The Over-Reacher

English literature owes a great debt to Marlowe for identifying a certain type of classical tragic hero in the works of Sophocles and making him intelligible in English cultural terms. Harry Levin called this type "the over-reacher" after rhetorician George Puttenham's attempt to find a close English synonym for the Greek word "hyperbole" (in *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589). Marlowe characters have an exaggerated appetite for achievement, whether it's world conquest (Tamburlaine), knowledge as power (Faustus) or revenge and the acquisition of riches (Barabus). Marlowe's heroes were popular then, and remain fascinating now, as portraits of English imperial ambitions dressed in the appearances of an Asian warlord, a German scholar, and a wealthy Maltese Jew. Their exotic (to contemporary English audiences) appearances and settings gave Marlowe an opportunity to dazzle us with some of the most elaborate and extended set speeches in English drama. His use of the new Elizabethan vocabulary drew upon the language of the exploring nations (Spain, France, Holland) as well as the Latin and Greek learning that had filtered down to the street-English of his time from the most exotic experiments of the humanists and sonneteers.

1. Is Marlowe, perhaps, something of a "Faustus" in language? That is, has he made a kind of bargain with imperialism in order to make his theater, a bargain that costs him something precious?

2. Is writing, itself, and literacy as a social force, something "demonic" in the sense that it transforms its possessors? Look closely at Faustus's first description of his book of necromancy, "Lines circles, schemes, letters and characters" (1:51). Isn't this just a specialized sort of writing and reading, one that gives its user access to power?

3. In a related scene, note that writing the "deed" or instrument of his damnation is a crucial event in Scene 5. What interrupts the writing of it, what aid is brought by Faustus's "Writing Coach" to break his "writer's block"? Is this in any sense an analogue of Marlowe's own writer's psychology?