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Notes on the Translation of *Khvab-o-Khayal*

Saiyid Muhammad Mir, whose *takhalluṣ* was Aṡar, was the younger brother of Khvāja Mīr Dard (1719–1785 CE). He is remembered for a single long poem, the *maṡnavī Khvāb-o-Khayāl* (Dream and Imagination), which was published in definitive form by the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū in 1926, more than one-and-a-half centuries after it was written. Very little appears to be known about Aṡar. In the little I have read, I have been unable to find a reference even to his birth date. My attention was drawn to this poem by the tantalizing references in Muhammad Sadiq's *A History of Urdu Literature* (1964). Sadiq rates Aṡar, the poet, as high as his brother (which is praise indeed), and views what he calls the prologue to *Khvāb-o-Khayāl*, which is translated here, as an "afterthought" and an "apologia," appended to the whole because of Aṡar's remorse at having written a licentious poem (1964, 106).

On a visit to Delhi I obtained photocopies of the Anjuman edition of the poem in two libraries—those of the Jamia Millia Islamia and Hamdard universities. I had hardly read a page before I found myself translating: attempting, that is, to approximate for myself, in English, whatever was most attractive and elusive to me about the tone, the speaking register of *Khvāb-o-Khayāl*. I showed my version of the first couple of pages to my friend Dr. Mahmood Soofi, a Bhutto-era lawyer who had moved from Pakistan to Australia after the advent of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan. He was as intrigued as I was. We at last decided that I was proceeding in the right way, and I completed my translation—with some omissions—of the prologue. It is this that is presented here.

The fascination of this opening section of a long poem—"apologia" or "afterthought" as it may be—lies partly in the perspective it affords on aspects of personal disposition and social behavior in a corner of eighteenth-century Delhi. This corner, always known to a few, is a significant site in the annals of spiritual practice in India. To us, today, it is remem-

bered above all for its poetry. Spiritual practice and poetry are at the heart of the prologue. Yet the very content of the prologue is molded by the enigma of the tone. It would appear—and there is no reason to quarrel with appearances—that Aṡar in these verses repudiates the entire project of the poem which follows. One question immediately arises: if the prologue was written *after* the reception of the long poem by an audience, what is it intended to do? It hardly amounts to a *vindication* of the *maṡnavī Khvāb-o-Khayāl*, which is a complaint by a lover about a woman's hardness of heart. But although the *maṡnavī* is deplored, it is not retired. There is nothing in the prologue to suggest that the carnal verses will be destroyed, and one can only suppose that this repudiation was circulated at the head of the offending long poem—which is where it lies now. If I knew more, I could say more.

Are there like instances? When the famed Ibn al-ʿArabī (1164–1240 CE), of whom so much more is known, met with objection to the sentiments and images in his collection of poems the *Tarjuman al-Ashvāq* (Interpreter of Desires), he compiled a commentary (not in verse) which corrected the belief that he had authored an erotic poem. He alluded, in a "third recension," so-called by Nicholson (in Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, 4) to a certain critic, one suspicious of his bona fides. This critic had cast doubt on his declaration "that the love-poems in this collection refer to mystical sciences and realities" (*ibid.*, 5). The commentary supplies the substance of just those references which the critic had doubted. The poems of the *Tarjumān al-Ashvāq*, which are as beautiful in some places as they are obscure in others, do indeed appear to sustain both an erotic and a Sufic interpretation. I know the poems only in English translation, but their depth of mystical feeling, taken with their sensual urgency, constitute perhaps one of the glories of Arabic literature.

Muḥammad Aṡar, however, does not maintain in his prologue that he has composed a work of mysticism, or anything but a secular poem. He does appear in the prologue as a Sufi initiate: he has taken *baiʿat.* But he has come to his Sufism, or family inheritance, only recently, *after* the penning of the bulk of *Khvāb-o-Khayāl.* His spiritual guide is his brother. It is well known that Khvāja Mīr Dard before him was the *murīd* of their father, Khvāja Muḥammad Nāṣir (see part 4 of the translation), the founder of a suborder of the Naqshbandiyya in Delhi and a poet as well, whose *takhalluṣ* was ʿAndalīb. Dard's reverence for his father, which pervades his writings, is echoed by Aṡar's reverence for his older brother. The little compound stayed its ground in Delhi through the time of troubles—the massacre of the city's inhabitants ordered by Nadir Shah (1739), and its occupation by the Marathas (1760). This family, esteemed for its

piety, its probity, its innovation in Sufism (and Dard was a musician as well) had produced a youngster who made his mark with a poem about lovemaking!

If Sadiq is correct, and the prologue is an "afterthought," then Aṡar's undertaking here should come as no surprise. The junior offspring of such a family, having circulated a profane poem and noted its reception, felt prompted to "unsay" what he had done.

This interpretation seems very likely. But it does not prepare us for what we find in the *Khvāb-o-Khayāl*. It does not prepare us for the remarkable fluency and buoyancy of the verse, which is as far from defensiveness and abashment—qualities one associates with an "apologia"—as can be imagined. Aṡar's wish is to atone: his verses will say as much: but he does not begin the prologue with a mea culpa. Instead he begins with a vigorous polemic against the fatuity of the kind of people who occupy themselves with love thoughts, love poems and their fevered perceptions of the conduct of the beloved. Aṡar steps right into the frame, as a comic property of his own poem. He was himself one of those people. There were plenty of them, his verses say, in the Delhi of his experience. Much later in the prologue he will turn to his own transgressions, but to begin with, his only care is to impart as much truth and verve as he can manage to his depiction of this extraordinary way of life.

Here the question of tone arises. Aṡar at once strikes a note which veers between comic exaggeration and the poignancy of loss. Although the topic of the prologue would seem to cry out for moralizing, I am not convinced that there is any moralizing at all in what follows. What is communicated to me in this prologue to the *Khvāb-o-Khayāl* is a rapid, and vital, oscillation of rival ingredients of experience, which excite rival moods, the mood of derision at one point, of lamentation at another. All his moods are sincere, and conspicuously unlabored. The poet depicts his just-abandoned climate of feeling. He is incredulous: was he ever like that? It seems he cannot help expressing what is almost a kind of admiration for the folly of such extreme abandonment.

As the reader (and indeed the translator) continues with the poem, he or she begins to wonder even more at the complexity of tone. Lovesickness, the entire universe of the *Khvāb-o-Khayāl*—the long poem that will follow—is indeed repudiated, and in the most definitive way possible: it is made into an object of fun. But besides this, it is an object of sorrow. Aṡar himself, having the brother he has and with access to a circle of true friends, has escaped the *sakht āfat*, the *baḥr-e qulzum* of destructive abandonment to "the love of outward forms," *'ishq-e ṣūrī*. But there are "lakhs" of lovers, wretches, who have not escaped. The poet expresses

his compassion for those whose company he has left behind.

There is no compassion, however, for bad advisers to poets, for malicious judges, for all-knowing pundits and for appropriators of others' poetry—though with a poet as good, and as spendthrift of his own verses, as Khvāja Mīr Dard, his brother acknowledges that some degree of appropriation is inevitable. Appropriation, it seems, is not the worst of it. What is worse is the crushing of the spirit of another, whether in spiritual matters—there is certainly such a thing as a bad *pīr*—or in poetry.

Those who are a little familiar with the *ghazals* of Dard—so notable for their brevity, their pointed sufficiency, of language—will be intrigued by the representation of that poet here; though Dard himself (as Annemarie Schimmel's book *Pain and Grace* (1976) makes plain) did not own to any great concern with his Urdu poetry and implied that it all came to him as leaves to the tree, and as a respite from more reputable undertakings. This is consistent with the account here. Either this was family ideology, or the poets did indeed just toss off verses when the mood came on them. Such lightness and unconcern make all the more of a miracle of Dard's *ghazals*—but can easily be credited in the case of As̤ar's poem. The tone is so fluid and conversational that—if one is looking for a kindred spirit in English—it may be someone like Byron, a satirist and a skeptic but the amused object of a romantic cult following. It is the Byron of "Don Juan," and not any of the spiritual authors, who comes to mind, at least in the early passages.

In the prologue to *Khvāb-o-Khayāl* a versatile tone of voice links together a range of themes which might seem at odds with one another *were this tone missing*. This tone might be attributed to any one of a number of ingredients: animal spirits, or the ethos of that particular *dargāh*. But even in sum, these do not seem quite enough. What is its secret?

I do not know what the secret is, yet one kind of concern illuminates the entire prologue. The poem begins with lovesickness, treated as an illness, as a rich source of merriment, and as a calamity that excites pity. It proceeds to testify to the solace, the rejuvenation that As̤ar found in the Sufi path to which he was initiated by a loving brother. There is (as the reader of Urdu can investigate for himself) nothing forced about this transition, nor (I suggest) is there anything merely moralistic about the spiritual recommendations. The poem relates real experiences, and stays close to them.

What these polar regions of experience have in common is what knits the poem together. The poem is about abandonment—a Sufi topic if there ever was one. In the itinerary of this poem one form of abandonment is replaced by another. I should put this more strongly. One *extreme* form of

abandonment is replaced by another: for there is nothing halfhearted or commonsensical about the abandonment to God through one's *pīr*. It is not a project undertaken in one's spare time (as was, by all accounts, Dard's composition of his *ghazals*). It is—like obsession with the beloved —a quest, and an occupation, that gives a purpose to life.

In a passage in the prologue three central concerns come together—spiritual guidance, truth in friendship, and carnal love, which is not commended but furnishes the metaphor to the entire passage:

Yā jō kō'ī keh yār-e ṣādiq hūñ
Bē-takalluf bē-dil muvāfiq hūñ
'Āshiqāna paṛā hō ṣirf mizāj
Hō kisō sē unhaiñ na kām na kāj
Dil mēñ rakh̲tē hōñ ṭuk bh̲ī sōz-o-gudāz
Kuč̲h̲ samajh̲tē hōñ ḥarf-e rāz-o-niyāz
'Ālam-e dōstī sē hō ke khabar
Rakh̲tē hōñgē dilōñ mēñ dard-o-Aṡar

(1926, 8)

Sōz-o-gudāz, *rāz-o-niyāz*. As I translate this *bait*—"Conscious of what it is to melt and burn, / Schooled in the lover's idiom of secrets and meetings"—language appropriate to the carnal intercourse of lovers proves appropriate, too, to the affection of loyal friends and to the communication of Aṡar and Dard, the *murīd* and his spiritual guide, and so to the aspiration to divine love. This identity or near identity of language referring to rival planes is of course a commonplace in the *ghazal* tradition, which would be nowhere without it. The confusion of planes irradiates the most beautiful verse in the language. In this poem, a different kind of poem, a discursive poem, the poet suffers all kinds of entanglements (some comic) in getting from one plane to the other, but he brings it off and ends this prologue (and apologia) to his long poem with a serenely glowing passage, effortlessly expressive of the temperament of the poet capable of this kind of verse.

In this concluding passage, Aṡar appears to "conduct" the reader to *Khvāb-o-Khayāl*. He supplies a most persuasive reason for turning to the poem about love, which contains erotic passages. Yet a short while before, he had expressed his resounding contempt for that poem, product of a wasted youth. There can be little doubt that (as Sadiq supposed) *Khvāb-o-Khayāl* was behind him when he began his prologue; the question was what to do with it. The prologue solves that problem, bringing the long poem into circulation once again.

My translation will not have rendered all of this. There will be mistakes too. What I have tried to capture above all is the swiftness, pathos

and buoyancy of the verse: something of its tone, because it seems to me that the vitality and originality of the poem, considered as verse, and considered too as testimony true to experience, lies in the spell or "secret" by which a miscellany of events and moods important to the young poet in his transition from chaos to tranquility are fused in a single utterance with little sign of hesitation or effort.

In December 2007, I at last tracked down in Delhi that *dargāh* within which Muḥammad Nāṣir (ʿAndalīb) and his family lie buried. It is not hard to find—but, on short visits, I had somehow always ended up in the wrong place. Now, as dusk fell, I inspected the tombs. A Hindu merchant of the *bastī* accompanied me. He was proud of that family, though he could recite none of the verse. The big tomb, ʿAndalīb's (clearly inscribed with his *takhalluṣ* and name) was positioned in the center. Long after Sanjay Gandhi had ordered the demolition of buildings and neighborhoods around the Turkman Gate, this small sanctuary was well preserved—but shabby. The velvet coverings on Dard's tomb, and on that of his brother, As̱ar, could well have done with replacement—and, it seemed in the dark, there were inscriptions to be re-incised, or perhaps retrieved. I asked my local guide if there was any institution to which a modest donation might be handed. He replied emphatically: "give to poor people." After a tea-drinking session at a nearby shopkeeper's, and by way of farewell, he repeated in English: "Make your donation to poor people, in the name of Mīr Dard."

Although there are places where I have striven for the meaning, or perhaps just misunderstood, it has been my intention to stay as close to the spirit *and* the words of As̱ar's poem as possible. However to do this—to make a translation in English which is faithful to the poem—I have often looked for means which do not reproduce the exact words. To forewarn the reader, one example is with the first word of the poem. As̱ar has written "*baʿd ḥamd-e khudā-o-naʿt-e rasūl*"—"*after* the praise of God and adoration of the Messenger." I have brought in a word which is simply not in the poem: "*drowning* the praise of God." I have done so not to be smart but because I suppose that As̱ar means to insert his disruptive protagonist directly into the poem at this point. But it is also possible that As̱ar means simply to register a chronology: "this is when it happened."

What is the authorization for the term "prologue"? I can find none, though it is clear enough where this section ends and where *Khvāb-o-Khayāl* begins, a different genre of utterance in the same meter. The Anjuman edition uses the term "*dībāča*" which is plain enough, but which refers only to a small initial section of what hangs together as a "prologue." I have kept Sadiq's term. But the prologue is long: eleven

pages of text, a water drop in respect to the entire poem, but a great deal to occupy the pages of *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. I have translated about half, or a little more, making my excisions of entire passages mostly at the beginning, where the representative doings of classic lovers, for example, is (to me, standing in for the present-day reader) interesting only up to a point. Elsewhere too I have omitted whole passages and even within translated passages I have at times omitted lines or abbreviated them. The last few pages, however, are almost intact, so that my translation flows to the end. To perform such an abbreviation is to take quite a liberty with the poem. But there will be other translations. These words aside, I had better leave off admissions and qualifications and leave this translation to fare for itself. It points to a memorable artifact of Urdu verse. ❑

Works Cited

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