



## Ghazals of Ghalib

*Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib , Sasha Newborn (Translator)*

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GHALIB WAS AN OUTSTANDING poet in both Persian and Urdu, though his family may have come from Afghanistan. His father and uncle both led mercenary soldiers in the service of one rajah or another in Northern India. Unfortunately for Ghalib, they both died when he was young, and he had to find a way to support himself.

HE FOUND HIS CALLING as a court poet, in and out of favor. When the Sepoy Mutiny took place around him, he addressed a letter to Queen Victoria, offering his services — for a price — to her.

THE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP to God took many ironic forms. As he lived next to a mosque, he said he was God's neighbor. His love affair with God was the occasion of many poems of unrequited love, of the cruel mistress. Such an erotic connection to the divine may seem alien to Western minds, but Ghalib was not alone in this personal relationship; he merely took it to its height.

THE GHAZAL FORMAT of poetry is composed of a short series of two rhyming lines (not kept in the translation), each one a complete thought in itself. The resulting poem has a theme, but not continuity — much like a stand-up comic's delivery of short jokes on a topic. Ghalib was a master at double-entendres and shades of meaning; this translation aims for simplicity rather than to be overloaded with baggage.

### Ghazals of Ghalib Details

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## From Reader Review Ghazals of Ghalib for online ebook

### Rodney says

It's tempting to read Aijaz Ahmad's approach to translating Mirza Ghalib, giant of the modern Urdu-language ghazal, against his later Marxist criticism. Ahmad's intro lays stress on Ghalib's role as witness of a declining Mughal world being steamrolled by the British, and lends a postcolonial shading to the poet's special brand of wistfulness. But his politics is really in the book's approach to translation. Other translators have only interpreted the poems; Ahmad's point is to change them. His apparatus for each ghazal includes an open-ended "literal translation"; a section explaining the key Urdu vocabulary he's brought over into English; a General Explanation of each couplet, revealing the philosophy and theology behind the imagery; and two or three different translations from a pool of seven English-language poets. The poets aren't ones I'd think of for an exploratory project like this: W.S. Merwin, William Stafford, Mark Strand, and Adrienne Rich don't conjure up visions of radical advances in poetics. The beauty of Ahmad's project though is that you can call them out for their complacencies and distortions, since you're privy to the same text they worked from. By the same token, you end up giving credit where credit is due—Adrienne Rich stands out as especially deft at catching the thought at work behind the rainbows and flowers. The book's interest finally extends beyond Ghalib to the possibilities of translation in general, though the ghazals appear here with a beauty and accuracy that's hard to find anywhere else.

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### Kristen says

This book is poetry-nerd crack.

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### Arlene Ang says

This is an amazing volume based on the ghazals of Mirza Ghalib. I just love the literal translation of the verses followed by the exciting ways that poets like Thomas Fitzsimmons, William Hunt, W.S Merwin, David Ray, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, and Mark Strand interpret them using their own words.

Here's a fascinating example (Ghazal XIX)—

first, the literal translation by Aijaz Ahmad:

On every step, the distance of the goal from me is evident;  
At my own speed, the desert runs from me.

which W.S. Merwin turns it into:

Where I'm going is farther at every step  
the desert runs from me  
with my own feet

while Adrienne Rich expresses it thus:

Every step I take unrolls the distance further;  
racing the desert, it lengthens underfoot.

Mark Strand, however, takes a more active role:

With every step I took, my goal seemed farther away.  
I ran fastest, but the desert ran faster.

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### Jeff says

Excellent format offers the original, transliteration, literal translation and a few versions by mostly esteemed poets. Ghalib is brilliant.

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### Imran Muhammad says

nice book

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### Robert Sheppard says

PERSIAN MASTERPIECES OF WORLD LITERATURE--RUMI'S "BOOK OF LOVE & SUFI POEMS," OMAR KHAYYAM'S "RUBAIYAT," ATTAR'S "PARLIAMENT OF THE BIRDS," NIZAMI'S "LAYLA & MAJNUN," FIRDUSI'S "SHAHNAMA," POEMS AND GHAZALS OF HAFIZ & GHALIB ---FROM THE WORLD LITERATURE FORUM RECOMMENDED CLASSICS AND MASTERPIECES SERIES VIA GOODREADS---ROBERT SHEPPARD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Goethe honored Persian Literature as one of the four great literary traditions of World Literature, or "Weltliteratur" as he named it. In his "West-Oestlicher Divan" or (West-East Divan) he celebrated a German translation of the poems of the immortal Persian poet Hafiz (1326-90) as a major revelation of the genius of Persian poetry and its place in World Literature. He called on all writers in Germany and the West to rise to their cosmopolitan duty to widen their cultural horizons globally beyond their own familiar tradition of the West in order to strengthen their own creative powers and participate in the globalization of literature and human consciousness:

"I am more and more convinced, that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men . . . I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."

Matthew Arnold, another keen admirer of Persian Literature who included the classic tale of "Sohrab and Rustum" in his own poetry, seconded Goethe's view on the crucial necessity for all educated and civilized people in the West and elsewhere---writers, critics and readers, to look for "the best that has been known and

thought in the world" without respect to borders, languages, political or religious differences, stating in his seminal essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time:"

"But criticism, real criticism, obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.....one may say, that to get anywhere near this standard, every critic should try and possess one great literature, at least, besides his own; and the more unlike his own, the better."

It is in this spirit that World Literature Forum has embarked on this series of "Recommended Classics and Masterpieces of World Literature," on LinkedIn, Facebook, Goodreads and Wordpress, including this entry on Persian Literature, to introduce to the literary community and global Republic of Letters in the age of Globalization and the Internet, new authors, works and international perspectives.

## INTRODUCTION TO PERSIAN LITERATURE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORLD LITERATURE

The immense contribution of Persian literature and culture to World Literature and the history of global civilization is highly underappreciated, especially in recent times of political and religious conflict. Most of us in the West get our first impressions of Persian civilization from our reading of 5th century Greek history, foremost Herodotus, in which the Ancient Greeks in the infancy of their own national history, and when "The West" was a mere notional concept, successfully resisted the invasions of a much greater "superpower" Persian Empire under Darius and Xerxes, followed centuries later by the an Greek triumph over it under Alexander the Great. At this time Persia was already the heir and transmitter of a Mesopotamian culture of 3000 years, including contributions from Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian and later Egyptian cultures that became part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.

From the time of Alexander our cultural myopia often loses sight of the immense further contributions of Persian culture, both inside and outside the confines of Iran proper, down to the present. Nietzsche's landmark book "Also Sprach Zarathustra," (Thus Spake Zarathustra) reminds us of the continuing philosophical and spiritual contributions of Persian culture, across various centuries and dynasties. In the field of Renaissance Studies, or "Early Modern Studies" the contribution of the Arabic Golden Age (750-1250) to the rise of the Western Renaissance through preservation and transmission of the Greek and Roman classics such as Aristotle and Plato through Arabic translations is beginning to be known and appreciated. Less well recognized, however, is the crucial role of Persian culture in enabling that transmission, and thereby the Renaissance itself.

## THE PERSIANS AS KEY ENABLERS OF THE WESTERN RENAISSANCE

Even before the rise of Islam Persia was instrumental in preserving the works and culture of classical antiquity from the intolerant Christian suppression under the Byzantine Empire. The thousand year old Great Library of Alexandria was first burnt and destroyed in the Christian repression of "pagan" culture under the fundamentalist Theodosius, with the job probably being finalized in the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Many classical scholars fled the Byzantine Christian repression in both Alexandria and Constantinople, along with many Nestorian Christians who were branded "heretics," and settled in Persia, finding work and asylum at the renown Academy of Gondishapur of the Sassanian Persian dynasty. There they were employed in a

systematic project to translate all outside works into Persian and preserve their texts and scholarly tradition.

With the coming of Islam and its conquests the Persian scholarly, administrative and technocratic community once again played a highly critical role in enabling the rise of the Arabic Golden Age that then passed on the knowledge and texts of the classical world to enable the Western Renaissance. A critical turning point was the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, which occurred largely because of Persian support, especially that of the elite and scholarly Persian Barmacids, who then became the Vizirs under the Abbasid Caliphs, most memorably in the case of the Barmacid Jafar, who served as the Vizir of the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid in Baghdad, immortalized in the tales of the "One Thousand and One Nights."

By necessity the non-urban Arab conquerors turned to professional administrators, scholars and technocrats bred in the older empires such as the Persians. Though armed with the authority and force of the newly founded religion the aid of such scholarly, administrative and technocratic elites such as the Barmacids (Barmakids) of Persia was crucial in preventing the breakdown of the new domain. A crucial turning point in history was when after internecine conflict in the succession to the leadership after Mohammad, the Abbasid Caliphate took power and moved the headquarters from the Ummayyad capital in Damascus to the newly founded capital in Baghdad. Moving the power center from the Arabian tribal lands allowed the Persians to assume a dominant role in its administration, though hereditary succession still derived from the lineage of Mohammad. The Persian language came into common use within the royal court and in administration on a widespread basis.

Crucially for literature, culture and the flourishing of the Arab Golden Age civilization, the Persian scholars and administrators succeeded in changing the culture of the Caliphate from a narrow Arab ethnocentricity to an inclusive cosmopolitan outlook open to outside influences and progressive internal development, albeit within the framework of the consensus of the Islamic religion and guiding Arabic traditions. The Barmacid Vizirs under Haroun Al-Rashid and Mamun established a key institution, the "House of Wisdom" or "Bayt-al-Hikma" which in and of itself, along with replicated institutions elsewhere in the Caliphate, may be credited with preservation of the bulk of the heritage of classical antiquity and perhaps enabling the rise of the Renaissance in the West. Especially under the Caliph Mamun the House of Wisdom grew to become a national library, a center of translation from all languages and cultures into Arabic and Persian and a national Academy of Arts and Sciences supporting scholarly research, writing and projects.

The House of Wisdom was based on and inherited much of the resource base of the prior Sassanid Academy of Gondishapur. Scholars were employed and recruited as civil servants with tenure and high pay and engaged in independent research and scientific experimentation. The faculty was cosmopolitan and drawn from all cultures and religions. The head of the translation department was a Christian, Husayn ibn Ishaq (809-873). Scholars associated with the House of Wisdom included Al-Khwarizmi, the inventor of algebra, algorithms and the mathematician who introduced the Indian decimal system and zero into Arabic science and mathematics as later copied in the West, Alhazen (al-Haytham) the pioneer of Optics, Al-Kindi, master of cryptography, and the Banu Musa Brothers whose "Book of Ingenious Machines" founded the study of Arabic mechanics and engineering. The House of Wisdom's goal was to translate all the world's knowledge into Arabic and Persian, including that of the Greek and Roman heritage, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indian.

Interestingly, the Barmacids who became the Abbasid Caliph's Vizirs, or prime ministers, though new Muslims, were descended from Buddhist administrators of the monastery Nava Vihara (Nawbahar) west of Balkh in the Sassanid Persian empire. The monastery was a renowned center of learning referred to by the Chinese master translator Xuanzong, who was translating Indian scriptures into Chinese during the Tang Dynasty around the same period. This Barmacid Buddhist origin also facilitated the transfer of Indian mathematics and philosophy to the Arab world at an early time. The Barmacids also after the Arab defeat of the Chinese at the Battle of Talas brought Chinese paper-making technology to the Arab world, setting up

the two first paper mills in Baghdad and in Cordoba in Spain, both of which became enduring centers of scholarship and publishing. It is no exaggeration to believe that without the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, emulated in many other Muslim cities, Aristotle and much of the heritage of antiquity might have been lost to the West, and their "re-birth" in the Renaissance made impossible.

## KEY MASTERPIECES OF WORLD LITERATURE FROM PERSIA

### THE IMMORTAL SUFI MYSTIC POET RUMI

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) is one of the great poets of the Persian language, a Sufi mystic who was the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi and Dervish mystic order and a spiritual explorer of the realms of desire, passion and the quest for union of the soul with God, Allah. Rumi was a scholar and professor when he encountered a famous wandering Dervish, Shams al-Din Tabrizi, who persuaded him to abandon his academic studies and devote himself to the mystic path. From that time he received illumination and the love of God became the basis of his life. Contrary to Muslim practice Rumi gave music and dance a central place in his religious expression, developing the order of dervish dancers as a spiritual approach to unity with God. His diwan (collected poems) and ghazals (love poems) display a wide range of emotions and themes, from sexual love and passion, drunkenness, mystical longing to the holiest intimacy with the mystic presence of God, Allah. His broad tolerance and openness of spirit and keen sense of individuality is expressed in his lyrical voice:

What can I do, Submitters to God? I do not know myself.  
I am neither Christian nor Jew, neither Zoroastrian nor Muslim,  
I am not from east or west, not from land or sea,  
not from the shafts of nature nor from the spheres of the firmament,  
not of the earth, not of water, not of air, not of fire.  
I am not from the highest heaven, not from this world,  
not from existence, not from being.  
I am not from India, not from China, not from Bulgar, not from Saqsin,  
not from the realm of the two Iraqs, not from the land of Khurasan  
I am not from the world, not from beyond,  
not from heaven and not from hell.  
I am not from Adam, not from Eve, not from paradise and not from Ridwan.

My place is placeless, my trace is traceless,  
no body, no soul, I am from the soul of souls.  
I have chased out duality, lived the two worlds as one.  
One I seek, one I know, one I see, one I call.  
He is the first, he is the last, he is the outer, he is the inner.  
Beyond "He" and "He is" I know no other.  
I am drunk from the cup of love, the two worlds have escaped me.  
I have no concern but carouse and rapture.  
If one day in my life I spend a moment without you  
from that hour and that time I would repent my life.  
If one day I am given a moment in solitude with you  
I will trample the two worlds underfoot and dance forever.  
O Sun of Tabriz (Shams Tabrizi), I am so tipsy here in this world,  
I have no tale to tell but tipsiness and rapture.

## OMAR KHAYYAM'S "RUBAIYAT"

Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) was a renowned mathematician, poet, astronomer, scientist and founder of the field of algebra. In the Islamic world he is more remembered for his mathematical contributions than his poetry, whereas in the West he has been immortalized by the loose adaptation of his verse in "The Rubaiyat" by Edward FitzGerald.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
?Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit,  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
?Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

But helpless pieces in the game He plays,  
?Upon this chequer-board of Nights and Days,  
He hither and thither moves, and checks... and slays,  
?Then one by one, back in the Closet lays.

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
?A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou,  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness,  
?And oh, Wilderness is Paradise enow.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
?Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument  
About it and about: but evermore  
?Came out of the same Door as in I went.

Into this Universe, and why not knowing,  
?Nor whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing:  
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,  
?I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,  
?Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,  
Lift not thy hands to It for help—for It  
?Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

## ATTAR'S "PARLIAMENT OF THE BIRDS"

Farid al-Din al-'Attar (1119-1190) was another great mystic poet influenced by the Sufi tradition. His most famous work is the symbolic and allegorical "Parliament of the Birds" in which a flock of diverse birds led by the Hoopoe set off on a questing journey to find the ultimate bird, the Simurgh, and make him their King. Over many trials and hardships of a world-spanning flight all but thirty of the birds perish before reaching the land of their intention. But there is nothing there. Then the thirty survivors realize that they themselves are the yearned for Simurgh. They then transcendently merge into one, and by so doing they also perish in the divine, in the ultimate act of Sufi fulfillment and realization.

## NIZAMI'S "LAYLA AND MAJNUM"

Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209) is considered the greatest romantic epic poet in Persian Literature. One of his best known tales is that of "Layla and Majnun" which is often considered "The Persian Romeo and Juliet," a tale of "star-crossed lovers." In it Majnun falls hopelessly and insanely in love with Layla. Her father forbids her to marry him, citing his poverty and his eccentric madness into which his love has spilled over. Majnun abandons himself to wandering in the desert and peering after her from afar, while Layla submits to her father's will and marries another, but refuses to consummate the union. In the end Layla dies of a broken heart and Majnun. Later Majnun is found dead beside her grave, leaving behind a poem carved in a nearby rock:

I pass by these walls, the walls of Layla  
And I kiss this wall and that wall

It's not Love of the houses that has taken my heart  
But of the One who dwells in those houses

## FIRDUSI'S "SHAHNAMA"

Firdusi (Firdawsi) is considered the greatest epic poet of Persian Literature, celebrated for his "Shahnamah" or "The Book of Kings." The Shahnamah is a national epic which recounts the kings and dynasties of Iran's past. Being written in a Muslim context it begins with the creation and gives accounts of Persia's Zoroastrian heritage limited by the Muslim worldview. It contains such epic tales as that of "Sohrab and Rostum" in which a king kills his own son, not recognizing him, which was also rendered by Matthew Arnold in English.

## HAFIZ

Shams al-Din Muhammad Shirzai (1317-1389) is known by his pen-name Hafiz and is considered the father of the "ghazal" or love poem. He led a rich and full life, like many other Persian young men, though Muslim, enjoying excesses of women and wine. Hafiz is celebrated for interweaving the erotic and the mystic, the melancholy of mortality and fate, as well as philosophical paradoxes into his intensely emotional love songs.

## GHALIB

Ghalib (1797-1869) was born in Agra in Muslim northern India and wrote ghazals and poems in both Persian and Urdu. This reminds us that Persian was a literary, court and governmental language used alongside Arabic from the Ottoman Empire to Iran and throughout India, such that Persian Literature is not by any means confined to Iran. Urdu in India and Pakistan is heavily influenced by Persian as a legacy of the Mughul Empire, which used Persian as its official language. Ghalib like Hafiz and Rumi wrote ghazals of sensuous love, wine, women, song and the decay of the Mughul empire as it lost control to the British. Like Byron he was an aristocratic rebel with a touch of self-destructiveness about him. More modern in his consciousness, he exhibits a scepticism towards both political loyalty and religious orthodoxy and faith.

## SPIRITUS MUNDI AND PERSIAN LITERATURE

The tradition of Persian Literature is reflected in my own contemporary epic novel, Spiritus Mundi. The protagonists in Spiritus Mundi embark on a quest to create a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly, a globalized version of the EU Parliament as a new organ of the UN. En route, taking a theme from Attar's "Parliament of the Birds" they discover that they themselves constitute and embody the object of their quest, the People of the World, just as the thirty birds came to constitute the mystic "Simurgh" which they had sought. One of the characters in Spiritus Mundi Mohammad ala Rushdie, is a Sufi novice of the Mevlevi dervish order and Sufi themes abound in the work, including poems from Rumi and Mohammad's spiritual musings on Sufism in the modern world, as well as "Opening the Gates of Ijtihad" as means of renovating modern Islam.

For a fuller discussion of the concept of World Literature you are invited to look into the extended discussion in the new book Spiritus Mundi, by Robert Sheppard, one of the principal themes of which is the emergence and evolution of World Literature:

For Discussions on World Literature and n Literary Criticism in Spiritus Mundi:  
<http://worldliteratureandliterarycrit...>

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Author's Blog:

<http://robertalexandersheppard.wordpress...>

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Spiritus Mundi, Book II: The Romance <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CGM8BZG>

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**Arslan Gill says**

good

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