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ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF FITZGERALD'S
RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM

The year 1959 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of Edward Fitzgerald's English translation of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, one of the world's most popular books. A comparative newcomer among the universal classics, it has taken its place alongside Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, *The Bhagavad Gita* and the Bible as a book which every reader, regardless of his language, must know. Indeed, the Bible excepted, it is doubtful whether any of the so-called «great books of the world» has matched the *Rubaiyat's* success in transcending the barriers of language. A. G. Potter's *A Bibliography of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in 1929 listed 176 editions in European languages other than English; including Greek, Basque, Gaelic, Yiddish, Latin and Romani, as well as the synthetic international languages, Volapuk and Esperanto.

The *Rubaiyat*'s English and American reputation has been phenomenal. Besides 410 English language editions, Potter catalogued some seven hundred books, articles, and musical and theatrical compositions dealing with the *Rubaiyat*, the greater proportion of these in English. It quickly replaced Gray's «Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard» and Longfellow's set pieces as the very type of popular poetry which even the reader of taste need not be ashamed to quote.

More than a perennial best seller, the *Rubaiyat* has enjoyed the status of an important social document over which serious philosophical debate has been waged. It has lined up agnostics against believers, materialists against idealists, sybarites against saints, bibbers against teetotalers. It has begotten fraternities, produced music, supported social revolt, and provided names for race-horses and cigars. It has inspired calendars, advertisements, and book illustrations. It has

spawned innumerable fine, cheap and middling editions of itself, among them an eighteen pounder illustrated by Elihu Vedder, a thumb-nailer claiming to be the world's smallest printed book, and a bejeweled one valued at a thousand pounds sterling, which sank with the Titanic. It has even brought a new fame to its Persian author in his native land, where in recent centuries his poetic reputation had deteriorated and his name been associated for the most part only with astronomical and mathematical science.

The relationship of the Fitzgerald translation to the original Persian quatrains is a case of the tail wagging the dog. For most readers, the title of the poem is *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*; it is Edward Fitzgerald who is the author. Indeed, before 1859, Khayyam was, even among scholars of Persian literature, a little known figure. His compatriot poets had become acclimatized in Europe during the preceding century. Sadi, the poet of prudential wisdom, appealed to such figures of the Enlightenment as Voltaire, Addison, and Benjamin Franklin; Firdausi, the epic poet, was hailed as the Persian Homer; and Hafiz, the lyricist, enjoyed the patronage of Göthe, Emerson, and the English Romantic poets. During this burgeoning of Oriental studies in Europe, Omar was but one of two hundred Persian poets whom the German scholar Joseph von Hammer had included in an anthology of translations published early in the nineteenth century. Some of these German versions were later rendered into English by Emerson, who in 1858, a year before Fitzgerald's translation, prophetically announced that Omar «gave promise to rise in Western estimation».

But it was only when the famous Bodleian Library manuscript, containing 158 quatrains or *rubaiyat*, was discovered by the Orientalist E. B. Cowell and passed on to his friend Edward Fitzgerald, that the European fame of Khayyam was properly launched. Having put his friend in possession of this manuscript, Cowell left for India where he soon published an article on Omar Khayyam showing proper appreciation of the poet's moral courage but rejecting what he called his Lucretian philosophy. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald dabbled in the manuscript, confiding to Tennyson that he was reading «some Infidel and Epicurean Tetrastichs by a Persian of the eleventh century — as savage against Destiny etc. as Manfred but mostly of Epicurean Pathos of this kind — 'Drink, for the moon will often come round to look for us in this garden and find us not'». This was to become the penultimate stanza of the first edition:

*Ah, Moon of my Delight who knows't no wane,
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again;
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me — in vain!*

By 1858 Fitzgerald's translation was ready for publication in an English magazine. But when *Fraser's* gave it a cool audition, the author proceeded to print 250 copies at his own expense, giving a few away to friends and turning the rest over to his publisher to be sold at five shillings apiece. Unable to dispose of them at this price, or indeed at a shilling, the publisher transferred the lot to the penny box where they apparently attracted a buyer or two, among them a friend of the Pre-Raphaelite poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Once the poem fell into the hands of this coterie, its ultimate future was assured. During the sixties, Rossetti, Swinburne, Meredith, Richard Burton, Edward Burne-Jones and their circle handled it like a tract for the times. Since most of the copies of the first edition were lost when the publisher moved house, a second edition was called for by 1867. When American readers took up the poem, a third and a fourth became inevitable. By that time, the first edition was so scarce as to demand a price in pounds, not pennies. In 1929, at auction, a copy was priced at \$ 8.000.

Very few facts are certainly known about the eleventh century Persian whose « Infidel » verses caught the imagination of an English literary dilettante living thousands of miles and hundreds of years away from him. Omar's reputation in his own day was apparently founded mainly upon his astronomical calculations, which led to the reform of the Moslem calendar towards the end of the century in which he was born. He was probably a follower of the rationalist philosopher-physician Avicenna, who was himself not averse to occasional poetizing.

Omar may also have had the benefit of learned discourses with the remarkable Moslem theologian Al-Ghazzali, who ran a strange course from orthodoxy through skepticism back to a new orthodoxy by way of the mystical philosophy called Sufism. Apart from its influence upon monastic life, Sufism has played an enormously important role in Persian poetry. Most of the lyric poets of Persia have written in the Sufi tradition, much as both seventeenth and nineteenth century English poets reflected Platonic thought. Sufism employs the

language of the senses — even the vocabulary of the tavern — to describe symbolically the devotee's aspiration towards spiritual reunion with God. Thus, allusions to wine, the Beloved, the Saki or cupbearer, the state of drunkenness itself, all acquire an esoteric meaning according to a pantheistic philosophy, which, it is believed, sought to mitigate the rigors of Mohammedan predestinarianism.

Inevitably, attempts have been made to claim Omar Khayyam for the Sufi school. In the opinion of the best informed scholars, there is very little ground for the claim. In his satirization of hypocrisy, the Sufis are one of the main objects. Even the story of his death-bed repentance for an aberrant life seems to be an implausible attempt to make him conform to the orthodoxy he reviled. Quite possibly the Moslem divines condemned his verses, a fact which might account for the scarcity of manuscripts of his work in the centuries immediately after his time. On the other hand, the appearance of a submerged reputation may be due to two other factors: the manuscripts may have been destroyed in the Mongol invasions which ravaged the Islamic world from the thirteenth century on; or they have not yet been discovered. In support of the latter view may be cited the several very old manuscripts brought to light only in the last two decades, which, in the opinion of Arthur Arberry of Cambridge University, prove that Omar actually had a considerable reputation in his own time.

The quatrains of Omar Khayyam as translated by Edward Fitzgerald certainly occasioned a greater controversy than their originals had so many centuries earlier. In the first place, Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* presented a challenge to prevailing — or at any rate still surviving — esthetic taste. In Holbrook Jackson's opinion, « The *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam entered the arena of art when the Renaissance that glimmered for a while in William Blake, that was revived by Keats and that was eventually established by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his circle, was in its early manhood ». On the grounds of its being a thing of beauty, however, there was very little opposition to the *Rubaiyat*. Many Victorians felt as the art critic John Ruskin did when he wrote to the as yet anonymous translator that « I never did — till this day — read anything so glorious to my mind as this poem... » Ruskin had been shown the poem by the artist Edward Burne-Jones, who had in turn received it from Swinburne. Swinburne's ear was so ravished by the music of the stanza that he sought to imitate it in his own poem « *Laus Veneris* ». The same copy reached the hands of

William Morris, who is reported to have « glorified it by twice writing out the whole in an exquisite hand upon fine vellum illuminated with flowers and gold and colour fit for the words ». Mrs. Burne-Jones further testifies that her husband illustrated one of these versions.

But while the Victorian reader might accept the poem as art, he would understandably have his difficulties with it as philosophy. That was where it met opposition. Even the closest friends of Fitzgerald were disturbed by an ambivalence in their feelings. Carlyle, calling the work a jewel of its kind, described its Persian author as « a Mahometan Blackguard ». Tennyson, who paid his tribute later in a verse dedication, was constrained to refer similarly to Omar as « that large Infidel ». The less friendly Browning, replying to the *Rubaiyat's* reckless wine-cup philosophy in his own « *Rabbi Ben Ezra* », sharply instructed :

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,
That metaphor ! and feel
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay, —
Thou, to whom fools propound,
When the wine makes its round,
« Since life fleets, all is change ; the Past gone, seize today ! »

The Reverend John Kelman, writing in later years, observed that one had better take this poem merely as fascinating poetry, otherwise it would become a sort of Eastern plague. Indeed it was in the aspect of a species of subversive thought that the *Rubaiyat* appeared to those who hearkened to the words as well as to the music. On this count the poem was praised or blamed. Charles Eliot Norton, reviewing the second edition in 1869, noted that « in its English dress [it] reads like the latest and freshest expression of the doubt of the generation to which we ourselves belong ». An English reviewer, lining up with Tennyson and Carlyle, asserted that the dilemmas of the age had been poignantly enough expressed by the poet laureate and by the greatest social philosopher of the day, both of whom — strong souls — had reached through doubt to the Everlasting Yea. Omar, on the other hand, « could not lift the veil », although, to be sure, he « had sung his inability in verses which must deeply touch the human heart ». A third critic, calling his author « A Great Poet of Denial and Doubt », justified his rejection of Omar's skepticism by finding it shallow and ignoble. In a contrary mood, an editor of *The Harvard Monthly* in America scorned the English laureate's easy belief in a « far off divine

event towards which the whole creation moves», and applauded Omar's courageous fatalism. «Omar's thought», he concluded, «is thoroughly in accord with the essence of the thought of this century».

One recourse open to the opponents of this problematic poem was to question the authenticity of the translation. The Frenchman Nicholas had already countered Fitzgerald's version by a Sufistic interpretation, which in fact impelled the Englishman to produce his second edition containing a preface that refuted the mystical approach to Omar. In the year of Fitzgerald's third edition (1872), Mrs Jessie Cadell sent to the very same *Fraser's Magazine* which had failed to publish Fitzgerald's quatrains an article entitled «The True Omar Khayyam». By translation and commentary she sought to prove that Omar had «some sort of belief at the bottom of it all», that his attitude was one of «rebellion, not negation», and that although his wine might not have been the «wine of the love of God», neither did it represent mere sensual pleasure.

When Mrs Cadell's article was republished as a book in 1899, it was welcomed by the Women's Christian Temperance Union as an antidote to the popular Fitzgerald *Rubaiyat*. Here was «an Omar which may be read in young ladies schools without any apprehension of inflaming the cheek of outraged modesty».

Towards the end of the century, Edward Heron-Allen's judicious investigations were able to settle the question of Fitzgerald's accuracy as a translator of the 150 or so quatrains he employed. But until then, irresponsible charges flew fast; and indeed since then, this valuable work has not been sufficiently consulted by editors. In any case, a further question was raised regarding Fitzgerald's *selection* of quatrains. This permitted E. H. Whinfield and John Payne to boost the count to over a thousand and each to produce his own Omar: the one a pantheist of many moods, the other a Schopenhaurian pessimist. Soon the scholars had to call a halt. Many of the quatrains were declared spurious or attributed to other poets. Meanwhile, since no other translation approached it in literary worth, Fitzgerald's version continued to influence people and to make friends—and enemies.

What did the translator think of the work which he had wrought?

It may very well be that all of Fitzgerald's renditions from the Persian, both this most famous one and those which he made from Jami and Attar before and after it, were but idle pastimes begun in the spirit of friendship with E. B. Cowell, with whom he also read

classical and modern literature. Omar, however, came to mean much more to the translator, as he has come to mean to most readers of the translation.

Fitzgerald had met the Reverend Cowell about 1845 — when he was 37 and Cowell 20 — at the home of the Reverend John Charlesworth, whose daughter he spoke of marrying. Two years later she was married to Cowell. The three formed a very close friendship, Fitzgerald continuing to call Elizabeth Cowell « my old flame » but apparently receiving more enjoyment from the company of her husband. Indeed, although Fitzgerald counted as friends some of the most distinguished men of the day — Tennyson, Thackeray, Spedding, Carlyle among others —, he appears to have attached himself to the young Cowell as he did to only two other men in his life.

In a biographical study called *Into an Old Room*, Peter de Polnay, taking a hint from Havelock Ellis, suggests that Fitzgerald was latently homosexual. If, as there is reason to believe, the love quatrains of Omar Khayyam were addressed to a young man, the sympathy between author and translator becomes patent. Whether the *Rubaiyat* translation was a sublimation of Fitzgerald's sexual emotions or not, his association with Cowell was enthusiastic, and he credited the young Orientalist with all that he knew of Persian poetry. In the preface to his version of the *Salaman and Absal* of Jami, he publicly paid his full debt of gratitude to his mentor. In 1856 he offered the Cowells money not to go to India, refused to see them off when they at last left, and then incontinently entered upon a disastrous marriage with Lucy Barton, from whom he was permanently separated a year later.

In Cowell's absence, Omar became a consolation as well as a memento. While working on the translation, he wrote to his friend : « But in truth I take old Omar rather as my property than yours ; he and I are more akin, are we not ? You see all [his] Beauty, but you don't feel with him in some respects as I do ». Nevertheless, fearing that some of the stigma of Omar's dangerous doctrines might attach to the Reverend Cowell, he went so far as to quote from the latter's India article an apology for Omar's freethinking that he himself did not believe. He once wrote to Cowell : « I doubt [in the sense of suspect] you will regret you ever introduced him to me ». In fact, after Fitzgerald's death, the good clergyman admitted that

I unwittingly incurred a grave responsibility when I introduced his [Omar's] poems to my old friend

*in 1856. I admire Omar as I admire Lucretius, but
I cannot take him as a guide. In these grave matters
I prefer to go to Nazareth, not to Naishapur.*

The ambivalence in Fitzgerald's personal religious thinking made it a difficult task to please both Omar and Cowell. Early in life he had remarked that «it is a melancholy thing that the want of happiness and security caused by skepticism is no proof of the truth of religion». The poetry of Omar allowed him to indulge this *triste plaisir*. Yet he permitted himself to describe the mystical Persian poem the *Masnavi* — often called the Persian *Koran* — as a finer thing than the *Rubaiyat*, and he urged Cowell to translate it. Some words from his translation of *The Bird Parliament* of Attar might well be used to characterize Fitzgerald's own religious dualism :

*Not wholly sick, indeed, but far from sound :
Whose light inconstant soul alternate flew
From Saint to Sinner, and to both untrue.*

The significant phrase turns up again in a letter to his publisher suggesting the publication of Omar together with his earlier version of the mystical poem *Salaman and Absal*: « So I can stitch up the Saint and Sinner together, for better or worse ». The moving spirit behind this strange proposal is revealed in a letter to Quaritch asking that « If Omar be reprinted, Cowell wishes *Salaman* to go along with him ».

Yet perhaps his loyalty was finally with Omar, for, as he said, Omar « sang in an acceptable way, it seems, of what all men feel in their hearts, but had not express in verse before... ». Elsewhere he added : « It is a desperate sort of thing, unfortunately at the bottom of all thinking men's minds... ». Finally, with the pride of authorship, he boasted : « I have made my little shot at bringing up my old Poet (worth all the living ones except Tennyson) out of oblivion... ».

What had been a vogue of the *Rubaiyat* during the translator's lifetime became a cult after his death. By the last decade of the century a younger generation had come along who were the products, not of the milieu which had produced the *Rubaiyat* of Fitzgerald, but of the milieu which the *Rubaiyat* had helped produce. Fitzgerald's poem had appeared in the same year as Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, a book, as Bernard Shaw remarked, that abolished not only God but also Hell and the 39 Articles. It was perhaps the young devotees of

Omar and not of Darwin whom Shaw described as « Anacreontic writers [who] put vine leaves in their hair and drank or drugged themselves to death... » At least two such English admirers of Omar-Fitzgerald deserve mention because their own translations of the *Rubaiyat* contributed largely to its *fin de siècle* reputation.

Justin H. McCarthy, author of a rhythmical prose version first published in 1889, testified : « I drank the red wine of Omar from the enchanted chalice of Fitzgerald and gloried as joyously as old Omar himself in the intoxication — I made myself a kind of little religion out of Omar, and while my Persian today is at best beggarly, such as it is it has given me pleasure — I have got a little nearer to the great poet of Naishapur ».

Unlike McCarthy, Richard LeGallienne — poet, journalist, and historian of the Nineties — believed that knowledge of the Persian language was not a necessary qualification for your true Omarian, and so, following the letter of McCarthy's prose version and the spirit of Fitzgerald's poetic, he turned out what is, after the latter's, the most popular rendition of the poem in English. Emphasizing not so much the skeptical as the hedonistic aspects of the *Rubaiyat*, his 1897 version was well suited to the mood of the « decadent » movement in art. Interestingly enough, a few years later LeGallienne was to publish a book called *Omar Repentant*, a collection of original verses in the *Rubaiyat* stanza but humming a quite different tune. These told of a Broadway roue who meets a stripling at a bar and notices that the youth is carrying a copy of the *Rubaiyat*. « So that old poison-pot still catches flies! » he exclaims, and proceeds to admonish the lad :

Boy, do you know that since the world began
No man hath writ a deadlier book for man?
The grape! — The vine! — oh what an evil wit
Have words to gild the blackness of the pit!
Said so, how fair it sounds — the Vine! The Grape!
Oh call it Whiskey — and be done with it!

But this temperance wisdom was of the year 1908 ; in 1897 it had seemed to LeGallienne that « Omar was, emphatically, a poet who found his ideal in the real ».

It was inevitable that the 1890's cult of the *Rubaiyat* should beget Omar Khayyam Clubs on both sides of the Atlantic. The British or mother organization was formed in 1892 with Edmund Gosse as president. He was playfully referred to by the members as « Firdausi »,

in part no doubt because of that poet's preeminence among Persian authors, but in part because Gosse had written a poem about Firdausi's legendary exile at the hands of an unappreciative monarch. The annual dinners of the club were occasions for versifying about Omar or Fitzgerald or both. At one such gathering in 1897 Austin Dobson challenged the supremacy of Horace as the poet of good fellows:

*Persicos odi — Horace said
And therefore is no longer read.
Since when, for every youth or miss
That knows *Quis multa gracilis*,
There are a hundred who can tell
What Omar thought of Heaven and Hell...
In short, without a break can quote
Most of what Omar ever wrote.*

In that same year the Club was honored by the presence of John Hay, the American ambassador to Britain, who addressed the diners in more serious accents, confessing his early love of the *Rubaiyat* and expressing his astonishment that a twelfth century Persian could have felt such «jocund despair» in the face of life's bafflements. «Was this *Weltschmerz*», he asked, «which we thought a malady of our day, endemic in Persia in 1100?»

Hay reported that in the Eastern States of America Omar's devotees had formed an esoteric cult. In fact, in 1900 the American branch of the Omar Khayyam Club was formed in Boston on the 91st anniversary of Fitzgerald's birth. The Club was an association of professional men, not pedants, who had a love of good fellowship and admiration for the «king of the wise, Omar Khayyam». At their first dinner Persian wine from Shiraz was served. The Club's leaders, Nathan Haskell Dole, a Greek scholar, and Francis Eben Thompson, his pupil, had both turned to Persian studies out of love for Fitzgerald's poem. Dole was to edit a multilingual version of the *Rubaiyat* and to write a novel based on the legendary life of Omar. Thompson, after twenty years of work, produced his own translation of the poem. A later edition of this was to become the smallest printed book in the world, replacing an edition of Fitzgerald's put out by Charles Meigs (another Club member) in 57 copies for members only. The Club's treasurer, Charles Dana Burrage, on a later occasion recalled the first time he had heard the verses of Omar. «On that day I gave my life's

devotion unreservedly to Omar and Fitzgerald, and from that time to this have daily placed fresh flowers of tribute on their altar in my heart ».

If forced to offer an apology for their fanatical devotion to the philosophy of the *Rubaiyat*, its votaries might answer, as one American did, that « we are no longer a younger race... we are given over to introspection... We have lost our healthy out of door life... Our religious faith is disappearing ». This would seem to imply that the alternatives to the quietistic paganism of the *Rubaiyat* were either a life of action or another religion. To Paul Elmer More at the turn of the century, it indeed appeared that the chief intellectual struggle of the time was symbolized in the figures of its two most popular poets, Kipling and Omar Khayyam. The former stood for the energetic, forward-looking life; the latter for defeatism and ennui. More contemplated the struggle with amused detachment. But the Reverend William Hastie, a Scottish student of Hegelian philosophy, was more aggressive in prescribing against what he called the sickly cult of the *Rubaiyat*. His was a homeopathic remedy: the cultivation of another Persian poet, the mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, whose *Masnavi* Fitzgerald had wanted his friend Cowell to translate. The *Masnavi*, Hastie believed, offered a transcendentalist philosophy which might be a faith unto all people, the kind of world faith towards which the late poet laureate had himself been moving.

In the market place of popular religion, however, Jelaluddin could not compete with Omar even after he had found a superb English translator in Reynold A. Nicholson. Might the sturdy optimism of Robert Browning stand a better chance? Taking his cue from Browning's own opposition to the *Rubaiyat*, Frederick L. Sargent composed a dialogue called *Omar and the Rabbi*, which permitted the healthy sentiments of « Rabbi Ben Ezra » finally to prevail over the seductive music of the *Rubaiyat*. But readers were less easily persuaded; the dominant taste of the era was obviously for a less austere doctrine than that of the Rabbi. Talcott Williams, an American editor of the *Rubaiyat*, noted that Omar had shrewdly permitted « the dry Branch of Semitic monotheism » to be « watered by his desires rather than his convictions », so that it was able to put forth « that strange fruitage which is perpetually reminding us that under all skies and for both sexes, religious fervour and sensual passion may be legal tender for the same emotions » Shades of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde! Against this combination of sense and spirit, what chance had any competing faith?

The late Victorians had been interested chiefly in the skeptical and epicurean thought of the *Rubaiyat*. In the new century, its implications were considerably broadened; it came to mean all things to all people. Mystics, theosophists, and various other species of occultists were inspired by it; as were socialists, fatalists, eroticists, and at least one puritan. Without much regard for such objective facts as had been adduced about author and poem, admirers of the *Rubaiyat* made it the shibboleth of a variety of conflicting dogmas. It would not be correct to deny that a number of its followers were drawn from the lunatic fringe.

In *The Sufism of the Rubaiyat Or the Secret of the Great Paradox*, F. W. Hazeldine served up a mess of pseudo-mystical ideas that included the wholly unsubstantiated belief that «Omar Khayyam the Tentmaker» was «an ancient Persian manner of expression signifying the Supreme Creator». If this might have startled Omar, his English translator would have been no less amazed to read C. H. A. Bjerregaard's *Sufi Interpretations of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam and Fitzgerald*. Bjerregaard, a member of the New York Public Library staff, attempted to prove that Omar wrote «under the garb of the mystic's favorite method of doubt and protest», and that Fitzgerald, «in spite of himself, was permeated with Sufistic ideas».

Out of the Reform Press in Edinburgh in 1910 came *Omar the Tentmaker* by John S. Clarke, who, rejecting the Sufi interpretation, maintained that Omar was an atheist, a materialist, a determinist, and even a socialist. From Seattle, Washington in 1912 J. E. Featherston announced in his *Transcription of the Rubaiyat* (a rehashing of Fitzgerald's translation without reference to the Persian original) that «a new era has dawned. Labor has demanded its share of the good things of this life and is securing them as never before». Apparently, the renunciation of these good things, though demanded by conventional religion, was not enjoined in Omar's poem of pleasure.

For Clarence Darrow, the criminal lawyer, the philosophy of the *Rubaiyat* had a very practical social application. In an introduction which he wrote for a book called *So This Then Is the Book of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, he credited the author with anticipating the ideas of the modern pessimistic school, which, while it uncrowns man, also requires less of him. «To Omar Khayyam the so-called sins of men were not crimes but weaknesses inherent in their being and beyond their power to prevent or overcome». Thus the full implication for society of a controversial stanza of the *Rubaiyat* was spelled out as

a « punishment of the creature for the creator's fault », or as Omar put it :

*Oh Thou who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;*

*For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give — and take!*

The modern pessimists, as Darrow called them, had gone to Schopenhauer to school, but they learned equally well from Omar, for, as an Englishman had said, « these Persian poets write as if they had read Schopenhauer ». A stalwart of the old order like William Lyon Phelps might complain that both the German and the Persian had failed, where another German — Goethe — had succeeded, in fusing devotion to God with devotion to man. But a radical writer of the Naturalistic school, whose novels of sympathy for fallen humanity had run afoul of the law and of morality, would understandably agree with Darrow and Omar that it was the hand of the Divine Potter that shook and misformed the human clay. Theodore Dreiser's unsuccessful play *The Hand of the Potter* made it quite clear that its hero — a victim of sexual deviation — had no responsibility for his malady and that it was a cruel society which applied the law of free will to his predestined behavior.

How ironic, therefore, that John Pollen's *Omar Khayyam Faithfully and Literally Translated* (1915) should have presented Omar in a « quasi-Puritan dress ». Pollen believed that he « detected in Omar somewhat of the Miltonic Puritan and fancied he would have used some such meter [the four beat hymn measure] had he been writing in English ».

Of quite the opposite persuasion was an eccentric retired English colonel of the Indian army. « For the private amusement of philosophical bibliophiles », he published a book called *Life's Echoes*, which presumed to be « a new rendering » and « an interesting interpretation » of Omar's verses. The quatrains, the author believed, were deliberately obscured veilings of the sensuality of Omar, who was here laid bare as the devisor of a « vie intime » of man. The stanzas were classified under three heads according as they dealt with : 1) the purpose of sex, 2) the paired life till impotence, and 3) impotence till death. Thus, by the attachment of erotic meanings to various terms used frequently in the poem, Omar was saved from the Victorians, who, it seemed, had tried to make a Tennysonian out of him.

The First World War produced a hiatus between the generations which only a sturdy memory could bridge, but the 1920's brought a sort of Indian summer to the Omarians both in England and America. The Volstead prohibition act was of course the perfect foil—a sort of last gasp of the Victorian morality at which the proponents of the *Rubaiyat* had for more than a half century been tilting. George Seibel in his *The Wine Bills of Omar Khayyam* (1919) complained of those who would be virtuous and do away with cakes and ale. The three wise men of old, he noted (meaning Omar, Epicurus, and Solomon), all advised man to enjoy himself. Omar was no mere sensualist; he simply didn't see what the dervishes (i.e., Sufis) were howling about. « Let us view his philosophy », he urged, « not as a creed of despair, but as glad tidings of great joy which could be unto all people ».

In much the same spirit, the American branch of the Omar Khayyam Club, celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 1920, heard its members protest that they were not sots, but eminently temperate folk whom prohibition did not really affect one way or the other. The president could not forbear to ask, however, in some occasional verses addressed to Omar :

*What think you of this sober Western world
That joins Mohammed in forbidding wine?*

The parent club in England, too, had its last desperate fling in the twenties. Sobered by the complete suspension of annual meetings from 1914 to 1919, the members noted mournfully the absence of some of the old guard, most notably Lord Kitchener, who had been affectionately called « Rustum », after the warrior hero of the Persian epic, the *Shahnamah*. The war had brought other changes too: the coming of omnibuses in the London streets had forced the nostalgic devotees to shift their meeting place from one restaurant to another. The old Weltschmerz still prevailed in the memorial talks, and a certain reckless abandon was suggested in the picture of a cocktail-shaking flapper that decorated *The Second Book of the Omar Khayyam Club*. Yet there was no mistaking the new, modern note struck by Aldous Huxley in some verses entitled « Made Not Born ». Imagining that Omar suffered from the same spiritual disease as his contemporary adorers, namely an uns spontaneous epicureanism, Huxley wrote :

*Omar, the self made hedonist,
When he sat down with love to dine,*

Must know the reason why he kissed
 And find excuses for his wine.
 Sad Persian, did you envy those,
 The true-born heirs of love and wine,
 Who breathe no sadness from the rose,
 And drink for mirth, not anodyne?

As the twenties drew to a close, more than a decade ended for the *Rubaiyat*. The last of the Victorians began to be heard from on both sides of the argument which Fitzgerald's translation had opened wide. Thomas Hardy died reportedly listening to the blasphemous quatrain in which Omar asked that God should « Man's Forgiveness give and take ». On the other hand, the editor of the *Saturday Review* (which had ignored Fitzgerald's work when it first appeared), now in 1929 collecting some *Back Numbers* « to stir up Victorian memories », looked upon Omar's poem merely « as an excuse for Oriental picturesqueness different from but no more significant than that which prevailed in Byron's day ». An American bibliophile in the same year unexcitedly called it « this best known long poem in the English language... with a bow to Thomas Gray's *Elegy* ».

It wasn't that the *Rubaiyat* had become a classic to be praised but not read. There is no evidence that gift givers, fine edition publishers, book illustrators, and anthology makers lost any of their enthusiasm for it. On the contrary, among others a most splendid and scholarly edition by Sir E. Dennison Ross was published by the Golden Cockerel Press in 1938 which included even the monk-Latin versions of some of the quatrains which Fitzgerald had made prior to his English translation. Nevertheless, as the age of Darwin and Spencer was replaced by that of Marx and Freud, there were fewer people reading the *Rubaiyat* with shudders of anguish or ecstasy. The bemused recollections of the old power of the poem, in Eugene O'Neill's *Ah! Wilderness*, for example, or in the letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson, called for no polemics.

In the much harsher intellectual atmosphere of the period following the Second World War, the chips were rather on the shoulders of the anti-cultists. An academic participant in a radio symposium on the *Rubaiyat* as one of the great books of the world could express his feelings about it only in the single word « marshmallow », and it proved not to be a fighting word.

During the last two decades, as if to symbolize the completion of

a cycle, attention has turned more fully to Omar Khayyam himself, who started all the trouble. The quatrains erroneously attributed to him have been fairly fully weeded out by Russian, German, Scandinavian, and English Orientalists. Most recently, the researches of Arthur Arberry of Cambridge University — and, befittingly, of native Persian scholars — have brought readers closer to the authentic text of Omar Khayyam. It may be possible soon to determine just what the old « Mahometan Blackguard » did say, quite apart from what his most inspired translator — in a version that is unlikely ever to be matched — and his devotees and detractors — with a zeal almost unprecedented in literary history — have made him out to say.

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