

to speak of Ghālib's Persian poetry, I can do no more here than mention this possibility. It is certain, however, that some verses of Ghālib seem to call to mind Śankara's monism or even certain aspects of modern dialectic idealism. With one of them I close my rather haphazard considerations of him. It is particularly appropriate because it seems to invite to silence, after so many, perhaps useless, words.

بگفتار اندیشه برهم مزن

در اندیشه دل خون کن و دم مزن (p. 156).

'Do not spoil thought with words: let thy heart bleed in thought and cease speaking!'

GHĀLIB'S URDU VERSE

RALPH RUSSELL

In considering Ghālib's poetic achievement – and, for that matter, his achievement as a prose-writer too – it is entirely appropriate to look first at his Persian work. It is well-known that he himself took pride above all in his Persian poetry, and even on occasion expressed contempt for his Urdu verse. Thus, in much-quoted lines, he says:¹

فارسی بین تا به بینی نقش های رنگ رنگ

بگذر از مجموعه اردو که بر رنگ من ست

Look at my Persian: there you see the full range of my artistry –
And leave aside my Urdu verse, for there is nothing there of me.

At the same time, one must be careful not to over-rate the importance of statements such as these. It is undoubtedly true that he regarded his Persian as his great achievement. He lamented the fact that in his day Urdu had ousted Persian from its former place as *the* language of poetry and culture. He knew his Persian verse was little understood and little appreciated, and this pained him. But it is also true that the most forceful of his statements contrasting his Persian and his Urdu to the great disadvantage of the latter, are made in a particular context, in a context where his Urdu verse is under attack, or where he anticipates such an attack, or where his Urdu is being compared unfavourably with that of rival poets such as Zauq. In such a context it is his standard reaction to represent his Urdu as written under some sort of external compulsion, and not from any desire of his own, and to vaunt his superiority in a field where such slighting comparisons cannot be made. The poem from which I have just

¹ *Kulliyāt-i-Ghālib, Fārsī*, ed. Sayyid Murtaẓā Husain, Lahore, Majlis-i-Taraqqī-i-Adab, vol. 1, 1967, p. 161.

quoted itself belongs to just such a context. Later in the same poem he writes:¹

راست می گویم من و از راست سر نتوان کشید
هر چه در گفتار فخر تست آن ننگ من ست

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.

Hāli, with characteristic timidity tells us that these lines are 'generally said to have been addressed to Zauq', but the matter is put beyond all doubt by Ghālib himself in one of his Persian letters in a context where, without mentioning Zauq by name, he makes it perfectly clear that it is Zauq of whom he is speaking in this verse.² And this serves to re-emphasize the point I am making. Zauq didn't write any Persian verse, and so in this field it is true, in the most literal sense of the words, that there can be no comparison between him and Ghālib. It is true that the sort of judgment which Ghālib here makes is repeated on other occasions, but I believe that it could in every case be shown that these judgments are all given against the sort of background I have described.

I make this point at the outset not because I have any intention of making the reverse assertion. To exalt Ghālib's Urdu at the expense of his Persian, or his Persian at the expense of his Urdu is in my view quite misleading, and does not help one to make a just assessment of his achievement. This notwithstanding the fact that Ghālib himself on different occasions did both these things. One of his *ghazals* ends with the line:³

جو یہ کہہ کہ « ریختہ کیونکہ ہو رشکِ فارسی؟ »
گفتہ غالب ایکبار پڑھے کہ اُسے سنا کہ یوں

¹ Ibid., p. 162.

² Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Ghālib, Life and Letters*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1969, pp. 79-82. (In subsequent footnotes this is referred to as *Life and Letters*.)

³ Urdu verses quoted in this paper are taken from the standard edition of the *divān*: *Divān-i-Ghālib*, ed. Imtiyāz 'Alī 'Arshī, Aligarh, Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdū, 1958. This verse is on p. 178.

If one should say, 'Can Urdu then, better what Persian offers us?'

Read him a line of Ghālib's verse,
Tell him, 'It can: it does so thus!'

But here too a note of warning is no less necessary. The *ghazal* is the *ghazal*, and exaggeration to the point of hyperbole is one of its familiar conventions. Ghālib is perhaps here doing no more than assert that his Urdu verse too is good verse. And we know that he did think so, and that he was quite right in thinking so.

It is not true – no matter what Ghālib may sometimes have told himself – that it was only under some sort of external pressure that he wrote in Urdu. He began writing in Urdu, as well as in Persian, in his childhood, and by the time he moved to Delhi from Agra in his teens he had already written a substantial amount of Urdu verse and made at any rate some sort of name for himself as an Urdu poet.

It is true that a time came when he turned his attention mainly to Persian, and true again that when in the 1850s he was retained at the Mughal court it was the King's preference for Urdu verse which more or less compelled him to take to the medium of Urdu once more. But what Hāli – Ghālib's friend and biographer – has to say in this connection is just. He writes:

'It is important to emphasize here that Ghālib 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 *divān* there is no significant number of poems in any form other than the *ghazal*. . . 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.'¹

And Ghālib's own letters of this period to his friend Nabi Bakhsh 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

¹ *Life and Letters*, pp. 82-3.

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. Today 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.¹

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 it that Mir and Mirza wrote? And if that was Urdu poetry, then what is this?’² 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.’

Finally, in the early years after the Revolt of 1857, it is the loss of his Urdu verse in the looting of which the British soldiers were guilty to which he alludes with evident distress in his letters to his friends.³

We can surely regard it as established, then, that Ghālib *did* in fact take a pride in his Urdu verse. And having done so let us proceed to see what it has to offer us.

We have just seen that nearly all of Ghālib’s Urdu verse is in the *ghazal* form. In the collection of his verse which has been reprinted innumerable times over the last century, *ghazals* occupy something like eighty per cent of the whole. This means he writes in a *genre* bound by very strict conventions both of form and of theme. In form it is a fairly short poem, rarely of more than a dozen couplets, rhyming AA, BA, CA, DA and so on. Generally, every couplet is a complete and independent entity, commonly

¹ Op. cit., p. 83.

² Op. cit., p. 83.

³ Cf. for example *Life and Letters*, p. 182.

(though not obligatorily) differing from its neighbours not only in theme but even in mood. The last couplet must include the poet’s *nom de plume* – that is to say in Ghālib’s case, the name ‘Ghālib’ occurs in the final couplet of every *ghazal*.

The themes too are largely prescribed by convention. The predominant theme of the *ghazal* is love – the poet’s love for an earthly mistress, or his love, as a mystic lover, for God, his Divine Beloved. Very many lines can bear either interpretation or both. But provided these themes predominate, he may write also of almost any other theme he chooses. Ghālib frequently does so, and this is not an innovation on his part; the great *ghazal* poets before him did so too. However, because the standard themes do predominate I must describe them a little more closely, and then say something of how Ghālib handled them.

First, on the theme of earthly love. I will not repeat in detail what I have had occasion to write elsewhere on this theme. To people previously unfamiliar with any kind of medieval literature, the situations of love which they find portrayed in the *ghazal* come as something of a shock, and even when increasing familiarity at length banishes their surprise, they tend to settle into a state of mind which accepts that the conventions of the *ghazal* are what they clearly are, but assumes that this is a purely conventional picture, largely unrelated to anything in real life. I have tried to show elsewhere that despite a measure of exaggeration quite disconcerting to the modern reader in the west when he first encounters it, the conventional picture of earthly love in the *ghazal* is in fact far less fantastic, and far less removed from reality, than it at first appears. As in the love poetry of medieval Europe, love is generally illicit love – the love of a man for a woman already married or betrothed to another man – and hence a love persecuted by conventional society. The poet’s beloved, his mistress is – in real life sometimes, and in the *ghazal* convention nearly always – angered by his love, and the lover thus has to bear not only the cruel persecution of society, but also the even more grievous persecution of the girl whom he loves. True love therefore demands of him almost superhuman courage and fortitude. He must love for its own sake, not only without any expectation of his love being returned, but knowing that his beloved will treat him with unrelenting hostility, and resolving nevertheless to be ever true to her even though his life be forfeit. Once again,

in the *ghazal* convention he is in fact put to this supreme test. His mistress's eyebrows are bows which loose the sharp arrows of her eyelashes into his breast. She is his executioner, who has him led out to the execution ground and there strikes him down with the sharp sword of her beauty. And he submits not only uncomplainingly, but gladly.

These are the situations of earthly love which are then taken over bodily, so to speak, and applied to the experience of divine love, or mystic love. A modern audience perhaps understands this aspect of the *ghazal* more readily if it is expressed in non-religious terms. The poet's beloved here stands for the ideals of life in which he passionately believes, for the sake of which he is ready to face every hardship, to withstand every persecution, and in the last resort to sacrifice even his life. In a medieval society – and the *ghazal* is the poetry of a medieval society – such ideals could only be conceived and expressed in religious form. But the essence of the mystic love which the *ghazal* portrays is a self-sacrificing devotion to an ideal which, conceived in modern terms, is not necessarily a religious ideal at all, though of course it may be that.

The *ghazal* does not spell out in any great detail what these ideals involve for a man's personal and social life, but two features emerge very strongly. First, the *ghazal* poet's ideal is a strongly humanist one. It stresses the greatness of man, and proclaims his almost infinite potentialities, urging his claims even against God himself. Its cardinal religious commandment is to love your fellow men, no matter what their creed and nationality. Ḥāfiẓ, the great fourteenth-century Persian poet, proclaimed this commandment in a much-quoted verse which may be translated:

So that you do not harm your fellow men, do what you will.
For in *my* Holy Law there is no other sin but this.

And secondly, the *ghazal* poet takes it for granted that to proclaim such an ideal and to act upon it consistently necessarily incurs the wrath of the pillars of society. To take one's stand uncompromisingly on humanist ideals and not to flinch from any of their practical implications means to face persecution throughout one's life and ultimately to suffer death at the hands of the upholders of the established order of things.

I said earlier that among the conventions of the *ghazal* is exaggeration – exaggeration of an order that the modern reader

accustoms himself to only with great difficulty. This exaggeration is evident in the depiction of the situations I have briefly described. There are famous Urdu poets who indeed had illicit love affairs and suffered because of them; but none lived out his life as a cruelly persecuted social outcast, either because of such a love affair or because of his dedication to the ideals of the mystic lover. Nor did any of them end his life on the execution ground, on the gallows or the impaling stake. In other words, the *ghazal* picture is a conventional one – a picture through which the poet portrays in terms of the most extreme symbolism his dedication to the ideals of love and of mystic humanism in face of the hostility of the conventional and the worldly-wise who dominate the society in which he lives. One can sometimes go further than this and say of many Urdu poets – though not of the greatest among them – that they present themselves in the *ghazal*, not as they are, but as they would like to be – as they see themselves in fantasy or as they want to be seen by their audience. Approaching the *ghazal* from another angle, one can say that it is the verse form in which the poet/lover expresses his devotion to his beloved, and that in the case of the poet whose real-life experience and real-life emotions and beliefs come closest to those which the *ghazal* convention portrays, the beloved in this context means two things: a real-life woman whom he loves, and the ideals of life to which he dedicates himself even in the face of the most bitter hostility of society at large.

That is, I fear, all too long a prelude to what I shall have to say on Ghālib's Urdu poetry, and I am well aware that there are many to whom all or most of what I have been saying was already known. To them I apologize, pleading only that there are others whose fields of study do not lie in these areas and to whom what I shall be saying would perhaps not have been intelligible without such a prelude.

Ghālib was heir to this *ghazal* tradition that I have tried briefly to describe, and he wrote within its conventions. Some modern critics have claimed that he did so reluctantly chafing under the restraints which one of his verses calls *تنگنائے غزل* – 'the narrow straits of the *ghazal*'.¹ But I do not think that any such view can be sustained. The verse in question has a quite restricted reference. Ghālib is writing in praise of one Tajammul Husain Khan, and it

¹ *Divān*, p. 236.

is in this context that he feels that the *ghazal*, which is by definition a short poem, does not afford him the scope he needs. Nor does he reject the traditional symbolism of *ghazal* expression. Two much-quoted couplets run:¹

مقصد ہے ناز و غمزہ، ولے گفتگو میں کام
چلتا نہیں ہے، دشنہ و خنجر کہے بغیر
ہر چند ہو مشاہدہ حق کی گفتگو
بتی نہیں ہے، بادہ و ساغر کہے بغیر

One means her airs and graces, but one cannot talk of them
Unless one speaks of them as knives and daggers that she
wields.

One speaks of God's creation, but one cannot talk of it
Except in terms of draughts of wine that make the senses reel.

I do not think it is in any spirit of complaint or frustration that he speaks these lines. Rather he is saying that he is quite content to express what he has to say in terms of the traditional imagery.

At all events, the *ghazal* form is *par excellence* the form of his choice. One could hardly expect it to be otherwise, for he was a man with a great love of the old cultural traditions, and the *ghazal* stands at the centre of these traditions. And there are reasons even more substantial than this of which I shall have occasion to speak presently.

It is perhaps appropriate to say a word at this point about his development as a *ghazal* poet. I have already said that he was heir to a long tradition. True, in Urdu, the north Indian tradition goes back only about a century before him. But this Urdu tradition was itself heir to the whole *ghazal* tradition of Persian poetry, going back 500 years from Ghālib's time, back to Hāfiz and beyond him; and Ghālib knew the Persian tradition exceptionally well. His early verse shows especially strongly the influence of Bedil, a leading Persian poet of the late seventeenth century, and he himself writes about this, quoting a *maqta'* – i.e. a concluding couplet – from one of his *ghazals*:²

¹ Op. cit. p. 169.

² Quoted by Hāli in *Yādgār-i-Ghālib*, ed. Khalīl ur Rahmān Dāūdī, Lahore, Majlis-i-Taraqqī-i-Adab, 1963, p. 157.

طرز بیدل میں ریختہ لکھنا
اسد اللہ خاں قیامت ہے

He writes in Urdu, but in Bedil's style.
What a man is this Asadullah Khan!

– Asadullah Khan being, of course, Ghālib's real name.

There is a great deal of purely technical virtuosity about much of his early verse, and a straining after originality which produced some verses of quite outlandish obscurity. Hāli and others have related stories which show how verses of this kind exposed him to a good deal of ridicule: 'I have heard [writes Hāli] that the poets of Delhi would come to *mushairas* where Ghālib was present and recite *ghazals* which sounded very fine and impressive but were really quite meaningless, as though to tell Ghālib in this way that this was the kind of poetry *he* wrote.'

Others conveyed their criticism more privately. Hāli relates one instance: 'On one occasion *maulvi* Abdul Qādir of Rāmpūr said to Ghālib, "There is one of your Urdu verses which I cannot understand," and there and then made up this verse and recited it to him:

پہلے تو روغن گل بھینس کے انڈے سے نکال
پھر دوا جتنی ہے گل بھینس کے انڈے سے نکال

First take the essence of the rose out of the eggs of buffaloes –
And other drugs are there; take those out of the eggs of
buffaloes.

Ghālib was very much taken aback and said, "This verse is certainly not mine, I assure you." But *maulvi* Abdul Qādir kept up the joke and said, "I have read it myself in your *divān*; if you have a copy here I can show it you here and now." At length Ghālib realized that this was an indirect way of criticizing him and telling him that verses of this kind could be found in his *divān*.¹

By and large Ghālib treated attacks on his early verse with the contempt which he thought they deserved. One of his couplets – I do not know whether it belongs to this period, but it expresses his attitude accurately enough – reads:²

¹ *Life and Letters*, pp. 39-40.

² *Divān*, p. 209.

نہ ستائش کی تمنا نہ صلے کسی پروا
گر نہیں ہیں مرے اشعار میں معنی نہ سہی

I want no praise; I seek no man's reward.
My verses have no meaning? Be it so.

But the same sort of criticisms were made – no doubt in a more serious manner – by men whom he greatly respected, and when he came to put his *divān* – that is, his collection of *ghazals* – in more or less its present form, he discarded a great many of his early verses. He himself wrote of this, with characteristically gross exaggeration, many years later: ‘Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five I wrote on highly fanciful themes, and in these ten years got together a big *divān*. But in the end, when I learned discretion, I rejected this *divān* – tore it up completely – leaving only some ten to fifteen couplets in my present *divān* by way of samples of my former style.’¹

Hālī's more sober estimate, that he discarded about two-thirds of his early work at this time,² is nearer the truth. So is his statement that even now his *divān* is not devoid of examples of this kind. It must be admitted that Ghālib continued to retain even in his later years a fondness for the striking image and the far-fetched conceit that sometimes produced rather hair-raising results, and a wish to test his readers' ingenuity sometimes inspired verses rather like the clues of a difficult crossword puzzle in which the barest indication demands the use of a great deal of ingenuity to fill in the blanks. One example of each kind of verse must suffice. The first is from a *ghazal* – not devoid of a certain charm once you have deciphered its meaning – in which, in verse after verse, he contrasts on the one hand the comfort and serenity in which his mistress spends her days against the misery in which her hopeless lover spends his – a contrast heightened by a certain surface similarity in the two situations. One verse runs:³

وان کرم کو عذرِ بارش تھا عنانگیر خرام
گریے سے یاں، پنبہ بالش، کف سیلاب تھا

which, literally translated, means

¹ *Life and Letters*, p. 321.

² *Yādgar*, p. 161.

³ *Divān*, p. 145.

There, kindness had the excuse of the rain to bridle walking.
Here, from weeping the cotton-wool of the pillow was the foam
of the flood.

In other words: ‘She said she could not come to me because it was raining, and so on my side the rain of my tears produced a flood.’ Or, to move closer to the original: ‘The rain provided an excuse to her not to show her professed kindness towards me, for it prevented her from walking to see me. On my side the torrent of my tears produced a flood, on which the white cotton-wool of my pillow was like the white froth on the swirling waters.’

A verse of the other kind is quoted with complacent approval, and then explained, by Ghālib himself in a letter of 1864:¹

تجہ سے تو کچھہ کلام نہیں، لیکن، اے ندیم
میرا سلام کہیو، اگر نامہ برسے

I do not breathe a word against you, friend, but if you meet
The man you gave my letter to, just give him my regards.

This theme calls for something by way of preamble. The poet [lover] needed a messenger [to take a letter to his mistress]. But he was afraid that such a messenger might himself fall in love with her. A friend of the lover brought a man to him and said, ‘This man is a man of honour, a man whom you can trust. I can guarantee that he won't do any such thing.’ Well, he was given a letter to take to her. As fate would have it, the lover's misgivings proved well-founded. The messenger looked upon the beloved and at once fell madly in love with her. The letter, the reply – all were forgotten, and in his frenzy he rent his clothes and made off to the wilderness. And now the lover, after all this has happened, says to his friend, ‘Only God has knowledge of the unseen. Who knows what is in another's heart? So, my friend, I bear no grudge against you. But if by any chance you meet my messenger, give him my respects and say, ‘Well, sir, what now of your tall claims that you would not fall in love?’’

Let me remind you again of the verse from which you are supposed to deduce all this:

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 236, and *Life and Letters*, p. 302.

I do not breathe a word against you, friend, but if you meet
The man you gave my letter to, just give him my regards.

— not, if Ghālib worshippers will forgive my saying so, a verse of any great poetic merit, but one which affords some consolation to those who sometimes struggle unavailingly to discover Ghālib's meaning. If Ghālib's own friends and contemporaries needed to have such verses explained to them, we twentieth-century Europeans need not feel too distressed if we also need to have explanations supplied us.

But when this kind of extravagance is left aside, a great deal of good poetry remains. I said earlier that Ghālib is quite content to say what he has to say within the *ghazal* form. What *does* he want to say? And how, some of you may wonder, within a form where themes and situations and imagery are prescribed in such detail, *can* a poet say anything new and distinctive at all? Well, firstly, his style is distinctive — just as, to use a rough parallel, a man's handwriting is distinctive even if he writes the identical words that another man has written. Secondly — and this is more important — the limitations of theme are not as severe as one might think. Firstly, the poet may present in a new light what I may call the stock characters of the *ghazal* — the lover, his mistress, his unworthy rivals for her love, and so on — or, in the sphere of religion and mysticism, he may again show in a new light man's relationship with God, his view of God's role in the universe, of the different prophets of Muslim tradition, and so on. Secondly, as I indicated earlier, if themes of love (in both senses) predominate in the *ghazal*, they are not its only themes, and the *ghazals* of the great masters, like Mir in the eighteenth century and Ghālib in the nineteenth, include verses on an almost unrestricted range of themes, and they say in them whatever they want to say.

In a short paper like this, one cannot hope to convey more than a very inadequate idea of Ghālib's range. If I were to single out what seem to me to be the most characteristic, distinctive qualities which his Urdu poetry reveals, I would say that they are: firstly, a keen, unsentimental, detached observation of man and God and the universe; secondly, a strong sense of independence and self-respect; thirdly, a conviction of the originality, and of the value to mankind, of what he has to say and a determination to say it, upholding his beliefs to the end, no matter what other men may

think of them (it is here above all perhaps that the *ghazal* tradition meets his needs most perfectly); fourthly, an ability to see how limited is the scope for human enjoyment, a power to enjoy to the last drop everything that life brings, and yet to hold aloof, not to be trapped or enslaved by desire for the things he loves; and finally, a dry, irrepressible, unabashed humour which he is capable of bringing to the treatment of any theme, not excluding those on which he feels with the greatest seriousness and intensity. It is this last quality which has especially endeared him to successive generations of his readers.

Some of these qualities emerge clearly in his treatment of the conventional themes of love. The ambiguity or, as I would think it more accurate to call it, the universality of the term 'beloved', serves the *ghazal* poet in good stead. His 'beloved' is someone, or some *thing*, to which his dedication is complete and unshakeable, but the precise identification varies from poet to poet. For Mir, Ghālib's greatest predecessor in this field, the identification with a woman already married to someone else is a valid one. Mir did love such a woman deeply and constantly for years together, and suffered in consequence much of the persecution which such a love incurred. Ghālib, almost equally certainly, never experienced such love. He states his philosophy in a celebrated letter to his friend Hatim Ali Beg Mihr in which he tries to persuade him to banish the sorrow he felt at the recent death of a courtesan who had been his mistress:

'Mirza Şāhib, 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.¹

The tone is of course humorous, and is adopted in a particular context which it would take too long to go into here; but I think he is quite serious about the philosophy of life which it expresses, and an entirely serious Persian letter written many years earlier had expressed essentially the same view:

'... though grief at a beloved's death 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 than can banish this distress? ... You who have eyes to see, think upon this: that all the capital of those who venture all for love... is this one heart, lost now to the supple waist of their beloved, caught now and fettered in the ringlets of her curling locks. But where has a dead body the suppleness of waist to make the heart leap from its place? And where the curling ringlets to catch the soul in their toils? ... The nightingale, notorious for love, pours forth his melody for every rose that blooms, and the moth to whose great passion all men point, give 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.'²

¹ *Life and Letters*, p. 249.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

Ghālib then knew the joys of earthly love, and there are many verses which express it:¹

نہند اُس کی ہے ، دماغ اُس کا ہے ، راتیں اُس کی ہیں
تیری زلفیں جس کے بازو پر پریشان ہو گئیں

Sleep is for him, pride is for him, the nights for him
Upon whose arm your tresses all dishevelled lay.

But he neither knew nor perhaps, in practice believed in, the kind of love for a woman in which one devotes one's whole life and one's whole being completely to her. He subscribes to the traditional view that the lot of the lover – even if his love is not returned – is more enviable than that of any other man:²

بیٹھا ہے جو کہ سایہ دیوارِ یار میں
فرمانروائے کشورِ ہندوستان ہے

He who sits in the shade of his beloved's wall
Is lord and king of all the realm of Hindustan.

But if here we interpret 'beloved' in the more literal sense, it must be admitted that the beloved to whom it was applied might change from year to year. On the other hand, the verse can equally apply to a symbolic beloved, to a high ideal in life, and to the deep spiritual happiness which a man attains by serving it faithfully.

It is not surprising that in the conventional picture of human love, besides many verses distinctive in style rather than in content, there are many in which the rights of the *lover* are stressed as much as or more than the rights of his mistress, and in which the lover's self-respect is asserted.

One of his *ghazals* begins:³

ہر ایک بات پہ کہتے ہو تم کہ « تو کیا ہے ؟ »
تمہیں کہو کہ یہ اندازِ گفتگو کیا ہے ؟

To every word that I utter you answer, 'What are you?'
You tell me, is *this* the way, then, I should be spoken to?

¹ *Dīwān*, p. 191.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 202.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

And another begins with a rejoinder to her taunt that what he suffers from is not love, but madness:¹

عشق مجھہ کو نہیں، وحشت ہی سہی
سیری وحشت، تری شہرت ہی سہی

'It is not love, but madness'? Be it so.
My madness is your reputation though.

– that is, it is my mad love for you that makes *you* famous.

The lover traditionally accepts all that fate has to inflict upon him, and is proud to do so for the sake of his love. Ghālib sometimes takes a different view, and one feels that it is not in any very respectful tone that he addresses his 'friend', as the Urdu *ghazal* calls the beloved (even though the friendly feelings are generally only on the lover's side), when he says:²

یہ فتنہ آدمی کی خانہ ویرانی کو کیا کم ہے؟
ہوے تم دوست جس کے، دشمن اُس کا آسمان کیوں ہو؟

A lover needs no more than this to work his ruin utterly.
You are his friend. What need is there for fate to be his enemy?

and, in the very next verse of the same *ghazal*, protests against the harsh treatment designed, as she alleges, to test him:

یہی ہے آزمانا، تو ستانا کس کو کہتے ہیں؟
عدو کے ہولیں جب تم، تو میرا امتحان کیوں ہو؟

If this is testing, can you tell me, what would persecution be?
It was to *him* you gave your heart; what do you want with testing *me*?

It would not, I think, be true to say that no poet before Ghālib ever spoke of, or to, his beloved in this way, but it is certainly true that in Ghālib this bold, mocking tone occurs a good deal more frequently than in his predecessors.

But if these verses are especially characteristic of Ghālib, there are plenty more that are closer to the main tradition in their handling of the themes of earthly love. To those who have, so to

¹ Op. cit., p. 220.

² Op. cit., p. 200.

speak, grown up in the company of the *ghazal* I think that perhaps these present no problem. To us in the west, they do. We have seen that Ghālib was not the man to bind himself in the bonds of a single love. Why then does he so often speak as though he were? If one takes the whole range of these verses, I think the answer is threefold. Firstly, some are there to show that he too can handle these themes just as well as the great masters of the past; and he does indeed show this. Secondly, in some of them he is creating in fantasy the beloved which real life denied him, and pouring out to her all the intensity of feeling which no real woman in his life ever inspired in him. And, stated in these terms, his situation is not an uncommon one in the history of the *ghazal*. I have argued elsewhere that in medieval society the *ghazal* often represented, for poet and audience alike, the release in fantasy of emotion which could not without drastic consequences have been released in real life. In the typical case it is a fear (a very understandable fear) of the social consequences that holds the poet back from the forbidden joys of love: in Ghālib's case it was perhaps rather that no woman ever evoked in him the intense, all-consuming devotion that he would have wished to experience. In a letter written perhaps only a year or two before his death he looks back on his life and quotes a verse of the Persian poet Anwarī as describing his own position:¹

اے دریغا نیست ممدوحے سزاوارِ مدیح
وے دریغا نیست معشوقے سزاوارِ غزل

Alas! there is no patron who deserves my praise.
Alas! there is no mistress who inspires my verse.

It is perhaps not too fanciful to read into this something of the situation I have described.

But there is a third explanation which, valid though I think the other two are, has, I feel sure, a much wider relevance. This has to do with what I described earlier as the universality of the *ghazal's* symbolism. If one sketches the character of the lover/hero of the *ghazal*, first with the context of literal earthly love in mind, and then in more generalized terms, one can see its striking relevance to Ghālib's character and personality, and to his expression of what he feels in terms of the *ghazal* tradition. The lover is a

¹ *Life and Letters*, p. 354.

man whom the experience of an all-consuming love has completely transformed. Few men in the society in which he lives have ever undergone such an experience, and to one who has not undergone it, it is something that thought and emotion alike can hardly even begin to comprehend. Yet it is this experience which alone gives meaning to the lover's life. All other values, all other standards of conduct, are either discarded or are absorbed into, and given new meaning by, the way of life which is learnt from love, and which love alone can teach. The lover thus lives out among his fellow men a life dedicated to, and directed by, ideals which even the most sensitive and sympathetic among them cannot comprehend; and that great majority which is neither particularly sensitive nor particularly sympathetic, because it cannot comprehend his values, shuns him and fears him; and because it fears him, hates him; and because it hates him, persecutes him. If one condenses this description and expresses it in more general terms one can say that the hero of the *ghazal*, and the *ghazal* poet casting himself in that role, is a man to whom all the things that are most precious in life are the product of a unique, nearly incommunicable experience which is to him all-important, but which isolates him from his fellows and condemns him to live his life among men who cannot understand him, let alone appreciate him, and who cannot really accept him as one of their own community. But if this is true, any man who is a poet and who feels himself to be in this position, can express what he feels by using the *ghazal's* portrayal of the situations of the lover as the symbols of his own experience. Ghālib, both as a poet and as a man, felt himself to be in this position, and used the *ghazal* in this way. His great poetic forebear Mir, whose diction was often of a crystal simplicity, described himself in metaphor as 'speaking a language no-one understood'.¹ Of a great part of his own verse, and more especially of the Persian work which he so prized, Ghālib could say the same even in a literal sense. And in the metaphorical sense it was true even of his Urdu, for his Urdu includes only a small proportion of which it could be argued that it was the obscurity of his style that baffled his audience; for the most part it was the poverty of their emotional and intellectual experience that denied to the verse into which he distilled the essence of himself the appreciation which he justly felt to be its due. Writing to his friend Alai in

¹ *Kulliyāt-i-Mir*, ed. 'Abdul Bārī Āsī, Lucknow, Newal Kishor, 1941, p. 150.

his sixty-eighth year he says: '... I share your inauspicious stars, and feel your pain. I am a man devoted to one art. Yet by my faith I swear to you, my verse and prose has not won the praise it merited. I wrote it, and I alone appreciated it.'¹

As a man too he often felt that he stood alone. He felt it the more keenly when he reflected on the reason for his position, for he was forced to conclude that he put himself in this position because he lived by the standards which all his fellows professed, but which he was almost alone in practising. He had seen the practical value of their professions in 1847, when he was imprisoned on a charge of gambling and when, of all of his friends in and around Delhi, only Shefta stood by him and fulfilled the obligations of friendship towards him. Nearly fourteen years later he still held to the same position, and, just as the lover accepts that steadfastness in love necessarily makes him the target of persecution, so does Ghālib accept that steadfastness in observing a high standard of personal conduct necessarily brings misfortunes in its train. He writes to his friend Shafaq in 1861: '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.'² This was a judgment he was to repeat in the words of one of his Persian verses little more than a year before his death, when he had to witness the spectacle of respectable gentlemen who had been on visiting terms with him, taking the stand in court and testifying against his character in the most insulting and humiliating terms.³

When therefore Ghālib depicts himself in his *ghazals* as the true lover of a beautiful woman, gladly suffering all her cruelties, what he is often doing is asserting in traditional symbolism his unshakeable conviction of the soundness of his values and/or of the high quality of his poetry, and declaring that so long as he has breath he will continue to affirm them:⁴

لکھتے رہے جنوں کی حکایاتِ خونچکان
ہر چند اس میں ہاتھ ہمارے قلم ہوے

I filled the blood-stained pages with the story of my love
And went on writing, even though my hands were smitten off.

¹ *Life and Letters*, p. 312.

³ *Op. cit.*, 362.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁴ *Divān*, p. 226.

Interpreted in this sense, many of the verses that on first reading seem to be depictions of the love of man for woman are instead (or, perhaps, as well) expressions of emotion and belief which fall within the traditional category of mystic love of God but which, I have suggested, a modern audience understands most readily as dedication to ideals which are not necessarily religious.

Where Ghālib writes more explicitly in the mystic tradition his verses show the same sort of range as those which depict the situations of earthly love. For example, there are verses expressing the same bold, almost impudent attitude to God – his Divine Beloved – as some of those in which he addresses his human mistress. He demands from God treatment consistent with his self-respect. He tells Him:¹

بندگی میں بھی وہ آزادہ و خودبین ہیں کہ ہم
اُسے پھر آئے، درِ کعبہ اگر وا نہوا

I serve You; yet my independent self-respect is such
I shall at once turn back if I should find the Ka'ba closed.

And in numbers of verses he makes it clear that he does not always receive such treatment. According to Muslim belief, man's good and evil deeds are written down by recording angels, and it is on their written testimony that his fate is decided on the Day of Judgment. What sort of justice is that? asks Ghālib. You take the evidence for the prosecution, but what about the witnesses for the defence?:²

پکڑے جاتے ہیں فرشتوں کے لکھے پر ناحق
آدمی کوئی ہمارا دم تحریر بھی تھا؟

The angels write, and we are seized. Where is the justice there?
We too had someone present when they wrote their record down.

Here, as often, he speaks in some sense as the champion of mankind as a whole. Similarly he does so when, like other poets before him, he accuses God not only of injustice but of simple inconsistency in His treatment of mankind. He refers to the story of

¹ Op. cit., p. 162.

² Op. cit., p. 159.

how when God created Adam He commanded the angels to bow down before him. All did so except Iblis – and Iblis was punished by eternal banishment from Heaven. If this, then, was the status that God intended for man, how is it that God himself has not continued to uphold it?:¹

ہیں آج کیوں ذلیل؟ کہ کل تک نہ تھی پسند
گستاخی فرشتہ، ہماری جناب میں

Today we are abased. Why so? Till yesterday You would not
brook
The insolence the angel showed towards our majesty.

Elsewhere Ghālib, being Ghālib, speaks not for mankind at large, but specifically for himself in his relationship with God. Here am I, he says in effect, a great poet, and a man of unique understanding, and there are You passing me by and revealing Your secrets to men who cannot sustain them!:²

گرنی تھی ہم پہ برقِ تجلی، نہ طور پر
دیتے ہیں بادہ، ظرفِ قلعِ خوار دیکھ کر

You should have let your radiance fall on me, not on the Mount
of Tur
One pours the wine having regard to what the drinker can
contain.

The reference is to the story which appears in Christian guise as that of Moses and the burning bush. The Mount of Tur is the place where God revealed his radiance to Musa – the Muslim name to which our 'Moses' corresponds. Ghālib's lines suggest two comparisons. The first is between himself and the mountain – the huge, strong mountain, which for all its strength cannot compete with man – man whose apparent frailty is more than counterbalanced by an awareness and a sensitivity which enables him to accept from God the heavy burden of a trust which even the mountains could not sustain.³ Secondly, the verse suggests a

¹ Op. cit. p. 189.

² Op. cit., p. 169.

³ Cf. Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets*, Harvard University Press, 1968, and London, George Allen and Unwin, 1969, p. 183, n. 15.

contrast between Ghālib and Musa. Musa's response to God's radiance was to swoon before it; Ghālib would have had the strength to gaze upon it.

He certainly does not accept either the earlier prophets or the outstanding men of his own day as men who know all that a man needs to know, men in whose guidance he can implicitly trust. Thus he says of Khizr, that somewhat mysterious figure in Muslim legend who found and drank the water of eternal life, who roams the desert places and comes to true Muslims who have lost their way and guides them on to the right path, and who on one occasion explained the mysterious workings of God's benevolence to a perplexed Musa:¹

لازم نہیں کہ خضر کی ہم پیروی کریں
جانا کہ اک بزرگ ہمیں ہمسفر ملے

I am not bound to take the path that Khizr indicates.
I'll think the old man comes to bear me company on my way.

Or, rather less politely, he hints that Khizr is in any case not above some rather sharp practice. Legend has it that he guided Sikandar (Alexander the Great) to look for the water of eternal life and that, in somewhat obscure circumstances, Khizr got it and drank it while Sikandar did not:²

کیا کیا خضر نے سکندر سے!
اب کسے رہنا کرے کوئی؟

You know how Khizr treated Alexander.
How then can one make anyone one's guide?

And he states it as his own principle:³

چلتا ہوں تھوڑی دور ہر اک تیزرو کے ساتھ
پہچانتا نہیں ہوں ابھی زاہبر کو میں

I go some way with every man I see advancing swiftly.
So far I see no man whom I can take to be my guide.

¹ *Divān*, p. 237.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 242.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 190.

One is reminded of what he once wrote in a letter to his friend Tufta: 'Don't think that everything men wrote in former ages is correct. There were fools born in those days too.'¹

But if he sees himself as unique among men, he fully accepts, in line with the whole tradition of the *ghazal*, his oneness with his fellow men, the value of man *as* man, regardless of his formal religious and other allegiances. We have seen one aspect of this belief in his assertion of the rights of man in his relationship with God. He asserts the same values in relationships between man and man. And here he is not simply following a poetic convention. He was a man who had a wide circle of friends in all communities – Muslim, Hindu and British – and he rejected all narrow communal and national prejudices in his dealings with them. In one of his letters to his friend Tufta he wrote: 'My gracious friend, 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.'² His verses express this attitude. One of them links it with the central tenet of Muslim belief – belief in the absolute oneness of God:³

ہم موحّد ہیں، ہمارا کیش ہے ترکِ رسوم
ملتیں جب سٹ گئیں، اجزائے ایمان ہو گئیں

My creed is oneness, my belief abandonment of rituals;
Let all communities dissolve and constitute a single faith.

But like his predecessors he knows how hard it is for men to hold consistently to the principles of humanism, and he expresses this in paradox:⁴

بسکہ دشوار ہے ہر کام کا آسان ہونا
آدمی کو بھی میسر نہیں انساں ہونا

How difficult an easy task can prove to be!
Even a man does not attain humanity.

Armed with this sort of philosophical outlook he surveys the whole human drama and the universe in which it is played. He recognizes how limited is the scope that the universe offers, both

¹ *Life and Letters*, p. 279.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 226.

³ *Divān*, p. 192.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 151.

for joy pure and simple, and for that more complex joy which is inextricably linked with sorrow and sacrifice. And by the same token he recognizes that a man should live intensely, treasuring all that life can bring – not only its pleasures, but its suffering too. Poor *Khizr* again comes in for a rebuke in this context:¹

وہ زندہ ہم ہیں کہ ہیں روئناسِ خلق، اے خضر
نہ تم کہ چور بنے عمرِ جاوداں کے لیے

Khizr, we are alive who know the busy world of men
Not you, who slunk away unseen to steal eternal life.

Ghālib states his own attitude in two successive verses of a *ghazal*, deliberately parallel in their structure, in which he speaks in turn of the cruelty of fair women and the transience of spring, and stresses that without in any way blinding himself to these realities, it is to their beauty that he surrenders himself:²

نہیں نگار کو الفت، نہو، نگار تو ہے
روانیِ روش و مستی ادا کہیے
نہیں بہار کو فرصت، نہو، بہار تو ہے
طراوتِ چمن و خوبیِ ہوا کہیے

The fair are cruel. What of it? They are fair.
Sing of their grace, their swaying symmetry.

Spring will not last. What of it? It is spring.
Sing of its breezes, of its greenery.

Or, in a more general statement:³

دلا، یہ درد و الم بھی تو مُغْتَم ہے، کہ آخر
نہ گریبہٴ سحری ہے، نہ آہِ نیمِ شبی ہے

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.

¹ Op. cit., p. 236.

Op. cit., p. 248.

³ Op. cit., p. 205.

Linked with this view of life is a strong feeling for the value of the here and now, and a marked scepticism about even the allegedly certain benefits still to come. It is not that *Ghālib* lives only for the moment, heedless of the future; to describe his outlook thus would be to cheapen it and do him less than justice. It is rather that he seeks to live every moment to the full, prepared to face what is still to come, but careful to make no optimistic assumptions about it. Verses in which he expresses this sort of feeling even about life after death – usually in a humorous tone – are strikingly frequent. He *knows* the joys that he has tested; as a Muslim he believes in the coming joys of Paradise; and yet . . . after all he has not proved them by experience. Best not assume too much. But anyway, leaving aside the question of whether or not they will prove to be hereafter all that is claimed for them, they are pleasing fancies here and now, and even at this rating they have their value:¹

ہم کو معلوم ہے جنت کی حقیقت، لیکن
دل کے خوش رکھنے کو، غالب، یہ خیال اچھا ہے

I know the truth, but, be that what it will,
The thought of Paradise beguiles me still.

The true Muslim is forbidden to drink wine here on earth, but in Paradise God will give him to drink his fill of the wine of purity. Well, *Ghālib* has broken the prohibition, and has verified here and now that wine is good to drink. So this, at least, is one of the joys of Paradise that he has already proved. In fact, come to think of it, it is perhaps the *only* joy of Paradise that he has proved; and he says:²

وہ چیز، جس کے لیے ہم کو ہو بہشت عزیز
سوائے بادۂ گلفنامِ مشکبو کیا ہے؟

For what else should I value Paradise
If not the rose-red wine, fragrant with musk?

For the rest, he *hopes* that the joys he will know there will match the joys he has already known here in this present world. He tells his mistress:³

¹ Op. cit., p. 240.

² Op. cit., p. 242.

³ Op. cit., p. 197.

سنترے ہیں جو بہشت کی تعریف، سب درست
لیکن، خدا کرے، وہ ترا جلسہ گاہ ہو!

All that they say of Paradise is true, and yet –
God grant it be illumined by *your* radiance.

Space does not here permit more than the bare assertion, but in my view the vicissitudes of the historical period in which he lived, the traditions of his immediate ancestors, and the environment in which he passed his boyhood were all forces which led Ghālib to conclude early in life that he must 'settle on the sugar, and not on the honey' and to cultivate the attitudes that these verses express. It is very characteristic of him that, in life and in poetry alike, he shields himself against 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' with an irrepressible, unquenchable humour, and with an ability to get outside himself and look at himself even in the most painful situations with a dry, ironical detachment. In one of his letters he writes to a friend: 'I watch myself from the sidelines, and rejoice at my own distress and degradation'¹ – and many of his verses reflect this attitude. Thus he says to the mistress who spurns his love, even though she knows that he demands nothing of her:²

میں نے مانا کہ کچھ نہیں غالب
مفت ہاتھ آئے، تو بُرا کیا ہے؟

I grant it you, my dear, Ghālib is nothing.
But if you get him free then what's the harm?

Or he himself brings about a situation where he makes one of his closest friends a rival for his mistress's love:³

ذکر اُس پریش کا اور پھر بیاں اپنا
بن گیا رقیب آخر، تھا جو رازداں اپنا

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

But with this all too inadequate sample I must draw to a close.

¹ *Life and Letters*, pp. 299–300.

² *Dīwān*, p. 238.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 159.

Like many great men before him, Ghālib looked to posterity to award him the praise which men of his own times denied him. Two Persian couplets on the theme express his feelings in striking metaphors:¹

تا ز دیوانم کہ سر مست سخن خواهد شدن
این می از قحط خر یداری کہن خواهد شدن
کو کبم را در عدم اوج قبولی بوده است
شہرت شعرم بہ گیتی بعد من خواهد شدن

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.

When he was gone his verse did indeed begin to win the world's acclaim, until today wherever Urdu is spoken it is known and loved. But for the barrier of language it would, I am convinced, win wider acclaim still. At all events, a stage has been reached when interest in him and his work has spread far beyond the confines of his own homeland, to the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R., and many other countries. And it is most fitting that this should be so.

¹ Quoted in *Yādgar*, p. 6.