

Dr. Ahmad Azarmi

دکتر احمد آزرمی

Department of English

از گروه آموزشی زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی

بحث و نقدی

در باره

ترجمه‌های رباعیات عمر خیام

به زبان انگلیسی

THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM: TRANSLATION OR TRANSFIGURATION?

Never to my Knowledge, in the history of the world's literature, has any work been so popular and yet, at the same time, so misunderstood as has the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. The 12th century persian scientist Omar, ever since the 19th century, has been praised, condemned, abused and yet admired. I venture to say that some critics who have evaluated the Rubaiyat do not adequately possess a bi-cultural and bi-lingual knowledge of the persian language.

As a native-born Persian and as a student of English literature, I would like to define in this paper the nature of the Rubaiyat and point out some problem of translation and criticism involved in the work of Omar khayyam.

Scholarly chaos and misunderstanding of Persian literature have a long history in Western thought. Although

Western scholars have always been curious about the mysteries of Persian literature, those mysteries have not always been conveyed accurately in their English form. And since, to my sorrow, Iran up to this day has not produced a literary critic; and moreover, since those Persian scholars who serve as critics judge their own literature by the standards imposed on it by Western critics (who, themselves are orphans of truth when it comes to Persian literature) one should not expect to find true scholarship in the critical literature of Persia.

For, grotesque though it may sound, Iranian scholars never rely on their own judgment in the matter, they constantly express themselves accordingly to the dictates of others. I have read many critical essays in Persian in which the critics have stated, "according to E. Fitzgerald..." or "Professor V.A. Zhukovsky, in his study of Persian literature, states... without realizing that the Fitzgeralds and Zhukovskys were not Persian-born critics of Persian literature but acquired their knowledge from natives of Persia. This fact itself indicates where the confusion of circular scholarship originates. And the old French proverb about translation being like a woman, either beautiful or faithful, in the case of Omar's work seems to be out of fashion, since the translation is not the only problem. Another part of the problem is that there is no actual proof available which can demonstrate that Omar actually was the writer or speaker of the Rubaiyat.

The word Rubaiyat is the plural of an Arabic word, deriving from Rubai meaning a stanzaic form of four lines (Rubae meaning four).

Rubai is an Arabic translation of the Persian word

traneh, which means an arrangement of four lines. But Traneh in the Persian language is not necessarily the equivalent of an English quatrain with a rhyme scheme of A.A.B.A, it is merely a kind of song. And since it is a song by nature, it is usually sung or read, rather than written. Persians for years have worn their festive occasions by singing the Rubaiyat or using them as proverbs. And since most traneha are epigrammatic in substance, it is only reasonable to assume that they were usually the tools of clever intellectuals.

We know this from the fact that no Persian poet is known for his traneh, although he may have experimented with a handful of them.

To relate the translated Rubaiyat of Edward Fitzgerald to Omar calls forth two doubts: one is that we are designating Omar a poet; the second is that there is no evidence that Omar actually wrote these Rubaiyat. It may surprise the reader to know that Khayyam became famous as a poet in Iran only after Fitzgerald's translation. For five centuries Persia had known Omar only as a mathematician, astronomer and philosopher. Poetry belonged to Firdusi, Sadi, and Hafiz. And even if he did write these traneha, it may not have been to prove his poetic skill, but perhaps to show the bitterness of his cynicism. No page of the history of Persian literature before 1859 spoke of Omar as a poet. So, the question remains, where do the more than 1200 Rubaiyat of Omar come from? The answer is reasonably simple. They come from Persia, without doubt, but almost everyone of them appears to have been written by a group of drunken clergymen and folk-song writers who because of the fear of ostracism aroused by some of the more scandalous quatrains

related them to Omar Khayyam. It should be added here, however, that the whole culture of Persia tends to be centered on proverbs. It is difficult for a Persian to speak more than a few hundred words without using some proverbs. And as far as the nature of these proverbs is concerned, they must usually be very much up to date. Therefore, people constantly invent new proverbs, and to give them more bite and authority, one usually attributes them to the philosophers or poets. Omar happened to be one of these philosophers to whom the 1200 Rubaiyat were attributed:

A student of Persian literature may be troubled when he notices a great deal of inconsistency of ideas throughout the Rubaiyat: because he will find that very few of the Rubaiyat continue and develop the same idea. One is apt to get a hundred different ideas by the time he has finished reading them. Of course, each quatrain, since it stands by itself, is a complete thought; but, in a collection, it should play a part of the whole and also should manifest the general philosophy of the author. The Rubaiyat of Omar show everything but that. And since Omar was a mathematician, one would expect some consistency in his thought. As a matter of fact, Omar's stubborn rationality, as the records show, caused him to be most unpopular among his Sufi friends. A novice in Persian literature can see the contradictions when he notices that in one quatrain the author is belittling God. In another he is praising Him, in the next one, he is declaring the death of God, and hoping for wine and woman.

Edward Fitzgerald was aware of this problem when, in translating, he tried to select the quatrains which more or less conveyed similar hedonistic ideas, yet, somehow, he did

not bother to find out precisely who the original authors were or whether there were other versions of the quatrains: either Fitzgerald suffered from an inadequate knowledge of the language of Persian poetry, or he took for granted the words of his young teacher, William Cowell. In either case, he won his game. And moreover, his own poetic nature helped him many times to achieve his position in English literature, which otherwise might be dubious. Fitzgerald was admittedly a poet, and he also proved to be a gentleman by giving all the credit to Omar. He is among the very few translators in the world who became well known, and the reason is that he did not translate, but rather, transfigured.

To clarify the concept of transfiguration as a more apt term than translation, it is worth studying one of Fitzgerald's well-remembered quatrains, number XII

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

The Quatrain itself, as far as Edward Fitzgerald's artistry is concerned, is a beautiful one, but to prove whether or not it is a true translation of the original Persian, or belongs to Omar, or is understood by critics and scholars, is the main purpose of this study.

The anglicized version of the original poems A and B and my literal translation read:

TOUNG-A-MAY-A-la'l KHA-HAM o DIVANI
 SADD-A-RAMA-GHI BA-YAD o NISFI NANI
 VAN-GAH MAN o TU NI-SHŠTE DAR VIRANI
 KHOSH-TAR BO-VAD ON ZE MOLK-A HAR SULTANI
 I want a flask of ruby pure wine

A dam of resistance (will power and half a loaf of
bread And then you and I seated in a desolation
That would be more pleasant than a sultan's throne.

B- GAR DAST DAHAD ZE MAGHZ-A- GANDOME NANI
VAZ MAY DU MANI, ZE GOOS-FANDI RANI
BA DEL-BA-RAKI AGAR NAISHTI KHOSH BASH
AISHE BO-VAD ON NA HAD-YE HAR SULTANI

If the hand could give a loaf of the pith of wheat
And of wine, two mans (six kilo-liters) and of sheep a
thigh,

with a little sweet-heart if you are seated, be happy
It is a celebrstion that no sultan is worthy of.

Sadegh Hedayyat, the Persian authr who is considered
one of the sensitive critics of amar, (Rubaiyat of Khayyam,
Tehran, 1961 3rd. ed.) attributes quatrain A to Omar, but
never mentions anything about B. Some earlier texts attribute
the lines B to Omar; but modern critics of Persia avoid the
third line of this version (with a little sweet-heart if you
are seated, be happy) and change it completely because of its
homosexual possibility. And perhaps for the same reason M.
A. Frooghi, the author and critcs of Pesia, in his collection
of Omar's poems (Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam. Tehran 1961)
attributes the poem B to Omar but substitutes the following
for the third line:

With a tulip face seated in the garden of rosses, be
happy (no source is given for this line).

Professor A.J. Arberry (Omar Khayyam: romance of the
Rubaiyat) produced his own literal translation of the A and
B versions:

A-I desire a flask of ruby wine and a book of verse
A morsel to keep soul and body together, half a loaf is

needed, And then you and I seated in desolation-

That would be more delightful than a sultan's dominion.

B- If they should offer a loaf of the pith of the wheat,

A cup of wine, the thigh of a sheep,

And then you and I seated in a desolation-

That would be a pleasure beyond the bounds of any sultan.

The second line of poem A in Arberry's translation is not a literal translation, but rather a mis-reading. He shows his own weakness in the Persian language by stating, "semehow Fitzgerald found the 'sadd-i-ramaghi' of poem A identical with 'maghz' of poem B. For in the Persian language (along with most other Indo-European languages) the Pronunciation of the words plays an important role in the language. This is especially true with the Persian language because the written words (even by knowing their individual meaning and etymology) do not separately convey the same meaning, as they do collectively their suggested pronunciation. This is why Professor Arberry in the original poem A reads 'sadd-i-ramaghi,' rather than 'sadd-a-ramaghi'. For the letter "i" would change the meaning (a dam of resistance) to a fragmented thought. And the Persian word maghz, meaning pith of wheat has no conception with sadd-a-ramaghi.

J.H. McCarthy's prose translation of A and B poems (Rubaiyat of Omar kheyam translated, Strand, 1889) shows another presentation:

Give me a flagon of red wine, a book of verses,
a loaf of bread, and a little idleness. If with such
store I might sit by thy dear side in some lonely
place, I should deem myself happier than a king in

his kingdom.

When the hand possesses a loaf of wheaten bread, two measures of wine, and, a piece of flesh. when seated with tulip cheeks in some lonely spot, behold such joy as is not given to all sultans.

McCarthy's translation of the A and B poems seems to be closer to the original than those of Fitzgerald's and Arberry's.

Another translation of quatrain number XII is E.H. Whinfield's.

(Quatrains of Omar khayyam, London 1882) Whinfield, like Fitzgerald combines the A and B poems in this fashion:

Give me a skin of wine, a crust of bread,
A pittance bare, a hook of verse to read:
With thee, O love, to share my lowly roof,
I would not take the Sultan's realm instead.

As the reader notices, Whinfield's translation is more free and quite different from other translations in English of quatrain number XII which show different attitudes to the idea and beauty of this poem. Among these, one which stands as modern and popular is the work of a collaboration by Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah. (The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, London 1967) Unlike other translators they found it easier and more readable by translating Edkard Fitzgerald's version:

A gourd of red wine and a sheaf of poems--
A bare subsistence, half a loaf, not more--
Supplies us two alone in the free desert:
What Sultan would we envy on his throne?

The two translators claim that they are showing the Sufi quality of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat; but one cannot

find it difficult to notice Fitzgerald's hedonistic idea in the poem rather than the spirit of Sufism. Their claim of sufi-quality brings another major problem: i.e., a probable misunderstanding of the great tradition of Persian sufi philosophy.

The questionable scholarship and the corruption of many original works in the process of their translation, demonstrate the unfortunate positions of the authors works have become altered through their translators' misunderstanding. Omar Khayyam is one of the examples of this recurring phenomenon. Happy are they who can read the great writers in their original tongues.

