

**GOETHE MEDAL 2013 LAUDATORY SPEECH  
FOR S. MAHMOUD HOSSEINI ZAD  
BY WOLFGANG GÜNTHER LERCH  
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Mr Lehmann, Mr Mahmoud Hosseini Zad, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is impossible to hold a speech for an Iranian author on this occasion, on this day and in this place without beginning with Goethe and his close relationship to Persian poetry, to Iranian culture and to the eastern world. I needn't tell you that Goethe was the great stimulator in this field of cultural mediation between west and east and specifically in the west's encounters with Islam through his Hafez studies, but most of all with his *West-Eastern Divan*. The process of this mediation is now almost exactly two hundred years old. It began in the German "cultural nation" with Georg Friedrich Grotendorf (1775-1853), the decipherer of Persian cuneiform, and from there Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) and Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) to Rudolf Gelpke (1928-1972) and Kurt Scharf, whom we thank for deep insights into classical and contemporary Persian literature and poetry. As early as the nineteenth century, reciprocal interest in Germany awoke in Iran. Nasser al-Din Shah visited "Bismarck's empire," and Iranian writers such as Mohammad Ali Jamalzade (1892-1997), who lived many years in Berlin and translated Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, or the Persian-writing author Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938) studied German poetry and philosophy in early days, in particular Goethe and Nietzsche. Iqbal's Persian *Message from the East* (Payam-i-Mashriq) was a counterpiece to Goethe's *Divan* and an answer to it from the point of view of the eastern world.

You, S. Mahmoud Hosseini Zad, are also a cultural mediator of this standing. You have done German language and literature an underrated service in your own works, but most of all through your many translations of German-language authors, ranging from modern "classics" like Brecht and Dürrenmatt to Uwe Timm, Hartmut Lange, Bernhard Schlink, Judith Hermann and many others, you have introduced Iran to important works of the twentieth century, particularly Germany's current, contemporary literature with its unique sensitivities. In doing so, you have not lost sight of the problems of literary translation or, better put, rendition. The content and formats of the works rendered by you could not be more diverse. It must be a difficult adventure for you to adequately render German texts in Farsi. They are, as you once said, "entirely different linguistic systems." Every language has its own character, marks the thoughts and emotions, perceptions and understanding of the world of its speakers and writers in its own unmistakable way.

An author of some classics of Arabic and Muslim literature wrote of this problem that has concerned writers of all eras. Al-Jāhiz (776-869), the leading prose author of the early Abbasid epoch, wrote in one of his works, "Poetry cannot be translated.... And whenever it is converted into another language its concinnity is broken, its meter is rendered defunct, its beauty evaporates, and that something that inspires wonder and admiration simply absents

itself.... [The] specificity of [the poet's] doctrines, the intricate implications of his abridgements, and the subtleties inherent in his definitions are never conveyed by the translator with perfect fidelity." This is a truly sceptical résumé, which, it seems to me, does not affect prose as much as poetry.

Yet one might think that rendering German literature into Persian is relatively easy. Although Germany and Iran are rather far apart geographically, in Iran German philosophy is commonly identified as the comprehensive metaphysical world designs of German Idealism, which, conversely, may correspond to the speculative gifts of Iranian philosophers like Mulla Sadra (1572-1640) of Shiraz and the ideas of the theosophists of Isfahan. Germans and Persians have metaphysical leanings; it is not surprising that Hegel is the most read German philosopher in Iran. William Jones (1746-1794) and Franz Bopp (1791-1867) proved that Farsi – as the entire Iranian language group – is part of the Indo-European family of languages just like German. Actually, Farsi and German are grammatically far closer to one another than, say, Arabic or Turkish. Yet anyone who has had an opportunity to translate Persian writings quickly encounters the difficulties and complexities that differentiate the two languages from one another in spite of all their group-specific similarities. To name only one example, in German it is possible to combine nouns to create new “monster words,” while Farsi, in particular its poetry, is dominated by a certain semantic, even desired, haziness. Hence, the couplets of Hafez and many other poets cohere less through a logical context than through associations of their metaphors, while the chain of ideas within the poem is very loosely woven.

It is therefore all the more astonishing that authors and translators such as you continue to dare to thus pass on and adapt German literature to their own culture so that it remains authentic and conveys a valid impression. In this way an intercultural dialogue arises in the readers' minds that differs greatly from other dialogues. Today in particular, when we often hear of a confrontation of cultures, dialogues have often become mere monologues held in the presence of one another. Those like you who render works of literature, however, must immerse themselves – indeed delve into – the minds of the authors and their works. Monologues are of no use here. And thus you are able to go beyond tradition and make Iranian readers more aware of today's authentic Germany and its social changes since 1989.

Cultural mediation would benefit all the more if the often so thankless work of literary translators were more appreciated, honoured and emphasized. We are doing this today by honouring you, Mahmoud Hosseini Zad. Thank you.

Translated from German by Faith Ann Gibson