

# Comments on the Translation of *Faustus from the German of Goethe* (1821)

Guido Kohlbecher

---

I wonder if Coleridge, though well-versed in German, as a translator, was likely to get the following things so wrong.

The line numbers are taken from the Hamburg edition of *Faust* cited in the 2007 OUP edition.

The following translations are used for comparison:

George Madison Priest <<http://www.levity.com/alchemy/faust01.html>>

Walter A. Aue <<http://myweb.dal.ca/waue/Trans/Goethe-Gretchen.html>>

## Lines 359-62, Faust:

Und ziehe schon an die zehen Jahr  
Herauf, herab und quer und krumm  
Meine Schüler an der Nase herum -  
Und sehe, daß wir nichts wissen können!

and I for ten long years  
Have led my pupils up and down, thro' paths  
Involv'd and intricate, only to find  
That nothing can be known.

“Have led” is misleading, since Goethe says “have misled/ led astray”.  
Literally “pulled by the nose”. “led up and down...” fails to do justice to the scholar’s  
confession of having fooled his students.

And now I've nearly ten years through  
Pulled my students by their noses to and fro  
And up and down, across, about,  
And see there's nothing we can know! (Priest)

## Lines 1338-40, Mephistopheles:

Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!  
Und das mit Recht; denn alles, was entsteht,  
Ist werth, daß es zu Grunde geht;

I am the spirit who says ‘nay’ to all,  
And rightly so; for all that have existence  
Deserve that they should perish [...]

The original says: “all that comes into existence / Deserves that it should perish”: singular,  
referring to everything, not to persons.

I am the Spirit that denies!  
And rightly too; for all that doth begin  
Should rightly to destruction run;  
'Twere better then that nothing were begun. (Priest)

### **Lines 3374-3413 - Margaret [Gretchen] at her Spinning-Wheel**

The translator is partly mistaken again and poetically little inspired:  
3374-7

Meine Ruh' ist hin  
Mein Herz ist schwer;  
Ich finde sie nimmer  
Und nimmermehr.

My peace of mind's ruined;  
My bosom is sore,  
I ne'er meet him now,  
I shall ne'er meet him more.

The last two lines are wrong. "I (shall) ne'er meet him": "sie" refers to "Ruhe", not Faust! Of course, she will see (meet) Faust again, but she will not recover her "peace of mind" until that happens.

My peace is gone,  
my heart is sore,  
I'll find it never  
and nevermore. (Aue)

---

3378-9

Wo ich ihn nicht hab',  
Ist mir das Grab

Where he is not present  
A dark grave I see".

No, she does not see anything.

Without him here  
my grave is near (Aue)

---

3380-1

Die ganze Welt  
Ist mir vergällt

The universe round  
Is a prison to me:

No, there is no trace of “prison” in German. “vergällt” conjures up the bitterness of “gall”.

my world around  
is sadness bound. (Aue)

---

3382-5

Mein armer Kopf  
Ist mir verrückt,  
Mein armer Sinn  
Ist mir zerstückt.

My poor shatter'd reason  
Is quickly departing:  
And my poor foolish heart  
With sorrow is smarting.

Inadequate and very clumsy, too.

My sorry head  
is all forlorn,  
my sorry soul  
to pieces torn. (Aue)

---

3397

- Seiner Augen Gewalt

The fire of his eye(s):

No, power or might!

---

3406-7

Mein Busen drängt sich  
nach ihm hin;

My wild bosom swells  
At the thought of his coming.

“at the thought of his coming”: there is nothing the like in German.  
Just “toward him”.

My bosom presses  
toward his skin; (Aue)

---

3408-9

Ach, dürft' ich fassen  
Und halten ihn

Oh! could I but clasp him,  
And keep him from roaming;

“keep him from roaming”: no, hold him tight!

oh, may I hold him  
and draw him in (Aue)

---

3410-1

Und küssen ihn,  
So wie ich wollt’,

And give him one kiss,  
As I should then so madly,

Why one? She says she would like to smother him with kisses!

“As I should then so madly”: no, she wants to!

and may I kiss him  
as wants my heart (Aue)