

❁ Chapter 4 ❁

Ghalib and the Mughal Court, 1847-57

His imprisonment is a milestone in Ghalib's life; and the same year of 1847 is memorable also because it marks the beginning at long last of his connection with the Mughal Court. He was befriended by Nasir ud Din (generally known by his nickname of Kale Shah, or Miyan Kale Sahib), whom the King had accepted as his murshid, or spiritual guide. On his release from jail Kale Shah put a house at his disposal, where he was able to live rent-free, and it was through his influence that Ghalib at length gained audience with the King. Ghalib joked about his obligation to Kale Shah, whose nickname means roughly 'the Black Saint'. Hali writes: 'One day he was sitting with Miyan Kale when an acquaintance called to congratulate him on his release from prison. "Release? Who's been released?" said Ghalib, "I've come out of the white man's prison into the black man's prison".' Thanks to Miyan Kale Ghalib now had access to the King, but for another three years no permanent connection was established. Then in 1850, the King's physician, Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, who was an admirer of Ghalib's Persian writing, secured for him a commission to write in Persian prose the history of the Mughal dynasty. For this service he was to receive a stipend of Rs. 600 a year. Thus at the age of fifty-two he began to receive, for the first time in his life, a regular income over and above his 'pension'. At the same time the King conferred upon him a ceremonial robe, and the titles Najm ud Daula, Dabir ul mulk, Nizam Jang ('Star of the Realm, Scribe of the State, Marshal of War'). This was only a beginning. For the next few years a measure of good fortune continued to come his way. In 1854 he was chosen as the ustad of the heir-apparent, Mirza Fakhr ud Din. Ikram comments: 'The heir-apparent had taken the widow of Shams ud Din, Ghalib's ancient enemy, into his harem. Clearly, Ghalib's literary fame must have been very firmly established for the heir-apparent to overlook Ghalib's enmity to Nawwab Shams ud Din and make him his ustad.' Ghalib was to receive as ustad a stipend of Rs. 400 a year. In the same year (or perhaps a little earlier) he reaped the reward of his panegyrics of the Kings of Oudh, and Wajid Ali Shah, the last king, directed that he should be paid a stipend of Rs. 500 a year. In 1854, too, Zauq died, and Ghalib, perhaps only because no other poet of comparable standing was now left in Delhi, was appointed to succeed him as the King's ustad. Thus at the end of 1854 his financial position was better than it had been for many years. Besides his pension of Rs. 750 a year he was getting Rs. 600 from the King, Rs. 400 from the heir-apparent, and Rs. 500 from the King of Oudh.

If these years mark a certain turn in Ghalib's fortunes, they are also important for another reason. These were the years in which Ghalib, for the most part, gave up writing his letters in Persian and changed over to Urdu instead. Substantial numbers of these Urdu letters have been preserved, so much so that from this point onwards they begin to become the most important source for the story of his life, and it will be increasingly possible to tell that story in his own words. Hali believes that it was his appointment to the task of writing the history of the Mughal dynasty that marked the turning point. He writes:

'It seems that up to 1850 Ghalib always conducted his correspondence in Persian; but when in that year he received the appointment to write the history of the Mughal dynasty and became wholly engrossed in writing *Mihr i Nimroz*,¹ he must, out of necessity, have been driven to do his letter-writing in Urdu. He used to compose his Persian prose works, and most of his Persian letters too, with the utmost labour, and one sees in them, somewhat more than in his verse even, the working of his imaginative and poetic powers. Thus when all his effort was directed to the writing of *Mihr i Nimroz*, it must have been a burden to him to continue writing his letters in Persian, and that too in his own characteristic style. We must infer, therefore, that from 1850 onwards he began writing them in Urdu. . . .'

Hali's general inference is probably correct, though as we shall see, there are on the one hand a number of Urdu letters written as early as 1848, and, on the other, at least a few Persian ones which were written after 1850.

The letters show that the enhanced status and the improved financial position which these years brought did not make Ghalib by any means completely happy. In the first place the bitter and humiliating experiences of 1847 continued to affect him deeply. As late as January 1850 he writes to Haqir:

'My kind and compassionate and generous friend and benefactor, I owe you a reply to your letter. But what am I to do? Heavy grief and sadness is always with me. I no longer wish to live in this city; and the difficulties and obstacles in the way are such that I cannot leave it. In brief, my misery and sorrow is such that only the hope of death keeps me alive.

He who lives on because he hopes to die
His hopelessness is something to be seen.'

Secondly, though money was important to Ghalib, other things were much more important to him—nor, for that matter, was the money, welcome though it must have been, enough to solve his financial difficulties. These continued to oppress him, and it oppressed him still more to think that the King whose patronage he had at last won—and not only the King—was incapable of

¹ The name which Ghalib gave to the first part of his history—cf. below.

assessing him at his true worth. Being the man he is, he makes this perfectly clear in the preamble to the history he is writing for him. He begins with eloquent praise to Kale Shah, to whose kindness after his release from prison he owed so much.

'I am his neighbour, and the dwellers in the skies lie in my shadow, and so long as I sit in the dust of his threshold, the angels envy me my high estate and I am the apple of the eye and the joy of the heart of the shining stars, and the moon and the heavenly bodies lie at my feet.'

But he goes on to speak of his listlessness of spirit, and of the general unawareness of his talent that has reduced him to his present state.

'In my body, made of dust, there is no life, as there is no life in the whirling dust-storm that provides a brief spectacle for men's eyes. Perhaps I am the painted picture of the nightingale of the garden; the fragrance from the rose inspires no melody to burst forth from its heart. Or I am the verdure on the tempered sword, which cannot bend before the blowing of the drunken wind. The bond that linked my heart with joy was broken long ago, and the blood still drips unceasingly from my heart. How strong that bond must have been! And with what force it must have been broken! One night I said to my frenzied heart—a heart more wise than I: "Grant me the power to speak, and I will go into the presence of that King whose court and its wondrous works rank with the garden of Iram, and will say, 'I am the mirror of secrets, and should be made to shine; I am the creator of poetry and should be cherished.'" It said "O foolish one, these were words for another occasion; the time for them has passed. Now if you still have words to say, say, 'I am bruised and need balm for my wounds; I am dead and need life to revive me.'" "

' . . . I cannot feel too great a pride in my happy fate, that I have a master such as you to direct my labours; and as I would lay down my life for you I swear that you too must feel pride in the great kindness of fortune, that you possess a slave like Ghalib, whose song has all the power of fire. Turn your attention to me as my skill demands, and you will treasure me as the apple of your eye and open your heart for me to enter in. They say that in the days of —[the Emperor Shahjahan], by that open-hearted sovereign's command [the poet] Kalim was time and time again weighed against silver and gold and pearls and rubies. I desire that you command men of discernment to flinch not from the toil and effort, and to weigh my poetry—not many times, but just once—against Kalim's verse.

Look not upon me slightingly: though I
am dust beneath your feet
Men honour this your capital because I
dwell in it.

See my perfection, look upon my skill; see how despite the rage that wears away my life, despite the distress that drains away my strength, my rich imaginative power cherishes the muse of poetry and my eloquence surrounds her with all the delights that her heart could wish. I dwelt long with the Source of all Bounty, and drew constantly upon His store; and I excel the poets that came before me because I dwelt longer in His splendid abode. For I was sent down into the world after twelve hundred years,¹ and Sadi and Khusrāu appeared after six hundred and fifty. And why talk of the poets of the Emperor Akbar's day? My presence bears witness that your age excels his. . . .

'And now the age makes new demands of me—me, who have drunk wine my whole life through, and felt its heady exaltation and in that exaltation have spoken nothing but poetry, and if my steps have strayed into the paths of prose, have walked there too with the same drunken gait; now—at this time, when my heart is cleft in twain and my imaginative power destroyed, and my senses and perceptions dulled, and my mind as though no longer in being and my body broken because my soul is sick, and my soul in disarray because of my body's pain and if I set myself to write no more than a page, then before it is completed and I turn the leaf, the joints of my fingers have stiffened and the pen falls from them, and my blood is burnt to nothing in my veins, and my sight in my eyes, and my breath on my lips and my marrow in my bones—even so the age demands of me that I tune the lute of narrative, that it may judge of the quality of the melody I play and put my style of playing to the test.'

We can follow the progress of his work in the letters to Haqir. Its final form differed from that which he had originally planned. He describes the general plan thus:

'I have named the work *Partawistan* (The Land of Radiance) and divided it into two volumes. The first volume begins with the creation of the world² and goes up to Humayun [i.e. to 1556]; I have entitled it *Mihr i Nimroḡ* (The Sun at Midday). The second volume will begin with . . . Akbar and go up to the reign of His Majesty the present King, and will be entitled *Mah i Nimmah* (the Moon at Mid-month).'

Mihr i Nimroḡ was completed quite quickly, although, as we shall see, a stage came when Ghalib had to re-write the first part of it. His stipend for writing it was payable half-yearly in arrears, and as the first half-year came to an end he seems to have been anxious to be able to produce tangible evidence that he had really earned it. This is clear from a letter which he wrote to Haqir on January 2, 1851; and the same letter makes it clear that he had little other motive impelling him to write, for the task was one which did not inspire him. He writes:

¹ i.e. in the thirteenth century of the Muslim era.

² This describes the final form. Cf. below.

'Well, my friend, I've completed the account of the Emperor Babur [died 1530] . . . the first six months—July to December, 1850—are up. Let me see when I get my first six months' pay. If after I receive it my salary is henceforth made payable monthly then, of course, I'll go on writing. Otherwise I'll bid this job goodbye. I haven't yet sent this account of Babur to His Majesty. I finished the manuscript yesterday, and it is being written out in fair. When the fair copy is ready I shall present it, and at the same time apply to have my salary paid monthly. The six months were nearly up; that is why I concentrated on completing the manuscript. And that is why I have not had time to write to you. God save me, what a life! . . . The pen is never out of my hand.'

Ghalib put forward his request for monthly payments in a poem which is included in his collected Urdu verse. It ends with a couplet which he was to use later repeatedly in addressing other patrons:

May you live on another thousand years
And every year have fifty thousand days!

If the writing of *Mihr i Nimroḡ* gave him any pleasure at all, it was simply the pleasure of exercising his command of Persian prose, and this was a pleasure which he wished to share with Haqir, of whose literary judgement he had an exceedingly high opinion. Thus the same letter makes it clear that he had a copy of whatever he wrote specially made to be posted to Haqir: 'Write and tell me where the instalment I sent you ends. Write out the last sentence or the last verse—whichever it is—so that I can get the rest copied out from that point and send it to you.' More than once in subsequent months he stressed—in the words of a letter of August 4, 1851—'Rest assured, until what I write reaches you and you read it, I myself don't feel any pleasure in it.'

In another three months he had reached the end of Humayun's reign—that is, the point at which he had planned to bring the first volume to a close. On March 28, 1851, he writes: 'I've completed the account of . . . Humayun; . . . now I shall start on Akbar.' But in fact he never managed to get further. On September 6, 1851 he wrote:

'What have I to tell you about the history? I have only got as far as the end of Humayun's reign, and haven't even begun to write about the Emperor Akbar. My friend, this thing is a headache to me, and I can't cope with it. So I've left it as it is. I've found a copyist who writes a beautiful hand and copies accurately, and have given the manuscript to him. . . .'

However, his labours even on the first volume were not yet over. He later wrote to Haqir (April 10, 1853): 'Let me explain what happened. When I got as far as Humayun, by way of excuse—though what I said was no more than the truth—I told the Hakim Sahib [Ahsanullah Khan] that I could not manage the selection of the materials. I asked him to make the selection of relevant

materials from the historical texts, get a draft written out in Urdu, and send it to me. I would put it into Persian and deliver it to him. He agreed to this, and sent me a draft beginning with the creation of the universe and of Adam. Now I had, in effect, to write a new book. [Ghalib had started his history with Timur (Tamerlane) the ancestor of the Mughal kings.] I prefaced it with a short introduction, and began to write in a quite distinctive style. The draft he had sent me covered the period from Adam to Chingiz Khan ['Jengis Khan']. I wrote after my own fashion and handed over my manuscript to him. From the month of Ramzan up to the present day—that is, for the last ten months—the drafts have stopped coming. What I have written must amount to sixty-four pages. Two or three times I have pressed for more drafts, but I have always had the same answer—"It's Ramzan"; then "People are busy with the Id celebrations"; and so on. I thought, "What does it matter to me? Why should I ask to be given hard labour?"—and I stopped asking them. Hakim Sahib [Ahsanullah Khan] must have got the sixty-four pages I have written, but I'm not going to ask for them back. Why should I? Let them be, and good riddance to them. What have I to do when not even the foundation has been laid?

He had already had occasion some months earlier to avow quite bluntly his lack both of interest and of competence in history. A Brahmin friend of Haqir had apparently approached him to consult Ghalib on some point relating to the history of a particular locality in which he was interested. On November 19, 1851, he had replied:

'I am so much a stranger to history and geometry and arithmetic that I don't even understand them. Employees of the royal offices write out in Urdu the material I need for the book and send it to me. I put it into Persian and hand it in. I don't possess a single book; my only acquisition is that I can write verse and prose according to my lights. I am no historian:

I have not read the stories of Sikandar and Dara
The tales of love and loyalty are all my stock in trade.'

(The verse is a much-quoted Persian couplet. Sikandar and Dara are the Persian names of Alexander the Great and Darius respectively.)

It is characteristic of Ghalib that even so he had taken pains to do what he could to help his questioner. He explains at some length why the question does not fall within the scope of the kind of history he is writing, and how little help is to be expected from the inadequate stock of books in the royal libraries. Then, after explaining his own incompetence in the words already quoted, he continues:

'I have a brother [actually a relative by marriage] Nawwab Ziya ud Din Ahmad

Khan, son of the late Nawwab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan. He is my shagird in prose and verse. Now he has developed a taste for history, and has acquired an unparalleled knowledge and mastery of the subject. I asked him to investigate the point, so that I could send you something in reply, but he told me that nothing would be found in any book except *Ain i Akbari*—and he has read every book on the subject and carries its gist in his head. So that is how I am placed; this is what he, in whom I have full confidence, tells me; and that is the state of affairs in the royal libraries. Express to him my humble service, and my regret.'

Mihr i Nimroq was ultimately printed and published in 1854, on the initiative of the heir-apparent, who in the same year made Ghalib his *ustad*. Ghalib wrote to Haqir on September 15, 1854:

'This time I didn't write a panegyric ode at Id, but finished and presented a volume of the history. . . . In short, *Mihr i Nimroq* has been completed and presented to His Majesty. Now, if I live long enough, I shall write *Mah i Nimmah*. I have been presented with the King's letter of pleasure—that is, with a document expressing the royal praise and pleasure. I try to look upon it as the equivalent of a robe of honour and an estate. . . . Well, I must be thankful for my connection with the King. I cannot boast of anyone who appreciates my worth. As the *dom* said, "When a man understands me, he is my slave; and when he doesn't I am *his* slave." [The *doms* are a Hindu caste of male singers and dancers, hired by wealthy men on occasions for celebration. The *dom* whom Ghalib quotes means that he can command his own price from the man who really appreciates his art; otherwise he is helpless, and must be content with what he can get.]

Life lies upon you like a yoke upon your neck, Bedil,
And, willy-nilly, you must live it; what else can you do?

In the event it seems probable that *Mah i Nimmah* was never written, or, if written, was never published.

This letter makes it clear that by presenting *Mihr i Nimroq* to the King he escaped the chore of writing an ode in his praise. Repeated references in his letters to Haqir show that the writing of such poems at Id and on other occasions for rejoicing—which would be expected of him as a poet in the King's service—became ever more distasteful to him. The following year (June 23, 1855) he wrote to Haqir: 'This Id I didn't even contemplate writing an ode; in fact not even a qata or rubai. I composed two or three couplets on the spot and recited them and I didn't even keep a copy of them.' And three months later, on September 24, 1855, he wrote again:

'I've left off writing odes; and why do I say "left off"? The fact is that I *can't* write them. I've been writing a qata or a rubai for the two Ids [Id ul Fitr,

which follows the Ramzan fast, and Baqar Id, which falls forty days later] and presenting them. On this occasion Hakim Sahib [Ahsanullah Khan] insisted strongly, saying that these were no Id offerings at all—no better than the couple of couplets which schoolboys write to give to their teacher as an Id offering. There was nothing else for it but to write these forty or so couplets in masnavi style and present them.’

These remarks come in the course of a letter replying to an enquiry from Haqir. It seems that Haqir had heard of this masnavi and had written to complain that, contrary to his usual custom, Ghalib had not sent him a copy. Ghalib replied:

‘My lord and master, do you *understand* what you are writing about, or do you just come forward to complain? . . . You may put me on oath, and I will swear to it that I never entered these verses in my diwan. It’s nothing; so why should I send it to you? I am sorry that you have no inkling of my plight. If you could see me you would know that

I no more have the heart on which
I used to pride myself.

I do not draw breath without thinking of the last breath that I shall ever draw. I am already sixty years old.¹ How much longer have I to live? I have written ten to twelve thousand couplets in Persian and Urdu—ghazals, odes, qatas and rubais. How much longer can I go on writing? Through bad times and good, I have passed my days the best way I could. And now the thought of death occupies me; what will death be like? And what shall I have to face after death?

I lived my life waiting for death
to come,
And, dead, I still must see what
else I face.

If I didn’t send you these verses it was only because I was depressed. Had I included them in my diwan I could not have failed to send them. But when I didn’t include them, what point was there in sending them to you?’

In his next letter, of October 3, 1855, he adds the comment, ‘I only wrote the Id masnavi to save money; because if I hadn’t presented that I would have had to make an offering of three or four rupees.’

Where poetry was concerned his relations with the King had from the start been of a somewhat ambiguous kind. A delicate situation which arose in December 1851 well illustrates the sort of problems which they posed. In that

¹ In fact, he was not quite 58.

month Ghalib wrote a prothalamion on the occasion of the forthcoming marriage of the King’s youngest son, Mirza Jawan Bakht. Azad relates the story in detail; but Azad was the loyal shagird of Ghalib’s rival Zauq, and, consciously or unconsciously, he suppresses things which it is important to know if we are to see the incident in its true perspective. Fortunately we possess Ghalib’s own (albeit less circumstantial) account of the early stages, and this throws additional light on the affair. Azad says:

‘Nawwab Zinat Mahal [one of the King’s wives] was a great favourite with the King, and although her son Jawan Bakht was younger than many of his other children, the King was trying to get him recognized as his heir. On the occasion of this marriage, the most elaborate preparations were made, and Ghalib composed this prothalamion and laid it before His Majesty. [Azad then gives the full text of the poem, but the only significant lines are the last, in which he makes the poetic boast:

As one who knows the worth of poetry—and not as
Ghalib’s partisan—I say
If you would write a prothalamion, read this of
his and try to know the way].

When this last couplet was read out to him it occurred to His Majesty that it implied a hit at him, as though to say,

‘No one else can write a prothalamion like this, and since you have made Shaikh Ibrahim Zauq your *ustad* and Poet Laureate, this shows that you do not ‘know the worth of poetry’ and are merely Zauq’s ‘partisan’.’ Accordingly, that same day, when Zauq presented himself as usual, the King handed him the prothalamion and asked him to read it. Zauq did so and the King then said, ‘Ustad, you too compose a prothalamion’. ‘Very good, Sire,’ replied Zauq. ‘Write it now,’ said the King, ‘and consider well the last verse.’ Zauq sat down there and then, and wrote this prothalamion. [The full text follows; the last verse is:

Take this to those who claim that they are poets;
Stand and recite it to them, and then say:
This is a poet’s prothalamion:
If you would write one too, this is the way.]’

In Ghalib’s account there are significant differences. First, it appears from it that the prothalamion was a command performance, written at the King’s virtual order or, more precisely, at the order of the Queen, conveyed through the King, and that even the final rhyme (which Ghalib did not approve) was laid down for him. In the elaborate prose style which he usually prescribed for himself when he wrote in Persian, he wrote (in a letter to Shafaq):

'I have long ceased to tune the lute of Urdu verse. True, to gain the good will of that Sovereign before whom Solomon is a simple scribe, I from time to time untimely pour out the strains of Urdu song. And especially at the command of that Queen before whom Bilqis bends in worship, I bent my mind to the writing of rekhta¹ in this unreasonable rhyme. Perchance I may in the concluding couplet have cried the drunken cry of poetic drunkenness. One [Zauq] whom the fancy possesses that he possesses a perfection he does not possess, presumed that it was he of whom I spoke. In the concluding couplet of a poem he struck a note accordingly and stood in the stance of combat, and thought that thus my challenge had been checked. But I, drunk still with the lees left in the glass in which my pen had once distilled the wine of

The verse on which you pride yourself is verse I should feel shame to own—²

did not deign to turn towards him, deeming sheer disdain sheer proof of my distinction.'

There follows the passage already quoted in chapter one,³ in which he laments the fate that barred the paths to martial prowess and to learning and to the wandering life of a darwesh and made him a poet; and he goes on:

'And either in this age there is none with eyes to see, or else there are such, but they will not glance my way. And surely that is why, in the deep darkness of my days, none knows and none acknowledges the wonder of my work. And now in these last days when my teeth are gone and my ears are slow to hear and my hair is white and the wrinkles line my face and my hands tremble and my foot is in the stirrup,⁴ what is left of the tumults that once raged in my heart? I break my daily bread and taste the tortures of approaching death—and that is all. What shall I reap tomorrow of all I have sown today?'

It seems clear that when Ghalib wrote this letter he did not yet know that Zauq's rejoinder to his original poem had been written at the King's instance and that it was the King's displeasure as much as Zauq's that it expressed. However, he soon realized the true position, for, to continue in the words of Azad's narrative,

'Zauq's poem was at once given to the singers who attended on the King and by evening it was being sung in every by-lane of the capital. The very next day it appeared in the newspapers. Ghalib was not slow in understanding these things. He presented the following poem to the King:

An Apology

I write these lines to lay the facts before you
And not to boast my sterling quality.

¹ An old term for Urdu.

² Cf. p. 82 below.

³ Cf. p. 28 above.

⁴ i.e. ready to make my last journey—that is, to die.

For centuries my ancestors were soldiers
My standing does not rest on poetry.

Broad-minded, I would live at peace with all men
Friendly with all, with none at enmity.

That I am Zafar's slave is ample honour—
Though without wealth or rank or dignity.

Could I presume to cross the royal tutor?
I could not think of such temerity!

The King's all-seeing eye knows truth from falsehood:
I need no oath to pledge my honesty.

I make no claims to be an Urdu poet:
My object was to please Your Majesty.

I wrote the poem at the royal order—
To tell the truth, out of necessity.

Nothing that I expressed in the last couplet
Intended any breach of amity.

I taunted none—or let my face be blackened!
I am not prone to such insanity!

My fortunes may be ill: not so my nature;
Thank God, I pass my days contentedly

God is my witness, Ghalib is no liar;
I set great store by my integrity.'

The poem seems to have satisfied the King and allayed his displeasure, but it is in fact far from being a mere apology. As in so much of Urdu poetry, there are other meanings besides the surface one, and many of them are not complimentary either to the King or to his *ustad*. They emerge already in the second couplet where he says, in effect, 'I am a noble, whose ancestors have for generations followed the noble profession of arms; and as such I would have my place in society even if I had never written poetry',—and he *implies* that this is a claim that Zauq certainly cannot make. It was common knowledge that Zauq was a man of humble birth, and only his poetry had won him social status. The seventh and eighth couplets imply that a really great poet says what he has to say in Persian, *the* language of Muslim culture, and that which all the really great Mughal emperors had patronized; if their latter-day successors choose instead to patronise Urdu, so that in order to please them a poet must write in this inferior medium, that, of course, is another matter. These

two reactions—to vaunt his ancestry, and to exalt Persian at the expense of Urdu—are, as we have seen, typical of Ghalib when he is under attack, and they do not command much sympathy from a modern reader. But the tone of the poem as a whole is admirable; his assertions of his own position in the third, eleventh, and twelfth couplets are sincere and dignified, while the implied irony of the fourth and fifth hit hard at the King and his tutor in a way which delights us because we feel that they are getting what they deserve. In particular the piling up of the words 'wealth' and 'rank' and 'dignity' reminds us forcibly that it was in the King's power to bestow all these things, and that he had chosen to bestow them on much lesser men than Ghalib. Finally, the last couplet, with its emphatic assertion that he is a man of his word, ostensibly rounds off the poem; but it inevitably suggests comparison with the last couplet of the original prothalamion and could well be interpreted as a re-assertion that what he had written there was no more than the plain truth. It is difficult to think that the King did not see these possible implications, but there was nothing the poem overtly said to which he could take exception—indeed, it is precisely in the lines that hit hardest that the surface meaning is unexceptionably meek—and he would be forced to accept it at its face value.

Ghalib's high-brow claim that Urdu was not really a fit medium for poetry reflects a feeling which possessed him more strongly at some times than at others. One result of his ties with the King in these last years before the revolt of 1857 was an increase in his output of Urdu verse. Hali comments:

'It is important to emphasise here that Ghalib did not regard Urdu poetry as his field. For him it was a diversion; he would write an occasional ghazal sometimes because he himself felt like it, sometimes at the request of his friends, and sometimes in fulfilment of the commands of the King or the heir-apparent. That is why in his Urdu diwan there is no significant number of poems in any form other than the ghazal. In a letter to Munshi Nabi Bakhsh [Haqir] . . . he writes, "My friend, you praise my ghazal, and I am ashamed of it. These are not ghazals, but things I write to earn my bread. The Persian odes that I pride myself upon, nobody enjoys. My sole hope of appreciation now arises when His Majesty the Shadow of God takes it into his head to issue his command, saying, 'My friend, it is some time since you brought me a present'—i.e. a new Urdu poem. So willy-nilly occasion arises when I compose a ghazal and bring it to court." . . . He did not look upon the ability to write Urdu poetry as an accomplishment; in fact he thought it beneath him. Thus he writes in lines generally said to have been addressed to Zauq:¹

Look at my Persian; there you see the full range of
my artistry

¹ Ghalib's own words quoted on p. 80 above leave little or no doubt that what was 'generally said' of these lines was quite correct.

And leave aside my Urdu verse, for there is nothing
there of me.
I tell you truth, for I am one must tell the truth
when all is done,
The verse on which you pride yourself is verse I
should feel shame to own.

Yet since most of his contemporaries were men of cultivated taste and quick to discern poetic merit, in his Urdu poetry too he was concerned to maintain the same pre-eminence as in Persian, and he gave all his attention and all his efforts to writing it.'

Hali's estimate is on the whole a sound one. There were indeed some verses which were written simply as a necessary chore, as the letters already quoted make clear. But other letters to Haqir show that during these same years he produced Urdu verse of which he felt proud, even where it was at the King's instance that he wrote. Where he was pleased with the results he praised them with an engaging lack of reserve, and demanded that Haqir praise them equally highly; and, indeed, some of his very best ghazals are the product of these years. Early in 1851—probably between April and June—he writes:

'You should know that when I attend upon the King he usually asks me to bring him Urdu verse. Well, I wouldn't recite any of my old ghazals. I compose a new one and bring that. To-day at midday I wrote a ghazal which I shall take and recite to him tomorrow or the day after. I'm writing it out, and send it to you too. Judge it truly: if Urdu verse can rise to the height where it can cast a spell or work a miracle, will this, or will this not, be its form?'

He then appends not one ghazal, but two. The second is still one of his best-loved.

In May or June 1852, he writes, enclosing another, now famous, ghazal: 'My friend, in God's name, give my ghazal its due of praise. If this is Urdu poetry, what was that Mir and Mirza wrote? And if that was Urdu poetry, then what is this?' In other words, My verse is in another class from that of Mir and Mirza (the colloquial names for Mir and Sauda, the two greatest Urdu poets of the eighteenth century)—so much so that you cannot call their work and mine by the same name. He goes on: 'This is how I came to write it. A gentleman—one of the Mughal princes—brought this *zamin* with him from Lucknow [*zamin* is a technical term in Urdu poetics: it is a prescription for a ghazal in which metre, rhyme and end-rhyme are all laid down]. His Majesty himself composed a ghazal on it, and commanded me to write one too; and I fulfilled his command.'

From a letter of somewhere between April 10 and 23, 1853, it appears that that the King could, on occasion, issue such commands fairly frequently. Ghalib writes: 'The King has given instructions for a mushaira to be held at

the Fort. It is held twice a month, on the 15th and the 29th. His Majesty prescribes one *zamin* for Persian and one for Urdu'. He then states what these were for 'the last mushaira, held on the 30th Jamadi us Sani' and continues: 'I wrote one ghazal in Persian and one in Urdu on the prescribed pattern, and another in Urdu on the same pattern, but incorporating something different. I'm writing out all three for you. Read them, and show them to friend Tufta too.' Once again, one of the three ghazals is one of his very best.

The following year the King's old *ustad* Zauq died and Ghalib was appointed in his place—an appointment that was probably reluctantly made and reluctantly accepted. In the forties and early fifties Zauq, Momin, and Ghalib were the only poets of outstanding reputation in Delhi, and Momin had died in 1852, two years before Zauq. Thus the King could hardly avoid choosing Ghalib as Zauq's successor. He did so knowing perfectly well the poor opinion of Zauq as a poet which Ghalib held. Hali writes of how Ghalib felt about his new duties:

'In 1271 AH [AD 1854] when Shaikh Ibrahim Zauq died, the duty of correcting the King's verses fell to Ghalib, but it seems that he discharged this duty with an unwilling heart. The late Nāzir¹ Husain Mirza used to relate how he and Ghalib were sitting in the Hall of General Audience one day when a footman came to tell Ghalib that His Majesty was asking for his ghazals. Ghalib told him to wait, and turning to his own servant said, "In the palanquin you'll find some papers wrapped in a cloth, Bring them here." The servant brought them at once, and Ghalib opened the package, and took out eight or nine sheets of paper, each with one or two half-verses written on it. He called for pen and ink and started to write ghazals, each beginning with one of these half-lines. He completed eight or nine as he sat there, and handed them over to the footman. According to Nāzir Husain Mirza, it took him no longer to write all these ghazals than it takes a practised *ustad* to read through a few ghazals and make occasional corrections. When the footman had gone off with them, he turned to Nāzir Husain Mirza and said, "Now I am free; for the first time for ages all His Majesty's occasional commands have been fulfilled."² Whatever Ghalib wrote in his own style—whether in verse or in prose—cost him a great deal of effort and concentration, as he himself tells us more than once in his writings. But whenever he did not need to write in his own style, he could compose with very little effort.'

The fact that the kind of poetry which both Zauq and his royal pupil admired could be churned out without effort in this way constituted the whole basis of Ghalib's poor opinion of it, and it was this fundamental difference in their view

¹ Nāzir is a title, and indicates that he was Steward to the Royal Household. For a fuller account of him cf. pp. 206–8.

² The clear implication is that some of Zafar's poems were not in fact his own work but that of his *ustad*. A similar tradition is current about Zauq.

of poetry which was, in great measure, responsible for the uneasiness of their relationship, an uneasiness evidenced, among other things, by the fact that Ghalib never received the title of *Malik ush Shuara* ('King of Poets'—i.e. Poet Laureate) which he might legitimately have expected, and that the new appointment was not accompanied by any increase in his stipend. Much of Zauq's and Zafar's verse is polished, but much of it lacks depth, and Ghalib was strict in these matters. He could neither admire nor pretend to admire verses which he thought mediocre. Hali writes:

'In our society it is the general rule that when a man recites his verse, every line—good or bad—is greeted with cries of approval, and no one distinguishes between a good line and a bad one. Ghalib's way was quite the opposite of this. No matter how revered and respected a poet might be, until he heard a line that he really liked he never on any account expressed appreciation. Towards the end of his life he became completely deaf, but this was not the case in earlier years. One had to raise one's voice in speaking or reciting to him, but if this was done he could hear perfectly well. Yet until he heard a verse that really appealed to him he would remain quite unmoved. Some of his contemporaries were offended by this attitude, and that is why they found fault with Ghalib's poetry; but although Ghalib was by temperament one who did not like to quarrel with anybody, he never deviated from his practice in this respect.'

Hali goes on to make it clear that there was no motive of jealousy behind this:

'Yet to any verse that did move him, he gave praise that was almost extravagant—not because he wanted to please anyone, but because his own love of poetry compelled him to praise it. His rivalry with Zauq is well-known. Yet one day when Ghalib was absorbed in a game of chess, the late Munshi Ghulam Ali Khan recited this verse of Zauq to someone else who was present:

Tired of all this, we look to death for our release
But what if even after death we find no peace?

He used to say: "The moment Ghalib caught some snatch of this he at once left his game and asked me, 'What was that verse you recited?' I recited it again. 'Whose verse is it?' he said. I told him it was Zauq's. He was astonished, and made me recite it again and again, savouring it every time I did so." You may see in his Urdu letters that he speaks of this verse repeatedly, and wherever he quotes examples of good verses, this one is always included. In the same way, when he heard this verse of Momin's:

I seem to feel that you are by my side
When all are gone and I am quite alone

he praised it highly and said, "I wish Momin Khan would take my whole diwan and give me this one verse in exchange." This verse too he has quoted in many of his letters. . . .'

Hali's evaluation of Ghalib's stand in these matters is borne out by other evidence. His judgement of a verse was not influenced one way or another by his opinion of the man who wrote it, whether as a man or as a poet. For Zauq he seems to have had no great liking in either capacity. On his death he writes respectfully enough of him to Haqir: 'The latest news here is that friend Zauq is dead. . . . The truth is that the man was unique in his own way and in this age a poet to be thankful for.' But a well-attested tradition says that his first reaction to the news of Zauq's death was to express his satisfaction that 'the man who spoke in the language of a lodging-house keeper' was no more. It is noticeable that his opinion of Momin as a poet, expressed also in a letter to Haqir of May 21, 1852 shortly after Momin's death, had been given in similarly vague and non-committal words: 'He wrote well in his own way. A man of a fertile and inventive turn of mind.' But this is preceded by warm praise for Momin as a man:

'You must have heard that Momin Khan is dead. It is ten days since he died. Just see, my friend, one after the other our children die; one after the other people of our own age die; the caravan moves off, and we ourselves are waiting with one foot in the stirrup. Momin Khan was of the same age as I, and was a good friend too. We got to know each other forty-two or forty-three years ago when we were no more than fourteen or fifteen years old, and in all these years there was never the slightest bad feeling of any kind between us. And, my good sir, you'd be hard put to it to find even an enemy of forty years' standing, let alone a friend.'

Because he knew that much of the poetry that he would hear there was worthless, it was with mixed feelings that he went to mushairas. Some of his Persian letters describe his experiences at them. Thus he writes to Majruh:

'The King's command came, bringing joy to those that dwelt near and good tidings to those who dwelt afar; and the Chamberlain of his Court directed the poets to the Hall of the Royal Steward, saying that on Friday February 25th they should come to that auspicious abode and ply one another with the wine-cups of poetry. A band of the princes of Babur's line and a few of the capital's men of distinction gathered together, and so great a throng assembled that every space was filled, and you would have said that body merged with body. First of all the Prince of Poets, Shaikh Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq plucked the string and recited a ghazal of the King in a voice so sweet that Venus descended from the sky to listen. Then that prince who possesses Yusuf's beauty . . . Mirza Khizar Sultan Bahadur, recited a . . . ghazal in such wise that you would

think that the Pleiades had sprinkled the carpet with their stars. Then the melody of the verses of Mirza Haidar Shikoh and Mirza Nur ud Din and Mirza Āli Bakht Āli rose on high, and then Ghalib . . . who was seated at the side of Mirza Āli, recited his ten couplets. Then a stripling named Mahvi, one of those who drink the wine of Sahbai's tavern [i.e. a shagird of Sahbai's] tuned his intoxicated lay. And Mirza Haji Shuhrat presented to the ears of us seated in the assembly a poem of some seventy couplets. [A ghazal should be a *short* poem.] I, on the pretext of easing a physical need, rose from the gathering and took the road to my abode of sorrow. The doors of the shops stood open and the lamps were still burning, and clearly the hour of midnight had not yet passed. . . . I sat and took wine. As the next morning drew to a close I made my way to the Auspicious Fort. The four princes whose names the tongue of my pen has already spoken revived the melodies of the night, and I again recited my ghazal. Friends told me that the whole night had passed in these diversions and the assembly had dispersed as the white light of morning began to appear. They say that as the gathering drew to a close the Prince of Poets [Zauq] recited two ghazals of his own. . . .'

Ghalib's ironical tone, the purely conventional praises, and the absence of any reference to the content of the ghazals recited, including his own, speak for themselves.

On other occasions he found himself pleasantly surprised. He writes to Shefta:

'On Friday, as night fell, the poets held their assembly. I had not composed a ghazal, and, ashamed to go empty-handed I sat with head bowed, and the thought of going to the gathering was far from my mind. But . . . Nawwab Ziya ud Din Khan, whom God preserve, sent two angels to stand over me—Zain ul Abidin Khan Arif and Ghulan Husain Khan Mahv. These two insistent, stubborn men came as evening fell to my lonely cell of solitude riding on an elephant; and loading me on it just as a man loads a tiger he has killed in the hunt, they bore me off to the gathering. There the sight of my exalted master. . . . Maulvi Muhammad Sadr ud Din Bahadur [Azurda] made up for all the sorrow I had suffered on the way . . . and I too raised my voice in melody and recited. . . .'

In other letters to Shefta he speaks slightly of poets who wrote only in Urdu: 'Those who make verse in Urdu were there in plenty to recite their great long ghazals, and it was past midnight when I got back home and lay myself down to sleep.' And, in another letter:

'A man had been sent to ask . . . Azurda to come. He came late, but come he did, bringing radiance to my heart and voice to my tongue. I had written an ode . . . but I was thinking to take the manuscript back with me, like a rejected

petition, and not to vex the hearts of the poets of Urdu. But . . . Azurda's coming put me in good heart and gave my tongue leave to sing.'

Even those who knew him well did not always understand his attitude in these matters. As a man whose literary reputation now stood very high, many a would-be poet sought the honour of becoming his shagird, while other writers would approach him to write forewords to their works. His generous nature made it difficult for him to refuse these requests, while on the other hand his integrity as a writer would not allow him to express any greater measure of praise than he sincerely felt. This latter trait put his forewords into a class on their own. The standard foreword of his day was an elaborate piece of ornate Persian prose full of exaggerated praise for the book and its author. Hali remarks:

'Obviously only a very few books really deserve high praise. Ghalib would not refuse the requests made of him, but he wrote his foreword in a fashion which would please the author without doing violence to the truth. He would begin with describing the author's good qualities, or his character, or the sincerity of his love and affection; or else he would write of other interesting . . . topics which had some relevance to the book; and these things would occupy the greater part of the foreword. Then he would add a few pertinent sentences about the work in question which contained points of substance, and at the same time would be enough to satisfy the author. But . . . it did sometimes happen that people complained to him that he had been rather niggardly in his praise.'

This happened in the case of Ghalib's friend Hargopal Tufta. Tufta was a devotee of Persian poetry, and had himself been writing it for a number of years, with Ghalib as his *ustad*. By 1848 he had a volume ready for publication, and Ghalib wrote an introduction to it at his request. A letter from Ghalib to Haqir on May 25, 1855 recalls what Tufta's reaction had been:

'On one occasion I wrote an introduction to please him, and the reward I got was that he got cross with me and wrote to me saying that what I had written "ridiculed him with seeming praise". I wrote back, "My friend, you are not my rival, not my enemy. You are my friend, and you call yourself my shagird. Curses upon that friend who would ridicule his friend with seeming praise, and a thousand curses upon that *ustad* who feels a rivalry with his shagird and so ridicules him." That shamed him somewhat, and he calmed down.'

Ghalib was quite capable of writing to Tufta in these terms, but if he did, the letter has not survived. We do have another letter, written with more restraint in May 1848:

'I received your letter, and though it did not please me, at any rate it did not displease me either. Anyway, you may continue to think of me—unworthy and despised of men though I am—as your well-wisher. What can I do? I cannot change my ways. I cannot write the way the Indian writers of Persian do, and start talking all sorts of nonsense like a hired panegyrist. Look at my odes and you will see how long the preamble is and how relatively short the panegyric proper. My prose is the same. Look at my foreword to Nawwab Mustafa Khan's [i.e. Shefta's] *tazkira* to see how much praise you find in it. Look at my introduction to Mirza Rahim ud Din Bahadur Haya's *diwan*. Take the foreword I wrote, at Mr John Jacob's request, to the *Diwan* of Häfiz—you will see that apart from one couplet of verse in which I have mentioned his name and praised him, all the rest is taken up with quite different themes. I swear by God that if I had been writing a foreword to the *diwan* of some prince or nobleman I would not have praised him so highly as I have praised you. If you knew me and my ways you would have counted what I wrote as ample praise. Anyway, in short, I have taken out the sentence I wrote about you and written another in its place, just to please you. It is clear to me that you don't think these things out for yourself, but allow yourself to be misguided by other gentlemen, most of whom, I expect, will regard my verse and prose as worthless. And why? Because their ears are not accustomed to its sound. Well, you can't expect people who rank Qatil as a good writer to appreciate the real worth of prose and poetry.'

A few years later Tufta had a second volume of verse ready, and asked Ghalib for another foreword. He replied:

'It's easier for you to write a *diwan* than it is for me to write the introduction or foreword. . . . If you're as keen as all that, go on writing verse, but wait a while and see. Otherwise you will have this second *diwan* printed now and start worrying about producing a third. It'll only take you another three or four years, but how am I to go on writing forewords? Wait till this *diwan* is as long as the first. Try your hand for a while at the ode and the *rubai*, and whatever you get together in this way over the next three or four years can be added to your second *diwan*.'

The letter to Haqir just quoted shows that this reply again incurred Tufta's displeasure:

'He's cross with me. He commanded me to write an introduction. I replied, "Sir, you will write a *diwan* every year. How long am I to go on writing introductions?" Since then he hasn't written to me. I won't write to him either; I'll wait and see when he favours me with another letter. My friend, is it an easy matter to write an introduction? It's a heart-breaking task. To write prose is just as hard as to write verse. How can I do it in this heat? What can I write? . . .

By your life I swear to you, it's not that I grudge him the introduction; it's simply that I no longer have the energy. God knows how I survive. Id, Baqar Id, Nauroz—it's all of two to three years since I stopped writing odes for these occasions. I write simply to let you know that my refusal is justified and his anger out of place. I wanted you to know. . . .'

Haqir must have gone and reasoned with Tufta—or perhaps Tufta was not as cross with him as Ghalib thought. Anyway in his next letter to Haqir he writes:

'Well, my friend! This is a diverting state of affairs! You urge me not to upset Tufta, when I was all along afraid that he'd stopped writing to me because he was upset with me. In the end I wrote to you about it. You found an appropriate way to let him know, and then he wrote to me. And so two days ago I replied to his letter. Thanks to your kindness my fears have been allayed, and my mind is at ease. Now what is there left, that you commend him to me? By God, I look upon Tufta as a son, and I feel proud that God has given me a son so talented. As for the introduction, you do not realize the plight I am in. . . . I am sure that you and he will both accept my apology and excuse me. God has excused me prayers and fasting; cannot you and Tufta excuse me the introduction?'

Tufta, so far as we know, was then content to accept the situation.

In at least one famous case Ghalib was to find that in attempting to please an author and to express his own views at the same time, he had bitten off more than he could chew. In the early 1850s he was approached by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, later to become Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and the outstanding leader of the Indian Muslim community in the last three decades of the century. Sayyid Ahmad Khan had just completed the task of editing *Ain i Akbari*, the work in which Abul Fazl, the minister of Akbar, the greatest of the Mughal emperors (1556-1605), describes in detail Akbar's system of administration. Hali writes:

'Prominent men in Delhi had written prose introductions to the work, and Ghalib wrote one in verse. . . . He was very attached to Sir Sayyid, and was on intimate terms with him and his family. But he was not an admirer of Abul Fazl's style; he thought the system of administration which *Ain i Akbari* describes beneath all comparison with those of modern times; and, as he himself admitted, he felt no interest in history. Hence he regarded the editing of *Ain i Akbari* as a pointless task . . . and could not restrain himself from saying so in his introduction.'

Not surprisingly, Sayyid Ahmad Khan did not include Ghalib's introduction along with the others when the book was published, 'for the introduction found fault with *Ain i Akbari*, and far from praising the excellent work which

Sir Sayyid had done, expressed the view that it was valueless.' In consequence relations between the two men remained strained for a number of years.

The same considerations which influenced him in his writing his introductions governed also his conduct as an *ustad*. He readily accepted requests from poets to correct their verse, and despite the volume of work this involved, he gave it his most careful attention. His attitude was the same towards those who aspired to write Persian prose. One of these was Haqir's son Abdul Latif. When Haqir wrote saying that Abdul Latif wanted to submit his Persian prose to Ghalib but felt diffident about asking if he might, Ghalib replied on April 23, 1853:

'Abdul Latif is my life, my soul, my son. Who are you to come forward to plead his case and negotiate for him? Who ever forbade him to send me his work? And who forbids him now? Verse, prose, anything he likes he can send to me. He must not press me to return it. I'll look at it in my own good time and then return it to you. This shyness he feels will be the death of me. When Abdus Salam [Abdul Latif's child] was born I wrote to congratulate him; his honour the Munshi Sahib, that is, our young friend Abdul Latif, did not reply; in the end you wrote to say, "My friend, he's shy. He doesn't know what to write to you in reply." And now there's this matter of his sending his prose for me to correct. Is this too something that his honour feels shy about? God save us!'

And when even after this Abdul Latif still hung back, it was Ghalib who on his own initiative sent him, through Haqir, repeated reminders. Thus he writes two months later, on June 22, 1853:

'Munshi Abdul Latif Sahib has made up his mind and then stopped short. Why doesn't he send his prose? Is it that he sees my letters in Urdu and imagines that I've forgotten how to write Persian prose? Give him my blessing, and tell him that I'm eager to see what he's written.'

Months later, on March 27, 1854, he is still telling him the same thing.

From a letter of October 18, 1855 it seems that he was even prepared to correct the verses of poets whom he did not even know, for he writes to his friend Shafaq, who, it seems, had proposed to forward such verses to him, 'I shall be waiting now for the other gentlemen's ghazals to arrive. Would you please be kind enough to write, along with the *takhallus* of each of them, his name and a few particulars about him?' Tufta, whose output was prolific, apologized on one occasion for sending him so many verses to correct. Ghalib replied on June 18, 1852:

'Listen, my good sir. You know that the late Zainul Abidin Khan was my son,¹

¹ Actually, his wife's nephew. For Ghalib's relationship with him, and his adoption of his two sons after his death, see pp. 104 below.

and that now both his children, my grandsons, have come to live with me, and that they plague me every minute of the day, and I put up with it. God is my witness that you are a son to me. Hence the products of your inspiration are my spiritual grandsons. When I do not lose patience with these, my physical grandsons, who do not let me have my dinner in peace, who walk with their bare feet all over my bed, upset water here, and raise clouds of dust there—how can my spiritual grandsons, who do none of these things, upset me? Post them off at once for me to look at I promise you I'll post them back to you at once. May God Almighty grant long life to your children—the children of this external world—and give them wealth and prosperity, and may He preserve you to look after them. And on your spiritual children, the products of your inspiration, may He bestow increase of fame and the gift of men's approval. . . .'

At the same time he expected those who accepted him as their ustad to be ready to take his forthright criticism. He writes in an undated letter to Tufta (about mid-1853), quoting a Persian half-line which he had submitted for Ghalib's comment. The line, literally translated, means: 'Whether the rose, or the lily, or the dog-rose, or the eglantine, do not make.' Ghalib comments,

'The "do not make" should complete the meaning. It is not superfluous; the trouble is that whether you leave the half-line in Persian or translate it into Urdu, it has no sense or meaning . . . "Do not make"—"Do not on any account make". Do not make what? Only when you yourself reply, "Do not make mention, sir" will anyone *know* what; otherwise no one could ever discover that you mean "Do not make mention". And what's more, even if you tell me, "I mean 'do not make mention,'" then how does your honour establish a connection between the "mention" and the "rose" and "lily" and "dog-rose" and "eglantine"? You'll reply, "I have, not 'mention', it's true, but 'speech' in the preceding half-line". But you can drag your "speech" with ropes and chains, and it still won't connect with these four words. Do what you like . . . but you won't get your line to make sense. It's absolutely meaningless.'

A few months later (January 13, 1854) he begins another letter:

'Your word "*did-mast*" is a new invention. I understand what you mean, but you may depend on it, no one else will. This is what they mean when they say "The meaning is in the mind of the speaker". . . . In all these verses there is nothing wrong—and nothing of interest.'

In Urdu and Persian poetics immense importance was attached to precedent. An apprentice-poet whose ustad criticized some expression in his verse would, if he could, justify himself by producing a precedent from the verse of a classical poet. Ghalib's attitude in these matters is characteristic of him. He had

objected to Tufta's use of a double plural, and Tufta, in reply, had produced a precedent from the poet Saib. Ghalib wrote again, quoting a well-known Persian verse:

'To find fault with our elders is a fault'

and continuing: 'My dear friend, in such instances we should not find fault with the verse of the classical writers; but we should not follow them either. Your humble servant will not tolerate a double plural; nor will he say anything against the great Saib.' Elsewhere he writes:

'*Be-pir* is a word coined by Indians of Turkish descent. When I forbid my pupils to use it even in Urdu verse, how can I permit you to do so in Persian? Mirza Jalal Asir (peace be upon him) is a free agent, and the usage of his verse is authoritative. Who am I to say that a word which he has used is wrong? But I am surprised, *very* surprised, that a Persian of noble family should have used such a word. *Be-pir* is not authentic Persian, even though Asir is as much a master of his language as Zahuri.'

And on occasion he could be even more emphatic. In a letter of mid-1853 he writes:

'In this couplet [which he has just quoted] Hazin [a classical Persian poet] has written one "*hanoz*" too many; it is superfluous and absurd, and you cannot regard it as a precedent to be followed. It is a plain blunder, a fault, a flaw. Why should we imitate it? Hazin was only human, but if the couplet were the angel Gabriel's you are not to regard it as an authority, and are not to imitate it.'

One of the tasks of the angel Gabriel, in Muslim belief, has been to convey the words of God to the prophets sent to mankind; he is therefore associated with divine eloquence.

Ghalib encouraged the same independence of judgement in his friends and shagirds. Thus he wrote in a Persian letter to Hisam ud Din Haidar Khan:

'The rhythmic speech which men call poetry finds a different place in each man's heart and presents a different aspect to each man's eyes. Men who make poetry all pluck the strings with a different touch and from each instrument bring forth a different melody. Pay no heed to what others see and feel, and bend all your efforts to increase your own perception.'

At the same time he had definite views as to which poets and writers repaid attentive study—and he included himself in their number. In a Persian letter to Nawwab Ali Bahadur he writes of how the secrets of poetry are to be learned:

'If you seek to find these secrets and desire to know the frets of this lute then keep before your eyes, of the Urdu poets, the verse of Mir and Mirza [Mir and Sauda] and, of the legion of the poets of Persian, the poetry of Saib, Urfi, Naziri and Hazin. Keep them before your eyes—but not in such wise that the black lines on the page do not travel from your eyes to your heart. Bend all your efforts to this end, that you may come to know the essence of each word, and that the range of meanings may come beneath your gaze, and that you may know true coin from counterfeit.

'If *Panj Ahang* had not been my own work I would have said that the wise approve it as a model of Persian writing. In it there are deep and subtle points expressed, and in its pages is abundance of beautiful phrases and sweet and fair words.

'I speak the truth in hope that men will credit it. . . . For the writing of Urdu verse I have long felt no inclination. I write in Persian, but since it is the pleasure of His Majesty the Shadow of God that I should from time to time bring verse of this kind as a gift into his exalted presence, I perforce write now and then in Urdu too. Thus I enclose in this letter of humble submission a few recent ghazals . . . which I have copied out. Be pleased to study them, and set your heart on winning for your pen this style of writing, and for your song this kind of melody.'

Nothing delighted him more than meeting a man whose love of poetry and discriminating judgement matched his own. This was above all the basis of his warm feelings for Haqir, as one can see from the remarkable Persian letter which he wrote to Tufta after they first met:

'In these days when night descends on the darkling day of my life—and how dark must be the night of him whose day has been so dark!—I sat in the darkness of sorrow and solitude, at war within myself. My tortured heart that burns with grief to look upon my solitude, is the one poor lamp that lights the black abode in which I dwell. But God's compassion sent a man to me who brought balm for my bruises and the comfort of his comradeship to quell my pain, and set a thousand stars to shine in the dark night of my soul. Truly his eloquence has lighted a candle, a candle by whose shining light I see shine out the lustre of the pearls of poetry my lips have spoken, when in the thronging darkness of misfortune's night their lustre had lain hidden from my eyes. O Tufta, you whose verse roves in new realms, singing new melodies, this wise man without peer, Munshi Nabi Bakhsh [Haqir] is a gleaming gem of a man in whom great God has made the talent of man manifest and given insight of the soul in high degree. For though I am poet and know poetry, until I met this venerable man I did not understand what understanding is or what it means to be well-versed in verse. The tale is told that when the Great Creator bestowed beauty upon men He made two halves; and one half He bestowed on Yusuf and the other half He sprinkled over all mankind. What wonder if when He

gave out the power to value poetry and know its meaning, in this same way He took two portions? One He apportioned to this man of many virtues; the other was the portion of the others. Tell the revolving heavens not to turn for me, and leave my destinies to sleep unheeding; for I have found a friend the joy of whose comradeship frees me from all fear of the age's enmity and this is a wealth which leaves me no complaint against the world.'

We have seen that he had a similar opinion of, among others, Fazl i Haq and Shefta.

Ghalib sometimes had occasion to make it clear to his shagirds that to accept him as their ustad meant, in his view, to accept his corrections, though he did not mind these being questioned before they were finally adopted. There are letters in which he makes these points explicit. Thus in a letter to Tufta dated February 19, 1852, he asks him to give a message to their mutual friend Rind, who, like Tufta, used to send his verses to Ghalib for correction: 'I corrected his verses within a week of receiving them, adding my comments and advice, as I always do. . . . Tell him to read carefully what I have written at the end, and make it his permanent guide. It is not something to be glanced through and then forgotten.' A month later, on March 22, 1852, he insists to Tufta himself that the corrections he makes are not made lightly, and should be accepted—though he puts the matter in the nicest possible way:

'I recall that I had taken your half-line [here he quotes it] and re-fashioned it into this rhymed couplet [here he quotes it]. In this form it appealed to me so much that I was tempted not to let you have it back but to use it as the first verse of a ghazal of my own. But then I felt I must not begrudge it you, and I sent it to you. Your lordship didn't choose to study it. You had been drinking when you wrote to me, and you must have been in the same condition when you went through the corrected verse. Now you are to delete the half-line you have written and let my couplet stand. It's a good one. . . . My friend, when I correct your verses, read the corrections carefully, so that the labour I spend on them is not wasted.'

In mid-1853 he writes:

'Study carefully what I write and see that you understand it. It doesn't annoy me when you raise questions or return to them again; on the contrary, I feel pleased. But I grant you I don't like it when you keep on about "*besh*" and "*besh-tar*", because that amounts to a clear reproach to me. When I write an expression myself why should I forbid you to write it?'

We do not know what exactly Tufta's query on this point was. But we do know that he was not to be put off by Ghalib's words. In the very next letter Ghalib complains: 'There you go again! You're determined to wrangle with

me over this "besh" and "beshtar" business.' And in the letter after that: 'There you go! You've again dragged up this "besh" and "beshtar" business in your letter.' Despite which there is no change in Ghalib's at once forthright and friendly tone.

It is noteworthy that he did not attempt to impose his own style on his shagirds. In a letter to Haqir dated September 3, 1853, he singles out one couplet from a ghazal Haqir had sent him for correction and begins his letter: 'My friend, who wrote this verse? [He then quotes it.] Yes, who else? It could only be one of mine or one of my brother's [i.e. yours]. By God, what a verse! It has a distinctive quality that not everyone is master of.' On October 6, 1853 he speaks of the same ghazal again:

'One of its couplets was in my style, as I wrote to you. And all the rest of the couplets are good, without any fault or unevenness. Had there been room for correction I would not have overlooked it. My relationship with you isn't such that I would flatter you. I look upon your verse as my verse, your skill as my skill, your faults as my faults. Now look at the ghazal. I cancelled one or two couplets, and in the opening couplet and one other, made some verbal changes. The verses that I marked with *swad*¹ are very good, and you're to be congratulated on them. And the ones I have left unmarked are just good.'

He goes on to praise a piece of someone's Persian prose which Haqir had sent him to correct, calling it, characteristically, 'the equal of Zuhuri's *Sih Nasar*, and half the equal of [his own] *Panj Ahang*.' He then details some of its good points and goes on,

'I am obliged and grateful to you, because thanks to your kindness I have had the opportunity to see it. . . . I am one who pays good writing its due, and wishes writers well. Where there is room for correction I do not shirk it. Beyond that, I am not the kind of man who interferes with writing which has no fault or defect in it. Return these pages to their owner and give him my greeting; and show him these lines I have written.'

Elsewhere he states his attitude towards criticism. It seems that some acquaintance of Tufta's had criticized his verse, even after Ghalib's corrections had been incorporated. Ghalib tells him:

'Although his objection is absurd and the question he raises a pointless one, it would not become us to refuse to reply or to discuss it. His objection to your verse is really a criticism of me, since I had seen and approved it. I am not concerned with whether he accepts this or not. I am satisfied that our verse is essentially sound and true, and anyone who knows the language will under-

¹ The first letter of *sahih* ('correct') and the sign regularly used by an ustad to show that a verse needs no correction.

stand it. If out of ignorance or perversity they don't understand it, well, so be it. It's not our job to improve and instruct all humanity. Education and instruction are for our friends, and not for others. I don't need to remind you how often I have told you: See to it that *you* aren't in the wrong, and never mind if other people are. Today your verse is such that no one can pick holes in it.'

The ustad-shagird relationship between Ghalib and the King was, of course, of a different order. When Tufta and others made him their ustad they did so freely, and he accepted freely, whereas in the present case it was because neither could see any other course open that the King had made, and Ghalib had accepted, the appointment. In the circumstances he seems to have limited himself to such corrections as he felt the King would be likely to accept without reluctance. Each knew perfectly well that the other did not greatly admire his verse. Ghalib used to complain to Shefta of the King's inability to appreciate what he wrote. 'One day,' writes Hali, 'he went straight to Shefta's house after leaving the Fort. "Today His Majesty was pleased to show his appreciation of me," he said bitterly. "I had presented an ode of congratulation on the occasion of Id, and when I had recited it to him he graciously said, 'Mirza, you recite excellently'." Ghalib did indeed 'recite excellently', but this was hardly the kind of praise the occasion called for. Moreover the effectiveness of his recitation was generally acknowledged. Hali describes one occasion when he himself had heard him:

'His style of reciting his verse, especially in mushairas, was most moving and effective. I myself only heard him once at a mushaira, a few years before the Mutiny, when mushairas used to be held in the Hall of General Audience. His turn came at the very end, so that it was already morning when he rose to recite. "Gentlemen," he said, "I too must sing my lament." Then he recited, first an Urdu ghazal, and then one in Persian . . . in a voice so full of feeling that his voice alone seemed to be saying that in this whole assembly he sought in vain for one who knew his worth. . . .'

It was not only because the two men were ill-matched as poets that Ghalib's relationship with the King was a somewhat uneasy one. As a member of the nobility, a great writer, and from 1854, as the King's ustad (and hence in this sphere his formally-acknowledged superior) he took it for granted that he could treat the King with considerable freedom, and he did so, employing only the minimum of formality. For the same reasons he often found his duties as a courtier irksome. We have seen how often he evaded his unwritten moral obligation to present odes on formal occasions, and in this matter it seems that the King, to his credit, did not specifically insist, as he might have done, on his producing them. But where on occasion His Majesty saw fit to command his courtiers, they could hardly disobey, whatever their own inclinations might be. Ghalib wrote of such an occasion to Haqir on December 9, 1856:

'His Majesty has for the last twenty days or so been holding court every day. I go between eight and nine and return at twelve, and the call to midday prayer comes either while I am still having my lunch or as I wash my hands after it. All the courtiers are in the same position. I expect that some of them eat before they go, but I can't manage it. All this was bad enough. And the day before yesterday the King in his kindness commanded me, saying, "There is kite-flying every evening on the sand by the riverside. You must come to Salimgarh [the northern extremity of the Red Fort] too." In short, I go in the morning, return at noon, have my lunch, rest a couple of hours, go again, and get back as the lamps are lighted. My friend, I swear by your head, I lie down to sleep at night as exhausted as a labourer. It's four days since your letter came, and only today have I been able to get time to write to you. And that too only because instead of resting after lunch I have written this letter to you.'

Hali tells a number of stories which show how freely Ghalib behaved with his royal master.

'One day . . . Bahadur Shah, accompanied by Ghalib and a number of other courtiers, was walking in the Hayat Bakhsh or the Mahtab Garden. The mango trees of every variety were laden with fruit, but the fruit of these gardens was reserved exclusively for the King and his queens and members of the royal family. Ghalib looked at the mangoes repeatedly, and with great concentration. The King asked him, "Mirza, what are you looking at so attentively?" Ghalib replied with joined hands, "My Lord and Guide, some ancient poet has written:

Upon the top of every fruit is written clear
and legibly:

'This is the property of A, the son of B, the
son of C.'

and I am looking to see whether any of these bears my name and those of my father and grandfather." The King smiled and the same day had a big basket of the finest mangoes sent to him.'

Equally characteristic of Ghalib was the freedom with which he joked about religion both in conversation with the King and in poems addressed to him, though the King was, in the main, religiously orthodox. However, we have to distinguish here between Ghalib writing in his official capacity and Ghalib speaking his own mind. As a poet and writer in the King's employ it was the King's religious views which he was sometimes required to express. Hali writes:

'On one occasion the King fell seriously ill. At the time Mirza Haidar Shikoh [a member of a branch of the Mughal royal family long settled in Lucknow] . . .

had come to Delhi on a visit from Lucknow and was staying as the King's guest. He was an Asna Ashari [a Shia sect], and when nothing seemed to bring the King any relief, healing dust¹ was administered to him at Mirza Haidar Shikoh's instance, after which the King recovered. Mirza Haidar Shikoh had made a vow that if the King recovered he would make an offering of a standard at the shrine of Hazrat Abbas in Lucknow. [Abbas was the cousin and standard bearer of Husain, the grandson of the Prophet, at the fatal battle of Karbala.] When he returned to Lucknow he wrote to the King to say that the fulfilment of his vow was beyond his financial means, and requesting the King's help. The King had money sent to him and the offering of the standard was made with great pomp and ceremony, in the presence of the whole royal family of Oudh and all the most prominent nobles and divines. . . .

'This incident gave rise to a general rumour that the King had become a Shia, a rumour which caused him much pain. . . . Hakim Ahsanullah Khan had a number of pamphlets published to counter the rumour and . . . proclamations were posted . . . in the markets and byways. On the King's order Ghalib too wrote a masnavi in Persian . . . in which the King was cleared of the charge of having turned Shia. Ghalib expressed nothing of his own views in the poem, but simply put into Persian verse whatever Hakim Ahsanullah Khan told him. When the poem reached Lucknow, the leading Shia divine² enquired from Ghalib whether the views which it expressed about the Shia religion and Mirza Haidar Shikoh were his own. He wrote in reply, "I am in the King's employ and carry out whatever order he gives me. You may attribute the contents of the poem to the King and Hakim Ahsanullah Khan and the words to me."'

Ikram adds further details:

'In 1853-4, when the rumour went round that Bahadur Shah had become a Shia, the leading Muslim divines in Delhi warned him that if this rumour were correct they would exclude his name from the Friday sermons and the Id address. To refute the rumour, Bahadur Shah had Ghalib write a Persian masnavi. After this the King wrote a book . . . [in vindication of Sunni beliefs], to which Ghalib wrote an eloquent and forceful foreword. . . .'

It is worth noting in passing that this foreword was written in Urdu, and Ghalib, with his usual bluntness, makes clear in the course of it that this medium was not his own choice. 'When this work was completed,' he writes, 'the command came from His Majesty . . . that the servant of his court Asadullah should show his graceful submission in writing a foreword, contenting himself to adorn his eloquence with the adornment of the Urdu tongue . . . The fulfilment of this command is incumbent upon me. . . .'

¹ Dust brought from Karbala, the scene of the martyrdom of Husain, and believed to have miraculously curative properties.

² *Mujtahid ul asar*—a title officially conferred by the Lucknow Kings on the leading Shia divine.

In point of fact, says Hali,

'Ghalib's real religion was "enmity towards none", but he inclined towards Shia beliefs and held . . . [Ali], after the Prophet of God, to be pre-eminent. On one occasion . . . Bahadur Shah said in the presence of his court, "I hear that Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib is of the Shia persuasion." Ghalib was informed of this and wrote a number of rubais which he presented to the King. I remember one of these . . . and quote it here. [In prose translation the verse reads:] "Men who are deeply hostile to me call me 'heretic' [i.e. Shia] and 'atheist'. How can one who is a Sufi be an atheist? And how can one who hails from 'Beyond the River' be a Shia?" The gulf that exists between atheism and Sufism is clear: the atheist denies even the existence of God, while to the Sufi all that exists is God, and all else is nothing. So how can a Sufi be an atheist? The point of the fourth line is that the people of "Beyond the River", i.e. of Turkestan, are proverbial for their Sunni bigotry . . . and since Ghalib's ancestors came from "Beyond the River" he asks how a man from "Beyond the River" can be a heretic or a Shia.'

Hali continues:

'People who are not well-acquainted with Ghalib's temperament and his way of writing may think that Ghalib falsified his religion in order to safeguard his access to the King. But the truth is that all these rubais were written simply to amuse the King and raise a laugh among his courtiers; for there was not a man in the court who did not know that Ghalib was a Shia, or at least a tafzili [one who, though not a Shia, acknowledges the pre-eminence of Ali]. Ghalib frequently recited verses of this kind . . . for the King's amusement. On one occasion when the court was assembled the conversation turned on the close relations that had existed between [the medieval Muslim saint] . . . Nizam ud Din and [the Persian poet] Amir Khusrau. Ghalib at once composed and recited the following verse:

Two holy guides; two suppliants. In this
God's power we see.
Nizam ud Din had Khusrau: Siraj ud Din has me.'

(Siraj ud Din was the King's real name. He took the name Bahadur Shah when he came to the throne.) The verse neatly combines a compliment to the King with a compliment to himself, suggesting that Bahadur Shah matches the great Nizam ud Din in holiness and spiritual power while Ghalib matches Amir Khusrau, who was universally honoured as one of the greatest of the old Persian poets.

Bahadur Shah may indeed have found these incidents as amusing as Hali

says he did. Ghalib, for his part, gave him little opportunity to take him seriously. Whenever the King said anything which could suggest that he was chiding Ghalib for his religious shortcomings, Ghalib's rejoinder was generally flippant and irreverent. 'On one occasion,' writes Hali, 'after Ramzan was over the King asked him, "Mirza, how many days' fasts did you keep?" Ghalib replied, "My Lord and Guide, I failed to keep one", and left it to the King to decide whether this meant he had failed to keep only one or failed to keep a single one. Colloquially, eating during the periods when one should fast (between daybreak and sunset) is called 'eating the fasts'. Ikram writes:

'It was perhaps on this same occasion that he read the following verse before the Royal Court:

The man who has the wherewithal to break
the fast when evening comes
Must surely keep the fast; it is his
bounden duty to.
He who has nothing he can eat when it is
time to break the fast
Can only eat the fasts themselves; what
else is he to do?'

At the same time he presented a rubai in which he wrote that to keep the fast was an article of faith with him—and he would keep it if only he had the means to do so in comfort. Ghalib wrote to Haqir on June 4, 1854 quoting both these short poems and adding: 'His Majesty was very amused, and laughed heartily'.

Ikram writes:

'In the ghazals of this period there are any number of flippant verses of this kind. . . . Towards the end of 1851 Bahadur Shah planned to make the Pilgrimage [to Mecca—an act of great religious merit]. Ghalib [who thought that if he could go he would enjoy the journey] included the following couplet in a ghazal which he wrote at this time:

He goes to Mecca; if the King will take
me in his company
Gladly will I transfer to him the merit
that accrues to me.'

One of his ghazals ends with the couplet:

Ghalib, you write so well upon these
mystic themes of Love Divine

GHALIB

We would have counted you a saint, but
that we knew your love of wine.

Hali says: 'I have been told that when Ghalib recited this ghazal, the King commented on the final couplet, "No, my friend; even so we should never have counted you a saint." Ghalib replied, "Your Majesty counts me one even now, and only speaks like this lest my sainthood should go to my head."'