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Forgetting FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát*

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Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* constantly advises the reader to forget – preferably with the help of a drink:

Ah, my Belovéd, fill the Cup that clears

TO-DAY of past Regret and future Fears.

And again –

Oh, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine

Must drown the memory of that insolence!¹

Readers have not forgotten the *Rubáiyát*: by the end of the nineteenth century it “must have been a serious contender for the title of the most popular long poem in English,” and since then it has steadily continued to appear in innumerable (usually illustrated) editions.² Critics, on the other hand, seem to have taken FitzGerald at his word. The critical corpus is small; even major recent studies of Victorian poetry scarcely mention the poem.³ Yet ironically, it is the *Rubáiyát*’s treatment of forgetting that marks it as a central text not only of Victorian poetry but of a rich and continuing literary tradition.

FitzGerald’s poem gives a new twist to a widespread mid-Victorian preoccupation, the problem of striking an appropriate balance between memory and oblivion. Matthew Arnold, for instance, spoke out against an educational system founded upon rote memorization: “taught in such a fashion as things are now, how often must a

candid and sensible man, if he were offered an art of memory to secure all that he has learned . . . say with Themistocles: ‘Teach me rather to forget!’”⁴ The need for forgetfulness continues to be a pressing issue at the end of the century for writers of the Aesthetic school; indeed, “aesthetic” literature often explicitly aspires to an *anaesthetic* condition. Consider for instance Dorian Gray’s words, with their echo of Arnold: “[I]f you really want to console me, teach me rather to forget what has happened.”⁵ And the tradition has continued on into the twentieth century, most notably in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, a great reader and critic of Victorian literature.⁶ Borges’s heroes, in their obsession with memory, seem to be such prime candidates for Freudian analysis that it is easy to overlook the fact that they often find their closest models and analogues not in Freudian case-studies but in nineteenth-century literary texts.

Among poets of the period Tennyson and FitzGerald were the two most deeply concerned with the question of memory. I wish to begin with a brief discussion of Tennyson’s poetry up to and including *In Memoriam*, a poem of commemoration which nevertheless seriously questions the desirability of memory. Tennyson’s ambivalent feelings about “Blessèd, cursèd, Memory”⁷ date from the very start of his career; poems such as “The Lotos-Eaters” express a longing for oblivion mingled with intense anxiety. I shall argue that this anxiety stems from the important role played by memory in Tennyson’s troubled conception of “dead selves” – the states a being passes through as the soul matures. Turning then to the *Rubáiyát*, which may well have been written partly as a response to Tennyson’s elegy,⁸ I examine the formal means FitzGerald uses to efface his poem from the reader’s memory. In the concluding section, I offer a consideration of

the poem's publication history, suggesting that readers have never forgotten the *Rubáiyát* paradoxically because they are unable to remember it precisely.

I

In section XLI of *In Memoriam* Tennyson grieves over his sense of estrangement from Hallam:

But thou art turned to something strange,
 And I have lost the links that bound
 Thy changes; here upon the ground,
 No more partaker of thy change.

(5-8)

The problem is not that Tennyson has forgotten Hallam but quite contrarily that he remembers so well. A too vivid memory, rather than bringing the past nearer, tends to render it unfamiliar, in the same way that an old snapshot of a loved one can hinder one's recollections rather than revive them. This is the same problem that plagues Tennyson in section XXIV, when he begins to doubt his own memories of Hallam: they are too like "Paradise" to be compatible with the fallen world he has known since. A certain amount of forgetting is indispensable to blur the differences between past and present and give a sense of continuity; perfect memory is unforgiving.

This disturbing, even terrifying aspect of memory is best described in our own century in Borges's great story, "Funes the Memorious," the title character of which possesses an infallible memory. Borges describes him thus:

He was, let us not forget, almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term *dog* embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front). His own face in the mirror, his own hands, surprised him on every occasion.⁹

Total recall here resembles forgetfulness, or even madness; Funes lacks the obliviousness to difference that makes life bearable. If we were incapable of forgetting, Borges suggests, every change would imply a new identity, every parting would be a death. It is only by forgetting the details that we are able to convince ourselves of continuity, that we do not mourn a lost friend with every change of hairstyle or accent. Forgetting provides what Tennyson calls the “links” that bind our “changes.”

It is possible that Funes would never have needed to write *In Memoriam*, but more importantly it is certain that he would never have been able to write it. A perfectly memorious man could feel no great grief at a friend’s death, no greater than at the infinite losses of former selves that take place every day. Hence it is that Tennyson begins his elegy by repudiating the idea that each state of existence dies to give way to the next:

I held it truth, with him who sings
 To one clear harp in divers tones,
 That men may rise on stepping-stones
 Of their dead selves to higher things.

But who can so forecast the years

And find in loss a gain to match?

Or reach a hand through time to catch

The far-off interest of tears?

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drowned.

(I, 1-9)

Tennyson ascribes this rejected notion of “dead selves” to Goethe (the “him” of line 1), but it belongs to anyone who, like Funes, is mindful of distinct phases of development.

Yet there is a difficulty here. Tennyson would not be Funes, or Goethe – he wishes to obliterate or forget distinctions between states of self. But at the same time he disowns a belief that belonged to his former self, and throughout the poem he will continue to try to shed his current, melancholic self and to become someone new and worthy of the transformed Hallam (“following with an upward mind / The wonders that have come to thee” [XLI, 21-2]). Eric Griffiths locates this complication in the poem’s very first words (“I held”): “The simple past next to ‘I’ immediately sets off the existence of the subject against change of state, and very sharply so, for this opening section of *In Memoriam* records altered convictions about the processes of alteration through which a self passes.”¹⁰ In its initial and continued desire to disown and forget “dead selves,” and its contradictory impulse to cling to the past, *In Memoriam* writes large a conflict that reappears throughout Tennyson’s poetry.¹¹ The paradox is present already in “Tithonus” (begun in 1833), who refers to his former self in the third person, who desires nothing more than to “forget” (75), but who clings to memory as his only pleasure; and it continues through many of the major poems.

The simplest and most complete formulation of the problem appears in “Locksley Hall” (published 1842):

Where is comfort? in division of the records of the mind?

Can I part her from herself, and love her, as I knew her, kind?

I remember one that perished: sweetly did she speak and move:

Such a one do I remember, whom to look at was to love.

Can I think of her as dead, and love her for the love she bore?

No – she never loved me truly: love is love for evermore.

(69-74)

The speaker entertains the possibility of drawing a strict demarcation between past and present selves, only to dismiss the idea within six lines. Princess Ida in *The Princess* (1847), though she too will change her mind, holds out longer and more forcefully. She is the first to use the term “dead self,” when she speaks to the Prince of having left behind all childish things:

Methinks he [the Prince] seems no better than a girl;

As girls were once, as we ourself have been:

We had our dreams; perhaps he mixt with them:

We touch on our dead self, nor shun to do it,

Being other.

(III, 202-6)

That girl-self is not dead, but sleepeth, as it turns out. Ida is asked in the end to recognize that for a woman to abandon her childish self (to “lose the child”) is to risk being childless as well. The Prince advises her that she must “nor fail in childward care, / Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind” (VII, 267-8), and although her acquiescence to such regression is not shown, it is implied. Supposedly dead selves have a way of coming back to haunt those who claimed or sought to forget them.

This is most painfully true in *Maud*, the speaker of which longs explicitly for deliverance: “And ah for a man to arise in me, / That the man I am may cease to be!” (I, 396-7). The difficulty is that even when the new man arrives, the old one refuses gracefully to quit the stage. The speaker does change, from a melancholic, violent man into a lover; but the former self reasserts itself the moment his childhood enemy confronts him. This is one reason why he is so fascinated by the lovely shell on the Breton beach just after he has killed his old rival. The shell is the dead self of some mollusk that has now moved on, leaving the shell “Void of the little living will / That made it stir on the shore” (II, 62-3). The creature may seem to have left it behind, but the shell is not therefore to be ignored:

Frail, but of force to withstand,
 Year upon year, the shock
 Of cataract seas the snap
 The three decker’s oaken spine
 Athwart the ledges of rock.

(II, 72-5)

However unassuming they may sometimes seem, dead selves are indestructible. The wish to forget one's former self, and the impossibility of doing so, drives the speaker of *Maud*, like that of "Locksley Hall," to the desperate resolution of war.

The conundrum of *In Memoriam*, however, though it concerns the same issues, is somewhat different. Unlike his other speakers, who try to kill off an earlier phase of existence but who soon encounter the return of the repressed, the Tennyson of *In Memoriam* wishes to believe that there *is* continuity from state to state. The difficulty arises when he tries to postulate a continuity between the living Hallam and the dead Hallam. He is capable of momentarily forgetting that any change has taken place, as when he pictures how his friend "should strike a sudden hand in mine, / And ask a thousand things of home" (XIV, 11-12). Yet he is repeatedly compelled to admit that these things are gone – that Hallam's hand and voice will never reach him again. Physical death is too absolute a discontinuity to be treated in the same manner as the daily deaths of former selves; the difference between Hallam as he is now and as he used to be is simply too great to be glozed over by an act of selective memory.

The consolation finally comes in the speaker's intimation of immortality; yet it is a specifically Tennysonian immortality – not a progression (like Wordsworth's) that forgets former states of being, but one that remembers everything:

That each, who seems a separate whole
Should move his rounds, and fusing all
The skirts of self again, should fall
Remerging in the general Soul,

Is faith as vague as all unsweet:

Eternal form shall still divide

The eternal soul from all beside;

And I shall know him when we meet.

(XLVII, 1-8)

By conceiving an afterlife of memory, Tennyson is able to preserve the idea of an integral self, even in the face of overwhelming change – and death. Heaven solves the conundrum that had faced Tennyson on earth: that to forget (Hallam) and to remember (his “change” [XLI, 8]) were equally devastating. Tennyson’s distinctive heaven resembles earth in every way save one: there is no change (“selves” is here reduced to “self”), and so no need for forgetting. *In Memoriam* is a masterpiece of “negative capability”: it is able and willing to contemplate conflicting ideas without deciding between them. The poem therefore does not propose to resolve the inherent tension between memory and forgetfulness; but it does suggest that consolation is perhaps to be found in the prospect of eventual changelessness. Less than a decade later, the *Rubáiyát* would respond to the same problem very differently – by embracing the inevitability of change, and hence of oblivion.

II

The distinctive methods of the *Rubáiyát* are illuminated by another of Borges’s stories, which deals not with the capacity for infinite, instantaneous memory, but with the process of memory indefinitely drawn out. “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*” concerns a young French symbolist whose life’s work is to write *Don Quixote* – not to

transcribe it, not to transpose it to the present, not to write an equivalent, but to write the original, which he had read once, as a boy, and of which he maintains a foggy memory, “much the same as the imprecise, anterior image of a book not yet written.”¹² This extraordinary undertaking is inspired in part by a “fragment of Novalis . . . which outlines the theme of *total* identification with a specific author” (32).

Herein lies much of the appeal of Borges’s fantasy: his recognition that a reader who truly loves the work of an author is not satisfied merely with reading his or her works, still less with memorizing them; the dedicated reader wishes to identify with the process of actually conceiving the work. It is a commonplace that all reading is actually writing, or misreading; but Menard is not doing anything of the sort – “Any insinuation that Menard dedicated his life to the writing of a contemporary *Don Quixote* is a calumny of his illustrious memory” (32). All readers misread or rewrite, but only the truly kindred spirit does what Menard does: appropriates. Such appropriation demands a fine balance between memory and forgetting – remembering the words but forgetting their origin, obliterating the distinction between self and other.

Menard’s unusual project makes him a remarkably close fictional approximation of Edward FitzGerald, as is evident from Borges’s brief, beautifully perceptive sketch, “The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald.” FitzGerald is usually described simply as a “translator,” but his relationship with his favorite authors, as Borges describes, was remarkably personal: “FitzGerald is aware that literature is his true destiny, and pursues it with indolence and tenacity. Over and over again he reads *Don Quixote*, which seems to him almost the greatest of books (he does not wish to be unjust to Shakespeare and ‘dear old Virgil’) and his passion embraces the dictionary in which he looks up words.”¹³

But this real-life Pierre Menard dedicated himself to the translation not of Cervantes but of another beloved and kindred spirit, Omar Khayyám, and then “A miracle happens: from the lucky conjunction of a Persian astronomer who ventures into poetry and an English eccentric who explores Spanish and Oriental texts, without understanding them entirely, emerges an extraordinary poet who resembles neither of them” (95).

FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát* deserves all the semi-mystical language and veneration that Borges gives it, because it is one of the oddest and most extraordinary poems in English. It is, for one thing, quite unclassifiable, thanks to FitzGerald’s Menardian knack for writing someone else’s poem. Borges is not alone in refusing to ascribe it either to FitzGerald or to Omar: librarians have had the same dilemma, and anyone looking for editions or references is almost invariably required to look under both names. The translation, as FitzGerald admitted, is terrifically inexact; yet FitzGerald no more wrote “a contemporary *Rubáiyát*” than Menard wrote “a contemporary *Don Quixote*.” All of his liberties and his tinkering are done in good faith in the service of another: “I suppose very few people have ever taken such pains in Translation as I have.”¹⁴ The result is something selfless, yet at the same time personal: because this singular genre – the creation of another’s work – is in fact peculiarly typical of FitzGerald. It was FitzGerald’s habitual trick to ascribe to others his own words or images: he was a free translator, an intrusive editor, and an inveterate misquoter (that most common unacknowledged form of literary collaboration), but he never took credit for his contributions.¹⁵ Almost all of his so-called translations appear with only the original author’s name on the title-page.

But although all of FitzGerald's works show the same tendency for self-effacing collaboration as his *Rubáiyát*, none of them meant nearly as much to him as his Omar, whom he claimed as his "property."¹⁶ Omar's verses appealed to FitzGerald for their hedonistic negligence;¹⁷ to be sticklingly meticulous in his translation of them did not seem either necessary or proper. "Total identification" with the author required, in this case, not a perfect reconstruction of the text, but just the opposite. So when FitzGerald put forward his version of the *Rubáiyát* (anonymously, of course), the only way he could do so truly and ingenuously, with respect both to Omar and to himself, was to misremember almost every word.

The *Rubáiyát* continually exhorts us to do the very thing that Tennyson found so difficult – to forget, or at least to remember imperfectly. Forgetting is always problematic, but it is particularly so for a poet, since poetry is traditionally a mode of commemoration and preservation. It is worth examining the *Rubáiyát* in some detail, therefore, to try to understand how it achieves that very elusive state, oblivion. We might begin by noticing that there was at least one aspect of the original Persian that FitzGerald did not misremember: the all-important *aaba* rhyme-scheme. This remembering is more difficult than it may seem – is, in fact, an act of memory so extraordinary as to equal an act of Menardian creativity. It is by no means self-evident that non-English verse-forms should be retained in an English translation: Arnold, for instance, required a lengthy argument to make his case that Homer's hexameters should be translated by hexameters. FitzGerald's assumption of the foreign verse-form is not only more successful than Arnold's,¹⁸ but more daring. Hexameters are not entirely uncommon in English poetry, but an *aaba* rhyme-scheme is.¹⁹ Unrhymed lines in English stanzas almost invariably

come in twos (and so, though they do not rhyme with each other, at least they do-not-rhyme with each other, as it were); couple this odd unrhymed line with a triple *a* rhyme, and you have something that sounds quite alien to English ears. Swinburne wrote “*Laus Veneris*,” according to one account,²⁰ within minutes of his enraptured first perusal of the *Rubáiyát*; yet he was unable or unwilling to retain the unrhymed third line, but rhymed it instead with the third line of the succeeding stanza. Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” also begins as a reminiscence of the *Rubáiyát* stanza (though in tetrameters), but Frost too recuperates the *b* rhyme, making it the rhyme-word of the next stanza.

Nor was the retention of the rhyme scheme any easier for FitzGerald. His Latin translations of the quatrains for the most part retain the original scheme, but his first attempt at an English version does not:

I long for Wine! oh Saki of my Soul
 Prepare thy Song & fill the morning Bowl;
 For this first Summer Month that brings the Rose
 Takes many a Sultan with it as it goes.²¹

The extraordinary effect of FitzGerald’s brave decision to stick to the peculiar-sounding original is evident when one compares the final version of this quatrain:

Each Morn a thousand Roses brings, you say;
 Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday?
 And this first Summer month that brings the Rose
 Shall take Jamshyd and Kaikobád away.

This quatrain illustrates – as almost any of the quatrains might do equally well – how the form of the stanza speaks as effectively as the words. The third line proposes a new element, a change; but it is immediately, even willfully forgotten by the fourth line. The return of the initial rhyme is like a resignation, a refusal to try to struggle with the new terms that have been introduced – as again in the next quatrain:

Well, let it take them! What have we to do

With Kaikobád the Great, or Kaikhosrú?

Let Zál and Rustum bluster as they will,

Or Hátim call to Supper – heed not you.

(X)

If only forgetting were such an easy thing. But the fourth line, although it forgets to rhyme with the previous line, is not itself unrhymed. The “heed not you” at the end refuses to acknowledge the presence of the third line (or of Zál and Rustum); but it does look back to the sound of the opening of the quatrain. Yet this insistent triple rhyme (*do* – *ru* – *you*) is itself a sophisticated form of obliteration. It would be too simplistic to think that the narcotic, oblivious effect of the *Rubáiyát* was due only to its unrhymed lines; if this were true, blank verse would have the same effect, infinitely multiplied. The *Rubáiyát* is extraordinary not only for its unrhymes, but for its rhymes: the triple rhymes of each quatrain are themselves repeated (“rose,” “wine,” “dust” all reappear as the rhyming sounds of several quatrains); and the poem is also full of internal rhymes and assonance (“Rustum bluster”). This chiming is FitzGerald’s way of dealing with the persistence of matter and of memory. One can make oneself forget some things by ignoring them (like the third line’s *b* rhyme); others are unignorable, and must be erased

by being repeated, but at the same time slightly transformed. It is therefore no contradiction if the poem's forgetful nature that the quatrain quoted above ("Each Morn a thousand Roses brings, you say") rhymes with the supposedly unrhymed line of an earlier quatrain:

Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring

Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling:

The Bird of Time has but a little way

To flutter – and the Bird is on the Wing.

(VII)

We thought we had seen the last of "way," only to find it echoed two quatrains later ("say," "Yesterday," "away"). But this reappearance, as I say, is no anomaly, because the poem is so concerned with the transformation of dead selves – how everything dies only to be reborn in different shape. Every rose was once a king; every lost friend is now grass on which we sit; and we shall soon be grass for others. Sounds likewise are constantly repeated, echoed, and transformed, and the cumulative effect of these rhymes is an impression, not of persistence, but of ephemerality. Each avatar is so brief and unremarkable as to be negligible; words and their component sounds are formed and unformed as easily as clay (and vice-versa). The lush repetition of words and images is a formal means of ensuring that each individual occurrence will be forgotten. Thus the "Spring" mentioned in the quatrain above reappears near the end of the poem:

Yet Ah, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!

That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!

The Nightingale that in the branches sang,

Ah whence, and whither flown again, who knows!

(XCVI)

As if to pre-empt the objection (or the consolation) that Spring does not close permanently – that it is reborn again a year later, and therefore is not obliterated – Fitzgerald brings it back in the very next quatrain.

Would but the Desert of the Fountain yield

One glimpse – if briefly, yet indeed, reveal'd,

To which the fainting Traveller might spring,

As springs the trampled herbage of the field!

(XCVII)

We are here offered several glimpses of “spring”: not only the springing of the traveller and of the herbage, but the “Fountain” itself – “fountain” being another word for “spring.”²² And yet for all the multiplicity of “springs” in this quatrain, none of them is the same “Spring” that vanished in the quatrain before; you can not step into the same spring twice. Spring, roses, clay, both as concepts and as rhymes, keep cropping up in the poem, but always slightly changed from the previous incarnation. If they are remembered at all, they are misremembered.

At a larger structural level, the quatrains themselves are similarly forgetful.

Although the separate quatrains echo each other, they do not usually pick up where the last one left off (unlike many paired or consecutive sections of *In Memoriam*). They give the impression of being at the same time cumulative and independent – as if each quatrain had a memory, but only a vague one, of what the others had said. This characteristic makes it very difficult to remember the order of the quatrains, which helps

explain how such a remarkable poem can also be so utterly self-effacing. FitzGerald himself gives perhaps the best description, in a concise critique of Gray's "Elegy": "I am always remembering, and always forgetting it: remembering, I mean, the several stanzas, and forgetting how they link together, partly, perhaps, because of each being so severally elaborated."²³ The *Rubáiyát*, which is even less sequential than Gray's elegy, achieves an even greater forgettability, though at the risk of lyric fragmentation. Yet in the context of the poem's hedonism, the effect achieved is not fragmentation, but a pleasing dissolution.

III

The *Rubáiyát*'s distinctive appeal lies in the verve and sheer exuberance with which such obliteration is celebrated. The later editions of the poem make some attempt at casting it as cyclical, based on the cycle of day and night;²⁴ but the work is less notable as a cycle than as an example of recycling. The constant changes that bodies undergo, which had caused Funes such surprise and Tennyson so much grief and desire for oblivion, here provide a sense of release. We discover body parts emerging in the most unusual places: the garden has a lap (XIX); the river has a lip (XX), and so does the earthen urn (XXXV), which is capable of speaking and kissing. Like the constant repetition of homonyms ("spring") or of phonemes ("earthen urn"), the reappearance of body parts destabilizes and blurs our perception of entities in the poem; dismemberment prevents remembering. As a result, repetitions that would elsewhere be infelicitous and body-images that would elsewhere be grotesque here become a source of delight.

An extreme example comes in the description of the polo-ball:

The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes

But Here or There as strikes the Player goes.

(LXX)

It is likely that in a poem less crammed with remembrances of human decay, a reader would not notice the “eyes and nose” peeping up out of the first line; here, by contrast, the pun is slyly insistent. Shelley says that poets ought to revitalize dead language, and this is exactly what FitzGerald quite literally does (in this case with the stock collocation “ayes and noes”). The changes that bodies undergo in the text is analogous to the changes that rhymes and images and stanzas undergo. In both cases, readers are left with no choice but to do as they are told: to forget, since the endless variations of form prevent any single body or image from taking root in the memory.

One more example may serve to show how the *Rubáiyát* encourages us to rid ourselves of deep-seated memories. Consider for instance one of the poem’s numerous literary allusions:

Look to the blowing Rose about us – “Lo,
 “Laughing,” she says, “into the world I blow,
 “At once the silken tassel of my Purse
 “Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw.”

(XIV)

This quatrain contains, if not the “strongest,” at least one of the most original misreadings of the final lines of Wordsworth’s *Intimations Ode*:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
 Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Wordsworth freezes the blooming flower in the depths of imaginative memory; FitzGerald digs it back up and makes even the flower subject to change. Thoughts about flowers may lie too deep for *teers*, he suggests, but no flower can long be free from *tairs*. This whimsical misreading reminds us that from the point of view of the flower (who is here given a voice), brooding recollection is inappropriate; like everything in the *Rubáiyát*, she appears and is “at once” forgotten. FitzGerald plays on Wordsworth’s “blows” to give it a double sense: Wordsworth’s flower not only blooms but blows away. Thus even Wordsworth is recalled only to be subject to immediate transformation and dissolution.

Yet for all the forgetfulness that it both practices and preaches, the *Rubáiyát* was not forgotten, but became for over a century one of the most-read and most-remembered works in English. “In the 1953 edition of *The Oxford Book of Quotations* there are 188 excerpts from the *Rubáiyát* (of which 59 are complete quatrains) – this is virtually two-thirds of the total work. Not even Shakespeare or the Authorized Version of the Bible are represented by such massive percentages.”²⁵ Comparable representation appears, perhaps even more appropriately, in Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*. More appropriately, I say, because “familiar” is exactly the word to describe the status of quotations from the *Rubáiyát*, since the poem has this further peculiar distinction: many people can quote phrases or even whole lines that appear in it, and yet one can almost never be said entirely to have remembered a line of the *Rubáiyát*.

For what we call the *Rubáiyát* is actually four different versions of the poem, all of which, but especially the first and the fourth,²⁶ are considered standard. After having put forward the poem a first time, FitzGerald showed the same loving disregard for it as

he showed for Omar's Persian version, and retouched even those quatrains which have become the most well-known. Each successive edition has the effect of both recalling and effacing earlier versions – the poem's "dead selves." To be sure, there are other works that exist in various forms or stages.²⁷ But rarely do all the forms enjoy equal recognition; rarely are the variations so liberally sprinkled through the whole work; and rarely is it a work as much-quoted as the *Rubáiyát*: the A, B, and C texts of *Piers Plowman* for instance manage two entries in Bartlett's between the three of them.

This coexistence of different versions is an essential aspect of the *Rubáiyát*, and it may very well have contributed to the poem's unexpected endurance. There is a sad truth about literature which is felt by all who delight in poetry: that a perfectly memorized poem is to some extent a dead poem. When one knows a poem so well that one does not even have to reflect in order to recreate it *verbatim* in one's mind, one gets little pleasure from remembering it. Poems and passages on the other hand that are only half-remembered, that need to be reconstructed, continue to haunt the memory. A line that is missing only a single word can be savored and considered, and enjoyed in a way that is denied to lines that arrive already complete. And while searching for the perfect word, the lover of poetry can even know in part the thrill of creating a great work, merely from the fact of having forgotten it.

This thrill is characteristic of the *Rubáiyát*, and enables it to remain a living presence in the mind far beyond the usual date. When one remembers a stanza of one version of the *Rubáiyát*, even word for word, one still gets the sense of possessing only the half of it; every lover of the *Rubáiyát* is thus a miniature Pierre Menard – and a miniature Edward FitzGerald. Indeed, we identify with FitzGerald doubly when we try

to remember the poem. While we “write” the poem, we identify with him as we do with any author whose work we half-remember; and we identify with him again because this half-recollected reconstruction of the *Rubáiyát* is exactly what he undertook with Omar’s version. This strong sense of identification may go some way to explaining why FitzGerald the man has held such a great fascination for his readers – at times, indeed, has been a greater source of interest than his poem itself.²⁸

For myself, I can say that I have studied the poem for years – I have surely read it ten times as often as Hamlet’s soliloquy or “Ozymandias”; but it has been a long time since I have had the pleasure of mentally reconstructing either of these latter two. FitzGerald, on the other hand, I am never sure of having remembered, even after all those readings. And perhaps this same peculiarity that keeps the *Rubáiyát* alive in my mind explains in part why it continues to haunt the public in spite of its familiarity. For several generations bits of the poem were everywhere;²⁹ many a person still living probably grew up with a faded sampler in his or her bedroom that read:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Yet even for that person, this stanza might not be ruined by over-familiarity – because the same person could go downstairs and find, engraved on a plate or some other heirloom:

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.³⁰

It is surely questionable whether the same benefit would accrue to other poems if it had been their fate to be presented to the world in such a multiplicity of forms. It would be disconcerting if *In Memoriam*, for example, existed in four equally authoritative versions; for even though *In Memoriam* does not purport to give answers, it is a poem of dwelling, of considering, and hence would only be injured by allowing the evidence of its own piecemeal composition to become too prominent. So it is not just “benevolent destiny”³¹ that granted the *Rubáiyát* this gift of misrememberability, but something inherent in the work itself. The poem is forgetful, or at least absent-minded, at every level: the rendition of the Persian, the rhymes, the quatrains, the different editions – all simultaneously recollect and efface dead selves. In its form, and its forms, the *Rubáiyát* constantly misremembers, then demands and ensures that it should itself be richly misremembered in turn.

Tennyson and FitzGerald caught the fancy of their age by offering two poetic responses to the conflicting demands of memory and forgetting. In the early part of his career, culminating in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson revealed the importance of forgetting in allowing continuity from state to state of being – thus linking the question of memory to that other great Victorian concern, evolution. FitzGerald, in his no less enduring masterpiece, responded by creating a work which paradoxically succeeds in commemorating oblivion. The *Rubáiyát*’s peculiar authorial and textual multiplicity render it unique, and hence, in the strictest sense, inimitable; but readers and poets alike seized upon it, if not as a model, yet as an inspiration.

¹ Sts. XXI, 1-2; XXX, 3-4. All quotations from the *Rubáiyát* refer to the fourth edition, as reprinted in Christopher Decker's critical edition of the poem (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997). I choose the fourth edition for convenience only, since (as I explain below) all editions are equally relevant.

² Norman Page, "Larger Hopes and the New Hedonism: Tennyson and FitzGerald," in *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, ed. Philip Collins (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), p. 156.

Decker's introduction notes the wide variety of audiences the poem has enjoyed: "It has been issued in illustrated editions, in pocket-sized wartime editions for servicemen in combat, in variorum editions, in limited editions, and in cheap paperbacks" (p. xiii). It is reprinted in its entirety in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

³ I am thinking, for instance, of Isobel Armstrong's massive *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), which allots the *Rubáiyát* less than a paragraph. Pauline Fletcher, *Gardens and Grim Ravines: The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), does not mention the poem at all, although Khayyám's Persian rose-garden is arguably the most famous single garden in the poetry of the period. Other books on Victorian poetry are no more generous.

⁴ "Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. VIII (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 306-7. Arnold cites Themistocles' dictum again in *The Popular Education of France* and *God and the Bible* (as Super points out, VIII, 461).

⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Donald L. Lawler (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 86. Ironically, these words are addressed to Basil Hallward, whose portrait of Dorian serves as a constant reminder of “what has happened.”

⁶ Borges wrote not only the piece on FitzGerald that I mention below but also similar short essays on Stevenson, Wilde, Chesterton, Wells, and Shaw.

⁷ “Memory [Ay me!]” (c. 1827), line 5. All quotations from Tennyson refer to *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Other early works on the same subject include “Memory! dear enchanter” (published 1827) and “Ode to Memory” (1830).

⁸ William Cadbury, “FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát* as a Poem,” *ELH* 34, 4 (Dec. 1967): 541-567, notes striking verbal parallels (in addition to the clear thematic similarities), pp. 554, 557.

⁹ Translated by Anthony Kerrigan in Jorge Luis Borges, *A Personal Anthology*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 42.

¹⁰ “Tennyson’s Idle Tears,” in Collins, ed., *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Pace* James R. Kincaid, who holds that the desire to forget overwhelms the compulsion to remember; see “Forgetting to Remember: Tennyson’s Happy Losses,” chapter 6 of his *Annoying the Victorians* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹² “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” in Borges, *Ficciones*, tr. Anthony Bonner (New York: Everyman, 1993), p. 34.

¹³ Tr. Alastair Reid, *A Personal Anthology*, pp. 94-5.

¹⁴ Letter of April 27, 1859, in *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. A. M. and A. B. Terhune, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 335.

¹⁵ FitzGerald went so far as to touch up the paintings in his collection, not excluding those he ascribed to Old Masters. See Robert Bernard Martin, *With Friends Possessed: A Life of Edward FitzGerald* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 227.

¹⁶ “But in truth I take old Omar rather more as my property than yours: he and I are more akin, are we not?” Letter of Dec. 8, 1857; Terhune, II, 305.

¹⁷ FitzGerald turned to Omar specifically to help him forget: his period of most intense translation came while he was reluctantly preparing for his unhappy marriage in 1856.

¹⁸ Arnold gives tentative hexameter translations of a few passages of Homer near the end of “On Translating Homer,” *Super*, I, 160-7.

¹⁹ The rhyme-scheme may, however, derive some of its effect from our familiarity with AABA metrical structures (the limerick is a good example); the deviation in the third element creates a suspension that is resolved in the return at the end. See Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London and New York: Longman, 1982), pp. 94-96.

²⁰ The story is told by George Meredith in a letter to the *Times* of April 14, 1909, reprinted as letter 2553 in C. L. Clive’s edition of Meredith’s letters (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 1691-2.

²¹ Terhune, II, 289. FitzGerald calls this “a poor Sir W. Jones’ sort of parody,” referring to a quatrain that FitzGerald saw translated into verse in Jones’s Persian grammar, which can be found in the edition of the *Rubáiyát* by Dick Davis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 36. Like FitzGerald’s first attempt, Jones’s translation abandons the Persian rhyme-scheme, and rhymes *aabb*. FitzGerald’s Latin versions are reprinted in Decker’s edition.

²² Daniel Schenker, “Fugitive Articulation: An Introduction to *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*,” *Victorian Poetry* 19, 1 (Spring 1981): 49-64, mentions the play on the words “spring” and “fountain” (p. 50).

²³ *Euphranor* (first published 1851), reprinted in *Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. W. A. Wright (London: Macmillan, 1889), II, 53. This passage was added in the third edition, published in 1882, by which time all four versions of the *Rubáiyát* had appeared.

²⁴ Comparing the second edition to the first in a letter to his publisher Quaritch of March 31, 1872, FitzGerald writes of the speaker: “He begins with Dawn pretty sober and contemplative: then as he thinks and drinks, grows savage, blasphemous, etc., and then again sobers down into melancholy at nightfall” (Terhune, III, 339).

²⁵ From Davis’s introduction to his edition, pp. 1-2. More recent editions of the *Oxford Book of Quotations* have severely cut back on quotations from the *Rubáiyát*; the entry in Bartlett, on the other hand, has not changed. It is easy to forget just how familiar the poem was until just a generation ago; as late as 1959, Hugh Kenner could begin a book on Eliot by calling “Prufrock” the “best-known English poem since the *Rubaiyat*” (*The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* [New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959], p. 3).

²⁶ What is often called the fifth edition is just the fourth edition with a few punctuation changes, penciled in by FitzGerald before his death.

²⁷ Recent critical emphasis on the multiplicity of versions of even our most canonical texts makes it necessary to explain what is distinctive about the *Rubáiyát*. It is rare for multiple versions to continue to coexist, rather than to be hidden away in publication history. Thus although there are multiple *Hamlets* and *King Lear*s, conflated versions of

both plays with relatively few major variants have until very recently dominated classroom and stage. *The Prelude* existed in one version throughout the nineteenth century, and two through most of the twentieth; only the demands of Romantic anthologists put into circulation a third (“1799”) and more recently a fourth (the “five-book *Prelude*”). Multiple versions of the *Rubáiyát*, on the other hand, have always coexisted in popular editions: the edition published in the Golden Treasury Series (1899), though it was one of the first posthumous British editions intended for a popular market (rather than for connoisseurs or enthusiasts), was a mini-variorum, reprinting the first and fourth editions, together with an appendix showing all variants from the other editions.

²⁸ There are far more biographies and anecdotes than studies of the verse, and a critical edition of FitzGerald’s letters was available seventeen years before the first good critical edition of the *Rubáiyát* itself.

²⁹ Any second-hand bookshop or consignment shop, in America as much as in England, bears witness to this. Paul Elmer More, writing in 1899, attests to the poem’s being quoted even “in a far-away mining camp” (“Kipling and FitzGerald,” *Shelburne Essays, Second Series* [New York: Putnam’s, 1907], p. 105). See also Barbara J. Black, *On Exhibit: Victorians and Their Museums* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), whose second chapter (pp. 48-66) offers an account of the *Rubáiyát* as both a collection and something to be collected. Black provides an excellent analysis of just how strong a cultural presence FitzGerald’s poem was; see especially pp. 59-61.

³⁰ Stanza xii of the fourth edition, and xi of the first edition, respectively.

³¹ Thus Borges describes the mystery of the poem’s composition, “The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald,” p. 96.