

Orient Pearls Unstrung: The Quest for Unity in the Ghazal

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Formally speaking, the ghazal is a short lyric poem in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, or Urdu, usually of not more than nine or ten two-line verses (*bayts* or *shi'rs*), rhyming (*aa*), *ba, ca*, etc., in one of the "canonical" meters throughout, with a certain kind of rhyme scheme (compulsory rhyming *qāfiya*, optional repeated *radīf*) throughout, usually including a double-rhymed first verse (*maṭā'*) and a last verse (*maṭṭa'*) incorporating the poet's pen-name (*takhalluṣ*). In terms of content, the ghazal's main subject is passionate love, considered from the point of view of the first-person (male) lover/protagonist. This lover may long for a divine beloved or a (female or male) human beloved; he may also reflect on the nature of the world as it appears to him, so that the ghazal has room in principle for a wide range of abstract, aphoristic utterances. Often a number of extremely varied topics, moods, images, and figures are represented within one ghazal, some of them occupying no more than a single two-line verse. The ghazal thus appears to be in some sense "atomistic" or "molecular," with many of its small verse-units seemingly held together by their formal connections alone, like pearls on a string. Bausani, emphasizing the "external incongruity" among the various unrelated verses, describes the ghazal as "a bunch of motifs only lightly tied together" (1965: 1036). Similar conclusions have been reached by other scholars: Ehsan Yarshater, for example, writes that "the norm tends toward disparity" (1988: 25).

But a consensus has developed in the past half-century among a number of Western scholars that the ghazal does in fact have "unity." The *locus classicus* of the quest for unity is A. J. Arberry's famous article, "Orient Pearls at random strung" (1943). Arberry's discussion reaches back to the early days of the Western encounter with Persian literature, to Sir William Jones' translation in 1772 of Ḥāfiẓ's 'Shirazi Turk' ghazal (*agar an Turk-i Shīrāzī ba-dast ārad dīl-i mārā*). Arberry takes Jones severely to task: Jones has made Ḥāfiẓ address his poem in the final verse, "Go boldly forth, my simple lay, / Whose accents flow with artless ease, / Like orient pearls at random strung . . ." Arberry objects strongly to the implication:

Like orient pearls *at random* strung! An unfortunate, a most regrettable translator's gloss . . . Ḥāfīz, who was using a most apt and happy (and indeed, most customary) image to describe his own meticulous craftsmanship, was by Jones misrepresented as confessing himself a casual, careless jeweller of words.

The accusation, once made, was never afterwards repelled . . . (1943: 703).

Arberry feels that Ḥāfīz's poetic honor has been besmirched by this "accusation": the idea of stringing pearls "at random" implicitly concedes that the ghazal lacks unity. He quotes with marked distaste the view of the classicist and translator Walter Leaf, who argues that while Westerners have learned from the Greeks to cherish unity, the Persians simply do not see things in the same way; this is a "hard lesson which we must learn before we can do full justice to Eastern art":

In the Persian ode we find a succession of couplets often startling in their independence, in their giddy transitions from grave to gay, from thought to mood. To the Persian each couplet is a whole in itself, a *nukta*, or "point," sufficiently beautiful if it be adequately expressed, and not of necessity owing anything or adding anything to that which comes before or after.

From this formal description Leaf goes on to draw a gratuitous conclusion: that the Persian ghazals like the Persian mind — "sensual, mystic, recalling the voluptuous dreams of Hashish, the flashes of intuition wherein the Godhead reveals himself in moments of blinding visions to the ecstatic drunk with wine, be it of Heaven or of Earth." Arberry tartly describes this view as "highflown nonsense" (1943: 704), and hastens to defend Ḥāfīz from such allegations by proving that his pearls were not casually strung "at random," but carefully embedded in a larger design. Thus the terms of the debate were set: the quest for unity was seen as part of the defense of the ghazal against its (patronizing, cultural-imperialist) Western detractors. To adopt what might be called the string-of-pearls view seemed to disparage the ghazal — and indeed, often the whole culture that produced it.

The unity Arberry finds in Ḥāfīz is one based on the careful manipulation of well-known, established "themes": in each ghazal Ḥāfīz uses "as a rule not more than two or three whole themes, with fragments of others," and works them into a pattern like that of the mosaic designs at which the Persians so excelled. The 'Shirazi Turk' ghazal, for example, is unified by Ḥāfīz's development of one principal theme, "the fair charmer," one subsidiary theme, "wine (and music) are the sole consolation of the lover," and one signature or "clasp" theme, "[t]he poet looks upon his handiwork and finds it very good" (1943: 704-7). These relatively broad analytical concepts soon provoked further scholarly discussion.

Taking Arberry's conclusions as his "point of departure," G.M. Wickens (1952a) sought to clarify the nature of the problem: the Westerner reading Persian poetry is indeed "conscious of a vital lack," but "this deficiency is not

one of unity," for the ghazal does have unity. Rather, it is a lack of linear development toward a climax in the Western style. But when Wickens offered his own analysis of unity in Ḥāfīz (using the same 'Shirazi Turk' ghazal as an example), it turned out to be an immense web of doubtful word associations divided into no fewer than ten "classes," based on alternative spellings and second and third meanings, not anchored at all in any actual reading of the poem (1952b). Mary Boyce immediately demolished it (1953).

Henri Broms, for his part, judged Ḥāfīz's poetry to be indeed to some extent guilty of the "incoherence," "disconnectedness," and "obscurity" of which it has sometimes been accused; he noted Iqbāl's warning that Ḥāfīz had mixed "poison" into the wine of his poetry. But, Broms argued, in reality Ḥāfīz had made a radical shift in his poetry from an early period of "logical continuity, which very often means plot continuity," to a later reliance on "continuity achieved solely by means of psychological associations." Thus Ḥāfīz introduced into Persian (and Indo-Persian) poetry "a modernism whose stylistic features survived well into the 19th Century," a modernism which could well be compared to that of Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Valéry. Broms seems to conclude that Ḥāfīz's earlier poetry has the unity of "logical continuity," while his later poetry has the unity of a sophisticated modernist sensibility behind it (1968: 7,8,16).

More recently, Robert M. Rehder (1974b) has based his discussion on Arberry; he analyzes the "Orient pearls" article almost line by line, and criticizes it most effectively. If Ḥāfīz's technique is thematic, he asks, how can we decide where one theme ends and another theme begins? Thematic criticism stereotypes poems, and fragments them unnecessarily; general references to mosaics and the like are not helpful. Rehder finds that the "Shirazi Turk" *ghazal* has, rather than thematic unity, "an obvious unity of thought and mood" (1974b: 58-61, 85). Rehder denies that the ghazal as a genre reveals either the "atomism" depicted (in Arab and Islamic culture in general) by Bernard Lewis, or the poetic "exhaustion" (leading to a lack of unity) alleged by Rypka (1974b: 64-65, 82-83). In fact Ḥāfīz's ghazals do have unity: in addition to the rigorous formal unity common to all ghazals, they have the unity of craftsmanship. "If one *bayt* follows another, it is because [the poet] has so arranged it"; if the poem has nine verses, it is because the poet decided "that his purpose could not be accomplished in eight." Thus every ghazal has "the unity of the form, of being a ghazal, and of being the particular poem which it is." Lest this come to seem circular (as in fact it obviously is), we should also remember that the ghazal is concerned to render emotion, and "a certain discontinuity or illogicity of thought in its literary representation may be the most accurate way to render it." We should also note the presence of figures of speech, and patterns of grammatical form and meaning. "That they are random, partial patterns, which are more-or-less independent of each other, and

not total patterns, does not make them any the less unifying factors," (1974b: 79, 87, 96). Of all the unity-seekers, Rehder indoubtably offers the most complex, elaborate, and tortuous notions of unity.

Rehder also argues, most ingeniously, that when Ḥāfīz's ghazals appear haphazardly organized (as he knows they often do), the poet may have been taking creative liberties with some forms of unity customary in his time. Perhaps, he speculates, the ghazal's rigor created "a desire for freedom and innovation, or a certain impatience with what was customary, which was satisfied within the tradition by including more subjects in a single poem, by glossing over or ignoring transitions, and by making tacit and allusive connections between the *bayts*." For the ghazal was so developed by the time of Ḥāfīz that "it would have been difficult to write ghazals and to do anything new within the limits of the conventions in any other way." In support of this conjecture Rehder cites an unusual and possibly apocryphal anecdote recounted by Khvāndamīr. In the anecdote Shāh Shujā' is represented as reproaching Ḥāfīz for the lack of unity in his ghazals compared to those of other contemporary poets; but Ḥāfīz, who is clearly given the last word, replies (perhaps politely?) that this is indeed so, but still his poetry is famous all over the world, while his rivals' poetry is known only in their own city of Shiraz (1974b: 83-4).

In marked opposition to this view, however, Ḥāfīz has also been portrayed as a poet whose ghazals were *more* unified than those of other poets, one who offered a good example other poets have not always followed. The modern Persian scholar and poet Mas'ūd Farzād has noted the traditional string-of-pearls metaphor, in which the string represents the "rhyme and meter" linking the *bayts*, such that "the pearls could be rearranged, and even have their numbers reduced or increased," without destroying the necklace itself. He concedes that "at first glance, some of the best Persian ghazals, would seem to be of loose construction," as this metaphor would suggest, and that "many mediocre and inferior Persian ghazals, especially later ones, are so in fact." But he insists that "not a single one" of Ḥāfīz's ghazals is of this kind. On the contrary: Ḥāfīz has created "an unuttered but clearly suggested train of thought (or silent verse, as it were) between each verse-unit and the next." If we employ "the simple process of association of ideas," we discover that every verse in every single one of his poems is linked to the next in a sequence "as solid as a steel chain, and as beautiful as a golden one" (quoted in Arberry, 1958: 358). Among the unity-seekers, Farzād stands out as uncommonly sanguine; but the idea of inserting an intuitively-discovered "silent verse" between every two verses does not commend itself as a way of demonstrating unity in a poem.

Michael C. Hillmann has devoted not merely an article but a whole book to the subject of unity in Ḥāfīz, for he sees Ḥāfīz's ghazals as "defendants in a longstanding indictment" (1976: 4). After a thorough review of the discussion, he examines various possible definitions of unity, and presents Ḥāfīzian examples of each: a set of five ghazals that exhibit strong "organic unity"

(Chapter 4); a set of five ghazals that exhibit weaker "thematic unity" (Chapter 5); and a set of four ghazals that exhibit only "unity in (apparent) multiplicity" (Chapter 6). One of these latter four (the first ghazal in the *ḍiwān*) is, he says, commonly held to be a masterpiece — apparently somewhat to his surprise, since it appears to lack suitable "transitions" and "inevitability" in its progression, while exhibiting "multiplicity of theme and imagery"; at least three of its seven verses are so little integrated that they "might be felt as complete poems out of context." The only kind of unity that can be claimed for it is that it provides "an enumeration of the problems, demands, and consequences of embarking on love through six *bayts*," with a final *bayt* in which "the dilemma is resolved" (1976: 116, 123-4).

Most remarkably, Hillmann refuses to include the "Shirazi Turk" ghazal even in this latter group of weakly unified ghazals, for it "fails" as a poem and in fact "because of its disunity and incoherence, may not even be a poem" at all. It can only be allotted the lesser status of a "song," designed preferably to have an "instrumental interlude" between verses that would gracefully disguise its lack of unity. Hillmann's willingness to label such a masterful and much-admired ghazal a failure, to deny it even the rank of a poem, marks him as the strictest and most doctrinaire of the unity-seekers. His own principles cause him pain at such times, for he realizes that the "Shirazi Turk" ghazal may well be "flawless" in "the vitality of its images and statements, and the freshness of its conceits," and that it does indeed cause even "the critical reader" to "experience a sense of being transported (1976: 142-5). But in his eyes, nothing can atone for its lack of unity.

Other theorists have of course continued the discussion. Rehder (1977) has reviewed Hillmann's book at length, and very critically. Iraj Bashiri has proposed that if two verses of the 'Shirazi Turk' ghazal are held to be interpolations, the resulting seven-verse ghazal can plausibly be read as a ghazal with the "one main theme" of "love," and with a unity of structure based on its depiction of "a major station of the *ṭarīqat*" (1979: 186-8). Jerome W. Clinton is optimistic: he feels that "the discussion has now advanced to the point where its focus is not so much on whether Persian lyrics are unified as on how they are." But since "unity, like beauty, is in the mind of the beholder," and we have hardly begun the attempt "to understand how this quality was perceived and valued by Persian poets and their audiences," it is not possible to do much more than point out ways in which certain suggestive metaphors of weaving, etc. imply complexity and integration in the *qaṣīda* (1979: 73-4, 93).

Scholars of Arabic have worked on the question as well. G. J. H. van Gelder cites Coleridge's dictum denying poetic legitimacy to "a series of striking lines or distichs, each of which, absorbing the whole attention of the reader to itself, disjoins it from its context, and makes it a separate whole, instead of an harmonizing part;" he maintains that this dictum might almost have been framed on purpose to apply to classical Arabic poetry. In his recent book (1982: see

especially 14–19), van Gelder describes a number of ways in which various Western scholars of Arabic have tried to deal with the question of “molecularity.” He provides an excellent overview and bibliography of the whole debate.¹

The discussion has also extended itself into the area of Turkish poetry. Walter G. Andrews finds that the string-of-pearls view leads to what he sees as “the rather pervasive conclusion that the Ottoman poet is no more creative than the child is ‘creative’ who operates a kaleidoscope” (1973: 97). Rejecting this view, he finds three unifying forces in the Ottoman *ghazel*: first, “basic themes” that provide a context; second, a linking structure “represented by the repetition of vocabulary of syntactical patterns”; and third, the development of ideas and “the isolation of significant points of meaning (*nukte*)” by means of “rhetorical figures” or “chains of association” (1973: 109–110). Recently however, Walter Feldman has written that in the Ottoman *ghazel* the “lack of clearly demonstrable thematic connections between the couplets had become both extreme and central to the literary style”; verses usually shared only “links provided by syntax, tropes and single words” (1987: 71, 713).

In Urdu too, we have had our defenders of unity in the ghazal. Bruce Pray has devoted an extensive article to showing that in five selected Urdu ghazals, both devices of “sound recurrence” such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, etc., and also the “patterning of caesuras” in sequential verses, show cumulative effects leading up to “poetic closure” as defined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Pray states his view clearly: “I believe that any study which takes as its sole domain the single, isolated verse (*shi'r*), apart from its context, the whole *ghazal*, is bound to miss many intriguing, significant and powerful structural principles which help shape the hearer’s and the reader’s perception of the poetic experience” (1979: 143–44).

More recently, Kenneth Bryant has attempted, in a conference paper (1986), a Riffaterrean analysis, dealing with the ghazal as “a sort of grand central station of intertextuality.” Bryant concludes that although we cannot expect to find “an elusive thematic unity” in the ghazal, neither ought we to “accept the *she'r* — the couplet — as the sole object of study.” Future research should address the whole ghazal:

If there is any deficiency to be noted in the critical literature to date, it is in the relative paucity of analyses of entire ghazals — and by that I mean not simply an analysis of their individual couplets, but an analysis of the entire network of signification which surrounds a ghazal . . . The ghazal is not simply an anthology, but an organism — and a game.

Thus the defense of the ghazal against charges of “molecularity” continues, with the new critical weapons being brought to bear as literary fashions change.

This quick tour through the unity-seeking movement has of course been representative rather than complete. But it suffices to make two points. First, the unity-seekers markedly disagree among themselves about what constitutes

unity in the ghazal. Second, they agree that unity is something the ghazal ought to have. Finding unity is a proper part of establishing the ghazal's poetic excellence and, thus, for most of these critics, a way to defend the ghazal against its (real or potential) detractors.

Like the scholars whose views have been cited above, I too began as a unity-seeker; I loved the ghazal, and wanted to find in it every excellence, including unity. And indeed I easily found in various ghazals various kinds of unity. This helped me to enjoy the ghazal, and to teach it to my students, as we read whole ghazals on the printed page.

The Urdu ghazal tradition, unlike that of Arabic, Persian, or Turkish, is still very much alive. In the course of studying it, I naturally spent time in Pakistan and India, working with people for whom the ghazal is both a classical tradition and a contemporary medium of serious poetic expression. I noticed that memorization and oral recitation were by far the most common ways of experiencing and enjoying the genre. After a time I found that I too had learned by heart dozens of individual *shi'rs* — but not even one whole ghazal. This seemed to be a kind of flaw in my background, and I set out to remedy it. I soon reached the point at which I could recite any of the twelve verses of my chosen ghazal, given the first word as a prompt. Or else gradually, by cudgelling my brain, I could piece together the whole ghazal. But in what order did the verses come? This was appallingly difficult to remember; only the first and last verses were, for the obvious formal reasons, easy to get right. I assumed that this failure of memory reflected my inadequate background in the culture, and consulted my Indian and Pakistani *ustāds*, wanting advice on memorization techniques. How did they memorize whole ghazals?

The answer was that they didn't. It simply never occurred to them to do so. I discovered with a kind of shock that within Indo-Muslim culture, virtually *no one* knows *any* whole Urdu or Persian ghazal by heart. My literarily sophisticated, ghazal-loving friends, who had grown up with this poetry from childhood, who could repeat almost any single verse of Ghālib's if given the first word as a prompt, and who could gradually construct from memory all or most of dozens of ghazals by working backwards from the rhyming elements, were absolutely unable to recite these *shi'rs* in the correct order without reference to the written text. I then photocopied some famous ghazals, cut them up into individual verses, shuffled them, and found that even with this much help people couldn't reconstruct the correct order — nor, in longer ghazals, could they so much as tell whether or not a verse or two was missing. Nor were they much bothered by the whole question. Their deep enjoyment of ghazals was obviously not founded on any quality dependent on the ghazal as a carefully arranged whole. The unity-seekers' various approaches to the ghazal had all been cut off at the root: if people don't pay attention to the whole ghazal in the first place, it doesn't matter *what* kinds of unity we do or don't ascribe to it. It became clear to me that for most poetic purposes, the whole ghazal hardly existed.

In an article as well-known among Urdu scholars as Arberry's "Orient Pearls" is among Persian scholars, Ralph Russell has documented his own difficulties with the ghazal. He has described how hard he found it — despite a strong background in Greek, Latin, and English poetry — to understand and appreciate the genre. "In the typical ghazal the close unity of form stood (to me) in glaring contrast with a complete disunity of content." The problem of the varying quality of *shi'rs* within a ghazal bothered him as well. When he was offered the string-of-pearls metaphor — "beautiful, separate pearls held together on a single string" — he could not entirely accept it, for he found the situation even more disorderly than that.

[I]n the typical ghazal, including some of the very best ones, not every couplet is a pearl, or, indeed, a precious or semiprecious stone of any kind. It is not a string of pearls, but a string on which are threaded, in apparently haphazard order, pearls, rubies, pretty pebbles, and cheap beads of plain and colored glass, uniform in size and shape, but not in anything else (1969: 107).

Russell was finally able to overcome the dismay he had felt at this haphazardness by discovering an explanation: "The disunity of content of the ghazal is explained by its mode of transmission to its audience, as is the range of variation in pitch and tone of its successive couplets" (1969: 124).

Russell thus accounted for the radical autonomy of the individual *shi'r* by perceiving the ghazal as an essentially oral genre. This hypothesis is plausible and inviting. It has been briefly entertained by Hillmann, though mostly as a tactic of desperation, a way to rescue irretrievably non-unified ghazals from total disgrace (1976: 143-5, 149). More suggestively, Heshmat Moayyad has concluded from the testimony of authors like Shams-i Qays Rāzī (13th c.) that initially, and as late as the 13th and 14th centuries, the ghazal, loosely defined, "was a poem to be sung and accompanied by an instrument" (1988: 121). On this view, even written ghazals would retain the special constraints and characteristics of their original, ideal performance conditions. It is hard to find ways to prove or disprove such theories; what would count as firm evidence? Still, the standard verb for composing a ghazal in both Persian and Urdu has always been to "say" a ghazal.

But the real point, however we explain it, is the autonomy of the individual *shi'r* — which came to Russell as an unwelcome but inescapable realization, a cultural fact that was so fundamental there was nothing to do but accept it. By a different path, that realization has come to me too. Now that my eyes are open, I have come to see that virtually every use of the ghazal in traditional Indo-Muslim culture is a use based on the individual *shi'r*, rather than the whole ghazal. Illustrations of this are easy to find in Urdu literary culture in India, Pakistan, and elsewhere; in fact, once the observer is paying attention, they are hard to escape.

In informal oral contexts, this state of affairs is obvious and ubiquitous. It is

the individual verse that is inserted into conversation to prove a point, highlight a mood, or offer a witty comment on events. Rarely are two verses mentioned together; even if they are, they are likely to come from different ghazals.

For singing, a set of several individual verses is the normal unit. Ghazal singers usually sing four or five verses from a ghazal — and ghazals can easily be ten or twelve verses long. The selected verses usually include the first and last ones, but by no means always. Ghazal singers choose which verses to sing, and sing them without regard to order: they will skip over a number of intervening verses to reach their next choice, or will rearrange the order of the verses to suit their own taste. It is almost unheard of for anyone to sing a whole ghazal. The only singer I know of who has done so is Amjad Parvez; he once made such a tape of some of Ġhālib's ghazals, probably as a special tribute. Still, everyone else's special tributes to Ġhālib consist of the usual four or five selected verses from each ghazal.

In formal recitation as well, there is considerable flexibility. Poets themselves, reciting their own ghazals at public poetry readings (*mushā'iras*), generally recite the verses (except for the first and last) in varying order, and often do not recite all the verses. C.M. Naim writes, in a recent analysis of *mushā'ira* organization:

Every successful *mushā'ira* poet must be sensitive to the mood of the audience, and able to respond to their silent or vocal cues . . . Of course, they all watch how the poets preceding them fare. In this context, a ghazal writer has a further advantage: he can change the order and number of his couplets at will. Usually he will try to make his opening verse quite good, to be followed by another of the better couplets. If he gets some applause he might try to sneak in a mediocre verse before presenting another good one. Thus a poet, while reading the same ghazal at different *mushā'iras*, may alter the order of the verses or vary their number to suit the audience. (1989: 172).

Any *mushā'ira* habitué will recognize the accuracy of this description.

In written forms of presentation, the situation is the same. The individual verse is the unit most commonly written in a small poetry notebook, or *bayāz*, which poetry enthusiasts carry around with them. This is so today, and seems to have been so in the past as well. Certainly the traditional anthology (*taẓkira*) more often contains selected *shi'rs* from a ghazal than the whole ghazal, and very often includes individual *shi'rs* in isolation. Modern printed anthologies (*intikḥāb*), while usually including the skeleton of a chosen ghazal (i.e., its first and last verses and at least a few intervening ones), will freely omit verses from it, at the editor's pleasure. The editor may even choose to combine verses from two or more formally identical *ham zamīn* or *ham ʃarah* ghazals into one. Even poets themselves have made such choices about their ghazals: Ġhālib, in preparing his own *ḏivān* for publication, often chose to present brief two- or three-*shi'r* fragments, or even isolated individual *shi'rs* which he had removed from the ghazals that originally contained them.

In the written *ḏivāns* of many older Persian poets there are textual problems;

and it is significant that one of the main forms of textual corruption in the uncertainty of the order and number of verses in a ghazal. When studying Ḥāfīz, serious uncertainty about verse order is “a typical situation which we come across while reading different editions” — one which, as Broms comments grimly, “does not make studies on Ḥāfīz’s poems any easier” (1968: 25). In the case of Ḥāfīz, the textual problems are especially intractable, for they began in the poet’s lifetime: it appears that he himself always refused to collect his own poems into a *ḍivān*. When others made various (and apparently unrelated) manuscript collections of his ghazals, these were flawed from the start: “insertion of spurious *bayts* and *misra*’s,” and problems with the “order of the *bayts*,” were noticed at least as early as 1501–2, and steadily, over time, “both individual poems and the *ḍivān* as a whole became longer” (Rehder, 1974a: 147). This kind of growth is typical of an oral, or at least partially oral, transmission process, especially when the verse-units involved are small and relatively autonomous. The similar rearrangement and progressive expansion of the poetry of medieval *bhakti* poets like Sūrdās has been well documented.

When it comes to the “Shirazi Turk” ghazal itself, Hillmann chooses to discuss the nine verses of the “most popular version,” while noting that only the “sequence of *bayts* 1, 2, and 3 is stable in the available oldest sources” (1968: 10, 25). Rehder acknowledges “the possibility that one or both of *bayts* four and eight [in the standard Qazvīnī-Ġhanī edition] are spurious, and if eight is genuine there remains a question as to its place in the sequence of the poem” (1974b: 67–9). Bashiri, by contrast, finds that a version of the “Shirazi Turk” ghazal which dispenses with *bayts* six and seven of the Qazvīnī-Ġhanī edition “has shown great promise and seems structurally unified” (1979: 186). In such cases the unity-seekers are fighting an uphill battle: they are obliged to construct by their own editorial choices the poem they will then perceive as a unity. For the tradition itself has preserved and used many of its most cherished ghazals in a number of versions of considerably varying length and sequence.² Did *all* of these permutations alike have unity? If they did not, Ḥāfīz’s many devoted admirers obviously enjoyed them just as much without it. In either case, the unity-seekers face severe methodological problems. Their critical ingenuity is inevitably devoted to close analysis of verse sequences that Ḥāfīz possibly, or even probably, did not create. The contradictions they face here should give them pause.

The individual verse is the basic unit not only for transmission, but also for commentary (*sharḥ*). While some commentators systematically discuss every verse in a whole *ḍivān* (in the case of Urdu poetry, usually that of Ġhālīb), others comment only on selected verses. And discussions of isolated individual verses, without any reference to the rest of the ghazal in which they occur, are very common.³

Moreover, in virtually all traditional Perso-Arabic works of literary theory

the individual verse is taken as the natural basis for discussion. This tendency is so overwhelmingly clear that the unity-seekers themselves have had to recognize it. Rehder finds that Ibn Khaldūn's discussion of poetry, primarily concerned with the *qaṣīda*, "clearly asserts the independence of each *bayt*," though it does emphasize the "craftsmanship" of the poem as a whole (1974b: 80-1). Most tellingly of all, Jerome W. Clinton examines the conclusion of the *Mu'jam* of Shams-i Qays, in which the necklace metaphor appears: poetry consists of "correct words, palatable expressions, eloquent phrases, and subtle themes, which when poured into the mold of acceptable meters, and strung into a string of pleasant *bayts* are called good poetry." Although Shams-i Qays emphasizes the need to arrange the *bayts* of the *qaṣīda* carefully, he gives no examples of a well-made *qaṣīda*; the few illustrations he does provide, "two *rubā'īs* in which there is thematic discontinuity between first and second *bayts*," are to Clinton "almost more damaging than no examples at all" (1979: 77, 80-81). Yet Clinton ruefully notes the uniqueness of even this much analysis: "All other works on prosody in Persian, as well as the vast majority of those in Arabic, deal with poetry exclusively as a matter of individual *bayts*. The structure of the whole poem is either ignored completely, or dealt with in fleeting and allusive terms" (1979: 75). Unity in the whole ghazal, however it may be defined, was obviously of very little importance to the ghazal's original creators and critics.

It could also be argued that certain special terms and concepts help to clarify the norm against which they define themselves. In classical Urdu ghazal there is the well-known concept of a "verse-sequence" (*qif'a*), a label which is applied to a small group of verses within a ghazal to show that they are meant to be read together, as a set, in sequence. Similarly, there exists the special concept of a "sequential ghazal" (*ghazal-i musalsal*), a whole ghazal which develops in a unified, linear way; these are not too numerous. Walter Feldman describes the Turkish term "*gazel-i yek ahenk*," a ghazal of "single-harmony" or "single-melody," in which "every couplet deals with the same theme." Such ghazals are, he finds, "rather uncommon in the Ottoman courtly tradition" (1987: 72).

My basic thesis — the virtual disregard of the whole ghazal, in favor of the radically autonomous individual *shi'r* — rests on observation of modern Indo-Muslim use of the ghazal. As Rehder notes, questions about performance and use of ghazals cannot be answered from the texts themselves, for what is needed is historical evidence. "A meticulously documented study of exactly how Islamic poets lived and worked would be of the greatest importance" (1977: 113-14). While we cannot obtain such information about the classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poets, we can and should learn from the practice of modern Urdu poets and audiences.

It seems to me that there is also an argument *ex silentio* to be made on the basis noted above by Clinton: the fact that theorists of the Perso-Arabic literary tradition overwhelmingly ignored the whole poem — and not only the ghazal but

the *qaṣīda* as well — in favor of the individual verse as the unit for discussion. The weight of this tradition falls heavily against the unity-seekers; any attempt to establish unity must account for the fact that the indigenous theoretical tradition has shown so marked an indifference to the whole ghazal as a poetic entity.

The unity-seekers argue, since they generally have no other choice, from the ghazal as it appears on the page, with the built-in visual coherence and linear sequence of written presentation. Using the ghazal in this written form, they can indeed find some kinds of unity.

The ghazal's formal rigor can generate a certain amount of thematic unity, though this effect is much more apparent in some ghazals than in others. A ghazal which has as its repeated element (*radīf*) a phrase like "doors and walls," or "you may remember, or not," or "I am drunk," will inevitably come to have a certain amount of connectedness in its contents. But in fact such semantically marked *radīfs* are in a distinct minority; "neutral" *radīfs* are usually preferred, so that their polysemy can be exploited. Moreover, a ghazal need not have a *radīf* at all, only a rhyming element (*qāfiya*), and that too can be reduced to a single syllable.

In addition, the stylized, heavily marked, "pre-poeticized" repertoire of imagery at the heart of the classical ghazal is so rich that there are almost always suggestive, even seductive, resonances among the individual verses. Van Gelder remarks cynically that the "temptation to force the unity or coherence of any poem is strong," and the temptation is, he adds, "not too difficult to satisfy if one is both ingenious and determined" (1982: 19). I do not want to push the argument that far. Given the written texts of literally hundreds of thousands of ghazals, and the wide variety of concepts of unity, it would be extraordinary if critics couldn't find some examples of whatever kind of unity they had in mind. Concepts old and new, archaic and fashionable, Eastern and Western, can be explored in the context of particular, selected ghazals.

Even the strongest kinds of sequential, integral, "organic" unity can be found in some small number of ghazals. Poetic fashions have changed from time to time over a period of some centuries, and from place to place over a tremendous geographical area. Naturally there were local trends and individual experiments of all kinds. In Urdu we indeed have a few "unified" ghazals, which we know were deliberately created to be coherent wholes; not surprisingly, most of these were written within the past century or so, under the (openly avowed) influence of Western ideas. These ghazals, although there are precious few of them, are grist to the unity-seekers' mill.

We must recognize, however, that such unity is supererogatory. It is easy to say, and show, that some ghazals have some kinds of unity; it is quite another thing, and untrue to the real nature of the genre, to say that "the ghazal," in principle, has unity. After all, within the ghazal, a half-line (*miṣrā'*) sometimes has internal rhyme (usually among the metrical feet, or at the "caesura"); but no one would ever say that "the *miṣrā'*" has internal rhyme, for most *miṣrā'*'s

don't, and those that don't are not considered inferior, within the tradition, to those that do. For the same reason, we cannot say that "the ghazal" has unity.

And I would suggest that in most cases (leaving aside the very few ghazals known to be composed as integral wholes) the unity we do find is of a rather vulnerable, after-the-fact order. For there must be very few ghazals about which one could immediately and confidently say that the verses either were or weren't in the correct order, or that a verse or two had to be, or couldn't be, missing from the poem. In fact quite a number of permutations of most ghazals could be analyzed for thematic continuity, figural repetitions or oppositions, sound recurrence, caesura patterning, closural devices, Riffaterrean matrix convergence, or whatever, often with almost equally satisfactory results. It would be an interesting experiment to try.⁴ (Indeed, in the case of Ḥāfiẓ it is at times almost a description of actual *faute de mieux* critical practice.) Another experiment, imagined by Hillmann, would involve making an artificial ghazal by combining randomly chosen, formally identical (*ham tarah*) verses from a number of Ḥāfiẓ's ghazals (1974: 26). Could this artificial ghazal be distinguished by critics from a real one? Could it be shown to have certain kinds of unity? The possibilities are intriguing. But any such experiments would have to be arranged by Westerners, for within the Indo-Muslim culture itself, no one pays much attention to the whole ghazal as a unit in the first place. The ghazal is treated much more like a showcase in which *shi'rs* elegantly displayed, and from which they can be pulled out with a flourish when the occasion demands.

This may be, as Arberry's *bête noire* Walter Leaf said, a "hard lesson which we must learn before we can do full justice to Eastern art." But obviously the lesson is ours to learn. Who says the ghazal needs unity? Only we Westerners (and of course the occasional Easterner who has adopted Western cultural biases); we have made the "accusation" which turns the ghazal into a "defendant." Westerners have framed the charge against the ghazal, then Westerners have made energetic efforts to defend the ghazal against it. If we find unity, we feel we have vindicated the ghazal, validated it for ourselves and other Westerners; if we fail to find it, the ghazal remains (in our eyes) vulnerable, devalued, subject to disparagement. Whereas if we judged the ghazal by its legitimate generic criteria — those of its original makers and users — the whole problem of "unity" would cease to exercise us.

It is not a question of judging by "Western" or "Eastern" norms; this is another culturally loaded dichotomy. Rehder insists that we should not read ghazals "in any way radically different from the way in which we read sonnets, or any European poem, or any other poem" (1974b: 82). Clinton, on the other hand, finds that his own work "argues strongly against the tendency so prevalent among modern scholars to judge medieval Persian poetry by the same criteria as modern poetry," ignoring its "craftsmanlike qualities" (1979: 93). I would maintain that the real question is that of discovering and using norms

appropriate to the genre itself. This is a piece of common sense that should be applied to literary judgments in all cultures. Why should we reproach pearl necklaces for not being gold chains? What is truly interesting to discuss about the ghazal is not that it is organized, say, like a string of pearls, but that some pearls and some necklaces are so much more spectacularly effective than others. The ghazal insists on its rigorous formal limits and conventions, but as Rehder puts it very well, “[w]hat is interesting is that *within these narrow limits* some poems seem artificial, trivial and insipid while others generate great power and beauty” (1974b: 72).

If we are determined to find unity, we can find it much more easily and unambiguously in the *shi'r* than in the whole ghazal. The individual *shi'r* is a tightly knit, unified mini-poem like a haiku, in which every word is crucially important. The individual *shi'r* is, moreover, connected most organically to the whole large world of ghazal language and conventions, and can refer with ease and power to other *shi'rs* from other ghazals. The *shi'r*, a poem much smaller than the ghazal that formally contains it, integrates itself into a poetic universe immensely larger than the ghazal that formally contains it. There is room here not only for unity-seeking, but also for much more revelatory kinds of exploration.

The stylized rhetoric of the ghazal, which has so often been ridiculed by hostile critics both Western and (for about the past century) Eastern, in fact works strongly to ensure the autonomy of the single *shi'r* as poetic unit. The obligatory persona of the passionate lover, his unattainable beloved of indeterminate gender and status, the supporting players who are brought in only to complicate the drama of hopeless desire: all this stylization makes for the greatest possible compression. Above all, thanks to this rhetoric it is never necessary within the verse to specify the speaker, or the basic situation: the voice is always that of the true lover unless the verse itself contains other cues, and he is always alone in a world defined and refined by his passion. The solitude of the lover, epitomized by the ultimate narrowness of his single verse, opens out directly into unbounded worlds of meaning. Surely we can fruitfully explore the kinds of “craftsmanship” involved in using traditional poetic tools to create such *tours de force*. Many of us know very well in our own experience that the ghazal is one of the great poetic genres of the world; and it is surely not for its “unity” that we ourselves love it. We need to cast our nets wider.

Realigning our interest from the ghazal to the *shi'r* would also enable us to work with the grain of the tradition instead of against it. We could use our theoretical sources freely and fully, for what they do abundantly contain, rather than sifting through them seeking the tiniest traces of things they basically don't contain. Traditional Perso-Arabic literary theory is strongly interested in rhetorical figures, as many Western scholars have noted, including Browne (1964, 2: 46–83) and Gibb (1958, 1: 111–124). Rehder shows that the “Shirazi Turk” ghazal exhibits one such figure in every verse, and that Ḥāfīz certainly

knew at least something about this kind of rhetorical theory (1974b: 88–90). Yet most Western scholars who have looked at the ghazal have paid only minimal attention to such indigenous analytical concepts.

The Urdu performance tradition in fact has a vocabulary of descriptive terms which are sometimes used even today in *mushā'iras* to introduce the individual verse: the poet announces a verse of *taḡhazzul*, “intense (lyric-erotic) emotion,” or one of *zabān*, which might here be rendered as “verbal ingenuity,” or one of *nayā k̄hiyāl*, “fresh thought,” etc. Terms like these, which have been ignored by critics, might also help to shed light on the traditionally recognized elements of the ghazal as a genre.

An emphasis on the *shī'r* would also make us more sensitive to its structure as a two-line unit, and thus to the relationship of the individual lines (*miṣrā'*). Although enjambement is permitted and does sometimes occur, welding the two lines into a unity, far more often the two lines are end-stopped. The integrity of the line is so commonly maintained and valued that, as Ehsan Yarshater notes, in the case of Persian “a number of traditional anthologies consist mostly of single lines” (1988: 25). The interplay between the separate lines is emphasized and exploited, with the two lines placed in some distinct logical relationship to each other. The first line will often make a general statement or claim (*da'vā*), followed in the second line by a response (*javāb-i da'vā*), an illustration (*tamsīl*), or a “proof” (*dalīl*). If possible, the two lines are joined not only by this logical relationship, but also by wordplay and related imagery. If they are interlocked in several ways, they become truly *marbūṭ*, possessing the quality of *rabṭ*, “connection.” The quality of *rabṭ* within a verse — and particularly between the two lines of the verse — is absolutely fundamental to the poetics of the *shī'r*; it is the kind of technical skill master poets (*ustāds*) demanded that their students (*shāḡirds*) acquire.⁵

There is, in short, no lack of fruitful topics for students of the ghazal to explore. To concentrate attention on the individual verse is no constraint to the critic, and no insult to the poetry, because that is what ghazal poets themselves, and the cultures that produced and enjoyed them, have always done. Ḥāfiz himself, whom Arberry was so eager to defend as a creator of unified ghazals, might not have objected to Jones' line about “Orient pearls at random strung.” His reputed reply to Shāh Shujā' — that his ghazals, with or without unity, were far more popular than anyone else's — points to the great success of the ghazal: for a thousand years, across vast expanses of space and time, spanning languages, spanning social barriers, the ghazal has given its creators and enjoyers a poetic experience that they have cherished. Nowadays in South Asia it is not only alive but thriving; beyond the ubiquitous *filmī ghazals*, fine modern poets and singers have emerged. The universe of the ghazal has proved to be one of the world's most enduring poetic microcosms, and its “molecular” verses, so pithy and memorizable, have been perhaps its strongest asset. As usual, Ghālib has said it best:

If there's no Tigris in a drop
 no whole in the part
 it's a child's game
 not an eye
 that sees.

Notes

1. I am grateful to C. M. Naim for bringing this work to my attention.
2. See Rehder (1974a: 145–56).
3. For example, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's serial commentary called "Understanding Ġhalib" (*Tafhīm-e Ġhālīb*), in the literary journal *Shabkḥūn* (Allahabad) which he edits. I owe much of what I know about ghazals to this distinguished critic; I am grateful for his invaluable help during every phase of my work.
4. The Urdu ghazal I would at once present as a severe challenge to the unity-seeker would be Ġhālīb's famous classic "*sab kahān kuchh lāla o gul meñ numāyān ho gā'īn / khāk meñ kyā šūrātēñ hoñgī kih pinhāñ ho gā'īn.*"
5. Mīrzāpūrī (1918) is a fascinating anthology of corrections (*iṣlāḥ*) made by famous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *ustāds* on the (Urdu) poetry of their *shāgirds*. By far the most common form of *iṣlāḥ* is an improvement in the *rabī* of the *shī'r*. Not a single example of *iṣlāḥ* concerns the *ghazal* as a whole.

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