This essay appears in
A New Divan: A Lyrical Dialogue between East & West
Gingko / 2019 / 9781909942288

The New Tasks of the Translator: The *West-Eastern Divan* and the problematic legacy of translation theories from Goethe to Benjamin

STEFAN WEIDNER
Translated from the German by Charlotte Collins

The *West-Eastern Divan*,[1] more than any other of Goethe's works, is the fruit of a translation; indeed, it could be said that, in a way, the *Divan* is itself a higher form of translation, a *Nach-Dichtung* in the true sense of the word.[2] Goethe also addresses the subject of translation in the 'Notes and Essays' he appended to the *Divan* poems to explain their cultural-historical background. In Goethe's *Divan* we are therefore presented with fundamental structures for dealing with translated cultures, and the translated 'Orient' in particular, that still impact on us today and have also influenced my own work as a translator from the Arabic. A peculiar tension exists between these structures – i.e. translation practice, then and now – and considerations such as those pinpointed by Walter Benjamin with reference to Goethe in his 1923 essay 'The Task of the Translator'.[3]

Many of Goethe's works are indebted to his encounters and engagement with other literatures. The *West-Eastern Divan* is an exception in that in this instance the stimulus derived from a totally different cultural context and was mediated by a translation from a language which Goethe – a few Arabic handwriting exercises notwithstanding – had not mastered, unlike the other languages whose literatures inspired him: French, Italian, English, Latin and Greek. When Goethe encountered Hafiz in Hammer-Purgstall's 1812 translation[4] and became fascinated by him, he found himself in a situation familiar to most modern readers (and almost all Western readers when the literature in question is an Oriental one) when dealing with foreign-language literature, namely: having to rely on the translation. Thus it is only in his engagement with Hafiz

that translation, in Goethe's work, acquires both the significance and the problematic aspect we so often encounter in translated literature today.[5]

With this in mind, it is no surprise that the 'Notes and Essays', and thus the *West-Eastern Divan* as a whole, conclude with a short essay on translation.[6] Walter Benjamin ranks it, alongside observations by Pannwitz, as 'the best comment on the theory of translation that has been published in Germany'.[7] In it, Goethe differentiates between three styles of translation: first 'a plain prose translation',[8] of which he cites Luther's Germanisation of the Bible as an outstanding example. Secondly, Goethe refers to 'parodistic' translation; the example he gives for this is Wieland's translations of Shakespeare. 'Parodistic' should not be understood here as satire. Instead it means 'a concern to transpose oneself into a foreign country but in fact only by adapting foreign notions to one's own particular perspective'.[9] Finally he identifies the kind of translation that seeks to 'make the translation identical to the original'.[10] For this Goethe's example is the translation of Homer into German hexameters by his contemporary Johann Heinrich Voss.

Although each of these translation paradigms has its own merits, for Goethe the 'final as well as the highest'[11] is none other than the method of translation that renders it 'identical to the original' – not although but *because* in so doing the translator 'more or less abandons the originality of his own nation; and so a third element comes into being', through which, according to Goethe, the German is enriched and extended and 'versatility appeared among the Germans'.[12]

Benjamin borrows this approach to translation, writing:

> Therefore, it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. [. . .] A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax . . .[13]

Translation theories such as these raise a number of questions that require us, the translators of today, to adopt a position. As far as the

questions themselves are concerned, the first that needs to be addressed is where the *West-Eastern Divan,* and the Hammer-Purgstall translation that inspired it, should be located within the framework of Goethe's and Benjamin's translation theories. The next thing we must do is ask ourselves what attitude we intend to take towards them, i.e. how do we want to translate today, especially when the material in question is supposedly 'culturally foreign'? Finally, we must examine whether the theories put forward are in fact applicable, i.e. whether they are borne out by translation praxis.

Goethe does not clearly state into which of his three paradigms he would classify Hammer-Purgstall's translation of Hafiz, but he would *like* to classify it into the third. He writes, cautiously: 'Von Hammer's works for the most part show a similar approach [*i.e. the manner of the third style of translation – SW*] to Oriental masterpieces. His approximation of their outer form is especially commendable.'[14]

However, Hammer-Purgstall is actually an excellent example of the second, parodistic style of translation. As far as form is concerned – the way he deals with the rhyme, for example – his approximation to Hafiz is extremely tentative. Whereas the original consistently uses the monorhyme – i.e. where each line of the poem ends with exactly the same rhyme – typical of classical Oriental poetry, Hammer's versions are predominantly written in unrhymed couplets or quatrains. Admittedly, we do already find occasional strophes consisting of only two lines, the two of them ending with the same word, serving as a substitute for the monorhyme.[15] However, Goethe's description of a style of translation that seeks to be identical to the original certainly does not pertain here:

> A translation which tries to identify with the original comes close to an interlinear version in the end; it makes an understanding of the original much easier. We are led to the fundamental text – indeed, we are driven to it – and so at last the entire circle within which the approximation of the foreign and the domestic, the known and the unknown move is drawn to a close.[16]

It must have been obvious to Goethe that Hammer's Hafiz translation does not correspond to these ideas and does not even tend towards an

'interlinear version'; however, he passes over this without comment. I suspect the reason is that, in a way, Goethe saw the *West-Eastern Divan* itself – i.e. his own poems – as a work that, according to the third translation variant, 'more or less abandons the originality of his own nation', thereby allowing something greater to come into being 'for which the public must gradually develop a taste'.[17]

In this context, Goethe notes that Voss's translation of Homer 'couldn't please the public at first but then bit by bit it learned to hear his new approach [to translation] and to feel comfortable with it'.[18] As he writes at the beginning of the 'Notes and Essays', Goethe feared the same fate might befall his *Divan*.[19] He hoped that this clarification would help 'readers who have little or no familiarity with the East [to] gain a more immediate understanding'.[20] He saw himself 'as a traveller for whom it is praise enough if he adapts comfortably and sympathetically to foreign ways, both aspiring to make other forms of expression his own and understanding how to enter into and assume other ways of thinking, other customs'.[21]

Thus the lyrical 'I' seeks to identify with the foreign world, and the traveller is essentially a personification of the *Nach-Dichter*. At the same time, however, Goethe knows that in his case this identification 'succeeds in this only to a certain degree'[22] and that he must also simultaneously assume 'the role of the merchant who spreads out his wares attractively and strives in various ways to make them appealing', in order 'that what the traveller brings back may all the more swiftly give pleasure to his compatriots'.[23] This ambiguity in Goethe's self-conception – as, on the one hand, the traveller who assimilates foreign customs, and on the other as the merchant who wants to make them pleasing to the public, to sell them, and who therefore has to make them less foreign – explains the peculiar dual nature of the *Divan,* as both a volume of poetry inspired by a foreign literature and a treatise that seeks to familiarise people with the literature of the Orient. Goethe, we may conclude, was perfectly aware that neither Oriental literature in German translation nor the *Nach-Dichtung* it inspires, such as the *Divan*, has any chance of finding readers and being appreciated by anyone other than specialists if it is offered up completely unmediated simply for what it is. In other words: as far as the Orient is concerned, Goethe's (and later Benjamin's) ideal of

'[seeking] to make the translation identical to the original' does not appear to be a very promising undertaking, and neither Hammer-Purgstall nor Goethe seriously attempted it.

The reason for this is easily apparent. Voss's translation of Homer was well received (albeit, as Goethe comments, only after some time) because Homer was part of the Occidental educational canon. To stick with Goethe's metaphor of the *Nach-Dichter* as a travelling salesman, this meant that the 'goods' required no further marketing. Rather, because Voss's translation appeared to be closer to Homer than the other translations, Voss's version could be sold as the true, more authentic Homer – indeed, almost as the original itself. The same is true of the translators Benjamin lists as model exponents of the desirable style of translation that produces work identical to the original: 'Luther, Voss, Hölderlin, and [Stefan] George have extended the boundaries of the German language.'[24] However, the texts these translators translated in the manner described were all already part of the canon: Luther translated the Bible, Voss Homer, Hölderlin Pindar and Sophocles, while George translated Dante. In none of these cases was it necessary to familiarise people with the author, explain the cultural context, or answer the question of why they should be translated.

The opposite is true of Hafiz and other 'Oriental' authors when they are translated into European languages. They must first be rendered accessible to the public. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Hammer-Purgstall's translation, according to Goethe's taxonomy, falls into the second, 'parodistic' category. Something similar can be said of Goethe's *Divan* poems themselves: to use Goethe's own (idiosyncratic) terminology, they are a 'parody' once removed – a parody of Hammer-Purgstall's (Hafiz) parody. However, this means nothing more than that neither Goethe's authorial nor Hammer-Purgstall's translation praxis corresponded to the ideal of translation and *Nach-Dichtung* postulated by Goethe and endorsed by Benjamin.

Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century it was precisely this thing at which neither Hammer nor Goethe managed to succeed, namely the translation and *Nach-Dichtung* of the literary Orient into something identical to the original, that was attempted by several German translators and poets, in particular Friedrich Rückert and August von Platen,

who came closest to emulating the Oriental forms in the German language. Thanks to Rückert we have a German Hafiz who is, in the formal sense at least, much closer to the Persian Hafiz than Hammer-Purgstall's, and who imitates the monorhyme of Persian poetry.[25] It is also thanks to Rückert that we have a German Qur'an that rhymes, like the original.[26]

So would it not, after all, have been possible to '[turn] German into Hindi' (as formulated by Rudolf Pannwitz in the quotation by Benjamin[27]) – or, in our case, into Arabic or Persian? And shouldn't this ideal therefore still apply today? I must confess that I very much doubt it. It is my belief that the translation ideas propounded by Goethe and Rückert, Pannwitz and Benjamin have become questionable. They are certainly not suited to the translation of 'Oriental' poetry. Why?

First, it must be noted that these translation theories are not derived from praxis. Where attempts have been made to implement them – Rückert and Hölderlin are the best examples – the translations border on the unreadable, as Benjamin also observed when writing about Hölderlin's Sophocles translations: 'in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language'.[28] While Hölderlin's translations come (too) close to an interlinear version, Rückert's translations are afflicted by a different shortcoming. Versatile though the rhymes are, his language cannot shake off a nineteenth-century feel, and the obsessive, dogmatic use of rhyme gives the German a ponderous, laboured quality not found in any of the originals. It would not occur to a reader of Rückert's translations that the original texts were often set to music and sung, and that even ordinary and illiterate people know verses by Hafiz, Rumi or Ferdowsi by heart.

If we take this into account, the claim to identity or the ability authentically to 'turn' German into Hindi or Persian falls apart. *Changing* it into German is ultimately a selective process: one may retain only the formal aspects, for example, imitating rhyme and rhythm. The criterion for identity with the original remains extralinguistic. However ingenious the result may sound, it will seldom touch the heart as the originals do, and as more natural-sounding translations succeed in doing. Goethe and Hammer-Purgstall knew this, at least intuitively. They dispensed with *Nach-Dichtung* and the kind of translation that seeks to be identical, choosing instead the variant described by Goethe as 'parodistic'. Goethe's

Hafiz lives, not although but *because* he has evaded Goethe's own translation theory.

With translation that tries to identify with the original, it is not only the results that are often questionable; the ideology behind it is questionable, too. In Goethe this manifests itself in the assumption that languages and literatures follow a 'natural' course of development which is reflected in the different 'epochs' of translation and ultimately in a continuous assimilation of the various national literatures into each other, a process for which Goethe later coined the term 'world literature'.[29] Benjamin augments this notion to make of it a quasi-religious eschatology of translation: the translator is required to get close to the pure language – which remains, *per se*, inaccessible – by 'breaking' the boundaries of his own. Inherent in the idea of a 'pure language' is a vision of overcoming Babelesque linguistic diversity. If the translation 'breaks through decayed barriers of [the translator's] own language'[30] and, as Goethe put it, 'abandons the originality of his own nation', paradisiacal pre-Babel conditions come a little closer. Seen in this way, the 'task of the translator', as in the title of Benjamin's essay, is almost soteriological.

Worthy though these ideas may be, it is time they were discarded. They may once have promoted the reception of foreign, unfamiliar literatures. Today they impede it, or else harness translation to causes that have nothing whatsoever to do with literature, be they economic or, as with Walter Benjamin, political and philosophical (not to mention ideological, rooted in Hegel's dialectics).

Furthermore, the imitation of Oriental poetry in the interlinear style praised by Goethe, as well as by Benjamin and Pannwitz, does not break down barriers; it erects them. It banishes the Orient back to where it came from: the realm of the exotic. Like a colonial circus, it exhibits what is foreign and specifically *other* about the poetry – only in this way can German be 'turned into Hindi'. Where the translation really does make itself identical to that which is foreign, it invites not so much identification but differentiation, demarcation.

This is particularly true of new literature from the 'Orient'. The exoticising, alienating, interlinear translation envisaged by Goethe and Benjamin would be inappropriate here. Modern Arab or Iranian poetry is not alien and Oriental, as perhaps it may seem to the superficial

observer. Rather, it must be seen as a branch or part of modern poetry as a whole, which is a worldwide phenomenon. The Arab and Iranian poets' responses to Goethe in this book are proof of this: surprising though they may be, they are in fact much closer to modern Western poetry than classical Arabic poetry or what Hamid Dabashi called 'Persian literary humanism',[31] meaning the tradition of which Hafiz is the best-known exponent.

Goethe references this Persian literary humanism but uses it as a disguise or role-play to write poems that, in literary-historical terms, can be classified as belonging to the Romantic or perhaps even Early Modern period. As such, it could even be said that, for literary Europe, the Orient was the midwife of the modern age. Meanwhile, Arab and Persian authors have been writing novels and modern poetry of their own for more than a century, and in the past twenty-five years this literature has increasingly been translated into European languages. A literary circle is being closed, and Goethe's words from the 'Nachlass' section of the *Divan* have proved true:

> Whoever knows himself and others will recognise this as well:
> Orient and Occident are no longer to be separated.[32]

It is therefore time finally to discover and appreciate the latent modernity of this supposedly other, foreign, Oriental literature – not least the latent modernity of Hafiz and of Persian literary humanism itself. The means for doing this are translations that do not lose themselves in technical acrobatics or seek the specifically poetic, interesting, special and valuable primarily in form (a very classical approach). Rather, they should bring out the spiritual and thus also poetic aspects of the original – translated texts whose form is not external, as often seems to be the case with rhyming translations, but in which form and substance merge into one.

As far as Arabic and Persian literature are concerned, many translations that succeed in doing this are now available to the English-speaking world.[33] However, the existing – mostly much older – German translations of Arabic and Persian poetry are predominantly stuck in the paradigms developed in the nineteenth century which I have criticised

here. Newer, and novel, German translations of this poetry remain rare. I myself have translated primarily modern Arab poetry in the innovative, non-exoticising style described in this essay,[34] as well as one of the most famous volumes of medieval Islamic mystic poetry, *The Interpreter of Desires*[35] by Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240). The response to these attempts was extremely positive, which ought to encourage the translator to continue in this vein. Ultimately, however, any such intention is dependent on the banal question of whether it can attract interested publishers, sufficient funding and enough readers. At present, at least for poetry, which is nearly always difficult to sell, the paradoxical answer given by most educated people still seems to be: what for? We already have Goethe!