

sinner is not so great as we are accustomed to think; it is only a question of the redirection of energy which, impeded or thwarted in one direction, finds a new channel for itself like a river. Some such thing, I am sure, must also have happened to Asar. If this line of reasoning is correct, and there is nothing to question its validity as I see it, the poem is one of the finest instances of what the psychologists call *sublimation*, i.e. the unconscious process by which sexual energy is deflected so as to express itself in a higher channel.

The poem is, therefore, a spiritual watershed or turning-point in the inner life of the poet. Having composed it, he must have found that he was no longer a thrall to the past; and the once torturing consciousness, its force spent, must have resolved itself into a distant memory.

It only remains to say a word about the title of the poem, which strikes me as rather misleading. It would be palpably wrong to infer that the poem is so called because it dealt with a far-off, unhappy episode which had become a remote memory or dream when the poet sat down to compose it. The poem shows that every detail of it was etched on his memory, and the poignancy which runs through it proves only too conclusively that he was oppressively conscious of it. But once fully articulated, the memory must have gradually detached itself from his mind; and as time passed and he developed new interests, it must have withdrawn itself into the back of his mind and become a part of the dead past.

24

Mir Ghulām Hasan (known as Mir Hasan) born in Delhi in 1727, was the son of Mir Zāhik, a poetaster satirized by Sauda. He moved with his father to Faizābād, and was attached to the levee of Mirza Navāzish 'Alī Khān, son of Sālār Jang Bahādur. He followed his patron to Lucknow, on the transference of the capital there in 1775, and died in 1786.

The author of half a dozen *masnavīs* of varying length and merit, Mir Hasan's chief passport to fame is his romance, *Masnavī-e-Sihr-ul-Bayān*, rightly considered by some to be the best metrical romance in Urdu. The story it tells is as old as Indian folklore. The King of Sangaldīp (a place associated by the medieval mind with magic and marvel), who has approached old age without a male issue, is about to retire into private life, when his astrologers bring him the good news that it is not too late for him to beget a son. A son is born and when he is twelve years old, the critical time in his life predicted by the astrologers arrives, and he is spirited away by a fairy who has fallen in love with him. During one of his

jaunts on a magic horse—a gift from the adoring fairy—he falls in love with Princess Badr-e-Munīr. Betrayed by a demon, he is thrust into a well in Mount Caucasus from which he is rescued by the good offices of Najm-un-Nisā, the minister's daughter who, having donned the dress of a *jōgan*, charms the ear of the king of jinn's son by her music, and through him secures the release of the prince. There is the usual happy ending. The prince and the princess are united in marriage, and Najm-un-Nisā is wedded to Firoz Shāh, the jinnee prince, amidst great rejoicing.

Such are the dry bones of a story told in 4,442 lines. Those who are acquainted with the folklore of the East, especially that of India and Persia, will at once realize that there is hardly anything new about the plot. Invention is not one of Mir Hasan's strong points. The disappointed king contemplating retirement, the astrologers and their good tidings, the warning of the danger which threatens the prince, the precautions to avert the calamity and their failure—for what is predestined must come to pass—the disappearance of the prince, his incarceration in a well, the wise and resourceful daughter of the vizier—one and all have worn a rut in our folklore. Mir Hasan's excellence lies solely in his style. He takes up the commonplaces of the popular romance and weaves them into a living work of art by his treatment. 'What oft was thought but ne'er so well expres't,' was also his ideal, like the English Augustans.

Masnavī-e-Sihr-ul-Bayān is a notable example of the truth that in art novelty and surprise are not lasting wares and seldom survive the first reading. Who reads a detective story with the same engrossing interest a second time? But let a man portray things faithfully and let him add to them the preservative of style, and the chances are that he will not quickly fall into disuse.

In dealing with the supernatural, Mir Hasan is following the Coleridgean recipe. Discussing the origin of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge explains that his endeavours were directed 'to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith'.

Sihr-ul-Bayān is a good example of this 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'. Mir Hasan has in this poem *realized* the marvellous. And how has he done this? The answer is, by a strict realism in detail. In the description of the natural background—gardens, flowers, trees, clouds, the earth and sky; the pomp and

pageantry of royalty; their costly robes and elaborate toilet; their carefree life of luxurious ease; the description of the attendants, maids, musicians, and astrologers—in all these Mir Hasan is intent on facts. The poem is a masterpiece of close and loving observation.

Of equal importance with this is the inner realism, the truth to feeling and thought. The king, the minister, the princess, the servants, astrologers, all talk in character, i.e. their words and sentiments are appropriate to the character, mood, or situation of the speaker. Last though not least, the story is interspersed, very sparingly of course—for would they not otherwise impede the movement of the story?—with moral reflections on life and fate, which arise out of the situation, and reinforce the truth and realism of the narrative. We feel that we are not in a fantastic world, but in the midst of everyday values. The strength of the poem, therefore, lies in its realism, romantic though it be. All art is at bottom realistic. In fact, the greater the improbability, the greater must be the seasoning of realism to make it credible.

As in all romantic stories, characterization is ancillary in the *masnavi* to plot-interest. The author is not intent upon explaining why people do what they do: his art is pictorial, concerned with the surface phenomena of life. Nevertheless, the people in the story are fairly articulated and speak in character. Occasionally, one detects a false note in the archness, coquetry, and pertness of his aristocratic ladies. This, as I propose to discuss in connection with Sarshār and Sharar, is the besetting fault of the age. The fact is that the strict seclusion of women obtaining in the past precluded all real knowledge of womankind for men. In their own families, where formality crushed or suppressed self-expression, and where to say or do what one felt was taboo, especially in the presence of elders, the poets could get no knowledge of womankind. But prostitutes were common. Consequently, in portraying women of a higher order the poets would invariably trick them out in the familiar gestures and accent of the brilliant courtesan. The wish to dazzle and attract is, no doubt, as great in a princess as in a cottage girl, but the following speech by Badr-e-Munir is obviously in a false key:

مرو تم پیری پر وہ تم پر مرے بس اب تم ذرا مجھ سے بیٹھو پرے
میں اس طرح کا دل لگاتی نہیں یہ شرکت تو بندی کو بھاتی نہیں
عبث تم سے کیوں دل لگاؤ کوئی بھلے چنگے دل کو جلاوے کوئی

Go, die for the fairy, and let her die for you,
And now you had better keep at a distance from me [I'll have none of
your endearments],

I don't like love on these terms,
I don't like this partnership in love.
It is no use loving you
And putting my heart on the rack for nothing.

On the whole, Mir Hasan's style deserves the praise he claims for it at the conclusion of the poem. There are occasional concessions to the taste of the age in the form of word-play and conceits: but they are exceptions rather than the rule and emphasize his sound judgement and his desire to rise above the popular taste. The treatment of a long poem is seldom equal. But Mir Hasan has kept his level; and in its higher moments the poem attains a remarkable degree of smoothness, forthright directness, and brilliance.

But it is not only by its style that a poem lives. There was never a great poet but was first a lover of life. The law of literature is simple but inexorable: you must live before you can create. *Masnavi-e-Sihr-ul-Bayān* is a clear index to the author's intimate knowledge of nature and humanity, especially in their externals. Take away these tapestried effects, take away his nature-pictures, the large canvases painting the pageantry of the Middle Ages, take away his insight into human motives, and what is left? The story as a story is nothing but the quintessence of the commonplace. But in its setting, human and natural, as devised by Mir Hasan; in its style, at once direct and imaginative; and above all, in the human note struck again and again, bizarre though the story be, it has acquired the charm of a symphony in which many dissimilar elements are blended harmoniously.