

Review of *The West-Eastern Divan of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, translated from the German by Robert Martin (Wakefield Press 2016)

In the *West-Eastern Divan of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, Goethe (1749-1832) pretends to be a Middle Eastern poet. It is worth remembering, in these times, the love affair the West once had with the East, imputing to it all that was exotic, erotic, and decadent – the ‘orientalising’ fetish dissected by Edward Said and many others since.

Robert Martin, in his translator’s preface, describes the impetus for the Divan: in his mid-sixties, Goethe discovered the renowned fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafez, through translation. So this book is a translation of Goethe’s attempt to translate Hafez’s genre into German, based on a German translation of the Persian. There’s more: Goethe had fallen in love with a young woman, Marianne von Willemer. The 12 books in the volume contain dialogues and refrains between Goethe and Marianne, in the character of Suleika. What intrigues me is that Marianne herself has written some of the poems. She is no silent muse: her voice is clear.

The question for me is, why not go straight to the original Hafez? What does Goethe have to offer us? Well, I’m about to find out. I decide the best way to do this is to read the volume in chunks, book by book, during my summer sojourn in the southern Riverina region of NSW.

It’s hot on the day before Christmas, as I read the first book, Moganni Nameh, or the Book of the Singer. There are 19 poems, seldom longer than a page (I like a short-to-moderate length poem, having been scarred by attempting to read Thomas Moore’s 1817 ‘Oriental romance’ Lalla Rookh as a teenager).

Hafez is mentioned numerous times in the first book, but he plays a greater role in the second, Hafis Nameh or the Book of Hafez. I read the ten poems on Christmas Day, after lunch, with a glass of champagne. The theme is the madness and metre of poetry. In this Book we are introduced to Suleika, the poet’s love.

Family members join me on the patio outside and I read them a few poems from the Book of Hafez to gauge their reactions. ‘He’s no Rumi’ says Claire. For Daniel, the feel of the poems is ‘quite Seussianesque’ – referring to the rhythm of Dr Seuss. To be honest, I can see what he means. Tish says ‘It’s one for the Goethephiles’. This tells me that these poems are not best appreciated when read aloud – perhaps inevitable with translation.

On Boxing Day, with the hum and click of cricket on the TV in the background, I tackle The Book of Reflection. It’s nearly 40 degrees. There are seven poems, one of them pages long. The reflections are about how to live a good life: forbearance, stillness, the middle path.

The next day I begin on Rendsch Nameh, The Book of Displeasure. I’m quite interested in this, as displeasure is both a precise and negative concept. The displeasure alluded to seems to be a mild disgruntlement with how eminence fails to be recognised. There are 14 poems. The first contains this line, which could have many uses:

Would they have the sense to tell a
Rodent turd from coriander?

Also this:

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I enjoy a conversation
With an expert or a tyrant

Hikmet Nameh, the Book of Proverbs, is next, on another scorching day. This book seems to be about the ambiguities of life and how to steer a clear path. These lines resonate:

One day, when I had extinguished a spider,
I paused: Was that a thing well done?

And:

Two friends that bring no trouble
Wine goblet, book of poems

The heat continues to build. On New Year's Day 2018 I read the Book of Timur. Timur, or Tamerlane, was a fourteenth-century Mongolian-Turkish empire builder, with territory from India, Russia to the Mediterranean. In the second poem, the poet speaks to Suleika – imagining love feeding on such a multitude of souls as fell victim to Timur's domination.

And so we come to the Book of Suleika, where the real business begins. Goethe talks about Suleika, Potiphar's wife, who tries to seduce Joseph, he of the many-coloured coat. Martin notes in his glossary that Potiphar's wife is named in the Islamic tradition, and Joseph does not spurn her. It's interesting that Goethe does not take the character of Joseph, young and handsome. Instead he uses the alias of the sixth-century poet Hatem Tai, 'renowned for his generosity' as Martin explains.

Here we have the first poem in Marianne's hand. She reassures Goethe that her passion equals his. In a time when scrutiny of male predation on women is finally happening, it is very interesting to have Marianne's strong voice of assent and engagement – and to have the intellectual dimensions of the relationship brought to the fore.

As the dialogue between Suleika and the poet unfolds (and she is, of course, poet too), the poems come into focus: even in translation, their fiercely personal nature makes the poetry ring brighter and stronger. The ginkgo leaf becomes the symbol of two entities uniting, and/or dividing; the lovers, of course, but also the divergence between the poet's vision and the reality of life.

Marianne reassures the poet of her love:

You can grace my youthful freshness
With your passion's seasoned force.

In these lines, she encourages him not to be deterred in seeking her love:

Let your cracked planet forever
Try to make itself whole

Then Hatem and Suleika experience a separation. He worries that the words of other poets appear on her lips. Marianne's poem sends the West Wind to comfort him and looks forward to the reunion. She exhorts the West Wind to

Tell him, but tell him humbly:
Say his love is all my life.....

When the reunion happens, Marianne renews her vows of love to Goethe. But is the poet completely satisfied? In Saki Nameh, the Book of the Cupbearer, Hatem goes to the Tavern and sits alone drinking. He says

The drinker, whatever the truth,
Sees much clearer the face of God

Suleika, real or in his imagination, interjects:

Why are you so often like a fiend?

Hatem replies that the poet's soul is restricted by being contained in the body. He interrupts his inner dialogue to request a new cupbearer. I'm not sure if there is some homoerotic Zeusian thread here. Hatem grows intemperate and the cupbearer tries to restrain him. They go out to look at the stars on a summer's night. The cupbearer wants an older, wiser man to teach him the ways of life, but, callow youth, falls asleep instead.

It's now mid-January, and on a gloriously hot day, I've just returned from the Berrigan Show and Shine – a vintage car and motorcycle show, a big event in this tiny country town. I drag my brain back into Goethe's world, to the 10 poems in Mathal Nameh, the Book of Parables. One is written from the perspective of a pearl, speaking to the jeweller about to pierce her through: she and her pearly sisters will be 'fixed in ruination' upon the strand. I'm struck by the violence of the metaphor.

Next is the Book of the Parsee. It's the day before 'Australia Day', over 42 degrees in the shade, and country is heaving with controversy. Only two poems in this book. One is about Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsees. Both speak of sun and water.

On 'Australia Day', after dripping sweat over a full fried breakfast at the local Country Women's Association hall, it's time for Chuld Nameh, the Book of Paradise. This is the last book, with 10 poems. The poet is questioned by a houri at the gates of Paradise. 'Did your battles or your merit send you here to Paradise?', she asks. The poet replies:

As a man I lived a life, and,
So that means I fought a fight.

So the poet is admitted and gets his own houri – who turns out to be Suleika, or maybe Suleika, for the houri doesn't remember, although she still loves poetry. The last poem is 'Goodnight', as the poet takes his place in Paradise.

So ends the *West-Eastern Divan*. It bears more than one reading to fully appreciate the themes woven through the books. Overall, the volume explores the relationship of the poet, with all his foibles and doubts, to God, society, good, evil and the world. Martin's translation is easy to read and accessible, but unless the original German is more subtle and poetic, I'm not convinced by Goethe's pose. Nevertheless, the story of Suleika/Marianne is intriguing, and for the Goethephiles, it is a valuable addition to his oeuvre in translation. In short, if this is your sort of thing, you will enjoy it.

I read the final part, a selection of unpublished poems, in the aeroplane on the way back to Adelaide. Fat drops of rain are flattened against the windows as we rise through the clouds, closer to heaven. The change has come at last.

Alice Gorman

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