

Iqbal As Poet And Thinker

A. A. Ansari

The variety of changing critical perspectives that have been brought to bear upon Iqbal's poetry reflects its width of reference and its strata of significances. His supreme distinction among con-temporary thinkers and poets lies in the unique freshness and originality of his genius. He hardly made any experiments in poetry, for he was primarily concerned with crystallizing into distinguished utterance both his critique of the Western civilization and the exposition of his own view of Reality. It is a truism repeated time and again that Iqbal's genius, originally nurtured on the Eastern sources, was further enriched and sharpened by his assimilation of the Western philosophical tradition. While drinking deep at the fountain-heads of knowledge abroad Iqbal had the opportunity of scrutinizing under currents of thought and ponder over the intellectual attitudes which were in vogue at that time. He was fully aware of the dangers inherent in that line of approach and could very well perceive how, little by little, the European civilization was heading towards the inevitable, logical crisis of its destiny. It may not be far from truth to argue that his close and intimate acquaintance with the Western modes of thought and value-system set up a strong reaction against them in his mind; simultaneously, it generated in him the impulse to reformulate the premises on which his own vision of Reality came ultimately to rest.

Iqbal regards the Medieval Arab thinkers as the *via media* through which the intellectual heritage of the Greeks was passed on to the West. But for this bridge built across the abysm of time, the Dark Ages, one should presume, could never pave the way for the blossoming forth of the Renaissance temper. Bacon is the one major figure in the Sixteenth Century England who is given undue credit for opening up new vistas of knowledge by insisting

upon the adoption of the Inductive method and the empirical approach to the exploration of the mysteries of the phenomenal world. But it is now an incontrovertible datum that Bacon's radical interpretation of the given Reality had already been anticipated by the Arab philosophers. The Medieval Muslim thinkers, it must be conceded, were not mere commentators on the Greek texts or quiescent transmitters of knowledge, but they were also given to philosophical speculation in their own right. Apart from the amazingly original contribution of Avicena, Al-Farabi and Ibn-e-Khaldun to human knowledge — a contribution whose solidity and comprehensiveness have been only recently recognized — what is even more sticking and relevant is the emancipation of the human mind brought about by their works and the impetus provided by them for an objective and revealing study of both the contingent and the transcendental Reality. The Western Europe was stimulated by this fact to break away from the shackles of dogmatic theology which had fettered the human mind in the Middle Ages.

The appearance of Iqbal on the contemporary scene of Indian life was an ambivalent and therefore a unique phenomenon. Not only did the Muslims of India — a religious and cultural entity to which he himself belonged — feel uprooted but the whole of Asia seemed to be plunged in the cauldron prepared by the expanding Imperialist hegemony. His own co-religionists were on the verge of the breakdown of predictable expectations in which new radical choices had to be made: they were thus faced with a 'boundary' situation. Very much like T. S. Eliot in a similar predicament Iqbal was conscious of the lack of total commitment on their part and therefore what was required was a leap of faith which could help them make a successful assault on contemporary realities. The aftermath of the First World War saw the decay of the old order of Civilization in the West. This and the 1917

Revolution in Russia provided the immediate political context for the poetry of protest Iqbal came to compose in the earliest phase of his career. He welcomed the Revolution with all the spontaneity and expectancy of his soul but only tentatively approved and later on rejected the ideological bulwark supporting it. After a careful sifting of facts and because of his moral earnestness and deep-seated anxiety for the victims of political and economic exploitation Iqbal came to realize that he should anchor his faith on to a more realistic and comprehensive value-system. His was a quest for a principle of Universalism and this he found embodied in those social and economic doctrines of Islam he considered to be truly egalitarian in intention and emphasis. It may be reiterated that Iqbal's was not an advocacy of any kind of sectarianism but an approach to life that was in consonance with and satisfied the basic urges and needs of human kind.

Iqbal's most well-known poems like 'Khizr-e-Rah', 'Tutu'-i-Islam' and the one about Revolution in *Zubur-i-Ajam* owe their lilt, their hectic display of colour and their swirl of passion to his firm conviction that the dawn of the era of freedom and equality he was looking forward to was bound up with the acceptance of the radicalism of Islam. Iqbal's poetic development in its earliest phase may therefore be viewed in terms of a search and a discovery. The search is made, initially, with passionate sincerity and almost total non-commitment: the discovery is irradiated with the glow of faith and an absolute resignation of will.

Like some of the European thinkers and creative writers Iqbal too subjects the Western civilization to harsh and withering criticism. Two aspects of this criticism arrest our attention all at once. During his stay in Europe Iqbal had witnessed the emergence of the concept of nationalism and this was used as a kind of camouflage for covering up all varieties of political and territorial ambitions and strategies. The jealously guarded sense of political identity was allowed to grow at the expense of all other allegiances. In fact the larger cosmopolitan or world outlook was completely ignored or slurred over. The result was the steady growth of "a militant kind of national consciousness — a sense of being hedged in by one's historico-geographical contexts. Powerful political and economic systems like Fascism, Nazism or even Bolshevism, supposed to have a global character and claiming to demand extra-territorial loyalties, were also seen to converge at long last towards some kind of regional groupism. National sentiment countered them at every step. The narrowness and

parochialism bred by such an outlook was repugnant to Iqbal and he could perceive with an uncanny insight that an adherence to this kind of pernicious nationalism was bound to strike at the very roots of a truly humanistic culture. He was therefore constrained to take up arms against it. This concept appears to be subservient to a kind of political adventuring relating to the achievement of imperialistic designs and was instrumental in safeguarding the interests of a particular nation-state.

But apart from his indictment of any specific ideology or value-system Iqbal was much more concerned with attacking some of the fundamentals upon which the Western outlook on life was based. In other words, he rejects its purely materialistic basis, for to him the nature of Reality, in its ultimate analysis, is spiritual. For him life proceeds from an eventuates into consciousness which is synonymous with the Indefinable, and matter is the greatest impediment placed in its way which the flow of life in its sweep brushes aside. The evolution of life is generally defined in terms of the increasing refinement which matter achieves in the various stages of its onward progression. But Iqbal does in no way accept the primacy of matter nor does he accept the assumption that human consciousness is the end-product of its evolution. It is not matter but consciousness which, according to him, is reflected in the multiple aspects of life. While matter and its various forms imply a degree of passivity, consciousness, on the contrary, is equivalent to freedom and the possibility of a choice. Iqbal is opposed to all forms of necessitarian-ism, mechanism and constraint. He is, on the other hand a strong advocate for the freedom of the human will, the assertion and affirmation of the Ego and the continuous subdual of matter by the human consciousness. Like Eliot and D. H. Lawrence in the West Iqbal insisted that we should try to resist the pressure of mechanization over the finer impulses of the human spirit in order to save it from coarsening. The West has turned the machine into a totem with the result that human beings are treated as lifeless objects and

human relationships have lost all their sanctity and tenderness. Iqbal was deeply and painfully aware of the fact that unless the tremendous reservoir of energy placed at our disposal by the scientific potential were properly harnessed and controlled by the moral order of values humanity would be in peril. He was not so much perturbed by the achievements of science as by the scientific culture and the entire spectrum of values associated with it.

Belief in the primacy and supremacy of matter leads to the negation of a God-oriented universe as well as of one in which consciousness is the focal point and the primary datum. This Iqbal takes dare to deny vehemently. For him the progression of life is teleological; it is teleological not in the sense that this progression is pre-determined but that it does ultimately move forward to some kind of goal or objective. This goal or objective is not foreseen but it does emerge during the course of the evolution of life. Life is not to be equated only with movement or flux in the sense of being mind-less: it is indeed a flowing stream, but its movement is purposive and meaningful. It is this movement which creates values and objectives, gives birth to ideals and aspirations and it is in process of this realization that life really seeks to justify itself. It would be unfair to ascribe all this to Iqbal's indebtedness to Bergson, for Iqbal's main grievance against the latter — a grievance which is validated with all the logic at his command — is that he has brought in rigidity and mechanism either inadvertently or consciously through the back door.

It may be added here that though the ultimate nature of Reality, according to the Qur'an, is spiritual — and Iqbal subscribes to it unequivocally and whole-heartedly — yet the material, the temporal and the secular are the necessary outward modes of its manifestation. The spiritual and the temporal, as pointed out by Iqbal in his Lectures, are not two distinct domains in Islam but they have their subtle points of contact. In other words what we designate as secular or material is really sacred at the

roots of its being provided the frame of mind we bring to bear upon its contemplation or handling is fully cognizant of the complexity of things. The material world is the sphere of enactment for all our ideas and intuitions and in it consists the life of the spirit. 'The truth, however, is,' maintains Iqbal, 'that matter is spirit in space-time reference.'

Iqbal's view of Reality is characterized in the first instance by the fact that life for him is not static but dynamic. This knocks out the bottom of the view taken by the Greeks in general and by Plato in particular. Iqbal owes his debt in this regard partly to Bergson and partly to the Medieval Muslim thinkers. Its real germs are, however, to be found in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an itself. The latter lays emphasis on the principle of movement as involved in the very structure of the Universe which we live in. It also enjoins the necessity of deed or action as an inevitable complement to belief or idea. Solitary contemplation or mere belief unattended by any motivation to action is likely to turn individuals into self-contained entities. In order to achieve the greatest good of the greatest numbers, in order to make the individual an effective member of the body-politic and an active participant in the community which he belongs to it is imperative that he should be able to break the shell of his exclusive and insulated existence. What Iqbal calls Ego is really equivalent to the human potentialities existing in a state of embryo. The self or the Ego is enabled to realize itself when these latent psychic energies are released and actualized, and they can be actualized only in terms of action. In the polarization of Being and Becoming Iqbal places emphasis on the latter which is another way of saying that what is really worth caring for is not what we are but what we tend to become. Action is the only means of strengthening the Ego and it is strengthened when it contrives to come to grips with the not-self, adjust itself to it and also make it subservient to its own ends. The not-self, it has been pointed out by Iqbal, is posited by the self as something necessary for its own unfolding and realization. Reality as a

constantly changing phenomenon and incessant action as a means of restructuring it according to one's own ideals are the corner-stone of Iqbal's vision of life.

It is a sheer travesty of facts to uphold that Iqbal's poetry is marked by a facile optimism, born of an uncritical acceptance of the inherited values and that this acceptance does not involve a process of exploration and judgment. His conception of God, for instance, is the end-product of a prolonged search for God's identity in the midst of the chaos of phenomena. It did not emerge as a full-blown rose, distinct and luminous in all its lineaments but had to be won through a hard and persistent struggle. It was conceived in the beginning as an indefinable Unity manifesting itself in the multitudinousness of the physical world — the archetype of all the lovely forms of nature. It bore upon itself the impress of the Plotinian hypostases according to which both the Nous and the soul are emanations of the one according to the principle of compenetration. Later on Iqbal came to think of God as the Eternal will that could be visualized either as an extension of the individual will or provided a typology for it. Still later he came to believe in some kind of anthropomorphic or personalized deity and entertained the possibility that the Absolute Ego had fragmented itself into finite monads. Iqbal's conception of Satan is significantly more original than that of Milton. For to him, unlike Milton, the creation of the universe and of man is not symptomatic of the Fall. Satan turned his back on the colourless existence in the Garden of Eden and the stasis of Eternity. The punishment inflicted upon Adam is, as a matter of fact, tantamount to the opportunity provided to him for the awakening and growth of self-consciousness. Only by being pitted against the sovereignty of God does Satan eventually walk into the region of his Egohood. The fall of man, instead of being it enables him to become aware of his own infinite potentialities. It is also significantly linked up with the vexed problem of moral choice. In presenting Satan

in a heroic mould Iqbal has made a slight deviation from Orthodoxy. This helps him bring Satan's motivations in conformity with his own peculiar notion of the Ego. In the ultimate analysis Iqbal's entire thinking is centered round the concept of freedom, the exercise of the individual volition and willed acceptance of the risks involved in it. The two are inseparable because in the absence of all the options lying before us and readily available in a particular human situation the concept of freedom is denuded of all its significance. Related to it is also Iqbal's conception of man not as a static entity but as a dynamic self — a centre round which is organized the whole potential of psychic energies — the latter being no more than concrete forms of consciousness. It is therefore not the essence but the lived particularity of human beings — their existential self — that absorbs Iqbal's attention most as poet. It is likewise both human consciousness and the objects to which it is directed — Sartre's *pour soi* and *en soi* — which are equally attractive for him. Man, like other Existents, is a part of *Da Sein*, and he also possesses the capacity of transcending the objective situation to which he is tethered. The self, according to Iqbal, though finite, is also boundless (cf. 'Javeed Se' in *Zarb-i-Kalim*,) and consciousness of the personal identity has to be integrated with the positional consciousness as it has also to be accommodated with the consciousness of the Absolute Ego. And Iqbal has very consistently pointed out in *javed Nama* that the bearing of this kind of witness is part of the Divine pattern.

Iqbal's notion of the finite Ego has both a philosophical ration-ale and a pragmatic relevance. He drew heavily both on Fichte and Rumi and Derived his cult of energy and the notion of the will to power from Nietzsche whom he continued to admire till the end of his days. It is only in the process of focalizing his energies that the finite Ego is able to put the impress of its personality on the entire universe. This undoubtedly involves a degree of hardness and tenacity on the part of

the Ego. Iqbal steers clear of the two extremes of transcendence and immanence and believes in a variety of existential monism. For him God is not merely a hypothetical Deity — remote, impersonal and inaccessible but very much personalized and He is conceived of not in terms of extensity but of intensity. The Creator and the Created, God and Man, are not only distinct but also discrete entities and the question of man's mergence and assimilation into the Divine entity is quite irrelevant for Iqbal. Man has to fashion himself in the Divine image, and the human and the Divine, in spite of several points of contiguity, are still distinguishable from each other. And similarly the created universe, with all its heterogeneity and colour-fulness, is not a mere illusion but is possessed of a solid reality. In this connection we may also mention the rather novel and unorthodox idea, reiterated in a variety of contexts by Iqbal, that God is as much in search of man as man is in search of the Deity in the chaos of phenomena, and thus the two are intertwined by the firmest bonds of mutuality. In *Payam-i-Mashriq*, *Zubur-i-Ajam* and *Bal-i-Jibril* one comes across Iqbal indulging in this speculation which is identical with what Thomas Mann projects in his famous novel, *Joseph and his Brothers*. This is stressing indirectly the pivotal position of man in the cosmos, a way of persuading or inciting him to action and impressing upon him the necessity of self-assertion. The basic intuition with Iqbal is man's capacity for self-transformation as also accommodation to social and cosmic reality.

Like some of the great thinkers of the world Iqbal prizes intuition higher than reason because of the former's revelatory power and its being an immediate mode of cognition. This, however, does not mean any disparagement of reason as such because reason is used to test the validity of the truths grasped and vouchsafed by intuition. It may be well worth stressing here that Iqbal did not believe in the dichotomy of 'reason' and 'intuition' though he is strongly opposed to our regarding 'reason' as the exclusive or self-sufficing mode of the apprehension of Reality, Deductive reasoning, based as it is upon a closed syllogistic design, has its obvious limitations. Inductive reasoning, on the contrary, opens up the way for the classification of data, its verification and analysis, and the process of inference from the given to the possible or the probable. Intuition supplements the conclusions of empirical reasoning and may therefore be equated in the Wordsworthian sense, with 'higher reason'. One may go a step further and uphold that for Iqbal the dualism of reason and intuition is

subsumed into a higher unity of experience which may be designated as either mystical or existential. Like the religious existentialists Iqbal treats existence as prior to essence and the saving grace with him is that unlike some of his Western counterparts Iqbal does have an access to some fragments of faith, some stabilizing and cohesive centre of certitude which he 'shores against his ruins'. Man has not only been exalted and ennobled but almost defied in Iqbal's poetry; he partakes of Creativity with God; he even tries to catch him in his toils with the result that he ceases to be infinitesimal or inconsequential and acquires a kind of dignity and grace.

Related to these two concepts is another one which is hardly less crucial and significant. I refer here to the emphasis Iqbal places on Man's pivotal position in the universe and the dignity he invests him with. Back of it lies the notion of choice and the sense of responsibility with which he exercises that choice and which is called forth for actualizing his potentialities. The finite Ego is a portion or replica of the Absolute Ego, and if the latter is characterized by will, how could the finite Human Ego be denied this unique gift? The human actions performed in the world of contingency are indeed foreknown to God, but the fact of their being contained in God's instantaneous act of perception does not make them have a pre-determining power in the world of time. They are there as a fore-known but open possibility. By his acceptance of the burden of responsibility which was refused by the mountains, as it is parabolic-ally recorded in the Qur'an, man came to establish his superior claim as the apex of the created world. Man is regarded by Iqbal as the architect of his own destiny, as the one who does not sometime even hesitate to challenge the ways of Divinity and insists on himself being treated as His co-partner in the act of creation. And how else could man sustain this claim except in the light of this gift of choice? This exaltation of man in relation to a disciplined sense of responsibility links Iqbal with the -existentialists of our own day though he no-where makes a specific reference to them either in his prose or

poetry. This may be accounted for by the fact that this freedom of choice is hedged in by and operates within the framework of certain cherished religious values. The choice is doubtless there but its limitlessness is curtailed to the extent of making it harmonize with the Divine will and the furtherance of human social ends.

Iqbal is one of the two major poets of the Indian Renaissance — Tagore being another — and of the resurgence of Islam in India and elsewhere in Asia too. Not unlike Dante or Eliot or Tagore the most abiding and significant segment of his poetry has its source in a religious and metaphysical consciousness. There are a number of very fine poems like 'Love', and 'EROS and Death' in *Bang-i-Dara*, 'The Subjugation of Nature' and 'Loneliness' in *Payam-i-Mashriq* and 'Earth Spirit Welcomes Adam' in *Bal-i-Jibril* which are distinctively mythical in their resonance. It is Iqbal's exploration of his conception of God, it is the subtlety and ambiguity with which the figure of Satan is probed by him and it is the existential stance of poems like 'The Tulip of the Desert' and 'Separation' in *Bal-i-Jibril* which at once arrest the attention of the modern reader, and Iqbal is excitingly modern. Three distinct varieties of style — the rhetorical, the lyrical and the meditative — are characteristic of him at different phases of his poetic career. The rhetorical one which reflects a degree of heightened emotionality and relies on the elements of repetition, accumulation and paradox is the apt vehicle for the poetry of protest as in poems like 'Khizr-i-Rah' and 'Tulu'-i-Islam' and in some lyrics and poems in *Bal-i-Jibril* and *Zarb-i-Kalim* also. The lyrical style brings out both his imaginative exuberance and highly developed rhythmical sense - a predilection for the patterning of sounds, and most the shorter Persian poems in *Payam-i-Mashriq* as well as some Urdu poems exploit this particular idiom. No less characteristic of him is the meditative style where poetic experience becomes the focus of the process of cogitation and where thought and feelings are fused into an inextricable whole. In a way Iqbal's most

distinguished idiom is a variation of the Sublime where poetry tends to transcend itself and becomes co-extensive with 'prophecy' in the Blakean sense of the term. Iqbal is also a master of the ironic mode though not to the same extent as Ghalib or Omar Khayyam because his ironical thrusts are neither so tangential nor so oblique as theirs in spite of being employed with almost the same degree of subtlety and finesse. Iqbal's claims to greatness rest on his value-system being important in and for itself — and this value-system may be characterized as rational, vitalistic and forward-looking — as also on the fact that he has been able to provide for this value-system intellectual coherence, emotional depth and poetic force. In other words the value-system is involved in the structure of his poetry and the poetry is sustained by the value-system. He has also articulated through his poetry the anxiety and aspirations, the sense of fulfilment as well as the frustration of the contemporary man with a rare degree of honesty and perspicacity.

At the centre of Iqbal's thought is the emphasis on man's freedom, his potential for creativity and his unique privilege and capacity for carving out his own destiny against all odds. There are moments when Iqbal seems to be disturbed by his sense of man's alienation, his separation from the eternal, primordial state of being and when he seems to be frightened of man's sequestration from *Dasein*. But there are also moments of resilience when man becomes more important than other members of the created universe and when even God's sovereignty is defied and challenged. Moments of despair and anguish, though few and far between, are nevertheless to be taken into account for purposes of an objective assessment of his poetry. It is an altogether mistaken notion to suppose that Iqbal is a poet only of affirmation and commitment, of a mere facile optimism resting upon unquestioned assumptions of belief. Almost all his Persian and Urdu poems bear ample evidence to his questioning of some of the conventional sets of beliefs.

Iqbal's poetry, contrary to the wide-spread impression based upon ignorant prejudice or malicious and wilful distortion of facts, reaches certitude after passing through moments of scepticism, despair and anguish, and this is also borne out by entries in some of his most intimate letters written to Atiya Faizi in which he makes a number of startling revelations. For further corroboration one may keep in mind some of his crucial lyrics and poems like 'The Tulip of the Desert' in *Bal-i-Jibril*, 'Loneliness' in *Payam-i-Mashriq* and 'Elegy on Ross Masood' included in the posthumous collection of his poems called *Armughan-i-Hijaz*. One should be wary of calling Iqbal an existentialist poet because he does not accept all the premises on which this peculiar variety of speculation rests: there is no specific mention of either authenticity or I-thou relationship in his poems. But undoubtedly there is something in common between the existential pattern of experience and that of Iqbal. He is preoccupied with the process of change and mutability and the evolution of the self, and his involvement with matter is rather intriguing. He also did not make any rigid distinction between the religious and the secular. For him whatever is sterile,, uncreative and aggressively inhuman connotes the inauthentic and is equivalent to the possession of power without the corresponding vision.

Iqbal was an advocate for the discipline of religion and there are many things in common between the discipline of religious meditation and the discipline of poetry. He was sensitive to the demands of an expanding, physical universe around as —sensitive to its scientific and rational implications: he was no less sensitive to the emotive and spiritual impulses which it involved. We had better make a distinction — and the distinction is always a legitimate and fruitful one — between theological dogmas and rituals on the one hand and the psychic life at the deepest levels on the other. Poetry or religion and metaphysics are essentially concerned with the exploration of man and the universe. Both seem to be engaged with areas of thought and experience where boundaries are not fixed but fluid and are constantly in the process of being re-drawn. An escape from the pressure of contemporaneity was

sometimes sought in primitive modes of living, in the life of the Unconscious and in the building up of an alluring but impure archetype. For others the solution of this dilemma lay in the discovery of the timeless myths of religion which seemed to embody a kind of wisdom which transcended the premises of logical reasoning. Iqbal belongs to the latter category of thinkers and creative artists. Unlike the major Urdu poet Ghalib who is almost exclusively involved with the contingent reality, with all its heterogeneity, passion and exuberance, in Iqbal's poetry the accent falls on some kind of transcendence and this puts him in the hierarchy of other poets of a cosmic vision and of a universality of appeal. Here thought and feelings, contemplation and action, the inner and the outer cease to be distinct polarities but are merged into an 'otherness' which is truly inclusive of them all.