

## Bringing Persia to Germany: Joseph von Hammer and Hafiz

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*My little book makes plain in all its parts  
how indebted I am to this estimable man.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,  
*West-Eastern Divan*, 'Von Hammer'

It is a well-known and oft-repeated fact that the initial spark for Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* came from his reading of Hammer's translation of Shams ad-Din Hafiz's Persian Divan into the German language. As Goethe writes, he instantly developed the wish to connect with Hafiz through literary production of his own. Goethe had used publications by Hammer before. He mentions the journal *Fundgruben des Orients* (Treasure-trove of the Orient), which Hammer edited in the years 1809–18 and also his Persian literary history, the *Geschichte der schönen Redekünste Persiens* (History of the Beautiful Arts of Persian Rhetoric) which was published in 1818. Both works Goethe valued highly, as he writes in his 'Notes And Essays for a Better Understanding of the *West-Eastern Divan*'.<sup>1</sup>

How greatly Goethe was inspired by the motto of the *Fundgruben*, 'Sag: Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes ist der Okzident, er leitet, wen er will, den wahren Pfad', becomes visible in one of the most famous poems in the *West-östlicher Divan*:

To God belongs the Orient! To God belongs the Occident!  
Northern and southern lands rest in the peace of His hands.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph von Hammer's place in German scholarship in regard to his contribution to Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* is substantial. Interestingly

enough this is not generally recognised in the scholarly history of the period. The accolade accorded to Hammer's work by the Titan of German literature Johann Wolfgang von Goethe did not, paradoxically enough, lead to a thorough treatment of Joseph von Hammer and his work. Exceptions to this rule are the works by Ingeborg Solbrig, Nima Mina and, to some extent, Hamid Tafazoli.<sup>3</sup> In general Hammer's role is limited to giving Goethe the idea for the *West-Eastern Divan*. The downplaying of Hammer goes hand in hand with the downplaying of the quality of his translations. The harsh verdicts of his contemporaries, often imposed out of personal animosity, went on being repeated by scholars of German studies, although themselves ignorant of Oriental languages, among them Hendrik Birus, who classified Hammer's translation as: 'an sich wenig inspiriert' (in itself offering little inspiration).<sup>4</sup> But also scholars of Persian and Arabic continued to misclassify Hammer's translation of Hafiz as a minor and outdated contribution to its field. Hartmut Bobzin, for example, wrote in a review about the 2003 reprint of the 1812–13 edition: 'Daß im übrigen Hammers Übersetzung in fast jeder Hinsicht überholt ist und ihren (freilich begrenzten) Wert lediglich als "Quelle" für Goethes *Divan*-Inspiration besitzt, sei am Rande vermerkt' (It should be noted by the way that Hammer's translation is outdated in almost every sense and that its (limited) value lies in acting as 'source' for Goethe's *Divan*-inspiration).<sup>5</sup> This article opposes such downplaying and attempts to acknowledge the quality of Hammer's translation of Hafiz given the time in which it was done and what was then possible.

Joseph von Hammer (1774–1856), Hammer-Purgstall after 1835, was without exaggeration the most eminent scholar of Oriental Studies Austria can boast. This is due to his tremendous productivity on the one hand and the vast variety of his interests and activities on the other. It is hard to imagine any scholarly enterprise concerning Oriental matters in the first half of the nineteenth century without Hammer-Purgstall being involved. Born in Graz, Styria, Hammer moved at a young age to Vienna and enrolled in the Oriental Academy, a school founded by Maria Theresa in 1754 with the goal of educating interpreters and diplomats in Oriental languages for the foreign service. For his entire professional life Hammer remained a civil servant of the Staatskanzlei (the foreign ministry), although he was able to devote much of his time to scholarly

matters. This was not unusual, there are several examples of Austrian diplomats trained at the Oriental Academy who published on various scholarly matters. What makes Hammer outstanding is the intensity of his studies, which easily outpaced his peers'. Due to the lack of proper language-instruction material and also due to the mode of the time, the language was taught via poetry. During his time at the Oriental Academy Hammer read a vast amount of poetry; in his memoirs he writes that he read a billion lines. In addition to the work of other Persian, Turkish and Arabic poets Hammer encountered the work of the most famous Persian poet, Hafiz. From 1798 on he spent regular evenings reading Hafiz together with his school friend Karl von Harrach. In 1799 Hammer was transferred to Constantinople, and there he heard for the first time a Persian recite verses of Hafiz 'Es war der erste Perser, den ich seine Muttersprache sprechen und Hafiz lesen hörte. Im Besitz eines Diwan's desselben mit dem Kommentar Sudi's fasste ich den Entschluss der Übersetzung ins Deutsche.' (He was the first Persian I heard speaking his mother tongue and reading Hafiz. In possession of the *Divan* itself and with Sudi's commentary I made the decision to translate it into German').<sup>6</sup> The similarity to Goethe is striking, in that the reading or listening to Hafiz becomes the starting point for translation or poetic production. It is hard to say if this passage in his memoirs, which by the way do not contain many references to Goethe, is shaped according to the latter's words in his 'Notes and Essays' quoted above. In the introduction to his translation Hammer states plainly that he began the translation in 1799 and finished it in 1806.<sup>7</sup>

Hammer's translation was, in fact, the first translation of the complete text into German. The celebrated William Jones had incorporated translations of single lines of Hafiz in his *A Grammar of the Persian Language* and also in his *Dissertation sur la littérature orientale* (Dissertation on Oriental Literature),<sup>8</sup> where he compared the verses of Hafiz with those of Horace.<sup>9</sup> Also in 1771 the Austrian diplomat of Hungarian origin, Karl Emmerich Revicky, translated poems of Hafiz into Latin and commented on the poems verse by verse. Hammer writes in his introduction that he translated approximately seven hundred poems by Hafiz from the *divan*.

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The importance of Hafiz, Shams ad-Din Muhammad Shirazi (c. 1315–90),<sup>10</sup> for Persian literary history and identity cannot be overestimated. Even today in every literary Persian house, Hafiz is regarded as the Titan of Persian literature, as Goethe would be that of German literature. However, whereas even today almost every Persian-speaking person can recite some verse by Hafiz, it is unlikely that the average German could do the same by Goethe. This difference is important because it shows the importance accorded to literature in general in Iranian culture.

Hafiz is recognised for his unmatched mastery of the nuances of Persian language in combination with a remarkable sense for rhythm and musicality, which is important for memorising the verses easily. Hammer translated Hafiz' poetry into verse, trying to reshape the Persian text into German. Hafiz's favorite form of poem is the *ghazal*, which is the form for love poetry. Hafiz uses the *ghazal* for love poetry as well, he shapes verses of unrequited love and affection for the young and beautiful *Saqi*, the cupbearer in wine houses. Thematically Hafiz opens the possibility of topics for his *ghazals* on drinking poems. '... no other poet made bacchanalia so frequent and integral a part of his poetry.'<sup>11</sup> In addition to wine and love Hafiz includes poems in which he exposes as hypocritical, often in a very witty and funny way, the superficially pious man who preaches water and drinks wine. His attacks always target the authorities. The poems challenge the self-declared authority of the officials of the time and unmask their obliquity. As Ehsan Yarshater writes: 'The wittiest lines of Hafiz are those in which he attacks the false figures of authority in the institutional religion.' And further: 'One of the main reasons for the popularity of Hafiz is precisely his trenchant gibes against the pretenders of piety in the religious establishment.' Yarshater belongs to the fraction of scholars who oppose the popular opinion that Hafiz's poetry contains secret mystical content (*lisan al-ghayb*, lit. the tongue of the unseen). 'Attempts at finding a mystical interpretation for Hafiz's praise of wine and drunkenness are not supported by his Divan.'<sup>12</sup>

Reducing Hafiz to the free-thinking rebel against the religious and stately authorities alone, has been opposed by many, prominently by Annemarie Schimmel, who stressed the multifaceted and manifold possibilities of interpretation of Hafiz's poetry. She was very much convinced that Hafiz's poetry was strongly embedded in the mystical literary

tradition of Shiraz and had a strong mystical element and gave several examples of the diverse possibilities for interpreting his poems.<sup>13</sup>

For the European reader during the romantic development of the enlightenment idea of freedom of thought, this aspect of Hafiz's poetry was especially favourable. John D. Yohannan goes so far as to say: 'Hafiz in the Age of Reason could only be perceived as a sort of pseudo-classical lyricist – the "Persian Anacreon".'<sup>14</sup> Goethe was strongly attracted by the anti-authoritarian attitude suggested by Hammer's translation, but this did not prevent him from interpreting Hafiz more broadly than Hammer, as we can see in the poetry of the *West-Eastern Divan*:

But you are mystically pure because they do not understand you –  
you who without being pious, are blessed! They will never concede  
you that.<sup>15</sup>

The key phrase for me is to be blessed without being pious. The independent, free, uninfluenced by orthodox theology Hafiz seemed for Goethe to be the ideal twin. This did not hinder Goethe from seeing the mystical dimension in the poetry, as Annemarie Schimmel has stated, where she quotes Goethe's famous poem 'Selige Sehnsucht' (Holy Longing) in the first book of the *Divan* as an example of the mystic's strive to dissolve like the butterfly into eternity.<sup>16</sup>

The form of Hafiz's *ghazals* is apparently simple, but they employ an artful language which the connoisseur is able to enjoy up to the level of his knowledge, whereas the beginner is not. This makes the pleasure of Persian poetry an exclusive and educated one. Only if the reader is able to decipher the manifold metaphors and images of speech, can he understand the *ghazals* in all their facets. As Ingeborg Solbrig has written, 'Ohne Einführung ist dem westlichen Leser die Bedeutung der Symbolik oder Allegorie, die streng festliegt, nicht zugänglich' (The meaning of the imagery or allegory, which is strictly defined, is inaccessible to the Western reader without introduction).<sup>17</sup> Joseph von Hammer, we should remember, had acquired through his intense reading of Persian poetry a more than solid grasp of the way metaphorical language works. He – and this gave his critics ammunition – denied the mystical component of Hafiz's *ghazals*. In 1818 he wrote:

Desto weniger verdiente er aber seinen Vor- und später hinzugekommenen Eigenschaftsnamen, denn dem Glauben hat er als Sonne schlecht vorgeleuchtet, und seine Zunge dollmetschte bloß die Lehren des Sinnesgenusses, und nicht die Mysterien der göttlichen Liebe. [. . .] so ist doch die Gesamtheit seiner Gedichte nichts, als ein lauter Aufruf zu Liebe und Wein, und der höchste Ausbruch erotischer und bachantischer Begeisterung (The less he deserved his name and his later appellative name [*Hammer refers to Shams ad-Din 'Sun of religion' and lisan al-ghayb (tongue of the unseen)*] since his tongue interpreted only the doctrine of pleasure and not the mysteries of divine love. [. . .])<sup>18</sup> His poetry in its entirety is nothing more than a loud call for love and wine, and it is the highest outburst of erotic and bacchantic enthusiasm).

Hammer's view of Persian literature was very much influenced by the way the Ottoman Empire valued literature. Hafiz and Persian literature in general was very popular in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Turkish was greatly enriched by Persian idioms and figures of speech. Persian and the Persian style of letter writing was copied in the Ottoman Empire, where the use of the elaborate Persian style was regarded as beautiful. Ottoman commentaries helped the average or even the advanced reader in understanding the difficulties of the Persian texts. Also Hammer used a commentary on Hafiz. Of three standard commentaries, he chose that of Ahmad Sudi (d. 1591). Sudi is said to be one of the most prominent Ottoman Persianists.<sup>19</sup> Originally from Eastern Bosnia, he was educated in Diyarbakir and later served as a teacher at the Ibrahim Pasha Madrasa in Istanbul, where he wrote several commentaries on Persian poets. His commentaries, including that on Hafiz, are philologically focused. He does not follow the popular trend to attribute a 'hidden' mystical meaning to his wordly verses about song and love. As Brockhaus writes in his edition of the commentary of Sudi: 'Sudi erklärt den Hafiz als Philolog und mit warmem Gefühle für die Schönheiten der Dichtung, nicht als Theolog' (Sudi elucidates Hafiz as a philologist, with a warm sense of the beauty of the poetry, not as a theologian).<sup>20</sup> This attitude had a strong influence on Hammer's view of Hafiz. So he writes in his introduction: 'Der Uebersetzer ist in die Fußstapfen Sudi's getreten' (The translator

walks in Sudi's footsteps).<sup>21</sup> This commitment to a wordly interpretation has earned Hammer the accusation of one-dimensionality, which reduces the complexity of Hafiz's poetry to drinking and sensual pleasures.

Nima Mina is the first to have actually tried to analyse the quality and the general achievements of Hammer's translation, something most Germanists were simply not able to do. He observed that Hammer translated verse by verse, and that the translation follows rhythmical patterns, but is not rhymed at the end. For Mina the mastery of a rhetorical vocabulary, which can be interpreted in either a mystical or a wordly way, especially when it comes to wine and love, is part of the poet's general repertoire of the time. The use of themes and motives coming out of the Sufic tradition does not necessarily mean that Hafiz himself was part of mystic environments.<sup>22</sup> Hammer, opposing any Sufic content in Hafiz's poetry, chose the interpretation of mundane love, even when clear signs of mystical-religious content are visible.<sup>23</sup> He stresses that Hammer, although he understood very well the countless ambiguities in the text, normally chose the superficial interpretation, whereas he had no problem acknowledging the male sex of Hafiz's beloved, which so many others have turned into a woman.<sup>24</sup> On the whole, Mina judges the quality of Hammer's translations to be very high. He goes so far as to say that the existing philological mistakes in the translation are due to the mistakes of the editor Sudi.<sup>25</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, although opposing Hammer's 'mundane' translation, says similarly that the mistakes in the text can be put down to printing errors.

In Hammer's time the book was praised, but it, or rather Hammer, also met with strong disapproval. In today's light these criticisms may seem a bit silly, but in their time the confrontation was fought with remarkable vigour, and, as observed at the beginning of this essay, this has had consequences for the reputation of Hammer's work until today.

We do not know, what Hammer thought about the *West-Eastern Divan*, but we do know that Karl August Böttiger, an influential personality in Weimar who from 1804 lived in Dresden, following a serious disagreement with Goethe, was in regular correspondence with Hammer, telling him eagerly the gossip of the town. On 4 November 1818 he wrote to Hammer: 'Sahen Sie denn schon Goethes Diwan? Man spricht mir mit

Entzücken davon. Offenbar hat er Ihren Hafiz nun auf seine Weise ausgeborgt und in Ihr Nest seine Eier gelegt. Noch habe ich nicht zu Gesicht bekommen. Ich wünschte sehr, Ihre Ansicht darüber zu erfahren.' (Did you see Goethe's *Divan* already? Everybody speaks of it with delight. Obviously he borrowed your Hafiz in his way and put his egg in your nest. I have not seen it yet, I would love to hear your opinion about it.)<sup>26</sup>

Hammer's answer, if he gave one, is unknown. In the autobiography Hammer wrote thirty years later, he mentions very dryly among his readings in the summer 1819: '[...] von Dichterwerken den Childe Harold und Goethe's westöstlichen Diwan durchgenommen und durchgenossen' ([. . .] studied and enjoyed among works of poetry *Childe Harold* and Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*).<sup>27</sup>

It seems to me of some relevance that Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* is in its setting and composition a Persian book. The poetic part is structured by a series of *nameh*, the Persian word for book. The Persian character of the *West-Eastern Divan* is probably disguised a little bit by the fact that Goethe's 'Notes and Essays' cover a *tour d'horizon* through Goethe's general readings on this topic, which includes a broader cosmos of Oriental Studies than only Persian literature. Goethe's wish to mediate Persian literature into the German in the *West-Eastern Divan* has been estimated in recent times as a desire to overcome differences of an intercultural kind. Joseph von Hammer, who brought a significant part of Persian culture and identity, Hafiz's poems, to Romantic Germany, should not be forgotten.