POET AS AETIOLOGIST: TWO POEMS BY IQBAL

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INTRODUCTION

Aetiology is the study of the causes of phenomena: in medicine, it is the study of the causes of a disease; in imaginative literature, the attempt to explain, for instance, how the elephant got its trunk and the sky its blue colour. In at least two poems, Iqbal plays the aetiologist. The poems translated below, give evidence of Iqbal's imaginative power and artistic skill both. But Iqbal's imagination is often philosophical and his art deeply grounded in the Islamic literary tradition and the two poems bring out these aspects of his poetry as well.

In the first of the two poems, *MaÁabbat* ("Love"), Iqbal suggests that love is like soul to the body of the universe: the world, at the time of its creation, was like a frozen picture that became animated only when it was infused with love. Not only did love transform a static world into a dynamic one, it gave meaning and purpose to existence itself. It is noteworthy that Iqbal associates love with God: the secret recipe of love which the heavenly alchemist wished to acquire was inscribed on one of the pedestals of the Divine Throne and was jealously guarded by the angels. God, however, did not intervene when the alchemist approached the Throne under the pretext of glorifying God, thus "tricking" the angelic guard. This can only mean that God wanted the secret to be discovered.

The poem raises a few questions and it is while attempting to answer these questions (we shall select two for treatment) that we recognize and appreciate how rich its tapestry of thought and art is. The first question is, Who is the heavenly alchemist? Obviously he is not an angel, for the angels sought to keep the recipe a secret. He is not Adam either, for it was "from the eye of Adam's soul" (see n. 10) that the angels wished to hide the recipe.

It is really not very important to identify the alchemist with precision, though certain possibilities come to mind. In one way he resembles Prometheus, who stole fire and gave it as a gift to man. But he cannot be identified with Prometheus completely, for the latter was punished by Zeus, whereas the alchemist's action has at least tacit Divine approval; in fact the compound prepared by him receives the name Love from God Himself, definitive proof that God was pleased at the discovery of the recipe of love. In another sense the alchemist is like Khiîr, the name given by tradition to the person who guided Moses on a certain journey as described in the 18th *sërah* of the Qur'an. Note especially that Iqbal calls the alchemist "one who was privy to the Court of God," which invites comparison with the Qur'anic description of Moses' guide as "one of Our servant worshippers" (*'abdan min 'ib«din«*) and as one whom God had blessed with special insight (*wa- 'allamn«hu min ladunn« 'ilman* 18:65). Furthermore, the alchemist dissolves the ingredients of the recipe "in the water of the fountain of life," and Islamic literary tradition represents Khiîr, if we may use that name, as being in charge of the fountain of life. In yet another sense it might be argued that, alchemy—or chemistry—being one of the distinctive Muslim contributions to science, the alchemist is a typical representative of Islamic civilization. But while Iqbal's alchemist has traits or qualities of Prometheus, Khiîr and a scientist, he cannot be identified completely and exclusively with any one of them and must be regarded as a composite figure created by Iqbal himself.

> The second question is: What exactly is love as conceived by Iqbal in this poem? This question may be answered in two ways. In respect of its constitution, love is made up of ingredients which Iqbal lists in detail. The notable thing is that these ingredients are strongly reminiscent of the descriptions of the lover and the beloved in Persian Urdu poetry. In this literary tradition the beloved is often described as having a bright, star like face and long pitch-black hair, possessing the modesty of a houri and the Jesus-like power to revive the pining and near-dead lover with an affectionate look and a kind word, but showing godlike indifference to the woebegone lover. The lover, on the other hand, is described as a humble, self-sacrificing

individual ever hoping to win his beloved's favour. Iqbal thus employs the native literary tradition in the service of a philosophical idea that is, as we shall see, universal in import.

In respect of its function, love, as we learn in the concluding couplets of the poem, is the principle of movement in the universe: love is the bond that unites the atoms of the universe, sets the heavenly bodies in motion and makes the flowers bloom. This does not seem to help very much. But then it is not meant to be a scientific answer to a scientific question. Iqbal, it seems, is trying to present a philosophical idea using poetic language. In a certain philosophical sense, the universe is a unity: the heavenly bodies on the one hand and the flowers in earthly gardens on the other are parts of the same system and are ruled by laws that are essentially the same. All phenomena are thus interlinked, together making up a system remarkable for its harmony. Harmony, then, is the underlying principle of the universe—and another word for this harmony is love. Just as scientists are trying to discover an ultimate principle that would bring out the unity of the physical universe, so the philosopher is in search of a principle that would reveal the spiritual basis of the unity of the universe. This, one might say, is the "stone" the philosopher is searching for.

We are told that while the recipe of love was in the heavens, the ingredients of the recipe were to be found on the earth. This is significant because it implies, on the one hand, that love is earthly in constitution and on the other, that earthly love is sanctioned by heaven. This is not all. Once the alchemist succeeds in preparing the compound called love—a name given it by God Himself—the whole universe becomes ready for business, so to speak. Love, in other words, knits the heavens and the earth into a unity; like the same soul it runs through the different parts of the universe's body.

Although, as we saw, Iqbal explains the function of love only at the end of the poem, he prepares the reader for this explanation from the outset. The very first line, "The tresses of the bride of night were yet uncurled," arouses the reader's curiosity: "night," "bride," "uncurled tresses," and the adverb "yet" are all presageful. Before satisfying this curiosity, Iqbal introduces the figure of the alchemist. Now its peculiar history has given alchemy the reputation of being a

mysterious art or science. The mention of the existence of an alchemist in the heavens thus heightens the reader's curiosity, as do the alchemist's plan to make away with the secret recipe, his search for the ingredients of the recipe and his act of sprinkling the liquid compound on the "new order of existence." The resolution of the whole drama comes only in the last two and a half couplets of the poem when movement appears in the universe. This gradual unfolding of the theme is highly dramatic and demonstrates Iqbal's ability—sufficiently attested elsewhere—to create and maintain the reader's interest until the very end.

One other point about Iqbal's art. Most of Iqbal's poem have a proper beginning, middle and end. They are, that is to say, complete in themselves. This is not the case with the poem *Love.* The poem seems to begin *in media res,* the little adverb "yet" in the first line again serving a crucial role, for it suggests that the universe was still in the process of being made when the incident involving the alchemist occurred. The conclusion of the poem also seems to be somewhat abrupt. I think, Iqbal deliberately intended the poem to give a sense of incompleteness. Infusion of love into the body of the universe could take place only at the last stage of the creation of the universe and it is at this stage that the alchemist comes on the scene; this explains the beginning *in medias res.* Once love has informed the universe, the latter is ready for business—hangs out its shingle. Considering the limitless Potential of love, this "business" will never come to an end. The lack of closure on the artistic level thus signifies a lack of closure on the level of thought.

In the second poem, *Bë'-i Gul* ("The Fragrance of the Flower"), Iqbal explains how the fragrance of the flower (or rose [*gul*]) came to be so called. The poem begins with a houri noting with regret that she was never informed about the region beyond the heavens. In order to find out about this new region namely, the earth, she leaves paradise and comes to earth in the guise of a flower. Having entered the world of time, she becomes subject to the law of death with her petals finally dropping on the ground and withering away. Before perishing, she utters a sigh, and this sigh a memento of hers, comes to be called fragrance.

Although Iqbal does not spell it out, the "disquietude" of the houri mentioned in the opening line of the poem represents Iqbal's own dissatisfaction with the notion of static perfection. Paradise, if taken to be a perfect abode in the sense that it lacks movement and growth would be, in Iqbal's view, a place unworthy of habitation and in several other places (e.g., in the poem "The Houri and the Poet" in *Pay«m-i Mashriq)* Iqbal says that an eternal and changeless paradise kills the "hearts of lovers," of those that is to say, who are in love with an unattainably high and noble ideal. Endless progress, limitless perfection that is what Iqbal desires, and the houri of this poem understandably becomes impatient with the perfect existence of paradise and is eager to explore the world "on the other side of the heavens." The terrestrial world for all its imperfections, is interesting and charming enough and the houri, Iqbal seems to be suggesting, does not make a wrong decision. To be sure, she pays a heavy price for her decision. In a sense she is like Faust. This requires further explanation.

> In talking about the world beyond the frontiers of the heavens, the houri says that she does not understand what is meant by day and night, dawn and evening and that she is equally at a loss to know the meaning of birth and death. Implicit in her confession of ignorance is a deep desire to find out the truth about the world of time and space, a world that is ruled by the laws of transience and change. She wafts her way into the world as fragrance, takes up residence in a flower-branch, becomes first a bud, then a flower and then dies. It is on account of her love of discovery, her hunger for understanding the truth of the alteration of day and night and the phenomena of birth and death and her willingness to indulge her fancy at any cost that she leaves paradise and enters this world. For the discovery she makes and the understanding she acquires she pays with her life. This is exactly the fate of Faust.

The houri breathes a sigh upon leaving this world-when her feet were "unshackled," as Iqbal puts it (see n. 6). What is signified by the sigh? The poem does not provide a clear answer and the ambiguity may have been intended by Iqbal. Did the houri sigh because she would soon cease to exist

altogether and felt that she had paid too big a price to satisfy her curiosity? Or was it the case that she liked this imperfect and transient world regardless and was filled with regret on departing from it?

LOVE [31]

The tresses of the bride of night were yet uncurled.[32]

The stars of the sky knew not the joy of travel;

The moon in its new dress looked a little odd,

And was unaware of the binding law of revolution.[33]

The world had just emerged from the dark chamber of possibilities; [34]

The vast universe lacked an appreciation of life.[35]

The order of existence was just being brought to perfection, as it were:

From its eye was evident the ring's desire for a stone.[36]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

LOVE:

[31] Source: *B«ng-i Dar«*, in *Kuliyy«t-i Iqb«l:* Urdu, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1997, p. 137.

[32] *The tresses . . . uncurled:* The night is here pictured as a bride who did not yet know how to make her hair curl. In other words, the night had not yet acquired the charm peculiar to it.

[33] *And was . . . revolution*: The moon, too, was unaware that constant orbiting was to be its lot.

[34] *The world ... possibilities*: The world, in Muslim theological and philosophical terminology, is possible and contingent, God being the only necessary and absolute being.

[35] *The vast . . . life:* This was so because true appreciation of life would come only after love had informed the universe.

[36] *From its eye ... stone:* The eye of a ring is the border of metal in which a stone is set. That the eye of the ring was desirous of a stone means that the world, still imperfect, yearned for perfection: the stone that would make the ring complete had yet to be supplied.

In the world up high,[37] it is said, there was an alchemist

The dust of whose feet was brighter than Jamshed's cup [38]

On a post of the Throne was inscribed the recipe of an elixir, [39]

Which the angels hid from the eye of Adam's soul. [40]

But the alchemist's eyes were ever watchful:

That recipe to him was worth more than the Name Most High. [41]

On the pretext of glorifying God he moved towards the Throne,

Through persistent effort he finally got his heart's desire.

The search for ingredients made him roam the realm of possibilities [42]

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[37] The world up high: ‘ÿlam-i b«l«-i.e., the heavenly realm.

[38] *The dust ... cup:* Jamshed, an ancient king of Persia, had a crystal bowl in which he could see the happenings of the whole world. For him to be able to do so, the cup had to be shiny clear. The dust of the ground the alchemist walked was, however, brighter or clearer than even Jamshed's cup. Incidentally, this line may contain an allusion to Qur'an 20:96. When Moses returns from Mt. Sinai and discovers that his people have taken to worshipping a calf made by a certain Samaritan, he interrogates the latter. The Samaritan tries to excuse himself by saying that he saw Gabriel passing by and taking a handful of dust from the angel's pathway, cast it into a calf he had made and this made the calf speak. Iqbal, of course, does not mean to compare the Samaritan of Surah 20 to the alchemist of his poem-the Samaritan is evil whereas the alchemist is a hero. On a purely linguistic level, however, the Qur'anic phrase *fa-qabaîtu qabîatan min atharir-rasëli* of 20:96 may have suggested "the dust of whose feet" of Iqbal's poem.

[39] *elixir*: Elixir of love, as we shall soon find out.

[40] *the eye of Adam's soul:* The phrase implies that Adam had not yet assumed a body.

[41] *the Name Most High*: One of the names of God, though it is not certain which one, which, on being pronounced, is said to have miraculous effects.

How could anything hide from one privy to the Court of God [43]

He borrowed glitter from the star, from the moon the scar of its heart; [44]

From the ruffled tresses of night he picked off some black;

He took from lightning its flash, chasteness from the houri,

And warmth from the breath of Jesus son of Mary; [45]

Then he took, from God, a pinch of majestic indifference, [46]

Humility from the angel, self-abasement from dew.

He dissolved these ingredients in the water of the fountain of life.

The compound received the name Love from the Grand Throne.

The alchemist sprinkled this water on the new order of existence.

His skill untied the knot, as it were, of the affairs of the world. [47]

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[42] *the realm of possibilities*: The terrestrial world, which is marked by contingency or possibility.

[43] *one privy to the Court of God:* A possible comparison with Khiîr (see Introduction).

[44] *from the moon the scar of its heart:* The scar has not pejorative but positive connotations: the moon got its scar from the fire of love which burnt in its heart. The scar here represents the mark of love a lover comes to have in his heart.

[45] *And warmth ... Mary:* Jesus had the special gift of reviving the dead. Love is thus not only sanctioned by God, it is a positive, life-giving force, the animating principle of the universe.

[46] *majestic indifference*: see Introduction.

[47] *His skill . . . world:* "To undo the knot of something" is to make it operational. Once informed by love, the inert universe was stimulated into action and became vibrant with life.

There appeared movement: The atoms gave up the joy of slumber,

And got up and began to embrace their mates;

The suns and the stars received their proud gait;

The buds learnt to bloom; the tulip-beds got their scars.

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THE FRAGRANCE OF THE FLOWER [48]

In a corner of the garden of paradise, a disquieted houri[49] said:

"No one ever told us about the region beyond the heavens.[50]

I don't understand this dawn and evening, day and night,

And am at my wits' end when they speak of birth and death."[51]

She turned into a wave of fragrance and emerged from a flower-branch,

Setting foot, thus, in the world of yesterday and tomorrow.[52]

She opened her eyes, became a bud, and smiled a while;

She became a rose, then split into petals and dropped on the ground

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THE FRAGRANCE OF THE FLOWER:

[48] Source: *Pay«m-i Mashriq*, in *Kuliyy«t-i Iqbal:* Persian, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1994, p. 243.

[49] *A disquieted houri*: See Introduction.

[50] *the region beyond the heavens*: The terrestrial world.

[51] *I don't ... death*: All these things are foreign to the houri's experience.

[52] the world of tomorrow and yesterday: The world of historical time.

The memory of that lovely maiden—her feet unshackled[53]

Is kept alive by a sigh called fragrance.

[53] *her feet unshackled*: This is a simple metaphor for death and does not necessarily connote release from the bondage of life.