

# IQBAL, THE POET

(Part II)

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Around the fountain fluttering,/The ever changing dragonfly,/My joy,  
it is a long while now,/To see its colours dark and bright (...) (Johann  
Wolfgang von Goethe: *The Joy*)<sup>1</sup>

So let us transform our life into a piece of art, and we may boldly claim  
to be already immortal, while still living on Earth. (Wilhelm Heinrich  
Wackenroder: *Fantasies about Art, for Friends of Art*)<sup>2</sup>

If you allow me, I would like to continue my dream-like explorations into the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal, which I started in 2006,<sup>3</sup> and as I said at the end of my article then: *There will be more to come.*

Since then, I have kept on reading Iqbal's poetry and his prose, and I also tried to understand what has been written about him by different authors around the globe. All of this reading and studying added to my understanding. Yet, as I went along in this personal study, I came across one idea that crept up frequently in scholarly books and articles on him. In a way, it was a question put forward by many authors which might be rephrased like this: How can we see the work of Iqbal as a whole? Furthermore: Do we have the right to pick out the writings of *one* period of his work (while neglecting others that seem to be in contradiction)?

The fear behind this question seems to be: If a poet or a philosopher shows traits of contradictions, maybe he is not a serious poet or a serious philosopher... Or in other words: There is constant danger, that we might make this poet lose his eminence. Therefore, we have to find a 100% consistent picture, and if we cannot find it, we have to be tricky and construct it...

Hundred percent consistency, however, can never be attained. To a certain degree, every thinker is— somehow— at least a little bit inconsistent. There have been the systematic philosophers, but Iqbal himself has never claimed to be one. It has never been his intention

to be some kind of a second Kant or a second Hegel. He aimed at something higher.

As we, in writing about Iqbal, are in need of some kind of label on this way of 'avoiding orthodox consistency', I suggest that we might use a description offered by Khurram Ali Shafique. He connected Iqbal to romanticism, even calling him *the last romantic*.<sup>4</sup> After all, had not Iqbal himself stated that he owed much to the British romantic William Wordsworth, since reading Wordsworth had saved him from the danger of turning into an atheist? So, in another *bonmot*, maybe Iqbal is *a first and a last romantic*. One of the last old romantics, and one of the first new romantics? In other words: A bridge between two romanticisms?

Romanticism: So we are coming closer to Iqbal's poetry!

What is romanticism? It is an individualist approach to life, stressing a new way of life for oneself, yet discovering some old forgotten ways, too; for example, the romantics of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century rediscovered the Sanskrit language, they also rediscovered some aspects of the Middle Ages and started to collect folktales, etc. This approach is connected to the feeling of an individual possessing the potential to be a hero, to the landscape as a mirror for Soul, to a fascination with death, mysticism and the beyond, to the night, to fantasy and to passion.

Today, there is a misunderstanding about romanticism. For more sophisticated people, it is something way back in history, long forgotten. On the contrary, but with the same result, to the ordinary man in the street it is just a mediocre candle-lit dinner in a middle class restaurant.

Yet, romanticism is a mode of living individually that returns again and again in history and which, as a form of being, is always available. Romanticism is not fixed to the time-period of— let's say— between 1790 and 1830. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has not been very romantic for a majority of people. It has been a century of depriving man of his individuality. (How bold of Iqbal to have been a romantic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century! Let us see what the 21<sup>st</sup> century will bring.)

So calling Iqbal a romantic is well-founded in the facts. And out of a romantic work, like the one of Iqbal, we can pretty well pick out one phase of his life— in a way of speaking, one *individual* phase— without necessarily constructing a continuum that maybe just isn't there.

We do not have to follow the Hegelian approach, trying to dialectically dissolve contradictions into a synthesis. For a romantic, it is easy to live *right in the middle of contradictions*. Maybe this means

*taking the middle path*, avoiding the extremes, something that so many saints of many different religions have suggested.

It parallels the films of the dissident Russian film-maker Andrei Tarkowskij (like *Stalker* or *Nostalghia*), films of ruins: probably just in the same way ruins— as ruins— were consciously built in gardens. The literary scientist Hartmut Böhme stated that Tarkowskij's film *Stalker* turned Hegel around: Not that there was a natural evolution from religion to science, but— as shown in the case of Tarkowskij— from science back to religion! Important parts of his essay connect Tarkowskij to romantic poets/artists/thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

As a romantic, Muhammad Iqbal was one of the most interesting thinkers of religion. We— as his readers— can *use* seeming contradictions by selecting the phases of his work *that suit us best* in order to understand his words, to re-think them and to use them for our own further thinking along those lines. Iqbal himself stated, while talking about his own work:

It must, however, be remembered that there is no such thing as finality in philosophical thinking. As knowledge advances and fresh avenues of thought are opened, other views, and probably sounder views than those set forth in these lectures, are possible. Our duty is carefully to watch the progress of human thought, and to maintain an independent critical attitude towards it.<sup>6</sup>

So, all in all, I suggest here that we can pick out certain works of Iqbal, in order to study them as single texts. We have the privilege to accompany Iqbal in this critical way, something that we can accept as this romantic's present to his readers. A gift.

Picking out fine parts of his work seems to simulate the activity of the self that *for the sake of a single rose, destroys a hundred rose gardens*.<sup>7</sup>

Almost as an effort in *antique skepticism*,<sup>8</sup> I feel free to use a quote by Muhammad Iqbal himself, in order to describe this poetic/romantic *separation* of one text from the whole of his writings while maintaining the romantic bond holding them together, just because Iqbal is a poet, and poetry is the art of separation *par excellence*:

*Separation is better than Unity.*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> “Es flattert um die Quelle/Die wechselnde Libelle,/Mich freut sie lange schon:/Bald dunkel und bald helle,(...)” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Die Freude*, 1768)
- <sup>2</sup> “Lasset uns darum unser Leben in ein Kunstwerk verwandeln, und wir dürfen kühnlich behaupten, daß wir dann schon irdisch unsterblich sind.” (Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder: *Phantasien über die Kunst, für Freunde der Kunst*, 1799)
- <sup>3</sup> Stemmer, Thomas: ‘Iqbal, the Poet’, *Iqbal Review*, Vol. 47, No.2, Lahore, April 2006, p. 113ff.
- <sup>4</sup> In Khurram Ali Shafique’s book *Iqbal. An Illustrated Biography*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2006. The most interesting connection of Iqbal to the spirit of romanticism is on p. 90, where Shafique compares him to the individualist US-American author Ayn Rand, and especially to her 1971 *Romantic Manifesto*.
- <sup>5</sup> Böhme, Hartmut: Ruinen-Landschaften. Naturgeschichte und Ästhetik der Allegorie in den späten Filmen von Andrej Tarkowskij in Hesse, Heidrun (ed.): Natur und Wissenschaft. Konkursbuch 14. Zeitschrift für Vernunftkritik, Tübingen, 1985, p. 117 ff.
- <sup>6</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad: *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, edited and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1999, ‘Preface’, p. xxii.
- <sup>7</sup> Iqbal, Muhammad: *Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i-Khudi)*, as quoted in Khurram Ali Shafique’s *Iqbal: An Illustrated Biography*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2006, p. 86.
- <sup>8</sup> The term *Antique Scepticism* describes the method of testing a theory by applying it to the theory itself. A simple form of *antique scepticism* is the answer one might give to somebody who says that there is no truth: After all, he must have spoken truth once by uttering the statement that there was no truth.  
What I am trying to say here is that the test of *antique scepticism* was successful in this case!