Altair Hussain Hali’s Ideas on Ghazal

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The importance of Maulana Altair Husain Hali [Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī] in the evolution of Urdu literature is sufficiently known, and we don’t need to emphasize it here again. It is sufficient to say that his Muqaddama, or ‘Introduction’ (originally intended as a rather long preface to his Divān, published in 1893) was and still partly is considered the modern ars poetica for Urdu poetry. “Hali and Shibliii were the two great literary dictators of their age: writes Dr. Vahid Quraishi in the preface to his valuable re-edition of the Muqaddama published by the Maktaba-e Jadid in Lahore with interesting notes and appendices— they studied the old and new literary criticism and after having clearly fixed the limits of the old frame they tried to pour into it the leaven of Western ideas”. Such first attempts to create a fusion of Eastern and Western ideals in Art I consider extremely interesting both for their theoretical value (nobody can possibly know the intricacies and depths of the Muslim poetical style as much as an oriental poet) and their practical results. From the latter point of view it is sufficient
to say that Hali is considered the renovator of modern style in Urdu and
a bridge between the great Ghalib⁴ and the national Poet-Philosopher
of Muslim India and Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal.⁵

As far as I know, Hali’s Muqaddama was never translated into
any European language, and, since not many students of Persian
Literature and stylists know Urdu. I think it useful to condense and
study the most important passages of Hali’s lengthy “Introduction”
concerning the “renovation” of the classical ghazal. Hali’s Muqaddama
(I follow Dr. Quraishi’s edition quoted in note 1) covers more than 200
pp. in 8’: the part on ghazal consists of 54 pages.

Hali starts saying that the ghazal, together with the rubā’ī and
the qit’a is particularly well adapted to the expression of momentary
and fugacious emotions or ideas brought about by this or that event of
everyday life. This is why a reform (iṣlāḥ) of the ghazal is urgently
needed: the ghazal is moreover extremely popular even among illiterate
people and children. According to Hali those who more than any other
contributed to render the ghazal so popular were the so-called “men of
God” (ahlu’llāh) and esoteric reform (iṣlāḥ) (ṣāhib-i bātin) poets
including Sa’di, Rumi, Amir-i-Khusrau, Hafiz, ‘Iraqi, Maghribi,
Ahmad Jam, etc. Hali however, like many Oriental thinkers of the
modern school, expresses his doubts as to the love that they described
being really majazi.⁶ In any case his opinion is that, especially in Iran,
the majazi love became more and more the generalized subject of the
ghazal style, whereas in Urdu literature not more than half of the
ghazals treat this subject, another good half being devoted to the
description of true love and emotions in a natural and simple way.⁷
The proposed reform of the ghazal includes in his opinion the following four points, which he treats in detail.

1. The range of the love-motifs ought to be extended so as to include not only the real or mystical love of the Leila-Majnun and Shirin-Farhad type, but also the love between God and man, children and parents, brothers and sisters, husband and wife, masters and servants, kings and subjects; love among friends, love of man for his home or town, or country, folk, family and so on.

Concerning this first point of his reform Hali particularly insists on the fact that the new ghazal writer ought to avoid such words as may reveal whether the object of such a generalized love is male or female, as for instance  (a man’s hat),  (turban),  (different men’s coats),  (down on adolescents’ faces),  (the young minstrel),  (the young Magian),  (the young Christian) etc., or, on the other hand,  (spouse),  (a part of a woman’s dress),  (mirror) etc.

Concerning the famous question of the “gender” of the Beloved in ghazals, Hali—in order to save his great classical Iranian and Urdu predecessors from the accusation of homosexuality—maintains that the use of words indicating female dresses or female beauty was considered indecent owing to the old parda custom; so the poets used to speak of their beloved as young boys. This soon became a “style” with the chrisms of classicity, but ought to be absolutely avoided by the new ghazal writer. Actually classical Urdu ghazal-writers made this habit even worse, since the Urdu language—differently from Persian, where no grammatical gender exists—knows the masculine and feminine genders; in this language even the general ambiguity of the Persian style (which Urdu poets imitated) is spoiled, and to the Beloved
the masculine gender is openly applied. Strangely enough the use of the masculine gender was so generalized in Urdu poetry as to be applied even to unmistakably feminine subjects, as e.g. in this verse by Zauq (d. 1854):

[“Oh how fortunate the wasp’s nest in that hole in the wall wherefrom they (evidently pretty girls) were peeping at us!”] Here the subject of “they were peeping” is clearly feminine, but the verb is in the masculine gender.

2. The second important subject of ghazal, after love, is what could be synthetized in the word خَطَّرَات, including both nanacreontic praise of wine, cup-bearers and accessories, and the scornful reproach of Muslim orthodox mullās, faqīhs and ascetics including even praises of kufr, in the most exaggerated ways. This style, according to Hali, ought to be abandoned by the new ghazal writers. It owes its origin to the fact that — the ghazal style having been popularized especially by sufi poets, who criticized partly rightly the hypocrisy of the mullās their innumerable imitators carried this tendency to its extreme limits, often in a quite artificial way. Hali partly accepts (to save his great predecessors from the accusation of kufr) the metaphorical and symbolical interpretation of such verses, quoting Rumi’s justification:
But, in a rather rationalistic and quite exoteric way, he distinguishes between a “just” protest against the hypocrisy of the zuhhād and the mullāhs, like the one embodied in this verse of Zauq:

रूढ़ि तराबः खलु करायें दिखायें
ज्याहाँ कोई आया खुद, इतने निखूं

(“O ascetic! Don’t censure the profligate libertine, what hast thou to do with others’ sins, think rather of thine!”)

where the reproach is addressed to a well-defined evil quality of the reproached, and this other verse of the same author:

्दृढ़ राजा सिया भज ग्वारहिं स्वरूप
जो केस आप जाग से गँगा से गँगा से

(“O Zauq, how nice it is when on the white beard of the shaikh, the wasma is made of hashish and the mahindi of rose-red wine!”)

where the shaikh qua shaikh is reproached and scorned, even if he might possibly be faultless.

3. If a deepening and an extension ought to be achieved by the new, ghazal-writers in the field of love and ḥaṭīṭ, which are the two chief subjects of the classical ghazal, the themes of the new ghazal must acquire a new scope also in other directions. Hali invites the poet to express his feelings of joy and sorrow, repentance, thankfulness, lament, patience, resignation, contentment, trust in God, hate, passion, clemency, justice, wonder, love of his country, social problems etc. In
this point Hali is clearly a forerunner of modern “social” art, which he himself successfully endeavoured to realize especially in his simple and dignified *Musaddas*. He admits that a full realization of such a social art is rather difficult, but, he says, a revolution is now necessary: "Nowadays the situation of the world resembles that of an old tree in which new young sprouts are germinating and old branches are withering away and falling... Old peoples are giving place to young peoples, and this is not like a flood of the Ganges or the Jumna which is only covering a few nearby villages with its waters; no, it is like a great Ocean flood which expands its waters over the entire globe. If one looks at this, and understands it, hundreds of exemplary images will occur to him from morning to night, so that an entire life will not be enough for a poet to describe all their details... What other material could be more interesting than this for *ghazal*-writing?... The ecstasies of love were beautiful for happier times; now that time is gone. The night of pleasure and joy has passed away, the dawn has come”.

New *ghazals* must, in other words, be descriptive of new social and political realities also. And this in a more congruous way too, Hali tells us. He criticizes the well-known incongruity and looseness of the classical *ghazals*, and invites new poets to compose *ghazals* in which e. g. the description of a season of the year, or the grace of a moonlight night or of a forest at spring-time, or the sadness of a cemetery, or the love for one’s country, may be expressed by means of a continuous flow of congruous verses.

The *ghazal*— he says—resembles now those boxes of English sweets where the bonbons are in the most different shapes (round, oblong, rectangular; triangular etc.) but have all one and the same
flavour and taste. To demonstrate this he brings an interesting example from the divān of a contemporary poet, whose name he does not mention: he succeeds in extracting from the ghazals of that divān 23 different ways of expressing the same classical metaphor of the “the rending of the collar” (in despair, but also told of blossoming rosebuds etc.) well known to every student of Persian, Turkish and Urdu poetry. Together with the image he puts other time-worn, ever repeated concepts, which formed the stock-in-trade of every classical ghazal writer, such as etc. etc.

If we concentrate—Hali says—all the concepts used by the classical ghazal writers, leaving apart repetitions and reinterpretations, it will result into something like a long “condensed” ghazal of a few pages including all the themes of the classical style of poetry.

This does not mean, however, that imitation (تَطَییف) has to be absolutely forbidden and avoided. In his opinion imitation is justified only when the imitator fills some gap or perfects or corrects some “defect” of the original. So the famous verse of Hafiz:
but it seems that Hafiz has filled some conceptual gap in Sa‘di’s verse (بیافصرزیمپرتنگامویاتکووکاردیابه) and Naziri expressed the same concept in the following form:

\[
\text{پیریشختمچهلواجیکردهبیافرآ}
\text{نواگرما،نوردهگردنارچریخر}
\]

Hali’s comment on this verse is interesting. He says that though Naziri has not added anything new to the concept, so that it may be said that he vanquished (بیاچصی). Hafiz, he however expresses the concept in so new a style (پایالاروب) that it seems altogether new.

Ghalib however succeeded in improving even on the verse of Hafiz, adding in the second \textit{miṣra} a less explicit but artistically more graphic image of the neglectful friends:

\[
\text{فواکافوشمبازاربرکرطوفالبیر}
\text{گیشهکبی 한اناخیر}
\]

As I consider these comparative aesthetic judgments by an Oriental particularly interesting, I shall quote some more. The Persian poet Shifa‘i of Isfahan in his verse

\[
\text{مشتاقراکوربرسیابسدندست}
\text{پیراهندوزندکوکنانشپاردید}
\]

wanted to express the idea that the ordinary appearance of the Beloved is not sufficient for us, and a \textit{شماط} (‘bride – adorner’) is needed to add something to the beauty of the Beloved, because it is now our turn to have a look at her. Hali discovers in this verse three defects: a) it is not
sahih to call dust a person who is not in love with him (the poet); b) it seems that that person had no original beauty of her own if she needs so much a ہم ہم to be really beautiful and attractive to the poet, and this is not nice; c) Love is born always involuntarily and as by chance; on the contrary the poet seems here to see love as something which can be directed at will.

But look—now Hali says — at the way Ghalib expresses this same concept, though in a quite different way:

زندہ غم من سے اس کے توحید آئیں

ہیں گے اور ستارے اس آسان کے کے

(“Destiny has lost—in this Epoch of His—all his adornments: new stars are now needed for the sky.”)

In this splendid madḥ-verse Ghalib intends to convey the idea that the cosmos has no more ornaments (ہم ہم) for the Praised one: so it shall be necessary that new, “other” stars be created in the sky (to adorn the Praised one, the old stars being insufficient and unworthy). The idea is more or less formally the same (something must be added to adorn the person loved or praised in perfect way) but all the three defects present in the verse of Shifa‘i are here absent: the praised Person is here introduced as already perfect, but even the stars must be renewed to show themselves to him (or her) in a way worthy of his (or her) Perfection! Ghalib perhaps imitated Shifa‘i, but this kind of imitation is not only allowed, it is a recommendable perfectionment.

Let us take now the concept of unfathomable depth of esoteric “meanings” hidden even in the simplest objects of Nature.
‘Urfi of Shiraz says:

جرک نیشان دهنده راز است و گردن
اینی اچ راز است ک معلوم عالم سب

And Ghalib on the same subject:

غرم کنیم سب تو نیا پاب سب رازا
یاف من دی جواب سب پر پد سب سالاک

(“There is no confident here of the melodies of the Arcanum; otherwise where is the veil (قاب) is in reality the true parda of that mysterious Music”.

where parda means both “veil” and “musical tune”.)

Told in plain words, what ‘Urfi meant is that those things which seem well-known to everybody, to the vulgar, are in reality mysteries. Ghalib’s imitation is very clear (even in the outward form, in Ghalib’s verse there is a گردن, exactly corresponding to the گردن of the original Persian) but Ghalib succeeds in “adding” something to that, saying that those things which seem to be impediments to the revealing of the Mystery, are in reality the revealers of the Secret themselves, and at the same time the parda (play on words!) of the arcane music. The original idea is, of course, in its turn, much older than both poets and Hali retraces it in the Qur’an (XVII, 44).

Thus for Hali there is progress in Art, there is a “better” and a “more complete” in aesthetical expression, though this is meant from the point of view of mere content. In order to enrich the stock of classical imagery and to improve on the گردن, the new ghazal-poet
ought to imitate, eventually, not only Persian and Arabic poets, but also European literatures (Hali speaks especially of English literature) in which poetry and even more prose are extremely rich in new and various images, concepts and subjects for poets (this “richness in subjects” seems to impress Hali more than anything else, in comparison with the thematic poverty of the classical Persian Bildschatz). Also Sanscrit and can be highly useful for this purpose.

All this introduces the problem of “poetical translation”, which Hali solves very simply, saying that it is a difficult task but a task worth undertaking: some verses can even be better in translation than in the original, as for instance the following verse of Sauda (d. 1780):

(“There came to my memory the form of His eye, o Sauda; take the cup away from my hand, I am gone!”),

translated from Naziri’s

Criticizing this from the point of view of balāghat, Hali says that the idea of substituting the perfume of the rose with the comparison of the red-wine goblet as the intoxicated eye of the Beloved one is a far more qarīn qiyās and, above all, the az kār shudam of the Persian original is much heavier and out of place in its precision, than
the vague "I am gone", "it is finished with me") of the Urdu translation.

Here are two more examples of “translation better than the original”. Unknown Persian author:

غریب رسول آخرودون امرودون نئ جدید را

Urdu by Khwaja Mir Dard (d. 1785):

نہ گوگلی منہ تمہارا گنرفتاری جاۓ
دوستودو کونکو کھتی مین نے تم پاکرو

(“O friends! Don’t even mention the name of Dard in your assembly, so that your pleasure may not be spoiled!”).

The merits of this “translation” (rather an adaptation) are, according to Hali: a) To have nicely introduced his *takhallus* (ضریب Sorrow) in this verse, shifting it from the *maṭla’* of the ghazal (as it was in the original) to the *maqṭa’*. b) The substitution of گوگلی with گوگلی, thus emphasizing the hyperbole. Moreover گوگلی has in Urdu also meaning of “to call” (especially of a superior calling an inferior): so also the sense of the Persian گوگلی is preserved, but in a more refined way, c) The first گوگلی of the Urdu verse is *lighter* than the second گوگلی of the Persian text, of which it is the rendering, because the Persian گوگلی (آخرودون امرودون نئ جدید را) is a too sharp and absolute statement, whereas the Urdu verse gives the idea “so that one may not say their pleasure is spoiled…”

Sa’di:
Mir (d. 1810):

بیاں کرنے کا ہم خوشت ہم چہ رکبت ہیں کہاہ
ان سے گھی تو اپنے "تھم اسے گھیو چپا ہو کے"

("Those beautiful maidens who adscribe to us as a sin our having them dear—or “loving them”—one ought to ask them “why have you become so dear”?)

Even in this case Hali gives the palm to the Urdu poet-translator (or imitator): the reason he gives is that the question of the second must be unanswerable. Now this is not the case for Sa’di, as, strictly speaking, an answer to the question “why are you so pretty” could perhaps be given, whereas the really unanswerable question is that of Mir, who asks the person dear to him (لا) “Why did you become, or why were you, so dear to me?”

At the end of this paragraph on translation, Hali emphasizes again its utility, stating that the only cause (sic!) of the superiority of the Europeans in literature in modern times is that they did not leave untranslated any of the great works of foreign literary geniuses of all ages.\[15\]

4. But the new ghazal needs a widening of shape still in another field: I mean the linguistic field. Not only its contents but its language too must be renewed. The present classical ghazal—Hali says—utilizes only a very limited Wortschatz. In its centuries-long process of
formation the ghazal created for itself a fixed language: any expression or word strange and foreign to that fixed style was felt as unfamiliar, and rejected. This is one of the causes of the birth of the ṣūfi metaphors, as the ṣūfi poets were compelled to utilize the already codified Wortschatz of the ghazal. It is true that in the first times the Urdu ghazal of the Deccan type used a much wider range of words and expressions (often of a colloquial and natural kind unusual in the classical Persian), but after, in the late Delhi period and still worse in the Lucknow school, the persianization of the lexicon became extreme. It can seem rather curious that Hali (as well as the majority of the Urdu critics of the new school) attributes all the faults connected with a swollen and bombastic style to the Persian influence, whereas this kind of style is generally known in Persia as “Indian style.”

In order to achieve this linguistic and formal renovation Hali recommends attention to the following points:

A) Revolution in ghazal must be gradual. The language of the ghazal must remain familiar also for practical purposes: the vulgar like presently the old language, and we need ghazals first and foremost to influence their ideas. The sudden introduction of unfamiliar and “strange” words, as done by certain contemporary poets, must be avoided: even the language of the Qur’ān made use of metaphors of the ancient classical pre-islamic poetry. Language is more conservative than ideas, a revolution in ideas is not generally followed by an immediate revolution in language. The following paragraph is an interesting example of the cautious revolutionarism of Hali:
“Let us consider that a time has come when the progress of human science has finally demonstrated the falsity of such concepts as the fixity of the earth, the existence of four elements, of a miraculous world-reflecting Cup of Jamshed, of the Water of Life hidden in the land of Darkness, of the etc. The task of the poet is not that of avoiding mentioning such objects any longer, nay, his perfection will consist in declaring and explaining realities, facts and true and natural ideas just by means of those mistaken and unfounded concepts, used as embellishments: they are a magic charm created by the Ancients, a charm which must in no way be broken, otherwise the poet will soon notice that he has lost a powerful spell to captivate the hearts of men.”

This page could be considered—and is in fact—the aesthetic manifesto of the modern Urdu writer, so different in this from the Persian.

In order to inculcate that “truth” Hali quotes numerous instances of well-constructed and efficacious “classical” ghazal-verses in which no perfectionment through new and unfamiliar words is needed. Examples are taken from the divāns of Hafiz, Mir Dard, Sauda, Zauq, Ghalib and Shefta.

I quote only a couple to show the literary taste of Hali: a) Look—Hali says—at the way this very simple and sound concept (): “God dwells in the hut of the poor” can be expressed in a classical form in this verse by Shefta:

نَافَاسُ وَشَهَیدُوْگَن زَرَن سَے کِا حَصُول

وَمَعِیَا بِلَانگ چَنَان ۚہِم رَنَزُ اَیمٗن
(“What is the ultimate use of lanterns and glasses and golden vessels? He abideth where there is no oil for the lamp!”)

b) And here is how Sauda expresses the idea: “those who speak of the ephemeral state of the things of the world are neglectful of their own ephemerality”

(“The rose is laughing on our ephemeral state. But tell me: On whose evanescent Being is the dewdrop weeping?”).

As we see, Hali is far from denying importance to the classical tropes, استعاره، کانن، تبلیغ, etc. He however distinguishes between a minority of objects and situations, poetical in themselves and which need none of the embellishments taught in the treatises of علم ایپان, and the majority of them, which would remain lifeless without a good use of the استعاره etc. But Hali, with his characteristic equilibrium, hates the “bad” metaphors, i.e. those in which the intellectual effort of the poet is too apparent, or the two objects compared are conceptually too far from each other. As for instance this, worthy to be called a پچان (enigma) rather than a comparison, embodied in a verse by Shah Naṣir:

(“The drunken night stole the veil of the Moonshine over the Jaihun river; at dawn the sun began to let the golden goblet run around in the firmament”).
Hali finds that, “stealing the veil of Moonshine” to express the idea of “revealing the beauty of the full Moonshine” is not def, the same reproach is addressed to those poets who compare the sun with an  آئیرگا، the stars with the اکف، the letters of the alphabet with the اپ، the cup with the آپ، etc. In any case the استیارد  Hali rightly remarks, is at the basis of many everyday idioms (کلامات) so that it can be said that the metaphor is not only a living element of poetry, but also of the colloquial language.

B) This section, for us comparatively less interesting, is devoted to a discussion of the real meaning of the terms  and  کمکا، the first translating English idiom, the second used in the sense of the English word colloquial.  کمکا (“to eat pain” i.e. “to be sorrowful”) is an idiom, روئی کمکا (“to eat bread”) is a colloquial expression. The idiom, Hali thinks, renders often poetry “higher” and more efficacious, whereas colloquial expressions are rather unfit for it. Some instances follow (as customary, single verses of poets) as this verse of Mu’min (d. 1851).

کل تم تر چند فریس میں آکسین کے
cum e se bem te to ko afziayiye kya

(“Yesterday when you stole your regards — from me, feigning neglect and disdain—in the assembly of strangers, I was so shameful and confused that the strangers guessed it”).

Here there are at least three idiomatic expressions:  آکسین کے (to steal the eyes, i.e. to pay no attention)  جاتا (lit. “to be lost” i.e. “to become abashed and confused”) and  شا (to guess” as Persian  چکرہ). This simple and idiomatic verse is, according to Hali, better (there
is more in it) than the more persianized verse by Ghalib, from which it was taken:

("Though the style of feigned neglect is the curtain-holder of the secret of Love, I was so confused that he guessed all the matter") in which, however, two of the three above-mentioned idioms are also present.

C) About literary artifices (مناخ and براغ) Hali recommends a natural (this word, in English, تَهِيل recurs very often in the Muqaddama) use of them. In other words they have to come as if spontaneously, as in this verse of Hafiz:

Where, in the contrast درازت کہا درازت where we have a طاشق and in the play of مراعات اخیار a استین with

On the contrary درازت and مناخ are not in good taste in this verse of a “famous poet” (یک مشهور شاعر), probably a contemporary of

("The cat of thy door will tear to pieces the bird of my heart, my body will be gnawed by the mouse of thy nose!").
Here the مارامات آکھر (cat—mouse) is extremely forced and artificial.

Hali also attempts an explanation of the fact that the moderns من لحن (cat—mouse) much more and often more artificially than the ancients فیل (cat—mouse). He says—rather naively indeed—that the moderns saw that some verses of the ancients, in which they had used plays on words, were very much liked by the people, and mistook the cause of this acceptance as due to those plays on words rather than to the forcefullness of expression; and so they began to imitate that part of the ancients’ style. It is also difficult to follow him when he says that the Urdu literature is comparatively safer from such plays on words than the Persian. It depends, evidently, on the historical period chosen for the comparison.

D) The last of Hali’s recommendations for a renovation of the form of ghazal is of a metrical and prosodical character. The new poet—Hali says—ought to avoid the “heavy” غزل (ghazal) and difficult metres سنا (stanza). The rhyme—though a powerful means to embellish poetry—is sometimes too غزل, it imposes too strict limits to fancy, especially when, as in ghazals and especially Urdu ghazals, it is accompanied by the راڈیف. Hali seems to have a special dislike for the راڈیف, or, to put it better, for an excessive generalization of too long راڈیف. Sometimes راڈیف force the poet to rather ridiculous coupling of images, as for instance:

He mentions the fact that European poets—to be rescued from the difficulty of rhymes—adopted the blank verse, but he gives no
judgement on it, though he rather seems to approve of the European system.

Summing up, Hali thinks that a renovation of *ghazal* must be achieved on the line of an amplification of its subjects (عشق، مضاهاه and ترکیب), adding especially social and patriotic themes and avoiding useless imitation from the Ancients. Formally, a gradual revolution in style must be accomplished on the line of enlarging the *Wortschatz* and using metaphors and tropes in a more natural, moderate and simple way; introducing idioms of the common language and avoiding unnatural and cumbersome complications in rhyme and rhythm.

The importance of Hali’s work and personality has been extremely great in Muslim India (he is considered with Ghalib and Iqbal one of the Big Three of Urdu Literature) as he, with both his *Ars Poetica* and his own poems (first and foremost his *Musaddas*) introduced something resembling a Romantic revolution into the classical crystallized Urdu literature. As an Italian I feel him very much akin to some of our Risorgimento poets, so enthusiastically content-conscious but often alas so incapable of understanding the deeper reasons of artistic phenomena. Actually Hali in his long and detailed analysis of the *ghazal* fails to understand fully three points.

a) The only causes of the alleged فُرُوج of European literature is not abundance of translations, nor simply the fact that it is more natural and straightforward etc.

b) That highly interesting artistic phenomenon which is the classical *ghazal*-style, with its imagery, its metaphors, its *Leit-motive* has deeper roots than those imagined by the over-simplifying mind of
Hali (we saw above some rather childish “historical” interpretations of the reasons of metaphors etc.)

c) A renovation of the ghazal, from the point of view of “natural art” from which Hali seems to start, is possible only through the abolition of the classical ghazal itself; classical ghazal is a highly unnatural form of Art.

We observe:

Regarding point a): Modern European lyrics is different from the classical Muslim ghazal-style chiefly in that European poetry is not based on a bidimensional decorative visual play, but has a dynamic dimension which seems unknown to classical Muslim style. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate what I say (of course to connoisseurs of the classical Persian ghazal only: a tentative description of what ghazal is would be out of place here). Let us take e. g. Rilke’s verses:

Uraltes Wehn vom Meer

welches weht

nur wie für Urgestein,

lauter Raum

reißend von weit herein . . .
That “lauter Raum reißend von weit herein” is an action totally absurd for an Oriental ghazal-poet. Somebody would object perhaps that even an action as that described by Hafiz,

دوش رویم که می‌گذشته کو با هم اندازه

is equally absurd. But it is very easy to realize how different the two absurdities are. The fact of angels knocking at the tavern door is simply a moral absurdity, an exaggeration (a mubalaga, to use the well-known technical term) whereas in Rilke’s expression a new physical plane, as it were, is introduced to suggest a new emotion. This “curving”, this possibility of moving not only on a linear-visual plane but also freely in other directions, is what renders modern European poetry so rich in new images and subjects (a fact which Hali rightly remarks without explaining its deeper reasons).

The same could be said of this other verse by the same German poet:

Der Heilige hob das Haupt und das Gebet
fiel wie ein Helm zurück von seinem Haupte…

It is quite improbable that to an Oriental ghazal-writer would ever occur the idea (for him) extremely strange of comparing a “prayer” to a “helmet”. What unites the two terms of comparison in the European poet is a common action, in the Oriental poet it is a common (visual) form. It is clear that a comparatively limited number of things have a more or less clear common form, whereas the number of things to which the fertile imagination of a poet can give a common field of action is practically infinite. xxvi So it happens that though oriental
metaphors are often very strange to our taste, if we go deeper, we will easily see that a certain reasonable similarity of shape, of static linear form between the two objects compared is always preserved: so the moon is compared with a face, or possibly a omelette, or even, as we saw above, a nose to a mouse, but the moon is never brought into action, in a mythical way, as a personified entity, e.g., walking with its (or her) feet on the clouds etc.

To point b): Actually we have to look for the reasons of this difference deeper, into that metaphysical background of Art which is, for the ghazal-style, a sort of a visual antimythical neo-platonic background. So when Shelley sings, in his wonderful ode *The Cloud*, of the moon among the clouds:

…that orbéd maiden, with white fire laden

whom mortals call the Moon,

glides glimmering o’er my fleece-like floor

by the midnight breezes strewn;

and wherever the heat of her unseen feet

(which only the Angels hear)

may have broken the woof of my tent’s thin roof

the stars peep behind her and peer…

he is instinctively still connected with a pagan mythologizing world. Every orientalist knows how many thousands of ghazal verses include metaphors and comparisons having as chief ingredient the moon, but I
think everybody will agree when I say that nowhere in the infinite number of classical *divāns* we could find such a moon-image as in Shelley’s *Cloud*. The moon breaking the woof of the cloud's tent by the gentle touch of her feet is an absurdity to the *ghazal* writer — because the moon has no feet! The moon can only be compared with more or less round objects, or luminous objects, or possibly yellow objects, or, when it is *hilāl* with ships and vessels, but cannot walk: this, for a *ghazal*-writer would amount, consciously or not, to *notdef*. And all this, we would add, cannot be renewed or reformed without in the same time renewing or reforming neo-platonic Islam itself.

To point c): So the logical issue of Hali’s pleading for a “natural” reform of poetry would be the automatic annihilation of the *ghazal* itself and ultimately (though he is prudently opposed to all “excesses”) the introduction of that simple *blank-verse*-style which is now attempted also in Muslim countries by some modern progressive writers. Hali would mark so the starting point of an evolution in Art quite different from that initiated, inside the *ghazal*-style, in a masterly way, by Ghalib. The idea often expressed by Eastern and Western historians of Urdu literature that Hali is a link in the evolution Ghalib-Hali-Iqbal is only partially true. The real renovator of the *ghazal* style is Ghalib, who succeeds in this in a way quite far from the *natural style* adovated by Hali (Ghalib is one of the perhaps *less natural* Urdu poets). When Ghalib writes verses like

\[
\text{“they see the Road as a pulsating vein in the body of the Desert”}
\]
"At every step I see the distance from the Station deeper and clearer: deserts have run away under my gait") or when in some perfect verses in his he expresses his dislike for the “fixed” and eternal paradise of lights of the traditional religions, he shows both a complete mastery of the old style and a taste for dynamic images unknown to his predecessors. Of course Ghalib’s system for the reform of ghazal is the “narrow path”: Ghalib is one of the most difficult poets of the Urdu-Persian literature. Hali, as a romantic oversimplifier (his Musaddas could be translated by an able versifier into European stanzas with great ease) is rather in sharp contrast with Ghalib. The core of all his Ars Poetica could be poetically summarized with the following verses taken from his Divân:

If poetry is not charming (داکرپ) don’t be sad,
regret you must feel if poetry is not heart-melting (دکردار).
The entire world can be allured by Art,
when it comes from your sincerity (سادگی) not from play (زکه)
If in thy personality (داخل) there is the pearl of Truth (صبر)
Time will praise thee spontaneously (پیمان)
Gone are the days in which Lying was the faith of Poets,
don’t pray any more with thy face turned towards that Qibla!
I don’t know however of any important study of Hali by European Orientalists, who generally devote to Urdu literature an amount of work far inferior to the importance of this Muslim language, written and spoken by a far greater number of persons than Arabic itself. Especially modern Urdu literature — with personalities as those of Ghalib (d. 1869), Hali (d. 1914), M. Iqbal (d. 1938), Faiz A. Faiz (a living progressive poet presently in jail in Pakistan) etc. — is a subject of study perhaps more repaying than that of contemporary Persian literature. A summary bibliography on Hali (see Dr. Vahid Quraishi’s edition of the Mgaddama quoted below) is the following:


There are of course numerous articles on him (often rather poor) in Urdu literary magazines. Especially valuable that of the magazineorgan of the Anjuman-i taraqqi-i Urdu (Karachi, April, 1952); see also the Hali Number of the periodical نند (Dec. 1935) and the article devoted to Hali in the “Personalities Number” (شمعہت پر) (Lahore, 1954) by E. G. Browne.

It constitutes the second number of a splendidly printed (in movable characters, which is still rather an exception in Pakistan and Muslim India) collection of “Urdu Classics” (Urdu Klasiki Adab). The Maktaba-e-Jadid is one of the best new publishing houses of Lahore, and gives particular attention to young and progressive writers.

It is really astonishing (and another proof of the scarce value wrongly attributed by European Orientalists to Urdu literature) to see that no European Orientalist— at my notice at least—devoted a monograph to this poet, in my opinion the greatest Muslim poet of the XIX century.

Hali in his “Life of Sa’di” (*Hayat-i Sa’di*), pp. 188-192) quotes passages to demonstrate that the Persian poet did often exactly the contrary, i.e. adorned with the garment of *majāzi* love a real (*haqiqi*) love.

This idea of Hali, together with that expressed by him some pages further (see notes 17 and 23) amounts to say that in general Persian poetry is more artificial than Urdu poetry, and can hardly be shared by a knower of Persian literature in its historical development. Actually—seen from an Indian perspective—(the maximum of Persian influence on India being exercised in the Mughal period, XV-XIX cc.), this opinion can become understandable, if not approvable. Persia influenced India, just at the beginning and during the course of its literary and moral decadence. So the so-called Indian style of the Persian poets of the Mughal court was born, a style famous for its bombast and exaggerated subtleties and bad taste. This style on its turn influenced the Urdu literature of the Delhi and Lucknow periods, while the original Deccan Urdu was one of great simplicity and freshness.

An article on *notdef* in classical Persian and Urdu poetry can be read in a recent number of the Pakistani literary magazine *notdef* (Aftab Ahmad. *notdef* pp. 10-24 of n. 1, s. d. but prob. 1954).

This famous *Musaddas* of Hali (so known by antonomasy. Its title is *‘Ebb and Tide of Islam*) represents really something new in the classical Muslim literature, both for the dignified simpleness of style (sometimes even falling into shallowness) and for its epic inspiration (rather rare in Islamic literatures).

This verse of Ghalib is quoted more than once in the *Muqaddama* and evidently Hali liked that image very much: he openly imitated it just in the first stanzas of his *Musaddas*.


Hali did not know English: what he knew of English literature and literary taste was through translations or through oral information obtained from English knowing friends, See Vahid Quraishi op. cit., p. 67 ff.

By *notdef* is meant here *lalo sensa*, perhaps including all the post-Sancritic literature in Western Hindi.

Naziri (d. 1612-13) is one of the numerous Persian poets (he was of Nishapur) who migrated to Mughal India. He still enjoys a far wider popularity in India and Pakistan.
than in Persia. For a *fathām* (ff. 268v-269r) by Nazirī Iqbal (see his *Maqārah* p. 188) would have given all the reign of Jamshed.

This and other instances that we have already remarked (e.g. the reasons given for the “homosexual” form of classical ghazal poetry etc.) are good examples of the illuministic naiveness which remained until recently a characteristic of certain Muslim progressive thinkers. This is rightly and exactly admitted and emphasized by Dr. Quraishi in his already quoted and really remarkable introduction to his re-edition of the *Muqaddama* (pp. 95-96) where he also criticizes the *samāl* (fāli li awr ʿaṣaṣnān) (“logical misunderstandings and confusions”) of the first Muslim modernists of India such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad and other collaborators of his magazine تَثْبِیع الافْتَهَاقِی.


See note 7.

This shows another basic component of Hali’s aesthetic thought: he is clearly in favour of the poetry à thèse, and against the concept of *āthāb* ( exter “Art for Art’s sake”). This is also very clear from the verses quoted at the end of this paper.

It seems to me that contemporary Iranian poetry did not yet succeed in reaching a formal and contentistic equilibrium between classical heritage and modernism. It oscillates between pure aesthetism and total imitation of some kind of Western revolutionary art.

All these matters too I consider known to my readers. Otherwise consult the pp. 19ff. of the above quoted *History* of Browne.

A poet of Delhi (d. 1810) famous for his elaborate style.

See note 13.

See note 7. Hali’s criticism of Persian poetry and his appreciation of Arabic and Hebrew poetry (this last known by him in translations from the Bible), have been inherited by the younger generations of Indo-Muslim thinkers (including Iqbal). During my recent visit to Pakistan I had occasion to remark how much the study of Persian language and culture has lost ground in that country, whereas the study of Arabic is much more fostered. For Hali Arabic (especially old Arabic) and Hebrew poetry possessed in high degree a quality which is, in his opinion, of first rate importance in poetry i.e. مَرْحَب (passion) (See *Muqaddama* pp. 160 ff.). For him perhaps less clearly and less consciously, for others (especially Iqbal) in a more determinate way, a return to Arabic “passion” means a revaluation of Semitic absolute monotheism as against the new-platonic “deterioration” of Islam typical of Persian aesthetical taste.

What Hali wanted poetry to be, could perhaps expressed by those famous words of Milton (*Tractate of Education* ed. Morris, London 1895, p. 18)… poetry…being… more simple, sensuous and passionate” words enthusiastically approved by
romantics as Coleridge as a fitting definition of Poetry. Hali indirectly knew something of those Miltonian ideas of poetry.

Actually, though Hali here and there states that form (الدل) and contents (السَّمَيْن) are in the relation of body (الجسم) to soul (النِّفَاس), he more often remains attached to the old canon of Muslim literary criticism, which sees rather this relation as one of body to “garment” (اللبَن). His sharp and artificial distinction of الدل and السَّمَيْن is one of the greatest handicaps of Hali a literary criticism and shows him partly still a follower of the classical “decorative” taste.


One of the consequences of all this is that an Urdu poet can write poetry in a foreign language (as Persian) more easily than, say, a German poet in Italian or vice-versa. It is interesting that Hali had remarked that in his book on Ghalib (ذوالفقار p. 388 ff.) where he maintains that one of the differences between European and Asiatic (sic!) art is that the first aims at “interpretation of Nature” (القدْسْرالنِّفَاء), the second is a purely verbal perfectionment—brought to extreme degrees of الگو—is one of a certain given world of images (those first “invented” by the حُصُم). In this way Hali says: for an Asiatic poet it is not so difficult as for a European to compose poetry in a foreign language (as Ghalib masterly did in Persian).