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Some Comments on de Tassy's *Les Auteurs Hindoustanis et Leurs Ouvrages d'Après les Biographies Originales*

THE COMPANION ARTICLE WHICH FOLLOWS presents a translation of the French Orientalist Garcin de Tassy's 1868 book *Les Auteurs Hindoustanis et Leurs Ouvrages d'Après les Biographies Originales* (The Hindustani Authors and Their Works, as Described in the Primary Biographies).

For a short biography of Garcin de Tassy (1794–1878), including a summary of his contributions to the scholarly study of Urdu language and literature, the reader is referred to the note accompanying the translation of one of de Tassy's annual reports (Abdali 2011, 135–42). That note also cites several other references for more detailed information about his life and work. His most comprehensive biography, with a detailed review of his contribution to Indian languages, especially Urdu, is in Suraiya Husain's doctoral dissertation written in French (1962). She herself translated this dissertation into Urdu (1984).

De Tassy stands out among European Orientalists by virtue of the depth and breadth of his scholarship, and his lifelong devotion to and advocacy of Urdu, which contributed significantly to the spread of interest in this language among European scholars. During a fifty-year period, he translated several Urdu books and manuscripts into French and wrote prolifically on a vast range of issues related to Urdu, including its history, linguistics, grammar, and literature, and on its speakers' culture, customs, festivals, and even politics and communal issues.

The present book is about *tazkiras*. The *tazkira* (literally “remembrance”), a popular literary genre in the Indian subcontinent, is a biography of literary personalities, particularly poets. A *tazkira* is not the biography of a single person, but a collection of short biographies of many people, sometimes hundreds of them. In the guise of biography, *tazkiras* provide an extraordinary wealth of information about poets and writers, including records of their births and deaths and important events in their life, their

association with various princely courts, mentor-disciple relationships, extracts of their literary creations, and the critique of their work by the biographers. The biographers can sometimes be very blunt in describing the subjects of their *tazkiras*; they talk candidly about incidents of plagiarism and make snide remarks about what they consider disgraceful or immoral behavior by their biographees. In general, the *tazkiras* are at the same time books of biography, anthology, literary criticism, and history—literary as well as general.

Garcin de Tassy personally acquired, or found out about, seventy-three works that he considers to be *tazkiras* in some way or other. For example, some are basically anthologies, but they contain biographical notes about the authors whose work they have excerpted. In the book being translated here, de Tassy discusses and analyzes these *tazkiras*, and presents a lot of linguistic and literary information gleaned from them.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section (untitled) lists the *tazkiras*, with some remarks (of varying length) about each, including dates and authorship, location of the handwritten manuscript if unpublished, and so on. The second section is about the authors who are the subjects of the *tazkiras*. Of course, only a small number of these authors are discussed, mainly the ones who are considered important in some way. The third section is about the works that have been mentioned by the biographers. But in this section, de Tassy also explains the various genres of Hindustani poetical compositions with respect to form and content, and uses the definition of these genres to develop somewhat of a taxonomy of the works covered in the *tazkiras*.

De Tassy has managed to pack a great deal of miscellaneous information into this book in the form of casual remarks, such as the comparison of Indian lifestyle, habits, customs, ideas, and religious beliefs with those in Europe, and anecdotal comments on people and places.

While being a devout Catholic in his personal life, de Tassy was also a very tolerant person who pointed out positive things about the various beliefs and creeds of India. He mentions matter-of-factly whatever he senses as disparate from his own beliefs, but does so without any expression of condemnation or value judgment. For example, when talking about the themes frequently found in Urdu poetry, he remarks that the perceived unity between the immortal (divine) beauty and the created (human) beauty would amount to sacrilege in Europe. But a rare, puritanical side of his personality shows up when it comes to (what he considers) obscene literature. For example, when describing a *tazkira* by Mir Ḥasan, he says, “[Hasan] has also written some very obscene poetry which indicates that he indulged in a kind of libertinism that rarely defiles [*souille*] Christian lands”

(1868, 44). De Tassy seems too troubled to give any specific details about the supposed obscenity or even name the offending work.

Normally, de Tassy's writing is scholarly, serious, and very dry. Any display of humor by him must truly be an exception. We see a rare instance of humor here when he criticizes the verbosity of many biographical works, French as well as Indian. He says that these biographers love to cram their books with all sorts of useless information, so the books have nothing missing but the dates of death of their subjects (who are still living, of course) (*ibid.*, 8–9).

A most astounding fact about him is that he became a great Indologist and scholar of Indian languages, especially Urdu and Hindi, without ever having set foot in India. Quoting from the note referred to at the beginning of this article, "his knowledge of Indian languages was acquired mainly from reading, from correspondence, from interactions with any visitors to France who spoke those languages, and from any students who might already have acquired the rudiments of those languages" (Abdali 2011, 140). He kept abreast of the literary developments in India by obtaining and studying most of the Indian publications, such as books, magazines, newspapers, and reports in the languages that were of interest to him. But de Tassy's physical isolation from the mainland of the speakers of those languages did take its toll on his understanding and judgment about some matters. Ḥusain (1962) has reported a number of de Tassy's erroneous statements which have been noted by several scholars. A few more are pointed out in Abdali (2011). The present translation uncovers others, some of which are described below. These seem to be simple misunderstandings, caused by de Tassy's solitary mode of research. Surely, most of these would not have arisen if he had made periodic visits to India and had frequented the literati there.

There is no mention of the poet Ghālib in this book, but a number of Ghālib's contemporaries are listed and called the most noteworthy living poets of Urdu, such as Zauq, Mōmin, Ṣahbā'ī, and Shēfta. Now, Shēfta's *Gulshan-e Bēkhār* is one of the *tazkiras* which De Tassy lists among his important sources, and this *tazkira* describes Ghālib in superlative terms and includes extensive quotations from his poetry, filling up four pages. So it is difficult to explain how de Tassy remained unaware of Ghālib and his prominence, or deliberately chose not to discuss him.

Garcin de Tassy thought that the famous Persian poet, Sa'dī of Shiraz, also wrote poetry in Urdu and could have been the first poet of Urdu. De Tassy's statements led to a lively controversy, described at some length in Abdali (2011). It seems that he never gave up on his claim, so even the present book contains this statement: "In the thirteenth century, [we have]

Sa‘di, who, as we have seen above, did not disdain writing verse in the Urdu dialect ...” (1868, 69).

An almost hilarious mistake is that de Tassy took the poet Mir Yār ‘Alī Jān Ṣāhib, the famous master of *rēkhtī*, to be a woman, and a dancing courtesan at that. The poet’s name gave him no clue, since “Ṣāhib” was commonly used as a title for both men and women during de Tassy’s and his contemporary Jān Ṣāhib’s time.

In the introductory remarks in the first section, de Tassy gives a French translation of a long passage from the classical biographical work *Gulshan-e Hind* (Luṭf 1906). Comparing his translation with the original text, we notice a number of deviations from the original text. For example, the original Dakhani Urdu text of a couplet transliterated as

*Kis dar kabūn, jāūn kabān, mujh dil pe b̄bal bajbrāt hai.
Ek bāt kē hōngē sajan, yabān jī hī bārab bāt hai!*

(81)

has been translated by De Tassy’s as:

*A quelle porte irai-je dire (ma peine)? Oū pourrai-je aller?
Adressons-nous à mon propre cœur, qu’il soit pour moi mon
mibrab.*

*Si mes amis me disent seulement une parole, ce sera pour moi
comme un frais pavillon dans la saison d’été.*

(1868, 16)

This, rendered fairly literally in English, would be:

To which door shall I go to complain (about my misery)? Where could I go? Let me just address my own heart, so that it would become my *mibrāb*.

If my friends tell me just one thing, that will be like a new abode for me in the summer season.

But the meaning of the couplet is really closer to this:

At which door should I state (my misery); where should I go. My heart is struck (by the calamity of separation from the beloved).

My beloved is but of one word (his refusal to grant me union with him), and (as a result) my heart/mind is confounded (and restless).

De Tassy has obviously misread *bajbrāt* (wounded, struck by lightning, suffering from a calamity, etc.) as *mibrāb* (niche that the praying congregation faces in a mosque) and has thus misinterpreted the second clause of the first hemistich. The two words have some visual similarity in the

Urdu script, so it is possible to mistake one for the other, especially in a poorly handwritten copy. In the second hemistich, the trouble comes from the phrases “saying just one thing,” which simply refers to the beloved’s being adamant in saying “no” to all of the poor lover’s entreaties, and “the mind being of twelve divisions,” which means being confounded, confused, or perplexed. Similarly it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he understood *bārah bāt* to be the name of some summer month. As a result of these misunderstandings, the translator has strayed miles off the intended meaning.¹

There are several mistranslations in the passage from *Gulshan-e Hind*, although all are not as serious as the above. The cause of the discrepancy might be the very ornate prose of the original. (It is an extreme example of *musajjaʿ* and *muqaffā* Urdu text.) Its literal translation is likely to be quite abstruse and opaque. Instead of encumbering the translation with elaborate notes and additions, de Tassy perhaps preferred producing just an approximate translation to convey most of the intended meaning. Of course, another, more plausible explanation of the translation mishaps is that the manuscript available to de Tassy might have been poorly handwritten and different from the published edition accessible to us these days.

Some little problems aside, this is perhaps the only book that has catalogued, analyzed, and summarized such a large number of *tazkiras*. With many of the described *tazkiras* now lost, this book is a valuable resource for scholars of Urdu. □

Works Cited

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¹I am indebted to Dr. Moazzam Siddiqi who explained the Dakhani vocabulary used here and unraveled for me the meaning of the couplet.