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The Sky, the Road, the Glass of Wine: On Translating Faiz

MANY of us have tried to translate Urdu poetry into English. In fact there are more and more of us nowadays, which is an encouraging sign for the future. But there are all too few chances for mutual discussion or for learning from each other's experiences. I want to suggest some thinking points for us all—what can (and can't) we reasonably expect to achieve in a translation? What kind of problems are solvable, and what kind are probably not?

My own experience started with a great desire to translate classical Urdu *ghazal*. I was always looking around for clues to how it could be done. The search was a frustrating one, but I was young, naïve, and hopeful. For various reasons, I did not like most of the translations that I saw. But could I do any better myself? I was not interested in making technically accurate translations that sounded awful in English and/or did no real justice to the original. Nor was I interested in producing free “transcreations” that used the Urdu originals merely as jumping-off points for new English poems. I read some translation theory, but I found that it tended to be either extremely abstract and philosophical, or else grounded on specific successes in other languages that were not easy to emulate in Urdu. If practical advice was offered, it was often just common-sensical (the translator was urged, for example, to respond to the needs of the intended audience).

So I began to think about the whole process in quite concrete terms. Naturally (to me at least), I began by asking myself what sort of features of a poem were more “translatable” than others. One obvious choice: formal features that could be replicated in English. And of all such formal features, repetition was surely the easiest and the least problematical. So, since I wanted above all to work on Ghālib, I began to look for ways I

could translate *ghazals* and preserve the *radif*. Some *ghazals* obviously had eminently preservable *radifs*: Mīr's "main nashē mēn hūn," for example, or Mōmin's "tumbēn yād hō ke na yād hō," or Ghālib's "jal gayā" or "mauj-e sharāb." In a few such cases, I thought I had some limited success.¹ But most *ghazals*, of course, had unpreservable *radifs*, or sometimes none at all. And the further difficulties of multivalent "meaning-creation" (*ma'nī āfrīnī*) and wordplay kept thwarting my best efforts to translate Ghālib, the "difficult" poet, the one on whom my heart was set.

When I looked at modern poets, however, I felt a bit more hopeful. Since modern Urdu poets so often make a point of avoiding the traditional kinds of complex wordplay, multivalent meanings, subtle allusions, and so on, there tends to be less to lose: starkness, simplicity, deliberate prosiness, colloquial language seem to travel so much better across the language barrier. Moreover, *nazms* as a genre travel better than *ghazals*, since they usually operate in units of thought larger than the two-line *she'r*, and create their own contexts rather than requiring the reader to bring and use so much prior knowledge of the tradition. Thus even when modern *nazms* are complex and subtle (as the best ones often are), they tend to require less background on the part of the reader. The result has been that the poetry I've translated² has mostly been modern, and has mostly consisted of *nazms*.

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Of all modern poets, in practice the inescapable, indispensable one is Faiz. He is generally perceived as the hinge between the classical and modern *ghazal*; he is widely known, loved, and even revered. Compared to his great contemporaries Nūn Mīm Rāshid and Mīrājī, he has been by far the most amply translated: at least five translators have produced whole English volumes of his work, and he appears in countless anthologies. Partly because of this lavish and often high-quality set of translations, I never added my own two cents, though I have studied and taught Faiz's poetry for years.

I first came to know Faiz through Victor Kiernan's very helpful book

¹Some of these were published as "Two Ghazals" and "Stanzas from Ghālib" in *New Letters* 51. 4 (Summer, 1985): 126–30.

²*A Listening Game: Poems by Saqi Farooqi* (London: Lokamaya Publications, 1987) and, with Asif Aslam, *An Evening of Caged Beasts: Seven Post-Modernist Urdu Poets* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

(which is now long out of print, alas, though I am trying to get it reprinted). Of all the poems Kiernan included, my eye fell on one in particular that seemed born for translation. What a pleasure it was to read it and think how the translation might be done! Here is the poem that seemed to me so relatively translatable:

Raṅg hai Dil kā Mirē

- (1) *Tum na ā'ē thē tō har čīz vahī thī ke jō hai*
- (2) *Āsmān ḥadd-e naẓar, rāh guẓar rāh guẓar, shīsha-e ma'ē shīsha-e ma'ē*
- (3) *Aur ab shīsha-e ma'ē, rāh guẓar, raṅg-e falak*
- (4) *Raṅg hai dil kā mirē, "khūn-e jigār hōnē tak"*
- (5) *Čampa'ī raṅg kabhī rāḥat-e dīdār kā raṅg*
- (6) *Surma'ī raṅg ke hai sā'at-e bēzār kā raṅg*
- (7) *Zard pattōn kā, khas-o-khār kā raṅg*
- (8) *Surkh phūlōn kā dahaktē hū'ē gulzār kā raṅg*
- (9) *Zahr kā raṅg, labū raṅg, shab-e tār kā raṅg*
- (10) *Āsmān, rāh guẓar, shīsha-e ma'ē*
- (11) *Kō'ī bhīgā hū'ā dāman, kō'ī dukhī hū'ī rag*
- (12) *Kō'ī har lahẓa badaltā hū'ā ā'īna hai*
- (13) *Ab jō ā'ē hō tō thahrō ke kō'ī raṅg, kō'ī rut, kō'ī shai*
- (14) *Ēk jagah par thahrē,*
- (15) *Phīr sē ik bār har ik čīz vahī hō jō hai*
- (16) *Āsmān ḥadd-e naẓar, rāh guẓar rāh guẓar, shīsha-e ma'ē shīsha-e ma'ē*

For purposes of discussion, I give the poem here in the definitive form in which it appears in Faiẓ Aḥmad Faiẓ's *kulliyāt*, *Nuskhahā-e Vafā*, with spacing and punctuation exactly as in the Urdu.³

I was encouraged by the very marked formal structure of the poem; anyone who looks at the Urdu will surely see it immediately. Most obviously, line (2) and line (16)—the final line—are exactly the same, and each consists of triple pairs: “sky limit-of-sight, road road, glass of wine glass of wine.” Within the poem, moreover, these three pairs form basic organizational elements. Line (3) alludes to them in reverse order (altering one for the sake of a crucial rhyme), and line (4) links them to the title of the poem. Line (10) repeats them yet again, and lines (11) and (12) implicitly turn sky, road, and glass of wine into a wet garment-hem, an aching vein, and a mirror changing every moment. Thus by the time they

³(Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1986), pp. 365–6.

are so starkly repeated in the last line, the trinity of sky, road, and glass of wine have formed an evocative, if deliberately elliptical, framework for the poem. I felt that they were a gift from God (or Faiz) to the translator.

Here are the first lines and the last lines of four translations of this poem. I am going to label them A through D, in chronological order; the key will be found in the Appendix.

- (A) Before you came, all things were what they are—
 The sky sight's boundary, the road a road,
 The glass of wine a glass of wine;
 ...
 And all things once again be their own selves,
 The sky sight's bound, the road a road, wine wine.
- (B) Before you came things were just what they were:
 the road precisely a road, the horizon fixed,
 the limit of what could be seen,
 a glass of wine was no more than a glass of wine.
 ...
 This time things will fall into place;
 the road can be the road,
 the sky nothing but sky;
 the glass of wine, as it should be, the glass of wine.
- (C) Before you came,
 things were as they should be:
 the sky was the dead-end of sight,
 the road was just a road, wine merely wine.
 ...
 Stay. So the world may become like itself again:
 so the sky may be the sky,
 the road a road,
 and the glass of wine not a mirror, just a glass of wine.
- (D) Before you came, everything was what it is—
 the sky, vision-bound
 the pathway, the wine-glass.
 ...
 and once again everything may become what it was—
 the sky, vision-bound, the pathway, the wine-glass.

It is not hard to see that each of these translations obscures Faiz's

careful structure of elegant, slightly oblique, paired repetitions. Though (A) preserves strong similarities, only in (D) can the reader guess that the second and final lines of the original might be *totally* identical—and (D) doesn't reflect Faiz's repetition of the three items at all. Moreover, (D) has the problem that "vision-bound" is most naturally read in English as "bound by vision" or "bound for vision" rather than "the boundary of vision." Both (B) and (C) introduce a moralizing note: (B) speaks of "the glass of wine, as it should be, the glass of wine," and (C) of how "things were as they should be"; the Urdu offers no hint of any such "oughtness." Thus the translators either overlook or consciously ignore the very marked, and conspicuously translatable, formal structure that Faiz has given to the poem.

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Faiz's careful—and carefully unexplained—set of correspondences in lines 10–12 suffers the same kind of damage. Loosely linking his trinity of items, as a group, to a second set of three items, Faiz says:

- (10) *Āsmān, rāh guẓar, shīsha-e ma'ē*
 (11) *Kō'ī bhīgā hū'ā dāman, kō'ī dukh'tī hū'ī rag*
 (12) *Kō'ī har lahẓa badaltā hū'ā ā'īna hai*

Sky, road, glass of wine
 is some wet garment-hem, some aching vein,
 some mirror changing every moment

Here is how the translators deal with it:

- (A) Sky, highroad, glass of wine—
 The first a tear-stained robe, the next a nerve
 Aching, the last a mirror momentarily altering....
- (B) As for the sky, the road, the cup of wine:
 one was my tear-drenched shirt,
 the other an aching nerve,
 the third a mirror that never reflected the same thing.
- (C) And the sky, the road, the glass of wine?
 The sky is a shirt wet with tears,
 the road a vein about to break,
 and the glass of wine a mirror in which

the sky, the road, the world keep changing.

- (D) The sky, the pathway, the wine-glass—
 some tear-stained robe, some wincing nerve,
 some ever-revolving mirror.

Since the translators do not take care to preserve the unmediated exact repetitions of these three crucial items throughout the poem, they cannot get the maximum effect from a passage like this. (D) is the closest to the Urdu, though “wincing” is a facial expression and thus applies to people rather than nerves, “ever-revolving mirror” sounds like a light-house fixture rather than a mirror that actually “changes” at every moment (as does the surface of a glass of wine), and “wine-glass” could easily be an empty glass, rather than a full one such as would create a mirror in its liquid surface.

Apart from (D), the other three all feel the need to give the reader extra prompting: (A) through explaining that the “first” is one thing, the “next” another; (B) through enumerating “one,” “the other,” and “the third”; (C) through actually making the identifications explicit (“The sky is...” and so on). They thus link the three items to their three metaphorical counterparts in a flatter, more pedestrian way than Faiz does. It is easy to imagine their reason for doing so: it might not be entirely evident to the reader that these three new items were meant to correspond one-for-one to the three items in the line before, so it would be better to clarify it a bit.

Yet this whole “clarification” process, it seems to me, is a fix for a problem that could have been avoided in the first place. Faiz has set up a structure in his Urdu poem that cues any reasonably alert reader to make exactly these identifications. It is no harder for the reader to do this kind of thing in English than to do it in Urdu; English poets routinely expect much more difficult feats than this from their readers. No special cultural background or baggage is involved here—only a genuine, close attentiveness to the language of the poem as it develops. Only because the translators have not reproduced Faiz’s careful and systematic formal structure in English, although they easily could have, do they have to insert artificial clues and “helps” for their readers—and thus in every case make the poem simpler and more prosy, less fluid and mysterious, than the original.

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There are legitimate problems too, of course, that the translators

face—problems that cannot be resolved merely by replicating a formal structure. One such problem is the translation of “*bhīgā hū’ā dāman*.” No doubt the sense of “*dāman*” as “garment-hem,” meaning something like the trailing edge of a long robe, is clumsy to express in English, and the classical Persian-Urdu idiom of a “wet garment-hem” as a sign of pollution or sinfulness (cf. *tar-dāmanī* vs. *pāk-dāmanī*) does not really come through in English very well. All the translators seem to have decided, however, that the wetness on the garment-hem is that of tears. I don’t know of any reason in the Urdu to make such an explicit identification.

If anything, to see the sky as a dirty, stained, bedraggled garment-hem, a garment that has been trailing in the mud, a sign of sin and pollution, seems much more in keeping with Faiz’s poem. After all, in the poem there are clear references to moods of exaltation, as well as blood and poison, and no references at all to tears—much less to the kind of endless weeping that would drench a garment. In fact Faiz is not at all a lachrymose poet: when you think of the range of moods he describes in his poems, it is hard to come up with many examples of tears, and easy to find situations in which tears and grieving have been emphatically rejected in favor of more meditative or politically inspirational moods.

Moreover, (B) has decided that the tear-wet garment is “my tear-drenched shirt,” (C) describes it as “a shirt wet with tears”; there’s no warrant in the poem, however, for turning the sky or a robe or a garment-hem into a “shirt,” much less “my” shirt. The sky, after all, is much more like a spread-out cloak or other long flowing garment, than it is like a shirt, so that the altered metaphor becomes much less effective. And since the lover’s tears in the *ghazal* world tend most often to be tears of blood, the vision of a possibly blood-drenched garment would rise involuntarily to the traditionally-trained reader’s eye. This association of ideas is another reason Faiz is unlikely to have wanted us to think of the sky primarily as wet with (bloody) tears. Translations (B) and (C) have turned an image of cosmic bleakness—the sky as a stained, polluted cloak—into a piece of personal emotional expression—the sky as a shirt wet with tears (presumably shed by the wearer). In the process, they have replaced Faiz’s ambiguity—he pointedly does not tell us what the sky is wet with—with an explicit piece of (pseudo-)information.

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If we look at the middle part of Faiz’s poem, we see a separate movement of thought, one that involves the basic three items (sky, road, glass of

wine) in an intense play of colors:

- (3) *Aur ab shīsha-e ma'ē, rāh guzār, raṅg-e falak*
- (4) *Raṅg hai dil kā mirē, "khūn-e jīgar hōnē tak"*
- (5) *Čampa'ī raṅg kab'ī rāhat-e dīdār kā raṅg*
- (6) *Surma'ī raṅg ke hai sā'at-e bēzār kā raṅg*
- (7) *Zard pattōñ kā, khas-o-khār kā raṅg*
- (8) *Surkh p^hūlōñ kā dahaktē hū'ē gulzār kā raṅg*
- (9) *Zabr kā raṅg, lahū raṅg, shab-e tār kā raṅg*

In lines (5) through (9), we see that the word “*raṅg*,” “color,” is repeated no fewer than nine times, three of them in the final line. This repetition is almost as conspicuous and obtrusive in Urdu as it would be in English; it goes well beyond the creation of end-rhymes, and plainly represents a deliberate, emphatic effect that the poet is creating. Here is how the translators render lines (5) through (9):

- (A) Now golden, as the solace of meeting is,
Now grey, the livery of despondent hours,
Or tint of yellowed leaves, of garden trash,
Or scarlet petal, a flowerbed all ablaze:
Colour of poison, colour of blood, or shade
Of sable night.

- (B) your eyes gold
as they open to me, slate the color
that falls each time I lost all hope.

With your advent roses burst into flame:
you were the artist of dried-up leaves, sorceress
who flicked her wrist to change dust into soot.
You lacquered the night black.

- (C) the grey of your absence, the color of poison, or thorns,
the gold when we meet, the season ablaze,
the yellow of autumn, the red of flowers, of flames,
and the black when you cover the earth
with the coal of dead fires.

- (D) Sometimes the golden tinge, sometimes the hue of the joy of seeing
you
sometimes ashen, the shade of the dreary moment—

the colour of yellow leaves, of thorn and trash,
 of the crimson petals of the flower-beds aglow,
 the tint of poison, of blood, of sable night.

Even without a detailed discussion, it's easy to see that all the translations have avoided Faiz's incantatory repetition of the word "color."

Perhaps the translators thought "color" in English could not be as evocative as "*rang*" in Urdu? It is easy to sympathize with them, and yet the attempt could have been an interesting one. It seems to me that the translators didn't trust the English-reading audience to like what Faiz actually did in this passage. But what is unlikable about it? Incantatory, rhythmic repetitions are not exactly unknown or powerless in English poetry—talented translators like these might have had a go at recreating Faiz's actual effects in English. Instead, however, they have let that opportunity pass.

In line (5), moreover, all four translations take *rāḥat-e dīdār*, "comfort of vision," the sight of something very pleasant, to mean meeting with the beloved; this is one possible interpretation, but it still involves replacing the carefully ambiguous Urdu with a pseudo-specificity that is in fact misleading. For we notice that line (5)'s apparent opposite in line (6), *sā'at-e bēzār*, "a time-interval of disgust/distaste," pointedly avoids equating such a time with separation from the beloved (although translation (C), on its own responsibility, makes this equation as well). Faiz, as is his wont, is being elliptical here, leaving it for the reader to assign a meaning to these moods. There is no "you" in the Urdu—only the rhythmic enumeration of wildly changing dark and blazing colors and moods. Versions (B) and (C) have even depicted this "you" as an active agent, responsible for creating the color-changes: in Faiz's Urdu, it's clear that the lover lives in his own mind, undergoing wild but private shifts in mood; but in (B) and (C) the lover has been turned into a sort of helpless victim: the Svengali-like beloved is actively manipulating his universe.

To varying degrees, all the translations have simply remade the passage, eliminating Faiz's incantatory repetitions and artificially "clarifying" his carefully maintained ambiguities into explicit, conventional phases in a love affair. The Faiz of the translations is much simpler and more straightforward than the real one. The changes tend to obscure what Faiz was doing in the poem.

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And what was Faiz doing in the poem? The best evidence, I submit, is to

be found in these two lines:

- (3) *Aur ab shīsha-e ma'ē, rāh guzar, raṅg-e falak*
 (4) *Raṅg hai dil kā mirē, "khūn-e jigar hōnē tak"*

The punctuation is Faiz's, including of course the conspicuous quotation marks around the latter half of line (4). The quotation marks surround a phrase from a famous *she'r* of Ghālib's; and lines (3) and (4), like ten of the sixteen lines in Faiz's *nazm*, are in the same meter that Ghālib used for his *she'r*. And in this one case, the poet substitutes for his otherwise invariable *āsmān*, "sky," the phrase *raṅg-e falak*, "the color of the heavens," which both introduces the key term *raṅg*, and creates an eye-catching rhyme (*falak, tak*).

Faiz was a notable Ghālib-lover, of course; the titles of two of his collections of poetry, *Naqsh-e Faryādī* (into which he inserted the *izāfat*) and *Dast-e Tah-e Saṅg* (from which this poem comes), were phrases from famous verses of Ghālib's. In this case, the original *she'r* is:

Āshiqī ṣabr ṭalab aur tamannā bētāb
Dil kā kyā raṅg karūn khūn-e jigar hōtē tak⁴
 Lover-hood, endurance-demanding; and longing, restless—
 What color/state would I make of the heart, until it becomes blood
 of the liver?

Ghālib's now-archaic *hōtē tak* has been modernized, by Faiz and almost everybody else, to the current usage *hōnē tak*. And my clumsily literal translation at least shows the way in which Faiz's line—*Raṅg hai dil kā mirē, "khūn-e jigar hōnē tak"*—is a direct answer to Ghālib's question. Ghālib poses the question, What color/state would I cause my heart to be in, how would I manage it, caught as I am between passionate longing and forced endurance, both equally inescapable parts of the lover's situation? Faiz answers, "It's the color of my heart," and embodies the answer in a poem full of vividly shifting heart-colors.

Faiz's title itself, in fact, repeats this phrase: "It's the Color of My Heart." Translation (A) rebaptizes the poem as "Before You Came"—a translation of the first phrase in line (1)—and (B) and (C) follow its lead. Version (D) calls the poem "The Colour of the Moment," with even less

⁴Mirzā Asadu 'l-Lāh Khān Ghālib, *Divān-e Ghālib*, Ḥāmid 'Alī Khān, ed. (Lahore: Punjab University, 1969), p. 63.

textual warrant. Thus the translations all deny their readers a piece of important knowledge that the poet obviously meant for them to have: the knowledge that this single phrase embedded in the poem was to be given special importance in interpreting it. Did the translators gain anything through their retitling that was as valuable as what they lost?

The title-phrase itself, which forms the first half of line (4), calls our attention to the second half of line (4), the directly quoted phrase of Ghālib's: *khūn-e jigar hōnē tak*, "until [it] becomes blood of the liver." This phrase is to be interpreted in the light of *ghazal* physiology: the heart constantly loses blood—because of its numerous wounds and lacerations, and because the lover weeps tears of blood; in the meantime, fresh blood is made in the liver. Thus the heart is an emblem of wild self-consuming passion, and the liver an emblem of fortitude, discipline, endurance. There is also an evocative suggestion of the idiom *khūn-e jigar pīnā*, "to drink the blood of the liver," with its wonderfully suitable range of meanings: "To suppress (one's) feelings, restrain (one's) emotion, or anger, or grief, etc.;—to consume (one's own) life-blood; to vex or worry (oneself) to death; to work (oneself) to death."⁵

Ghālib's verse, in short, asks how the lover should manage his unbearable, mutually contradictory needs both for wild expression of passion, and at the same time for endurance—which means among other things a kind of stoical suffering in silence. The first line states the dilemma, and the second asks the question, while also making it clear that the question is only a short-term one. For one only has to ask this question, and to worry about a color/mood (*rañg*) for one's heart, *khūn-e jigar hōnē tak*—until the heart turns completely into liver-blood, until it is ground down between the two millstones of passion and suppression and becomes a mere quivering blob of blood. The single idiomatic expression "to drink the blood of the liver" carries, as we have seen, the whole range of meanings: one may simultaneously "suppress (one's) feelings" and "vex or worry (oneself) to death" for only a relatively short time, because the process itself requires that one "consume (one's own) life-blood."

To make the liver a poetic organ in English is a tall order. How have the translators dealt with this complex, multivalent, virtually untranslatable allusion?

⁵John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī, and English* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 497.

- (A) all have taken
The hues of this heart ready to melt into blood—
- (B) With you the world took on the spectrum
radiating from my heart:
- (C) Now everything is like my heart,
a color at the edge of blood:
- (D) everything bears the colour of my heart
till all melts into blood.

In all the versions, the heart-liver opposition, so central to what both Ghālib and Faiz were thinking about, drops out entirely. Well, since nobody can really translate Ghālib anyway—as I have been gradually and painfully realizing over the years—why should I be surprised if this complex phrase proves un-conveyable? I as a translator certainly can't do it justice either. I also agree, in literary contexts, with the translators' omission of a scholarly footnote that would identify the phrase as borrowed from Ghālib (though Faiz, through his quotation marks, made a point of his borrowing). In cases like this all translators encounter, I would say, genuine, legitimate, essentially insuperable difficulties. They might as well go ahead and "transcreate" as best they can.

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Looking at the larger designs of the translations, we can see a tendency—especially in (B) and (C)—to increase the presence of the "you" in the poem, and to turn the poem into something more like a familiar kind of romantic lyric in English. I would argue that, on the contrary, the organization of the poem around a crucial phrase from Ghālib tends to anchor it in the more austere, tough, pessimistic world of the classical *ghazal*, in which as a rule the beloved is more important for his or her absence than for any other quality.

For this reason I also have some doubts about the translators' reading of the conclusion. The lover says in lines (13) and (14), "Now that you've come, stay; so that some color, some season, some thing / Would stay in one place." Line (15), given here in context, is the crucial one. On the face of it, it would seem to mean literally, "Again one time every thing would be that which it is."

(13) *Ab jō ā'ē hō tō ṭ'ahrō ke kō'ī raṅg, kō'ī rut, kō'ī shai*

- (14) *Ēk jagah par t̤ahrē,*
 (15) *P̤hīr sē ik bār har ik čīz vahī hō jō hai*
 (16) *Āsmān̄ ḥadd-e nazār, rāh gužār rāh gužār, shīsha-e ma'e shīsha-e ma'e*

Yet the translators all blur the “one time” (*ik bār*). Here is how they render line (15):

- (A) And all things once again be their own selves,
 (B) This time things will fall into place;
 (C) Stay. So the world may become like itself again:
 (D) and once again everything may become what it was—

They all, as far as I can judge, leave the implication that the lover is asking the beloved to stay with him from now on, so that the poem seems to anticipate a kind of reconciliatory “happy ending,” and possibly a better future.

My own reading would, by contrast, take the “one time” (*ik bār*) quite seriously. The lover has no illusions. He knows that he is doomed—that the beloved has basically gone, and will not be with him in the future. He is asking only for a brief moment of respite from his vertigo—a reprieve, a temporary fix of stability. Let the beloved stay for just a bit, let the lover “one time” again see things as themselves rather than as a helplessly whirling blaze of dark and bright colors, moods, passions.

Of course Faiz has cleverly used *t̤aharnā*, a verb that can mean “to stop, rest, pause, cease, desist; to stay, remain, abide, wait, tarry,”⁶ so that he preserves the ambiguity and thus keeps the question at least slightly and intriguingly open. Here translations (A) and (D) have taken perfect advantage of the conveniently ambiguous English phrase “once again.” Who could say that “once” is not a satisfactory translation of *ik bār*, and “again” of *p̤hīr sē*? And yet “once again” can carry a charge of futurity—as “one more time” cannot. “My love will be with me once again” and “My love will be with me one more time” have very different implications. I would argue that the anchoring of the poem on *khūn-e jigar hōnē tak*, signaled forcefully by quotation marks and by its very title, should sway

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 365.

our judgment toward the grimmer, less hopeful, more literal reading. After all, the very next poem after this one in Faiz's volume *Dast-e Tab-e Sa'ig* is called *Pās Rabō*, "Stay With Me," and makes it clear that the poet uses *rahmā* as the verb for real "staying."⁷

The beloved in "It's the Color of My Heart" is envisioned almost as a drug. Before the beloved comes, everything is what it is. Then the beloved comes, and everything is a whirling mass of bright and dark. The lover begs the beloved to stay a while, so that, paradoxically, "one more time" everything can be what it is. Drugs too first take one *out* of one's normal perceptions of reality; then eventually they become necessary for one to be *in* one's normal perceptions of reality, rather than suffering some wild chaos of withdrawal. All this can come to no good end—except the death of the heart, which may come almost as a relief, as it consumes itself and turns into *khūn-e jigār*. A hopeful, optimistic reading of the conclusion is, I submit, untrue to the Urdu poem Faiz actually wrote; and if the real poem is too bleak to be enjoyed in its own right, why translate it?

*

By now it is probably clear that I am urging a kind of middle ground between extreme literalness and free "transcreation." It seems to me that we translators ought to try most carefully to understand the original poem very accurately in the Urdu. Then we ought to steer between Scylla and Charybdis. Here are some principles that I suggest for the careful translator who respects and enjoys an Urdu poem:

- Preserve the poem's formal structure as much as possible. (If the poet takes pains to repeat a line in identical form, so should the translator.)
- Maintain the poem's ambiguities and obscurities; do not over-explain, do not provide "information" that the poet has not provided. (If the poet says the sky is a "wet garment-hem," don't turn it into "my tear-stained shirt"; if the poet speaks of a sight that delights the eyes, don't turn it into a meeting with the beloved.)
- Give readers information that the poet clearly wants them to have. (If the poet has used a line in the poem as its title, don't retitl it.)

⁷Faiz, *Nuskhahā-e Vafā*, pp. 367–8.

Of course, it will all too often be impossible to do all this. There will be plenty of situations in which “transcreation” will be the only option—it is hard to argue that “*khūn-e jigar hōnē tak*” should be translated literally as “until it turns into blood of the liver.” Since there are always all too many such impossible situations, why not save the transcreation for those truly hard cases? Why remake the poem unnecessarily, if a great deal of it can be brought over directly into English instead?

Certainly I have no universal solution for the problems of translation, or even for the problems of translating this poem.⁸ In an appendix I have given the four translations, (A) through (D), and have added a fifth translation (E), which is my own (unpublished) one. It seemed only fair that I too should have a go, and see how far I could succeed or fail. My heart is with my fellow translators: our task is impossible, but nevertheless it must be done. As Cynthia Ozick recently put it,

The issues that seize, grab, fall upon, overwhelm, or waylay translation are not matters of language in the sense of word-for-word. Nor is translation to be equated with interpretation; the translator has no business sneaking in what amounts to commentary. Ideally, translation is a transparent membrane that will vibrate with the faintest shudder of the original, like a single leaf on an autumnal stem. Translation *is* autumnal: it comes late, it comes afterward.⁹ □

⁸I want to thank my colleague and friend, Shamsur Rahman Farooqi, for his comments and suggestions on this paper.

⁹“The Impossibility of Being Kafka,” in *The New Yorker* (11 January 1999), pp. 83–4.

Appendix: Translation Texts

(A) Before You Came (tr. by Victor Kiernan)

Before you came, all things were what they are—
The sky sight's boundary, the road a road,
The glass of wine a glass of wine; since then,
Road, wineglass, colour of heaven, all have taken
The hues of this heart ready to melt into blood—
Now golden, as the solace of meeting is,
Now grey, the livery of despondent hours,
Or tint of yellowed leaves, of garden trash,
Or scarlet petal, a flowerbed all ablaze:
Colour of poison, colour of blood, or shade
Of sable night. Sky, highroad, glass of wine—
The first a tear-stained robe, the next a nerve
Aching, the last a mirror momentarily altering...
Now you have come, stay here, and let some colour,
Some month, some anything, keep its own place,
And all things once again be their own selves,
The sky sight's bound, the road a road, wine wine.¹⁰

(B) Before You Came (tr. by Naomi Lazard)

Before you came things were just what they were:
the road precisely a road, the horizon fixed,
the limit of what could be seen,
a glass of wine was no more than a glass of wine.

¹⁰Victor Kiernan, tr. *Poems by Faiz* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 252–5.

With you the world took on the spectrum
radiating from my heart: your eyes gold
as they open to me, slate the color
that falls each time I lost all hope.

With your advent roses burst into flame:
you were the artist of dried-up leaves, sorceress
who flicked her wrist to change dust into soot.
You lacquered the night black.

As for the sky, the road, the cup of wine:
one was my tear-drenched shirt,
the other an aching nerve,
the third a mirror that never reflected the same thing.

Now you are here again—stay with me.
This time things will fall into place;
the road can be the road,
the sky nothing but sky;
the glass of wine, as it should be, the glass of wine.¹¹

(C) Before You Came (tr. by Agha Shahid Ali)

Before you came,
things were as they should be:
the sky was the dead-end of sight,
the road was just a road, wine merely wine.

Now everything is like my heart,
a color at the edge of blood:
the grey of your absence, the color of poison, or thorns,
the gold when we meet, the season ablaze,
the yellow of autumn, the red of flowers, of flames,
and the black when you cover the earth

¹¹Naomi Lazard, tr., *The True Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 32–5.

with the coal of dead fires.

And the sky, the road, the glass of wine?
The sky is a shirt wet with tears,
the road a vein about to break,
and the glass of wine a mirror in which
the sky, the road, the world keep changing.

Don't leave now that you're here—
Stay. So the world may become like itself again:
so the sky may be the sky,
the road a road,
and the glass of wine not a mirror, just a glass of wine.¹²

(D) **The Colour of the Moment** (tr. by Shiv K. Kumar)

Before you came, everything was what it is—
the sky, vision-bound
the pathway, the wine-glass.
And now the wine-glass, the pathway, the sky's tint—
everything bears the colour of my heart
till all melts into blood.
Sometimes the golden tinge, sometimes the hue of the joy of
seeing you,
sometimes ashen, the shade of the dreary moment—
the colour of yellow leaves, of thorn and trash,
of the crimson petals of the flower-beds aglow,
the tint of poison, of blood, of sable night.
The sky, the pathway, the wine-glass—
some tear-stained robe, some wincing nerve,
some ever-revolving mirror.

Now that you're here, stay on
so that some colour, some season, some object

¹²Agha Shahid Ali, tr., *The Rebel's Silhouette* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1991), pp. 56–7.

may come to rest
and once again everything may become what it was—
the sky, vision-bound, the pathway, the wine-glass.¹³

(E) *It's the Color of My Heart* (tr. by Frances W. Pritchett)

Before you came everything
was what it is:
the sky the limit of sight
the road a road, the glass of wine
a glass of wine.

And now the glass of wine, the road, the color of the sky
are the color of my heart
while it breaks itself down
into blood.

Sometimes a gold color—a color of eyes' delight
that sooty color, the color of disgust
the color of dry leaves, straw, thorns
the color of red flowers in a blazing garden
poison color, blood color, the color of black night.
The sky, the road, the glass of wine
are a sodden cloak, an aching vein,
a mirror changing every moment.

Now that you've come, stay—let some color, season, thing
stay in place.

One more time let everything
be what it is:
the sky the limit of sight
the road a road, the glass of wine
a glass of wine.

¹³Shiv K. Kumar, tr., *Faiz Ahmed Faiz: Selected Poems* (New Delhi: Viking Books, 1995), pp. 126–7.