Although several poets of the Mughal era, such as Mir, Sauda, and Momin, are greatly admired for particular effects, Mirza Asadullah Khan, known by his pen name Ghalib ("Conqueror"), is celebrated as the pre-eminent exponent of the Urdu ghazal. Born in the north Indian city of Agra into an aristocratic Muslim family of Turkish origin, the poet was educated in Agra and in Delhi. In 1812 he settled permanently in Delhi, devoting his time to writing poetry, mainly in Persian. By Ghalib’s time, although Delhi continued to be the seat of the Mughals, the Mughal king was subservient to the British East India Company, which ruled India on behalf of the British Crown.

Financial support was a major problem for Ghalib throughout his life. After the death of his uncle, who was also his guardian, the poet spent many years negotiating with the British colonial government for his share of the uncle’s military pension. It was not until 1847 that he secured a major patron. In that year Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal “emperor,” accepted Ghalib at his court. Three years later, the king commissioned from the poet a Persian prose history of the Mughals, tracing their lineage back to the Central Asian conqueror Timur. In 1855, a year after the death of his rival, the court poet Zauq (also a pen name, a tradition in Persian and Urdu poetry), Ghalib was appointed as Bahadur Shah’s tutor in versification.

Ghalib’s good fortune was short lived. When Indian princes and soldiers (sepoys) rose in revolt against the British regime in 1857, Delhi was besieged and looted. The British suppressed the revolt, and Bahadur Shah was deposed and exiled to Burma. Earlier events, such as the Persian king Nadir Shah’s sack of Delhi in 1739, had forced poets and artists to flee from the capital city and had led to the rise of Lucknow, the capital of the north Indian state of Oudh, as a major center for Urdu literature. The chaos that surrounded the revolt of 1857 resulted in a new exodus of poets and artists from Delhi to lesser provincial towns. Ghalib, however, remained in Delhi till his death in 1869. In addition to Persian poetry the poet left a number of works in Urdu: a collection (divan) of ghazals; two volumes of letters; and Dastambh (Boquet of Flowers), the diary he wrote during the revolt of 1857. While the lyric ghazals are unquestionably Ghalib’s masterpieces, his letters and diary are exemplars of elegant Urdu prose style. If the former reflect an intense poetic and moral sensibility, the latter reveal Ghalib as a man of keen intelligence who possessed an observant eye and a sense of humor, and was deeply engaged with literary and political issues.

Ghalib’s couplets have become an integral part of the consciousness of Urdu speakers, who will quote them freely in the course of everyday conversation to illustrate a point or to express a mood. Among the Urdu poets, Ghalib achieves to perfection the ghazal poet’s goal of balancing subjectivity with a universalizing philosophical vision. Like other forms of classical Indian and Persian poetry, the ghazal is a highly conventional genre. In his poems Ghalib molds the very conventions of the ghazal into a personal, even private, poetic language that perfectly expresses his sensibility. In the couplet “Because of you the goblet had a thousand faces; Because of me it was mirrored in a single eye” (Ghalzal XIX), the stock images of the wine goblet and mirror fuse to place the relationship between subject and object in an entirely new light. In “The dove is a clutch of ashes, nightingale a clench of color” (Ghalzal XXI), the blurring of sense-experience images the intensity of feeling. Other couplets reveal the reflective, personal aspect of the ghazal: “Fire doesn’t do it; lost for fire does it. / The heart hurts for the spirit’s fading” (Ghalzal XI). The range of style and interpretation represented in the translations given here testifies to the combination of couples, brilliant images and ambiguities of language that renders Ghalib’s couplets at once direct and elusive, precise and enigmatic, in much the same manner as the poems of the German poet Rilke.

Ghalib’s poems are startlingly intense. Here, more than in the verse of any other Urdu poet, the ghazal’s characteristic melancholy deepens into a profound loneliness, an overwhelming sense of loss. Some have seen in these traits a reflection of the uncertain age in which Ghalib lived, when Indian rulers were being ousted by British colonial agencies, and English was beginning to take the place of Persian and Urdu language and literature among the Indian elites. The poet survived the revolt of 1857, a cataclysmic event that effectively ended Indian political power on the subcontinent. His letters and diary reveal a life constantly troubled by financial instability as well as by the decay of civilization as he knew it. Yet the voice that speaks to us most compellingly in Ghalib’s ghazals is the private, personal one, testifying to the poet’s visceral response to the enduring pain of the human condition, a darkness far more unsettling than “this time’s great shadow.”

A NOTE ON THE METERS OF GHALIB’S GHAZALS

The ghazal poets use a number of Persian quantitative meters. Stress patterns may vary from line to line, but the lines must be of equal length. Here is the first couplet of Ghazal XIX, in a meter with thirteen syllables per line:

har kadam duri-e-manzil
numayin mujh se

With every step, my goal seems farther away from me.

meri raftar se bhage hai
biyabon mujh se

As fast as I run, the desert runs away from me.

The  and  represent short and long syllables, respectively:  in numyain and biyabon is the rhyme (qafyuh); the fixed phrase mujh se, which is repeated at the end of each of the couplets that follows, is the end refrain or end rhyme (radf).


PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

The following list uses common English syllables and stress accents to provide rough equivalents of selected words whose pronunciation may be unfamiliar to the general reader.

Bahadur Shah: baha-ha’-door shah
ghazal: g-ha’-zal
Mirza Asadullah Khan: meer-zah’ uh-sul doo’-lah khalan
Urdu: or’-doob

divah: deh-
dablah: qah-hiikh-’dah
ghalib: ghah’-lib
g-ha’-zal
sheh: shayr
luh-hul’-loos
musha’-rah: moh-shiikh-rah

qafyuh: qah-h-hiikh-
radi: raah-deef
shakullus: tuhk-huhiik-
[GHAZALS]

V

Waterbead ecstacy: dying in a stream;
Too strong a pain brings its own balm.
So weak now we weep sighs only;
Learn surely how water turns to air.

Spring cloud thinning after rain:
Dying into its own weeping.
Would you riddle the miracle of the wind's shaping?
Watch how a mirror greens in spring.²

Rose, Ghalib, the rose changes give us our joy in seeing.
All colors and kinds, what is should and be open always.³

VIII

Here in the splendid court the great verses flow:
may such treasure tumble open for us always.

Night has arrived; again the stars tumble forth,
a stream rich as wealth from a temple.

Ignorant as I am, foreign to the Beauty's mystery,
yet I could rejoice that the fair³ face begins to commune with me.

Why in this night do I find grief? Why the storm of remembered affliction?
Will the stars always avert their gaze? Choose others?

Exiled, how can I rejoice, forced here from home,
and even my letters torn open?

X

Why didn't I shrink in the blaze of that face?
I flare up, apprehending the gaze that returned that vision unblinded.⁷

Out in the world they call me a disciple of fire
because the words of my grief fall like a shower of sparks.⁸

Many have fallen in love with the slim neck of the decanter;
seeing you walk, the wave of the wine trembles with envy.

1. Translated by Thomas Fitzsimmons.  2. The face of the mirror turns green with midieu, thus rivaling its metallic back, which is normally kept green with a kind of polish. In ghazal poetry the mirror is a mystical image of perfect truth and clarity.  3. Ahmad's literal rendering of this couplet reads: "The appearance of the rose has waned to its desire to witness (and enjoy), Ghalib! / Whatever the color and condition of things, the eyes should always be open."  4. Translated by William Stafford.  5. Angelic.  6. Translated by Adrienne Rich.  7. The verse alludes to the Muslim myth of Moses in which God revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai in a dazzling flash, rendering him unconscious; the mountain was turned to bismut.  8. Probably a reference to the Parsees of Zoroastrians of India, who worship fire.

We and the poems we make get bought and sold together;
but we knew all along for whom they were intended.
The lightning-stroke of the vision was meant for us, not for Sinai;
the wine should be poured for him who possesses the goblet.

XII

I'm neither the loosening of song nor the close-drawn tent of music;
I'm the sound, simply, of my own breaking.¹

You were meant to sit in the shade of your rippling hair;
I was made to look further, into a blacker tangle.²

All my self-possession is self-delusion;
what violent effort, to maintain this nonchalance!

Now that you've come, let me touch you in greeting
as the forehead of the beggar touches the ground.

No wonder you came looking for me, you
who care for the grieving, and I the sound of grief.¹

XIII

No more those meetings, partings, tears!
No more those days, nights, months, and years!

Who has time for love, its lore?
Delight in beauty?—now no more.

All that was from the thought of someone,
a grace that's taken, now long gone.

Tears now hurt more; they flow deep.
Heartick these days, it's blood we weep.⁴

Oh, Ghalib!—weak limbs, no hope, disgust:
no balance now, even in this dust.

XIV

Wings are like dust, weightless; the wind may steal them;
otherwise they would have neither power nor endurance.⁷

9. Translated by Adrienne Rich.  1. Gād-e-naghām, literally, "blossoming of song." Tent: or pardah, which can suggest web, curtain, tapestry, screen, veil, and note of music.  2. The beloved's dark curls are a stock image.  3. Ahmad's literal rendering of this couplet reads: "Now that you ask for me, it is no wonder: I am helpless / poor / afflicted / Miserable, and you who look after the afflicted."  4. Translated by William Stafford.  5. Ahmad's literal rendering of this couplet reads: "Weeping tears of blood is not so easy / No more is strength in the heart, stability in our condition!"  6. Translated by W. S. Merwin.  7. Dust (dhak) is the leitmotif of this ghazal, appearing in the refrain phrase dhak nahi, which conveys a different meaning in each couplet.
What beauty now is bringing nearer the face of heaven
So that the path bears not dust but flower visions?

At the mere thought of the flower's face, some are drunk.
There is nothing else in the cellar, in the wineskins.  

I have been shamed by my love's power to destroy.
In this house the wish to build lives alone.

Now Ghalib, these verses are idle amusements.
Clearly nothing is gained by such a performance.

XIX⁹

With every step I took, my goal seemed farther away.
I ran my fastest, but the desert ran faster.

That lonely night fire inhabited my heart
And my shadow drifted from me in a thin cloud of smoke.

Because my feet were blistered in the desert
Of my madness, my wake shone like a chain of pearls.¹

Because of you the goblet had a thousand faces;
Because of me it was mirrored in a single eye.

Fire runs from my burning eyes, Asad!²
I light up the soil and the dead leaves in the garden.

XXI³

Dew on a flower⁴—tears, or something:
hidden spots mark the heart of a cruel woman.

The dove is a clutch of ashes, nightingale a clench of color:⁵
a cry in a scarred, burnt heart, to that, is nothing.

Fire doesn't do it; lust for fire does it.
The heart hurts for the spirit's fading.

To cry like Love's prisoner is forced by Love's prison:⁶
hand under a stone, pinned there, faithful.

Sun that bathes our world! Hold us all here!
This time's great shadow estranges us all.

8. Here khák nahiū means "There is nothing."  9. Translated by Mark Strand.  1. Possibly an allusion to the Arabian legend of Majnoon, who wandered in the desert, mad with passion for his beloved Lala.
2. Ghalib's first name, which he used as a pen name until he adopted "Chalib."  3. Translated by William Stafford.  4. The lālā, tulip, or Indian red poppy.  5. Or qafas-e-rang, literally, "prison of color."  6. Ahmad's literal rendering of this line reads: "To claim to be love's prisoner is itself a consequence of constraint (compulsion)."