Stefan Weidner

# *The Oriental Question*

An attempt to reconcile Goethe and Edward Said

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Abstract

*On the face of it, the romantic image of the East presented in Goethe's* West-Eastern Divan *and the postcolonial critique of the European view of the East in Edward Said's principal work* Orientalism *are difficult to square with one another. In our attempt to bridge the gulf between these two perspectives, we are aided by Goethe's own conception of a world literature, in which he confronts orientalist clichés and helps us to discover the 'Orient' as a multicultural space for the imagination that has a Utopian potential.*

No 'Oriental Question' can ever be posed innocently. Its beginnings go back to the age of Goethe. There was much talk of 'The Eastern Question' in the nineteenth century. It was a question typical of colonialism, and its focus was how to deal with the last great Muslim power, the Ottoman Empire. Though it must be said that in answering this 'question', the Ottomans themselves, the forerunners of the Turks of today, played no significant part. They weren't asked; the European powers resolved the Eastern Question amongst themselves.[i] Indeed, such a question already indicates some measure of distance. Anyone asking it does not entirely belong to the realm under discussion. The Eastern Question, posed by a superior Europe, could therefore only spell trouble for the Orient itself. The nub of the Eastern Question was how the Ottoman Empire, even while it was still a living polity in its own right, could be carved up 'fairly' between the major European powers. In some regards, the old Eastern Question survives even today, primarily in the form of the still-unresolved matter of Europe's relationship with Turkey.

Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* appeared at almost exactly the same time as this Eastern Question, and has the same contemporary historical roots. Spring 1814 saw the publication of a translation of the works of Hafiz by the Austrian orientalist and diplomat Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall, who had studied the Persian poet while resident in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Hafiz lived in the city of Shiraz during the fourteenth century. His lyric verse, or ghazals, in which every line ends on the same rhyme, were regarded as the epitome of oriental poetry. The region within which his poetry was known and admired extended far beyond the territory of what is now Iran, encompassing

a broad but remarkably homogeneous cultural area extending from the Balkans in the west to Indian in the east.[ii]

Hafiz was also considered to be the model for the lyric poetry that was produced at the Ottoman court, and written in a hybrid language of Persian and Turkish.[iii] It is therefore hardly surprising that Hammer-Purgstall first became aware of this Persian poet in what was then the cosmopolitan cultural melting pot of Istanbul, which we nowadays tend to see as an exclusively Turkish metropolis.

It is also noteworthy where, and by whom, Hafiz's ghazals were first printed (in Persian script) and published in book form: in 1791 in Kolkata, in British-controlled India, at the instigation of The Asiatic Society of Bengal.[iv] Up to that point, they had only been disseminated either orally or in handwritten manuscripts. Colonialism and Western philologists' discovery of Eastern poetry are closely connected.

Shortly after Hammer-Purgstall, who was working in Vienna as a court interpreter at the time, had translated Hafiz's *Divan* – in this context, the term simply means 'Collected Poems' – the Congress of Vienna was held in the autumn of 1814. It established a new order within Europe, and this restructured Europe would in turn give rise to the 'Eastern Question' several decades later. A few days after the Congress of Vienna ended in June 1815, Napoleon was defeated for the final time at the Battle of Waterloo. At the same time, Goethe wrote the first poems of his *West-Eastern Divan*.

Yet the connection between the Eastern Question, emerging colonialism and the genesis of the *West-Eastern Divan* goes even deeper than this. By the time Hammer-Purgstall translated Hafiz, the European powers, foremost among them France, Great Britain and Austria, had already been conducting a kind of 'data mining' in the East for over a century. Such activities included learning oriental languages and collecting, publishing and translating manuscripts.

The most famous case of such literary 'data mining' is associated with the name of Antoine Galland, the discoverer and first translator of the story collection *The Thousand and One Nights*. In recognition of his work as a collector of oriental manuscripts, he was granted the honorary title of *Antiquaire du Roi* by the Sun-King Louis XIV. Goethe also purchased a number of oriental manuscripts for the library of his patron Karl August, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar.

The Eastern Question thus manifests itself as early as the eighteenth century in this passion for collecting. The gathering of information was the prerequisite for questioning the prevailing social and political structures in the East. Only someone who knew something

about the region could fathom what might be garnered there, and how to go about doing so. Accordingly, in dealing with oriental literature, the European superiority in media technology such as book printing made itself felt.[v] The *Divan* of Hafiz, printed in Kolkata, was just one of the small 'immutable mobiles' that sociologist Bruno Latour has identified as the decisive factor in European domination. Latour defines these phenomena as resources, such as the written word or images, that could (thanks to the printing press) be transmitted reliably ('without corruption' in Latour's phrase, i.e. with no possibility of intermediate alteration) across great spatial and temporal distances. A piece of information that was gleaned in India or South America, could thus also be processed in London, Paris or Vienna and reflected back in such a way as to exert effective control even from those remote locations.[vi] In the case of literature, this meant that Western philologists were able to attain a hegemony of interpretation of these resources, which could then retroact on the regions or cultures in which the texts originated and fundamentally change those texts according to European values.

Hammer-Purgstall's translation of Hafiz and Goethe's reaction to it in the form of his *West-Eastern Divan* – just like the European discovery of *One Thousand and One Nights* a hundred years earlier – therefore represent an appropriation, reshaping and transformation of the original Hafiz or the original stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*. In line with Bruno Latour's interpretation, this can be classified as a strategic advantage on the part of Europe over the East, which was incapable of undertaking anything comparable. This effect still impacts upon our image of the East nowadays, as well as upon the self-image of people in the countries that have been labelled as 'Eastern.'

When *One Thousand and One Nights* was still a purely oriental story collection and no European knew about it, it only consisted of 282 nights! That was enough to count as an infinite amount – and indeed the notion of 'infinity plus one' was precisely what the figure in the original Arabic manuscript was meant to convey. It was Galland who took the figure literally and really did assemble 1001 stories from the most diverse of sources, some of them oral. These included some of the most famous of the tales, such as *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *Sinbad the Sailor* and *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*, none of which are to be found in the original manuscript.

However, if you were to go into a bookshop in Cairo or Casablanca, Baghdad or Tehran nowadays and request a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights*, you'd be given one containing that number of stories, and not 282 (at most, you might find that the odd suggestive passage had been censored). The post-Enlightenment European lack of imagination, which failed to identify this exaggeration as the rhetorical figure known as hyperbola, but instead took it at face value, has in the interim also set a precedent for the

East. In the case of *One Thousand and One Nights* this loss was turned to advantage, in so far as we readers were treated to far more stories, tales which in the meantime have been unhesitatingly accepted as autochthonous, despite the fact that no sources can be found for them in the original Arabic.

Another important factor in this transformative back-projection is the translation, whose effect is by no means confined to the target language. During the medieval period in the East, the *One Thousand and One Nights* did the rounds as a form of popular literature recounted by storytellers. The simplistic, in part even incorrect, language in which it was couched made it worthless for the educated classes; instead it was seen as lowbrow entertainment in the manner of modern blockbusters. But with Galland's French translation, from the early eighteenth century on they were promoted to the status of refined entertainment for the higher echelons of society – namely, all those who could read and afford to buy books. Over the course of the eighteenth century these fairy tales also became so popular in serious-minded literary circles that Goethe was moved to compare himself with Scheherazade, the narrator in the frame story of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Having been thus ennobled, *One Thousand and One Nights* became something quite different to the undervalued piece of popular literature it had traditionally been seen as even in the East, its place of origin. And at least from the twentieth century on, it also came to be regarded even there as a serious work of literature, and allusions to it in the contemporary literature of the East are numerous. Yet in so far as Arabic writers identify with or refer to the tales, the image that they have of themselves also alters. The reason for this change is that the stories in their current form are essentially a European product, in the sense that they epitomize a European perspective on an Orient for which *One Thousand and One Nights* was long emblematic. But because this perspective is deeply ambivalent – with the capacity to glamourize and mystify the East yet also to scorn and condemn it – the adoption of such a viewpoint in the East itself leads to a veritable 'cultural schizophrenia,' a phenomenon identified in an eponymously titled book by the Iranian philosopher and religious scholar Daryush Shayegan.[vii] However, the very best means of dominating and controlling an adversary or competitor is to sow division among his ranks, foment internecine strife and provoke civil war.

### *The Jews: Europe's Own Orient*

Even during the lifetime of Hammer-Purgstall and Goethe, the European image of the East became increasingly Janus-faced. On the one hand, an ideal, good and inspired East manifested itself, especially in art, literature and music. This was a purely intellectual,

imaginary and imagined East, and was the passion of a small group of writers, composers, painters, philologists, thinkers and social misfits. Diametrically opposed to this view was the East as seen by European politicians, military commanders and businessmen. They regarded it as problematic, disruptive and even downright repellent. Accordingly, their view was that the East needed to be reformed and Europeanized if it were not to end up on the refuse dump of history. The idea of the moribund East, with vultures circling overhead and the European powers ready and waiting to carve it up among themselves, was a mainstream obsession at this time, preoccupying politics, the press, debating clubs, the military and sundry adventurers. This, then, was the abiding theme of the Eastern Question. [viii]

Modern commentators are all too ready to suppress the fact that this broad tendency towards marginalizing and devaluing everything Eastern also affected European Jews, who in spite of all efforts at emancipation were still looked upon as the Orient in the Occident, the problematic stranger within the European homeland – a role that is nowadays assigned to Muslims. By way of illustrating how Jews were spoken of at that time as 'Orientals', I cite the example of a German Professor of Oriental Studies who was very eminent in his day. He was one of the foremost German anti-Semites of the nineteenth century and an ardent nationalist. His name was Paul de Lagarde 1827–91). In his treatise *The Role of Religious Communities in the State* (1881), he wrote: '*[Their] alien nature is stressed every day and in the most striking fashion by the Jews – who nevertheless wish to be made equal to the Germans – through the style of their synagogue. What is the sense of raising claims to be called an honorary German and yet building the holiest site that one possesses in the Moorish style, so as to never let anyone forget that one is a Semite, an Asiatic, a Foreigner.*'[ix]

The bitter irony of this claim is that the construction of synagogues in the Moorish style was an innovation of the nineteenth century, and was an expression of playful historicism. Building erected in this orientalizing style of architecture, such as the New Synagogue in Berlin, the former Leopoldstadt Temple in Vienna or (an especially magnificent example) the Spanish Synagogue in Prague, always had something of the theatrical stage-set about them. The Yenidze Tobacco Factory in Dresden was built in the same idiom, as was the steam-engine house for the imperial palace at Sanssouci in Potsdam and the Opera House in Tbilisi. It is particularly perfidious to accuse the Jews of being responsible for such an out-and-out European architectural fashion as this Oriental Style. Yet for Lagarde and his fellow anti-Semites, this accusation served the purpose of branding the Jews as Orientals and '*Semites, Asiatics, and Foreigners*.'

Talk of the 'Eastern Question' has much the same ring to it as the 'Jewish Question', which was also widely discussed at the time: they both had the same racist roots. The French

orientalist Ernest Renan wrote: 'The Semitic spirit has manifested itself in just two truly pure forms: the Hebrew or Mosaic, and the Arab or Islamic.'[x] The Jews represented the Orient within Europe, the despised Semitic element of society. By contrast, the Islamic world represented the Orient outside of Europe, the '*Semites, Asiatics, and Foreigners*.' We are indebted to Edward Said and some of his students for highlighting the analogy between Judaism and the Islamic Orient within European racism. Edward Said described 'Orientalism', namely the pseudoscientific denigration of Arabs, as a 'secret aspect of Western anti-Semitism.'[xi] Said wrote: The Arab is conceived of now as a shadow that dogs the Jew. In that shadow – because Arabs and Jews are Oriental Semites – can be placed whatever traditional, latent mistrust a Westerner feels towards the Oriental.'[xii]

***The Orientalist Love of the East***

In view of Edward Said's mordant criticism of all clichés and our propensity to denigrate the 'Orient' and all things 'oriental', how might it be possible to construe Europe's love affair with the East not as a capricious whim, a blind infatuation or a form of mental derangement or aberration but rather as an expression of genuine, deep need, a manifestation of a yearning and a highly political, Utopian desire?

The political dimension of the European love of the Orient only emerges when we contrast it with this other, disparaging image of the East and ask ourselves how the two fit together and how it is that that both these perspectives on the Orient can not only coexist but also even derive from the same source (namely Europe's global colonial expansion) and yet still have produced such contradictory reactions? How might we reconcile the views of Goethe and Said without doing either of them an injustice or treating one or other of them as an aberration or relativising it? And who could possibly be better placed to pose this question – this new and far better 'Eastern Question' – than us, two hundred years after the publication of the *West-Eastern Divan*?

We can only hope to fully understand this love of the East, which first blossomed during the Romantic period, if we view it against the background of its counterpart, nationalism. The discovery of the alien and exotic in the form of largely imagined Orient was accompanied by the discovery of the equally imaginary sense of nationhood. According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is nothing more than an 'imagined community.'[xiii]

These two concepts – that of the nation and that of the East – stood in an antagonistic relationship to one another. While nationalists like Lagarde disparaged the Orient and

lambasted the Jews as supposed Orientals, more critical intellects appealed to the Orient as a corrective to narrow-minded nationalism.

Examples of this are Goethe's integration of the Orient into his concept of world literature, or the incorporation of eastern poetry into the German language in the work of the indefatigable poet and translator Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866), who endeavoured to blend a cosmopolitan sensibility with his undeniably nationalistic outlook. He set forth the principle guiding his translation of ancient Arabic verse in a poem prefacing his collection of these works – the addressees here are the Arabic poems themselves:

*O kommt im schlichten Hemde*
*Zum buntgemischten Mahl!*
*Ihr sollt und seid ihr Fremde,*
*Nicht fremd sein hier zumal.*
*Ich bring' euch als die meinen*
*So möget ihr erscheinen*
*Im deutschen Gastversammlungssaal.*[xiv]

[No matter how simply dressed you are, you're welcome/ At this colourful, varied feast! /And though you hail from far away, /You won't stand out as foreign here. / I'll bring you along as my family / So you can make your entrance /In this German assembly hall for guests.]

These verses voice the Utopian notion that the German language might become a haven for the most diverse of identities. We note that the 'feast' which Rückert mentions is 'colourful, varied', and that, despite coming 'from far away' the foreigners should not feel out of place 'in the German assembly hall for guests' (that is to say, the German language). We may read this as a subtle commentary on Lagarde's charge against the Jews that their aim was to remain foreign wherever they migrated to. And when Rückert compares foreign poems to alien people, all we need to do is to take this metaphor literally in order to obtain an ethical yardstick for our attitude toward foreign migrants today.[xv]

So, just as Europe was on the point of organizing itself into nation-states, embracing industrialization, celebrating scientific positivism, turning its eyes toward conquest of the world, and believing that all this could be justified on the basis of reason, history and the natural order of things, the Orient and the Oriental (externally in the form of the Islamic world and internally within Europe in the form of the Jewish community) began to emerge as an alternative concept to this. The result was an orientalising form of escapism, as epitomized by the lines from the first stanza of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*: 'Take flight to the pure East to taste the air of the patriarchs.' Whereas the majority of Europeans, even to the present day, have regarded the supposed otherness of the East negatively and have taken it as a pretext to intervene in the East, it was precisely this otherness that Goethe found

attractive. The image of the East that Said criticises and that of Goethe and other devotees of the Orient are fundamentally identical, in as much as in both the East is treated as different, alien and the opposite of the West; however, the way in which each evaluates the East is quite different. Anyone who was out of sympathy with the modern world of the Enlightenment found its antithesis in the Orient or believed that they could stylize the East to fulfil that role.

Rückert gave voice to this contrast between the Orient and the dawning modern world in four lines of his lyrical diary:

*Mag der Orient ewig still stehen*
*Mag der Occident schnell wie er will gehen*
*Immer bleiben jene Karawanen*
*Poetischer als diese Eisenbahnen.*[xvi]

[Let the Orient stand still for all eternity / let the Occident go as fast as it will / Their caravans will always be / More poetic than our railways.]

The West may be faster, but the East is more poetic. What do we want, speed or poetry? Or both together? In the early twentieth century, the art movement known as Futurism attempted to poetry and speed. It is a bitter irony for Futurism that it comes across as quaintly dated today, with its biplanes and speeding steam locomotives. Take, for example, this Turkish Futurist poem from 1923:

*trrrrum, trrrrum, trrrrum!*
*trak tiki tak!*
*makinalaşmak istiyorum!*
*beynimden, etimden, iskeletimden geliyor bu!*
*her dinamoyu altıma almak için çıldırıyorum! [...]*
*mutlak buna bir çare bulacağım*
*ve ben ancak bahtiyar olacağım*
*karnıma bir türbin oturtup*
*kuyruğuma çift uskuru taktığım gün!*
*trrrrum. trrrrum, trrrrum!*
*trak tiki tak!*
*Makinalaşmak istiyorum!*[xvii]

['Trrrrum, trrrrum, trrrrum! trak tiki tak! I want to become a machine! This impetus comes from my brain, from my flesh, from my skeleton! […] And I will only be content when I have a turbine in my stomach and screws on my tail. Trrrrum, trrrrum, trrrrum! trak tiki tak! I want to become a machine!]

The author of this work was the foremost Turkish modernist poet, Nazım Hikmet. In this poem, which is meant to be read ironically, we can see that the East soon – all too soon – found itself caught up and swept along by the maelstrom of modernity, by scientific and technological positivism. It could hardly have done otherwise. In order to resist European

encroachment, a state had to Europeanize, and none did so more thoroughly than the Ottoman Empire, which presently ceased to be the Ottoman Empire and became the Turkish Republic.

Following its defeat in the First World War, Turkey was occupied by the Allies, much like Germany after the Second World War. If Kemal Atatürk had not prevailed in the War of Independence, Turkey would most likely not exist today. However, the price for driving out the European occupation forces was an attempt at the same time to expunge all traces of the Orient from Turkey, to brutally Europeanize the country – except that this was carried out not by the Europeans but by the Turkish elite themselves. Though this was less humiliating, the end result was the same. In accordance with the official narrative of national homogeneity, this expulsion of the Orient from the Orient was accompanied by a violent ethnic cleansing of all those who were not deemed to be genuine Turks: first the genocide of the Armenians followed by the expulsion of Greeks resident in Asia Minor, who were deported from the country in the 1920s as part of a so-called 'population exchange' with Turks who had been living in Greece. The next phase of this process, particularly after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, saw the gradual expulsion or voluntary emigration of Turkey's Jewish population. Nowadays, it is once more (or perhaps still) the Kurds who are being regarded as alien elements within the Turkish state and correspondingly oppressed. Precisely the policy of alleged neo-Ottoman Renaissance that is being enacted by President Erdoğan renders the current administration incapable of establishing a positive relationship to the ethnic diversity that characterized the actual Ottoman Empire and its polyglot, cosmopolitan capital Istanbul; in terms of its cultural horizons, it is precisely Erdoğan's ruling AKP party that remains trapped inside the Anatolian provincial city of Ankara, which Atatürk established as the country's capital not only because it lay beyond the reach of the Allied European forces he was waging war against but also because, unlike the metropolis Istanbul it seemed to embody a pure and authentic Turkishness. The fact that Erdoğan invokes Islam does nothing to reverse the expulsion of the Orient from Turkey. For the driving force which also informs this revival of religious fundamentalism is also Turkish nationalism, which, like all nationalisms, stands in stark contrast to the concept and the reality of the Orient, as Rückert and Goethe knew and observed it (as, in a negative way from nationalistic motives, Paul Lagarde the anti-Semite also did).

Henceforth, even for the inhabitants of the region, the Orient possessed nothing more than an imaginary greatness – and this remains the case today, as evidenced by the ubiquitous Orient kitsch that can be seen throughout the Islamic world, especially in the construction of new mosques.

In line with the ideology exported to the rest of the world by Europe (which I have referred to elsewhere as the 'Ideology of the West'[xviii]) caravans and railways, the East and the nation-state, pre-modernity and modernity, poetry and the rhythm of machines are irreconcilable antitheses that must of necessity conflict with each other until one of them prevails and the other is beaten, destroyed, eradicated and banished.

The 'Eastern Question' was resolved in the Near and Middle East by the Orient Europeanizing itself; in Europe it was brought to an end by the Holocaust.

***Towards a New Concept of the Orient***

In view of this previous history, how might it be possible to celebrate Goethe's positive perspective on the Orient while at the same time subscribing to Edward Said's criticism of disparaging views of the East?

I maintained previously that both of these viewpoints had the same root, and could be traced back to European 'data mining' in the Orient. The prime example of this is European Oriental Studies, which Said places squarely in the firing line of his critique. At root, and ostensibly, this discipline entails an unbiased approach to philology. It edits texts such as Hafiz's *Divan* or the works of many other poets. However, what scholars chose to do with the raw material thus provided was entirely up to them. Some, like Goethe and Rückert, were inspired by it to write new poems of their own. Yet Western scholars were also free to declare Oriental poetry – and Islamic cultures as a whole – alien, unintelligible and worthless, and many did indeed do so.

The problem with this is not just that we might one time have a positive, appreciative attitude, and another take a disparaging view. The point is that both can happen simultaneously. To express things even more pointedly: if we apply Said's critique with absolute rigour, we ought to be just as critical of the positive view of the Orient as we are of the negative. For after all, even the positive view establishes an image of an unenlightened, pre-modern Orient, and posits the Orient as a different world to which one might 'flee', and which is more poetic than the West precisely because it is conceived of as being different. And is it not exactly this image that Said and other postcolonial critics have branded as 'Othering'? Even affection, even a positive viewpoint, therefore has the capacity to 'other'.

While Rückert was adamant that caravans are more poetic – which in his eyes was an unequivocally positive trait – Said would point out that the Orient isn't forever condemned to remain stuck in the age of camel caravans and that, as Nazım Hikmet set forth in his poem, it is perfectly capable of quickening its pace and developing an affinity for

technology. Consequently the association between the Orient and the caravan is problematic, and indeed was actually seen in Europe as a challenge to build railways in the East. The Germans set about doing so with construction of the Berlin–Baghdad railway, which played an important military role during the First World War. This was exactly the intention behind it.

Even more problematic is another aspect; if we find the 'Other' attractive in its 'otherness', in other words if we find the Orient beautiful because it represents pre-modernity, the poetic, and all those things that we can no longer find at home in the West, what then are we to do if, under pressure from Europe to reform itself, the Orient no longer wishes to be this poetic, slow, premodern Orient? If it no longer wants to be alien, other, Asiatic, and the Orient, but instead would prefer to become like us?

In that case, there is a danger that our admiration might in an instant turn to disenchantment, in the same way as one is disillusioned if one travels to the Near East with romantic images of the Orient in one's head and encounters nothing but skyscrapers, motorways and airports constructed by international celebrity architects. What use is there in an Orient that has long since ceased to be one?

Conversely, we could try turning the problem on its head and identifying the blind spot as residing not with the poetic lovers of the Orient as an alien entity, but instead with those, including Edward Said, who criticize and brand as racist *every* instance of 'othering'. Shouldn't the advocates of such a critical standpoint themselves be criticized for having absolutely no vision or concept for the 'other', for what lies beyond the West, aside from dismissing the whole notion as a simple aberration? Does that which is different from us and our mental image of the world even still have any place at all as the 'other' in this mode of thinking? Does it have a place in Edward Said's critical cosmos?

This topic has been addressed by a leading disciple of Edward Said, Wael Hallaq, in his book *Restating Orientalism*. Wael Hallaq comes to the conclusion that Edward Said was not only – and quite rightly! – criticizing the Western view of the Orient, but that he himself did not have any specific conception of the Orient or the Islamic world: '*Said did not develop an understanding of his own about the Orient, wavering between the Orientalists' "different" Orient that, precisely because it is different, gave rise to their prejudice and a modern and liberal Orient that would give rise to the charge of 'reconstituting' the Orient in the image of the West, no less a prejudice.*'[xix]

In so doing, Hallaq puts his finger in the same wound that I have touched upon: in Edward Said's cosmos no place has been provided for the positive image of the Orient promulgated by our poets and thinkers, both old and new. His set of critical tools is incapable of

adequately grasping them. This blind spot on Said's part is a loss, and it is important to try and close this gap and heal this wound, and moreover without screening out that vision of the Orient which, notwithstanding the fact that it has been 'othered', is still beautiful and Utopian.

The attempt to do this formed part of an answer to the fundamental question of how we might gain new perspectives vis-à-vis the issues raised by modernity, and also to the question of whether we can afford to suppress ideas which we associate with the Orient, and for which we have the Orient to thank, merely because they run the risk of falling foul of Said's damning verdict against 'Orientalism'. I am firmly of the view that we cannot afford to do so.

We have arrived at an era in which almost all the products of an optimistic faith in progress, scientific positivism, and of political and social modernity – everything, that is, to which the Orient was posited as an antithesis – are being subjected to a critical revision, and quite rightly so. For some time now, the question has no longer been which is the more poetic, caravans or railways, but rather what is still responsibly achievable. For a long time, the view that caravans might be better than railways (let alone air transport) because they are more sustainable, environmentally friendly and so on, was hardly ever advanced seriously. In our current age, however, this viewpoint (or insight) has moved firmly into the realm of the rationally plausible. Might it be the case that the Orient, so long disparaged by Europe – the Orient that both its friends, like Rückert and Goethe and its detractors were intent on presenting, imagining and portraying as anti-modern – ultimately has the better solutions?

The question is no less urgent if we think in terms of politics rather than technology. Reorganizing the world in the form of nation-states is a thoroughly modern and European notion, which in the interim has become a reality across all the continents of the world (with the exception of the Antarctic). To begin with, the concept was imbued with a sense of hope – the hope for freedom, equality and brotherhood. Yet the dangers and problems inherent in it, and the splits, divisions and ruptures that it generated, were realized by only very few (Goethe was one of them). Furthermore, it was the official policy of the West, at least following the famous Fourteen Point Plan drawn up by US President Woodrow Wilson in 1918 (especially points 12 and 13, which directly concerned the former territories of the Ottoman Empire), to recreate the East as nation-states. Across large tracts of the Islamic world, this idea was taken up enthusiastically. Once again the East showed itself to be the eager student of the West. As early as 1968, the great Syrian poet Adonis (b. 1920), whose poem begins our *A New Divan*, wrote:

*The East posed childish questions*
*While in its eyes the West*

*Was a wise man who is never wrong.*[xx]

Nowadays, almost universally throughout the Arab world, nationalism is just as prevalent, if not more so, as it is in Europe. Only, unfortunately, the wise West was wrong, and at some stage changed its mind and since then has been attempting to rein in nationalism, clearly with little success. While nationalism is thriving – since it is enjoying a revival – the borders it created are now crashing down around our ears, especially in the East. Adonis's poem ends with the following lines:

*Yet the map has changed*
*Now the world is ablaze*
*And East and West*
*Are a grave, heaped up*
*From the ashes of both.*

This latest text to date, which I am quoting here, is a perfect illustration of the combative and problem-focussed way in which contemporary writers from the East have long been reflecting upon the same questions that I have raised here. Adonis's poem can also be read as an acerbic commentary on the famous lines from Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* which we have taken as our motto:

*Wer sich selbst und andere kennt,*
*Wird auch hier erkennen:*
*Orient und Occident*
*Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.*
[Whoever knows himself and others / will recognise this too: / Orient und Occident / are no longer to be separated.][xxi]

The altered 'maps' that tore the Islamic world apart and set it 'ablaze' in the twentieth century have always been a central theme of modern Eastern literature. Salman Rushdie came to fame with his novel *Midnight's Children*[xxii], which takes as its point of departure this kind of colonial demarcation – in this case the brutally implemented partitioning of British India into Muslim and a Hindu areas, resulting in the modern states of Pakistan (and Bangladesh) and India respectively. *Victims of a Map*[xxiii] is the telling title of an anthology of modern Arabic poetry from the 1980s. This volume includes the famous lines of Mahmud Darwish, the great Palestinian poet:

*Lana baladun min kalam, takallam, takallam,*
*li-na'rifa haddan li hadha as-safar.*[xxiv]
['We have a country of words. Speak, speak, so we may know the end of this travel.']

One would hardly be in a position to criticize Palestinians, Kurds and others for striving to attain their own nation-state after Europe spent centuries believing that its mission was to favour all the peoples on Earth with this idea. However, if we think ahead into the future, it would seem a good idea to gradually either supplement the idea of the nation-state by suggesting variants or replace it by putting forward alternatives. The writers of the East are doing this already, by transgressing or questioning all established boundaries – be it literally with their feet or metaphorically with their poetic voices. They are doing this in the form of the languages in which they write, which have long since cease to be exclusively Eastern tongues; plus they are doing so with reference to wherever they happen to be living – namely all around the globe!

At this juncture I should like to recall Essad Bey (1905–1942), who was not only the first author from the East to write in German (beginning with his autobiography *Blut und Öl im Orient* ['Blood and Oil in the Orient'] in 1929) but was also a writer who willingly embraced the label 'Eastern,' made it his own and saw it as a mark of distinction. Moreover, he did so in explicit contradistinction to the various nationalisms that were running rampant in the 1930s. As a Jew by birth and a practising Muslim (yes, such people do exist!) and as an Azerbaijani of Russian descent and a naturalized German, alongside works of non-fiction he also wrote pieces of German-language literature with a decidedly oriental flavour to them, such as the romantic novel *Ali und Nino* (1937, under the pseudonym 'Kuban Said').[xxv]

And what's to stop native German speakers from also writing Arabic or Oriental literature – indeed, haven't they already been doing this for some time? As examples of this endeavour, we might cite Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* or Friedrich Rückert's verse collection *Die Weisheit der Brahmanen* (1836, 'The Wisdom of the Brahmans'). Likewise, nowadays it is perfectly possible for a Polish-German author like Stanisław Strasburger (b. 1975), in his novel *Der Geschichtenhändler* ('The Story Seller', 2009)[xxvi], to write 'Arabic' literature in Polish, as the list of Arabic sources appended to the work clearly suggests. Strasburger was directly involved in the translation of the novel into both German and Arabic.[xxvii] It would be absurd to assign an author such as this to just one nation, one culture, and one literature.

Or let us take the example of Mona Yahia, who was born into a Jewish family in Baghdad in 1954. She spent her childhood in Iraq before fleeing with her family to Israel, where she lived throughout her teenage years and where she began her

higher education. She then moved to France, and now lives in Germany, and writes in English about Iraq or the history of her family in the Ottoman Empire. The only category that adequately describes her output is 'world literature'. It would also be selling Salman Rushdie short to describe him either as an English-language or an Indian-English author. For good or ill, he is also a Muslim author, and without his Muslim background his works and the trajectory his life has taken as a persecuted writer cannot be properly understood.

We therefore propose reactivating Goethe's idea of a world literature, albeit while widening it and interpreting it afresh. Even Goethe himself recognized in the emergence of world literature a tendency toward standardization and convergence of individual literatures. There is no denying that such a phenomenon exists. This has led to a number of heated debates and given rise to book titles such as *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability.*[xxviii]

However, in order to counter such a tendency toward uniformity, Europeanization and convergence, it is vital to emphasize the essential cosmopolitanism at the heart of any idea of a world literature. This essence, as expressed in Rückert's poem about the Arabic texts that are welcome precisely because they are alien, entails comprehending and respecting the literatures of the world as an achievement and legacy of the whole of humanity, rather than of particular nations, peoples, languages or cultures. The classical literatures of the East, which Goethe wrote about in the second part of his *Divan*, entitled 'For a Better Understanding', furnish us with prime examples of this. Hafiz was, of course, anything but simply or even primarily an Iranian poet; rather, he was the poet of what Hamid Dabashi, another key disciple of Edward Said, has called 'Persian Literary Humanism'[xxix], comparable to the Latin humanism of the European Middle Ages. The former arose even slightly earlier than Latin humanism, and was more widespread and endured for longer. Furthermore, it can boast several authors who in the Farsi-speaking world are still read by many people in the original: Ferdowsi, Attar, Rumi, Saadi, Nizami, Hafiz, Omar Khayyam, and others.

The East, even when endowed with its long-discredited but still alluring name of the 'Orient', is ripe to be rediscovered and newly appreciated as a multicultural (i.e. belonging and accessible to all peoples and cultures) realm of the imagination with an immense critical and Utopian potential. In the process, the concept of world literature will help us resolve the inner conflict that has characterized our

view of the East since the Enlightenment. If the Orient and the Occident are really, as Goethe wrote, no longer to be separated, then Orientalism will cease to exist as well. We will then have correctly answered the 'Eastern Question' when it simply no longer arises.

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Stefan Weidner is an Islamic scholar, author, and translator from Arabic. From 2001 to 2016 he was editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine *Fikrun wa Fann/ Art & Thought*, which appeared in four languages and was published by the Goethe Institute to promote dialogue with the Islamic world. In recognition of his work, he has been awarded (among other accolades) the 2006 Clemens Brentano Prize, the 2007 Johann Heinrich Voß Prize and the 2018 Sheikh Hamad Translation Award. He currently lives and works at the Villa Tarabya in Istanbul.

Publications by Stefan Weidner include:

- *1001 Buch. Die Literaturen des Orients.* Edition Converso, Bad Herrenalb, 2019
- *Jenseits des Westens. Für ein neues kosmopolitisches Denken*. Hanser Verlag, Munich 2018
- *Fluchthelferin Poesie. Friedrich Rückert und der Orient.* Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2017
- Ibn Arabi: *Der Übersetzer der Sehnsüchte*. Transl. from Arabic by Stefan Weidner. Jung und Jung Verlag, Salzburg 2016.
- Adonis: *Die Verwandlungen des Liebenden*. Transl. from Arabic by Stefan Weidner. S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2011.
- *Manual für den Kampf der Kulturen.* Verlag der Weltreligionen, Frankfurt am Main 2008
- *Fes. Sieben Umkreisungen.* Ammann Verlag, Zurich 2006
- *Mohammedanische Versuchungen*.Ammann Verlag, Zurich 2004
- Mahmoud Darwish: *Wir haben ein Land aus Worten.* Transl. from Arabic by Stefan Weidner. Ammann Verlag Zürich 2002.

Translated by Peter Lewis.

i *"The British were asking, talking, writing about the Eastern Question everywhere and mostly not caring much what the Turks thought about their own Western Question."* From: Nazan Çiçek: *The Young Ottoman. Turkish Critics of the Eastern Question in the Late Nineteenth Century.* London 2010, I.B. Tauris, p. 4

ii *"For several hundred years after his death, taste for his poetry was cultivated more in India and in the Ottoman world than in Persia proper"*, writes Leonard Lewisohn in the afterword to his Hafiz translation *The Angels Knocking on the Tavern Door*, New York 2009, Harper Perennial.

iii Examples of this can be found in *Ottoman Lyric Poetry.* Ed. and trans. Walter G. Andrews et. al. Seattle 2006, Washington UP

iv *Diwan-i-Khwajah Hafez-i Shirazi; The Works of Hafez; with an account of his life and writings.* Ed. Mirza Abu Talib Khan (Calcutta, printed by Aaron Upjohn 1791)

v cf. Latour: *Drawing things together.*

vi See Erhard Schüttpelz 'Die medientechnische Überlegenheit des Westens: Zur Geschichte und Geographie der immutable mobiles Bruno Latours' In : Mediengeographie: Theorie—Analyse—Diskussion. Ed. by Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann, Bielefed, 2009, p.70: "*Anything* that will accelerate the mobility of the traces that a location may obtai about another place, or *anything* that will allow these traces to move without transformation from one place to another, will be favored."

vii Daryush Shayegan: *Schizophrénie culturelle. Les sociétés islamique face à la modernité.* Paris 1989, Albin Michel

viii Çiçek (op.cit. p.1): *"A brief glance at the political writing of the Western world in the nineteenth century shows Europeans enthusiastically discussing the Eastern Question. Between 1876 and 1885 nearly five hundred articles exploring the different aspects of this subject appeared in the ten most widely circulated monthly journals in Great Britain alone. Even the travellers wandering across the sultan's dominions throughout the century could not resist the temptation to devote at least a chapter in their diaries to the dynamics of the Eastern Question, and they speculated about the destiny of the 'senescent' Turkish Empire' at some length."*

ix Paul de Lagarde: *Die Stellung der Religionsgemeinschaften im Staat.* Quoted in Ivan Kalmar, 'Moorish Style: Orientalism, the Jews, and Synagogue Architecture,' Jewish Social Studies 7, no. 3 (2001), pp. 68–100 (here p.89).

x Renan continues: 'Admittedly one must concede that the Hebrew form soon intermingled and in a remarkable way transcended the boundaries of its unique racial spirit in many regards; and that in actual fact Arabia is the true yardstick for the Semitic spirit.' From Ernest Renan: *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* Paris 1858, L'imprimerie impériale, S. 14

xi *'I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism. That anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it in its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood.'* Edward Said: *Orientalism*, NY 1979, Vintage, p. 28f.

xii Said: *Orientalism*, p. 286

xiii Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London 2006, Verso

xiv Friedrich Rückert, *Hamâsa,* Göttingen 2004, Wallstein, p. 988.

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xvi Unpublished manuscript in the Schweinfurt archives, Rückert collection All 71a–145b.

xvii Nazım Hikmet, *Bütün şiirleri,* Istanbul 2007, p. 38

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xix Wael B. Hallaq *Restating Orientalism,* New York 2018, Columbia UP, p. 22

xx Adonis, 'A Grave for New York

xxi Goethe, Aus dem Nachlaß. In Ibid., Hamburger Ausgabe 2 (Gedichte und Epen), 121.

xxii London, 1981.

xxiii ed. by Abdullah al-Udhari, London 1984, Saqi Books

xxiv Ibid., p. 31

xxv Kurban Said: *Ali und Nino.* Munich 2000, Econ Ullstein List

xxvi Berlin 2018, Secession, (Original: *Handlarz wspomnień*, 2009)

xxvii (*Bā'ī l-ḥikāyāt*, Dar al-Adab 2013)

xxviii Emily Apter: *Against World Literature*. London 2013. Verso

xxix Hamid Dabashi: *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*. Harvard 2012, Harvard UP