

THE USES OF POETRY FOR HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING: THE CASE OF GHALIB

Ainslie T. Embree
Duke University

Let me say at the outset that this lecture has no pretensions of being a contribution to literary criticism, nor does it aspire to contribute anything new to the understanding of Ghalib's poetry. I am equipped neither by literary nor by linguistic training for that task, accepting instead the judgments and interpretations both of the critics who have defined Ghalib's place in the field of Urdu poetry and, indeed, in world literature, as an artist of the first rank, as well as of the many millions in Pakistan and India who, during the past hundred years, as in his own lifetime, have made the poet's vision part of their own experience.¹ What I shall attempt to do is, in a way, an abuse of poetry to read it for the echoes it provides of an age, rather than as a statement of how one individual understood himself and his place in the universe. In doing so, I plead the sanction of a great scholar who characterizes Ghalib's writings as the "culminating point of an intellectual, aesthetic, and ideologically integrative" movement in the history of the subcontinent,² but I will move backward to the eighteenth century, rather than forward to the nineteenth, to which of course Ghalib belongs chronologically, in an attempt to suggest that through Ghalib—as through other poets—one can sense something of the spirit of an age that may be quite different from the picture provided by political records.

Not that one should make the mistake of supposing that one can ever really understand how men of another age

¹ The most important of these has been my friend S. Paul Nirash of Deshbandhu College, Delhi, who has patiently helped me read Ghalib and the other poets of the age.

² M. Mujeeb, *Ghalib*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1969, p.33

and time felt, for it is a hopeless task to try to reduplicate experience. It is true that they stood in the same river of time as we do, but it is not the same water, nor the same time of day nor the same season. What was the future for them is the past for us,¹ and this fact radically alters our perception not only of events themselves, but even more importantly, of what they meant. Since we know—or think we know—how things turned out, "what really happened," we do not see the events in the context of a present and a future, as did those who participate in them, but of a past, and, moreover, *our* past, which is, of course, totally irrelevant to answering questions about how men understood their own times.

All these generalities are meant to introduce the suggestion that we need to rethink some of our familiar assumptions about the eighteenth century, and that Ghalib, both in his person and in poetry, provides us with some clues. Undoubtedly the most commonplace assumption about the eighteenth century is that it was a time of degeneration and decay, when, as a result of the weakening of the central authority of the Mughal Empire, the subcontinent was given over to anarchy and chaos. The great symbol of this breakdown of political and social life is, of course, the fate of the great empire that had unified the subcontinent, shrinking within sixty years of the death of Aurangzeb to Shah Alam's patrimony, which if he could have secured it, extended little beyond the suburbs of Delhi. The decay of political power is matched, in this reading of history, by corruption and decadence in social, artistic, and religious life. Then, amidst the decay, the arrival of the West in the appropriate *persona* of a trading company, marked the beginning of a new age, the outward symbol of which was the unification of the subcontinent, and the inward spirit of which was the nationalist movement.

It is easy to see in retrospect why this version of history was so readily accepted, altogether apart from its truth or

¹ I owe this phrase to Prof. Arthur Danto of Columbia University.

falsity. For the nineteenth century, the movement towards the unification of territories into large nation-states seemed the inescapable logic of history, the fulfilment of long ages of struggle against divisive and anti-national forces. The unification of Italy and Germany were the classic examples not only for the West but also for the East: Mazzini was translated into Bengali and Bismark's achievement were a model for Japan. For the British, the unification of India was their supreme political achievement, proof, however distressing some of the auxiliary events may have been, of the providential nature of the western intrusion. On the whole, the early Indian nationalists accepted this evaluation, regarding those periods in which India was supposed to have been politically unified—particularly the reigns of Asoka, Chandragupta Maurya, and Akbar—as the great ages of Indian civilization. The eighteenth century, with its political disunity and its alleged moral corruption and decadence, was the necessary explanation of both the western conquest and the need for revival.

The difficulty with this reading of the eighteenth century is that when one looks at the society without the nineteenth century in mind, what impresses one is not its decadence but its creativity. Everywhere, and in almost every aspect of society, there are signs of a flourishing culture. It is true that the Mughal central authority no longer asserted itself over the subcontinent, but the political life of the regional kingdoms—Bengal, Hyderabad, Oudh, Jaipur are familiar examples—was grounded in the administrative structures of the old empire, and they probably provided to their subjects as much justice and security as had previous regimes.

Looking only at the area of Indo-Islamic culture that had Delhi as its center—through the districts of Agra and Mathra to eastern Rajasthan—astonishing creativity is found in many other aspects of the social order. In the field of religion, it was the age of Shah Wali Ullah, surely one of the greatest Islamic theologians produced in the subcontinent. In art, it was the time of flowering for the schools of painting of Bundi, Hotah, Bikaner, and the Kangra hills, all of which were deep-

ly influenced by the traditions of the Mughal court. In architecture, the achievements of the eighteenth century can be compared without apology to those of any age. Jaipur is one of the great triumphs of the eighteenth century spirit, with its broad avenues and decorated facades being perhaps the most truly successful blending of the influences of the Mughal style with indigenous and western influences. The great observatories at Jaipur, Delhi and Ujjain are further evidences of how the lively intelligence of the age moved towards a synthesis of Hindu, Islamic and modern western ideas before the actual political impact of the west was felt in the area. That this movement was abortive, does not lessen its significance as a facet of a creative age. In Delhi itself, there was much building in the eighteenth century, with some of the loveliest mosques of Shahjahandabad and its environs dating from this time. One thinks of the Sonehri Masjid built in 1751, but above all, of the great tomb of Safdarjang, completed in 1754, which can be taken as a symbol of the way the nineteenth century historians regarded the achievements of the eighteenth century. The usual verdict is that it is "the last flicker of the lamp of Mughal architecture", and the guide books often quote Bishop Heber's comment that the combination of red and fawn stone makes it look like "potted meat." The great survey of the monuments of Delhi made in 1916 by the Archaeology Department sums up this attitude, emphasizing that the tomb, like the century to which it belongs, lacks restraint and virility; above all, it follows the bad principle of "constructing ornament, rather than ornamenting construction."¹ In one form or another, this is the repeated judgement of Victorian critics, both British and Indian, on the art of the eighteenth century. Instead of making a good solid structure, and then adding ornamental decoration, the eighteenth century artists, whether they were poets, painters, architects, made the "ornament" integral to their design. It is this fact that is at the heart of eighteenth century art in all its forms in the Delhi region in the eighteenth century. This is

¹ Delhi Province: List of Mohammedan and Hindu Monuments, Calcutta, 1916, Vol. II, P.190

particularly true of poetry, the aspect of culture that flowered most luxuriantly.

One must be content with the bold statement, leaving its proof to an examination of the histories of literature of the time; the period from roughly 1720 to 1857 saw an enormous production of literature in the Delhi region, both in Urdu and Hindi, which both in its intrinsic quality and sheer bulk is unequalled in any previous period of comparable duration. It is a literature that has frequently invited the same judgements as Safdarjang's tomb: florid, over-ornamented, and most damning; sensual. Such judgements are true enough, but what they miss is the vitality of the literature, its expression of self-awareness, its sensitivity to the human condition, in a word, its reflection of the spirit of the age. By not seeing that this period from the second decade of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth has a quality of its own that cannot be defined by the canons of either the previous age or of the nineteenth century, the significance of its creativity has often been ignored.

To borrow a term from European literary history, this was an Age of Sensibility, when artists sought to give expression to their own intuitions of the meaning of the world. It is here that Ghalib reigns supreme, not, as he has sometimes been pictured, the last representative of a dying culture, a lonely nightingale singing in a decaying garden, but as one who sums up and characterizes the spirit of an age of extraordinary sensitivity to the beauty and mystery of life. One sees in Ghalib what one sees as well in the painting of the period: an emphasis on personal emotion, a desire to communicate an inner vision rooted in the artist's own personality. For an age that values intellectual explanation and moral statement, as did the nineteenth century, the cultivation of sensibility indeed carries with it an air of decadence. What has been said of writers and artists in the second half of the eighteenth century in Europe, can be said with equal truth of Ghalib and his predecessors: "They were more emotional, more focused on the individual, more feminine, in a word, more modern, than the aristocratic and mascu-

line assumptions of the previous generation"¹ This was as true of the Hindi poets of Vrindaban as of the Urdu poets of Delhi, for despite the utter difference in symbol and imagery, there is a continuity in mood, and indeed in theme, between the poets of the court of Krishna and of the court of the Mughal Emperor. That the same sensibility, the same emphasis on personal emotional statement, infuses both literatures, can hardly be accidental. Both are reflections of the dominant artistic influences of the age, which are rooted in the culture of the Mughal court.

Ghalib's use of Urdu, despite his allegiance to Persian as the language of elegance and culture, is indicative of one aspect of this Indian Age of Sensibility. Again, there is a parallel with contemporary European experience: a turning away from classicism, a desire to experiment with new forms both in style and content. The use of Urdu, rather than Persian, in Delhi is to some extent a product of the weakening of imperial power, but there is more to it than that. It is evidence that artists were trying to escape the bonds of an old tradition, seeking for a vehicle that would give them more freedom to express emotions and concepts alien to the classic tradition. Against this argument, can be cited Ghalib's own seeming derogation of his Urdu, as contrasted with his Persian poetry:

*"Study my Persian poetry and you will find numerous many-coloured pictures. Pass over my Urdu verses because they are insipid and colourless."*²

But the literal meaning seems an unlikely statement for a poet to make; one guesses that this was meant ironically, to be taken at its face value by those who preferred Persian, but not by those who loved Urdu. That this was so, seems proven by the audience his Urdu poetry won in his lifetime and ever since. Its marvellous expression of his under-

¹ M.S. Anderson, *18th Century Europe, 1713-1789*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p.128

² Translated in Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p.181

standing of the human condition as well as the beauty of the poetry won from Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan an accolade attested through the years by many others: "One word of Ghalib is better than a book, one flower of Ghalib's is better than a garden."¹

The obscurity for which Ghalib's contemporaries chided him, is another one of those features of his art that doubtless grows out of the break with old traditions. The most commonplace criticism of the modern artist is that the man in the street does not understand what he is driving at; that his pictures are not of recognizable objects, that his poetry is not intelligible, that his music is filled with strange sounds. When Ghalib's Delhi critics found him incomprehensible, and reminded him that "What is really praiseworthy is that others understand what you say,"² they were enunciating the critical canon most dear to the heart of the Philistines. But the poet who is concerned with the expression of his own emotion, whose subject is his own intuitions and not a restatement of those of the tradition, must of necessity, be obscure. Two quotations from great English poets can be used to underscore this point. One is from Coleridge: "Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood." The applicability of this to Ghalib is confirmed both by the enormous pleasure he gives to his readers (and no less to listeners) and the astonishing differences that are to be found in the translations of his poems. The other quotation is from John Keats, who said that the reader of good poetry must be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason, remaining content with half-knowledge."³ Such judgements are not necessarily true for the art of all periods, but they illuminate the problems of coming to terms with that of this Indian Age of Sensibility, in painting as much as in poetry.

¹ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Athar al-sanadid*, Delhi: Central Book Depot, 1985, p. 590

² Sadiq, *History of Urdu Literature*, p.199

³ Quoted in James Sutherland, *A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp.165-66

Ghalib was also at one with his age in being a poet of the town. We have all heard a thousand times: India and Pakistan are countries of villages, the "real" Indian, the "real" Pakistani, is the simple villager, not the sophisticated city dweller. This sentimental vision is held, on the whole, by Westerners, although it seems to have gained some currency in modern times among intellectuals of both countries concerned. It finds little echo, however, in the literature of the subcontinent itself, either Hindu or Islamic, and certainly the artists of our period, again whether painters or poets, are above all men of the town. Islam everywhere has given birth to a culture of cities, and no where has this been more true than in the subcontinent. Here the town is a symbol of man's triumph over nature, of his ability to take its measure and master it. It is significant that when nature is celebrated, it is almost always nature confined and tamed in the beauty of a garden. Delhi was Ghalib's city, as it was of so many of the poets, and although he admired the marvels of the great new city of Calcutta, it was always to Delhi that he returned. One has to remember that Delhi really came into its own in the eighteenth century, for previously other places, such as Agra or the great moving military camp of Aurangzeb, had been the seat of government. But in the eighteenth century, Delhi and the Mughal Court were one, and it was in that atmosphere that Ghalib filled his poetry with the imagery of the city. Possibly writers like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, out of nostalgia, exaggerate the beauties of pre-Mutiny Delhi, but its charm, as the essence of the urban culture of this Age of Sensibility are attested by all its poets. Mir's moving verse speaks for them all, not least Ghalib:

*"The streets of Delhi are not mere streets, they are like the album of a painter;
Every figure I saw there was a model of perfection."¹*

Ghalib himself, in one of his Persian poems, referring to the time when he went to Banaras and Calcutta, speaks of being "Banished by my unkind fate from Delhi", and the greatest

¹ Quoted in Sadiq, *History of Urdu Literature*, p.100

grief is that he has been forgotten in "my native town Jehanabad."¹ That it was so much an age of cities is probably one reason why its critics in the nineteenth century found it distasteful; they sought their imagery—as they did their political support—among the uncorrupted men of the villages of the plains and of the hills.

In his treatment of the whole theme of love, Ghalib is also at one with the spirit of the age. The dominance of the love motif in painting and poetry is of fundamental importance for an understanding of Indo-Islamic culture in this period, and there is no doubt at all that the love represented is physical love, not spiritual love, whatever that may be. In the painting of Bundi and the Kangra Hills, as well as in late Mughal painting at Delhi itself or at the Court of Oudh, the emphasis on human love is almost overpowering, and the impact it makes on the viewer is the same as the poetry of the time makes on the reader. The glorious celebration of the joys of love — both in separation and in union—found in the *chitrashala* at Bundi palace could be used as illustration of a Ghalib manuscript on love despite the formal setting in another cultural milieu.

In this love poetry, whether of Ghalib and the other Urdu poets or of the Braj Bhasa poets, it is important to make a distinction between symbolism and allegory, for a failure to do, has resulted in much confusion in the understanding of the painting and poetry of the period. The love depicted is not an allegory of divine love, as some critics have suggested in a desperate attempt to make Ghalib and the rest respectable. It is, however, symbolic. In an allegory, the figures stand for something else, for an idea, and quite clearly in the poetry of Ghalib, as in all the art of the age, the figures are precisely what they seem—human lovers, meeting outside the conventional bounds of propriety. But it is symbolic art, in that symbols point to a continuity of existence with something hidden, something deeper and more real, of which human love is an essential part, but not the

¹ I am indebted to this reference from one of Ghalib's Persian *Mathnavi*, "The Lamp of the Temple", to Professor Ahmed Ali of Karachi.

whole of the story. As C.S. Lewis puts it, "Symbolism is a mode of thought, but allegory is a mode of expression." The symbolism of love in Ghalib is part of the content, integral to his meaning, as it is to all the art of the age. Speaking of love in Ghalib's poetry, Dr. M. Mujeeb comments that "Like God, love is essence and attributes, and demands absolute obedience,"¹ and surely this is a clue to the deepest meaning of the love motif in the art of the age. The complete absorption demanded in human love becomes fused with the deepest commitments of the human spirit.

This line of thought leads inevitably to some consideration of Ghalib's religious commitments. Some critics have insisted that he was irreligious or a "pagan," but such classifications depend largely upon the definition given to religion. Certainly, he cannot be called a religious man, if that designation is reserved for those who do not drink, gamble, enjoy sensual pleasures, and who regard this world as a preparatory stage for another. But if to be religious, means to live with an awareness that there are mysteries that cannot be confined within neat definitions, that ceremonies and rituals have no validity in themselves and can be stumbling blocks to true religion, that in fact all "religions" are radically false, then Ghalib is profoundly religious. This is the point of his famous verse:

ہم موحد ہیں ہمارا کیش ہے ترک رسوم
ملتیں جب مٹ گئیں اجزائے ایمان ہو گئیں

*"I am a unitarian, my religion is to abandon rituals,
For when all ceremonies are destroyed, then true religion begins."*

Ghalib is also religious, if at the heart of religion, is an awareness of the ultimate emptiness in the human heart, that if we search for the ground of our being within us, we find only darkness and void. It is this awareness that makes Ghalib seem so modern; or perhaps more accurately so

¹ Mujeeb, *Ghalib*, p.134

timeless.¹ For the man of sensitivity, it is always a time of breaking of nations, of the end of old certainties, bringing the knowledge that he walks alone on the shore from which the Sea of Faith has receded.

But such an awareness can lead an affirmation of the values of human life, not their denial, if for no other reason than the poet knows that it is this life with which he must come to terms. Ghalib knows that man, like the rest of creation, must die, but it is this self-knowledge that separates him from the created world: of all creation, man alone *knows* that he must die. This I take to be the meaning of one of his most splendid verses:

ہوس کو ہے نشاط کار کیا کیا
نہ ہو مرنا تو جینے کا مزا کیا

*It is the knowledge of death that gives
meaning and poignancy to life's pleasures.*

I have stressed Ghalib's relation to what I have called the Age of Sensibility, but in conclusion, some mention must be made of another aspect of his life and work, his relationship to the British. For some critics, his attitude has seemed outrageously sycophantic. He wrote poems to Queen Victoria, Lord Auckland, and Ellenborough as well as to the various Delhi commissioners, and he congratulated the British on their defeat of the Sikhs. He also wrote an endless series of letters seeking the renewal of his pension, and after 1857, he protected his loyalty and sought his old place in the darbar.² But possibly there is another side to all this: a reflection of the poet-patron relationship that is vital to the whole artistic tradition in the subcontinent. Ghalib was neither a democrat nor a populist; he saw the ruler as necessarily the patron of the artist. There was nothing demeaning in this relationship, for it was the artist's right

¹ Although they were not available when this lecture was prepared, the splendid translations in Ahmed Ali, *Ghalib*, in *Serie Orientale Roma*, xxxix, 1969, seem to confirm this interpretation.

² *Ghalib and the English*, the catalogue of an exhibition arranged at the National Archives, New Delhi, February, 1969, provides documentation for this aspect of the poet's life.

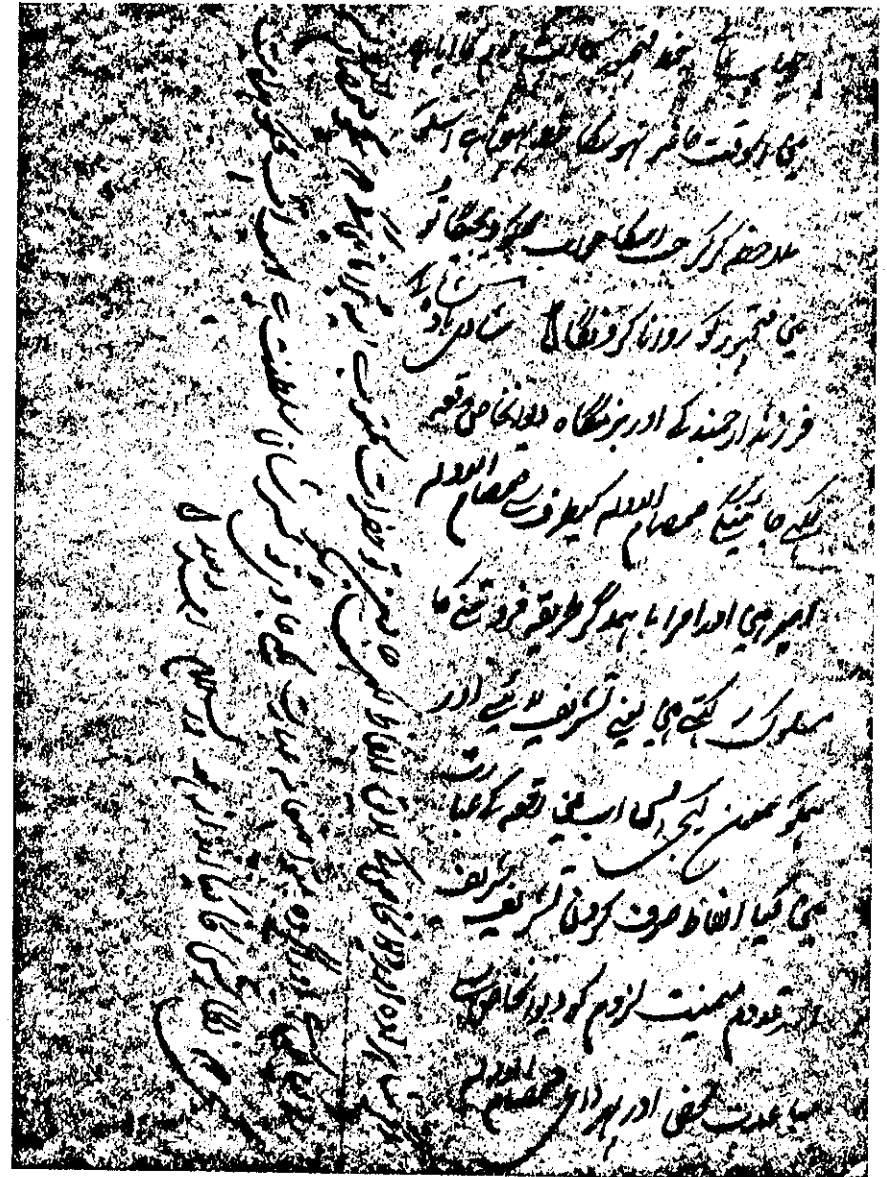
to demand patronage as it was the ruler's duty to provide it. What this meant was that while the poets and the artists were dependent upon the court, not the people, they were fulfilling a social function—and compelling the rulers to acknowledge the claims of art. So, while Ghalib's poetry is the product of a courtly relationship, as is Braj Bhasha poetry and Rajput painting—it is also, by the same token, a product of the social order itself. In seeking British patronage, Ghalib was thus seeking a continuation of the world that he knew.

This is why there is a special poignancy to Ghalib's life and work after 1857. Insofar as any date can mark the end of an era, 1857 signalled the end of the world Ghalib represented. The destruction caused in Delhi, first by the mutineers and then by the victorious armies of the Government of India, was symbolic, and symbolic in the sense I have already noted. As long as the Mughal court remained, there was a center, however, impoverished, that could serve as a focus for art and literature. The formal end of imperial power symbolized the passing of power to new cities—Bombay, Calcutta, Madras—and to new classes. Ghalib's assertion of his rights, and his protestations of loyalty are the claims of the old order on the new. They were not met, because the new age, with its own values and its own standards of excellence, had no place for them. But neither the new age nor the old should be judged by the standards of the other; both should be accepted in their own terms for what they say about man's fate and for the insights they provide for making our lives more human and more tolerable. For this enterprise, let Ghalib speak from his time and place:

نقش فریادی ہے کس کی شوخی تحریر کا
کاغذی ہے پیرن ہر پیکر تصویر کا

*Listen to the reverberations
Of my lament,
Which in these tattered verses
Finds embodiment,
Inscribed upon this parchment*

Of poetic art,
 Is the timeless story
 Of my tormented heart.
 Upon every desolate page
 Is my sorrow and my rage;
 Tarnished images that cry out for mercy
 In the vast corridors of eternity.*



Facsimile of Ghalib's handwriting

* From an unpublished translation by Daud Kamal of the Department of English, Peshawar University.