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

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The ‘classical’ [klasses] 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 [ustads] to correct the poetry of the pupils [shāgirds] 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 Asadullah Kān ‘Ḡālib’ (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 [sharh] 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 biblioygrāfī, 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 Ğālib? As we will see, Āzād and Ḥālī, the two canonical founders of the movement, both contributed to the body of commentary on Ğālib’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 Ğālib, 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 Ğālib’s *dīvān*. Ğālib 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 Ğālib, 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 Ğālib give us instead?

\[
naqsh faryādī hai kis kī shokhī-e tahrīr kā
kāghažī hai pairahan har paikar-e taṣvīr kā^{3}
\]

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


^{4} All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated. Except for verses of Ğālib’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 hamd.

We know that the hue and cry about it began during Ghalib’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. Throughout his lifetime, Ghalib’s friends and correspondents asked him for interpretive help with his poetry. Maulvi Muhammad Abd ur-Razzaz ‘Shâkir’ was one such correspondent. Writing to him in 1865, near the end of his life, Ghalib 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 sunīye]. 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 notional, it is a cause of grief and sorrow and suffering.6

Ghalib’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 Shâkir, but in what tone of voice? Teasing? Irritated? Rueful?7

To find Ghalib’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 divân. Yet at least to this limited degree, we must consider Ghalib 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 Altāf Husain ‘Hâli’ (1837-1914), and the third was Ali Ḥaidar ‘Naẓm’ Ţabātabâf (1852-1933). Hâli completed his great work Yâdgâr-e ghâlib (A Memorial of Ghalib) in 1897, and Naẓm published his commentary Sharh-e divân-e urdū-e ghâlib (A Commentary on the Urdu Divân of Ghalib) 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. Hâli 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

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5Razâ, Divân-e ghâlib, p. 112.


7Ḵalîq Anjum, Khuṭṭî-e ghâlib, 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: shaug har rang raqīb-e sar o sâmān niklā and zaḵm ne dād nah dī tāngī-e dil kī yā rab. For these two additional verses, see Arshi, Divân-e ghâlib, Part 2, pp. 162-63.

8Vâlah Dakanî, Sharh-e divân (1893), and Shaukat Meraṭhî, 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’ Ṭabāṭabāǰī is something like a fellow-ustād with a prickly ego: he judges Ghālib 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 Nazm 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 Māmnūn, and I’ve seen it in the poetry of Momin Khān 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-l-bāţīn ash-shā’ īr].

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-ittibār] because it was awkward and his purpose was to compose an opening verse [mat‘la’]. 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. Nazm’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 Nazm has already recognized that such literary examples exist. In fact, Nazm seems to be objecting to the claim of historicity that Ghālib 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 Ghālib 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.

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

10Naẓm Ṭabāṭabāǰī, Sharḥ-e dīvān, pp. 1-2.

Pritchett, Ghālib, page 4
Rather, it has simply been inserted because of the special exigencies of meter and rhyme in an opening verse [matla‘]. 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. Nazm 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.

Nazm 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 Ghalib’s reply to Shākir’s query? Did Shākir report such continuing objections, and is that why Ghalib 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 Hālī and Nazm, punctuated only by the fragmentary work of Muḥammad Abd al-Vājid ‘Vājid’, and the brief and partial work of ‘Hasrat’ Mohānī (who, on this verse, merely paraphrases Ghalib’s own words). Then we find another pair of important commentators, the two ‘Bekhud’ s: Sayyid Muḥammad Ahmad ‘Bekhud’ Mohānī (1883-1940), writing around 1923, and Sayyid Vahīd ud-Dīn ‘Bekhud’ Dīhlavī (1883-1955), 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 Ghalib himself, and then at more length by Nazm. In fact it is striking how little the commentators disagree among themselves in their explication of this ‘meaningless’ verse; many of Ghalib’s verses generate a considerably wider range of commentarial readings.

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

I am entirely astonished at Janāb [Nazm]’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 [ghaliaban] 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 [Nazm]’s presumption—that he didn’t even reflect that Mirzā chose this opening verse [matla‘] for the opening verse of his Divān. 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 Divān was published in his lifetime. Even after the publication of his Divān, Mirzā

11Vājid, Vijdān-e tahqīq (1902), and Ḥasrat, Divān-e ʿgālib (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.’

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 Ghālib 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.

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 Āḡā Muḥammad ‘Bāqir’ (1917?-1972), writing in 1939, sums up the situation pretty accurately: ‘Except for [Naẓm], all the commentators call this verse meaningful.’

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.

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12 Beḵhud Mohānī, Sharḥ-e dīvān, pp. 1-3.
13 Beḵhud Dihlavī, Mīrāt ul-ghālib, p. 9.
14 Bāqir, Bayān-e ghālib, p. 7.
Roads Not Taken, Tools not Used

We can also marshall 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 Ghālib’s own.

Some say that this verse is nonsensical. But this is entirely an injustice. Mirzā Šāhib 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 [san at] of ‘elegantly assigning a cause’ [husn-e ta lil]. 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’ [husn-e ta lil] 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 lil means ‘to establish a reason’ or ‘to express a reason’. Ḥusn-e ta lil 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 lil.16

In the most massive classical handbook of poetics, Najm ul-Ǧhani’s 1232-page Bahr ul-faṣāḥat (Ocean of Eloquence, 1885/6), Ḥusn-e ta lil 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 Ghālib 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., Dārs-e balāghat, pp. 49-50.
17Najm ul-Ǧhani, Bahr ul-faṣāḥat, pp. 1076-1082.
many subtle analyses of possible intra-verse (which in practice almost always meant inter-line) relationships. 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 Ḡālib’s use of what I have translated as ‘sophisticated naiveté’ [tajhul-e ārifānah]; this is itself considered a šan 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 [mubālíghah] can be used in explaining it.’ And in this case too, Bahr 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.

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-nażūr] (‘image’, ‘writing’, ‘of paper’, ‘robe’, ‘figure’, ‘picture’) Ḡālib has also taken good care in this verse to have ‘resemblance of sound’ [tajnīs-e sautī] (faryādī, kis kī, shokhi, kāghzāi 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 tasvīr and increases the elements of intensity and mystery in the line.

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-nażūr, 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-nażūr (which is so fundamental a poetic quality that it goes by several other names as well, such as tanāsūb 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’.

For example, see Najm ul-Ghānī, Bahr ul-faṣāḥat, pp. 1015-1117. Many of the verbal devices [šan at] in his inventory rest on such inter-line relationships.

Fārūqī et al., Dars-e balāghat, p. 46.


Fārūqī, Tafhīm-e ḡālib, p. 23.

Fārūqī et al., Dars-e balāghat, 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 sault], refers to a broad range of sound effects and kinds of alliteration. These are indeed conspicuous: in the nine words he mentions, -i 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 tegeh-e barq dam kā qadam darmiyān nahīn, in which stitching together barq dam replicates the sound of qadam.24 And of course Bahr ul-fasāhat analyzes a whole range of such san 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 Ghālib’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 Ghālib 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 tasvīr 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 Ghālib’s verses, which after all were composed for oral recitation, have the most astonishing sound effects. The verse jān dī dī huṣūsī kī thi / ḥaq to yūn hai kih ḥaq adā nah huā26 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 inshājah, that is, interrogative. Interrogation is Ghālib’s special style. It’s possible that he learned the art of interrogation and other inshājah principles from Mīr. But the first verse of the dīwān, 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 Ghālib’s characteristic manner. Mīr too has called the arrangements of the Creator of the Universe into question; for example, in his very first dīwān he says,

ko ḥo mahram-e shokhī tirā to maiñ pūchhūn

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23 Platts, A Dictionary of Urdu, pp. 1145, 300.

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

25 Najm ul-Ḡanā, Bahr ul-fasāhat, pp. 894-920.

26 Arshī, Dīwān-e ghālib, p. 193.
/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 Gālib’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 Gālib.27

This resonant and suitable conclusion gives Gālib 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 Saлим Chishṭī (among others) also makes the point about the special ‘mischievousness’ of using such a verse as a ḥamād.28 But no other commentator has directed our attention toward the poetic value of inshāfiyah speech, although interrogative discourse is such a prominent feature both of this verse, and of Gālib’s poetry in general.

The concept of inshāfiyah or non-informative (i.e., interrogative, prescriptive, hypothetical, or exclamatory) discourse, as opposed to khabartic (informative or falsifiable discourse), is far from new within the Arabic-Persian-Urdu poetic tradition.29 It is considered at length in Bahr ul-fasāḥhat; 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 istīfhām, ‘interrogative expression’; 20 examples, some explained
  [with subsections devoted to: āyā; kān; kaun sā; kyūn; kis liye, kis vāste; kis ṭarḥ; kaisā, kaise, kaisī; kab; kahūn; kis; kīn; kāhūn; kitnā, kitne, kitnī; kabhī]
- bayān-e amr, the imperative mood; 34 examples, some explained
- bayān-e nahi, 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; Bahr ul-fasāḥhat alone is 1,232 pages long.

Since these off-the-shelf analytical categories were so readily available, why do the commentators generally ignore them? Gālib 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 Nazm 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

28 Chishṭī, Sharḥ-e dīvān, pp. 231-32.
29 Fārūqī, Andāz-e guftagū kyā hai, pp. 23-37, and in many later works, notably Urdū ghazal ke aham mor. See also Pritchett, Nets of Awareness, pp. 106-08.
30 Najm ul-Ghanī, Bahr ul-fasāḥhat, 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 hamd). 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.

Muhammad Ḥusain ‘Āzād’, author of the great canon-forming literary history Āb-e hayāt (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 Ḡālib’s work has grave problems as compared to that of earlier ustād: ‘Ḡālib, 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 [ḡālibīban] unblemished verses has not turned out to be more than one or two hundred.’

Poor Ḡālib, 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 Ḡālib’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 ḫayāt 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 [Ḡālib] Sāhīb’s style of ‘delicate thought’ [nāzuk kхiyālt], 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{daryā-e ma āšī tunuk-ābī se huī khushk} \\
\text{merā sar-e dāman bhi ābhī tar nah huī thā} \\
/\text{The river of sinfulness dried up for lack of water} \\
\text{As yet, not even the hem of my garment had become wet/}
\end{align*}
\]

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 Āḡā 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, Žauq emphasizes the unappreciatedness of even Ḡālib’s better verses, while Aish mocks him in a specially composed verse-sequence [qiṭ ṣah]. 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 Sāhīb, 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 Ḡālib’. I remember one opening verse:

\[
\text{markaz-e maḥvar-e girdūn bah-lab-e āb nahīn}
\]

---

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

32Āzād, Āb-e ḫayāt, pp. 494-96. See also Pritchett, Āb-e ḫayāt, pp. 405-06. For the verse by Ḡālib, see Arshī, Dīvān-e ḡālibī, part 2, p. 177.
The late Ghālib was a flowing river. He used to listen, and laugh.\textsuperscript{33}

Āzād thus pretends, in his clever and sneaky way, to end with a tribute to Ghālib’s sense of humor. But the rhetorical point has been amply made: Ghālib 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. Ghālib’s loyal biographer and shāgird, Alīf Ḥusain Hālī, 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 [Ghālib], ‘I don’t understand one of your Urdu verses.’ And at that moment he composed two lines of verse and recited them before Mirzā:

\begin{quote}
\textit{pahle to rogān-e gul bhaiñs ke añde se nikāl
phir davā jīnī bhī hai kul bhainās ke añde 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.}\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

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 divān! And if there’s a divān 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 divān.\textsuperscript{35}

Hālī notes that Ghālib 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:

\begin{quote}
nah satāfsh kī tamannā nah śile 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\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Both this and another, similar verse cited by Hālī are quite early (1821), and Hālī goes on to argue, just as Āzād does, that in later life Ghālib 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

\textsuperscript{33}Āzād, \textit{Āb-e ḥayāt}, p. 469. See also Pritchett, \textit{Āb-e ḥayāt}, p. 381.

\textsuperscript{34}This wonderful verse translation is taken from Russell and Islam, \textit{Ghālib: Life and Letters}, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{35}Hālī, \textit{Yādgār-e ghālib}, p. 112.

\textsuperscript{36}Hālī, \textit{Yādgār-e ghālib}, p. 112. For Ghālib’s verse, see Arshī, \textit{Dīvān-e ghālib}, part 2, p. 266. Hālī also cites another and similar verse, pp. 112-13 (Arshī p. 259).
friendly and not-so-friendly harassment he received, Ghâlib never repudiated the ‘meaningless’
poetry of his youth. He retained dozens of verses like naqsh faryādī—and some far more obscure
and rebarbative—inn his dīvān through all four editions (1841, 1847, 1861, 1862), and still seemed
quite content with the ‘meaningless’ verses that he explained to Shâkir only four years before he
died. In the case of another of these ‘meaningless’ verses he wrote to Shâkir with apparent
pleasure that it contained a ‘new idea I have brought forth from my temperament’ [ek bāt maiñ
ne apnī ūbā at se na j nikālī āhat], and he explicated all three verses without the least hint of
anything other than pride in them.37

Certainly Ghâlib 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
(ravān) 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 ustâds, 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 khākastar o bulbul qafas-e rang
ai nālah nishān-e jigar-e soḵhtāh kyā hai38
/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 Ḥâfiz was not even born until 1837, and his
conversations with Ghâlib took place in the last thirteen or so years of Ghâlib’s life. Here is his
report on this particular verse:

I myself asked Mirzâ 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 Mirzâ 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

38Arshī, Ḍīvān-e ḡâlib, 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. Ghalīb is guilty at times of his own form of shokhī-e tahrīr, ‘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.

Ghalīb the poet of ‘meaning creation’ [ma nī āfīrīnī] and ‘delicate thought’ [nāzuk khīyānī] was always a high flyer, as he himself insisted and as Ḥālī points out so aptly (and as Azād 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 create 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 shāgīrs 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 Ghalīb suggested to him not only interpretations, but also an interpretive process.

\[ \text{kaun hotā hai ḥarīf-e mai-e mard-afgan-e ishq} \\
\text{hai mukarrar lab-e sāqī meīn sālā mere ba d}^{40} \]

/who can withstand the man-killing wine of passion?\n
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 Ghalīb did not want him to stop there. Ghalīb urged him to think harder, and to dig more deeply into the verse. As Ḥālī reports,

The manifest [zāhīrī] 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

39 Ḥālī, Yadgār-e ghalīb, p. 114. It is possible to be sure where the direct quotation from Ghalīb 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, Ghalib: Life and Letters, p. 39.

40 Arshī, Dīvān-e ghalīb, 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 [lahajah] and style [turz-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 latif 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 inshāyah mode, and in Ghālib’s greatly favored inshāyah category, the interrogative (just as in naqsh faryādī), Ghālib has been guiding Hālī not only to read the verse with two different line-relationships, but also to read it with different kinds of inshāyah intonation. And he has tactfully implied to Hālī that such subtleties have become evident even to Ghālib himself not initially but only after further thought [ziyādah ghor karne ke ba d]-- although it’s impossible to believe that a veteran ‘meaning creator’ like Ghālib wouldn’t do these tricks with deliberate intention, subtle planning, and the maximum possible technical expertise. We know that Hālī 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 Ghālib is patiently playing the ustād here, and explaining technical tricks in non-technical language. But explain them he does, so that Hālī 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 Ghālib 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?

41Hālī, Yādgār-e ghālib, 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 [Naẓm] that wordplay and verbal affinities are nothing worthy of respect.’ Fārūqī’s view, however, doesn’t account for the fact that Ghālib 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 Ghālib and his critics, on the question of meaning. The commentarial tradition assumes that Ghālib 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.’ Ghālib’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.

How egregious this notion is, readers of Shamsur Raḥmān 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 Ghālib’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 Ghālib!

To us, of course, the best defense would be a good offense: to insist that Ghālib 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 Ghālib’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 Ghālib’s great verses about letters on paper and their all too ephemeral fate:

\[
yā rab zamānah mujh ko miṭātā hai kis liye 
laух-e jahān pah ḥarf-e mukarrar nahiṁ hūṁ main\]

\[\text{Fārūqī, Tafhīm-e ghālib, p. 61.}\]

\[\text{Arshī, Divān-e ghālib, p. 337.}\]
/oh Master, why does the age erase me?
on the tablet of the world I am not a repeated letter/

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