

GHAZALS

Originating in Persia, the ghazal is the most popular of all the classical forms of Urdu poetry. Although the form as it is now written first appeared in Persia, it probably goes back to the ninth century. The great master of the ghazal in Persia was Hafiz (1320 – 1389). Five hundred years later, Ghalib, writing in Urdu, became an equally brilliant master of the form, which is full of conventions, required images, and predetermined postures.

The ghazal proceeds by couplets which (and here, perhaps, is the great interest in the form for Western writers) have no necessary logical, progressive, narrative, thematic (or whatever) connection. The ghazal is immediately distinguishable from the classical, architectural, rhetorically and logically shaped English sonnet.

The link between couplets (five to a poem) is a matter of tone, nuance: the poem has no palpable intention upon us. It breaks, has to be listened to as a song: its order is clandestine.

The ghazal has been practiced in America (divested of formal and conventional obligations) by a number of poets, such as Adrienne Rich. My own interest in the ‘form’ lies in the freedom it allows — the escape, even, from brief lyric ‘unity’. These are not, I think, surrealist, free-association poems. They are poems of careful construction; but of a construction permitting the greatest controlled imaginative progression.

There is, it seems to me, in the ghazal, something of the essence of poetry: not the relinquishing of the rational, not the abuse of order, not the destruction of form, not the praise of the private hallucination.

The ghazal allows the imagination to move by its own nature: discovering an alien design, illogical and without sense, a chart of the disorderly, against false reason and the tacking together of poor narratives. It is the poem of contrasts, dreams, astonishing leaps. The ghazal has been called ‘drunken and amatory’ and I think it is.

JOHN THOMPSON

(preface to *STILT JACK*, a book of ghazals by John Thompson, published in 1978)