

Mir: The Man and His Age

WHERE A MAN'S POETRY proclaims high ideals of conduct, it is the tendency of some modern critics to compare his theory with his practice and criticise both the poetry and the poet if they find that the two do not correspond. This is perhaps not altogether fair, for the poet is not the whole man, and he may believe with all his heart in the ideals that his poetry declares, and yet lack the strength to bring his own life into conformity with them. Still Mir would have welcomed being judged in this way, and it is ironical that he usually had to face criticism from a standpoint which is almost the exact opposite of this. He found himself in a position where his poetry was universally praised, while his conduct was often disapproved; and yet that conduct was generally no more than the application in practice of the principles that his poetry upheld.

The fact is that the conventions of the ghazal worked in his favour in that they enabled him to speak "the secrets of his heart" with a voice that was "free and unrestrained";¹ but they worked against him as well, because his hearers were all too ready to assume that his verse was no more than an accomplished handling of the conventional themes, and only to the more sensitive among them did it occur that in his case the poetry really meant what it said. To the rest it was "only poetry," and remained so even though he told them:

مجھ کو شاعر نہ کہو میر کہ صاحب میں نے
درد و غم کتنے کئے جمع تو دلوں کیا

Don't think me a mere poet—no, my verse
Is made of pain and grief more than you know. (III.370.5)

And,

اس پردے میں غم دل کہتا ہے میر اپنا
کیا شعر و شاعری ہے یار و شعار عاشق

Under this guise of poetry Mir speaks the sorrows of his heart.
What poetry it is, my friends!—this lover's way of life. (II.279.1)

And,

کیا تھا زبختہ پردہ سخن کا
سو ٹھہرا ہے یہی اب فن ہمارا

Under this guise I spoke the message of my heart,
And all my practice now is to perfect this art. (I.28.14)²

For these verses too could be taken to be "only poetry." He had to put them into plain prose before people could see that he meant them—as when he told a young nobleman who approached him with a request to correct his verse: "Young sir, you are a noble and the son of a noble. Practice horsemanship and archery and the handling of the lance. Poetry is a task for men whose hearts have been seared by the fire of love and pierced by the wounds of grief."³ Whatever other men might think of his attitude—and it was often resented and wrongly ascribed to arrogance—Mir knew that the "pain and grief" of love, in all its senses, was the

¹ Cf. above, p. 213.

² Cf. III.423.23 and III.388.10.

³ Āzād, *Āb i Hayāt*, p. 215.

essential material of poetry, and that mere technical excellence could do nothing without it. At a distance of two hundred years most people can now see that he was right, and that his ghazals have outlived so many others precisely because they are the expression of an experience deeply and passionately felt.

What we know of his life⁴—and fragmentary though this knowledge is by modern standards, it is a good deal fuller than our knowledge of his contemporaries—shows how close was the relationship between his ideals and his practice. His capacity to suffer for his principles was put to the test while he was still a mere boy. His father had been married twice. By his first wife, a sister of the famous Persian scholar Khān i Ārzu, he had a son named Muhammad Hasan, and by the second, two sons, of whom Mir was the elder. Mir was clearly his father's favourite, and Muhammad Hasan bitterly resented this. When his father fell gravely ill, Mir was perhaps in his early teens. Despite treatment, his father's condition did not improve, and Mir describes in his autobiography how one day, sensing that death was near, he called his sons to his bedside and said:⁵ "I am a faqīr,⁶ and I own nothing. All I have is three hundred books. Bring them here and divide them between you." Muhammad Hasan said, "You know that I am a student, and that I spend most of my time on studies. What do my brothers want with these books? They will only tear them up to make kites and paper boats. It would be better to give them to me. But you must do as you please." His father replied, "You wear the cloak of unworldliness, but underneath it your nature is unchanged. You want to cheat these youngsters of their rights, and ill-treat them when I am dead. But remember that God is a jealous God, and befriends those who are jealous for their honour. I do not think that Muhammad Taqī [that is, Mir] will ever lay himself under obligation to you; and if you try to harm him, it will be he who will come off best. Men will never honour your name as they will this boy's. . . . People never trust a petty-minded man, and greed and jealousy will never reap

⁴ The main sources for his life are *Zikr i Mir* and his own poems, in which he often speaks more frankly than he does in prose. For *Zikr i Mir* see above, p. 207. It is sometimes difficult to interpret, for though Mir has an excellent memory for the sequence of the events he describes, he does not date them. One has to refer throughout to Sarkar's *Fall of the Mughal Empire* to provide the dating.

⁵ *Zikr i Mir*, pp. 59–60.

⁶ Cf. above, p. 194.

anything but contempt and disgrace. Very well then. Take the books and take good care of them." Then he turned to Mir and said, "My son, I owe three hundred rupees to the money-lenders, and I want you to promise that you will not bury me until you have paid it. All my life I have been true to my principles, and I never yet cheated any man." Mir replied, "These books, which are now my brother's, were all our wealth. How can I pay our debts now?" Tears came into his father's eyes, and he said, "God will provide, never fear. Even now money is on the way. I wish I could live until it comes, but death is near, and time is short; and I cannot wait." Then he gave Mir his blessing and commended him to God's care, and after breathing a little longer, died.

Mir says that by God's grace he carried out his father's commands without having to be beholden to anyone, although his stepbrother openly refused to accept any responsibility for the settlement of his father's affairs. Then he handed over charge of the household to his younger brother and set out to find himself some means of earning a living. But he could find no livelihood in Agra, and so he set out for Delhi to try his fortunes there. Again he could find no one to help him for quite a while. At length, however, he won the ear of a nobleman named Khwāja Muhammad Bāsīt, the nephew of the great noble Samsām ud Daula, to whom reference was made in Chapter 1.⁷ Samsām ud Daula at this time held one of the highest offices in the Empire—that of Imperial Paymaster and Marshal of the Nobility—and through Muhammad Bāsīt, Mir was now able to gain an introduction to him.⁸

Samsām ud Daula had known and revered Mir's father, and when he was told whose son Mir was, he ordered that the boy should, for his father's sake, be paid a daily stipend from his treasury. During the interview an incident occurred which is highly characteristic of Mir. He asked that the order for the payment of his stipend be put into writing so that no difficulty could arise when he went to receive it. Muhammad Bāsīt, thinking perhaps that this down-to-earth request might offend the noble lord, intervened and said, "This is not the proper time for the inkstand." At this Mir, as though he had not already gone quite far enough, began to laugh. Samsām ud Daula looked at him in astonishment and asked, "What

⁷ Above, p. 16.

⁸ *Zikr i Mir*, pp. 62–63.

is the matter? Why are you laughing?" Mir replied: "I do not know what that means—'This is not the proper time for the inkstand.' If he had said 'The Navvāb cannot sign now,' or 'The inkstand-bearer is not here,' then I could have understood it. But this is a curious statement. The inkstand is not a living thing that can observe times and occasions; it is a piece of wood, which any of your servants will fetch whenever you order him." At this Samsām ud Daula laughed too, and made out the written order there and then.

Mir's good fortune did not last long. About a year after this, in 1739, came the invasion of Nādir Shāh, and in the disastrous battle of Karnāl, Samsām ud Daula was mortally wounded. Thus Mir was again without support. Whether he had remained in Delhi up to this point we do not know for certain, but we do know that, either before or after Samsām ud Daula's death, he returned to Agra; and here he soon had more bitter and painful experiences to undergo. In his autobiography he says only that all his relatives and friends turned against him, so that, as his poetic prose puts it, "men who had once made the dust of my feet the adornment of their eyes"⁹ made his life so unbearable that he felt obliged to leave the city and go once more to Delhi.¹⁰ His poetry, in which convention allowed him the freedom to describe experiences which would not have been acceptable in prose, provides the key to the mystery, and we may deduce with near certainty that the love affair which his masnavi *The Stages of Love* describes was the occasion of his persecution. Sooner or later this hostility made itself felt even in Delhi. Mir stayed for a time with his stepbrother Muhammad Hasan's uncle, Khān i Ārzu, but one day a letter from Muhammad Hasan came condemning Mir roundly and asking Khān i Ārzu not to assist him in any way. Mir writes sarcastically that the old gentleman, despite his pretensions, was one for whom considerations of worldly wisdom were paramount, and for this reason he acted on his nephew's request. "I never asked him for anything," writes Mir,¹¹ "but still he persecuted me, and if I were to write of all I suffered at his hands, it would fill a book." It was the cumulative effect of all this that drove him mad; the account which he gives in his autobiography tallies with that which forms the theme of the masnavi *Mir's Vision*, already described.

⁹ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 63.

¹⁰ He did not see Agra again for more than 20 years.

¹¹ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 64.

Thus Mir had indeed suffered "pain and grief more than you know" when he began to make his name as a poet; and it took him only a few years after he recovered his sanity to establish a reputation. Henceforth, for the rest of his long life, it was on his reputation as a poet that he depended for his livelihood. Most of his patrons were nobles highly placed in the imperial administration. The first was closely related to Qamar ud Dīn, Itimād ud Daula II, who was Vazīr of the Empire from 1724 to 1748. This man offended Mir, and he parted company with him. Soon after, he won the patronage of the eunuch Jāved Khān, who was all-powerful in the Empire from 1748 to 1752, when he was assassinated by his rival Safdar Jang. Mir, however, was taken under the wing of a noble close to Safdar Jang, until Safdar Jang's own downfall the following year again placed him in difficulties. It seems that for some years after this he was without any regular means of livelihood, until about 1757–1758, when Rāja Nāgar Mal, soon to become Deputy Vazīr of the Empire, became his patron. Except for a short break in 1760, Mir continued in his service for about fifteen years.

We can study more closely these twenty some odd years of Mir's life from the late 1740s to 1772, both in the histories of that period and in Mir's own brief account of them. A number of salient features emerge. The first is the ever-present insecurity which he must have felt, both from the repeated incursions of Abdāli from Afghanistan and from the armed strife between the different factions within India. His most powerful patron is assassinated; another is driven from Delhi after months of civil war; another time he himself is so distressed by conditions in Delhi that he wanders off on his own, "not knowing where he was going, but trusting in God to lead him."¹² So that if in 1772 he could look back on a period of twenty-five years during which he had rarely been without the patronage of an influential noble, it was nonetheless a period in which from day to day he had never felt secure.

The second striking thing is Mir's own close sense of involvement in the events of his day. His personal experience of Abdāli's invasions has already been described.¹³ In addition, he tells us how he accompanied his first patron, Riyāyat Khān, in two campaigns in 1748, where he undertook a diplomatic mission of some importance on his behalf; how in 1750

¹² *Zikr i Mir*, p. 90; cf. above, p. 33.

¹³ Above, p. 32.

he suffered all the hardships of a forced retreat with Safdar Jang's defeated army after the fiasco of his military expedition to Rohilkhand and Farrukhābād; and how in 1754 he was with the Emperor when he fled before the forces of the Marāthas and of his own Vazīr Imād ul Mulk, leaving his harem captive in their hands. But it is not only the events he has personally experienced that remain clear in his mind. His autobiography gives the whole complicated story of the politics of imperial Delhi during these years, for the most part crowding out all but the briefest references to his own fortunes; and though he writes from memory many years after most of these events had taken place, he is rarely at fault in the account he gives. His belief that one must not withdraw from the life of society, but "live in the world, where griefs and joys beset you,"¹⁴ is clearly one by which his own actions were guided.

Mir's attitude towards the great men upon whom he depended is also worthy of note. He sees them in two roles, and judges them in each without reference to the other. As political figures, nearly all are judged harshly, even scathingly. Thus Mir writes quite boldly of the eunuch Jāved Khān that "[in 1748] the control of the Empire fell into his hands,"¹⁵ and by way of comment simply quotes a Persian verse to the effect that power is perhaps a beggar that presents itself now at one man's door, now at another's. Yet as a patron he found Jāved Khān generous, and he praises him accordingly. Imād ul Mulk he considered in much the same way. Mir describes the triumph of Imād and his associates with the blunt words, "power came into the hands of worthless men,"¹⁶ and Imād's subsequent political crimes are related without any attempt at palliation. But Mir also had dealings with him as a poet, and in this field he found him a man of considerable accomplishments, and one who knew the duties of a noble towards men of letters. And so a quite incidental mention of him in connection with events that occurred in 1764-1765 prompts Mir to remark: "Despite his age he is still a unique figure in these times, and has many accomplishments. He writes five or six styles of script admirably, and composes good verse both in Persian and Urdu. He is very good to me, and it has always been a great pleasure to visit

¹⁴ Cf. above, p. 209.

¹⁵ *Zikr i Mir*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 74.

him."¹⁷ A traditional, but quite credible, story of the two men shows that there was nothing in the nature of servility prompting this judgement. The story¹⁸ is that one day Imād was sitting by the riverside amusing himself by watching the ducks and waterfowl. Mir happened to pass that way, and Imād called him across and proceeded to recite some *qasīdas* which he had composed. When he had finished, he asked Mir what he thought of them. "What need of my praise is there?" replied Mir. "See, every duck on the water is in ecstasy." Imād was much put out, as he clearly showed when he sent for Mir on the following day. When Mir entered, he found Imād seated, but there was no other seat in the room, and no carpet on the floor. Mir remained standing, expecting every moment that a chair or stool would be brought for him, but when none came, he understood that Imād expected him to stand in his presence. He at once folded his shawl, laid it on the floor, and sat down upon it. Imād then asked him to recite something. Mir recited this verse:

کل پاؤں ایک کاسہ سر پر جو آگیا
ناگہ وہ استخوان شکستوں سے چوتھا
کہنے لگا کہ دیکھ کے چل راہ بے خبر
میں بھی کبھو کسوا کا سر پر غرور تھا

While walking yesterday I stumbled on a skull,
Which, as it crumbled into pieces, cried to me:
"O heedless one! Be careful where you set your feet!
I too was once the head of one as proud as you!"

There is nothing particularly outstanding about the verse, and the theme is the well-worn one that man should subdue his pride, remembering that death comes one day to level all men in the dust. The point of the verse is in the situation in which it was recited, and it would not be lost on Imād.

Mir himself relates an incident¹⁹ of the period between 1753 and 1757, when he seems to have had no permanent security for his livelihood.

¹⁷ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 113.

¹⁸ The story is quoted in *Khawāja Ahmad Fārūqī, Mir Taqī Mir: Hayāt aur Shā'iri* (Aligarh, 1954), pp. 291-292.

¹⁹ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 75.

He was sent for by Rāja Jugal Kishor, one of the wealthiest of the Delhi nobles and one who had held high office in a previous reign. He did Mir the honour of showing him his verses and requesting him to correct them. "I found," Mir writes, "that most of them were beyond correction, and scored them through." Such an action, which one of Mir's modern editors still finds shocking nearly two hundred years later, was not calculated to help him out of his material difficulties, but Mir would never allow such a consideration to weigh with him where he felt that his honour as a poet was concerned. And in fact the incident well illustrates the nature of the relationship between poet and patron that prevailed in Mir's day, for though Rāja Jugal Kishor must have been displeased, there was no breach in their relations. Only later did they part company, and Mir's account of the circumstances shows that for the noble it was a matter of honour to make adequate provision for a poet under his patronage, and a painful situation for him when he could not do so. At the time in question Mir was receiving so little support from him that he simply could not manage any longer on it, and one day in desperation he hinted this to him. "His face flushed with shame," writes Mir,²⁰ "and he replied, 'I am myself on the verge of poverty; otherwise I should not have been backward in helping you.'" One day shortly afterwards, Jugal Kishor visited Rāja Nāgar Mal and spoke to him about Mir. Later he told Mir to go and call upon Nāgar Mal. Mir did so, was kindly received, and was given to understand that permanent provision would be made for his support.

The fact that Mir lived for fifteen years under Nāgar Mal's patronage is the best testimony to his good opinion of him. There is little explicit comment on him in Mir's autobiography, but instances are given of his consideration not only for Mir but for the large numbers of others whom he took under his protection, and Mir's tone conveys the satisfaction he felt at this. There is also a notable absence of hostile comment on his political role. This could not have been a major one during the period of Mir's association with him, dominated as it was by the conflicts of far more powerful forces, but we know, partly from Mir and partly from other sources, that Nāgar Mal more than once mediated successfully between political rivals to avert armed clashes in which innocent people

²⁰ *Zikr i Mir*, p. 78.

would have suffered, and there can be little doubt that this must have won him Mir's regard. All this notwithstanding, Mir was prepared to sever relations even with him when honour and self-respect seemed to demand it. The break came in 1771-1772, when the titular emperor Shāh Ālam, who had fled from Delhi thirteen years earlier to escape from the clutches of Imād ul Mulk and had ever since been a virtual captive—first of the ruler of Oudh and later of the British—decided to assert his right to return to the capital. Nāgar Mal, who had been living since 1761 in the Jāt kingdom, heard of this and sent Mir to smooth the way for him to join the imperial court. This Mir successfully did, but immediately after his return Nāgar Mal changed his mind and decided to throw in his lot instead with the Marāthas, who already occupied Delhi. Mir felt deeply humiliated, and though he accompanied Nāgar Mal on his journey to Delhi, as soon as they got there, he installed his wife and children in a suburb called Arabsarāi, and then parted company with him permanently.

He must have known how serious could be the consequences of the step he was taking. Nāgar Mal had been his mainstay for fifteen years, and for the last ten of them they had been away from Delhi. He was fifty years old, and had a wife and family to support. But the fact that Nāgar Mal had treated him dishonourably outweighed all these considerations, and though the next ten years were to prove some of the most difficult of his life, there is no indication in his writings that he ever regretted the course he took. He had long since determined not to submit to insult and dishonour—and long since realised what this resolve would cost him. He puts the point with wry exaggeration:

میر صاحب زمانہ نازک ہے
دو ہاتھوں سے تھامے ستار

Mir Sahib, take care! The times are critical.

You need both hands to keep your turban on.²¹ (I.68.18)

The penalty Mir paid for such actions was not only material hardship and actual physical hunger; he had to endure also the disapproval of most of his contemporaries. It might be expected that though not themselves

²¹ In the convention of Mughal society, to knock a man's turban off or to knock it crooked was a deadly insult.

prepared to make so drastic a sacrifice for their principles, they would at any rate respect one who was. But this was not the case. They had lived too long in an age when material self-interest was the overriding consideration guiding both the nobles and all those who depended upon them. A man must make his way in life, and that meant that he must change with every changing wind and not be too particular about principles. Poets were no exception: in their poetry they were lovers true unto death, eternally constant to their "beloved"—that is, to their mistress, to their God, to their ideals; but this was generally assumed to be a mere literary convention. It was in vain that Mir told them that he meant what he said. They could not understand that here was a poet who really believed with all his heart in the values which his poetry expressed, and did his best to practise them; and at a loss to comprehend the real motives of his actions, they attributed them to stubborn, foolish pride.

Mir knew well enough what they thought of him. In one of his verses he wryly addresses himself, as though in their words:

تری چال ٹیڑھی تری بات روکھی
تجھے میر سمجھا ہے یہاں کم کسوتے

Your ways are awkward, and your speech is blunt.

None of us really understands you, Mir. (II. 343. 22)

But their attitude was a constant source of pain to him, and after his break with Nāgar Mal, at the height of his difficulties, it was this, more than any material privations, that he felt most keenly. This is made clear in one of his most bitter poems, which must have been written at this time. We know from his autobiography to what straits he had been reduced. For a while another noble, less wealthy than Nāgar Mal, made such provision for him as he could, but a sudden change of political fortune deprived his new patron of his sources of income, and Mir was left with nothing. His autobiography says bluntly: ²² "I went out begging, calling at

²² *Zikr i Mir*, p. 122; the *mukhammas* on pp. 950-951 of the *Kulliyāt*. Khwāja Aḥmad Fārūqī (*Mir Taqī Mir*, p. 172) wrongly associates this poem with Mir's visit to Kāmā in 1760-1761. The title given to the poem in the *Kulliyāt* is misleading, but Mir was in Kāmā in 1771-1772 as well as in 1760-1761, and it is to the later period that the poem belongs. The poem is actually not about Kāmā at all, but about Mir's experiences after his return from there to Delhi.

the door of every man of standing in the Emperor's camp; and because of my fame as a poet I was enabled to live somehow—as a dog or a cat might live." His poem gives a fuller account, describing how, weak with hunger, he made his way from one to another, with one hand on the wall to support himself; how he was rebuffed by men who had professed regard for him, and how he swallowed his pride to beg food and water from men whom in other circumstances he would have thought it beneath him to approach. He dwells bitterly on the lengths to which hunger forced him to go, and on the inhumanity with which he was treated, but these themes only lead up to the climax, and the poem ends with the words:

حالت تو یہ کہ مجھ کو غموں سے نہیں فراغ
دل سوزش درونی سے جلتا ہر جوں چراغ
سینہ تمام چاک ہے، سارا جگر ہے داغ
ہے نام مجلسوں میں مرا میر پر بے داغ
از بسکہ کم دماغی نے پایا ہے ہاشتار

Grief assails me without respite, and my torn and wounded heart burns, as though in a flame that burns within my breast: and where men gather together they call me "Mir the arrogant"—so widespread has my name for pride become.

Mir was universally acclaimed as a great poet, but he often felt that he met with no more understanding here than he did in other fields. He lived in an age when poetry was one of the polite accomplishments—as indeed to a considerable extent it still is in circles where Urdu is the language of culture—and most cultured men aspired to write it. Men of the world found no difficulty in praising their verse, particularly where its author was a man of influence. Mir, on the other hand, found considerable difficulty, because poetry was his life, and since most of this verse was not poetry, he could not bring himself to speak as though it were. It is an

accurate, though at the same time half-humorous, picture that he draws of himself listening to a poet reciting his verse at a mushāira:

بات اپنے ڈھب کی کوئی کرے وہ تو کچھ کہوں
بیٹھا خموش سامنے ہوں ہوں کروں ہوں میں

Once let him speak a worth-while line, and he shall hear my praise.
Till then I'll sit here silent, greeting every line with "H'm!"

(III.423.24)

People attributed his attitude to the worst motives, and in this field too thought him arrogant and overbearing.

It is ironical that this view is still quite widely held among modern Urdu critics, who do not seem to notice that their own judgements of eighteenth-century poets are generally quite in accord with his. Thus he and Sauda have always been recognised as the outstanding poets of their day, and it is surely no grave fault in Mir that he knew this to be a sound judgement, and said so. His assignment of the next place to the mystic poet Mir Dard would also be generally accepted as just by most modern critics. The judgement was not an arbitrary one, made on the spur of the moment. In his earliest collection of verse he had written:

کیا رہا ہے مشاعرے میں اب
لوگ کچھ جمع آن ہوتے ہیں
میر و مرزا رفیع و خواجہ میر
کتنے یہ اک جوان ہوتے ہیں

Though people still turn out to come to them
Mushāiras are dull affairs these days.

Mir, Sauda, Dard and just a handful more—
These stalwarts still deserve a poet's praise.

(I.110.13-15)

And according to a traditional story, which in essentials seems quite authentic, he repeated this judgement, with a significant modification, many years later.²³ "Who are the poets of today?" he was asked. He replied. "First, Sauda; next, your servant," and after a pause, "Mir Dard is half a poet." "And Mir Soz?" someone asked. Mir frowned and said, "Oh, is he a poet too?" "Well, after all," said the man, "he is the ustād of Navvāb Āsaf ud Daula." "Is that so?" said Mir drily, "Very well, then; make the total two and three quarters." We can only speculate what lay behind his assessment of Mir Dard as "half a poet," but it was certainly not arrogance or jealousy, for we know that the two men liked and respected each other. Perhaps it was that Dard was one of the few Urdu poets who really were mystics, and Mir may have felt that his restriction of his poetry to mystic themes excluded him from the first rank of poets.

The latter part of the story illustrates perfectly the standards of judgement which his contemporaries applied and the contempt and ridicule with which Mir rejected them. To them the ustād of Āsaf ud Daula must be a great poet, because Āsaf ud Daula was a great man—ruler of Oudh and so one of the most powerful men in India. To Mir, as to us, this consideration is ludicrously irrelevant. (And we might add that nobody now thinks Soz a great poet.) He could indeed be scathing in his remarks about people who refused to recognise their limitations and imagined themselves to be the equals of Sauda and himself, and more than one of his comparatively few satirical poems are devoted to them. Once, during a prolonged absence from Delhi, he wrote of them:

منصب بیل غزنوی تھا سو تو ہے اسیر
شاعری زراغ دزغن کا کیوں نہ ہوئے اشعار

The nightingale held pride of place for song, but he is captive now.
What wonder, then, if crows and kites should now aspire to sing like him?

(II.265.2)

²³ Āzād, *Āb i Hayāt*, p. 216. The story as Āzād gives it is not fully accurate, for he attributes it to the period when Mir had settled in Lucknow. This cannot be correct, for the story implies that Saudā was still living. Yet he had died in 1781, a year before Mir left Delhi for Lucknow.

And, more seriously:

بات بنانا مشکل سا ہے شعر سبھی یاں کہتے ہیں
فکر بلند سے یاروں کو اک ایسی غزل کہہ لائے دو

They won't find *saying* something all that easy.
As versifiers all of them are fine.

But let our friends show us their inspiration
By writing me a poem like this of mine. (III.425:3)

This, however, is no proof of arrogance, particularly when one recalls the satirical conventions of the age; and there is much weightier evidence that points the other way. Thus throughout his life Mir acclaimed Sauda's greatness in the warmest terms. He described him in *Nikāt ush Shu'ara* as "outstanding among the poets of India . . . and fit to be acclaimed as King of Poets."²⁴ More significant still in this connection is his unstinting praise of poets who never made a name for themselves but whose work seemed to him to deserve it.

The truth is that Mir's "arrogance" sprang from a steadfast adherence to principle which in his degenerate age the average man was incapable of understanding, and from a keen and growing sense of spiritual loneliness. The attitudes of men around him were not new to him. Again and again in his verse he had lamented the change that had come over his country, a change so complete and all-embracing that it was as though he were inhabiting a different world and a different universe:

اس عہد کو نہ جانے اگلا سا عہد میر
وہ دور اب نہیں وہ زمیں آسماں نہیں

This age is not like that which went before it:
The times have changed, the earth and sky have changed.
(II.290.16)

²⁴ Pp. 32-33; cf. above, p. 56.

He feels that an air of desolation pervades everything:

جس جاگہ خس و خوار کے اب ڈھیر لگے ہیں
یہاں ہم نے انھیں آنکھوں سے دیکھیں ہیں بہاریں

Here where the thorn grows, spreading over mounds of dust and ruins,
These eyes of mine once saw the gardens blooming in the spring.

(I.115.5)²⁵

اٹتی ہے خاک شہر کی گلیوں میں اب جہاں
سونا لیا ہے گود میں بھر کر وہیں سے ہم

Here in this city where the dust drifts in deserted lanes
A man might come and fill his lap with gold in days gone by.
(II.289.25)

کل دیکھتے ہمارے بستے تھے گھر برابر
اب یہ کہیں کہیں جو دیوار و درزہ ہے ہیں

These eyes saw only yesterday house after house
Where here and there a ruined wall or doorway stands.

(II.300.17)

The men who lived in these houses, the men whose achievements made Mughal India great and prosperous, are gone, and no one remembers them any more. Mir feels as though he had been present at a great assembly of talented men; just for a moment he had closed his eyes, and when he opened them again they had vanished. All he can do is look at the traces of their footprints in the dust, and weep for their loss. More painful still, the people all around him have changed: he is living among men to whom the old values mean nothing—values that have died with

²⁵ Cf. I.116.18.

the men who believed in them; and yearn for them as he will, he feels that they are gone beyond recall.²⁶ These days men live to themselves, loving no one, loyal to no one, grieving for no one, finding no warmth in one another's company, lacking the most elementary sense of common humanity:

کیا زمانہ تھا وہ جو گزرا تیر
ہمدگر لوگ چاہ کرتے تھے

What days were those!—the days that are no more,
The days when people loved their fellowmen. (VI.673.17)

عہد ہمارا تیرا ہے جس میں گم ہے ہر وفا
انگلے زمانے میں تو یہی لوگوں کی رسم و عادت تھی

Ours is a dark age; men have lost all trace of love and loyalty.
In former days it was not so; these things were second nature then.
(IV.530.9)²⁷

سو ملک پھرا لیکن پانی نہ وفا اک جا
جی کھا گئی ہے میرا اس جنس کی نیا نیا

Roaming from land to land I sought for loyalty.
Grief tears my heart; it is not to be found. (I.142.14)

تو جہاں سے دل اٹھا یہاں نہیں رسم درو مندی
کسی نے بھی یوں نہ پوچھا ہوئے خاک یہاں ہزارا

Live out your life away from men's society,
For men no longer feel that you are one of them.
Thousands and thousands here were laid low in the dust
And no one even asked what had become of them. (I.94.1)

²⁶ Allusions to III.456.11, I.145.23, II.349.14.

²⁷ Cf. II.275.24.

کیا کیا عزیز دوست ملے تیر خاک میں
نادان یہاں کسوکا کسوکو بھی غم ہوا

Such friends I had—and one by one they died and turned to dust.
I am a fool—nobody grieves for anybody now. (I.26.3)

اب رسم رباٹ اٹھ ہی گئی ورنہ پیش ازین
بیٹھے ہی رہتے تھے ہم اجاب روز و شب

The custom now is quite extinct—and yet in days gone by
Friends would sit down and talk to one another night and day.
(I.55.22)

رسم اٹھ گئی دنیا سے اک بار مروّت کی
کیا لوگ زمین پر ہیں کیسا یہ سماں آیا

The cult of human decency has vanished from the world.
What men are these upon the earth! What times we live in now!
(IV.466.11)

You cannot talk to them about the things that make up the meaning of life; they are creatures in human form, but they are not human. And the worst among them are the great men, the nobles who set the tone for the rest of society. Mir feels deeply the injustice of an age in which good men suffer, while wealth and power go to those who show the least scruple in fighting for them, and having won them, use them for their own selfish advantage alone. Such men destroy the peace and prosperity of society, while those whose skill and talent should be rewarded are ruined instead.²⁸

²⁸ Allusions to I.113.18 and I.182.7.

Mir is at pains to dissociate himself from the rich and powerful, and to express his sense of oneness with those who suffer hardship and distress:

کیا اہل دول سے ہے اے میر مجھے نسبت
یاں عجز و فقیری ہے واں ناز امیری ہے

What have you got to do, Mir, with men of wealth and substance?
On your side, all humility; on their side, boundless pride.

(III.439.6)

فرو آتا نہیں سرناز سے اب کے امیروں کا
اگرچہ آسمان تک شور جاوے ہم فقیروں کا

The nobles are so proud, they will not bow their heads to listen
Though we, the poor and humble, shake the heavens with our cry.

(II.243.8)

نہ مل میر اب کے امیروں سے تو
ہوئے ہیں فقیران کی دولت سے ہم

Do not approach the great ones of the age, Mir;
It is their riches that have made us poor. (II.289.16)²⁹

Sometimes he expresses these themes with great bitterness, mingled with a fierce pride that if he is denied the conditions of comfort due to a great poet, at any rate his poverty clearly marks him off from a class of men whom he despises:

گو تو بڑے زمانے کی جہاں میں مجھ کو
جاہ و ثروت کا میسر و سامان نہ ہوا

²⁹ Cf. I.187.13 and Āsi's footnote.

شکر صد شکر کہ میں ذلت و خواری کے سبب
کسی عنوان میں ہم چشمِ عزیزاں نہ ہوا

Although the fortunes of the age have not shown favour to me
So that the ways of wealth and grandeur could not be my ways,
Praise be to God that I am poor and mean—for none can class me
With the great ones whom men delight to honour in these days.

(I.46.1-2)

But he knows that it is their values and not his which prevail in the cultured society in which he moves, and he joins with Sauda in the conclusion that "we are living in a special kind of age"³⁰ in which everything is the reverse of what it should be, an age that rewards vice and punishes virtue, an age that seems to think it a grave offence to possess any talent or skill and therefore ruins talented men and allows worthless people to prosper, an age in which a great poet can expect a life of hardship, just as the bird that sings most sweetly knows for that very reason that it is he who will be trapped and shut in a cage:

یہ زمانہ نہیں ایسا کہ کوئی زلیت کرے
چاہتے ہیں جو بڑا اپنا بھلا کرتے ہیں

What man would want to live in times like these?
When doing good means wishing yourself ill. (I.94.23)

صناع ہیں سب خوار ازاں جملہ ہوں میں بھی
ہے عیب بڑا اس میں جسے کچھ ہنر آوے

The craftsmen are all ruined now, and I am one of them.
It is a grievous sin to know your craft in times like these.

(I.167.3)

³⁰ Cf. above, p. 68.

گر زمزمہ یہی ہے کوئی دن تو ہم صیفر
اس فصل ہی میں ہم کو گرفتار دیکھنا

If I sing on like this, my friend, I know the day will come
This very spring when you will see me captive in the cage.

(I.48.3)

اسیری کا دیتا ہے مژدہ مجھے
مرا زمزمہ گاہ و بے گاہ کا

The song I sing, in season, out of season,
Heralds the news of my captivity. (III.373.20)

The world itself is like a great cage:

زیرِ فلک رکا ہے اب جی بہت ہمارا
اس بے فضا قفس میں مطلق ہوا نہیں ہے

Pent in between the earth and sky, we stifle
In this cage where no breath of air can come. (II.360.21)

A man may wander from place to place and find no peace:

کہیں ٹھہرنے کی جا بھان نہ دیکھی میں نے میر
چمن میں عالم امکان کے جیسے آب پھرا

Here Mir could find no resting place; he must go on and on
Like running water flowing through the garden of the world.

(II.231.15)

Power and wealth are everything, and the man who has neither should
know better than to expect anyone to befriend him.

زور و زور کچھ نہ تھا تو بارے میر
کس بھروسے پر آشنائی کی

Power and wealth were not at your command, Mir.
How could you, then, make anyone your friend? (I.141.19)

پھر میں صورتِ احوال ہر اک کو دکھاتا تھا
مروتِ قحط ہے آنکھیں نہیں کوئی ملاتا تھا

I sought them one by one to show them how things stood with me.
Humanity is dead—not one would look me in the face. (IV.505.22)

It is not enough that they are incapable of giving their love to him or to
any other man; none of them is prepared even to accept the love that
others offer him. Love, which was once treasured as precious beyond
anything else that life could offer, is not wanted any more:

ہر جنس کے خواہاں ملے بازارِ جہاں میں
لیکن نہ ملا کوئی خریدارِ محبت

Here in this market of the world all kinds of wares are in demand;
But one can find no purchaser: no one has come in search of love.

(I.58.17)

کوئی خواہاں نہیں محبت کا
تو کہے جنسِ ناروا ہے عشق

Nobody here wants love; it seems they think
That it is tainted wares you offer them. (II.279.10)³¹

³¹ Cf. I.33.15 and I.90.24-25.

And if Mir's reaction is to withdraw into himself, then he is "proud," "unapproachable," "reserved." The rare exception, who treats Mir with a love and respect to which he can respond, is asked in astonishment:

کس طور اتفاق پڑی صحبت اُس سے دیر
ہے میر بے دماغ و قیامت کم اختلاط

You've been with Mir? How did you manage that?
—So proud and unapproachable a man! (II.276.18)

And this is a reaction which he hears so often that Mir sometimes imagines half-humorously that living with one's fellowmen must have needed some special skill, known to past generations, but now lost:

کسو ہنر سے تو ملتے تھے باہم اگلے لوگ
ہمیں بھی کاشکے ایسا کوئی ہنر آتا

In former days men knew the way to live with one another.
Alas! if only I had learned to master some such skill! (III.380.23)

One is reminded of what Mark Rutherford wrote about himself:

I have been accused [of] secrecy and reserve. . . . People would ordinarily set it down to self-reliance, with no healthy need of intercourse. It was nothing of the kind. It was an excess of communicativeness, an eagerness to show what was most at my heart and to ascertain what was at the heart of those to whom I talked, which made me incapable of mere fencing and trifling and so often caused me to retreat into myself when I found an absolute absence of response. . . . Only when tempted by unmistakable sympathy could I be induced to express my real self.³²

³² Mark Rutherford, *Autobiography*, 13th ed. (London, n.d.), pp. 23-24; cf. also pp. 109-110. Others who have expressed this feeling about themselves are T. E. Lawrence and A. E. Housman; cf. John Sparrow's Introduction to Housman's *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 16.

The words fit Mir's case exactly. Men's reaction to him makes him feel as though he were a stranger in the land of his birth—

مسافر ہی رہے اکثر وطن میں

a foreign traveller in my own land. (I.98.14)

as though he and his countrymen did not speak the same language:

رہی نگفتہ مرے دل میں داستاں میری
نہ اس دیا میں سمجھا کوئی زبان میری

How could I tell my tale in this strange land?
I speak a tongue they do not understand (I.150.9)³³

—a simile that occurs again and again in his verse.

There are times when he regrets that he ever devoted himself to poetry:

ہر بحر میں اشعار کہے عمر کو کھویا
اس گوہر نایاب کی کچھ بیات نہ پائی

I wrote in every metre, wasting all my years
Bringing up pearls for men who did not know their price.
(II.329.21)

پھر امت میر سراپا نگراں گوشوں کی مجلس میں
سے کوئی تو کچھ کہیے بھی اس کہنے کا کیا حاصل

Why bother, Mir, to speak to this assembly of the deaf?
One speaks to those who listen: what's the good of speaking here?
(III.405.20)³⁴

³³ Cf. III.420.5 and VI.655.17.

³⁴ Cf. III.395.23-24.

And he reflects that these are men who love a poet's immature flights of "poetic fancy," but give him good cause to regret it if once they feel he is trying to tell them something:

باؤلے سے جب تلک کہتے تھے سب کرتے تھے پیار
عقل کی باتیں کیاں کیاں ہم سے نادانی ہوئی

I raved and ranted on, and so far everybody loved me.
I started talking sense—what folly I committed then!

(II.328.17)

He himself feels more and more the one survivor of a former race:³⁵

کھا گیا اندوہ مجھ کو دوستانِ رفتہ کا
ڈھونڈتھا ہر جی بہت پر اب انھیں پاؤں کہاں

My friends are dead and gone, and grief for them consumes my heart.
My soul seeks for them always, but where shall I find them now?

(III.409.21)

Men who knew the meaning of love and felt its torture with the same intensity as he are all dead. "Majnūn is gone from the desert and Farhād from the mountainside: the friends who brought some joy into my life are all dead."³⁶ And he tells himself that he should die too:

یارانِ رفتہ ایسے کیا ڈور تر گئے ہیں
ٹلک کر کے تیز گامی اس قافلے کو جالو

The dead friends that you mourn are not so very far ahead;
Quicken your pace a little; overtake the caravan. (II.319.15)³⁷

³⁵ Allusion to I.136.20-21.

³⁶ Allusions to I.184.5,8,9; II.234.24.

³⁷ Cf. IV.502.18.

Meanwhile, because he does not really belong to his own times and his contemporaries know it, they single him out for persecution, while they enjoy all the benefits that life has to give:

قسمت اس بزم میں لائی کہ جہاں کا ساقی
دے رہے سب کو، ہمیں زیرِ بلا تارِ میاں

Fate brought me here, into a gathering where the cupbearer
Brings wine to all—and pours a deadly poison in my cup.

(III.419.1)³⁸

In these conditions it is, once again, the qualities of the lover—using the word in all the senses that it bears in the ghazal—that give a man the strength to live, and to live to some purpose. The lover, the true worshipper of God, the man who is true to his high ideals, expects misunderstanding and hostility and hardship, and he is proud to show that he can bear them without wavering in his devotion.

During the hard years that followed his return to Delhi in 1772, Mir needed all these qualities to sustain him. For ten years he lived on there, apparently without any sort of permanent provision for his support, and this part of his autobiography makes painful reading. At one point he writes, "For the last three years I have lived in the most straitened circumstances, for none is left in the world who could be my patron. I have put my trust in God, for it is He who gives us our daily bread, and keep to my own house. There are a few men left . . . whom I sometimes visit and whom I can depend upon to help me when they can, and I receive occasional gifts from people who admire me as a poet or respect me as a good and unworldly man. I am usually in debt, and I live in great poverty."³⁹

He comforted himself with the thought that since he had nothing, he would at any rate be spared the attentions of all those who harrass wealthier men.

³⁸ Cf. I.139.20-21.

³⁹ *Zikr i Mir* (Rāmpūr MS), ap. Khwāja Aḥmad Fārūqī, pp. 207-208. This passage does not occur in the published edition of *Zikr i Mir*.

غم زمانہ سے فارغ ہیں مایہ باختگاہ
قمارخانہ آفاق میں ہے ہار ہی جیت

In times like these, those who have lost their all live free from care.
This is the sort of gambling house where only loss is gain.

(III.388.18)

He began to spend long periods in the seclusion of his own home. "Many times the Emperor sent for me, but I did not go. Abul Qāsim Khān . . . was very kind to me, and I occasionally used to visit him. From time to time the Emperor would send me something. I still write a line of poetry now and then, but that is all the world holds for me now." At another point he speaks with high praise of the Deputy Vazīr, Hasan Raza Khān, whom he describes as a good man, distinguished above all for his unstinting generosity. "Not only I, but many others, owe much to his kindness."⁴⁰

As the years went by he made up his mind that he would leave Delhi as soon as opportunity offered. But as long as he had no money, this was out of the question, and it was not until 1782 that the opportunity came. In that year it was suggested to Āsaf ud Daula, who had succeeded Shuja ud Daula as ruler of Oudh in 1775, that he should send Mir enough money to cover the expenses of the journey and invite him to settle in Lucknow. Āsaf ud Daula did so, and Mir at once set out. There he was kindly received by Āsaf ud Daula in person, and fitting provision was made for all his needs. It is safe to say that nothing but the need to find conditions of comparative security in his declining years (he was now sixty years old) would have persuaded him to forsake Delhi. As it was, he was one of the last to go. Sauda, who was by no means the first poet of note to migrate elsewhere, had left twenty-five years earlier, and after Mir's departure only one poet of major importance—the mystic poet Mir Dard—was left there. One wonders how he would have fared if he had not left when he did, for in the same year, 1782, there was a severe famine in the Delhi district in which half of the total population died.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Zikr i Mir*, pp. 135 and 136.

⁴¹ Spear, *India, Pakistan and the West*, p. 168. However, there seems to be some doubt whether this date is correct. The same author's *Twilight of the Mughuls*, p. 116, gives the date of the great famine as 1785.

Though almost all the famous poets of the day were now gathered in Lucknow, there is abundant evidence in Mir's poems of the deep regret he felt at leaving Delhi, the city which from his early youth had grown to be no less dear to him than Agra. Despite all the destruction, the city was still beautiful. To look at its lanes and side streets was like turning the pages in the album of a great painter, and wherever one looked, the scene that met one's eyes was itself a picture.⁴² All the variety of the whole world was there:

ہفت اقلیم ہر گلی ہے کہیں
دلی سے بھی دیار ہوتے ہیں

The seven climes are in its every lane.

Does Delhi have its equal anywhere? (I.103.12)

The days of its greatest glory were past, but even now it seemed to him to preserve, more than any other place, the best values of Mughal India. It was the centre of the new Urdu poetry, the poetry which aspired to the heights already achieved by Persian, and the language of its people—"the language of the steps of the Jama Masjid"—was the raw material of that poetry. He felt a special warmth for the ordinary people of the capital and identified himself with them in their misfortunes:

صناع ہیں سب خوار ازاں جملہ ہوں میں بھی

The craftsmen are all ruined now, and I am one of them. (I.167.3)

He valued the appreciation with which they received his verse, and sometimes felt that they understood him better than the nobility did. He makes the point both in the innocent-seeming verse:

جیسی عزت مے دیوان کی امیر میں ہوئی
وہی ہی ان کی بھی ہوگی مے دیوان کے بیچ

I will write verses showing that I hold the great

In that same honour as the great have held my verses⁴³

(II.257.22)

⁴² Allusion to I.146.19 and I.103.12.

⁴³ We have already seen the "honour" of the great that his verses express.

—and also quite directly, when he says:

شعر میرے ہیں سب خواص اپند
پر مجھے گفتگو عوام سے ہے

My verses are all liked by high society,
But it is to the people that I like to speak. (II.367.11)

In his autobiography, which was concluded six years after he had left Delhi forever, it is still political developments at Delhi which form the main thread of the narrative.

The traditional account of his arrival in Lucknow⁴⁴ well shows the intense pride in Delhi which he felt and which he was to continue to feel until his death. On the evening of his arrival he went to take part in a *mushāira*. He was not known by sight to those present, and the gathering of fashionable, modern young gentlemen, complacent in the conviction that they represented the finest product of the culture of the age, smiled at one another as they noted the newcomer's old-fashioned dress. All this was not lost on Mir, and when it was his turn to recite he rose and recited this verse:

کیا بود و باش پوچھو پورب کے ساکنو!
ہم کو غریب جان کے ہنس ہنس پکار کے
دلی جو ایک شہر تھا عالم میں انتخاب
ہم رہنے والے ہیں اسی ابرٹے دیار کے

Why do you mock at me and ask yourselves
Where in the world I come from, easterners?
There was a city, famed throughout the world,
Where dwelt the chosen spirits of the age:
Delhi its name, fairest among the fair.
Fate looted it and laid it desolate,
And to that ravaged city I belong.

⁴⁴ *Āzād, Āb i Hayāt*, p. 204.

After this his audience soon discovered who he was and hastened to make their apologies to him.

For some years after he had settled in Lucknow, a feeling of relief and thankfulness for his new-found security seems to have been uppermost in his mind, and in his autobiography, which takes us up to 1788, there is no indication that he was dissatisfied with his material position. Āsaf ud Daula gave him a stipend of three hundred rupees a month—considerably less than Sauda had received, if both figures are to be relied on, but more than that granted to most other poets, and, in any event, more than enough to provide for all his material needs.⁴⁵ In fact, Āsaf ud Daula is spoken of appreciatively in many passages. Mir accompanied him on hunting expeditions and wrote poems in which he gives an account of them. About one he writes in his autobiography,⁴⁶ “We went on a hunting expedition right to the foothills of the northern mountains [the Himalayas]. Although we experienced much hardship in covering so great a distance, we had never seen such game, or been in so lovely a setting or breathed such air. It was three months before we returned to the capital.” He speaks highly of Āsaf ud Daula's skill as a poet, and seems to have felt it no burden in these years to fulfil his requests for the composition of particular poems.

But the words with which he ends his life story show that with all this he had not found peace in Lucknow. “The world is a place of strange vicissitudes,” he writes.⁴⁷

I have had eyes to see, and ears to hear, and what things have I not seen and heard! In this brief span of life this drop of blood which men call the heart has suffered all manner of blows, and is all bruised and bleeding. My temperament was unsuited to these times, and I no longer mix with people. I am sixty now, and old age is upon me.⁴⁸ I am generally ill, and for some time my eyes have been troubling me . . . My failing powers, my sensitiveness, my weakness and grief and despondency, all tell me that my end is near, and the truth is that the times

⁴⁵ Cf. *Khwāja Aḥmad Fārūqī, Mīr Taqī Mīr*, p. 244. Saudā had been granted Rs.6,000 a year (according to accounts quoted by Shaikh Cānd in *Saudā*, pp. 61–62).

⁴⁶ *Zikr i Mīr*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ *Zikr i Mīr*, pp. 151–153.

⁴⁸ He was in fact more: perhaps 65 or 66.

are no longer fit to live in. It is time to withdraw from the world. I wish that I may come to a good end, but God's will must prevail.

The stylised, poetic prose which the fashion of the day dictated obscures to some extent the depth of feeling that lies beneath it, but his verse of this period—

پرو میں سارے مطلب اپنے ادا کرے ہے

“the guise in which he tells all that he has to tell” (II.365.24)—convinces one that he did indeed often feel that he had lived too long, and that death would be welcome. But another twenty-two years were to pass before his wish was to be realised, and as they dragged on, he came to feel an ever greater distaste for Lucknow and its whole atmosphere. For some years he seems to have received his stipend regularly and thus to have been free of any material worries. But he came more and more to feel that the treatment accorded to him was a mere formal rendering of what was conventionally due to a poet of his standing; for since Sauda's recent death in 1781, he was undisputedly the greatest Urdu poet living. His relations with Āsaf ud Daula himself became strained, and one day an incident occurred which led him virtually to sever his connection with the court.

The tradition is⁴⁹ that on one occasion Mir, at the request of Āsaf ud Daula, was reciting one of his ghazals. They were standing by a fishpond, and as Mir recited, the Navvāb was playing with the fish, touching them with the end of a stick which he held in his hand. After one or two lines Mir stopped. “Go on, Mir Sahib,” said the Navvāb. “If Your Majesty will give me his attention, I will,” replied Mir. The Navvāb replied casually, “Any worth-while line will compel my attention.” Mir was so displeased at this incident that he stopped coming to the court. A few days later he was walking along the street when he saw the Navvāb's carriage coming towards him. The carriage stopped by him and the Navvāb said, “Mir Sahib, you seem to have forsaken me altogether. You never come to see me now.” Mir replied brusquely, “This is no place to talk about it. Gentlemen don't discuss these things in the street.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Āzād, *Āb i Hayāt*, p. 205.

⁵⁰ Cited by Khwāja Ahmad Fārūqī, *Mir Taqī Mir*, p. 245.

This incident may well have made his breach with the court complete, though his stipend continued to be paid to him until Āsaf ud Daula's death in 1797 and, according to one authority, was still being paid three years later by Āsaf ud Daula's successor, Sa'ādat Ali Khān. But there seems to have come a time when even that ceased. At any rate the story is told⁵¹ that one day Sa'ādat Ali Khān's carriage was passing through the streets and passed by a mosque near which Mir was sitting in a position overlooking the street. As the carriage drew level, everyone else stood up, but Mir remained seated. The poet Insha, a well-known younger contemporary of Mir, was in the Navvāb's immediate retinue, and the Navvāb turned to him and asked, “Insha, who is this man who is too proud to stand up?” Insha replied, “Sire, he is that proud pauper of whom we have often spoken to you. He is penniless, but see how proud he is! He has probably had nothing to eat all day.” On his return Sa'ādat Ali despatched a palace servant to him with a ceremonial robe and a present of a thousand rupees. Mir would not take them. “I am not so poor,” he said. “Give them to a mosque for charity.” When this response was reported to Sa'ādat Ali, he was astounded. His courtiers explained the reason for Mir's reaction, and the Navvāb then instructed Insha to take the robe to Mir. Insha did so, urging him to accept it, if not for his own sake, then for the sake of his wife and family, adding, “It is a present from the ruling sovereign and you should accept it.” Mir replied, “He is king of his own country, and I am king of mine. If a complete stranger had behaved as he has, it would have been understandable, and I would have had no cause to complain. But he knows who I am and what my present situation is. All this time he has shown complete indifference towards me, and then he sends some menial with a robe for me. I would rather stay poor and hungry than submit myself to such insult.” Insha's eloquence persuaded him in the end to accept the gift, and thereafter he paid occasional visits to the court. But his relations with it remained tenuous for the rest of his life.

Mir's dissatisfaction was not only with the court. The cultural standards of Lucknow were changing, and in Mir's view changing very much for the worse. This was perhaps the inevitable result of the conditions of the time. When the eighteenth-century poets left Delhi in search of security

⁵¹ Āzād, *Āb i Hayāt*, pp. 217-218.

elsewhere, it was natural that most of them should make for Oudh. It was remote enough from Delhi to escape involvement in the constant attacks of Afghans, Marāthas, Rohillas, Jāts, Sikhs, and others; and at the same time it was near enough for men to undertake the journey there—a perilous matter in those troubled times—more readily than they would have done to more distant centres. Oudh was one of the great powers in India, and after 1765 its security against attack by other Indian powers was further strengthened by alliance with the British, who were now felt to be a force to be reckoned with. The country was fertile and its rulers rich. Further, the rulers of Oudh consciously aspired to uphold in their dominions the values and traditions of Mughal India, including the tradition of generous patronage of literature and the arts. All these things attracted to their territories the emigrants from Delhi, and by the time Mir reached Lucknow, all the most famous poets had preceded him there. But Oudh was in fact a power already in decline. The British alliance had been imposed by force of arms, and though Shuja ud Daula seems to have tried to build up his resources with a view to ultimately reasserting his independence, the British saw to it that no such plan could be realised. When Āsaf ud Daula succeeded him, they imposed a new and more onerous treaty, and their inroads steadily increased until in 1856 Oudh was forcibly annexed to British territory.

Oudh's cultural decline was a logical consequence of this process. Whether from a sense of security in British "protection" or from a growing realisation that they were too firmly subordinated to British policies to play any independent role in Indian affairs, its rulers from Āsaf ud Daula onwards turned almost without exception to squandering their resources in all manner of ostentation. Their growing insignificance as political figures was matched by a growing self-conceit. Before Āsaf ud Daula's time they had been content to aim at continuing the best traditions of Mughal India; now they felt that Delhi's day was past, and that they could improve upon the old-fashioned ways of life which had been the standard there. One of Āsaf ud Daula's first acts was to move the capital from Faizābād to Lucknow, and here the change of cultural climate soon became very marked. Mir had a foretaste of it—if the traditional story is true—in the first mushā'ira he attended immediately after his arrival there.

There is no evidence that Mir grasped the causes of this cultural decadence, but he recognised it for what it was and reacted sharply against

it. Lucknow had undertaken the task of (as it thought) giving polish and refinement to Urdu poetry. "Inelegant" words and loose grammar were henceforth to be excluded, and rules of diction, grammar, metre, and rhetoric were formulated to prevent the misguided from reverting to old, bad practices. Not all the work that Lucknow did in this respect was bad, but the spread of a literary taste which mistook technically accomplished versification for poetry was undoubtedly one of its results. Mir, who was now, since Sauda's death, undisputedly the greatest Urdu poet living, was angered by this presumption, and the stronger became Lucknow's conviction that Delhi's day was past and that Lucknow now set the standards, the more vigorously Mir asserted the contrary—that standard Urdu was the Urdu of Delhi, and the best models for poetry the work of the Delhi poets, including his own.

A traditional story of this period well illustrates the point.⁵² On one occasion some prominent citizens of Lucknow went to call upon him, hoping to hear him recite his verses. The door was opened by an old maidservant, who, having enquired their business, went in, spread a piece of sacking on the floor, and asked them to be seated. She then prepared an ancient hookah for them to smoke and placed it before them, after which Mir came in. When the formalities of greeting were over, he was asked if he would recite. He was at first evasive, but being pressed, told them flatly that they would not understand his poetry. This of course they resented; but out of politeness they acknowledged their unworthiness, at the same time repeating their request. Mir again refused. At this one of them, unable to restrain his displeasure, said, "Come sir! We understand the poetry of Anvari and Khāqāni;⁵³ why should we not understand yours?" Mir replied, "Granted that you understand *them*; but there you have commentaries and vocabularies to help you; whereas one thing alone will help you to understand my verses—a knowledge of Urdu as you will hear it spoken on the steps of the Jama Masjid; and that knowledge you do not possess." He then recited one of his verses and said, "You will quote your books and tell me to give full weight to the *a* of *khayāl*, pointing out that in this line it is not taken into account. My answer to that is simply that I have used the word as the people of Delhi speak it."

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁵³ Anvarī (d. 1169-1170) is considered the greatest panegyrist of Iran in the Seljuqid period. Khāqāni (d. 1199) is thought to be his peer in the art of *qaṣīda*. (A.S.)

The great prophet of "correctness" in poetry was the Lucknow poet Nāsikh, a man whose writings are generally agreed to be practically devoid of any deep feeling. There is a tradition,⁵⁴ which may well be true, that when Nāsikh began to write verse, he approached Mir with a request to accept him as his shāgird, and that Mir refused.

If empty formalism was one aspect of the Lucknow trend in Urdu poetry, another was an increasing emphasis on themes of sexual pleasure. The poet Jurat was the most accomplished poet of these themes, and was very popular in Lucknow. There is a story⁵⁵ that Mir was once present at a mushāira where Jurat was reciting, and being so loudly applauded that at times it was difficult to hear what he was saying. Perhaps carried away by this applause, he approached Mir, and in language of the utmost deference, invited him to give his opinion. Mir frowned and made no reply. Jurat asked him a second time, and Mir made some noncommittal remark. But Jurat would not be content with this, and pressed him further, whereupon Mir said, "The fact is that you can't write poetry; just stick to your kissing and slaving." This judgement could be interpreted as an expression of traditional puritanism, but the character of Mir's own verse speaks against such an interpretation. It is more likely that he is condemning the kind of love poetry in which most of what the word *love* implied for Mir was ignored and the concept of love was restricted to one of mere sexual enjoyment.

Mir's aversion to Lucknow grew more and more intense with the years, and one can trace the development of his feelings through the last three collections of his ghazals—the fourth, fifth, and sixth dīvāns—all of which were compiled after he had settled there. In the fourth he writes,

خرابہ دلی کا وہ چند ہتر لکھنؤ سے تھا
وہیں میں کاش مر جاتا سر اسیمہ نہ آتا یہاں

The ruins of Jahānābād were ten times better than Lucknow;
Oh, that I had stayed there to die—not come to live distracted here.

(IV.505.23)⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Āzād, *Āb i Hoyāt*, p. 215.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 237–238.

⁵⁶ Cf. IV.463.7–8.

And in another verse, which does not mention Lucknow by name, he says that there is something wrong with a man who goes on living in a land that has no talented men.⁵⁷ The clear implication, that he still hoped even at this advanced age to find refuge in some more congenial place, is repeatedly made explicit in his fifth dīvān, compiled when, as one of his verses tells us, he had been living there "for years" (V.566.9). One whole ghazal in it is devoted to this theme. "Now I shall arise from here and go away; and never shall I come this way again," it begins (V.541.7). The city seems desolate, as though its human population had left it and the owls had moved into the empty city—so that "it is hard for a *man* [the word is deliberately emphasised] to live here any longer" (V.570.7). The word *owls* is deliberately and insultingly chosen, first because, as a bird that is commonly found in deserted ruins, it is a bird of ill-omen, and secondly because in colloquial Urdu it means a fool.

In the sixth dīvān this bitterness dies away. Rather, he laments his loneliness, which he feels more and more keenly as one by one his few remaining friends die, leaving him to long for death to release him from his imprisonment "within the four walls of the world." There is no more any sign that he still has hopes of leaving Lucknow, and in fact he never did.⁵⁸ Personal misfortunes added to the burden he had to bear. His health was failing and he was losing his sight. In three successive years he lost a son, a daughter, and his wife, to all of whom he had been deeply attached; and finally, he fell seriously ill with a painful disease of the bowels. But from this he never recovered, and in 1810, in his eighty-seventh or eighty-eighth year, he died.⁵⁹ In spite of all his afflictions, he had gone on writing poetry and attending mushāiras even in his last years. He writes:

اور کچھ مشغلہ نہیں ہے ہمیں
گاہ و بیگمہ غزل سرائی ہے

I have no other work to occupy me now.

In season, out of season, I recite my verse. (V.622.25)

⁵⁷ Allusion to IV.529.21–22.

⁵⁸ Allusions to VI.640.22 and VI.649.21.

⁵⁹ Cf. Āsī's account in the Introduction to his edition of the *Kulliyāt*, pp. 32ff.

He knows that his time is drawing to a close, but he claims proudly:

کوئی دم رونق مجلس کی اور بھی ہو اس دم کے ساتھ
یعنی چراغ صبح سے ہیں ہم دم بھی اپنا غنیمت ہے

Some moments more this gathering gains lustre from my name.
Night passes, and the lamp burns low; yet men see by its flame.

(V.608.16)

One of the most striking features of his last *divāns* is the number of verses in which he continues to assert the same values that his poetry had proclaimed ever since he first made his name. Some of these are expressed in words almost identical with verses he had written many years earlier. One short poem in the last *divān* of all can fairly be described as his last testament as a poet.

باتیں ہماری یاد رہیں پھر باتیں ایسی نہ سُنئیے گا
پڑھتے کسی کو سُنئیے گا تو دیر تلک سر دھنیے گا
سچی تلاش بہت سی رہے گی، اس انداز کے کہنے کی
صحبت میں علما فضلا کی جا کر پڑھیے گئیے گا
دل کی تسلی جبکہ ہوگی گفت و شنود سے لوگوں کی
آگ بھٹکے گی غم کی بدن میں اس میں جلیے چھنیے گا
گرم اشعار میر دروڑنہ داغوں سے یہ بھریں گے
زرد رو شہر میں پھریے گا گلیوں میں گل چھنیے گا

A fairly free prose translation is: "Remember well my verse; you will not hear its like again. You will hear someone reciting it and long shake

your head as you sit and wonder at it. If you would write as I did, long and earnestly must you seek. You must study in the company of men of learning and culture, and ponder what you learn from them. And when you have learned all you can from them, the fire of grief must kindle within you, and in that fire you must burn. Then the burning verses of Mir will sear all your heart, and you will roam pale and wan through the city." The original poem is a ghazal of four couplets, unusual not only because of its single, continuous theme but also because of its use of internal rhyme and the extreme freedom of its metre (VI.629.6). Its basic pattern is that of the fifteen long syllables (seven spondees and a single long at the end) of which he grew increasingly fond over the years.⁶⁰ But the variations are, in this poem, almost unlimited, with $\cup\cup$ — as well as $\cup\cup\cup$ alternating with the basic — —, as though Mir were forcefully asserting the right that his mastery gave him to establish his own norms where he chose to do so. It deserves verse translation, but a comparable effect in English verse cannot be achieved. In short, his message is what it had been right from the start, that a poet must master his craft, but only if he speaks out of the deep pain of a passionate spiritual experience will he really be a poet.

Mir is buried in Lucknow. The graveyard in which he lies is a large one. Many of the tombs have through years of long neglect lost all distinguishing marks, and moreover, part of the cemetery was destroyed when the railway was built. At all events the site of Mir's grave is now unknown. One as accustomed as he was to indifference and neglect would perhaps not have minded too much, for he had long been convinced that he had raised his own memorial, and that it would be more lasting than any tomb. In one of his first poems he had claimed:

جانے کا نہیں شور سخن کا مرے ہرگز
تا حشر جہاں میں مراد پوان رہے گا

My verse endures eternal down the years:
As long as the world lasts, so will my fame.

(I.5.12)

⁶⁰ Cf. above, p. 213.

And in one of his last he repeats the claim, more quietly, but just as confidently; for he knows that the poetry of his heart speaks to the hearts of his fellow men:

خاک کا پتلا ہے آدم جو کوئی اچھی کہے
عالم خاک میں برسوں میں وہ بات ہے

Man was first made of clay, and if the song you sing is good
This world of clay for years to come will listen to your voice.

(VI.675.5)

A Complete Ghazal of Mir

TRANSLATIONS of ghazals or of parts of ghazals have been given on pages 128, 148, 175, 177, and 196-197. That which is most nearly complete is that on pages 196-197, which omits only three couplets from the original poem of twelve. In the originals double rhyme has been used in every case, but only in the translation on page 128 have we found it possible to reproduce this feature in translation. In one important respect none of the ghazals translated is typical, for all of them possess a unity of theme or mood which the typical ghazal does not. We have found it impossible to reproduce in tolerable English verse, preserving the rhyme scheme of the original, any more fully typical Urdu ghazal than these. In default of this we give here a whole ghazal of Mir, followed by a full description and a literal prose translation with brief explanatory notes where these seem necessary.

دیکھا اس بیماری دل نے آخر کام تمام کیا	اُلٹی ہو گئیں سب تدبیریں کچھ نہ دوائے کام کیا
یعنی رات بہت تھے جاگے صبح ہوئی آرام کیا	عہدِ جوانی رو رو کاٹا پیری میں لیں آنکھیں موند
ہم سے جو پہلے کہہ بیجا سو مرنے کا پیغام کیا	حرف نہیں جان بخشی ہیں اس کی خوئی اپنی قسمت کی
چاہتے ہیں سو آپ کریں ہیں ہم کو عبث بدنام کیا	ناحق ہم مجسوروں پر تیرہمت ہے مختاری کی