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Sufis of the Antipodes: the ghazal in contemporary Australian Poetry

The Ghazal in the West

The fascination of Western writers with Persian literature and literary tropes predates Romanticism – as seen in, for example, the French thinker Montesquieu's 1721 *Lettres persanes* ('Persian Letters') – but it was with the late-18th and early-19th century explosions of the literary, cultural and philosophical revolution of Romanticism that, as seen in German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* ('West-Eastern Divan', 1819-27), Western poets developed an acute appreciation of not only the overall Persian literary milieu but also of the central poetic genre of this literary scene. This was a form of classical lyrical ode, written in semi-rhyming couplets or verses, known as the *ghazal*.

Goethe's use of the form in his book was one of the first and most famous, but by no means rare, instances of Western poets applying both the structure as well as the discursive quality of the *ghazal* to their own poetics. During the following two centuries, a range of poets from Europe as well as the Westernised *New World* would employ, experiment with, and appropriate the form, with varying degrees of success and according to varying aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, not too dissimilar to the ways in which other pre-modern forms – such as the sonnet and the villanelle – or other non-Western forms – such as the *haiku* and the *renga* – have been included in the body of modern Western poetry. And with each application or appropriation, the very definition and possibilities of the *ghazal* form have been at times subtly, at other times overly, modified to accommodate the changing doxa and dynamics of Western poetics.

The Romantic perspective of the earliest Western proponents of the form has resulted in the dominant Western view of the genre as an exceedingly visionary, metaphysical and mystical aesthetic production. The 20th-century German scholar Hellmut Ritter, for example, has viewed the *ghazaliyat* of the 13th-century Persian poet Farid al-Din 'Attar as the expression of a 'total renunciation of any physical love [as] part of the heightened, spiritualised poetry which is the voice of 'Attar'.¹ This view of the genre understates the *ghazal*'s pre-Sufi, non-religious origins – in, for example, popular, picaresque songs of pre-Islamic taverns of ancient Persia – and enforces the prevalent spiritual or transcendental conception of both the genre as well as its famed medieval practitioners such as 'Attar, Rumi and Hafiz as Sufi mystics. It should come as no surprise that no less than the leader of the Transcendentalist movement, the American poet and mystic Ralph Waldo Emerson, was among the most ardent Western champions of Hafiz's poetry in the 19th century.



A young prince with attendants.
From a collection of verse in *ghazal* form, copied c. late-15th century. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Elliott 329, fol. 120r.

Related but not identical to the Romantic view of the *ghazal* as a genre of spiritual writing is what we may see as the Orientalist view, according to which the form is perceived as an essentially Eastern and exotic literary convention. This view can be said to have originated in the work of Romantics such as Goethe for whom ‘the Orient, with its poetry, its atmosphere, its possibilities, was represented by poets like Hafez’.² As such, the *ghazal* has provided Western poets with a medium for a fantastic, potentially escapist projection of ‘an “abroad” to an audience assumed to be located at “home”’.³ Clearly contemporaneous with the historical reality of Western imperial expansions in the Near East, North Africa and South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries, this exoticised approach to the *ghazal* was championed by, among others, the English writer, adventurer and colonial administrator Gertrude Bell who produced a version of her own translations of Hafiz’s *ghazaliat* in the late-19th century.

The decline of Romanticism as a dominant cultural movement and of colonialism as an explicit policy of Western governments did not bring an end to Western writers’ interest in the *ghazal*. In our contemporary post-colonial milieu, the *ghazal* has been used by many a multicultural and immigrant writer from a Persian, Middle Eastern or Islamic background in the West as an expression of a unique and/or transnational cultural and ethnic identity. Some of the best-known examples of this post-colonial use of the *ghazal* can be found in the work of the late Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali who, in addition to producing his own original English *ghazals* and translating those of the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz from Urdu into English, edited an influential anthology of English-language *ghazals*, titled *Ravishing DisUnities: real ghazals in English* in 2000. This book includes many Anglophone American poets who have used the form in a style perhaps best described as postmodernist. Marilyn Hacker’s *ghazal*, for example, can be seen as a continuation of her playful appropriations and recontextualisations of canonical literary forms with an ironic, intertextual twist.

The purpose of this article is not to assess or judge the cultural, political or literary values of these Western views and applications of the *ghazal*. That some of the abovementioned poets have produced more successful poems than others, and that some have been more culturally sensitive than others, are matters for a different kind of discussion than the one I wish to provide in this piece. Far from either celebrating the above Westernisations of the Persian literary genre in the name of cross-cultural dialogue and so on, or condemning them in the name of opposing cultural misappropriation and the like, I would like to provide a brief account of the *ghazal* in a rather unique and idiosyncratic Western literary space, that of modern Australian poetry. By examining three particular *ghazals* by three different modern and contemporary Anglophone Australian poets, I will explore the unlikely yet fascinating possibility of a number of the genre’s unique literary potentials emerging, or being resurrected, in the work of three different Australian poets from three different generations: Judith Wright, Philip Salom and Andy Jackson.

Resurrections of the *Ghazal* in Modern Australian Poetry

My methodology or reading strategy for engaging with three modern English *ghazals* by the three Australian poets is influenced by the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou's notion of *resurrection*, as developed in his more recent work. Badiou is known for, among other things, his radical revival of the idea of Truth, an idea frowned upon by a great deal of modern and postmodern philosophers. Badiou agrees with many other 20th-century European thinkers such as Michel Foucault that knowledge as such is an ideological construct that cannot be relied upon as a transparent medium for the presentation of facts. Importantly, however, Badiou also believes that it is possible – in fact inevitable – that in the four unique areas or conditions of love, politics, science and art, pre-existing systems of knowledge or valuation may be challenged or even ruptured, as a result of which a new idea or *a truth* may emerge to transform what we know and how we practice our knowledge.

Badiou's earlier works have focussed on the ontology and occurrence of such *truth-processes* or *events*, and have specified the conceptual frameworks for such events in the arts in general and in poetry in particular. The key poetry-events proposed in Badiou's writings prior to *Logiques des mondes* ('The Logic of Worlds', 2007/2009) include modernist pioneers such as Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Fernando Pessoa, whose ground-breaking poems have altered the literary landscape and have caused the creation of new artistic configurations. In *Logiques des mondes* and his *Second manifeste pour la philosophie* ('Second Manifesto for Philosophy', 2009/2011), Badiou has refined the key tenets of his thought by adding a new idea, that of resurrection, as one possible mode of engagement with an event, as one way in which a Truth can be produced:

the True can only be known to the extent that, in the course of the various episodes pitting it against reactive or obscure innovations, it will have attained the eternity of which it is capable. As a result it will only be known – which is what is called 'knowing' – as detached from its present and, hence, from the confused world having witnessed its birth. Only when it is set out in another world, in order to be used for purposes of new incorporations, will its resurrection deliver it up to us as such.⁴

In the context of the topic of this article, the eternity of the idea under discussion – that is, the poetic power and aesthetic efficacy of the *ghazal* – has been subject to 'reactive or obscure innovations' such as the Romantic or Orientalist appropriations of the form, due to the genre's removal from 'its present' or from 'the confused world' that 'witnessed its birth', that is, the medieval Persia of 'Attar, Rumi and Hafiz'.⁵ Yet, when 'set out in another world' and when 'used for new incorporations', the *ghazal* may be resurrected to 'deliver' to us some of the repressed, unrealised truths of the literary form. And, in my view, modern Australian poetry is such 'another world' with 'new incorporations' which have allowed for the medieval Persian form to not only be repeated and represented but to also be revived and made new.

One of the first Australian poets to take an active interest in the *ghazal* was one of

the country's foremost 20th-century authors, Judith Wright (1915-2000), who published a number of her own original English *ghazals* in her 1985 collection, *Phantom Dwelling*. Many of these poems correspond more or less closely with a Romantic formulation of the genre. These are poems which eulogise the superior power of a *sublime* Nature over the limitations of human culture, confirming literary scholar Philip Mead's observation that Wright's poetics entails 'the well understood imperative within the Romantic aesthetic to sublimate the contradictions of the material and historical world into a dream of human essence and subjective transcendence'.⁶

While I believe this to be the case with many of Wright's best-known poems, including most of her *ghazals*, I believe that her *ghazal*, 'Memory', in fact directly names and expressed the material corporeality of the Australian bush and, by so doing, the poet introduces a new possibility to the range of topics, themes and experiences associated with the classical genre of the *ghazal*, that of geographically specific flora and fauna:

Yesterday wrapped me in wool; today drought's changeable weather
sends me down the path to swim in the river.

Three Decembers back, you camped here; your stone hearth
fills with twigs and strips peeled from the candlebark.

Where you left your tent, the foursquare patch is unhealed.
The roots of the Kangaroo-grass have never sprouted again.

On the riverbank, dead cassinias crackle.
Wombat-holes are deserted in the dry beds of the creeks.⁷

This poem is a vivid and tangible demonstration of an idea being reactivated when 'set out in another world'. The world of Kangaroo-grass and wombat-holes is as semantically removed as conceivable from the motifs and symbols found in classical *ghazaliat*, from the roses and nightingales, the moon-faced beauties and angelic wine-bringers of the medieval Persian imagination. Yet it is precisely due to this removal that the Persian form, thus far narrowly 'obscured', in Badiou's sense, in the discourse of religious symbolism, Romantic spiritualism and esoteric allegory, can be liberated and revived as a genre which may indeed comprise the immediate, the profane and the physical. While Wright's natural imagery is palpably favourable to metaphysical, somewhat spiritual implications – with images such as a 'stone hearth / filled with twigs and strips' functioning as metaphors for the passage of time and so on – such images may also be read as synecdoches, that is, as direct albeit partial and cryptic allusions to an actual ecology.

As such, Wright's 'Memory' may be read as an *ecopoetic* exploration of the interface between humans and the natural world, as seen in the line 'Where you left your tent, the foursquare patch is unhealed'. While an environmentally aware poetics and Romanticism are not necessarily at odds – one may think of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as a work that conflates both fields – Wright's *ghazal* is not in any way the 'total denunciation' of materiality that many Romantic champions of the *ghazal* have observed and prescribed. It is this possibility for a physically engaged poetics that marks Wright's poem as a 'new

incorporation' of the *ghazal*, and by so doing resurrects the form as a poetic genre with an eco-poetic potential in addition to and beyond mystical teachings and ruminations.

A more physical, indeed visceral and sensual revival of the *ghazal* takes place in the 1996 poetry collection *The Rome Air Naked* by the acclaimed Western Australian-born, Melbourne-based poet Philip Salom (b. 1950). While it is difficult to label Salom as anything like a doctrinaire postmodernist – the Australian poets of Salom's generation described as such, i.e. the so-called Generation of '68, were/are more active members of self-consciously experimental *cliques* and social groupings, a phenomenon that the staunchly individualist Salom has strongly rejected – we may see his poetics as one which may be generally described as a postmodern aesthetics due to what has been described as the 'constantly changing and overlapping perspectives' and 'time travel, identity shifts and wish fulfilments' that characterise Salom's work.⁸

His sexually explicit sequence 'Erotic Ghazals' however, while playful and open to postmodernist readings, is also an instance of the 'new incorporations' of a literary genre that has been, for too long, viewed as an articulation of a chaste, ascetic, and positively non-sexual religious experience:

If we're tired from making love late into the night
we doze to the smell of bakers at their ovens.

Tired late at night because the world is sad
in all its bulletins, and nothing disappears in orgasm.

We don't speak in tongues, or turn away from hurt,
we drink from the wet syllables, we fuck outside our dreams.⁹

It is commonly assumed that postmodernist appropriations of classical forms and concepts are attempts at rejecting Romantic and Modernist beliefs in originality and authenticity as well as deconstructing, via parody and irony, classical aesthetics.¹⁰ Salom's *ghazal* could be read through this prism: his mischievously *rude* signifiers undermine the religious morality of the classical Sufi monk-poets while his use of an openly unoriginal structure – that of a very well-known, time-honoured and *closed* poetic form – does away with any pretence at Modernist iconoclasm and anti-establishment posturing. Read as a 'new incorporation' of the *ghazal* genre, however, Salom's poem provides a new approach to the classical genre, and reveals its form and aesthetics as those of erotic verse.

Most Western as well as Middle Eastern interpreters of the *ghazal* have viewed the genre's potentially sexual or at least amorous connotations – such as the sensual images of luscious flowers that bloom when roused by the song of excited birds, the allusions to impossibly beautiful *houris* and the teasing, tantalising Beloved – as merely metaphorical depictions of religious, Sufi principles and doctrines; and yet, as Salom's appropriation of the genre informs us, the poetic form itself is far from a puritanical one. In the light of this poem, one is tempted to find something erotic about the very device of the division of the poem into couplets – couples, coupling, copulation – while taking pleasure in the poet's use of a component of the classical *ghazal* composition – the *qaafiyaa* towards the

end of the second line of each couplet – by half rhyming ‘orgasm’ with ‘our dreams’. As such, Salom resurrects the *ghazal* as a genre amenable to sexually explicit content due to formal qualities – rhythmic to-and-fro movement between the lines of each couplet, the smooth sound devices at the end of the rhyming lines – that characterise the form with an almost singular ability for embodying an erotic content.

The youngest Australian poet under discussion, the Melbourne-based Andy Jackson (b. 1971) also discovers new possibilities in his intricate applications of the *ghazal*. Since the publication of his first book in 2010, Jackson has been composing a series of *ghazals*, many of them – such as ‘Ghazal – Kolkata, Siliguri, Kalimpong’¹¹ – written during or influenced by his travels to India, his study of the aforementioned anthology of English *ghazals* *Ravishing DisUnities*, and his being in the audience for live singings of original Urdu *ghazals*. It would therefore be tempting to perceive Jackson’s interest in the form as that of an Orientalist traveller in the East or that of a postcolonial transnational nomad writing a culturally hybrid poetry that brings together a non-Western form with a Western content and language.

Interestingly, however, Jackson is best known as a poet of the body and of the human anatomy, and not as a cross-cultural or multicultural writer. As mentioned by a reviewer of his first collection, in his poems ‘the body – specifically the ‘irregular’ or ‘different’ body – is viewed as a battle zone that divides the self’.¹² And it is this concern with the contradictory rigidity/fragility of the body that is most discernible in one of his best *ghazals*, simply titled ‘Ghazal’:

Press your thumb into these bruises, your forehead
to the earth, and face the unbreakable tryst. Still

water? A trick your mind plays, persuasive as a mother
tongue or god. Beyond the city’s grid, thick mist still

waits in the deep valley for your water-logged body.
Dream of becoming bread, oh grain – you are grist, still.¹³

Jackson’s revival of the *ghazal* in this poem is, for the purposes of this article, the most lucid exemplification of a Badiouian resurrection as it uses an actual (live/contemporary) body – that of the poem’s speaker – as the conceptual host for the re-entry of the spirit of an ancient, conceivably expired, literary mode. If there is, to borrow Badiou’s term, something ‘obscure’ about the excessively particularist, culturally specific – Orientalist or postcolonial – approaches to the *ghazal*, Jackson’s decision to instead use the form for a universalist interrogation of the relationship between one’s mental self and one’s physical being results in a radical and provocative ‘new incorporation’. This produces a discourse similar to what the American philosopher Judith Butler has described as ‘a figure of disembodiment, but one which is nevertheless a figure of the body, a bodying forth of a masculinised rationality, the figure of a male body which is not a body, a figure in crisis, a figure that enacts a crisis it cannot fully control’.¹⁴

In concert with the other Australian poems discussed in this article, Jackson's poem prompts a non-spiritual and physical aesthetic of the *ghazal* – which we may now perceive as a feature of the Australian version of the poetic form – but his is perhaps the most directly corporal and material of these texts, as it invokes, in Butler's terms, 'a bodying forth' of poetic construction via words that name various parts of a body – 'thumb', 'bruises', 'forehead', 'face', 'tongue' – while setting these signifiers in crisis and conflict with the speaker's attempts at rationalising the experience of disembodiment as symbolised by references to melting and 'water'. The enjambment or line-break separating 'mother' from 'tongue' in the second of the above-quoted couplets is an effective formal illustration of the poem's conceptual dimension. 'Mother tongue' as a cohesive, linear phrase denotes a rather curial mental concept, out of which, according to certain strands of psychoanalysis, the very perception of selfhood arises; but when broken by the poetic device of enjambment, 'mother' and 'tongue' become two separate *bodily* notions: the first, the physical matrix from which anybody/any body emerges; the second, a part of the mouth which, deprived of language and the role of language in forming identity, is still only 'grain' (the dream of full embodiment) and not 'bread', that is, the realised, actualised body.

According to this reading of Jackson's 'Ghazal', his is the most conceptually challenging and complex of the poems referenced so far, and yet it must also be emphasised that his is the most formally faithful or classically accurate application of the *ghazal* discussed in this paper. Although his couplet divisions eschew the classical view of the *ghazal*'s verses functioning as self-contained couplets without extending into the following verses, his use of more or less metered lines and the *radif* refrain ('still') at the end of the second line of each verse/couplet is in keeping with most configurations of the genre. It is this 'fidelity' to the original truth of genre – to use a term much favoured by the philosopher Badiou – that enables Jackson's powerful resurrection of the form not as an archaic or exotic form, but as a medium for addressing profound and profoundly contemporary concerns to do with selfhood, subjectivity and the body.

Conclusion

The three Australian *ghazals* explored in this article have each used the canonical Persian literary genre to produce new possibilities for the form's aesthetic formulation. In Judith Wright's 1985 poem, 'Memory', the ecological or the poet's specific perspective of a unique ecology have been expressed through a poetic form commonly viewed as allegorical or symbolist in its use of natural motifs and images. In Philip Salom's 1996 'Erotic Ghazals', the erotic and the sensual have been incorporated into the very corporeality of the form's generic features and devices, fomenting a revision of the common perception of the *ghazal* as a form of ascetical religious writing. Finally, in Andy Jackson's 2010 'Ghazal', the body and the human subject's conflicts with the physical limitations or the phenomenological otherness of the body are the poem's central theme, against the conventional view of the *ghazal* as a metaphysical genre. All in all, in the space of modern

Australian poetry, the *ghazal* has been resurrected as a poetry of the environment, of sexual love, and of the materiality of the human form.

As argued in this article, I believe these poems are lucid demonstrations of Alain Badiou's notion of resurrection, an idea defined by another contemporary European thinker and commentator on Badiou's work, Slavoj Žižek, as 'the subjective re-activation of an event whose traces were obliterated, "repressed" into the historico-ideological unconscious'.¹⁵ It can be said that during the long history of the Western discourse of the *ghazal*, certain potentials of the form have been 'repressed' as the genre has been subjected to various ideologies – Romanticism, Orientalism, Postmodernism, etc. – as a result of which the form has come to be seen and known as a mystical, Eastern and classical genre. In the work of modern Australian poets, however, new truths emerge that contradict this knowledge, delivering to us the eco-poetic, the erotic and the somatic as viable modes of the *ghazal*.

I should conclude by saying that phenomena similar to what is discussed in this paper – the radical resurrection of an old form in the work of modern writers – can be observed in other literary milieus, and that this contingency is by no means unique to the Australian writers of the *ghazal*. As I've discussed elsewhere, for example, the American poet Alice Notely's 1996 poem, *The Descent of Alette*, offers a feminist and 'contemporary transformation of the traditional epic' not at all dissimilar to the transformations of the traditional *ghazal* outlined in this article.¹⁶ In my opinion, such revivals and resurrections of old forms of writing are crucial if we are to retain literary traditions that are, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, always in danger of erasure by the 'storm of progress', and to celebrate the sophistication and achievements of contemporary poets and writers.