FRANCES W. PRITCHETT

Introduction

Ab-e hayat (Water of Life) has been described—probably accurately—as "the most often reprinted, and most widely read, Urdu book of the past century."[1] During this period its influence, both direct and unacknowledged, has been incalculable; more than any other work it can be said to have created the canon of Urdu literature. The unique power exerted by *Āb-e Ḥayāt* is what made us—Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and me—decide to translate this exasperating, moving, wrongheaded, fascinating, all-too-persuasive text. We want it to be opened up for more kinds of scrutiny, from more kinds of audiences.

I myself first read *Āb-e Ḥayāt* about ten years ago. It is an intensely personal book; reading it aroused my interest in that intense person, its author. By now I feel that I know Āzād better than I know some of my friends. At first I imagined him as a culture hero. Later I came to think of him as a culture villain, since his form of battlefield triage required him to try to kill what he thought he couldn't save. As I pieced together the story of Āzād and his times, it took hold of my imagination so deeply that I ended up making a book out of it. In that book, *Nets of Awareness,* I looked at Āzād and his friend Alṭāf Ḥusain "Ḥālī," their lives and work, in the light of the whole modern Urdu critical tradition that they essentially founded.[2] There's no need to repeat that story here. I'll confine myself to a brief account of Āzād's life, and then focus on the matter at hand: his greatest masterpiece, *Āb-e Ḥayāt.*

---

[1] ʿĀbid Pēshāvarī, *Żauq aur Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād* (Na'ī Dillī: Idāra-e Fikr-e Jadīd, 1987), p. 126.

[2] F. W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

*

Muḥammad Ḥusain, who chose for himself the pen name "Āzād" (Free), was born in Delhi in 1830 into a family of Persian emigrés. His mother died when he was only three or four years old. His father, Maulvī Muḥammad Bāqir (c. 1810–57), who had been educated at the newly founded Delhi College, was a man of versatile talents: among many other activities he worked in the British administration, involved himself in Shīʿa-Sunnī religious controversies, and in early 1837 bought a press and launched the *Dihlī Urdū Akhbār* (Delhi Urdu Newspaper), probably the first Urdu newspaper in North India.[3] Around 1845 Maulvī Muḥammad Bāqir enrolled his only son in Delhi College. Muḥammad Ḥusain did well there. He was enrolled in the Urdu-medium "Oriental" section, which offered Arabic and Persian rather than English; his Urdu essays won prizes. At some point during these years his family arranged his marriage to Āghā'ī Bēgam, the daughter of another Persian emigré family. After completing Delhi College's eight-year curriculum, Muḥammad Ḥusain graduated, probably in 1854, and began to help his father with his newspaper and publishing work.[4]

Then his world cracked open: in 1857 the famous "Mutiny" broke out. The rebels arrived so suddenly, and seized the city so rapidly, that people were left stupefied. This abrupt downfall of the British was, as the *Dihlī Urdū Akhbār* editorialized, a reminder of the Day of Judgment, and was thus "meant to scourge us into obedience to the Divine Will."[5] For God had apparently decided to overturn the British and restore the elderly Mughal emperor, Bahādur Shāh, to the kind of imperial status that his ancestors had enjoyed. Seeing this handwriting on the wall, Maulvī Muḥammad Bāqir went to the royal court and enrolled himself under the emperor's banner. Āzād himself apparently helped with his father's journalistic efforts on behalf of the rebels. After the British retook Delhi some months later, Maulvī Muḥammad Bāqir was arrested and executed. Āzād

---

[3]Another Urdu newspaper was also started in 1837, and exact dates are hard to determine. For a detailed account of the available evidence see Nadir Ali Khan, *A History of Urdu Journalism, 1822–1857* (Delhi: Idarah-e Adabiyat-e Delli, 1991), pp. 25–30, 65–73, 209–10.

[4]Aslam Farrukhī, *Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād* (Karāčī: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 80–2; Khan, *op. cit.,* p. 71.

[5]Khan, *op. cit.,* pp. 86–7.

was summarily expelled from his house at bayonet-point, together with his whole joint family including old women and young children. Āzād later described the scene in *Āb-e Ḥayāt*.[6] After wandering on foot for several days, half-starving, under conditions of the greatest hardship and danger, the refugees found shelter with friends. But Āzād himself kept traveling, moving from one town to another.[7]

Finally in early 1861 he reached Lahore, where a relative helped him get a low-level job in the postmaster general's office. In February 1864, Āzād was finally appointed to the job he had been seeking: a clerical position in the Department of Public Instruction. As it happened, Lahore's new Government College was also founded in 1864, with Dr. G. W. Leitner as principal. Āzād had been supplementing his income by tutoring Englishmen in Urdu; in 1864–65 he tutored Dr. Leitner, who formed an excellent opinion of him.[8]

In 1865 Dr. Leitner founded what is commonly known as the Anjuman-e Panjāb, the "Punjab Society." Over time, the Anjuman arranged public lectures, set up a free library and reading room, compiled educational texts and translations in Indian languages, and established Lahore's famous Oriental College. The Anjuman was actively supported by leading British officials; it was considered a great success. Soon people in many cities began to manifest "a growing interest in vernacular literature impregnated with the spirit of the West."[9] The Anjuman made Āzād's career. He threw himself energetically into its activities from the beginning. In the first essay he ever read before the group, in February 1865, he thanked God for the government's educational program and fully endorsed its paternalism: "If the parents don't take care of their children, who else will?"[10] Āzād's Anjuman activities so solidly established him that he was sent by the government on a special espionage and information-gathering tour of Central Asia in 1865, and on a mission to Calcutta in 1866. His part in the events of 1857 had left him under a cloud, but now

---

[6]P. 450. Hereafter all citations to this work (2nd ed. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Academy, 1982 [facsimile of 1907 ed., Lahore]) appears in the text, including the translation.

[7]Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 104–9.

[8]Muhammad Sadiq, *Muhammad Husain Azad: His Life and Works* (Lahore: West-Pak Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 20–3; Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 113–29, 137–49.

[9]Sadiq, *op. cit.,* p. 24.

[10]Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, p. 154.

that cloud had been entirely dispelled.[11]

In 1866 Āzād became a regularly paid lecturer on behalf of the Anjuman; in 1867 he became its secretary. Āzād now stood so high in official favor that in early 1867 the lieutenant governor presented him with a "trinket" in token of his services. Gradually Āzād's lecture and essay topics came to be drawn more and more from the realm of literature. He wrote the extremely successful school textbook *Qiṣaṣu 'l-Hind* (Stories of India). In 1869 Āzād was appointed assistant professor of Arabic at Government College, on Dr. Leitner's recommendation. In 1870 he started to edit a newspaper for the Anjuman, but the paper was soon accused of being English-influenced to an unacceptable degree; in 1871 Dr. Leitner ordered it handed over to someone else.[12]

On 9 May 1874, Āzād delivered to the Anjuman his famous lecture on the reform of Urdu poetry. The audience included a number of Englishmen of high official rank. The text of Āzād's speech was printed the next day in a local newspaper, and there is no doubt about the boldness of his message: he called for a new Urdu poetry and a new poetics, both based on English models.

> Oh gardeners of the Garden of Eloquence! Eloquence is not something that flies along on the wings of exaggeration and high-flying fancy, or races off on the wings of rhyme, or climbs to the heavens by the force of verbal ingenuity, or sinks beneath a dense layer of metaphors. The meaning of eloquence is that happiness or sorrow, attraction or repulsion, fear or anger toward something—in short, whatever feeling is in our heart—should as we express it arouse in the listeners' hearts the same effect, the same emotion, the same fervor, as would be created by seeing the thing itself.[13]

The traditional adornments of poetry, he argued, had become obsolete. "New kinds of jewelry and robes of honor, suited to the conditions of the present day, are shut up in the storage-trunks of English—which are lying

[11]Sadiq, *op. cit.,* pp. 25–7; Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 164–90.

[12]Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 193–4, 214–21; Sadiq, *op. cit.,* pp. 27–8.

[13]Tabassum Kashmīrī, ed., *Naẓm-e Āzād* (Lāhaur: Maktaba 'Āliya, 1978 [1899]), p. 45. Āzād's term *faṣāḥat,* which I have here translated as "eloquence," is almost impossible to convey properly in English; something like "appropriate speech" might be the best rendering.

right here beside us, but we don't realize it."[14]

Āzād was immediately attacked by a number of his contemporaries for his proposed new poetics. He was accused of writing a language that was "outwardly Urdu and inwardly English, such as the present rulers want to create." His rejection of the traditional repertoire of poetic adornments and figures of speech was "as if some beautiful woman were stripped of her jewelry and clothing, and made to stand absolutely naked." After all, "without metaphors and similes, there's no pleasure in poetry!"[15] One person who did encourage and support Āzād was the great reformer Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. He advised Āzād to ignore the critics, and recommended a strong and simple literary creed: "Bring your work even closer to nature (*nēčar*). The extent to which a work comes close to nature is the extent to which it gives pleasure." Sir Sayyid called for a realistic, outward-looking "natural poetry" (*nēčaral pō'iṭrī*).[16]

Āzād stayed on in Lahore for the rest of his life. For years he taught at Government College and wrote books. Most conspicuously, he wrote school textbooks; they gained him a great popular reputation, and *Qiṣaṣu 'l-Hind* was a perennial favorite. Āzād's prose style, in his textbooks as elsewhere, won him widespread admiration and lasting fame. "In addition to being the greatest prose stylist of Urdu, Āzād is our most important educational writer as well."[17] From about 1875 to 1877 Āzād worked on *Nairaṅg-e Khiyāl* (The Wonder-World of Thought; 1880), a set of thirteen allegorical essays, mostly by Samuel Johnson and Joseph Addison, that he translated—or rather transcreated—into Urdu.[18] In his introduction to this book of essays, Āzād continued to urge radically Westernizing approaches to poetic problems. In fact, however, Āzād's heart was not entirely in it: he remained deeply ambivalent about the loss of the old poetry and its projected replacement with the new. As Farrukhī puts it all too accurately, "He struggled his whole life long to adopt a Western way of thinking; he advocated the development of new concepts and new principles; but mentally he lived in the past."[19]

In the same year, 1880, Āzād published his masterpiece, *Āb-e Ḥayāt*. It

---

[14] *Ibid.,* p. 46.

[15] Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 241–2.

[16] *Ibid.,* pp. 279–82.

[17] *Ibid.,* vol. 2, p. 638; see also pp. 606–7.

[18] Sadiq, *op. cit.,* pp. 43–5.

[19] Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 2, p. 618.

was recognized widely and immediately as the definitive history of Urdu poetry; it was (literally) an epoch-making achievement. Āzād's friend Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī wrote a long and glowingly favorable review.[20] *Āb-e Ḥayāt* at once became, and has remained, the single most influential sourcebook for both anecdotes and historical theories about Urdu poetry. The first edition sold out quickly. Āzād published a much revised and expanded second edition in 1883; Ḥālī was one of the many friends and correspondents who helped him gather new material for it. Both *Nairaṅg-e Khiyāl* and *Āb-e Ḥayāt* were soon incorporated into the official curriculum at Punjab University and many other schools.

Āzād's relationship with Dr. Leitner deteriorated over time: after an unsatisfactory collaboration on a book, Dr. Leitner now found Āzād "as inaccurate as he is occasionally brilliant," given to "intrigue," and definitely "unworthy of trust."[21] And Āzād's personal life continued to be marked by suffering. In the ten years between 1875 and 1885 he lost two of his sons, and also a much-loved aunt who ran his household. His house later caught fire. And—the worst blow of all—his beloved and talented daughter Amatu 's-Sakīna suddenly died. As the grieving father wrote, "she was in truth more precious than seven sons, when I was writing she was my right hand; her death has shattered my heart."[22]

A trip to Iran in 1885–86 seemed to restore his composure; in 1887 he managed to set up the "Āzād Library," which earned him much praise and the official honorific title Shamsu 'l-'Ulamā' (Sun among the Learned). Āzād also finished writing another major work, *Sukhandān-e Fārs* (On Iranian Poets). It was completed in 1887, but was not published until 1907—a gap of fully twenty years.[23]

The reason for this hiatus was the tragedy of Āzād's later life: the attacks of insanity that began increasingly to afflict him. Sometimes he used a planchette to summon the spirits of Mīr and other Urdu poets. Sometimes, suffering terribly from insomnia, he paced the floor all night, reciting verses, calling on the great *ustāds*, hearing their voices, replying to their words. In one fit of madness he even set out on foot for Delhi.[24] At

[20]Shaikh Muḥammad Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, ed., *Kulliyāt-e Naṡr-e Ḥālī* (Lāhaur: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1968), vol. 2, pp. 184–94.

[21]Farrukhī, *op. cit.,* vol. 1, pp. 302–3.

[22]*Ibid.,* pp. 324–5; see also pp. 314–5, 323.

[23]*Ibid.,* pp. 326–34; vol. 2, p. 373.

[24]*Ibid.,* pp. 356–60, 362–3.

another time, he managed somehow to reach Aligarh, where he appeared without warning at the house of the amazed Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. He told his host that Abu 'l-Faẕl and other spirits had been speaking to him—dictating a book, which he was taking down in their own words. This book, *Darbār-e Akbar* (The Court of Akbar; 1898), grew into an immense, extravagant hymn of praise to Akbar. It was colorful, anecdotal, repetitive, full of long authorial asides—and so seductively written that it won immediate popularity and remains a favorite today.

All accounts agree that Āzād's madness was fitful: for five minutes, ten minutes, half an hour, he would be entirely his normal self, then suddenly an attack would overcome him. Over the years, the lucid intervals grew fewer, and the madness worse. Āzād died in Lahore in 1910, at the age of eighty.[25]

*

When I first set out to read *Āb-e Ḥayāt,* I saw that it began with an introduction describing the history and development of the Urdu language. And the very first sentence in that introduction left me astonished: "Everybody knows this much—that our Urdu language has emerged from Braj Bʰāshā" (p. 6). For in fact, nobody knows this at all. Nobody knows it today, and hardly anybody "knew" it in Āzād's day. It's such a flat statement, so casually offhand and confident—and so wrongheaded. What could Āzād have been thinking of? I didn't want to believe that the primal, definitive vision of Urdu literature had been shaped by someone who was so uninformed, or who told such falsehoods, as this sentence seemed to indicate.

The term "Braj Bʰāshā" has always referred chiefly to the language, both spoken and written, of the Braj region, around Mathura and Vrindavan. Braj Bʰāshā has a centuries-old literary history, a strong modern presence, and its own well-established grammar.[26] Urdu too has a centuries-old literary history, a strong modern presence, and its own well-established grammar—the "Kʰaṛī Bōlī" grammar of the Delhi region, common to Urdu and modern standard Hindi. The Braj Bʰāshā grammar

---

[25]*Ibid.,* pp. 371–6. A more detailed account of Āzād's life can be found in Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness,* pp. 11–3, 22–6, 31–42.

[26]See Rupert Snell, *The Hindi Classical Tradition: A Braj Bhāṣā Reader* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991).

and the Urdu (Kʰaṛī Bōlī) grammar can both be traced back at least to the early medieval period. They are quite distinct. Even a single sentence is enough to differentiate them unmistakably. Linguistically speaking, there has never been a shred of evidence to suggest that either one of these two contemporary grammars "emerged from" the other.

Casual usage may of course subsume both Braj Bʰāshā and Urdu under the broad rubric of "Hindi." Urdu has been known at various medieval and later times not only as Rēkhta, Hindustani, and Kʰaṛī Bōlī, but also as Hindi (or Hindavī). Grahame Bailey explores the use of these terms at length, with many examples; of them all, he finds that only the name "Hindi" requires no special analysis, since it was "the natural word to use in early times."[27] After all, "Hindi" at its loosest can be an umbrella term: it can simply refer to the colloquial language(s) of Hind, or northern South Asia. Such usage was very possible in Āzād's time: F. S. Growse described himself in 1872 as "a resident of Braj" engaged in studying "Braj Bhāshā, the typical form of modern Hindi, which I hear spoken about me."[28]

But it can easily be shown that in Āzād's day, as in our own, knowledgeable observers were quite clear about the different forms of "Hindi" involved. In the introduction to his famous Hindi grammar book (1875), Rev. S. H. Kellogg grudgingly recognized the predominance in practice of "that variety of Hindí which agrees in grammatical form with the Urdú" and which "has also often been termed kharí bolí." Only that Urdu-like form of Hindi had, he conceded, a position "as a *lingua franca* throughout the whole Hindi area of North India"—at the expense, he noted with regret, of "the *Braj* and the old *Purbí,*" the "two great dialects of classic Hindí literature," which were undeservedly neglected.[29] In Āzād's day, virtually all serious observers, whatever their biases, realized that Braj Bʰāshā and Urdu (along with Urdu-style Kʰaṛī Bōlī Hindi) were sisters vying with each other in sibling rivalry, not mother and daughter.[30] Āzād

---

[27]T. Grahame Bailey, *Studies in North Indian Languages* (London: Lund Humphries & Co. Ltd., 1938), p. 8; see also pp. 1–5, 159–65.

[28]Growse, F. S., "On the Non-Aryan Element in Hindi Speech," *Indian Antiquary* 1 (April 1872):103.

[29]Rev. S.H. Kellogg, *A Grammar of the Hindí Language* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1972 [1875]), pp. xvii–xviii.

[30]For an excellent account of the language controversies of the period see Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994).

himself aspired to linguistic sophistication; he relied in *Āb-e Ḥayāt* on the fashionable Western scholarship of the day, referring learnedly to the coming of the Aryans, the Indo-European affinities of Sanskrit and Old Persian, the growth of Prakrits like Magadʰī and Shaurasēnī, and so on. How then could he go wrong about something so basic? What was he up to?

Seeking further clues, I read and reread the beginning of Āzād's introduction. I noticed that he identifies Braj Bʰāshā, explicitly described as the language of the Braj region (p. 6), as the medieval North Indian poetic language. According to Āzād, during that period "the Hindu poets," including Kabīr from Banaras, wrote in Braj Bʰāshā (p. 16). Then two pages later he says that Tulsīdās wrote in "Bʰāshā" (p. 18). Here I saw a glimmer of hope. Might not this shift give Āzād some useful room for maneuver? "Bʰāshā," which literally means "language," can be used for any colloquial dialect. Might Āzād perhaps be thinking of "Bʰāshā" as a broad umbrella term, with "Braj Bʰāshā" and "Hindi" as variant forms of it? Indeed, he speaks of Braj Bʰāshā as "the language of this place," meaning India, and alternates the terms Braj Bʰāshā and Bʰāshā while clearly referring to the same language (p. 19).

Moreover, his few uses of "Hindi" are also vague; in one place he seems to substitute "Hindi" for "Braj Bʰāshā" (p. 48). (The more exact term "Kʰaṛī Bōlī" he never uses at all.) Perhaps "Braj Bʰāshā" simply looms unduly large in his mind, as the dominant medieval literary form of "Bʰāshā"? If so, his statement about Urdu might look less absurd. He might mean to say merely that Urdu developed out of the great medieval trans-regional colloquial language soup that could loosely be called "Bʰāshā." If he meant to say this, he would still be writing much too carelessly—for he does say "Braj" Bʰāshā over and over, and he locates it quite clearly in the Braj region. But he would not necessarily be quite so wrong or untrustworthy. Through all this terminological confusion, I had hopes of exonerating Āzād.

As I did further research, I learned of a significant predecessor for Āzād's views. Muḥammad 'Abdu 'l-Ḥayy "Ṣafā," in the introduction to his *tażkira* or poetry anthology *Shamīm-e Sukhan, Ḥiṣṣa-e Avval* (1872–73) had also maintained not only that the Urdu language had emerged from Braj Bʰāshā, but that the founder of Urdu poetry was Amīr Khusrau; he described the transitional poet Shamsuddīn "Valī" Dakanī (1667–1720/25), who around 1700 made his legendary trip northwards and kindled enthusiasm for Urdu poetry in Delhi, not as a "Deccani" but as a Gujarati from Ahmedabad; Ṣafā also disputed the view that Urdu first reached full

development in the Dakan and that "the sun of Urdu poetry rose" there. Although this *tażkira* cannot be shown to be among Āzād's sources,[31] Āzād himself seems to be engaged in somewhat the same process of historical erasure and reconstruction. For Āzād too emphasizes, in a section called "The Birth of Urdu Poetry," the role of Amīr Khusrau (1253–1325) as a kind of prime forefather of Urdu: from his work "we can tell what relish the salt of Persian had added to the flavor of Hindi" (p. 67). In his time "the sequence of verses that we call ghazal came into our hands," and Persian meters began to be used (p. 72).

Yet Āzād also describes Valī, who lived four centuries later, as the "Adam of the race of Urdu poetry" and meditates at length on his role as its founder, the person who "brought all the meters of Persian into Urdu," who imported the ghazal itself and "opened the road" for the other genres, for "at that time the Urdu language was capable of nothing except Hindi *dōhrās* and themes from Bʰāshā" (p. 83). But even on Āzād's own account, the Urdu ghazal had already been invented four centuries earlier by Amīr Khusrau, so it should hardly have been necessary for Valī to reinvent it. Āzād has thus provided Urdu ghazal with not one but two founding fathers, four centuries apart—both of them operating, however independently, in the north. Whereas in fact Amīr Khusrau remains an isolated example of a prolific Persian litterateur lightly trifling with the demotic tongue for the amusement of his friends, and scarcely bothering to preserve his work. The tradition of Urdu poetry cannot in a real sense be said to have begun with him, and our access to his words in a reliably original form is highly doubtful. As for Valī, since Urdu poetry had had a lively history of two centuries prior to him in the Deccan, he could at the most have been not an Adam but a kind of Noah, restarting poetry in the north after a great flood of forgetting had wiped the slate clean of Deccani literary activity.

I thus had to acknowledge that Āzād was what might be called a "northern chauvinist," and that he was confused (to say the least) about terminology and linguistic development, and that he used the term "(Braj) Bʰāshā" entirely too loosely. But these were relatively minor failings; they could almost be seen as natural outcomes of the pioneering effort he was undertaking. Farmān Fatḥpūrī, author of the definitive Urdu study of the *tażkira* tradition, mounts an eloquent defense of Āzād along

---

[31]Farmān Fatḥpūrī, *Urdū Shuʿarā' kē Tażkirē aur Tażkira-Nigārī* (Lāhaur: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1972), pp. 487–8, 610–1.

just such lines. Noting that Āzād's Urdu-from-Braj claim has aroused much literary and scholarly commentary, Farmān Fatḥpūrī observes the presence of the same claim in some other *taẕkiras*, especially *Shamīm-e Sukhan*. (It is clear from Farmān Fatḥpūrī's own work, however, that the *taẕkiras* containing examples of Dakani poetry are considerably more numerous than those that deny its existence.) Farmān Fatḥpūrī's defense then assumes a more emotional tone:

> But the way Āzād has talked about this claim of his, and the scholarly way in which he has entered into the details of Bʰāshā and discussed the common roots of Persian, Urdu, and Sanskrit words—that has remained his portion alone. Even if today we cannot accept the claim that Urdu emerged from Braj Bʰāshā, is it a small thing that Āzād invited thoughtful attention to the source and origin of Urdu? And the result of this invitation was that in Urdu a valuable treasury of linguistic research on this topic has come into being. It is as if Āzād alone first smoothed the path for linguistic discussions in Urdu. For this reason, in the linguistic history of Urdu his writings, no matter how erroneous they may be proved today, cannot be ignored.[32]

I was very sympathetic to this line of reasoning. Āzād was guilty, on this showing, of no more than careless scholarship and regional chauvinism—common failings in his time and place. Knowing so well the pressures under which Āzād was writing, I hoped to be able to echo, and even reinforce, Farmān Fatḥpūrī's defense.

But as I read further in *Āb-e Ḥayāt,* all such hopes collapsed. Āzād himself makes rescue impossible; he burns his bridges behind him. He develops his notion of (Braj) Bʰāshā beyond the point of any face-saving ambiguities. For he carries his historical argument further than his defenders care to notice. "Although the tree of Urdu grew in the ground of Sanskrit and Bʰāshā," he argues, "it has flowered in the breezes of Persian." From Persian the "color of metaphors and similes" came into Urdu. And this "color" came not like soothing "collyrium in the eyes," but overpoweringly: "its intensity caused severe harm to the eyes of our power of expression." Here, in addition to revealing his own wild gift for metaphor ("the eyes of our power of expression," indeed!), Āzād prepares

[32] *Ibid.,* p. 614.

the ground for an extraordinary dichotomy.

For the result of this Persianization, according to him, was that "Bʰāshā and Urdu became as different as earth and sky." He promises to prove his claim: "I want to juxtapose examples of both and place them before you, and point out the difference" (p. 49). What could be fairer? The reader looks forward to a well-grounded discussion. After all, Āzād has implicitly equated Bʰāshā with Braj Bʰāshā, and has declared (Braj) Bʰāshā to be the language of the whole medieval North Indian literary tradition. He has dozens of texts from which to draw examples of Bʰāshā. And he certainly has access to at least some of them, for he has earlier given brief examples from the work of several important medieval poets. Which ones will he now choose to cite, to prove his case?

Remarkably, perversely, egregiously, the answer is—none. With what can only be called chutzpah, Āzād simply makes up his own examples. He doesn't bother even pretending to attribute them to anyone else. In a series of set pieces, he shows us how "the writer of Bʰāshā literary style" describes: a garden in the rainy season; the rainy season itself; the evening; and the bleakness of the night (p. 54–6). Any Urdu-knowing reader can easily verify that the language of these passages, apart from Āzād's half-hearted attempt to avoid Perso-Arabic words, is just the same Kʰaṛī Bōlī Urdu in which the rest of *Āb-e Ḥayāt* is written. It is certainly not Braj Bʰāshā. If it is in any sense Hindi, it is modern standard Kʰaṛī Bōlī Hindi: in effect, Urdu with some vocabulary changes. Moreover, these are straightforward prose passages; the real (Braj) Bʰāshā works at Āzād's disposal would have been overwhelmingly in verse. Āzād's only exemplary "writer of Bʰāshā literary style" is, in short, himself.

Relying on these rather less than convincing examples, Āzād develops his argument with the triumphant air of one who is driving a point firmly home. From great heights of effrontery he hands down his conclusion:

> Look—both these gardens [of Urdu and Bʰāshā] are spread out before you, facing each other. Have you compared them? What's the difference in their style and manner? The eloquent Bʰāshā-speaker doesn't, even by accident, take a step toward metaphor. Whatever enjoyable sights he sees with his eyes, and whatever agreeable sounds he hears, or whatever agreeable scent he smells, are exactly what he very clearly describes in his sweet language, spontaneously, without exaggeration (p. 56).

Now as any reader of our translation can verify, even in the narrowest

sense this claim is false. Even Āzād the one exemplary Bʰāshā-writer, even when he is composing passages designed specifically to be exemplary, cannot entirely avoid metaphor ("fruit and seeds kiss the ground") or simile ("a cobra like a cucumber"). In fact he cannot even entirely refrain from wordplay—note the Persianized pun on *āb* (p. 55). He not only fakes his evidence, but fakes it self-refutingly.

Yet he has no choice but to fake it, since one look at the genuine article would demolish his argument. For even if there ever were to be a literature that eschewed metaphor, it would never be any form of (Braj) Bʰāshā. In his saner moments, Āzād knows perfectly well that medieval North Indian literature delights not only in metaphor but in many forms of wordplay (see for example his comments about "punning and words of double meaning" on p. 88). But of course the problem goes deeper: the attempt to show the existence of any literature devoid of metaphor is doomed from the start. There cannot be such a literature. In fact there cannot be such speech at all; metaphor is deeply embedded within everyday language itself.[33] Āzād is trying to prove a hopelessly unprovable proposition.

Yet he will go to any lengths necessary to prove it. Āzād's tendentious replacement of real (Braj) Bʰāshā texts with fakes that he has created himself can hardly be due to innocent error or confusion. No ambiguities of terminology can save him. His own version of metaphor-free "Bʰāshā" is an invented construct, with no historical or literary tradition behind it whatsoever; it has so little viability that it cannot sustain itself for even as long as a page or two. In some part of his mind Āzād knows this. But he will not admit it. He is nothing if not determined. He hacks his way resolutely through all the intellectual thickets and historical underbrush: he makes a path that will take him where he wants to go.

For he is trying desperately to assure that his "Bʰāshā" will have a literary tradition ahead of it, in the future. He has imagined for Urdu an idealized linguistic "mother"—a language simple, sweet, natural, and entirely Indian. Āzād's invented genealogy gives this "mother" language ancestral legitimacy, so that it can be projected forward into the future. After all, Urdu has surely inherited its mother's nature. Urdu thus can and should, in filial duty, adopt its mother's values.

---

[33]George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

*

Āzād sought—in the teeth of strong opposition from many of his contemporaries—to change the contours of Urdu literature for all time to come. Looking at his life, it is easy to see why he undertook such an apparently quixotic task. He was desperate: he saw the poetry that he loved, the culture that he cherished, sliding downhill toward irrelevance and death. Time, as he saw it, was not on his side. In the aftermath of 1857, the victorious British were defining a new world order not only politically, but culturally as well. The page of history had been turned—with, literally, a vengeance. Āzād felt that Urdu had to change or die. As early as his 1874 Anjuman talk, he had begun to call for an Urdu literature that drew its "jewelry and robes of honor" not from Persian but from "the storage-trunks of English." In Āzād's eyes, emulating English was quite consistent with recapturing the simplicities of "Bʰāshā," because English literature too was governed by a naturalistic poetics that aimed above all at transmitting emotional reactions from writer to reader (p. 58).

Obviously the first task in the remodeling process would be to strip Urdu of its traditional Persianized imagery and poetic devices. Āzād rails against them with an almost comic show of petulance:

> Those same fixed things! Here and there we move the words around, here and there we do some substitutions—and we keep on composing with them. As if they're morsels that have already been eaten—or at least chewed—by other people. We chew on them, and we're happy. Think about it—what relish do they still have left? Beauty and love—marvelous!—very fine! But for how long? Whether she's a *ḥūrī* or a *parī*, once you're stuck with her, she becomes sickening. How long can it be till you get fed up with beauty and love? And by now she's become a hundred-year-old crone! (p. 79).

Āzād knows he has his work cut out for him. He indulges in harangue: traditional imagery is like already-chewed food that should have no more relish; it's like a long-enjoyed woman who should have no more sexual allure. Yet we keep on eating the food; we are not fed up with the woman! He is plainly trying to convince the unconvinced, to hector his reluctant readers into changing their ways. Āzād is seeking, as I argued at length in *Nets of Awareness,* to kill the classical poetic tradition—and then to claim that it died of old age.

Of course there's nothing wrong with bringing to a literary task a point of view, a personal vision, even an avowed ideology. Why else would the writer choose to undertake that particular task? But when the writer feels that he has a license to kill, the reader must be warned that he's capable of anything, and must watch him like a hawk. Āzād does feel that he has a license to kill, and he's gunning for the old poetry. He is ready to use fair means or foul, real texts or fakes, truths or falsehoods, to bring it down. He'll see it lying before him as a corpse. Then he'll swathe it in billows of genuine, tearful, heartfelt nostalgia and lay it reverently to rest—with a stake through its heart.

The literary historian as gunslinger—it's the kind of metaphor Āzād himself might have relished. He uses his own exuberant gift for metaphor to promote the impossible dream of a metaphor-free Urdu—or at least, an Urdu that uses only fresh and "novel" metaphors (p. 79). He is a powerful and totally unscrupulous writer; no one would like to be in his gunsights. And yet the whole classical poetic tradition has been in his gunsights for more than a century. Most of what the man-in-the-street Urdu-speaker today knows about classical poetry comes, directly or through a thousand indirect channels, from Āzād. (I've been told that there are even people who believe that Urdu came from Braj Bʰāshā, because they have read it in *Āb-e Ḥayāt.*) Modern Urdu-speakers often fail to understand classical poetry—and if they do enjoy some of it, they tend to feel slightly reactionary or apologetic. Modern critics generally do not have a satisfactory critical vocabulary for making analytical sense of the poetry. The finest classical poetry has so much vitality, so much power, that it is not dead today, despite Āzād's best efforts. But it lives confined to the back room of a museum, visible only through an ornate marble lattice; the spirits of Āzād and Ḥālī are always lurking in the foreground to frighten off anyone who might come too close.

*

When Āzād is at his best, prose really does turn to poetry in his hands. As a master of wordplay he has no peer in Urdu. Between one lively, engaging sentence and the next there may lie a tremendous chasm; but the reader is often seduced into leaping easily over it, allured by the sentence on the far side. Āzād can in fact be at his most delightful when he is being persnickety and prejudiced. Even when he sets forth opposing points of view with a show of judiciousness, his real interest is always in placing a dexterous thumb on his preferred side of the scales. Virtually every major

Urdu literary figure of the past century is on record as admiring his prose.

Āzād's style is usually held—with reason—to be untranslatable. No doubt we as translators will be found wanting, unable to capture its full subtlety and charm. But we go to our doom gallantly, in a good cause. We want people to realize what Āzād is up to; that much at least, we feel that our translation can accomplish. We want to break the passionate, hypnotic spell he has cast over a century of Urdu-speakers; we want to make people conscious of the acid of cultural self-contempt that he pours over his own genuine nostalgia. We want to encourage Urdu-speakers to see the radical falseness and self-contradiction of Āzād's vision of "natural poetry." We want people to read Āzād critically, with the distrust he so richly deserves, rather than to take seriously his air of naïve nostalgia and apparently earnest fair-mindedness.

We see other uses as well for our translation. On the most general level, Āzād's life and work provide a kind of case study. They illustrate with uncommon vividness an all too common nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon: the widespread defensive reaction by the colonized to the colonial critique. Āzād's predicament, and his desperate attempts to resolve it, find echoes in many other modern South Asian literatures, and beyond South Asia as well. On the most specific level, through our apparatus and methodology we will be opening up *Āb-e Ḥayāt* to detailed scholarly scrutiny of a kind never possible before. The special introduction on "How to Use This Translation" makes our procedures clear.

And of course, we love the classical poetry ourselves, and want to do our part in bringing it out of durance vile. We seek to offer it the intelligent scholarly and poetic attention it so well deserves—and so richly repays. To spend time in the company of the classical masters is a joy. Āzād too knew very well that the pleasure of poetry is "such a powerful affliction" that "all pleasures become pleasureless" by comparison (p. 118).

*

A note on the translation itself: This project has been a collaborative one between Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and me. I did the draft translation and all the typing and computer work, and prepared all the apparatus. But thanks to a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, we had the chance to go over the whole translation together, line by line and word by word. Without Shamsur Rahman's help, I would never have agreed to tackle such an ambitious project. The translations here are in something close to final draft form. The apparatus will include a list of all authors

and works mentioned in *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, with page references for every occurrence; a list of technical terms, with explanations as well as page references; a list of more general references that might interest the reader; and of course a bibliography. The excerpts that appear here are in fairly final draft form.

Shamsur Rahman and I decided to write two separate introductions to the translations, to take advantage of our different interests and perspectives. An earlier form of Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's introduction, entitled "Constructing a Literary History, a Canon, and a Theory of Poetry: *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (1880) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830–1910)," appeared in *Social Scientist* (New Delhi) 23, 10–12 (October–December 1995):70–97. Parts of my introduction appear here, in early draft form.

Our translation is now in the final stages of preparation for publication. It will be co-published by Manohar Publications in Delhi and Oxford University Press (Pakistan). ❐