“Form Without a Home: On Translating the Indo-Persian Radīf”

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What pleases in a ghazal is the variety with which conspicuous sameness can be sustained; what the form unleashes is the poet’s mercurial powers.

—Kelly LeFave, American poet

One of the most distinctive and recognizable features of Persian poetics, the refrain (radīf), entered literary history by way of a contrast with Arabic poetic norms. A word, syllable, or set of syllables that recurs at the conclusion of each poetic distich (verse), the radīf can be provisionally translated as refrain, but it does more than simply recur. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the Persian poet-critic Rashid al-Dīn Watāwāt dedicated a special section of his rhetorical treatise, Gardens of Magic in the Nuances of Poetry, to explaining this literary device. Defining the radīf as one or more words that recur after the rhyme, Watāwāt noted that Arabic poets “do not use radīfs, except for recent innovators displaying their virtuosity.” Elevating the Persian refrain to the gold standard of poetic excellence, Watāwāt argued that this device effectively tested the poet’s talent (tabīt) and excellence (bastāyat).

Even as the radīf’s formalization within the Persian literary-critical tradition was heralded by rhetoricians, Persian poets turned increasingly to this literary device to develop the resources of the Persian literary language as it defined itself against—and within—Arabic poetic genres. In nontechnical terms, the radīf functions like a refrain in a song, except that the rules governing its usage are considerably more formalized than in most musical traditions. It occurs at the end of every distich, and twice in the first distich. Technically, the radīf is an extension of a poem’s rhyme letter (known in Persian as the ravī). Although like any rhyme, it intensifies a verse’s sonic resonance, the radīf is often more complex, more semantically weighted, and more formally demanding than the rhymes that inform Anglophone poetics. As a Persian-inflected rhyme, the radīf constitutes one of Persian poetics’ major contributions to world literary history. But what does the radīf have to say to us today, and how can it help us savor the nuances of literary form, including the paradoxes entailed in its translation across cultures and languages? How can the radīf enrich our ways of reading lyric verse in general? This essay aims in part to illuminate these questions.

Beyond the feats of technical virtuosity it enables, the Persian refrain is significant from the point of view of comparative poetics for challenging prevalent notions concerning what can be “brought together and held” within the space of a single poem. Semantic rhyme in English literature is as old as Chaucer, and parallels exist in the Old French romance. Yet, notwithstanding its frequent use during the global Middle Ages, semantic rhyme carries specific weight with Persian literature. This difference is in part due to the nonsequential structure of the genre in which it occurs, the ghazal, a genre uniquely suited for the radīf. As the British Orientalist William Jones famously asserted, the ghazal is a lyric that links its verse together like “pearls at random strung.”
Jones’ controversial characterization of Persian poetics has been challenged by scholars keen to draw attention to the complex way in which meaning is held together by Persian poems, but few have contested his basic point, that the sequence of verses within a given poem does not easily map onto the structure that informs more prosaically inclined, and less rhyme rich, literatures, such as English. The nonsequential structure of the Persian ghazal generates a variety of rhyme unfamiliar to modern European and especially Anglophone literature. In this essay on Persian and Indo-Persian understandings of rhyme as embodied and entailed in the radf, I aim to enable a deeper appreciation of the unique relation the Persian refrain generates between translation and lyric form.

As Alessandro Bausani notes, even when the Persian lyric has been approached comparatively, the comparative method has not been applied historically, with a view to the changes internal to the Persian tradition. And yet the rad, like other elements of the ghazal, has varied so dramatically over time, that a historical understanding of these changes is crucial for grasping their implications for poetics. The historical trajectory of the Persian refrain recapitulates the process through which classical Persian distinguished itself from Arabic norms. Originally, notes Franklin Lewis, “a rad typically consisted of a rhyme noun followed by a recurrent verb at the end of each line.” With the rapid spread of New Persian literature, first in Central Asia, and subsequently from the Caucasus to South Asia from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, nouns came to replace simple verbs such as būd (was), ast (is), and nīst (is not). Meanwhile, the rad increased in length “to encompass as many as four or even five syllables after the rhyming vowel.” The progressive replacement of simple verbs with more elaborate noun and pronoun combinations reflects Persian poets’ increasing confidence in their own poetic tradition and their interest in developing the Persian literary language to the maximum degree.

While it came to structure the ghazal’s form and meaning, the rad also came to function as a tool for organizing the poet’s diwan (collected poems). Rather than being grouped thematically, the works of classical Persian poets were grouped by form—including qaṣida (ode), ghazal (lyric), masnāvī (narrative poem), and rubā‘ī (quatrain)—and secondarily in alphabetical order according to rad. This method of organization fostered specific forms of intertextuality, inspiring poets to produce new ghazals on specific refrains, and highlighting their innovations in this domain. Because they are rarer and therefore easier to identify than rad based on common verbs, rad formed from compound rhymes furnish “precise information about which poets were influenced by whom, as well as the ways in which this influence . . . reverberated through the classical Persian poetic tradition.” Bearing semantic as well as phonemic weight, compound radfs work as citational trails, much as quotation marks and footnotes do in modern texts. The more demanding were the formal restrictions imposed by the rad, the more were poets driven to work creatively within the constraints this formal device imposed. At times, through strategic citation of their predecessors’ radfs, poets managed even to surpass the poem that they were imitating.

In what follows, I explore how two of South Asia’s greatest premodern lyric poets: Hasan Sijzi (633–715/1254–1336) and Bidel (1054/1644–1133/1721), engaged in the appropriation and recreation of prior radfs. Situated geographically and culturally on the peripheries of mainstream Persian literary culture, these Indo-Persian poets transformed what they inherited from their Persian predecessors. Persuaded that every successful imitation would increase their poetic stature, both within their lifetimes and for posterity, Hasan and Bidel deployed the radfs with abandon. Although neither poet was born in Delhi, both came of age as poets in what was, to deploy a paradox, a central periphery of the Persian ecumene. That their talents flourished in Delhi specifically is more than fortuitous. Their location on the peripheries of mainstream Persian
literary culture enabled Indo-Persian poets to experiment with hitherto unused literary devices and forms more boldly than their Iranian counterparts. Hence the radīf’s extraordinary career in Indo-Persian poetics, which is one crucial chapter in the history of the ghazal’s transnational circulation across early modern Asia, and subsequently modern Europe and America.

While Persian rhetoricians like Watwāt intimated the radīf’s significance, the poetic force wielded by this device, and which was in part the consequence of the dense constellations of meaning fostered by the Persian ghazal across premodern Asia, exceeded the formulations given to the device in Persian literary criticism. Before proceeding further with his poetic innovations, it is worth dwelling within the social and historical world within which our poets cultivated the radīf. I first consider the literary horizons of Hasan, followed by those of Bidel, before examining how their deployments of the radīf clarify the relation between translation and literary form.

Sameness in Difference, Difference in Sameness

Hasan Sijzi entered the world at an early moment in the development of Indo-Persian poetry. Although it had already had a lengthy history in Arabic and Persian literature, the ghazal had yet to make a major impact on the subcontinent. Following the Mongol invasions of 1258 that hastened the collapse of Baghdad’s already-waning caliphate and which contributed to the rise of Persianate dynasties throughout South and Central Asia, the panegyric qasida had to compete for pride of place in the Persian genre system with lyric genres, including the ghazal and the rubā‘i. In a world where the composition of poetry had traditionally been entangled in contestations of political sovereignty, the poetry of patronage was in the process of being gradually superseded by the verse of mystic union, which merged worldly and spiritual desire. Although his diwan is, like that of other poets of the Delhi Sultanate, rich in panegyrics, the predominance of the lyric voice in Hasan’s oeuvre cannot be separated from this historical shift in literary production.

Like many poets, critics, and historians who attained to prominence in the Delhi Sultanate, Hasan descended from immigrants who had journeyed to South Asia while fleeing the Mongol invasions, and who had taken up residence there in search of new opportunities and a more peaceful life. While there are conflicting accounts regarding the location of his birth, it is known that Hasan passed most of his adult life in Delhi. His full name, Amīr Najm al-Dīn Hasan Dihlavī ibn Khwāja ʿAlā al-Dīn Sistānī, indicates that his father was from Sistān (also known as Sijistān), an area that encompassed eastern Iran and southern Afghanistan. Hence his name Sijzi, meaning from Sijistān. According to his own testimony, Hasan began writing poetry at the age of thirteen, under the influence of the Persian poets Sacī (d. 1291), best known as the author of Gulistān (Rose Garden) but also a pioneer of the ghazal form, and Abū Sacīd Abū al-Khayr (d. 1049), the mystically inclined author of many rubā‘iyat (quatrain). Hasan did not become publicly known for his verse, however, until he met Delhi’s most famous poet, Amīr Khusrow, at a baker’s shop in Delhi, a city that was at that time “renowned throughout the Islamic world for its institutions of learning and as a haven for wandering scholars and poets.”

Together, Amīr Khusrow and Hasan Sijzi extended the boundaries of Persian literature in part by incorporating Indic content into their verse. Their merger of Persianate and Indian narrative traditions, and even, in the case of Amīr Khusrow, poetic devices and words from Indian vernaculars, marked a turning point in Persian literary history. Their techniques set the stage for subsequent centuries of multilingual and cross-confessional innovation. Hasan’s narrative poem Book of Desire is one of the earliest self-proclaimed adaptations of an Indian story to a Persian narrative form.
Hasan’s ghazal on the radif judā strikingly exemplifies the literary stimulus afforded by this device:

Two days have passed since my lover parted.
Every joy left this body when he parted.
I scream at the threshold of parting from my lover.
I scream like a bird torn from its nest.
The arrow of his coquetry was caught near the city.
Signs of parting puncture the arrow’s tips.
Time will bleed the stars of their souls.
The grief of this parting crushes the heart-ravishers.
The sun sets while I scream,
severed from grief, from stars, from time.
Just once, gaze on Hasan, far from his lover,
with no news of his heart, severed from home.

(Dīvān-i Amr Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlāvi, 128)

This ghazal depends for its effect on the repetition of the radif judā, the semantic spectrum of which includes “parted,” “separate,” “distinct,” and “divided,” at the end of every couplet. My rendering of this radif seeks to reproduce its effect in translation by offering several variations on judā, a word that bears considerable semantic flexibility in Persian. Thus, when the lover “parted,” the poet is spurred by his “departure,” even though the terms for these different meanings are identical in Persian. Arrows pierce the poet with yet more “departures,” and the lover’s “parting” is compared to death and time’s “departure,” even though, again, the word does not vary in Persian. All of the variations on parting used in this ghazal correspond to a single word (judā), so, while the English rendering necessarily diverges from the original continuity, it does preserve the refrain’s repetitive qualities.

The full power of the radif judā is activated in the concluding verse, with the introduction of the second defining feature of the Persian ghazal and another aspect of Persian literature’s contribution to global poetics, the pen name (takhallus). In keeping with the ghazal form as it had become standardized by the thirteenth century, the poet refers to himself in the third person, while at the same time addressing an imagined listener/reader, whom he calls on to cast his gaze (rā’yat) on Hasan, and to observe the poet’s destitute condition: far from his lover (yār dūr), bewildered (bī khabar), and severed from his home (ze khāneh judā). In this instance, the authorial positioning afforded by the takhallus is internal to the refrain’s signification, for the alienation of self and other that is implicit in such forms of authorial reference is literally entailed in the meaning of judā. In this way, the Persian refrain enables content to express form and form to express content.

Beyond this specific example, another significant function of the takhallus within Persian poetics was its conferral of fame on the poet. A poet’s takhallus provided the formal testimony of his position “at the court of the patrons for whose soirées his songs were composed.” This observation, made with respect to the Ghaznavid poet Sanā‘ī (d. 1131), also clarifies the creative power wielded by the takhallus at the court in Delhi. In particular, it sheds light on one of Hasan’s most paradoxical ghazals, on the radif nist (is not, does not exist). This poem ends by deploying the takhallus in a quite distinctive way. The maqta’ (closing distich) invokes the title of the ruler,
Alā al-Dīn Khiljī (r. 1296–1316), in place of the name of the poet, which would normally occur at the beginning of the first half of the couplet:

Shah, your one hundred servants
know the truth as well as the khaqan.
Your one hundred poets like Khāqānī
say to the khaqan that truth does not exist.

Even more extraordinary than the replacement of the poet’s name by the title of his ruler, however, is the allusion to the poet Khāqānī (d. 1199), famed for his elaborate poetics, in the second half of the couplet. This allusion is one of the rare moments in the history of the Persian ghazal when another poet’s takhallus is invoked in place of the poet’s own. And yet, rather than signifying poetic genius, as he often did in Indo-Persian literary texts, Khāqānī here is figured as a sycophant who deceives his ruler.24 The pun on Khāqānī, the poet’s name, and khaqan, the Turkic term for a ruler, is more than merely fortuitous. Thus the elision of a conventional takhallus achieves an effect here even more powerful than its inclusion could have done. It implies that Hasan is unique among his peers for his relative distance from the patronage network. At the same time, this ghazal on the radīf “is not [nist]” never surrenders its panegyric qualities, for its raison d’être is the praise of Shah Alā al-Dīn Khiljī. These complex significations, each of which is dependent on the takhallus’ presence or absence, demonstrate that, for the purposes of poetic meaning, what is omitted can matter more than what is said.

With only a few exceptions, all of Hasan’s ghazals give the poet’s takhallus in the concluding verse (known in Persian as the maqtā). Ghazals that omit the takhallus do so for a reason. In the example given above, the substitution of the poet’s name with that of the shah makes a political statement. In another exception, the elision of the poet’s name serves the poem’s purpose of rhetorically denigrating the poet’s persona and encouraging his lover to go away.25 Hence while the verses between the matla’ (opening verse) and the maqtā may be loosely structured as per Jones’s dictum, the opening and closing verses stringently adhere to a fixed pattern: the radīf must occur twice in the matla’, halfway through and at the close of each distich, and the takhallus must occur in the maqtā, generally towards the beginning. To the extent that I have rendered Hasan’s takhallus in his concluding verses and his radīfs in his opening verses, I have preserved this pattern in my translations. When I have diverged from the original, for example by placing the radīf at the beginning of each verse rather than at the end, where Persian poetic norms require it to be, the intent has been to convey the effect of the Persian device through means that resonate more sonorously in English.

In the history of the ghazal, the unvarying radīf has often been rendered in translation through patterned variation. For example, the German Orientalist Hammer-Purgstall rendered one of Hafez’s ghazals on the radīf amad (to come) by alternating between gekommen (to come) and bekommen (to get).26 By adhering, like Hammer-Purgstall, to the principle of sameness in difference and difference in sameness, I have endeavored to convey the poetic force of the original without retrofitting the Persian text into an English structure that makes a reliance on rhyme sound like monotony.

Others of Hasan’s ghazals do more with the refrain than simply letting it close each distich. In addition to reproducing the radīf at the end of each distich, these poems incorporate it elsewhere into the text. One example is the following ghazal by Hasan, on the radīf nūn. Nūn is a letter of the Persian alphabet (ٍ), as well as the final syllable for many Persian words:

Without the ruby of your lips filling my eyes at the hidden court,
young man, the last gaze draws nigh.
Beyond the radīf, this ghazal uses words ending in n (the Persian letter nūn) throughout, for example twice in the second distich and at the beginning of the third, with qānūn (law). Using nūn as the radīf enables the poet to include other rhyming words such as aḵnūn (now; v. 1), māknūn (hidden, latent; v. 1 and 5), and, most compellingly of all, majnūn (v. 4). While this last word can be translated simply as “madness,” Majnūn is also the famed lover of Laylī. According to the Arabic legend that entered Persian through oral sources, Majnūn loved Laylī more than any lover has ever loved his beloved. Majnūn’s devotion to his beloved became a staple of classical Persian texts.27 When the poet claims in the fourth distich that the guardians (āshāb) of the shrine (haram) are crazier than Majnūn, he is therefore claiming that such attraction can overturn the social order, such that even the pious find themselves beholden to worldly desire. Meanwhile, the poet remains calm in the face of such chaos, for his immersion in poetry enables him to focus on the hidden door, which signifies an opening into eternity.

The power of these verses is compounded by the double entendre (ihām) that attends haram (shrine). Vocalized differently, haram can also be read as harem, meaning the place where women live in premodern Islamic societies (the spelling is the same). Although, given that the Kaʿba was a shrine, the signification of harem is not the dominant one, this secondary meaning adds another layer to this poetic image. Hasan’s use of the radīf nūn in this ghazal extends poetic meaning by bringing incongruous significations into rhyming relations. To adapt W. H. Auden, the end result of such technical feats is a “sound metaphor,” meaning a verbal congruence that becomes meaningful through phonemic proximity.28

Confounding Closure

Although he may have been the most outstanding Persian poet of early modern India, the poetry of Bidel of Delhi remained marginalized within world literary history. In part his absence can be attributed to problems of translation. One obvious reason for Bidel’s difficulty is the distance of his refined Persian idiom from modern modes of expression. Yet there are moments when the distance between the source language and the original facilitates rather than impedes the task of translation. The endeavors documented here to render Bidel’s recalcitrant ghazals into English help to clarify the interface between translatability and literary form. Many of the problems and pleasures that pertain to translating Bidel apply to predecessors as well, including Hasan Sijzi, who introduced the ghazal genre to the subcontinent four hundred years earlier.

Like his Indian predecessor, Mirza ʿAbd al-Qadir Bidel descended from a lineage of immigrants to northern India from Central Asia. Like many of the most important ghazal poets of South Asia, he came of age in the multilingual environment that flourished under the Mughals. While his first spoken language was probably Bengali, the erstwhile poet soon acquired fluency in Persian and Arabic through his studies. He attained proficiency in Sanskrit and is reported to
have memorized the *Mahabharata* along with the Qur’an. He chose his pen name, literally meaning “heartless” in Persian (“bi,” without; “del,” heart), soon after embarking on a literary career. Although supported by numerous patrons, Bidel maintained his distance from court politics, and strove to carve out a literary aesthetic that was beholden neither to sectarian religious differences nor to the intrigues that flourished at the Mughal court. Most importantly, he brought together Persian and Sanskritic literary traditions in his poetry. The author of four narrative poems (masnavi), Bidel features prominently in contemporary Afghanistan and Tajikistan literary life, and his poetry is recited by people of all classes to this day. In his native India, by contrast, Bidel is remembered only within the rapidly shrinking field of Persian literary studies.

Through his ghazals and narrative poems, Bidel crafted a uniquely metaphysical poetics, which was at the same time severed from historical and social realia. To invoke the negative terms in which the genre has been described, Bidel’s ghazals are insular, claustrophobic, and repetitive. And yet, reading Bidel’s ghazals—not just once but repeatedly over the course of a life—can open worlds of astonishment. In their fullest realizations, Bidel's ghazals acknowledge no reality outside the artifice of literary form. As such, they epitomize a genre that, in words of Pakistani-Welsh writer Sara Suleri Goodyear, “questions the limitations of a specific cultural context and a specific language.”

Even more than its content, the ghazal’s transnational dimensions are revealed through its form. The genre’s peculiar way of proceeding through sonic association rather than semantic logic makes it adaptable to a wide variety of geographies and traditions, without requiring any grounding in a specific narrative tradition. Alongside its adaptability, the form successfully resists the modern desire to fix form and meaning into a single whole. Echoing Adorno’s dictum that “in modernity, it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,” the ghazal pioneers ways of literary signification that are untethered to specific stories.

The ghazal’s metasemantic peculiarities are epitomized by Bidel’s alter ego, the insane lover Majnun, who carried his home on his back on his lifelong journey across the desert in search of his beloved, ghazals epitomize a literary form that “must travel and recreate its boundaries, however fragile they may be.” As Canadian poet Lorna Crozier writes, ghazals “don’t seem to be going anywhere, even towards their own indefinite conclusions.” The disconnect in these poems between images and meanings shifts the burden of interpretation to the reader. “The form,” explains Crozier, “demands trust as we look through the glass darkly to see or intuit the hidden harmony that is there.” Frustrating the modernist desire for expectation of closure (which often coexists with a recognition of closure’s impossibility), the ghazal’s open-ended structure undermines its own foundations. Through its asemantic lyricism, the ghazal as form denies the possibility of an end, in life as well as in verse.

How is it possible that verse that fails to satisfy the most basic modern readerly expectations can provide delights unavailable in European literature? One way to answer this question is by studying those aspects of Bidel’s poetics that can be retained—or rather recreated—in translation. The most distinctive among these is the radif. Bidel’s many complex radifs include “nightingale [‘andalib],” “absent-mindedness [taghæfel],” and “wave [mawj].” This latter term in particular features broadly in Bidel’s poetics, as a radif but also more generally to suggest how life compares to the breaking of waves on the ocean’s edge. Bidel’s deployment of such radifs functions in a way similar to his pen name: in identifying his poetic persona, it enables readers to recognize the distinctiveness of his voice.

The effect initiated by the radif is compounded by the repetition of the poet’s name in the closing distich at the end, combined with the requisite transition from the third to the first person, which, at some point between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, came to be
referred to as *takhallusan* (from the Arabic term for “ending”). In Suleri’s phrasing, this closing device acts as an “invocation of tragedy that certainly exceeds what may be called a signature.” The tragedy of the *takhallusan* is that, as the ghazal proceeds towards closure, no end is in sight, for the “very structure of the poem disallows closure.” Combined with the final transition, which as a rule invokes the poet’s name, the radif enables the poet to insert himself into a classical tradition while intervening in and extending extant poetic canons.

Having seen how the radif functions in Persian poetics, it is now worth asking what becomes of the radif in translation. Given that the English language is dominated by sonic values alien to classical Persian, and resists the quantitative meters on which the radif depends, I was surprised to discover that my most successful renderings of Bidel tended to be those with the most unusual radifs. Precisely the poems I expected would be most difficult to translate, including ghazals with relatively adventurous radifs such as “here [injā],” “night [shab],” and “sun [āftāb],” lent themselves most readily to translation. By contrast, ghazals with common radifs such as “is not [ništ]” were more difficult to render effectively into English and came out sounding banal and perfunctory, even when they worked in Persian.

In his study of semantic rhyme from Chaucer to Pope, W. K. Wimsatt explains the kind of rhyming developed by Alexander Pope on historical grounds. As it developed into a modern language and parted ways with its Germanic origins, Wimsatt explains, English lost many of its “easy rhymes,” including “stressed Germanic and Romance endings.” As a result of these losses, Pope was compelled to use “rhymed words differing more widely in meaning.” Although the suffusion of medieval Germanic and Romance languages by “easy rhymes” is paralleled by the equally sonorous inflections of classical Persian, these phonic resources are unavailable to the translator who undertakes to give life in contemporary English to the Persian radif. Instead, the translator must make do with the same limited resources available to Pope, who was compelled to bring unlikely objects into a rhyming relation. Wimsatt’s observation that, in contradistinction to Chaucer, Pope’s couplet is marked by “closure or completeness, its stronger tendency to parallel, and its epigrammatic, witty, intellectual point,” also elucidates the difference between the Persian ghazal and its English counterpart.

While the English language’s paucity of easy rhymes cannot but limit the potential for certain kinds of translation, the radif has demonstrated a surprising elasticity across languages. It carries over into English features that would otherwise be lost in translation. The radif achieves such literary feats in part by merging sound and sense, form and meaning. The following ghazal of Bidel, on the radif “sun [āftāb]” achieves its effect by bringing phonemic and semantic repetition together, thereby causing each iteration of these two syllables, āf and tāb, to generate new significations:

The light of your hair hangs a shadow facing the sun.
Your musky lines are broken by the letters of the sun.
The entry of the eye into your mind is a miracle.
When does the pearl line the edge of ocean and the depth of the sun?
Our darkness, free from the light of union, lures.
The last shadow circumambulates the sun.
Even our crazy fortunes are blessed.
Our nakedness can spend the sun.
In its sweat, a beautiful miracle is underway.
The flower’s dew drips here from the sides of the sun.
Everywhere, the surface of your face is hit
by the rays striking the earth, the sun’s letters.
It is rare that we can boast of poverty while
The pearl of astonishment is surprised in the expanse of the sun’s flourishing.
Sacrifices, Bidel, play on its face.
Like the dawn, make the cash of life an expense of the sun.

(\textit{Divan-i Ab\textsuperscript{u} al-Mac\textsuperscript{\=a} Mirz\textsuperscript{\=a} ‘Abd al-Q\textsuperscript{\=a}dir Bidil Dihlav\textsuperscript{\=i}}, ghazal 355)

Because every distich in this ghazal ends with the word sun, the word functions equally as an end rhyme and as a thematic unifier. In contrast to the English, the Persian lines follow a strictly quantitative format, with the same number of syllables containing equal distributions of long and short vowels in each verse. English does not handle such nuances well. As American poet John Hollander wrote of his own ghazals, disrupting the quantitative syllabic pattern followed by Persian poetics is one means of making rhyme “audible” in modern English.\textsuperscript{39} So, while there is usually more to be gained than lost by retaining the radif, often there is more to be lost than gained by striving for a syllabic pattern that English does not easily accommodate.

Even when they lack full syllabic fidelity, Bidel’s Persian verses share with the English version other formal qualities. In both texts, the incessant turn to the sun works as a formal device that also conveys semantic content and generates wonder. That English translations of the ghazal can embrace rhyming patterns marginalized within mainstream American poetics was one of the most important insights of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001), whose early death cut short his bold efforts to merge Anglophone and Middle Eastern poetics. In a classic discussion of the ghazal, Ali celebrated the genre on the grounds that it offers an opportunity for English-language poets to “again employ full rhymes, even the most cliché-ridden, without apology or embarrassment.”\textsuperscript{40} Reviving literary norms discarded centuries ago, Ali argued that “the radif enables the rhyme to lose, through a transparent masking, its strained and clichéd element.”\textsuperscript{41}

Repetition is made attractive in both the Persian and the English, as the radif changes its meaning as the verses move forward. Opening with a typical image of a beloved, the poem launches into a metaphysical disquisition on the meaning of life and the inevitability of death. Whereas this ghazal began life as a love poem along the lines of what in English might qualify as light verse, by the time it reaches its conclusion, it has acquired an ethical dimension, with the poet instructing himself to make his every movement through life a perpetual turn to the sun. The poem’s desire for closure has been compelled by the radif to yield to openness without end. Far from generating a monotonous litany, Bidel’s radif confers on the poem a unity that is stylistic and thematic, and imparts to it a forcefulness it would lack in the absence of this device. If, in obedience to prohibitions on repetition, “sun” had been replaced by synonyms such as “light” and “radiance,” the text’s poetic intensity would have been diluted.

The Poetics of Incongruity

Owing to a paucity of naturally sonorous end-rhymes, the English translator who aims to preserve the radif in translation is likely to be compelled to repeatedly yoke seemingly incongruous objects together. Incongruous marriages of sense and sound abound within Persian poetics, particularly among poets who participated in the school that later came to be called the Indian style (sabk-i hindi). Bausani alludes to this shift in poetic values when he speaks of how “the shattering of the law of formal harmony” becomes more marked the closer the ghazal approaches to modernity.\textsuperscript{42}
Wimsatt proposes that “the difference between prose and verse is the difference between homoeoteleuton and rhyme.” Homoeoteleuton is the repetition of identical or similar endings in close proximity to each other. Rhymed prose, called saj in Persian Arabic, is one example of a literary form replete with homoeoteleuton. The rhyming that animates saj is intrinsic to a given verbal unit. Similarly, in inflected languages, case endings of themselves generate homoeoteleuton. The radif, by contrast—to carry Wimsatt’s distinction into a realm he did not probe—calls on the poet to look beyond the automated mechanics of grammar and to reflect on the limits of language itself.

In sum, my work with the poetry of Ḥasan and Bidel has shown that those ghazals with the most commonplace radifs tend to be most resistant to translation. Simple rhymes and radifs offer less that can cross the threshold on the journey from one language to another. Firmly rooted in a specific idiom, these words and phrases are more closely yoked to linguistic convention than their more amorphous counterparts. Prior to translating these poets, I expected that the radifs that demanded the least from the Persian poet would lend themselves most readily to English translation. Such radifs, I assumed, would have less to lose over the course of their linguistic metamorphoses. Contrary to my expectations, the opposite turned out to be the case: the radifs that had the most to lose also had the most to gain when they were rendered in translation.

My endeavors to render these extended radifs into English confirmed a counterintuitive hypothesis advanced by Walter Benjamin. The closer a text approaches to mere information (Mitteilung)—meaning in this context the simpler the refrain’s grammatical function—the more, to Benjamin’s mind, will it resist translation, because simpler radifs are less prone to generate polysemy. Benjamin’s point is that texts that foreground language’s polysemy are translatable (übersetzbar) relative to texts that conceal or suppress polysemy for the sake of communicating information. Translatability becomes on Benjamin’s account a benchmark of a reflexivity that is literary as well as conceptual, rather than a measure of clarity in language. Over the course of my work on the ghazal, the radif became for me, the translator, a measure of a ghazal’s translatability, and I came to expect that the most complex and creative radifs would lend themselves most fully to the journey across languages.

The radif’s translatability bears equally on the work it does within Persian poetics and on its life in translation. If the linking of incongruous objects through rhyme can be shown to be more amenable to translation than mere rhyme, which remains confined within a language’s grammatical parameters, then the implications for translation theory are obvious. The radif’s translatability supports Benjamin’s suggestion that “a fixed meaning [bestimmte Bedeutung] residing in the original text expresses itself” through the act of translation. While this significance inheres (innewohnt) within the original text, it is not contained by it; in fact, translation is what makes this fixed meaning visible. The translatable radif is a kind of metaphor—a “carrying over,” as the Greek meaning of metaphor suggests—between two (and sometimes more than two) linguistic worlds.

The radif’s translatability contributed to the ghazal’s “wide and deep influence on the literatures of Asia” that has been the subject of multiple scholarly studies. This influence encompassed the literatures of Albania, the Malay Archipelago, and the Deccan, to list merely a few of the manifold geographies the genre has traversed, thanks in part to Ḥasan, Bidel, and other Persian poets of Islamic South Asia. Like the homeless Majnūn traversing the desert in Bidel’s resonant image, the worlds the radif carries on its back are as divided by the language of the original text as they are when they embark on their journey to another language’s shore. Inasmuch as translation is a “provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages,” the radif is the ideal instrument for forcing us to face the incommensurability between
language and the object of its representation. In the very act of giving flesh to sounds, the radīf reminds us of the incongruity of all comparisons. The breach between being and nonbeing that translation compels us to confront is the dominant keynote of Persian poetics. The radīf, I have argued, is the key formal device that makes such confrontations possible.

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This essay is adapted from the introduction to After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi, forthcoming from Northwestern University Press in Fall 2015, which includes fifty of Hasan’s ghazals organized by radīf.

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NOTES

2. I use distich and couplet interchangeably here to refer to the bayt, which is the basic unit of Persian and Arabic verse and consists of two misrā’s, or hemistichs. While the bayt is not fixed with respect to meter or syllable length, the key requirement is that both of its components are identical in structure.
4. For these details, see Heinrichs, “Radīf,” 8: 368.
7. See, for example, A. J. Arberry, “Orient Pearls at Random Strung.”
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. For a masterful study of this process of adaptation and appropriation, see Losensky, Welcoming Fighani: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal.
13. This is not to imply that Iranian poets did not also pioneer the radīf. On the radīf as cultivated by poets based in Iran, see, for example, Losensky, “Demand, Ask, Seek.”
14. The fullest treatment of the ghazal’s global circulation to date are the volumes edited by Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth, Ghazal as World Literature.
15. For the interface of these two discourses, see Ingenito, “Tabrizis in Shiraz Are Worth Less than a Dog,” esp. 102.
16. Although Borah (“The Life and Works of Amir Hasan Dihlavi,” 1) asserts that Hasan was born in Delhi, Salomatshoeva cites a verse, missing from the edition of Nargis Jahān, in which the poet states that
he was born in Badaun, 200 kilometers southeast of Delhi. See the introduction to her edition of Hasan’s Divan, 6.

17. Borah argues that the other name by which the poet was known, Sanjarī, was a scribal error for Sistānī (“The Life and Works” 1, no. 1).
20. For Amir Khusrow’s use of Indian languages, see his Nuh sipihr, 147–201.
21. For a detailed discussion of this work, see Gould, “Persian Love in an Indian Environment.”
22. Major studies of this literary device include Losensky “Linguistic and Rhetorical Aspects of the Signature Verse (takhallus) in the Persian Ghazal,” and de Bruijn, “The Name of the Poet in Persian Poetry.”
24. For another engagement with Khāqānī, this time in the form of a qaṣīda rather than a ghazal, see Divān-i Amīr Husān Sijzī Dihlawī, 611. Also see Gould, “The Geographies of ‘Ajam,” for the reception of Khāqānī in Indo-Persian poetry generally.
25. This poem is included in my translations of Hasan’s ghazals: After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi.
29. See Crozier, “Dreaming the Ghazal into Being,” 62. Bausani more diplomatically refers to the ghazal as one of Iranian civilization’s “hermetic forms” (“The Development of Form in Persian Lyric,” 152).
31. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 41.
33. Crozier, “Dreaming the Ghazal into Being,” 64.
34. Ibid.
35. For the dating of this terminology, see de Bruijn, “The Name of the Poet in Classical Persian Poetry,” 56.
38. Ibid., 328.
42. Bausani, “The Development of Form in Persian Lyrics,” 150.
43. Wimsatt, “One Relation of Rhyme and Reason,” 324. For criticism of Wimsatt’s distinction as “problematic” (with no reason given), see Brogan and Gerber, “Homoeoteleuton,” 640.
44. These ideas are explored in greater detail in Gould, “Inimitability versus Translatability.”
46. Ibid. 4: 10; my translation.
47. For this quotation, see Bausani, “The Development of Form in Persian Lyrics,” 152.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


