

Abstract

My dissertation offers a fresh perspective on the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), one of the most pivotal figures in German literature. I focus on Goethe's garden writings, from his early translation of the *Song of Songs* to his later poetry in the *West-Eastern Divan*. These writings reveal the garden as a transformative space where Western and Eastern traditions merge, becoming a central element in Goethe's poetic explorations. By tracing the recurring theme of the garden across Goethe's works, I uncover interconnected ideas that provide new insights into his legacy, within the broader cultural and intellectual currents of the 18th and 19th centuries.

At the heart of my argument is the idea that Goethe's representations of gardens serve as profound catalysts for transforming subjectivity and renewing connections to the world, through a poetic lens that looks eastward. These gardens become platforms for reimagining the human subject, shaped by echoes from "Eastern" literature, such as the *Song of Songs* and Persian classical literature, while engaging with modern concepts of subjectivity and transformation. By examining Goethe's garden imagery and his deep interest in "Eastern" and world literature, my project demonstrates how the garden, as a literary trope, significantly reorients the Western subject. Goethe's work thereby reveals a complex mutual influence and transformation process.

The three main chapters of my manuscript explore Goethe's central works that reflect his engagement with garden spaces. The first chapter examines his translation of the *Song of Songs* concerning themes of desire, transformation, and destruction, as reflected in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The second chapter investigates Goethe's novels *Elective Affinities* and *Wilhelm Meister*, exploring the concept of *Bildung* (self-cultivation). The third chapter focuses on Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* and his engagement with forms and themes drawn from Classical Persian poetry, Muslim sources, and the Hebrew Bible.

In addition to these primary chapters, I include a few “interventions” that engage with the *Song of Songs*, the Classical Persian poets Sa’di (1210–1291), Hafez (1325–1390), and Nizami (1141–1209), and Hebrew poetry from Muslim Spain, particularly a poem by Samuel HaNagid (993–1056). These interventions allow me to revisit Goethe’s writings on gardens after reading some of their “sources” in their original languages.

Moreover, I view Goethe’s engagement with these texts as an invitation to re-read them in a new light, recognizing notions typically seen as “modern” within these earlier works. Instead of treating the non-German texts merely as “ornaments” or sources of influence, I position them as “interventions” that resonate with Goethe’s writings, creating a comparative framework that transcends national literatures. This approach facilitates a planetary reading that engages with Goethe’s works as part of a global literary space, emphasizing multilingualism, translation, and cross-cultural dialogue.

My research contributes to German literature by uncovering new dimensions of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s engagement with intercultural traditions, particularly through his use of garden imagery as a space for poetic and cultural transformation. By situating Goethe’s works in dialogue with Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic literatures, I challenge conventional models of “Orientalization” and highlight processes of mutual influence and renewal. This approach not only enriches the understanding of Goethe’s legacy but also demonstrates the broader potential of comparative and intercultural studies to illuminate the dynamic exchanges that shape literary and cultural history.

In the introduction to my work, I outline the main theoretical framework for my dissertation. A key concept in my study is *Bildung*, the aesthetic education of the subject. I aim to interpret this notion not only as a process of socialization and the subject’s adaptation to the norms of bourgeois society and the centralized state, but also as a transformative process of aesthetic education. The garden serves as one of the spaces where *Bildung* occurs. As a liminal

zone between “nature” and “culture,” it acts as a site of cultivation and refinement, a space where the wild is organized according to aesthetic principles.

However, the aesthetic process that unfolds within the garden is not linear. Under its auspices, "collapses" occur within the subject, these collapses encompass extreme emotional states, loss of orientation, and conditions of illness and grief. To characterize these collapses, I draw on psychoanalytic criticism, particularly the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, along with their concepts of the desiring-machine and becoming. Utilizing these concepts, I also define "lovesickness," which emerges from Goethe's translation of the *Song of Songs* in the first chapter. Throughout my study, I employ "lovesickness" as a literary figure that enables me to explore extreme states of radical openness to the Other, translation, and wandering.

Additionally, I engage with theories from the field of “world literature,” particularly its critical currents, including the writings of Emily Apter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Amir Mufti. With the concept of “world literature,” I seek to articulate connections between German literature, ostensibly the heart of the European canon, and literatures from the so-called margins of the Western gaze: the ancient Near East (the *Song of Songs*) and the Persian-speaking sphere between the 11th and 14th centuries. I aim to map out a Euro-Asian network of affinities and to describe how the garden, as a literary trope, reflects the transmission of knowledge and the resonance of traditions. These traditions are evident in rabbinic interpretations of the Torah, in Sufi thought as manifested in classical Persian poetry, and in Goethe’s literary writings.

Alongside this, I employ translation theory and the concept of translation as an additional theoretical framework. This study examines how concepts from different literary traditions are translated into other cultural spaces, also in relation to Goethe’s theory of translation as expressed in his *West-Eastern Divan*. I explore what is lost in translation, what remains translatable, and how the untranslatable takes on heightened significance, seen with

the final verses of the *Song of Songs*, which were “smuggled” out of Goethe’s translation. I propose reading this omission as an intentional emphasis on their importance.

The first chapter examines Goethe’s major garden works from the period between *Werther* (1774), his translation of the *Song of Songs* (1775), and *Triumph der Empfindsamkeit* (1777). This period places Goethe at a historical crossroads, on the eve of the French Revolution, while marking his transition to Weimar and his engagement with the court of Carl August. The chapter is divided into two main parts: the first explores the lovesick figure in Goethe’s *Song of Songs* translation and rabbinical exegesis, presenting it as a hermeneutical key for reading Goethe’s garden writings. The second part examines the role of the garden in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *The Triumph of Sensibility*.

I use Goethe’s translation of the *Song of Songs* to draw on key figures that have influenced my reading of the garden throughout his entire corpus. In his writings, “the lovesick,” the garden dweller, and the escaping gazelle guide my exploration of themes such as lovesickness, reterritorialization, and the path of escape. I demonstrate that these tropes permeate Goethe’s poetry from the beginning of his career and are present even in contexts where they are not explicitly mentioned or commonly discussed. I propose lovesickness as a central framework for interpreting the garden in Goethe’s work, linking it to the concepts of the economy of desire and radical openness to others. Goethe’s later reflections on translation reinforce this openness, as seen in his concept of the “third epoch” of translation, which aims to retain the foreignness of the original text while allowing it to resonate within the translator’s own language.

By aligning Werther’s experiences in the garden with the lovesick figure explored earlier in Goethe’s *Song of Songs* translation, we see how Werther’s immersion in nature reflects a radical state of vulnerability and longing. His attachment to the garden mirrors the condition of the lovesick, an active yet unstable state of devotion and striving that reveals the

fragility of subjectivity. The garden becomes a stage for Werther's oscillation between moments of ecstatic connection and existential despair, reinforcing the novel's broader meditation on desire, loss, and the limits of control.

The notion of disorientation recurs throughout Werther's encounters in the garden. Heinrich's futile search for out-of-season flowers reflects Werther's own lovesick state, where the desire for something unattainable transcends reason or reality. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "desiring-machine," Heinrich's "madness" can be interpreted not simply as delusion but as a radical openness to a different mode of existence--one that resists fixed identities and embraces desire as a continuous, fluid process. In this sense, Werther's encounter with Heinrich underscores the novel's exploration of longing as a force that transcends social norms and temporal logic.

Simultaneously, Werther's shift from reading Homer to Ossian marks a significant change in his relationship with literature and the world. This transition, from Homer's structured, patriarchal world to Ossian's fragmented, emotional landscape, parallels Werther's increasing detachment from social stability and rational order. His identification with the flower in the Ossian passage, where he voices the lament of a fading bloom, further reflects his merging with the garden's cycles of life, decay, and renewal. This identification reveals Werther's longing to escape into garden-like rhythms while also underscoring the impermanence and vulnerability of such a state.

Ultimately, by placing Werther's narrative within the broader framework of Goethe's engagement with the *Song of Songs*, Eastern traditions, and the lovesick figure, the novel emerges as a meditation on the fragility of subjectivity, one that unfolds in a garden where longing thrives, yet mastery remains elusive.

In contrast, *The Triumph of Sensibility* presents a strikingly different vision of the garden. Here, Goethe critiques the artificiality of sentimentalism and the Enlightenment's

impulse to control nature. The figure of Prince Oronaro embodies this artificial desire, surrounding himself with a constructed "garden", an indoor, sterile space filled with artificial moonlight, birdsong, and bubbling springs, all carefully engineered to eliminate nature's messiness. By placing *Werther's* themes of longing and disorientation alongside *The Triumph's* parody of artificial control, Goethe presents two contrasting yet interconnected takes on the garden.

Where *Werther's* lovesickness thrives in moments of vulnerability and attachment to the natural world, Oronaro's obsession with controlling and sanitizing nature reveals an ironic inversion of this desire. Goethe critiques this artificial world as a retreat into imaginative isolation, one that distorts human connection rather than fostering it. Together, these works reflect Goethe's evolving understanding of the garden as both a site of creative disruption and a space prone to manipulation and control.

In Chapter II, I examine the concept of *Verwandtschaft* (kinship/affiliation) in Goethe's botanical writings, alongside his novels *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, as well as in *Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil*, I explore how the garden functions as a space of negotiation and transformation, particularly within the context of *Bildung* in bourgeois society and its ties to paternal duties. Moreover, I highlight the garden as a site where gender differences are distinctly expressed, especially in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, and as a setting for Faust and Gretchen's unfolding relationship.

Goethe's notion of *Verwandtschaft* (kinship), drawn from his botanical thinking and reflected in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, further emphasizes the interconnectedness of the garden and subjectivity. In this context, Goethe's concept of *Bildung* becomes a process of continuous formation, where transformation unfolds through cycles of creation and decay. By integrating this botanical thinking into his literary vision, Goethe's garden emerges as a space

where subjectivity is cultivated through dynamic exchanges between self and nature, tradition and renewal, life and death.

In *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Goethe's botanical theory extends this idea of transformation into the natural world. Written after his Italian Journey, Goethe's exploration of plant life mirrors his understanding of subjectivity as a dynamic and evolving process. His concept of *Verwandlung*, the transformation of plants as they grow, decay, and renew, aligns closely with his poetic vision of subjectivity in the garden. Just as the plant evolves through interconnected stages, Goethe's garden writings explore the self as a fluid and transformative process. The figure of the "garden-sitter" reflects this dynamic.

In Wilhelm Meister's *Apprenticeship*, Goethe's depiction of the garden reflects his evolving ideas on subject formation. Drawing from his botanical theory of metamorphosis, Goethe presents the garden as a site where personal growth and social responsibility intersect. The pivotal garden scene in Book 8 illustrates Wilhelm's transformation as he follows Felix into the garden, where he gains a renewed vision of nature and his role as a father. Through Felix's curiosity and the gardener's knowledge, Wilhelm experiences nature with new awareness, signifying a shift in his understanding of *Bildung*, not as a linear path but as a dynamic, reciprocal process shaped by relationships and encounters.

The garden, with its blend of cultivated order and organic growth, emerges as a metaphor for the complexities of subjectivity, combining care, responsibility, and uncertainty. Just as Goethe's concept of metamorphosis highlights continuity within transformation, Wilhelm's evolving role as a father reflects this interplay of stability and change.

I also suggest interventions drawn from the Hebrew poetry of Muslim Spain. Although Goethe had no direct engagement with Hebrew poetry from Al-Andalus, Samuel HaNagid's poetry offers a valuable comparative lens for understanding Goethe's garden as a space of transformation. HaNagid's poetry, deeply influenced by Arabic traditions and the Song of

Songs, presents the garden as a site of sensory richness, cultural exchange, and existential reflection. In one notable poem, HaNagid's son Yehosef invites his father into the garden, a reversal of traditional Bildungsroman roles, where the child leads the father into a space of renewal.

The garden, described with circular imagery and linked to both planetary movement and textual creation, mirrors Goethe's vision of the garden as fragmented yet harmonious. The garden's festive atmosphere, with wine-drinking and sensuality at its center, emphasizes both joy and impermanence. HaNagid's emphasis on cycles of seasons, celebration, and decline echoes Goethe's portrayal of gardens as spaces of disorientation and renewal. HaNagid's poetic garden, like Goethe's, emerges as a space where boundaries blur, inviting new ways of seeing and being.

In *Elective Affinities*, Goethe's portrayal of the garden undergoes a shift from a space of paternal Bildung seen in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* to a realm dominated by conflicting desires and tragic consequences. In *Elective Affinities*, the meticulously designed landscape, initially signifying marital stability and aesthetic order, becomes the stage for emotional turbulence and social disruption. Charlotte's ambitious plans for the garden, countered by the Captain's critique, highlight tensions between structured, rational planning and the unpredictable, organic force of desire. The tragic death of Charlotte's child, falling into the water that was part of the newly landscaped park, further underscores the garden's transformation into a site of mourning and shattered relationships.

In *Faust I*, Goethe's depiction of the garden functions as a complex space of desire, innocence, and moral ambiguity, echoing themes from the *Song of Songs* and earlier works like *Wilhelm Meister*. The garden scenes, particularly those involving Gretchen, draw heavily on Goethe's earlier engagement with biblical texts, especially his translation of the *Song of Songs*. By connecting Faust's relationship with Gretchen to the language of the *Song of Songs*,

Goethe emphasizes the interplay between divine love and earthly passion, revealing the garden as a site where these forces converge.

In Chapter III, I explore *Verwandlung* (transformation) in the *West-Östlicher Divan*, where Goethe's garden becomes a transcultural space shaped by his encounter with Persian poetry. In this chapter, I incorporate various interventions from Classical Persian literature. In the *West-östlicher Divan*, Goethe's engagement with Persian, Arabic, and Islamic traditions reaches its most profound expression. Not detached from his earlier literary phases, Goethe's poetic journey reflects a movement further toward a hybridized, intercultural voice.

The notion of transformation (*Verwandlung*) defines this phase of Goethe's work, where movement, both literal and figurative, reshapes subjectivity. Drawing on figures like Muhammad and Hagar, Goethe's *Divan* maps a poetic journey marked by displacement, renewal, and redefinition. This journey reflects Deleuze and Guattari's idea of nomadic movement, where fixed identities are destabilized and the subject is formed through fluid and shifting encounters.

To illuminate Goethe's choices in the *Divan*, I have already brought Sa'di's Golestan into the discussion. Sa'di's depiction of the garden as both a physical landscape and a poetic space offers a valuable counterpoint to Goethe's vision. In Golestan's prologue, a man enters a garden intending to collect roses but becomes so overwhelmed by their scent that he forgets his purpose, an image that mirrors the disorientation and desire that characterize Goethe's own garden spaces. While Goethe's gardens often explore the tension between control and surrender, Sa'di's garden emphasizes the fragility of human intentions in the face of overwhelming beauty and impermanence.

Another intervention in this chapter concerns Layla and Majnun. In this work by Nizami, the garden emerges as a potent space for exploring love's unfulfilled yet transformative nature. While Majnun's love for Layla remains impossible and unresolved,

Goethe's reference suggests a reimagining of this longing as an ongoing process rather than a tragic endpoint. Much like Majnun's retreat into the wilderness, Goethe's poetic garden resists closure, reflecting a mode of subjectivity defined by displacement.

In Hafez's poetry, the figure of the Sāqī embodies the tension between earthly pleasure and spiritual transcendence, a tension Goethe explores in his *Buch des Schenken*. By invoking the Sāqī, Goethe aligns his poetic vision with Hafez's exploration of intoxication as both a sensual and mystical experience. The Sāqī, like the *rend* in Sufi tradition, operates outside social and religious conventions yet holds a privileged role in facilitating revelation. In Goethe's reinterpretation, the cupbearer represents not just escapism but serves as a guide toward poetic self-dissolution, a state in which the boundaries of the self are blurred, and the subject becomes open to new modes of perception. Much like the unstable garden space Goethe constructs throughout the *Divan*, the Sāqī *Nameh* suggests that moments of intoxication, both literal and metaphorical, offer the potential for transformation. By weaving together themes of love, longing, and intoxication, Goethe expands the Sāqī's poetic role, reimagining the cupbearer as a figure who destabilizes fixed subjectivities and allows desire to unfold as a dynamic, self-generating force.

Ultimately, Goethe's gardens reveal a subjectivity that emerges through paradox, rooted in both suffering and liberation, order and chaos, cultivation and destruction. By tracing these dynamics, my dissertation presents Goethe's garden writings as a powerful model for understanding subject formation in German literature, shaped by intercultural encounters and global perspectives. This dissertation redefines the literary garden as a space of cultural encounter and subjectivity transformation, challenging the traditional, nationalistic reading of Goethe's works. By reorienting Goethe's literary garden toward Persian and Hebrew traditions, I demonstrate how his engagement with these cultural worlds reshapes notions of identity,

desire, and the poetic self. This approach not only expands the scope of Goethe studies but also repositions German literature within a broader, planetary context.