

## **Literary Mirrors and the Reconstruction of the Holy Places of Shiism in Nawabi Lucknow** A Few Topological Asides from Qatīl to Ghālib

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**Abstract** The article deals with a few literary responses, in Persian and Urdu, to the reconstruction of the sacred places of Shiite Islam in the North Indian centre of Lucknow. Focusing on some lines of poetry of representative authors of the period such as Ghālib and Qatīl, the paper hints at some possible and hitherto overlooked textual paths to look at the capital of the Shiite state of Awadh as a significant literary space-time to be located in a peculiar 'region' of that geography of the 'Ajam and the Indo-Persian. By adopting a loose topological approach, we show how an analysis of the poetical discourse on the city and the places of Shiite pilgrimages might help in understanding how the Nawabi architectural theatrics were received and what were the implications of the urban dissemination of Imambaras and other comparable structures.

**Keywords** Lucknow. Ghalib. Qatīl. Indo-Persian. Shi'a. Imambara.

It is no groundbreaking assumption to say that the North Indian centre of Lucknow – the subject of persistent narratives of decadence<sup>1</sup> – has been since the colonial times imagined as a city of memory and nostalgia, and orientalistically represented as India's last capital of 'Muslim splendor' (if not emblematically identified with the "last phase of an Oriental culture"<sup>2</sup>). The fall of the Shiite Nawabs that had ruled there since 1775, with the failure of the Mutiny of 1857 and the consequent definitive annexation of the territories of Awadh to the British possessions, leaves an indelible mark on the image of a centre that is still perceived in South Asia as the melancholy bastion of an otherwise vanished world (see, for instance, Graff et al. 1997, 14 and Llewellyn-Jones 1997). The prevailing idea of Lucknow as a literary site is, indeed, composed of the crystallisation of a series

1 We may think for example of the world of the courtesans described in one of the most famous novels in Urdu, *Umrā'o jān Adā* by Hādī Ruswā, published in 1905, the object of numerous reprints and also, in 1981, of a film (see in this regard Oldenburg 1997).

2 Here I take up the title of a famous work by Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1929) dedicated to Lucknow, *Hindūstān mē mashriqī tamaddun kā akhīrī namūna*, initially published as a series of independent articles in the Lucknow review *Dilgudāz* beginning in 1913. The text has been translated into English (Sharar 1975).

of precise identifying aesthetic ideas relating to the eighty years during which the city held the role of political and cultural capital of a large part of the Gangetic area: the exhausted magnificence of the courtly life, the Shiite connotation of power and of public rituals, the real and the imagined connections with Iran, the refinement of a social *etichette* perceived as the epitome of the Indo-Islamic *adab*, the formation of a distinct school of Urdu poetry, the influx of Persianate literati from Delhi, etc.<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind such well-known premises, in this paper I will briefly explore some possible and hitherto overlooked textual paths to look at the *construction* of Lucknow as a significant literary space-time – signifying much more than the above mentioned late romantic ‘Oriental’ decadence – to be located in a peculiar ‘region’ of that geography of the ‘*Ajam* and the Indo-Persian brilliantly explored, for instance, by Sunil Sharma and Mana Kia (Sharma 2012; Kia 2014). As a matter of fact, the capital of Awadh does appear – in a particularly visible manner from the urbanistic and monumental standpoint – as a city conceived in order to represent a series of values and relationships already crystallised at the moment when it was chosen as the centre of power. Its characteristic eighteenth/nineteenth century architectural scenography is the expression, among other things, of a programmatic attempt to emphasise a semantic bond with a certain idea – in stylistic dialogue with the rococò, the neo-classical and the neo-moresque – of Iran, Iraq and the Ottoman space, as exemplified, for instance, by the Rūmī Darwāza, a declared imitation of Istanbul’s Bâb-i Hümâyūn.<sup>4</sup> As Juan R. Cole has shown in a detailed study published almost thirty years ago (Cole 1988) this must of course be read on the background of a series of profound connections – identifiable first of all in the search for a cultural and political legitimisation – with the Shiite centres of the Iranian plateau and especially of Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup>

Similar phenomena can also be observed on the level of textual reality: all the more so if we look at authoritative literary examples where the city in question seems to turn into a sort of Eastern reflection of the mausoleums of the Imams in Najaf and Karbalā and, at times, even of the

3 What came afterwards – and, especially, what came before – counts for much less. The city was a centre of significant importance well before the Nawabs (e.g., see Alam 1997, especially 17-22), although the increase in population in the last quarter of the eighteenth century – from approximately 5,000 to 30,000 inhabitants according to Llewellyn-Jones’s estimates (1985, 12-3) – is sufficient to suggest the extent of the change that followed its choice as capital by Āṣaf al-Dawla. On the history of Lucknow after 1856, see Oldenburg 1984.

4 Specific studies on this subject are those of Llewellyn-Jones 2006 and Tandan 2001. Regarding the general characteristics of the nawabi taste in the Indo-Islamic architectural system, the summary observations by Bianca Maria Alfieri (1994) can serve as an introduction.

5 With regard to the Awadh state’s place in the historical and cultural system of the Shiite transregional network, see also Scarcia Amoretti 1994.

*ḥaramayn* of Mecca and Medina. Two verses taken from an Urdu *ghazal* probably composed in Lucknow in 1827<sup>6</sup> by the man who was also India's last great Persian poet, Mīrzā Ghālib (1797-1869), can serve to introduce the principal aspects of the problem we are dealing with here:

*lakhna'ū āne kā bā'is nahiñ khultā ya'nī*  
*hawas-i sayr u tamāshā so wuh kam hai ham ko*

*maqṭa'-i silsila-i shawq nahiñ hai yih shahr*  
*'azm-i sayr-i najaf u ṭawf-i ḥaram hai ham ko*  
 (Ghālib 1982, no. 119, vv. 9-10)

It is not clear what urges us to come to Lucknow:  
 weak, in us, is the desire for pleasant vistas.

The city is not the final verse of a long ardent wandering:  
 we wish to see Najaf, and walk around the Ka'ba.

What is the relationship between Lucknow, Najaf and Mecca on which Ghālib is basing his topological play of mirrors here? A particularly useful clue can be found in an observation by Veena Oldenburg, who affirms in fact that, with respect to the 'devotional' interpretations normally proposed,

A more historical explanation might be that Ghālib did not like the tawdry imitation of Najaf and Karbalā made by Ghazi al-Din Haydar in his Shah Najaf, which later became his tomb. This was built around 1813-1816 or thereabouts. Everyone gets a bit upset with the pretentious stuff the Nawābs did – and perhaps that's what he's saying about Lucknow.<sup>7</sup>

It is well-known that beginning in 1775, the year in which Āṣaf al-Dawla abandoned the former capital of Fayzabad and moved his court to Lucknow, immediately declared Dār al-Shī'a, the city underwent an extremely rapid and impressive process of architectural transformation aimed at giving it a recognizable modern Shiite visual identity also in its modules of construction and public meeting places. According to the observations of historians and travellers, already at the beginning of the nineteenth century Lucknow had roughly two thousand *imāmbāras* and six thousand *ta'ziyakhānas*, sites that were dedicated to hosting official or private events – especially the rites of *'ashūrā* – and to conserving the instruments

6 This date of composition is suggested by Imtiyāz 'Alī 'Arshī in Ghālib 1982, 244.

7 The comment, dated 'May 2006', is taken from Frances W. Pritchett's website dedicated to Ghālib's Urdu *ghazal* (Pritchett 2002-).

needed for the public celebration of the mourning of the martyred Imam.<sup>8</sup> Ghālib is probably referring in his verse to the most striking examples of this scenographical riedition of the holy places:<sup>9</sup> not only the *imāmbāra* Shāh Najaf erected at the behest of Ghāzī al-Din Ḥaydar, but also the far more representative Āṣafī or Baṛā *imāmbāra* and Ḥusaynābād *imāmbāra*, where the taste for mimicry led to reconstructing, in addition to the sepulchre of the *imām* Ḥusayn in Karbalā, a scale model of the Taj Mahal, not coincidentally another building conceived as a mausoleum. Lucknow is therefore imagined, first of all architecturally, as a mirror destined to reproduce the originals of a specific topography of the sacred. This does not escape Ghālib, who however, working on a textual level, uses a poetic *topos* already widely-used and structured in the Perso-Islamic poetic space, in order to introduce this *contingent* historical/architectural theme. We are obviously referring to the motif of the journey to the holy places, of which there is a representative and pertinent example in the *dīwān* by Ḥāfīz of Shiraz (d. approx. 1390):

*ḥāfīz agar qadam zanī dar rah-e khāndān ba šidq  
badraqa-yi rah-at shawad himmat-i shaḥna-yi najaf*  
(Ḥāfīz 1996, no. 290, v. 9)

Along the path of the sacred family if you move sincere your steps  
the certain sentinel of Najaf protects you, oh poet, on your journey

If the *mutaqaddim* Ḥāfīz simply textualizes the wish to set forth physically on the road that will lead him to the western resting places of the members of the *ahl al-bayt* (the 'sentinel', but also the 'prefect', *shaḥna*, of Najaf is a metaphorical allusion to the *imām* 'Alī as protector of the pilgrims), the verses of the *muta'akhhir* Ghālib present a series of layers of interpretation that can be read in the immediate compositional context. As we have seen, he appears to situate the holy places alongside the site where they have been reconstructed and which he is observing while writing the text - Lucknow's Shiite religious scenario in fact - substantially calling into question the absolute validity of the Nawabs' theatrical operation and expressing the need to continue his textual journey to the places reflected

8 I am relying on the data deduced by Cole 1988, 96, who bases himself on Lakhnawī 1976, 49-50, 77-127, 182-3, 192-3 and Shīrwānī 1974, 3, 1053.

9 The even too obvious parallel with the innumerable New Jerusalems of sixteenth-eighteenth c. Southern Europe (and especially the great Counter-Reformation projects of the Sacri Monti of Piedmont and Lombardy) and the clamorous Ethiopian case of Lalibela, definitely needs a comparative study. Interestingly enough, the Christian reconstructions at times appear in the two-pronged version of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, to be juxtaposed to the coupling of Mecca-Medina and Najaf-Karbalā.

in the Indian mirror. At the same time, however, Ghālīb *passes* through Lucknow and alludes to the scenographies of the *imāmbāras*, which remain a fundamental stage on his textual path and appear to acquire, also because of their rejection, the rhetorical-cognitive value of *ishāra* ('sign' but also 'hint') and necessary metaphor. Phenomena of this kind are common in the literary space of the capital of Awadh, that finds exactly in the *imāmbāra* – which in many ways compete with the institution of the Sufi school here in their social function<sup>10</sup> – centres of intellectual aggregation for *thinking* Karbalā and Najaf. The *imāmbāra* played in fact a fundamental role as the preferred place for the recitation of the *marsiya* and the usual celebratory verses for the Imam. Moreover, its importance as a centre of literary exchange was such that – as noted by Cole – the poets and the reciters of elegies (*marsiyakhwān* or *rawzakhwān*, according to the typology of the text recited) who performed here acquired greater notoriety, in the religious context, than the '*ulamā* themselves; attracted by the Nawab court's warm reception, at times they came directly from Iran, like Mullāh Muḥammad Shushtarī and Shāh Ḥusayn Wilāyat (see Cole 1988, 97-8).

But in the literary circles which are based in these places dedicated both to remembrance and to geographical fiction<sup>11</sup> something more happens, something that concerns us more directly in these notes on the imaginary dimension of the capital of Awadh. In fact, the Hindu authors who are members of Lucknow's various circles and schools (*maktab*) of Persian poetry – the writer has identified approximately seventy of these by systematically examining more than a dozen contemporary and only slightly later biographical collections<sup>12</sup> – participate actively in the readings of elegies held in or around these new Najafs or new Karbalās,<sup>13</sup> present-

10 Observations regarding the difficult relationship between *shī'a* and Sufism in Awadh are found in Cole 1988, 146-8.

11 As I observed in the course of fieldwork carried out in 2002 and 2003, saying 'I am going to Najaf' may still mean today, in Lucknow, 'I am going to the *imāmbāra* of Shāh Najaf'. Much more significant, in this sense, is the name 'Karbalā' attributed to the various places (usually open spaces) where the celebrations of the mourning of the '*ashūrā* and the *chihilum* end and where the reproductions of the mausoleum of the *imām* (*ta'ziya*) carried in procession are symbolically buried. Moreover, some typologies of *imāmbāra* are called 'Karbalā': five of these 'replicas' are listed and briefly described in Abbas 2002, 31-44, 85-8, 105-112.

12 See Pellò 2012, 136-52, where the data is provided in detail.

13 Among the best known Hindu authors who tried their mettle with the literary genre of the *marsiya* in Urdu poetry, I recall here Munshī Chhanū Lāl Dilgīr Lakhnawī (born circa 1796, he was a pupil of Nāsikh) and Munshī Kunwar Sen Muḥṭar Lakhnawī (d. circa 1850, he was a pupil of Muḥṭafi), about whom see Srīvāstav 1969, 456-9. Among those who used, other than Urdu, Persian, at least Rāja Ulfat Rāy 'Ulfat' is worthy of mention: the *tazkira Ṣubḥ-i gulshan*, for example, recalls his active participation in the celebrations of *muḥarrām* and mentions several verses taken from a *mukhammaṣ* in honour of Ḥusayn (Salīm 1878, 32); a note concerning him is also found in Srīvāstav 1969, 459). A monograph on the subject is Sayyid Amjad Ḥusayn 1995.

ing their own compositions to vast audiences of different faiths and in a certain sense acting as cultural 'representatives' in the religious/literary assemblies (*majlis*).<sup>14</sup> And if being close to, or in, an *imāmbāra* means being metaphorically close to, or in, the sanctuaries of Iraq or the holy places of the Arabian peninsula, the presence of non-Muslim authors in these *loci* raises interesting questions regarding textual identities and identifications (see Pellò 2015). The Hindu poets, in order to be able to accede to these places of fiction, appear in fact to acquire a Shiite textual identity that does not necessarily correspond to a real conversion. Leaving for a moment the field of literature, the doxographic *Haft tamāshā* by Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Qatīl' (d. 1817) provides a piece of information concerning the religious and social field that is of use in understanding this type of process; this is a work dedicated to the description of various confessional groups present in North India during the second half of the eighteenth century. In this context, one in particular attracts our attention: the Husayni Brahman of Deccan, a group of Brahmans whose religious practices are characterised by a decided devotion to the *imām* Ḥusayn despite the absence of a formal conversion to Islam. What concerns us most here however is a specific point mentioned in Qatīl's description, according to whom the Husayni Brahman declare themselves to be natives of *Karbalā-yi mu'allā*, i.e., of the "lofty Karbalā":<sup>15</sup> in order to sanction their pro-Shiite identity, they imagine for themselves a geographical ancestry in striking contrast with their absolutely Indian quality of Brahmans. But what is most pertinent to our analysis is, in fact, the idea of the place and the values associated with it, in a context where Karbalā is effectively present, as we have seen, in its 'replicas' that bestow on Lucknow an important part of its identity. In the literary context, certain aspects of the similar 'special' relationship between the Hindu Persian poets, the city of Lucknow and the holy places of the Mesopotamian area are highlighted, for example, in the *Safīna-yi Hindī* (completed in 1804) by the Hindu Bhagwān Dās 'Hindī', a collection of biographies of poets living in Lucknow in the 1700s that furnishes rather clear indications in this regard.<sup>16</sup> A paradigmatic case is the biographical note on Meḍī Lāl, known, as an author of Persian verses, by the poetic pseudonym 'Bīmār'. Here the *topos* of the journey to the holy places which we have introduced reading Ghālib performs an essential function in determining the identity of the poet in question:

14 It is interesting to note, in this regard, the perplexed reaction of the Iranian traveller Sayyid 'Abd al-Laṭīf Shūshtarī, who visited North India at the end of the eighteenth century and who is not able to explain the reason why many Hindus "who do not intend to accept Islam" gave large sums of money for the construction of cultural buildings dedicated to the veneration of the *imām* (Shūshtarī MS, f. 199a-b).

15 Qatīl 1875, 39-41.

16 I partially draw here from Pellò 2015.

He belonged to a Hindu caste of Lucknow, the *rustogi*. In his youth he was extraordinarily handsome and had an ardent, sensitive and suffering spirit. He spent most of his time in the company of the ascetic lovers who were the envy of the beauties of China, and he was always engaged in the study of the various treatises of Sufism and in the reading of the *Masnawī* by Mawlawī, and read the verses and the *Masnawī* with intense suffering. I myself saw him once or twice while he was reciting poetry with tears streaming down his cheeks. Finally, in 1182 he abandoned every bond and went to Ajmer. It is said that he remained there for a while, and that he then headed for the holy places of Islam, and of this God knows more. (Hindī 1958, 29-30)

That Lucknow ideally 'borders on' Iraq, and that the journey to the Shiite West is the natural consequence and continuation of the sojourn in the capital of Awadh is an idea that appears to be suggested in the text time and time again, where Hindī mentions quite frequently the pilgrimages of the poets to the principal centres of Iraq and Iran. This is the case, for example, if we read the notes dedicated to Mīrzā Bhachchū 'Zarra', an author born right in Lucknow and linked to the court of Shujā' al-Dawla:

following the death of the Nawab Shujā' al-Dawla Bahādur he headed in the direction of the lofty Karbalā, where he ended his earthly existence. (Hindī 1958, 80)

The direct passage from Lucknow to Karbalā is clearly expressed in the biography of Mīr Shams al-Dīn 'Faqīr', who, according to Hindī, after having moved from Delhi to the capital of Awadh, "remained in Lucknow for a year, and then headed towards the holy Karbalā" (Hindī 1958, 153). Other than for the couple Karbalā-Najaf,<sup>17</sup> Bhagwān Dās (we note how in the definitions used to indicate the various holy places he adopts an internal, pseudo-Shiite, point of view) also shows an interest in the Iranian centres of pilgrimage, in particular Mashhad. In the entry concerning the poet Mīr Awlād 'Alī 'Zāyir' (a Shiite native of Awadh whose own *takhalluṣ* reflects on his poetic persona the inclination to visit the holy places), for example, we read the following:

He honoured himself with the pilgrimage to the sublime sacred temples of Iraq [...] and after having acquired further honours with the pilgrimage to the Mashhad of the *imām* Riżā – may peace be upon him – returned to India [...] A year ago he left again in the direction of those blessed precincts, may God allow him to reach his destination. (Hindī 1958, 99)

17 The city is mentioned as *Najaf-i ashraf*, "the most noble Najaf", according to the traditional eulogistic formula (Hindī 1958, 220).

Also connected to the relation of proximity and dialogue with the holy places is the reference to the *rawza-yi rażawiya* ('The garden of Riżā', i.e., the sanctuary of the *imām* Riżā in Mashhad) of which the poet Sayyid Muḥammad 'Ḥasrat', who emigrated from Khorasan to India, is described as one of the 'honoured servants' (Hindī 1958, 56. In this case, too, Hindī uses the common denomination *Mashhad-i muqaddas*, 'the holy Mashhad'). What is more significant for us is however the fact that Hindī himself, in the space dedicated to his own autobiography, inserts a *qaṣīda* partially centred exactly on the theme of the journey to the holy places of Islam and in particular, those of Shi'ī Islam on the Arabian peninsula, in Mesopotamia and on the Iranian plateau. Subsequently, what is reported both in transcription and in translation, is the opening to and the section of the text where corresponding to every verse is the mention of one of the holy sepulchres to which the Hindu poet - who meanwhile, in Lucknow, is observing the construction of some of their replicas - imagines sending a message of devotion:

*ay nāma bar ba jānib-i ān dilrubā biraw  
ay hudhud-i khujasta ba shahr-i sabā biraw*

*bar khīz ay ṣabā wa biyābānnaward bāsh  
az tishna sūy-i chashma-yi āb-i baqā biraw [...]*

*az man sar-i niyāz binih bar dar-i khudāy  
w-āngah ba sūy-i shahr-i rasūl-i khudā biraw*

*ānjā ṭawāf-i rawza-yi pāk-ash ba ṣidq kun  
z-ānjā ba dargah-i 'alī-yi murtażā biraw*

*ānjā niṣār kun dil u jān-rā ba ṣad niyāz  
z-ānjā bar āstāna-yi khayr al-nisā biraw*

*ānjā jabīn-i 'ajz ba khāk-i adab bisāy  
z-ānjā bar rawza-yi ḥasan-i mujtabā biraw*

*ānjā hazār pāra jigār az du dīda rīz  
z-ānjā qadam zi sar kun u dar karbalā biraw*

*ānjā ba nālahā-yi gharībāna girya kun  
z-ānjā ba ṭawf-i rawza-yi zayn al-'ibād biraw*

*z-ānjā guzashta rawza-yi bāqir ṭawāf kun  
z-ānjā ba rawza-yi ja'far-i khudā biraw*

*z-ānjā ba ṭawf-i marqad-i kāzim kharām kun*  
*z-ānjā ba sūy-i mashhad-i mūsā rizā biraw*

*z-ānjā pay-i ṭawāf-i mazār-i taqī shitāb*  
*z-ānjā ba rawza-yi naqī pārsā biraw*

*z-ānjā pay-i ziyārat-i dargāh-i 'askarī*  
*bā ṣad taḥiyat u ṣalawāt u sanā biraw*

*z-ānjā maqām-i ḥaẓrat-i mahdī talāsh kun*  
*bā ṣad adab ba khidmat-i ān muqtadā biraw*  
 (Hindī 1958, 244-5)

Reach, message, that thief of hearts,  
 And you glorious hoopoe reach the land of Saba!

Now then rise up, breeze, and cross the deserts quickly,  
 the thirsty sends you, go then to the spring of the water of life! [...]

For me bow your imploring head before the house of God,  
 then go to the city of he who is of the Lord the Prophet.

When there walk around, sincere, that pure garden,  
 then leave it and go into the court of 'Alī, who is the beloved.

When there make a sacrifice of the heart, with a thousand prayers,  
 then go to the court of she who among women is the most excellent.

When there humbly rub your head on the ground, obsequious,  
 then go to the garden of Ḥasan, the certain chosen.

When there pour shreds of heart from your eyes in thousands,  
 then with rapid step reach Karbalā.

When there weep with loud laments, just as he who is in exile,  
 then go to walk around the garden of Zayn al-'Ibād.

Go, having left that place, to pay homage to the garden of Bāqir,  
 and then go to the garden of the Ja'far of God, to walk around it.

From there go to walk with grace around the tomb of Kāzim,  
 and then reach the place where to Mūsā Rizā was granted martyrdom.

Hasten, then, to pray at the tomb where Taqī rests,  
and from there go to seek the garden of Naqī, the devoted ascetic.

Of 'Askarī, then, you must visit the court,  
and take him myriads of praises and prayers and greetings.

And then with commitment reach the threshold of the saint Maḥdī,  
and paying him a thousand respects, enter his venerated service.

As in Ghālib, for Hindī, too, the vision of Lucknow's religious scenography is perhaps a sign that suggests the necessity of continuing the journey towards the originals. These are obviously extra-textual suggestions of interpretation that must be verified with reference to sound and ample repertoires; it is possible however to indicate at least one case where the sense of the psychological and urbanistic repositioning of the holy places in Lucknow has been expressly taken to its extreme consequences by transforming – on the textual level – the sign/hint itself, the *ishāra*, into the true goal. Preference is in fact accorded to the metaphor, with respect to the original, by an author just slightly older than Ghālib, the previously-mentioned Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Qatīl' (a prominent Hindu *munshī* who turned Shiite in his youth<sup>18</sup>). The following verse comes from a *ghazal* of his *dīwān*, still unpublished:

*shawad naẓẓāra-yi rūy-i tu rūzīy-am ānjā*  
*imāmbāra bih az khāna-yi khudā-st ma-rā*<sup>19</sup>

The spectacle of your face will be my support there:  
To the house of God I prefer, for myself, the enclosure of the Imams.

For Qatīl the replica is better than the original, and the empty *imāmbāra* ('the enclosure of the Imams': the translation, based on the etymology of the term, is explanatory) which constitutes an architectural hypostasis of the absence of the body of the Imam – in this case superimposed on the poetic figure of the *ma'shūq* – is preferable to the empty Ka'ba which is the supreme sign of the divine reflection on the earth's mirror. The conceived city of Lucknow, a mirror that reflects other reflections, thus transforms itself into a familiar destination that is within reach; interpreted through the textual filter, the meaning of the originals, is already codified within its architectures.

18 On Qatīl's discourse on the superimposition of the ideas of Iran, Shiism and the Persian language see Pellò 2016.

19 Qatīl MS, f. 7a.

Speaking of the capital of Awadh as an imagined space made up of continual references to a multiform elsewhere (not only the 'classic' Islamic space of West Asia but also 'modern' Europe, whence a form of self-exoticism also derives<sup>20</sup>) Rosie Llewellyn-Jones asks herself whether a real Lucknow ever actually existed, pointing out, furthermore, how the city was already felt by some travellers to be like a façade that conceals the sign of illusionary fiction.<sup>21</sup> But Lucknow's aesthetic truth really appears to be (also) reproduction and *real* evanescence, like the revealing reflection of the mirror so dear to the poets of the so-called 'Indian style' and to their most significant representative Bīdil (1644-1720).<sup>22</sup> In this context, the verses which we have cited here, too few to confirm our suggestions, are if nothing else an invitation to investigate in greater depth and systematically (also through lexical and thematic scrutiny) the poetic dimension of pre-mutiny Lucknow so as to better verify, in the context of the city's literary community, how the Nawabi architectural theatrics were received and what were the implications – in terms of identifications and hermeneutics – of the anxiety to reconstruct the Shiite sacred places.

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20 "Given the weight of all these foreign elements (and the Nawabs themselves had come from Nishapur in Iran only at the beginning of the eighteenth century), can the 'real' Lucknow be said to have existed at all?" (Llewellyn-Jones 1997, 51). On the subject of 'feeling out of place' and internationalisms in Lucknow, see Rota 1996.

21 In this regard, M.A. Beg's observations quoted by the scholar in question are clear: "You find, on examination, that the white colour of the buildings, which presented in the sunlight the effect of the purest marble, is simply whitewash. The material is stuccoed brick, and your taste is shocked by the discovery that the gilded domes, of perfect shape and apparently massive construction [...] are mere shells of wood, in many places rotten" (Beg 1915, 7 [*non vidi*], quoted in Llewellyn-Jones 1997, 49).

22 Significantly enough, the authoritative Iranian scholar Muḥammad Rizā Shafī'ī-Kadkanī calls Bīdil, in the title of a classical study on the Indo-Persian master, *shā'ir-i āyīnahā* 'poet of mirrors' (Shafī'ī-Kadkanī 1987).

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