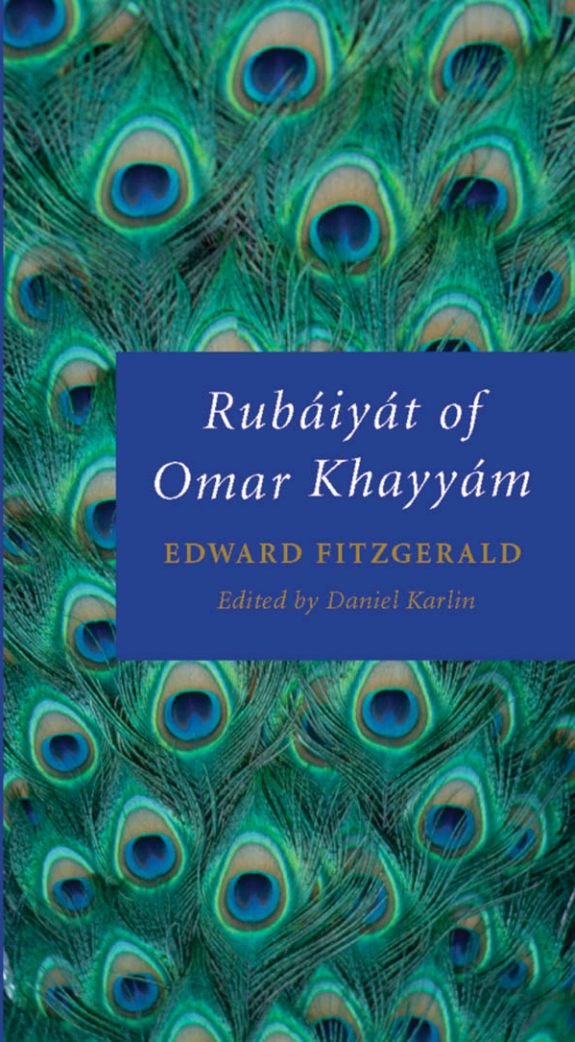

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

EDWARD FITZGERALD

Edited by Daniel Karlin

RUBÁIYÁT OF
OMAR KHAYYÁM

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Edward FitzGerald

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Edited by

DANIEL KARLIN

OXFORD
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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This edition first published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Omar Khayyam.
[Ruba'iyat. English]
Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam / [translated by] Edward FitzGerald;
edited by Daniel Karlin.
p. cm.—(Oxford World Classics)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–19–954297–0
I. FitzGerald, Edward, 1809–1883. II. Karlin, Daniel, 1953- III. Title.
PK6513.A1 2009
891'.5511—dc22
2008036653

Typeset by Cepha Imaging Private Ltd., Bangalore, India
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Clays Ltd., St Ives plc

ISBN 978–0–19–954297–0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE focus of this edition is on the poem that Edward FitzGerald called *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, not on the authentic original *ruba´iyat* (plural of *ruba´i*, a short epigrammatic poem) of Omar ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyam (1048–1131)—assuming these could be identified. I have not commented on questions of attribution at all, and cannot comment on questions of accuracy, except at second-hand. Nevertheless it is essential to have some knowledge of FitzGerald's Persian texts; here I have relied mainly on the versions of A. J. Arberry, whose flavour is a bit archaic to modern taste but who is (as far as I can judge) properly 'literal' in that he does not introduce figures of speech which are not in the original, or at least does not do so without explanation. I have also consulted the older versions of Edward Heron-Allen (about whom Arberry is sometimes unnecessarily sharp) and I have looked at other modern versions, of which the best (to my layman's mind) is that by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs, which repeats in some measure the collaboration between a scholar of Persian and an English poet from which our *Rubáiyát* was born. I have benefited from the work of other editors, critics, and biographers, even where I have disagreed with their conclusions or emphases. I owe a particular debt to work by Peter Avery, Dick Davis, Christopher Decker, Erik Gray, Robert Bernard Martin, and Alfred McKinley Terhune, FitzGerald's biographer and (with Annabelle Burdick Terhune) the editor of his letters.

I am grateful to staff at the British Library, Cambridge University Library, and the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, and to Professor Adrian Poole, for facilitating my research. Samantha Matthews compiled the Chronology and gave me, as always, invaluable help and advice at every stage.

My work in this book is dedicated to my son, Ben Karlin, and my daughter, Katie O'Shea.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Arberry	A. J. Arberry, *The Romance of the Rubaiyat: Edward FitzGerald's First Edition Reprinted with Introduction and Notes* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959)
Avery and Heath-Stubbs	*The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam, translated by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs* (London: Allen Lane, 1979)
Binning	Robert Binning, *A Journal of Two Years' Travel in Persia, Ceylon, etc.*, 2 vols. (London: W. H. Allen, 1857)
Calcutta MS	Manuscript of *ruba'iyat* attributed to Omar Khayyám, MS no. 1548 in library of Bengal Asiatic Society, Calcutta [original not extant]
Davis	Dick Davis (ed.), *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989) [Penguin Poetry Bookshelf]
Decker	*Edward FitzGerald,* Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*: A Critical Edition*, ed. Christopher Decker (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997) [Victorian Literature and Culture Series]
d'Herbelot	Barthélemy d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque orientale ou Dictionaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connaissance des peuples de l'Orient* (Paris: Compagnie des Libraires, 1697).
Gray	Erik Gray, *The Poetry of Indifference from the Romantics to the Rubáiyát* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005)
Heron-Allen 1898	*The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyām: A Facsimile of the MS in the Bodleian Library, translated and edited by Edward Heron-Allen* (London: H. S. Nichols, 1898)
Heron-Allen 1899	*Edward FitzGerald's Rubâ'iyât of Omar Khayyâm, with their original Persian sources, collated from his own MSS., and literally translated by Edward Heron-Allen* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1899)
Letters	*The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. Alfred McKinley Terhune and Annabelle Burdick

	Terhune, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980)
Life of Cowell	George Cowell, *Life and Letters of Edward Byles Cowell* (London: Macmillan, 1904)
Martin	Robert Bernard Martin, *With Friends Possessed: A Life of Edward FitzGerald* (New York: Atheneum, 1985)
Nicolas	Louis Jean Baptiste Nicolas, *Les Quatrains de Khèyam, traduits du Persan par J. B. Nicolas, ex-premier drogman de l'ambassade française en Perse, Consul de France à Rescht* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1867)
Other Men's Flowers	Christopher Decker, 'Edward FitzGerald and Other Men's Flowers: Allusion in the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*', *Literary Imagination*, 6/2 (2004), 213–39.
Ouseley	Sir William Ouseley, *Travels in various countries of the East; more particularly Persia*, 3 vols. (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1819–23)
Ouseley MS	Manuscript of *ruba'iyat* attributed to Omar Khayyám in Bodleian Library, Oxford (no. 525 of Sir William Ouseley's collection)
Terhune	*The Life of Edward FitzGerald* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947)
Variorum	*The Variorum and Definitive Edition of the Poetical and Prose Writings of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. George Bentham, 7 vols. (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1902–3)
Wrentmore	*Letters from Edward FitzGerald to Bernard Quaritch 1853 to 1883*, ed. C. Quaritch Wrentmore (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1926)

INTRODUCTION

In the decade before Edward FitzGerald's death in 1883, his *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which failed to sell a single copy when it was first published in 1859, became the fashion, and brought its elderly, shy, obstreperous author a measure of unwanted fame. In the decade following his death, it became the rage: 'editions and apparatuses . . . clubs and eulogies . . . wreaths and odours and panegyrics' as Edmund Gosse put it.[1] Gosse himself was no stranger to the Omar Khayyam Club, whose convivial spirits would not allow FitzGerald's to rest in peace until his grave at Boulge had been planted with a rose from the veritable Omar Khayyám's Persian tomb.[2] In the early twentieth century the poem was spoken of as one of the two or three best-known in the English-speaking world; ominously perhaps, it was also spoken of as the poem you would find on the shelves of people who knew no other poetry. Then the fever died down, and as it did so something odd happened to the fabric of the *Rubáiyát*. It became brittle, and collapsed into a heap of phrases. The last generation for which the poem was a 'standard' was probably the one born in the 1920s, and its taste is reflected in the 1953 edition of the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, in which, as Dick Davis observes, 'there are 188 excerpts from the *Rubáiyát* . . . virtually two-thirds of the total work'.[3] This is certainly an index of popularity, but also of the way in which the 'total work' had become less than its parts. And parts are more easily swept away. Today only a few remain—'A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse, and Thou', 'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, moves on'—amid a dust of exotic or *fin-de-siècle* hedonism: nightingales and roses, sultans and sheikhs (there are no sheikhs), caravans and camels (there are no camels), and Aesthetic poseurs saying things like 'Ah, fill the Cup' and addressing each other as 'Moon of my Delight'.

[1] *Variorum*, I. ix.

[2] The Omar Khayyám Club was founded on 14 Oct. 1892 by 'a group of jolly gentlemen . . . at Pagani's Restaurant in Great Portland Street' (Arberry, p. 30). Arberry's account of the planting of a rose grown from hips gathered near the reputed tomb of Omar Khayyám in Naishapur draws on an article in the *East Anglian Daily Times* (9 Oct. 1893) entitled 'Poet-Pilgrims in Suffolk', repr. in full in Wrentmore, pp. 115–28.

[3] Davis, p. 1.

What makes it worse is that none of this was FitzGerald's fault. He did not initiate, encourage, or slyly collude in the inflation of the poem's literary or commercial value; indeed he resisted it, to the exasperation of his British publisher, Bernard Quaritch, who had to watch American pirates making off with 'his' booty. The shredding and cheapening of the texture of the poem would have struck FitzGerald as a high price to pay for a popularity he never sought, but if that in itself was a milestone on the road to oblivion he would not have been surprised. In 1872 he referred to the *Rubáiyát* as 'that Immortal Work which is to last about five years longer'.[4] He lived long enough to realize his mistake, and to refer with a rueful shrug to his 'illustrious Fitz-Omar name'.[5] But it is not hard to imagine the surprise (and, to be honest, hostility) with which he would have greeted this, or any, scholarly treatment of his work. When Quaritch suggested reprinting the first and second editions in a single volume, FitzGerald replied that this '*would be* making too much of the thing: and you and I might both be laughed at for treating my Omar as if it were some precious fragment of Antiquity'.[6] Readers, too, may look at the disproportion between FitzGerald's text and the apparatus of an edition such as this, and echo Prince Hal's reaction to Falstaff's tavern bill: 'O monstrous! but one half-penny-worth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack!' True, FitzGerald was the poem's first editor; he issued it with an introduction and notes, and never reprinted it without them. But it would be disingenuous to take advantage of that fact. I can only plead that the *Rubáiyát* is, for us today, a 'precious fragment' of a Victorian age which is receding into 'Antiquity' at a vertiginous rate.

What kind of poem, then, is the *Rubáiyát*? It consists of a number of quatrains translated from verses by, or attributed to, Omar ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyam, who was born in 1048 and died in 1131. The facts of Omar Khayyám's life and work as FitzGerald knew them are set out in his Preface, which in this respect remained much the same through the four editions of the poem that appeared in his lifetime. With one exception—the fable of the schoolboy pact between Omar, the great statesman Nizam ul-Mulk, and Hasan Sabbah, future leader of the Assassins—the information is basically accurate, and where modern scholarship would disagree is on its context and

[4] *Letters*, iii. 389. [5] Feb. 1883, ibid. iv. 559. [6] Ibid. iii. 339.

interpretation.[7] The date-range given by FitzGerald needs to be shifted a little, but only a little; Omar did live under the dominion of the Turkish Seljuk dynasty which invaded and conquered Persia in the first half of the eleventh century (Toghril Beg occupied Naishapur in 1040); the name 'Khayyám' does indeed mean 'tent-maker' (indicating a reasonably prosperous family background). Omar's fame in the medieval Islamic world rested on his achievements as a mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher; early accounts by people who knew him (including his pupil Nizami of Samarkand, who tells the story of Omar's prophecy of his burial place) say nothing about his poetry. His treatise on algebra is extant (FitzGerald knew the French edition and translation published in 1851) and is still cited in mathematical history as the first to propose a method for resolving cubic equations. The first allusion to him as a poet comes in a treatise of 1176–7, where verses in Arabic are attributed to him; only in the following century did he begin to be identified as a composer of *ruba'iyat*. The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century destroyed many of the great centres of Persian culture and made it difficult even for the survivors to reconstruct their heritage. Omar Khayyám was not primarily a poet, and if he composed verse at all did so in a popular form which circulated orally as much as in writing. Compilers of anthologies in successive centuries and in different countries therefore had a free hand; more and more *ruba'iyat* were attributed to Omar, with less and less authority. Jessie Cadell in the nineteenth century, and Peter Avery in the twentieth, agree that the plainer, clearer, and more forceful the *ruba'i*, the likelier it is to be Omar's; but a final settlement of the attribution question is not possible on current evidence.[8] The more interesting question is why certain kinds of *ruba'i* were attributed to Omar, and here Peter Avery directs us to the original ground of his fame. As a Persian philosopher, Omar was a successor to the great Abu Ali al-Husayn Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, whose ideas were founded on Aristotelian rationalism and Neoplatonic metaphysics. Anyone affiliated to this Greek tradition would have found himself at odds with the Islamic orthodoxy embraced by the new Seljuk rulers

[7] I am indebted throughout this section to the introduction by Peter Avery to his and John Heath-Stubbs's modern translation. Avery offers not just historical and contextual information but guidance in understanding it.

[8] For Cadell see App. I, p. 120; Avery and Heath-Stubbs, pp. 30–1.

of Persia. Despite Omar's intellectual eminence, there is evidence that he was viewed with suspicion as a freethinker and heretic. It may well be that he composed some of the poems attributed to him—those that express philosophical scepticism, or that pour scorn on religious hypocrisy and conventional piety. But it is equally likely that he acted as a magnet for such attributions, so that when a compiler came across a *ruba'i* which embodied some especially scandalous notion, he would assign it to Omar. Scepticism about the value of high-flown metaphysical speculation, and satirical reflections on the conduct of the 'unco' guid', go hand-in-hand with an emphasis on the concrete pleasures of human life (as they do for Burns), so it is easy to see how *ruba'iyat* in praise of drunkenness and sex would be enlisted under Omar's banner.

These poems, however, raise another question, that of Omar's relation to Sufism, the mystical tendency within Islam. FitzGerald understood Sufism to be a form of Pantheism, and images of earthly desire in Sufi poetry to be allegorical, representing the soul's yearning for reabsorption into the divine unity. In such an allegorical scheme, drunkenness represents spiritual ecstasy, sexual desire the longing for union with the divine, etc. FitzGerald's rebuttal of this way of reading Omar, in his Preface and elsewhere, speaks for itself; modern scholarship might not challenge his conclusion, but would seek to shift the terms of the debate. The equation between Oriental Sufism and western Pantheism is not as straightforward as FitzGerald implies, and the categorical distinction he draws between symbolic and literal meaning may not do justice to the subtlety of the poems. FitzGerald himself recognized that, in the end, the matter was one of interpretation.

The main historical feature of Omar's activity as a poet which is missing from FitzGerald's account is to do with the form of the *ruba'i* itself.[9] A whole dimension of meaning rests in this choice of form, as it does in European literature with a poet's choice of the sonnet or ode. All that FitzGerald tells us about the *ruba'i* is that it is a short whole poem, a quatrain with a fixed metrical scheme. (FitzGerald's major innovation in the poem, which I discuss later in this introduction, was to manufacture a poem from a sequence of such quatrains—akin to telling a story in limericks.) He says nothing

[9] See Preface, p. 14, and Explanatory Notes, p. 146.

about the cultural significance of the form, which, Peter Avery remarks, offered Persian poets of Omar's time an alternative to the 'lengthy and highly artificial panegyrics and narrative poems in a single rhyme' which were the staple of official literary culture.[10] But Avery goes on to emphasize that this in itself cannot account for the popularity of the *ruba'i*. It became a form identified with dissent from social and religious orthodoxy; it could circulate anonymously, was easily memorized, and 'could be recited in coteries of like-minded people, both for entertainment and to afford relief from oppression'.[11] Although FitzGerald does not give his readers this context, it supports his interpretation of the form as used by Omar; it is one among many examples of how far his sympathy with Omar carried him, past the point at which better-informed scholars and translators have become bogged down in what they know.

When FitzGerald encountered Omar's poetry, in the summer of 1856, he did so in the form of a copy of a fifteenth-century manuscript which, though it undoubtedly contained dozens of poems not by Omar, only contained a few which could not possibly be his. It was, to use a term found in modern scholarship, an 'Omarian' text, as we speak of a 'Homeric' corpus. In this manuscript FitzGerald discerned, and was touched and possessed by, a spirit of uncompromising materialism, as profound and clear-sighted as that of Lucretius, shot through with lyrical power and sardonic wit. It was that spirit he set out to capture in his English version. In the Persian text the *rubáiyát* are independent, epigrammatic poems, grouped according to tradition by end-rhyme—in other words, not forming a narrative or argumentative sequence. FitzGerald saw how some of these separate poems might be combined in such a sequence, by analogy with the classical Greek or Latin 'eclogue'. The poem begins at dawn and ends at nightfall, and in the course of this symbolic day the speaker meditates on 'Human Death and Fate' (st. XXXI), mourns the transience of life, confronts his mortality with courage, with indignation, with gaiety, but without what he regards as the illusions and consolations of religious faith. Only the present moment has value; past and future are equally unreal; it is one of the poem's many fruitful paradoxes that this proposition can only be understood from a perspective which, like that of the speaker, takes in the whole cycle of time.

[10] Avery and Heath-Stubbs, p. 7. [11] Ibid. 9.

A second such paradox expresses delight in drunkenness, and in sexual freedom, in terms that bring the pleasure of sensation close to that of oblivion, of self-unmaking. The companionship of fellow-drinkers is invoked at the beginning and end of the poem, and the speaker intermittently addresses a 'Beloved' who may be male or female, but human relationships are not the subject of the poem and do not in themselves compensate for a deity who may be absent, or indifferent, or unjust.

The *Rubáiyát* is in the first instance, therefore, a philosophical poem, but one whose philosophy is articulated through the sensibility of its dramatic speaker, the figure of 'Omar' whom FitzGerald in part discovered, and in part created. Omar is an old man, but age has not mellowed him. The lyrical cadences of his speech are braced by a fierce and unreconciled spirit, far removed from the self-pleasing melancholy the poem has been taken to express:

> Into this Universe, and *why* not knowing,
> Nor *whence,* like Water willy-nilly flowing:
> And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
> I know not *whither,* willy-nilly blowing.
>
> What, without asking, hither hurried *whence?*
> And, without asking, *whither* hurried hence!
> Another and another Cup to drown
> The Memory of this Impertinence!
>
> (sts. XXIX – XXX)

The poem is governed by this heterodox scorn; as well as ridiculing attempts to dogmatize about the afterlife, it questions the justice of the divine order in terms that unmistakably refer to Christianity as much as to Islam, the notional target; this aspect of the poem reaches a scandalous apotheosis in stanza LVIII, where God is offered man's forgiveness.

Despite asserting that the riddle of existence cannot be solved, and that only the present has value, the speaker of the poem enjoys a sweeping and commanding view of historical, mythological, cosmic time: the poem's scale reaches from 'Earth's Centre' to 'the Throne of Saturn' (st. XXXI), embracing both the sublime ('The Courts where Jamshýd gloried and drank deep', st. XVII) and the beautiful ('this delightful Herb whose tender Green | Fledges the River's Lip on which we lean', st. XIX). It is this complex figure, with his anger,

his tenderness, his puckish wit, who binds the poem together and, so to speak, convinces us of its integrity, of its giving utterance to something inevitable, and therefore permanent.

FitzGerald's creation of the figure of Omar can be understood in a number of different, but overlapping 'frames' of interpretation. Biography and history define the poem's personal and cultural 'moment', its origins in FitzGerald's own life and character, and its responsiveness to contemporary events and ideas. The 'Victorian' aspect of the poem seems especially attuned to the malaise of religious orthodoxy in the mid-nineteenth century, and to the growing popularity of an 'aesthetic' reaction against the forces of respectability; at the same time we must acknowledge that the poem did not originate as an intellectual project, but was set in motion by circumstances in FitzGerald's life which he would have done almost anything to avoid, and of which his introduction to the poetry of Omar Khayyám was in some ways an accidental by-product. His 'Orientalism', though it shares some of the characteristics of a well-established tradition in English, and indeed European literature, is distinctive in that it began as a linguistic exercise, not a literary choice. FitzGerald's method as a translator comes into play here, as does his profound living sense of his own literary tradition: these are the sources of what he called the poem's 'English music', without which its bleak vision could not have been so powerfully or movingly conveyed.

Edward FitzGerald: Life and Contacts

To Edmund Gosse there was something exasperating and pitiable in the spectacle of Edward FitzGerald's 'career'. 'He was a man of taste in easy circumstances,' Gosse remarked, 'and until he was forty years of age he was nothing else whatever.'[12] Biographers have done what they can to disperse the atmosphere of drift and dilettantism that suffuses his life, but Gosse's judgement, that of a man who had worked for his living and was subject to the discipline of a professional writer and 'man of letters', is more clear-sighted. FitzGerald was born in 1809 to a wealthy Anglo-Irish family—so wealthy that

[12] *Variorum*, I. xi.

what remained, after multiple financial reverses (the most serious being his father's disastrous speculation in coal-mining in the grounds of one of his own estates), was more than enough to support him throughout his life. His father was a squirearchical cipher; his mother was a Thackerayan grotesque of social pretension and emotional nullity. Recalling his small child's view of the world from the nursery at Bredfield Hall, he wrote many years later: 'My Mother used to come up sometimes, and we Children were not much comforted.'[13] For years FitzGerald's only 'occupation', after his parents separated, was to accompany his mother, as nominal male companion, to society dinners and the theatre in London and Brighton. He writhed, but until her death in 1855 could not escape. His education, at the King Edward VI Grammar School in Bury St Edmunds and Trinity College, Cambridge, was benign and productive of close friendships and wide, unsystematic learning (mostly outside the formal curriculum); but it led to no profession, indeed to no activity. He had no fixed idea of what to do; there was no need for him to make what Samuel Johnson, in *Rasselas*, calls 'the choice of life'. It may be said that not to choose itself constitutes a choice, but it is hardly a vocation.

FitzGerald's way of life became an odd blend of transience and tenacity, and a paradoxical emblem of his social origins and standing. He did not have a house of his own until he bought Little Grange on the outskirts of Woodbridge in 1864—and he did not actually move in until he was evicted from his lodgings in 1873. (He then took to signing himself 'Littlegrange' or 'The Laird of Little Grange'.) Yet he was rooted in Suffolk; his *Sea Words and Phrases along the Suffolk Coast* (1869) is evidence of intense attachment, and of his hostility to the landowners who bought up the coastline, blocked up footpaths, and persecuted poachers. No one but a gentleman completely assured of his own breeding could have excoriated one of his neighbours as a 'bull-dog-named Potentate, on whose large slice of Suffolk birds do accumulate and men decay; cottages left to ruin lest they should harbour a dog, or a gun, or a poor man'.[14] No one but a gentleman could have got away with dressing as FitzGerald dressed, or behaving as he behaved in public, while reserving the privileges of his rank. His slovenliness was not an affectation, and neither was his occasional

[13] *Letters*, iii. 331. [14] *Variorum*, vi. 239–40.

and startling rudeness.[15] He was not disreputable, but he was not respectable either; he was not 'alienated', not a *poète maudit* like Baudelaire (*Les Fleurs du mal* was published in 1857, two years before the *Rubáiyát*); he was not urban enough for that. Yet he was unassimilated, except to the grand tradition of English eccentricity. Nowhere is this more evident than in his life as a writer, which may be described as a kind of anti-career, devoid of professional or financial ambition, haphazard, miscellaneous, and undeveloped: for although the *Rubáiyát* belongs to a group of translations, the group itself has no intellectual or stylistic coherence, and nothing but chronological sequence links FitzGerald's first composition to his last.

FitzGerald was capable of hard and devoted intellectual work, as we shall see; but the impetus for this work had to come from a personal, not an intellectual source. From his schooldays onward, what mattered to him most were friendships, almost all with men. Into these relationships he poured his capacity for both emotional and intellectual exchange; physical desire was almost certainly sublimated. His homoerotic feelings, clear as they seem to modern biographers and critics such as Robert Bernard Martin and Dick Davis, were probably unclear to him, at least in the form conveyed by our word 'gay'; but it is clear enough that friendship in itself mattered more to him than any other form of relationship, including family.

We owe the *Rubáiyát* to the loss, or threatened loss, of one such friendship, and to FitzGerald's single disastrous experiment in social conformity, his marriage to Lucy Barton. Both these events took place in 1856. In February of that year, FitzGerald learned that his close friend, and mentor in Persian, Edward Cowell, had accepted an appointment as Professor of English History at the Presidency College in Calcutta. FitzGerald was approaching his 47th birthday; Cowell had just turned 30. They had met in 1844, when Cowell was only 18. He was the son of an Ipswich merchant, a self-made scholar with a passion for both European and Oriental languages; he taught himself Persian at the age of 14, but had to work in the family business until he was 23, when he finally matriculated at Oxford. It was there, on a 'wet Sunday' in December 1852, that he suggested to FitzGerald

[15] On FitzGerald's cultivated slovenliness, see Martin, p. 231. Anecdotes of his eccentricities, abruptnesses, and put-downs are legion; they were already being collected and disseminated at the time of his centenary (in e.g. *Edward FitzGerald 1809–1909: Centenary Celebrations Souvenir*, Ipswich, 1909).

the study of Persian as an intellectual pastime, 'and guaranteed to teach the grammar in a day'.[16] FitzGerald was slow to enthuse: 'I am not *greatly* impressed with the desire to poke out even a smatter of Persian', he wrote to Cowell in October 1853, and in December he told Frederick Tennyson that he was persevering only 'because it is a point in common with [Cowell], and enables us to study a little together'. A month later he had the bug: he was 'Persian mad'.[17] But Cowell himself, though he never abandoned Persian, was always more interested in Sanskrit; when he graduated in 1854 he found few academic openings in England, whereas India offered both a career and an opportunity to develop his scholarship on native ground.

FitzGerald tried hard to persuade Cowell not to go to Calcutta. 'What is to become of my Stupendous Learning when you go?' he wrote. 'I scarce see my old Friends, and make no new ones. I shall die starved of human regard. . . . I want you to do Work in England, as well as help to keep me alive in it.'[18] But Cowell's mind was made up; the irony is that his parting gift to FitzGerald was to stimulate his friend's 'Stupendous Learning' to its highest pitch.

In April 1856 Cowell came across a fifteenth-century manuscript compilation of poems by Omar Khayyám, in Sir William Ouseley's collection of Oriental manuscripts, purchased by the Bodleian Library in 1843. Cowell transcribed the Ouseley MS, and then made a copy of his transcript for FitzGerald, which he finished in FitzGerald's company and gave to him on 11 July, when FitzGerald was staying with him at Rushmere, near Oxford. A week or so later FitzGerald wrote to him with what seems almost like brusqueness. 'Thanks for Omar. I have looked over most of him since I left you. Here are Queries etc.' But the brusqueness covers pain that can't quite be suppressed, for Cowell's departure for India was imminent. A list of dry queries about vocabulary and idiom is followed by this: 'Well—all this I have written; but my Thoughts are often upon other Things in which you are concerned: of which I less care to speak.'[19] His farewell letter of 28 July takes stock of his diminished expectations: 'I shall very soon write to you; and hope to keep up something of Communion by such meagre Intercourse.'[20]

Yet Cowell's gift to FitzGerald of the Ouseley MS did more than FitzGerald could have hoped to establish 'something of Communion'

[16] Terhune, p. 170. [17] *Letters*, ii. 110, 117, 119. [18] Ibid. 214.
[19] Ibid. 234–5. [20] Ibid. 236.

between them—much more than a 'meagre Intercourse' of letters could have done on its own. With unconscious tact and perfect timing, Cowell had presented FitzGerald with a kind of magic mirror, in which he could see himself—'savage against Destiny', as he put it, but also given to 'Epicurean pathos'—and also conjure the image of his absent friend.[21] But Cowell's departure, though it might have prompted FitzGerald to read and relish Omar's 'curious Infidel and Epicurean Tetrastichs', would probably not have been enough for them to claim him, body and soul, as they did over the next two years. For that daemonic possession we have to thank the un-daemonic figure of Lucy Barton.

FitzGerald's marriage remains an enigma. However he defined his sexual nature he had never tried to live against it. Yet on 4 November 1856, just over two months after the Cowells left for India, he married Lucy Barton, the 48-year-old daughter of an old Suffolk friend, Bernard Barton, the 'Quaker Poet'. Why did he do it?

The explanation refers rather to the engagement than the marriage itself. Bernard Barton's death in 1849 left Lucy impoverished and dependent. He may have asked FitzGerald to look after Lucy, and each may have interpreted this request in a different sense. FitzGerald either said something, or allowed something to be inferred by Lucy, which he later found impossible to disavow. His own financial affairs were embroiled at the time, in the aftermath of his father's bankruptcy, and it seems that Lucy understood that the marriage would have to be delayed. She accepted a position as governess and companion in a wealthy family who were friends of her father, and sat down to wait. FitzGerald, on the other hand, seems to have hoped the whole arrangement would quietly dissolve in time. He maintained no contact with Lucy. He spoke to no one of his being 'engaged', and only the shadow of a rumour flitted here and there among his friends.

The catastrophe was precipitated by the death of FitzGerald's mother in January 1855. Released from filial bondage, he was free to enter wedlock; in the summer of 1856, when the estate was settled, he found himself comparatively wealthy. The timing was

[21] These phrases (and the one in the following sentence) come from a letter to Tennyson of 15 July 1856, written just after FitzGerald returned from his last visit to the Cowells (ibid. 234). See note to st. LXXIV (p. 166).

fortuitous—better say fatal. FitzGerald became aware that Lucy expected him to fulfil a promise he had not intended to make; his circumstances no longer gave him an excuse for further delay; at the same time he understood that Cowell did really intend to go to India. It is likely that he made up his mind to marry Lucy on the rebound from Cowell's abandonment of him.

FitzGerald was rarely mean-minded, and even more rarely mean in his behaviour; but his own suffering, and shame at his folly, hardened him to treat Lucy with intolerance and contempt. He thought the daughter of his old Quaker friend had acquired airs and graces and expected him to lead a life of fashion. He began by refusing to dress for the wedding itself, which he attended in his usual shabby clothes, looking 'like a victim being led to his doom'.[22] The sexual side of the marriage is undocumented, but cannot have been happy. FitzGerald seems to have set himself systematically to thwart Lucy's desire to live elegantly, or even respectably. Anecdotes of their brief time together as husband and wife make painful reading, and include a rare glimpse of FitzGerald drunk—and not in the happy manner of Omar Khayyám.[23] By May 1857 he and Lucy were spending more time apart than together, and in August their separation was formally agreed. As though cured of toothache, FitzGerald regained his generosity and composure. Lucy had an allowance of £300 a year and agreed not to live in Woodbridge. The arrangement was amicable, and, so to speak, well founded. If Lucy had shown blundering insensitivity in holding FitzGerald to his 'promise', she let him off with good grace, and more lightly than he deserved.

The period of FitzGerald's greatest misery in his marriage was the winter of 1856–7. During this time he wrote regularly to Cowell, and these letters are filled with Persian, though Omar is by no means an exclusive concern. But in the spring and early summer, as his separation from Lucy became a de facto reality, Omar began more and more to preoccupy his thoughts. Although Cowell had, so to speak, left him to Lucy, he had also left him this trace of himself, a manuscript that was a labour of love. On 5 June 1857 he wrote to Cowell from the Bedfordshire estate of one of his closest friends, William Browne, telling him of his reading of Omar Khayyám 'in a Paddock covered with Buttercups and brushed by a delicious Breeze', offering

[22] *Letters*, ii. 242 n. 1.
[23] Terhune, p. 199.

the first of his verse translations—not into English, but what he called 'Monkish Latin' (i.e. medieval Latin, which ignores the quantitative scansion of classical Latin prosody and puts Latin phrases into 'English' metrical patterns); he told Cowell that the stanza was one of a number he had composed. He knew that Cowell 'would be sorry . . . to think that Omar breathes a sort of Consolation to me!'—but he told him all the same.[24]

Cowell had not forgotten either FitzGerald or Omar. Soon after his arrival at Calcutta towards the end of November 1856, he found, in the library of the Asiatic Institute, a manuscript of Omar made by an Indian scribe, later in date and considerably longer than the Ouseley MS. He arranged for it to be copied by a local scribe, and sent the copy to FitzGerald, who received it on 14 June 1857, along with a present for Lucy, a box made of aromatic wood. Lucy was away, and FitzGerald sent thanks for both gifts:

> My Letter will not have to be posted for a few days yet, so as my Wife may yet return in time to inclose her thanks for the beautiful Box which came forth [from] its Coffin breathing a veritable باد صبا which has also perfumed my MS. . . . And the human Interest which all MSS have beyond Printed Books—written by a living hand at the end of which was a living Soul like my own—under a darker skin—some 'dark Indian face with white Turban wreathed' and under an Indian Sun. And you spoke to him those thousands of miles away, and he spoke to you, and this MS. was put into your hands when done; and then deposited in that little box, made also by some dark hand, along with its aromatic Companion: you and your dear Wife saw them after they were nailed down; and directed the Box; and so they have crossed the Atlantic, and after some durance in London have reached my hands at last.[25]

Images of imprisonment and death are 'perfumed' with divine creativity, as FitzGerald continues the metaphor of Omar 'breathing consolation' to him. The phrase 'a living Soul' echoes Genesis 2: 7: 'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul'. The 'human Interest' which FitzGerald sees in 'all MSS' means more than that such things arouse our curiosity; we all have an *interest* in each other, are joined by our common humanity, however differentiated by

[24] *Letters*, ii. 273. The Latin stanza contributed to st. IV.

[25] *Letters*, ii. 274. Terhune translates the Persian phrase as 'morning breeze' (p. 275 n. 8).