider himself above other creatures and is the faculty that helps him investigate

¹³ The petty God of the petty earth (it.)(tr. n.).

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the mysteries of the universe. Mephistopheles compares it to an illusion produced by drunkenness. The impact is all the greater as the two words, *illusione* and *ragione*¹⁴ rhyme. The juxtaposition of the Mephistophelian trill with this mockery of human Reason in the music is particularly compelling. The word *Ragione* (Reason) is uttered starkly, twice, each time on a descending perfect fifth, accompanied by the strident, sforzando trill of the piccolo. The repetition of the word *Ragione* – now a minor third lower and set against an unstable, modulating harmonic backdrop – evokes the human fall from grace as depicted through the diabolical lens. Mephistopheles expresses his utter contempt with a menacing interjection, delivered with vocal force in the acute *F* of the bass voice. At this moment, the orchestra recalls the opening interval of the *Prologue* – the octave – which resurfaces in the lower strings as Mephistopheles addresses the Divinity. As illustrated in the example below, the octave precedes the direct address to the *Maestro Divino*, underscoring that these two opposing forces are now locked in dialogue.

E.g. 7

M

Lento $\text{♩} = 48$

Ah! Si, Ma - es - tro di - vi - no,

Lento $\text{♩} = 48$

pp legatissimo

Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 41-43. from C

The acoustic image shifts abruptly: the *tempo* slows to *lento*, the dynamics diminish precipitously, as the recitative concludes Mephistopheles' exposition. In a muffled, fading sonority, his voice growing ever more subdued, Mephistopheles nears the end of his speech, maliciously revealing that the degradation of human existence affects even him. Man has fallen so low that the demon can no longer be bothered to tempt him into evil. This is musically rendered through the vocal line's descending melody, which sinks to the low

¹⁴ Illusion and reason (it.) [tr. n.].

notes of the bass voice (*B \flat* , *B \flat*), while the accompaniment plays altered chords with an oscillating chromatic motion in the treble (*D-D \sharp -E-E \flat -D-D \sharp -E-E \flat -D*). The effect underscores the spiritual and moral descent Mephistopheles describes, as harmony and melody dissolve into instability.

Following this criticism of human reason – which man wields to survive and to impose meaning on his existence, oscillating between darkness and light, good and evil – Mephistopheles delivers an almost human admission: he lacks the motivation to tempt humanity further. Within this observation lies a trace of irony, as his words are accompanied by the same musical motif from his first appearance and from the moment he mockingly apologized for his “inferior” language compared to the “exalted celestial beings.” This passage erupts in a sudden *forte*, brief yet explosive – three measures of triplets, energetic and brimming with vitality, abruptly disrupting the somber recitative. An ascending octave leap, followed by a descent to the fifth, both articulated in a punctuated, emphatic rhythm, once again evoke sarcastic polemics. The musical gesture underscores Mephistopheles’ derisive detachment, reinforcing his diabolical wit.

E.g. 8

Come prima

di ten - tar - lo al mal.

Come prima

Arrigo Boito, *Mefistofele*, Prologue, Scene II, m. 48-50. from C

For a diabolical figure with chivalrous pretensions, it is beneath him to tempt one who has already fallen. Though his nature compels him toward evil, this universal wretchedness no longer brings him joy. More than that, he feigns innocence, as if he bore no responsibility for humanity’s downfall. A notable distinction arises here between Goethe and Boito: while the former employs the verb “to torment”, Boito chooses “to tempt”, lending Mephistopheles a subtler, less radical embodiment of evil.

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