

# TRANSLATIONS FROM IQBAL

\* *Solitude*

\* *The Poet*

\* *The Night and the Poet*

\* *The Hour and the Poet*

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## SOLITUDE

### I. INTRODUCTORY

Muhammad Iqbal's poem *Tanba'i* ("Solitude") in *Payam-i Mashriq* (in *Kulliyat-i Iqbal: Farsi* [Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1994], p. 272) is tantalizing. It explores the question of the meaning and significance of human existence in the context of the universe, but the result of the exploration is not stated; one even wonders whether there is a suggestion that the exploration would be futile. Nothing can be said with certainty about the final message of the poem, though several possibilities suggest themselves.

Conscious of possessing a feeling heart, the poet, as a representative of humanity, contrasts himself with the universe. In succession he approaches the sea, the mountain, and the moon, asking each whether it possesses, like him, a heart. All are embarrassed at the question and remain silent, for none of them possesses a heart. Finally, the poet arrives in the presence of God

and complains that he has no companion in the whole wide world He has created: nothing in the universe possesses a heart, whereas he, although a handful of dust, is all heart. At this God smiles, but He, too, remains silent.

What are we to make of all this? It is obvious that the universe, with all its gigantic proportions and impressive phenomena, lacks that priceless thing called heart—which is possessed by man and which renders man superior to the universe. The French thinker Pascal says that man is superior to the universe because the universe, though it crushes man, does not realize what it does to him, whereas man at least has the awareness of being crushed by the universe. Consciousness, then, is distinctive of human existence and makes up for man's physical weakness or inferiority. In "The moon," a poem in *Bang-i Dara* (in *Kuliyat-i Iqbal: Urdu*, [Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994], pp. 105-106), Iqbal, comparing himself with the moon, notes a few similarities between man and the moon, but then says:

And yet, O shining moon,

You are so different from me

And I so different from you!

The breast that feels the pain

Is a different breast indeed.

Though I'm all darkness and you're all light,

Yet you're hundreds of miles away

From the station of awareness.

The purpose of my life is known to me-----

This is a sheen your countenance lacks.

At one level, then, the poem “Solitude” argues for the superiority of man to the universe.

The important question, however, is: Why does God smile in silence? There are several possible explanations.

1. Possession of a feeling heart distinguishes man from and sets him above the rest of creation. This secret was, however, hidden from man not with a view to keeping him ignorant of his distinction but in order to motivate him to discover it through his own effort. Discovery of the secret earns man praise from God: he has risen to his Creator’s expectations, and the Creator smiles in appreciation.

2. The discovery is painful. Man’s search for a “heart” in nature was actuated by his desire to find a companion with whom he could share his joys and sorrows. But nature can offer man no solace, and the search, which makes him aware of his distinction, also leaves him high and *dry*. God smiles in compassion, even pity. In the poem “Man” in *Bang-i Dara* (p. 206), Iqbal says that God has made man a seeker of the secret of existence, but has then hidden the secret from him.

3. Man may take consolation in the fact, the Divine smile may be suggesting, that the discovery, though painful, is after all an achievement. If man can find no companion outside of himself, then at least he can be a companion to himself. In fact, instead of turning to lifeless, or rather heartless, nature, he might consider cementing his bonds with the other members of the human race. The painful discovery thus redirects man towards humanity, and God smiles not so much at the present failure of man to much at the present failure of man to find a companion in nature, but at the possibilities that lie hidden in man’s discovery of the strengths of the bonds of humanity.

4. Unlike the natural phenomena, which are disconcerted by Iqbal’s query, God smiles. Might it be that God, through His smile, is suggesting that man has finally discovered that God Himself is the friend man needs—and deserves?

None of these interpretations finds conclusive support in the poem. Is the ambiguity deliberate? Quite possibly Iqbal does not want to provide a neat solution to a complex problem.

The sequence of Iqbal's queries is notable. Iqbal first approaches the sea, then the mountain, which is at a higher altitude, then the moon, which is even higher, and finally God, Who is in the highest heavens. At each level, one can feel, the problem Iqbal is facing becomes more poignant.

Incidentally, this is not the only "enigmatic" poem in Iqbal. One gets a similar feeling in a short poem entitled "Life" in *Payam-i Mashriq* (in *Kulliyat-i Iqbal: Farsi*, p. 254):

One night the spring cloud wept and wept, [saying,

"This life is one long spell of crying."

A swift lightning shone, and said,

"You're wrong—it's a moment's laughter!"

I don't know who bore this news to the [garden, For the rose and the dew are debating the [point.

A number of verses in several other poems of Iqbal express similar thoughts and feelings.

## II. TRANSLATION

I went down to the sea

And said to the restless wave,

"You're ever in search.\_

What's troubling you?

In your pouch<sup>1</sup> are a thousand brilliant pearls\_ But do you have in your chest, like me, A pearl of a heart?"

It writhed and swung away from the shore \_\_\_\_\_ And said not a word.

I went up to the mountain and asked,

“What insensitivity!

Did the sighs and cries of any anguished soul Ever reach your ears? If your rocks have

But one diamond formed from a drop of blood,

Then come for a moment

And talk to a wretched soul<sup>3</sup> like me.”

It withdrew into itself and stood still.\_ And said not a word.

I went a long distance, and asked the moon,

“It is *your* lot to journey along,

Is destination also your lot or not?<sup>4</sup> The rays of your countenance Turn the world into jasmine land .<sup>5</sup> But the sheen of your scar,

Does it dome from the splendor of a heart or not?’

It cast a jealous glance<sup>7</sup> at the star<sup>8</sup>

And said not a word. Leaving the moon and the sun behind,

I reached the presence of God, and said,

“Not a single atom in Your World Is an intimate of mine

The world has no heart, but I, A handful of dust, am all heart.

It's<sup>9</sup> a mice garden, but not worthy of my song!<sup>10</sup>

A smile appeared on His lips\_

He said not a word.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The word in the original is *giriban*, literally, the “opening at the breast of a garment.”

<sup>2</sup>Again the meaning is: Do you possess a heart?

<sup>3</sup>Wretched because, possessing as he does a heart, than feels the pain and misery that is found in the world.

<sup>4</sup>The implication, of course, is that the moon is denied a destination. In the

poem “Thoughts of Stars” in *Payam-i Mashriq (Kulliyat-i Iqbal: Farzi, p. 253)*, a star says:

We're in an ocean, no shore's in sight: It is our fate to journey along,

This caravan has no destination, though.

<sup>5</sup>That is, your rays illumine the world, so that it appears that white jasmine is blossoming all over.

<sup>6</sup>Iqbal asks the moon: Is the scar of your face due to the splendour of your

own heart, one that is burning with the fire of life, or is it due to borrowed fire?

<sup>7</sup>The word *ragibanah* in the original means literally “like a rival.” “Jealous glance” would seem to capture the meaning intended. See also next note.

<sup>8</sup>”Star” (singular in the original) may be generic, in which case it would mean “stars,” for the light of the stars is original to them, whereas the light of the moon is borrowed. But the word may refer specifically to the sun, from which the moon borrows its light. This would be more meaningful since in the next stanza the poet mentions the moon and the sun both (“Leaving the moon and the sun behind....”)

<sup>9</sup>”The world or universe.

<sup>10</sup>“Not worthy of my song,” because Iqbal’s song arises from his heart and a heart is needed to appreciate it, whereas the universe has no heart.

**\*\*[7**The variety and richness of Iqbal’s overall intellectual perspective allows us to add a few comments here by way of further elucidating the multifaceted and many tiered concept of heart in Iqbal’s poetical works. The word ‘heart’ is a highly nuanced term used in different interconnected shades and meanings during the various phases of Iqbal’s poetic career, ranging from ‘heart’ as a seat of emotions and feelings to the sufi idea of ‘heart’ as the center of human interiority and the deepest seat of consciousness. In his mature works, to which category this poem belongs, he mostly employs the term ‘heart’ in its mystico-philosophic meaning and, for an adequate explanation, one inevitably has to turn towards the relevant sufi perspective which provided the underpinning to Iqbal’s verses and which, consequently, is the only legitimate paradigm that may reveal the beauty and intellectual profundity of his thought in its full splendour.

One is also reminded of the fact that in Islamic texts in general and sufi works in particular, the heart is a locus of knowledge and intelligence rather than sentiments or feeling. Equating the heart to ‘emotions’ and ‘feelings’ is a typically modern phenomenon. The Qur’an employs the term about 130 times and often attributes understanding and intelligence to the healthy heart. *Hadith* literature also carries abundant references to it. Based on these primary sources a vast body of literature came into existence in various schools of Islamic thought which worked out its implications according to their respective points of view. Iqbal places himself squarely in the perspective of intellectual Sufism when he, for example, says: “No less than the Exalted Throne is the breast of Adam” (Masjid-i-Qurtubah’, in *Bal-i-*

*Jibril*, *Kulliyat*, Urdu, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1994, p. 422). Thus, in our view, to gain a comprehensive view of Iqbal's key concepts, it is hardly possible to glide silently over the question of their proper perspective and intellectual background. No interpretation would yield results to the required degree of satisfaction unless an unrestricted approach is adopted to read his works.

In short, without negating anything that the learned translator has noted, it may be concluded that the term 'heart', at least in the majority of Iqbal's mature works, represent, before every thing else, the following ideas:

The deepest seat of consciousness;

Locus of intelligence;

Centre of interiority or inwardness;

Secret of God;

The point where the Divine intersects the human realm thus projecting itself onto the mental plane in a rational mode and into the intermediate domain of human psyche as will, sentiments and emotions.]

(Editor)

## **POET AND SOCIETY:**

### **THREE POEMS BY IQBAL**

One of the main functions of the poet, in Iqbal's view, is to serve as the conscience of society. Of the many poems of Iqbal's on this subject, three are translated below. In the first ("The Poet"), the nation is called a body and the poet, its eye, which weeps whenever any part of the body is hurt. The eye, though it cannot act to relieve the pain, draws attention to the pain, causing remedial action to be taken.



In the second poem (“The Night and the Poet”), the night asks the poet why he has not gone to sleep whereas the whole world is asleep. The poet replies that he has a message of love which he must deliver. His people, however, are either unprepared or unwilling to receive the message, and so, when he is no longer able to keep it in, he comes out in the solitude of night and relates the message to the stars of the sky. Note the dramatic element in the poem. The question asked by the night in the first line of the poem is fully answered only when we get to the last line of the poem. The periodic structure of the poet’s reply thus creates and maintains suspense until the very end of the poem.

In the third poem (“The Hour and the Poet”), the houri asks the poet why he is uninterested in the pleasures of paradise. The poet replies that paradise, which represents perfection, cannot satisfy him because he is always in search of something more perfect, and this possibility is excluded in paradise. Paradise is all happiness and joy, and there is no room in it for sorrow and pain. Iqbal is not advocating masochism. It is the pain and sorrow of love—that is, the pain and sorrow due to the realization that one’s lofty ideals will be forever unattainable. To be capable of feeling pain and sorrow in this sense is the highest good, and, one might say, the highest pleasure—what Iqbal describes in the beginning of the poem as the pleasure afforded by the pointed thorn. Read in the light of other poems, such as “The Night and the Poet” may be identified as love of mankind, or, more specifically, as love of one’s community (see the concluding lines of The Hour and the Poet”).

## THE POET1

The nation is like a body,  
And the individuals are its members;  
The treaders of the road of industry  
Are its hands and feet,  
The rulers are its beautiful face,

And the poet of colourful tunes its seeing eye? If but one limb should suffer  
from pain, The eye sheds tears:

How caring, how solicitous

Is the eye for the entire body!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Source: *Bang-i Dara*, in *Kulliyat-i Iqbal: Urdu* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1994),  
p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>*seeing eye*: The phrase *didab-yi bina* signifies both sight and insight.

## THE NIGHT AND THE POET'

### *THE NIGHT*

Why do you wander around in my moonlight,

So vexed and troubled,<sup>1</sup>

Mute like a flower, diffused<sup>3</sup> like fragrance?

Perhaps you are a jeweller

Who deals in these pearls called stars,

Or are some fish in my river of light.

Or perhaps you are a star,

That has fallen off of my brow,

A star that has forsaken the heights

And taken up residence in the depths below. The strings of the violin of life are still; In my mirror is pictured life as it sleeps. The eye of the vortex is asleep

At the bottom of the river,

And, hugging the shore, is asleep, too, The restless wave.

What a bustling place is earth, but now It sleeps as if it had no tenants at all!  
But the poet's heart knows no peace: How were you able to elude my spell?

### *THE POET*

I sow pearls in the soil of your moon; Hiding fro men, I weep like dawn.<sup>4</sup>  
Reluctant to issue in the bustle of day,

My tears begin to drop in the lonesome night. The cry that is pent up inside me, Whom shall I get to hear that cry, To whom show the sight of burning desire? The lightning of Sinai sobs, lying on my chest: Where sleeps the eye that would see?<sup>6</sup> My assembly-hall<sup>7</sup> is dead,

Like the candle at the grave.<sup>9</sup>

Alas, O night! I have very far to go! The winds of the present age suit it<sup>9</sup> ill: It has no sense of the loss it has suffered. The message of love,

When I can no longer hold it in,

I come and relate to your shining stars.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Source: *Bang-i Dara*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup>*vexed and troubled*: The Persian word is *Parisban*. For the play on this word, see n. 3 below.

<sup>3</sup>*diffused*: The word in the original is *Parishan*. which means both “worried” (see n. 2 above) and “scattered.” Iqbal plays on the word, using it twice, once in each sense.

<sup>4</sup>*weep like dew*: That is, my tears drop like dew at dawn.

<sup>5</sup>*The lightning of Sinai*: The Persian phrase *barq-i ayman* means literally either the “blessed lightning” or “the lightning that shone on the right side [of Mt. Sinai],” but in either case makes reference to the experiences of Moses on Sinai. The phrase represents a confluence of two Qur’anic descriptions. (1) The part of Mt. Sinai where Moses was addressed by God and given the Law is called in the Qur’an *jamb at-tur al-ayman* (“the blessed [or right] side of the Mount” [19:52, 20:80; see also 28:30]). (2) When Moses expressed his wish to see God, the latter manifested Himself on Mt. Sinai, or rather a part of it, which was crushed to pieces, Moses himself falling down unconscious (sa’iqa; 7:143). From the second description Iqbal borrows the word *barq* (this word does not actually occur in 7:143, though it is suggested by the words *tajalla* and sa’iqa in it), and from the first description, *ayman*, and coins the phrase *barq-i ayman*. Note the oxymoron in “the lightning of Sinai sobs;” it is as if a fire were shedding tears.

<sup>6</sup>*The lightning ...would see*: Unlike the *barq-i ayman* of Moses, which brought life to the Israelites, the *barq-i ayman* of Iqbal has no takers: there are no eyes to notice it! This causes grief to the lightning itself.

<sup>7</sup>*assembly-hall*: The word in the original, *mahfil* means both (1) gathering place and (2) people who have gathered in a place. Iqbal is referring to the Muslim Community, which seems to have no life, for it is not responsive to his message.

<sup>8</sup>*Like ...grave*: That is, like the candle that people light at the graves of the deceased and which burn out after some time.

<sup>9</sup>*it*: The “assembly-hall,” or the people who once gathered there—again, the Muslim Community.

## THE HOURI AND THE POET<sup>1</sup>

*THE HOURI*

You are not drawn to wine,

And you do not cast your eyes on me:

It is surprising that you are so unsociable! It is but a tune of quest, a flame of desire\_ The breath you draw, the song you sing. With your song you have created

Such a lovely world

That paradise itself, it seems to me,

Is but a work of magic .<sup>3</sup>

You steal the travellers' hearts

With pointed talk,<sup>4</sup>

Except that in the pleasure it gives

It does not compare with the pointed thorns What can I do, for by nature I feel

Ill at ease at a stopping-place!

I have an impatient heart,

Like the zephyr in a garden of tulips.

As soon as my eyes are set on a pretty face, My heart begins to yearn for one prettier still. From the spark I seek a star, from the star a sun: I do not long for a destination,

For if I stop I die.

When I arise, having quaffed

A cup of wine brewed by one spring breeze, I begin to sing another song,

To the breeze of another spring.

I seek the end of that which has no end \_\_\_\_\_ With a restless eye, but with a hopeful heart.

An eternal paradise is death to the lover's heart\_ In it no *cry* of a soul in affliction,

No sorrow, and no friend to share the sorrow!<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Source: *Payam-i Mashriq*, in *Kulliyat-i Iqbal: Farsi* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1994), pp. 279-280.

<sup>2</sup>*It is ... you sing:* The houri notes that the poet, although he has reached paradise, supposedly the highest goal of a mortal, is still in search of something else.

<sup>3</sup>*That paradise.... magic:* That is, even paradise appears to lack reality and substance in comparison with the beautiful world created by the poet's imagination. -

<sup>4</sup>*You steal ... pointed talk:* A possible allusion to the sirens of Greek mythology.

<sup>5</sup>*Except ... thorn:* See introductory note.

<sup>6</sup>*In it ... sorrow:* The pangs of love a lover feels give him joy. Paradise, while a perfect place in every other way, does not afford this special type of pleasure. In an eternal paradise, therefore, the lover's heart will wither and die.

notes to the poem 'Solitude', it is possible here also to situate Iqbal's ideas in a

different perspective which, in our view, facilitates a more satisfactory explanation without denying the interpretation offered by the translator. The primary sources of Islam contain seminal references to the state which Iqbal has portrayed in these poems. When the Qur'an speaks of the hereafter as 'greater in levels and greater in heirarchical excellences' or of the 'two paradises' and when the traditions inform us about beatitude (*ridwan*) being above the pleasures of paradise (hadith of 'dunes' is also relevent her) they imply that, for certain souls atleast, the possibility of 'pain and sorrows of love" due to the 'unattainable lofty ideals' would exist. These 'ideals', in our view, are not 'created by the poet's imagination' (see note 3 to *The Hourri and the Poet*) but reflect an objective possibility to be actualized for some of the blessed souls. This predilection, evident form the poet's attitude, is the same which is expressed in the earlier poetic expressions of his predecessors in preferring the 'Gardener over the garden' or, in theological terms, by the distinction between the 'seekers of salvation (*Najat*)' and the 'seekers of the Self or sanctification (*Tagarrub*)'. Therefore, this 'special type of pleasure' is neither peculiar to the poet's soul nor absent form the paradise. Iqbal has infact placed himself squarely in the tradition which admits of a heirarchical arrangement of human souls correspouding to the degrees of acheivement in the paradise and which, as a consequence, speaks of the aspirations which Iqbal has translated into his own idiom and manner of expression.]

Editor