

Goethe Medal 2012

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- Check against delivery -

In Spite of His Times

One of the things that I admire about Goethe is his ability to transcend his times. This is demonstrated at a number of levels, perhaps most directly in his understanding of world literature. While nations and along with them national literatures – each intended to articulate the uniqueness of a nation – were arising all over Europe, Goethe formulated the term “world literature.” It is not really a term, but more an image; a mesh, woven from references of meaning and intellectual relationships, that stretches across time and space. The threads of this mesh are, as I said, the intellectual relationships and the corresponding meanings; its knots are the encounters, collisions and dialogues of individual writers and works. The mesh of world literature makes all works and all writers contemporaries and neighbours without questioning the differences between them. For instance, in his *West-Eastern Divan*, Goethe initiates a dialogue with Hāfez, a Persian poet of the fourteenth century according to the Gregorian calendar, in whom he recognizes a dialogue partner closer to him in many ways than most of his contemporaries.

Goethe is right to recognize the dialogue partner in Hāfez, if we judge by the book from which their conversation arose. It contains no trace of that “exotic unreality,” which Goethe’s European contemporaries attribute to the Orient, nor any tour-guide know-how in the guise of familiarity and knowledge, nor... I will not venture to explain the picture of the Islamic Orient conveyed by Goethe in *West-Eastern Divan* – this undertaking would require a new book of its own – but merely emphasize with pleasure that this picture has nothing, absolutely nothing, in common with the picture produced and sold by European literature in his day.

Goethe’s *West-Eastern Divan* has nothing in common with the production of unreality that European literature dealt with when it wrote of the Orient at that time. It had even less, if that is possible, in common with the contemporary political and social atmosphere. We must remember that the conquest of the countries of the Islamic Orient began at this time (Napoleon had, as it were, just gotten back from Egypt bringing a plethora of wonders and cultural anthropology, which, as a new academic discipline, would prove to be quite a useful instrument in colonization). To this end, a fierce anti-Islamic movement was organized, comparable with that of today, in order to prepare western societies for the imminent campaigns and wars. Rather than to join the choir of voices demanding that Western society civilize those unfortunates and unbelievers from the East, Goethe came on stage as a solo voice, finding dialogue partners and friends among the “unfortunates and unbelievers.” It

was not until the 1960s that, in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Napoleon's great countryman, cultural anthropology would follow Goethe's example and seek out dialogue partners among other cultures, rather than see them as "unfortunates and unbelievers" who needed to be occupied and civilized.

Another valuable example of Goethe's transcendence of the times is found in his *Faust*. When the tragedy was written, the generally accepted conviction was that Cartesian thinking provided the only true awareness and the only true knowledge. It is a school of thought that transforms all that it encounters into objects, which believes that encountering something means mastering it. It cannot recognize any other subject because its basic assumption is that the only subject is the Cartesian thinking "I." Cartesian thinking transforms everything outside this "I" into an object so that, according to the nature of things, it produces a world of dead objects; that is to say of machines and inorganic materials. In his tragedy, Goethe – long before the Romantics' revolt against the horror of rationality – evokes Empedocles and the Pythagoreans; namely that love is the form of cognition that gives us knowledge of another subject. Gretchen, who knows because she loves, is led by the omniscient Faust to critical awareness, to the answer to the question: "What essentially holds the world together?" Because she loves, she knows Faust – far better than he knows himself – and even Mephistopheles – better than Faust knows him. With the Cartesian method you view the world as a whole; you cannot recognize existence because it cannot be objectified. How can the "I" that I am, transform existence into the object of my cognition? This is the paradox, the insufficiency of Cartesian thought, which Goethe identifies at the very moment when this way of thinking is becoming so dominant that it denounces all other forms of awareness as ignorance, prejudice, error... *Faust* was followed first by the futile revolt of the Romantics, then by Positivism, which solidified the claim of rational thought as being the only form of awareness. But, this is already history.

I hope that these examples show clearly enough why Goethe's ability to transcend his times is deserving of recognition, especially in our time when so many cultural fields function like industries of forgetting. Human beings are creatures of time, which, as Plato ensures us, is the moving image of eternity. Does the pear tree now in bloom know that it blossomed last year? I do not know, I assume it does not know but I believe that this does not hinder it from being a whole pear tree and blossoming successfully. A pear grower who does not know that he picked pears last year would not be a whole person. Perhaps he would succeed in his work even if he were to believe that every pear harvest was the first and only one; he would probably pay taxes and vote in an orderly way, but I know many people who would think there was something wrong with him. We are creatures of time, not only in that we are immersed in our fleeting, transient lives, but also in that eternity is reflected in our spirits. We must therefore link the present moment and eternity in our feeling, thought and action. When we so completely capture the present moment, we either stop being human or we become it in a new way. In our day, Goethe is up-to-date and valuable in many respects, perhaps primarily in that he knew that he was a creature of time so well that he masterfully linked yesterday, today and tomorrow in his actions, and he realized his own vision and form of transcendence through a very simple gesture: by refusing to be completely captured by his day.