

Ghalib and the ghazal

Ghalib was one of the greatest poets South Asia ever produced, and in my view the greatest poet of two of its great literary languages, Persian and Urdu. His poems are recited and sung wherever Urdu speakers have settled. Many of his verses have become proverbial, part of the everyday life of Urdu speakers much as phrases from Shakespeare have become in English. If his language had been English he would long ago have been recognized all over the world as a great poet. My translations are an attempt to present some of his poetry in English dress so that English speakers may be able to judge his work for themselves.

As is the case with all great poets, there is much in his poetry that needs no explanation for it deals with themes that are universal and are intelligible everywhere, but there is also much that will be difficult to appreciate fully unless one knows something about the times he lived in and the poetic conventions through which poets of his time expressed themselves. Yet he is a surprisingly modern poet, speaking through traditional forms in ways that can make a powerful impact even today.

A poet in the time of Mughal decline

Ghalib was born in 1797 and died in 1869. He lived most of his adult life in Delhi, at a time of political transition when the way of life of the community to which he belonged was under threat. He was part of the predominantly Muslim elite that prided itself on its association with the Mughal dynasty that for centuries had dominated much of India, but whose political role was now in rapid decline. In its heyday, Delhi had been the centre of a vast empire, and the splendour of its court had drawn people of talent and energy from all over central Asia. Ghalib's grandfather was one – he came to seek his fortune as a military commander at the court of the Mughal emperor, and Ghalib's father and uncle had continued in this tradition. They inhabited a medieval world where a noble entered the service of a more powerful overlord to whom he pledged his service in war in return for the wealth and rank appropriate to his position. But during the century before Ghalib's birth, Mughal power had been drastically eroded by successive struggles for the throne, and large areas had seceded to form independent states under great nobles whom the centre was no longer able to control. Meanwhile the British were gradually extending their influence across north India and in 1803, when Ghalib was still a child, they occupied Delhi. From then on they controlled the Emperor, allowing him to maintain the outward forms of power but with none of the reality.

All this time, the thought and feeling of the Muslim nobility was dominated by a bitter awareness of their political decline and a nostalgic yearning for the return of former glory. Ghalib too prided himself on his membership of the old ruling elite and – more significantly – shared its ideals of personal conduct, which he regretted were now less and less observed in practice. But by the time he came to manhood it was clear to realistic minds, his among them, that to think of a restoration of the old order was to yearn for the impossible. He adapted to the changes happening around him, and though culturally a traditionalist, his enquiring mind and independent spirit led him to challenge many of the assumptions of the society he had grown up in, and to form his own judgments on important aspects of life.

Urdu and Persian

To understand the cultural atmosphere in which he lived and wrote, it is important to first know something about the relationship between Urdu and Persian in this period. The succession of Muslim dynasties who had ruled the greater part of northern India had come originally from central Asia, and the lands they ruled were part of that vast area of the Islamic world in which Persian was both the language of government and diplomacy, and the language of culture, just as Latin had been in medieval Europe. No cultured North Indian Muslim before the beginning of the eighteenth century would have dreamed of writing poetry in any other language.

Urdu had developed out of the need of Muslim rulers for a language in which to communicate with their Indian subjects. It shares its homeland with Hindi – the two languages are, linguistically, variants of each other and at the level of everyday spoken transactions are almost identical. As literary languages they are considerably different; where Hindi links culturally to Sanskrit, Urdu uses the Persian script and draws heavily on Persian for its higher vocabulary, and through Persian on Arabic. Like many of the modern languages of Europe, Urdu had to establish itself as a literary medium in the face of a convention that only a classical language could be a fit vehicle for poetry. This happened because many Indians had begun to feel that they could not express themselves as adequately as they would wish in Persian, and major poets appeared who wrote in their mother tongue, Urdu. But all Urdu poets were familiar with the literary heritage of Persian and many still wrote some of their verse in it (just as in England Milton wrote verse in Latin as well as in English). Thus Urdu poetry represents, in a sense, a further development of a literature already centuries old, with only the language changed. Urdu poets had ready to hand all the rich tradition of Persian poetry and they made full use of it – its verse forms, its metres, its delight in verbal conceits, its major themes, and its expression of the teachings of Islamic mysticism. But the use of the mother tongue helped Urdu speakers convey an intensity in their poetry which they could not have expressed in Persian.

Urdu had become accepted as a medium of poetry about a century before Ghalib started writing, but he was one of those who regretted this change and continued to write in Persian as well as in the new medium. He had been given the education traditional to the sons of the aristocracy and had begun writing poetry in both Urdu and Persian in childhood. For some years he had enjoyed the inestimable advantage that his teacher had Persian as his mother tongue, something that was by now extremely rare in India and which no doubt gave added impetus to his poetic ambitions. By the time he moved to Delhi in his late teens he had already written a substantial amount and was making a name for himself as a poet.

That he chose to express himself primarily in poetry is unsurprising. For him and his contemporaries, poetry was the natural medium of expression. Prose literature never commanded the same esteem as poetry did. Poetry was seen as a vital part of life, the highest of arts, and is still the part of their literature which Urdu speakers most value.

The man and the poet

Ghalib was a remarkable man in many ways, remarkable not only for his poetic skill but for his intellectual power, his originality, his unconventional attitudes, his generosity, and his wit. He made a great impression on those who knew him and countless anecdotes about him were circulating among his contemporaries long before they were written down. Many are about his unorthodox attitudes to religion and his wit in deflecting criticism of his behaviour. He seems to have accepted the main tenets of Islam but had a cheerful irreverence towards established religion, and certainly towards its ritual observances. It was well known that he never said the five daily prayers and never fasted during Ramzan, when for a month Muslims are expected not to eat or drink between dawn and dusk. And he openly drank wine, which is not permitted to a true Muslim, and far from attempting to conceal his liking for it he openly sang its praises. He would not be drawn into any serious discussion about

it and he could rarely resist the temptation to make fun of people who tried to lecture him. His younger friend and fellow poet Altaf Hussain Hali, whose later *Memoir of Ghalib* is justly regarded as a classic of Urdu literature, described an occasion when a man in Ghalib's presence strongly condemned wine-drinking and said that the prayers of the wine-drinker are never granted. Ghalib replied, 'My friend, if a man has wine, what does he *need* to pray for?'

Hali gives us a glimpse of how Ghalib wrote:

He often used to compose his verses at night, under the influence of wine. When he had worked out a complete verse he would tie a knot in his sash, and there would be as many as eight to ten knots by the time he retired to bed. In the morning he would recall them, with no other aid to his memory, and would write them down.

He was a man with a great zest for life. He took himself very seriously as a poet and worked with dedication at his art, but he was also sociable and had a relaxed enjoyment of life's pleasures. He had a wide circle of friends, many of whom were also poets, and maintained a vast correspondence. His frankness about himself in his letters is a major source of what is known about him. These letters are like conversations, and show him to be warm, humorous, blunt when he disagreed, genuinely interested in what was happening to his friends, and supportive to them in their troubles.

He had friends in all communities – race and religious affiliation were alike irrelevant to him. One of his letters says: 'I hold all mankind to be my kin and look upon all men – Muslim, Hindu, Christian – as my brothers, no matter what others may think.'

The ghazal

Ghalib wrote almost all his Urdu poetry and a substantial part of his Persian in a form called the *ghazal*, one of a number of traditional genres which stemmed originally from medieval Arabic, were then

adopted in Persian, and later still in Urdu. It was and is still by far the most popular of the traditional genres. The ghazal is a relatively short poem, comprising a series of two-line verses (couplets), each independent in meaning but knit together by a strict metre and rhyme scheme. Each couplet encapsulates a complete thought or feeling. The couplets can be on any theme and Ghalib wrote on a wide range:

– the delight of a lover:

With only half your charm you lay the base of a new world
A new earth is created and new heavens start to turn

– barbed attacks on religious orthodoxy:

They offer paradise to make up for our life below
It needs a stronger wine than this to cure our hangover

– the tensions of one who struggles with his own temperament:

I grapple with that fragment of ill fate that is my untamed heart,
The enemy of ease, the friend of reckless wandering

– philosophical reflections:

Though it play only strains of grief, my heart, yet you must
treasure them
The music of this lute of life will all be stilled one day

Only exceptionally are the couplets linked in a connected statement or theme. Even the mood may change completely from couplet to couplet. These sudden shifts may be disconcerting to readers not used to this style of poetry for it is almost impossible for people used to a different tradition of poetry to put aside the expectation that a poem should have a unity of theme and tone. But there are solid reasons for it which are not obvious to people

whose normal mode of encountering poetry is in reading it. That was not, and still is not, the way in which the Urdu lover of poetry (and almost every Urdu speaker was, and is, one) encountered the ghazal. It is significant that in Urdu idiom verse is not *written*, it is *spoken*, and the poet who 'says' it presents it to the audience by reciting it to them; only later does it appear in print. If it becomes popular it may be sung, and so spread to a wider audience still.

Poetry to listen to

Poetry in this tradition is first presented in a *musha'ira*, a gathering in which numbers of poets assemble to recite their verse. This is how Ghalib's poetry would first have been heard. A *musha'ira* can be small and informal, in someone's home, or a large public event. There is always an element of competition among poets, especially when – as was often the case in Ghalib's day – the host would prescribe beforehand a half-line of verse which each of the poets attending had to incorporate in their own ghazal, with both metre and rhyme prescribed for them. Each couplet would be assessed by the listeners/audience as the poet recited it, and approval, indifference or disapproval politely but unmistakably expressed.

Poets who compose in this tradition need qualities which are not needed by those whose poetry will primarily be read. Besides the essential qualities of a poet, they need something of the talents of an orator, a debater, and an actor. They have to be able to hold their audience in competition with their fellow poets, and react sensitively to the audience's changing moods. The *musha'ira* is a long drawn-out affair which can last for hours and the poets' main enemy is monotony – they cannot hope to keep their audience's attention without variety. Unless the ghazal is one of quite exceptional force, uniformity of tone and emotional pitch are likely to pall. Poets commonly strive to make their impact in two or three couplets only, and intersperse them with others which will be liked, will ease the emotional tension, and even on occasion provide a certain comic relief. The audience will find

adequate satisfaction in a couplet which has little to say but says it in a manner that demonstrates the poet's ability to manipulate with ease the metres, rhymes, and complex figures of speech and thought of which any poet is expected to be master. Verses like this are not of course great poetry, but we should not make the mistake of imagining that the people who compose them think they are. Their purpose is simply to heighten the impact of the verses into which they have put what they most want to convey. The audience knows all this, takes it in their stride, and enjoys it all; but what they remember afterwards are the good verses.

The ghazal form

There are aspects of the ghazal form which listeners enjoy that are not always obvious in a translation, but it will help to know something about them. Because a ghazal is primarily intended to be heard, its sound patterns – metre and rhyme – are strongly marked. It is these, and only these, which hold different couplets of a ghazal together. Traditionally, a ghazal has been compared to a pearl necklace – each couplet is an individual pearl, connected to the others by the thread – the metre and rhyme pattern – on which they are strung. (This is not an entirely apt comparison, for not every couplet is a pearl or indeed a precious stone of any kind!)

Urdu poetic metres are considerably more complex than those commonly used in English poetry – there are scores for the poet to choose from, but once chosen, the metre must be followed without variation throughout all the couplets of that ghazal and is the key to what makes it feel a single poem. Competence in handling metre is an essential poetic skill. The rules of how words fit metres are complex; even those who have grown up listening to poetry are unlikely to be able to explain them but they will hear if a verse does not scan properly or if it is misquoted with words that don't fit the metre. Ghalib had about seven favourite metres that he used again and again in his ghazals, and many others that he used more rarely.

Rhyme is equally important. The two lines of the first couplet rhyme, and this same rhyme is repeated in the second line of all the others – so the pattern is AA, BA, CA, DA and so on. The rhyme has an extra dimension which can affect the sense as well as the sound. It has two parts, called, in the usual English translation of the Urdu terms, ‘rhyme’ and ‘end-rhyme’. The end-rhyme is a word or a phrase – sometimes quite long – that *follows* the rhyming word, and is identical in each couplet. This translation of the first verse of a ghazal by Mir, Ghalib’s great eighteenth-century predecessor, is an apt example:

Perhaps the flower in spring compares with you
Yet what created thing compares with you?

Or this one of Ghalib’s:

The world is but a game that children play before my eyes
A spectacle that passes night and day before my eyes

A long end-rhyme makes a particular appeal, for once listeners have heard the first couplet they know how all the other couplets will end. They wait for it and when it comes they join in, reciting the ending along with the poet. Everyone who has seen this happening knows how much they enjoy this.

The repeated end-rhyme words sometimes create a link of mood across the otherwise independent couplets of the ghazal. Here is an example from a ghazal of Ghalib’s with end-rhyme *na sahi*. I have translated *sahi* as ‘be it so’, and *na* means ‘not’ – and each couplet speaks of the need to come to terms with a situation which is not what one would like but with which one must nevertheless be content. Here Ghalib accepts that grief is inevitable:

Home is not home unless it holds the turmoil of strong feeling
If there are cries of grief, not songs of joy, then be it so.

– that his poetry may not be understood:

I do not long for people's praise; I seek no one's reward
And if they say my verses have no meaning, be it so.

– that life is too short:

Treasure the joy of life spent in the company of fair women
Ghalib, though you may not live life's full span, well, be it so!

Occasionally, the meaning of the end-rhyme is so specific that the couplets seem to cohere into something much closer to what English-speakers are used to in a poem – as in these from one of Ghalib's Persian ghazals:

The waves are rising high and wreckage floats on them. Why
be afraid?

With you I have no fear of fear – I'm not afraid I'll be afraid

In that house where a lamp burns bright a man feels no uneasiness
In this dark corner of the earth I have my heart. Why be afraid?

When you are happy with me, if the times are out of joint,
why fear?

When you are true to me, what if the heavens are cruel? Why
be afraid?

But this degree of thematic unity is the exception rather than the norm. Shorter end rhymes are more common, providing a link in sound pattern but little in meaning.

Ghalib took it for granted that to write poetry meant to work within the strict forms that tradition had prescribed. Ideally I would like to reflect this by translating his ghazals into a form which maintains the rhyme scheme. But the stubborn and unalterable fact is that while in Urdu there are rhymes in abundance and rhyming

is easy, this is not the case in English. Only rarely can one find in English a good, consistent rhyme which one can maintain through all the verses of a ghazal without distorting the sense or the quality of the poetry. So while my translations are all in poetic metre, I have usually not attempted to make couplets in the same ghazal rhyme. You as the reader will just have to imagine this as an added dimension that Urdu speakers enjoy.

Since it is only these features of form that give a ghazal its unity, there is in most cases little point in presenting whole ghazals in translation. Ghalib himself defined poetry as 'the creation of meaning, not the matching of rhymes'. It is the *couplet* which is the unit of meaning, so in this book I have not presented whole ghazals but let the couplets stand independently.

The poet's signature

The last couplet of a ghazal has a special feature: the poet must include a pen-name (*takhallus*), rather like a signature. 'Ghalib' is such a pen-name – his actual name was Asadullah Khan. Using it creates the effect that poets are speaking about themselves in the third person (... Ghalib says...). And there are ways that poets can play with the convention. Here Ghalib uses it to suggest that someone is trying to reason him into being sensible:

Ghalib, what do you hope to gain that you should taunt her as
you do?
You tell her that she is unkind. Will that, then, make her kind
to you?

He may use it ironically – as here, where someone upbraids him for his well-known disregard of religious observance:

Ghalib, you have the face to go to Mecca?
But then you never feel a sense of shame

– or in this verse, where the woman he is wooing uses his name, but only to put him down:

She is perplexed. She asks me, ‘Who is Ghalib?’
Tell me, someone, what answer can I give?

– and here he fends off rejection with wit:

I grant that you are right, Ghalib is nothing
But if you get him free, then what’s the harm?

Sometimes it creates the effect that he is observing himself from the outside, and this can underline the strength of feeling:

All that she is puts Ghalib’s soul in turmoil
All that she says, and hints, and looks, and does

The art of the couplet

There is an art to appreciating ghazals which can be easily cultivated. To Ghalib’s audience it came naturally, and it does still to Urdu speakers who have grown up with the ghazal. People used to a different kind of poetry may find it takes an initial conscious effort to cross a barrier of cultural difference, but this will be amply rewarded.

The starting point is to recognize what a couplet can and can’t do. Poetry in which everything has to be said in two lines cannot set a scene, tell a story, track fluctuating emotions, explore layers of memory. What it *does* lend itself to is the succinct expression of states of mind and feeling. Ghalib’s couplets offer us wonderful distilled moments – the quiet joy when desire is unexpectedly fulfilled:

At last she came into my home – such is the power of God!
Sometimes I turn my gaze on her, sometimes upon my home

Awareness of the transience of all existence:

Not one created atom here but what is destined to decay
 The sun on high a lamp that gutters in the windy street

The experience of union and separation:

Without you, just as wine within the glass is parted from it
 My soul is in my body, but is not a part of it

A poetic form as brief as this makes more demands on the reader than you may be used to. The words must go straight to the heart of a situation and that leaves you having to imagine how it arose. Who is speaking? To whom? What events might have led up to it? Sometimes you feel you are hearing the last lines of a story:

It was her beauty I described, and my words that described it
 And he is now my rival who was once my confidant

The context and significance of a verse may be obvious, or it may be a challenge to work out – but this is part of the pleasure.

Poetic effects

The poetic effects that Ghalib creates come partly from the connotations that words and images carry from long use. This makes ghazals notoriously difficult to translate – though the main sense of each word can be translated, the effect on the reader will not be the same. However, even in translation it's possible to get a sense of these poetic effects. As one reads one becomes increasingly aware of Ghalib's skill in conveying complex meaning concisely. He plays with contrasts:

I sought my own delight and found abundant misery
 Good news for any enemy that I may seek to harm

He may use two closely related words, each with its own connotations – here it is the ambiguity between 'man' and 'human':

Exceeding difficult an easy task can prove to be
 Not every man can manage to achieve humanity

He may strengthen the impact with balancing phrases, two images that reinforce each other – as here, to evoke our helplessness to control the course of events:

The steed of life runs on. None knows where it will stay its course
 The reins have fallen from our hands, the stirrups from our feet

He says things that sound simple but set you thinking – what does he actually mean?

I am so far away that even I
 Have not the least awareness where I am

He can state a profound religious paradox without using one complex word:

When nothing was, then God was there; had nothing been, God would have been
 My being has defeated me: had I not been, what would have been?

He turns a situation on its head to create unexpected insights:

Had he not robbed me in the day, could I have slept so sound at night?
 I feel no more the fear of theft. My blessings on the highwayman!

This couplet also points to one of the fundamental themes in Ghalib's poetry – it is through our response to crisis that we develop real understanding. Here he uses the image of lightning to evoke a sudden, potentially destructive experience, which nevertheless illuminates:

We pass our lives in journeying in constant restlessness
 This year it is the lightning, not the sun, that marks time's course.