

## Ghalib, the Heavenly Scribe of Earthly Sorrow

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Ghalib, the pen name of Mirza Asadullah Khan (1797-1869), was the last great classical Urdu poet and the first Urdu poet with a distinctly modern sensibility. Ghalib raised the *ghazal*, a lyrical poem composed of self-contained couplets, to new heights of meaning and expression. Through paradox and bafflement, Ghalib conveyed the complexity of human emotions and experience. His poetry has been compared to Alexander's proverbial bowl in which the universe can be seen.

Daud Kamal (1935-1987), who was my English professor at the University of Peshawar, translated all the Ghalib poems in this essay. Save for the uncollected "Ghalib: Three Renderings," these translations are from his self-published *Reverberations* (1970), which lacks pagination and has never been reprinted. Kamal later added titles to the translations titled "Transience" and "Life's Maddening Futility." In his introduction to *Reverberations*, the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz observes:

[I]n the peculiar idiom evolved by Ghazal writers over many centuries, words, terms and phrases, rarely mean what they appear to mean and it is difficult to locate in another language (except in cognate languages like Urdu and Persian) satisfactory equivalents which embrace the entire associative content of the original expressions. As a result in most scholarly translations of Urdu or Persian verse, it is generally, "the meaning –" skeleton outline of a poet's thoughts or feeling – which is, or is intended to be, portrayed and the intangibles which give body to his experience and its expression are generally lost.

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