The Unicorn and the Dancing Girl: Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Trans. by Daud Kamal. Selected & ed. by Khalid Hasan. Ahmedabad: Allied Publishers, 1988.

Faiz on Faiz

I hate to talk about myself, because it is the occupation of bores. I wish to apologize for using this English word, but since we now seem to use even its derivatives, it should be considered part of everyday Urdu idiom.

Anyway, I was saying that I don't like to talk about myself in the first person singular. Even in my poetry, I have always employed the plural form "we", rather than its singular variation.

Often, when literary detectives ask me why I write, and how, or for what, I say the first thing which comes to me, just to silence their inquiring minds. Sometimes I say, "Well, why don't you read what I write and find the answers?"

However, there are some who refuse to take my innocent prevarications for an answer. As such, the responsibility for what follows, is entirely theirs.

I cannot think of any one reason why I began to write in the first place. Was it the poetry-conscious atmosphere of my boyhood, or the influence of my friends, or even the restlessness of youth? Frankly, I do not know.

The first part of *Naqsh-i-Faryadi*[1] consists of poems written between the years 1928-29 and 1934-35, when I was a student. Almost all these verses are a direct consequence of that certain mental and emotional experience which is common at that point of life. But there must have been some external factors also. It was an era constituted by two distinct and different currents. Between 1920 and 1930, there prevailed in India an atmosphere of social and economic detachment, tranquillity and emotional upsurge. While serious national and political movements were in full sway,

1. Faiz's first collection of poems

in literature, at least, there was a tendency to have a sort of "good time", instead of facing up to fundamental issues. In poetry, men like Hasrat Mohani, and later, Josh, Hafiz Jullandri and Akhtar Shirani, ran the show, as it were. Syed Sajjad Hyder Yildrim was the major short story writer and criticism was confined to the art for art's sake or art for life's sake debate. The early poems in my first collection date back to those years. I was still very young and discovering the first excitement of love.

However, while we were still trying to make sense of our times, suddenly everything came tumbling down. The depression descended upon the country. One found that high and lusty men one had known in college and looked up to, were now reduced to a life of economic uncertainty, looking for work which was not there. The smiles on the faces of children seemed to have vanished and farmers, abandoning their fields, had begun to move to the big cities in search of employment. Women who used to be confined to the four walls of the house, were now on the street. But the external situation notwithstanding, the same kind of lackadaisical poetry continued to be written. One felt the enormous impact of this contradiction and some of the poems in *Naqsh-i-Faryadi* are indicative of the emotional and intellectual confusion of those days.

I left college in 1934 and took a lecturership at the M.A.O. College, Amritsar, a year later. Here begins a new chapter in my intellectual and emotional life and in the lives of many of my contemporaries. I was reunited with my class-fellow, Sahibzada Mahmood-uz-Zafar and his wife, Rashid Jahan. Those were the years when the Progressive Writers' Movement was founded, and when workers began to organize themselves. It was a time of great creativity and the opening of new perspectives. I think the first lesson I learnt was that it was impossible to detach oneself from what was happening externally. An individual, no matter how rich and fulfilled emotionally and in intellectual terms, is, after all, only an individual, a small, humble entity of little

consequence. What matters is the world outside and the people in it and what happens to them. What is important is the larger human equation of pain and pleasure. As such, internal and external experiences are two sides of the same coin.

My next thirteen or fourteen years were spent in "owning up the sadness of the world outside", then after stints in the army, journalism and trade unions, I spent four years in jail. The two collections *Dast-i-Saba* and *Zindan Nama* are a tribute to my captivity. Confinement, like love, is a fundamental experience. It opens many new windows on the soul. The early sensations of youth return in an intensified form. One's curiosity returns, as does one's sense of wonder at such phenomena as the light of early morning, the fading evening twilight, the sheer blue of the sky, or the gentle touch of the wind. Time and the immediate world become one. What was near, appears to have reached into the distance and what was in the distance, moves in. A passing moment can become an eternity. Then there is also more time to refine what one has produced. My first years of captivity were years of wonder and the discovery of this sensibility I have spoken of. My later years were years of intellectual fatigue and boredom with that experience. The two collections contain poems reflecting both states of mind.

After *Zindan Nama*, I spent many years unable to focus my mind on things. I was forced to leave my profession of journalism, went to jail once again and was subjected to the experience of Martial Law. It is all reflected in poems written at the time and later.

Translated from Urdu by Khalid Hasan

A Conversation with Faiz

(Transcript of a conversation between the poet and Muzaffar Iqbal. Saskatoon, Canada, 4 June 1981)

Question: Our literary and political history is full of so many agitational and emotional movements. The tragedy is that they all begin with a tremendous momentum and gain such immediate and total domination that it seems as if nothing would stand in their way, but after some time, the momentum breaks and where there once was power and driving force, one only finds a vacuum and an emptiness. Take as examples the Quit India Movement or the Khilafat Movement.

In literature there has been one such movement—the Progressive Writers'—of which you were, of course, a founder. Beginning in 1936, it became in a year or so the most powerful literary movement of its time. So many famous names were associated with it. It appeared then that the future of millions of people of India lay in the success and acceptance of this movement. In less than a decade, schisms began to develop among its founders. By 1949, even you had dissociated yourself from it. So many sub-groups came to be formed in what was once a great body of opinion. Now that so much time has passed, how do you look at the Movement? What was its contribution to Urdu literature?

Faiz: First of all, it is not true that the Movement broke into many sub-groups, as you suggest. What was called the Progressive Writers' Movement or the Progressive Writers' Organization maintained a general sort of unity as long as it

remained focused on one objective at a certain given time and a given circumstance. There are two points one should bear in mind. The Movement or its organization came into existence at a time when the national independence movement was in full swing in our country. There was a specific objective in front of the people, namely, national independence, and on this point there was no difference of opinion.

The second point to remember is that there was no difference of opinion on the social priorities of those times. It was agreed that there was a need to portray the lives and problems of the class which had always been exploited and deprived of basic rights and comforts. It included white collar people in the cities, labourers and similarly neglected segments of society whose lives had never before been considered a fit subject for literature. There was an assumption and a hope that after independence, social injustice would be brought to an end.

Since there was agreement on these basic points, a movement came into existence. It was a united movement. With independence, the first objective was met. However, it was soon evident that true independence had yet to be achieved. Everyone had his own formula. There were different views on how best to reach the goal. So, in that sense, the Movement did suffer from schisms.

There were different views also on how to portray life and its problems realistically in literature. When there is intellectual confusion and lack of direction in a society, it has been observed that people either externalize the problem or do its complete reverse.

Some felt so disgusted at the prevailing uncertainty that they said: 'to hell with it all. Let us look inwards, and explore our unconscious'. This led to certain purely subjective movements. Their high point was that nothing was either intrinsically good or bad. The result was a kind of anarchism or nihilism or narcissism. I don't think you can blame the Progressive Movement for this development, because some writers have always looked forward, while

others have looked over their shoulder. In this sense, the Progressive Writers' Movement has always been there, since literature began.

This is the way it has always been. I believe that such vital literature as is being created today is based on, and flows from, the same values which the Progressive Writers' Movement epitomized. Before the Movement, there were other progressives—men like Sheikh Saadi and Iqbal.

It is quite another matter that so far we have not been able to decide upon a social structure for ourselves. Nor have we agreed upon our ultimate goal or upon how to reach it. Naturally, this has had an effect on literature. Nevertheless, I am of the view that much literature of vitality is being created, literature which is fundamentally consistent with life and progressive values. The escapist route is not being pursued, but genuine attempts are being made to find realistic and rational answers.

Question: I still feel that in its initial stages any movement has a clear vision, at least of fundamental matters, of what literature should be. But after a while differences arise. Among the Progressive take Manto and Ismat Chugtai and their detractors who dubbed them pornographers. Then there are the conflicting attitudes towards Iqbal. You had your differences with Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi on some of these matters. I would like to know whether they were differences of an organizational nature or differences fundamental to the Progressive Writers' Movement?

Faiz: No, the differences (with Qasmi) took place inside the Movement. When you associate a movement with an organization, there are bound to be some differences of opinion flowing from organizational decisions. So, when after independence, we found ourselves confronted with certain problems that had not existed before, it was but to be expected that there would be differences. Certain organizational decisions were taken which in the view of

some of us were not correct.

It also happens that some people tend to take an extreme view and, instead of looking at things from a realistic angle, they tend to become subjective. This can lead to narrow interpretations and shortsightedness. There was always this thing about Manto and Ismat. Some critics even went on to generalise that all progressive writers were pornographers. The fact is that progressivism has nothing to do with pornography or permissive writing. Basically, neither Manto nor Ismat wrote pornography. It is true, though, that their style of writing and some of their themes could sometimes be misunderstood as pornography. I too had my views on the subject, but as far as their integrity and their commitment to realism were concerned, they were above reproach. However since, because of these two, attempts were made to dub the entire Movement pornographic, there were some among us who took a rather extreme position. It was said that Manto and Ismat had nothing to do with the Movement. This is something I disagreed with then, and I disagree with now. However, such differences within a movement are neither new nor unusual.

Question: But in 1949, you parted company with the Movement, while. . .
Faiz: No, I did not part company in the manner that is being suggested. It was like this: for the sake of the movement itself, one chose to keep quiet about things one did not agree with. At the time, certain misinterpretations were made with regard to Iqbal. Also, in my view, the attitude adopted towards Manto, Ismat, Qurratulain Hyder and N.M. Raashid was wrong. I never dissociated myself from the Movement because there was nothing wrong with it as such.

Question: Let's turn to your poetry. In Urdu prose there have been some epoch-making events such as the publication of Abdullah Hussain's novel, *Udas Naslen*. But in Urdu

poetry, one can't think of a similar event, except when your collection of poems, *Dast-i-Saba*, was published in 1952. How did it affect you? You were in prison at the time. Did this "event" condition your subsequent poetry, did it create the problem of maintaining standards? Suddenly, your name was echoing everywhere. How did you take it?
Faiz: Well, as far as my "name" goes, when my first collection, *Naqsh-i-Faryadi*, was published, it seemed to me that I had arrived. I was, of course, somewhat surprised at the happy reception of the book. After all, what had I done? Written some verse. But behind *Dast-i-Saba* lay a new experience—that of captivity. People identified themselves with it because of the new situation in the country. They perhaps felt the events of the day and the forces behind them as portrayed in the book. To me, it did not really make any difference. Nor was it anything new, because people have always been kind to me.

But popular reaction does not affect one's poetry or change its direction. One always writes about what one has undergone and experienced. *Dast-i-Saba* is nothing more than a mirror of my feelings at the time. It has always been so with me.

It is a question of what one feels. When one feels a particular emotional impact of things in personal terms, one tries to empathize with others, with events outside oneself. So, one never changes one's course or one's attitude. Nor does one allow oneself to become a prisoner of this or that.

Question: The image of the morning is basic to your poetry. The purity of daybreak, its resplendent light. It is like a dream. You belong to a generation which saw dreams, which worked for their fulfilment, as in the freedom movement. You were travellers through a long night. When we look back, we feel that your generation travelled from one stretch of darkness to another stretch of darkness. In between, there were dreams of morning, but no shaft of light to penetrate the gloom.

There have been two consequences of this great betrayal of the dreams of your generation. Either complete escape from reality or bitterness and disillusionment. Your greatness lies in the fact that you have avoided both these extremes. Though there is an underlying melancholy in your poetry, you have retained inner resistance and resilience in your music. In fact, with time, these two elements have deepened. How have you managed to do this?
Faiz: First of all, I do not think that the dream is shattered. The poet Mir said that death itself is no more than a pause, a point of reference from which one moves on. There is always the nation and the country.

Secondly, to keep a dream alive, hope is essential. This is instinctive in me.

Realism too required that, while one should not deny the presence of despair, one should, at the same time, keep faith and hope intact.

Question: This seems a good way of saving oneself from disillusionment, but some writers of your generation became either introverts or screaming propagandists. Have you never experienced this divide? Or do you manage to somehow avoid it consciously?
Faiz: There is no real dichotomy between the conscious and the unconscious. One's unconcious is always involved in whatever one does consciously. Of course, there is a kind of struggle between the conscious and the unconscious. Perhaps, unconsciously, I too would like to scream out; let's give it all up and sit at home and intone God's name. But then I do not do that. Depends on how much fight you have in you. So, I suppose, the fact that one goes on is due to many factors: a bit of faith, a bit of the inner light, a bit of it from the outside, and then friendships. You move with the people, with the caravan, as it were, and you are not unhappy or sad.

Question: Your poetry is like one long struggle. But it does not violate the norms of the classical tradition. How do you

reconcile writing about the problems of today with the old classical modes?
Faiz: What old modes! To me the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary fall in their proper places in the larger composite tradition of literature. The great advantage—or miracle—of the *ghazal* form, for example, is that you can use it to render traditional themes in traditional diction and still be in tune with contemporary reality. The traditional struggle between the mystic and the sermonising priest is also a contemporary humanistic struggle between authority and the ordinary man.

Question: Your life—I mean your poetic life—was influenced by the fact that you were jailed twice. Did it in any way limit the canvas of your poetry?
Faiz: No, quite the contrary. Imprisonment brings in a new dimension, a new way in which you look at things. Objects one had not even noticed in normal life, because one was too busy to perceive their ugliness or beauty, appear anew. One's sensitivity is heightened. Then you have much more time in prison. You can look at the world and think about it at leisure. It was in jail that I wrote my poem on Africa and on many other subjects, which I would not have normally thought about. So, in that sense, when you are in jail, the world outside comes closer—or recedes into the distance. Ironically, imprisonment brings freedom in that sense. I feel that the kind of intellectual freedom you experience in jail, you don't experience outside. When you are outside, you are caught up in day-to-day affairs. You never see the entire canvas. Imprisonment opens the windows of your mind.

Question: A personal question now. Those who are close to you know that your relationship with Alys is not a mere husband-wife relationship, but a long and deep friendship. However, you come from a certain background, with a certain cultural psyche, nurtured over hundreds of years. Don't you sometimes feel (because of the difference in your two

backgrounds) that there is a communication gap, that there are things she is not able to grasp or things you are not able to grasp?
Faiz: Yes, one does have that feeling, often, many times, but I think . . . after all, it is forty years. . . . And well, then there are the children. They are there and they are part of the circle of our life together, as much as we two are. We react to our children and they react to us and it so happens that at a certain point distances converge into proximity. They cease to exist. Still, something does remain. Our purely Eastern things, for instance. She does not always understand them, but in forty years, I suppose, she has learnt so much that. . . .

Question: Yes, I see. I have a friend. Salimur Rahman. Teaches economics. He often says that in the end all things become one because of a common denominator. But in the beginning, when you were just married. Did you have a feeling that there was a gap?
Faiz: One did not marry in a day. We knew each other for two or three years. And because she had a certain political mind, and because we had ideological affinity with each other, when we met in Amritsar, where she had come to see her sister, we spent a lot of time together. We felt it would work that we could, make a go of it. So we decided to get married. So, you see it was not a matter of love at first sight.

Question: In your last book *Mere Dil Mere Musafir*, one detects a certain quality, a feeling. It is so different from your other books. It reads like poetry of exile. A feeling of being away from your country, in a physical sense, I mean. Has it brought a new dimension, a new feeling, to your poetry? Are you now part of the international community of exiled poets like Nazim Hikmat and Mahmood Dervesh?
Faiz: In one sense, yes; in another, no. What I have in common with them is physical separation from the homeland. But the difference is that they were forcibly evicted. I was wandering about of my own free will. Nobody

has ordered me to leave. I can return whenever fancy takes me. Of course, there is always the sadness of separation from one's homeland, like the sadness of separation from one's beloved. But the helplessness of those two is something quite different. I am not helpless in that way. I will go whenever I so wish.

Question: But you wrote recently: "And so it has been ordained that we be banished".
Faiz: Yes, that is true but not literally. I was not ordered to leave. I saw that things were not quite right, so I thought I would take a holiday from the situation. But my situation is different from Hikmat and Dervesh. I am not deprived in the sense in which they are. I can always go home. No one has stopped me. I have the choice. But Mahmood Dervesh and the Palestinian people have not only been individually but collectively banished from their homeland. Their anguish is greater than mine. Nazim Hikmat was sentenced for fourteen years and had to escape. They cannot go back home. But I am still confident that there are many back home whose love and affection I have. However, the anguish of separation from one's loved ones is not lessened by this awareness. It is there.

Question: You have been abroad by an act of volition, as it were, for the last three years. Are there things you now see from a different perspective? When you place an object very close to your eye, you cannot see it. It becomes hazy. Has distance changed your views?
Faiz: Yes, it is true. From a distance one can see things more objectively, more clearly; but in a personal sense, one is not really involved in what the people back there are going through. So, in a way, your burden is lighter. Were one back home, it would be different.

Question: Your poetic diction, your similes, your metaphors are purely classical, and are part of our traditional poetry.

But you invest classical diction with a new meaning. Have you never thought of using a new language, a new diction, a new idiom, as some people do these days? Have you never felt the need to do so?

Faiz: In every language—and that includes Urdu and Urdu poetry—there are certain limitations, certain internal parameters. Within this limited framework, there has always been innovation. Mir, Sauda, Nazir Akbarabadi, Ghalib and Iqbal made innovations, changed the idiom, changed the grammar, changed the imagery. But to go beyond that point, well, one would require a much greater talent.

One must see that the distinction between prose and poetry is maintained. Poetry involves bringing things together. Prose involves scattering them. Poetry is a discipline. One has to abide by some discipline. Poetry is in higher planes, prose is one flatland. So, one has to maintain the difference and still say something new. There is no simple formula. One has one's temperament and one's inspirations. I feel that what our tradition has given us, we have not made full use of. There is much that remains to be done. We have not really tried to do so. Our generation has distanced itself from tradition, we do not attempt to discover this apart, what lies hidden in that tradition. To blaze a new trail, one needs the distinctive manner and style of a very great poet. I am not invested with such greatness. Sometimes, when I cannot say it in Urdu, I try to write in Punjabi, as I have done.

Question: This new Urdu poetry. Are these new poets not overly influenced by the west?

Faiz: Yes, obviously. This began with us as far back as Maulana Hali and Maulana Mohammad Hussain Azad. The poetry they produced in imitation of the west, by abandoning their own tradition, is of no consequence at all. It has no native blood. It is imitation, and imitation is not creative. This does not mean that one should not benefit from poetry written elsewhere. It does not mean that we

should not look for new structures in accordance with changed times. We must. The only thing we have to watch for is that we choose forms which integrate with our tradition. The patch must fit and suit the quilt.

Poetry is not merely a matter of expressing feelings and emotions. It is like the craft of an artisan. A craft one must know. It is like a musical composition. One has to see if and where a note fits. A plant must have its roots in the soil. A rootless plant cannot flourish. Similarly, the roots of tradition must be kept intact. However, in accordance with changed circumstances, one must continue to prune the plant. It should be recognizable in the contemporary context. So, there are two things: continuity and renovation. Tradition and experiment. There is no laid-down formula or recipe.

Every poet must find his own answers. If you know what you are doing, you will hit the right balance. Take some of our prose poets. Normally, they give up in about four years and come back to traditional poetry. I have never tried this rigmarole. Perhaps, a few times, come to think of it. However, I have tried to stay within the framework of tradition and tried innovations where I could. As in religion, there is freedom to interpret the revealed word in accordance with the needs of the age; so it is in poetry. But while interpretation aimed at tailoring things to contemporary reality is allowed, heresy is not.

Question: Some Latin American poets are close to your way of thinking. Do you think poetry can affect the international situation? Does it affect people?

Faiz: Well, to tell the truth, I have not had much to do with poetry written outside, other than English poetry. And English poetry has little to do with our conditions. But in some other parts of the world, it is different. We share their experience and their stress. Our conditions are similar. Many voices you hear from those regions resemble ours. They can learn from us and we can learn from them. But this has only

happened to me in the last ten or twenty years. Instead of French, English and German poetry, I have established an empathy with Latin American, Spanish—and more recently—Palestinian and Arabic poetry. And, of course, African poetry. Those people have undergone the same experiences as ours. This is good. We can learn more from them. We can learn from the literature of the societies with which we have cultural and political similarities, compared to countries with which we have little to share.

Question: Garcia Marquez's novel "The Time of the Patriarch" reads like a story which could have happened in our own country. The same repression, the same incidents, the same use of force. So when things like this are translated, they create an effect. What has been the impact of your translations in other languages?
Faiz: Translations are of great benefit. We have translations of literature in our country from Arabic. I have translated some poetry from Turkish, some of Nazim Hikmat's. Now Palestinian literature is being translated. All this helps people to understand their own environment and their own lives. It gives them a new vision. So, in a sense, it all adds to the enlargement of the realm of literature.

Question: A word about poetry today. What do you think of your contemporaries or of those who will follow you?
Faiz: I believe that in spite of the mental confusion and emotional restlessness which prevails today, a great deal of good poetry is being written. It is always difficult to make predictions about youth, because one can never tell how many of those who are writing today will eventually give up. However, it proves that those who say that there is a lack of literary creation are wrong. There are plenty of new writers: poets, critics, and writers of prose. In every branch of literature, much that is new is being produced. There is movement, but it is nothing comparable to what things were like during the Progressive Writers' Movement. So let us say

no movement as such has been born yet, but there are signs and waves. Therefore, there is no need to worry about literature. Leave Urdu. There is Punjabi, Baluchi, Sindhi and Pushto. For the first time, people are paying attention to these languages. Vibrant poetry is being written in them. Prose writers are beginning to make their mark, and the caravan of literature is moving on.

Question: In poetry there is always the question of who influenced whom. Is a poet of your stature, who is influencing an entire literature, part of a continuity? Or does he act as an inhibiting influence on new writers who find it difficult to discover a new means of expression?
Faiz: Yes, a poet may influence other poets, but, more important, objective conditions also create a new idiom, a certain kind of grammar, a particular form of expression. The poet who becomes the first to employ these innovations becomes a stylist—at a particular time, that is. Then, poets borrow from other poets. Even today, we continue to borrow from Mir and Ghalib so it is a natural process. People borrow from other people and benefit from what others have done. There is nothing wrong with that. It is only natural. It has always been so. And if someone sits down and tells himself that he is going to write in the manner of Josh or Qasmi, or even Faiz, then it is his problem and no blame lies on us. Good writers discover their own path. They pick out from others what they find good, as I take from Ghalib or someone takes from Josh or from Qasmi. It is but natural.

Question: People of your generation had a dream. They were part of a struggle, a movement. Then the dream was shattered, although you say it has not been shattered. You say it was only an interregnum. However, the generation which followed yours doesn't see it quite that way. Those who were born after partition, or who were four or five years old at the time, see a different reality. They see what the politicians have done and what has happened to the country

internationally and at home. One doesn't quite see how it is an interregnum. There is poetry of frustration, protest and anger being produced. How do you see it?
Faiz: I do not think it is right to generalize. Good poetry is good poetry, no matter when it is written. Good poetry of today has all the qualities, realism and protest and hope and faith. Since there appears to be no movement in the offing, every individual is discovering his own path to salvation which is good. I have never thought that I have done something which the younger generation is incapable of doing. Those who have talent will one day distinguish themselves, just like people in earlier generations did.

Question: And now a cliché. How do you write?
Faiz: How does one write? I do not really know how one writes. Sometimes while reading a book, a phrase or a sentence or an image or a rhyme sticks in the mind and, ultimately, ends up in a poem. At times, while listening to music, a certain note or a certain rhythmic pattern leaves a deep impression. Suddenly a line comes to mind. A *ghazal* first requires the emergence of a rhyming scheme in one's consciousness. One builds on it. For a *nazm*, one has to think. A line comes first and then you think of the pattern of the poem. It is like an artisan at work. It has to be built. You have to get it in focus. The basic image must be in sharp focus. You have to match things. The music has to be right. No false notes. At time, the experience of a certain event is so sudden and intense that the entire poem is born immediately. At other times, it can take months.

Question: Did you ever want to write something major and were unable to do so?
Faiz: Once or twice, I tried to write a long poem. I wanted to make the dedication to the collection, *Sar-i-Wadi-Sina*, into a long poem, but then I got bored writing it. Another poem in *Dast-i-Saba*—A Prison Morning—I thought of making into a long poem, but then I gave up.

Translated from Urdu by Khalid Hasan