

“The Meaning of the Meaningless Verses”: Ġhālib and His Commentators

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The ‘classical’ [*klāsīkī*] Urdu ghazal [*ghazal*] is a Persian-derived genre of romantic/mystical lyric poetry that was widely cultivated in North India during the 18th and 19th centuries. Its hegemony ended only when the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1857 destroyed the aristocratic Indo-Muslim society and patronage networks that had kept the tradition alive: there was less and less leisure for master poets [*ustād*] to correct the poetry of the pupils [*shāgird*] they were training, and the famously conflict-prone mushairahs [*mushā,irah*] at which poets performed for each other and for a small circle of patrons and connoisseurs could no longer be maintained.

Mirza Asadullāh Kḥān ‘Ġhālib’ (1797-1869) is universally considered to be one of the two greatest poets of the classical ghazal tradition. Lovers of Urdu ghazal have struggled over the past century to maintain access to his poetry, which at its best is some of the finest in the world. Ġhālib is also known as a notoriously ‘difficult’ poet, and more than a hundred commentaries [*sharḥ*] have been written to explicate his work.¹ Even today still more commentators are constantly appearing; I am now, for my sins, in the process of becoming one of them.² Ġhālib is the only Urdu poet to have acquired such a commentarial tradition.

Yet the commentators are for the most part astonishingly unhelpful. Their work is radically limited, often in ways that seem actually counterintuitive. Their explanations don’t at all suffice to elucidate for a serious reader what Ġhālib is actually doing. How to explain such a failure? How to account for so many voices earnestly saying such a limited, narrow range of things?

Historically speaking, there might seem to be an obvious place to point the finger. The development of the commentarial tradition coincided with the growth of the post-1857 ‘natural poetry’ movement, which emphasized a Wordsworthian notion of poetry as realistic, biographically informed, emotionally ‘sincere’, sociologically accurate, progressive, devoted to inspiration and national uplift--everything, in short, that the classical ghazal was not. The rise of

¹For a detailed inventory see Muḥammad Anṣārullāh, *Ġhālib biblioygrāfi*, in two editions: 1972, and the greatly expanded one of 1988.

²For the present, my commentary appears as a work in progress on my website, <http://www.columbia.edu/~fp7>, under the title of “A Desertful of Roses.”

the ‘natural poetry’ movement, like the death of the classical ghazal, resulted from the complex changes wrought by the (intellectual and cultural) aftermath of 1857. I have written in detail in *Nets of Awareness* about the ‘natural poetry’ movement and its hostile approach to classical ghazal, and so will not provide an extensive account here. It might seem that the ‘natural poetry’ movement would provide an obvious culprit--can it not readily and plausibly be blamed for promoting unsatisfactory commentary on Ġhālib? As we will see, Āzād and Ḥālī, the two canonical founders of the movement, both contributed to the body of commentary on Ġhālib’s poetry.

But in this case such finger-pointing will not get us very far. After all, the commentators stepped forth as admirers and defenders of Ġhālib, rather than hostile detractors; they were volunteers, and they spent hundreds of hours of their lives analyzing the whole corpus of his verses. Why would so many of them take so much trouble to provide their readers with (however inadequate) readings of the poetry, if they didn’t themselves feel that their work had value, and that they were accomplishing something significant?

I would like in this paper to lay out the dimensions of the problem, and then offer my own best guess at a solution.

Let us therefore take a brief tour through commentarial history. For demonstration purposes I will choose the first verse of the first ghazal in Ġhālib’s *dīvān*. Ġhālib himself selected and arranged his verses for publication; he was the first Urdu poet to have the opportunity to do so. His poetry was popular enough, and printing presses were by then widely enough available, to permit four editions of his *dīvān* to appear in his lifetime (in 1841, 1847, 1861, and 1862). He knew that this verse would be in a specially marked position, and particularly exposed to scrutiny.

I want to show that most commentators, including Ġhālib, provide only prose paraphrase; and when they do engage in literary argumentation, it is often a thrust-and-parry about ‘meaning’.

‘The meaning of the meaningless verses’

The first verse of the first ghazal is, by tradition, the only verse from a classical poet’s whole *dīvān* that has a strongly prescribed theme: everybody knows that it is to be a *ḥamd*, or verse in praise of God. And what does Ġhālib give us instead?

naqsh faryādī hai kis kī shoḳhī-e taḥrīr kā
kāḡhazī hai pairahan har paikar-e taṣvīr kā³

- 1) the image/painting is a plaintiff--about whose mischievousness of writing?
- 2) of paper is the robe of every figure in the picture

The translation is mine,⁴ and is of course painfully literal. The verse is one that has proved

³,Arshī, *Dīvān-e ḡhālib*, Part 2, p. 159.

⁴All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated. Except for verses of Ġhālib’s, which have

confusing to many readers, and has provoked extraordinary outbursts by commentators. But certainly no serious critic has ever mistaken it for a genuine *ḥamd*.

We know that the hue and cry about it began during Ġhālib's lifetime. The ghazal that contains it goes back to 1816, when the poet was all of nineteen years old. The earliest form of the ghazal had nine verses, of which verses 1-4 and verse 9 were--twenty-five years later--selected for publication.⁵ Throughout his lifetime, Ġhālib's friends and correspondents asked him for interpretive help with his poetry. Maulvī Muḥammad ,Abd ur-Razzāq 'Shākir' was one such correspondent. Writing to him in 1865, near the end of his life, Ġhālib gave a direct and straightforward explanation of several difficult verses.

First listen to the meaning of the meaningless verses [*pahle ma,nī-e abyāt-e be-ma,nī suniye*]. As for *naqsh faryādī*: In Iran there is the custom that the seeker of justice, putting on paper garments, goes before the ruler-- as in the case of lighting a torch in the day, or carrying a blood-soaked cloth on a bamboo pole [to protest an injustice]. Thus the poet reflects, of whose mischievousness of writing is the image a plaintiff? --since the aspect of a picture is that its garment is of paper. That is to say, although existence [*hasī*] may be like that of pictures [*taṣāvir*], merely notional, it is a cause of grief and sorrow and suffering.⁶

Ġhālib's explanation is direct and straightforward, that is, except for the first sentence. How are we to judge the implications of a cryptic phrase like 'the meaning of the meaningless verses'? The words themselves are clear. They seem to respond to a query by Shākir, but in what tone of voice? Teasing? Irritated? Rueful?⁷

To find Ġhālib's verses difficult--or even at times 'meaningless'--is a common frustration, and to have any explanatory words from him is a rare luxury. By my count, he has only commented on 14 verses out of the 1,459 in his published Urdu *dīvān*. Yet at least to this limited degree, we must consider Ġhālib himself to be the first and in some obvious ways the most significant commentator on his poetry.

Leaving aside for the present two early works of little influence,⁸ the second important commentator was Alṭāf Ḥusain 'Ḥālī' (1837-1914), and the third was ,Alī Ḥaidar 'Nazm' Ṭabāṭabāḥī (1852-1933). Ḥālī completed his great work *Yādgar-e ghālib* (A Memorial of Ġhālib) in 1897, and Nazm published his commentary *Sharḥ-e dīvān-e urdū-e ghālib* (A Commentary on the Urdu *Dīvān* of Ġhālib) in 1900. These two early commentators have been quoted constantly every since, both with and without attribution, by later entrants into the field.

These two primal commentators assumed archetypally opposite attitudes. Ḥālī was the devoted and admiring pupil, the collector of anecdotes and provider of lavish praise. (Never mind the inconvenient fact that his 'natural poetry' ideology had helped to overthrow the popular

been translated countless times, most of these texts have never been translated. Where I know of another available translation, the reference has been provided.

⁵Razā, *Dīvān-e ghālib*, p. 112.

⁶Khalīq Anjum, *Khuṭūṭ-e ghālib*, vol. 2, p. 837.

⁷Khalīq Anjum, *Khuṭūṭ-e ghālib*, vol. 2., pp. 837-38. Daud Rahbar (*Urdu Letters*, pp. 281-83) provides a translation of the whole passage. The set of 'meaningless verses' explained in this letter includes not only *naqsh faryādī* but also two other difficult early (1821) verses: *shauq har rang raqīb-e sar o sāmān nīklā* and *zakḥm ne dād nah dī tangī-e dil kī yā rab*. For these two additional verses, see ,Arshī, *Dīvān-e ghālib*, Part 2, pp. 162-63.

⁸Vālah Dakanī, *Sharḥ-e dīvān* (1893), and Shaukat Merathī, *Ḥal-e kulliyāt* (1899).

reign of the classical ghazal; here he is almost doing penance for his iconoclasm.⁹) Ḥālī has nothing to say in the whole course of his memoir about *naqsh faryādī*. He apparently found the verse to be neither a major problem nor a great glory, and thus didn't feel that he had to make a point of mentioning it.

In marked contrast to Ḥālī, 'Naẓm' Ṭabāṭabā'ī is something like a fellow-*ustād* with a prickly ego: he judges Ḡhālīb not reverently but critically, even jealously, and definitely as an equal. Throughout his commentary he is acerbic and nit-picking; although he occasionally offers high praise, he is more than ready to point out flaws and problems. And Naẓm makes a point of starting out the way he means to go on. No other opinion of his has been so famous, so controversial, so shocking to the sensibilities of later commentators, as his all-out attack on the verse *naqsh faryādī*. This attack is here translated in full:

The author's meaning is that in life, we become separated and divided from the True Source, and separation from that Beloved is so grievous that even a figure in a picture complains about it. And after all, the existence of a picture is no existence! But it too longs to become lost in God: it laments its life.

The suggestion of the paper dress of a plaintiff is present in Persian too, and in Urdu in the poetry of Mīr Mammūn, and I've seen it in the poetry of Momin Ḡhān too. But the author's saying that in Iran there is a custom that the justice-seeker puts on paper robes and goes before the ruler-- I have never seen or heard any mention of this anywhere.

As long as in this verse there's no word that would make manifest an ardor for becoming lost in God, and a hatred for worldly existence, we cannot call it meaningful. Nobody deliberately composes things without meaning. What happens is that because of the constraint of meter and rhyme, there was no scope for some necessary words, and the poet considered that the meaning had been expressed. Then, however many meanings have remained in the poet's mind, they should be called [in Arabic] 'meanings internal to the poet' [*al-ma'nī fi ḡbā'īn ash-shā'ir*].

In this verse, the author's intention [*gharaz*] was that the figure in the painting is a plaintiff about an insubstantial, unworthy existence. And this is the reason for its paper robe. There was no scope for 'insubstantial existence' [*hastī-e be-itibār*] because it was awkward and his purpose was to compose an opening verse [*matla*]. In place of 'existence' he put 'mischievousness of writing', and from this no presumption about the cutting out of 'existence' was created. Finally, even to his face people said, 'This verse is meaningless'.¹⁰

This famous attack raises a number of issues. The one that I want to leave out of our present discussion is the question of whether in ancient Iran justice-seekers really did customarily wear paper robes. Naẓm's rather hair-splitting critique is not clearly developed. (If he has never heard of the custom, does that in itself constitute a poetic flaw? If in truth the custom never existed, does that constitute a poetic flaw? If so, why, when the ghazal is full of such conventions?) With few exceptions, later commentators simply produce more examples of poetic reference to the custom, but this doesn't advance the discussion, since Naẓm has already recognized that such literary examples exist. In fact, Naẓm seems to be objecting to the claim of historicity that Ḡhālīb makes in his letter, rather than to the paper-robe imagery in the verse itself.

Naẓm's real attack rests on the alleged meaninglessness of the verse. He intends this claim of meaninglessness in a technical sense, and he locates and explains his objections clearly--or at least, relatively clearly, as these things go in the world of Ḡhālīb commentary. The verse is meaningless, he says, because the phrase 'mischievousness of writing' [*shokhī-e tahrīr*] does not specify precisely enough the nature of the complaint made by the paper-robed justice seekers.

⁹For a discussion of the 'natural poetry' movement and Ḥālī's role in it, see Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*.

¹⁰Naẓm Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Sharḥ-e dīvān*, pp. 1-2.

Rather, it has simply been inserted because of the special exigencies of meter and rhyme in an opening verse [*maṭla*]. The poet should have contrived to put in something like ‘insubstantial existence’ instead, and then the verse would in fact have the meaning that the poet intended it to have. Naẓm himself, however, seems to find no difficulty in understanding and explicating the intended meaning of this ‘meaningless’ verse--a fact which must cast significant doubt on his argument.

Naẓm wraps up his attack with a stinging report of audience response, one of very few such observations in the whole commentarial tradition. The verse is so patently incoherent, he says, that people actually confronted the poet and told him so. ‘Finally, even to his face people said, “This verse is meaningless.”’ Which of course makes us wonder: does this fit in with Ġhālib’s reply to Shākir’s query? Did Shākir report such continuing objections, and is that why Ġhālib began his reply as he did? Probably we will never be able to be sure, but the possibility is well worth considering.

In the commentarial tradition, a gap of twenty-odd years follows Ḥālī and Naẓm, punctuated only by the fragmentary work of Muḥammad ‘Abd ul-Vājid ‘Vājid’, and the brief and partial work of ‘Ḥasrat’ Mohānī (who, on this verse, merely paraphrases Ġhālib’s own words).¹¹ Then we find another pair of important commentators, the two ‘Beḵhud’s: Sayyid Muḥammad Aḥmad ‘Beḵhud’ Mohānī (1883-1940), writing around 1923, and Sayyid Vaḥīd ud-Dīn ‘Beḵhud’ Dihlavī (1863-1955), writing around 1924. Both of them, and in fact all the later commentators, generally agree with the paraphrased prose ‘meaning’ of the verse as outlined first briefly by Ġhālib himself, and then at more length by Naẓm. In fact it is striking how little the commentators disagree among themselves in their explication of this ‘meaningless’ verse; many of Ġhālib’s verses generate a considerably wider range of commentarial readings.

Of all the commentators, Beḵhud Mohānī is unique in the passion he brings to refuting Naẓm’s charges of ‘meaninglessness’. He is moved to a furious defense that goes on at much more length than Naẓm’s original attack. These excerpts are typical of its lively, readable, polemical tone:

I am entirely astonished at Janāb [Naẓm]’s words. Five objections to one verse, and those objections too such that a sound taste puts its finger to its teeth [in amazement]! The aforementioned gentleman doesn’t find any word in this verse that expresses aversion to insubstantial existence. Although in the first line, not to speak of aversion, a powerful word like ‘plaintiff’ is present. And the complaint too is such that the plaintiffs, like those seeking vengeance for the murder of an innocent, have donned paper robes. ‘Aversion’ was a commonplace word; so in such a place why would a pulse-taker of words and meaning like Mirzā have selected it? After a look at what I have submitted, probably [*ghāliban*] it cannot be said that the verse is in the realm of ‘meanings internal to the poet’....

As for the claim that people told Mirzā to his face that this opening verse was meaningless, in my opinion it’s not necessary to give a reply, because the aforementioned gentleman has not given any source for this information. But it’s necessary to say this much: that if such a thing happened, it’s no cause for astonishment. There are many such ‘connoisseurs’ today; nor were they few in Mirzā’s time either....

I am astonished at Janāb [Naẓm]’s presumption--that he didn’t even reflect that Mirzā chose this opening verse [*maṭla*] for the opening verse of his *dīvān*. He ignored the fact that the rank Mirzā held as a poet, he also held as a judge of poetry. The pitilessness with which Mirzā made a selection from his own poetry [for publication]--such examples are not to be seen even in the case of the Persian purists. Then, those venerable elders who were destined to have the honor of taking part in the making of the selection--in that day there was heartfelt acceptance of their understanding of poetry, their grasp of subtle points, and even today people don’t dispute their decisions. Everyone also knows that Mirzā’s *dīvān* was published in his lifetime. Even after the publication of his *dīvān*, Mirzā

¹¹Vājid, *Vijḍān-e taḥqīq* (1902), and Ḥasrat, *Dīvān-e ghālib* (1905).

lived for some time. It's astonishing that he never had the suspicion, 'My opening verse is meaningless!' [Arabic:] 'Take heed, you who are insightful.'¹²

What a fine and vigorous riposte! According to Beḵhud Mohānī, why is Naẓm's accusation groundless? 1) Because the word 'plaintiff' and the wearing of paper robes show plenty of aversion to 'insubstantial existence'; 2) because no source has been given for the allegations that contemporaries found the verse meaningless; 3) because even if some contemporaries did make such claims, they were pretentious poetasters seeking to augment their own glory; 4) because Ġhālib himself was both an excellent judge of poetry, and an admirably severe critic of his own work; and 5) because his friends who helped him choose verses for publication were revered connoisseurs. Here, one might think, the battle has been fairly joined. How will later commentators advance the debate?

As it turns out, they will advance it minimally if at all. Beḵhud Dihlavī, writing at almost the same time as Beḵhud Mohānī, illustrates a much more typical commentarial approach. His remarks are given in their entirety.

The meaning is that existence is a cause of pain and suffering because of its instability and mortality. The commentary is that the world--that is, the population of the world--is a plaintiff, about the Eternal Engraver's mischievousness of writing. (The dress of a plaintiff, according to an ancient custom of Iran, used to be of paper, the way in Hindustan those with complaints used to carry a lighted torch in the day, or in Arabia they used to put a murdered person's clothing on a spear and go to seek vengeance.) The meaning of 'mischievousness' is 'not to stay fixed'. And 'not to stay fixed' is already proved, because of the picture's having a paper robe. That is, the common custom is that a picture is made on paper, and paper is a thing that gets ruined quickly. By 'every figure in the picture' is meant the totality of animals and plants. And all these things are destined for oblivion. The only difference is that a flower withers in the course of a day; for a human's death, no [fixed] interval has been decreed. Even things made of wood, stone, metal finally become useless and broken. When all the things in the world are in this state, then for an image of existence to be a plaintiff about its instability and contingency, is a complete proof of the poet's lofty imagination and uncommon inventiveness. In my opinion this verse is meaningful, and the thought is one heretofore untouched. To call this verse meaningless is to do violence to the claims of justice.¹³

Beḵhud Dihlavī thus takes the high road: he does not argue with Naẓm in detail, but simply provides an eloquent prose paraphrase and explanation of the verse. He then concludes that the verse is so manifestly meaningful that to call it meaningless is 'to do violence to the claims of justice.' Beḵhud Dihlavī unquestionably represents the commentarial mainstream. The synthesizing commentator Āghā Muḥammad 'Bāqir' (1917?-1972), writing in 1939, sums up the situation pretty accurately: 'Except for [Naẓm], all the commentators call this verse meaningful.'¹⁴

Thus the main line of the commentarial tradition: prose paraphrase including disputes about 'meaning', interspersed with prose paraphrase not including disputes about 'meaning'. If space permitted, I could provide many more examples, most on the order of Beḵhud Dihlavī's comments. But let's move on to consider some of the neglected possibilities--tools that were conspicuously available to every commentator, and were conspicuously not used.

¹²Beḵhud Mohānī, *Sharḥ-e dīvān*, pp. 1-3.

¹³Beḵhud Dihlavī, *Mirāt ul-ḡhālib*, p. 9.

¹⁴Bāqir, *Bayān-e ḡhālib*, p. 7.

Roads Not Taken, Tools not Used

We can also marshal internal evidence from the commentarial tradition to provide a sort of minority report: to show rare examples of the use of some of the critical tools that the commentators so routinely neglected.

Around 1950 there appears a brief and unusually lucid commentarial analyses of *naqsh faryādī*: that of Labbhū Rām ‘Josh’ Malsiyānī (1883-1976). Josh provides a more precise and technically focused analysis than any we have seen before--including Ġhālib’s own.

Some say that this verse is nonsensical. But this is entirely an injustice. Mirzā Ṣāhib says in a style of ‘sophisticated naiveté’ [*tajāhul-e ārifānah*], ‘Who has, through his artisanship, displayed so much mischievousness in the image of every creature, that each individual is unable to endure that mischievousness, and can be seen to make a complaint?’ In the second line is the verbal device [*ṣan,at*] of ‘elegantly assigning a cause’ [*ḥusn-e ta,līl*]. The clothing of a picture is of paper. Mirzā takes that clothing to be the clothing of plaintiffs. ‘Mischievousness’ refers to the coming into being, and destruction, of substances, and thus to the various types of events that keep erasing one creature after another.¹⁵

For the first time, we see a commentator who goes beyond arguments about meaning, and beyond prose paraphrase. Josh’s use of technical terms enables him to describe the verse more incisively and compactly than any previous commentator. Let’s pause to consider the critical tools that enable him to say a lot in a small space.

‘Elegantly assigning a cause’ [*ḥusn-e ta,līl*] is a well-established technical term in the classical poetics of the Persian-Urdu ghazal. It is defined by an authoritative modern handbook as follows:

Ta,līl means ‘to establish a reason’ or ‘to express a reason’. *Ḥusn-e ta,līl* is to give a fine and superior example of that action. If a reason is expressed for something such that even if it’s not real, it has in it some poetic richness and subtlety, and it has some affinity with reality and nature as well, then that is called *ḥusn-e ta,līl*.¹⁶

In the most massive classical handbook of poetics, Najm ul-Ġhanī’s 1232-page *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat* (Ocean of Eloquence, 1885/6), *ḥusn-e ta,līl* is not only defined in similar terms (though with more detail), but is systematically analyzed into four sub-classes, each of which is then elaborately explained through the analysis of many illustrative verses.¹⁷

Josh has, it seems to me, identified exactly the primary ‘verbal device’ that Ġhālib was using in his verse. In classical ghazal most lines were end-stopped; enjambement, though by no means nonexistent, was relatively uncommon. And because each two-line verse had to make its own independent poetic impact, manipulating the relationship(s) of the two lines to each other was one of the poet’s most effective strategies. One line could give a cause, and the other its effect; one line could ask a question, and the other could answer it; one line could make a general assertion, and the other provide a specific example; etc. Handbooks of rhetoric provided

¹⁵Josh, *Dīvān-e ghālib*, p. 49.

¹⁶Fārūqī et al., *Dars-e balāghat*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁷Najm ul-Ġhanī, *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat*, pp. 1076-1082.

many subtle analyses of possible intra-verse (which in practice almost always meant inter-line) relationships.¹⁸ Reversing the expected logical order (first effect, then cause; first answer, then question; etc.) was another source of piquancy, especially under conditions of oral performance in a *musha,irah*. Such reversal forms the framework of *naqsh faryādī*: the first line expresses an interrogative reaction, while the second line--for which, in oral performance, the listeners would have had to wait--provides the crucial piece of observational evidence on which the first is based.

So relevant are the traditional Persian-Urdu analytical categories, in fact, that Josh has casually invoked not one but two of them. For he points as well to Ġhālib's use of what I have translated as 'sophisticated naiveté' [*tajāhul-e ārifānah*]; this is itself considered a *ṣan,at* or verbal device. Its meaning is 'to knowingly become unknowing.' That is, 'despite knowing about something, to express one's unawareness, so that extravagance [*mubāliġhah*] can be used in explaining it.'¹⁹ And in this case too, *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat* not only recognizes the device but carefully analyzes its use into two subcategories: those in which the poet proposes two possible explanations for something; and those without such an either-or structure.²⁰

I want to offer one further example, this one from the very recent commentarial tradition: two excerpts from an extended analysis by the distinguished modern critic and all-round literary figure Shams ur-Raḥmān Fārūqī (1935-), whose own selective commentary was published in 1989. Fārūqī makes several additions to our repertoire of technical terms; and in the process, further deepens our understanding of the verse.

In addition to the 'semantic affinities' [*murā,āt un-naẓīr*] ('image', 'writing', 'of paper', 'robe', 'figure', 'picture') Ġhālib has also taken good care in this verse to have 'resemblance of sound' [*tajnīs-e ṣautī*] (*faryādī, kis kī, shokḥī, kāġhaẓī hai pairahan har paikar*). In the second line there is a special emphasis on *har*, which knocks against the two *r*'s of *paikar-e taṣvīr* and increases the elements of intensity and mystery in the line.²¹

Here we notice two technical terms, suggesting two kinds of analysis that can be performed on the verse. The meaning of the first term, *murā,āt un-naẓīr*, can be recognized simply from the examples Fārūqī gives: the verse is crammed with interrelated and mutually evocative words from the vocabulary range pertaining to painted/written images. In fact, out of the verse's fifteen words, six are part of this domain. Technically, *murā,at un-naẓīr* (which is so fundamental a poetic quality that it goes by several other names as well, such as *tanāsub* and *munāsibat*) is defined as occurring when 'in the poem words are gathered together the meanings of which have a relationship to each other, but this relationship is not one of contrariety or opposition'.²² In fact, this semantic affinity goes deeper in Urdu than my translation can even show. Consider just the following multi-faceted examples: *naqsh*, which I have translated 'image/painting', is defined as: 'a painting, a picture; portrait; drawing; a print; a carving, an

¹⁸For example, see Najm ul-Ġhanī, *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat*, pp. 1015-1117. Many of the verbal devices [*ṣan,at*] in his inventory rest on such inter-line relationships.

¹⁹Fārūqī et al., *Dars-e balāġhat*, p. 46.

²⁰Najm ul-Ġhanī, *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat*, p. 1059.

²¹Fārūqī, *Tafhīm-e ġhālib*, p. 23.

²²Fārūqī et al., *Dars-e balāġhat*, pp. 56-57.

engraving; a map, or plan'. And *paikar*, which I have translated 'figure', means: 'face, countenance, visage; form, appearance, figure; resemblance, portrait, likeness'.²³

The other term that Fārūqī uses, 'resemblance of sound' [*tajnīs-e sautī*], refers to a broad range of sound effects and kinds of alliteration. These are indeed conspicuous: in the nine words he mentions, *-ī* occurs four times, *-ai* and *-ar* three times each. And then there are, of course, the special effects created in the second line by the use of *r* sounds, as he points out. To see how closely sound effects are analyzed within the classical poetic tradition, consider just one example: the special term 'stitched-together resemblance' [*tajnīs-e marfū*] applies to lines like this one of Dabīr's: *lo teġh-e barq dam kā qadam darmiyāñ nahīñ*, in which stitching together *barq dam* replicates the sound of *qadam*.²⁴ And of course *Baħr ul-faṣāħat* analyzes a whole range of such *ṣan.at-e tajnīs* into a remarkable number of categories, with examples even more detailed and varied.²⁵

Commentators do sometimes point out 'semantic affinities' within a verse of Ġhālib's, though usually only casually: they may mention a couple of strikingly related words, but without undertaking a careful survey of the whole verse. However, far more commonly they do nothing at all along these lines. As the reader will have noticed, in the case of this verse, which has extremely conspicuous semantic affinities involving fully 40% of its total words, no commentator so far has even once alluded, even in passing, to the presence of this important structural device.

But the second sentence in Fārūqī's analysis is far more remarkable, indeed even unique, in the tradition of Ġhālib commentary. On the face of it, it looks quite normal: 'In the second line there is a special emphasis on *har*, which knocks against the two *r*'s of *paikar-e taṣvīr* and increases the elements of intensity and mystery in the line.' And yet it is not normal within the commentarial tradition. Not only in the analyses of this verse, but in all the analyses on all the verses that I've read so far, I cannot recall that even one commentator has ever closely analyzed the sound effects in even one verse. And this despite the fact that quite a number of Ġhālib's verses, which after all were composed for oral recitation, have the most astonishing sound effects. The verse *jān dī dī hu fusī kī thī / haq to yūñ hai kih haq adā nah hu ħ*²⁶ comes to mind at once, but many others cry out almost as loudly for analysis in terms of sound effects. Invariably they cry out in vain; the commentators are simply not listening.

Let me conclude this brief tour through the commentarial approaches to *naqsh faryādī* with one more excerpt: the conclusion of Fārūqī's analysis of the verse.

The first line is also constructed as *inshā fyah*, that is, interrogative. Interrogation is Ġhālib's special style. It's possible that he learned the art of interrogation and other *inshā fyah* principles from Mīr. But the first verse of the *dīvān*, the theme of which ought to have been founded on praise of God, calls the arrangement of the two worlds into question. This mischievousness, or free-spiritedness, or lofty-mindedness, is Ġhālib's characteristic manner. Mīr too has called the arrangements of the Creator of the Universe into question; for example, in his very first *dīvān* he says,

ko fho maħram-e shokhī tirā to maiñ pūchhūñ

²³Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū*, pp. 1145, 300.

²⁴Fārūqī et al., *Dars-e balāghat*, pp. 59-62; see especially p. 61.

²⁵Najm ul-Ġhanī, *Baħr ul-faṣāħat*, pp. 894-920.

²⁶Arshī, *Dīvān-e ġhālib*, p. 193.

kih bazm-e aish-e jahān kyā samajh ke barham kī

/if anyone would be intimate with your mischievousness, then I would ask

what were you thinking (that it was) when you overthrew the gathering of enjoyment of the world?/

Seeing the word ‘mischievousness’ the suspicion arises that Mīr’s verse might have stuck in Ġhālib’s mind. But to use the theme of the mischievousness of the Creator of the Universe, and on top of that to turn that mischievousness into a subject for question and place such a verse at the head of the *dīvān*-- this mischievousness was possible only from Ġhālib.²⁷

This resonant and suitable conclusion gives Ġhālib and Mīr well-warranted praise, of a kind that they surely would have appreciated. It invites us to consider the term ‘mischievousness’ [*shokhī*], as many other commentators do as well. In fact, Yūsuf Salīm Chishtī (among others) also makes the point about the special ‘mischievousness’ of using such a verse as a *ḥamd*.²⁸ But no other commentator has directed our attention toward the poetic value of *inshā fīyah* speech, although interrogative discourse is such a prominent feature both of this verse, and of Ġhālib’s poetry in general.

The concept of *inshā fīyah* or non-informative (i.e., interrogative, prescriptive, hypothetical, or exclamatory) discourse, as opposed to *khabariyah* (informative or falsifiable discourse), is far from new within the Arabic-Persian-Urdu poetic tradition.²⁹ It is considered at length in *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat*; and just look at how elaborately it has been appreciated and analyzed. Its internal categories, all individually discussed, consist of:

bayān-e tamannā, ‘expression of desire’; 20 examples, some explained

bayān-e istifhām, ‘interrogative expression’; 20 examples, some explained

[with subsections devoted to: *āyā*; *kyā*; *kaun*; *kaun sā*; *kyūn*, *kis liye*, *kis vāṣṭe*; *kis tarḥ*; *kaisā*, *kaise*, *kaisī*; *kab*; *kahān*; *kis*; *kin*; *kahīn*; *kitnā*, *kitne*, *kitnī*; *kabhī*]

bayān-e amr, the imperative mood; 34 examples, some explained

bayān-e nahī, prohibitive expression; 14 examples, some explained

bayān-e nidā, the vocative mood; 36 examples, some explained

bayān-e du,ā, expression of supplication; 5 examples, some explained³⁰

In short, the classical Urdu ghazal poets did not exactly lack for technical explication of their poetics; *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat* alone is 1,232 pages long.

Since these off-the-shelf analytical categories were so readily available, why do the commentators generally ignore them? Ġhālib himself, when he explains his own verses in letters, rarely goes beyond the simple prose paraphrase level he employs in explaining *naqsh faryādī*. And why does a major critic, literary figure, and connoisseur like Naẓm generally ignore these well-established analytical categories? And why do virtually all the other commentators do the same? (I haven’t looked at every commentary, but I’ve looked at the most important and influential ones.) In the case of this particular verse Josh has mentioned two such categories, but

²⁷Fārūqī, *Tafhīm-e ḡhālib*, pp. 23-24.

²⁸Chishtī, *Sharḥ-e dīvān*, pp. 231-32.

²⁹Fārūqī, *Andāz-e guftagū kyā hai*, pp. 23-37, and in many later works, notably *Urdū ḡhazal ke aham mor*. See also Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, pp. 106-08.

³⁰Naẓm ul-Ġhanī, *Baḥr ul-faṣāḥat*, pp. 595-627.

within Josh's whole commentary such terminology, alas, remains rare. Fārūqī has given us three more categories, but he is quite exceptional within the commentarial tradition, since he is, among other qualifications, a devoted student of classical poetics.

To sum up, two features of the commentarial tradition are worthy of note. 1) Commentators almost always provide an interpretive prose paraphrase of a verse, either brief or expanded (or sometimes twofold, for two interpretations); once in a while they will also defend or (more rarely) attack the 'meaning' of the verse. 2) Commentators generally ignore both the technical terminology of Persian-Urdu poetics, and the formal analysis that this terminology is designed to facilitate; though they occasionally use a technical term or briefly point out a formal feature within the verse, this is haphazard and rare.

It is this second observation that I have found so perplexing. Here we have in the ghazal an extremely stylized genre of poetry, one that takes shape within the tiniest possible verbal space, one that both possesses and requires a tremendous repertoire of technical knowledge. And here we have a poet who writes its most difficult and complex verses. And here we have a number of volunteers, some of whom were, in theory at least, highly competent insiders within the tradition, who offer to help us understand the poetry. Why in the world do they do so partial and limited a job of it? Why don't they use the wide range of tools their own tradition had developed for exactly this purpose?

What price 'meaning'?

As we have seen, Ġhālib undertook to tell Shākir 'the meaning of the meaningless verses,' starting with *naqsh faryādī*. And what he then provided was a brief, coherent prose paraphrase, spelling out in more detail the thought that was latent in the fifteen words of the verse. He also offered some background information about the history and meaning of paper robes as plaintiff's attire (though he didn't point out the extra piquancy of positioning this verse as the *ḥamd*). Not only did he not mention such terms as 'elegantly assigning a cause', 'sophisticated naiveté', 'semantic affinities', 'resemblance of sound', or 'interrogative discourse', he also didn't suggest in layman's language any of the domains they were designed to investigate. That is, he didn't say, 'Take a look at how many of the words in the whole verse come from the domain of painted/written images', or 'How about those interesting sound effects involving *i* and *r*!', or 'Did you notice that you first get the conclusion (and that too in the form of a question), and only afterward learn the reason for it?' Even if Ġhālib had considered Shākir a poetic novice, he himself was a masterful letter-writer and could certainly have conveyed this kind of analytical information if he had wished to do so. Apparently, to tell 'the meaning of the verse' was, for his purposes at the time, to provide something much simpler than a full exposition or analysis of the verse.

This letter was written late in his life, and perhaps in a spirit of courtesy and resignation. For after all, by then he was used to being asked variations on this question. He had been asked them at frequent intervals for almost fifty years. We have a smallish amount of anecdotal evidence that documents a much larger amount of controversy on the subject--controversy that apparently continued throughout Ġhālib's life.

Muḥammad Ḥusain 'Āzād', author of the great canon-forming literary history *Āb-e ḥayāt* (Water of Life, 1880), conspicuously dislikes Ġhālib, and never misses an opportunity to take

potshots at him. Introducing the classical ghazal tradition, Āzād explains that Ġhālib's work has grave problems as compared to that of earlier *ustāds*: 'Ġhālib, on some occasions, followed excellently in their footsteps--but he was a lover of 'meaning creation' [*ma,nī āfirīnī*], and he gave more attention to Persian, so that in Urdu, the number of his largely [*ghāliban*] unblemished verses has not turned out to be more than one or two hundred.'³¹

Poor Ġhālib, what a piquant situation: because of his love of 'meaning creation', his poetry is attacked as flawed and even meaningless. The situation is so dire, in Āzād's eyes, that only one or two hundred of Ġhālib's Urdu verses are really satisfactory. In case we might have missed the point, Āzād spells it out for us later on with even greater care. Because of the central role of *Āb-e hayāt* in shaping poetic attitudes over the past century, the relevant passage is given at length:

One day the late *ustād* [Ẓauq] and I were discussing Mirzā [Ġhālib] Ṣāhib's style of 'delicate thought' [*nāzuk k̄hiyālī*], and Persian constructions, and people's various temperaments. I said, 'If some verse manages to come out without convolutions, it's as devastating as Doomsday!' He said, 'Very good!' Then he said, 'Even his better verses, people fail to appreciate. I will recite some of his verses to you'. He recited a number of individual verses. One is still in my memory:

daryā-e ma,āṣī tunuk-ābī se hu,ḡ k̄hushk
merā sar-e dāman bhī abhī tar nah hu,ḡ thā
 /The river of sinfulness dried up for lack of water
 As yet, not even the hem of my garment had become wet/

There is no doubt that through the power of his name [since 'Asad' means lion], he was a lion of the thickets of themes [*mazmūn*] and meanings. Two things have a special connection with his style. The first is that 'meaning-creation' and 'delicate thought' were his special pursuit. The second is that because he had more practice in Persian, and a long connection with it, he used to put a number of words into constructions in ways in which they are not spoken. But those verses that turned out clear and lucid are beyond compare.

People of wit did not cease from their satirical barbs. Thus one time Mirzā had gone to a *mushā,irah*. Ḥakīm Āghā Jān 'Aish' was a lively-natured and vivacious person [who recited some verses that included the following:]

/We understood the speech of Mīr, we understood the language of Mirzā [Ṣaudā]
 But his speech-- he himself might understand, or God might understand/

For this reason, toward the end of his life he absolutely renounced the path of 'delicate thought'. Thus if you look, the ghazals of the last period are quite clear and lucid.³²

As Āzād tells it, Ẓauq emphasizes the unappreciatedness of even Ġhālib's better verses, while Aish mocks him in a specially composed verse-sequence [*qit,ah*]. And this is not the only such incident reported by Āzād. He also tells us a long story of how this same Aish sets up a foolish, bumbling schoolmaster as a poet, giving him the pen-name 'Hudhud' [Hoopoe] and making him a figure of fun at Court *mushā,irahs*. Composing his poetry for him, Aish puts into his mouth many satiric verses:

At the secret instigation of the Ḥakīm Ṣāhib, Hudhud pecked at the nightingales of poetry with his beak. Thus he recited some ghazals before the whole *mushā,irah*, of which the words were extremely refined and colorful, but the verses absolutely without meaning. And he would say, 'I've written this ghazal in the style of Ġhālib'. I remember one opening verse:

markaz-e maḥvar-e girdūñ bah-lab-e āb nahūñ

³¹Āzād, *Āb-e hayāt*, p. 77. For a translation see Pritchett and Faruqi, *Āb-e hayāt*, pp. 103-04.

³²Āzād, *Āb-e hayāt*, pp. 494-96. See also Pritchett, *Āb-e hayāt*, pp. 405-06. For the verse by Ġhālib, see Arshī, *Dīvān-e ghālib*, part 2, p. 177.

nāḳḳhun-e qurṣ-e qaraḳḳh shub 'hah-e mizrāb nahīn
/The circle of the axis of the heavens is not at the lip of the water
The fingernail of the arc of the rainbow does not resemble a plectrum/

The late Ġhālib was a flowing river. He used to listen, and laugh.³³

Āzād thus pretends, in his clever and sneaky way, to end with a tribute to Ġhālib's sense of humor. But the rhetorical point has been amply made: Ġhālib wrote poetry in which 'the words were extremely refined and colorful, but the verses absolutely without meaning,' and everybody knew this and mocked him for it.

Nor is Āzād our only source for such anecdotes. Ġhālib's loyal biographer and *shāgird*, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, contributes another such wryly amusing account:

One time Maulvī ,Abd ul-Qādir Rāmpūrī, who was a great jester by temperament, and who had for some time been connected with the Fort of Delhi [i.e., the Court], said to Mirzā [Ġhālib], 'I don't understand one of your Urdu verses.' And at that moment he composed two lines of verse and recited them before Mirzā:

pahle to roḡhan-e gul bhaiṅs ke aṅḡe se nikāl
phir davā jītnī bhī hai kul bhaiṅs ke aṅḡe se nikāl
/First take the essence of the rose
out of the eggs of buffaloes--
And other drugs are there; take those
out of the eggs of buffaloes.³⁴

Hearing this, Mirzā was quite astonished, and said, 'Far be it from me--this is not my verse!' Maulvī ,Abd ul-Qādir said, keeping up the joke, 'I myself have seen it in your *dīvān*! And if there's a *dīvān* here, I can show it to you right now.' Finally Mirzā realized that in this guise the Maulvī was objecting to his work, and was insisting that there were verses like this in his *dīvān*.³⁵

Ḥālī notes that Ġhālib was not easily intimidated: to the contrary, in fact, for he incorporated into his verses a firm defiance of his critics. Perhaps the most explicit example was this one:

nah satā ḡsh kī tamannā nah ṣīle kī parvā
gar nahīn haiñ mire ash,ār meñ ma,nī nah sahī

/neither a longing for praise, nor a care for reward--
if there's no meaning in my verses, then so be it/³⁶

Both this and another, similar verse cited by Ḥālī are quite early (1821), and Ḥālī goes on to argue, just as Āzād does, that in later life Ġhālib duly saw the error of his ways and ceased to write such difficult poetry. This is the official 'natural poetry' view, and we don't have the scope in which to discuss it here; but whether we accept this view or not, it is clear that despite all the

³³Āzād, *Āb-e ḡayāt*, p. 469. See also Pritchett, *Āb-e ḡayāt*, p. 381.

³⁴This wonderful verse translation is taken from Russell and Islam, *Ġhālib: Life and Letters*, p. 40.

³⁵Ḥālī, *Yādgār-e ḡhālib*, p. 112.

³⁶Ḥālī, *Yādgār-e ḡhālib*, p. 112. For Ġhālib's verse, see ,Arshī, *Dīvān-e ḡhālib*, part 2, p. 266. Ḥālī also cites another and similar verse, pp. 112-13 (,Arshī p. 259).

friendly and not-so-friendly harassment he received, Ġhālib never repudiated the ‘meaningless’ poetry of his youth. He retained dozens of verses like *naqsh faryādī*--and some far more obscure and rebarbative--in his *dīvān* through all four editions (1841, 1847, 1861, 1862), and still seemed quite content with the ‘meaningless’ verses that he explained to Shākir only four years before he died. In the case of another of these ‘meaningless’ verses he wrote to Shākir with apparent pleasure that it contained a ‘new idea I have brought forth from my temperament’ [*ek bāt maiñ ne apnī tabī, at se na fñikālī hai*], and he explicated all three verses without the least hint of anything other than pride in them.³⁷

Certainly Ġhālib had to endure the hostility of those who genuinely preferred a simpler and more colloquial style, and of those who preferred an emphasis on romantic emotion rather than a more cerebral metaphysics. In general, people who liked their ghazal verses to be flowing (*ravāñ*) and readily, colloquially, intelligible, ended up furious at him: he could write such verses brilliantly when he chose, as his *dīvān* amply demonstrates, yet he so often didn’t choose! Why didn’t the wretch write more verses like ‘The river of sinfulness dried up for lack of water / As yet, not even the hem of my garment had become wet’? Behind the mockery of his contemporaries one can sense the deep irritation of envious colleagues and frustrated connoisseurs who see a major talent being misdirected into folly.

And in some cases, one can quite well sympathize with the critics. No one could possibly understand *naqsh faryādī* without knowing that plaintiffs wear paper robes when they come in search of justice; but at least that literary convention, whether or not it was historically true, had a proper ‘warrant’ [*sanad*], or historical lineage of prior use by authoritative *ustāds*, within the ghazal world. Consider a far more dire situation: a totally arbitrary warping of language, with no other defense than sheer caprice.

*qumrī kaf-e kḥākastar o bulbul qafas-e rang
ai nālah nishān-e jigar-e sokḥtah kyā hai*³⁸

/turtledove, a fistful of dust, and nightingale, a cage of color
oh lament, what is the sign of a burnt liver?/

Now this is one that you could think about for an awfully long time without being able to figure it out. It is another very early ghazal, composed (like *naqsh faryādī*) in 1816. (Composed by a nineteen-year-old boy!) But please note that Hālī was not even born until 1837, and his conversations with Ġhālib took place in the last thirteen or so years of Ġhālib’s life. Here is his report on this particular verse:

I myself asked Mirzā the meaning of this. He said, ‘In place of “oh” [*ai*], read “except” [*juz*]; the meaning will come to your understanding by itself. The meaning of the verse is that the turtledove, which is not more than a fistful of dust, and the nightingale, which is not more than a cage of elements-- the proof of their being liver-burnt, that is, lovers, is only from their warbling and speaking.’ Here, the meaning in which Mirzā has used the word *ai* is obviously his own invention.

One person, having heard this meaning, said, ‘If in place of *ai* he had put *juz*, or if he had composed the second line like this, “Oh lament, except for you, what is the sign of love,” then the meaning would have become

³⁷Khalīq Anjum, *Khaṭuṭ-e Ġhālib*, vol. 2, pp. 837-38.

³⁸,Arshī, *Dīvān-e Ġhālib*, part 2, p. 283.

clear.’ This person’s utterance is absolutely correct, but since Mirzā avoided common principles as much as possible, and didn’t want to move on the broad thoroughfare, rather than wanting every verse to be widely understandable he preferred that inventiveness and un-heard-of-ness [*nirālāpan*] be found in his style of thought and his style of expression.³⁹

Who would not sympathize with this hapless ‘person,’ whose own plaintive lament is perfectly justified? Such a spectacular level of youthful poetic arrogance does seem to be an aberration; it is hard to find other such blatant, in-your-face redefinitions of common words elsewhere in the *dīvān*. In the case of a verse like this one, the charge of making ‘meaningless’ poetry could be said to be well-grounded. Ġhālib is guilty at times of his own form of *shokhī-e taḥrīr*, ‘mischievousness of writing.’ But there is no evidence that in his conversations with Ḥālī--or anywhere else, for that matter--he ever showed any regret for this youthful arrogance and *shokhī*.

Ġhālib the poet of ‘meaning creation’ [*ma,nī āfirīnī*] and ‘delicate thought’ [*nāzuk kḥiyālī*] was always a high flyer, as he himself insisted and as Ḥālī points out so aptly (and as Āzād points out so accusingly). He wanted to create his own meanings, and to have them apprehended subtly. He wanted to do brilliantly what others had done well; and he also wanted to do what no one had done before. He wanted to make more meanings, and more complex meanings, and in a more compressed and multivalent way, than anybody else in the whole Persian-Urdu poetic world. To a large extent he succeeded, and he knew it. But his success was contested and controversial, and came at a price. He died in poverty, humiliated at the end, dependent in old age on unresponsive patrons.

Throughout his life he expressed frustration that he did not find hearers or readers who could grasp the full dimensions of what he was doing. He didn’t suffer fools gladly, but he responded to genuine *shāgirds* and lovers of the ghazal. He no doubt gave Shākir the ‘meaning’ that he thought was suitable and sufficient to the occasion. And he gave Ḥālī rather more. In the case of another verse, Ḥālī tells us how Ġhālib suggested to him not only interpretations, but also an interpretive process.

*kaun hotā hai ḥarīf-e mai-e mard-afgan-e ,ishq
hai mukarrar lab-e sāqī meñ ṣalā mere ba,d*⁴⁰

/who can withstand the man-killing wine of passion?
many times there is a call on the lips of the Cupbearer, after me/

This verse is another early one (1821). It was certainly not unfathomable, since it had an ‘apparent’ meaning that was perfectly clear to Ḥālī. But Ġhālib did not want him to stop there. Ġhālib urged him to think harder, and to dig more deeply into the verse. As Ḥālī reports,

The manifest [*zāhirī*] meaning of this verse is that since I have died, the Cupbearer of the man-killing wine of passion--that is, the beloved--many times gives the call--that is, summons people to the wine of passion. The idea

³⁹Ḥālī, *Yādgār-e Ġhālib*, p. 114. It is possible to be sure where the direct quotation from Ġhālib begins, but not where it ends. I’ve made my best guess, but it might well be thought to end one sentence earlier. For another translation of this passage, see Russell and Islam, *Ghālib: Life and Letters*, p. 39.

⁴⁰Arshī, *Dīvān-e Ġhālib*, part 2, p. 199.

is that after me, no buyer of the wine of passion remained; thus he had to give the call again and again. But after further reflection, as Mirzā himself used to say, an extremely subtle meaning arises in it, and that is, that the first line is the words of this same Cupbearer's call; and he is reciting that line repeatedly. One time he recites it in a tone of invitation....Then when in response to his call no one comes, he recites it again in a tone of despair--Who can withstand the man-killing wine of passion! That is, no one. In this, tone [*lahajjah*] and style [*tarz-e adā*] are very effective. The tone of calling someone is one thing, and the way of saying it very softly, in despair, is another. When you repeat the line in question in this way, at once the meanings will enter deeply into your mind.⁴¹

Mirzā used to say that 'after further reflection' another meaning--in fact, an 'extremely subtle/refined/delightful meaning' [*nihāyat latīf ma,nī*]--arises in the verse. And how is that meaning created? Why, first of all, by rearranging the relationship of the two lines, so that instead of reading the second as an explanatory sequel to the first--'1) Who can endure the wine of passion? [not me, I died of it!] 2) [Thus] after my death the Cupbearer often calls out [in vain] '--we read the first as a result of the logically prior second: '2) After my death the Cupbearer goes around calling out many times, 1) Who can endure the wine of passion?' In short, more meanings can be provided by rearranging the logical and semantic relationships of the two lines, just as classical poetic theory would lead us to expect; and with a special piquancy provided by putting the secondary or reactive line first, and the logically prior or informative line second--just as in *naqsh faryādī*.

Moreover, we notice that the first line is in the *inshā fīyah* mode, and in Ġhālīb's greatly favored *inshā fīyah* category, the interrogative (just as in *naqsh faryādī*). Ġhālīb has been guiding Ḥālī not only to read the verse with two different line-relationships, but also to read it with different kinds of *inshā fīyah* intonation. And he has tactfully implied to Ḥālī that such subtleties have become evident even to Ġhālīb himself not initially but only after further thought [*ziyādah ḡhor karne ke ba,d*]-- although it's impossible to believe that a veteran 'meaning creator' like Ġhālīb wouldn't do these tricks with deliberate intention, subtle planning, and the maximum possible technical expertise. We know that Ḥālī had had a patchy, often-interrupted classical education with which he was never satisfied,⁴² so perhaps he was not too good on his terminology; perhaps Ġhālīb is patiently playing the *ustād* here, and explaining technical tricks in non-technical language. But explain them he does, so that Ḥālī ends up provided with a cluster of meanings for that verse that he didn't have before. Moreover, he can then explain them clearly and intelligibly to us, and does so. We see that it can be done, and that he can do it. Why does he so rarely carry over this excellent critical approach to other verses? (And why does Ġhālīb never do so at all?)

How much 'meaning' is enough?

In short, why the parlous state of the commentary on *naqsh faryādī*, and of the commentarial tradition in general? It is clear that the typical, least-common-denominator commentarial entry for any given verse is a prose paraphrase of the 'meaning', rather than anything analytically more sophisticated; but it is much less clear why this is so consistently the case. Why do the commentators give us so frustratingly little access to the huge, sophisticated, invaluable set of analytical tools developed within the Persian-Urdu poetic tradition?

⁴¹Ḥālī, *Yādgār-e ḡhālīb*, pp. 130-31.

⁴²Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, pp. 13-14.

S. R. Fārūqī writes in his commentary about verses that have ‘layer upon layer of wordplay [ri.āyateñ] and verbal affinities [munāsibateñ], but the commentators have generally not mentioned them, because...they have followed the opinion of [Nazm] that wordplay and verbal affinities are nothing worthy of respect.’⁴³ Fārūqī’s view, however, doesn’t account for the fact that Ġhālib himself explains the ‘meaning’ of his verses in a similarly stripped-down way.

To me, the most plausible explanation for the commentators’ tunnel vision is the fact that the commentarial tradition springs directly out of the lifelong, no-holds-barred conflict between Ġhālib and his critics, on the question of meaning. The commentarial tradition assumes that Ġhālib is always under suspicion of creating the kind of poetry that Āzād mocks: verses that are full of ‘extremely refined and colorful’ words, but that remain ‘absolutely without meaning.’ Ġhālib’s verses are thus in danger of having zero meanings; the commentators seek to vindicate them by providing at least (and usually at most) one meaning apiece. The commentators’ primary goal is to provide not ten meanings rather than one, but one meaning rather than none. A verse with one meaning is quite sufficiently vindicated and equipped, and needn’t be greedy for more. Once the commentators have winkled out such a meaning, they tend to show the pride and enthusiasm of successful crossword puzzle solvers. Shaukat Merathī, author of one of the earliest commentaries, entitles his work *Hal-e kulliyāt-e urdū-e mirzā ghālib dihlavī* (A ‘Solution’ to the Complete Urdu Verse of Mirzā Ġhālib Dihlavī). Beḡhud Mohānī uses the same term, ‘solution’, for his interpretation of each verse; if he finds two meanings for a verse, each one is labelled as a separate ‘solution’ [*hal*], and numbered accordingly. When you’ve finished a crossword puzzle, then it’s done; the problem has been solved, and you are well entitled to move on.

How egregious this notion is, readers of Shamsur Raḡmān Fārūqī’s work will already understand. However it is to be explained, the impoverished state of the commentarial tradition with regard to the very resources that one might think would be most suitable and closest at hand--the technical analytical categories of the classical Persian and Urdu poetic tradition--is a striking and depressing reality. The commentators’ ‘solution’ approach is opposed to Ġhālib’s own poetic practice and theory, as well as to the best poetic practice and theory of our own time (and, of course, of practically every other time too). How the Empson of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* would have loved to work on Ġhālib!

To us, of course, the best defense would be a good offense: to insist that Ġhālib offers not one meaning, but *four or five!* Four or five meanings in two little lines! Plus wordplay, sound effects, and every poetic device he could fit in! Reading the commentators makes you feel like putting on paper robes, carrying a lighted torch in the daytime, and going in search of justice.

And yet the deficiencies of the commentarial tradition serve also to highlight a strange triumph: that Ġhālib’s poetry lives, and is loved, despite more than a century of naturalistic criticism and grossly inadequate interpretation. And the commentaries serve also to evoke the memory of another of Ġhālib’s great verses about letters on paper and their all too ephemeral fate:

*yā rab zamānah mujh ko miṭātā hai kis liye
lauḡ-e jahāñ pah ḡarf-e mukarrar nahīñ hūñ maiñ*⁴⁴

⁴³Fārūqī, *Tafhīm-e ghālib*, p. 61.

⁴⁴,Arshī, *Dīvān-e ghālib*, p. 337.

/oh Master, why does the age erase me?
on the tablet of the world I am not a repeated letter/.

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