

ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER IL MEDIO ED ESTREMO ORIENTE

GHALIB

SELECTED POEMS

translated with an introduction

by

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INTRODUCTION

GHALIB died a hundred years ago in Delhi at the age of seventy-two, having lost his sense of hearing and all interest in life which, anyway, had not treated him too kindly. Not fully appreciated in his own day, he stands very high today wherever Urdu is read, including the Soviet Union which has taken a lead in celebrating his centenary. This should give us food for thought, not so much for the sake of Ghalib as that of poetry and ourselves. Whether we like him or not, whether we understand him or do not, Ghalib's poetry has a quality which, in the essence, is for all time, having been in his own time far in advance of the age, so that it strikes us as modern and still advancing into the future. His approach to life is highly individualistic and his attitude, sophisticated and difficult, expresses the sum total of cumulative feeling and intellectual experience based on diverse factors present in the age.

The nineteenth century in India was an age of upheavals, doubts and uncertainties, religious controversies, esoteric doctrines, orthodoxy and moral recession, revolts and acceptance, decay and disorder, but also of hope as a new order was emerging like

Dispersed light in the mirror, a speck of dust
Caught in the sunlight in the window

to use Ghalib's imagery. With the passing of the care of Urdu and the culture of India to British hands under the treaty of 1765, British ascendancy had been acknowledged. The people still owed allegiance to the Mughal Emperor, but found no glory at the Court which was incapable of inspiring any sense of national pride. Torn between the reality and a future still incomprehensible, they felt helpless if not stunned. Some were exasperated into taking up arms under the banner of religion, and some were lost in the pursuit of pleasures or apathy typical of defeatism. Psychologically it was a difficult period of warring loyalties, instinct demanding attachment to what was national, expe-

diency suggesting alignment with a power that had virtual control of India. Attitudes underwent a change. The main pattern of culture remained oriental, but Western ways were making inroads into the minds of men. Since knowledge of alien manners and customs was superficial, and imitation inherent in the situation, a laxity became visible in life and morals, encouraged by the loosening hold of tradition and failing faith in the stability of a society which could no longer uphold its values by giving its members an assurance of its strength. The divine right which sustained it had collapsed. In poetry, therefore, the fleshly school, developing in a fast degenerating Lucknow, the second seat of culture, decaying before it had become ripe, gained popularity and subsidized a desperate order floundering in a morass of superficialities. Some patriotic minds revolted against the rising tide of the West, and preached revolution, like the Vahabis¹ and Momin² who said:

O Doomsday, come, shake up the world
And rend it up and down, about;
It may be it will come to nought,
But in revolt there is hope at least.

a sentiment echoed by Ghalib himself:

Some feeling souls are waiting
For revolution;
Make those who have found happiness
Unhappy again.

But their voices were stilled in death or defeat.

¹ The Vahabi movement was started by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Vahab of Arabia with the object of restoring its original simplicity to Islam. In their zeal the Vahabis destroyed the sepulchre at Karbala and the sacred relics of the prophet Muhammad's tomb. The movement was crushed by the Turks. The Indian leaders of the movement were Syed Ahmad of Bareilly and Muhammad Ismail (Shaheed) a grandson of Shah Waliullah. They fought a number of battles against the Sikhs (then rulers of the Punjab) when they interfered with the right of Muslims to practise their religion. The British Government mistook the movement to be a political organisation directed against them, and prosecuted its followers, sentencing many to harsh terms in jail, including imprisonment in the Andamans where many died.

² Momin Khan Momin, 1799-1851, a major poet, was also physician, scholar, amateur astronomer and aesthete. He was a sympathizer with the Vahabi movement, and the first poet to express national sentiments in poetry, and was a friend of Ghalib's.

These currents produced sentiments and attitudes difficult to analyze. Ghalib's developed sensibility accepted a variety of thoughts as valid experiences. His peculiar mind amalgamated these experiences into a unity so that the sifting of their elements becomes a hopeless task, the more so as Ghalib had a comprehension of his age, like Baudelaire, while the changing pattern of the age was still incomplete and unknown to his contemporaries³. It is still largely unknown, as no serious attempt has been made to find its true form and nature, in the preoccupations of the day, and because of the inadequacy of scholarship to tackle the complex problem. Without full awareness of it any study of the mind and method of Ghalib is bound to remain incomplete.

Not much is known of Ghalib's early life. His full name was Mirza Asadullah Khan, and he was born in 1797 at Agra. He belonged to a family of Central Asian Aibak Turks who claimed descent from King Afrasiyab of Trasoxiana, who founded the Seljuq dynasty of kings⁴. On their downfall the Seljuq princes lived a life of idleness in Samarkand. Ghalib's grandfather, however, decided to come to India in Shah Alam's reign (1759-1806), seeking fortune, and found employment as a high-ranking officer in the Army, as did his sons. Ghalib's father was killed when the poet was only five years of age. He was brought up by his uncle who was also killed when Ghalib was only nine. At the age of thirteen he was married to the daughter of a nobleman of the Mughal court and moved over to Delhi. He speaks but only of one love affair, that with a professional singer; but he seems to have been an admirer of fair women, and writes in his letters about the care-free and happy life of his youth. He was seldom free of financial difficulties and had to face many problems in maintaining a standard of life in keeping with his aristocratic descent and tastes.

We do not know much about his education. It is, however, certain that he received instruction under private superintendence in the usual subjects which formed part of the curriculum of cultured families, na-

³ Baudelaire and the Symbolists, quoted by T. S. Eliot in his essay on Baudelaire, *Collected Essays*, p. 368, edition of 1932.

⁴ 1037 to 1300 A.D., was a most influential dynasty which brought the Muslims of West Asia up to Afghanistan under one banner.

mely, theology, astronomy, logic, philosophy, medicine and literature. He speaks of a teacher who imparted much knowledge to him, a Persian Zoroastrian convert to Islam, and obviously a man of learning. But he seems to have been an invention of the poet's brain, necessitated by the criticism that he had no schooling or scholarship, for no other evidence has been found of his existence, and there are discrepancies of time and place in Ghalib's own account of the scholar, and in one of his letters he even confesses to having invented him. His education, nevertheless, could not have been as comprehensive as he wished, for he dwells on his shortcomings and lack of knowledge in his letters with much regret, albeit he was a Persian scholar and philologist, knew Arabic, and for years wrote only in Persian and preferred to be considered a Persian poet and writer in preference to one of Urdu, and held his Persian works in greater esteem.

He started writing verses in Urdu at the early age of ten without ever having become anyone's disciple, contrary to the established practice, and adopted Asad, 'lion', as his pseudonym, but abandoned it later in favour of Ghalib, 'conqueror'. Very early in his poetic career he became the talk of the town, and many spoke of him with sarcasm and ridicule and said, as the University Wits had done of Shakespeare, that an insolent poet had appeared on the scene, who took his stand on ways other than those of Shah Naseer⁵ and Zauq⁶ (the two most popular poets of the day), who talked of unbeknown and absurd worlds. His art had, however, already reached perfection before he was twenty-three years of age, as the manuscript of his poems known as the Hamidia Manuscript of Bhopal dated 1237 Hijra or 1821 A.D. proves. Nearly half of the 3,776 lines of this manuscript were included in the definitive selections of his Urdu works which he prepared on the insistence of

⁵ Shah Naseer-uddin, a minor poet who, by virtue of becoming the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam's court poet, was much talked of in the first half of the nineteenth century. He died in 1840.

⁶ Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq, 1789-1854, was the son of a poor soldier, but having become a pupil of Shah Naseer, gained access to the poetic assemblies of Prince Abu Zafar, and having become his teacher was appointed court poet when the Prince came to the throne as the last Mughal Emperor. His poetry is characterized by polish of language and didacticism.

friends who wanted him to delete his more difficult and obscure poems. The Bhopal MS displays all the characteristics and qualities that distinguish his poetry, even though he altered and chiselled many lines in later years.

The years between 1825 and 1833 were spent in a futile attempt at the restoration of his family pension given in lieu of service rendered in the Army but withheld by British authorities. The attempt continued almost until 1844, even though he had lost the case for the pension in 1833. This was a period of vicissitudes and mental strain during which he travelled to Calcutta, visiting Benares and other cities on the way. His admirers and pupils, among them the rulers of Rampur and Lucknow, and the Mughal Emperor himself whose chronicler he became in 1850 and his teacher in 1855 after the death of Zauq, gave him annuities. Most of these, however, ceased after 1857. The Mughal court conferred on him two titles, and the King bestowed other gifts and honours, but they meant no permanent relief, and his life remained one of struggle and financial worries which run to the end of his days like a persistent experience. The two great sorrows of his life seem to have been the death of a woman he loved, perhaps the same woman of his early love affair, and that of Zainul Abedin Khan Arif, his adopted son and nephew, to both of whom he addressed passionate elegies.

A few more facts are recounted by commentators and recorded by him in letters written in the finest prose to many friends in later years, while the rest of his life is obscure like that of many great authors of the Renaissance. The obscurity becomes pronounced in view of his temperament which combined originality with pride in his noble birth, intellect with imagination, truth of observation with philosophical doubt. (Unsympathetic criticism and the indifference of people left him with a sense of frustration, even bitterness:

There is no place for me in any heart;
Melodious is my work, but still unheard.
As a man bitten by dog dreads water,
I dread the mirror for I have been bitten by man.

As a result his poetry is full of poignant grief and intense yearning:

Driven by an unknown hope
I go, I know not where;
The path itself is the straight line
Of grace to me.

This is expressed in many ways, time and again, as emotion recollected in tranquillity, as longing for love and leisure and time past, the regret for lost perfection leading to the search for the ideal, a moving realization of Beauty:

The lightning heat of heart's anguish filled the cloud
With terror last night; each whirl of the vortex was molten flame.
With the lustre of the rose by the water bloomed a garden of lamps,
But a channel of blood flowed from my eyes bedewed.
My clamouring head had turned to a wall with lack of sleep,
But, head on silken pillow, that beauty was rapt in peace.
Whereas my breath lit the lamp of forgetfulness,
The splendour of the rose was the extent for the meeting of friends.
From the earth to the sky was a tumult of colour wave on wave,
For me this space was only the door of a burning waste.
Then suddenly the heart, ravished with the joys of pain,
Began to drip, out of this colour, red tears of blood.
Enraptured was it with the coming of the storm,
But a reed to the water's sound the lover's soul.

The search continues throughout his life, now appearing as the past, now as quest for beauty in nature and behind it awareness of a mystical presence:

The world is full of the effulgence
Of the one-ness of the well-beloved;
Where would we be if Beauty
Did not possess self-love?

leading to a teleological approach to God:

When nothing here exists without Thee,
Then wherefore all this tumult, O Lord?

Under his keen and enquiring mind these ideas break up into many forms, aesthetic, material and metaphysical. He disbelieves the evidence of the senses:

My mad despair is the enemy
Of the evidence of the world:
The heavenly sun is only a lamp
Along the path of the wind.

and advances towards philosophical scepticism:

Be not deceived by life:
However they may say
It is, it does not exist.

(He could not accept the established view of things and was sceptical of known beliefs. In fact, he was in revolt against many of them which his rational mind was loath to accept; and though a good deal of his imagery was based on the conventional one, he inverted it to suit his thought, sometimes grotesquely perverting it:

I know the truth of Paradise:
A futile thought, but desirable.

exposing, at the same time, the emptiness of orthodox attitudes:

If Paradise he desires,
None else but Adam is heir to Adam.
The brilliance of the priest's faith
Is dullness of action.

Ghalib saw through hypocrisy:

Deception of the hypocrite,
I'm the illusion of those
Distressed without a cause.

and emphasized action:

Men are put to shame
By false courage. Therefore
Produce tears, Asad.
(If the sigh has no effect.

The dialectic of Ghalib's poetry is double-edged. He uses current imagery, but makes new use of it, and shows its hollowness as it has become empty of thought and is inadequate to reflect the reality. His imagination is esemplastic. Perception and thought are continuously

fused in his mind, so that he could see creation and the Creator all at once involved in the situation:

Life's leisure is a mirror of the hundred hues
Of self-adoration;
And night and day, the great dismay
Of the onlooker of this scene.

The position is reversed from the accepted belief. Life in its multiple forms is engrossed in itself alone, and the Maker, bound by His own laws, turns a beholder of the scene of night and day he had himself made, sorry at its plight. Life goes on caught in its own vortex, concerned with itself alone; and even God cannot change the pattern and views it with dismay.

Ghalib is both a representative of a culture and in revolt against it. He makes the temporary eternal, and the divine helpless in the face of necessity:

Intelligence Unconcerned
Is caught in the great despair
Of encirclement; and man's
Image remains imprisoned
In the mirror of the world.

God, and He is the Intelligence Unconcerned, is encircled within the laws of the universe and cannot disentangle Himself, hence the great despair, while the world, the house of mirrors, acts as a prison for man's image so that he cannot look beyond it. Even the Creator is bound by the laws of responsibility and change, and cannot help mankind caught in the whirl of life, the prison-house of the perceptual world. Both man and God are held inevitably and cannot get out of the necessity of night and day. A situation more tragic was not visualised even by Milton, and most difficult to find outside of Greek drama!

Ghalib saw life as a moment between two opposites, and wished to escape the gravitational force of either to stand clear of them and be free. He does not make naïve accusations like Mir ⁷, though valid

⁷ Muhammad Taqī Mir, 1723–1910, the greatest poet of the eighteenth century who, both for perfection of vision and grace of expression, remains the outstanding representative of the Renaissance.

in the context of Mir's vision and the social reality:

For nothing we, the helpless ones,
Accused of independence are,
For you act as it pleases you,
And yet it's we who get the blame.

Ghalib was aware of the limitations of man:

It has not been given to man to become even man
and of man's predilection for self-deception:

In the joy of blossoming the rose
Is lost in a sea of colour;
O consciousness, the lure
Of illusion is everywhere!

as well as the imperfection of life:

How can perfection of love
Be found in this defective world?
The thought of maturity
Of mind is futile here.

Ghalib's poetry reflects the movement of thought. It is the product of a civilization standing on the brink of change and conscious of it. The quality it displays is a personal one, and Ghalib's personality was complex. The nature of his experience was, therefore, varied and concentrated. The stamp of his individuality is present in every line he wrote, so that he founded no school nor left an heir to his rich tradition. Only a mind like his could feel and express like him, hammer out plastic images from a piece of steel on the anvil still red hot. People like him are born after an age of Wonder and Romanticism, when the imagination is still active to participate in the whirl of life, but shaped by experiences divergently opposite. They represent a change of something more fundamental than form, the mind itself; and Ghalib's mind is on a different plane from Mir, Dard ⁸, Sauda ⁹, and Nazir ¹⁰.

⁸ Khwaja Mir Dard, 1720-1785, sufi, musician, poet, is ranked with Mir among the great poets of the eighteenth century.

The poets of the eighteenth century blended other qualities of heart and imagination. They were products of a different social order, one which found its sustenance from the very Indian air they breathed, and wrote in an idiom with which every one was familiar, in spite of the divergences in their approach to life and poetry. Theirs was an age of awakening Romanticism and Renaissance. They were relishing the wonder of the freedom of thought from the bondage of orthodoxy and an order based on authority which the reign of Aurangzeb had stood for. They were also critical of society, its faults and foibles and essential weaknesses, such as Sauda in his satires and Nazir in his odes. If Dard could indulge his fancy in the trained flights of mysticism, Mir's imagination could soar up to the very skies and travel back to pre-existence or forward to post-existence in a unique comprehension of the universe, grieving not for any failure of vision, but the crass casualty of accidental birth. When we come to Ghalib, however, we find that something had happened to the mind of India itself. The genius of Urdu poetry had taken a different turn from the traditional appeal to the emotions towards an intellectual approach. The gap between Ghalib and his predecessors of the eighteenth century was bridged by Nazir and Momin who display, though as yet undemonstrably, the role of the mind in the shaping of emotion. Nazir had known the injustices of a society in which man had degraded man, where poverty and wealth had held either extreme. He possessed a greater consciousness of Time than any other Urdu poet, time that destroys and time that reconciles, time conscious and time remembered, and the mind as conscious of time as it was aware of itself. Momin had known the tribulations of revolt and the incursions of an alien civilization into the established order, the time-old landscape of love and jealousy. All of them were busy rediscovering truth buried under the debris of rigid

⁹ Mirza Muhammad Rafi Sauda, 1713-1780, a poet with a sharp wit and pen. He was both a lyrical and satirical poet, whose satire on the incongruity of the age remains the finest satire in Urdu.

¹⁰ Vali Muhammad Nazir, 1735-1830, a most remarkable figure in Urdu poetry with his deep awareness of social reality, who sang of man, his dignity and degradation, riches and poverty, the pleasures and the iniquities of the world, with feeling and realism, in poems that remain the greatest in the language.

laws and beliefs. But Ghalib carried the search for truth to a more rational and metaphysical plane, cutting out for himself a path more difficult, at the same time presenting a view of the age as the age itself could hardly understand.

He used the suggestive richness of the language of his predecessors, but made it more precise and sharp, imparting to it a profound quality of their thought, even to the extent of becoming a nihilist. But a good deal of his nihilism had root in the religious controversies and the esoteric doctrines of the nineteenth century which was the sowing time of the rationalism and free thinking of the later decades. A good deal of this never came to any thing, and a good deal was watered down by the hold of orthodox Islamic thought into a laxity of morals and religious beliefs, so that a section of the rising middle class ceased to have more than a superstitious fear of God and the retribution of Hell. This situation was helped by the increasing Western education and the materialistic tendencies advancing in consequence, until today we do not witness more than superficial adherence to the tenets of the faith, and largely find mere lip service paid to religion. The reformistic movement of Shah Waliullah (1703–62) and his son Shah Abdul Aziz (1746–1823) in the second half of the eighteenth century, which had stood for purifying Islam of extraneous practices which had become incorporated in it, gave place to the Wahabi movement for restoring its uncorrupted simplicity, and which was mistaken, with such disastrous consequences for its adherents later in the century, by the British as a militant and subversive move directed against them. Along with its more ecclesiastical successors of the Deoband and its parallel system of the Ahl-e-Hadis (followers of the Tradition), as well as the dissident sectarian doctrines of the non-Wahabis and the non-Muqallids, the opponents of the Ahl-e-Hadis, it had a great influence over the minds of Indian Muslims. The mid-nineteenth century was, in fact, charged with intellectual restlessness in which the middle class and the intellectuals were as passionately involved as the religious leaders themselves, for the border-line between religion and secularism was as narrow as a thread, and discussions on religious matters were as common among Ghalib's friends and associates as exchanges on poetry and life, and

Ghalib could hardly escape being involved in the religious ideas of his age. He was accused both of obscurity and difficultness of thought as well as of Shiistic tendencies and atheism. Had he lived in the reign of Aurangzeb his fate would have been anybody's guess; but the boldness of his imagination and the metaphysical depth of his thought stood him in good stead, as they stand witness to his intellectual integrity and honesty of search for truth.

But then, Ghalib expresses an attitude, not an emotion. There is no room for sentiment in his poetry. His approach is through the mind: it is a state of mind. He is a poet not of the past, but of the present. He is not interested in a philosophy, and attempts at finding in him adherence to this mystical belief or that religious doctrine are beside the point. He is primarily concerned with communicating his experience, sensing his thought and turning his ideas into sensations. He is essentially a poet of our civilization, and "poets of our civilization, as it exists at present", as T. S. Eliot says in his essay on the Metaphysical Poets, "must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and the variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more direct, in order to dislocate, if necessary, language into its meaning".

Ghalib possessed the quality of absolute curiosity, love of comprehension, and a sense of beauty which led to a capacity for acute impressions, heightening of imaginative feeling and perception of beautiful images, even in such social concepts as the home, for it is in the awareness of the presence or absence of an emotion, an object, that beauty resides:

There is in the desert
Desolation on desolation,
Endless, without extent,
Reminding me of home.

and the opposite state:

On wall and arch grows green the grass;
I am in the desert, at home it is Spring.

which speaks of the same mental agony as is felt at the recession of the ideal. His romantic sense of sorrow and regret is really a means of seeking the opposite state of joy. His poetic experience was intensive, or intentional, in Jaques Maritain's phrase, having a tendential existence, presenting an object in the idea of it. Hence the intellect played the substantive part in his poetry which has its source in the pre-conceptual life of the intellect. The experience presented in words is symbolized; the emotion is raised to the level of the intellect and transcends itself by becoming that which it knows:

The heat engendered by thought is indescribable;
I had just thought of despair when the desert went up in flames.

He could, therefore, see both sides of thought at once, the face and the obverse, the light and the shadow. This is not confined to one facet, but is a characteristic of his mind:

In my construction lies
Concealed the form of ruin;
The lightning's flash that strikes
The granary
Is the burning blood
Of the peasantry.

which was certainly written before the publication of *Das Kapital*. For the same reason he had a dread of conventions:

Kohkan¹¹ could not die unaided by the pick;
Poor man was slave to conventional thought and belief.

This is not a mere façade or sophistication. It is a mental state, a personal realization of things born of a realistic approach and the habit of analysis, which is the basis of Ghalib's contemporaneity and consciousness of movement and change:

Each change of the mirror
Of creation

¹¹ Literally mountain-digger, but here the popular name of Farhad, the famous Persian lover who, in the hope of winning his beloved Shireen, dug a canal through the mountain. Ghalib was not in sympathy with Farhad, his beau ideal being Majnoon, the Arabian lover *par excellence*.

Brings sorrow in its train:
The cloud sheds its tears
At the departure of Autumn.

He is the perfect example of the intellectual poet, a poet not so much of the nineteenth century as of the present one, and in the present of the modern age to which both Eliot and Baudelaire belong:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

And Baudelaire in *La Voix*:

Derrière les décors

De l'existence immense, au plus noir de l'abîme,
Je vois distinctement des mondes singuliers,
Et, de ma clairvoyance extatique victime,
Je traîne des serpents qui mordent mes souliers.
Et c'est depuis ce temps que, pareil aux prophètes,
J'aime si tendrement le désert et la mer:
Que je ris dans les deuils et pleure dans les fêtes,
Et trouve un goût suave au vin le plus amer:
Que je prends très souvent les faits pour des mensonges,
Et que, les yeux au ciel, je tombe dans des trous.
Mais la Voix me console et dit: «Garde tes songes;
Les sages n'en ont pas d'aussi beaux que les fous!»

But in the positiveness of his vision, the affirmation of faith in humanity, Ghalib stands apart from both Eliot and Baudelaire, his vision and insight penetrating the darkness of the mind:

Your light is the basis of creation;
The grain of sand is not formed without
The glow of the sun.

presenting not the nemesis of an over-ripe civilization, but a message of hope:

Wearied, desire invents and seeks refuge
In temple and mosque, mere reflections in
The mirror, hope's images multiplied.

Helpless and weary, humanity has gone on from faith to faith, accepting one, discarding another. And yet each one has proved illusory, a reflection in the glass, not reality. But out of despair hope is born again, and man multiplies illusions, never to become hopeless and lost. The thought recurs in Ghalib time and again:

Where is, O Lord, the other foot of hope?
I found this desert of contingent existence
A mere foot-print.

This can be understood only through Ghalib's theory of association by which the poet must leave suggestions for the guidance of the intelligent reader. For when this contingent world is like a foot-print, where would the other foot be whose traces are found on the sands of existence? Thus the thought expands into:

We have only known this shadowy world
Of contingent existence:
In what other world of certainty
Can we repose our trust?

Yet, since the illusion exists, there must also be the reality, for one cannot exist without the other. It is this reality which has been the object of man's search and in which mankind must repose its trust.

Ghalib's poetry demonstrates the difference between the esemplastic imagination and one bound up with tradition however admirable, the esemplastic seeing the opposite in the same breath as the object, the cause and the effect, presenting them as an inseparable entity by a third quality of the mind which singles out each colour of a complex picture and then reassembles them into a complex whole:

The world is full of the effulgence
Of the oneness of the well-beloved;
Where would we be if Beauty
Did not possess self-love?
The music of the ebb and flow

Of life and oblivion are both false;
Absurd the thought of difference
Between madness and good sense.
Despair, like Spring, is only an image
In the looking-glass of contentment;
Doubt is but a mirror of the birth
Of the image of certainty.
Vain is the boast of wisdom, and
The gain of worship is – well-known
Mere dregs of the cup of negligence,
The world or religion.
Faith and unbelief are both
A swell of the remorse of drunkenness,
Truth and doubt are the curvature
Of a line from a ruler drawn.
There's neither longing nor spectacle,
The sense of wonder nor the eye;
The mirror of the heart is veiled
In the amalgam of mercury.

This quality, thus, reflects the whole process of separating the colours of a painting and combining them again in the finished production, and make his poetry difficult. Unless the reader's mind becomes a filter capable of separating and combining the colours, he cannot get into the spirit of the poet and know the tones and shades of his thought and feeling. And unless it is split up, the thought cannot be comprehended. Ghalib's imagination was, thus, panchromatic, sensitive to all the spectrums of thought. It could receive the different shades all at once and separate them too.

This brings us to the problem of Ghalib's style and obscurity which has been the subject of discussion since Ghalib's day and which lies behind a hundred bitter accusations hurled at him:

We have understood the works of Mir,
And those of Sauda understand;
But what he writes that he alone
Or God can comprehend!

Ghalib was a serious poet conscious of his responsibility, and looked

upon poetry as a vocation. He had a definite attitude to his art and believed that the function of poetry was to show a mirror to truth. His intensive mind, analytical and reflective, full of an excess of thought and originality, needed a new diction and grammar, a new imagery, to express itself. The language of poetry to him, therefore, was not the language of every day life, nor was his imagery the same familiar one of the poets of the eighteenth century or that of his day, although he could not altogether avoid the use of old symbols for, as he himself said:

However the talk may be of the observation of truth,
We cannot avoid the mention of flask and wine.

The question of technique cannot be divorced from thought; and thoughts represent mental states, new concepts demanding a new attitude to symbols and language. Ghalib often introduces subjects which to the people of the eighteenth century would have seemed unpoetical, and did so to many of his day, and presented them as ideas which, being preconceptual, bewildered the readers, the bewilderment increasing with Ghalib's original use of words, not only in a new order, but often in a new meaning to convey the wide range of his thought and emotion, thus becoming a "counter-romantic" like Baudelaire. He used a diction of his own, more Persian and highly conjuncted; and his difficultness became more pronounced when words were displaced, their position changed and the syntax distorted to form a new grammar. Ghalib employs this method of *ta'qeed*, verbal displacement, justifying its use as an embellishment of style on the precept of the Persian masters who used it to make the sense less direct and more oblique:

To split asunder the breast of the wave
Of the sea of sparkling wine, the saki
Used the ray of light from the eye
Of the slim decanter's needle, and joined
It to the lip of the cup.

Although Ghalib avoided sense-displacement and condemned it as a fault we, nevertheless, find something akin to it in his poetry, or at least feel the displacement of sense, for the meaning eludes our grasp.

But that is because Ghalib leaves out words and sentences, the steps in an argument, which alone could have bridged the gulf between thought and thought, and thus leaves the reader groping for the connection and the meaning:

Life is a mirror of the hundred hues
Of self-adoration;
And night and day, the great dismay
Of the onlooker of this scene.
Then wherefore, like the candle, raise
In vain the accusing head?
Where is the claim of permanence?
The flaming rose is born
With a heart for grief and patience.
Lamentation is a blood-stained page,
The rose, the subject of twilight:
The beautifier of the soul
Is the despair of loneliness.
The rose's scent is evil awake,
The garden, a wardrobe of dreams,
Union is the dress of disgrace
On the bliss of eagerness.
From the silence of the heart's garden
Now desolate, the word
Of love speaks of the burnt-up breath
As the secret of the garden.

This method is characteristic of Ghalib, and is the real cause of his difficultness. It demands utmost intelligence and alertness on the part of the reader. The obscurity is, however, relieved by subtle links inherent in the concepts which invariably appear in series of contrasts, such as:

Intelligence Unconcerned
Is caught in the great despair
Of encirclement; and man's
Image remains imprisoned
In the mirror of the world.

where four concepts are advanced: 1) Intelligence Unconcerned, 2) de-

spair of encirclement, 3) man's image imprisoned, and 4) the mirror of the world. The contrary of Intelligence Unconcerned is man involved, and that of encirclement the world of mirrors. Followed further, the opposite of the world is God who is caught in the despair of encirclement by the laws of necessity and change, while man remains confined within the world – his own problems. These links are provided by Ghalib in the suggestions which, he believed, should be provided so that the mind of the reader could easily turn to the eschewed words and sentences and he could, thus, ferret out the meaning, as in the lines already quoted above, or as in:

Where is, O Lord, the other foot of hope?
I found the desert of contingent existence
a mere footprint.

or:

How we press the sky to return, and claim
From it, the pleasures lost and gone,
Taking this captured wealth to be
A debt due from the highwayman.

This suggestiveness is different from the associative quality of European poetry like that of Eliot whose basis is purely personal and accidental, which we also meet in Ghalib though rarely as in:

Of whose gay workmanship
Does the painting complain
That every portrait wears a paper dress?

which has a reference to the ancient Persian custom whereby the plaintiff appeared before the judge wearing dress made of paper. It is not the associative quality of simile or metaphor either. It is rather a quality of thought which leads to a connection between 'foot' and 'foot-print', between 'pressing for return' and 'debt'. For without foot there could be no foot-print, and the foot-print leads to the speculation that the foot which has left its print must surely be present some-where. Similarly, in the other quotation, pressing the sky, as one pesters a borrower, to return the lost, or captured, pleasures, suggests that the sky (time, fate) has captured the wealth from us, and yet we claim

it as though it were a debt and the highwayman (the sky) was liable for the return of the usurped property. These divergent mental states have their root in the same though remote associative feeling, and the 'suggestion' leads to the catalyst, the agent which had brought the two together and fused them. The solution lies in Ghalib's careful and studied use of words, heavy with meaning in the context, e.g. *taqaza*, pressing for return, and *qarz*, debt, as well as "sky" and "highwayman". This is another way of finding "verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling" which we come across in the Metaphysical Poets of England who were as mature and difficult as Ghalib was without the requisite of philosophy.

Thus we find in Ghalib a method similar to that of the Metaphysical Poets, the same multiplied associations and telescoping of images, the same forcing and dislocation of language into the meaning. We have the same use of conceit which presents the flux of the poet's thought but arrests that of the reader. Ghalib's poetry was less lyrical than that of Mir and Momin, and more impersonal, implying intellectual energy and a multiplication of thought, thus enlarging the scope of intelligence. That is why it was less popular and considered difficult, therefore absurd. The average reader demanded, like his counterpart today, literature of wider appeal to the basic primary emotions, such as was found in the poetry of the fleshly school of Lucknow which had a direct appeal to erotic sensations:

I am a lover of breasts
Like pomegranates:
Plant then no other trees
On my grave but these.

— Nasikh

or:

May those arms, smooth like sandalwood,
Be thrown around my neck:
And may it be my fate to have
The pleasure of caressing those silken thighs.

— Saba

To such readers, and their name was legion, Ghalib was "man-effac-

ing" wine. They could not catch his nuances nor catch up with the flights of his fancy or the import of his thoughts and words. The more so as he developed, like Donne and Cowley, commonplace comparisons into subtleties of conceit:

With what joy in front
Of the executioner I walk
That from my shadow the head
Is two steps ahead of my feet.

which recalls Donne's comparison of parted lovers to a pair of compasses. Like them he elaborates conceits to the farthest extreme of ingenuity:

The wing of the moth was the sail
Of the boat of wine, perchance;
For with the warmth of the festive company
The cups began to go round.

Ghalib makes the seemingly easy more difficult by juxtaposing the intellectual with the physical:

You wait until the poison of grief
Permeates the veins and arteries;
At present it's only the bitterness
Of love and dreams that is on test.

Subjects of astonishment were many, and Ghalib was conscious of the excess of thought:

With intense expression of subjects of astonishment
Each finger-tip has become the point of a worn-out pen.

And rush of ideas demanded a new measure, a new gauge of speed. When they start flowing no flood-gate of speech could contain them:

The playfulness of words does not endure
The despair of grief;
To wring the hands with sorrow is
A promise of the renewal of desire.

Hence words take on ingenuous tones, stretching the meaning to the farthest extent:

The pledge of words is to open the door
Of a mind unawakened:
For me the charm of the alphabet's lock
Was hidden in the building of the school.

Not only is the thought intense and packed with passion, the economy is explosive. To express such mental states one has, naturally, to have a new dictionary, for they reveal strange experiences, implying the excitement of discovery, and the integration of the external reality of the senses and the inner world of the mind, making thought an emotion and emotion a thought. They express the unity and multiplication of the perceptual world, the accepted universe. Images hurry, experience assumes the garb of words, and vocabulary is inadequate to express the richness and concentrated fire of thought, the unity in its singleness and division. The verb and substantive come together and are tacked with ellipses which multiply. New words and compounds are manufactured to express the peculiar mental states, and to confine the flood of thoughts within a reasonable space of compressed language, employing old words in new combinations to elaborate new concepts, giving them original tones and symbolical meaning based in his own peculiar experiences. In this manipulation Ghalib uses the Persian conjunctive form to produce a string of compounds which are themselves often conjuncted together with bewildering effect. He is coining new phrases all the time, compounded of noun and adjective, or noun and noun, and noun and verb, such as, "inebriety of custom", "silent fire", "the river of wine", "the snare of desire", "sea familiar", and so on, using the same word at different places to denote a different meaning. As he does not pause to explain, and the reader hurries along with the words, he is left behind with thought which he cannot resuscitate from the inhibitive process of his mind.

In Ghalib's well managed sensibility the scattered images, seemingly unrelated, become an entity, though to a reader whose sensibility is untrained, this looks more of a riddle than a statement, as the

central idea breaks up into the colours of the spectrum so that the putting back of the different colours into the pencil of light again, if not impossible, becomes a formidable task, and requires a trained mind and considerable agility. Ghalib's central idea, with all its component elements (for no thought is ever single, and is always a compound of many states), becomes an active metabolical process. As there is an under-current of plasma in the body-organism, there is a continuous under-current of feeling in Ghalib's poetic system which forces us to revert to his poetry all the time. This is a sure test of great poetry as Coleridge pointed out, and even in his obscurest moments there is something in Ghalib which compels us to go back to him. It is this which lies behind his undying appeal, so that in spite of any psychological aversion one may have for this kind of poetry, in spite of the impossibilities of his poetic technique and impenetrable obscurity, one cannot ignore him or put him out of mind. Because what he says is universal, and because it had never been said in the way Ghalib says it, he becomes a classicist in expression, and no one, not even the average reader, can forget his lines. Ghalib's poetry pleases for the same reason as it intrigues, and he remains a living poet. For the thoughtful reader the search for the meaning becomes a stimulating mental exercise, and the casual reader derives enough aesthetic satisfaction from the surface. Even when inscrutable, his expression is so architectonic that he remains like the Sphinx, delightful in its mystery.

Love of poetry was inborn to Ghalib: and his thought remained intricate throughout his life, although he did simplify it in later years, not due to any weakening of intellectual energy or perception, but as a result of constant pruning and perfecting, and as a reconciliation with life when the intellectual situation of the age advanced towards a settlement. Even then the purity of his vision remained, as did the resilience of his thought. In the process he acquired the additional quality of a wider appeal. As in youth so in maturity, he expressed his experiences not because he thought they were unique, but because he was compelled by an inner urge to do so. His whole being was suffused with them so that no distinction between the experience and himself remained, and what was within found expression as poetry:

Like the mirror's light the eye
Is familiar with the heart;
Every tear-drop that falls
Is suffused with observation.

The wonder is that Ghalib wrote poetry of such high order, for the nineteenth century was a spiritless age, almost hostile to poetry, pushing it to the edge of didacticism as in Zauq, or the very abyss of orgasmic pleasure as in the poetry of the fleshly school. That there was a personal conflict in Ghalib's mind is undoubted; and he presented its essence as truth. And truth as the extract of mental struggle cannot appear as simply as the resolution of spiritual struggle in submission. Ghalib expressed submission not as a consequence of spiritual faith, but as an acceptance of forces beyond his control, over which he could have no control, when he realized that the outcome was pre-determined.

This was largely the cause of the misunderstanding about his personal faith and beliefs. A man with the courage of his convictions, Ghalib stood for no compromise and paid no heed to what others thought. His personal experiences, embedded in the frustrations originating from his deprivation of the family pension, conviction of the justice of his cause, belief in his own genius and superiority as a poet which, however, did not find unqualified acceptance in circles he admired, led to bitterness and a search for a charismatic leader who alone, by virtue of divine authority, could set the wrongs right. The search was intensified by an awareness of the apathy of his countrymen towards political and social degeneration, their hypocrisy and failure to arise from the atmosphere of indifference in which the age was steeped, sung now with sarcasm as in the ghazal beginning:

In so far as we are full
Of longing for the beloved,
We are rivals of the desire
For seeing the face of love.

now with sadness as in the one beginning:

I am the lip parched with thirst,
The holy place of men
With afflicted breasts.

The feeling of helplessness that runs through his work like a thread, led him to an admiration for Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, an intellectual like himself, in whose personal situation Ghalib saw a pale reflection of his own. Time and again, in moments of doubt and distress, Ghalib addressed him, seeking spiritual solace and support, in a spirit not of any schism but confession and appeal, as in the "Qasida in praise of Ali". His attitude of philosophical doubt, rooted in the nature of his experience, was mistaken by superficial readers for atheism. It is highly improbable that a life-long friend of fighters for freedom and purity of religious thought and belief like Momin, the rebel poet, and the orthodox Sunnite Molvi Faz le Haq, should have been a schismatic or an atheist.

What is comprehensible is that the world of perception and shadows stood in the way of the perfect realization of the deity. In Ghalib's view the 'house of mirrors' confused sight and deflected the image of the divinity. Beauty lost in the flaw and impurity of the senses, the amalgam of tin or mercury through which alone reflections reached the eye causing confusion between the Reality and Illusion, resulting in nihilism, the *nity-nity* of Vedanta:

Be not deceived by life, Asad.
The world is all a mesh
Of the web of thought.

Positive affirmation requires a different kind of passion, an experience of identification as that of the Persian mystic Hallaj. In the world of physical phenomena to which Ghalib belonged, the mirage of dried-up sense-perception hides the awful mystery unveiling of which could only lead to annihilation, the dissolution of nothing into nothing, idea into idea. Hence, of necessity, the mystery must be preserved:

I fear the secret of the beloved
May become known, otherwise there is
No mystery in dying.

For this alone opens the door to the secret of life and not-life. Had nothing been, only one of four alternatives would have been possible:
1) It would not have mattered, as there would have been no distinction

between being and not-being. Creation has resulted in the bifurcation, the duality of creator and the created. 2) The creator would have been there. 3) The created would have had existence in the creator, the reality in the idea, man in God. 4) That man would have been God. All these possibilities have been summed up by Ghalib in the brief but far-reaching question:

When there was nothing, there was God,
Had nothing been, God would have been;
My being has brought about my fall,
Had I not been, what would have been?

Sorrow comes of knowledge, of having known the joy and exuberance of life. The tragedy of Adam was enacted because he ate of the fruit of knowledge which gave him consciousness of the reality, the distinction between life and not-life, and resulted in the necessity of change and physical death. Yet change is movement and progression, and Ghalib is a poet of movement and change:

Ambition is busy weaving dreams
Of happiness;
Yet there is death
Without which dull would be life itself.

That is why his symbols are not just erotic. They are charged with social and political intent:

The breath cannot but reap
The harvest of the flame
When with the effort of checking
The fire we are aflame.

In spite of the apparent despondency and despair that abound in him, Ghalib was filled with the rapture of life. In fact, life to him was ecstasy:

Life is the ecstasy of the whirl
Of rapture. Why
Should one complain
About the saki's negligence?

The fear that this ecstatic song will end brings more anguish than the thought of total extinction of being:

I fear the wheel of joy
May come full circle. I do not grieve
For loss everlasting.

And he sought comfort in the lost memories of the human mind, of timelessness when night and day did not exist and time itself was lost in time, the final end indistinguishable from the origin of existence in whose womb it was conceived:

The month and year are rapt
In thoughts of eternity,
The bright day of the night
Beyond the reach of thought.

And he wanted to be free, free of everything, the world, even love and himself:

The curls of my beloved's hair
Lie in ambush to encircle me;
Enable me, O Lord, to keep
My intent of remaining free.

These are the facets of his mind and imagination that lift his poetry to a pre-conceptual plane and give it universal appeal.

In the final analysis, therefore, Ghalib was closely bound up with a culture and a tradition, even though he leapt beyond their concepts and scope. The same poet who could turn and twist thought round his little finger, play with conceit and hyperbole as with marbles, could also write with disarming simplicity:

I wish to go away and live
In a lonely and forsaken place,
Where not a soul will talk to me,
Nor I behold a face.
And I will build myself a house
With neither roof nor walls nor doors,
And not a neighbour nor a friend
To listen to my woes.

Where if bad luck would have me ill
There will be none to care for me;
And when death lays me low no one
Will ever care for me.

And yet behind the ideal setting the poem rings with deeper meaning and a sense of eternal peace, for the house he wished to build was not a house of brick and mortar or wood and stone. To escape from the awning of the domeless sky which gives neither shelter nor security from ineluctable fate, he would have rather built another world, a new universe:

I could have built another scene,
Another landscape on a height,
If only my home were far away
Beyond the empyrean.

It is not given to man, alas, to realize his dreams in the face of mortality and death, for

All elements of Creation tend to decay.

Like the victims of Dante's *Inferno* he must suffer with the keenness of mind and memory heightened by a sense of loss and regret:

I'm moved to tears, O Ghalib,
To think of the helplessness of love:
Where will this all-destructive flood
Go after me when I am dead? ¹²

And he was right. There has been no poet in a hundred years to inherit the wealth and richness of mind he bequeathed to humanity!

¹² All translations are by the present author.