SOUTH ASIA

MIR TAQI MIR:
Selected Ghazals and Other Poems.
(trans. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi.) (Murty Classical Library of India, 21.) xxxv, 666 pp. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. ISBN 978 0 674 91920 4.

MIR TAQI MIR:
Remembrances.
(ed. and trans. C.M. Naim.) (Murty Classical Library of India, 22.) xxii, 371 pp. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. ISBN 978 0 674 66029 8.
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Mīr Taqī Mīr (1723–1810) was arguably Urdu's most significant eighteenth-century poet. He was pivotal in Urdu literature's negotiation with the established Persian tradition to shape itself into the now-familiar canon. Mīr's stylistic range, which often rests on deceptively simple idiomatic language, has made him somewhat hard to access in English. The Murty Classical Library of India has revisited Mīr in two bilingual volumes, a selection of his poetry (Urdu–English) and his complete autobiography *Ẕikr-i Mīr* (Persian–English), which is titled *Remembrances* in translation. The translators, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and C.M. Naim, are peerless when it comes to editing and interpreting these texts, and the translations are the fruit of decades of work. For decades to come, these editions will be English readers' most comprehensive access to Mīr.

Mīr has an undeserved reputation as a sourpuss, whose lot in life and artistic process were shot through with suffering and little else. This impression was cemented by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Āzād in his influential 1880 literary history *Āb-e Ḥayāt*. Āzād relates a story, for example, that a friend visiting the house in Lucknow where Mīr had been living for several years suggested that they open the shutters to look out on to the lovely garden. Mīr surprised the visitor by saying that he had not realized that there was a garden. He had been so absorbed in the melancholy work of composing verse that he had never bothered to open the shutters. Although Mīr lived through the tumult of India's eighteenth century and experienced privation, without the framing of almost certainly bogus stories like the case of the missing garden he comes across as a fully-rounded artist sensitive to a vast range of human experience, from the sublime to the squalid. Faruqi compares him to Shakespeare ("Just as everything came naturally to Shakespeare, so it did to Mir"), which rings true (p. xxiv).

The back-to-back publication of these texts in the Murty series is fortuitous because reading them together shows us Mīr's remarkable mind through two different kinds of writing. *Remembrances* is an odd autobiography because it actually offers scant biographical information, especially about Mīr's literary circle. Its scattershot presentation makes it a difficult source to work with, but it is nonetheless an extremely important document. Mīr's poetic corpus, which includes six volumes (*diwān*s) of Urdu poetry, is off-puttingly vast. As primary sources, both the autobiography and the poetry demand experienced guides like Faruqi and Naim to be accessible. Faruqi co-edited the complete Urdu poetic works (*kulliyāt*) of Mīr and

wrote a magisterial four-volume treatise on his works (*Shaʿir-e Shorangez*, first ed. 1990). Naim's volume is a revision of his translation published in 1999 by Oxford University Press (New Delhi), which he first planned in the 1970s.

Early modern Urdu and Persian lyric poetry and literary prose often reads poorly in translation. Everything that makes the text glorious in the original (literary devices, constructive ambiguity, stylistic innovation within formal constraints of meter and rhyme, stock characters and mythologies, a view of the body based on the humours, and so on) mauls the translator dragging it into English. Translations sometimes hew to a confusing and grotesque literalism, or they spin off into interpretation that bears little resemblance to the original. Faruqi and Naim's translations by contrast are as perfect as translations of these works could ever be. Both men are masters of the original texts and of a multilingual literary sensibility. Their introductions and footnotes are sensitive in accounting for cultural difference, not only for Western readers but for modern South Asian readers. For example, they both face the implications of the Beloved's ambiguous gender with clarity and nuance.

These translations introduce us to a Mīr who is not all highbrow and philosophical (although he is often that). The dirty jokes at the end of *Remembrances* are here printed in the original Persian for the first time. These were a matter of concern for previous editors (how could Mīr, master of philosophical poetry, also revel in sodomy jokes?) but their frequency in the manuscript copies vouches for their significance. Naim pulls no punches in the translations: It is unusual in a scholarly translation to find the words "f--k" or "c--t" (redactions mine – this reviewer is apparently more squeamish than the editors at Harvard University Press), but that rawness conveys the sense of the original. The "Other Poems" included in Faruqi's translation have, I believe, never appeared in English. They are examples of what might be called "occasional poems" that are rarely mentioned and in some cases have been actively suppressed as unworthy of the poet's greatness. The poems included in this volume are "The Fire of Love" featuring a handsome Hindu youth from Patna called Paras Rām, a poem bemoaning the heavy rains, four animal poems, and an account of an epically unpleasant journey to a village called Tisang. The last features the immortal lines (as translated by Faruqi) "Who the hell has money for mutton? / Eat lentils, and fart away fearlessly." (p. 555). Obviously this side of Mīr has generally been unavailable to English readers.

If there is any criticism to be made about these volumes, it is to do with the presentation of the source texts. My preference would be for the Urdu text in the poetry to include short vowel markers on unfamiliar words to aid students, but others would no doubt applaud the Murty Classical Library's bare-bones approach to the original text. More significantly, but again open to debate, Naim has effectively compiled a critical edition of *Ẕikr-i Mīr* on the basis of five of the six extant manuscripts, making what he refers to as a "composite" Persian text. However, he does not actually mark (except in a brief prefatory note) differences between manuscripts and so the Persian text is a critical edition without the necessary critical apparatus. If future scholars of *Ẕikr-i Mīr* are to go beyond the work Naim has done, they would probably have to go back to the manuscripts. Why did he not save them the trouble?

Arthur Dudney
University of Cambridge