

The life & afterlife of “Festus”

by *Mischa Willett*

On Philip James Bailey’s masterpiece.

Books in this article

Philip James Bailey

Festus: An Epic Poem

Edinburgh University Press, 408 pages, \$120.00

Philip James Bailey’s *Festus* is the most popular poem most people have never heard of.¹ An epic in twenty cantos about the end of time in the Faustian mode, it all but dominated literary conversation in the early Victorian period and was hugely influential on authors now widely revered. Early critical discussions of the poem were concerned not with the fact of its influence so much as the scope. F. B. Money-Coutts pleads, for example, in the periodical *The Academy* in 1901, that “not from any audience chamber ought this great, this conscientious prophet-poet to be dismissed without being fully heard” and that “Mr. Bailey’s life-work deserves, not an ephemeral comment, but a volume of earnest analysis.” *The Athenaeum* avers in 1876 that “in the study of English poetry, it is always necessary to consider the influence of . . . *Festus* . . . upon most subsequent poetry.” Always necessary? Most subsequent poetry? For readers like these, the quality of the poem was obvious and all but guaranteed it a place in posterity. An issue of *The Saturday Review* from 1889 contends, “the fact remains that schools of poetry rise and fall, one influence yields to another influence, and Mr. Bailey’s . . . poem rides every storm and survives every revolution of taste.” *Festus* achieved a reach the English-speaking world had not seen since Byron and has rarely been since. The modern critic Richard Cronin writes that *Festus* “was recognized. . . rather widely, as the great poem of the age.” It is safe to say that most readers now, even most educated readers, have never so much as heard the name. What happened?

Philip James Bailey was born on April 22, 1816, in Nottingham, to the newspaper editor and sometime poet Thomas Bailey and his first wife, Mary Taylor. Brought up on Byron and interested in literature and speculative metaphysics from an early age, he entered the University of Glasgow at sixteen but left before completing a degree, not wishing to enter the Scottish clergy. After some travels, he entered Lincoln’s Inn as a barrister and began composing *Festus* the next year, when he was nineteen years old. The first edition was published anonymously in 1839 by William Pickering, who had recently put out works of similar imaginative metaphysical reach, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example.

It was an instant hit. The scholar Herbert Tucker writes that, across the social spectrum, the poem “enjoyed an almost uproarious state of success.” Even before its official release, the printers and binders—“the gentlemen engaged in the mechanical execution of the work”—gathered at the Manchester home of its first printer, Wilmot Henry Jones, to stage a reading. Entranced by the staggering quality of the book they were assembling, these rude mechanicals recalled decades later the precise time at which they printed the last pages and had their names inscribed on the bookplate, as if joint partners in creating a monument for the ages. Such an anecdote gives some sense of the rare enthusiasm the poem stoked and its appeal for working-class types. Readers took to referring to the author himself as “Festus” in the absence of an alternative, and to the end of his life the author was known in some circles as “Festus Bailey.”

Bailey lived a long life after *Festus*, working continually to perfect—or at least to expand—his youthful masterwork, entertaining illustrious visitors and admirers and making trips to the continent. His home became a stop on tourist itineraries, and encounters with the mysterious author appeared in books of literary reminiscence, such as those by Mary Watson. When Ralph Waldo Emerson visited England, he dined with “Festus Bailey” at least twice, telling him “that his appreciation for *Festus* was great” and that “Philip Bailey was the first of the Transcendentalists & its founder.” Attracted as ever to cataclysm, and with a knack for being present at historical events such as Lord Byron’s funeral, Bailey witnessed the major eruption of Vesuvius in 1872. The poet died in Nottingham in 1902, prompting obituaries and career remembrances from across the literary spectrum.

The poem was more than just a popular success; critics responded with an enthusiasm that can only be described as breathless. Early reviewers noted the social diversity of *Festus*’s readership, as though it were unusual to have spanned such divides: readers “both cultivated and uncultivated,” one said, feel a “passionate sympathy with Mr. Bailey’s poem.” They noted further its ubiquity, stating that “volumes sell by the thousands and are on all tavern and parlor tables.” Authors in particular rushed to embrace *Festus*. When naming the six greatest poets then living, Elizabeth Barrett Browning identified “the author of *Festus*,” along with Mr. Browning of course, as among “the only men of genius who are poets at all at the present day.” Further praise came from Tennyson, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, Owen Meredith, James Montgomery, W. M. Thackeray, and Ebenezer Elliott, to name only the most prominent. Reviewers recommended for Bailey a place beside Shakespeare. One went so far as to stake the very notion of genius on Bailey’s qualifying as one. The Scottish critic George Gilfillan called *Festus* “the greatest work of our generation.”

In America, the embrace was, if possible, still more rapturous. Margaret Fuller wrote in 1841 that, “in inspiration, in prophecy, in those flashes of the sacred fire which reveal the secret places where time is elaborating the marvels of nature, [*Festus*] stands alone.” Emerson claimed that only Tennyson stood beside Bailey. Thoreau memorized large sections of the poem that he recited on walks, quoting Bailey in both letters and journals. Walt Whitman became, in the words of one critic, Bailey’s “American disciple.”

What subject could win over such a host of admirers? The poem’s inaugural scene takes place in Heaven, where seraphim and cherubim adulate God. They are joined by a fallen Lucifer, who seeks divine permission to tempt a youth named Festus. God consents without hesitation. The next scene introduces a disenchanting Festus, whom Lucifer offers “to crown . . . with liberty and joys/ And make . . . free and mighty even as I am!” Festus yields to Lucifer’s offer, assured that God “will not let thee harm me.” And so, whether soaring above the nations on black steeds or mingling with humanity, the pair tours the globe, all the while dialoguing on metaphysics. Scenes of courtship dot their escapade, as Festus indulges in amours with several mistresses and even Lucifer dabbles in romance. The journey eventually transcends Earth, as Lucifer disembodies Festus with the command “Body and spirit part!” and takes him on an interstellar voyage. Visiting Venus, Festus discourses with spirits who reside there, including a deceased lover of his. Later, Lucifer escorts Festus heavenward to meet God himself, though the mortal glimpses “nothing but . . . dazzling darkness.” While in Heaven, however, Festus finds his name inscribed in the Book of Life, a guarantee of his salvation. In time, the duo also survey the flames of Hell. After completing Festus’s “every quest,” Lucifer endows his companion with “the power which thou dost long for,” and so, in the scene called “A Gathering of Kings and Peoples,” Festus is crowned “monarch of the world.” His reign, however, is curtailed by the Apocalypse, and Festus dies along with the rest of the world, entrusting himself to God. As Lucifer prepares to depart Heaven, he entreats Festus, “Forgive me that I tempted thee,” and—in all editions after the first—an ambivalent God then recants Lucifer’s banishment, restoring him “to archangelic state.” With Heaven’s throng made complete, the poem closes.

However great *Festus* may or may not seem to us today, it became the spark that lit a literary movement: the Spasmodic School. When modern critics mention Bailey, they do so in the context of the Spasmodic phenomenon. The term was coined by William Edmonstone Aytoun in 1854 to criticize poets writing in the style of Bailey and was sometimes taken simply to mean “the school of Bailey.” Alexander Smith in *A Life-Drama* (1853), Sydney Dobell in *The Romances* (1850) and *Balder* (1854), J. Stanyan Bigg in *Night and the Soul* (1854), and others attempted to write verse in the Festonian style, many successfully. It may be hard to discern at this vantage, but when an issue of *The Scottish Review* from 1855 declares that “Tennyson can scarcely be said to have founded a school—Bailey has,” the writer is bragging about a figure he sees as clearly the more significant of the two. Whether we think of the Spasmodics as a Victorian aberration or as integral to the history of English poetry (as Rossetti, Tennyson, and others did), we have Bailey to thank for them.

But the school of Bailey is even broader than the world-spanning reach of the Spasmodics. Scholars have shown convincingly that James Joyce took *Festus* as a model for *Ulysses*. Others have argued for its influence over psychologically charged novels such as those of the Brontës. Still others have demonstrated its implications for the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Arthur Hugh Clough. Emily Dickinson wondered if she herself counted as a Spasmodic writer. Even the modernist poet Conrad Aiken is indebted to Bailey, paying a sincere compliment of imitation in his fragmented, imagistic, metaphysical work *The Pilgrimage of Festus* (1923), which covers much of the same ground as Bailey’s masterpiece.

In *Festus*, spirituality and theological reflection hold a central place. Whatever else ostensibly happens in the poem, its *raison d’être* is to provide occasions for intellectual engagement with the Bible and theological literature. *Festus* teems with allusions to scripture. The likeness to the story of Job is foremost; as one reviewer acknowledges, “*Festus* is the argument of Job applied. . . to the whole human family.” Yet the poem’s engagement with biblical narratives does not end there. In fact, it is likely that, while retaining a poetic tie to the legend of Faust, the name “Festus” is meant to suggest more directly a New Testament passage, Acts 25–26, in which the apostle Paul, indicted by Jewish authorities, stands trial before Porcius Festus, a Roman provincial official. Mid-trial, Paul appeals to the court of the emperor, suspending his hearing and thus releasing Festus from making a legal judgement.

Despite its use of biblical material, *Festus* presents an offbeat metaphysic. The cast of characters includes an array of otherworldly and unorthodox figures. In the poem’s course, Bailey gives voice to “the Muse,” who inhabits Festus, “Genius,” and a personified “Death.” Guardian angels are assigned both to individuals and to planets, as is a “Recording Angel” who documents the fates of men; both varieties mingle with biblically traditional seraphim, cherubim, and archangels. In another unusual feature, the poem is populated with allusions to extraterrestrial life. It opens with a Christ who is a full-time savior, redeeming not only Earth but also many other alien planets. So the Earth is cast as one of many populated orbs, some of which have already undergone apocalypses of their own: “Worlds have been built, and to their central base/ Ruined and rased to the last atom.” Planets also act as holding places for the deceased; Festus finds that Venus, called “Another and a Better World,” harbors spirits of the pure. Heaven holds still other spirits who, moreover, have posthumous agency: “for God hath made it lawful for good souls/ To make souls good; and saints to help the saintly.” In a similar vein, Bailey’s Hell is ultimately purgatorial, its flames refining marred spirits instead of tormenting them.

Bailey’s Lucifer, moreover, is not an orthodox Satan who happens to be forgiven by an overly gracious omnipotent. Rather, he is an agent of God, working destruction and death in the world when it is called for by the Almighty. Unlike in Goethe or Milton, for whom Satan might have figured in some original plan but is now a fallen rebel, Bailey represents a Satan who freely acknowledges God’s sovereignty and who works for him, causing death when called for and war when necessary. Even sin is constructive in Bailey’s spiritual vision. Lucifer volunteers:

God! for thy glory only can I act,
And for thy creatures’ good. When creatures stray
Farthest from Thee, then warmest towards them burns
Thy love.

As *Festus*’s proem explains, “Evil and good are God’s right hand and left./ By ministry of evil good is clear? Evil is not a threat to God’s sovereignty but an expression thereof, a force that nudges all spirits into Heaven’s fold.

Universalists in the early part of the nineteenth century believed that dividing people into the blessed and the damned put an impossible strain on their practice of charity. The development of “God-consciousness,” they maintained, coevolved with “fellow-feeling.” That Bailey likely held this universalist doctrine is evident in a prayer offered by Festus, wherein this fellow-feeling is used as an argument for the abolition of slavery and for unity among social classes. After asking that education lift the nations “to loftier and more liberal ends,” he entreats the Almighty thus:

We pray
Above all things, Lord! that all men be free
From bondage, whether of the mind or body;—
The bondage of religious bigotry,
And bald antiquity, servility
Of thought or speech to rank and power; be all
Free as they ought to be in mind and soul
As well as by state-birthright.

More compelling even than the device of a submissive and reinstated Lucifer, however, are the poem’s devotional expressions. Often, a character will see something beautiful—a woman, a sunset—and fall into rhapsodies about God’s power and goodness, many of which are genuinely moving. Bailey’s heterodox Satan certainly shocked audiences, but moments like these help the poem to read as worshipful. The most striking examples of this devotional style are found in the angelic songs and hymns. A typical example is the following:

Thee God! we praise
Through our ne’er sunseting days,
And Thy just ways.
Divine:
In Thy hand is every spirit,
And the need is the same my merit;
All which all the worlds inherit
Are Thine!

But the rapturous embrace Bailey enjoyed was due not so much to his choice of subject matter as to the poetry itself. Whatever else he was, Bailey was a pioneer of aesthetic styles. One such stunning aesthetic technique of *Festus*, which read to most as new, was Bailey’s use of stacked metaphors. Rather than using a point of comparison to illuminate a single line or an image, Bailey piles these up, “load[ing] every rift with ore;” as Keats recommended to Shelley. If his metaphors have metaphors to explain them, muddling the contours of the images, as one symbol gives rise to, and blurs with, another. Sometimes over twenty lines pass before the reader arrives even at the subject of the comparison, as in the following passage:

Now,
So light as not to wake the snowiest down
Upon the dove’s breast, winning her bright way
Calm and sublime as Grace into the soul
Towards her far native Grove; now, stern and strong
As ordnance, overturning tree and tower;
Cooling the white brows of the peaks of fire—
Turning the sea’s broad furrows like a plough,—
Fanning the fruitening plains, breathing the sweets
Of meadows, wandering o’er blinding snows,
And sands like sea-beds and the streets of cities,
Where men as garnered grain lie heaped together;
Freshening the checks, and mingling oft the locks
Of youth and beauty ’neath star-speaking eve;
Swelling the pride of canvas, or, in wrath,
Scattering the fleets of nations like dead leaves;
In all, the same o’ermastering sightless force,
Bowling the highest things of earth to earth,
And lifting up the dust unto the stars;
Fateful, confounding reason, and the world’s
Spirit, conferring life upon the like, —
Midst all corruption incorruptible;
Monarch of all the elements!

Bailey has described the wind as “monarch of all the elements” but makes so many qualifications that it, instead of the actual syntactic sense, the qualifications themselves become the point. The wind is so gentle that it fails to ruffle a dove’s feathers as the dove makes her way home, but then her way-making is itself like God’s grace coming upon the Heaven-bound soul. Yet sometimes, the wind is strong as law, the poet continues, toppling towers and uprooting trees. That strong wind is also said to cool “the white brows of the peaks of fire,” in which metaphor we see mountain peaks, snow-capped but aflame when pink sunset hits them and thereby in need of cooling—but also those same snow peaks as a feverish forehead, white and high, that likewise requires cooling. And all of this before the wind is shown to turn over the sea as a though wind were plough and the sea land, to act as a fan, as a lover’s breath, or as a personified wanderer who visits the aforementioned snow peaks, the great “sands,” which are themselves like the beds of the sea, and the various cities in which men are stacked up like sheaves of wheat, presumably from the windswept plains.

This technique drove Victorian readers mad, either with delight or with frustration. For most, it was the former. They had simply never read anything so richly metaphorical. This is the feeling—of exhaustion, of sublimity—to which early reviewers are referring in comments such as that “in point of brilliancy [*Festus*] has no rival in our language.” The sheer accumulation of poetic gold dazzled. Of course, other readers found such concatenations vexing. One, still acknowledging the quality of Bailey’s proverbial jewels, decries their collected opulence, arguing that too many diamonds make a ring tough to look at; it is blinding.

Festus’s extraordinary reach was also due to its scientific sensibility. The poem knowingly participates in scientific discourse, commenting in the opening pages that “the world hath made such comet-like advance/ Late on science.” Rife with such references, *Festus* twines the realms of science and art. It makes frequent mention of matter’s atomic nature, for example. Envisaging the Apocalypse, Bailey has Festus note, “River and mountain melt into their atoms;/ A little time, and atoms will be all.” Even God, mingling science and metaphysics, declares that “Suns are made up of atoms, Heaven of souls.” Later, Bailey touches on the sun’s composition in further detail:

They tell us that the body of the sun
Is dark, and hard, and hollow; and that light
Is but a floating fluid within him.
Ah! how oft, and how much, the heart is like him!
Despite the electric light it lives and hides in.

But the heavenly bodies at which the reader is meant to gaze are not only of the astronomical kind. If the poem is starstruck, it is also girl-crazy. It is amorous in the extreme. Whenever they are not taking interstellar horse-rides or welcoming the Brahmin into Heaven, Lucifer and Festus are at parties wooing women. They’re good at it, too, trading in the Victorian delicacy of overreue Lucia to female beauty and virtue. This is surely another reason the poem was so popular: in one book, readers would encounter the most sincere pieties, the most daring aesthetic techniques, and the lines most likely to cause a blush in a sought-after romantic conquest. Festus thus praises Helen:

To say sooth,
I once loved many things ere I met with thee,
My one blue break of beauty in the clouds;
Bending thyself to me as Heaven to earth.

In such exchanges, the beloved occasionally breaks into songs that can act as stand-alone ditties, typical of Victorian lovmaking. Helen rhapsodizes accordingly:

Like an island in a river,
Art thou, my love, to me;
And I journey by thee ever
With a gentle ecstasie.

These love scenes allow Bailey to copy his stock-in-trade of rapturous praise for following subjects as well as the deity, and, in addition to helping move poetry, they influenced the generation of writers mortal Bailey towards sensuality. D. G. Rossetti—long an admirer of Bailey—and his Pre-Raphaelite associates, as well as Swinburne and perhaps the Tennyson of *Maud*, were subject to derision as “fleshly” poets for assuming the same amorous postures Bailey strikes in *Festus*. Their peer Theodore Watts-Dunton noted the similarity of style, claiming, “even the warm love-making . . . of our contemporary singers may be traced . . . to the scenes between Festus and Lucifer, and their respective loves.” Which is to say, if *Festus* is technically an epic, many readers experienced it, and appreciated it, as a collection of love lyrics.

It couldn’t last. The bubble burst. And Bailey kept tinkering with his poem and making it worse. The poem’s importance for the Victorians and for literary history failed to secure its endurance. W. M. Rossetti may have exaggerated in 1876 when he lamented that “at the present day *Festus* is little read,” and he was chastened by an angry correspondent who argued that, far from being a forgotten work, *Festus*’s readership had widened in the 1870s rather than contracted. But nobody could disagree today—and it is certainly true now that *Festus* is little read. No editions of the poem have been printed since 1903 (until now), and, despite its influence, ambition, and breadth of appeal, *Festus* has never inspired an academic monograph, nor a biography of its author. It is, however, often treated in period surveys and always mentioned in overviews of the aesthetic movement to which it gave birth.

There are at least two reasons for this lack of attention. It is partly due to the unavailability of reliable editions. Over a dozen official editions were printed in England, each substantially different from the last, and as many again in America, which sometimes, but not always, kept pace with the changing British versions. Additionally, scores of pirated editions were published, which vulgarized the already fluid and difficult text. Because of Bailey’s practice of expanding the text—another thing Whitman learned from Bailey—in successive editions, when someone refers to *Festus*, it is difficult to say what they mean exactly: the 8,100-line poem from 1839 or the 39,100-line poem from 1889? Another possible reason why the poem fared less well after the turn of the century is its strangeness. *Festus* is amorous, even sensual, but also deeply devotional. It features an offbeat metaphysics, wherein Christ spends eternity saving the many populated and fallen planets, but follows recognizable literary predecessors like Goethe, Byron, and Edward Young. Its prayers and sermons are such comforting expressions of Christian piety that some preachers read from *Festus* in church, but its underlying theology, especially Lucifer’s redemption at the eschaton, was sufficiently troubling that other preachers warned congregations to stay away from it.

Despite these challenges, Bailey’s legacy ought to extend beyond his place as a Victorian best-seller and founder of a school of spectacularly popular poets. Bailey was a reformer in many other ways. At multiple levels, *Festus* challenged the era’s tastes—for how theology should be considered, for how poetry should be written, for how courtship should be portrayed—rather than adopting them. Its striking novelty, its scandal, and, well, its poetry, combined with shrewd marketing, deserve at least some of the credit for the magnificent success. We need not agree with its early readers, that “in richness of imagery and aptness of illustration. . . [*Festus*] has no competitor in modern times,” or number it, as did British and American worthies, among the greatest productions of the age. But surely, if we make the attempt, modern readers will see what poetic wealth drew our Victorian forebears to such a frenzy of appreciation in the first place.

1. This piece is adapted from the introduction to *Festus: An Epic*, by Philip James Bailey, edited by Mischa Willett, published by Edinburgh University Press.