

# GHALIB: A SELF-PORTRAIT

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On February 15, 1969 it was exactly a hundred years since Ghālib died. It seems to me fitting that in celebrating his centenary we should begin by remembering him not as a great poet of Urdu and Persian – although he *is* that – and not as a great writer of Urdu and Persian prose – although he is that too – but as a man; and that is why in this paper I propose to present a portrait of him as a man, a portrait which one can draw almost entirely in extracts from his own writings. I must confess that there are other reasons too for this choice of subject. I am addressing myself to an audience part of which knows Ghālib's poetry well, and part of which knows it not at all. The British element in my audience has not reached that desirable stage of cultural development which would enable it to appreciate Ghālib's poetry without a good deal of explanation, and a paper in which Ghālib is first introduced is not, I think, one in which I should launch into such a venture. On the other hand, even Urdu speakers may find in the picture which I present at any rate *some* features with which they are not already familiar – features which, I hope, will enhance still more their enjoyment of his poetry. I hope, therefore, that this self-portrait may be of interest to all.

I propose to portray Ghālib mainly in terms of extracts from his prose writings, both Persian and Urdu,<sup>1</sup> and I should perhaps explain at the outset that there are considerable differences between his Persian and his Urdu prose styles. His Urdu is in general almost conversational in its style; his Persian on the other hand, is prose of a highly formal, stylized kind, to which he devoted as much care as he did to his poetry. It is markedly rhythmical, often rhyming, with much alliteration and play upon words. Critics

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Ghālib, Life and Letters*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1969. Page references in subsequent footnotes are to this book.

have tended all too often to assume that it is somehow lacking in sincerity and in natural appeal. That is a view which I emphatically do not share. At any rate, in translating it I have tried to reproduce something of the character of the original. I must leave it to you to decide how far it makes its intended impact.

Ghālib, as many of you will know, came from a family of soldiers – men of Turkish stock who had emigrated to India from an area that now falls within the territory of the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. It was an ancestry of which he was inordinately proud, and Hāli is echoing Ghālib's own words when he writes:

'His ancestors traced their pedigree back to Tur, the son of Faridun [a legendary king of ancient Persia]. When the Kayyanis conquered all Iran and Turan, and the power and majesty of the Turanis departed from this world, the line of Tur was for a long time stripped of its dominion and its wealth. But the sword never fell from its hand, for among the Turks it was an age-old tradition that when a man died, the son inherited only his sword, and the rest of his property and wealth and home went to the daughter. At length, after many years, during the period of Islam, by the power of this same sword the Turks restored their fallen fortunes, and in the Seljuk dynasty the foundation of a mighty empire was laid. For several centuries it ruled over all Iran and Turan, and over Syria and Rum [i.e. Asia Minor], until at last after many years the Seljuks' empire came to an end, and their sons were scattered and dispersed abroad. One of them was Tarsam Khan, a man of noble birth, who made his home in Samarkand. And it was from this Tarsam Khan that Ghālib's grandfather . . . was descended.'<sup>1</sup>

Ghālib, I think, often regretted that he could not follow in their footsteps. He was the first to break with their tradition. His grandfather, he tells us, had served under the Emperor Shāh Alam. His own father had lived a soldier's life, and indeed had been killed in battle.<sup>2</sup> But for Ghālib himself a different destiny was intended. He writes in one of his Persian letters:

'Alas for my fate! born to be struck down by misfortune and to see my granaries reduced to ashes! I had not the means to

<sup>1</sup> p. 27.<sup>2</sup> p. 23.

ride to war like my ancestors . . . nor the capacity to excel in knowledge and ability like Avicenna and the wise men of old. I said to myself, "Be a darvish and live a life of freedom." But the love of poetry which I had brought with me from eternity assailed me and won my soul, saying, "To polish the mirror and show in it the face of meaning – this too is a mighty work. The command of armies and the mastery of learning is not for you. Give up the thought of being a darvish, and set your face in the path of poetry." Willy-nilly I did so, and launched my ship upon the illusory sea of verse. My pen became my banner, and the broken arrows of my ancestors became my pens.'<sup>1</sup>

He was born in Agra, in December 1797, and spent his boyhood there, until at the age of thirteen he was married to a bride of eleven and shortly afterwards made his permanent home in Delhi. Late in life he recalled his early days there. He writes to a young Hindu friend:

'[Your grandfather] and I were about the same age – there may have been a year or two's difference one way or the other. Anyway, I was about nineteen or twenty and he was about the same. We were close friends and used to play chess together; we would often sit together until late into the night. His house was quite near mine and he used to come and see me whenever he liked. There was only Machia the courtesan's house and the two by-lanes between us. Our big mansion is the one that now belongs to Lakhmi Chand Seth. I used to spend most of my time in the stone summer-house near the main entrance. I used to fly my kite from the roof of a house in one of the lanes nearby and match it against Rājā Balwan Singh's.'<sup>2</sup>

He remembered Agra for rather less innocent pleasures too, to which he refers in a suitably vague and delicate way in a Persian letter written to his wife's kinsman Ziya ud Din Ahmad, perhaps not many years after he had settled in Delhi. Ziya ud Din Ahmad was visiting Agra, and Ghālib writes to him:

'Twin soul of mine, may Agra's air and water, distilled from hapless Ghālib's sighs and tears, rejoice your heart. Though we are far apart, yet the power of thought of my far-ranging mind has brought our oneness to the point where distance dares not to

<sup>1</sup> p. 28.<sup>2</sup> p. 179.

draw near. Granted that you have gone on a far journey and that the thought is near to you that you are far from me; and yet while you yet stay in the city of my birth, then truly we are near to one another. And I rejoice because my love that sees afar has sent my eyes and heart with you upon this journey, that I too, held in this place of exile [Delhi], may pay due tribute of joy at the sight of the city of my birth. Let no man look upon Agra as of slight account, but as he passes through her roads call on God's preserving and protecting power to hold her in its keeping. For she... was once the playground of my love-distracted heart. There was a time when in her soil only the mandrake grew, and, save the heart, her trees would bear no other fruit, and the drunken breeze of morning ranged through her gardens to lift up and to bear away men's hearts so that the drunkard longed no longer for his morning draught, so that the pious bent his mind no more to prayer. To every grain of dust of that land in flower my body sends it message of love, and on every leaf in those fair gardens my soul calls benedictions to rain down.<sup>1</sup>

Though he was only in his teens when he came to Delhi to live, he had already acquired some reputation as a poet, and it was a reputation which he maintained and enhanced as the years went by. But it was not only his poetry that made him popular, for he was a remarkable man in many ways – remarkable for his personal appearance, for his frankness, for his friendliness, for his originality and for his wit. There is plenty of independent evidence to support what he has written about himself in this sort of connection, but I shall quote mainly his own words. In 1861 he wrote to a friend who had had his portrait done and sent it for Ghālib to see:

'Your auspicious portrait has gladdened my sight. I must have said some time in the company of friends, "I should like to see Mirza Hatim Ali. I hear he's a man of very striking appearance." And, my friend, I had often heard this from Mughal Jan. In the days when she was in Nawwāb Hāmid Ali Khan's service I used to know her extremely well, and I often used to spend hours together in her company. She also showed the verse you wrote in praise of her beauty.

'Anyway, when I saw your portrait and saw how tall you

<sup>1</sup> p. 29.

were, I didn't feel jealous because I too am noticeably tall. And I didn't feel jealous of your wheaten complexion because mine, in the days when I was in the land of the living, used to be even fairer, and people of discrimination used to praise it.'

In the same letter he speaks of his aversion to following current fashions. The day came, he says, when he decided to grow a beard:

'But remember that in this uncouth city [Delhi] everybody wears a sort of uniform. *Mullahs*, junk-dealers, *hookah*-menders, washermen, water-carriers, innkeepers, weavers, greengrocers – all of them wear their hair long and grow a beard. The day your humble servant grew a beard he had *his* hair shaved off – but God save us! what am I prattling about?'<sup>1</sup>

The reference to the lady in the extract I quoted a moment ago indicates quite frankly one of the features of his life at this time. The terms in which he writes of her show quite clearly that she was a courtesan. He himself tells us that somewhere about this time he was in love with a *domnī*, that is, one of a Hindu caste of singing and dancing girls. More than forty years later he was to speak of the grief he felt when she died:

'It is forty years or more since it happened, [he writes] and although I long ago abandoned such things and left the field once and for all, there are times even now when the memory of her charming ways comes back to me and I shall not forget her death as long as I live.'<sup>2</sup>

A Persian letter written many years earlier refers perhaps to this same woman. And it describes not only his grief but the philosophy of love and of life which he formed at the time and to which he adhered for the rest of his life. The letter is written to a friend who, it seems, had recently suffered a similar loss. Ghālib writes:

'In the days of my youth, when the blackness of my deeds outdid the blackness of my hair, and my head held the tumult of the love of fair-faced women, Fate poured into my cup too the poison of this pain, and as the bier of my beloved was borne along the road, the dust rose from the road of that fortitude which was my essence. In the brightness of broad day I sat on

<sup>1</sup> pp. 203-4.

<sup>2</sup> p. 249.

sack-cloth and clad myself in black in mourning for my mistress, and in the black nights, in the solitude of sorrow, I was the moth that flew to the flame of her burnt-out candle. . .

'Yet though grief tears at the soul and the pain of parting for ever crushes the heart, the truth is that to true men truth brings no pain; and amid this tearing of the soul and this crushing of the heart we must strive to ponder: Where is the balm that can banish this distress? . . . A man must amid the sorrow that melts the soul, set out to learn the lesson of fortitude. . . The nightingale, notorious for love, pours forth his melody for every rose that blooms, and the moth to whose great passion all men point, gives his wings to the flame of every candle that makes radiant her face. Truly, the candles radiant in the assembly are many, and roses bloom in the garden abundantly. Why should the moth grieve when one candle dies? When one rose fades and falls why should the nightingale lament? A man should let the world of colour and fragrance win his heart, not bind it in the shackles of one love. Better that in the assembly of desire he draw afresh from within himself the harmonies of happiness, and draw into his embrace some enchanting beauty who may restore his lost heart to its place and once more steal it away.'<sup>1</sup>

Where Ghālib can write frankly of matters such as these it is hardly surprising that he made no secret of the fact that he never kept the more troublesome commandments of his religion – never said the five daily prayers, never kept the Ramzan fast, had no ambition to perform the Pilgrimage to Mecca, and broke the prohibition on wine. Hālī wrote of him:

'From all the duties of worship and the enjoined practices of Islam he took only two – a belief that God is one and is immanent in all things, and a love for the Prophet and his family. And this alone he considered sufficient for salvation.'<sup>2</sup>

Ghālib continued to live in Delhi until he was nearly thirty, when, for reasons that need not concern us here, he went to Calcutta. He was away for nearly three years, and though he did not achieve what he went for, he enjoyed travelling and he liked Calcutta very much. For some extraordinary reason, if my Bengali friends will excuse me for saying this, he even liked the

<sup>1</sup> p. 43.<sup>2</sup> p. 35.

Calcutta climate. And in a short poem he wrote after his return he speaks of the other things he liked about it – its greenery, its pretty women, its fruits, and its wines:

Ah me, my friend! The mention of Calcutta's name  
Has loosed a shaft that pierces to my very soul.  
Its greenery and verdure take away your breath;  
Its women's charms are such that none escapes them whole.  
Their glances pierce the armour of the stoutest breast;  
What heart withstands the blandishments of forms so fair?  
All freshness and all sweetness are its luscious fruits;  
Its mellow wines are pleasing beyond all compare.<sup>1</sup>

When he speaks of 'its luscious fruits', what he has first and foremost in mind are undoubtedly mangoes. Like all men of sound taste he had a passion for mangoes. And, again like all men of sound taste, he knew the proper way to eat them:

'I once said how I wished I could get to Marahra during the rains and eat mangoes to my heart's content and my belly's capacity. But where shall I recover the strength I once had? I neither have the same appetite for mangoes nor the same capacity to hold so many. I never ate them first thing in the morning, nor immediately after the midday meal; and I cannot say that I ate them between lunch and dinner because I never took an evening meal. I would sit down to eat them towards evening, when my food was fully digested, and I tell you bluntly, I would eat them until my belly was bloated and I could hardly breathe. Even now I eat them at the same time of day, but not more than ten to twelve, or, if they are of the large . . . kind, only six or seven.'<sup>2</sup>

He returned from Calcutta to Delhi, and so life went on. He was generally in debt, for he lived in a style a good deal more lavish than his regular income could support, and all his attempts to supplement it were for years together almost without result. In general he did not let this depress him unduly, though there were certainly times when he felt it keenly and wrote bitterly about it. But in 1847, when he was in his fiftieth year, he suffered a terrible and quite unexpected blow. He was charged with keeping a gambling establishment at his house, was convicted, and spent

<sup>1</sup> p. 49.<sup>2</sup> p. 245.

three months in jail. More painful to him even than this was the way in which all his friends and admirers deserted him at this crisis. Only one – Mustafa Khan Shefta – stood by him in his need. His wife's relatives, who had been his friends and great admirers of his poetry, would have nothing to do with him at this time. All this is reflected in a poem which he wrote from jail. I give a much shortened version of some of its verses. He begins:

Here within prison walls confined I tune the lute of poetry  
That sorrow bursting from my heart, transmuted into melody,  
May sing a song to draw forth blood – that even from captivity  
I may work wonders in the world, and build a tavern for the  
free.

Thus shall I labour hard; hard labour consorts with  
imprisonment.

Bonds shall no longer choke my voice, and I will sing my  
heart's lament.

He continues with two verses in which he speaks with bitter irony of his self-styled 'friends':

Old friends, you must not incommode yourselves to come and  
visit me,

And knock upon my door – I cannot open it as formerly.  
Imprisoned thieves are now my friends, and bow to my  
supremacy.

I still their clamour, telling them, 'Outside there is no loyalty.'

The sentence passed upon me, true, is not for all eternity,  
But from the world I look no more for joy that makes man  
truly free.

And in contrast, he greets his new companions in prison and expresses the warmest gratitude to Shefta – Mustafa Khan Shefta – who alone stood by him:

But prison warders, prison guards, assemble here, for I am  
come.

Open the gates to welcome me as I draw near, for I am come.  
Friends, prisoners in your narrow cells, be of good cheer, for I  
am come.

A poet's words, a poet's wisdom you shall hear, for I am come.

When friends and kinsmen all have turned away from me  
in my disgrace  
Why should I not find comfort here from strangers, captive  
in this place?

It was no policeman sent me here, no magistrate, no power of  
earth –

This suffering, this imprisonment, was written in my fate at  
birth.

And what of that? One noble man, Mustafa Khan, despite this  
dearth

Of noble men, asks after me, and makes me see my own true  
worth.

He is God's mercy, God's compassion, sent in human  
form for me.

And if I die I shall not grieve, knowing that he will mourn  
for me.<sup>1</sup>

His experiences taught him something he never forgot. It showed him how different were the values which respectable men professed from those which they practised when it came to the test, and convinced him that those few who, like himself, really practised the standards of conduct which society proclaimed, were calling down misfortune upon their own heads. It must have been with the experience of 1847 very much in mind that he wrote to one of his friends fourteen years later:

'Glory to God! I find that in so many things you and I have shared the same fate – ill-treatment from our relatives, grievance against our kin.

'... You are a prey to grief and sorrow, but... to be the target of the world's afflictions is proof of an inherent nobility – proof clear, and argument conclusive...'<sup>2</sup>

But after his release from jail his fortunes took a turn for the better. He was befriended by men who had influence with the Mughal King, Bahadur Shāh, and who secured for him what in many years of effort he had not been able to secure for himself, the patronage of the Mughal court. Three years later, in 1850, he was commissioned to write a history of the Mughal dynasty. In succeeding years he became the *ustād* – the mentor in poetry – of

<sup>1</sup> pp. 68–70.

<sup>2</sup> p. 264.

the King, gained the patronage of the heir apparent and, briefly, a stipend from the King of Oudh. At no time in his adult life was he materially so well off as he was in these years. But, as a poet and writer, this was not primarily what he wanted. He saw himself above all as a great Persian poet, but what the King demanded of him was Persian prose, Urdu poetry, and even – most deplorably of all – Urdu prose. He is pretty blunt in expressing some of these feelings in the preamble to the history he was writing for the King.

‘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.’”’

Having thus made it clear that what the King has given him is very much a second preference he goes on to say how fortunate he is to be writing for the King, and then, being Ghālib, goes straight on to add how fortunate the King is to have Ghālib writing for him:

‘...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 Ghālib, 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.’<sup>1</sup>

He was always very free in his behaviour towards the King. To this period belong some of the best-known anecdotes about his attitude to his religious obligations. Ghālib rarely allowed any serious discussion of this, and nearly always turned aside any serious criticism with a joke. When a man read him a lecture against wine-drinking and told him that the prayers of the wine-

<sup>1</sup> p. 73.

drinker are never granted, Ghālib replied: ‘My friend, if a man has wine, what does he *need* to pray for?’<sup>1</sup> A *ghazal* which he recited before the King ended in the verse:

Ghālib, you write so well upon these mystic themes of love  
divine  
We would have counted you a saint, but that we knew your  
love of wine.

Hāli says: “I have been told that when Ghālib recited this *ghazal*, the King commented on the final couplet, ‘No, my friend; even so we should never have counted you a saint.’ Ghālib replied, ‘Your Majesty counts me one even now, and only speaks like this lest my sainthood should go to my head.’”<sup>2</sup>

Once at the end of the Ramzan fast the King asked him: ‘Mirza, how many days’ fasts did you keep?’ Ghālib 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.<sup>3</sup>

When the King contemplated making the Pilgrimage to Mecca, Ghālib, who was only rarely able to gratify the love of travel which I mentioned earlier, proposed this bargain to him:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Ghālib’s period of relative prosperity did not last very long. In 1857 came the great revolt sparked off by the sepoy mutiny of May, and by the end of September, with the British re-occupation of Delhi, the Mughal court departed from the stage of history, never to return.

Ghālib may or may not have foreseen the revolt, but he did know that the British were moving towards the ending of Mughal power, and he tried to safeguard his livelihood beforehand. In his book one of the recognized functions of royal courts was to maintain good poets, and he therefore drew the attention of the wealthiest royal court in sight to the fact that he would be an eminently suitable recipient of its generosity. In other words, he wrote to Queen Victoria. In case she was not too familiar with the proper forms he explained them to her. He tells us:

<sup>1</sup> p. 36.<sup>2</sup> pp. 101-2.<sup>3</sup> p. 101.<sup>4</sup> p. 101.

'I indicated what my expectations were by saying that the emperors of Rum and of Persia, and other conquering kings, had been accustomed to bestow all manner of bounties on their poets and panegyrists. They would fill a poet's mouth with pearls, or weight him in gold, or grant him villages in fief or open the door of their treasuries to shower wealth upon him. "And so your poet and panegyrist seeks a title bestowed by the imperial tongue, and a robe of honour conferred by the imperial command, and a crust of bread from the imperial table."'

He didn't know, poor man, that the British monarchy was a horse of a very different colour from the monarchies *he* knew about. He received a polite reply which much encouraged him, but that was about all he ever did receive.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the revolt itself Ghālib stayed in Delhi. He himself tells us what he did:

'On May 11, 1857 the disorders began here. On that same day I shut the doors and gave up going out. One cannot pass the days without something to do, and I began to write my experiences, appending also such news as I heard from time to time.'<sup>2</sup>

I think there can be no doubt that he was entirely out of sympathy with the revolt, not, I think, because of any fervent loyalty to the British, but because he was a shrewd and realistic man: he estimated that the revolt was bound to fail, and that failure would bring disaster in its train. Moreover he was a very self-conscious aristocrat, and it was evident to him that it was men whom he regarded as plebeian riff-raff that were the driving force of the revolt. His contempt for them, and his sympathies for the aristocratic elements who suffered at their hands is evident in what he writes. But if his sympathies were not with the rebels, neither did he condone the excesses which the British committed, especially against the Muslims. He writes in a short poem of the time:

Now every English soldier that bears arms  
Is sovereign, and free to work his will...

The city is athirst for Muslim blood  
And every grain of dust must drink its fill...<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> p. 149.

He wrote bitterly of the execution of three Muslim nobles – Nawwābs of three small estates in the neighbourhood of Delhi:

'[They] have been taken separately, on separate days, and hung on the gallows tree, that none might say that their blood has been shed.'<sup>1</sup>

And the events of 1857 deeply affected his own family – his wife (for whom however, as he bluntly tells us, he had no particular love), his two adopted children and his younger brother. Extracts from his diary here tell their own story.

'I am face to face with misfortune, and wild and fearful fancies throng my heart. Formerly I had none to support but my one wife, with neither son nor daughter. But some five years ago, I took to my bosom two orphaned boys from the family of my wife, prime source of all my troubles. They had just learned to talk, and love for these sweetly-speaking children has melted me and made me one with them. Even now in my ruined state they are with me, adorning my life as pearls and flowers adorn my coat. My brother, who is two years younger than I, at thirty years of age gave sense and reason to the winds and trod the ways of madness and unreason. For thirty years he has passed his life unaware, troubling no man and making no commotion. His house is apart from mine, at a distance of about 2,000 paces. His wife and daughter, with the younger children and the maidservants, saw that their best course lay in flight, and went away, leaving the mad master of the house with the house and all it contained, with an aged doorkeeper and an old maidservant, to fend for himself. Had I had an enchanter's power I could not in those days have sent anyone to bring the three of them and their goods to me. This is another heavy sorrow, another calamity that has descended on me like an avalanche. Two tender children, tenderly reared and cherished, ask for milk and sweets and fruit, and I cannot give them. Alas! at such a stage the tongue falls silent. We live in anxious thought for bread and water, and die in anxious thought for shroud and grave. Constant care for my brother consumes me. How did he sleep at night? What did he eat by day? And no news comes, so

<sup>1</sup> p. 148.



that I cannot even tell if he be still alive or if the weight of constant hardship has broken and killed him...<sup>1</sup>

On Wednesday, September 30th, seventeen days after the taking of the city and the sealing of our lane, news was brought to me that robbers had attacked my brother's house and looted it, and the whole lane had been plundered. But they spared ...[his] life and those of the old doorkeeper and old maid-servant...<sup>2</sup>

'On October 19th, in the first watch of the day, my brother's doorkeeper with downcast face and dishevelled hair, brought me the joyous news of my brother's death. I learned that he had taken the road to oblivion and walked with hurrying steps: for five days he had burned in high fever, and then half an hour after midnight, had urged the steed of life to leap from this narrow pass. Think not of water and cloths, seek not for corpse-washers and grave-diggers, ask not for stone or brick, talk not of lime and mortar; but say how can I go to him? Where can I take him? In what graveyard can I consign him to the earth? Cloth, from the dearest and finest to the cheapest and coarsest, is not to be had. Hindus may take their dead to the river and there at the water's edge consign them to the fire. But what of the Muslims? How could a Muslim join with two or three of his fellows and, joining shoulder to shoulder, pass through the streets carrying their dead to burial? My neighbours took pity on my loneliness and at length girded their loins to the task. One of the Patiala soldiers went in front, and two of my servants followed. They washed the corpse, wrapped it in two or three white sheets they had brought with them, and in a mosque at the side of his house dug a hole in the ground. In this they laid him, filled up the pit with earth once more, and came away. Alas for him who in his life of sixty years passed thirty happily and thirty in sadness...God grant him His mercy - for in his life he knew no comfort - and send some angel for his delight and grant his soul to dwell in Paradise for ever. Alas for this good man of ill-fortune...who in the years of sanity never showed anger and in the years of madness troubled no man...but lived his life a stranger to himself... and on the twenty-ninth of the month of Safar, died.

<sup>1</sup> p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 143-4.

Bow down your head and ask for God's forgiveness;  
Where'er you do so, there His threshold is.'<sup>1</sup>

A year later, when he looked back on events, what grieved him perhaps most of all was the loss of so many of his friends. He had friends in all camps - among the British, among the Hindus, among the Muslims who aided the British and the Muslims who supported the revolt - and he mourned all of them deeply and sincerely.

He once wrote to Tufta:

'I hold all mankind to be my kin and look upon all men - Muslim, Hindu, Christian - as my brothers, no matter what others may think.'<sup>2</sup>

And a year after the revolt he wrote:

'How grievous it is to mourn *one* loved one. What must his life be like who has to mourn so many? Alas! so many of my friends are dead that now if I should die there will be none to weep for me.'<sup>3</sup>

This intense feeling of loneliness never quite left him throughout the eleven years of life that remained to him. The British re-took Delhi in September 1857, and at once expelled most of the population from the city. *Hindu* residents were allowed to return only three months later, in January 1858. It was more than two years before *Muslims* were allowed to return and take up permanent residence. All this time Ghālib was there, but his friends were scattered far and wide. He comforted himself by writing letter after letter to them, and the great collection which resulted constitutes, after his poetry, his greatest memorial. He once wrote to Tufta:

'In this solitude it is letters that keep me alive. Someone writes to me and I feel he has come to see me. By God's favour not a day passes but three or four letters come from this side and that; in fact there are days when I get letters by both posts - one or two in the morning and one or two in the afternoon. I spend the day reading them and answering them, and it keeps me happy. Why is it that for ten and twelve days together you haven't written - that is haven't been to see me? Write to

<sup>1</sup> pp. 145-6.

<sup>2</sup> p. 226.

<sup>3</sup> p. 153.



me, Sāhib. Write why you haven't written. Don't grudge the half-anna postage. And if you're so hard up, send the letter unstamped.<sup>1</sup>

From then to his death the situation did not change much in this respect. His friends could not come to Delhi, and he generally lacked the money, and increasingly, the physical health, to leave Delhi to visit them.

Life increasingly became a burden to him, and he repeatedly expressed a longing to die which I think he genuinely felt. Meanwhile it was characteristic of him that he never, to the very end, lost the sense of humour which was his main shield against the afflictions of life. At one time he was convinced that he would die in the Muslim year 1277, corresponding to 1860/1 of the Christian calendar. Two years before that date he wrote:

'You know that when despair reaches its lowest depths there is nothing left but to resign oneself to God's will. Well, what lower depths can there be than this that it is the hope of death that keeps me alive? And my resignation gains strength from day to day because I have only another two to two and a half years to live; and somehow the time will pass. I know you will laugh and think to yourself I am talking nonsense. But call it divine revelation or call it superstition, I have had this verse kept by for the past twenty years...'

He then quotes a verse which incorporates a chronogram – a form of words from which a date can be deduced – giving 1277 as the year of his death.<sup>2</sup>

As 1277 approached he looked forward to it more and more:

'How much life is left to me? Seven months of this year and twelve of next year. Then in this very month I shall go to my Master, where hunger and thirst and piercing cold and raging heat will be no more. No ruler to be dreaded, no informer to be feared, no rent to be paid, no clothes to be bought, no meat to be sent for, no bread to be baked. A world of light, a state of pure delight.

O Lord, how dear to me is this my wish:  
Grant Thou that to this wish I may attain!

<sup>1</sup> p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> p. 192.

The slave of Ali, son of Abi Talib,  
Who longs for death's release,

Your servant,

Ghālib.<sup>1</sup>

But in due course 1277 came and went, and Ghālib didn't die. One of his friends wrote to ask him why his prophecy had not come true. Ghālib replied pointing out that there had been an epidemic of cholera in Delhi:

'My friend, I was not mistaken about 1277, but I thought it beneath me to die in general epidemic. Really, it would have been an action most unworthy of me. Once this trouble is over we shall see about it.'<sup>2</sup>

In other moods he was thankful that he had been spared. He replied to a friend who had written some verses to him congratulating him upon his escape:

'Lord and Master, to what can I compare the couplets you write in my praise and how can I thank God sufficiently for them? It is God's goodness to His servants that makes His chosen favourites speak well of a such a disgrace to creation as I am. It seems that this great good fortune was written in my fate that I should come through this general epidemic alive. O God, my God, praise to Thee that Thou hast saved one who deserved death by sword or fire, and then raised him to high estate! I sometimes feel that the throne of heaven is my lodging and Paradise my back garden. In God's name compose no more verses in my praise, or I shall not shrink from claiming Godhead myself!'<sup>3</sup>

The mention of the cholera epidemic prompts me to say in passing that one of the most interesting aspects of Ghālib's letters is the picture they give of the long tribulations which the people of Delhi had to suffer during these years – sufferings to which the events of 1857 were merely the prelude. Ghālib wrote in 1860:

'Five invading armies have fallen upon this city one after another: the first was that of the rebel soldiers, which robbed the city of its good name. The second was that of the British, when life and property and honour and dwellings and those who

<sup>1</sup> p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> p. 265.

dwelt in them and heaven and earth and all the visible signs of existence were stripped from it. The third was that of famine, when thousands of people died of hunger. The fourth was that of cholera, in which many whose bellies were full lost their lives. The fifth was the fever, which took general plunder of men's strength and powers of resistance. There were not many deaths, but a man who has had fever feels that all the strength has been drained from his limbs. And this invading army has not yet left the city.<sup>1</sup>

But more relevant to my present purpose are the letters in which he speaks frankly of himself, or of how he feels towards his friends. It is striking how quick he is, despite the heavy burden of his own troubles, to encourage and sustain them when *they* are in trouble. Thus he writes to Mihr:

'First I want to ask you a question. For several letters past I have noticed you lamenting your grief and sorrow. Why? If you have fallen in love with some fair cruel one, what room for complaint have you there? Rather should you wish your friends the same good fortune and seek increase of this pain. In the words of Ghālib (God's mercy be upon him!),

You gave your heart away; why then lament your loss in plaintive song?

You have a breast without a heart; why not a mouth without a tongue?

And if – which God forbid – it is more mundane griefs that beset you, then my friend, you and I have the same sorrows to bear. I bear this burden like a man, and if you are a man, so must you. As the late Ghālib says:

My heart, this grief and sorrow too is precious; for the day will come

You will not heave the midnight sigh, nor shed your tears at early morn.<sup>2</sup>

Two of his most famous letters were written to the same man on another occasion. Mihr had a mistress, a courtesan named Chunna Jan, and he was deeply grieved when she died. Ghālib writes to comfort him:

<sup>1</sup> p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 183-4.

'Mirza Šāhib, I received your letter with its grievous news. When I had read it I gave it to Yūsuf 'Alī Khān Aziz to read, and he told me of your relationship with her – how devoted to you she was and how much you loved her. I felt extremely sorry, and deeply grieved... Friend, we "Mughal lads" are terrors; we are the death of those for whom we ourselves would die. Once in my life I was the death of a fair, cruel dancing-girl. God grant both of them His forgiveness, and both of us, who bear the wounds of our beloveds' death, His mercy... I know what you must be feeling. Be patient, and turn your back on the turmoil of earthly love... God is all-sufficient: the rest is vanity.'<sup>1</sup>

We have no means of knowing how long an interval elapsed between this letter and the next, but it seems that Mihr could not overcome the grief he felt at his mistress's death, and Ghālib adopts quite another tone in an effort to rally him:

'Mirza Šāhib, I don't like the way you're going on. I have lived sixty-five years, and for fifty of them have seen all that this transient world of colour and fragrance has to show. In the days of my lusty youth a man of perfect wisdom counselled me, "Abstinence I do not approve: dissoluteness I do not forbid. Eat, drink and be merry. But remember that the wise fly settles on the sugar, and not on the honey." Well, I have always acted on his counsel. You cannot mourn another's death unless you live yourself. And why all these tears and lamentations? Give thanks to God for your freedom, and do not grieve. And if you love your chains so much, then a Munna Jan is as good as a Chunna Jan. When I think of Paradise and consider how if my sins are forgiven me and I am installed in a palace with a houri, to live for ever in the worthy woman's company, I am filled with dismay and fear brings my heart into my mouth. How wearisome to find her always there! – a greater burden than a man could bear. The same old palace, all of emerald made; the same fruit-laden tree to cast its shade. And – God preserve her from all harm – the same old houri on my arm! Come to your senses, brother, and get yourself another.

Take a new woman each returning spring  
For last year's almanac's a useless thing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> pp. 248-9.

<sup>2</sup> p. 249.

His friends were indeed very close to his heart. Tufta once wrote saying that he was afraid Ghālib was displeased with him. Ghālib replies:

‘What you have written is unkind and suspicious! Could I be cross with you? May God forbid! I pride myself that I have one friend in India who truly loves me; his name is Hargopal, and his pen-name Tufta. What could you write which would upset me? And as for what someone else may whisper, let me tell you how matters stand there. I had but one brother, who died after thirty years of madness. Suppose he had lived and had been sane and had said anything against you: I would have rebuked him and been angry with him.’<sup>1</sup>

Very occasionally something happens that provokes an explosion. In 1862 he ends a letter to Alai: ‘Stopped drinking wine on June 22nd: started again on July 10th:

Thanks be to God! The tavern door is open once again!’<sup>2</sup>

He was asked to explain what this was all about, and in his next letter (of July 28, 1862) he does so:

‘But these days all I have is the sixty-two rupees eight annas of my pension from the authorities and my hundred rupees from Rāmpūr, and only the one agent from whom I can borrow and to whom I must pay interest and an instalment of the principal month by month. There is income tax to pay, the night-watchman to pay, interest to pay, principal to pay, the upkeep of my wife, the upkeep of the children, the upkeep of the servants – and just the Rs 162 coming in. I was in difficulties, and could hardly make my way. I found I could not even meet my day-to-day needs. I thought to myself, “What shall I do? How can I solve the problem?” Well, a beggar’s anger harms no one but himself. I cut out my morning cool drink, halved the meat for my midday meal, and stopped my wine and rosewater at nights. That saved me twenty rupees or so a month, and I could meet my day-to-day expenses. My friends would ask me, “How long can you go on without your morning and evening drinks?” I said, “Until He lets me drink again.” “And how can you live without them?” they asked. “As He vouchsafes me to

<sup>1</sup> p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> p. 272.

live,” I replied. At length, before the month was out I was sent money from Rāmpūr, over and above my stipend. I paid off the accumulated instalments on my regular debt. That left the miscellaneous ones – well, be it so. My morning drink and wine at night were restored, and I again began to eat my full quota of meat.

‘Since your father asked why I had stopped drinking and then started again, read this part of my letter to him...’

He then turns upon one Hamza Khan, a *maulvi* who had once been tutor to Alai in his childhood and had now been ill-advised enough to have Alai write to Ghālib that it was time to act on the words of Hāfiz:

Hāfiz, old age besets you: leave the tavern now.  
Debauchery and drinking go along with youth.

Without even breaking the sentence, Ghālib goes straight on:

‘... and give my respects to Hamza Khan and tell him:

You who have never known the taste of wine  
We drink unceasingly

‘You see how He vouchsafes me drink? To make a name as a *maulvi* by teaching the *baniyas* and brats of Dariba, and to wallow in the problems of menstruation and post-natal bleeding is one thing; and to study the works of the mystics and take into one’s heart the essential truth of God’s reality and His expression in all things is another. Hell is for those who deny the oneness of God, who hold that His existence partakes of the order of the eternal and the possible, believe that Musailma shares with the Prophet the rank of the Seal of the Prophets, and rank newly-converted Muslims with the Father of the Imāms. My belief in God’s oneness is untainted, and my faith is perfect. My tongue repeats, “There is no god but God,” and my heart believes, “Nothing exists but God, and God alone works manifest in all things.” All prophets were to be honoured, and submission to each in his own time was the duty of man. With Muḥammad (peace be upon him) prophethood came to an end. He is the Seal of the Prophets and God’s Blessing to the Worlds... Then came the office of Imām, conferred not by the consensus of men, but by God: and the Imām ordained by God is ‘Alī (peace be

upon him), then Ḥasan, then Ḥusain, and thus onwards until the promised Mahdī (peace be upon him):

In this belief I live, in this I die.

‘Yes, and there is this more to be said, that I hold free-thinking and atheism to be abhorrent, and wine-drinking to be forbidden, and myself to be a sinner. And if God casts me into Hell, it will not be to burn me, but that I may become added fuel to the flames, making them flare more fiercely to burn those who deny God’s oneness and reject the prophethood of Muḥammad and the Imāmate of ‘Alī. . . And now you graduate from school-mastering and take up preaching to seventy-year-olds. By dint of repeated fasting you memorize one verse of Ḥāfiz:

Ḥāfiz, old age besets you, etc.

and recite it – and that before one who has written twice and three times as much verse as Ḥāfiz did, to say nothing of prose. And you do not observe that as against this one verse, Ḥāfiz has thousands which contradict it!’<sup>1</sup>

The letter is interesting also as one of the very few places where Ghālib speaks seriously of his religious beliefs.

Besides letter-writing he spent much of his time in these years correcting and polishing the verses which his many friends who bowed to his poetic superiority submitted to him. It was a task which he enjoyed, and it is evident that he took great pains with it. Tufta, who was a full-time poet, and prolific one at that, once apologized for sending so much at a time for him to correct. Ghālib replied:

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

<sup>1</sup> pp. 273-4.

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. . . .’<sup>2</sup>

But if he was kind he was also firm. And he had a very independent approach to the generally recognized authorities on Persian usage and Persian poetry. He once wrote bluntly of the poet Ḥazīn – and Ḥazīn was one whom he regarded as a *good* poet – that he had used an entirely superfluous word in one of his verses:

‘In this couplet [which he has just quoted] Ḥazīn has written one “*hanox*” 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? Ḥazīn 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.’<sup>2</sup>

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.

And he once gave him even more general guidance:

‘Don’t think that everything men wrote in former ages is correct. There were fools born in those days too. . . .’<sup>3</sup>

On occasion he helped his pupils and friends to compose odes to various prospective patrons. In his day patronage was still the mainstay of poetry, and the first move for any aspiring poet who wanted the time and opportunity to practise his art was to find himself a patron who would be willing to support him, or at any rate *contribute* to his support. He would compose an ode in such a man’s praise, present it to him, and hope for the best. Ghālib not only polished his pupils’ odes for them, but sometimes even wrote them for them. He often comments sarcastically when some

<sup>2</sup> pp. 91-2.

<sup>3</sup> p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> p. 279.

intended patron doesn't respond as Ghālib thinks he should. Thus he writes to Tufta:

'Listen to me, my friend. The man to whom you addressed your ode is as much a stranger to the art of poetry as you and I are to the problems of our respective religions. In fact you and I, in spite of our ignorance of religious matters, at any rate have no aversion for them while this is a fellow whom poetry makes sick. . . These people aren't fit to be spoken of, much less to be praised.'<sup>1</sup>

The only consolation in such circumstances was that the ode was generally a paean of praise in such exaggerated and unspecific terms that if it failed to secure the desired response from one prospective patron, it might, with a few alterations here and there, be made suitable for presentation to another. Ghālib used his odes in this way on at least one occasion. He had written an ode in praise of the last-but-one King of Oudh, Amjad Ali Shāh, which for some reason had never been presented. Amjad Ali Shāh was succeeded by Wājid Ali Shāh. In Urdu and Persian metre the two names scan exactly the same. So when Ghālib had occasion to present an ode to Wājid Ali Shāh he just changed the names and used the old ode. He wrote of what he had done: 'I put Wājid Ali Shāh in Amjad Ali Shāh's place. After all, God Himself did the same.'<sup>2</sup>

While he helped his friends in this way he had nothing much to offer from successful experience of this sort of operation. It was not until he was in his fifties that his own efforts in this direction had produced any very substantial results. Indeed, in one rather sourly humorous passage he reflects that his odes seem to have a disastrous effect.

'No one whom I praise survives it. One ode apiece was enough to dispatch Nasir ud Din Haidar and Amjad Ali Shāh [Kings of Oudh]. Wājid Ali Shāh [the last king] stood up to three, and then collapsed. A man to whom I addressed ten to twenty odes would end up on the far side of oblivion.'<sup>3</sup>

In the last years of his life, writing letters and correcting his friends' verses remained virtually his only occupations. His health was failing. He had started going deaf many years earlier and had

<sup>1</sup> p. 316.<sup>2</sup> p. 222.<sup>3</sup> p. 254.

sometimes suffered from persistent boils and other maladies which he ascribed to overheating of the blood. In 1863 he fell ill again, and this time it was a painful, long-continued illness which depressed and embittered him. The conduct of his friends at this time distressed him a good deal. He *told* them how ill he was, and asked their forgiveness if he could not reply at once to their letters or correct and return their verses promptly. But it seemed as though they simply refused to register how ill he was. He writes to one:

'Today I got another letter from my lord and master. I have not read it yet, but Shāh Alam Shāhib has written on the back of it, "You have not replied to my letter"—although. . . I have already written to say that I no longer have the strength to write or the quickness of mind to correct verses. Why should I repeat the same thing a dozen times? I conceive two possible ends to my present state: recovery, or death. In the first case I will inform you myself; in the second, all my friends will know of it from others. I write these lines as I lie in bed.'<sup>1</sup>

Even Tufta was no exception, and Ghālib writes to him bitterly:

'I wrote to you that I was well, and you believe it and offer thanks to God. I wrote what I had said about the severity of my illness was poetic exaggeration, and I expect you believe that too, although both these things were said ironically. I am sick of lies, and heartily curse all liars. I never tell a lie. But when all my attempts to persuade you I was telling the truth had no effect, then I wrote and told you I was well. And I did so after I had sworn to myself that so long as there was breath in my body, so long as my hand could hold a pen, and so long as I could contemplate correcting your verse, I would send back the very next day every sheet of paper you sent to me. Briefly, I am near to death. I have boils on both my hands and my leg is swollen. The boils don't heal and the swelling doesn't subside. I can't sit up. I write lying down. Your double page arrived yesterday and today I have corrected it lying here and sent it back. Take care that you go on thinking of me as in good health, and send sheet upon sheet to me. I shall never keep it more than a day. If I am near to death, well, what of that?'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> p. 289.<sup>2</sup> p. 289.

His memory began to fail him more and more. He lost poems which people sent to him. To one such he writes:

'Exalted sir, the *ghazal* your servant brought has gone where I am going - to oblivion. That is, I have lost it. . .'<sup>1</sup>

Despite periods in which his health improved a good deal, he never really got better. His friends continued to pester him, though he even went to the extent of having it printed in the newspapers that he was no longer in a position to accept verse for correction. But, in general, the bitterness disappears from his tone. He writes to his friend Maududi:

'Do you know the state I am in now? I am extremely weak and feeble. [My hands] have begun to tremble, my eyesight has got much worse, and my senses are not with me. I have done what I could to serve my friends, reading their pages of verse as I lie here and making corrections. But now my eyes cannot see properly and my hands cannot write properly. They say of Shāh Sharaf Ali Bu Qalandar that when he reached advanced old age God exempted him from his religious duties and the Prophet excused him the prescribed observances. I expect of my friends that they will exempt me from the service of correcting their verses. The letters they write out of love for me I shall continue to answer to the best of my ability.'<sup>2</sup>

By February 1869 he was on his death bed. Ḥālī describes his last days, and his very characteristic last letter:

'A few days before his death he became unconscious. He would remain unconscious for hours at a time, coming to for only a few minutes before relapsing again. It was perhaps the day before he died that I went to visit him. He had come to after being unconscious many hours, and was dictating a reply to a letter from . . . Nawwāb Ala ud Din Ahmad Khan [Alai], who had written from Loharu asking how he was. He replied, "Why ask me how I am? Wait a day or two and then ask my neighbours."<sup>3</sup>

A few days later he was dead.

He died knowing that men of his own age had not valued him at his true worth; he looked to posterity for the appreciation he

<sup>1</sup> pp. 300-1.

<sup>2</sup> p. 339.

<sup>3</sup> p. 368.

deserved, and he was confident that he would one day receive it. He had written:

Today none buys my verse's wine, that it may grow in age  
To make the senses reel in many a drinker yet to come.  
My star rose highest in the firmament before my birth:  
My poetry will win the world's acclaim when I am gone.<sup>1</sup>

I think he was right. His fellow-countrymen now acclaim him as one of their greatest poets, and to the extent that his work can be presented in other languages, the world at large will come to recognise his worth.

<sup>1</sup> p. 28.