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The Urdu *Ghazal*—A Rejoinder to
Frances W. Pritchett and
William L. Hanaway

I HAVE JUST READ William L. Hanaway's review of my *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* in *AUS* #9, and was gratified by his generally favorable opinion of it. But his strong disagreement with my assessment of the *ghazal*, together with a recent reading of Frances Pritchett's *Nets of Awareness*, which I had just reviewed for the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* and now review at greater length in this issue of the *AUS*, revived in me a long dormant feeling that I should respond to the criticism which she made a good many years ago, and in which he now joins her. (I first encountered it in her article "Convention in the Classical Urdu Ghazal: The Case of Mir."¹ I don't know whether she would still stand by every word of that, but she refers the reader of *Nets of Awareness* to it and clearly still holds the main line of her argument to be valid.) Then during the summer and autumn of 1994 I had an exchange of letters with Frances Pritchett in which further discussion of some of these issues figured and other issues were also raised. In her letter of 3 August 1994 she suggested that we might ask "for space in the *AUS* for a kind of debate on the subject." I am very glad to accept her suggestion.

Briefly, the difference between us is this: I, with Khurshidul Islam, see the *ghazal* as essentially the love poetry of a society in which passionate, romantic love is necessarily illicit and is persecuted by the pillars of society; and in it the theme of love between two human beings is paralleled by the experiences of mystic love for God, the Divine Beloved

¹For which, see *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 3:11 (Fall 1979): 60-77.

(or, in secular terms, for a high ideal in life) similarly persecuted by the pillars of society. Frances Pritchett and William L. Hanaway on the other hand argue that “this characterization is all wrong” (Hanaway), that it is “impossible to consider the *ghazal* a social document” (Hanaway again) and that “any attempt to move from poetic imagery to social reality ... is destined to break down” (Pritchett). (Actually, to say that they argue this is to pay them a compliment they do not deserve. They don’t argue; they just assert.)

But before I come to this major difference between us I think I should first clear the ground by taking up other points from Frances Pritchett’s 1979 article and her recent book *Nets of Awareness* (a book of which, incidentally, despite reservations, I have a high opinion). In both she writes as though the views expressed in *Three Mughal Poets*² and “The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal”³ are mine. Of course they *are* mine, but—and this is an important point to which I shall return below—they are the views of not just Ralph Russell, but of Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam. In her 1979 article she makes the valid point that the “I” of Mir’s poetry is not necessarily the same as the actual Mir. Islam and I have accepted this, but, to quote *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*⁴ (p. 54), while this is true it is “not very significant, because Mir was clearly prepared to have his readers think that it was himself he *was* writing of and so to identify himself with ‘I’ of the poems.”

She goes on to say that in *Three Mughal Poets* “Russell [i.e. Russell and Islam] makes [make] no further attempt to examine the facts of Mir’s life.” Indeed we don’t, since that was not our aim. Our aim was to illustrate from the verse of Mir the typical course of love, regardless of whether the lover in these verses was always Mir, or the beloved was always Mir’s beloved. She says “Russell’s [i.e. Russell and Islam’s] interpretative goals ... require him [them] to claim a high degree of sociological accuracy for his [their] model.” Yes, for reasons which I shall elaborate later, we do claim this; and I might add at this point that in my view the *ghazal* poets themselves support us. Because as I have had occasion to observe elsewhere (e.g., *Three Mughal Poets*, pp. 106–07) some of the

²Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

³Ralph Russell, in *The Journal of Asian Studies* XXIX:1 (1969): 107–24.

⁴Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1992).

great poets who wrote *ghazals* also wrote *maṣnavīs*, in which the course of love is portrayed essentially as *Three Mughal Poets* describes it. There is no reason to think that Mīr's *maṣnavīs* are not, and every reason to think that Mōmin's are, essentially realistic stories, as is the story of Shauq's *Zahr-e 'Ishq*. (I used to have my Urdu students read *Zahr-e 'Ishq* before we came to the *ghazals* because that poem to a large extent spells out the situations of love of which the *ghazal* assumes previous knowledge.)

She goes on to contrast my [our] portrayal of Mīr (although in *Three Mughal Poets* it is not claimed that Mīr's verses always portray Mīr) both with 'Andalīb Shādānī's and with Annemarie Schimmel's. I venture to say that, outside the USA, no one ever took Shādānī's "sensational" article seriously, and his select verses no more prove Mīr to have been essentially a pederast—a lover of boys—than other selections which could equally well have been made would prove him to have been essentially heterosexual. Not that Mīr, or Urdu *ghazal* poets in general, would have disapproved of love of boys. And I am not, as Pritchett alleges, in the least "uncomfortable" with the idea that Mīr may have loved boys, handsome men, and courtesans as well as purdah-observing women. To him, and to *ghazal* poets in general, love is love—and as Ḥasrat Mōhānī put it

muḥabbat khēr-e muṭṭlaq hai baharḥāl
All love is unconditionally good ...

Of course, this sentiment was not, and is not, shared by conventional society, and it is, unfortunately, those who uphold the values of conventional society who have predominated in the ranks of Urdu literary critics for the last hundred years and more. (I once remarked to 'Ibādat Barēlavī that the *ghazal* has fared badly at the hands of Urdu literary critics because the *ghazal* poet is an *'āshiq*—a lover—and his two main adversaries are the *shaikh* and the *dunyādār*; and the values of the literary critics have been either those of the *shaikh*—in modern terms, the fundamentalists—or those of the *dunyādār*—the worldly wise.) The conventional have always been uncomfortable with the *ghazal*, and traditionally the best that the poets could do when cornered by them was to defend themselves by alleging that, for example, detailed descriptions of sexual intercourse were *really* simply an allegory for divine love—as though this altered the fact that even if they were, they were *also* detailed descriptions of sexual intercourse. The approach of Ḥālī, Shibli, and others to men's love for boys is motivated by the same desire to make respectable what cannot *be* made respectable. Pederasty in Urdu poetry,

they allege, is a (now purely conventional) feature of Urdu poetry carried over from Persian in imitation of Persian convention. They knew perfectly well what everyone else knew (and knows), and is much more relevant—that homosexual love, including pederasty, is one inevitable product of societies (like their own) in which there is strict segregation of the sexes, be it ancient Athens, South Asian Muslim society, the old British navy (“rum, buggery and the lash”), British public schools or (if contemporary American detective novelists are to be believed) prisons in the USA. And that is why Urdu poetry reflects it.⁵

Of Annemarie Schimmel, Pritchett writes, “Schimmel’s emphasis on the theme of ‘the suffering lover’ suggests an approach to classical ghazal poetry—including Mir’s—very different from the one used by Russell and Islam.” Oh? How does she make that out? Russell and Islam, it seems to me, emphasize the suffering lover just as much as Schimmel does. Where does Pritchett get the opposite impression from?

There are other points in Pritchett’s article which need to be taken up. For instance, she expresses some surprise that “Russell even feels able to identify in the character of Fancy Day [of Thomas Hardy’s *Under the Greenwood Tree*] a girl who resembles in many ways the heroine of the Urdu ghazal.” There is nothing surprising in that; in many ways she *does* resemble ... etc. And Pritchett is surely aware that I never suggested that there are not other ways in which she does not. She also writes that “the question ‘Who is the beloved?’ is a thoroughly unhelpful and misleading one if the answer expected” is anything like “Russell’s attempted reply—a girl like Fancy Day.” Her very next sentences make it clear that this is a far from adequate description of “Russell’s attempted reply.” And ten years before she wrote these words I had made clear in “The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal”—an article which presumably she had studied, since she refers to it in a footnote—what my view was. I quote the relevant extract here:

⁵Two notes in passing: first that lesbian relationships also arise on the same social basis. I don’t think anyone has yet worked out any far-fetched theory about some mythical, far distant origin of the existence in Urdu of word *chāpīṭ*—delicately glossed by Platts in the Latin he deemed appropriate for such things as “congressus libidinosus duarum mulierum”—lustful congress of two women. Secondly, I do not suggest that homosexual relationships are a feature *only* of such societies or communities—still less that there is anything wrong with them.

We can now put in comprehensive form the question, “Who, or what is the beloved of the Urdu ghazal?” and can answer, “Any person, or any ideal to whom or to which the poet, whether in real life or in fantasy, is prepared to dedicate himself, sacrificing himself for its (her, his) sake and willingly accepting the hostility of his fellow men as an inevitable consequence of his love.” (pp. 119–20; see footnote 3 above)

And now let me come to the central issue—that of conventions and what they do or do not show. Pritchett, in her 1979 article, went so far as to assert, “It is precisely this conventionality of theme and content that Russell [and Islam] is [are] unwilling to recognize in Mir’s ghazals” (p.70). Oh? Where is her evidence for this? We are not in the least unwilling to recognize the conventions of the *ghazal*. Where is there anything in what I [we] have written to suggest that we are? Every student of the *ghazal* knows that *ghazal* poets write within strict conventions, and that it is important to discuss their significance. So I have no substantial quarrel with Hanaway when he writes in his review that classical “Persian [and Urdu] lyric poetry screens the direct expression of emotions through a dense filter of conventions,”⁶ though I think that “dense” is too strong a word. What I do quarrel with is his astonishing assertion in his very next sentence (echoing, as we have seen, Pritchett’s view). He writes, “It is this process of abstraction that makes it impossible to consider the ghazal a social document ... and to give the lover and beloved of the poetry direct analogs in real life.” Oh? *How* does this “abstraction” make this “impossible”? This is something which needs to be argued, not simply asserted. (And I wonder what on earth it is that drives him and Pritchett to assert this so emphatically.) It is as though one were to say, “Shakespeare makes his characters speak in blank verse; this proves that it

⁶See his review of my *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* in *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 9 (1994), p. 256. Hanaway begins his review with a brief summary of the things he thinks I have got wrong and then proceeds to tell me what the Urdu *ghazal* owes to the Persian *ghazal*. Nothing to quarrel with there—except his apparent assumption that I did not know all that, whereas my writings, including, e.g., the first half of p. 24 of the book he is reviewing, make it clear that I do know it. (The same passage will show that Hanaway’s suggestion that my treatment fails “to show continuity rather than disjunction with the past” is quite unwarranted.)

is impossible to give them analogs in real life.” Of course it doesn’t prove anything of the sort. Neither Hanaway’s assertion nor the hypothetical assertion about Shakespeare either proves or disproves either what Hanaway asserts or what Islam and I assert. It simply has no relevance to either assertion. The use of conventions is the use of conventions; it implies nothing about either the relevance or irrelevance of the social context in which the poets write. The relevant question to ask is: What are the emotions that the poets express through these conventions? But before coming to that, let us see what these conventions are and consider where they come from. In her *Nets of Awareness* Pritchett tells us that “people of the old culture felt able to invoke attraction to beautiful boys ... illicit heterosexual love, intoxication, apostasy, and other images of forbidden behavior” ... “as powerful, multivalent poetic images.”⁷ Why *these* images? Why are beautiful boys, etc., etc., the images that the “people of the old culture” invoked? And where do these images come from? Islam and I answer that where the Urdu *ghazal* is concerned, they come from the social reality that the poets experienced, from the experience, in fact or in fantasy, of love that was necessarily illicit love. The best that Pritchett and Hanaway can do is to tell us that they come from the conventions of Persian, Turkish and Arabic. Okay, they come from Persian, Turkish, Arabic ... But where did the Persians, Turks and Arabs get them from? What real experiences did they represent? Islam and I didn’t need to talk about Persian, Turkish and Arabic, but we would maintain, as I have said in my review of *Nets of Awareness*, that they were the product of a Persian, etc. “social reality” similar to the “social reality” which produced them in the Urdu *ghazal*. Pritchett and Hanaway should not content themselves with asserting (*not* arguing) that Islam and I are wrong; they should tell us where *they* think these things ultimately come from.

Pritchett says that these “images of forbidden behavior” are invoked as “powerful, multivalent poetic images.” Powerful, etc., images *of what?* What is it that the poets express through these conventions? Neither Pritchett nor Hanaway has anything much to tell us about this. Pritchett says that the vision of Mir which emerges is not that which Russell and Islam portray “but rather of Mir the consummate poet, who uses the

⁷*Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 175. [Ralph Russell’s review of this work appears elsewhere in this issue. —Ed.]

traditional themes and conventions of the ghazal with brilliance, individuality, and intense emotional power" (1979:71). (Why "but rather"? There is no contradiction between the two "visions" she speaks of. Mir is both what we say he is *and* a "consummate poet," etc.) She quotes with approval Muhammad Sadiq's judgment of Mir's verse as "moving and powerful," verse which "at its best comes from the heart and goes to the heart," but she is pretty vague about what she thinks this "intense emotional power" is used to express. He expresses "with simple dignity," she says, "moods of melancholy, futility, pain and despair" (*ibid.*, 71–72). Yes, and much, much more besides, as *Three Mughal Poets* amply showed.

Pritchett and Hanaway tell us what they think *ghazal* poetry is *not* about, but have very little to say on what it *is* about. (A few days ago I was reading Lytton Strachey's essay on Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and felt I might equally say of Pritchett and Hanaway what he says of Johnson. "Johnson never inquired what poets were trying to do; he merely aimed at discovering whether what they had done complied with the canons of poetry."⁸)

So much for Pritchett and Hanaway's published writings. In her as yet unpublished letter to me—the one in which she suggested an exchange of views in the *AUS*—Frances Pritchett presented her argument in more detail, and it is only fair to her that I should quote the relevant paragraphs at length. So here they are, followed by my rejoinder to them.⁹

To me the ghazal's reliance on its wonderful network of images and conventions makes it very clear that for most purposes, it is not

⁸See the essay "Lives of the Poets," dated 1906, in his *Books and Characters, French and English* (London: Chatto and Windus, Phoenix Library Ed., 1928), p.61.

⁹Since her letter was not written for publication I wrote to ask whether she wished to send me a revised version of what she wrote. She replied:

I've just looked over my letter to you, and although I'm not convinced it's as lucid as I would have made it for the public, of course you have my permission to use it. I'm sure you'll identify it as being from a private letter, and then people will realize why the points in it aren't explicated more formally or at more length. And because I've thought so much about these points for so long, it certainly does represent my basic views. The only thing I didn't mention in it that I also would emphasize is the importance of wordplay and the value placed on it in the tradition.

derived from anything like the *actual* “social conditions” of their personal and collective lives. After all, if the ghazal poet writes as a passionate lover (of people of both sexes and widely varying social conditions), he also depicts himself as a drunkard, a madman, an apostate from Islam, a caged bird, a hunted animal, and even a voice from beyond the grave. If we do not imagine him to be these latter things in reality, why do we imagine that he must be a passionate lover in reality? If any of these reflect actuality, it’s surely at one remove, through conventions adopted and understood by all practitioners and enjoyers of the genre. Your attempt in *Three Mughal Poets* to construct an ideal-type love affair—the glimpse on the balcony, the secret messages, etc.—has sometimes reminded me of Freud’s archetypal band of brothers who kill their father and thus give rise to the Oedipus complex. Can this primal event at all be located in history? Did it occur once and definitely (like the Fall), or repeatedly for everybody, or only conceptually? After all, we know that many Urdu poets began composing well before they reached puberty, and we know they were trained by technical methods that emphasized a mastery of the tradition rather than personal experience, and we know that their mushairah [*mushā’ira*] performances were deliberately made competitive and formally restricted, in a way that cut personal experiential input to a minimum. I believe I argue from a wealth of evidence that the classical ghazal is indeed a “game of words.”

But of course I would never agree that it is *only* words. To me the central thrust of the ghazal is the exploration of states of passionate desire—and the experience of the radical, irrevocable unfulfillment of desire. The beloved’s one chief role is to be absent. I know many ghazal-lovers whose lives have had almost nothing in common with the social conditions of medieval North India, who still find rich emotional and intellectual experience in the ghazal. I am certainly one of them!

To me it is like country-and-western music: the hero in a song always has to be a cowboy or a long-distance truck-driver, or something very similar, but nobody thinks that the song-writer, the singer, or the audience has to be. The delights of genres like this do not lie in their realistic depiction of particular social conditions but in their expression of shared human emotional experiences in literarily heightened ways. Maybe the inventors of the genre were cowboys, but their actual experience (to whatever extent it was

reflected in the songs) is now entirely conventionalized for modern enjoyers of the genre.

The strong form of your argument I think is open to many objections. In a weaker form, however, I would argue that it becomes irrefutable but also undecidable. Even if people don't actually live the lives they depict in their poetry, maybe the original impulse for setting up those generic conventions was an actual set of social conditions? Maybe so and maybe not, but how to prove or disprove it? What would count as evidence, and would we have to start with the early Arabic ghazal? Persian ghazal? We are back looking for Freud's primal band of parricidal brothers. And what of the poet as apostate from Islam, as embracing Hinduism in fact—would some poet or group of poets ever have actually done this? And if not, how to explain such conventions?

Here, Frances Pritchett, is my response to what you write:

First, let me again ask *how* "the ghazal's reliance on its ... images and conventions makes it very clear that ... it is not derived from anything like the *actual* 'social conditions' of their lives"? You must *argue* this, not just state it.

Secondly, since I have never studied Freud (a statement which is neither a boast nor an apology) I cannot respond to this part of your argument.

Thirdly, I think that much of the rest of what you say supports my interpretation rather than yours. I shall return to this point later.

I hope you won't take it amiss if I say that I think the answers to most of your questions were given long before you asked them—in *Three Mughal Poets* (1968), "The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal" (1969), and an article (which, however, you may not have seen) called "The Urdu Ghazal in Muslim Society," which was published in the now long-defunct *South Asian Review*.¹⁰ However, its essential points are again made in Chapter 2 of my *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* which you had read and reviewed (in gratifyingly favorable terms!) before you wrote the letter to which I am responding.

First let me make the case of the man who was/is in real life the illicit lover of another human being. You will surely not deny that there have been, and are, such people, even if we grant (as I do) that they

¹⁰3:2 (1970), pp. 141–49.

constitute(d) a very small minority of their community. (Heloise and Abelard existed, though the vast majority of their contemporaries did not love and act as they did.) Surely you will also not deny that many of them will have been *ghazal* poets. *Their ghazals* will, within the *ghazal* conventions, have been the direct, literal expression of what they were actually feeling. Some of these poets will also have subscribed to the common mystic view that earthly love teaches divine love,¹¹ to the humanist, anti-fundamentalist concept of Islam, to the view that one may be a true lover of God even if one calls Him by some other name, and that *all* human beings should be united by love for one another. All these things are, I am convinced, literally true of Mīr, and if it is true that neither I nor anyone else can conclusively prove this, it is, so to speak, even more true that you can't produce the slightest evidence for your assumption that he was *not* the man his poetry describes himself as being.

In what terms does he so describe himself? Often with an exaggeration which is surely a feature of all language. When someone says, "He's crazy about her," no one takes "crazy" literally. When you say of someone who holds tenaciously to an outrageous opinion, "He's completely mad," you don't mean that he's *literally* mad. Urdu is a language which, in my experience, is given to forthright, unqualified statement. (No Urdu speaker ever says, or even thinks, in such terms as "The bulk of the evidence would perhaps tend to suggest ...") And exaggeration, often of a more extreme kind than people bred in the English tradition can easily stomach, is a regular feature of Urdu, and more particularly of Urdu poetry, and is, so to speak, an extension of this forthright, unqualified style of expression. That being so, I'm surprised that you think it necessary to ask such questions as "...what of the poet as apostate from Islam, as embracing Hinduism in fact—would some poet or group of poets ever have actually done this? And if not, how to explain such conventions?" These things are from the very start entirely intelligible, exaggerated statements of a genuinely held belief. Take the verse quoted by Rusvā in *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* (where he, wrongly, it seems, attributes it to Ḥāfiz):

mai khur-o-muṣḥaf bisūz-o-ātish andar ka'ba zan
sākin-e butkhāna bāsh-o-mardum āzārī makun

¹¹For a remarkable instance of this, see M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), pp. 293–94.

Drink wine, burn the Qur'ān, set fire to the Ka'ba, live
in the idol-temple, and don't injure your fellow-men.

Every reader with a taste for poetry knows at once that the poet doesn't mean his words to be taken literally. What he is saying is: "Don't you realize that if you injure your fellow-men you are committing an even greater sin than you would be if you burnt the Qur'ān, etc.?"

When Mīr writes

mīr kē dīn-o-maẓhab kō ab pūc̣ḥtē kiyā hō? un-nē tō
qashqa khēnc̣ā dair mēñ bēṭhā kab kā tark islām kiyā
Why do you ask now about Mīr's religion? He has
drawn the caste mark on his forehead, settled in the
temple, and long ago abandoned Islam.

he means by "Islam"—and again everyone with a taste for poetry knows this—the version of Islam upheld by what are nowadays called the fundamentalists. The Hindu imagery is equally simple. The poet's beloved, whether human or divine, is his idol, whom he worships. If human, his/her beauty is one of the manifestations of God, and the worship of beauty is the worship of God. (Cf. *Three Mughal Poets*, pp. 174–76, where this is *directly* expressed, without recourse to symbols derived from Hinduism.) In a Hindu environment what is more natural than that he should use a literal description of Hindu practice as a metaphorical description of his own?

The symbolism of the other things you instance is equally clear and simple—and all of them are, if I may say so, quite adequately explained in my writings from 1968 onwards. For madness see *Three Mughal Poets*, pp. 154 and 193. For wine and intoxication see *ibid.*, p. 195. The metaphors of the caged bird and of speaking from the grave are too obvious to need explaining.

So, my first point is that the *ghazal* can perfectly well be the poetry of men who really were illicit lovers and men who really held some of the main beliefs, derived from the doctrines of the Sufis, that the *ghazal* expresses—anti-fundamentalist, valuing *all* human love, and stressing humanism as an essential feature of true Islam. That these beliefs were expressed in the symbols and metaphors we have been discussing in no way changes the fact that these *were* their real, genuine beliefs. There is no reason to doubt the essential truth of what Mīr says of himself in his *maṣnavīs* and in *Ẓikr-e Mīr*, and, through the conventions of the form, in

his *ghazals*. To ignore the fact—yes, *fact!*—that many of the great *ghazal* poets had the experience, and held the views of which I have described, is to do them a grave injustice. We know that Mōmin was the illicit lover of purdah women, as was Ḥasrat Mōhānī. We know that Ghālib may have been so, and certainly was the illicit lover of at least one singing-and-dancing girl. We know that Ghālib's attitude toward Islam was, in real life, that of the *ghazal* poets, and that he was a drinker of real, as well as metaphorical wine, and that he wrote to Tufta, on 23 December 1859, "I hold all mankind to be my kin, and look upon all men—Muslim, Hindu, Christian—as my brothers."¹² So why the emphatic assertions of the *ghazal's* remoteness from real life? For the greatest *ghazal* poets it is not in the least remote from their real lives. What *makes* the great poets great is that they mean what they say, and that somehow this comes across. They are not simply manipulating conventional symbols. (The ones that *aren't* great *are* doing that, and no more than that. But I shall come to them later.) 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 humanism—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.

The *ghazal* has another very important relevance to social realities. Part of its enormous appeal lies in the fact that it enables real lovers (still present in appreciable numbers in South Asian Muslim society and still in most cases—necessarily so in that society—illicit ones) to express their feelings without being penalized for doing so. The heroine of *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* rightly stressed the importance of this where love for human beings is concerned. (Cf. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, p. 46, repeating what I had already written in 1969. But the same point holds good for *all* the themes of the *ghazal*.) I have shown how the *ghazal* is a "licensed, institutionalized form of passionate protest against the world in which poets and their audiences were alike confined" (*ibid.*, p. 46)—a sort of safety valve for them. No one could prove that in real life their attitudes

¹²All the evidence of this is quoted in my and Khurshidul Islam's *Ghālib: Life and Letters* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969).

were those which they expressed in their *ghazals*—which by no means proves that this was never the case. The position of the poet who really was an illicit lover was not unlike that of Pasternak under the Stalin regime when he gave public recitations of his translations of Shakespeare's sonnets. His audience would often call for the one which, in the original, begins, "Tired of all this ..." and includes such lines as, "And art made tongue-tied by authority." He, his audience, and "authority" knew very well that he was speaking of Soviet society, but no one could prove it, and "authority" knew very well that he could say that he was simply reciting a poem by one whom he, his audience, and "authority" alike recognized as a great poet. Similarly the lover's audience might strongly suspect (and in some cases know) that he is speaking of his own experiences, safeguarded by a convention which made it impossible for anyone to prove this.

However, if one looks at the whole range of the members of South Asian Muslim society, the great majority were not and are not illicit lovers. And similarly, if one takes the whole range of *ghazal* poets—good, bad, and indifferent—the great majority are not and never have been true lovers of the kind the *ghazal* exalts. This too my writings have made perfectly clear. I hope I may be permitted a lengthy quotation from them. Thus on p. 117 of my article "The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal" I wrote: "...the deterrents against love which purdah society had [and has] at its disposal were generally quite effective to make most of its members hold back from so dangerous a course." And on p. 118:

... qualities ... which he hoped to find in a mistress—or would have hoped to find if he had dared to have one.

These last words foreshadow a fourth possibility. If the poet is writing of actual experience of love for a real person, the real person is either another man's wife or betrothed, or a boy, or a courtesan. But in many cases the "beloved" must have had no existence at all except in the poet's fantasy. In this case, the question of real-life experience and real-life models simply does not arise; all is the product of the poet's imagination, and in his "beloved" he paints the portrait of someone who in his real-life experience never existed and probably never will exist...

Finally, just to complete the picture, let it be said that there have no doubt always been *ghazal* poets who never had a fantasy beloved. For a tolerable performance at *ghazal* composition was regarded by many as a necessary part of the social equipment of a gentleman, in much the same way as a tolerable ability to play bridge is so regarded

in some circles in the modern West. At this level, the ghazal is nothing more than evidence that its author has successfully acquired certain techniques.

It is not necessary to trace at any length the parallels in the mystic or quasi-mystic aspect of the ghazal. At the two extremes stand first, those poets who really were mystics—Mir Dard is the example that comes most readily to mind—and, at the other end those who have no more loved their God than they have ever loved a woman, but who can handle the techniques with sufficient expertise to show that they are cultured gentlemen. In between, the possible diversity of range is great.

But there is more to be said about fantasy than I said there. Fantasy plays an important role in everyone's life, and the contrast between "real experience" and "fantasy experience" should not be overstressed. The exercise of fantasy is as much a part of everyone's real experience as the daily round of "real" activities are. And here I come to your paragraph about country-and-western music and to my point that some of your points support my interpretation of the *ghazal* rather than yours. This one certainly does. In the first place, for lovers of country-and-western and lovers of the *ghazal* alike, it is the essential content of what is said or sung that is of primary importance, not the conventions with which that content is expressed. Then you say that the hero of country-and-western "always has to be a cowboy or a long-distance truck-driver, or something very similar," and "nobody thinks that the song-writer, the singer, or the audience has to be." I entirely agree. Real truck-drivers did and do exist, and so did real cowboys (do they still?); but all that enthusiasts for country-and-western are concerned with is their image of an imaginary hero who has the qualities they vaguely assume his real-life prototype has, or once had, qualities which in fantasy they would like to feel that they too have, even if in real life they neither have them, nor, quite often, even *want* to have them. They want, in fantasy, and in some cases in real life, to experience (again in your words) "shared human emotional experiences in literarily heightened ways." Well, in all that substitute "*ghazal*" for "country-and-western" and "lover" for "cowboy or long-distance truck-driver" and it applies word for word. In your letter you are a bit more specific than you have been in your published writings about what "shared human emotional experiences" form the subject of the *ghazal*, but let me say again that both you and Hanaway give short measure when it comes to telling us what the *ghazal* tells its readers; and no satisfactory

account of the *ghazal* can be written unless the writer tells us what he or she thinks this is. Which brings me to a final point. I've got nothing against country-and-western songs, but I think that what they tell their audience and what that audience values, is less valuable than what the *ghazal* tells *its* audience and *its* audience values. And I don't agree with you that "the central thrust of the *ghazal* is the exploration of states of passionate desire—and the experience of the radical, irrevocable unfulfillment of desire." Of course, it *does* explore that, but the central thrust is the celebration of the heroism of the lover, who remains unshakably true to his love, come what may.

So much for a direct reply to my critics. But I feel I cannot conclude without saying something about the general context in which this discussion must be set. This may be a delicate matter, but I think we need to consider who it is that says what, and what are their qualifications for saying it. So first, I need to revert to the point that what Pritchett and Hanaway regularly speak of as my assessment of the *ghazal* is not Ralph Russell's assessment but Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam's assessment. Frances Pritchett in her 1979 article explicitly assumed (perhaps understandably but nevertheless unjustifiably) that the relevant chapter in our *Three Mughal Poets* was "chiefly Russell's work" and said that accordingly she identified it as such. I had occasion to write to her correcting this false impression and reaffirming that the views expressed were the joint views of both of us. Whether Hanaway was as aware (or as fully aware) of this as Pritchett was, I don't know. But she is still writing as though Khurshidul Islam's views aren't of any great relevance—whereas in fact they are of absolutely cardinal relevance. Because he knows and understands the Urdu *ghazal* and the poetry of all its major exponents better than Pritchett, Hanaway and I will ever know and understand it if all of us live to be a hundred, and there can be no justification for, so to speak, brushing him aside in this way. (Which of course is not to say that one is not entitled to disagree with him—provided that one can explain why.)

Secondly, something about myself. I was amused to read Pritchett's remark in her 1979 article, speaking of the picture of love which *Three Mughal Poets* presents: "Its source is unclear, but it seems to be an abstraction made by Russell himself from a combination of Mu'amlat-e 'Ishq and his own historical and sociological knowledge about the period." It evidently didn't occur to her that the source of my (and, let me repeat, Khurshidul Islam's) picture could be what in fact it was—his

life experience and life-long study, and my own (much shorter and more limited but nonetheless relevant) experience and years of study. I am well aware that what I am about to say may be misunderstood as boasting, but I must take that risk all the same, because it is closely relevant to my argument. I know South Asian Muslim family and social life quite intimately—"from the inside," as they say. My close friendship with Khurshidul Islam began in 1949 and continued unbroken until 1986. During those thirty-seven years there was nothing—repeat *nothing*—about which we could not speak openly and honestly to each other, and no question, however intimate, which we could not ask each other in the complete certainty that we would receive a frank and honest answer. I have lived for two whole separate years, as a member of a South Asian Muslim family in which the wife was not highly educated, and came from a traditional background, and for shorter periods in similar families. I have numerous other close Indian and Pakistani friends, both in South Asia and in Britain. I have lived in South Asian villages as well as towns. And all of this experience is relevant to my (and Islam's) understanding of the *ghazal*, for, as Pritchett surely knows, the social conditions which Islam and I show as the soil from which the *ghazal* sprang are in all essentials the social conditions in which millions upon millions of South Asian Muslims still live, and there are quite a number of them known to me personally who have experienced all or most of the situations of love which *Three Mughal Poets* describes. I am reminded of the words of, I think, Mark Rutherford (a little-known nineteenth-century author who is a great favorite of mine) to the effect that to be a competent critic of literature, what you need even more than a knowledge of literature is a knowledge of life; and in this area I feel that I have this knowledge. Which is why, to quote Pritchett's words again, we "claim a high degree of sociological accuracy" for our model.

Thirdly, we need to find out, and having found out, pay careful attention to, the assessment of South Asian Urdu scholars, beginning with those who have long been established in the universities of the USA. I know that at least one of them, C.M. Naim, at whose feet Pritchett once sat as a student, is evidently not of her opinion. In a letter which he wrote on 1 August 1989 (ten years after the publication of Pritchett's article) to a friend of mine, and which I have his permission to quote, he said, "Russell's brilliant article ["The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal"] was like a godsend for me. It laid out the issue in detail, then offered useful analogs and suggestions, doing it all in the most lucid and cogent fashion. It had many new things even for an insider. Since then that article has headed

the list of required readings for my students.” (I know of course that this doesn’t necessarily imply that he agreed with it *in toto*.) What do the others think? I am struck by the fact that, so far as I know, none of them has published anything in support of the view which Pritchett and Hanaway so emphatically put forward. They are all of them people who, so to speak, grew up with the *ghazal*, and their views would be of special interest. (I would especially like to know what Pritchett’s close collaborator Shamsur Rahman Faruqi [for whose formidable range of learning I have a great respect] may have to say on the question.) If any of them like to regard this as something in the nature of a challenge, so be it. I know very well that there was a time when it would not have been profitable to invite Urdu speakers to discuss relaxedly the interpretations which I (and Khurshidul Islam) put forward. In the 1969 article to which Naim refers I wrote of my experiences in the University of Delhi in 1958, when in the course of a lecture on the *ghazal* I made a statement (which in my then innocence I thought unremarkable) that it was the poetry of illicit love. This was greeted with marked disapproval, conveyed to me (in suitably delicate terms) by the chairman, who (though I did not name him in my article) was none other than the illustrious K.G. Sayyidain. I wrote of this in my 1969 article: “...my statement is true, and ... even those who disapprove of it must have sensed its truth to some extent” (p. 113). But, true or not, it calls for calm and uninhibited discussion. For years after 1958 it was my experience that Urdu speakers simply could not bring themselves to talk frankly and without embarrassment about illicit love, but I hope that by now this is no longer the case—or at any rate no longer the case with South Asian scholars working in the USA.

So it would be very good if they would tell us what they think, and I want hereby to invite them to do so.