

Chapter I

A faylasûf of 'Today

At the end of his poem translated into English under the title *The Mysteries of Selflessness*,³ Muhammad Iqbal addresses a prayer to God entrusting Him with the posterity of his work. Thus, the same author who in the Prologue of another of his long philosophical poems entitled *The Secrets of the Self*, had declared that his message, bearer of 'things that are yet unborn in the world',⁴ was addressed to the future – *I have no need of the ear of To-day, I am the voice of the poet of To-morrow*⁵ – came to wish that his thought, if it came to represent a thought 'astray' and 'thorns' dangerous to those coming across it, should be in this case 'choked' and deprived of growth as an 'untimely seed'. On the other hand, he implores, if it has reflected something of the truth, may the 'April shower' turn into 'pearls of great and glittering price'.⁶

We must not doubt imagine that the mirror was not without 'luster', to borrow his words, since the author presented by Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch as the greatest poet and most important philosopher of our era from the Indian sub-continent, translated into several languages, has become the 'intellectual model for several tens of millions of men'.⁷

Muhammad Iqbal was born 9 November 1877⁸ in the Punjab city of Sialkot. It was his grandfather, Sheikh Rafiq, who came to settle in this town along with his three brothers, in 1857, following the example of numerous Kashmiri Muslims pushed into exile in the Punjab province by the political situation in this region. The biographies indicate that his father, a tailor by trade, was in a position to raise his children in a Sufi Islamic tradition, while supporting the full cost of a modern education, which he did not have himself, was able to direct his children on the path of brilliant scholarship.

Thus Iqbal's older brother, Ata Muhammad (1860–1940), undertook a career as an engineer while his younger brother was more of a literary type who was deeply affected, at Murray College⁹ in his native city, by the teaching of Maulvî Sayyid Mîr Hasan (1844–1929), an instructor particularly well versed in Arabic

and Persian writings.¹⁰ At the end of these first years of education, he held for several years a teaching position in philosophy at the Government College in Lahore before instigating a decisive phase in his life by going to Europe to pursue tertiary studies.

His friend, Abdul Qadir, explains¹¹ that his own travel to Europe encouraged Iqbal to join him there after obtaining the financial support for the expenses involved from his older brother. Regarding the three-year period spent by Iqbal in England, from 1905 to 1908, Abdul Qadir declares that they represented a crucial time in his personal story and in that of his work.¹² In Great Britain, he encountered the schoolmaster Sir Thomas W. Arnold (1864-1930), the philosopher and orientalist who had been his teacher and his friend at Government College in Lahore where he taught from 1898 to 1904 before returning to London. Thus one year before Iqbal was to join him there: the Urdu poem that his departure from India inspired in his disciple is an expression of the desire Arnold transmitted to him to push, ever further, his quest for knowledge.¹³

At Cambridge, in parallel with his philosophical studies, Muhammad Iqbal received a training and a degree in law, which opened up the career he embraced on his return to his country. Notably, in 1907, he prepared a thesis entitled *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* with, as its subtitle, *A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy*.¹⁴ To the degree obtained from Cambridge, he was to add a doctorate from the University of Munich: after having spent several months in Germany and having acquired a certain knowledge of German, he presented there a version of his thesis in this language. This thesis, published in 1908, in London, with a dedication to his teacher Arnold, who he thanked for ten years of training in philosophy, immediately attracted a great deal of attention.

As we have seen, Muhammad Iqbal had already written an abundant body of poetry in Urdu. His son, Javid Iqbal, was to say of this poetry that it belonged to his 'research period', which he places between 1895 and 1912. During this time, he notes, his father wrote *ghazals* in imitation of the 'Dagh conventional style', as well as poems exalting Indian nationalism in general; to which must also be added the poems for children that resemble 'Urdu adaptations of Emerson, William Cowper, Longfellow or even Tennyson'.¹⁵ Of all the poems of this first period – which were published in 1924 – the most moving, writes Javid Iqbal, are those that express the cry of Muslims engaged in India or the Middle-East, in the fight for their independence.¹⁶ In a general sense, he considers these first poems as a testament to what may have been Iqbal's state of mind at the time he went to Europe; a state of mind that can be summed up by a few convictions: nationalism, faith in Islamic solidarity and a certain Sufi pantheism. Muhammad Iqbal will later consider this period, as his son goes on to report, as belonging to 'his phase of ignorance and madness'.¹⁷

The poet's stay in Europe subsequently led him to a new phase in which he adopted for his poetry, which 'thus attains a prophetic quality', the Persian language – 'the language of Islamic culture' – instead of Urdu, as 'the message was henceforth addressed to Muslims worldwide'.¹⁸ This message first took the form of the poem titled *The Secrets of the Self*, the first instalment, in 1915, of a poetico-philosophical trilogy in Persian, whose second instalment was *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, published three years later and the third *The Message from the East*.

This new phase will also be that of the active and more direct role Iqbal took in the political upheavals India was undergoing. As a result, in 1926, he is elected as a member of the Punjab Legislative Council. In 1930, he is appointed President of the annual meeting of the Islamic League. It is at this time that the philosopher, whose whole thought nevertheless indicates that he refuses with his whole being 'these idols represented by race or nationality'¹⁹ declares himself clearly in favour of an autonomous Islamic state, thus becoming from the perspective of history, even if he did not see it realised before his death in 1938, one of the founders, if not *the* founder, of the idea of Pakistan.

Javid Iqbal, remarking on the mysterious connection that, according to him, has always existed between great problems and great poems like *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust* or *Mathnavi*, writes, 'in its highest form, poetry is more philosophical than philosophy itself'.²⁰ Later on, the *Lectures* given by Iqbal during a tour, in 1928–29, of southern India, at the invitation of the Muslim Association of Madras, when they were later published in English by their author, under the title *Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* in 1930, gave philosophical expression to his thought in prose.²¹ But it is also, and perhaps especially in the highest form of poetry that this *reconstruction* will be carried out, on the foundation of the affirmation of the self via the ego, after this latter is truly constituted as the result of what could be called, with Gaston Berger, 'the walk towards the I'.

