

Identifying Khizr: On the Paths of Goethe and Iqbal

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The solution to the problem of identity is, get lost.

—Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body*

Certain conditions are propitious for an encounter with the legendary yet normally remote figure of Khizr. For both Goethe and Iqbal, Khizr appears on the path as soon as one has taken the initial steps for a departure from oneself, or when one is no longer sure who one is. Goethe deploys the provocative term “Hegire” on occasions when he is taking leave from his usual environs, as when starting for the *Journey to Italy* (1786). He employs the Arabic term (derived from *hijr*, “to depart”) to mark the start of a journey that ended in his reflections on world literature (*Weltliteratur*) during his final decades, where, with the Copernican decentering of the nation, the entire world verges on becoming a universal *Heimat*. Along the way, as if at a crucial resting place—much like a caravanserai—opens the alternative and thoroughly Arcadian universe of the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819).

Take for instance the opening lines of the first poem, “Hegire,” of this much-neglected work:¹

North and West and South are shattered,
 Thrones are toppled, empires battered.
 Flee to the pure Orient, there
 To breath the patriarchal air.
 Love and drink and song in truth
 At Khizr’s spring restore your youth.
 (Safranski 2017: 470)

“Along with loving, drinking, and singing / Khizr’s fountain should rejuvenate you,” claims this voice, literally urging the reader to escape from the political tumult of one’s midst, a movement understood by Walter Benjamin in his writings on Goethe and this very poem to signify an escape from an already reluctant bourgeois existence. I return to Goethe’s nearly forgotten poem of the East on the two-hundredth anniversary of its publication (none of which is reproduced in *The Essential Goethe*, recently edited by Matthew Bell [Goethe 2016]).² I do so in order to retrace these long-neglected steps to rediscover the kinds of encounters and lines of escape it permits for world literature: the space of another possible world. The rendezvous with Khizr in particular is decisive, mediating linkages between Goethe and his late colonial paragon Muhammad Iqbal, and, indeed, in our recent times, Norman O. Brown. Each in their distinct way, Goethe, Iqbal, and Brown enact an imaginary departure from the horizons of the West and depict in its stead an Arcadian world that has left narratives of Enlightenment progress and seemingly endless class struggle behind. Iqbal himself extends the reach of this timeless Arcadian retreat in *Payam-e Mashriq (Message of the East, 1922)*, revivifying it from a perspective equally critical of the fundamental categories of modern imperialism (read as Western civilization).³ The ramifications of the departure and subsequent encounter with

1. The original German may be found in Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1918: 11), *West-östlicher Divan*, and reads as follows: “Nord und West und Süd zersplittern / Throne bersten, Reiche zittern, / Flüchte du, im reinen Osten / Patriarchenluft zu kosten, / Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen, / Soll dich Chisers Quell verjüngen.”

2. Another complementary reader that would cover the “unessential” works of Goethe is a new critical desideratum.

3. For a broader contextualization of Muhammad Iqbal’s work within late Romanticism, see Sahota 2018: 143–71, 233–41.

Khizr are worth following for how they mark a noticeable shift from a unitary identity predicated on property relations and their securing by nation-states to one of mutual alchemical transformation, dialogism, and pluralizing perspectivism—metamorphoses that defy the crude identity-thinking (and thus identitarianism) premised on Enlightenment reason.

It is little wonder, then, that it is while exploring the wide imaginary paths beyond the outskirts of Western civilization that Goethe, Iqbal, and Brown each individually encounter Khizr, who is nothing other than the image of an unbounded dream-self to which they each self-identify in their own ways. In the case of Brown, preparations were made for this kind of encounter with all of its political implications over a long period of mystical reclusion in the wake of his disappointments with American liberalism after the debacle of the Henry Wallace candidacy for US president in 1948. His roots in an English homeland and ties to the Oxbridge world of his early education were allowed to erode slowly over his American residency and were never reestablished; rather he sought to avoid any such identitarian petrification, regardless of its symbolic value, and instead to put into motion at the psychic-textual level Dionysian experiments with self-expansion, -renewal, and -transformation. His training in Greco-Roman classics and the Western canon proved too restrictive over the years that followed, especially in light of his insights into the repressive core of this civilizational model, as pointed out in *Life Against Death* (1959). With a poignant sense of the inadequacy of his inheritances for the liberation he desired, Brown was propelled over the last decades of his life toward an interrogation of the boundaries that kept the West artificially, indeed oppressively, intact in conjunction with a radical openness toward the challenges of various counterpoints, especially Shi'a Islam, which radically decentered the West of his upbringing. "One has to die several times while still alive"—he cites these lines from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* to make one of his fundamental points in *Love's Body*: that one must hold to a dream-self, however unbound and elusive, as the means to retrieve a unity underlying the divides of our everyday existence (Brown 1990: 99). Khizr, an image that embodies this unity and marks a path toward universal liberation, is this very self of dream, poetry, and prophecy.

The encounter with Khizr is thus figured as one of self-renewal in which boundaries get shifted, backgrounds altered, categories rethought, and selves—and by extension, collectivities—rejuvenated in his presence. *Khizr bahar dar qadam darad*—"Khizr has spring in his wake," as Steingass's *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* states, for "the ground on which he places his foot is supposed to be at once covered with green."

This freshness is explained by the fact that, as Steingass ([1892] 2000: 465) affirms, the “prophet Khizr, who discovered and drank of the water of life, whereby he became immortal, figures in Oriental tradition as a wazir of Iskander, and also as Elias and St. George of England, on the supposition that the same soul animated them by transmigration.” Later we shall have occasion to note the overlapping deployments of this long-standing trope of Islamic literature in the works of Goethe and Iqbal, where it has the effect of de-particularizing their identities by enfolding them into each other in infinite reflection as metonyms of West and East, metropole and colony, North and South, in a garden of eternity. But for the moment we must return to the archetypal arena in which the figure of Khizr awaits us.

“Who is Khizr?” asks Norman O. Brown in his illuminating analysis of “The Apocalypse of Islam,” and, following the medieval Andalusian philosopher Ibn Arabi (1165–1241 CE), “What does it mean to be a disciple of Khizr?” In connection with the first question, the Koran leaves him unnamed and only half revealed as “the mysterious other,” as Brown (1991: 82) eloquently indicates, “to whom Moses turns for guidance” in sura 18 of the Koran:

Then found they one of Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence.

Moses said unto him: May I follow thee, to the end that thou mayst teach me right conduct of that which thou hast been taught?

(Koran 18:65–66; Pickthall 2000: 213)

Brown’s reading of this sura is a magnum opus in miniature—a tour de force that exhumes the numerous layers of the mythology of Khizr, setting the various archaeological finds into simultaneous play, and from this particular expression of prophecy and apocalypticism deriving universalist—indeed, revolutionary—possibilities for the present. Brown travels farther down the road of revolutionary renewal lurking within religious canons than most dare, as he is well aware throughout *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*. That is what may be surmised as the proper response to the second question regarding the discipleship of Khizr—that, with the guidance of Khizr, one goes ever further down to the radicalism of what Brown (1991: 92) calls the “dream-life of the masses,” for he is none other than a personification of unconscious political desire for justice on a mass scale. “In Islam,” Brown writes, “the umbilical cord which connects ‘popular superstition’ with avant-garde esoteric, theosophic speculation has not been cut; and Khidr [Khizr] is that cord” (83).

The mediating powers Khizr is imagined to embody and of which both Goethe and Iqbal partake in their own ways, are wide-ranging but most potent in their capacity for displacing boundaries. It is worth following in Brown's footsteps to the magisterial oeuvre of the French Islamicist Henry Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* (*Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, 1958), for here one comes upon the contact zone that serves as the point of mutual transformation for figures such as Goethe and Iqbal. In his inspired analysis, Corbin is able to trace the various overlaps and ambiguous identifications, such as that between Khizr and the Hebrew prophet Elijah in the composite being of Khizr-Elijah in Sufi traditions, or in the very fact that Khizr is for Corbin at one and the same time a concrete individual and an archetype. In laying out these apparent anomalies and following their philosophical tracks, Corbin demonstrates the risks involved in rituals that depart from the normal, even normative, terms for understanding identity in the context of modern bureaucracies. But he does so to the advantage of revealing the underlying dialectics of discipleship under Khizr. Corbin (2006: 81) specifies:

Because it [person-archetype] is an archetype, the unity and identity of the persona of Khizr reconciles itself with the plurality of his exemplars among those who at their turn are Khizr. To have him as a master and initiator is to have to be what he is himself. Khizr is the master of all those without master because he shows all those of whom he is master how to be who he is himself: one who has attained the Fountain of Life, Eternal Youth.⁴

Corbin's analysis exposes and attempts to reconcile various contradictions—between the particular and the universal forms of selfhood, the historically contingent and the transhistorical, the concrete and abstract modalities of apprehension—that find fleeting resolution in the notion of a mystical body in ritual practice. Brown (1991: 140) decodes this mystical body—for him, Love's Body—in a way that sheds light on the potentiality for a human praxis and theory that resembles the infinity of God, an infinity

4. My translation. The original French reads: "Parce qu'elle [l'identité de personne-archétype] est un archetype, l'unité et l'identité de la personne de Khezr se concilie avec la pluralité de ses exemplifications dans ceux qui à leur tour *sont* Khezr. L'avoir pour maître et initiateur, c'est avoir à être ce qu'il est lui-même. Khezr est le maître de tous les sans-maître parce qu'il *montre* à tous ceux dont il est le maître comment être ce qu'il est lui-même: celui qui a atteint la Source de la Vie, l'Éternel Adolescent."

that “cannot be realized in the single human being or in any particular community but only in the multitude of humans taken all together.” “The human species, made in the likeness of God, resembles God most when it is most unified,” clarifies Brown (140).⁵

It is, in certain respects, this very function of unification that Khizr performs on an idealistic plane, revealing, as if in the negative, what underlies any particular iteration of identity: the fact that it is only ever completed in and through the recognition that one must attain from the wide collective. As a metonym for the universality desired and imagined in the dream-life of the masses, Khizr gives back to the particular person his genuine Oneness—that sheer particularity that need not come under any universal rubric. This marked difference that everyone possesses—the universal particular—is what Khizr is able to recognize, unlike us “human, all too human” subjects of modernity who apparently require an imposing, if not violent, identity-producing epistemology.⁶ Despite having a foot in phenomenal reality, Khizr positions himself on the banks of linear time and beyond duration—and is thus evergreen. From the position of eternal archetype, the mythology of Khizr is one that grasps the subjects he encounters *sub specie aeternitatis et universitatis*—as all one embodied energy. For the lost one who has no longer any clear sense of where his background begins or ends, and thus cannot find his way back to a more circumscribed and delimited identity, Khizr is able to restore recognition of the eternity of propulsions of transindividual potency, combining in some sense all the powers of indelible individuality within himself. The trope of youthful renewal depends upon this fundamental function of Khizr in this wide-ranging mythology. It is exactly this transhistorical, indeed mystical, universality that the disciple of Khizr is supposed to emulate in all of his immediate concreteness.

I would like to briefly survey two encounters with Khizr, those of Goethe and Iqbal, each of which arose from self-imposed wandering and exile, and each of which resulted in a significant breakthrough: the breakdown of the fiction of a unitary identity that is the implicit basis of bourgeois property relations. Research on Goethe’s engagement with Islam has lagged behind just about every other Goethean topic. But Rüdiger Safranski’s recent *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art* devotes substantial space to the evolution of Goethe’s interests in an emergent Orientalism and draws

5. The reference is simultaneously to Dante’s *Paradiso* and his *De monarchia*.

6. The classic statements on nonidentity are found in Adorno 1970. The Nietzschean underpinnings of Adorno’s position are laid out in Held 1980: 200–22.

connections back to Benjamin's keen insight regarding Goethe—that he was a reluctant bourgeois. Like Benjamin, Safranski draws a connection between Goethe's increasing estrangement from Germany (on account of the mismanagement of the German Restoration in the wake of the Napoleonic empire) and a turn to non-Western topics (Benjamin [1928] 1982). Much more research is required to grasp the motivations behind Goethe's *hijrat* from the West and escape to an imaginary East that culminates in the *West-östlicher Divan*. In many ways the work inaugurated a curious countercultural experimentalism within metropolitan society that remained strange, opaque, and neglected for centuries. Yet, we might find it easier today to depart from the discursive norms of Enlightenment and enter Goethe's Arcadian universe of timeless archetypes with an appreciation for the hyphenated voice of Goethe-Hafiz, and Goethe's own self-positioning as a subject who speaks not as a singular self-contained identity but rather as composite force. Take for instance the poem "Gingo Biloba" from the Book of Suleika of the *West-östlicher Divan*:

Gingo Biloba

In my garden's care and favour
 From the East this tree's leaf shows
 Secret sense for us to savour
 And uplifts the one who knows.
 Is it but one being single
 Which as same itself divides?
 Are there two which choose to mingle
 So that each as one now hides?
 As the answer to such question
 I have found a sense that's true;
 Is it not my songs' suggestion
 That I'm one and also two?
 (Goethe 1998: 261)

7. The original reads: "Dieses Baums Blatt, der von Osten / Meinem Garten anvertraut, / Gibt geheimen Sinn zu kosten, / Wie's den Wissenden erbaut. / Ist es Ein lebendig Wesen, / Das sich in sich selbst getrennt? / Sind es zwei, die sich erlesen, / Das man sie als eines kennt? / Solche Frage zu erwidern / Fand ich wohl den rechten Sinn; Fühlst du nicht an meinen Liedern, / Daß ich eins und doppelt bin." It is worth noting that Ginkgo trees are bisexual, some producing seeds while others only pollen-bearing organs (Crane 2015).

It is a distinct garden that Goethe has cultivated: one where the lines separating East and West are playfully displaced and reconfigured, allowing for new experiments with nonbourgeois modes of identity—one that breaks from property regimes, national constrictions, and imperial hierarchies. The self is one and doubled: two that join as one, a one that divides spontaneously into two, leaving it difficult to know when one is looking at one or two. It is worth noting too that in the very form of a three-stanza poem, Goethe points to a thirdness beyond one and two in dichotomous formation.

A century later (and a century ago), the Indo-Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal, after a long engagement with Goethe (especially his forays into the Orient), had his own imaginary encounter with the evergreen prophet in his 1922 poem “Khizr-e Rah” (“Khizr on the Path”). This encounter too occurs when the poet is lost within himself and the distinguishing lines of things begin to fade: “One night upon the river bank, lost in my thoughts, / I nursed a world of anxious worries in my heart” (Iqbal 2017: 83).⁸

Appearing out of the dusk, Khizr responds to the anguish of the poet divided in two with words that “resounded like the clap of Judgement Day.” What is of concern to the poet and of relevance to the present discussion is the imperial normativity imposed on the subject populations of the colonial world. Rather than religion being an opiate of the masses, it is actually the entire dispensation of Western imperial power that lulls colonized subjects: “The god of despotism dances, dressed in democratic garb. You believe it to be the sapphire fairy of freedom! Assemblies of constitution, reform, concessions and rights—the taste of Western medicine is sweet; the effect sends you to sleep. Heaven preserve us from the heat of the speech of the members of assemblies! This is also one of the money-making wars of the capitalists” (Iqbal 1993: 67).

With imperial hegemony as the forgetting of alternative political possibilities, the task of the poet is to interrupt false dream space. In the section titled “Capital and Labor,” the spell of Western imperial institutions and discourses has the capacity to divide and individuate: “Race, Nationhood, the Church, Kingship, Civilization, Colour—‘Imperialism’ has chosen its narcotics well” (69).

Iqbal’s Khizr encourages the poet to release himself from the illusions and blandishments of the imperial power, to see the entire imperial order as one of disguised appropriation of wealth and power by the few. Iqbal’s (1993: 71) revolutionary refusal to abide by the terms of Western power is

8. A more literal translation and the original Urdu are given in Iqbal 1993: 59–75.

cast in the language of Rumi, echoing Khizr: “Before they can repopulate any ancient ruin, do you know that first of all they must destroy its foundation?” The citation of a premodern precursor as the impetus to break foundations complicates the temporality of modern progressive temporality.

It is upon such dilapidated civilizational foundations and contradictory times in need of further deterioration that the world remains standing today. In its uncharted fissures Brown, and before him Iqbal and Goethe, find their more exact imaginations in their other, producing in simultaneity the figure of Khizr. Their critical sojourns point the way toward a redrawing of the world map in ways that might evade the impasses grafted by obsolete civilizational boundaries. At the very point at which they find themselves in the figure of Khizr, it is no longer clear where East or West or North or South fall. For both Goethe and Iqbal, through their encounters with Khizr, renew themselves by refusing the reified identity categories that have been normalized for them. Their poetics emphasize nonidentity, negativity, radical fracturing, and unexpected metamorphoses in their stead. These are the dimensions of their selves that Khizr identifies—for them. Brown’s restless mysticism and his celebration of the prophetic militancy of the Iranian revolution may have foundered in the historical projects that ran aground by the end of the twentieth century, which in turn expose their own distinct limitations. Yet, in the flux of these hopeless times and amid the wreckage and fracture of the present, Brown’s challenges to crude self-same identity and his model for producing de-particularizing processes of encounter serve as eddies for rescuing the possibility of uncoercive universalization and renewing a symbolism of a collective unity *liberans*.⁹

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9. These inevitably political countercurrents may serve to usher in new models of what world literary method may become in our own times.

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