

Ghazal on Ghazals

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
Of each one's a refrain like a chime: "*at the end.*"

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
It's this second line only will rhyme at the end.

On a string of such strange, unpronounceable fruits,
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

All our writing is silent, the dance of the hand,
So that what it comes down to's all mime, at the end.

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,
But your hands were most fragrant of thyme, at the end.

There are so many sounds! A poem having one rhyme?
—A good life with a sad, minor crime at the end.

Each new couplet's a different ascent: no great peak,
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Two armed bandits: start out with a great wad of green
Thoughts, but you're left with a dime at the end.

Each assertion's a knot which must shorten, alas,
This long-worded rope of which I'm at the end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

W E S L E Y A N P O E T R Y

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Introduction

For a seemingly conservative, but to me increasingly a radical, reason—form for form's sake—I turned politically correct some years ago and forced myself to take back the gift outright: Those claiming to write ghazals in English (usually American poets) had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit. Of course, I was exercising a Muslim snobbery, of the Shiite clan, but the ghazal floating from so many monthlies to quarterlies was nothing of the kind. And wasn't the time ripe for stringent, formally tight disunities, not just arbitrary ones?

First, to be teasingly petty, I offered the pronunciation: *ghuzzle*, the *gh* sounding like a cousin of the French *r*, the sound excavated near unnoticeably from deep in the throat. So imagine me at a writers' conference where a woman kept saying to me, "Oh, I just love guh-zaals, I'm gonna write a lot of g'zaaals," and I said to her, in utter pain, "OH, PLEASE DON'T!" When I complained to Carolyn Kizer (as a translator of Urdu poets, particularly Faiz Ahmed Faiz, she is aware of the real thing) that the Americans had got the ghazal quite wrong, she, in extravagant despair, responded: "Have they ever!" For those brought up on Islamic literary traditions, especially the Persian and Urdu ghazal, to have many of these arbitrary near-surrealistic exercises in free verse pass for ghazals was—is—at best amusing. And let me assure the free-versifiers that nothing neo-formalist lurks in my true-to-form assertions.

Then, I had to register a protest, an irritation at Paul Oppenheimer's assertion that the sonnet is "the oldest poetic form still in wide popular use"; he cites its origins in thirteenth-century Italy. But the ghazal goes back to seventh-century Arabia, perhaps even earlier, and its descendants are found not only in Arabic but in—the following come spontaneously to mind: Farsi, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Pashto, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu—and English. The model most in use is the Persian (Farsi), of which Hafiz (1325-1389)—that makes him a contemporary of Chaucer's—is the acknowledged master, his tomb in Shiraz a place of pilgrimage; Ghalib (1797-1869) is the acknowledged master of that model in Urdu—the only language I know whose mere mention evokes poetry. Lorca also wrote ghazals—*gacelas*—taking his cues from the Arabic form and thus citing in his catholic (that is, universal) way the history of Muslim Andalusia. And, as Raymond Scheindlin has written, "The typical medieval Hebrew love

poem belongs to a genre known in the Arabic literary tradition as *ghazal*," which "flourished primarily in Andalusia from the 11th to the 13th centuries"—that is, in Muslim Spain.¹

Finally, I found it tantalizing to strike a playful pose of Third-World arrogance, laced with a Muslim snobbery (I hope no one will accuse me, as an editor once did, of playing some kind of wise sage from the East). For a free-verse ghazal is a contradiction in terms. As perhaps a free-verse sonnet, arguably, is not? At least those who arrive at free verse sonnets have departed from somewhere: from Petrarchan platforms or Elizabethan terminals (as all the ghazals in this volume, even when not entirely true to the canonical form, reveal departures from a definite place—for example, Paul Muldoon's *sui generis* "double" ghazal). I mention the sonnet because the ghazal—somewhat arbitrarily—has been compared with it. But imagine a sesina without those six words. What would be the point? Many American poets (the list is surprisingly long) have either misunderstood or ignored the form, and those who have followed them have accepted *their* examples to represent the real thing. There have been no points of departure. But, as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* informs us, the ghazal was introduced to Western poetry "by the romanticists, mainly Fr. Schlegel, Rückert, and von Platen (*Ghazelen*, 1821) in Germany, and was made more widely known by Goethe, who in his *Westöstlicher Diwan* (1819) deliberately imitated Persian models."²

So what is the Persian model—I mean the real thing? I will plagiarize from *The Practice of Poetry* (edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell), in which my not altogether correct entry, "Ghazal: The Charms of a Considered Disunity," quite correctly argues:

Because such charms often evade the Western penchant for unity—rather, the unities—I offer a truly liberating experience: the ghazal. . . . When students ask about a poem such as *The Waste Land*—How does it hold together?—I suggest a more compelling approach, a tease: How does it not hold together? I underscore *How* to emphasize craft. The ghazal has a stringently formal disunity; its thematically independent couplets held (as well as not held) together in a stunning fashion.²

The ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself. One couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another political. (There is, underlying a ghazal, a profound and complex cultural unity, built on association and memory and expectation, as well as an implicit recognition of the human personality and its infinite variety.) A couplet may be quoted by itself without in any way violating a context—there is no context, as such. One should at any time be able to pluck a couplet like a stone from

a necklace, and it should continue to shine in that vivid isolation, though it would have a different lustre among and with the other stones. In less exotic terms, the poet must have no enjambments between couplets.

Then what saves the ghazal from what might be considered arbitrariness? A technical context, a formal unity based on rhyme and refrain and prosody. All the lines in a ghazal can *appear* to have—because of the quantitative meters of Persian and Urdu—the same number of syllables; to establish this metrical consistency, poets follow an inner ear rather than any clearly established rules, as in English. To quote the Marxist historian Victor Kiernan—a translator of Iqbal and Faiz, two of Urdu's most important poets:

Urdu metres, mainly derived from Persian, are varied and effective. They are based on a quantitative system which divides the foot into sound-units composed of long vowels and vowelized or unvowelized consonants. Urdu has, properly, no accent; on the other hand, Urdu verse, evolved for public declamation, can be recited with a very strong accentual rhythm, the stresses falling on almost any syllable in accordance with the quantitative pattern. This pattern cannot be reproduced with much fidelity in English, where quantity plays a considerable but an undefined and unsystematic part, and where two "long" (or "strong") syllables cannot be made to stand side by side in a fixed order, as they do habitually in Urdu verse.³

However, some rules of the ghazal are clear and classically stringent. The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*; and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. That is, once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master. A ghazal has five couplets at least; there is no maximum limit. Theoretically, a ghazal could go on forever (in practice, *Car* poets have usually not gone beyond twelve couplets).

Perhaps one way to welcome the shackles of the form and be in emotional tune with them is to remember one definition of the word *ghazal*: It is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die. Thus, to quote Ahmed Ali, the "atmosphere of sadness and grief that pervades the ghazal . . . reflects its origin in this" and in the form's "dedication to love and the beloved. At the same time, the form permits, in the best Persian and Urdu practice, delineation of all human activity and affairs from the trivial to the most serious." Further, although there is no unity in the form "as there is in European verse, atmospheric and emotional cohesion and refinement of diction hold the poem together, permitting at the

same time terseness, intensity, and depth of feeling, uniqueness of imagery, nobility of language, and a high conception of love" in its unconnected couplets. For the "outstanding mood of the ghazal," in Urdu and Persian, has remained "melancholic and amorous."⁴

Of course, most of the poets who have contributed to this anthology have not been particularly in tune with this emotional aspect of the ghazal. Rather, they have been intrigued with the form, and it is gratifying to find that most of these contributors usually work in open, not given, forms. What, then, led them to try this thematically freeing but formally shackling form? Kelly Le Fave, one of the poets represented here, has this to say:

In a ghazal, one is not allowed to hide rhymes in enjambements or vary the refrain; the pressure that some traditional forms demand to delicately manage rhymes or refrains is off, since the repetition of the *qafia* and *radif* in a ghazal is both frequent and emphatic. Once I decide on a refrain, I make as large a list as possible of rhyming words—which is great fun—and spend days letting them incubate in my head, waiting to light on surprising variations in my approach to the inevitable resolution of each couplet. In fact, so much is given in the form—the regular syllables of the lines, the absence of enjambment, the disunity of one couplet's relation to another, the thematic address to the absent beloved, the rhyme and refrain—that what is left to the poet once the scheme is established is solely the inventive delight of the momentary that I think so many poets crave. As someone who writes mainly in a lyric free verse mode, I find the ghazal offers a fascinating and fresh combination of brief lyric moments contained within strict structural restrictions. These restrictions, along with the obligation to avoid unity, create—unexpectedly—a liberating ground within which the lyric voice has the ability to shine and accumulate without requiring a larger narrative or thematic meaning. What pleases in a ghazal is the variety with which a conspicuous sameness can be sustained; what the form unleashes is the poet's mercurial powers.⁵

The question asked again and again: Is there no unity of any kind except the formal one? To cite Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr.'s introduction to *The Green Sea of Heaven: Fifty Ghazals From the Diwan of Hafiz*:

These ghazals are often puzzling to the "Westerner" who approaches them for the first time. . . . The poems do not seem to go anywhere: there is . . . no ultimate resolution or answer. [The couplets] seem unrelated to one another. And everything seems ambiguous: is the poet talking to the one he loves? Or is he approaching a patron? Or is this a nugget of wisdom at the disciple who seeks union with God? If the poet is talking about his beloved, is the beloved a man or a woman? Is it actually the poet talking?

The thirst for unity haunts the "Westerner," even in these fussingly nonlinear days. So to repeat the question: Is there no unity? The answer: Well, no. However, there is a cultural unity—created by the audience's shared assumptions and expectations. There is a contrapuntal air.

The first convincing approximation of the form in English—at least for our times—is John Hollander's:

For couplets the ghazal is prime; at the end
Of each one's a refrain like a chime "at the end"

qaf'a

Having seen or heard this opening couplet, one would know that the *radif* is "at the end" and the *qafia* a word or syllable that would rhyme with "ime." Thus the second line of every following couplet will end with "at the end" preceded IMMEDIATELY by a rhyme for "ime." Hollander continues:

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
It's this second line only will rhyme at the end.

He goes on with thematically autonomous couplets:

On a string of such strange, unpronounceable fruits,
How fine the familiar old lime at the end!

All our writing is silent, the dance of the hand,
So that what it comes down to's all mime, at the end.

Dust and ashes? How dainty and dry! We decay
To our messy primordial slime at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,
But your hands were most fragrant of thyme, at the end.

There are so many sounds! A poem having one rhyme?
—A good life with a sad, minor crime at the end.

Each new couplet's a different ascent: no great peak
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Two armed bandits: start out with a great wad of green
Thoughts, but you're left with a dime at the end.

Audience

Each assertion's a knot which must shorten, alas,
This long-worded rope of which I'm at the end.

To mark the end of the ghazal, often a poet has a signature couplet (*makbia*) in which s/he can invoke his/her name pseudonymously or otherwise. Hollander, charmingly, pseudonymizes:

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

Notice that with the exception of the first (well, in this case also the second) and final couplets, the poem would not in any way suffer by a rearrangement of the couplets. Nor would the ghazal suffer if one would simply delete some of its couplets. Such freedoms may bewilder, even irritate, those who swear by neo-Aristotelianism and New Criticism.

Hollander has done something remarkable here, for by having "at the end" as his *radif* he has caught the particular spirit of the form. For, "within the ghazal, the poet almost always adopts the stance of a romantic hero of one kind or another: a desperate lover intoxicated with passion, a rapt visionary absorbed in mystic illumination, an iconoclastic drunkard celebrating the omnipotence of wine."⁶ In this century, especially among left-wing poets, the poet is often the committed revolutionary intoxicated with the struggle for freedom. "He represents himself as a solitary sufferer, sustained by brief flashes of ecstasy, defined by his desperate longing for some transcendent object of desire," which may be "human (female or male), divine, abstract, or ambiguous; its defining trait is its inaccessibility." (This form, in other words, which as it is being described in English would seem to lend itself comfortably to "light" verse, is anything but, and that is bound to be a challenge for those attempting it in English.) What is particularly compelling about Hollander's "at the end" is that it contains the possibility of being imbued with such longing and loss!

Of course, the past has been *some* attempts in English at the formal properties of the ghazal. Here is James Clarence Mangan's "The World: A Ghazal":

To this khan, and from this khan
How many pilgrims came and went too!
In this khan, and by this khan
What arts were spent, what hearts were rent too!
To this khan and from this khan
(Which, for penance, man is sent to)
Many a van and caravan
Crowded came, and shrouded went too.

Christian man and Mussulman,
Guebre, heathen, Jew, and Gentoo,
To this khan, and from this khan,
Weeping came, and sleeping went too.
A riddle this since time began,
Which many a sage his mind hath bent to:
All came, all went; but never man
Knew whence they came, or where they went to.

Mangan has other examples, but all of his seem to have little more than historical interest. I recently discovered another example, in James Elroy Flecker's 1922 play called *Hassan*. There it serves largely to enhance the play's love theme:

How splendid in the morning glows the lily, with what grace he throws
His supplication to the rose: do roses nod the head, Yamin?
But when the silver dove descends I find the little flower of friends,
Whose very name that sweetly ends, I say when I have said, Yamin.
The morning light is clear and cold; I dare not in that light behold
A whiter light, a deeper gold, a glory too far shed, Yamin.
But when the deep red eye of day is level with the lone highway,
And some to Meccah turn to pray, and I toward thy bed, Yamin.
Or when the wind beneath the moon is drifting like a soul aswoon,
And harping planets talk love's tune with milky wings outspread, Yamin,
Shower down thy love, O burning bright! for one night or the other night
Will come the Gardener in white, and gathered flowers are dead, Yamin!

This is a particular kind of ghazal, a continuous one (though the couplets are still separate), which is called a *qata*. But that is always the exception that emphasizes the customary ghazal in which each couplet is an autonomous poem.

An aside: After a few years of relishing Hollander's ghazal and popularizing it among my poet-friends and students, I wrote to him with a few suggestions: "All the lines of a ghazal must have the same syllabic length, and in yours though most have twelve syllables, some lines have eleven and one has thirteen and one has ten." When I wrote this, I had not paid attention to Urdu's quantitative meters. Hollander answered: "I had not intended in my example, partially because of needing the stress-pattern to

make the rhyming audible in English, to observe the strictest syllabic integrity (my lines had a four-stressed, largely anapestic rhythm, but a few iambic substitutions allowed for the divergent syllable-length on some occasions.)” These words have proved instructive for me. As a result, my suggestion to those attempting ghazals in English is that they create some system whereby some basic—but not debilitating—consistency in line lengths (inclusive of the *qafīa* and *radīf*) is established.

One essential ingredient missing in unrhymed ghazals is the breathless excitement the original form generates. The audience (the ghazal is recited a lot) waits to see what the poet will do with the scheme established in the opening couplet. At a *musbatna*—the traditional poetry gathering to which sometimes thousands of people come to hear the most cherished poets of the country—when the poet recites the first line of a couplet, the audience recites it back to him, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit. This back and forth creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the suspense will be resolved in terms of the scheme established in the opening couplet; that is, the first line of every succeeding couplet sets the reader (or listener) up so that the second line amplifies, surprises, explodes. For example, if Hollander were to recite:

You gathered all manner of flowers all day,
the audience would repeat it and so on, and then when he'd come to

But your hands were most fragrant of thyme . . .

the audience would be so primed, so roused by this time that it would break in with “at the end” even before Hollander would have a chance to utter the phrase. And then, in raptures, it would keep on *Yaab-Yaab-ing* and *Sabhan-Allah-ing*. If the resolution is an anticlimax, the audience may well respond with boos. I should mention that a ghazal is often sung. Some of the great singers of India and Pakistan have taken ghazals and placed them gently within the framework of a raga and then set the melodic phrase (which contains the individual lines of the ghazal) to a *tala* (cycle of beats). The greatest of them all was Begum Akhtar, who died in 1974. This seemingly “light” form can lead to a lot of facile poetry (haiku-ishy, one could say). But in the hands of a master? Ghalib’s ghazals reveal a great tragic poet, Faiz’s a great political one.

To make abundantly clear why an unrhymed ghazal would be a contradiction in terms to an Urdu or Persian speaker I will offer some of my own ghazals. A time for confession: When I attempted my first ghazal, I totally dispensed with the *qafīa* and settled simply for the *radīf*: That is, I made

matters much too easy for myself, despite Hollander’s compelling example. This is what I did:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic.
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Ancestors, you’ve left me a plot in the family graveyard—
Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?

Mainoon, his clothes ripped, still weeps for Laila.
O, this is the madness of the desert, his crazy Arabic.

Who listens to Ishmael? Even now he cries out:
Abraham, throw away your knives, recite a psalm in Arabic.

From exile Mahmoud Darwish writes to the world:
You’ll all pass between the fleeing words of Arabic.

The sky is stunned, it’s become a ceiling of stone.
I tell you it must weep. So kneel, pray for rain in Arabic.

At an exhibition of Mughal miniatures, such delicate calligraphy
Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic!

The Koran prophesied a fire of men and stones.
Well, it’s all now come true, as it was said in the Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:
his *gasidas* braided on the horizon into knots of Arabic.

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—
Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

Where there were homes in Deir Yassin, you’ll see dense forests—
That village was razed. There is no sign of Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw the dresses of beautiful women—
And everything else, just like you, in Death, Hebrew, and Arabic.

And now for my *makbala*:

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—
Listen: It means “The Beloved” in Persian, “witness” in Arabic.

Sometime later I made another attempt, dropping some of the couplets, adding some, revising others, but it is a more honest attempt. My choices were dictated by my not wanting to let go of the *makhia* of the earlier version, which on a couple of occasions in New Delhi had drawn for me the requisite *YahYahs*. Keeping that in mind, I created my *makhia*:

A language of loss? I have some business in Arabic.
Love letters: calligraphy pitiless in Arabic.

Here are some couplets that correspond with couplets in the first version:

Mainnoon, by stopped caravans, tips his collars, cries "Laila!"
Pain translated is O! much more—not less—in Arabic.

At an exhibit of miniatures, what Kashmiri hairs!
Each paisley inked into a golden tress in Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:
On the sea his *qasidas* stitched seamless in Arabic.

Where there were homes in Deir Yassein, you will see dense forests—
That village was razed. There is no address in Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw everything, just like you did—
In death. In Hebrew. And (Please let me stress) in Arabic.

Listen, listen: They ask me to tell them what Shahid means:
It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.

I think it is the seeming arbitrariness of the unrhymed ghazal that has kept it from being a necessary part of the American "mainstream" (a word around which quotation marks, in any context, are wise); it has led only to "exotic" dabblings. I think many Americans are often tempted by the "wisdom" of the East. One has only to remember Tagore, Gibran, Ravi Shankar, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi . . . I am being unfair, but only to make the point that when they heard that an ancient culture sanctions a poem of thematically independent couplets, various surrealistic juices overflowed. It is the sort of thing that happens with haiku (Richard Howard is supposed to have said that as a poetry editor having to read five hundred haikus a week was like being nibbled to death by goldfish, and James Merrill in his "Prose of Departure" has actually used rhymes for his haikus so that Americans would know that "something is going on").

Further, there is a bonus for those willing to pursue the real ghazal (in

addition to not having to search for titles—"Ghazal" suffices; and because the word is now found in *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, there is no need to italicize). Through ghazals, English can again employ full rhymes, even the most cliché-ridden, without apology or embarrassment because the *radif* enables the rhyme to lose, through a transparent masking, its strained and clichéd element; the *qafia* is made transparently invisible. What an incredible gift: all those rhymes one thought could never be used again. Further, the ghazal also offers English a chance to find a formal way, a "legal" way out, to cultivate a profound respect for desperation—something that American poetry has not altogether lost. As for the English? Let me leave it there.

I do like many aspects of the so-called ghazals by many American poets (among the more vibrant examples, I would single out James Harrison, Adrienne Rich, Robert Mezey, and Galway Kinnell) and could make a case for their discarding of the form in the context of their immediate aesthetics and see in their ghazals a desire to question all kinds of authorities by getting away from linearity and that crippling insistence on "unity." I have certainly enjoyed Rich's and W. S. Merwin's translations of Ghaleb's ghazals. Now while translating an Urdu or Persian ghazal into English, one would have to use free verse (it would be impossible to sustain a convincing *qafia*—given the *radif*—when translating couplet after couplet; however, Andrew McCord in his translation of Ghaleb in this anthology may well be proving me wrong). Anyway, I found their translations, like Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr.'s of Hafiz, rather attractive because they often struck me not just as efforts but real accomplishments. But when poets attempted their own original ghazals, they simply did not bother with the form. I have a suspicion that Aijaz Ahmad did not quite establish the primacy of the form when explaining Ghaleb to those who collaborated with him in translating Ghaleb. Thus, this is how Adrienne Rich explains the form in a note to her "Ghazals: Homage to Ghaleb":

This poem began to be written after I read Aijaz Ahmad's literal English versions of the Urdu poetry of Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869). While the structure and metrics of the classic *ghazal* form as used by Ghalib are much stricter than mine [but hers are not strict at all!], I adhered to his use of a minimum five couplets to a *ghazal*, each couplet being autonomous and independent of the others. The continuity and unity [Notice how it becomes difficult to get away from "unity"! flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single *ghazal*.]

Perhaps the business of rhyme and refrain just did not suit the aesthetic politics—and the political complexion—of various contexts in the late sixties and early seventies? The ghazal, as many of those poets practiced it,

gave them the authority of a foreign and rich culture; it allowed them formally to question the authority of their own culture's often rigid proscriptions, and perhaps they saw in the thematic freedom of the couplets a chance for all kinds of liberation. What would have been paradoxical to many Westerners—the ghazal's blend of "unity and autonomy"—would have attracted them. (I hope it is clear that my use of "West" and "Westerners" assumes immensely deconstructive qualifications; Edward Said argues there is no such thing as the "West." This may be an apocryphal story, but Mahatma Gandhi upon being asked what he thought of Western civilization is supposed to have answered, "It would be a good idea." I must add that there is no such thing as the "East" either.)

I love forms, but I do not wish to come across as some kind of thematic formalist. I am not, certainly not the neo-kind who wishes to save Western civilization—with meters and rhymes! However, the issue here is that by following the form of the ghazal, the writer could find herself tantalizingly liberated, surprising herself with unusual discoveries by being stringent with herself as she goes from one theme to another in couplet after couplet. Form has been associated (remember the recent free verse vs. formalism debate)—and quite wrongly, really—with what holds truth back, especially political truth. But as Faiz said, there is nothing good or bad in any poetic form but the poet makes it so. And he used this very strict form to express an impassioned left-wing politics—using the stock figure of the Beloved to figure as the Revolution. Martha Zweig, one of the poets represented in this anthology, offers this provocative aside:

Beloved-revolution is happiest in the ghazal, where it has been able to rise to the occasion of Faiz's bright insight as sort of found-object of the tradition; once you see it, you've got it made, it's a cinch, over and over, because it always was, and remains, objectively(!) *there*. Although the meaning of the beloved-revolution metaphor has everything to do with obsession, these poems do not at all resemble sestinas, for example; I testify further that sestina—even maddened over a capricious beloved—cannot be the name of *this* tune. The sestina wants to control; it hopes to spellbind in its ritual; it stakes a claim in its six magic words and interweaves them ever more densely and narrowly, like the web of a funnel spider. The sestina is out to get you, its plot thickens. The Revolution might write sestinas about us, but never vice-versa!¹⁸

In comparison, however, "the ghazal's couplets are quixotic, each takes another tilt at the poem's material; the speaker flirts, beguiled into the next and the next couplet by the will-o'-the-wisp glimmer of the last."⁹

So how far can one go with those free verse couplets with nothing but a seeming arbitrariness to guide one? In January 1996, some months before

his death, I was discussing the ghazal with Larry Lewis at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina. He was ready to attempt some real ghazals, saying of the ones in various magazines that one finds a juxtaposition of things among them but the poet does not seem to have a way to return—as a musician in a jazz solo does. The jazz soloist has a way of coming back no matter how far he has gone; because of an underlying melody, a basic rhythm. Thus, readers of the free-verse ghazal cannot but ask how the couplets are connected: they will automatically be looking for thematic unities. That is why I think the free verse ghazal in America (or anywhere else) seems always a momentary exotic departure for a poet, nothing that is central to him or her, to their necessary way of dealing with the world of their poetry. But the actual form, by its very nature, erases that expectation, preempts it. Recite Hollander's ghazal to anyone and notice how no one will ask for unities; the form seduces one into buying the authority of each couplet as thematically autonomous. When poets go crazy with the idea of composing thematically independent couplets in a free-verse poem, they manage to forget what holds the couplets together—a classical exactness, a precision so stringent that it, when brilliant, surpasses the precision of the sonnet and the grandeur of the sestina (I do mean that) and dazzles the most untutored of audiences. The ghazal's disconnectedness must not be mistaken for fragmentariness; that actually underscores a profound cultural connectedness. The ghazal is not an occasion for angst; it is an occasion for genuine grief.

So while I admire the effects of various "ghazals," it really is time the actual form found its way into American poetry. It really is. For one thing, as the narrator of *Swann's Way* phrases it, one can exact from a restriction a further refinement of thought, "as great poets do when the tyranny of rhyme forces them into the discovery of their finest lines." If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western civilization?

Notes

1. Philologos, "On Language," *Forward* (March 14, 1997), 10.
2. Robin Behn and Chase Twitchell, eds., *The Practice of Poetry* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 205.
3. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *Poems* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 15. The quote is from Victor Klemann's introduction.
4. Ahmed Ali, *The Golden Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 2-22.

5. Kelly Le Fave, letter to author, October 10, 1999.
6. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and Frances W. Pritchett, "Lyric Poetry in Urdu: In the Ghazal," *Delos* (Winter 1991): 7.
7. Adrienne Rich, *Poems: Selected & New, 1950-1974* (New York: Norton, 1974).
8. Martha Zweig, letter to author, March 7, 1998.
9. Martha Zweig, letter to author, March 7, 1998.

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