

On Coleridge as translator of *Faustus* from the German of Goethe

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Abstract

The recent publication of *Faustus from the German of Goethe*, translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Oxford University Press, 2007), edited by Frederick Burwick and James McKusick, has given rise to some controversy concerning whether Coleridge was properly identified as the translator. In this short essay I select a few telling facts from the comprehensive collection of evidence supporting Coleridge's role as translator. In addition to a sampling of the phrases from Coleridge's own poetry that are echoed in his translation, and of the references in his notebooks on rendering German words, this essay also briefly summarizes evidence from external sources.

In our edition of *Faustus from the German of Goethe*, translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Oxford University Press, 2007), James McKusick and I brought together a comprehensive collection of evidence supporting Coleridge's role as translator. The edition has triggered a reaction by some commentators unwilling to countenance the introduction into Coleridge's oeuvre of such a significant work and the necessary adjustments to our understanding of his biography that such a discovery must generate. The cumulative and corroborative weight of the evidence, nevertheless, indicates that the work is Coleridge's. The absence of any counter evidence makes the case even stronger. The internal evidence alone has prompted careful readers to recognize Coleridge's hand. Over 800 verbal echoes from Coleridge's other writings recur within the translated text. Mephistopheles's monologue on the ascent of the Brocken (3940-55), which deviates from the reliance on blank verse, reveals a mastery of the tetrameters of *Christabel*. During the period of the translation from May 1820 to September 1821, Coleridge in his notebooks ponders the meaning of German words and phrases that occur in Goethe's *Faust*. Further documentary evidence is found in the letters of the publishers and the contemporary reviews. In the following paragraphs, I shall endeavor to sharpen the debate by refining a few salient examples, first of Coleridge's self-echoing phrases, then of his notebook references, and I conclude with a summary of evidence from external sources.

On Sunday, 28 October 1827, Coleridge wrote to James Gilman to let him know that his return from his voyage was eagerly awaited. Coleridge had strolled down to the Custom House on the Thames for news of Gillman's anticipated arrival. Standing on the landing stairs, Coleridge watched a steamer turning on the river and went on to describe the pulsing energy manifest in the swirling mists:

we have had & have a steady deliberate soft thick soaking Rain, which yet does not sufficiently disburthen the Atmosphere of it's ever contracting and dilating, ascending and descending aqueous vapor, as to quiet the gusty winds or to smooth the white breakers. (*Letters* 6.706)

Coleridge uses here words and phrases that also belonged to *Faustus from the German of Goethe* published six years earlier by Thomas Boosey. Sources for Goethe's description of the Sign of the Macrocosm have been identified among the copperplate engravings to the works of Jacob Boehme and Johannes Kepler and other pansophic accounts of universal harmony. In Goethe's image, golden buckets, like the paddles of a water-wheel, are seen as scooping up the heavenly powers and forever ascending and descending as the wheel resolves (*Goethes Faust* 499). The English translation provides natural description rather than mechanical and alchemical symbols:

How divinely
Are all things blended! how each lives and moves
But with the rest! how heav'nly powers descend,
And re-ascend, balancing reeling worlds. (447-50)

As is typical throughout the translation, departures from Goethe's words and images coincide with a turn to those which are familiar in Coleridge's poetic idiom. Although the Sign of the Macrocosm might well conjure a sense of all-blending power, Goethe's text gives only the revolving wheel with its golden buckets that depict "Wie Himmelskräfte auf und nieder steigen," but there is no all-blending vitality such as Coleridge evoked in his letter to Gillman and had earlier celebrated in "Religious Musings" and "Ode on the Departing Year."

If the lines in which Faustus contemplates the Sign of the Macrocosm provided the only example of Coleridgean verbal echoes in Boosey's 1821 edition, then there would be little excuse to refer to the matter as more than a coincidence. As abundantly documented in the notes to the Oxford edition of *Faustus from the German of Goethe*, the verbal echoes recur persistently. Too many coincidences and there is no coincidence at all. Rather, coincidences are transformed into corroborative evidence gaining strength with each new instance. A majority of these notes point to stylistic features and to similarities in concept or phrase to be found in other works by Coleridge. Among the many verbal echoes and parallels are a few that occur in poems written after the 1821 *Faustus*. While incidental occurrence of a given image or phrase might be found in the writings of another poet, the cumulative frequency and abundance of these stylistic features can be matched in the works of no poet other than Coleridge himself.

Faustus begins his reflection on the Sign of the Macrocosm by asking whether a god had created the sign and commenting on its power to still his inner turmoil ("War es ein Gott, der diese Zeichen schrieb,/ Die mir das innere Toben stillen" 434-5). With a remarkable rephrasing of Goethe's line, the translator has inserted a distinctive possessive modifier, "Was it a god/ Who wrote this sign? it stills my **soul's wild warfare**." In a later scene, when Faustus refers to the calming effect ("Wenn aus dem schrecklichen Gewühle / Ein süß bekannter Ton mich zog" 1583-4), the translator again alters the phrasing with a similar possessive modifier: "Tho' from my **heart's wild tempest** / A sweet remembered tone recovered me." Variations on this peculiarly Coleridgean phrasing recur throughout the poet's work:

Remorse (III.ii)

... A worse sorrow/ Are **fancy's wild hopes** to a heart ...

Death of Wallenstein (II.vi)

... incapable of compact,/ Thy **heart's wild impulse** only dost thou ...

Fall of Robespierre (Act I)

... endearment,/All sacrificed to **liberty's wild riot**.

"Ode to the Departing Year" (line 23)

... young-eyed Joys! advance! By **Time's wild harp**,

"Monody on the Death of Chatterton" (line 73)

... of vernal Grace,/ And **Joy's wild gleams** that lighten'd o'er ...

During his stay in Göttingen, Coleridge twice ascended the Brocken, first on May 13 and again on June 24, 1799.¹ The Brocken is the reputed site of the gathering of witches on Walpurgis Night (May 1), and from its summit during the month following the vernal equinox, the Brocken Spectre can be viewed at dawn. When Goethe conjures misty images that arise from the damp foliage ("schweben mir/ Von Felsenwänden, aus dem feuchten Busch/ Der Vorwelt silberne Gestalten auf" 3236-8), Coleridge substitutes other associations as Faustus discerns that "from the damp/ Moist bushes, rise the forms of ages past." Coleridge here retrieves words that were written upon his own first ascent of the Brocken, "Where bright green moss heaves in sepulchral forms," from "Lines written in the Album at Elbingerode, in the Hartz Forest" (line 6).

In July 1821, Coleridge asked Thomas Poole to send him a transcription of "the Letter from Germany containing the account of my Journey to the Harz, and my ascent of the Brocken" (*Letters* 5.160). In his notebooks Coleridge often ponders how to translate German words and phrases. For example, in an entry of October 1820, he refers to "German Words, for which I am still to seek for an exact Correspondent in English. Anmuth" (*Notebooks* 4731). In *Faustus*, Coleridge managed to avoid translating Goethe's use of *Muth*, *Anmuth*, *Großmuth*, *Armuth*, *Demuth* (206-207, 462-464, and 1795-1798). For example, when Coleridge writes "I feel at once/ The renovated streams of life and pleasure/ Bubble thro' every vein." ("Ich fühle Muth mich in die Welt zu wagen" 464), his translation circumscribes the implication of *Muth* as "courage to confront the world." Coleridge also avoids Goethe's echoic *Schuhu* for the hooting owl ("Was hast du da in Höhlen, Felsenritzen/ Dich wie ein Schuhu zu versitzen?" 3272-3). Coleridge translates the line: "Why dost thou thus/ Flit like a weak-eyed owl in caves and clefts?" But in notebook entry he commented on bird sounds as represented in German and English (4726). In an entry of November 1821, Coleridge wrote "Twixt thro' - twixt in - Zwischen Branches - Swelling Branches" (4738),² referring to Anselmus's vision of the Serpent Daughters ("Zwischen durch - zwischen ein - zwischen Zweigen, zwischen schwellenden Blüten") in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf* which Coleridge commenced translating for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (January 1822) immediately after completing the translation of *Faustus* (*Shorter Works* 2.963-87).

Verbal echoes from Coleridge's other poetry recur throughout the translation of *Faustus*. Entries in his notebooks of the period correspond to challenges in translating Goethe's language. In addition to the abundant internal evidence of Coleridgean attributes of style in *Faustus from the German of Goethe*, there is also the evidence provided by "My Advice and Scheme," the plan for the translation which Coleridge prepared on May 12, 1820,³ just two days after informing Boosey that his anonymity would be a necessary condition. "Without my name I should feel the objections and

difficulty greatly diminished” (*Letters* 5:42-44). Boosey honored an author’s anonymity. When Goethe sought to discover who had written the prose translation published in June 1820, Boosey did not name Daniel Boileau but said only that it was by “a German in humble circumstances, a man of no little ability, and possessing a very considerable knowledge of the German language.”⁴ Boosey again upheld the translator’s anonymity in the announcement in the *London Magazine* (July 1821) of the forthcoming blank-verse edition:

The Publishers of Moses’s Etchings from Retch’s Outlines to the Faustus, have engaged a Gentleman of Literary Eminence to prepare a Translation of a considerable portion of that wild and singular play into English Blank Verse.⁵

Twice the attempt had been made by prominent publishers to engage Coleridge as translator of *Faust*: first by John Murray in August 1814, then by Thomas Boosey in May 1820. On both occasions, Coleridge submitted his plan on how the translation might best be conducted, proposing to translate the wide-ranging metrical variations in Goethe’s text chiefly into dramatic blank-verse, and insisting that his translation be published anonymously (*Letters* 3:523-5). In 1814, his efforts flagged after less than two months. In 1820, he stayed with the project, and his translation was published by Boosey in September, 1821.⁶

Why did Coleridge’s accomplishment remain concealed throughout the intervening centuries? The primary factor was the anonymity, compounded by publication in a competitive market as one of six editions of *Faust* to appear between 1820 and 1823: George Soane’s translation of some sixty lines as captions to Johann Heinrich Bohte’s publication of *Extracts from Göthe’s Tragedy of Faustus, explanatory of the plates by Retsch*, January 1820; John Anster’s translation of excerpts in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, June 1820; Boosey’s edition of an anonymous prose translation by Daniel Boileau, illustrated with the Retsch plates re-engraved by Henry Moses, June 1820; Boosey’s edition of the anonymous blank verse translation by Coleridge, also with the re-engraved plates, September 1821; Bohte’s planned dual-language edition, with a complete translation by George Soane, consisted of only the first 576 lines in English when he sent a set of page proofs for review in the *London Magazine*, November 1821; Bohte sent a second set of the page proofs to Goethe, June 1822;⁷ Lord Francis Leveson Gower’s *Faust* published by Murray, 1823; realizing that Soane would not complete the task, Bohte in 1823 published the German text of *Faust* without the parallel English translation.

As the rival publisher, Bohte was well informed of Boosey’s forthcoming edition when he revealed to Goethe that Coleridge was engaged for the translation:

Under the progressive cultivation of German literature in this country one has become especially attentive to your *Faust* - to which the splendid outline engravings by Retsch have contributed much. Another commentary with excerpts of remarkable passages appeared in Blackwood’s *Edinburgh Magazine* in translation on the 1st of last month - I hear with pleasure that the poet Coleridge is working on a complete translation of this Dramatic Poem.

(Unter der fortschreitenden Cultivierung der deutschen Literatur in diesem Lande ist man seit einiger Zeit besonders aufmerksam auf Ew. Wohlgeboren *Faust* geworden -

wozu die herlichen Umrissse von Retsch vieles beigetragen, - Eine andre Abhandlung mit Auszügen von merkwürdigen Stellen in Uebersetzung erschien in Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine untern 1ten vorigen Monathes - und vernehme mit Vergnügen, daß der hiesige Dichter Coleridge an einer gänzlichen Uebersetzung dieses dramatischen Gedichte arbeitet.)⁸

On September 4, 1820, Goethe wrote to his son August, repeating Bohte's news that Coleridge was translating *Faust*.⁹ Less than two months after being informed that Coleridge was at work on *Faust*, Goethe quoted lines of his poetry approvingly in a conversation with Friedrich Förster (September 27, 1820). Förster records:

He was always of the opinion that the indicated passages had no need of musical support, wherein he completely agreed with the keen-witted Coleridge:

(Er sei immer der Meinung gewesen, daß die bezeichneten Stellen keiner musikalischen Beihilfe bedürften, worin er vollkommen dem geistreichen Coleridge zustimme:)

An orphic tale indeed,
A tale divine of high and passionate thoughts,
To their own music chaunted.
(Der Faust) Ein orphisches Gedicht fürwahr,
Ein göttliches, voll hoher, leidenschaftlicher Gedanken,
Ertönend zu der eigenen Musik. (Förster 201-206)

Goethe not only quoted, he translated and appropriated. The lines in which Coleridge praised the intrinsic musicality of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are applied by Goethe to his own *Faust*. Goethe cited Coleridge's "To a Gentleman. Composed on the Night after his recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind" (lines 45-47). The poem was written in January 1807, but not published until 1817 in Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves*, and later, with a sequence of slight revisions in the first, second, and third editions of *Poetical Works* (1828, 1829, and 1834). In the third edition of 1834, Wordsworth's name was first publicly introduced into the title.

In their review essay, "'A Gentleman of Literary Eminence,'" Roger Paulin, William St. Clair, Elinor Shaffer have provided an excellent commentary on the illustrations to *Faust* by Moritz von Retzsch, Peter Cornelius and others. They err, however, in their account of the copies of Retzsch executed by Henry Moses. Their mistake apparently derived from using the edition of 1824 and assuming that it was the same as the original edition of 1821. This error is evident when they refer to the "Portrait of Goethe that was included with *Faustus* and is not reproduced in the volume" (21). The portrait was included only in the 1821 octavo edition and did not appear with the illustrations by Retzsch in the quarto edition. Only in the subsequent edition of 1824 do portrait and illustrations appear together.

In rejecting Coleridge as the author of the translation, they betray considerable confusion in their scramble to propose other likely translators (27-28). Having argued that the translator, identified as "a Gentleman of Literary Eminence," could not be Coleridge because Coleridge was no Gentleman, the authors of the review are pleased to endorse George Soane as their most likely candidate. As the son of the

distinguished Sir John Soane, architect and philanthropist, George Soane had the credentials of a gentleman, at least up to the time that he was disinherited, and he was the individual mistakenly identified as the translator throughout the past century. Commissioned as translator for Bohte's planned dual-language edition, Soane abandoned the task after completing only 576 lines. To be sure, Soane later wrote his own adaptation, *Faustus: A Romantic Drama* (opening at Drury Lane May 16, 1825), but neither plot nor dialogue have any resemblance to Goethe's *Faust*. The authors of the review ignore the case against Soane presented in the Oxford edition. Nor in their own case against Coleridge was it possible for them to acknowledge any of the evidence summarized here, not even a glance at literary merits of the text nor at the thorough cross-references to Coleridge's poetry. Having noted in the Chronology my discovery of the letters to Goethe from Hüttner and Bohte, Roger Paulin wrote to the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar to obtain the transcriptions reproduced in the review essay (10-11). Bohte's testimony that Coleridge is translating Goethe's dramatic poem is then dismissed as the literary gossip of the London bookdealer. The reviewers undermine their own credibility in denying to Bohte the credibility he deserves as a publisher preparing the rival edition intended to include Soane's translation.

All evidence points to Coleridge as the translator of *Faustus from the German of Goethe*. No evidence points elsewhere. Coleridge's negotiations with Murray and Boosey document his involvement. Bohte's inside knowledge of Boosey's publishing venture adds further evidence. The edition published by Oxford University Press reprints the 576 lines translated by George Soane, all that he was able to complete for the dual language edition planned but abandoned by Bohte. For comparison's sake, the translations by Francis Hodgson (from Germaine de Staël's French version), Daniel Boileau, John Anster, and Lord Francis Leveson-Gower are also included. The edition concludes with James McKusick's stylometric analysis of the *Faust* translation. Here, too, "the results are entirely consistent with Coleridge being the sole author of the 1821 *Faustus* translation" (330).

Notes

1. See *Notebooks* 412 and 447 and letter to Mrs. S. T. Coleridge, May 17, 1799 (*Letters* 1:504)
2. The editors of the Notebook do not identify Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf* as source for this entry.
3. "My Advice and Scheme", a proposal for translating *Faust*; single sheet dated May 12, 1820. Huntington Library MS accession number 131334.
4. From Thomas Boosey to Goethe, quoted in Schreiber 8-10.
5. *London Magazine* 104; "Works preparing for publication".
6. This text is reprinted with line-by-line annotation in *Faustus, translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*.

7. See Goethe *Werke*, IV, Bd. 36, S. 61, to Carl Friedrich von Reinhard (June 10, 1822): “In England hat ein Herr Soane meinen Faust bewundernswürdig verstanden und dessen Eigenthümlichkeiten mit den Eigenthümlichkeiten seiner Sprache und den Forderungen seiner Nation in Harmonie zu bringen gewußt; ich besitze die ersten Bogen mit nebgedrucktem Original.”

8. Johann Heinrich Bohte to Goethe, 1 August 1820; MS GSA 28/88 Bl. 362f.; Mappe 8/0068. Transcribed by Sabina Schäfer.

9. Goethe *Werke*, IV, Bd. 33, S. 199-200; I. Bd. 42, Zweite Abtheilung, S. 491.

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