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## Call him a Beatnik, if you must

*Approaches to the German 19th century poet*

**Friedrich Rückert**

(1788 - 1866)

*Someplace between the Orient and the Occident*

**Abstract:** - Friedrich Rückert is shown in this article as a mediator between East and West. Also, it becomes clear that as an extraordinary personality his life and works show that such a personality is need in order to become a "Classic". The idea is being a Beatnik first an a Classic later.

### About a Classic

The story of a classic is almost always the same. Many people have suggested that a classic author or poet is one everybody knows but nobody has read. But I shall propose here to use the word classic for an author being a beatnik (1) first and a classic later. Somebody who does not fit into the rules prevailing at any given time and by insisting and saying something important at the same time. There is always something irregular in a classic author.

Friedrich Rückert who left a classic-poetic as well as scientific trail between East and West can surely be seen in this light.

### The Man

When Friedrich Rückert was walking down the streets, all the children were horrified. He was more than two meters tall and usually dressed in black clothes in a way that was called *altdeutsch* (<<Old German>>) in the 19th century. Quite unusual for his times, he had long hair. Still it was the time of late romanticism and ideas like dressing up *altdeutsch* were finding followers (at least a few, a small minority...). He was a poet. Estimations give the number of up to 50.000 poems that he has written during his lifetime.

In 1788, he was born in Schweinfurt (in Franconia which is a part of Bavaria, Germany). He studied in Würzburg, Heidelberg and Jena. Soon he starts teaching but finds it boring. So what does he do?

He returns to his parents in Ebern (close to Schweinfurt). People say, he is a misfit, does not work and lives on the money of his father.

But there is more to come. He starts visiting a tavern called *Specke* and falls in

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love with the landlord's daughter, Marielies. It turns into a disaster, and Rückert, despised by people as some kind of <<loser>>, turns his sorrow into poetry: More than 100 poems changing the name of Marielies into *Amaryllis* or *Amara* (<<the bitter one>>), etc.

### Love & Death

Later (1821) he marries *Luise Wiethaus-Fischer*. Fate hits him again: Within a few weeks his two children die. They are buried in Erlangen (2) where Rückert was a professor for Oriental Studies (1826-1834). Rückert transforms his mourning into 500 poems, called *Kindertotenlieder* (<<Songs on the Death of Children>>). Later, the romantic / classic composer *Gustav Mahler* (1860-1911) would transform those *Kindertotenlieder* into touching music.

The horror of this experience has never left Friedrich Rückert. No wonder that one of his most famous poems (also turned into music by *Gustav Mahler*: *Rückert-Lieder* [<<Rückert-Songs>>]) starts like this:

*Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,  
Mit der ich sonst so viele Zeit verdröben.  
(I am dead now to the world (3)  
Having spoiled time here before)*

### Presenting the Orient to the Occident

Do many people know Rückert by the beginning of the 21st century? Would it be possible to ask someone in the street about Rückert?

To the common public Friedrich Rückert might be known as author of poems on the backside of calendar leaves. So people who buy calendars and who also turn the leaves for every day (each one gives a poem or a motto, a recipe for cooking or some cartoon like *Snoopy* or *Garfield*...) might grin sarcastically. But never mind: They did not take the pains to thoroughly read his poems.

Yet, to educated people (4) the name Friedrich Rückert rings a familiar bell. He was one of the outstanding orientalis of the 19th century - comparable to *Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall* (1774 - 1856) - but there is this one thing that makes Rückert very special: He was a poet and a scientist at the same time. *Annemarie Schimmel*, his 20th century successor once stated that this very fact was a lucky circumstance:

*In Friedrich Rückert (...) dann liegt, zumindest für die deutsche Literatur, der Glücksfall vor, daß ein erstklassiger Orientalist zugleich Dichter war und der deutschen Sprache einen überaus reichen Schatz arabischer, persischer und indischer Dichtung anverwandelte. (5)*

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*Concerning Friedrich Rückert, we then find, at least for the German literature, the lucky circumstance that he was a first-rate orientalist and a poet at the same time, and that he confided a very rich treasure of Arabian, Persian and Indian poetry to the German language. (6)*

So Friedrich Rückert contributed to the understanding of West and East through his translations that he presented as the man he was (and probably could not avoid to be): a poet. And in a way as some kind of drop-out of his times.

This might confirm an old suspicion that I always had in my mind: That in order to be a **classic** later, maybe the best advice is to be a **beatnik** first.

So, yes... there is hope in literature, no matter if you live in the East or in the West. There is logic in it, I suppose: For a wanderer between the worlds, wandering (never standing still) is mandatory. Otherwise the wanderer would not be a wanderer any longer.

And East and West meet in a wonderful way in their individual, poetic beatniks, like for example Friedrich Rückert. Maybe we do not understand their genius. But what we can do is to honour them as **classics**.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

1. A beatnik is commonly known as someone being an outsider. Usually the etymology is traced back to "being beaten down" by society or in other words being a victim. Quite a different etymology was presented by Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac who stated that beatnik or beat or beat generation - which was his own literary home - should be derived from the beatitudes (sayings in the Bible like f. e. "The last shall be the first", etc.) and the beatific vision, a mystic / religious vision granting the individual happiness and bliss. A very different understanding.
2. Erlangen is located close to Nürnberg. The grave of Rückert's children still exists. Even the tree the broken father had planted onto the grave, can still be seen and is now very, very huge.
3. translation Thomas Stemmer
4. I know it is bad times for education, humanities, literature and art nowadays, but - yes... - we still do have a handful of those people here and there...
5. Schimmel, Annemarie: Der Islam. Eine Einführung, Stuttgart, 1990, p. 10
6. translation Thomas Stemmer

