

In the Afternoon of Time: An Autobiography, by Harivansh Rai Bachchan. Ed. and trans. [and greatly abridged from 4 Hindi vols.] by Rupert Snell. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998. Selections chosen, and passages highlighted, by FWP.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and my Hindi translation of it both have a particular place in my development and that of my verse. The translation was made in the summer of 1933 under the title *Khayyam ki Madhushala*. I wrote extensively in the introduction about the way in which this work became the cry of my very soul. Here I would simply reiterate that I did not undertake the translation as a literary exercise: rather, it was a demand from within, a compulsion like so many other compulsions in my life. The translation supplied a symbol and an idiom for the things endured, suffered and lived that were massing inside me. I have acknowledged **my debt to Omar Khayyam** in a poem, but **my own Hindi Madhushala** [published in 1935] could not have been built without my own capital also. Reverting to my earlier metaphor, I should say that **my gun was already loaded**, and that too with ammunition that was very much live, powerful and piercing: what I learned from Omar Khayyam was to pull the trigger. That's no small skill: many loaded guns remain unfired for the lack of it, or sometimes the mechanism jams and the gunman forgets what a powerful weapon lies in his hand. But those who pull the trigger with an unloaded chamber are even more laughable. [pp. 141-42]

I recited *Madhushala* to the people of Indore for the first time [at the All-India Hindi Literature Conference, May 1935]. The audience was enraptured, though many perhaps did not understand what this 'house of wine' was all about. Somebody had complained to Gandhiji that the conference he was chairing was glorifying the consumption of alcohol. I was summoned to see Gandhiji one night just before a midnight meeting of the executive committee. Even people anxious to meet Gandhiji were not getting appointments, so I felt both happy and a little apprehensive at being called; if he said that I should not recite *Madhushala* or should destroy it, how would I be able to refuse? Gandhiji mentioned the complaint and asked to hear a few verses. **I adopted a certain caution in my choice of rubais, selecting those whose symbolic meaning would be readily accessible to him....** 'There's no wine-glorifying in these verses!' said Gandhiji, and with this exoneration, I hurriedly took my leave. He had his meeting to go to. This was the first and last occasion on which I sat in close proximity to Gandhiji. [pp. 163-64]

People expressed their delight with every verse of *Madhushala*, called out their 'wah! wah!', clapped, raised me shoulder-high; but when I got back to my room I was feeling very depressed. I still feel the same depression after reciting; **the sudden loneliness is disagreeable after being in company.** [p.164]

The label 'Halavad', 'the Poetry of the Vine', that was applied to my poetry from the very

beginning, simply differentiated it from Chhayavad; but if Chhayavad was a literary genre, then my poetry should be dubbed '**Jivanvad**', '**the Poetry of Life**', a direct expression of life lived, enjoyed, and endured. [p.164]

Imitations or parodies of *Madhushala* had begun to appear immediately after its first public reading: the day after my recitation at Benares Hindu University in December 1933, Professor Manoranjan Prasad dashed off imitations of several verses and recited them during the course of my own readings the day following. Critiques also appeared... [p.165] One abstemious paragon found my poetry salacious; some die-hard optimist found it pessimistic; others accused me of idle escapism or passive fatalism; still others pronounced me decadent or corrupt. [p.170]

People went crazy when they heard it recited publicly, and I really wondered what they saw in it to become so carried away. [p.165]

...the consensus of the critics is that *Madhushala* was my most successful work in terms of popular acclaim, and *Nisha Nimantran* in terms of literary qualities... [p.224]

An interesting tale lies behind this translation ['The House of Wine']. The translator was Marjorie Boulton, who knew not a word of Hindi. While she was studying for her BLitt at Oxford, a North Indian student called R. S. Vyas fell in love with her and would recite her verses from *Madhushala*, **probably in the tune that he had heard me sing at some poetry recital**. Marjorie was so taken with the lilt of the tune that she began asking the meaning of each line; and being poetically inclined, she rendered it into English verse. Thus a translation of *Madhushala* came into being as a witness to the tender moments between an English beloved and an Indian lover; and when publication was planned, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru agreed to write a foreword. [pp.302-03]