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Goethe and Arabic Literature: Reception, Interaction, and Aesthetic Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamic intellectual and aesthetic engagement between the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the Arab-Islamic literary tradition by analyzing *West-östlicher Divan* as a paradigm of East–West cultural dialogue. It focuses on three principal dimensions: Goethe’s reception of Arabic and Islamic texts, their integration into his poetic framework, and their reciprocal influence on modern Arabic literature and thought. Adopting a comparative analytical methodology, the study juxtaposes Goethe’s *Divan* with selected works of classical Arabic poetry, especially those of Ibn ‘Arabi, Ibn al-Fāriḍ, al-Mutanabbī, and Hafez al-Shīrāzī. The analysis draws upon frameworks of cultural intertextuality and postcolonial theory to explore Goethe’s literary construction of the “self” and the “other”. The findings reveal that Goethe’s engagement with Arabic literature was both profound and artistically transformative. Rather than a superficial appropriation, his *Divan* constitutes a creative synthesis of Eastern Sufi poetics and German Romanticism. This synthesis influenced prominent Arab intellectuals such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Adonis, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, reshaping Arab perceptions of the West and offering a model for transcultural literary dialogue. The *West-Eastern Divan* emerges as a seminal contribution to world literature and comparative aesthetics. It demonstrates that dialogue with the cultural “other” is not confined to translation or admiration but represents a collaborative aesthetic vision. Such interaction underscores literature’s potential to bridge civilizational boundaries while preserving the integrity of cultural identities.

Keywords: Goethe; *West-Eastern Divan*; Arabic Literature; Intertextuality; Sufism; World Literature

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 29 April 2025 | Revised: 3 April 2025 | Accepted: 12 June 2025 | Published Online: 7 July 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i7.9730>

CITATION

Naqrash, N., Almazaidah, I.S., 2025. Goethe and Arabic Literature: Reception, Interaction, and Aesthetic Transformation. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(7): 126–133. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i7.9730>

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1. Introduction

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (*The West-Eastern Divan*) cannot be fully understood without a return to the historical and cultural backdrop in which it emerged. This work was not the product of a fleeting literary impulse, but rather the result of a long and complex interaction between Europe and the East—specifically between German culture and Islamic literary traditions. The *Divan*'s publication in 1819 coincided with the rise of Orientalist studies in Europe, a significant expansion of translations from Eastern into European languages, and a growing thirst among Western intellectuals for Eastern spirituality as a counterbalance to the strict rationalism that characterized the Enlightenment.

In approaching Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (*The West-Eastern Divan*), the concept of intertextuality emerges as a fundamental analytical lens. Goethe's engagement with the East was not confined to symbolic appropriation or ornamental literary borrowing. Rather, he cultivated a vibrant, dynamic dialogue between texts—between Arabic and Western literature, between the self of the poet and the imagined other. The *Divan* thus becomes a paradigm of interactive civilizational intertextuality, which transcends quotation and gestures toward the re-creation of meaning and symbolism within a newly structured poetic framework. Julia Kristeva encapsulates this idea by stating that “every text is an absorption or transformation of another text”^[8]. This principle aptly characterizes Goethe's poetic process in the *Divan*, where he internalized Arabic and Islamic poetic elements—particularly in their Sufi dimensions—and reimaged them within a German literary framework charged with universal and humanistic significance.

Several layers of intertextuality are discernible in Goethe's *Divan*, ranging from direct textual references to symbolic evocations and conceptual absorption. In instances of direct textual intertextuality, Goethe integrates Qur'anic phrases or translated Arabic poetry, subtly rephrasing them in German poetic diction. A notable example reads:

“To God belong the East, to God the West,
The earth—North and South—
Rests peacefully in His hands.” (*Author's translation*)^[2].

This verse draws on Qur'an 2:115—“To Allah belong the East and the West”—yet Goethe expands the geographical scope to include North and South, thereby reinforcing the notion of divine omnipresence and imbuing the original sentiment with a meditative serenity and humanistic tone^[5].

Elsewhere, symbolic intertextuality comes to the fore as Goethe invokes cultural and poetic imagery deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic traditions. The motifs of camels, deserts, and the lament over ruins echo themes found in the *Mu'allaqat* and classical Arabic elegy. In a poem titled *Separation*, Goethe writes:

“Let me weep... in the desert night,
The camels are resting, the stars watch over me,
While my heart counts the miles to Zuleikha”^[2].

This evokes the *nasīb* of Arabic qasīdahs and the figure of Zuleikha functions as a bridge between Qur'anic tradition and Goethe's muse, Marianne von Willemer, illustrating how classical symbols are reformulated through personal and cross-cultural prisms.

A deeper layer of intertextuality lies in Goethe's absorption of Islamic metaphysical concepts without overt citation. Ideas central to Ibn 'Arabī's mystical ontology, such as *fanā'* (annihilation of self) and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), reappear in Goethe's reflections on existence, love, and divine presence. Consider the following lines:

“I am you, and you are me,
In you I vanish, from you I arise,
All that is within me is your light”^[2].

This passage resonates with Ibn 'Arabī's formulation:

“I was He, and He was I, no difference; in the presence of union, all is one”^[6].

Through such verses, Goethe presents Sufi metaphysics through a European poetic idiom, filtered through a Romantic sensibility.

Goethe also mirrored structural and formal elements of Arabic poetry. Thematic divisions in the *Divan*—such as *The Book of Love*, *The Book of Asceticism*, and *The Book of Proverbs*—recall the genre-based organization in Arabic literary anthologies, including *ḥamāsah*, *ghazal*,

and *hikmah*. In terms of rhythm and style, he experimented with rhyme schemes and *rubāʿiyāt*-inspired stanzas, aligning his German verse with the musicality of Eastern poetry. For example, in one stanza he writes:

“God has ordained my steps,
And filled my path with trials,
Yet I do not ask why—
For all that comes... holds hidden beauty”^[2].

Such verses resemble Arabic maxims that condense wisdom into melodic brevity—an aesthetic Goethe applies throughout his *Book of Proverbs*, seamlessly blending Eastern ethical tones with Western introspection.

Goethe’s immersion in Sufi poetry—particularly that of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn ʿArabī, and Hafez—supplied him with a language that echoed his own metaphysical explorations. His verse:

“I drank your wine and forgot myself,
Forgot earth, ceiling, and sky,
I am all passion, all absence,
I am neither here nor there”^[2],

reproduces the affective ambiguity found in Sufi verse. It is reminiscent of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s lines:

“I am neither in longing, nor is the other with me,
But through love alone have I become united”^[9].

Here, Goethe reinterprets spiritual intoxication not merely as mystic metaphor but as existential inquiry.

A defining quality of the *Divan* is its aesthetic equilibrium. Rather than exoticizing the East, Goethe integrates its symbols with German literary technique in a balanced synthesis. As ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Mikkāwī observes, “Goethe seamlessly wove Islamic spirit into the fabric of the German poem without a discordant note”^[10]. This balance stems from Goethe’s ethical stance toward the cultural other—not as a spectacle, but as a mirror of the self. He articulates this ideal in the preface to the *Divan*: “He who knows himself and the other, sees the East and West as one in the mirror”^[2].

Ultimately, the *West-Eastern Divan* exemplifies cross-cultural poetic construction. Goethe did not merely write about the East; he wrote from within a doubled literary voice—visibly German in structure, subtly Arabic in spirit. The *Divan* brings together Arab landscapes (camels,

caravans, ruins), Islamic temporalities (Hijrah, Ramadan, Revelation), and Sufi themes (ecstasy, annihilation, divine unity), all alongside classical Western symbols like Achilles and Alexander. Rather than producing discord, this plurality results in aesthetic enrichment, enabling the text to speak meaningfully across cultural contexts.

Goethe’s aesthetic engagement with Arabic texts, therefore, was neither superficial nor transitory. It was a deeply spiritual and poetic enterprise that fused citation, transformation, imitation, and reflection. The Arabic text in Goethe’s hands became more than a source—it became a constructive element within a new poetic architecture, inscribed with the legacies of two civilizations. The *West-Eastern Divan* thus stands as more than a poetic experiment; it is a living document of civilizational encounter, of the dialogue between reason and revelation, self and other. It aligns with Goethe’s wider project of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), which affirms that wisdom may spring from any cultural soil, and that the most fertile terrain for shared humanity lies in intertextual communion.

1.1. Goethe and the Rise of European Orientalism

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Oriental studies flourished across Europe, particularly in France and Germany. The latter witnessed a notable surge in the translation of Arabic and Persian literature. The Austrian Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall played a pivotal role in this movement by translating the *Divan* of Hafez into German in 1814, a work that marked a critical turning point in Goethe’s interest in Eastern literature^[1]. Goethe was not isolated from this intellectual current; he was one of its most active participants, fully aware of the importance of engaging with other cultures. He once wrote:

“In Hafez, I found a poet who speaks to the depths of my soul, despite the difference in tongue”^[2].

Translation was one of the primary tools that enabled Goethe to access Arabic and Persian texts. He read selections from the *Qurʾan*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and poetic translations of the Arabic *Muʿallaqat*, through the efforts of Orientalists such as William Jones, Antoine Galland, and de Sacy, who offered Arabic literature a

genuine gateway into the European intellectual sphere^[3]. Although Goethe did not master Arabic, he made an effort to learn its script and transcribe some of its phrases. His archives include manuscripts bearing handwritten Arabic expressions, reflecting a deep empathy and intellectual curiosity^[4].

Goethe's fascination with Arabic literature was not limited to its aesthetic structure; it extended to a profound respect for Islamic culture itself. He expressed admiration for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) on multiple occasions and described the Qur'an's style as "elevated and solid." In one of his poems in the *Divan*, he writes:

"To God belong the East and the West... the earth lies secure in His hands" (*Author's translation*)—a near-direct paraphrase of verse 115 from *Surat al-Baqarah*, confirming his engagement with Islamic monotheism^[2,5].

1.2. Spiritual Affinities: Goethe's Engagement with Islamic Thought

Goethe also displayed an affinity for Islamic mysticism. His *Divan* includes references to Jalal al-Din Rumi, and he composed verses that echo concepts such as *fanā'* (annihilation of the self) and *wahdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Being), which he encountered in the works of Ibn Arabi^[6].

Goethe lived during a period marked by the convergence of Romantic philosophy and Enlightenment rationalism. The *West-Eastern Divan* emerged as both an artistic and moral endeavor to reconcile reason and spirit, East and West. Goethe expressed this inclusive vision, stating:

"The West is incomplete without its East; I am not a German poet, but a world poet"^[2].

The *Divan* thus serves as a literary embodiment of this holistic worldview—celebrating faith, imagination, intellect, and art within an open human dialogue.

Although Persian literature (especially Hafez's poetry) was the primary source for the *Divan*, Goethe also engaged with Arabic pre-Islamic poetry, particularly the *Mu'allaqat*, through William Jones' translations. He expressed particular admiration for the Bedouin spirit and the poetics of nostalgia and ruins^[7]. Goethe even attempted to translate select lines by Imru' al-Qays into German,

noting that he found in them a tenderness and elegance comparable to the works of Homer^[2].

This early exposure to Arabic poetry planted in Goethe's imagination a poetic vision of the East—as a homeland of longing, wisdom, and spiritual sublimity. It laid the foundation for his later composition of the *Divan* as a literary synthesis of East and West through the medium of poetry. Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* was not a decorative appropriation of the East, but the product of a profound interaction with Arabic and Islamic literature—set within a European cultural context actively seeking spiritual and intellectual alternatives. The rise of Orientalist translations, increased interest in Eastern literature, and the philosophical openness of German Romanticism all provided fertile ground for the blossoming of Goethe's extraordinary literary experience.

1.3. Cultural Dialogue and Modern Arab Reception

In the field of comparative literature, the image of cultural interaction remains incomplete when viewed from a single perspective. It gains depth and legitimacy when we also trace the reciprocal influence of such engagement. While Goethe received and reshaped Arabic and Islamic texts within the poetic framework of his *West-Eastern Divan*, this very work later became a source of inspiration and interaction for numerous Arab thinkers and poets. They regarded it as a progressive model of non-Orientalist openness and a testament to the possibility of conducting civilizational dialogue based on mutual respect and parity. To many Arab intellectuals, Goethe came to represent more than just a great European poet. He became a friendly voice, a balanced thinker who spoke on behalf of universal humanism and offered a view of the West that was less Eurocentric and more inclusive.

At the dawn of the 20th century, with the emergence of the Arab cultural renaissance, numerous intellectuals and writers engaged with Western literature and read Goethe's works—especially *The West-Eastern Divan*—as a model of tolerant world literature. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn expressed great admiration for Goethe's endeavor, often referencing it in his writings. He viewed Goethe's engagement with the East as "a lesson in cultural respect and humility." He further added: "Goethe was a poet seeking

his human wholeness in the mirror of the other—not to elevate himself above it, but to share with it”^[9]. ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād described Goethe as “a poet of awakened instincts, who understood early on that civilizations do not conflict, but rather complement each other.” He saw *The Divan* as a text that united German rationalism with Islamic spirituality and noted Goethe’s translation of the *Mu‘allaqāt* and his engagement with Eastern civilizations^[11].

Philosopher ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī was among the foremost scholars to explore Goethe’s relationship with Islamic mysticism. His major contributions include *A German Poet Who Believes in Islam* and *Existential Time in Islamic Mysticism*. Badawī argued that “Goethe was not merely impressed by the outer form of Islam, but experienced genuine Sufi ecstasy”^[12]. He also drew parallels between Goethe’s experience of divine love and that of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, stating: “Had Goethe been born in an Arab setting, he might have become one of the great Sufi masters, for his metaphysical intuition closely resembles the insights of Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ”^[12]. This philosophical engagement positioned Goethe as a bridge between Islamic spiritual heritage and modern Western existential thought—through the medium of poetry.

Poet Adonis offered an advanced and bold reading of Goethe, especially in his work *Al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwul* (*The Static and the Dynamic*). He considered *The Divan* a turning point in East-West relations, asserting that Goethe was the first to “view the East not as an antithesis, but as an existential and intellectual extension.” Adonis wrote: “What distinguishes Goethe is that he did not gaze upon the Arab heritage from above, like Voltaire or Montesquieu, but entered the Arabic text as if from within. He understood it through its inner voice—through longing, symbolism, and experience”^[13]. Adonis went even further, suggesting that Goethe was the first to poetically articulate the notion of universality or *Weltliteratur*—not as a Eurocentric project, but as a network of symbolic relationships in which cultures intersect and converse. “Only experimental poetry is truly alive, for it opens itself to all experiences”^[13].

Goethe’s influence extended beyond the Arab world to Persian- and Urdu-speaking Muslim thinkers. Chief among them was Muḥammad Iqbāl, the Pakistani poet-philosopher, who in 1923 published *Payam-e-Mashriq*

(*The Message of the East*) in Persian—a poetic and philosophical response to Goethe’s *Divan*. In the preface, Iqbāl wrote: “Goethe opened a door for dialogue with the East; now it is time for the East to return the greeting”^[14]. Iqbāl’s *Divan* included poems addressed directly to Goethe, calling for human unity founded on justice and spirituality, rather than power or dominance. This work may be seen as the first Eastern literary response to Goethe’s *Divan*, establishing a dialogical poetic tradition between East and West.

The translation of Goethe’s *Divan* into Arabic led to its inclusion in Arab university curricula, particularly in comparative literature courses. Dr. Muḥammad Ghunaymī Hilāl devoted a chapter to Goethe in his foundational work *Comparative Literature*, describing him as an example of “productive intercultural engagement—not blind imitation or cultural egocentrism”^[15]. Through such inclusion, Goethe became part of the modern Arab critical consciousness—a model for building true bridges between civilizations through literature, not ideology.

Goethe’s work on *The West-Eastern Divan* was not merely an individual endeavor; it was the first step in founding what he would later call “world literature” (*Weltliteratur*). In one of his letters, he declared: “The age of world literature has begun; every nation must learn from the other”^[2]. This concept found resonance in modern Arab thought, with many intellectuals embracing it as an alternative to Eurocentrism—a call for plurality, openness, and equitable cultural exchange. Thus, for Arab thinkers, Goethe was not only a German poet but a symbol of a possible civilizational alternative in East-West relations—one based on interaction rather than assimilation, and partnership rather than dependency.

Goethe’s influence was not confined to Western readers. It extended deeply into modern Arab intellectual and literary life. *The West-Eastern Divan* received wide critical and poetic acclaim in the Arab world. Arab thinkers saw in it a model of a different kind of European intellectual—one open to the “Other.” It became a tool for literary dialogue and a means for rediscovering the self through a compassionate Other. In this sense, Goethe’s experience evolved from a Western reception of the East into a continuous cycle of dialogue that shaped Arabic poetry, Renaissance thought, comparative criticism, and Arab

worldviews. Its echo still resounds today—in a world ever more in need of cultural symbols that build rather than destroy, that engage rather than exclude, and that illuminate differences rather than erase them.

2. Conclusions and Recommendations

Contemporary scholarship has further illuminated the intricate relationship between Goethe and Arabic literary heritage. al-Kīlī^[16] discusses the fluid boundaries between writing and transcription in the context of Arabic literary heritage, a notion that aligns with Goethe's view of poetic creation as a dialogical act. The poetic philosophy of al-Mutanabbī^[17] echoes throughout Goethe's depiction of the self and destiny, particularly in his embrace of poetic grandeur and existential affirmation. 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawi's reflections^[18] on Goethe's mysticism and affinity with Islamic metaphysics are central to understanding this intercultural dialogue. Bates^[19] analyzes Romantic Orientalism as a framework that contextualizes Goethe's engagement with the Arabesque and the symbolic allure of the East. Nicholas Boyle^[20] offers biographical insight into Goethe's intellectual and emotional evolution during the period in which the *Divan* was conceived, revealing its spiritual significance. Genette's theory of hypertextuality^[21] helps in understanding Goethe's creative reconfiguration of Arabic poetic motifs into new literary structures. Goethe's own notes and appendices to the *Divan*^[22] provide rich intertextual clues and clarify his interpretive strategies when adapting Islamic and Arabic materials. Hasenholzer^[23] offers a detailed mystical interpretation of Goethe's poetic structure in the *Divan*, revealing its spiritual layering and metaphysical depth. Neuhauser^[24] explores Goethe's intellectual stance between Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic spirituality, especially in his engagement with Islam. Reiske's early work^[25] on Arabic and Persian languages helped frame the linguistic and poetic context in which Goethe encountered Eastern literature. Stein^[26] discusses the notion of the "Arab soul" as perceived by Goethe, identifying how deeply the *Divan* is rooted in Arabic affective and symbolic frameworks. The poetic tradition of Imru' al-Qays^[27] resonates in Goethe's desert imagery and evocations of longing, revealing structural parallels with Arabic *qasīdah*.

This study has endeavored to offer a comprehensive

and in-depth examination of the cultural interaction between the eminent German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the Arab-Islamic heritage. By conducting a detailed analysis of the influence of Arabic texts on the formation of Goethe's poetic work, *The West-Eastern Divan*, the research has uncovered the aesthetic and intellectual transformations that resulted from this encounter, both within Goethe's literary production and his broader personal and philosophical worldview.

Several key findings have emerged from the study:

- (1) Goethe was not a superficial consumer of Arabic texts, but rather a discerning and empathetic reader. He approached the Arab-Islamic heritage not as an exotic "Other," but as a reflective mirror of a shared human truth—one that transcends linguistic, religious, and civilizational boundaries.
- (2) Goethe's reception of Arabic texts was mediated through multiple channels: Orientalist translations, philosophical engagement, linguistic curiosity, and symbolic-aesthetic interaction. These diverse influences converged in the production of a literary model that was integrative and dialogical, rather than ornamental or appropriative.
- (3) *The West-Eastern Divan* is not merely a collection of poems; it constitutes a cultural and intellectual artifact. The work stands as an early prototype of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), wherein traditional dichotomies between East and West dissolve and a poetic voice emerges that exalts universal values of love, wisdom, and dialogue.
- (4) The research demonstrated that the influence of Goethe's *Divan* was not unidirectional. Many modern Arab thinkers, poets, and philosophers engaged with the text as a model of mutual cultural respect and reciprocal intellectual enrichment. It became a tool for redefining East-West relations outside the frameworks of hegemony and cultural superiority.
- (5) Goethe's intertextual engagement with Sufi literature, his symbolic assimilation of Islamic spiritual themes, and his appreciation of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) all contributed to the dismantling of Orientalist misrepresentations. The *Divan* offered German and European audiences an alternate path—one grounded in understanding,

admiration, and ethical openness.

Ultimately, Goethe's experience demonstrates the transformative capacity of literature as a medium for bridging civilizations. His poetic language—infused with sincerity, intellectual curiosity, and emotional depth—illustrates that literary creation is capable of expressing the universal core of humanity. The *Divan*, in this sense, is both a personal testament and a cultural blueprint: it affirms that shared meaning can emerge across languages and identities, provided the interaction is grounded in respect, dialogue, and mutual recognition.

Recommendations

- (1) **Promote comparative literary research** that investigates the interaction between Arabic and Western literatures through intertextuality and dialogical models, rather than mimicry or assimilation—highlighting Goethe's *Divan* as a balanced paradigm.
- (2) **Re-examine *The West-Eastern Divan*** in light of contemporary critical approaches—such as postcolonial theory, cultural intertextuality, and reception studies—to deconstruct its layered aesthetic architecture and to reveal its symbolic interplay across traditions.
- (3) **Support specialized and critical Arabic translations** of Goethe's works, especially the *Divan*, ensuring the faithful rendering of its spiritual, mystical, and Sufi nuances.
- (4) **Integrate examples of Western engagement with Arabic literature**—including Goethe's model—into the curricula of language, literature, and cultural studies programs to foster critical awareness of intercultural exchanges and mutual literary influence.
- (5) **Enhance institutional cooperation** between Arab and German universities by organizing academic conferences, workshops, and exchange programs centered on world literature and literary diplomacy, using the *Divan* as a case study for successful civilizational dialogue.
- (6) **Encourage cultural institutions and creative platforms** to revive the spirit of the *West-Eastern Divan* through literary evenings, public readings, dramatic adaptations, and visual art exhibitions that explore

Goethe's vision of intercultural harmony.

- (7) **Inspire Arab poets and critics** to adopt Goethe's model of seeking the "Other" within the self, thereby producing literary works that embrace both cultural authenticity and global resonance—contributing to a living tradition of open, pluralistic creativity.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.N. and I.S.A.; methodology, N.N.; validation, N.N. and I.S.A.; formal analysis, I.S.A.; investigation, N.N.; resources, N.N.; writing—original draft preparation, I.S.A.; writing—review and editing, N.N. and I.S.A.; supervision, N.N.; project administration, I.S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article or generated during the study. Where no new data were created, or where data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions, a statement is still required.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their insightful comments and the editorial team for their guidance.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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