

*Faustus From the German of Goethe Translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Frederick Burwick and James C. McKusick. Oxford: Oxford UP, Clarendon Press, 2007. liv + 343 pages. 85 pounds. 978-0-19-922968-0.

In September 1821, Boosey and Sons in London published an anonymous translation of Goethe's *Faust*. In the carefully edited reissue of this text under the renowned Clarendon-imprint of Oxford University Press lies a sensation of the highest order for literary studies: for the two editors believe they can substantiate the claim that the translator of *Faust* was none other than Samuel Taylor Coleridge – the poet of the fragmentary dream vision 'Kubla Khan' and the mock-antiquarian ballad 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.

Coleridge is incontestably one of the great mediators of German literature and German philosophy in Britain in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. He translated, for instance, Schiller's *Wallenstein* as early as 1800, put numerous German poems into English (without always citing the originals), and spread the ideas of Kant, Schelling, A. W. Schlegel and many others on the other side of the Channel – sometimes modified, sometimes presented as his own – in writings, lectures, and apparently endless conversations. Also, Coleridge's highly developed interest in supernatural and metaphysical questions suggests that he probably felt a particular affinity for the subject-matter of *Faust*. If he was nevertheless not previously considered as a serious candidate for the authorship of this translation of *Faust*, this was above all for three reasons. It was known that nothing came of his initial plan (1814) to translate *Faust* for his publisher Murray. Further, as we can look up in his *Table Talk*, Coleridge himself unambiguously declared in 1833 that he had never even begun the translation ('I never put pen to paper'). And finally, it was asked reasonably enough why Coleridge, who notoriously made many announcements, but delivered on fewer of them, began much, but completed little, should have maintained anonymity and denied any involvement in the exceptional case of a successfully completed project. And yet that seems to have been the case.

Both the history of this discovery and the editors' presentation of their case have all the excitement of a crime novel. As early as 1971 the American scholar of English Literature Paul M. Zall pieced together some indications that pointed to Coleridge's authorship. At that time his hypothesis found interest among experts, but he was encouraged to present additional evidence above all in the area of stylistic comparison. Exactly that – and more – now appears in this edition by Burwick and McKusick, since Burwick's introduction offers a thick description of the circumstances of the various *Faust* translations around 1820 and accumulates further external evidence, such as correspondence with publishers, relevant entries from Coleridge's *Notebooks*, Goethe's remark to his son on 4 September 1820 ('Coleridge [sic] übersetzt das Stück', i.e. Coleridge is translating the play) – evidence that, taken together, quite convincingly isolates Coleridge as the true translator of the 'Boosey'-*Faust* of September 1821. Furthermore McKusick is able to show, from a computer-aided stylistic analysis that utilises the technological progress of the last few decades (the *Signature*-program of the University of Leeds that McKusick used can be downloaded free of charge from the Internet), that the author of this translation was, with probability bordering on certainty (as McKusick reasonably and repeatedly emphasises, such an analysis cannot yield a hundred-percent conclusive 'proof') Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The stylistic match of the anonymous *Faust* translation of 1821 with Coleridge texts, especially with his drama *Remorse*, is extremely high and beyond random coincidence; the characteristic stylometric profile of the translation is furthermore not reached by any other *Faust* translation of this period, nor by any competing candidates, so that the double conclusion can only be stated

thus: it was in all probability none of the ‘usual suspects’, *and* it was in all probability Coleridge.

Now, these are by no means all the contents of the newly published volume. In the introduction Burwick relates absorbingly that Boosey’s edition was a reaction to the great success of the extracts from *Faust* published by the London publisher Bohte (January 1820, translated by George Soane). The Bohte edition, however, offered only the lines of the drama that related to the 26 outline sketches by Moritz von Retzsch. Boosey first (June 1820) countered this success with a prose translation of *Faust*, whose author Burwick has newly identified as Daniel Boileau, and which also prints the Retzsch illustrations (engravings after Retzsch by Henry Moses), before Coleridge’s translation followed in September of the next year, much of it in dramatic blank verse (Coleridge translated about half of the play and summarised the remainder in prose). The richly annotated edition from Oxford University Press, however, contains not only this *Faust* translation of 1821 together with the outlines by Retzsch, but also – and this increases its worth still more – offers the whole of the translations by Soane (*Extracts from Göthe’s Tragedy of Faustus, Explanatory of the Plates by Retzsch* [sic]) and Daniel Boileau (*Retzsch’s* [sic] *Series of Twenty-Six Outlines Illustrative of Goethe’s Tragedy of Faust*), as well as the extracts from *Faust* in de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne*, part two, chapter 23 (translated into English by Francis Hodgson, as McKusick newly identifies), and finally the *Faust* translations by John Anster (June 1820 in *Blackwood’s*) and by Lord Francis Leveson-Gower (1823). More than this really cannot be expected from a scholarly edition.

Each of these sections is supplied with informative headnotes. The annotation, especially of the Coleridge translation, is exemplary, and by means of parallel passages and echoes provides further material to support the ascription to Coleridge. Burwick, scholar of English and Comparative Literature, internationally recognised expert on Romanticism and editor of the forthcoming *Coleridge Handbook* (Oxford University Press), is responsible for all sections of the text apart from the 28-page extract from de Staël; McKusick for this, for the computer-assisted stylistic comparison, the index, and finally for the proof reading as well. This may have been a mistake, for in the otherwise irreproachably prepared edition one keeps coming across absurd mistakes in German, e.g. right at the beginning in the ‘Chronology’: ‘*Faust. Ein* [sic. for ‘Eine’] *Tragödie*’; ‘aus’ is turned into a meaningless ‘ans’, and ‘Lock- und Gaukelwerk’ into a grotesque ‘Loch- und Gaukelwerk’ [Loch = hole!] (xliii); not to mention ‘Hexenkuche’ [i.e. a dialectical witches’ pie, a mistake for ‘Hexenküche’, witches’ kitchen]. Admittedly Coleridge too had certain problems with the cases and umlauts of the German language, but such instances of carelessness remain nevertheless irritating.

The qualities of Coleridge’s translation of *Faust* – so it may be called from now on – will be debated (in my judgement there is wonderfully successful material alongside some less inspired). However, the importance of this new edition seems to me incontestable: it is a milestone for the research of reception history, a milestone too for comparative literature, and especially for the exploration of Anglo-German literary relationships in the nineteenth century. The editors deserve thanks for their efforts and for their courage, for their thesis will not go unchallenged; Coleridgeans are not generally known for unanimity of opinion. It was also courageous of the editors to decide to present such a text belatedly, after the multi-volume, definitive Bollingen edition of Coleridge’s collected works was at last completed – a text, moreover, that must reignite the discussion about Coleridge as translator and mediator of German culture to English-speaking countries, but also the basic discussion about the boundaries of his *oeuvre* and what is to be considered as canonical. If this *Faust* text is by Coleridge, it is less ephemeral than much that appears in the Bollingen edition.

The question remains as to why Coleridge uncharacteristically insisted on anonymity in this case, and equally uncharacteristically protected this anonymity. Once again, several explanations are possible. The most important may be that Goethe's reputation in England was highly dubious at this time: his religious and moral views – or what was rumoured of them – were considered very suspect, in that they were far too liberal and unorthodox. In 1820 Coleridge, on the other hand, in contrast to his radicalism of the 1790s, was already very conservative in political as well as religious and moral issues: so it is understandable that he did not want to be openly associated with Goethe, whose status he nevertheless acknowledged. Perhaps Coleridge was also not perfectly persuaded of the quality of his own translation. And then there was the unfulfilled commission from 1814, and from his usual publisher, too, an affair that had perhaps better not be re-opened. These were sufficient reasons – but he needed the money.

So we end up with a double irony: Coleridge, who failed even to begin so much of what he announced, and failed to complete so much of what he began, had in this case of a successfully completed project to deny that he had ever begun it: 'I never put pen to paper'. And because it sometimes takes a relatively long time for a thing like this to come to light, the work stands outside the completed Bollingen *Collected Works* as an outward sign of this typical Coleridgean muddle, graced by the customary, traditionally dignified 'Author's Works' design of the noble Clarendon Press. Coleridge himself might well have been the first to recognise that this is possibly emblematic of his life and work.

Christoph Bode (LMU Munich).