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S. R. Faruqi's *Flower-Lit Road* (Review Article)

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. *The Flower-Lit Road: Essays in Urdu Literary Theory and Criticism.* Allahabad: Laburnum Press, 2005. 320 pp. Rs. 640. ISBN 81-903125-0-2.

What is literature's mode of reference to the world? While this question appears amenable to a variety of answers, our reading practices in literature departments today, particularly in the postcolonial world, would seem to suggest a tacit consensus that historicism—the idea that thought is only ever *of* its world, that it can be reduced to the references it makes to its empirical origin—supplies the only responsible answer. Not that the recentness of this disciplinary privilege accorded to historicism in its many forms invalidates it, but that its taken-for-grantedness keeps us from recognizing the contingency of our own reading methods; that is, it ironically keeps us from historicizing our own historicism.

That a work of literature bears and projects a possible world as much as it arises from an actual one is a recognition that we receive first in Plato's distinction between *diegesis* and mimesis and receive again in the distinction that frames Gerard Gennette's *Narrative Discourse*, the distinction between "story" and "narrative," between what happened and the telling of what happened. For Gennette, the literary—a dimension of language-use wider than "literature"—consisted in this very non-coincidence of event and discourse on event. And yet we seem to have ignored this recognition in our haste to reduce a literary text to the world of its empirical origin.

Apparently lacking a distinct textual corpus of literary theory before the late nineteenth century, Urdu literature became particularly vulnerable to this kind of reductive reading method that, mistakenly assuming an unselfconscious reception and production of literature, undertook to

supply this lack by elaborating and prescribing a poetics. Such a poetics would then supply a canon of rules to retrospectively judge the Urdu-Persian literary past. Thus we observe that Persian poetry became valuable for Shiblī Nuʿmānī in his narrative history and canon of it, *Sheʿru'l-ʿAjam* ([1908]), to the extent that he believed it to have modified the government or political state it was produced in and for. Matching this instrumental criterion of literary value based on the putative effects of poetry on its empirical context was Shiblī's psychological theory of its unpremeditated or spontaneous genesis in the poet's verbal articulation and transmission of a hyperstimulus. Paradoxically, then, the best poetry was to be spontaneous and purposive at once. And both its spontaneous psychological cause and purposive political effects referred poetry immediately to the world of its empirical origin. That poetry may refer in mediated and nonliteral ways to a world was not a consideration that troubled Shiblī's aesthetics.

The major ambition that motivates Mr. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's new book, *A Flower-Lit Road: Essays in Urdu Literary Theory and Criticism*, is to call for a break with this post-Romantic and historicist conception of literature and criticism, of literary writing and reading. This review-essay will read Faruqi's book with an attention to points where this ambition is explicitly at work, assessing the degree to which it is realized and singling out individual essays for discussion in doing so. The assertion of a self-conscious Urdu literary practice thus constitutes a motif this work shares with his earlier work, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (2001). This assertion is one that he makes in the face of charges and assumptions that a literature without an explicit *ars poetica*, or scripted literary theory, of its own must have been practiced and produced unreflectively and was thus somehow inferior to a literature that did thematize itself in a theory. He writes in this regard:

> It is now generally recognized that there can be no poems without other or earlier poems, and the best commentary on a poem is another poem. Most importantly, we now have some idea of the nearly decisive role played in the production of literature by the literary community and the entire body of the literary-textual heritage of a language which is nowadays somewhat loosely called écriture and which Rajasekhara would have preferred to call kavyapurusa.
>
> (xiii)

This remarkable early passage already anticipates some of the aspects of Faruqi's text that I will discuss at length. It does so in the particu-

lar conceptions it presents of literary intertextuality, literary criticism and literary community. "There can be no poems without other or earlier poems, and the best commentary on a poem is another poem" (xii–xiii): Of the several readings this hypothesis lends itself to we must tend to the one the rest of Faruqi's book shows evidence of assuming: namely, a New Critical or Eliotesque conception of "Tradition and the Individual Talent." T. S. Eliot argues in his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1951) that the individual literary work only re-configures a synchronically co-present literary heritage so that any individual work of literature assumes a foregoing and timeless tradition that it modifies. How does this strike us as a normative account of the relation between a literary work and its "tradition"? The slightest reflection on the nature of literary practice today would suffice to put this model of a literary heritage into question: for nearly two centuries now writers in arguably every South Asian language have been open to literary influences from traditions other than the ones they may explicitly claim as their own or ones that they may be ascribed to. And aside from the problematic claim to participation in a clear and distinct tradition (that was unproblematically European for T. S. Eliot), this account ignores the variable and active individual assimilation of literary inheritances: how to determine which and how much of an intertextual web a text participates in? How to determine, if indeed it is a matter of such determination, authorial agency in the surely selective engagement with a literary past? In his essay-foreword to his translation (with Frances Pritchett) of Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād's famous *taẕkira* of Urdu poets, *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (1880), Faruqi observes that *Āb-e Ḥayāt* breaks with the tradition of Indo-Persian literary historical imagination in articulating its topics within a diachronic or chronologically successive frame (Faruqi 2001b, 1). The foregoing tradition of *taẕkira* production, whatever its other variations, treated its subject matter as synchronically co-present. Might it then be the case that the Eliotesque model of literary-historical consciousness was especially pertinent to the sort of precolonial Indo-Persian literary community that Faruqi is concerned with? And must it therefore be taken, not as normative for Indo-Persian literature as such, but as describing a spatio-temporally specific system of assumptions individual Indo-Persian authors operated in accordance with? If so, we must fairly expect an exposition of such a historically specific literary logic that, while being irreducible to any one individual, accounts for certain of that individual's premises about literature. It is in this mode that we might expect an account of literary community and the entire body of the literary-textual heritage of a language.

"The best commentary on a poem is another poem": this assertion reiterates a thesis earlier verified in *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* to the effect that precolonial literary theoretical speculation in the Indo-Persian context was embedded either in the self-reflexive portions of literary texts themselves or in prefaces such as Amīr Khusrau's rhetorically rather than logically organized preface to his divan, *Ghurratu'l-Kamāl* that takes the form of a poetic meditation on the place of poetry ("*sukhan*") in the hierarchy of creation. Without intending to, this demonstration serves to refute the unsubstantiated thesis put forward by G. N. Devy in his *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (completed in 1989, published in 1992), and still current in different forms, to the effect that precolonial South Asian literary criticism was an untheorized praxis dedicated to the noninstitutional teaching of literatures that facilitated the "enjoyment of literature" rather than theoretical speculation on it (something he terms a "colonial compulsion"). If this false dichotomy of intellection versus enjoyment is of Romantic provenance too, then it must be included among the various post-Romantic notions of literature and criticism that Faruqi is at pains to discern and criticize in this volume of essays.

In his review of Annemarie Schimmel's *The Dance of Sparks*, her study of Ghālib's poetry, he takes issue with Schimmel's reading method that attends to imagery in isolation rather than situating it in its semantic context. This method allows Schimmel to make random comparisons of Ghālib's "imagery" with that of European and Indo-Persian poetic traditions. Aside from such a methodological preclusion of attention to how a sign functions in relation to others rather than only to the sign as such, Schimmel's method also permits the deployment of a post-Romantic critical distinction between expression and formalism in her discussion of a poetry hardly suited to it. In addition to the valuable cautionary recognition this alerts us to in our unreflective reading habits, Faruqi's essay also commends itself to our attention where it speaks of "two rather obvious points" that Schimmel misses. First, he stresses the need for "at least a comparative sample survey" (145) to support Schimmel's claim that Ghālib had surpassed his predecessors by "the variety of expressions connected with fire symbolism" (*ibid.*). In doing so, he asserts the imagistic affiliations that bind Ghālib to other figures in his literary tradition. However, at this point, as at others in the book, we are left wishing he had supplied such a "comparative sample survey" himself. Second, Faruqi indicates two qualities in Ghālib that Schimmel fails to attend to: "creation of meaning" (*maʿnī āfarīnī*) and "creation of theme" (*maẓmūn āfarīnī*), "both of

which work through irony, paradox, ambiguity and wordplay" (*ibid.*). We must infer from this tantalizingly brief exposition of two crucial categories from precolonial critical practice in Urdu that criticism had attended not to the word or sign alone, but to its play within the sentence as the unit of meaning. In other words, "irony, paradox, ambiguity and wordplay" all assume and demand a semantics, rather than only a semiotics, as a reading method. But here the review breaks off to attend to issues of translation and literary history, leaving us wishing we had been offered a more detailed exposition of critical terms appropriate to Ghālib. But perhaps this is only an effect of the genre of the book review, a disingenuous cross between an academic essay and a journalistic article, structurally committed to striking an impossible balance between an adequate exposition and an easily readable summary judgment. Which leads us to ask whether Faruqi operates in another sub-genre of the essay more amenable to such an exposition. And indeed he does. Seven of the eighteen essays in this book offer more or less detailed expositions of categories and conventions at play in individual genres, works of literature or in a historically specific corpus of texts.

"Faiẓ and the Classical Ghazal" is among them. But while it offers only a passing account of some major precolonial critical categories, this essay makes a remarkable suggestion: that the eclipse or loss of "traditional terms and concepts" systematically confuses the critical reception of Faiẓ's poetry because although we "intuit" these older aesthetic values, we lack the terms in which to formalize them. Faruqi may be read as implying, then, that Faiẓ's readership retains precolonial aesthetic intuitions even as it has lost its traditional conceptual grid and terminology. How can we account for the resilience and persistence of literary-aesthetic intuitions through intellectual colonization? How can we explain the apparent fact that colonialism only damaged our understanding and not our sensibility?

Also among the essays to discuss the crisis of critical analytic tools is "Lyric Poetry in Urdu: Ghazal and *Naẓm*." This essay offers leads into the history of the poetic genres of the ghazal and the *naẓm* as well as a broad discussion of their poetics such as would be invaluable to anyone seeking an introduction to these topics. In doing so, it also offers fine translations by way of illustration. The essay sets out to discern criteria by which to distinguish these two genres and, as always with Faruqi, this becomes a simultaneously archival and theoretical exercise, evaluating a rich history of definitions of the ghazal even as it contributes to it. However, the historical novelty of this exercise lies in the protean nature of the *naẓm* to

which the ghazal is compared. Whereas in the "early years of its history Urdu ghazal was defined in opposition to maśnavī, qaṣīdah, marṡiyah, and other traditional genres," (49) the *naẓm* offers a poetic analogue to Mikhail Bakhtin's novel in being an infinitely capacious genre that could include every other genre of poetry while still being other than them. (Here, it must be borne in mind that Faruqi is speaking of the practice of the *naẓm* that emerged in the 1880s and after.) Given the *naẓm*'s hold-all quality, then, a ghazal could in fact be a *naẓm* in disguise! How was the older genre to be distinguished from its simulacrum? Faruqi indicates an attempt at a solution in the conception of "ghazal-ness" (*taghazzul*) that was advanced "to cut through all such perplexities at a single stroke" (40). But this attempt fell short of "encompassing the full extent of the genre" (42). It remains unclear whether this attempt at defining a ghazal-ness that Faruqi calls a "traditional vision" was a modern tradition or one as old as the ghazal itself or perhaps a recently "invented tradition." The latter possibility—or even the possibility that ghazal-ness was a topic of literary-theoretical reflection as old as the ghazal itself but was distinctly foregrounded now in reaction to its invasive simulacrum—the *naẓm*—leads me to understand the problem at hand by analogy with the one posed in nineteenth-century Europe by the emergence of photography. If photography could perform to perfection the recording or documentary functions of painting, then painting had to distinguish itself by appropriating photography's object for itself while foregrounding qualities unique to itself. Hence Impressionist painting's double ambition to treat light as an object of representation itself, rather than as a medium in which the object became visible, and to break with realism by such techniques as impasto (the thick layering on of paint), the foregrounding of drawn outlines and hand movements and so forth. But by this relinquishment of a domain of its objects to photography, painting became more distinctive only at the cost of becoming narrower in its qualities. So, when Faruqi offers us his own account of ghazal-ness by citing an ideal of "phonetic harmony" (*ibid.*) that avoids retroflex consonants and an indirect mode of reference as largely peculiar to the ghazal, one wonders if this might not constitute a similar narrowing of characteristics. No doubt he presents them as qualities that are as old as the ghazal itself and calls them a "fundamental least common- denominator definition" (48). But must we not ask whether this assertion of a nonliteral mode of reference as peculiar to the ghazal was not motivated by the modern *naẓm*'s well-known claim to verisimilitude or literal reference? And, to pursue our analogy further, is this not what Impressionist painting did too when it presented the quali-

ties it called attention to as fundamental to painting as such? But then photography has long renounced its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century claim to be recording an indisputably existing term of reality and now admittedly generates (through the Photoshop computer program for example) images of things that do not exist in the world, thus appropriating painting's self-presentation as an invented representation. And so, too, has the *naẓm* come to appropriate these very "least common-denominator" traits of the ghazal. Faruqi observes: "A more immediate problem is the incursions of modern *naẓm* poets into ghazal territory" (*ibid.*). But after all, is this not an inherently unstable distinction since one of its two terms, the *naẓm,* is an absolute variable?

Arguably, the novelty of a work of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences may be judged by two distinct criteria: how it reads a canonical work differently to the history of its reception, thus interrupting this history and modifying the terms of such reception; and whether it reads thus-far unread texts. By both of these criteria, the epistemological and the empirical respectively, Faruqi's essay "Unprivileged Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India" excels anything on the topic. It takes up the "strange" question of why it was "that sometime early in the nineteenth century, users of (Indian) Persian, and Urdu, lost their self-confidence and began to privilege all Indo-Iranian Persian Writers against all Indian Persian Writers, all Iranian Persian Writers against the other two, and all kinds of Persian and Arabic against Urdu?" (71). It lays bare as never before the details of this pathology that is so widespread and taken for granted by Urdu speakers, whether in a literary context or otherwise, that its recent historical origin is forgotten, being projected into Urdu's remote past itself. The novelty of its reading lies in its refusal to endorse the familiar privilege accorded in so-called "postcolonial studies" to colonialism as the only significant rupture. That is to say, Faruqi demonstrates the utter non-coincidence of political power and linguistic privilege in precolonial and colonial India where Persian and Urdu remained "languages of high culture … until late in the nineteenth century" (87) even as Mughal power was being displaced by British. In doing so, he offers an invaluable outline of the actors and stakes in a debate that engaged several of North India's foremost Persian intellectuals from the mid- to late-eighteenth century, strictly ending only with Shaikh Imām Bakhsh Ṣaḥbā'ī's contribution to it in the mid-nineteenth century. This debate related to whether or not Indians possessed literary authority in Persian after Shaikh ʿAlī Ḥazīn, an Iranian émigré poet, declared that they did not. The sides taken and the ethnic identities

of the participants reveal "Indian self-confidence and competence in Persian language and literature" (92), a confidence that only declined inexplicably in the early nineteenth century. Also illuminated by this study is the still current status of the Urdu of the Deccan and Gujarat (Dakkani and Gujri) as "dialects" of mainstream North Indian Urdu. Mīr Taqī Mīr in his famous late-eighteenth-century *taẕkira* of Urdu poets, *Nikāt al-Shuʿarāʾ*, opened his text by declaring that "since no significant poets have arisen" from the Deccan, he would confine himself to those of "Hindustan" or North India (43–48). But apparently this discrediting of the Urdu literary tradition that Mīr himself acknowledges suggests the earliest Urdu was not much older than Mīr's rejection of it. As Faruqi shows us, the later image of Urdu as an eighteenth-century North Indian descendant of Persian depends on this exclusion or discrediting of South and West Indian Urdu literatures from the nineteenth-century canon, literatures whose study would set the beginning dates for Urdu back by a few centuries at least, since Sulṭān Qulī Quṭb Shāh was composing poetry in Urdu by the first half of the sixteenth century.

Among the places in this book where its author appears to take issue with Romantic inheritances is "On Translation." This essay constitutes a survey of certain theories of translation as well as of theories that may bear on it, while offering a set of valuable practical guidelines for making a successful translation that, according to Faruqi, must be "faithful" and "creative" at once. However, its opening makes assumptions whose basis is not already apparent. The essay opens by predicating "questions about translation" on "the nature and origins of language": "If there was no single primeval language from which all languages are descended, and if each language is unique in itself, then translation is impossible" (225). But why should this nineteenth-century philological premise of an Ur-language be the only basis for the translatability of a language into another? Or if, as the author suggests, this is a Chomskyan hypothesis then it is not sufficiently clear whether talk of a "universal transformational grammar" or a "rule system" intrinsic to the human mind is tantamount to talk of "one primeval, universal language" (225). One wishes these theories had been explicated rather than only recounted and surveyed. The failure to do so sometimes impedes the reader's ability to follow an argument: "[Richard] Rorty says that since truth is expressed through language, and language is man-made, it follows that all truth is man-made" (227). But surely it follows only that truth's expression is man-made, not truth itself. "Such a formulation could sound the death-knell for translation, because if all truths are man-made and therefore contingent, then there is no uni-

versal truth which can be known and translated. All translations risk becoming the re-creation of our own truths, with no validity whatsoever" (*ibid.*). But why should translatability assume a "universal truth"? Also, truth and validity are not the same. Nor is it clear why the familiar recognition of the arbitrariness of relation between a word and its meaning renders language incapable of designating an "absolute truth." After all, did Hegel not operate both with this recognition and the reference to absolute knowledge?

On the whole, Faruqi's essay tends to the conclusion familiar in Translation Studies that translation must unavoidably be a defective if worthwhile exercise. And perhaps this is in keeping with his generally anti-Romantic stance throughout this book, for Romanticism alone, to the best of my knowledge, advanced a perfective rather than defective account of the project of translation. But let us briefly consider a major Romantic text on this topic to consider whether the prescriptions Faruqi ends with might not, after all, bear a certain affinity with the Romanticism he elsewhere takes issue with. In his lecture from 1813, "On the Different Methods of Translation" (that remains a major influence on contemporary theories of translation), the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher advocated an ideal of translation that, rather than "moving the writer immediately into the world of [the German] readers" (1992, 42) in an attempt to domesticate the foreignness of the original, would instead "move the reader towards his viewpoint" (*ibid.*), thus retaining the original's foreignness. In doing so, the translator assumed in himself the will that impelled the original, bringing it to completion in his translation—except as a foreign work that foreign-ized the receptor language. On this model, German literary culture was thus to dialectically absorb the foreign into itself, nourishing its domestic soil with foreign implants, generating itself solely through such an endless absorption of its foreign limits. All this presupposed, as my vitalistic phraseology indicates, a conception of literature as organism. And indeed, it was in this sense that a work of literature was a "work" in the organicist or vitalistic sense of an autotelic process "at work." Whether or not we subscribe to this vitalism, we may accordingly suggest that rather than only being an inevitable loss, a translation could, by accessing authorial intention, also release or make explicit the connotations of a word where the author had failed to in the original. And notwithstanding Faruqi's broadly anti-Romantic stance, is this not the import of his concluding discussions and prescriptions with regard to translation? He writes: "Translations of fiction made into Urdu … mostly suffer from the translator's lack of ability to *internalize* the source

language and work from within. The original language does not function as a *vitalizer*, but as a model. It does not shape the target language text, but collides with it, damaging both. In a creative translation, the source language should work as a *vitalizer* of the translator's own language" (233, my italics). Do we not detect here signs of a Romantic ambition to inhabit the intention of the original work in order to work it or vitalize it to completion in and through the translation? Is this not a remarkably Romantic value in a book whose scholarly interventions are otherwise expressly anti-Romantic? And do we not detect here a Romantic discrediting of rule-governed translation in the criticism of translation that regards the original as a "model" rather than a "vitalizer"? However, in his advocacy of a sort of unconscious understanding as the ideal understanding of the languages in question, Faruqi advances here an ideal that is not so much Romantic as Aristotelian. I am not referring here to any theory of translation offered by Aristotle, but to a distinction that frames his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book 6 of this text, Aristotle distinguishes between "poiesis" or actions undertaken with an aim to shape nature to human aims—actions requiring a kind of intelligence he called "tekhne"—and actions that were ends in themselves, actions he termed "praxis." He included the production of literature in the former general category of human production ("poiesis"). However, praxis required a kind of intelligence distinct from the instrumental knowledge "tekhne" constituted; it demanded rather a kind of prudence that, knowing such activity (politics, for example) could be not be rule governed, one maneuvered as well as possible. This prudence—a free-floating and flexible capacity to make social judgments—he termed "phronesis." Notwithstanding Aristotle's long-reigning separation of these two activities and his apparent submission of literary practice to an instrumental rationality, I read Faruqi as making the novel suggestion that the practice of literature be regarded as an activity that, in Aristotle's words, "is itself an end" rather than as one with "an end other than itself" (Book 6, 1140b, lines 5–6). Such a literary praxis would demand a corresponding "phronesis" of its ideal writer and reader, the very "ability to internalize the source language and work from within" (233) that Faruqi calls for. In Aristotle, "phronesis" oriented a human being in the social realm of moral norms and was thus a kind of practical moral wisdom. Faruqi's ideal of a translator's intelligence bears moral import, too, in its call to preserve the "translatedness" of the translation, respect the foreignness of the foreigner. And since it is practice we are speaking of, what would this mean practically? Faruqi does not detail any of the examples he approvingly cites. Is it not this: that we renounce the futile and irre-

sponsible desire to repeat the pleasure of the original, commercially pragmatic though it may be, and instead produce annotated scholarly translations that supplement what they cannot directly convey by footnotes? To the extent that this will compel Faruqi to modify the defective valence he places on the ideal translation, it will equally bring him close to the Romanticism he elsewhere impugns.

Finally, among Faruqi's preoccupations in this book is refuting the charge that Urdu is a foreign language, a notion deriving from a false nineteenth-century etymology and philological theory devised by British Orientalist scholars and then widely assumed by South Asians. In doing so, he takes issue in particular with the accusing observation that "all the forms and genres in Urdu are of Arab-Iranian origin" (xiv) by correctly retorting that English literature was never singled out for having derived its forms, genres and meters from Latin and Greek. Here, we might speculate as to whether this might not be the case because English literature—like French, German and other continental European literatures—has long assumed a conception of Europe as an extra-geographical and trans-linguistic civilizational unity that, however disputable by reference to internal differences, functioned as a civilizational premise across regional European literatures. South Asian literatures today do not assume any such equivalent trans-regional and trans-linguistic civilizational identity. But evidently Urdu did until recently in our history when it inherited a now nearly lost geographical imagination of an Islamicate cosmopolis extending from greater Iran to Bengal. (See ʿAbdu'l-Ḥalīm Sharar's historical novels from the early twentieth century that are mostly set in the greater Islamic world of Umayyad Spain, Fatimid North Africa, Abbasid Iraq, and so on.) It was only the recent emergence of nationalism in South Asia that, fracturing this cultural continuum, caused us to take for granted and project back into time the conception of India as a bounded entity absorbing and exuding cultural "influences." Is the charge of foreignness leveled against Urdu, then, the disguised return of our repressed knowledge of an equivalent Europe, an "al-Hind" (in Andre Wink's choice of phrase) whose civilizational continuities far exceeded the bounds of "India," "Pakistan" or even "South Asia" and whose imagination—still preserved in Urdu—thus threatens our historically naive conflation of nation and culture? ❑

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