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Chapter 4

A VICTORIAN POEM: EDWARD FITZGERALD'S *RUBÁIYÁT OF* *OMAR KHAYYÁM*

Clive Wilmer

2009 was the year of centenaries: Calvin and Gladstone, Johnson and Swinburne – the list was a long one. In Cambridge, this was peculiarly striking. While the University was celebrating its 800th anniversary, several of its alumni were fêted as well. The year 1809 had produced three distinguished Cantabridgians: Charles Darwin, Alfred Tennyson and Edward FitzGerald. There was something wonderfully serendipitous in the realisation that so private and reticent a man as FitzGerald was sharing the limelight with two of Victorian England's most monumental presences. Tennyson and FitzGerald both studied at Trinity College and soon afterwards became friends: not an easy friendship, as it happened, but an important one for both of them. FitzGerald's 'translation' – if that is what it is – of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was one of the most popular poems of the nineteenth century. Tennyson's praise of it did not quite rise to the occasion: according to F. T. Palgrave, he commended 'FitzGerald's famous Omar Paraphrase, in which Oriental thought is so marvellously refracted through the atmosphere of modern English style':¹ faint praise for a work of such stature, though the blandness may be Palgrave's more than Tennyson's. As I hope to show, however, the two poets had a good deal in common and the traffic seems to have flowed in both directions. It was FitzGerald who encouraged Tennyson to learn Persian, though Tennyson's interest in Middle Eastern poetry pre-dated FitzGerald's engagement with Omar Khayyám. But the actual relationship between the two men is not terribly enlightening. Much more interesting to reflect upon is the fact that not only was FitzGerald Darwin's contemporary, but that they also published their masterpieces in same year: 1859 – the year of their fiftieth birthdays.

It is not my purpose in this paper to give a new reading of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* as an English poem. Instead, I shall try to illuminate it by looking at its context and asking how FitzGerald was able – through Persian lyrics of

the Middle Ages – to speak to his contemporaries. And the first thing to be said of it, inevitably, is that Khayyám's sceptical and more or less hedonistic view of the world belongs, as filtered through FitzGerald, to the era in which Darwin – in most respects as modest and retiring a man as FitzGerald – was dismantling old certainties. Tennyson is also relevant here. His *In Memoriam* (1850) also reflects on the possibility and consequences of evolutionary theory – though, published nine years before Darwin, not on Natural Selection. FitzGerald disparaged the poem, which he found mechanical (which is surely wrong) and too long (which is probably right).² What he should have noticed is that *In Memoriam*, though it seems to arrive at a resonantly affirmative conclusion, is at its heart as sceptical and uncertain a poem as his own masterpiece:

Behold, we know not anything;
 I can but trust that good shall fall
 At last – far off – at last, to all,
 And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
 An infant crying in the night:
 An infant crying for the light:
 And with no language but a cry.³

Despite Tennyson's sage-like appearance, everything about *In Memoriam* suggests the need to withdraw from the posture of poet as *vates* and unacknowledged legislator and to accept radical uncertainty as the new condition of humanity. It is characteristic of the poem that the word 'trust' and related words – notably 'hope' and 'faith' – far from expressing Christian assurance, as they normally would have done, are undermined by Tennyson's context and rhythm, instead suggesting the insecurity of all human knowledge and conviction. Moreover, Tennyson's famous ABBA rhyme scheme, which turns back upon itself, in some ways anticipates FitzGerald's Persian scheme. In both cases there is the sense of an unknowable universe, which then asserts its power over us with the ineluctable finality of the returning A-rhyme. Moreover, merely to state that 'we know not anything' was shocking and courageous. What were poets for if not to know things hidden from the rest of us?

The anxious doubt of the mid-nineteenth century and its impact on literary expression are registered in a well-known passage from the historian J. A. Froude:

The present generation, which has grown up in an open spiritual ocean, which has got used to it and has learned to swim for itself, will never know what it was

to find the lights all drifting, the compasses all awry, and nothing left to steer by except the stars. The best and bravest of my own contemporaries determined to have done with insincerity, to find ground under their feet, to let the uncertain remain uncertain, but to learn how much and what we could honestly regard as true, and believe that and live by it.⁴

The best and bravest were, in Froude's judgment, Thomas Carlyle and Tennyson. The success of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and certain books of Carlyle's seems to have been due to the fact that they said things their readers feared but needed to hear. FitzGerald was less given to heroic stances, but the *Rubáiyát's* popularity is likewise attributable to the troubled spirit of the age. What connects FitzGerald with Tennyson here, as my comment on rhyme suggests, has as much to do with texture as with posture. What did it feel like to read the *Rubáiyát* when it first became known? William Morris was one of the clutch of distinguished writers whose copies of the poem came from the remainder box at Quaritch, the London booksellers and publishers of the *Rubáiyát*. He had been intended for the church, but his spiritual enthusiasm had been diverted into art and design, and by 1859 he too was losing his faith. So he was a natural target for FitzGerald's scepticism, the effects of which can be felt in the poignant lyrics that punctuate his book-length poem *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70). But Morris can also help us to see how characteristically Victorian FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* is as a work of art, because like FitzGerald and like many another Victorian independent, Morris was to feel the attractions of the Orient.⁵

Such enthusiasm cannot be separated from Britain's role as an imperial power, or from the perception of modern British life as dreary, oppressively orthodox and unimaginative. But for Morris it was not a question of actual travel. What he loved was oriental design: flat patterns – carpets, tiles, fabrics and so on – from Turkey, Iran and India. He became an advisor to the South Kensington Museum – the Victoria and Albert, as it now is – and many of the oriental rugs you see there now were purchased on Morris's advice. Some of the finest, indeed, were owned by him. These designs could not help but influence his own work as a designer of carpets and other textiles, to say nothing of their effect on his social concerns. But it is important to recognise the kind of influence. He was not interested, for instance, in reproducing oriental designs, any more than he and the best architects of the Gothic Revival merely copied European design of the Middle Ages. Victorian artists often drew on exotic or archaic styles as on a language that could expand their own, but they did not, on the whole, go in for pastiche. Think of, say, St Pancras Station, which, though

it is a Gothic building, could not be mistaken for a medieval one, not least because – at the risk of being obvious – there were no medieval railway stations. This is not a trivial point. It suggests that, to the effective revivalist architects, Gothic was a language to be adapted to their own ends. It is worth noting in this context that the *Rubáiyát* was not only an exotic poem but a medieval one, and quite as much a product of Victorian medievalism as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translations in *The Early Italian Poets* (1861). I have cited St Pancras partly for that reason, for it, too, is exotic in its use of colour and fantastical decoration, and the response of the Victorians to exoticism was what you might expect of the children of empire: they knew how to take possession of alien treasures but would not allow the treasures to overwhelm them.

In his lecture 'Some Hints on Pattern-Designing' (1881), Morris stated the case for this without ambiguity.⁶ Designing for carpets, he says,

is mighty difficult, because from the nature of it we are bound to make our carpet not only a passable piece of colour, but even an exquisite one, and, at the same time, we must get enough form and meaning into it to justify our making it at all in these Western parts of the world; since as to mere colour we are not likely to beat, and may well be pleased if we equal, an ordinary genuine Eastern specimen.

Morris goes on to argue that carpet designs should be as flat as possible, mainly

because in a carpet we specially desire quality in material and colour; that is, every little bit of surface must have its own individual beauty of material and colour... [If] we make awkward attempts at shading and softening tint into tint, we shall dirty our colour and so degrade our material...⁷

Clearly, as Morris understands it, good carpet design is, in important respects, uncharacteristic of Western taste since the Renaissance. The West values depth above surface. For Morris the recovery of surface values and the richness of colour that accompanies them is wholly desirable and crucial to his radical zeal. But though he does not condescend to the East – the creative achievement is fully valued – he also feels respect for his own culture. Western people, he tells us, *expect* 'form and meaning', and elsewhere he calls for 'rational' design.⁷ To stretch this a little further, we may say that Europe requires a narrative or argument, or did so in Morris's day.

Something similar may be said for the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in FitzGerald's version. The poem is sometimes classified as what Dryden

called an *imitation*, which is to say neither a translation nor a paraphrase, but a free variation on a foreign text with the aim of enabling that text to speak to a modern English audience.⁸ Samuel Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749) is perhaps the classic example, one of Juvenal's satires on early imperial Rome delivered to eighteenth-century English taste and skewed to speak to eighteenth-century London. As I have suggested through my remarks on Darwin and Tennyson, FitzGerald is addressing the doubts and desires of his mid-Victorian readership, despite his holding on to exotic names – to Jamshýd and Bahram and Sultan Mahmud. In fact, it is through his insistence on those names that we see how Anglicised the poem is, for few English readers know who he is talking about. Such names, exact in reference and association to a Persian reader, are to an English one exotic, vaguely resonant, and attractive for what the Persian speaker might think the wrong reason. At one level of the poem, that is to say, FitzGerald deliberately courts imprecision: an atmospheric mistiness.

So we are faced with a paradox. FitzGerald allows his Persian and medieval meanings to deliquesce, then seeks to construct a different sort of meaning, or the appearance of one. In Persian, we are told, the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* is not a sequential work but an anthology of discrete epigrams arranged according to an alphabetical system. It is precisely this that FitzGerald alters. Like Morris giving a meaning to his carpet, FitzGerald structures his poem on something which resembles, but is not quite, a narrative. His quatrains are linked by thematic associations and by chains of imagery. They appear to tell a story, which begins with the dawn and ends with the coming of night. There is in fact no narrative at all, but the manner of the poem seems to suggest the sort of narrative that is left to inference, as in the Victorian dramatic monologue. The poem, that is to say, depends for its effect on the expectations created by monologue as developed by such poets as Browning and Tennyson, and Omar Khayyám is as much persona as poet. This is not to suggest that FitzGerald's poem *is* a dramatic monologue, but that it has profited from the creation of that genre. We might compare a device of Ezra Pound's – most notably used in his 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' (1919) – whereby lyrical poems are rendered dramatic through the process of translation, the original poet becoming the poem's speaker and the lyric 'thou' – in FitzGerald's case the *sáki* or cup-bearer – the dramatic interlocutor. Like a character from Browning or Swinburne, Omar speaks to us from his distinctive individuality and discovers a chime of sympathy in us. I suspect that mid-Victorian readers, not expecting so vulnerable a response, would have been surprised by the opening up of such despair and such need for

consolation – surprised too, maybe, by the simple sufficiency of what the speaker offers us:

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise enow. (XI)⁹

The lines are so famous they hardly need quoting, yet in that very fact their power is evidenced. They are famous because they say it all and what is said was not to be anticipated.

And yet though the poem is adapted to Western taste, it is not quite a Western poem. If it is not actually a narrative, it is not an argument either. FitzGerald's own word for it is 'tesselated':¹⁰ the *Rubáiyát* is a mosaic made up of fragments and therefore simultaneous, without that normal requirement of Western literature, development, the absence of which is also a characteristic of Tennyson's work. 'Mariana' (1830) or 'Tithonus' (1833–59) or 'Tears, idle tears' (1847), diverse as they are in other respects, are poems in which development is suspended: they go nowhere. But since (as Donald Davie has said) 'poetry, like music, erects its structures in the lapse of time', it is in time that poems are appreciated.¹¹ The French symbolist analogy with music is helpful here. Like a musical work, the poem proceeds by a structural logic but is not otherwise logical: it imitates the consecutive, but is not arranged in *necessary* sequence. In FitzGerald's case, this might be seen as evidence of failure: the failure both to translate a perfectly normal Persian *florilegium*, and to construct a coherent English poem. But the opposite is the case. It is precisely in its independence of structural norms of this sort that the English *Rubáiyát* moves us.

In his marvellous introduction to the Penguin edition, Dick Davis notes how Victorian it is. 'FitzGerald's metre mimes conclusion and certainty', he says, 'rather than the processes of arriving at certainty.' (He is thinking of the steady regularity of its movement and the ineluctability of the rhyme scheme.) What makes it Victorian, he argues, is the way in which 'it conveys, primarily, sentiment rather than ratiocination, the emotions consequent on understanding rather than the operations of the intellect that arrive at understanding.'¹² Davis contrasts it with the sort of poem – seventeenth-century perhaps – which displays its thought process, enacts a process of intellectual struggle. Forty or fifty years ago – especially in Cambridge, through the influence of such critics as F. R. Leavis – this absence of directed vigour made Victorian poetry an art which, it was widely felt, could not be taken seriously.¹³ Today, we are more likely to see in such structures a version of what was to evolve into modernism, and to compare, say, Tennyson with T. S. Eliot, or Browning

with Ezra Pound. This is not to suggest that there is anything modernist in the formal precision and exact articulation of FitzGerald's stanzas, but that the discontinuities of modernism have helped us to recognise other sorts of discontinuity. The purpose of discontinuity is to hand the poem over to the reader, who fills in the gaps from his or her experience. Victorian poetry bridges its gaps syntactically as modernist poetry does not, and it is in the gestural bridge that the poignancy resides:

Break, break, break,
 At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
 But the tender grace of a day that is dead
 Will never come back to me.¹⁴

What is the occasion for 'But' in Tennyson's stanza: a conjunction that draws together two utterly diverse statements? How is it that the imperative 'break' seems addressed less to the unresponding sea than to the speaker's own heart? Are we perhaps meant to pick up a somewhat Eliotic allusion to *King Lear*, to Kent's compassionate prayer for his dying master: 'Break, heart, I prithee break!... O, let him pass, he hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer'?¹⁵

In selecting from Omar's collection, in tessellating the quatrains into 'a sort of Epicurean Eclogue in a Persian Garden', FitzGerald was taking this method further than Tennyson.¹⁶ For instance, of the seventy-five stanzas in the first edition, thirteen begin with 'and', two with 'but', three with 'for', one with 'so' and four with 'then'. This is forcibly to create connections where originally there were none, and when we come to examine the connections we realise that they are associative rather than logical. This is not only a matter of conjunctions:

Then to this earthen Bowl did I adjourn
 My Lip the secret Well of Life to learn:
 And Lip to Lip it murmur'd – "While you live
 Drink! – for once dead you never shall return."

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
 Articulation answer'd, once did live,
 And merry-make; and the cold lip I kiss'd
 How many Kisses might it take – and give!

For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
 I watch'd the Potter thumping his wet Clay:

And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd – “Gently, Brother, gently, pray!”

Ah! fill the Cup...

(XXXIV–XXXVII)

In his organisation of this passage FitzGerald has fused two different strands of imagery: the wine-bowl understood as the source of consolation and the mortal clay of which both bowl and human being are made. He contrives, as well, to include the consolation of love – the kissing of the bowl – and the incomprehensible suffering that occupies so much of life – the potter thumping his clay – to which the joys of love and drinking are opposed. The passage also anticipates the *Kuza-Náma*, the eight stanzas on the Potter's Shop that interrupt the sequence towards the end. But the elements of the poem could have been integrated in another way and, indeed, when we isolate such passages we begin to realise how they reflect in little the poem's overall structure. FitzGerald's selection from Omar Khayyám gives him the opportunity to construct a poem that is at once broken and thematically unified. Its disconnectedness invites the poem's readers to draw their own connections and to construct a work inwardly that answers to their own experience of passing time.

The simultaneity that underlies the poem's apparent narrative makes something else possible that is characteristic of Victorian writing. In 1952 the American scholar E. D. H. Johnson published a book called *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, one of a handful of critical works that overthrew what were then the prevailing views of Tennyson, Browning and Arnold. Johnson argued that Victorian society was oppressed by orthodoxy and that the key strategies of the major Victorian poets were developed to bypass the unofficial censor. The dramatic monologue, for instance, enabled poets to contemplate desires considered anarchic, disruptive or immoral by attributing them to fictional personas. Most Victorian artists found liberation through locating their concerns in exotic or ancient cultures. It has often been noticed how such classicising painters as Frederic Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema got away with something akin to soft pornography in paintings on classical subjects, and similar excuses were provided by Orientalism. It does not take much ingenuity in a modern reader to notice what seems to have eluded all Victorian critics: that Omar's interlocutor is a young male. To make a further comparison, Christina Rossetti's great poem 'Goblin Market' (1862) seems to be concerned with the challenges faced by women in adolescence. Most modern readers understand it metaphorically: the heroines of the poem are offered fruit by goblins, a situation which appears to stand for the offer of sex by men. It is important that the analogy is not overtly stated but suggested by the language of the poem. Rossetti herself insisted that the poem was just a fairy tale, thus seeming to

deny what might be thought its purpose: that it is not just an allegory of sexual awakening but a warning against premature sexual experience. The creation of a symbolism at once powerful and obscure is characteristic of the period. The fact that it communicates through the suggestive power of language frees the poet, if necessary, to deny specific intentions.

The *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* is not exactly a poem in this category, but the existence of the category throws light upon it. The poem treats the existence of a loving God with extreme scepticism. It advocates the pursuit of pleasure – represented by the pursuit of drinking wine – as the only consolation a meaningless life can offer. It treats poetry, too, as a source of pleasure, rather than of moral uplift. It appears to celebrate homosexual love. In the eyes of orthodox Victorian society, all these things were taboo. One has only to think of the obloquy that was heaped on as moral a writer as Thomas Hardy for daring to question the standard orthodoxies to recognise what FitzGerald got away with. He did so by writing what appeared to be a translation and clothing it exotically in oriental dress. But one has only to look around in Victorian poetry to recognise that, translation, free variation or original work, the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* is a Victorian poem, and a seminal one at that.

Notes

- 1 Hallam, Lord Tennyson, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1897), II: 505. In ‘To E. FitzGerald’, the beautiful poem he wrote for his friend in 1883, Tennyson is notably more generous:

your golden Eastern lay,
Than which I know no version done
In English more divinely well;
A planet equal to the sun
Which cast it, that large infidel
Your Omar.

- 2 *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London and Harlow: Longmans, 1969), 1318. Hereafter, *Tennyson*.
- 3 ‘[I]t is full of finest things, but it is monotonous, and has that air of being evolved by a Poetical Machine of the highest order.’ *Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. William Aldis Wright, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1869), I: 208. Hereafter, *Letters*.
- 4 *Tennyson*, 909.
- 5 Quoted in Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830–1890* (London and Harlow: Longmans, 1993), 88.
- 6 Morris made an illuminated hand-written copy of the *Rubáiyát* as a gift for Georgiana Burne-Jones (ink, watercolour and gilding on vellum, finished 16 October 1872, now in the British Library (Add. MS 37,832)); the script is a tiny roman minuscule, probably written with a crow-quill.

- 6 *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longman, 1910–15), XXII: 194–5.
- 7 *Ibid.*, XXII: 199.
- 8 John Dryden, 'The Preface to Ovid's Epistles', in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), I: 182.
- 9 All quotations from the *Rubáiyát* in this essay are taken from FitzGerald's first edition (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1859).
- 10 *Letters* I: 269. The suggestion in FitzGerald's word of an activated *surface* may also remind us of Morris's designs and, like much in FitzGerald, anticipates the mood of Aestheticism, especially as adumbrated in the notorious 'Conclusion' to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873), itself extracted from an 1869 review of Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*.
- 11 Donald Davie, 'The Relation between Syntax and Music in Some Modern Poems in English', in *Modernist Essays: Yeats, Pound, Eliot*, ed. Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 37.
- 12 Edward FitzGerald, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, ed. Dick Davis (London: Penguin, 1989), 37.
- 13 The classic statement of Leavis's view is to be found in 'Poetry and the Modern World', the first chapter of his *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).
- 14 *Tennyson*, 602.
- 15 William Shakespeare, *King Lear* V. iii. 313–16 (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
- 16 *Letters* I: 269.