

The Secret Mirror: Essays on Urdu Poetry
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Delhi: Academic Literature
1981

A Ghazal of Zafar Iqbal

1. Introduction

Zafar Iqbal (b. 1933) is remarkable in many ways as a poet, and no less so as a person. A Panjabi (which perhaps explains some of his characteristics), he lives in a small town of the Pakistani Panjab called Okara. A lawyer by profession (and by all accounts a successful one), he became a politician by choice during the last years of Bhutto's government, was reportedly imprisoned for his pains, fought the election and was defeated—like most of Bhutto's adversaries. He has written four books of Ghazal, the last of which came out in 1979; since then he has been writing more or less continuously, though not so voluminously as before.

Zafar Iqbal appeared on the literary scene in about 1955 as a serious Ghazal writer with firm classical grounding, a clear inclination towards boldness in imagery, a cautious delight in experimentation, and an occasional virtuosity in metre. Even his early ghazals were remarkably free from that trivial sentimentality which often wins the approval of the jejune as *gudaz* (melting in the fire of emotion) and *soz* (slowly burning in sadness). On the contrary, he revealed a tendency toward self-mockery and a desire to concretize emotion through metaphor.

A GHAZAL OF ZAFAR IQBAL

Had he stopped with his first collection *Ab-e Rawan* (flowing Water), published in 1962, he would have remained one of the myriad minor figures of the fifties and sixties who had much promise of excellence but no potential for greatness. He was then, somewhat paradoxically, an exciting poet in a conformist way.

But his second book *Gulaftab* (Sunflower) burst upon the world in 1966 like a stink-bomb—or, if that is a bad simile, like a torrential rain whose waters form a turgid stream, fascinatingly full of a bewildering variety of flotsam. Willingly or not, everyone had to sit up and take notice. Many of his admirers noted with dismay that some of their best-loved *shers* had been disfigured by the replacement of good, standard Urdu with Panjabi usages and pronunciations; that in many Ghazal the language was barely recognizable in traditional terms; that frequently the imagery was so devastatingly new as to deaden the innocent reader's response. A startling mastery over language in its classic, creative forms was combined with what seemed at best irresponsibility, and at worst gaucherie. Bawdiness crowding out "respectable" and "heartfelt" experience of love; apparently reckless ribaldry alternating with—and occasionally overpowering—what was considered the traditional solemnity of the Ghazal; intense self-mockery combined with a highly introverted, metaphorical, and ambiguous style—these and other such tendencies caused the dull academic minds to withdraw from Zafar Iqbal in a huff. He influenced his contemporaries and the younger poets tremendously (just as he himself had been influenced by some of his peers), but the more sedate critics shook their heads over his apparent irreverence toward language—his disregard of the golden rule that "native" Urdu words should not be joined with non-Urdu words by *kasra-e izafat*, his mispronunciation or misspelling of certain words, his occasional tampering with rhyme and metre, his blithe "ignorance" of the so-called softer, heart-touching, and thrilling-trembling emotions. Indeed he was so irreverent that he misspelled even the name *Gulaftab*. Instead of using the familiar *gul-e- aftab* (sunflower), or even the less familiar but "correct" *gul-aftab*, he simply wrote *gulaftab*, making one word out of two and thus

slyly permitting another meaning (flower-sun) to creep in. Yet because of these as well as its purely "standard" poetic qualities, *Gulafab* remains for many people the most exciting single book of Ghazal since Ghalib published his diwan for the first time in 1847.

Zafar Iqbal never did quite the same thing again. He stormed into the realm of "anti"-Ghazal with a vengeance, writing funny, almost nonsensical, as well as lewd, ironical, satirical Ghazal. At times he also cultivated a more classical manner, smoothing out many of his exciting angularities, using a language not so conspicuously charged with outre imagery. He produced hard, brilliant, mellifluous and felicitous Ghazal strongly reminiscent of Sauda, Ghalib, and Insha, and yet managed to maintain his individuality, largely through an intensification of self-mockery. He became more preoccupied with direct or oblique comment on the frustrating dishonesty of contemporary social life (including romantic experience) and with regret at what Camus termed the "unreasonable silence" of the universe. The words are no longer so radically ambiguous, the imagery no longer like an almost physical blow. There is an apparent effortlessness, a deceptive thoughtlessness which reveals its mysteries only on close reading. What is lost in spectacular effects is gained in subtlety; the language is generally more conventional, and the many layers of meaning more apt to escape notice if close attention is not paid. Perhaps this is why his last books *Ratb o Yabis* (literally, Wet and Dry; figuratively, Good and Bad) and *Ahd-e Zian* have not made such a splash as *Gulafab*.

Zafar Iqbal resembles Ghalib in that his feeling for the Persian language is not just competent mastery such as one finds in Momin or, curiously enough, in Nazir Akbarabadi. Like Ghalib, Zafar Iqbal can build Urdu into the Persian and not the Persian into Urdu as Momin does. His Persianism is not just a prolific use of *izafat* and of unfamiliar Persian words and images. It is an expression of the mind, visualizing and then effecting a cross-pollination at unlikely places, creating ambiguity by dexterous use (or omission) of *izafat*, manipulating words in the hard, metallic way so characteristic of all *Sabk-i Hindi* poets (including of course Ghalib). Like Ghalib, Zafar Iqbal loves to play upon

and with words, and his sharp awareness of their possibilities makes him, again like Ghalib, create worlds of metaphor totally beyond the reach of Momin—whose obscurity and Persianism make him seem a kind of dehydrated Ghalib. In contrast to Mir, both Ghalib and Zafar Iqbal think more in terms of variety of experience than of variety of feeling. Yet the mystical and metaphysical dimensions of both Ghalib and Mir have been largely out of Zafar Iqbal's reach; this makes him the lesser poet, but certainly a suitable foil to them.

Like the seventeenth-century Persian poet Muhammad Sufi, Zafar Iqbal shows a kind of self-mockery which often borders on self-hatred. He is harried by thoughts of sexual impotence, and is often, like Yeats, driven to sex in desperation, only to hate himself and the sexual urge still more in consequence. He is thus perhaps a more complex (or complex-prone) person than either Ghalib or Mir. But he does not exhilarate us as does Mir in his erotic moments, and does not fill us with admiration as does Ghalib in his. The sheer poetry and the technical skill do evoke our admiration, but the sexual person in Zafar Iqbal does not inspire confidence. "Romantic" love has fled the modern world, and Zafar Iqbal feels this deprivation perhaps more than most of us; yet he is not at all given to dumb, romantic admiration of the beloved. He treats her as a sexual being, and his experience of love is alternately warm and businesslike. He shows none of that dominatingly worshipful, sadistic yet self-immolating attitude toward sex so characteristic of Baudelaire among others. He craves sex, yet hopes to get away without "th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame."

As for Zafar Iqbal's distortions of language, they have two characteristics which have always, from Shakespeare, been sufficient warrant for such distortions. First, they rest on a total mastery over the received language which proves them to be indulging in more than just ignorance or sloppiness; and second, they reveal the careful effort and planning that have gone into their creation. Zafar Iqbal has not always succeeded in giving the language the fillip he thought it so much needed. But at least he has made the venture and tried, like Baudelaire, to reach the unknown through the known.

2. *The Ghazal*

The ghazal I have chosen is from *Ratb o Yabis* (Allahabad: Shabkhun Kitab Ghar, 1970, page 80.) Here is what might be called a "literary" translation of it:

Why the excuse that speech is mischief-making?
Does the murder of voices even need a warrant?

The typhoon itself was mute as the breath of death;
Rather, the cry came from the sinking ship.

Arrogant, eluding even the reaching hand—
That branch from the red-green garden of mystery.

The sun has flashed through forests of desire,
Risen is the wave of the ice-body's melting.

Black weather hung itself over my heart;
At least you averted your onlooker's eye.

On the stone is the mark of someone's humble offering,
In the mirror trembles beauty's artful scorn.

Why vainly hold the torch of asking high?
Why lengthen fruitlessly the tongue of longing?

I slipped out through the enemies' territory
Whenever my friends began to plot and plan.

I was better off, Zafar, without a tune at all;
Never before was my tone a monotone.

(tr. by S. R. F. and F. W. Pritchett)

This translation is meant as a kind of compromise: we hope that it brings out, at least partially, the flavour of the original, while achieving some degree of readability in English.

3. *Technical Details*

This ghazal has nine *shers*. Though there is no formal limit to the number of *shers* that a ghazal can have, it is generally agreed that it should not have less than five or more than eleven; seven and nine are considered optimal. In *Ratb o Yabis*, as another proof of his excellent traditional skills, Zafar Iqbal has used exactly nine *shers* in each ghazal. He has also, as in conventional diwans, arranged the ghazals in alphabetical order by *radif* (end rhyme repeated throughout the ghazal), and has used all the letters of the Urdu alphabet in his various *radifs*. Apart from exhibiting his skill, such traditionalism could also be one of Zafar Iqbal's ways of laughing at himself and at those of his admirers who like to regard him as the epitome of modernity in the sense of unconventionality.

The ghazal is written in a well-known form of the metre called *Mudare'* which is very popular in Persian and Urdu, perhaps more in Urdu than Persian. It was Ghalib's favourite metre: in fact the ghazal of Ghalib which I analyse elsewhere in this volume is in the same metre. It was not much used by Mir and his contemporaries and rather rarely by the Progressives, Zafar Iqbal's immediate predecessors; it is however very popular with the modern poets. Although not particularly difficult, it has an unusual combination of short and long syllables; they are not distributed over the line with the regularity found in most Urdu-Persian metres. Representing short syllables by an asterisk and long ones by a dash, the metrical picture of a standard line would be:

— — * / — * — * / * — — * / — * —
1 2 3 4

Thus the first line of the ghazal (in transliteration) can be broken up like this:

Lete hain | ar kyon su | khan-e fitna | saz ki
— — * | — * — * | * — — * | — * —

Since the metrical system is strictly quantitative, every unit containing a vowel sound is counted as a syllable (short or long depending on certain constants and certain variables which are learned by instinct or instruction). Each isolated sound at the end of a word is presumed to have a vowel effect and must be scanned.

It is interesting, but not really fruitful, to speculate about why this metre is more popular than ever in modern times. The influence of Ghalib and Mir Anis may have something to do with it; or since practically all standard Urdu metres are rather easy to compose in, it could be just a matter of chance. It could also be that the uneven distribution of short and long syllables in this metre has a sort of built-in variety which suits the modern mind. The comparative variety of metres in modern Ghazal is in any case a refreshing change from the parrot-like effect of our immediate predecessors, who delighted in a particularly popular variant of "Ramal."

In this, as in all the ghazals of *Ratb o Yabis*, Zafar Iqbal has used his *takhallus*, or pen-name, to indicate the *maqta'*. Most modern poets, and Zafar Iqbal too elsewhere, have not been so scrupulous about preserving this traditional usage. In fact many modern poets do not have, or use, the *takhallus* at all.

Unlike most other ghazals in *Ratb o Yabis*, this one has two rhymes (*qafia*) repeated in two *shers*. The *Matla'* has *fitna saz* in the first line, and *saz* again appears in the last line (the second *misra* of the *maqta'*). *Baz* is the rhyme in the fifth *sher*, and reappears in the *saz baz* of the eighth. These are not entirely identical words, and thus, strictly speaking, not the same rhyme word. But the rules of the art of *qafia* in Urdu and Persian treat them as identical for the purpose of rhyming, and would not permit the *matla'* to have *saz baz* and *baz* as its rhymes. It is an interesting problem of the art of *bayan* (techniques of poetic excellence) whether the use of different (and unusual) rhymes successfully in the same ghazal, or the repetition of the same rhyme twice or more—in different ways, and with different contextual or semantic meanings—is the greater art. Using the same rhyme in each *sher* without losing the effect of variety is more or less a *tour de force*, and poets generally avoid (especially in

short ghazal) using the same rhyme word more than once.

4. The Analysis

1. Why the excuse that speech is mischief-making?
Does the murder of voices even need a warrant?

The verb form in the first line is common to first, second, and third person plural, and second person singular. With characteristic ambiguity, the poet has omitted the subject pronoun which would have more or less fixed the meaning. In its present form, the *sher* might represent the following situations: first, an impersonal remark directed to nobody in particular, which could be translated as "Why do these people (the government, the politicians, tyrants generally) trot out the excuse that. . .?"; second, a remark addressed to a given audience or a single hearer, referring to a specific situation; third, an advisory remark made by an aide to a tyrant: "Sir, why do you even have to make the excuse that. . .?"

The word *ar* basically means "umbrage; concealment provided by a wall etc.; concealment in general; certain kinds of pretending." In the *sher* it therefore suggests the image of a sniper or conspirator lying in wait behind a wall or window for the unwary victim. This image is strengthened by "murder" in the second line. For "speech," the poet uses *sukhan*, which means talk, but is often used for poetry too, and thus suggests the idea of censorship of the written word as well. *Fitna saz* is interesting because though it does mean "mischief-making," the phrase *sukhan saz* does not mean a simple maker of poetry (or talk), but one who talks facilely and deceptively; thus a disingenuous person is a *sukhan saz*. The phrase *fitna saz* therefore strongly suggests a dishonest advisor applying salve to the conscience of a none-too-scrupulous tyrant: all *sukhan* is *sukhan sazi*, anyway. Another interesting speculation is to treat *saz* as "musical instrument," therefore "music." Thus *fitna saz* may also mean "one whose music is mischief," reinforcing the sense of "poetry" latent in the word *sukhan*.

In the second line, "need" is *hajat*; and *hajat* is "need" in

the sense of religious imperative, ritual obligation, too. This sense is important because "warrant" is *jawaz* which means "justification" or "justifiability," and has clear theological and rhetorical overtones in the sense of "permissibility." *Sada* means "voice"; it also means "sound" or "cry"—particularly a cry of anguish or protest, or a call. *Sada* also refers to the words used by beggars for begging importunately or submissively: *sada karna, sada lagana, sada dena* all mean "to call like a beggar" and thus, simply, "to beg." This sense becomes important in the context of the ambiguity of the situation, since it may be seen as referring not only to censorship or free speech but also to an oppressed populace crying out in anguish, begging for relief or succour.

Much Urdu and Persian poetry has been concerned with vocal, almost jarring expression of personal sorrow, and has revelled in the effectiveness on others and on the poet himself—and ineffectiveness on the beloved—of the poet's sighs and tears. There has been some mention of dignified silence in suffering, particularly among the metaphysically inclined. *Bedil* comes readily to mind:

Since my colour/style/state is from top to toe a mystery-
magic of silent/muted musical instrument,
Even breaking did not take away from my form/image its
silences.

These are rare instances. But even rarer are instances of poets protesting against suppression or, or defending the right to, free speech. Perhaps these matters were not considered important enough for poetry; or perhaps they were expressed through formalized depictions of opposition between the poet or the free man (*mard-e azad* or *rind* or simply *ashiq*) and the practitioner and executor of theological law (*zahid, muhtasib, shaikh*, etc.). The fact remains that even Faiz, who more than most has made his poetry a vehicle of protest against the political suppression of free speech, talks about the matter in plainly personal terms:

My little possession of pen and tablet has been seized,
but what's the harm?
For I have dipped my fingers in the blood of my heart.

My tongue has been sealed, but to what avail?
For I have put a tongue in every link of my chain.

In spite of his deeply moving tone and wealth of classical as well as new imagery, Faiz remains a personal protester, making a token resistance by overrating the potential of poetry as an instrument of politics. By introducing irony and yet keeping a totally straight, impersonal face, Zafar Iqbal achieves a different kind of effect, subtler than that of Faiz and characteristically cruel.

2. The typhoon itself was mute as the breath of death;
Rather, the cry came from the sinking ship.

In this *sher*, the image of sound and voice takes on a different shape and dimension. The *sher* is characteristic of Zafar Iqbal in its unexplained residue of mystery, which finally defies all explication. Let's first examine the usual and obvious complexities. "Mute" is *be sada*, which also means "soundless," "silent," "one who refuses to call out" (as in the *Bedil sher* quoted above.) "Breath of death" is *dam-e marg*, which also means "the moment of death." And *dam* has other meanings as well: "cutting edge or end of a sharp instrument; smell or odour; life." In certain combinations it may also mean "sound," as in *dam-e qalam*, "scratching of the quill." Thus the typhoon was muted like the sound (breath) of death. This use of the word *dam* to mean both "air" and "sound" recalls *Twelfth Night* (which Zafar Iqbal may or may not have read);

...the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets
Stealing and giving odour.

(I, 1, 5-7)

The typhoon's silence is indicative not only of its suddenness, but also of its sheer concentrative power—as if its breath were bated with the intensity of the effort to sink the ship. "Sinking" is *dubne wale* which also means "about to sink"—or "fated to sink, designed to sink." "Cry" is *awaz*, which also means "sound" in an impersonal sense, and "voice" in a personal sense. Zafar Iqbal has used the polysemy of *sada* and *awaz* and similar words with more effect than any of his contemporaries.

But what does the *sher* signify? What is the storm, what is the ship and the cry or sound or voice that came from it? Coleridge has said that the "lyric ode is subjective. . . but then it delights to present things as actually existing and visible. . . coloured highly by the subject of the ode itself." This could be a good definition for most Ghazal, and could help us understand this *sher* better if we knew what its subject was.

On one level the *sher* could be just an observation of death (in the shape of a mine or other disaster) silently striking an unsuspecting ship; the sound could be the rending apart of the ship, or the gurgle of the sea swallowing it up. Or the cry could be the mute, animal cry of the ship's own distressed soul, inaudible to all but the ship itself. On this level, the *sher* could be a fantasy, dreamed by the poet or a bystander. On another level the ship, being *dubne wala*, fated or designed to sink, could be life or a real ship, suddenly confronted with the fact of total annihilation. But I like to think that this is also an erotic *sher*, the typhoon being the silent rush of passion through the blood, and the sinking ship the woman in her climax. The moment of fulfillment has often been likened to a little death for the male; and this naturally recalls Keats in his "Bright Star" sonnet:

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

The somewhat cloying-sweet eroticism of Keats stands in sharp contrast to the mysterious vigour of the Urdu poet, but perhaps they are nearer than we suspect.

3. Arrogant, eluding even the reaching hand—
That branch from the red green garden of mystery.

Now this is a difficult *sher* because different readings are possible by manipulating the *izafat* in the second line. Ghalib does this sort of thing very well: he is even more difficult than Zafar Iqbal, because he uses out-of-the-way words whose basic meaning is itself often unclear. In this *sher*, the difficulty arises because one can with perfect justification read *shakh-e surkh o sabz*, meaning "the red and green branch." Alternatively, one can omit the *izafat* on *shakh* and read *shakh, surkh o sabz gulistan*. Now the sense will be "the red and green garden," since the two adjectives will qualify the following noun, *gulistan*. Thus either the "garden" or the "branch" could be "red and green."

If the branch is red and green, then the colour would appear to signify full bloom, youthfulness, a certain degree of hauteur and perhaps inexperience. The last signification appears valid because "green" (*sabz*) is one of the adjectival metaphors for youth in such phrases as *sabz khat* or *sabza aghaz*, meaning a youth on whose face the down is just sprouting. The first line has *sarkash hui*, "when it grew arrogant or unruly," and this also suggests growing up from an innocent unconsciousness of beauty to a conscious pride in its realization. But if the "red and green" refers to the "garden of mystery," then the mystery perhaps lies in the redness and greenness: a garden full of vivid colours which never fully reveals itself, but contains a definite hint of perhaps forbidden pleasures.

Sarkash is literally "one who draws up his head," hence "unruly, not amenable to discipline, arrogant." There is a subtle harmony between *sar*, "head," and *dast*, "hand"; the latter is described as *rasa* which means both "reaching" and "successful." The *sher* therefore appropriately uses the metaphor of *shakh*, since a branch, if not too high, can perhaps be reached with some effort of stretching—but once released, it springs up higher out of reach. Note too that *raz* means both "mystery" and "secret."

4. The sun has flashed through forests of desire,
Risen is the wave of the ice-body's melting.

Here again the *izafat* can be played two ways in the first line: one can read either *aftab, hawas jangalon ke par* or *aftab-e hawas, janglon ke par*. The first reading is more characteristic of Zafar Iqbal, for whom it would be natural to think up an unusual phrase like *hawas jangal* (meaning "forest of desire" but omitting the postposition *ka*, "of")—and then go on to make the construction doubly unusual by using the plural (*hawas jangalon*, "forests of desire") because such constructions are supposed to be indigenous to Persian and not properly usable with Urdu plural forms. It is interesting to note that modern standard Urdu refuses to form possessive compounds without a postposition joining the two nouns. Many compounds borrowed either wholly or in part from English do, however, retain this English characteristic; *bas isteshan* or *bas adda* is used for "bus station," rather than *bas ka isteshan* or *bas ka adda*. In many place names too, like *Rani mandi*, "Queen's Market," this characteristic can be observed. Yet pedants put a taboo on it, pushing it out of standard Urdu. Zafar Iqbal uses this kind of construction freely.

The *sher* itself is interesting in other ways as well. The scenario is clear, but the words are intriguing. "Forests of desire" could apply to the protagonist, to his beloved, to both; or even to an abstract entity. If it applies to the pair of lovers, it means that desire has enveloped them and they are unable to see their way out of it. If it refers to the woman, it perhaps implies her conscious coldness or frigidity; if to the protagonist, it perhaps means there was no answering light to lead him through the forest. The flashing of the sun through forests suggests dank density, and agrees well with the torrid emotion associated with *hawas*, which means "lust; desire, greed; yearning." Though now used mainly in a pejorative sense, *hawas* originally had a comparatively wholesome sense too, particularly in classical Persian and in such poets as Bedil and Ghalib.

In the second line too, there is an ambiguity in *barf badan* ("ice-body"): it can be read as *barf-e badan*, "ice of body," as

barf-badan, "body which is (or was) ice," or simply as *barf badan* as an inversion of the *izafat* formation *badan-e barf*, "body of ice." Again, "body" may refer to the human body, or to the mass of ice. "Wave" is *lahr*, which can be used not only for a wave proper, but also for a thrill, a frisson, an emotional stirring. On melting, ice turns to water; observe also that both ice and water shine like the sun. Thus wave (*lahr*) is beautifully apt and its other senses fit marvellously too, making a rich mosaic of meaning—a device typical not only of Zafar Iqbal, but also of such superb poets as Mir, Ghalib, Iqbal, and Anis.

5. Black weather hung itself over my heart;
At least you averted your onlooker's eye.

This *sher* is characteristic of Zafar Iqbal. At the emotional level, he is more concerned with the fact that the beloved did not care to look (and thus was spared the boring or embarrassing sight) than with his own plight—as if it hardly mattered to him that he was oppressed by clouds of black emotion. Fani said the same thing in a typically self-pitying—though moving—way:

Tears there were, but they now are dry; yet my being is
overflowing [with unshed tears like a cloud];
The kind of cloud is hung over my heart that neither
rains nor dissipates.

Fani's *sher*, being personalized, is moving only in a superficial way; sentimental flabbiness is just around the corner. By picturing himself as a *tamasha* ("pageant; entertainment; spectacle; show; something to look at") and then expressing relief that the beloved did not see it, Zafar Iqbal makes just a hint of complaint and then is immediately his robust self. *Siyah rang ka mausam* means "black-coloured weather," or "the weather which the colour black has"; the latter meaning suggests that all colours have their mysterious climates.

6. On the stone is the mark of someone's humble offering,
In the mirror trembles beauty's artful scorn.

This *sher* is another kind of typical Zafar Iqbal composition. The two lines present two situations, superficially dissimilar yet inwardly forming a homogeneous whole. Notice first how the key words are balanced against each other both semantically and imagistically. *Sang* "stone," and *aina*, "mirror," because stone is ground into glass; *nishan*, "mark," and *larzish*, "trembling" which creates a mark on the otherwise unmarkable mirror—the mirror which in its limpidity and brilliance is like water which again can be marked only by a trembling of the waves; *naqsh*, "mark; image; picture; magical drawing; impression," and *aks*, "reflection" which again may be a mark, an image, or a picture on the mirror or in water; *niyaz*, "humble offering or submission, particularly by the needy," and *naz*, "coquetry, flirtatious disdain." Notice also the alliteration of nasals: *sang*, *nishan* (two nasals), *naqsh*, *naz*, *aina* (here again there is a hint of two nasals because of the very slight nasalization of *ai* in the standard pronunciation), and *naz*.

The first line envisions someone's forehead or lips leaving a mark in stone; the stone could be the conventional threshold of the beloved's door, or any stone, perhaps one in a wilderness where the lover's distracted state has taken him. The lover perhaps imagines the stone to be symbolic of the beloved's hard heart or unresponsive form. Kisses leaving a mark on stone may or may not have come from Wilfred Owen:

Red lips are not so red
As stained stones kissed by the English dead.

The echo of Owen is probably coincidental, for Zafar Iqbal once wrote to me that despite my observation that some of his stylistic devices recalled e. e. cummings, the truth was that he had never heard of him!

In any case, the formal word *sang* suggests that the stone could be the beloved's own heart on which a lover's humble passion has left its mark, though not in any obvious way. This

possibility is reinforced by the second line, in which the image of artful scorn is seen trembling (again the frisson!)—perhaps with that self-realization which is the first stage of love, or perhaps with the realization of love itself. Thus the word *sang* creates more than a tenuous link between the two apparently unconnected lines: they are now seen as complementary, or at least as two events in the same story. This device can again be traced back to Ghalib.

7. Why vainly hold the torch of asking high?
Why lengthen fruitlessly the tongue of longing?

Notice the subtle device of using *mish'al*, "torch," for *sawal*, "question; begging; asking," and then using *zaban*, "tongue," in the next line for *tamanna*, "longing." For a torch is but a flame, and physically as well as figuratively the tongue is like a flame; thus the candle's flame is often referred to as its tongue (*zaban-e shama'*). *Mish'al-e sawal* also reminds us of *zaban-e shama'*. But "tongue" has another use too. Kissing is an ancient art, and Indians perhaps knew better than others that one puts out one's tongue in kissing. Ghalib uses this idea with fine effect:

Oh sure, you didn't kiss him;
That's enough out of you, there's a tongue in my mouth too.*

Even without going into the delicate nuances of the second line, we can certainly note that the tongue is a kissing instrument both in Ghalib and in Zafar Iqbal. The "lengthening of the tongue of desire" clearly suggests the desire to kiss. But it also suggests a person who expatiates on a theme endlessly but without effect. *Zaban daraz*, "one who has a long tongue," also means one who is insolently talkative. To be *zaban daraz* merely reflects adversely on the *zaban daraz* person, just as the "torch of asking" eventually singes the hand of the torch-bearer without bringing any illumination of hope or success.

8. I slipped out through the enemies' territory
Whenever my friends began to plot and plan.

*Tr. Frances W. Pritchett.

Saz baz is an interesting choice of expression because it may occasionally mean a conspiracy for fun or for somebody's benefit. But the *sher* is also conspicuous for its suggestion of cynicism, its weariness of worldly friends. The poet makes the same point more tellingly in the *maqta'* of a more recent ghazal:

Zafar, they brought me the cap of honour on the point of
a sword;
I saved my neck only by accepting it.

This *sher* is also the only one of the nine in the ghazal to show some slackness: Zafar Iqbal has used both *jis roz*, "the day," and *kabhi*, "whenever." It is clear that either *jis roz* should be replaced by *agar*, "if," or *kabhi* should be omitted altogether.

9. I was better off, Zafar, without a tune at all,
Never before was my tone a monotone.

This ghazal is one of the rare examples in *Ratb o Yabis* in which Zafar Iqbal has refrained from mixing bawdy or satirical or irreverent *shers* with more "conventional" ones. In his mixing of many kinds of *shers* within a single ghazal Zafar Iqbal resembles Mir, whose most poignant or metaphysically ambitious *shers* often sit in seeming unease with funny or lewd or plain-surface or irreverent ones. It is thus appropriate that in this *maqta'*, Zafar Iqbal should complain of his monotone. Yet even in doing so he uses the adjective *besura*, "tuneless," as a noun, though the correct form is *besurapan*, "tunelessness"—and just for an extra fillip, treats *sur*, "tune," as feminine even though it is masculine.

Yet the *sher* might well go deeper and be a genuine complaint against the failure of the communicative process. I suspect that the common complaint of Mir and Ghalib and other major poets that they can't say much in the beloved's presence is essentially about the general frustration that poets feel in not being quite able to say exactly what they want to say. Shelley spoke of "evanescent visitations which could not be captured,"

but Mir was more down-to-earth:

How difficult it became to write of things of love
I had pen and paper ready but wasn't able to say a thing.

Mir uses *kaha jata*, "saying," which often refers to composing poetry. Ghalib of course was infinitely more metaphorical:

The effort to write poetry is a prisoner of silence
through and through,
The smoke of the guttering lamp is like a soundless chain.

Here again I will not go into the verbal subtleties, but the main point is clear. Modern poets have complained more often about this kind of difficulty, perhaps because they demand more from language. Eliot defended the inaccessibility of modern poetry, and himself lamented in *Four Quartets* that words could come under his sway only when he had no use for them. Eugenio Montale talks about a "twisted syllable, one dead dry as a branch"; nor is there much distance between the "rag and bone shop" of Yeats' heart and the poem "My Pen is Dry" by the young Russian, Voznesensky, who feels degraded because his "soul is mute" and for him "there are no days, there are no lines." Perhaps it is equally appropriate that Zafar Iqbal, who of all modern Urdu poets has ridden the mighty horse of language with the greatest verve and the fullest vigour, should be the one to realize that it is really the horse, and not the rider, who rides. Coleridge, in suspecting that "processes of thought might be carried on independent and apart from spoken and written language," condemned all poets to an eternal feeling of silence. For the poet may think, but it is the language that talks.