LE TEXTE ÉTRANGER

# THE ECHO OF URDU POETRY IN ANITA DESAI'S *IN CUSTODY* :

## INTERLINGUISTIC PASTICHES

## AND THE QUESTION OF THE UNTRANSLATABLE

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*The central protagonist of In Custody is a diffident college lecturer who sets out to record for posterity the voice of a famous but ageing Urdu poet. The narrative parallels this endeavour by offering up several pastiches of classical Urdu ghazals, "translated" - or "transcreated" - into English. However, the reader cannot but note the discrepancy between the high praise lavished by the characters on the poet's works, and the unremarkable stylistic achievement displayed by the pastiches. This discrepancy could be interpreted as an authorial comment on the "untranslatability" of a culture-specific genre, too radically different from Western literary and cultural conventions to be adequately transferred into English. But this hypothesis seems to be immediately contradicted by the form of the novel itself, written in English by an Indo-German novelist about non-English speaking characters, which would tend to prove the constant possibility for literature of conveying a message across linguistic and cultural barriers. Caught in a gridlock between this evidence of the transferability of art into a different language or culture on the one hand, and the hurdles of translation and cross-cultural exchanges on the other, the narrative seems to adopt a waveringly ambiguous stance, marked by a problematic nostalgia for the past, which this paper will attempt to unravel.*

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Deven, the central protagonist and antihero of Anita Desai's *In Custody*, is a small-town Hindi lecturer who is in fact a would-be Urdu poet at heart. At the outset of the novel, he is offered what he believes to be the opportunity of a lifetime: his childhood friend and tormentor Murad, the editor of an Urdu magazine entitled *Awaaz* (meaning "voice") wants to publish an interview with the famous poet Nur Shahjehanabadi and offers to let Deven do the interview. Simultaneously elated and daunted by the task, the timid and unassuming Deven sets off for Old Delhi to meet the great poet, but the entire venture, in which Deven had originally cast himself in the elevated role of custodian of Nur's immortal poetry, even attempting to do an audio recording of the poet's work, crumbles into ruins about him as his fantasy of reviving Urdu court poetry - the classical *ghazal* - fails to withstand the reality-check of modern India.

Deven's fateful and unsuccessful attempt to give a new lease of life to Nur's poetry is echoed, in a way, by the narrator's effort to convey an idea of the formal features, the main themes and the poetic impact of his poems. This is done both through external descriptions, dwelling on the fame, the elegant terseness, the sonorities and rhythms of Nur's art, and, more directly, through pastiches, in English, of Urdu *ghazals*. But the question may be raised as to whether the narrator actually meets with more success than Deven in his attempt to *translate* in the narrative the poetic force of Nur's work. Although Nur's poetry is referred to as "a comet in the dark" (*IC*, 38) and Nur himself as one of the greatest poets of the age, the narrative's pastiches seem to fall far short of this description, displaying nothing of the flamboyance and the intensity of what Deven seems to think of as the typical Urdu style; instead, the pastiches offer up a collection of lifeless, often trite and formally unexceptional metaphors and comparisons:

> Life is no more than a funeral procession winding towards the grave,
> Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths... (*IC*, 21)
>
> Many sins, and much suffering ; such is the pattern
> Fate has traced on my tablet, with blood... (*IC*, 40)
>
> My body no more than a reed pen cut by the sword's tip,
> Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's blood. (*IC*, 40; 139)
>
> The breeze enters, the blossom on the bough wafts its scent.
> The opened window lets in the sweet season, spring. (*IC*, 112)

In fact, by far the most fitting and evocative comparison relating to Nur's poetry is one supplied by the narrator to suggest how Deven calls upon poetry at every moment of his life to help him interpret – and endure - his personal experiences:

> a verse of Nur's fell into Deven's mind as casually as a discarded bus ticket :
> Night ends, dawn breaks, and sorrow reappears,
> Addressing us in morning light with a cock's shrill crow. (*IC*, 64)

There is a slight blurring of boundaries in the comparison here that implicitly suggests that Nur's verse is not necessarily worth much more than a discarded bus ticket, and that the narrator thus creates a distance between Deven's point of view and his own. This effect is of a piece with the consistently sarcastic tone of the narrator towards the novel's protagonist: Deven is repeatedly described as an ineffectual, bumbling and browbeaten creature, half lost in a dream world of fantasy where poetry and poets have pride of place, and who is wholly incapable of coming to terms with the exigencies and the sordid facts of reality. However, at times, the narrative voice seems to drop its sarcastic stance and to empathize with Deven's experience, as for instance when Deven first meets Nur and the two characters share a fleeting moment of poetic communion together:

> He had not known before such intimacy, such intense closeness as existed in that dark and shaded room where his voice merged with those of the pigeons to soothe the listening, lulled figure before him. He was also aware, with the welling up of a drop of sadness that now rose and trickled through him, moistly, that this moment that contained such perfection of feeling, unblemished and immaculate, could not last, must break and disperse. (*IC*, 41)

In fact, the narrator never explicitly denies Nur's worth as a poet; throughout most of the novel, he seems to endorse Deven's enthusiastic view of Nur's poetry as the very embodiment of poetic greatness. The readers cannot therefore but be somewhat disappointed by the pastiches

of Urdu *ghazals* which are the sole glimpse they are granted of Nur's poetic work. The narrator seems to have set himself a certain poetic objective that he is unable to meet in these pastiches, and the attempt to create poetic value through a pretense of translation, an interlinguistic pastiche adapting a genre into a language different than the one in which it was originally written, appears largely unsuccessful in *In Custody*.

Why do these pastiches fail to convey an idea of the poetic value of the Urdu *ghazal*? Is it because this poetic genre, being culture-specific and radically different from any Western poetic tradition, proves more difficult to translate and adapt into English than other poetic genres might be? Is the *ghazal*, then, an "untranslateable" poem? This is a crucial issue as it raises the question of the transferability of art into another culture and another tongue, the question of the possibility of conveying a poetic message across the barriers of linguistic and cultural differences, which is, arguably, one of the central concerns of postcolonial fiction and, more particularly, of Indian Writing in English.

This paper will attempt to examine this issue and to sketch out the literary, linguistic and cultural background which is essential to gain a better understanding of the text.

The verses provided in the narrative result from a process that Genette calls "forgerie[1]" (that can be translated as forgery, in the sense of coinage, fabrication): the mimetic impulse which is at work here is not explicitly acknowledged by the narrator, there is no clue within the text that these poems are imitations, and the narrator's aim is apparently to lead the reader to believe that the poems quoted by the characters could in fact be authentic translations of existing Urdu poems. Genette identifies literary imitation as a rhetorical device defined first by its mimetic *function*, rather than by a specific formal structure, since it can take on various shapes, camouflage itself in the midst of various types of poetic devices, work its way into any genre. It is based on the identification of the stylistic characteristics of a group of texts and their generalization or extension:

> Car imiter [...] suppose toujours [...] la constitution préalable [...] d'un modèle de compétence dont chaque acte d'imitation sera une performance singulière, le propre

[1] Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris : Seuil, 1982), p.114.

> de la compétence étant, ici comme ailleurs, de pouvoir engendrer un nombre illimité de performances correctes.[2]

The pastiche forger, therefore, must first define what Genette terms a "matrice d'imitation[3]" (which I will henceforward translate as "matrix of imitation"), which is the idiolect of the group of texts to be imitated, constructed as the stylistic and thematic mould shaping the mimetic process [4].

Can the failure of the pastiches of Urdu poems in *In Custody* thus be attributed to the specific cultural rootedness of the classical *ghazal*, which would make it difficult to subject it to interlinguistic imitation? A brief overview of the classical forms of Urdu poetry is necessary at this point in order to determine what particular culture-bound feature – if any – of the "matrix of imitation" of this genre is liable to resist generalization and translation.

According to Frances Pritchett, the author of a comprehensive introduction to Urdu poetry entitled *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*, the Urdu *ghazal* can be defined as a game of words, an elaborate and complex wordplay with stringent formal rules based on shared semantic codes. Poems are composed of a fixed number of couplets, which are relatively autonomous on a semantic level, but which must preserve the global coherence of the poem through the recurrence of the refrain, called *radīf*, the identically repeated word or words at the end of the second line of each two-line verse, throughout the entire poem. One of the chief formal characteristics of *ghazals* is the strongly-marked sound effects created by these repetitions of the refrain and by the pervasive use of alliteration and consonance in this genre. These devices appear to be entirely lacking in Desai's mimetic transcreations, however. Similarly absent are the non-semantic verbal figures frequently drawn upon by Urdu poets and listed by Frances Pritchett: numerous sorts of homonyms, fully or partially rhyming

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[2] *Ibid.*, p.108.

[3] *Ibid.*, p.108.

[4] « Car imiter précisément, dans son éventuelle singularité, un texte singulier, c'est d'abord constituer l'idiolecte de ce texte, c'est-à-dire identifier ses traits stylistiques et thématiques propres, et les *généraliser*, c'est-à-dire les constituer en matrice d'imitation, ou réseau de mimétismes, pouvant servir indéfiniment. » *Ibid.*, p.109.

words and phrases, anagrams, puns, etc. The formal richness and inventiveness of Urdu poetry have been disregarded in the pastiches of *In Custody* and this is probably one of the sources of their poetic failure.

These pastiches, however, seem to have retained the *semantic* features of the genre. The *ghazal* as a genre is characterized by its extremely codified universe. The structure of the individual poem may seem atomistic, with every two-line verse standing ostensibly alone in its compressed tautness of form and meaning, but this is a trick of perspective, as each verse in fact "inhabits the whole ghazal universe, and so becomes one node in an elaborate, richly articulated network[5]." This universe is the "objective correlative", to borrow T.S. Eliot's phrase, mirroring the consciousness of the passionate lover, who yearns after and languishes for his inaccessible mystical (whether human or divine) beloved, and describes the world as it appears to him in his altered emotional state. Every scene and every moment, based on conventional settings and situations – i.e. the madhouse, the garden, the prison, the wine-house, the cemetery, etc. -, is thus charged with intense and complex meanings. These conventional and often self-referential scenes and settings do appear in the verses pastiched in *In Custody*, as well as in the indirect references made to Urdu poetry:

> [the grave:] Life is no more than a funeral procession winding towards the grave,
> Its small joys the flowers of funeral wreaths. (*IC*, p.20-21)

> [the cage/prison:] [...] she said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight, that her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover. (*IC*, 84)

> [the wine-house:] [...] the verse sequence about his profligate youth, the one that played on the many words for wine, goblet, and server of wine. (*IC*, 165)

As exemplified in the second excerpt quoted above, this universe is built up and expanded chiefly through series of strictly encoded metaphors that generate a constant and proliferating supply of new images which over time become part of the conventions of the genre themselves. The interlocking network of metaphors in a poem define its *mazmūn*, a term which designates, roughly, the poetic theme or proposition of the poem, chosen from a collection of conventional themes and enriched by the poet's

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[5] Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness* (*op. cit.*), p.89.

personal use of metaphor[6]. The art of the ghazal poet consists in finding new combinations of metaphors in order to produce new conceits and leaps of fancy, and thus to expand the scope of a pre-existing *mazmūn*, which will then be borrowed and reworked by subsequent poets:

> Over time, if a particular leap of metaphor is admired and widely adopted, it undergoes a kind of concretization, becoming a well-established part of the ghazal landscape. As such, it can readily become the jumping-off point for further leaps of metaphor.[7]

The art of the ghazal is primarily based on borrowing and on tradition: complete novelty is not required, and in fact is generally frowned upon. *Mazmūns* circulate freely, evolving as they change hands, enriched by successive re-workings and re-readings. Thus the craft of the ghazal depends heavily on a close knowledge and study of earlier poetry. Unlike most Western conceptions of poetry, poetic originality or inventiveness is not considered as the benchmark of the value of a *ghazal*.

> Absolute newness is hard to establish, and also irrelevant: *mazmūns* were always being invented as well as borrowed. Borrowing from a well-known poet was a form of either homage or challenge; borrowing from an obscure poet showed one's knowledge of the tradition; and inventing enabled one to display ingenuity. The interlocking network of *mazmūns* was thus a shared world that belonged to everybody – a world that *had* to belong to everybody, for the poetry to remain intelligible.[8]

For example, one of the metaphors used in the ghazal tradition likens the beloved to a cypress, on account of his height and slender grace. Poets who draw on this *mazmūn* do not need to spell out the link between the lover and the cypress, as it has already been established by the poetic tradition. Any mention of a cypress in a poem is immediately decoded by the listeners or readers as a reference to the beloved. Over time, this association has evolved and transformed with the new conceits created by

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6 "A *mazmūn*, therefore, may be understood as a proposition or statement that describes some aspect of the ghazal universe and that is derived metaphorically or logically from previously accepted propositions. Thus *mazmūn āfirīnī* is the extension of the ghazal universe by offering new metaphorical statements or propositions – which can then be employed by other ghazal poets." Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness* (*op. cit.*), p.94.

7 Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness* (*op. cit.*), p.93.

8 *Ibid.*, p.96.

successive poets on this image. Thus the craft of Urdu poetry cannot be disconnected from the tradition which it belongs to: the sequence of these poems, their order of composition and, fundamentally, their contexts of enunciation determine both their meaning and their poetic value.

Therefore, the explanation for the failure of the interlinguistic transcreations of ghazals in *In Custody* probably lies in a mistaken understanding of the "matrix of imitation" of the genre identified by the author as simply the formal recurrence of metaphors, drawn from the classical repertoire of the ghazal tradition: "some lines of Nur's [...] about the first white hair on a man's head appearing like a white flower out of a grave" (*IC*, 20); "My body no more than a reed pen cut by the sword's tip,/ Useless and dry till dipped in the ink of life's blood". (*IC*, 40; 139). And metaphoric repetition can indeed strike one as an obvious "matrix of imitation" of the genre since ghazal composition itself does appear to be based on the poetic exploitation of a similar "matrix", considered as an inexhaustible source of new combinations and networks of similes. However, the creation of a ghazal locates the poem within the continuum of a tradition which confers meaning and value to the metaphorical networks which it borrows from, whereas the pastiches in *In Custody*, which wrest the "mimetic transcreation" from this framework of affiliation and tradition, can only offer mere juxtapositions of lifeless comparisons, extracted from the historicity of enunciation. The interlinguistic pastiches in *In Custody* thus fail to produce the equivalent of a poem, of poetic speech; they merely replicate a formal structure, churning out worn clichés which as a result seem drawn straight from colonial accounts of what British critics often perceived as a contrived, overwrought and artificial style of poetry, lacking in "freshness" and in "naturalness" and flawed by its decadent subject matter. For example, Nur's "verse sequence about his profligate youth, the one that played on the many words for wine, goblet, and server of wine." (*IC*, 165) can be read as a hypotextual echo of colonial stereotypes focusing on Persian hedonism and propensity to effeminacy invoked as the alleged cause of the downfall of the Mughal empire (as Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas has pointed out in a recent article[9]).

Desai makes the wrong choice when she selects the structural element that she will replicate to compose her pastiches. The poetic value

9 « Présences linguistiques, absences critiques dans *In Custody* », *Etudes Anglaises*. Forthcoming.

of the ghazal does not lie merely in the codified concatenation of metaphors which constitutes its formal structure, but in the poetics of enunciation in which it is rooted: in fact, the ghazal could be described as a fundamentally metalinguistic genre in that it constantly manifests the supremacy of the act of enunciation over the content of the message itself, and this is probably what makes the ghazal such a difficult genre to translate – or to transcreate[10]. This is the reason why, instead of offering subtly interlocking metaphors and vivid similes, Nur's poems seem to be ridden with clichés and stereotypes and this unsuccessful attempt at pastiching Urdu poetry involuntarily borders on satire or parody.

The narrator tries to compensate for the failure of these imitative transcreations by resorting to indirect description in order to give an idea of the vividness and evocative beauty of Urdu poetry:

> Grumpily he would agree to forgive them and recite a verse sequence he had written in his youth on flight and that was familiar to his audience, easy and loved.
>
> Ravished by its sweet tones and murmured sibilances, Deven would sink back on his heels and shut his eyes, nodding gently in agreement with the poet's sentiments [...]. (*IC*, 167)

> [He] thundered out one of his earliest, almost forgotten poems that had once caused the literary world to be shaken like a straw stack in a storm, so livid and loud was it with dissent. (*IC*, 175)

These metatextual comments on Urdu poetry - which happen to be, incidentally, more alliterative and euphonic than the pastiches themselves - can be interpreted as an admission of defeat: it seems as though the cultural and linguistic difference embodied by the genre of the *ghazal* cannot adequately be transferred directly into English, and could only be *relayed* by the narrative voice, which seems to acknowledge the impossibility of translation when the cultural and linguistic difference is too radical. In such a case, it can only be mediated by an indirect description, a metadiscourse.

Perhaps these failed pastiches also result from the fact that Desai's construction of the cultural memory of Urdu and of Indo-Muslim literature is marked by a problematic nostalgia for the past. The type of *ghazals*

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[10] As Frances Pritchett acknowledges in her article: "The Sky, the Road, the Glass of Wine: On Translating Faiz", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 2000, vol. 15, p.57-76. http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/15/07pritchett.pdf

referred to in the novel are rooted in the "high" cultural tradition of the nineteenth century and the narrator fails to take into account the modern evolution of the genre. It has been suggested that Nur's character was inspired by the figure of the great twentieth-century poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz – who happened to die the year when *In Custody* was published, and whose poems were in fact used in the film directed by Ismail Merchant in 1993[11] - but one of the major features of Faiz's poetry is his rejection of certain formal conventions of the genre, and his use of the codified format of the *ghazal* to convey messages with a radically progressive social and political content[12]. Nur, on the other hand, is presented by Deven as the upholder of a dying tradition who is reluctant to give up not only the conventional themes and metaphors of the classical ghazal, but also a certain aristocratic lifestyle, which again reproduces colonial constructs depicting the soft-living and self-indulgent habits of the Muslim *nawabs* (or *nabobs*) of yore[13]: thus Nur lives in a sprawling and decaying mansion, is obsessed with his prize pigeons which he flies from the rooftop in the evenings, entertains with a lavish extravagance, consumes great quantities of rich *biryani* washed down by enormous amounts of alcohol.

In the same perspective, Desai's depiction of a fossilized Indo-Muslim culture is also problematic since Urdu poetry is still very much alive, mainly in Pakistan, it is true, but also in certain urban centers of north India. Not to mention the vitality of Urdu fiction with such major twentieth-

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11 *In Custody*, 1993, starring Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azmi and Om Puri.

12 "It is interesting that Faiz, stylistically wedded to the traditional form of the ghazal, was concerned with forging themes of modernity in his poetic message, constructing a new direction for his Urdu listeners and readers, while Desai, working with a modernist narrative, takes it back toward a sensibility rooted in tradition and premodern aristocracy". Amina Yaqin, "Communalization and Distintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*", *Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 19, 2004, p.2. http://www.urdustudies.com/Issue19/index.html

13 As Amina Yaqin points out the same could be argued about Deven's colleague Siddiqui's lifetstyle "Desai's references to Siddiqui's lifestyle disturbingly reproduce the colonial constructions of a morally decrepit Muslim aristocracy collapsing from drink, debauchery and decay.", "Communalization and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*", *op. cit.*, p.135. The narrator makes this hypotextual link quite explicit: "They sat there on the terrace, like a pair of nawabs stranded in the backwaters of time, thought Deven [...]" (*IC*, 147).

century exponents as Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Qurratulain Hyder, etc.

Ultimately, these unsuccessful pastiches are in keeping with the narrow, dehistoricized conception of languages and cultures which is constantly being evidenced in *In Custody*. It can be argued that the main reason for the failed pastiches is that there is no true meeting between languages in these interlinguistic transcreations, no real attempt to introduce linguistic otherness into the heart of the English language. This is hardly surprising, really, since languages in *In Custody* are constantly being essentialized and presented by the various characters primarily as symbols of fixed cultural and religious identities, thus ruling out any possibility of hybridation.

It is worth noting, in this context, that the only character who seems to have any inkling of the historicity of language and of literary productions is Imtiaz Begum, Nur's second wife, a former "dancer" (read "courtesan" here) and an aspiring poet herself. Although Deven at first rejects her work as being of secondary quality and cribbing from Nur's work, the letter she writes to him at the end of the novel briefly unsettles his firm conviction of her worthlessness as a poet. She places the blame for her situation squarely on the shoulders of the patriarchal culture she belongs to - "In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am? Ask yourself that when you peruse my verses, if you have the courage..." (*IC*, 217) – and thus underlines the importance of the historical context in which a work of art is produced. In fact, Imtiaz Begum's letter places the themes she draws on in her poetry (revealed in the scene where she recites her poetry before a poetic assembly, *IC*, p.84) in an entirely new light and gives them a more profound resonance than Deven had initially bargained for:

> she said she was a bird in a cage, that she longed for flight, that her lover waited for her. She said the bars that held her were cruel and unjust, that her wings had been hurt by beating against them and only God could come and release her by lifting the latch on the cage door, God in the guise of her lover. (*IC*, 84)

However, this consciousness of the historicity of language only occupies a very brief and secondary place in the general economy of the novel, since it is raised towards the end of the novel, by a peripheral character, and immediately rejected by the main protagonist who tears up the poems she sent him, unable to face the harsh truths they might present him with, as the writer herself had anticipated. He prefers to hold

on to his ideal of an immutable linguistic absolute that could be embodied and immortalized in literature, in the poetic form, while all the baser and more pedestrian uses of language are to be subjected to the ignominy of the "politics" of language. As Desai puts it, « He [Deven] realized that he loved poetry not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where they became bearable. » (*IC*, 52); but historical contingence has a way of catching up with lovers of language: « Nur was inviting him to join the fray, allowing the sublime concept of time to dwindle into the mere politics of language again. [...] [Deven] had always kept away from the political angle of languages. » (*IC*, 53). It is no coincidence that the character who underlines the historicity of language in the novel happens to be a woman. This is implicitly linked by Desai to the fact that women are traditionally oppressed and marginalized in traditional Indian society (whether Hindu or Muslim). Debarred from certain forms of speech - the public, the literary, the authoritative - women are perhaps more aware than men, in Desai's novels, that language has no existence outside a specific site of enunciation, that Deven's dream of a timeless literary perfection is only an illusion. But this view is only very briefly sketched and quickly suppressed by the male protagonist, in a symbolically meaningful destruction of the Begum's poems.

The theme of language thus raises the joint issues of identity and cultural belonging, on the one hand, and of history, on the other, two issues that are particularly acute in a postcolonial context. The relationship between languages and the postcolonial political context constantly emphasizes the instability of cultural representations of identity. Thus this novel, as a postcolonial text, is situated in an in-between location, on a linguistic and cultural threshold, where cross-cultural exchanges are the rule rather than the exception.

However, the narrative fails to draw the implications of this situation: it remains enmeshed in the nostalgic and reactionary stance displayed by the characters, even as the protagonist's quest is derided as regressive and doomed. The unsuccessful pastiches of Urdu poetry bear witness to this dual and contradictory impulse. If pure poetry does not exist then all that Deven can actually record is an echo, the empty support of speech. It is ironical in this respect that the magazine edited by Murad which Deven is writing for is entitled *Awaaz*, which means voice in Urdu, and that ultimately all that Deven is able to record, as a result of his technological incompetence, is indeed the mere physicality of speech,

devoid of the meaning that confers value to it. Somewhere between this indistinct sound, this meaningless echo of speech, and the silence of the answer offered by the great mosque during Deven's final epiphany – "The enormous arched doorway soared upwards [...], a silent exhalation of stone. It was absolutely still, very serene. It was in fact the silent answer to his questioning." (*IC*, 211) – the most important thing – the poem itself – seems to have been lost.

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