

Iqbal: A Poet Who Imposed Himself Upon the World and Upon Time

[publication and date not given in source]

Two Islamic poets raised the glory of Islamic letters to its very summit, and imposed that same literary glory upon time itself: one of them, Iqbal, poet of India and Pakistan; the other, Abu al-'Ala', poet of the Arabs.

Two poets who resemble each other as closely as poets possibly can, and yet diverge from one another as widely as poets possibly can. Both are poets first, both are philosophers, and both subjected philosophy to poetry, and poetry to philosophy — and how genuinely difficult it is to reconcile these two weighty arts! Both embraced mysticism until reaching its own furthest extreme, and both, thereafter, broke with familiar, traditional mysticism, adopting for themselves a particular path within mysticism scarcely anyone else has shared with them. Both asserted their own personal identity as forcefully as any personal identity can possibly be asserted, and both called upon man to know his own self in its truest sense, to impose himself upon the world, and impose himself upon time, never dissolving himself into anyone else, whoever that might be. Yet, beyond this, the two diverge, and part ways, as widely as possible. One of them — Abu al-'Ala' — spent his own days looking toward India, dwelling upon it at length, drawing from it, and being genuinely shaped by it, to the point of adopting, in his own life, the very life of ascetic Brahmin renunciants.

The other — Iqbal — looked, instead, toward the Arabs, extolling them, praising them, taking them as the highest ideal of a humanity genuinely worthy of existence, life, and endurance.

Both believed in their own individual identity, and called upon people to believe in themselves. But one of them — Abu al-'Ala' — believed in his own identity with a belief that ended in despair and negation, ended in withdrawal from people entirely, even though he loved them as no one had ever loved them before.

The other believed in himself too, but sought his own ideal among the Arabs, rather than seeking it close at hand, in India. He never withdrew, but rather hated withdrawal itself. He never rejected life, and

its own comforts, but took a reasonable share of them instead. He never suppressed his own instincts, as Abu al-'Ala' did, but rather managed them, mastered them, and subjected them to the rule of his own reason.

In this way, these two great men agree as closely, and as forcefully, as two men possibly can — and then differ as widely, and as decisively, as two men possibly can.

Abu al-'Ala' held people in contempt for one single idea above all others. He held them in the deepest contempt because they dissolved themselves into their own lords, dissolved themselves into their own rulers, enslaved themselves to kings and princes. He was genuinely intent on making people feel they ought to hold themselves in far higher regard than this, that they ought to affirm their own singular unity, exactly as they affirm the singular unity of their own Lord:

*Be singular, for God, your own Lord, is One —
and never desire the company of rulers.*

Abu al-'Ala' wanted people, then, to become genuinely conscious of themselves, to know their own rights, to impose their own identity upon the world, and to raise themselves above submission and self-effacement. He would fault princes, fault kings, regarding them as tyrants and criminals:

*I have grown weary of dwelling here — how long must I live among a
people*

whose own rulers command what serves not their own good!

*They have wronged their own subjects, permitted themselves every
scheme against them,*

and betrayed their own interests, though they were meant to serve them.

But none of this made it any easier for Abu al-'Ala' to live among people as they themselves lived. He saw that social life, in his own era, could never be set right for him except by denying his own self, and becoming a mere servant, like the countless other servants who both ruled and were humbled, at the very same time, before kings and rulers — and so he exiled himself from the world entirely, confined himself to his own house, and remained there, never leaving it, for fifty years, or very nearly fifty years.

Iqbal, by contrast, believed in his own individual identity with a belief every bit as strong as Abu al-'Ala''s own — but never contented himself with simply believing in himself, and stopping there, satisfied

with himself alone, unconcerned with reviving that same sense of identity in everyone else. He was, rather, genuinely constructive: genuinely intent on believing in himself, and on leading others to believe in him too — believing in his own identity, and carrying people along with him, not merely in Pakistan and India alone, nor in the Islamic world alone, but across the entire human world. He was intent on grounding human life itself in the individual's own belief in himself, and on the individual imposing himself upon life, rather than submitting to it, dissolving himself into this or that one of its own passing appearances. He remained, at the same time, entirely consistent with this same weighty philosophical position: he was as thoroughly social as any man could possibly be, devoted to the collective good, spending his entire life as a guide, teacher, counsellor, calling the Islamic world, and mankind itself, toward holding itself in genuine honour, so that it might be honoured among people, and honoured within life itself. Yet he held, at the very same time, that this same life, in which man is sincere toward man, counsels man toward man, and helps man toward man, can never be set right, can never truly succeed, can never bear its own proper fruit, except once man separates himself from man, and believes he possesses his own distinct, individual existence — and that this same good he spreads among people, this good he wishes to fill the earth with, must issue from himself, precisely because he is an independent individual, a distinct being, set apart from others, willing the good and issuing it from himself, deliberately and by his own choice — not the way light issues from a lamp, with no real will of the lamp's own involved in it, but the way light and illumination issue from God Himself, since God wills to fill the earth, and fill the world, with light and illumination.

And whatever Iqbal wanted for the individual, he wanted the same for communities, whenever they were granted the chance to unite around those same shared elements that together form a single nation, sharing common interests, common hopes and ends, common sorrows and needs.

For this same reason, he called for nothing so insistently as he called for the Muslims of this subcontinent we call India to stand apart as a distinct people — called for nothing so insistently as for Muslims to be genuinely distinguished, so long as these same unifying traits existed among them, so long as they shared these same hopes, these same sorrows, these same higher ends they all held in common, permeating all their hearts and consciences alike. They ought, then, to stand distinguished, to possess their own distinct political and social existence,

and to conduct themselves, in whatever passed between them and the rest of India's own people, and between them and all other people generally, from a genuine will toward good, a genuine will toward counsel, a genuine will toward cooperation and solidarity in advancing civilization and benefiting humanity — leading it out of this evil, dark existence it presently lives, toward another, better life.

He was intent, then, on the individual affirming his own singular unity of being, and on the nation affirming its own singular unity of being — this same unity serving as a means toward a solidarity issuing from will, not from instinct, issuing from heart, mind, and genuine reflection, such that man might be, as Aristotle put it, a social animal — but a social animal by his own will, by his own judgment and reason, not by mere instinct, the way bees are social, or ants. Man is, after all, the finest of all the beings life has been granted upon this earth, and ought, therefore, to stand distinguished on this earth, his own individuals distinguished, his own nations distinguished, so that this same distinction, granting each individual his own independence, and this same solidarity, allowing all of them to cooperate in righteousness and piety, and never to cooperate in sin and aggression, might genuinely be realized among people.

For all of this — for Iqbal's own genuine concern with individual identity, and his insistence that man hold himself genuinely intent on affirming his own singular unity, exactly as God affirms His own singular unity, on distinguishing himself, exactly as God is distinguished, on mastering the earth God has subjected to his own use, and subduing the nature God has subjected to his own use — some Europeans who read Iqbal's own philosophy and poetry, once Nicholson had translated it into English, imagined him influenced by Nietzsche, influenced by Nietzsche's own doctrine of the superior man, the "Superman." But Iqbal himself answered these same people directly, saying that, when he first proclaimed these same doctrines of his, he did not know Nietzsche at all, did not even know there existed, upon this earth, a man bearing that name — that he came to know the West, and Western philosophers, only much later, after he had already formed his own philosophy and his own literature, and had already advanced that same philosophy, and that same literature, a very long way indeed.

Whatever the case, these two great poets — Islam knew no equal to them before Abu al-'Ala', and we hope Islam will know an equal to them again, after Iqbal. What admits of no doubt, though, is that Islam knew no equal to these two poets, neither before Abu al-'Ala', nor in the whole

span between Abu al-'Ala' and Iqbal.

The Muslims needed nearly ten centuries before a second Abu al-'Ala' arose among them. But Iqbal was more fortunate than his own counterpart, for he lived in an era entirely different from the one his own counterpart lived in. Abu al-'Ala' lived in an era in which the Muslims had already begun growing weak and declining — in which non-Arab elements, the Turkish element in particular, had begun asserting their own dominance over the Muslims, and Europe had begun stirring itself to invade the East, in its own well-known Crusading campaigns — and so Abu al-'Ala' remained genuinely embittered against life, calling upon Muslims to change their own condition, that God might change theirs.

Iqbal, by contrast, lived in an entirely different era — an era in which the Muslims, exactly as we see them now, stood divided, though it was their own right to unite; weak, though it was their own right to grow strong; while possessing, at the very same time, a genuine readiness and stirring toward renaissance, strength, vitality, and solidarity. Yet they faced dangerous enemies, scheming against them, harbouring ill will toward them — these same Western colonizers. The two eras resemble one another in some respects, then, and differ enormously in others. Abu al-'Ala' knew nothing of this vast body of knowledge Iqbal was granted the chance to know; knew nothing of this vast body of philosophy Iqbal was granted the chance to know; knew nothing of this immense material civilization Iqbal was able to know, accepting the smaller part of it, and rejecting the greater part.

The two men's own call remains, nonetheless, one and the same: both call upon the Islamic world first, and mankind second, to know his own self and his own right, and to impose both, decisively — never dissolving himself into anyone else, whoever that might be, never dissolving himself even into God Himself.

The single thing Iqbal rejects most vehemently, and the single thing Abu al-'Ala' rejects most vehemently, in the mystics, is exactly this same idea of self-annihilation. Abu al-'Ala' disputed with the mystics at genuine length, and found nothing in their own doctrine more hateful than this same annihilation into the Divine Essence they professed, hating, too, their own tampering with people's own minds. Iqbal, for his part, was himself a genuine mystic, genuinely ascetic, genuinely attuned to the highest philosophy, and to the highest ideals, in their most magnificent, most beautiful form — yet never once wished to be annihilated into this

same great, formidable divine light. He believed, rather, that man must retain his own individual identity, must look toward this light, contemplate it, and address his own Lord as one who genuinely knows Him, who genuinely wishes to address Him, and to hear from Him in turn — never in order to be annihilated into Him, to deny his own existence, deny his own self, and become entirely lost within this same supreme divine power. He had no wish to be lost himself, nor any wish for anyone else to be lost; no wish for man to be dissolved into man, nor to be dissolved into God. He wished, rather, for man to help man, to stand in solidarity with him toward the good, and to worship God knowing Him, and exalting Him, yet acknowledging his own self, and believing in it. This is because God, when He commanded people to worship Him, never commanded them to annihilate themselves into Him — He commanded them, rather, to live free, believing in their own individual identity, genuinely independent. Were this not so, He would never have imposed upon them these very obligations He did impose upon them: God would never have obligated any soul to pray, to fast, to pay the zakat, to perform the pilgrimage... and all the rest of these obligations He imposed upon man. These very same obligations imposed upon man were imposed upon him precisely so that he might remain an independent individual — independent, steadfast before his own Lord, worshipping Him by his own free will to worship, and submitting to Him by his own free will to submit.

What is genuinely strange is that the two men shared, too, this same fascination with the celestial realm. Both reflected on that same miracle recorded in the Qur'an — the miracle of the Night Journey — both reflected on this, and both attempted their own night journey, exactly as the Prophet himself was carried on his.

Abu al-'Ala' reflected on Paradise, reflected on Hell, and was genuinely intent on wandering through Paradise and Hell alike, on becoming a genuine spectator there, and speaking to people of Paradise and Hell, and of whatever occurs within them — and so composed his own Risalat al-Ghufran.

Our own friend, whom we honour and exalt today, insisted, too, on ascending into the heavens, exactly as Muhammad, peace be upon him, once ascended.

But both men ascended into the heavens only in their own imagination. Iqbal visits the heavens, taking as his own guide on this journey a mystic — Jalal al-Din Rumi — visiting the moon, visiting Mars,

visiting a great many other stars and planets besides; this same guide of his leads him, much as Dante, in the Middle Ages, wandered through Paradise, Hell, and Purgatory, with the ancient Latin poet Virgil as his own guide throughout that same journey. Iqbal did exactly the same — and it seems most likely he came to know Dante only in the final period of his own life.

Whatever the case, Iqbal wandered through the heavens, exactly as Abu al-'Ala' once wandered through them. Yet the result of these two respective visits proves, in the two men's own hands, entirely contradictory. Abu al-'Ala' returned from his own visit to Paradise and Hell mocking, sceptical, very nearly breaking with religion entirely. Iqbal, by contrast, returned from his own visit believing, chastened, genuinely instructed, wishing to fill the world with admonition and lesson, after this same visit to these same heavens.

Our own friend Professor 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam has spent a great deal of time, and expended tremendous effort, offering us Iqbal's own life, and a body of Iqbal's own poetry, and continues, even now, translating whatever remains of his poetry. We remain indebted to him for everything we know of Iqbal in the Arabic language, a debt that will only grow, little by little, with every new translation he adds to those already in our hands. I would like us to remain genuinely loyal, and genuinely dignified toward ourselves — and the very first right dignity demands is that we credit the truth to those who deserve it, and that we remember Iqbal, in fulfilment of the debt he owes us all. It was he, after all, who called us toward the good, and spread among us this very same conviction — that we ought to know ourselves, and our own rights, and strive in the path of truth, goodness, and beauty.

And if we remember Iqbal today, and honour him, and wish his own immortal words might genuinely prove of use, and that all Muslims might come to be genuinely shaped by these same lofty doctrines of his — if we remember Iqbal today, and honour him, then I believe it is the very least due owed him that we also remember, and thank, Professor 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Azzam — for he was the very bond connecting us to Iqbal.