

Faustus. From the German of Goethe. Translated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ed. Frederick Burwick and James C. McKusick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. liv + 335. Cloth £ 85.00.

When, after almost two centuries, it is newly claimed that a major writer, critic, and poet has translated an important work, perhaps the most important work, of another world famous author and poet, then attention, even controversy, is secured. In September 1821 in London appeared an anonymous English translation of selections from Part I of Goethe's *Faust*, with illustrations by Henry Moses based on the 1816 series of twenty-six engravings by Moritz Retzsch. The publisher Thomas Boosey never divulged the translator, and no author ever claimed the work. In 1971, Paul M. Zall presented evidence that the translator was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This book, edited by one of Zall's former students, James McKusick, now a well-known critic, and by romantic scholar Frederick Burwick acknowledges Zall's work immediately but makes the claim for Coleridge in much greater detail.

Controversy surrounding this attribution stems in part from the wording of the title of the book, which leaves no doubt about the translator. Furthermore, the Clarendon Press has published the edition in a format that associates it with definitive editions by canonical authors. Even though the editors eventually refer to their judgment of authorship as a "hypothesis" (e.g., pp. 318, 325), the general tenor of their analysis and statements often conveys the sense that they have categorically identified and are presenting "Coleridge's translation" (e.g., p. xxiv). It would have served scholarly convention somewhat better, and avoided one flash point, had the book been entitled "Faustus. From the German of Goethe. A Translation Newly Attributed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge." After all, it remains an attribution, however well supported. There is no evidence yet available that with absolute security and certainty identifies Coleridge as the translator—no statement on his part, no manuscript, no publishing records.

In fact, Coleridge once remarked that he "never put pen to paper" to write such a translation. It has been objected, too, that the translator is identified as "a gentleman of literary eminence," and that this phrase would not be applied to Coleridge. Yet, it is something of a stock phrase used for, yes, anonymous translators as early as the 1790s,

and used, too, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* just one month, August 1821, before the translation in question appeared. Moreover, Coleridge may well have had misgivings about taking credit for the work on at least two counts. First, he had agreed in 1814 to perform this work for John Murray but failed to do so, despite the promise of payment. Second, the nature of *Faust* raised for Coleridge religious and moral scruples; the published introduction to the translation half apologizes for the difference in taste separating German and English readers. In an ambiguous letter to Boosey, he had written about the then projected translation that, "without my name I should feel the objections and the difficulty greatly diminished." If Coleridge denied or concealed authorship that was indeed his, it wouldn't be the first time he told a fib or hid something. Besides, Coleridge might have consoled himself that his statement about having "never put pen to paper" for such a translation was literally true (if it was), for he dictated some of what he wrote, for example, almost certainly sections of *Biographia Literaria*, including those in which he draws from German texts. Or perhaps he used pencil. His slippery statements provide no clear proof one way or the other. As added bits of information, Sir Walter Scott believed in 1818 that Coleridge was "engaged in translating Faust," and Goethe, too, wrote his own son in 1820 that Coleridge was at precisely that task.

So, the real question is, how convincing is this attribution? It is quite convincing and I believe correct—not absolutely airtight and not without room for conceivable doubt, but strong nevertheless. The attribution meets the criteria of civil proceedings in many countries, which is preponderance of evidence. If for some readers the attribution raises reasonable doubt, fair enough, but the work of McKusick and Burwick is generally meticulous and informed. Burwick lists at length (pp. 83-110, printed in small typeface) many verbal echoes and phrases in the translation connected in one manner or another with Coleridge's work (those pages reward scrutiny). This reviewer agrees with almost all of them as plausible echoes and at times strong associations with Coleridge's poetry and plays. This reviewer identified about a dozen more. One can quibble, but such evidence is, by accumulation, quite solid. Sands make the mountain. McKusick then presents a stylometric analysis of the translation now attributed to Coleridge as well as of other translations of *Faust*. He concludes that this analysis points to Coleridge as clearly the most likely candidate for the September 1821 work. That seems again a sound

conclusion, and any reader or critic may run tests with the same software (“Signature”) or another similar program. Of course, given the nature of statistical analyses of style and word frequency, it has always been harder to prove that a particular person wrote a specific anonymous work than to prove that a particular person almost certainly did not. The ear of this reviewer found the prose summaries of parts of *Faust* interspersed in the verse translation less convincingly attributable to Coleridge than the poetry. (Zall thought this, too—that there might be a collaborator lurking in those prose passages, a point mentioned on the last page of this edition.) McKusick admits that collaboration of some sort, even in the verse, cannot be ruled out. His statements of attribution seem less definitive than Burwick’s.

Yet, the consistency of qualitative criticism and of statistical stylistic analysis combined clearly points to Coleridge more than to anyone else as the author of the 1821 translation, and with a style similar to his own play *Remorse*, a point he himself had discussed with Murray. Even while this edition has raised questions, it advances considerably the study of the 1821 translation, rescuing it from several misunderstandings and partial discussions and bringing it into brighter light. J.C.C. Mays, excellent editor of Coleridge’s poetry, is on record stating that the attribution “remains unproven,” yet many attributions remain a matter of degree, and it is by degrees that they have become accepted as a change in kind. In his recent book on Coleridge and the fine arts, Morton Paley accepts the attribution. Various views are collected at <http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Faustus.htm>. Controversy will likely continue (a recent, long review by Joyce Crick in *The Coleridge Bulletin* [Winter 2008] is of interest), but any reader of Coleridge or Goethe, or of romanticism generally, should examine the work of Burwick and McKusick as a compelling model of a complex attribution.

Note of other Parallels (added May 2012)

- many-colour'd--"Religious Musings", "A Stranger Minstrel"; though a common phrase
- mind's eye--STC comments on Shakespeare's use of this phrase and uses it, e.g., in *The Friend* 1818

- unsouled--*Wallenstein* Part I, though occurs in other writers
- is an egotist--various places in STC
- intuition--at that time a somewhat unusual word that STC makes much of in *BL*
- girt round / girt around--"Kubla Khan"
- [just a few lines later, image of:] rocks / And beat them to fragments--"Kubla Khan"
- the plank / Across the pool--Sonnet to the River Otter ("Thy crossing plank")

In addition to what is said in the review in *Archiv* about the history of the phrase "a gentleman of literary eminence", the yoking of "gentleman" and "literary" soon became a formula for *not* indicating a gentleman in more common usage. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), seventeen years later, it's an object of satire. This occurs in chapter 48 several places; here is one example: a certain man "had dramatised in his time two hundred and forty-seven novels as fast as they had come out--some of them faster than they had come out--and who WAS a literary gentleman in consequence." Nicholas calls him "a gentleman of such great distinction".

James Engell
 Harvard University
 © 2012 all rights reserved