BOOK REVIEWS

STEPPE IM STAUKKORN (Texte aus der Urdu-Dichtung Muhammad Iqbal)

Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938), the "spiritual father" of Pakistan was an important poet and philosopher of the Islamic world in the present century. Iqbal's poetical work, written in Persian and Urdu, represents a synthesis of the Indo-Iranian tradition of Islamic poetry with European influences from Goethe, Nietzsche and Bergson in particular. The focus of Iqbal's thought is the idea of the "self," which he understands dynamically as man's self-determination in contrast to the ideal of self-effacement taught by Islamic asceticism. Man's self-determination, however, is oriented towards God and completes the as yet unfinished work of creation; it makes the desert sprout and frees the powers that lie hidden in each speck of sand.

J. Christoph Bürgel takes this metaphor of the desert hidden in the sand as the theme of his selections from Iqbal's Urdu poetry. His anthology, translated into German with commentary, is a valuable contribution to Iqbal studies and supplements the German translations of Iqbal's mainly Persian verses published by Annemarie Schimmel (Buch der Ewigkeit, Munich, 1957; Botschaft des Ostens, Tübingen, 1977).

Bürgel's selections and German translations of 164 poems (161 Urdu and 3 Persian Poems) are culled from four Urdu poetical works of Iqbal: Bāng-e-Darā, 1924, Bāl-e-Jibrīl, 1936, Zarb-e-Kalīm, 1937, and Armaghān-e-Hijāz, 1938. They are arranged according to topics, among them Islam, India, Europe, society, man, nature, and mysticism. Each section includes a brief introduction to the topic and succinct notes on difficult details. Often there is not only a literal translation into German but also metric version of the Urdu poem, in which Bürgel shows himself a master of both Urdu and German. Yet the general introduction to Iqbal's life, and particularly to his poetical style, appears to be rather sketchy and haphazard.

Bürgel's anthology had a forerunner in V. G. Kiernan's Poems from Iqbal (London, 1955), a selection of Iqbal's Urdu poems in English translation. It ought to be stressed, however, that Bürgel's selections are largely poems not included in Kiernan's anthology. Where there are a few overlappings, Bürgel's German metrical versions may stand on equal footing with Kiernan's
excellent English rendition of Iqbal's couplets.

For his western reader, Iqbal's poetic style is slightly artificial, and his content a bit fuzzy, yet rife with tension. There are several reasons for this complexity of style and dichotomy of thought. Iqbal was a lawyer by profession, and his career focused on the law. A poet by nature, he made poetry his vocation and occupation. His poetry was composed in Persian and Urdu, the cultural medium and national language of the Muslims living in India and Pakistan, not in Punjabi, his mother-tongue. Well acquainted with Arabic, the language of his religious ideals, he also possessed some knowledge of German, the language of his utopian dreams. He received his advanced education in the English language, in which he also wrote his philosophical prose.

Iqbal's rank as one of the outstanding Persian poets of the present century appears to be undisputed. As an Urdu poet Iqbal is widely accepted as the greatest of this century. It remains to be seen, however, whether history will rank the twentieth century poet of Lahore as an equal to the famous exponents of Urdu poetry active in nineteenth century Delhi and Lucknow. While some of Iqbal's Persian poems, published in 1915, convey the impression of rather complete meditations on philosophical themes, his Urdu poetry consists of short pieces of spontaneous utterances that do not appear to assume the dimensions of a masterpiece—-an ordered whole of thought and style. Well aware of the limitations of his Urdu, Iqbal once wrote: "My life has been spent mostly in the study of Western philosophy, and this point of thought has become nearly a second nature to me. I cannot express well in Urdu what is in my heart" (see G. Böwering, in Islam and the Modern Age, 9, 1978/2, p. 65). Thus it is not surprising that the scholar Maulana Shibli had to correct the Urdu style of Iqbal's first book in Urdu prose ('Iml-e-Iqtigad, Lahore, 1901) prior to its publication (see Annemarie Schimmel, Gabriel's Wing, Leiden, 1963, pp. 36-37). It may also be noteworthy that Iqbal began to write Urdu poetry at an early age, but did not publish his first volume of Urdu poems until he was fifty years old. Iqbal also did not spawn a circle of ranking disciples or followers that would have continued the thrust of his Urdu poetry. Indeed, such aspirants would have faced the mighty task of wide philosophical reading and a deep knowledge of the Islamic tradition of poetry.

These observations should, however, not obscure the fact that Iqbal's Urdu verses possess genuine dramatic power and derive much of their impact from his art of opposing character types and countertypes. Mulla and Sufi, clothed in religious robes and reciting pious words, represent traditional Islam, while rind and qalandar, the religious maverick and non-conformist, symbolize the dynamic ideal of Islam in an age to come (cf. J.C. Bürgel, "The Pious Rogue," in Edebiyat, 4:1 (1979), pp. 43-64). The European, the "Frank", is the cold-blooded rationalist, a man of science without emotion; the Muslim man of faith (mard-e-mümin) embodies the dynamic ideal of the human being who realizes the cosmic dimensions engraved in his soul. There is the great bedouin pair
of lovers, mad Majnūn and lovely Laylā, the legendary fiction of erotic and divine love in Islam; the gay couple of Sultan Mahmūd and his slave Ayāz, the symbol of a classless Islamic society of the future. There are the Koranic archetypes of Abraham, the model of faith, and Azar, the champion of paganism; the royal prototypes of Khusrau Parvēz, the symbol of perishable power, and Alexander the Great, the model of majesty and magic wisdom; and the pious stereotypes of ‘Ali, the hero of Muslim bravery and prowess, and Hallāj, the Muslim heretic and martyr of love (cf. Bürgel, Steppen im Staubkorn, pp. 27-28).

This reviewer has the impression that Iqbal, in viewing himself as a charismatic teacher of his Muslim contemporaries, tends to be both powerfully prophetic and insistently didactic in his poetical language. He tries to awaken the modern Muslims from their dream of majesty that was Islam in ages past, boxes their ears with slogans of vitalistic philosophy, and waves the banner of utopia before their eyes. In so doing, Iqbal’s thought oscillates between traditional Islamic motives, the legacy of his Muslim Indian upbringing, and modernist European maxims, the fruit and burden of his western education. As a result, Iqbal’s poetry produces frequently discordant images and conflicting ideas, going hand in hand with a vision of history that is sometimes something of a cliché. This intellectual dissonance may be viewed as a flaw, but can also be seen as Iqbal’s poetical strength at a time when Europe, Asia and Africa were about to experience the chaos of the second World War, and India the birth pangs of a separate Muslim state on its soil.

Iqbal himself knew that he was caught in the field of tension between East and West, neither at home in the Orient nor settled in the Occident. He had severed the bonds of traditionalist Islam, but had not yet caught up with his vision of its future. Awed by the forces of the bringer of evil, Ahriman, and keeping his distance from the mediator of revelation, Gabriel, the poet of Lahore discovers a melody of life in his soul, when he says in conclusion to the Jāvīdnāma:

Abandon the East, be not spellbound by the West, for all this ancient and new is not worth one barleycorn. That signet-ring which you gambled away to Ahriman should not be pledged even to trusty Gabriel. Life, that ornament of society, is guardian of itself; you who are of the caravan, travel alone, yet go with all.

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