In West-East Divan (1819), Germany’s greatest poet J. W. von Goethe offered a work of lasting appeal. Stimulated by the Divan (“Collection”) by medieval pub poet Hafiz, Goethe blends his own identity with that of the Persian Sufi master who sang the delights of wine and tavern romance in a context of Qur’anic allusion. Martin Bidney accompanies his rendering with commentary poems; and Peter Anton von Arnim joins him to offer, as well, the first translation into English of Goethe’s “Notes and Essays,” a pioneering guide to the cultural history of the Middle East. Bidney’s “Introduction” clarifies the transformation brought about in Goethe’s thought by his Muslim mentor.

Bidney’s translations of the… Divan poems … render, for the first time, both form and content in a way that is faithful to the original. The poetical commentaries authored by … Bidney are of a stunning originality and … are composed entirely in the spirit of Goethe’s own conception of world literature as a deeply felt interchange among peoples and cultures. I recommend this book most emphatically and with highest praise, in the hope that after nearly two hundred years it will help Goethe’s West-East Divan to make the breakthrough it deserves in the English-speaking world.

—Katharina Mommsen

Bidney’s Introduction… correctly indicates that Goethe offers “one of the most notable and far-reaching visions of East-West understanding achieved in modern times.…” [This] ‘englishing’ of the Divan [is] a pleasure to read.

—Khalil Semaan

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West-East Divan
The Poems, with “Notes and Essays”:
Goethe’s Intercultural Dialogues

ISBN: 978-1-58684-284-0

State University of New York Press
www.sunypress.edu

Cover Design by Kelsey Lefjeld

“Notes and Essays” translation assisted by Peter Anton von Arnim

Martin Bidney
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in Arabic. Reading his thoughtful “Afterword” to Katharina Mommsen’s *Goethe und der Islam*, I have been heartened by von Arnim’s depiction of the German sage as a herald of new possibilities for expanded openness to changes in world cultures through increased mutual understanding. His attitude has influenced my thinking throughout this exhilarating venture.

Goethe’s *Divan* is a journey of the spirit, and the “Notes and Essays” are a part of that journey, making it crucial for the reader to have the opportunity of accompanying him on the entire trip. Max Rychner explains:

Like many poetic works since the *Odyssey* and *Divine Comedy*, the *Divan* assumes the form of a journey. [From Vergil’s *Aeneid*, another travel-narrative, the *Divan* borrows the epic structure format of twelve “books.” — MB] Already the young Goethe saw himself as basically a wanderer: Wilhelm Meister, Faust, Dorothea move through the world; Iphigenie and Tasso set forth… Among the autobiographic works, *Trip to Switzerland*, *Italian Journey*, *Campaign in France* share to some degree the heightened feeling of one who began with deprivation and has attained fullness. The journey in the *Divan* leads from many places to a single point, where all comes together: Orient and Occident, past and present, personal and universal, sublime and ordinary, the serious and the ironic, fulfillment and the “strange feeling” within it of a higher longing, love and thought, poetry and prose. The “Notes and Essays” belong to the collection of lyrics as the diastole to the poetic systole; in that latter venture, Goethe tells of celebrated travelers in the East and introduces the section on Bible criticism dealing with the stressful wanderings of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. (Rychner xxv–xxvi)

Not only the encompassing breadth of Goethe’s mind and heart but equally the fruitful interaction of poet and scholar in his integrated outlook may be adequately approached only when the reader of English can savor the *Divan* and “Notes and Essays” together. There is a pathos in the lonely plight of the German West-East poet: systole and diastole, *Divan* and “Notes and Essays,” are mutual clarifiers that we today find powerful and cogent in their combined effect. But, as noted, the first edition of Goethe’s masterpiece had not yet sold out after a century. It takes awhile for a major innovator to create the taste by which he can alone be judged, as Bach with his Brandenburg concerti, or Beethoven in the late quartets. So Goethe, too, was obliged to wait:

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West-East Divan

The souls that form a standard for the judgment of The work of later ages’ creativity
Need patience. Had he waited for a century,
Goethe would find the West-East testament of love

He’d published not sold out! The riddle rose above Customers’ comprehension. Undespairingly He labored, though. A Noah, from a raging sea He’d pray the “Notes and Essays” helped, a hopeful dove.

In his experimental *Divan* Goethe, the German, Western poet, becomes a partly Persian, Eastern one as well, a thoroughly hybridized cultural figure, a role the “Notes and Essays” are designed to clarify. For over fifty years Katharina Mommsen has been disclosing the vast range and vivid particularities of Goethe’s two-part intercultural undertaking, unique of its kind among poets of the era. One work of hers, in particular, will guide us: *Goethe und der Islam (Goethe and Islam, 2001)*, and I will cite, among others, *Goethe und die arabische Welt (Goethe and the Arab World, 1988)*, which overlaps with it in a number of ways. I will briefly review the chief themes of the *Divan* and focus on a dozen highlights. Then I’ll give a quick tour of the “Notes and Essays” to clarify the poet-scholar’s main concerns. I conclude with remarks on the value of both *Divan* and “Notes and Essays” for us now.

Given the provincialism narrowing the views of many prospective readers, Goethe probably did not improve sales of the collection by coyly acknowledging, at age 68, that the book’s author did not wish to deny the imputation that he was himself a Muslim. But already at 23 he had written a poem in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (*Gwb* 157). After studying the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in the original languages as a youth, Goethe became interested in the Qur’an under the influence of the philosopher of history Johann Gottfried Herder. He shared Herder’s high estimation of the Islamic scripture’s elevated style, which he would later call “astonishing” (*Gdl* 22–4) even in its translations, of which Goethe studied many. And he shared Herder’s respect for Muhammad as both poet and prophet (*Gdl* 43–4). We already find Qur’an echoes in Goethe’s *Götze von Berlichingen*, a youthful drama that Sir Walter Scott was to translate (*Gdl* 30–6).

Goethe’s own widely-sensed charisma even tempted him, for a time, to consider playing the role of “prophet,” and he seriously thought through the hazards of this option while planning a drama about Muhammad (*Gdl* 68–80). The most important poetic consequence of the project is the “Song of Muhammad” noted above, where the Prophet is depicted as a river joyously rushing to God the Father-Ocean. As Annemarie Schimmel tells us, the twen-
Sonnet to My Collaborator, Peter Anton von Arnim,
and to my Mentor, Katharina Mommsen

Wha the lore of tune have known
Nevermore need live alone.

In Goethe's English works about the Middle East
I pray that you may find what all of us had found
In the original — Hafisius unbound;
Sheherazade's own caravanserai, a feast

Among whose many splendid merits not the least
May be the way he alters manner, mood, and theme —
Legend and pageantry, reality and dream —
Feeling Ulysses' freedom — prophet he, not priest.

Goethe, our guide, has been the bravest company
Both for himself and for the fact that us, all three,
He led upon a not-yet-ended odyssey,

Providing in the prose and wizard poetry
The vast horizon of a grander amity:
To breathe a kindred singing wind, and hear, and see.

Introduction

Rarely might one feel so fully the meaning of the phrase “a book whose time has come.” The volume you are holding in your hands will offer at least three timely surprises. Readers worldwide know Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as Germany's greatest poet and one of her finest thinkers, and Faust as one of the most lauded, oft-quoted wisdom books in the history of literature. But despite unparalleled current American and European interest in the culture of the Middle East, Goethe's West-East Divan and his accompanying “Notes and Essays” have yet to attain the renown and readership they merit. Few of my non-Germanist friends are aware that the two-part work exists (“Goethe's poems about Arabia and Persia: And essays on Islamic culture?”). Startlingly, even after a hundred years, the first edition of the scholar-poet’s pioneering book had not sold out. During the poet's lifetime only a few intimate friends ever guessed how much the Divan and the “Notes and Essays” meant to him. Yet although fine prefaces have been written to the work by outstanding German commentators (and I will cite some of these), it has yet to be widely read and relished as it should be, even in German-speaking lands. Goethe's book is a pathbreaker, a boundary-crossing intercultural poetic dialogue — one of the most notable and far-reaching visions of East-West understanding achieved in modern times. The relative neglect by critics and teachers is even more remarkable when we look at the attractive style of the poems and prose: both are exuberant, often humorous and amusing. The depth of Goethe’s writing proves more than compatible with the charm of his lightness and wit.

The second surprise is that the Notes and Essays, a book-length prose supplement to the lyrical Divan, has never before appeared in English, even though here, too, we find a mode of presentation that is not at all daunting but pleasantly conversational, casual in its lively style, and engaging in its varied subject matter. Goethe's talents as narrator and expositor make it a vigorous, colorful text. He opens the book by likening himself to a merchant displaying products “appealingly” and trying “in many ways” to make them attractive to the buyer. He introduces the Islamic background of Middle Eastern culture from a poet's standpoint, with a particularly engaging overview of medieval Persian poetry, always highlighting the arresting detail. Here again we are led to invoke the idea of a book whose time has come. Once a wider curiosity has been awakened in the West for
Middle Eastern culture, as we find happening right now, the barriers of the unfamiliar can be quickly broken down. We are now ready to visit the caravanserai where the well-traveled merchant of literary treasures will lay out his hybrid wares, while eagerly offering explanatory narratives.

One has to be a poet to translate poetry, and the need for a poet is twofold in Goethe’s intercultural dialogues in verse and prose, for even in the “Notes and Essays” one effective enhancer of reader appeal is Goethe’s generosity in sprinkling the prose text with many original poems and German translations of Arabian and Persian verse. I have sought to make each English rendering form-faithful, keeping the rhythm and rhyme schemes of the Goethean poems. These singable lyrics need to be made musical works of word art in a new language. Most important, the ingratiating wit and lightness of tone should come across. (No other English rendering of Goethe’s Divan is currently in print; John Whaley’s translation, though at times offering precise word equivalents for the German, lacks ease and humor, and the rhythm is often hobbled by metric errors.) Goethe’s poetic enthusiasm is infectious. And that leads to the third unexpected feature of this book: my commentary to the Divan is written in poems. To complement the rendering of Goethe’s West-East verses, I’ve created an interpretive “lyrical companion” to them in my anglophone workshop. You could call this book a dialogic translation. Grounded in the research outlined in this introduction, the poem-commentary will show that the appealingly rhythmed stanza patterns in the Divan are not museum pieces. These melody-forms are live options for the poet today, particularly if we enjoy the graceful ease conveyed in Goethe’s use of them. I often emulate Goethe’s verse forms quite precisely in my comment-lyrics; and on occasion, too, I’ll translate a related Goethe poem and write a verse “reply.” Whenever I choose other, non-Goethean, rhymed and metered strophe patterns, I do my best to lend them, as well, something of the melodic lightness abundant in the German master’s Divan.

It’s worth dwelling for a moment on the theme of Goethean lightness, ease, and grace. In “The Lightness of the Divan” Karl Krolow writes:

Of the many things said and written about the West-East Divan I particularly recall a comment of Heinrich Heine: “The verses of the Divan are so light, so happy, so naturally breathed [einmalig bewogen], so ethereal, that one wonders how such a thing was possible in German.” Indeed, it is this light, lively, evident mastery of a speech so unceasingly kept in movement and therefore mobile, at once fleeting or gliding past and yet extremely compact, as solid as an object, that is the first thing that strikes us when we read the Divan poems. (Krolow 1991, 379)

Lightness of this kind is the opposite of the simplistic or trivial. Rather, the lightness, the serenity of the Divan poems is finally to be found in their concision, in this [. . .] playful art of encoding the lyrical, which in however jocular a way has something of the mysterious or spiritual about it. (Krolow 1991, 385)

As an example, Krolow chooses the quatrain employed as epigraph to Notes and Essays:

Poetry if you would know,
To its country you must go.
If the poet you would know,
To the poet’s country go.

The light, unpretentious way of speaking shows the requirement of coherence in the concise-poetic tone as also in the “ethereal” diction that is employed here. A region is hidden; it is called “The Land of Poetry,” which here will always mean an area of harmonious proportion, of ordered balance as of fantasy. It is a process that leads from the one to the other, that indicates the one by the other, and that encompasses everything from the individual poem to the entire “plan,” intention, and execution. (Krolow 1991, 381)

Twice we have heard Krolow use the word “ethereal” [ätherisch], indicating the impression of the timeless value of a compact, aphoristic utterance. Even in the plainest phrasing, it will create the heightened, higher emotion of scripture or wisdom literature (“something of the mysterious or spiritual about it”). It is the well-pondered, naturally evolved, mature expression of a philosophic poet in his sixties. And I would add that only in a form-true rendering of such terse, proverb-like writing, permanent “wisdom literature” spoken naturally and serenely as to thoughtful companions, can we remain faithful to the Divan spirit (Bloom 2004).

Sadly, I write this preface alone, for my collaborator, Peter Anton von Arnim, died on August 19, 2009. The spirit of this kindly, learned man, with his deep love and rich appreciation of Middle Eastern and African culture, deserves forever to be held in cherished memory. His contribution to the preparing of the prose text of Goethe’s “Notes and Essays” (along with preliminary prose versions of some of the lyrics) has been invaluable. His empathy for Goethe’s text and themes was deepened by his admirable fluency
NOTES AND ESSAYS FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WEST-EAST DIVAN

by

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Translated

by

Martin Bidney and Peter Anton von Arnim
Moganni Nameh
Book of the Singer

1.

Twenty years I let pass by,
Relishing my destined lot;
Time that lent a pleasure high,
As when Barmecides had wrought.

2.

*Hegira*

North and South and West — they shake!
Thrones are cracking, empires quake,
To the purer East, then, fly
Patriarchal air to try:
Loving, drinking, songs among,
Khizer’s rill will make you young.

There, in what is pure and right,
Generations I, with might,
Urge to depth of origin
Where they from the Lord would win
Earthly-worded Heaven-lore;
They will rack their brains no more.
Where their fathers they respected,  
Alien rule at length deflected, 
Youthful limits I'll embrace:  
Thought confined in faith-wide space;  
Word still worthy to be heard  
For it was the spoken word.

Mine with shepherd-lives will mesh  
At oases that refresh  
When with caravans I wander,  
Coffee, shawls, and musk up yonder;  
Every path I'll travel down  
From the desert to the town.

As we ride the rocky way  
Solace in your song will stay,  
Háfiz, when the leader will,  
High on mule-back, music-thrill  
Lend, that stars might wake in light  
While the robbers quake in fright.

I'll in baths and taverns, too,  
Holy Háfiz, think of you  
If my Lovely lift her veil,  
Fragrant hair shake, amber-pale:  
Poet's lyric whispered loves  
Heat with sweet the houri-doves.

If you envy him this joy  
Or would spoil it for the boy,  
Know that poet-words await  
By the paradisal gate —  
Softly knocking, they will sway,  
Asking for Eternal Day.

Blessing Pledges

True believers' talisman  
Luck will gain: carnelian.  
Onyx-mounted, hallowed, this  
Consecrated lips may kiss.  
Every ill it drives away,  
Guards you everywhere you stay  
If the graven word will say  
Allah's name, which when you heed  
Will be kindled love and deed.  
Women, specially, raised high,  
Talismans will edify.

For an amulet divine  
On a paper write a sign.  
Gems confine in narrow frame;  
Here a wider space you'll claim.  
Souls may write with piety  
Longer verses and more free.  
Shoulder-hanging, some prefer —  
Making them a scapular.

The plain inscription nothing more will hide;  
Quite self-sufficient, needing nought beside.  
Whatever else behind the words may lie,  
Candidly answer, "I, I said it — I."

Bring Abraxas? No, a fright!  
Odds, contorted form, that some  
Craftsman made in madness glum,  
Thinking it the highest height.  
Do I sound a bit absurd?  
That's "Abraxas," perfect word!
Notes and Essays for a Better Understanding of the *West-East Divan*

Poetry if you would know,
To its country you must go;
If the poet you would know,
To the poet's country go.

(1) INTRODUCTION

"To everything there is a season!" According to this dictum, whose meaning we learn to appreciate more and more the longer we live, there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak. I am opting for the latter now. If doing and acting are proper to younger years, it is contemplation and communication that suit the later ones.

I sent the writings of my early years into the world without a preface, without even indicating what they were intended for. I did that because I trusted that the nation would sooner or later make use of what I had offered. Thus, many of my works succeeded in having an immediate impact, while others, not equally accessible or striking, needed several years to attain recognition. But now that this time has gone by, a second and third generation are repaying me double and triple for the wrongs done me by earlier contemporaries.

But this time I would like to see to it that nothing should stop my little book from making a good immediate impression. So I decided to clarify, explain, and illustrate, in every way I could think of, what would help readers attain immediate comprehension, even if they had little familiarity with the Orient. People will not need my supplement, of course, if they are already versed in the history and literature of this remarkable part of the world. Instead, they will quickly picture the springs and brooks whose enlivening water I have diverted onto my flower-beds.

What I would like best, though, is to be regarded as a traveler who will be worth hearing if he eagerly assimilates the ways of life of a strange country, tries to appropriate its forms of speech, and learns how to share views and comprehend customs. He will be forgiven if he succeeds only in
part, if he still continues to be identifiable as a foreigner because of a distinctive accent or a resistant inflexibility in his national character. It is in this sense that readers may pardon my little book. Judicious people will be forgiving because they understand. Amateurs, less distracted by my shortcomings, may accept without bias what is offered.

Also, to let his countrymen enjoy more readily whatever he brings back, the traveler takes on the role of a merchant who displays his goods appealingly and tries in many ways to make them pleasing. Readers will not object to a variety of verbal presentations: stating, describing, or praising.

To begin with, I would like to make it clear that in regard to morality and aesthetics I have made it my duty to keep this work within everyone’s grasp. So I use the plainest language, the easiest, most understandable cadences of my vernacular, and only distantly allude to phrasings by which the Oriental tries to please through artificiality and mannerisms.

But understanding may be hindered by many unavoidable foreign words that are obscure because they refer to specific objects, matters of faith, opinions, traditions, fables, and customs. I have made it my next obligation to explain these by taking into account needs that were made apparent by questions and objections raised by German listeners and readers. An index will note both the page where an obscure passage occurs and the place where I explain it [Goethe’s brief index is not included here. — MB]. Each explanation is made within a specific context, so rather than scattered notes the reader will find an integrated text. Though lightly and loosely handled, it can still provide a clarifying overview.

I hope my efforts in accomplishing the project will please the reader. I am entitled to that hope, for now that so many things from the Orient are being truly integrated into our language, it may well be worthwhile to draw attention to that area from which so much of greatness, beauty, and excellence has reached our country over the centuries, and from which we may hope for more each day.

(2) HEBREWS

In every country, native poetry is the first of its kind. It underlies all the succeeding varieties. The more freshly and naturally it comes to the fore, the more happily will later epochs evolve.

As we are speaking about Oriental poetry, it becomes imperative to mention the Bible as the most ancient collection. A large part of the Old Testament is written in a lofty spirit, with enthusiasm, and belongs to the realm of poetry.

If I now vividly recollect the time when [Johann Gottfried] Herder [1744–1803] and [Johann Gottfried] Eichhorn [1752–1827] enlightened me on this topic personally, I recall a sublime delight, comparable to a pure Oriental sunrise. What these men bequeathed to me can only be hinted at, and I will be forgiven for my haste in passing by such treasures.

As an example we may think of the Book of Ruth. While pursuing its lofty goal of providing a king of Israel with reputable, interesting forebears, it can be regarded at the same time as the most lovely small, well- unified work handed down to us in an epic and idyllic form.

Next, I will dwell for a moment on the Song of Songs, the most tender, inimitable expression of passionate, graceful love that has been transmitted to us. Certainly we deplore the fact that poems thrown together as fragments and piled one on top of the other afford us no full, pure enjoyment. But we still take pleasure in transporting ourselves into the circumstances of the poets’ life. A mild breeze of the loveliest region of Canaan wafts through the work — intimate rustic settings, wine production, garden plants and spices, something of urban constriction, but then a royal court with splendors in the background. The main theme, though, is still the ardent affection of youthful hearts that seek, find, repel, and attract each other, in a variety of very simple circumstances.

Several times I thought of singling out a few things from this lovely confusion and arranging them. But it is precisely the enigmatic, inscrutable nature of these few pages that lends them grace and distinction. How often have well-thinking, orderly minds been enticed to formulate or impose some kind of plausible organizing plan, while the next reader is still confronted with the same task.

In a similar way the Book of Ruth has already exerted irresistible charm upon many a well-disposed man who has succumbed to the illusion that events depicted with invaluable concision could gain something from a more detailed, roundabout treatment.

And thus, in book after book, the Book of all Books may demonstrate that it has been given to us in order that we, as in a second world, may test ourselves by it and get lost in it, be enlightened through it and educate ourselves with it.