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On Ralph Russell's Reading of the Classical Ghazal

READERS OF THE ANNUAL will recall that Ralph Russell's *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* was reviewed by William L. Hanaway in 1994. The review was rather critical, and it elicited in the 1995 *Annual* a response from Ralph Russell called "A Rejoinder to Frances W. Pritchett and William L. Hanaway, Jr." In it Prof. Hanaway and I were taken to task for our emphasis—his in the review in question, and mine throughout years of my research and writing—on the literariness and artifice of the ghazal, at the expense of its sociological realism. Ralph Russell invited us to respond to his arguments. I will now do so, focusing on the main points at issue. I speak only for myself; I have not discussed these points with Prof. Hanaway.

Almost thirty years ago, in *Three Mughal Poets* (1968), Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam first offered Mir as a paradigmatic classical ghazal poet: he was a great poet from a sexually-segregated society who remained true to his love for an unavailable woman (his cousin) all his life; he almost literally went mad with love, and this real-life passion was a focal point for his poetry and gave it at least part of its dignity, sincerity, and exemplary depth of feeling. This treatment of Mir was so lucid and well-written, and also to my mind so wrong-headed, that it later provoked me, lowly graduate student though I was, to write the first real scholarly article of my life in order to argue with its premises. I still remember the sense of thrill and daring that I felt at the time, since my admiration for the work was as great as my disagreement with it.

Now, in 1995, Russell's latest book, *Hidden in the Lute* (which I review elsewhere in this issue), affirms once again his essentially sociological vision of the ghazal. "The ghazal celebrates a love which, like that of medieval Europe, in the society which produced it, could only be illicit,

and its intensity reflects this situation. ... [L]ove was regarded as a menace to ordered social life. ... [W]hen it could not be prevented it was drastically punished" (p. 129). "Lovers who were discovered could be killed by their families." Because the stakes were especially high for women, a woman dealing with her lover "often felt the need, even where she returned his love, to put his steadfastness to the test, treating him with what seemed to him great cruelty until she felt sure that no matter what it cost him he would be true to her" (p. 130). The special example is Mir, who "tells the story of his own love"—in *Mu'amilāt-e 'Ishq*, which is read by Russell as reliably autobiographical. Mir says, in Russell's prose translation, "I long to be with her again, and without her I shall die." Russell adds, "In his ghazals he deals constantly with this theme" (p. 135). What Russell does not add, however, is that every other classical ghazal poet does so as well.

Thus even in Mir's case, the process is problematical: if we already know from outside sources (assuming for the moment that we do) that Mir passionately loved his cousin, we can then choose to read as biographically descriptive, verses that would otherwise be read as perfectly normal, conventional ghazal verses. However, the converse is not the case: nothing whatsoever in these selected verses themselves marks them as especially true-to-life or realistic. The relationship between poetry and biography is thus entirely one-way: we can at least attempt, or claim, to learn about the poetry from the biography (i.e., we can choose to read certain of Mir's verses differently in the light of our knowledge from other sources), but we can never even dream of learning about the biography from the poetry. Here, to me, Occam's razor applies: if we can account for the poetry quite satisfactorily with reference to well-established generic conventions, we are not entitled to choose to read selected portions of it, by critical fiat, as conveying information about specific biographical or sociological contexts. And the selectivity is important: Russell does not at all wish to use those verses in which the beloved is a beautiful boy to show that Mir was pederastically inclined, or to use those verses in which the poet claims to have renounced Islam to show that Mir was an apostate.

In effect, Russell wants to have it both ways: while acknowledging the conventionality of the poetry, he nevertheless maintains, "The use of conventions is the use of conventions; it implies nothing about either the relevance or irrelevance of the social conditions in which the poets write" (*AUS* #9 [1995], p. 98). But in fact, in a genre in which we know in advance that *everyone* writes with the persona of, say, a passionate lover or a cowboy or an eighteen-wheel-truck driver, we lose the chance to derive

from the poetry any meaningful information whatsoever about the actual personal situations and “social conditions in which the poets write.” We gain other—and much more valuable—things, but we lose the power to discern or distinguish biographical narrative (if any exists).

Pursuing his argument, Russell then suggests that “The relevant question to ask is: What are the emotions that the poets express through these conventions?” (*ibid.*). This, it seems to me, is not at all the relevant question to ask. Almost all the classical ghazal poets express the same fundamental range of emotions, and they are those of passionate, intransigent, suffering, love-in-separation, with various mystical overtones. Examining “the emotions that the poets express” will never enable us to discover why Mir and Ghalib tower above their contemporaries. It will never explain the appeal of the ubiquitous *tarhī mushā‘ira*. By contrast, examining *how* the poets learned to say things the way they said them, how they put their verses together, how they judged their own poetry and that of their peers, will bring us much closer to seeing the great *ustāds* in their glory.

But Russell is bound and determined to derive the ghazal universe as directly as possible from social conditions. He argues that even if the Urdu ghazal conventions are held to derive from Persian and Turkish poetic conventions, we must then ask “where did the Persians, Turks, Arabs get them from? What real experiences did they represent?” (*ibid.*). An approach like Russell’s will always have difficulty with the awkward question of discrimination: how are judgments of quality to be made? If all the poetry is derived from Indo-Muslim social conditions, and all the poets emerge in some broad sense from these conditions and derive their authenticity from experiencing them, how do we tell which poets are greater than others?

It would seem that, for Russell, the only criterion of excellence is some sort of sincerity. In the following flat assertion, the italics are his own: “What *makes* the great poets great is that they mean what they say, and that somehow this comes across” (*ibid.*, p. 104). Anyone who tries to use this criterion to evaluate poetry will quickly discover how thoroughly circular and unhelpful it is. But Russell proceeds to tie it, through sheer force of emotion, to a deeply-felt personal credo (all italics his):

One of the reasons why it comes across to *me*, and why I *know* that the great poets could really believe what their ghazals said they believed is that *I* believe it. *I* believe that “all love is unconditionally good”—both heterosexual and homosexual; *I* believe that human-

ism—not in my case religiously based—is the one unfailing guide to moral conduct in all departments of life; *I* hate fundamentalism; and *I* believe that one must be true to the people and the ideals one loves, no matter what price one may have to pay. No one can produce any convincing evidence that the great ghazal poets did not also believe these things. (*Ibid.*)

Now of course this is a very attractive set of beliefs, one which many of us may share—but it will not help us even the slightest bit to understand why Ghalib is a better poet than, say, Zafar. As a touchstone for discovering, analyzing, and enjoying the qualities of Mir and Ghalib and the other great *ustāds*, it is virtually useless.

Russell has thus put into the mouths of the great poets a sort of credo of (his own) humanist views, and made sincere adherence to it into *the* defining criterion of their greatness. But he is not able to show even that these poets actually did share his own beliefs, much less that the holding of such beliefs is “what *makes* the great poets great.” The only argument he offers is an *ex silentio* one: “No one can produce any convincing evidence that the great ghazal poets did not also believe these things.” This is not, needless to say, a strong argument. And to persuade us that his humanist credo is an accurate account of these poets’ real-life views as derived from their poetry (“what their ghazals said they believed”) is an impossible task. In a highly conventionalized genre like the ghazal, deriving any personal credo directly from individual verses would be a hopelessly subjective process. Verses could be variously selected and marshalled to show all kinds of things, including beliefs that the poet was insane, or was a caged bird, or was a Hindu, or was dead (this latter view is quite easy to find evidence for, in fact). The ghazal’s protean quality is part of its inexhaustible magic: the whole ghazal universe, since it centers on the painful, inescapable human experience of unfulfilled desire, can be perceived metaphorically not in any one way alone, but in a number of ways, according to one’s own intellectual and emotional needs. The ghazal finds in passionate love a ready source for all kinds of liminal and transgressive themes (*mazāmin*); ghazal verses also rely very crucially on powerful and exciting uses of language.

Mir and Ghalib themselves would never have taken Russell’s credo seriously as a description of their poetry or as a criterion for judging the quality of their work. On the contrary: it is overwhelmingly clear that these and other great masters were proud above all of their poetic virtuosity. They devoted much time and energy to cultivating technical skills in

themselves and their pupils, and then to displaying these skills in direct competition with each other in *tarḥī mushā'iras*. They judged themselves and other poets not by their sociological realism or humanist views or emotionality or degree of sincerity, but by their verbal and conceptual imaginativeness and ready technical expertise. In *Nets of Awareness* I have described and illustrated at some length this complex process of technical disputation, mutual correction, and critical evaluation; it is one that the great *ustāds* took very seriously. Fortunately, we are not reduced to arbitrary extrapolation from the poetry: we do in fact know reasonably well what the great poets believed about their art. We know above all from *tazkiras*, and also from letters, anecdotes, literary essays, and so on. I have offered some of this evidence in *Nets*, and I hope to offer more as I continue to study *tazkiras* over the next few years.

As Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has made clear in irrefutable detail in the four volumes of *She'r-e Shōr-angēz*, Mir wrote consummately elegant poetry that was obviously made out of other poetry, both Persian and Urdu: he loved wordplay, punning, figures of speech; he relished ambiguity, subtlety, and multivalent meanings; his occasional *faux-naïf* verses claiming innocence were themselves part of the ghazal's conventional repertoire. Mir was, in short, a sophisticated, rigorous, and extremely "literary" poet. And Ghalib, that notoriously "difficult" poet, that intransigent aristocrat of the literary world, would never have wished to be known as "great" for the reason given by Russell: that great poets "mean what they say, and that somehow this comes across." Not Ghalib's sincerity or humanism or political correctness but his ability to create powerful, complex, compelling (and often double and triple) meanings (*ma'nī āfrīnī*) in his poetry is what makes it so fascinating and revelatory to read. Ralph Russell and I are old friends, and this ongoing debate with each other about the poetry we both love seems to be a lifetime affair. Well, there are many worse ways to spend a lifetime. It is another proof of the depth and breadth of the classical ghazal: that two critics with views as different as ours can both be addicted to the poetry. I have long been grateful to Ralph Russell for his excellent knowledge of the language and literature, for his lucid and straightforward writing style, for his great scholarly integrity—and even for his heartfelt commitment to what I find to be a very unsuitable critical methodology. He provokes me to think carefully, in order to sort out areas of agreement and disagreement; our arguments help me to clarify my own ideas. I always end up admiring him, and admiring the solid achievement of his work. □