Concentrating on making poems,  
Is in fact nothing but a prison house of silence entirely;  
The smoke from the guttering candle is like a soundless chain.  

Asadullah Khan Ghalib

The great Urdu and Persian poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib's (1797–1869) current diwan contains less than half of the verses he actually composed, as he was an exacting and selective editor. Much of the discarded work belongs to his early period when he was more prolific and his poetic language was closer to Persian than Urdu. In this period his themes were so abstruse as to the point of being perplexing and recondite. Ghalib began composing verses at the early age of eleven or twelve, and had written many of his best-known ghazals by the time he was nineteen. His first and earliest diwan is dated 1816. Ghalib wrote first in Urdu—then for a long period only in Persian. He returned to Urdu after 1854 when he was appointed the royal tutor to the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shâh Zafar.

While five editions of Ghalib's Urdu diwan were published in his lifetime, starting with the first edition in 1841 and the last in 1863, the editions offer a mere 1,800 or so of the 4,209 verses composed by Ghalib. Most of the early work seemed to have disappeared, until a manuscript was discovered in 1918 nearly fifty years after the great poet's death. An edition of the early,  

1 This is the famous Nuskhah-i Hamidiyyah. It was first alluded to by Sayyid Sulaiman Nadvi in 1918; he saw it in Bhopal. At that time it was in the possession of Abdur Rashmân Bijnuri, who was preparing it for publication for Anjuman-i Taraqqi-i Urdu. The untimely death of Bijnuri left the task unfinished. Subsequently it was edited by Mufti Anvarul Haqq and published in 1921.
discarded poetry was first published in 1921 in Bhopal, India. Although the edition created a ripple in the Urdu literary world, it produced only one commentary, ‘Abdul Bārī Āsī’s Sharḥ-i Kalām-i G̲h̲ālib (Commentary on G̲h̲ālib’s poetry [Lucknow, 1931]). Most scholars were of the opinion that the discarded poetry was too obscure, even meaningless, to merit deeper analysis; besides, it had already been put aside by the poet himself. The mustarad divān has not received the attention it deserves. It is difficult to get a comprehensive picture of G̲h̲ālib’s work by dividing it into portions or ignoring his early output altogether.

In 1969, the centenary of G̲h̲ālib’s death was celebrated with enthusiasm and a flurry of scholarly conferences and publications followed. An unforeseen, serendipitous moment was the unveiling of a manuscript in G̲h̲ālib’s own hand that included almost all his early poetry. While the manuscript was published and feted, once again the rejected verses did not draw commentaries or formal analysis. The verses that were not included in G̲h̲ālib’s current divān inspired only one new tashrīḥ (commentary). Gian Chand Jain’s monumental though somewhat laconic commentary was published in 1971.

I was drawn to taking a closer look at G̲h̲ālib when I was invited to write a paper for a panel in honor of Professor Frances Pritchett, who retired from Columbia University in 2013. Pritchett’s erudite commentary on G̲h̲ālib’s current divān, A Desertful of Roses, is undoubtedly among the best known and most accessed of the numerous commentaries on the Urdu divān of G̲h̲ālib. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, had initiated a vigorous tafhīm of G̲h̲ālib’s well-known verses in 1968, when he began a column in Shabkhoon titled Tafhīm-i G̲h̲ālib. Faruqi’s Tafhīm aimed at reexamining and interrogating some of the noted commentaries on G̲h̲ālib’s current divān with a view to show that many of the shiʿrs that had been dismissed as meaningless (muhmal) or incomprehensible were actually brilliant compositions with intricate metaphors. Faruqi’s monthly column/commentary continued for nearly two decades and was compiled and published as a book. The column sparked a lot of interest and some controversy regarding interpretation.

I had been introduced to G̲h̲ālib at very early age and even memorized a unique ghazal from the mustarad divān then.

2 Mufti Anvarul Haq was the director of education of the princely state of Bhopal. A later edition, Dīvān-i G̲h̲ālib, Nuskhah-i Ḥamidiyyah, by Ḥamid Ahmad Khan (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab, 1969) is more reliable.

3 This manuscript is known by several names: Nuskhah-i ʿArshīzādah, Nuskhah–i Amroha, Nuskhah–i Bhopal bah khaṭṭ-i G̲h̲ālib. A facsimile edition was published soon after its unveiling; first in the Urdu journal Nuquš. Another separate, limited edition was brought out by Akbar ‘Ali Khān ʿArshīzādah in September 1969.