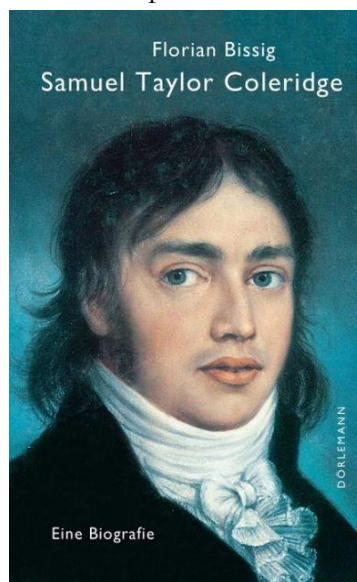


Christoph Bode
reads
In Xanadu: Gedichte Englisch/Deutsch
edited and translated by Florian Bissig
&
Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Eine Biografie
by Florian Bissig¹

TO CELEBRATE THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's birthday, freelance journalist, critic, and translator Florian Bissig has published two volumes with Swiss quality press Dörlemann: a nicely produced bi-lingual selection of STC's finest and most canonical poetry and, as a companion volume, an equally handsome, concise, and readable life of the polymath. Bissig brings the best qualifications to this project: his Ph.D. thesis (University of Zurich) was on *Coleridge and Communication* (Trier: WVT, 2015), and he evidently has an ear and a feeling for the nuances and registers of both the English and German language that bode well for the enterprise.

The selection of poetry has all the usual anthology pieces—'The Eolian Harp', 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', 'Frost at Midnight', 'Fears in Solitude', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Christabel', 'Kubla Khan', 'France: An Ode', 'Dejection: An Ode', and 'The Pains of Sleep'—but also, fittingly for a German audience, STC's sonnet to Friedrich Schiller or STC's appropriation of 'Chamouny beym Sonnenaufgange' by Friederike Brun, plus 'To William Wordsworth', 'Psyche', and 'Work Without Hope', along with a few others, 20 all in all. Given the limitations of space, you cannot argue with that. The volume provides a fair idea of the breadth and variety as well as of the specific signature of Coleridge's poetic oeuvre.

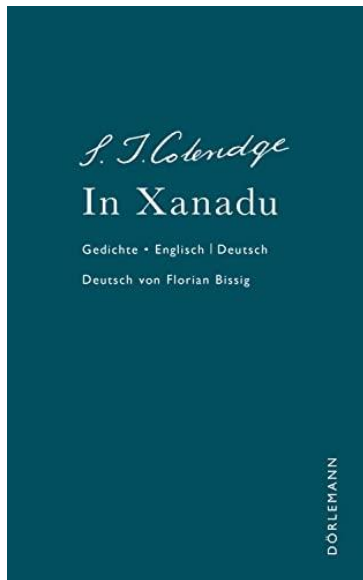
However, the author's and publishers' claim that there has never been a translation of such a selection must be taken quite literally: never of *this* selection. Of course, Coleridge has been translated variously into German, from Ferdinand Freiligrath's rendition of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1836) to Edgar Mertner's bi-lingual volume *S. T. Coleridge, Gedichte Englisch/Deutsch* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1973), which not only saw a second edition in 1989, but of which parts were also taken over into Raimund Borgmeier's anthology *Gedichte der englischen Romantik Englisch/Deutsch* (Stuttgart:



¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *In Xanadu: Gedichte Englisch/Deutsch*, ed. and trans. Florian Bissig (Zurich: Dörlemann, 2022); Florian Bissig, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Eine Biografie* (Zurich: Dörlemann, 2022).

Reclam, 1980, repr. 1989). So, for German-speaking readers of Coleridge who, for whatever reason, could not read him in the original, his poetry was never the complete *terra incognita* that, for marketing purposes I suppose, it is here pretended to have been. And, to be sure, STC is still taught in schools and universities in German-speaking countries—but *in English*, of course. On the other hand, it is true that Mertner's volume, of whose 25 poems 14 are identical with Bissig's 20 (among them also 'Christabel')—a significant overlap, I would say—is a line-by-line *prose* translation, which simply tries to make STC's poetry linguistically accessible to students of English and displays no pretence to any poetical achievement of its own. Bissig's translation, by way of contrast, adheres to the original metre, rhyme scheme, and stanza form, which makes the translator's job so much more of a challenge. His are true *Nachdichtungen*, in the service of what Bissig regards as his prime objective: to be, like Coleridge himself, a mediator, a go-between, a facilitator and to re-establish, on the continent, a poet and a thinker whose standing in European Romanticism should be beyond any doubt, even today.

As a rule, Bissig's solutions are very felicitous. For example, 'und mit einem Eindruck Welt / Und Himmel weckte' (for 'hath awakened earth and



sky / With one sensation', from 'The Nightingale') or 'Und nun schon fast Gewohnheit meiner Seele ist' (for 'And now is almost grown the habit of my soul', from 'Dejection: An Ode') are superb gems, as are many other renditions (e.g., 'zeitzernagt' for 'time-rent' in 'To the Author of the *Robbers*'; 'Solch federleichter sanfter Zauberklang' for 'Such a soft floating witchery of sound' in 'The Eolian Harp'; or the magnificent 'Ich seh die ganze Schönheit der Natur, / Doch spüre ich sie nicht, ich seh sie nur!' for 'I see them all so excellently fair, / I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!' again in 'Dejection: An Ode'). Bissig's blank verse runs smoothly, elegantly, most naturally, for me most convincingly in 'Ängste in Einsamkeit'. The quality of his translations is

so remarkably high that any less felicitous wording stands out conspicuously. For example, 'Gedankengift in meinem Geist, verschwinde' totally eliminates STC's snake imagery in 'Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind' (from 'Dejection: An Ode'), and one wonders why 'Seemed *imag'd* in its vast circumference' (from 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', italics in the original) is given as 'In ganzem Umfang schien hier *dargestellt*', when '*vorgestellt*' would have served the purpose much better; or why, 'I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within' from 'Dejection' is translated as 'Denn nicht von draußen hoff ich auf Gewinn / Von Leidenschaft und Leben, die entstehen drin', when 'außen'

(instead of 'draußen') would have been marked the 'within/without' contrast more appropriately.

But these are minor quibbles. A far more disconcerting feature is Bissig's use of textual sources: without a reason given and indeed inexplicably, throughout his selection of poetry, he does not use the Bollingen *Collected Works* as his basis, but rather the 1912 *Complete Poetical Works*, edited by E. H. Coleridge. Considering the enormous amount of scholarly work that went into the Bollingen—a century's worth of research and textual editing!—it is simply inconceivable to me why an *Anglist* and translator should not make use of this treasure trove of an edition. It is true that in his annotations Bissig gives a few scarce pieces of information about major textual variants (of which there are so many, so many . . .), but why should one wilfully ignore all the textual scholarship that has been carried out on, say, 'Frost at Midnight' alone? Why refuse a reliable textual edition that reflects the present state of editorial and scholarly art? Were there copyright issues?

It is not that Bissig ignores the Bollingen altogether: in his biography he references the Bollingen throughout for all the *prose* texts he mentions or translates from, and likewise he makes ample use of the *Letters* and the *Notebooks*; but as to the poetry, the *PW* of 1912 inconsistently remains the standard reference for him. Of the biographies, Bissig only makes use of Gillman's *Life* (1838) and Rosemary Ashton's (1996), bypassing, for example, W. J. Bate's monograph (1969) or Richard Holmes's splendid two-volume study (1989, 1998 respectively).

To be sure, the reader is given a coherent narrative that contains all the major phases and dramatic turning points of STC's career as poet and thinker. It is a tale that integrates the life and the works in a plausible, non-mechanic way. It identifies Coleridge's ongoing concerns, the continuities in a patchwork of discontinuities. It makes for pleasant reading; it has all the familiar anecdotes in it. Familiar? Ah, that is exactly the point: it offers nothing new to those who are already somewhat familiar with Coleridge. But then, argues Bissig explicitly, in writing this companion volume to his translations, he never sought the acclaim of confirmed Coleridgeans but only wants to acquaint the general reading public (who are *not* familiar with the man) with the person and his works, to make them curious about both. But why should these two aims be mutually exclusive with regard to textual reliability? Or when it comes to adequately representing the state of the art in biographical research?

Judging from the first reviews in German-speaking countries, which were positive and partly enthusiastic, Bissig has succeeded in interesting at least his reviewers. If you know little, you can discover a lot. To be a good mediator is something. And Bissig, having his eye on the non-academic market, *is* a good mediator, no mistake. But more so on account of his impressive and sometimes outstanding poetic renditions than on that of his biographic endeavours. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I suppose, would have been the first to see the superior merit in that, for it was his own forte.