

The Literary Anatomy

Looking in the Broken Mirror

Teaching the Ghazal

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THE *GHAZAL* HAS A SPECIAL POIGNANCY to me. In the spring of 2000, Agha Shahid Ali introduced the ghazal to our craft class at New York University (NYU) just before he became seriously ill with the brain tumor that would take his life the following year. During that first bout with cancer, before we even knew what was wrong, I would visit him in the hospital, bringing him the ghazals I was writing. They weren't very good, but Shahid¹ (pronounced SHAH-hid) was always encouraging, and always excited by a "real" ghazal. Do not get the impression that I was a selfless student visiting his lonely hospitalized professor. Rather, I was a devoted student for whom Shahid generously made room for among the countless and loving members of his family and social circle. Shahid was never alone from the time he fell ill to the time he died. He made everyone who knew him feel like they were an intimate, or a close friend, and I think that he made everyone feel that way because he genuinely

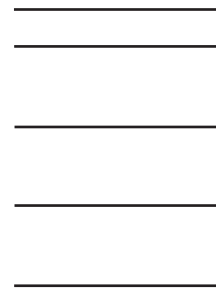
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cared for each person he met. Whether I tell my students or not, I teach the ghazal as a tribute to Shahid. I've been teaching the ghazal for a long time, and I hope that these guidelines will help you continue his work.

I. Jump Right In. Don't Explain.

I tell my students that we're going to be working on a form called the "ghazal," and that it's easier to do than to explain.

I start by drawing a sequence of five lines on the board like this:



The first two lines will be the ends of the first couplet, and the next lines will end the subsequent couplets. At about this point, you should ask students

¹"Agha" is Agha Shahid Ali's surname, and "Shahid" was his given name.

to take notes and write down what's on the board (you'll be writing on the board yourself). Now, tell the students that you need to have an end word, or an end phrase. It will be our refrain, and it will be repeated throughout the poem. Ideally, it should be something worth repeating, and if possible it should have a lot of different meanings. It should also be able to end a sentence. To fill out this model, I'll be using a ghazal written by a class I worked with in the summer of 2009 at the Firespark! arts program in Brenau, Georgia.

When I ask these high schools students for a refrain, they come up with "in full color," so I fill in all the lines with "in full color":

in full color
 in full color
 in full color
 in full color
 in full color

The next step is to come up with a rhyme. I now draw in the line where the rhyme will go:

_____ in full color
 _____ in full color
 _____ in full color
 _____ in full color
 _____ in full color

Now we need a word that can go right in front of the refrain and that rhymes with a lot of other words (so no "silver" or "orange"). Have the class write the first line, and then take the rhyme from that. This class comes up with "*There is great precision in full color.*" I write in the first line, and then fill in the rhyme:

There is great precision in full color
 -ision in full color

-ision in full color

-ision in full color

-ision in full color

Next, we make a list of words that rhyme with "precision" to make it easier to proceed. As the students call them out, I write them down to the right of the poem.

Now comes the fun part. I explain that we now have all the rules in place. We have our refrain (*in full color*) and our rhyme (*-ision*). We know how the first two lines end, but we have to supply the beginnings as a group. So for the first couplet, I'll say, we have the first line, and now we need "*something something something -ision in full color*". What are we going to fill in? I also explain that the second line of the couplet should reflect back on the first line—it should sort of change things around, or make us rethink the first line. This time, my students come up with:

There is great precision in full color
 To cut an incision in full color.

We have our first couplet! The next couplets, I tell the class, will be easier, because having established the rhyme and refrain in the first couplet, we now only need them to appear in the second line in the following couplets. Here I explain that it is very important that the couplets be completely unrelated. We do not want to have any characters that continue their adventures, no story being told, no objects that recur, no ideas that re-circulate. The whole idea is to have disconnected couplets, to approach the refrain in as many ways as possible. As we're coming up with the lines, I also try to show them how to have some sort of syllabic parity across the lines. While you could certainly write iambic pentameter or anapestic trimeter ghazals, I just focus on having lines of roughly the same length by syllable count. Here are the next two couplets:

The sun shines down upon the earth
 Creating a vast collision in full color.

Son standing at his parents' door
Ready to complete his mission in full color.

The final couplet has a special role, in which you must comment on yourself. I give them the example that my own ghazal ends with the couplet "*Jason, you are vain and, you are foolish / You do not live forever because this is on paper.*" At this point, I will often encourage the students to come up with a group name they can use in the couplet. If the students already have an identity as a group (e.g., Honors English), then you can use that. This particular group chose the name "Silvertongues," and here is their final couplet:

The Silvertongues use word and mind
To cause a vision in full color.

Now we have our full ghazal, and they've learned the form. At this point, I sometimes give them the terminology for the rhyme ("*qafia*") and the refrain ("*radif*"), although I don't actually use the terms myself, since "rhyme" and "refrain" seem perfectly adequate to me. (The opening couplet also has a technical name: "*matla.*") When possible, I use different colors of dry-erase marker for the rhyme, the refrain, and the rest of the lines.

This process usually takes me around fifteen or twenty minutes. Don't rush the students as they come up with lines. It can be a slow process, but they always come out of it with a better understanding of the form. The number of couplets that I set up on the board really depends on the size of the board. Ghazals should be at least five couplets, and as you can see, ghazals can go on forever. I would not advise doing this without some form of board visible to the entire group (a blackboard, a whiteboard, an overhead projector, etc.). Depending on time and student engagement, I'll sometimes do up to three group ghazals in this style. Group ghazals written with everyone coming up with lines as you go tend not to be very good. The poem that comes out of this exercise is usually a bit like the first pancake—not so good, but not a step you can skip.

II. What to Do with a Ghazal

Having the students write their own individual or group ghazals from here is a straightforward process. There are two ways that I've successfully had students write group ghazals. The first is by brainstorming rhymes and refrains. The class then votes on which ones to work with (they can vote for as many refrains as you want ghazals). The first and last couplet have to be assigned because they have their own requirements. If each student writes one couplet, then you have a ghazal with each student having contributed a couplet. This can be great for building community and creating a sense of shared endeavor. It's also a perfect performance piece if your group is expected to perform any of their writing in front of a larger group. You can also have students write as many couplets as possible, and then use a voting process to whittle down the poem—or just let the poem expand towards whatever length they want.

There are other ways to facilitate ghazal writing. Denver Butson offers a fascinating exercise that can be useful for students. In his "Drowning Ghazals" he shows how you can take a line from any poem and build a ghazal from it. He takes a line by Emily Dickinson: "After all the Birds have been investigated and laid aside," and makes "and laid aside" the refrain, and "-ated" the rhyme. His first couplet reads:

After all the birds have been investigated and
laid aside

After we with our Bellies are sated and laid
aside

His final couplet is wonderful:

The last time you called my name Denver out
across the dark

there was Nothing I had I wouldn't have trad-
ed and laid aside

This can be a great way to encourage students to pay homage to their favorite poems—encourage them to take a line they love from a favorite poem and start a ghazal from it. Also, if they’ve written anything earlier they can take a line from it and start a ghazal. Any line of language seems to contain a nascent ghazal, in a way it might not contain, say, a sonnet or haiku. Once they know the form, you can also have them write one short sentence (about ten syllables) and then have them pass it to the person next to them so that they write ghazals from each other’s lines. My high school students’ favorite activity is to write silly stories by having everyone pass their notebooks to the left with each student writing the next sentence. This can work equally well with ghazals, and the results tend not to go so far off the rails.

Perhaps the most valuable part of teaching the ghazal, for me, is that it makes revision possible for students who often find revision a scary process. In most poems (formal or free verse), revision is a bit like a game of Jenga. Shift any one part and you risk the whole thing falling down. In most poems, any revision ripples out across the poem, and the entire poem needs re-consideration. But the structure of the ghazal is modular. Each couplet has its own life. You can ask students to mark the three strongest and the three weakest couplets of their ghazal. You can ask them to write about what makes the strong ones better than the weak ones, or you can have them work to make the weak ones as good as the strong ones. You can ask students to find couplets that are too similar, and encourage them to make their couplets more daring. In working with a group ghazal, you can have them move the pieces around, trying to consider how the flow of the disjointed couplet alters the meaning of the poem. In revising individual couplets, they focus on a world small enough to play with without the fear of losing the whole poem. I’ve also used ghazals with

adults to help them when they feel overwhelmed. The disconnection and fragmentation of the ghazal allow it to be played with, written, and revised, all in small pieces.

III. The History and Uses of the Ghazal

The ghazal is the oldest poetic form still being practiced. It has roots in Urdu, Hindi, Hebrew, and Arabic. Agha Shahid Ali was very insistent that the word be pronounced “GHUH-zl.” The “gh” is sort of like the “kh” at the end of “Bach,” but with a “g” being brought back into your throat instead of a “k.” Agha described it “as a close relative of the French ‘r.’” I tell my students, many of whom try the “gh,” that it may be easier to just stick with saying “guzzle” or “huzzle.”

However, Agha’s pronunciation is in fact the Urdu pronunciation. Arab speakers pronounce the word “gha-ZAHL” (a pronunciation Agha hated). Hebrew speakers pronounce the word like Arab speakers, but with a slight difference in the “gh” sound that, I am told, exists. My own feeling is that policing the pronunciation of

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the word “ghazal” should be a low priority. The name is said to originate as an onomatopoeia for the cry a hunted gazelle makes when it has been captured and knows it will die.

The ghazal in most of the world is a sung and a spoken form. When the ghazal is familiar to its listeners, it has a special excitement that builds. Here is Agha’s description of the *mushaira*, or the traditional readings of ghazals: “When the poet recites the first line of a couplet, the audience recites it back to him, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit.” You can also try this with your students—have them be the audience reciting back the line to one of the students as she reads her ghazal. But while the number of repetitions in *mushaira* seems driven by the excitement of the audience (like curtain

calls), I would specify how many repetitions you expect. In class, Agha would tell us about what a thrill it was at the readings to get—after many repetitions—to the refrain.

David Jalalel's excellent history of the ghazal traces the emergence of the ghazal to the Umayyad Era, also known as the Second Caliphate (661–750). The two undisputed masters of the ghazal are Hafiz (1325–1389), writing in Persian, and Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), writing in Urdu. There were ghazals in English prior to the 1960s (James Clarence Mangan used the form in the 1920s), but they gained a new prominence when Aijaz Ahmad invited well-known American poets to translate Ghalib's ghazals, in honor of the centenary of his death. Most of these translations are in free verse, and Adrienne Rich's "Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)" set the American model for the ghazal. Rich was attracted to the disjointed quality of the form, which allowed her to express a certain kind of rupture she felt in the world around her. In the 1990s Agha Shahid Ali began to work on bringing the formal rules of the ghazal back into English, and encouraging poets to write what he called "real Ghazals." The rules that I've presented here are all based on the template provided by Agha in his 2001 anthology, *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*, an impressive collection of formal ghazals. This anthology remains the best source for structured ghazals in English. Agha's own ghazals were posthumously published in the book *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*.

Agha writes that the classic ghazal is unified by a longing for the beloved, and many of his ghazals achieve this unity. The mood of the Urdu and Persian ghazal is described by Ahmed Ali as "melancholic and amorous." And while there are certainly melancholic ghazals in English, I find that the ghazals I gravitate towards tend to be clever, full of impish humor and mischief. Without melody, the ghazal in English often takes a playful approach to the refrain, trying to see how many ways it can be reinvented, and reframed. Heather McHugh, using the refrain "person" and the rhyme "-irred," wrote this couplet in a ghazal:

Two pronouns and a vehicle was Icarus with wings.

The apparatus of his selves made an absurd person.

Get it? "Icarus" breaks down to two pronouns ("us" and "I") and a vehicle ("car"). Don't worry—I didn't get it at first either. Fortunately my students explained it to me. McHugh also breaks apart her refrain in a later couplet, ending the line, "and one bird per son." William Matthews, in his ghazal "Guzzle," uses "need" as his refrain, and does not use the rhyme. He gets to groan-inducing puns like,

Ant to grasshopper: How about some bread?

Grasshopper to ant: Whatever you knead.

He also has the metrically perfect, almost Pound-ian couplet:

Death and taxes. Dearth and taxis. Breath, stealth

lies and faxes. 1-800-eye-need.

Many poets layer other structures onto the ghazal. I'm quite fond of the playfulness that you often find in American ghazal writing. When I first encountered the ghazal, I feared that I'd never be able to work towards the longing and grief that the Eastern ghazal demands. I think we offer our students an exciting opportunity at cross-cultural experimentation as the English-language, American ghazal takes on its own properties, while not forgetting or revising its history.

I think of the ghazal as a kind of broken mirror. It reflects back a single object, but from multiple perspectives. In the poem by Michael Collier on page 9 of this magazine, home is fragmented into its many meanings. Collier looks at family vignettes, engages in etymological play, establishes setting, and contemplates the meanings of his names. While students are often upset to see that Collier has not employed the

rhyme before the refrain, they tend to agree with me that it's a pretty fantastic poem, and that its brilliance relies on the method of approach that the ghazal demands. I tell my students that most lyric poems in America are linear and usually follow one of three modes: the narrative (telling a story), the argumentative (proving a point), or the monologue (evoking a character). The ghazal is a meditative mode, and it forces the English-speaking practitioner to approach a single subject from a variety of angles. As Agha wrote in 1992, "Apparently, the Western mind is ready for a formal disunity." Collier's poem is moving because it brings together the many meanings of home—it is exciting precisely because it works in a prescribed fragmentation. I tell the students to think of a subject about which they have a lot to say, but about which they have conflicted feelings. The ghazal allows for contradictions and overlaps. If each couplet in the ghazal is a shard of that broken mirror, then every shard should reflect something true and beautiful. In the end, we have a whole picture, but one made up of pieces.

IV. A Final Note

A memorial ghazal to Shahid was begun by Christopher Merrill and compiled by M.L. Williams. The memorial ghazal in its entirety can be found in *Rattapallax* issue 7. The opening couplet is by Shahid, from his poem "Land" in his ghazal collection, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*:

Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land—
There is no sugar in the promised land.

Rattapallax printed 93 memorial couplets, and I often invite my students to write their own. Of course, those couplets end up being scattered to the wind, but I like to think it keeps Shahid's memory with us just a little longer. ☺

References

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