

The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald

A man, Omar ben Ibrāhīm, is born in Persia in the eleventh century of the Christian era (that century was, for him, the fifth of the Hejira); he studies the Koran and its traditions with Hassan ben Sabbah, the future founder of the sect of the Hashishin, or Assassins, and with Nizam al-Mulk, who will become the vizier of Alp Arslan and conqueror of the Caucasus. The three friends, half in jest, swear that if fortune some day favors one of them, the luckiest will not forget the others. After a number of years, Nizam attains the position of a vizier; Omar asks only for a corner in the shade of this good fortune, where he may pray for his friend's prosperity and think about mathematics. (Hassan requests and obtains a high post and, in the end, has the vizier stabbed to death.) Omar receives an annual pension of ten thousand *dinars* from the treasury of Nishapur, and is able to devote himself to study. He does not believe in judicial astrology, but he takes up astronomy, collaborates on the reform of the calendar promoted by the Sultan, and writes a famous treatise on algebra, which gives numerical solutions for first- and second-degree equations, and geometrical ones—by means of the intersection of cones—for those of the third degree. The arcana of numbers and stars do not drain his attention; he reads, in the solitude of his library, the works of Plotinus, who in the vocabulary of Islam is the Egyptian Plato or the Greek Master, and the fifty-odd epistles of the heretical and mystical *Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity*, where it is argued that the universe is an emanation of the Unity, and will return to the Unity. . . . It is said at the time that he is a proselyte of Alfarabi, who believed that universal forms do not exist apart from things, and of Avicenna, who taught that the world is eternal. One account tells us that he believes, or pretends to believe, in the transmigration of the soul from human to animal body, and that he once spoke with a donkey, as Pythagoras spoke with a dog. He is an atheist, but knows how to interpret, in orthodox style, the most difficult passages of the

Koran, for every educated man is a theologian, and faith is not a requisite. In the intervals between astronomy, algebra, and apologetics, Omar ben Ibrāhīm al-Khayyāmī works on the composition of quatrains whose first, second, and last lines rhyme; the most extensive manuscript attributes five hundred to him, a paltry number that will be unfavorable for his reputation, for in Persia (as in the Spain of Lope de Vega and Calderón) the poet must be prolific. In the year 517 of the Hejira, Omar is reading a treatise titled *The One and the Many*; an uneasiness or a premonition interrupts him. He gets up, marks the page that his eyes will not see again, and reconciles himself with God, with that God who perhaps exists and whose blessing he has implored on the difficult pages of his algebra. He dies that same day, at the hour of sunset. Around that time, on an island to the north and west that is unknown to the cartographers of Islam, a Saxon king who defeated a king of Norway is defeated by a Norman duke.

Seven centuries go by with their enlightenments and agonies and transformations, and in England a man is born, FitzGerald, less intellectual than Omar, but perhaps more sensitive and sadder. FitzGerald knows that his true fate is literature, and he practices it with indolence and tenacity. He reads and rereads the *Quixote*, which seems to him almost the best of all books (but he does not wish to be unjust to Shakespeare and "dear old Virgil"), and his love extends to the dictionary in which he looks for words. He knows that every man who has some music in his soul can write poetry ten or twelve times in the natural course of his life, if the stars are propitious, but he does not propose to abuse that modest privilege. He is a friend of famous people (Tennyson, Carlyle, Dickens, Thackeray) to whom he does not feel inferior, despite his modesty and courteousness. He has published a decorously written dialogue, *Euphranor*, and mediocre versions of Calderón and the great Greek tragedians. From the study of Spanish he has moved on to Persian, and has begun a translation of the *Mantiq al-Tayr*, that mystical epic about the birds who are searching for their king, the Simurgh, and who finally reach his palace beyond the seven seas, and discover that they are the Simurgh, that the Simurgh is each one and all of them. Around 1854 he is lent a manuscript collection of Omar's compositions, arranged according to the alphabetical order of the rhymes; FitzGerald turns a few into Latin and glimpses the possibility of weaving them into a continuous and organic book that would begin with images of morning, the rose, and the nightingale, and end with those of night and the tomb. To this improbable and even unbelievable proposition, FitzGerald devotes his life, that of an indolent, solitary, maniacal man. In 1859, he publishes a first version of the

Rubáiyát, which is followed by others, rich in variations and refinements. A miracle happens: from the fortuitous conjunction of a Persian astronomer who condescended to write poetry and an eccentric Englishman who peruses Oriental and Hispanic books, perhaps without understanding them completely, emerges an extraordinary poet who resembles neither of them. Swinburne writes that FitzGerald "has given to Omar Khayyám a permanent place among the major English poets," and Chesterton, sensitive to the romantic and classical elements of this extraordinary book, observes that it has both "an elusive melody and a lasting message." Some critics believe that FitzGerald's Omar is, in fact, an English poem with Persian allusions; FitzGerald interpolated, refined, and invented, but his *Rubáiyát* seems to demand that we read it as Persian and ancient.

The case invites speculations of a metaphysical nature. Omar professed (we know) the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the soul's passage through many bodies; centuries later, his own soul perhaps was reincarnated in England to fulfill, in a remote Germanic language streaked with Latin, the literary destiny that had been suppressed by mathematics in Nishapur. Isaac Luria the Lion taught that the soul of a dead man can enter an unfortunate soul to nourish or instruct it; perhaps, around 1857, Omar's soul took up residence in FitzGerald's. In the *Rubáiyát* we read that the history of the universe is a spectacle that God conceives, stages, and watches; that notion (whose technical name is pantheism) would allow us to believe that the Englishman could have recreated the Persian because both were, in essence, God or the momentary faces of God. More believable and no less marvelous than these speculations of a supernatural kind is the supposition of a benevolent coincidence. Clouds sometimes form the shapes of mountains or lions; similarly, the unhappiness of Edward FitzGerald and a manuscript of yellow paper and purple letters, forgotten on a shelf of the Bodleian at Oxford, formed, for our benefit, the poem.

All collaboration is mysterious. That of the Englishman and the Persian was even more so, for the two were quite different, and perhaps in life might not have been friends; death and vicissitudes and time led one to know the other and make them into a single poet.