

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

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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)