

Mir Taqi Mir's *Zikr-i Mir*: An Account of the Poet or an Account by the Poet?

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*Although the famous Mughal poet Mir Taqi Mir's Persian text *Zikr-i Mir* has come to enjoy considerable renown as the first autobiography penned by an Urdu poet, scholars of Mir have continued to be puzzled by the text's contents. Its diverse sections comprise a mishmash of hagiography, historical chronicle and popular bon mots, and yield little in the way of informing us about Mir the man or Mir the poet. Even more problematical is the inclusion in the text of numerous 'facts' that are quite easily disprovable. Should we then consider much of *Zikr-i Mir* to be false and fabricated? Or should we take Mir's intention in composing the text to be something other than autobiographical? This article argues for the latter, proposing that much of what is confusing about the text is only really so because of our misplaced generic expectations from it—many of its 'inconsistencies' may be accounted for by freeing it from its autobiographical straitjacket and viewing it instead through the prism of a variety of alternative Persianate genres forming part of a wider, cosmopolitan, classical literary tradition. Through the focal example of Mir's text as well as examples from a variety of Mughal, Ottoman and Arabic writings, the article underlines the importance of distinguishing between 'autobiography' and 'autobiographical', and contests notions*

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of the existence of a distinct, recognisable and recognised genre of autobiography in the pre-modern Islamicate context.

When the renowned champion of Urdu, Maulvi ‘Abd ul-Haq, edited and published the poet Mir Taqi Mir’s eighteenth-century Persian prose work *Zikr-i Mir*¹ in Aurangabad in 1928, the little-known text caused some amount of excitement in academic circles. In London, Graham Bailey paid tribute by describing it as ‘nothing *less* than the autobiography of Mir Taqi Mir’ (emphasis mine).² ‘Abd ul-Haq had himself subtitled the publication *ḥazrat mīr taqī mīr kī k̄ḥud-nawisht sawānih-i ’umrī*³. In the decades since, all editions and translations of *Zikr-i Mir* have borne the explicit title of autobiography,⁴ and the work has come to be celebrated as the very *first* autobiography or *āp-bīī* ever written by a poet of Urdu.⁵

To any reader who approaches the text with the expectations that the genre of autobiography typically arouses,⁶ *Zikr-i Mir* certainly looks like a strange and ill-fitting example.⁷ It is not just that Mir presents details of his life in a patchy fashion, with little attempt to provide a more holistic picture of either his private life and personal relations or his public interactions and engagements, the aspect of the text that is even more baffling *and* intriguing is that its author presents facts about his life that are quite easily disprovable and provides such far-fetched descriptions of

¹ The article will adhere mainly to the scheme of transliteration followed by John T. Platts’ *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*. In the interest of uniformity, all Arabic, Persian and Turkish names and words, even when quoted in texts and contexts outside historical India, will be transliterated according to standard Urdu pronunciations.

² Bailey, ‘Review’: 380.

³ *Zikr-i Mir: His Revered Presence Mir Taqi Mir’s Self-penned Account of His Own Life*.

⁴ Mir and Faruqi’s (1957) Urdu translation of the text was published under the title *Mīr kī Āp-Bīī* and Mir and Naim’s (1999) English translation of the text is subtitled *The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet*.

⁵ Naim, Mir in ‘Fact’ and Fiction: 4.

⁶ See Reynolds and Brustad, *Interpreting the Self* for an argument against having set, particularistic expectations of the representation of the self from the genre of autobiography.

⁷ I am grateful to Fran Pritchett for being the first to alert my mind to this contradiction.

numerous events that it is difficult to conceive that even he could have thought them to be credible in the eyes of his readers. Given the narrative's numerous inconsistencies,⁸ should large parts of Mir's account be treated as false and fabricated? Or should we think of Mir as having intended to produce something altogether different from a credible autobiographical depiction of his own life?

These seeming contradictions and inconsistencies in Mir's narrative may become resolved, I argue, if, rather than as a rare example of an autobiography penned by a pre-modern Indo-Muslim poet, we think of *Zikr-i Mīr* as lying along a continuum of multi-genre Persianate *aḳhlāq* (ethical), *tārīkh* (historical or biographical) and *tazkirah* (hagiographical or biographical) texts found in Mir's own literary milieu as well as the wider Perso-Arabic or Islamicate literary tradition, texts whose purpose is more generally that of *adab*, that is, to edify readers by providing accounts of exemplary lives while simultaneously demonstrating the literary mastery of the writer at the same time.

In terms of narrative structure, *Zikr-i Mīr* falls into three broad and diverse sections—the first consists of a hagiographical account of conversations that Mir the child observes between his father and his father's mystical associates; the second is a detailed chronicle of the devastation wreaked upon Delhi by repeated Afghan and Maratha raids that Mir himself only partly served as eyewitness to and the last is a collection of popular, contemporary bon mots and humorous anecdotes that are often so sexually explicit as to impede their inclusion in 'Abd ul-Haq's published edition. Once freed from the confines of generic expectations associated with the prism of autobiography, this seeming mishmash of different kinds of writing begins to make better sense if we observe the resemblance between *Zikr-i Mīr*'s form and the practice of maintaining *majmū'ahs* or miscellanies. This practice seems to have been widespread across the Persianate world, more widespread, certainly, than that of penning actual autobiographies. It is also one that appears to have received less attention from scholars of the Mughal period in India than from Ottomanists who have identified such miscellanies as an important source of first-person narratives.⁹

⁸ C.M. Naim has, in his translation of the text, meticulously documented many such inconsistencies in the light of historical sources from a contemporaneous period.

⁹ See Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies' and Schmidt, 'First-person Narratives'.

By comparing *Zikr-i Mir* to a variety of Mughal, Ottoman and Arabic writings, this article attempts to account for certain patterns of representation (or ‘misrepresentation’) identified in Mir’s text. Exploring potential meanings of the ‘autobiographical’ in pre-modern Islamicate literary contexts, it argues that much of what is surprising in *Zikr-i Mir* is only really so because of our misplaced expectations from the text as modern readers living in an ‘autobiographical age’; the contents of this work of Mir’s occasion much less surprise when viewed through the prisms of other genres forming part of a wider, cosmopolitan literary tradition.

Autobiography, Biography and Indo-Persian Historiography

Despite concerted efforts by scholars of selfhood to identify and loop together texts that appear to adhere to loose, expanded, minimalist definitions of autobiography, autobiography as a recognisably distinct genre appears to be elusive in pre-modern Persianate or Islamicate literary settings. Until well into the modern era when European literary influences become fully operative, the Arabo-Persian autobiographical act remains a branch of biography, with biography being treated as a branch of historiography.¹⁰ Moreover, whether biographical facts are recorded by the subject of the biography himself/herself or by someone else seems interestingly irrelevant to both writers and readers, for whoever wields the pen, the content, purpose and function of the text stay the same.¹¹

¹⁰ Enderwitz, ‘Fiction in Arabic Autobiography’: 1. She further supports the equation between autobiography and biography by pointing out that pre-modern Arabic possessed no term to differentiate autobiography from the biographical *sīrah/tarjamah* genre. This conclusion is disputed by Marlow, *The Rhetoric of Biography*: 4.

¹¹ Enderwitz, ‘Fiction in Arabic Autobiography’: 8. To a certain extent, this practice appears to have continued into the modern era. The famous Mughal poet Ghalib’s prose writings in Urdu include a brief sketch of his life titled *Mirzā Ghālib Ke Khud-nawisht Hālāt-i Zindagī*. In this, Ghalib’s genealogy, his claim on a particular estate and his relationship and loyalty to the British government is emphasised. It is written as a biographical sketch in the third person, and curiously in one instance, the writer says, ‘Ghalib told me...’, which appears to be an interesting device if the writer is indeed Ghalib himself. Ghalib and Da’udi, *Majmū’ah-i Naṣr-i Ghālib Urdū*: 354–57. There are a number of such biographical sketches among the private papers of the twentieth-century Urdu poet Noon Meem Rashid, and these are also penned by him despite being written in the third person.

In our more specific context of Mughal writings, too, the modern Euro-American divide between author, protagonist and narrator, as well as between biography and autobiography would appear to be non-existent.¹² As Taymiya Zaman argues, even the *Bābarnāmah*—widely celebrated as a rare example of medieval princely autobiography due to being a narrative of the Mughal king Babar’s life in the first person—actually contains detailed biographies of men and women from the king’s circle of kin and compatriots, with the overwhelming amount of space devoted to Babar himself owing more to his kingly stature rather than his status as author or narrator.¹³ It is telling that the text has over the ages been known by various alternative titles such as *Waqā’i*’ and *Ṭabaqāt-i Bābarī*—*waqā’i*’ being a record of court events intended for the use of historians and *ṭabaqāt*’ being a popular Islamicate genre of biographical dictionaries containing brief accounts of lives, works, kinship circles and sayings of influential men.¹⁴

The notion of auto/biography¹⁵ is given further credence by the difficulty of seamlessly dividing the act of life writing in the context of Mughal India into distinct categories of biography and autobiography. Babar, for example, appears several times in his first cousin and ruler of Kashmir Mirza Haidar Dughlat’s contemporaneous work *Tārīkh-i Rāshidī*, which comprises the author’s own history, excerpts from existing historical works and biographical notes on the khans of Central Asia.^{16,17} The *Jahāngīrnāmāh* appears to follow a similar pattern, demonstrating

¹² Zaman, ‘Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India’: 678.

¹³ The implication being that that had the work been penned by a humble subject, for example, rather than a prince, less space would have been given over to an explicit discussion of the writer’s own self, thereby highlighting the autobiographical aspect of the work to a much lesser extent, even if the chronological arrangement of events appeared to mirror the trajectory of the life of the narrator/writer.

¹⁴ Zaman, ‘Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India’: 678–81. I am grateful to Sunil Sharma for pointing me to Taymiya Zaman’s work.

¹⁵ Sidonie and Watson describe auto/biography as ‘a mode of the autobiographical that inserts biography/ies within an autobiography, or the converse, a personal narrative within a biography’. This intermixing of biographical and autobiographical is often called a ‘relational story’ with reference to more modern works. Sidonie and Watson, *Interpreting Life Narratives*: 184.

¹⁶ Zaman, ‘Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India’: 678–81.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Harbans Mukhia for pointing out to me that there is an almost inviolable tradition in Mughal historiography for authors to append brief biographical sketches of nobles, poets, learned men, etc., to the concluding part of their chronicles, ‘Abd ul-Qadir Badayuni’s *Muntakhab ut-Tawārīkh* being just one example among many.

the limited value placed on autobiographical narration—from the stage in life where Jahangir's failing health prevents him from continuing the first-person narrative, a courtier is commissioned to continue writing in the third person about court events pertaining to the remainder of this Mughal king's reign.

There is every indication, it is useful to note, that in producing these autobiographical narratives, rulers such as Babar, Jahangir and Mirza Haidar were composing 'readily recognisable genres, narrations or histories of events'. The fact that their descendants seemed to regard the works as typical examples of narrative history—paying little attention to the elements that capture the interest of modern European and American scholars looking keenly for signs of the individual and his/her motivations and personality traits—implicitly demonstrates that this historiographical act was one of literary continuity, rather than innovation.¹⁸

A number of modern scholars have nevertheless persisted in making the case that autobiography is a very real and, in fact, an ignored literary genre in the classical Islamicate context.¹⁹ The most influential recent work in this line is that of Dwight F. Reynolds, who endeavours to chalk out the existence of a distinct autobiographical genre in classical Arabic literature and appears to speak with regret of the lack of a conceptual category for pre-modern Arabic autobiography in either Western or Arab scholarship that could cause particular texts to 'be grouped together and thereby draw the attention of others'. Criticising a tendency to treat the few representatives of the genre as anomalies instead of as part of a literary genre or historical tradition, Reynolds declares somewhat impetuously, 'Ironically, al-Suyuti, writing in 1485, was far more aware of the Arabic autobiographical tradition than most Arab or western scholars are today.'²⁰

A great part of Reynolds' argument rests on his perception that the fifteenth-century Egyptian jurist Jalal ud-Din Suyuti spoke about Arabic

¹⁸ Dale, 'Autobiography and Biography': 90–91. Like Zaman and Dale, Mario Casari also defines autobiography as one of the subgenres of Indo-Persian historiography. Listing Babar's and Jahangir's accounts as the primary representatives of this subgenre, he also adds Chandra Bhan Brahman's *Chahār Chaman* and Bedil's *Chahār 'Unsur* as a sidenote, describing them as 'original philosophical, naturalistic or literary treatises filled with notes and accounts on the authors' lives'. Interestingly, he mentions Hazin's *Tazkirāt ul-Aḥwāl*, often cited as a model for *Zikr-i Mir*, as being 'one of the many actual autobiographies' composed in India between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Casari, 'Persian Literature in India'.

¹⁹ See Ghamdi, *Autobiography in Classical Arabic Literature*.

²⁰ Reynolds and Brustad, *Interpreting the Self*: 27.

autobiographical writing as if it were a recognisable tradition from ancient to modern times. Yet, the same extract from Suyuti that he quotes also mentions explicitly that people wrote down biographical accounts of themselves [*yaktabūna li-anfusihim tarājim*], not only from an impulse to provide an exemplary image for emulation, but also so that they could influence what would be written about them in biographical dictionaries. Where Suyuti's own 'autobiography' is concerned, it is clear that he wrote at least three 'versions of his life'; hence, if his object was primarily to present an authoritative representation of his own life, it is unclear why he should do this. Moreover, the prominent accounts Suyuti references as examples of the autobiographical are almost all situated in various histories or biographical dictionaries, with only one being in the form of an independent book. Yet, Reynolds takes this to demonstrate that the genre of autobiography was clearly established in the Arabic literary tradition as early as the twelfth century, with the earliest examples of Arabic autobiography being found as far back as the ninth century.²¹

In an apparent desire to counter the notion of autobiography as the exclusive creation of the modern West, Dwight Reynolds takes an extremely broad and minimalist definition of the genre, his expressed intention being to err on the side of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.²² Conceding that Suyuti's account of his own life does not conform to any concept and pattern of autobiography in the Western sense, and that the work as a whole resists ordering into a single narrative (literally, a life 'story'),²³ he argues for an appreciation of a different sensibility, even a different idea of the self in the Islamicate context, rather than simply different literary conventions. In order to evaluate these different ideas of selfhood, Reynolds selects from various kinds of self-narratives and examples of first-person literature those examples that appear to be most akin to an identified Western genre of autobiography,²⁴ his aim being the inclusion of as many texts as possible within the autobiographical genre.²⁵

While we can see why this should suit Reynolds' distinct purpose of searching for the 'individual' in Arabic literature and broadening the

²¹ *Ibid.*: 1–2.

²² *Ibid.*: 10.

²³ *Ibid.*: 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 9–10.

²⁵ Incidentally, the *Bābarnāmah* and *Zikr-i Mīr* both feature as prominent examples of Islamicate autobiography in Reynolds' book.

debate about Western ideas of the 'individual, self, soul, mind, personality and character', it is difficult to understand why such a selection should be meaningful for the writers and readers of these texts at the time they were composed. Should it not be enough that a text can provide us autobiographical information, or allow us to gain clues about the writer's notions of the self, without our needing to coerce it into a bounded genre?

What is also difficult to understand is that if Arabic autobiographical writing was as often a tightly knit literary tradition, as Reynolds claims, how is it that such few autobiographies in these 'historical clusters' bear resemblance to each other as texts? Why is it that when the tradition of penning biographies reflects certain conventions and formal features, that of penning autobiographies does not seem to yield any discernible pattern and instead continues to be represented through a number of 'highly idiosyncratic texts'? Reynolds' point that these texts were extremely limited in number in comparison with biographical texts²⁶ leads us once more to the conclusion that scholars prior to Reynolds have reached—that autobiography is not, in fact, discernible as a widespread genre in the Arabic literary tradition. Moreover, at several points in his book, Reynolds himself indicates that the autobiographical act and the biographical act were often not distinguished from each other or were not seen as being aimed towards distinct purposes.²⁷ This bolsters the ideas discussed earlier in this article about the place of auto/biography in Islamicate historiography.

It is important to remember that 'autobiography' is a term that frequently proves controversial even in pre-modern Western literary contexts. Thus, it is hardly surprising that it should prove unwieldy and reductive for scholars of pre-modern, *non*-Western settings.²⁸ Instead of struggling to broaden, refine or redefine this term, many scholars of the Middle East have, therefore, opted for the use of other terms which allow them to examine the widest possible range of self-narratives or first-person narratives. The result has been a range of terms such as 'life story' or 'life history' (which allows the simultaneous study of biography and autobiography),²⁹ the simple use of an alternate term 'autobiographical writing' (which allows the possibility of studying a wider range of texts than those which conform to any particular definition of autobiography,

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 39, 41–42, 43, 44, 60–61.

²⁸ Akyıldız, Kara and Sagaster, *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature*: 10.

²⁹ Arnold and Blackburn, *Telling Lives in India*.

however narrow or broad) and ‘ego-document’, the last being a term that appears to be more common in recent Dutch or German academic usage than in English.³⁰

The benefit of this approach is that it allows for an interesting comparison of self-representations as found in memoirs, diaries, official documents, letters, biographies, hagiographies, poetry, travelogues and even fragmentary notes in margins. Even unexpected sources like *sifāratnāmahs*, or official embassy accounts, can be a rich source of information about constructions and representation of the Ottoman self. Examining a set of eighteenth-century embassy accounts, Denise Klein shows how individual writers could use the medium to communicate very individual images of professional excellence, literary and scholarly prowess, and religious views and predilections, all of which could possibly be geared towards helping them gain advancement in their careers. Amongst all this, they also managed to communicate details of their own family background, status and lineage. Since their superiors were likely to be conversant with the salient details of their genealogy already, it appears that instead of fellow officials being the only target audience of these embassy accounts, these texts could perhaps have had wider appeal as travelogues for an audience interested in learning about other climes.³¹ Hence, more than one kind of medium could be used by writers to convey autobiographical details to a wider audience, and perhaps even to record these for posterity.

The Sufi hagiography (*taẓkirah*, *malfūzāt*, *sīrah*, *manāqib*, *ṭabaqāt*),³² composed with the purpose of confirming the mystic’s spiritual authority and instructing disciples and spiritual seekers, may be considered as another kind of auto/biographical text. Such texts can be found as free-standing books; they can often also be found to be housed in larger texts conforming to other genres and purposes, such as biographical dictionaries (*taẓkirah*), historical chronicles (*tārīkhhs*), travel literature and prologues or epilogues to religious, legal or scientific works.³³ Abu’l-Fazl ‘Allami’s concluding entry to his Persian magnum opus, the sixteenth-century *Akbarnāmah*, is an example of the last kind where an autobiographical account of the author is added to the epilogue of a scholarly work concerning a larger

³⁰ Elger and Köse, *Middle Eastern Ego-Documents*: 7.

³¹ Klein, ‘The Sultan’s Envoys Speak...’: 89–100.

³² Renard, *Islamic Hagiography*: 6.

³³ Terzioğlu, ‘Ottoman Personal Miscellanies’: 85–86.

subject. Under the title ‘Regarding Some Accounts of the Author’ [*nabẓe az aḥwāl-i muṣannif*],³⁴ the Mughal wazīr appends a brief sketch of his own affairs to the concluding part of the official history of the emperor Akbar’s reign, explaining:

The writer of this important work had it in his mind to draw up a memoir of his venerable ancestors and some particulars of strange incidents in his own life, and form of them a separate volume which should be a source of instruction to the intelligent who look afar; but various occupations, especially the composition of this work, absorbed his attention to the exclusion of all else. At this juncture a secret inspiration prompted the thought that the world would not welcome the detailed journals of personal biography in an isolated form, and that it would be more opportune to append an account thereof to this work and to intersperse here and there some practical and didactic comments.³⁵

We may glean two things from this—Abu’l-Fazl does not think that the stand-alone autobiography of even such a prominent scholar and political figure as himself would attract much in the way of readership (which says something about the lack of such an established genre in his time and setting), and that his expressed interest in composing even a brief autobiographical sketch is chiefly didactic.

Zikr-i Mīr as a *Majmū‘ah*

Historically, partial autobiographical sketches written in the first or even the third person can be found in various kinds of Arabo-Persian or Islamicate texts, demonstrating that there can be multiple sources for autobiographical accounts. Interestingly, one of the most common sources for such accounts appear to be miscellaneous compilations or scrapbooks known as *majmū‘ahs*. In fact, as far as the Ottoman context is concerned, the *majmū‘ah* appears to be the most common category used historically to classify many texts we would have little trouble classifying as ‘autobiographical’ today. The contents of some of the miscellanies that have been studied reflect the social, professional and religious affiliations of the compilers in diverse ways; yet, they contain textual materials of a diverse nature that definitely go beyond the ‘public’ functions and

³⁴ Abu’l-Fazl ibn Mubarak and Blochmann, *Ā’in-i Akbarī* (vol. 2): 258–83. I am grateful to Harbans Mukhia for this reference.

³⁵ Translation from Abu’l-Fazl ‘Allami, *Ain-i Akbarī* (vol. 3): 478–524.

persona of their compilers, often including excerpts of religio-mystical literature that makes these scrapbooks a very personal document in that they represent a particular individual's selections for his own use. They additionally contain notes about family and household affairs, career-related details of appointments and dismissals affecting the compiler himself and others, excerpts from earlier Ottoman chronicles, poetry and preserved copies of letters perhaps to document past correspondence or to serve as models for future correspondence for compilers as well as readers.³⁶

Regardless of the doubtful existence of any significant readership, some people in the Ottoman lands found it useful to keep such personal scrapbooks, and others cared to preserve them. In an age before the printing press and wider circulation, keeping personal scrapbooks may have been as close as one could get to a 'literary and cultural practice that sustained the autobiographical act, however ephemeral'. The practice of maintaining *majmū'ahs* or scrapbooks appears to have been fairly widespread within Islamdom wherever there was a substantial culture of literacy, and it seems to have been especially popular among literate males in Ottoman towns during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, judging by the large number of scrapbooks that have survived after the sixteenth century in the central lands of the Ottoman Empire.³⁷ Interestingly, we find several manuscripts categorised under the title of *majmū'ah* or with a description fitting the characteristics of this generic category in Mughal archives of a similar period, including one that appears to have been compiled by the emperor Aurangzeb.³⁸

³⁶ Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies': 87–90. Compilers may have shown these scrapbooks to others and may even have asked them to make an entry, a practice that appears to have been especially popular in Muslim mystic circles. A practice is known of later owners appropriating the scrapbook of previous owners and adding to them, even erasing certain parts to create space for the addition of *hikāyats* (anecdotes) set in pseudo-historical contexts, demonstrating that these new owners did not regard the scrapbooks as the personal testament of the original owners. So then why did Ottoman literati record personal information in their scrapbooks? Perhaps it was because they wanted to preserve the dates of certain important events in their lives and transmit these memories to their progeny.

³⁷ Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies': 87–96.

³⁸ Marshall, *Mughals in India*: 91. Called *Majmū'a-i Ash'ār*, this manuscript is described in the catalogue as a collection of verses composed by various ancient and modern authors, fragmentary notes, magical formulae (probably for a *tā'wīz* or amulet) and a number of extracts in the Hindustani and Dakkani dialects, besides the will of Aurangzeb.

The category of the *majmū'ah* seems particularly useful for explaining *Zikr-i Mir*'s 'mishmash' of mystical conversations, historical chronicle, humorous anecdotes and stray autobiographical details, especially since it corresponds to genres *existent* at Mir's time and in his pre-modern milieu, rather than to a genre like autobiography that was relatively rare even in the pre-modern Western context, much less the pre-modern Islamicate one. A noteworthy fact is that many of the *majmū'ahs* described in Mughal archives were, like *Zikr-i Mir*, composed by Indian poets whose oeuvre appears to be remarkably similar to Mir's. Besides his poetry, we have three major prose works by Mir. One is *Nikāt ush-Shu'arā'*, a *tazkirah* of Urdu poets, another is *Faiẓ-i Mīr*,³⁹ a short book containing brief narratives about obscure mystics and a *jogi*, and the last is *Zikr-i Mīr*, with at least one section thematically similar to *Faiẓ-i Mīr*. The oeuvre of many writers listed in the Mughal archives seems to be similar to him in that it includes *dīwāns* (collections) of poetry, as well as prose works such as historical chronicles, mystical tracts, even autobiographical accounts and of course biographical compendia of famous poets. Interestingly, most of these writers appear to be eighteenth-century poets, and therefore Mir's contemporaries, even if their fame did not ultimately equal Mir's.

One particularly interesting example is that of Yusuf Ali Khan, son of a *dīwān-i khālīṣah* of Patna called Ghulam Ali Khan. This eighteenth-century writer is known for penning several erudite histories in Persian (most famously the *Tārīkh-i Bangalā-i Mahābat-Jang*), as well as a biographical dictionary of contemporary Persian poets. He is also the author of *Majmū'a-i Yūsufī*, a Persian work described as 'a large compendium of information and a personal diary and an eyewitness account of the main political events that took place in Eastern India between 1761 and 1767'.⁴⁰ Another example among dozens of such examples is that of Azad Bilgrami. Besides being a poet and a famed biographer of Persian poets, he also has to his credit the *Rauzat ul-Auliyā'*.⁴¹ Compiled in 1748, this text is said to comprise accounts of the 'lives of ten saints buried at Rauzah or Khuldabad, followed by brief notices of Aurangzeb, Nizam ul-Mulk, Asaf Jah, and Burhan Shah, and an autobiography of the author'.⁴²

³⁹ I am grateful to Prashant Keshavmurthy for supplying me with a copy of this text.

⁴⁰ Marshall, *Mughals in India*: 494.

⁴¹ A work did not, of course, always need to have the word *majmū'ah* in its title to be a *majmū'ah*.

⁴² Marshall, *Mughals in India*: 94.

It appears that while *Zikr-i Mīr* may be a relatively rare-looking work in the world of Urdu poets, as far as Persian poets and writers are concerned, there appear to be several similar-looking examples. Thus, it may not have been simply the case that Mir found his models in Hazin or Mukhlis, the two well-known poets whose prose works are traditionally upheld as potential inspirations for Mir's text. Since there are several other prose works by Mir's contemporaries that appear at least from catalogue descriptions to resemble *Zikr-i Mīr*, the indication is that Mir may not necessarily have needed models because writing of this nature might actually have been a fairly widespread practice. The practice of composing miscellanies or *majmū'ahs* containing diverse sections dealing with a variety of themes does appear to have been well established since at least several centuries not only in India, but across Islamdom.

Of course, the *Tazkira-i Ānand Rām Muḥḥliṣ* does bear a clear resemblance to *Zikr-i Mīr*. Its catalogue description as 'memoirs of the author's life and of contemporary events in northern India including an account of Nadir Shah's invasion of India' further bears out the presence of a general practice of mixing autobiographical account with historical chronicle.⁴³ Mukhlis' other miscellany titled *Chamanistān*, compiled in 1746, is of even more interest for our purposes—it is described as a collection of anecdotes, witty sayings and accounts of some contemporaries of Mughal interest.⁴⁴

There appear, moreover, to be numerous miscellanies with titles with floral and garden-like imagery: *Chahār Chaman*, *Shash Chaman*, *Chahār Gulshan*, *Chahār Gulzār*, *Guldastah* and *Chamanistān*. While such titles carrying floral imagery are common in the Persianate world, it appears that for books with multiple sections, often relating to diverse and unrelated themes, especially those to do with some aspect of *aḳhlāq* or exemplary behaviour, the use of titles that evoke the Persian garden with its divisions into symmetrical units is favoured. By the same logic, selections of pithy sayings and collections of prayers under the title *Guldastah* (or bouquet) continue to be popular to this day. In the case of the famous Mughal *munshī* (or scribe) Chandra Bhan Brahman's seventeenth-century text

⁴³ Marshall, *Mughals in India*: 75. Ghalib's prose work *Dast-ambo* can also be seen to carry a similar flavour of personal diary and historical chronicle, with considerable autobiographical background being presented in a particular section, the purpose of some of which appears to be to stake his claim on the income from a certain family legacy.

⁴⁴ Marshall, *Mughals in India*: 76.

Chahār Chaman, certain *aḳhlāq*-related extracts were published by the author as a digest under the title *Guldasta-i Chahār Chaman-i Brāhman*.⁴⁵ This was the part of the text that dealt with the Mughal king Shah Jahan's daily routine and approach to governance; it was widely circulated under the title *Principles of Statecraft under Shah Jahan* [*Qawā'id us-Saltanat-i Shah Jahān*], and was even included in Gladwin's textbook for British administrators, *The Persian Moonshēe*, in 1795.⁴⁶

Zikr-i Mīr* as Adab and as *Aḳhlāq

In terms of its structure, *Zikr-i Mīr* may, like many similar-looking texts, correspond to the genre of the *majmū'ah*, but what of its function? And very importantly, what can we say about its author's intention in composing the text? The aim of much pre-modern Persian prose, be it biography or history or something multi-genred like the *majmū'ah*, is to present models of exemplary behaviour. The aim of *Zikr-i Mīr* is conceivably quite similar to this.

For modern readers of Mir's 'autobiography', bemusement is a common reaction. Those in search of a portrait of Mir's life and times can be forgiven for feeling a bit stumped when page after page goes by in narration of the golden words of sages, yielding few details about Mir the man, or even Mir the poet, and readers are assailed by visions of war and upheaval in a lengthy middle section until the book peters to an end with a selection of jokes that seem to have no bearing at all on Mir's life, although some of them may have been popular during his time.⁴⁷ If we read this book, however, for something other than information about Mir's life and character, the contents may present little cause for surprise and even less cause for disappointment.⁴⁸ Rather than as an autobiography, the book can be and, as I will endeavour to argue, *should* be read as a book of counsel and advice along the lines of many other works of the *adab/aḳhlāq* genre. Moreover, it can be read for the same basic reason

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 120.

⁴⁶ Kinra, 'Master and Munshi': 533.

⁴⁷ For an attempt to make sense of Mir's decision to shape his autobiography in such a fashion (especially its universally 'surprising' conclusion), see Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*: 16.

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Taha Sabri for bringing my attention to this alternate way of approaching the text as a result of his particular interest in mystical writings and his consequent pleasure in Naim's translation of *Zikr-i Mīr*.

that mystic poetry is read—for its literary merits and for the power of its words and imagery.

There are a number of passages of great beauty, and a very evident quality of what is called *rawānī* or ‘flowingness’ in *Zikr-i Mīr*. I quote:

(نکتہ) اے یار عزیز! دل اگر درد خور است در خور است، غم اگر دل خور است، شائستہ تر است؛ دل محزون می جویند نہ شائستہ طرب؛ جان درد ناک میخوانند نہ درمان طلب... بشیاری! کہ این مقام منزلہ اقدام است، چشمے باید کے بر غیر او را نشود، دلے شاید کہ از جائے خود نرود، دشمن و دوست ہمہ از اوست کہ دلہا در تصرف اوست؛ بدایت و ضلالت ہر دو مظہر اویند مست و بشیاری ہمہ او را میجویند. محراب از ابروئے او پیدا آمد، میخانہ از چشم او بویدا شد.⁴⁹

(Admonition) Dear friend, if you have a heart that thrives on grief it is a heart worth having; but having a grief that can consume your heart is a much worthier thing. One seeks a grieving heart, not one that is attuned to pleasure; and desires a pain-ridden soul, not one that longs for a cure...⁵⁰ Beware, this is merely a staging place. One should have eyes that do not look at anyone beside Him; and a heart that holds still and doesn't run after anything. Enemies and friends—all are from Him, for every heart is under his sway. Guidance and misguidance—both manifest His will; and the sober and the drunk, both seek His way. The arch of the mosque is the curve of His eyebrow, and the tavern comes about from His eyes.⁵¹

The words are replete with popular poetic imagery, especially the kind associated with mystical themes. Mir's intent, it appears, is to display his literary virtuosity in the *mazāmin* of *taṣawwuf* (themes of mysticism). Reading *Zikr-i Mīr* as high literature filled with exemplary tales can also help put into perspective Mir's rather cavalier-seeming attitude towards facts, dates and settings in this hagiographic first section of the book. The purpose is didactic, so the substance is important, rather than the details.

⁴⁹ Mir and 'Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 30–31. I am grateful to Ajmal Kamal for procuring me a copy of both this and Nisar Ahmad Faruqi's edition of Mir's Persian text.

⁵⁰ An evergreen mystical theme. Ghalib has a famous *ghazal* verse...

جب تک دہان زخم نہ پیدا کرے کوئی
مشکل کہ تجھ سے راہ سخن وا کرے کوئی - غالب

... which may be translated as:

It is difficult for words to reach You
Unless spoken through the mouth of the anguished wound

⁵¹ Translation from Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 43–44.

At one point, Mir claims to be present at a meeting with a famous *pīr* who in reality has already passed away by Mir's time.⁵² The autobiographical setting introducing Mir as a character among the *darweshes* (dervishes) is thus merely a narrative device. Mir intends his words to have effect, but he does not necessarily intend that people accept the circumstances surrounding the anecdotes at face value. This is perhaps the real reason behind his careless attitudes towards dates and his failure to present sufficient and sufficiently convincing detail in the narrative and render incontrovertible the veracity of his description of events. The task of hagiography, and that also fictionalised hagiography, does not require the writer to provide proof of the reality of his/her tales. We may contrast this with the *Bābarnāmah* where, in the interest of credibility, Babur provides names and details of even minor retainers, sometimes vexing the reader and the translator, but managing to fulfil the purpose of providing eyewitnesses to prove the actuality of the events he describes. Mir, in contrast, evokes vague and well-known tropes to represent the 'focusees'⁵³ of his narrative—his father and other *darweshes* he was supposedly acquainted with. He writes:

Then suddenly my father, even though he had no provisions for a journey, set out again—placing his trust in God—and in ten or twelve days reached Shahjahanabad Dihli. There he stayed at the house of Fakhruddin Khan, son Shaikh Abdul 'Aziz 'Izzat, who was the Divan of that region [*ṣūbah*] and also closely related to my father. Excellent people of the city came to that residence and with great devotion sought to serve [my father] who was intoxicated by the wine of love. When seated, he was like an enraptured person, and when standing, he appeared as if drunk. His speech was similarly inebriated, and his passionate breath set afire many a desirous heart. A great many people placed their hands in his hand and became his disciples, and many of them were transformed when his glance fell upon them. When he did his ablutions, people saved the [used] water and gave it to the sick. Those who drank it became well. My father wept so much that he would choke, and when he let out a cry it would pierce the heavens. News spread throughout the city that a dervish of such eminence had come into town. Now even nobles sought permission to visit him. My father refused: 'I am a faqir and you are an emir—we have nothing in common.'⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid.*: 45.

⁵³ Marzolph proposes the term 'focusee' for individuals serving as a focus for the attribution of narratives. Marzolph, 'Jocular Fiction': 123.

⁵⁴ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*: 31–32.

Mir's father's setting out on his journey trusting only in God's will to provide and his refusal to mingle with the rich and powerful are all ideal forms of high-minded, unworldly, faqīr-like behaviour. There is little to mark him out as a unique individual. In at least two other places in *Zikr-i Mīr*, Mir even puts verses from his own *dīwān* into his father's mouth, indicating that his intent is not to achieve verisimilitude, but to edify.⁵⁵ After all, it is not readers' absolute confidence in the truth of all of Sa'di's stories and the actuality of his characters and their words that makes the *Gulistān-i Sā'dī* so popular and indeed so revered.⁵⁶ That saintly qualities are best expressed in the saint's own words, even if they happen to be Sa'di's words, is something that Sa'di, like most skilled storytellers, understands well. The characters that appear in the *Gulistān* might be real characters, but they actually serve the narrative purpose of being the prototype of many different characters of a particular kind. The verses that are quoted often blend the voice of Sa'di with the saint.⁵⁷

The famous nineteenth-century biographer of Urdu poets, Muhammad Husain Azad's treatment of events in Mir's life has frequently come under fire in scholarly analyses of Mir's life and works.⁵⁸ Yet, while Azad does not appear to make any significant use of *Zikr-i Mīr* for his sketch of Mir's life,⁵⁹ most of Mir's later biographers and their reviewers appear to accept Mir's statements in *Zikr-i Mīr* about his life, his encounters with people and the conversations he witnesses at face value, despite their often incredible-sounding nature. This certainly seems to be the approach of 'Abd ul-Haq, Grahame Bailey, Khwajah Ahmad Faruqi and even Mas'ud Rizvi Adib, in whose eyes it is Mir's intention that his 'encounters' with

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 38, 44.

⁵⁶ The bent of modern Muslim sensibilities might be increasingly different. One commentator of Khwajah Hasan Nizami's early twentieth-century autobiography *Lāhūī Āp-bīū* actually extols it as a *Gulistān* in Urdu, referring to Sa'di's major work of advice literature. However, Nizami's colleague, Mulla Wahidi, calls it a completely new addition to Urdu literature and in his preface of the book makes a disparaging reference to people turning to imaginary fables to derive moral edification through means of entertainment. He expresses the wish that people should instead turn to lessons from real life, which is surely the best source of counsel and indeed the 'greatest story'. Hermansen, 'Sufi Autobiography in the Twentieth Century': 289.

⁵⁷ Keshavarz, 'Sa'di's Earthly Vision of Sainthood': 94–96.

⁵⁸ See Pritchett for a critique of Azad's representation of Mir. Pritchett, 'Mir as Suffering Curmudgeon'. See Mir and Rizvi for a defence against scholarly criticism of Azad's fact-finding abilities. Mir and Rizvi, *Faiḡ-i Mīr*: 3–4.

⁵⁹ It is possible that Azad was not aware of the text. Certainly, he does not include it in the list of Mir's significant works that he presents in *Āb-i Hayāt*: 194–220.

Sufis in not just *Zikr-i Mīr* but also *Faiḡ-i Mīr* be accepted by readers as fact rather than as situations and anecdotes modified or created expressly for a literary purpose: ‘... whatever is written is not based simply on hearsay [*sunī sunā’ī nahīn*], but on what he has himself witnessed [*ānkhōñ dekhī bāteñ hain*] of the events surrounding the God-fearing ones [*allāh wāloñ ke ḥālāt*] and the miracles of the mystics [*pīroñ ke karāmāt*]’.⁶⁰ Khwajah Ahmad Faruqi accepts Mir’s words verbatim and his account of Mir’s life in *Mīr Taqī Mir: Hayāt aur Shā’irī* is largely a close paraphrase of *Zikr-i Mīr*, even to the extent of being structured around events in the very order that Mir presents them in *Zikr-i Mīr*.⁶¹ C.M. Naim’s treatment of the text is a significant departure from this trend in that he brings in outside evidence to dispute the veracity of much of Mir’s account. However, until and unless he finds some specific proof from external sources contradicting what Mir says, he appears to accept Mir’s version of events.

One of Naim’s major points of disagreement with other scholars concerns the status of Mir’s father Mir Muhammad ‘Ali as a mystic of high stature. Like most other scholars of Mir, ‘Abd ul-Haq accepts the fact that Mir Muhammad ‘Ali was as great a *darwesh* as his son claims, and even attributes Mir’s famously touchy temperament [*nāzūk-mizājī*] and lofty sense of pride to having such an illustrious and widely revered mystic for a father.⁶² Naim’s view is that this is not borne out either in contemporary historical records of the prominent mystics of Agra and Delhi, in contemporary biographies of Mir himself or even in any of Mir’s other writings, including his entry on himself in his biographical dictionary of poets. Further, none of the other renowned mystics Mir mentions interacting with seem to be real historical figures either.⁶³

In a number of places in the text, Mir appears to construct an incident, refine its particulars or shape the direction that a particular event takes out of a desire to use a particular rare word or phrase from Siraj ud-Din Arzu’s dictionary *Chirāgh-i Hidāyat*⁶⁴. For example, for the sake of

⁶⁰ Mir and Rizvi, *Faiḡ-i Mīr*: 11.

⁶¹ Faruqi, *Hayāt o Shā’irī*.

⁶² Mir and ‘Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mīr*: ۷.

⁶³ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 9–12.

⁶⁴ Nisar Faruqi observes that one would be hard put to find many of the words and idioms used in *Zikr-i Mīr* in any other dictionary but *Chirāgh-i Hidāyat*. Although he observes that one of the rare place names mentioned in *Zikr-i Mīr* can only be found in this dictionary, he does not tie it to the wider problem of veracity in *Zikr-i Mīr*. Mir and Faruqi, *Mīr Kī Āp-būī*: 22.

playing on the expression *jawān-i charbe* (someone young, handsome and rich; *charb* means fat, greasy and smooth) from the dictionary, he presents the market boy his purported uncle falls in love with as an oil-seller's son,⁶⁵ and while describing the menu at a banquet, he mentions by name only the *kabābs* listed in one particular section of the dictionary.⁶⁶ He also describes most of his childhood incidents, his time in Delhi and his episode of lunacy in extremely stylised language.⁶⁷ The interesting thing about biographers' treatment of *Zikr-i Mīr* is that at points where Mīr appears reticent about particular aspects of his life, such as his conjugal life, they supplement this with details from his *maṣnawīs* (a genre of poetry), *as if* to say that Mīr's poetry is as credible a source of autobiographical information as his prose 'autobiography'.⁶⁸ Given that so many of the dates, names and facts that Mīr presents in *Zikr-i Mīr* are vague or questionable, it comes as rather a surprise that Naiyer Masud takes Mīr's figure for the number of books owned by his father at the time of his death as basis for speculation about Mīr's father's profession as a book dealer.⁶⁹ The question that arises is this—when we have rejected so many of Mīr's facts and representations in *Zikr-i Mīr* as errors, exaggerations or inaccuracies, why should we take other facts to be true simply because we have been unable to marshal the necessary internal or external evidence to disprove them?

The issue of whether parts of Mīr's account should be treated as false or fictional becomes easier to solve when we treat it not as an autobiography with considerable gaps and contradictions, but as an *adab* compilation, specifically a collection of exemplary, dramatic-historical and humorous anecdotes presented as deliberately fictionalised fact or perhaps factualised fiction⁷⁰ that allows us to retrieve a certain amount of

⁶⁵ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 123.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 94, 189.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 194. Since a display of virtuosity in classical Urdu poetry generally relies upon embroidering on existent tropes, trying to read details of poets' actual lives and emotions into their poetic verse overwhelmingly considered a controversial practice, except in very rare circumstances.

⁶⁹ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 63.

⁷⁰

Factual narratives can be fictionalised by stripping them of their original historical garments and placing them in a different environment in terms of time, protagonists, locality and even motivation. On the other hand, fictional narratives can be

autobiographical information from the prose work in a way comparable to the role that Mir's other text *Faiḏ-i Mir* plays for us.

What makes both *Zikr-i Mir* and *Faiḏ-i Mir* tricky is that they appear to completely conform neither to fact nor to the category of explicit fiction. This grey area between fact and fiction in the production of *adab* is already known to us from examples of the Arabic literary tradition. We know that Ibn-i Batutah's famous travelogue lifted entire passages from the *Rihlah* of Ibn-i Jubair, mostly failing to reference him. For this, Ibn-i Batutah has been called 'one of the greatest liars in literary history', with lying in this context not being a *moral* category for him but a literary one. A deep analysis of his text may not leave us much of Ibn-i Batutah, the fourteenth-century explorer and researcher, but his literary achievement becomes that much more evident. He achieves a good reputation as a traveller in spite of the open and obvious lies in the text because his story mostly does sound realistic, being based on reasonable if often false itineraries and on numerous references to places and people that did actually exist.⁷¹

There is a long tradition in *adab* literature of anecdotes possessing both fictional and non-fictional aspects, where named sources can play an important role in supporting an anecdote's claim to historicity. Consider the relationship between Ash'ab al-Tamma' and Jahiz's *Kitāb ul-Bayān wa'l-Tabayīn*, an influential early work of Arabic literary criticism. Ash'ab ibn-i Jubair, or at-Tamma' (the Voracious) as he is known, is a comic entertainer and poet from eighth-century Medina who goes on to become the subject of many jokes, mostly concerning his gluttonous, sponging ways.⁷² He enjoys both a historical and a fictional dimension in classical Arabic literature, appearing in several kinds of *adab* texts such as Jahiz's which, while being non-fictional in the basic sense, can include material whose historicity is considered indeterminate or variable. His appearance in non-fictional anecdotes indicates the irrelevance of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction where snatches of dialogue in *adab* works are concerned, since when a writer like Jahiz needs material

factualised by supplying them with a credible, reliable or otherwise apparently factual garb and by fitting them together with other narratives whose factuality is known or accepted beyond doubt. Marzolph, 'Jocular Fiction': 120–21

Modern scholars, however, as Marzolph observes, tend to focus mostly on the reverse process and remain preoccupied with tracing the fictional in history.

⁷¹ Elger, 'Narrative Techniques in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Travelogue': 71–72.

⁷² Kilpatrick, *Kitāb Al-Aghānī*: 327.

to demonstrate his ideas about the precise and eloquent use of language in his book, he locates it in the ‘common fund of sayings, proverbs, neat turns of phrase and so on (*āṣār*), as well as in the religious and historical reports that were in circulation in his time’. Some of these sayings might have been attributed to a wit named Ash‘ab at some point of time, but whether they really came from Ash‘ab or not does not affect their worth since they have a force of their own, independent of ‘historical props’. However, for Jahiz to attach them to an established name or personality of contemporary Arabic literature is a literary useful device, if only to ensure that people remember the anecdote for generations.⁷³

Similarly, if a certain thought or idea can be attributed to a named character like Mir’s father, regardless of his true stature as a mystic, or if an exemplary anecdote could be associated with Mir Amanullah (whom Mir cites as his uncle), regardless of the fact that such an obscure mystic or ‘uncle’ may never have existed, the saying achieves greater effect than if it had remained as bare utterance. As Jahiz says, ‘Anecdotes are only truly interesting when one knows the characters and can trace them back to their sources by establishing some kind of contact with their protagonists.’⁷⁴ Whether these events really transpired in this way remains immaterial until a biographer decides to accept them as the literal truth, treating Mir’s exemplary anecdotes as autobiographical material. After all, the relationship an exemplary anecdote may have with reality is not of primary importance for a reader who has the kind of expectations from the text that the literary traditions of the *adab* genre in which the text is situated have led him/her to have, *adab* being a genre in which neither the writer nor the reader may be overly concerned with matters of historicity.

Zikr-i Mir, like other *adab* texts, would likely have been quoted by contemporary readers with a specific kind of intention born of an understanding of the text’s actual meaning and function. It is an example of *aḳhlāq* literature in the traditional sense, *aḳhlāq* literature being a category that can pertain both to history and fiction.

Perhaps, however, it is best for us to avoid the question of whether *Zikr-i Mir* falls into the territory of history or fiction. Since historiography and fiction are genres of writing and not ‘bundles of fact or non-fact in verbal shape’, what passes as history or fiction at any given time and place is determined by the writer–reader contract (or writers’ and their audiences’

⁷³ Kilpatrick, ‘The “Genuine” Ash‘ab’: 98–99.

⁷⁴ Marzolph, ‘Jocular Fiction’: 125.

understanding of the genre) at a particular moment of time in a particular literary setting, with there being no universals of historical versus fictive form.⁷⁵ The presence of fictional elements alone cannot prevent a text from being read as history; we know from the experience of scholars of medieval European history that playing with fictionality at certain points in the text could be a matter of literary virtuosity for writers of histories.⁷⁶

We also know from works like Firdausi's *Shāhnāmah*⁷⁷ and our discussion of the oeuvre of many contemporaries of Mir such as Azad Bilgrami that there is a clear, long-standing Persianate tradition of belletrists and poets undertaking historiographical writing for the purpose of personal literary experiments or for pleasing patrons or friends. The Mughal poet Ghalib, too, composed a number of histories and chronicles such as *Mihr-i Nīmroz* and *Dast-ambo*. Given such a tradition of literary experimentation with the genre of history, perhaps it is better not to absolutely discount *Zikr-i Mir* from the category of history, since despite the apparent exaggerations and inconsistencies in the narrative, a historical function, to whatever limited degree, might have been one of its functions for readers. However, it seems fair to say that the kind of commitment to truth⁷⁸ expected from modern composers of non-fictive narrative (but not always from writers of classical *adab* or *aḳhlāq* texts) is likely missing in the case of *Zikr-i Mir*, allowing Mir the license or the

⁷⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*: 26–30.

⁷⁶ Otter speaks of small, controlled spaces within 'serious' discourse (legal, homiletic, historical) in which it was understood that narrative experimentation could be possible, *argumentum* being the Latin word for such spaces (pp. 111–12). She writes further:

Fictionality, then, enters medieval historiography quite easily, taking advantage of the fluid genre conventions. While the different truth claims of history and fictional narrative were certainly understood, crossovers and hybrids are possible and often useful. The functions of fiction vary widely, from ancestral legends for families, cities, monasteries or nations, with a quasi-truth claim that substituted for the real thing, to fictional elements in historiography that underscore the textual and literariness of the narrative and playfully probe its truth claims. (Otter, 'Fiction in Historical Writing': 122)

⁷⁷ For a look at the historical debate surrounding the classification of the *Shāhnāmah* as a romance (*qiṣṣah/dāstān*) or history, see Khan, 'Marvellous Histories'.

⁷⁸ Meir Sternberg formulates the distinction between history writing and fiction writing as being not the absence or presence of truth value in history writing, but the *commitment* to truth value. It is the work's claim to truth rather than its correspondence to the truth that essentially differentiates history from fiction. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*: 25.

privilege to completely embroider new events or fictionalise whichever events or facts he likes to, to whatever extent he desires. Appreciating this aspect of the text's nature and function can help us form a different understanding of its meaning and intention than has traditionally been formed by biographers.

With reference to Mir's intention in, or motivation for, composing *Zikr-i Mīr*, C.M. Naim takes the view that the work is a quite 'deliberate enterprise' on the part of Mir to (a) claim a Sayyid ancestry and indicate that his father was a Shi'ah like him and not a Sunni like his ancestors, (b) establish the identity of his father as a major mystic and his own identity as mystically inclined, similar to that of his peer, the famous poet Mir Dard and his father 'Andalib and (c) denigrate his uncle and mentor Siraj ud-Din Arzu with whom his relations appear to have become strained at some stage.⁷⁹ However, it might be better for us perhaps to think of aspects such as Mir's highlighting his Sayyid ancestry as a *feature* of the narrative, rather than a driving *motive* for it. It is quite common, after all, for authors to make it a point to present genealogical data about themselves and details of their teachers and patrons in classical Islamicate prose works where the author is not separate from the protagonist even where the text is not intended as an autobiographical account. We see startlingly similar trends to some of the ones identified in *Zikr-i Mīr* in a sixteenth-century Ottoman biographical compendium by a *qāzī* (judge) from Kosovo.

Mashā'ir ush-Shu'arā', completed in 1568, is said to be the most famous *taẓkirah* of poets from the Ottoman era. In it, its author Ashiq Chalabi (Āşık Çelebi) does not narrate his own life story explicitly, but the text is throughout permeated by his voice and in the midst of presenting notices on the lives of the 427 poets who are the formal subject of his biography, he also ends up mentioning details of his family, close friends, professors, patrons and respected peers, and personal trials and tribulations. In his accounts of others' lives and careers, his own personality, views on gender, social life, amorous relations and scholarly tastes and predilections are revealed, and he even presents samples of his own poetry to convey an impression of particular feelings and states. He also speaks of his Sayyid lineage and how it benefits his social interactions.⁸⁰ Even though his mother's family was as socially prominent as his father's, he, like Mir, does not speak of

⁷⁹ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 11–12.

⁸⁰ Aynur, 'Çelebi's Dictionary of Poets': 17–19.

them⁸¹ and concentrates instead on boasting about the prominent poets and learned men in his father's lineage. Communicating such information may not have been the primary purpose of his *tazkirah*, but Chalabi nevertheless consciously manages to turn the compendium into a source of autobiographical information about himself. By exposing flaws in other poets' claims and making it a point to mention the various persons who approached him for *işlāh* (correction of verses) and by presenting anecdotes and poetry wherever he deems suitable, Chalabi demonstrates his vast knowledge of Ottoman literature and mastery over three languages. Thus, he does not although formally include an autobiography of himself in his *tazkirah*, he nonetheless manages to create a subtle persona of himself as a man and a scholar. He writes about his career problems, his patrons, their expectations and the chronograms he wrote for them, and where he felt that his patrons had failed in their obligations to him; he succeeds in communicating his criticism by underlining the power of divine justice. After finishing his *tazkirah*, Chalabi presented it to Sultan Salim II, and by doing so asked to be appointed *naqīb ul-ashrāf* (Chief of the Sayyids—a prestigious state office).⁸²

Even where classical texts were more directly personal or autobiographical in nature, it is interesting to note that many authors wrote more than one text (often housed within larger texts) yielding autobiographical details, and that they did not compose a single, authoritative autobiographical text. The dispersed nature of such accounts leads us to question whether these writers had much motivation to gather together within a single work the details of their life as they wished it to be represented. It seems that it is the comparative amount of space that the narration of autobiographical details occupies within a text that makes modern readers read one particular text, from among several that the author might have written, as autobiography. This space could of course be determined by a variety of factors, and a positive correlation is often identified between the social status, public importance and level of literacy of writers and the space an account of their personal lives occupies even in miscellanies.⁸³

⁸¹ This appears to be a wider phenomenon. According to Herzog, late Ottoman (male) memoirs are characterised by the relative invisibility of female family members, spouses or daughters. Herzog, 'Memoirs of Muammer Tuksavul': 61.

⁸² Aynur, 'Çelebi's Dictionary of Poets': 20–26.

⁸³ Terzioğlu finds that the most literate and socially distinguished members of the group of authors penning the Ottoman miscellanies that she examined were the ones who wrote most extensively about what they did or witnessed on different occasions and what their feelings were, while the low-ranking soldiers in the group wrote only a sentence or two to summarise the details of their lives. Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies': 89–90.

It is also important to note that in an age before the printing press and wide circulation of prose texts, authors' motives for writing particular texts were not necessarily liable to remain constant. In the case of *majmū'ah* writing especially, the writer/compiler's purpose could change over the course of time. A work might start out as a literary exercise or a handy source of reference on which to draw for inspiration, instruction and guidance, but later on, as a person's public profile grows, he may begin to regard his scrapbook as a memento to pass on to his progeny or disciples.⁸⁴ Alternatively, he may at some point see an opportunity to present the work to a patron and consequently make the adaptations suitable for a dedication.

⁸⁴ The two miscellanies composed by the seventeenth-century poet and spiritual master Niyazi Misri (Niyāzi-i Mīsrī) are an example. It was not until his first text was intended for public circulation that he named it *Gulshan-i Tauhīd* (The Rose Garden of the Affirmation of Divine Unity), a title befitting a religio-mystical work. This was regarded by later readers as a memento from the *shaiḫh*. Nearly 60 years later, Misri composed another miscellany that conforms better to modern understandings of a personal narrative for the bulk of the text is taken up by a diary, a continuous first-person prose narrative containing intimate details of Misri's life and thoughts over a two-year period that he spent in exile. He frequently interrupts his account of daily tribulations to launch a diatribe against leading contemporary religious and political authorities or engages in an inspired discussion of his own spiritual state as a holy man, resorting to a more exhortative style here and assuming the voice of a preacher, a public agitator or an ecstatic mystic. He records whole worksheets of cabalistic predictions, drawn from selected verses of the Qur'an or the writings of Ibn 'Arabi, and also includes poems (mostly his own) dealing with the same themes as the diary entries in prose. Niyazi Misri describes this multi-layered, multi-vocal text of his by two terms: *majmū'ah* and *tārīkh*, or rather its plural form *tawārīkh*. In Ottoman literature, the term *tārīkh* or *tawārīkh* is commonly used to describe historical narratives or chronicles. In earlier Arabic literature, it had been used to describe diaries or chronicles kept in diary form. *Tārīkh* was also one of the several categories to describe Ottoman diaries (others being *yaumīyāt* and *ṣōḥbatnāmah*). This text of Misri's is rare in that it appears to be more personal in focus than all known examples of medieval Arabic diaries and most pre-modern Ottoman diaries. In 1808, it was probably a *darvesh* at the lodge of mystics where the manuscript was preserved as part of a collection who gave it the title *Majmū'a-i Kalimāt-i Qudsīya-i Hazrat-i Mīsrī* (Compilation of the Sacred Words of the Venerable Misri). Terzioğlu writes that while today, burdened as we are with notions about different genres of life writing from autobiography to diary, we are tempted to privilege Misri's second account as a diary while referring to the first manuscript merely as a miscellany, for the Sufi *darveshes* who had cherished, preserved and perhaps even read the two texts together over the centuries as two highly personal documents of their mystic master, the distinction was not as meaningful, since Misri's addition of personal details in one document did not necessarily make it more valuable for his readers. It was the opportunity to be close to a revered personage through his own seemingly spontaneous expression of thoughts in writing that actually gave the texts value. Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies': 91–96.

♦ *The Medieval History Journal*, 18, 2 (2015): 214–249

This certainly appears to have been the case with Mir—he may have started writing *Zikr-i Mir* with a particular purpose, but that purpose may have altered somewhat along the way. Although he seems to have worked on *Zikr-i Mir* over an extended period of time, including 1761, 1766 and 1770, the book appears to have been finally completed only in 1782–1783 (as indicated by its second chronogram)⁸⁵ when Mir updated the historical narrative and highlighted his devotion to the Nawwabs of Awadh in the text, before presenting the work to Nawwab Asaf ud-Daula.⁸⁶

Naim notes that it might have been the writing of *Faiẓ-i Mīr* as a kind of brief *tarassul* or practice reader for his young son Faiz ‘Ali that impelled Mir to write the second, longer work comprising *Zikr-i Mīr*.⁸⁷ This is an important point—since the theme of mystical gatherings and conversations is prominent in both books, it is plausible that both were intended for a similar purpose, that is, a literary exercise in Persian prose for Mir during a period when he also wrote almost all his Persian poetry.⁸⁸ A further argument to view both texts in a similar light is that although biographers may have chosen to call one text an autobiography and not the other, many of the details about Mir’s life that they have come to accept have been gleaned from *Faiẓ-i Mīr* and are pointedly missing from *Zikr-i Mīr*. Hence, it seems that it is the even more limited inclusion of information about Mir’s life and circumstances in *Faiẓ-i Mīr* as compared to *Zikr-i Mīr* that prevents *Faiẓ-i Mīr* from qualifying as an autobiography where *Zikr-i Mīr* has come to be accepted as such; this, and the fact that the events and episodes in the longer narrative of *Zikr-i Mīr* (though they may often have only a vague or unconfirmed/unconfirmable relationship to Mir’s own life) loosely conform to the chronological structure of his life, starting from his childhood, progressing through the death of his father to his adulthood in service of various patrons and the wars that occurred during his lifetime and ending with a description of dawning old age before transitioning to some light-hearted jokes and anecdotes.

We thus find prominent, pre-modern Islamicate figures, such as Mir, quite frequently composing more than one autobiographical text. This demonstrates that telling their own lives in a deliberate form may have

⁸⁵ Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*: 19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 164.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 19.

been a subsidiary motive for them, while the primary motive for literary composition remained ethical or literary-ethical, something quite typical of *adab* literature.

So why did *Zikr-i Mīr* come to be seen as an autobiography?

There are several reasons why this text of Mir's came to be regarded as an autobiography, with efforts being made to see its distinct sections as some kind of flowing narrative. One major factor is the *sabab-i tālīf* or reason for writing that Mir himself presents at the beginning of the work—many of the Persian words he employs here later went on to become modern Urdu terms for describing works in the genre of autobiography:

میکوید فقیر میر محمد تقی المتخلص میر کہ دریں ایام بیکار بودم. و در گوشہ تنہائی بے بار. احوال خود را متضمن حالات و سواخ روزگار و حکایات و نقلہا نکاشتم و بنیاد خاتمہ این نسخہ مرسوم بہ "ذکر میر" بر لطائف گراشتم. امید از یاران زمان آنست کہ اگر بر خطائے اطلاع یابند. چشم عنایت ببوشند و در اصلاح بکوشند.⁸⁹

Now says this humble man, Mir Muhammad Taqī whose *takhalluṣ* is Mir, that being unemployed these days and confined to my solitary corner, I wrote down my story [*ahwāl-i khud*], containing the events of my life [*hālāt*], the incidents of my times [*sawānih-i rozgār*] and some [other related] anecdotes [*hikāyāt*] and tales [*naql-hā*]. And I concluded this book entitled *Zikr-i Mīr* with some witty anecdotes [*laṭā'if*]. I hope my friends, should they notice any mistake therein, will not deny me their forgiveness and seek only to set me right.⁹⁰

Such a declaration can easily be interpreted as being tantamount to a very real intention to pen an autobiography. However, the translation of the first line can also be slightly different:

... I wrote down my own story, comprising the conditions and events of the times, and anecdotes and tales. And I concluded this book entitled *Zikr-i Mīr* with some witty anecdotes...

With this slight modification, the emphasis can shift from events directly tied with Mir and Mir's life to events and tales in general that Mir

⁸⁹ Mir and 'Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 2.

⁹⁰ Translation from Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 6.

the narrator/character is portrayed as having witnessed or heard of.⁹¹ The second factor that provides a strong argument for considering the text to be an autobiography is Mir's declaration at the end:

I, this ignorant person, wrote down these few phrases aided by my inherent nature and left them to remain as my memento in the register of this world—in short, I have named it *Zikr-i Mir*, and I have endured endless hardship in its preparation—with the hope that if it reaches the hands of someone with a heart, he would pray for my benefit. (Verse:) This book has been given a name, my talented friend, that should make it a tale heard around the world...⁹²

While it is tempting to read 'memento' as someone's autobiography, it could also be read as a literary text of worth and beauty, whose purpose is more general than specific. Moreover, the appeal to readers to pray for the author's benefit can be taken as evidence that the text was really intended to fulfil the purpose of exemplary hagiography and beautiful words of wisdom and advice aiming to benefit the readers on a spiritual level, and thus motivating them in turn to pray for the author's benefit.

Of course, the fact that the text is given the title of an account named after the author is clearly further motivation to read it as an autobiography

⁹¹ After all, if the Mughal king Humayun's sister Gulbadan Begam had said that she was writing an *ahwāl* of herself, could we possibly have taken her text to be an autobiography rather than a biography of Humayun? Rebecca Gould describes the *Ahwāl-i Humāyūn Pādīshāh* by Gulbadan Begam as a nominal dedication to her brother Humayun. Meanwhile, here is how Gould describes *Zikr-i Mir*: 'The Persian title of this autobiography, is evocative of the Arabo-Persian genre of biographical dictionaries (*taẓkirah*) through which poet's lives and works have been catalogued since the ninth century. The significant difference between Mir's autobiography and the *taẓkirah* genre is that this text is devoted to the life of a single author.' Gould takes a narrow definition of *taẓkirah* here, considering it only in the context of a biographical compendium of poets. However, although this was possibly the most common theme of the *taẓkirah*, the genre frequently also covered other kinds of subjects, such as mystic figures. Taken in this wider sense, *Zikr-i Mir* could be easily comparable to such *taẓkirahs*. In her course description of a course about Persianate autobiography, Gould also mentions a late nineteenth-century autobiographical text from Iran, in which the author Bibi Khanam Astarabadi writes about *akhilāq*-related issues in a work titled *The Vices of Men* (1894) that does not focus on her life until the end of the text, where she pens a concluding chapter called 'An Episode of my Life'. Gould also discusses the Persian princess Taj ul-Sultanah's memoirs of court life, *Khātirāt*, roughly covering the late nineteenth to early twentieth-century period where the author spends much more time than Gulbadan Begam does in representing her own life. Gould, 'Persian Autobiography Syllabus'.

⁹² Translation from Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mir*: 143.

of the author rather than a *tazkirah* of his father and other elders or a *tārīkh* of occurrences in his time. Frances Pritchett points out that *Zikr-i Mir* has been described by later scholars, and not actually by Mir himself, as an autobiography.⁹³ Rather than any specific, genre-based description, she favours a literal translation of the title for describing the work, and offers two options: ‘Mir’s Account’ and ‘An Account of Mir’. I would like to offer a third option—‘An Account by Mir’. This is certainly also a credible translation, especially since there does not appear to be a significant readership for an ‘account of oneself’ in Mir’s day, and chances are that, given the literary norms of his day, any account of others beside himself that he penned would enjoy the same prestige and value in the eyes of his readers as an account that he penned of himself.

Although we know that Mir’s *Nikāt ush-Shu‘arā* enjoyed wide readership as a biographical compendium of Urdu poets (one of the first of its kind), it is not until the modern period that we see *Faiẓ-i Mīr* and *Zikr-i Mīr* entering any kind of wide circulation,⁹⁴ having remained the stuff of fables (literally, as well as figuratively!) until their discovery as rare manuscripts in a handful of collections,⁹⁵ and their subsequent publication and translation.⁹⁶ There seems to be little appetite before the pre-modern period for such a genre as autobiography,⁹⁷ and when it comes to a text like *Zikr-i Mīr* (which, at least to some eyes, appears to be an autobiography, however loosely defined), even where an example did exist, it certainly does not seem to have enjoyed a wide audience nor does it seem to have

⁹³ Pritchett, ‘Mir as Suffering Curmudgeon’.

⁹⁴ According to Naim, even though *Zikr-i Mīr* was ‘published’ (meaning, made available for copying) during Mir’s lifetime, it does not appear to have a wide market. Only six manuscripts of the text have so far been identified, only one of which can be dated (1808) to Mir’s lifetime. Mir and Naim, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 20.

⁹⁵ Mir and ‘Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mīr*: 5.

⁹⁶ Mir and Rizvi, *Faiẓ-i Mīr*: 5–7.

⁹⁷ This appears to be true not only in the context of *Zikr-i Mīr*, but of the Persianate context generally. Schmidt concludes in his survey of Ottoman miscellanies that the genre of autobiography was clearly not a popular one with pre-modern Ottoman readers—the first-person narratives that can be found to exist do so mostly in unique, autograph copies in archives in libraries that were later ‘discovered’. This clearly indicates how limited their circulation was. There are plenty of fragmentary first-person narratives in the prefaces to works in a variety of genres, and in asides in many histories, books of advice, travel books, letters (although few private letters appear to have been preserved) and in collective manuscripts or *majm‘ūahs*. Schmidt, ‘Ottoman Miscellaneous Manuscripts’: 159–69. This is similar to Harbans Mukhia’s observation about the epilogues of Mughal works.

been representative of a wider practice of poets writing their stories as a self-standing autobiographical text. Naim, in fact, argues that *Zikr-i Mir* was certainly not intended for a large audience; it could have even had a total audience of one at the time of its composition, that is, Mir himself or his patron of the moment.⁹⁸

So, what happens in the modern period to suddenly change people's view of the text? *Zikr-i Mir* is written in the 1780s, and by the time of the text's first print circulation in the 1920s, several significant changes have taken place in the Perso-Urdu literary milieu in colonial India—in poetry, the natural *shā'irī* movement has arisen,⁹⁹ in prose, immense developments have occurred taking prose understandings even further from classical Persianate models than has happened in the case of poetry. Hence, there is perhaps a distance now that keeps older Persian prose genres from being quite so readily recognisable to people from the Urdu world who have already been introduced to novels, short stories and modern historiography. Colonial modernity has also fostered the development of an autobiographical culture privileging the self-narrative over the biography.

It is when a modern appetite for autobiography has already developed that we see *Zikr-i Mir* being unearthed and circulated, with the very rareness of anything resembling this genre in the pre-modern era paradoxically making people all the more eager to seize on *Zikr-i Mir* as an example despite the inherent difficulties of seeing it as such given the actual contents of the text. Maulvi 'Abd ul-Haq describes the text as a priceless pearl [*anmol motī*] in the treasury of literature, saying:

And then an account of events written by Mir himself—how can the delight of an account written by a person himself be equalled by a general account or *tārīkh* [*aur phir hālāt khud us ke apne likkhe hū'e—āp-bītī meñ jo mazah hai wuh jag-bītī (tārīkh) meñ kahān*].¹⁰⁰

He goes on to say that however relentless a researcher's efforts may be, the result cannot equal that of an autobiographer's efforts, since the latter's single spontaneous sentence can at times reveal secrets that endless time

⁹⁸ Naim, 'Mir in "Fact" and Fiction': 6.

⁹⁹ A movement under colonial influence to encourage writers to move away from classical modes of writing poetry towards a less stylised and supposedly more 'natural' style. See Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*.

¹⁰⁰ Mir and 'Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mir*: ب - ا.

spent in poring over the pages of biographies [*tārīkh̄s*] cannot. If every person who has a significant experience of the world and also some literary accomplishment would write about his experiences himself [*apnī bītī āp*], then these gems would be priceless in the treasury of literature. He bemoans the fact that in all the numerous *tazkirahs* of Urdu poets, there is very little in the way of *hālāt* (life events of poets), nothing sufficient, at any rate, to satisfy the heart and quench the thirst of the inquiring mind. Even though many of these *tazkirahs* mention Mir, he observes, they give preference to describing his verse rather than researching his *hālāt*. He then concedes that this is actually the correct approach with respect to the *tazkirah*-writer's task and purpose since, after all, man is ephemeral and his verse is what is enduring [*ādami fānī hai, kalām bāqī hai*].¹⁰¹ But now with *Zikr-i Mir*, celebrates 'Abd ul-Haq, we have the touchstone [*kasautī*] to confirm which of the tales and rumours [*sunī sunā ī bāteñ, ghalat̄ salat̄ riwāyateñ*] about Mir are correct.¹⁰²

Despite this initial excitement about the opportunity to confirm or disprove the tales in circulation about Mir's life, 'Abd ul-Haq does not appear to be able to make use of *Zikr-i Mir* to draw information about more than a few facts about Mir's life such as his father's actual name and the details of how he was really related to Arzu.¹⁰³ In fact, the concluding sentence of his effusive introduction reflects his utter surprise and deep disappointment [*hasrat rah jāī hai*] that Mir does not discuss details of his literary life and milieu—poetic points, fellow poets and literary gatherings of his times—in his autobiography, and actually provides even less detail about this undeniably salient aspect of his life here than he does in passing reference to such events in *Nikāt ush-Shu 'arā'*:

حیرت ہے کہ میر صاحب نے بھول کر بھی اس کا کہیں اشارہ نہیں کیا یا تو اسے میر صاحب کا ضبط سمجھنا چاہئے یا یہ کہ یہ چیزیں انہوں نے نکات الشعرا کے لئے اٹھا رکھیں تھیں۔ جو کچھ بھی ہو مگر یہ بات ہے بڑے تعجب کی کہ آپ بیٹی میں اس چیز کا ذکر نہ آئے جو میر صاحب کا سب سے بڑا کمال ہے اور جس سے ان کو بگڑے دوام ہے۔

It is astonishing that Mir has not even by accident made a reference to this anywhere (in the book)—either this should be understood as discretion and restraint on Mir's part or that he had reserved these topics for *Nikāt*

¹⁰¹ A telling statement about the value or lack thereof in the pre-modern Mughal context of preserving as a matter of official record the kind of personal details we may be curious to know about now in the present moment where we live in an 'autobiographical culture' that privileges the authenticity of autobiography over biography.

¹⁰² Mir and 'Abd ul-Haq, *Zikr-i Mir*: ب - ۱

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*: ۵ - ۲.

ush-Shu'arā'. Whatever might be the case, it is indeed quite surprising that he should not mention in his autobiography the very thing that is his biggest feat and the reason for his eternal fame.¹⁰⁴

It is interesting that despite leaving us three works of prose, *Nikāt ush-Shu'arā'*, *Faiẓ-i Mīr* and *Zikr-i Mīr*, Mir as a figure remains relatively opaque to us. The impression we gain of his voice and personality, for example, does not match the relatively direct access that we have to Ghalib in his letters. From Mir's three prose works, we can glean something about the spiritual values he ideally approved of and his views on some of the finer points of courtly etiquette, as well as the barest biographical facts about him, but we can gain only an extremely limited idea of Mir's actual behaviour in any given situation. We cannot know if the incidents he describes were real or not, except for some of the major battles and other historical incidents he appeared to witness and report and that we can verify from independent sources (though even these lack detail, and some are quite likely to have been based on indirect reports). We do know that he was capable of making vicious statements about contemporary poets which his biographers later sometimes tried to excuse or downplay in various ways, but we cannot know how justified he was in making some of those statements, for instance with reference to his mentor Arzu.

It is telling that rather than the few extra details and clarifications about Mir's life, ancestry and patrons that may *appear to* emerge in the text, the aspect of *Zikr-i Mīr* that the editor of its first published edition, Maulvi 'Abd ul-Haq, praises to the skies is the chaste beauty of the language and the great and moving efficacy with which Mir has presented the sayings [*qaul*], advice and exhortations [*pand o mau'izah*] and conversations [*gufft-u-gū*] of his father and other elders, through which a special pleasure [*luṭf*] has been created in the book.¹⁰⁵ This can be taken as further credence for reading the intent of the work as a book of advice and admonition and as an exemplary hagiography, rather than as an autobiography per se.

Conclusion

Where it comes to texts like *Zikr-i Mīr*, perhaps the question we need to ask is not whether they fit some expanded and inclusive post-modern

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*: ب

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*: ج.

definition of the genre of autobiography, but whether the autobiographical impulse even existed to any significant degree in the pre-modern Perso-Arabic world to any significant degree, and where it did, did it manifest itself as a distinct, and, more importantly, popular genre?

Employing the eighteenth-century Mughal poet Mir Taqi Mir's text as a focal example for discussion, this article has attempted to emphasise the importance of identifying a text according to the genre(s) it was likely to be classified in by its writer and his/her intended audience rather than by genres arising in other historical and cultural contexts that have come to dominate our thinking today. It has tried to demonstrate the fruitfulness of keeping in view the various functions, intentions and literary conventions typical to classical *adab* and *aḳhlāq* texts for judging whether, and the extent to which, a first-person narrative like *Zikr-i Mir* can even be a source of autobiographical information for the modern biographer or historian.

Certain scholars have recently argued that rather than searching for canonical autobiographical texts or the 'first' autobiography according to some peculiar parameter, it would be productive for scholars to turn their focus towards identifying how and when autobiography became a 'popular cultural practice' in a given historical context.¹⁰⁶ It is also important to recognise that even where writers appear to consciously employ the autobiographical register in texts belonging to different literary genres, and where they participate in practices of reading and writing that are 'conducive to autobiography in the wider sense', a substantial proportion of literary production that might appear to conform to the definition of 'autobiographical' today was not legible as such to writers and readers in the era it was produced.¹⁰⁷

While questioning the utility of scholarly endeavours to trace signs of the existence of modern or contemporary European genres in pre-modern non-Western literatures, it is also interesting to probe into potential motivating factors behind our impulse to search for and establish the existence of a genre such as 'autobiography' in the Perso-Arabic or Islamicate context. Is it under the influence of persisting ideas of the inextricable link between the development of the autonomous, modern/Western 'individual' and the genre of autobiography that we are keen to prove that Islamicate contexts too reveal a comparable trajectory?

¹⁰⁶ Terzioğlu, 'Ottoman Personal Miscellanies': 84.

¹⁰⁷ Akyıldız, Kara and Sagaster, *Autobiographical Themes in Turkish Literature*: 12.

There does not appear to be a strong case for the existence of an autobiographical mentality in the pre-modern greater Islamicate literary milieu, which includes the Turco-Mongol, Persian and Arabic spheres of literary production as discussed in this article. This lack of an autobiographical mentality should not, however, immediately translate into the conclusion that individuals from this particular 'world' should be seen as necessarily lacking in a sense of individuality or conforming to an altogether different sense of selfhood. We may simply conclude that different literary traditions and conventions prevail in different historical and literary contexts, and sometimes, literary conventions may be so strong that the habit of giving a direct account of events, circumstances and feelings may not be broken, even when it comes to pieces of poetry and tracts of prose that may at first sight seem to directly address the personal.

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