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Goethe's Relationship to the Turks as Mirrored in his Works

We can say with full confidence that the Turks appeared on Goethe's horizon very early since we find sentences in his Latin exercise book relating to 16th-century Ottoman history, written when he was 8 years old. Here is what little Wolfgang noted in March, 1758 about Sultan Selim I: "Selimus became emperor in the Turkish kingdom after he had killed his father Bayezid and banished his brother Zizimus."[1] It was surely no coincidence that this example sentence given by a German teacher to his pupil to be translated into Latin speaks of horrific acts of a Turkish ruler and raises the accusation of patricide, however unprovable it may be.

Whereas pupils in Turkey learn about the same transfer of royal power: that the pious and frail Bayezid II abdicated from the throne after 30 years of rule with the words, "I hereby bestow my kingdom upon my son Selim, May God bless him!"[2] Practice sentences like the ones in Wolfgang's Latin notebook seem guaranteed to create aversion in young minds. Yet even if this might have been the case when Goethe was a young boy, his later comments about the Turks

1 Cf. the German source in: *Der Junge Goethe*. Edited by Hanna Fischer-Lamberg. Berlin 1966 . Vol. III, p. 33 f.

2 Cf. Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*. Pesth 1840. Vol. I, p. 683.

demonstrate that such attempts at indoctrination failed miserably when confronted with the intellectual independence of this free thinker.

It is significant that Goethe incorporated verses written by Selim I, the feared conqueror of Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia and several Persian provinces, into his *West-Eastern Divan* and even used them as a motto to the *Suleika Nameh (Book of Zuleika)*.

Admittedly, this occurred only after he had immersed himself in the work *Selim I., Man, Poet, Man of Letters, and Regent*[3] and thus gained insights into this ruler as a praiseworthy emperor and man of dignity whose sense of justice, humanity and generosity were praised even by his opponents.

In the 18th century there were still reasons enough for the representatives of the church and upper levels of society to keep anti-Turkish sentiments alive and well. The literature of the Baroque contributed greatly to this prejudice with its depictions of extreme despotism and brutality that were meant to instruct readers about the horrors perpetrated by the Turks. After all, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had seen Islam as the militant enemy of Christendom for more than a thousand years.

During the Middle Ages, however, the positive impressions about the bravery and chivalry of the Turks that had been gained on the crusades still outweighed the negative impressions.

We know that Goethe had an ambivalent view of the crusades because of the short chapter *Pilgrimages and C rusades* from the *Notes and Essays on the Divan* from 1819. There he argues for recognizing and respecting the point of view of one's opponent, employing the crucial words "one-sidedness" and "limitation."

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3 *Selim I., als Dichter und Mann von Geist, als Regent und Mensch* - such is the title of a chapter in the book by Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, *Denkwürdigkeiten von Asien*. Vol. I. 1811, pp. 239-302 which is mainly based on Turkish sources.

Goethe always makes use of these words when he warns us of falling prey to partisan judgements: "The one-sidedness of the Christian perspective that sees [the Turks] as enemies limits us by its limitation that is broadened in our modern times only by degrees, as we gradually learn about the events of the wars from oriental writers."[4]

On the other hand, Goethe expresses his own gratitude for the fact that Europe did not fall under the yoke of foreigners, and praises the "conservation of the circumstances of educated Europe" as the merit of Christian warriors: "For all that, we remain indebted to all the agitated pilgrims and crusaders, since we owe the protection and conservation of the circumstances of educated Europe to their religious enthusiasm, their vigorous, untiring resistance against eastern pressures."[5]

In the same vein in a conversation with his friend Eckermann, Goethe describes the "crusades toward the liberation of the Holy Grave" as "clearly a false tendency; but the good thing is that the Turks were weakened and hindered in their attempt to take control of Europe."[6]

Since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a distorted picture of the Turkish enemy as a wild, barbaric warrior people had spread throughout Europe, even more as the threat posed by the Ottoman campaigns in the Balkans, the Aegean and on the Mediterranean coasts became more and more concrete. Under Suleiman the

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4 All Goethe quotations from *Werke*. Hrsg. im Auftrage der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen. Abt. I – IV. 133 Vols. (in 143). Weimar 1887-1919. The so called *Weimar Edition* here abbreviated WA . The above quotation see in *Noten und Abhandlungen zum West-östlichen Divan* chapter *Wallfahrten und Kreuzzüge*: WA I, 7, p. 184.

5 See *Noten und Abhandlungen*, chapt. *Wallfahrten und Kreuzzüge*: WA I, 7, p. 184.

6 Cf. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe* [any edition; conversation dated]: 1829, April 12.

Magnificent, the son and successor of Selim I., who extended the empire in Asia, North Africa and Europe during his reign of 40 years, Turkey controlled even parts of Poland and Hungary, Bosnia, Serbia and Wallachia, as well as Greece, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria in the Mediterranean region.

Particularly since the time of the great southern European offensives from the years 1529, 1663 and 1683 that led to the sieges of Vienna, resulting in panic throughout the Habsburg Empire, the notion of Turks in the popular imagination was largely characterized by fear. This was especially true since tendentious exaggerations and horror propaganda were spread in order to encourage the hesitant princes to lend their aid to the Christian cause.

As we know, Goethe studied the Qur'an with great respect from an early age and took inspiration from it for poems and drama fragments in praise of the founder of Islam.[7] When a translation of the Qur'an appeared in Frankfurt in 1772 under the title *The Turkish Bible*, the author of which declared the holy book of Islam to be a "book of lies," Goethe dismissed the translation as a "m iserable piece of work." According to the stated purpose of the fanatical author, the Frankfurt professor Megerlin, the so-called *Turkish Bible* was intended "to teach the Germans to better know the Antichrist Mohammed [...] and to ask God to make a quick end to this violent empire and its superstitious religion in the Qur'an [...], that Jesus and his blessed gospel was the sole reigning gospel and would rise again: when the Muslims, Jews and heathens were led to the sheep's stable of Christ in good time."

Goethe replied to this tendentious translation of the Qur'an with the following words: "We only wish that one day a different translation might be completed under the eastern skies by a German who

7 For the following quotations see K. Mommsen, *Goethe und die Arabische Welt*. Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 157-217.

would read the Qur'an in his tent with all the poetic feeling of the prophet and who would have enough insight to grasp the entirety of it."

Megerlin's mentality, which was not only one-sided and partisan but also of a poisonous militant quality as it overflowed from his supposed *Turkish Bible* was so distasteful to Goethe that he decided to undertake retaliatory measures. In his work, *The Pastor's Letter in the City of *** to the New Pastor in the City of ****, written in 1773, he created the character of a peace-loving, tolerant, enlightened protestant pastor to whom he gave the voice of his own convictions. For him, "God and love are synonyms." For this reason he entrusts even "all non-believers to everlasting, restorative love" and confesses enthusiastically:

> What bliss it is to think that the Turk who takes me for a dog, the Jew who takes me for a pig, will one day be overjoyed to be my brothers.[8]

Incensed by the intolerance of a colleague, Goethe's pastor makes a highly surprising remark for a man of the cloth: "If one views it in the right light, everyone has his own religion." He warns vehemently: "Beware of the false prophets. These worthless flatterers call themselves Christians and under their sheepskins they are vicious wolves." Here he is taking aim at militant orthodox fanatics like Megerlin. The positive character of the Protestant minister gave Goethe a way to speak for brotherly feelings toward Turks and Jews.

Soon thereafter he did this again in a carnival play, *Fastnachtsspiel vom Pater Brey*, with the creation of the negative character, the "Pfaff" (pulpiteer):

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8 The German original cf. in *Der Junge Goethe* Vol. III, p. 111.

Having, with words of spirit-grace,
While travelling to every place,
From unwashed rabble the chance to choose
Who lived like heathens, Turks, and Jews,
I've gathered a community
Who May-lambs filled with charity
For self and spirit-brothers be.[9]

Goethe's caricature of a Christian clergyman in the *Fastnachtspiel* stems from the same Enlightenment impulse that led him to create the positive figure of the pastor in *The Pastor's Letter* as a contrast to zealots like Megerlin. It was impossible for the young Goethe to share the usual notions of Turks as "the enemy of the Empire and of Christians" that had been common parlance for centuries.

It was natural for the German populace to side against the Turks in the territorial struggles for power between the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburgs and the Russians. But during the time when Goethe was young, people's thinking began to change. Strangely enough, Goethe in his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth,* tells of a parson's daughter who "wishes to go to Turkey."[10]

When Goethe was growing up, his mother declined to speak out against the Turks in the usual political conversations. We can see this in her correspondence: "You know that I am not political by nature — and the Kaiser and the Turks and the Turks and the Kaiser interest me as much as the man in the moon."[11] This excerpt from her letter

9 All poetical translations in this text are due to the courtesy of my friend and colleague, the poet Martin Bidney .For his complete English translation of Goethe' s *West-Eastern Divan* see *West-Eastern Divan*. The poems, with *Notes and Essays*. Translated by Martin Bidney. New York: Global Academic Publishing. 2010.

10 Cf. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) book 11 (WA I, 28, p. 36).

11 Katharina Elisabeth Goethe to Karl W. Unzelmann, 1788 July 18. In: *Frau Aja*. *Goethes Mutter in ihren Briefen*. Edited by Käte Tischendorf. Ebenhausen

reveals indirectly that "the Kaiser and the Turks" were indeed frequent topics of conversation.

Goethe's own opinion of the usual political blathering is revealed in his early comedy *Die Mitschuldigen* (*The Accomplices*) of 1769, in which he introduces a philistine holding forth on politics, one year after the start of the Russo-Turkish war: "The barkeeper in his bathrobe, in an easy chair, behind a table with a light soon to go out, some coffee, pipes and the newspapers [...]":

> The Poles? not doing well, so far as I can view,
> We'll wait and soon can tell what more the Turk will do.
> If wise, he'll grab the chance; he'll gain the most that way;
> They've got the guys can lead the Rooskie troops astray.
> When once you start to shoot, he rages like a bear!
> Here's what I'd do if I, a Turk, were waiting there:
> I'd march to Petersburg as fast as I was able
> And rifle-blast the court, and hunt a little sable...[12]

Goethe ultimately omitted this passage from the final version of *The Accomplices* — after the Russian victory.

Even in a comic poem dated Frankfurt, January 1773, Goethe makes ironic reference to this sort of philistine politicizing and the typical description of the Turks as the "enemy of the Empire and of Christians."

> So let the empire's, Christians' foe,
> And Russian, Prussian, Belial go
> Dividing up the earth-ball so,

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bei München 1914, p. 147.

12 Cf. *Die Mitschuldigen, ein Lustspiel in Einem Acte* (Scene 7) in: WA I, 53 , p. 59.

If just our German home can stay
Out of the great dividers' way...[13]

Clearly, Goethe enjoyed poking fun at political opinionators of the day, as evidenced in the Easter stroll scene from *Faust*. A "burgher" speaks (v. 860 ff.):

On Sundays, holidays, there's naught I take delight in
like gossiping of war and war's array.
when off in Turkey, far away,
those foreign armies are a-fighting.
One at the window sits, with glass and friends,
and sees all sorts of ships go down the river gliding;
and blesses then, as home he wends
at eve, our times of peace abiding.

Admittedly, the "burgher" speaking here is to be understood as a contemporary of the historical Faust, but historical reasons did not stop Goethe from attributing thoughts to this character that he had witnessed in his own contemporaries. The Turkish wars in far-off lands in the 16th century were no less than in Goethe's times the everyday accompaniment to political life and as such, in a sense, the spice of life. Since the outside world is always distinguishing itself "with the same movements [...] and we seem to be spinning on our own axis of world history as well as the earth's," Goethe referred to his early lines from Faust as late as 1828: "That off in Turkey, far away, / those foreign armies are a-fighting."[14]

13 Cf. *An J. C. Kestner. Frankfurt, Januar 1773*: „Wenn dem Papa sein Pfeifchen schmeckt..." (WA I, 5.1, p. 62 f.)

14 Letter to C. F. v. Reinhard, 28 January 1828. In: WA IV, 43, p. 266 f.

Thus, the foreign armies "off in Turkey, far away" offered fuel for discussion to the citizens of central Europe in earlier and later centuries.

Such "conversation about the war and war's array" has not let up to this day, when television directs our attention to conflicts in other parts of the world or shows us even bloody battles or victims of terrorist attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Asian countries as well as in North Africa. Most people react as spectators, just as Goethe shows the good burghers reacting as they read the newspapers, who partake of the fortunes and misfortunes of others, in a lively yet imaginary way.

The young Goethe witnessed several countries gaining their freedom from Turkish sovereignty in the Mediterranean region. Ali Bei restored the Mamluk regiment to its old independence and the Bedouin sheik Daher created an independent state in Akka. They seem to have been the heroes of the day for the citizens of Frankfurt if we consider the nicknames "Ali Bei" and "Sheik Daher," given to children in a family of Goethe's circle. Goethe mentions them by these nicknames in a versified letter from 1775.[15]

In his autobiography, Goethe took the opportunity to articulate the Germans' opposition to the Turks. When speaking of the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774, he reports with tangible irony how the "quiet, well-kept burgher" innocently engages in "prejudice" and how this partisan "limitation" ultimately leads to the "Turks" being regarded as if they were "not human beings," while the Russians strive to "expand the power of their ruler [Catherine the Great]." Goethe notes: "since this happened to the Turks, whose contempt we are wont to return in spades, then it seemed as if no sacrifices at all were made when these non-Christians fell in their thousands." [16]

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15 Letter to Johann Georg and Rahel d'Orville, on September 3, 1775 see in *Der Junge Goethe* Vol. V, p. 254.

16 Cf. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) book 17 in WA I 29, p. 66 f.

With these comments, Goethe is referring to the roots of a deadened capacity for feeling that is widespread in our era of mass media. Television, of course, shows us the victims and blood in the streets close up. The theatrical way in which Goethe's contemporaries perceived sensational political events happening far away is demonstrated by the brilliant Russian victory in battle at the Bay of Çeşme, a port on the west coast of Asia Minor across from the island of Chios. In 1770, the entire Turkish fleet was set on fire there and annihilated.

This battle at sea was a clear sign of the decline and gradual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which was then almost 500 years old. Goethe reports: "The burning fleet in the harbor of Çeşme caused an outpouring of jubilation across the civilized world and everyone participated in the victorious high spirits when a warship was exploded over the Rhede of Livorno so that the artist [Philipp Hackert] could study it as a model for his paintings of Çeşme, creating a genuine picture of this great event for posterity."[17]

Goethe recognizes in his autobiography that it is almost impossible to overcome our own limitations and blind partisanship — it's just human nature. It is also revealing for Goethe's analysis of the hatred toward the Turks that he sees his fellow countrymen's contempt as reciprocation for the Turks' own contempt of the Germans. In writing his autobiography, Goethe uses this neutral perspective to

17 Cf. *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*Poetry and Truth*) book 17 in: WA I 29. p. 67. The last sentence applies to the command of prince Orlow, to blow up an old frigate in the roadstead of Livorno, to offer the artist Philipp Hackert an opportunity to witness the explosion of a ship with his own eyes, because Hackert was commissioned by the St. Petersburg court to paint a realistic picture of the Russian victory over the Turks. See in Goethe's Biography of Philipp Hackert the passage WA I 41.1, p. 27 f. and also the section about the battle of Çeşme (*Schlacht bei Tschesme*) in WA I, 46, p. 130-138 and the extensive description *Ausführliche Beschreibung der sechs Gemälde, die zwei Treffen bei Tschesme vorstellend* (WA I, 46, p. 340-347).

relativize this contempt, since he shows it to be reciprocal. In this way, he creates a level of self-knowledge in which those who despise and those who are despised appear on equal footing — like enemy brothers in the same family.

Incidentally, not long after he wrote the section on the war between the Russians and the Turks for his autobiography, Goethe consulted a report from the Turkish point of view entitled *Essential Observations or: A History of the War between the Ottomans and the Russians from 1768-1774* by Resmi Achmed Efendi.[18]

Goethe's study of this text allowed him to "enlighten himself on the more modern way of thinking about the current situation."[19] The conversations recorded by Goethe's friend Eckermann reveal that the Greek war of liberation from the Turks as well as the recent conflicts between Turks and Russians and "quarrels in Turkey" were topics of conversation in Goethe's house in Weimar. It is also significant to note that the poet Goethe, who despised anything having to do with campaigns undertaken to conquer new territory, once praised the Russians for calling a halt to battle. It was "very grand" of them -- he says -- that they had "shown moderation after the capture of Adrianople and not marched on to Constantinople."[20]

In earlier centuries during which the Ottomans gained control of the Mediterranean countries without having access to a sufficiently

18 The book is still in Goethe's personal library in Weimar: Achmed Efendi, Resmi: *Wesentliche Betrachtungen oder Geschichte des Krieges zwischen den Osmannen und Russen in den Jahren 1768 bis 1774*. Aus dem Türkischen übers. u. durch Anm. erläutert von Heinrich Friedrich von Diez. Halle u. Berlin: 1813. 307 pages. Cf. Goethes Bibliothek. Katalog. Bearb. Hans Ruppert. Weimar 1958. No. 3484.

19 See Goethe's letter to H. F. v. Diez, dated November 15, 1815 (WA IV, 26, p. 153). Diez , the translator and editor of the book had send it to Goethe in July of 1815.

20 Cf. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe* [any edition; conversations dated]: 1827, July 5.; 1829 April 1.; 1829 April 7; 1829 April 11 and 1829 December 6.

large fleet, terror reigned due to the many battles at sea and pirate attacks on all the coasts as far away as Spain. Blame was laid largely at the feet of the Turks, although the looters in fact came from all over the region. Interestingly, Goethe does not pass up the opportunity in his drama *Faust* to portray a typical 16th-century pirate attack. Mephistopheles relates this event to Mrs. Marthe as the alleged death bed confession of her husband (v. 971 ff.):

> Meph.:... "When I from Malta went away
> my prayers for wife and little ones were zealous,
> and then good luck from Heaven befell us.
> We made a Turkish merchantman our prey,
> that to the Sultan's bore a mighty treasure.
> Then I received, as was most fit,
> since bravery was paid in fullest measure,
> my well-apportioned share of it…"

The fantasizing about the "mighty treasure" of the Sultans corresponded to the images of incredible wealth ascribed to the Ottoman Empire in the popular imagination of 16th-century Europeans; yet it is striking to note that in *Faust* the Turks are not the pirates but rather those being plundered.

Goethe used the opportunity to create a counter- image of the usual portrait of the enemy. This is typical for Goethe because throughout his work whenever the Turks are the topic at hand, he maintains his intellectual independence. Usually he conveys an air of neutrality, but it is not unusual for him to use his works as a vehicle for "clever stratagems," as he termed them, when he wanted to go against the grain of accepted prejudices.

This approach is quite clear even in the earliest draft of his first great dramatic work, *Götz von Berlichingen*. This drama, written in honour of a 16th-century hero, contains numerous references to the

Turks. This was a natural development in the play since the historical Götz had taken part in the campaign against the Turks in 1542. In keeping with the historical character of the piece, the Turks are described as the "sworn enemy" in all versions of the play.

Yet just in the way he employs the image of the Turks as the enemy, Goethe is careful to ensure that they are never condescended to and the wars with them are shown to be extremely problematic.

In the first act, when domestic problems of Germany are being discussed, Weislingen mentions the possibility that "the lands of our dear Kaiser are vulnerable to the violence of the sworn enemy," but Götz, who has no illusions about the selfishness of the German princes "is prepared to swear that there are those who thank God in their hearts that the Turk is holding back the Kaiser."[21]

The scene in the bishop's palace in Bamberg underscores the same issue when Olearius asks "What are people saying about the Turkish campaign, Your Grace?" and the bishop replies:

> The Kaiser has nothing more urgent than to first reassure the empire, abolish the feuds, and restore the respect of the courts. Then, people are saying, he will personally set off on a campaign against the enemies of the empire and of Christendom. He still has personal business to attend to and the empire is still a den of thieves despite 40 peace treaties. [...][22]

The pompous formulation "enemies of the empire and of Christendom" seems void of meaning in this context since the actual problem is a domestic German one.

In the second Act Goethe addresses the topic once again. Weislingen's argument is blatant. He says "The Kaiser is demanding

21 WA I 8, p.31.
22 WA I 8, p.40.

aid against the Turks and it's a ch eap price if he'll stand by us again"[23] and we can see that the Kaiser's vassals care only about their own advantage. They set the "Turks" against their own Kaiser the way chess players move their pieces on the chessboard. The lack of conscience displayed by those of privilege, the territorial lords and fawning courtiers thinking only of their own advantage is laid bare for all to see.

In the third act we read of the German knights who are meant to place themselves "at the empire's border, against the Turks, those wolves, [and] against the French, those foxes."[24] The term "wolves" for Turks is striking.

Such comparisons with animals have been part of the clichés that comprise propaganda about the enemy for millennia, especially during wartime. But Goethe, even as a young author, ensures with his word choice that we the reader recognize this usage immediately.

A closer reading actually reveals that the Turks come off better than the others depicted by animal names in this play. Götz pities the Kaiser because he has to "catch the mice" for the titled upper classes. Elsewhere, Götz states "the rats are gnawing away at his properties." The comparison to destructive rodents is aimed at those who have caused Germany's domestic troubles, in particular the fawning courtiers. The princes, who wish to "put pressure on the little man," so to speak, seem to Götz (Act I) to be like "birds of prey" who want to "devour their prey at their leisure." Götz scornfully calls his campaign against the troops of the empire a "rabbit hunt." The peasants in revolt call their formal feudal lords rabbits as well. After the tables have turned, they seem to be "like the rabbit being flushed from its den" or "like frogs croaking" in fear.

Compared to these animal analogies, referring to the Turkish wolves seem much more respectful. And incidentally, the hero

23 WA I 8, p. 76.

24 WA I, 8, p 113.

himself is compared to a wolf even in Act I when Weislingen makes the accusation: "You regard the princes like the wolf does the shepherd."[25] Götz also regards himself as a "wolf" (Act III) who proves to be too much for a whole herd of sheep.[26]

Another thing to remember is that Goethe was called Wolf because of his name Wolfgang and sometimes identified with being a wolf for the same reason and was also occasionally described as a "wolf" by others. All things considered, the term "wolves" seems more like a respectful term of address for the Turks than a form of slander.

Act III contains a particularly interesting and illuminating remark about Turkey. The general complains about Götz — in the enemy camp — as follows: "He goes through masses of soldiers in battle and the ones who don't die and get captured would rather run in God's name to Turkey than back to camp."[27]

The point made by Goethe here is astounding: The soldiers of the imperial troops appear to prefer imprisonment in Turkey to what they must reckon with in Germany! This means that they expect a lesser degree of punishment from the Muslim "sworn enemies" of Christendom than what awaits them from their own countrymen in their own country.

Act V presents us with an even stronger pronouncement in favour of Turkey as compared to German domestic affairs through an exclamation made by the hero. Götz who had placed himself at the head of the rebels for a short time during the peasant revolt. As soon as he hears of the terrible excesses of the perpetrators, he calls out in desperation: "The murderers! Incendiaries! I'm done with them! [...]

25 WA I, 8, p.31.
26 WA I, 8, p. 88.
27 WA I, 8, p.97.

If only I were a thousand miles away, lying in the deepest pit in Turkey!"[28]

Goethe has his hero declare that he would rather be marking time under the harshest conditions of imprisonment in Turkey than tolerate murder in his own country in which he feels complicit.

There are no references for either of these last quotations regarding Turkey in Goethe's source materials. He added them himself. A hundred other exclamations would be possible at this point to dramatize the hero's desperation about the current situation in his own country. So then we ask ourselves, why does Goethe mention Turkey in this instance, why does he place this unusually strong emphasis, breaking through the stereotypical notions of the excessive brutality of the "sworn enemy of Christendom."

We are meant to reflect on the fact that instead of these stereotypes, the Ottoman Empire is held up as a sort of refuge within Goethe's own dark landscape of the 16th century. The characters strive to reach this refuge because the moral and cultural bankruptcy of the circumstances in their own country has made existence there unbearable.

The young author knew, of course, that comparing the Germans to the Turks at such great disadvantage was an affront to his countrymen. But clearly Goethe enjoyed being controversial and used the opportunity in *Götz* to shake these clichéd notions to the core — even before Lessing in 1780 gave the most famous example of how to fight prejudice from the stage in *Nathan der Weise* (*Nathan the Wise*) with the noble characters of Sultan Saladin and the wise Jew Nathan.

The demand for tolerance raised by Enlightenment thinkers created an intellectual climate that was amenable to a revised image of the Turks, especially since thriving trade relationships had begun to

28 WA I, 8, p. 149.

replace the military conflicts. And gradually the thinking turned toward all the positive contributions the Turks had made.

Among the treasures of the Orient that western civilization owed to the Turks were many works of literature. Poetry had always enjoyed a place of honor in the Ottoman Empire. All the Ottoman rulers competed in their patronage of poets and support of scholars and even wrote poetry themselves, albeit with differing levels of success.

Selim I. was the first to publish his own poems in the Persian language, which he preferred. Given Turkey's geographical location as a natural bridge between Asia and Europe, the Turks were the ones through whom Europeans had the most direct contact with the Orient, and they became the most important means by which Europeans gained access to examples of eastern literature. In fact, many works of Persian and Arabic origin were preserved only in Turkey, thanks to the Ottomans' love of and respect for literature.

In other Islamic countries, their chances for survival were slim, at least at certain times. Of all the many works that came through the Sublime Porte into the west, I will name only one example that was dear to Goethe all his life, the collection of *1001 Nights*.[29] Throughout the centuries the Turks distinguished themselves again and again with their particular brand of liberalness in literature. In this way they became the guardians and preservers of literary treasures that would have been lost to the world forever.

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29 The first Arabian manuscript of the *Arabian Nights* arrived in Paris in the last quarter of the 17th century through Marquis Nointel, the French ambassador in Constantinople. He was accompanied by the scholar Antoine Galland, who later on translated the *Arabian Nights* in 12 volumes under the title *Les mille et Une nuit. Contes arabes*, traduits en Français par Mr. Galland. Paris 1704-1717. The influence of this work on the western literature cannot be overrated. *The Arabian Nights* had a very strong and lifelong impact particularly on Goethe. See. K. Mommsen, *Goethe und 1001 Nacht*. 3rd edition. Bonn 2006.

During the time of the greatest expansion of the Ottoman Empire, even the right to protect the holy sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina had transferred to the Turkish sultans. The fate of the poets and their works that were under attack by orthodox theologians depended on the official condemnation or tolerance by the muftis, especially by the Grand Mufti in Istanbul.

Selim I. and his son Suleiman the Magnificent, who viewed themselves as successors to the caliphs, took questions of religion very seriously, as did Selim II. When the most famous grand mufti of such powerful rulers, Ebusuud Efendi, who died in 1574, used his stature as the highest representative of religious law to protect the *Divan* of the great Persian poet Mohammed Schems-eddin Hafiz, he earned Goethe's admiration and gratitude.

The first *Fatwa* poem in the *Hafiz Nameh* of Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* demonstrates this:

FATWA

Hafiz' lyric writings boldly show you
Truths enduring, firm, uncontroverted.
Here and there, however, little items
Fall outside the bounds of the commandments.
If you'd walk secure, you must be able
Theriac and venom to distinguish.
Yet, with gladdened spirit to surrender
To the pure delight of noble action,
Meanwhile warding off, in thought well-pondered,
Things that only lead to endless torment,
Is the way mistakes may be avoided.
This was written by poor Ebusu'ud,

Be his sins by God in mercy pardoned.[30]

So does the following poem in the *Hafiz Nameh* :

THE GERMAN OFFERS THANKS

Holy Ebusu'ud, yes, you've got it!
Here, the holiness the poet wanted;
For precisely to these little items
Found outside the bounds of the commandments
He, high-spirited, is heir apparent,
Ev'n in sorrow happy moving freely.
Theriac and venom well may
Seem to take one form and then another.
Death's not in the latter, life the former.
For eternal innocence of conduct
Is the truer life, that so is proven
As it injures no one but the doer.
So the poet, old, continues hoping
That, well pleased, in Paradise the houris
Welcome him in blooming youth transfigured.
Holy Ebusu'ud, yes, you've got it![31]

Here Goethe sounds a particularly strong personal note by declaring the Ottoman legal scholar to be "holy", a saint, in a certain sense, the patron of poets. Such a call for sainthood might be shocking to Christians, but Goethe does not shy away from publicly honouring

30 Cf. the German original of *Fetwa*. "Hafis' Dichterzüge sie bezeichnen..." in WA I, 6, p. 36.

31 Cf. the German original of *Der Deutsche dankt*. "Heiliger Ebusuud, hast's getroffen!..." in WA I, 6, p. 37.

that wise Turk who claimed a space for poets beyond dogma and morality.

Goethe's second *Fatwa* poem in the *Book of Hafiz* was written to glorify another Turkish legal scholar.

FATWA

The Mufti works of Misri had perused,
One then another – till the lot were done –
Then prudently consigned them to the fire:
A finely written book, and quite destroyed.
Said the high judge, "Let anyone be burned
Who speaks, believes like Misri – he alone
The one exception to the penalty:
For Allah lent His gifts to many a poet.
If in a sinful life he misapply them,
Let him see to it, making peace with God." [32]

The mufti praised here had saved a poet from being burned at the stake at the end of the 17th century, even though he was not able to save his poems. With all three of the poems cited here, Goethe created eternal monuments to the artistic understanding and liberalness of important Turks.

Among the other accomplishments of Ottoman high culture that were transmitted to westerners by the Turks were many products of their highly developed art of horticulture. The first tulip bulbs, hyacinths and lilies and also the first lilacs arrived in central Europe in the 16th century by way of a Flemish messenger at the Sublime Porte. The famous cultivation of tulips in Holland goes back to Turkish predecessors.

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32 Cf. the German original of *Fetwa*. „Der Mufti las des Misri Gedichte..." in WA I, 6, p. 38.

We know that Goethe appreciated what the Turks had achieved in the realm of horticulture due to his charmed reaction to Sheik Muhammed Lalézari's book *Scale for Flowers*, a small volume *On the Cultivation of Tulips and Narcissus in Turkey*.[33] Goethe wrote an ode on the spot praising the translator Heinrich Friedrich von Diez who had arranged for Goethe to receive the book.[34] The messenger, Ferdinand Hand, reported back to the Turcologist Diez: "Mr. Privy Councillor Goethe asked me to thank Your Grace most kindly for the book you sent him and to assure Your Grace that he not only read it but studied it most assiduously." Hand makes a special note about the "book which offers so much information about tulips and narcissus" and continues as follows:

> There is truly a broad understanding of the world of flowers contained in this text, and one can see how far we are in this regard from the important ways of thinking and perceiving common to the Orient. [35]

Incidentally, Goethe shared the information about the book on tulips and narcissus with a botanist at the university of Jena and arranged

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33 German title: *Wage der Blumen* Vom Tulpen- und Narcissen-Bau in der Türkey. Aus dem Türkischen des Scheïch Muhammed Lalézari. Übersetzt von H. F. v. Diez. Halle u. Berlin 1815.The book is still in Goethe's personal library in Weimar (Hans Ruppert: Goethes Bibliothek. Katalog. Weimar 1958. No. 1773).

34 Goethe published the poem "Wie man mit Vorsicht auf der Erde wandelt…"(„How to be prudent in our wanderings...") in the chapter *Von Diez* of the *Notes and Essays of the West-Eastern Divan.* See *West-Eastern Divan*.The poems, with *Notes and Essays*. Translated by Martin Bidney. New York: Global Academic Publishing. 2010, p.273.

35 Ferdinand Hand in a letter to H. F. von Diez, dated July 31, 1815. Cf. K. Mommsen, *Goethe und D iez. Quellenuntersuchungen zu Gedichten der Divan-Epoche.* 2nd edition. Bern. 1995, p. 81.

for the court gardener to plant a tulip bed "in accordance with the advice of the Turkish flower expert."[36]

Another area in which the west owes a debt of gratitude to the Turks is the field of music. Among the instruments borrowed from the enemy Turks by western musicians were the cymbals, which were used in the music of the janissaries. Goethe was aware of this when he sent his duke Carl August, a military enthusiast, the poem

To Shah Shuja And Those Like Him

Mid Transoxanian song
Of crowning praise
Our hymns are loud and strong
To laud your ways!
From every fear set free,
We live in you.
Live long! Your realm let be
Longeval, too![37]

Goethe makes reference in the poem to the music of the janissaries that he had read about in the *Book of Kabus*. According to this book, the music came from Transoxiana, across the Oxus river in what is now Kazakhstan, Uzbekhistan and Tajikistan. The music was characterized by such "heartiness and fearlessness" that its "upbeat melodies [...] were well-suited to the actions of warriors and generals."[38]

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36 Cf. Goethe's letter to the botanist Friedrich Siegmund Voigt in Jena, dated April 22, 1815 (WA IV, 25, p. 280). and K. Mommsen, *Goethe und Diez*, p. 82.

37 The German original. *Schach Sedschan und Seinesgleichen*. „*Durch allen Schall und Klang der Transoxanen...*" in WA I, 6, p. 87.

38 Cf. *Buch des Kabus*. Ein Werk für alle Zeitalter aus dem Türkisch-Persisch-Arabischen übersetzt und durch Abhandlungen und Anmerkungen erläutert von H. F von Diez. Berlin 1811, p. 731. The book is still in Goethe's personal

We shouldn't neglect to mention the fascinating material goods that those in the west came to enjoy, thanks to the Ottoman world empire. The many objects of trade include precious fabrics, carpets, faience, perfumes, spices and luxury articles, particularly coffee, which was highly desirable. Goethe was clearly thinking of these goods that were still considered exotic in central Europe when he writes in his great opening poem *Hegire* of the *West-Eastern Divan*, about the poet as a merchant: "…when with caravans I wander, / Coffee, shawls, and musk up yonder…"

At the time that Goethe composed the *Hegire* verses, the fear of Turks syndrome had largely been replaced by many symptoms of a love of Turkish fashion. The shift in attitudes toward Turkey was primarily caused by France's politically savvy policy of alliances. The thriving trade relationships that stemmed from this policy instigated the love for all things Turkish in Europe.

It became chic to dress up in Turkish style at parties and to have one's portrait painted in Turkish costume. The fashionable world now connected all that was Turkish with fantastic notions of boundless hedonism, exotic luxury and fairy tale magnificence in the Serail.

The Sultan's harem probably stimulated the imagination of many painters and their public to such a great extent because they had so little opportunity to experience anything authentic about life in a harem. Goethe did not reveal any particular interest in such modern European imaginings; it was only on the occasion of a stay at the spa in Karlsbad that he made note in his diary of a joke about a harem told by a Prussian officer during a meal at the Duke's table. After the assembled group claimed the newspaper was uninteresting, the officer "read" an alleged article from and about Constantinople in the following way: "The new Sultan Mustapha found that, upon

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library in Weimar (Hans Ruppert: Goethes Bibliothek. Katalog. Weimar 1958. No. 1772).

closer examination, the entire serail of his predecessor Selim consisted of virgins."[39] This kind of joke among men in a health-resort had certainly to do with the fact that shortly before, Sultan Mustafa IV. (1779-1808) had become the successor of his childless cousin Sultan Selim III. (1761-1807).

Everywhere in Europe popular Turkish operas, ballets and Singspiele produced a fascination that stemmed from the elegance of the serail.[40] They showed a temptingly colourful Orient and also positive characters such as the magnanimous Selim Bassa in Mozart`s *Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782).

In his own one-act play of 1814, *Was wir bringen* (*What we bring*), Goethe used the Turkish ambience of this popular opera by Mozart to express joy over the peace and unity of the reconciled Turkish and Spanish characters after the German wars of liberation.[41]

Ever since the Prussian King Frederick the Great established his policy of alliances, there had been a shift in attitude to Turkey's advantage in Prussia so that even in Berlin the Turkish fashion held sway. Just as in other European capital cities, the turban became a favoured head covering such that the King quipped "Eating dates is de rigeur in Berlin; the fools plant a turban on their head."[42]

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39 Cf. Goethe's diary of June 28, 1807 (WA III, 3, p. 232 f.)

40 Only Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* survived the ca. 100 Turkish operas of the time; cf. Gerhard Rohde: *Einflüsse türkischer Musik auf das Abendland*. In *Türkei. Abendland begegnet Morgenland 16.-18. Jahrhundert*. Internationale Tage Ingelheim. Mainz 1992, p. 155-161.

41 At the end of the play, the well known illuminated ship of Bassa Selim was shown on the stage while Belmonte, Constanze, Pedrillo, Blonde and Osmin appear together jubilantly singing in chorus. There is prove that Goethe as the director of the Weimar theatre repeatedly showed Turkish roles on the stage.

42 The quotation is taken from C. A. Bratter: *Die preußisch-türkische Bündnispolitik Friedrichs des Großen*. Eine geschichts-theologische Analyse seiner Stellung in der Weltsituation. Weimar 1915, p. 132.

In Weimar, Bertuch's *Journal of Luxury and Fashion* recommended "*bonnets à la turque*" and "*robes à la turque*." Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1798/99 meant that the popularity of oriental dress increased even further, although Napoleon felt the turban was not becoming to him.

However Goethe enjoyed disguising himself with a turban occasionally as a fun "*masquerade*." In the *West-Eastern Divan* he praised the turban as a head covering that "*decorated better than any Kaiser's crown*."[43] In this book he also makes the following claim about the turban: "*The most beautiful decoration will always be the muslin.*"

For his 65th birthday, his beloved Marianne Willemer gave him a "*turban of the finest muslin*". When several of the poems from the *West-Eastern Divan* were published in a *Pocket Book for Ladies for the Year 1817*, Goethe chose a turban as the decoration for the book cover. Presumably this illustration of the turban suited the female readership's taste for the fashionably exotic.

From early on, it was clear for Goethe that he wanted the *West-Eastern Divan* to contain Turkish as well as Persian and Arab elements. When he first discussed the project with his publisher, Goethe emphasized, "The Turkish poets shall not be ignored."[44]

Historical and literary studies had shown him that the strands of Persian, Arab and Turkish religious, cultural, and literary history were tightly interwoven indeed. And so it comes as no surprise that fragments of Turkish writing in his own hand were found among the

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43 Cf. in *Moganni Nameh - Book of the Singer* the poem *Vier Gnaden* (*Four Gifts of Grace*) and in *Suleika Nameh* (*Book of Zuleika*) the poem "Komm, Liebchen, komm! Umwinde mir die Mütze / Aus deiner Hand nur ist der Tulbend schön…" (Come, darling, come! My cap needs winding well! / No one but you can twist my turban round...")

44 Cf. Goethe's letter to his publisher J. F. Cotta, dated May 16, 1815 (WA IV, 25, p. 414 ff.)

papers in his literary estate. A copper engraving “in the Ottoman style” appearing on the frontispiece of the first edition of the *Divan* signaled also that the Turkish element would not be “ignored.” Since there is not enough time here to illuminate the amazing number of Turkish elements in the *West-Eastern Divan* and Goethe’s intensive study of Turkish poets and Turkish literature, I would like to let you know that I am working on a book on this theme and hope to be able to finish it.

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