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Ghalib: Epistemologies of Elegance

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The present volume is an unusually enjoyable addition to the increasing stream of translations that pour forth nowadays from all sorts of devoted Ghalib fans. The translators explicitly disclaim any academic intentions: “Neither of us is in any way a scholar of the poet or of Urdu poetry as a whole,” they write, so that “we abjure rather than claim authority” (ix). Instead, they aim their work at a community that “shares in the pleasure of the text and recognizes that a reader's errors are only openings into the unending process of rereading” (xi).

What kind of readers are members of this community? The translators speak of their desire to reach “a generation that can speak Urdu but cannot read its complexities” (x). As the book unfolds, however, the translators don't assume in their readers any knowledge of Urdu whatsoever: they discuss only features of the verses that are apparent in their translations, and they make more use of English literary critical terms than of any assumed background of knowledge about the ghazal.. But on the other hand, they use technical terms like *misra*, *matla*, and *maqta* without formally defining them. And though their transliteration system is casual, they do provide every verse both in Urdu script, which could be helpful only to Urdu-knowers, and in transliteration, which could be helpful only to Urdu- or Hindi-knowers. So their imagined ideal reader would seem to be a North Indian or Pakistani with perhaps a weak knowledge of Urdu (or Hindi), and a strong literary background in English.

After a brief introduction to Ghalib's life (xiii-xvi), the book presents twenty of Ghalib's most famous ghazals; these don't seem to be arranged in any special order. No bibliography or other apparatus is included. Each ghazal is introduced by an overview one or two paragraphs long. Next, each verse is provided first in Urdu script, then in transliteration, then in translation; finally the verse receives a paragraph or two of explanatory discussion.

As an example of this method, we might consider “ko'i ummid bar nahin ati / ko'i surat nazar nahin ati,” the simplest and starkest of the twenty ghazals. The translators describe it as one in which “the opening sher delineates a state of resignation where even the possibility of hope has been exhausted: indeed, enervation remains the dominant atmosphere of the poem” (139). For this enervation the translators then confidently provide an explanation: “Ghalib is writing autobiographically not only with personal loss in mind, but against the setting of deep historical trauma, which

is the devastation of Delhi” He has seen “the demolition of courtly life as he and his companions knew it” (139-40). In other words, the ghazal was influenced by the events of 1857.

However, this ghazal can be dated to sometime between 1847 and 1852 (Kalidas Gupta Raza, *Divan-e Ghalib kamil, tarikhi tartib se*, Bombay 1988, p. 295). The translators themselves point out that Ghalib had composed the great bulk of his Urdu ghazals “by the time he was about nineteen” (xiii); in fact only two ghazals in the whole published divan date from 1857 or later. We may not be able to know whether Ghalib is in fact “writing autobiographically” in this ghazal, as the translators assert (on what evidence?), but we can be quite sure that he's not reacting to the devastation of 1857.

Here's the ghazal as the translators present it in their transliteration scheme:

1. Koi ummeed bar nahin aatii
Koi soorat nazar nahin aati
2. Maut ka ek din muayyan hai
Neend kyun raat bhar nahin aati
3. Aage aati thi haal-e-dil pe hansii
Ab kisi baat par nahin aati
4. Jaanta hoon savaab-e-taa-at-o-zuhd
Par tabiyat idhar nahin aati
5. Hai kuchh aisi hi baat jo chup hoon
Varna kyaa baat kar nahin aati
6. Kyun na cheekhoon ke yaad karte hain
Meri aawaz gar nahin aati
7. Daagh-e-dil gar nazar nahin aata
Bu bhi aye chaaragar nahin aati
8. Hum wahan hain jahan se hamko bhi
Kuchh hamari khabar nahin aati
9. Marte hain arzoo mein marne ki
Maut aati hai par nahin aati
10. Kaabe kis munh se jaaoge Ghalib

To give a sense of the translators' style, I will reproduce their translations of all the verses of the ghazal (141-47), with a few selections from their commentary, and will offer some thoughts and suggestions of my own. These suggestions will be aimed at a possible second edition, since I'd be delighted for the book to have one.

1) No longing can now be fulfilled

No respite can now be envisaged

“The sher reads like a matter-of-fact statement of a mind at the end of its tether but one that can evaluate the lack of choices before it lucidly. The poet's engagement in mutability is, as a consequence, strangely serene and has little to do with any cry of appeal” (141).

While the verse itself is powerfully, sweepingly, in the habitual, the translators insist on the present moment (two insertions of “now”). Is this a reference to the assumed post-1857 time? The sense of “*surat*” as both (beautiful) “face” and abstract “prospect” has also been replaced, perhaps for the same reason, by the narrower “respite.”

2) The day of death has been appointed

Why is the night crowded with sleeplessness?

The second line might literally be rendered “Why does sleep not come, the whole night?” Here *rat bhar* has morphed into a “crowded night.” But the effect is so striking in English that it's surely worth it. If the “single”day (*ek din*) of death in the first line were preserved, another part of Ghalib's original contrast could also be captured to good effect.

3) Once one could smile at the heart's confusion

Now, humor has no place in one's discourse

It's a heavily interpretive translation. Why not keep the radical simplicity of the diction? Something like “I used to laugh at the state of my heart / Now I don't laugh at anything” would retain Ghalib's pared-down words-of-one-syllable vocabulary.

4) I am cognizant of the blessings in worship and submission

But my disposition is not prone that way

“The poet would transgress against his selfhood by following the norms of piety instead of obeying the inevitable dictates of desire. In self-mockery, Ghalib declares that he remains blameless because his temperament does not draw him into such strictures” (142-43).

Here the deliberately pompous verbiage in the first line works well to capture the Arabicized vocabulary of the original.

5) There is a certain reason for my silence

Otherwise what could I not utter to you

The first line comes out excellently. A more literal rendering of the second line: “Otherwise--don't I know how to talk?”

6) Why not lament aloud, if only as a reminder

That my voice at least still exists

“He will cry himself hoarse simply so that the beloved will be spared the anxiety of worrying over his silence, because at least his howls of pain will be a reminder of his continued existence” (144).

Is the beloved likely to be anxious, or simply indifferent? It's hard to capture the verse's full logic, so the translators have made a defensible interpretive choice.

7) We have arrived there, where even we

Now know nothing of ourselves

“In a dramatic reversal of direction, this sher moves the reader away from the lover's bedchamber into Andrew Marvell's 'deserts of vast eternity'.... His state of mind, however, must be clearly distinguished from a Sufic trance of unification with the deity, for Ghalib is still acutely conscious of where he is but cannot exactly define the parameters of who he is any more” (145).

This one works very effectively.

8) If you cannot see my smouldering heart

Does its odour not reach you, oh well-wisher

“The reader must picture the poet supine on his lovelorn bed but at least accompanied by a compassionate friend.... The hyperbole here is of course mock serious and the reader feels less compassionate towards the invalid than for the friend” (144-45).

9) We perish with the wish to die

Death mocks but it will not arrive

“The love games of the earlier shers have been transmuted into something far more deadly: the poet is again waiting, but this time for a very novel amorous sport that would signify the end of existence” (146).

How about even simpler and more literal language, to retain Ghalib's own deliberate repetitiveness? “We die of the longing to die / Death comes, but does not come.” Of course it looks paradoxical in English—but then, it looks paradoxical in Urdu too, in exactly the same way. Isn't there a case to be made for preserving what we can of the poetic devices of the original?

10) With what countenance will you approach Kaaba, Ghalib!

If only shamefulness could come your way.

Since “*magar*” can mean both “but” and “perhaps,” two distinct readings are available for the second line: “But then, you have no sense of shame!” and “Perhaps you have no sense of shame?”. Only one or the other of these two possibilities can be brought into English; it's the kind of problem that drives translators to drink.

Even in an unusually simple ghazal like this one, not to speak of Ghalib's generally more complex ones, any translator constantly runs into indefinitely ramifying thickets of meaning—thickets that, in most cases, Ghalib has deliberately cultivated. He creates in many of his small two-line poems a sustained undecideability and multivalence that is a great part of their pleasure. But how to capture his effects in English? Alas, the poor translator is forced to cut back the thicket of meanings into a single thin stalk. The result is that translators are not only inevitably dissatisfied with each other's work—they are also doomed to be dissatisfied with their own.

The project of translating Ghalib is hopeless from the start, and yet it's a fascinating one, and has to be attempted again and again, by many gallant translators, in ever-new ways. For how can we Urdu-lovers not want to share our great poet with the rest of the world? This volume is a thoughtful and sophisticated labor of love, and many kinds of

readers will surely enjoy it. When it comes to Ghalib, we're all members of the community rightly invoked by the translators--the community that "shares in the pleasure of the text" and recognizes that any reading (or translation) offers us only some additional, and inviting, "openings into the unending process of rereading."