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# Urdu, Khurshidul Islam, and I

In "URDU AND I" (*AUS* II [1996]), I made passing reference to my collaboration with Khurshidul Islam. For reasons which I will not go into here that collaboration came effectively to an end nearly ten years ago, but for more than thirty years his contribution to my understanding of Urdu literature and to our joint work on it was immense and deserves to be recorded. I have related in "Urdu and I" how we met in Aligarh and how and why we quickly became close friends. Our active collaboration began some years later, toward the end of the three-year period when he taught at the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London. It was he who proposed that we should make it our life's work to present all that was best in Urdu literature to the English-speaking world, beginning with Mīr and continuing right up to (what was then) the present day.

We started practical work on this project in 1955–56, preparing what was ultimately to become our book *Three Mughal Poets,* though this was not published until 1968; and until 1987, with many interruptions made inevitable by his and my separate commitments to our work, we continued to work together to produce *Ghalib, Life and Letters*, a long article on Akbar Ilahabadi, and to prepare the materials for translation of selections from Ghalib's Urdu and Persian verse. In all these projects except *Ghalib, Life and Letters* all the essential preliminary work was his—that is, he would read, more than once, all of the relevant work of the poets we were planning to present and make the selection of verses appropriate to our purpose. He did that with Mīr's *Kulliyāt,* the satirical work of Saudā, and the verse of Akbar Ilahabadi. (In Ghalib's case, he read and made selections from Ghalib's Persian prose and from about half of the Urdu letters, while I did the same for the other half.) We would then read these selections together, discussing and explaining anything I didn't understand. I would then put the selected verses into the appropriate order, and produce English translations of them. Then we would discuss these transla-

tions and produce finalized versions which satisfied us both.

In my article "On Translating Ghalib," published long ago (*Mahfil* 5:4 [1968–69], pp. 71–8), I wrote:

> Our tastes and interests and judgments, and the range of our reading in literature in general are so similar that a more ideal collaboration could hardly be imagined. In addition, in translating, where every nuance of every word and phrase, in both the language of the original and that of the translation, can be important, we can do together what neither of us could do alone, for both of us know both languages well, and each of us has one of them as his mother tongue; and we can therefore hope to understand fully what the Urdu intends and to convey that intention as fully as English allows.

I may remark in passing that Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, in a learned article on translation published in *Urdu Canada* (1:3 [1987], pp. 5–11), expressed the same opinion. "Since there are very few truly bilingual persons, a team of two would seem to be the optimal solution: each of the two should be a native speaker of one language, and have an excellent knowledge of the other language. Thus each would supplement and complement the other." For an unknown but easily guessable reason he does not mention Khurshidul Islam and Ralph Russell. (For an equally guessable reason he does a few lines earlier mention Frances Pritchett.)

But I want to add something more to what I have just said about Khurshidul Islam.

He was (and is) the only Indian or Pakistani Muslim I have ever met for whom I know that literature is, as it is for me too, something that teaches you, molds you, changes you, transforms you, bringing to you all the time a greater and truer awareness of yourself and of other people and of the universe in which you live. Similarly, he is the only Indian or Pakistani Muslim I know who has read with this passionate, self-transforming interest, not only the literature of his own language, but that of the great world classics from the European renaissance onwards. His interest in, knowledge of, and assessment of the great Urdu writers reflect all this, and his work is consequently in a class of its own. In India and Pakistan you find others whose understanding of Urdu and Persian literature is profound, sincere and admirable. But for them "literature" *means* Urdu and Persian literature—period. On the other hand you find people who think "literature" means English literature, and those works of European literatures that are accessible through English translation—period. In my

experience this second group of people generally lacks the appreciation and love of the literature of their specialty that the first group has; for them, all too often, their knowledge is worn simply as a badge of superiority, and goes with an attitude to the literature of Urdu and Persian which can at best be called condescending. Khurshid differs very strongly from both these groups. His reading both in his own classics of Urdu and Persian and in English and European literature is wide, and he brings to all of it an appreciation, understanding and love that few Urdu speakers do. I wrote a moment ago of "literature … that teaches you, molds you, changes you, transforms you …" In my experience there are many people, including many whose profession it is to study literature, to whom such words are meaningless, and the idea that works of literature can have anything to do with changing the way you live would seem to them a very odd one. Not to Khurshid. He and I share that conviction about great literature, and each has felt its impact on his own life. That is the fundamental thing that has united us in our work.

I should perhaps add that I don't claim that no other person with these qualifications exists—only that I myself have never encountered one, possibly because I have had no need to look for one.

I think the way we worked together is worth describing in some detail. When we have had the opportunity to work steadily together, working with him has been a real joy. He gives himself wholly to the work. In later years I would set the tape recorder running and he would begin. First, he would read the verse he had selected. Then he would explain every word of it in Urdu. (This stage often afforded me a lot of silent amusement. He is in many ways a very traditional teacher, the kind of teacher who sees it as his job to explain *everything*, and to whom it never occurs that it would be sensible to take into account the particular needs and particular degree of proficiency of the person he's teaching. I remember with amusement how he told me when we began work on Ghalib's Persian verse that *rāz* meant *bʰēd*—both words mean "secret." The logic of his procedure goes like this; "*rāz* is a Persian word. We are explaining things in Urdu. The pure Urdu word is *bʰēd*. So I'll explain that *rāz* means *bʰēd*." Such reasoning leaves two important things out of account: first, that *rāz*, though it is indeed a Persian word, is also an Urdu word, and moreover a more common Urdu word than *bʰēd*; and secondly, as he knew perfectly well, I knew both these words long before I ever met him.) Then he would interpret the verse, elaborating in response to my questions any difficulties I might have.

Working with him sometimes called for patience and serenity. But

the rewards were out of all proportion to the inconvenience. Besides, he too needed patience, and his patience with me never failed. I would not be content to leave the discussion of a verse until I felt that I had understood it fully, and he never grudged me the time and effort on his part which this demanded. Sometimes I would feel, after full discussion, that a verse which he liked had little or no appeal for me and that it was not worth translating; and he would always accept my judgment in such cases without any tension or resentment. A striking instance of his forbearance occurred when at one stage in our work I found that I no longer had the text and notes of quite a substantial amount of the Persian verse we had already dealt with. He never reproached me for having lost all this material, but just read it all again and explained it all to me all over again.

In later years when we had gone over to recording on cassette his reading and our discussions of it, it would sometimes happen that I did not notice that the cassette onto which we were recording had been filled, and we sometimes had to go back quite a long way and deal with substantial numbers of verses all over again. He never complained about this and never rebuked me for my thoughtlessness.

What I am going to say next may come as a surprise. As a man he can be astonishingly arrogant. But as a scholar he is both modest and extremely conscientious, and when he was working, or we were working together, on the great poets, all that arrogance vanished. He *never* reached conclusions about the interpretation of their poetry without the most careful study of it and thought about it. Those qualities were most in evidence at the time when we were translating Ghalib's Persian verse.

Obviously what I said earlier about our qualifications for translating from Urdu does not apply so fully to Persian. My own knowledge of Persian is limited. I have studied Persian grammar and know enough to read Persian quite well and with full understanding with the aid of literal Urdu translation. Khurshid if I am not mistaken has never been a formal student of Persian but from boyhood onwards he has learnt enough and read enough to give him the necessary competence to understand and develop a sound taste for Persian poetry. But although he has a good reading knowledge of Persian he has been at pains to check and re-check with dictionaries and with commentaries and with friends with greater Persian expertise than he has before he will be satisfied that his interpretation is correct. (And I feel sure that in his own work—as distinct from his joint work with me—he has been equally scrupulous.)

He was always ready to question his own conclusions until he had given full thought to any ambiguities. Quite often he would look up in

Steingass's Persian-English dictionary the meaning of words with which he was familiar to see if they perhaps had other connotations which he had not known and might seem relevant to the couplet under discussion. He also used Sufi Tabassum's commentary on Ghalib's Persian ghazals and thought carefully about any interpretation which differed from his own, saying that Sufi Tabassum's knowledge of Persian was better than his. I quite often used to say on such occasions that to understand Ghalib's Persian verse you needed not only a knowledge of Persian but an intimate knowledge and understanding of Ghalib, and that where Sufi Tabassum's interpretation seemed not to be consistent with Ghalib's thought it should not be preferred to his own.

The plan we formed in 1955 has like many plans of mortal men and women been only very partially fulfilled. But this doesn't alter the fact that we have achieved a great deal, and not only I but all those whom our books have reached have a great deal to thank him for. Together we have done what neither of us could have done alone, and I shall never forget the great and indispensable contribution which he made. ❐