

Rückert as translator and imitator of Persian ghazal poetry

Hartmut Bobzin, Erlangen

Many artists, writers and even scholars tend to be better known beyond their native lands than they are at home, as may be observed in the case of the German poet and Oriental scholar, Friedrich Rückert.¹

Rückert was born in Schweinfurt in 1788. After a traditional humanistic school education, he began by studying jurisprudence only to give it up very quickly and turn to the study of philology. Whilst at Heidelberg, he was taught by Johann Heinrich Voss,² famous for his translations of Homer's epics. In 1811 he was awarded a doctorate by the University of Jena for a small but important work on the "idea of philology".³

Rückert won fame for himself early on as a political poet whose work celebrated liberation from the yoke of Napoleonic rule. But then, shortly after the appearance of his "Forceful Sonnets" (*Geharnischte Sonette*, 1814),⁴ he turned his attention to a quite different subject.

Returning from spending about a year in Italy, mostly in the circle of German artists and *hommes de lettres* in Rome,⁵ he visited Vienna and stayed there for some weeks. There he met the Austrian Oriental scholar Joseph v. Hammer-Purgstall⁶ and became his pupil in Oriental languages (Turkish, Persian and Arabic). After his return to Franconia he persevered in his study of these languages, concentrating especially on Arabic and Persian because of their rich poetic achievements.

From 1820 onwards Rückert lived in Coburg, where he found some of the books he needed for his language studies in the ducal library. Here too, he met his wife; it was for her that he composed the many love poems that were later to be collected

¹ One might mention as similar examples (1) Max Müller (1823-1900), a pupil of Rückert (cf. Bobzin 1986), who edited the R̥gveda and is held in such high esteem in India to this day that the German Cultural Institutions in India are named "Max Mueller Institutes" (Mokṣa-Mūlar Bhavan); (2) Wilhelm Geiger (1856-1943), a pioneer in Sinhalese Studies, who is regarded in Sri Lanka as one of the most important scholars in the field of Sri Lankan studies (cf. Bechert 1995); (3) Carl Brockelmann (1868-1956) whose name is known to all Arabic scholars. His *History of Arabic Literature* is a milestone in several regards.

² 1751-1826; cf. E. Th. Voss, in: Killy (ed.) 1992: 63-65.

³ Cf. Wiener 1944.

⁴ Published for the first time pseudonymously: Freimund Reimar, *Deutsche Gedichte*, s.l. [Heidelberg] 1814.

⁵ Cf. the catalogue *Künstlerleben in Rom*. Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844). Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde, Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum 1991.

⁶ 1774-1856; cf. the biographical accounts by Cornelia Fischer, in: Killy (ed.) 1989: 498 f., and Birgitt Hoffmann, in: Ranke/ Brednich 1990: col. 427-30.

and published under the title “Spring of Love“ (*Liebesfrühling*).⁷ It was to become the most famous collection of nineteenth-century German love poems published before World War I. For reasons familiar to many (as a poet, he was unable to support his growing family!), he applied for a professorship in Near Eastern Languages at the University of Erlangen, submitting his translation of al-Hariri’s *maqâmât*⁸ as evidence of his mastery of the required languages (Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic). He remained in Erlangen from 1826 to 1841 and taught various languages, including Turkish, Persian, Sanskrit, Armenian and even Tamil, a South-Indian language.

In 1841, Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia nominated Rückert for a position the University of Berlin, where he was obliged to teach only during the winter term.⁹ Rückert retired in 1848, shortly before the ‘revolution’, and spent the rest of his life at Neuses, his country estate near Coburg. There he studied one language after another, translated numerous texts and composed hundreds of poems, most of which remain unpublished to this day. He died in 1866, his last collection of poems having been published in 1863 – political poems directed against Prussia’s Danish enemy¹⁰.

Returning to Rückert as orientalist and promoter of world literature – Rückert did not begin as a ‘translator’ of Persian poetry in the literal sense, but rather as a kind of ‘imitator’. The reason for this may simply have been that in those days both printed texts as well as manuscripts in the original Persian language were very scarce. Joseph v. Hammer was one of the few scholars to have a rich collection of Persian texts at his disposal, those in his own possession and those held by the Imperial Library in Vienna. We are indebted to Hammer who not only published a translation of Hafiz’ *Divan*¹¹ but also his “History of Persian *belles lettres*, together with a selection from 200 Persian poets” (*Geschichte der schönen Redekünste Persiens, mit einer Blütenlese aus zweyhundert persischen Dichtern*).¹² Notwithstanding a number of shortcomings in Hammer’s translation as well as in his presentation these works allowed readers to acquire some idea of Persian poetry, of its form and content. In this context one need only point to the influence Hammer’s work had on Goethe’s west-eastern poetry,¹³ as well as on Rückert and August von Platen.¹⁴

⁷ The first separate edition appeared in 1844 (Frankfurt: J. D. Sauerländer).

⁸ *Die Verwandlungen des Ebu Seid von Seru’g oder die Maka’men des Hari’ri in freier Nachbildung. Erster Theil. s. I.* [Stuttgart]: Cotta, 1826.- A second complete edition appeared in 1837.

⁹ Cf. Bobzin 1986.

¹⁰ *Ein Dutzend Kampflieder für Schleswig-Holstein*, Leipzig, 1863.

¹¹ *Der Diwan von Mohammed Schemsed=Din Hafis. Aus dem Persischen zum erstenmal ganz übersetzt*, Stuttgart & Tübingen: J. G. Cotta 1812-1813; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1973, and most recently, Kelkheim: YinYang Media, 1999.

¹² Vienna, 1818.

¹³ Cf. Bürgel 1997a (in this article one can find other relevant studies by Bürgel).

¹⁴ Cf. Bürgel 1997b; Bobzin 1997.

Like Goethe, Rückert was deeply impressed by Hammer's important work; he was studying Persian with the help of textbooks that did not offer many original texts and he felt inspired by von Hammer's translations, especially those of poems by the great mystic Djelaleddin Rumi (1207-73).¹⁵ It seems probable that it was in the course of this reading that Rückert first discovered the *ghazal*-form – and decided to transform it into German. He mentions his first German *ghazals* in a letter to his publisher J. G. Cotta,¹⁶ speaking of his German Rumi-poems as being “curiosa persica”, which should not be understood as either “translations” or “imitations”, but as a kind of counterpart to Goethe's “West-Eastern Divan” (*West-östlicher Divan*). These “curiosa persica” should not be confused with Rückert's “Eastern Roses” (*Östliche Rosen*),¹⁷ as Annemarie Schimmel does in her short biography of Rückert,¹⁸ since this collection was first published by F. A. Brockhaus in Leipzig at a later date (1822).

The publishing history of the Rumi *ghazals* is not quite clear. Rückert himself first published 42 *ghazals* in an “Almanach” edited by Cotta in Stuttgart.¹⁹ The first edition of Rückert's “Collected Poems” which appeared in Erlangen in six volumes (1836-8) included these 42 *ghazals* as well as two more, together with a second series of 27 *ghazals*.²⁰ Both collections also appeared in what remains the most complete albeit uncritical edition of his work, that published by Rückert's son Heinrich two years after his father's death (Frankfurt/M. 1868).²¹ A separate, bibliophile edition of the first 44 *ghazals* appeared in 1927.²² A. Schimmel mentions a free rendering into English of the first collection by W. Hastie: “The Festival of Spring” (Edinburgh 1903).²³ On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Rückert's birth, all the Rumi *ghazals* were published by the Turkish Dağyeli publishing-house in Frankfurt.²⁴

¹⁵ Cf. Schimmel 1964 (ed.).

¹⁶ Rückert 1977, Nr. 90 (16.7.1819): “Es sind, damit ich Sie begierig mache, *curiosa persica* nämlich, nicht Übersetzungen zu nennen und auch nicht Nachbildungen, in seiner Weise ein Gegenstück zu Goethes *Diwan*, den ich aber leider noch nicht kenne; bei diesem der Geist die Hauptsache, bei meinem die Form; so daß, wer Göthes Geist und meine Form zusammen nimmt, und zu beiden die leibliche Masse, wie sie in Hammers *Hafis* und desselben persischer *Blumenlese* liegt, sich ohne Persisch zu kennen, einen ungefähren Begriff von persischer Poesie wird machen können.”

¹⁷ *Oestliche Rosen. Drei Lesen*, Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1822.

¹⁸ Annemarie Schimmel: *Friedrich Rückert. Lebensbild und Einführung in sein Werk*. Freiburg i. Br. 1987, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Taschenbuch für Damen auf das Jahr 1821*, pp. 211-48.

²⁰ *Gesammelte Gedichte*, Vol. 2, Erlangen: Heyder, 1836, p. 421-485.

²¹ *Gesammelte Poetische Werke*, Vol. 5, Frankfurt a. M.: Sauerländer, 1868, p. 200-237.

²² *Mystische Ghaselen nach Dschelaleddin Rumi, dem Perser*. Von Friedrich Rückert. Hamburg: Lerchenfeld 1927 (a copy of this rare work is available in the Landesbibliothek Coburg, shelf mark: L.sel. 115).

²³ Schimmel 1963: 53.

²⁴ *Mawlana Dschelaleddin Rumi: Das Meer des Herzens geht in tausend Wogen. Ghaselen. Übersetzt von Friedrich Rückert*, 1988.

To the best of my knowledge no detailed examination of Rückert's "free renderings" of Rumi's ghazals has ever been made. All that has been published are a few occasional remarks by A. Schimmel about the quality of Rückert's work²⁵, such as the following,

"The extent to which Rückert understood the spirit of Rumi seems remarkable, even though he was not able at that time to understand the original text due to his then insufficient command of the Persian language; his renderings are much closer to Rumi's mode of expression than some later, more literal translations, such as for example, Rosenzweig-Schwannau's."

The public response to Rückert's ghazals does not seem to have been very encouraging, as becomes clear from statements made by Rückert himself.²⁶ Soon after the publication of "Eastern Roses", poems largely inspired by Hafiz (in the form known to Rückert from Hammer's translations), August von Platen (1796-1835),²⁷ Rückert's young friend in Erlangen who had been teaching himself Persian since 1819, wrote in his diary,²⁸

"He [Rückert] himself is no more satisfied with his Eastern Roses, and generally is at odds with his poetry."

After this note, Platen expresses his own opinion on Rückert's "Eastern Roses" quite frankly,²⁹

"I have to confess that my expectations were disappointed by his *Eastern Roses*, and that I missed in it richness of imagination as well as wealth of ideas. He himself speaks of its shallowness."

It is quite clear that Rückert was increasingly moving towards translating Oriental poetry, trying to imitate its formal elements as much as possible whilst trying to do so without offending his German readers' tastes. Nevertheless, Rückert also composed many 'German' *ghazals* in the early 1820s which clearly show the influence of their Persian models, in terms of both form and content. I would like to quote just two of Rückert's early 'German' *ghazals*,³⁰

(13.)

Die Schöpfung ist zur Ruh gegangen, o wach in mir!
 Es will der Schlaf auch mich befangen, o wach in mir!
 Du Auge, das am Himmel wachet mit Sternblick,

²⁵ Schimmel 1963: 53.

²⁶ Cf. 200 Jahre Friedrich Rückert (Exposition Catalogue), Coburg 1988, p. 243.

²⁷ Cf. Och 1996 (ed.), Bobzin and Och (eds.) 1997.

²⁸ Laubmann and Scheffler 1900 (eds.): Vol. II, 504 (20.11.1821): "Mit den östlichen Rosen sei er [Rückert] selbst auf keine Weise mehr zufrieden, und überhaupt mit seiner Poesie zerfallen."

²⁹ Laubmann and Scheffler 1900 (eds.): Vol. II, 505: "Ich ... mußte gestehen, daß seine Oestlichen Rosen meine Erwartung getäuscht hätten, und daß ich sowohl Bilderreichthum als Gedankenfülle darin vermisse. Er selbst spricht von ihrer Untiefe."

³⁰ Rückert 1836: 499.

Wenn mir die Augen zugegangen, o wach in mir!
 Du Licht, im Aether höher stralend als Sonn' und Mond;
 Wenn Sonn und Mond ist ausgegangen, o wach in mir!
 Wenn sich der Sinne Thor geschlossen der Außenwelt,
 So laß die Seel' in sich nicht bängen, o wach in mir!
 Laß nicht die Macht der Finsternisse, das Graun der Nacht,
 Sieg übers innre Licht erlangen, o wach in mir!
 O laß im feuchten Hauch der Nächte, im Schattenduft,
 Nicht sprossen sündiges Verlangen, o wach in mir!
 Laß aus dem Duft von Eden's Zweigen in meinen Traum
 Die Frucht des Lebens niederhangen, o wach in mir!
 O zeige mir, mich zu erquickern, im Traum das Werk
 Geendet, das ich angefangen, o wach in mir!
 In deinem Schoße will ich schlummern, bis neu mich weckt
 Die Morgenröte deiner Wangen; o wach in mir!

Another *ghazal* from the same collection,³¹

(14)

Nun senke dich vom Himmel nieder im Morgenlicht,
 Und schließ mir auf die Augenlieder im Morgenlicht!
 Mein leiblich Aug ist aufgeschlossen im Morgenglanz;
 Schließ auf die Seelenaugenlieder im Morgenlicht!
 Du bist bei mir als Licht geblieben im Graun der Nacht;
 Ich schwebt' auf deinem Duftgefieder im Morgenlicht.
 Dein Traum, der nächtlich mich getragen ins Paradies,
 Ließ mich zur Erde sanft hernieder im Morgenlicht.
 Ich sehe dich auf Erden wandeln im Morgenglanz,
 Du gehst die Schöpfung auf und nieder im Morgenlicht.
 Die Lüfte, die den Fittig baden in deinem Thau,
 Sie tragen Botschaft hin und wieder im Morgenlicht.
 Die Schöpfung regt sich, dir zu dienen, im Morgenstral;
 Nun regt euch frisch auch, meine Glieder, im Morgenlicht!
 Die Kräfte, die das Herz gesogen im Schlummerduft,
 Will es dir weihen treu und bieder im Morgenlicht.
 Laß jeden Arm, der müd' ausruhte, die Arbeit und
 Die Lust zur Arbeit finden wieder im Morgenlicht!
 Laß jeden seine Körner streuen auf deinem Feld,
 Und streue du den Segen nieder im Morgenlicht!
 Und so wie über'm stillen Fleiße des Sämans schwebt
 Die Lerch' auf hellem Lobgefieder im Morgenlicht;
 So laß mit deinem Peise schweben hin ob der Welt,
 Die dir arbeitet, F r e i u n d s Lieder im Morgenlicht.

For Rückert, the most important Persian poet was Hafiz, and I have shown elsewhere that Hafiz' work was to occupy Rückert to his dying day.³² Yet, until today,

³¹ Rückert 1836: 499f.

³² Bobzin 1988: 52-74.

Rückert's translations of Hafiz have never been published in their entirety and have often been edited in somewhat unsatisfactory fashion.

Rückert's approach to Hafiz was very similar to his approach to Rumi. It was not a lack of texts that led Rückert to produce some very free renderings based on Hammer's translations. Rückert's debt to Hammer's work, or in other words, the dependency of Rückert's early "Oriental" poetry on Hammer's translations, has not been sufficiently appreciated to this day. In some instances Rückert may be shown to have used the same *bayt* in the "Eastern Roses" (following Hammer's text) as he did later on in his "Poetic Diary" (*Poetisches Tagebuch*)³³ – following the translation by Vincenz von Rosenzweig-Schwannau (1791-1865).³⁴ I would like to give one example,

Die guten Stunden hat das Los
Gezählt mir und gemessen;
Es hat mir an den bösen bloß
So Ziel als Maß vergessen

This is Rückert's "imitation" in his "Eastern Roses".³⁵ The source of this text is von Hammer's translation,³⁶

Die guten Stunden wurden zugezählt,
Doch Leiden schickt das Loos mir ohne Zahl.

Later, in the "Poetic Diary", we read,³⁷

Als mir Freuden gab der Himmel,
Zählt er sie;
Leiden gibt er jetzt mir ach, und
Zählt sie nie.

The source of this translation is the Persian text taken from the Rosenzweig-Schwannau edition,³⁸

falak ču shādī-i man dīd ān hama bi-shūmurd
kunūn ki mīdihad-am ḡham hamī na-paymāyad

Rosenzweig-Schwannau's own translation runs as follows,³⁹

Das Loos, als meine Freuden es
Geschaut, da zählt' es sie;

³³ *Poetisches Tagebuch* von Friedrich Rückert. 1850-1866. Aus seinem Nachlasse, ed. by Marie Rückert, Frankfurt a.M.: Sauerländer 1888.

³⁴ *Der Diwan des grossen lyrischen Dichters Hafis im persischen Original herausgegeben, ins Deutsche metrisch übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Vincenz Ritter v. Rosenzweig Schwannau*, Vol. I, Vienna: K. K. Hof- u. Staatsdruckerei, 1858.

³⁵ Rückert 1822: 463.

³⁶ Rückert 1812-1813: 446 (Nr. CLXV).

³⁷ Rückert 1888: 419.

³⁸ Hafis 1858: Vol. I, 732, line 15f. (letter Dal).

³⁹ Hafis 1858: Vol. I, 733.

Doch jetzt, wo es mir Gram nur schafft,
Jetzt misst es, ach, sie nie!

These two examples show the way Rückert was using Hafiz' ghazals: he usually took one *bayt* and used it to form a German *rubāʿī* "Vierzeiler"; it was not unusual for Rückert to use the same *bayt* for different renderings. The following example (Rosenzweig-Schwannau I, S. 128, Z. 11-12) demonstrates this,

"Eastern Roses",⁴⁰

Ich hab' entsagt den Riffen,
Ein Andrer tauch' ins Meer.
Ich habe die Perl' ergriffen,
Nun sind die Tiefen leer.

"Poetic Diary",⁴¹

Die Zeit ist nun vorüber,
Da ich mich wagt' auf's Meer;
Nun ich erfischt die Perle,
Brauch ich das Meer nicht mehr.

From the same manuscript,⁴²

Die Zeit, da ich dem Schiffer
Dank schuldet', ist nicht mehr;
Da ich die Perle habe,
Was brauch ich noch das Meer?

It is well known that Rückert also translated complete ghazals by Hafiz. The most complete edition of these translations is that made by Herman Kreyenberg (1889-1963),⁴³ a Sanskrit scholar and librarian at the University of Münster. Until then there had been forty-four known translations, somewhat idiosyncratically edited in 1877 by Paul de Lagarde (1827-91) whose manuscript is now lost⁴⁴. Kreyenberg added forty-two new pieces from a manuscript now held in Münster University Library.⁴⁵ Each of these two collections dates from a different period of Rückert's life. The pieces edited by Lagarde were translated in the 1840s, whereas the Münster manuscript is based on the Vincenz v. Rosenzweig-Schwannau edition, the first volume of which only appeared in 1858.⁴⁶

In his last years, Rückert translated many single *bayts* in the same manner as he had done earlier in his career in addition to the forty-two complete *ghazals*. For examples see above.

⁴⁰ Rückert 1822: 140.

⁴¹ Rückert 1888: 420, Nr. 59.

⁴² Bobzin 1994: 53-70; the quoted lines on p. 64, Nr. 35.

⁴³ Ghaselen des Hafis, München: Hyperion 1926.

⁴⁴ Lagarde 1877: 178-198.

⁴⁵ The importance and fate of this manuscript is described in my article on Rückert's Hafis-translations, cf. above Bobzin 1988.

⁴⁶ Cf. n. 34.

In summing up Rückert's occupation with Hafiz one can discern three periods:

The *first period* begins with the time Rückert spent in Vienna staying with von Hammer. Although von Hammer gave him some manuscript material Rückert was unable to understand Persian poetry very well before early 1820. It was only then that his command of Persian became sufficient, encouraged by his contact with Platen.⁴⁷ Rückert was not, as is sometimes claimed, Platen's Persian teacher; the relationship resembled more that of colleagues in a similar situation, i.e. studying Persian autodidactically. There must have been a certain element of competition between the two poets seeking to master the difficulties of the Persian language and poetry, yet the fact that they helped each other is proven by their correspondence (unfortunately, only Rückert's letters have survived). When Platen received a Hafiz manuscript from the library in Munich (with the help of the philosopher Schelling), he copied it and lent it to Rückert. It is remarkable that Rückert's many comments and addenda to this manuscript have not yet been suitably investigated.⁴⁸ However, as already indicated, the literary products of this period remain mere imitations or rather free renderings of Hafiz, mostly on the basis of von Hammer's translations.

The *second period* can be dated back to Rückert's time in Berlin (1841-48). He had some important pupils, including Paul de Lagarde and the Sanskrit scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900).⁴⁹ It seems probable that Rückert's first real (translations of) *ghazals* were made at this time, given the surviving copy of the above mentioned forty-four *ghazals* by Rückert's pupil Lagarde.

The beginning of the *third period* is clearly defined by the publishing of the first volume of Rosenzweig-Schwannau's edition and translation of Hafiz' works in 1858. Rückert acquired a copy of this work immediately and studied it very carefully.⁵⁰ He not only translated forty-two complete *ghazals* but also single *bayts* in the German *rubāʿī*-form. The dependence of Rückert's work upon Rosenzweig's edition is shown by the fact that Rückert always transliterated the first two lines of each *ghazal*, sometimes following Rosenzweig in his choice of words as well as in some stylistic peculiarities.

This short overview has not addressed the literary quality of Rückert's *ghazal* translations. My colleague Johann Christoph Buergel has given this subject comprehensive treatment in his introduction to a selection from Rückert's translations of Hafiz' *ghazals*, which appeared in 1988⁵¹.

⁴⁷ For the following cf. Bobzin 1996.

⁴⁸ Cf. the reproduction of a page in Bobzin 1997: (cf. above, n. 14), 121.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bobzin 1986 (above n. 1).

⁵⁰ Unfortunately, Rückert's copy of the book is, as far as I know, lost.

⁵¹ Rückert 1988: 7-23.

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