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The Final "Yes" in *Ulysses* and *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*

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My title may seem odd at first sight but points to a significant coincidence: the last word of *Ulysses*, "Yes", is related to Edward Fitzgerald's well-known English translation of poems by the eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyám, entitled *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,* published in 1859, the same year Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* saw the light. And I say well-known because, indeed, it was so, not only in English-speaking countries but also throughout Europe. In fact, Fitzgerald's is considered to be the most successful version and to have reached the widest reading public in English literature, clearly surpassing the Elizabethan classics (Chapman's translation of Homer, Golding's translation of Ovid, among others), perhaps A. E. Housman's *Shropshire Lad* being its sole rival. But the curious fact is that, nowadays, the editions of the *Rubáiyát* based on Fitzgerald's English version still appear in many languages. And what is even more important, Fitzgerald's translation has seeped deep in the English language, to such an extent that some more or less learned expressions from the *Rubáiyát* are already part of the English linguistic heritage. The following examples are worthy of mention: "A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness", "Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face", "I came like Water, and like Wind I go", "The Flower that eleven have blown for ever dies", "And that inverted Bowl we call the Sky", and "turn down an empty Glass", to quote but a few.[1] If we follow the entries in the *Oxford Book of Quotations* (1953), we find 188 quotations (two-thirds of the book), surpassing Shakespeare and the Authorized Version of the Bible.[2] As will be evident later, we are dealing with popularity without precedent: a translation published in numerous pocket editions, in luxurious, illustrated limited editions,[3] in pirate editions in the United States, and so on. This vast circulation led to the appearance of diverse parodies of the *Rubáiyát*, some of which are catalogued in the British Library: *The Golfer's Rubáiyát* (1903), *The Rubaiyat of Omarred Wilhem* (1916), *The Rubaiyát of William the War Lord* (1915), *The Rubáiyát of*

Omar Khayyám, Jr, etc. (1902), *Rubáiyáy of Omar Dogyám* (1914), *The Rubaiyat of Some-of-us. Being certain undergraduate parodies of the illustrious Persian* (1913).

The above helps us to establish the very real significance of Fitzgerald's translation within the English and North American literary traditions. As such, one can reasonably postulate some sort of intertextuality between the poems and Joyce's literary output**.** My suspicion was first aroused some years ago when I was preparing an edition of *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and realised that one of the quatrains could be a key precursor to the "Yes" with which *Ulysses* ends. But it was only recently that I began to give the subject more in-depth treatment and to verify whether the reasons that gave rise to my first intuition existed or were only mere speculation. I can already advance that the result is a positive one, always keeping in mind the premise that flat assertion is never good counsel, especially in relation to Joyce's work. Yet in spite of all such counsel, surprising facts exist that confirm Joyce's knowledge of Fitzgerald's translation. This is a question that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been previously investigated.

It is no novelty to point out the noteworthy presence of Oriental culture in Joyce's work, mainly in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, largely viewed from a Western perspective, and the critical studies that exist follow similar lines of investigation, with few exceptions. One indication of this tendency is the publication of a special issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly* (35.2/3 [1998]), significantly entitled "ReOrienting Joyce", in which it is stressed that critics had hardly emphasized topics related to Oriental culture and their sources until the Orientalist discourse started to gain interest, mainly thanks to the impact of *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said and subsequent works. As regards my own perspective, I must state that the Orientalist discourse has nothing to do with this essay. It is revealing to verify that none of the essays in the special issue of the *JJQ* mentions Fitzgerald's translation, and in my opinion there are more than sufficient reasons to do so. Consequently, I will proceed to enumerate what cannot simply be considered mere coincidences and thereafter examine direct references to both Joyce's and Fitzgerald's work.

A distinctive feature common to *Ulysses* and the *Rubáiyát* lies in the fact that the two works take place in the course of one day. As we recall, *Ulysses* starts atop the Martello Tower with Buck Mulligan as the main character: "He faced about and blessed thrice the tower, the surrounding land and the awaking mountains" (*U* 1.9-12). The first lines of the *Rubáiyyat* read:

> WAKE! For the Sun who scatter'd into flight
> The Stars before him from the Field of Night,
> Drives Night along with them from Heav'n, and
> The Sultan's Turret with a Shaft of Light.[4]

As we observe, in both cases towers are evoked and the day begins. It is also worth mentioning that the first word of the quatrain is "WAKE", and this is echoed in the first lines of *Ulysses* as "the awaking mountains". In light of what will follow, it would also be worthwhile to remember *Finnegans Wake*, mainly keeping in mind that after the 1868 second edition of the *Rubáiyát* Fitzgerald substituted "AWAKE" for "WAKE".

To these first coincidences it is necessary to add that, as we know, Joyce's novel takes place during June 16th, and the poem develops in spring and the first month of summer, as is related in quatrains IV, VII, IX and XXIII. As an added curiosity, in the latter we read: ". . . and Summer dresses in new bloom" (99). Could it be, perhaps, that Bloom comes from Persia?

What has been said up until now are only a few features, perhaps surprising, that lead us to think of a possible relationship between the *Rubáiyát* and *Ulysses,* but that would only remain mere speculation were further evidence not available. Nevertheless, I am certain that Joyce had read Fitzgerald's translation and that he knew it well, since several reasons support this idea, as I shall show next.

In one of his lectures in Trieste, "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages" (1907), Joyce mentions Fitzgerald's translation expressly:

> Even today, despite her heavy obstacles, Ireland is making her contribution to English art and thought. That the Irish are really the unbalanced, helpless idiots about whom we read in the lead articles of the *Standard* and the *Morning Post* is denied by the names of the three greatest translators in English literature—Fitzgerald, translator of the *Rubaiyat* of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, Burton, translator of the Arabian masterpieces, and Cary, the classic translator of the *Divine Comedy*. (*CW* 171)

Throughout this lecture Joyce not only tries to convince us that the Irish and English cultures are different; he also places himself within the Irish Orientalist discourse that goes back many centuries—one that does not in any way resemble the contemporary lines of investigation mentioned above—and that fixed the origins of Ireland in Asia Minor, to be exact in Phoenicia, according to legend. In point of fact, this was what Irish

historians, whom Joyce knew well, sustained, as Joyce recognises in the lecture:

> This language [Irish] is oriental in origin, and has been identified by many philologists with the ancient language of the Phoenicians, the originators of trade and navigation, according to historians. (*CW* 156)

But at the same time, these references to the Orient originated in Irish mythology, and in particular the legends of *Lebor Gabhala Erenn* or *Book of Invasions,* which locate the first Irish settlers in the Western Mediterranean, as Joyce assumes in his lecture (*CW* 156-7). This matter *per se* would deserve an in-depth study, but this would lead us far from the purpose of our analysis.[5]

Further definitive evidence that Joyce knew *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* very well can be found in *Ulysses*. Early in the "Circe" episode, Stephen refers directly to the work in dialogue with Lynch:

STEPHEN

> Anyway, who wants two gestures to illustrate a loaf and a jug? This movement illustrates the loaf and jug of bread or wine in Omar. Hold my stick. (*U* 15.116-8)

Without any doubt Stephen refers to quatrain XII of the *Rubáiyát*, which reads as follows:

> 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! (97)

Furthermore, we know that Joyce did not use the 1859 first edition, since it is in the second 1868 edition that Fitzgerald modifies the second verse and changes "A Flask of Wine" to "A Jug of Wine", which is what Joyce mentions in *Ulysses.*

In their well-known notes to *Ulysses*, both Weldon Thornton, on the one hand, and Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, on the other, include this direct reference to the *Rubáiyát*.[6] Beyond the borders of *Ulysses*, references to Omar Khayyám also appear in *Finnegans Wake*, according to Adaline Glasheen in her *Third Census of "Finnegans Wake"*.[7] Lastly, another irrefutable piece of evidence is the fact that

Joyce owned a copy of Fitzgerald's translation of *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in his personal library, as Connolly catalogues it.[8] Unfortunately, we do not know on which edition this copy is based because it has no date. We presume, however, that it is the well-known 1879 edition, since the previous ones of 1859 (250 copies), 1868 (200 copies) and 1872 enjoyed short issues.

In addition to Omar Khayyám's presence in Joyce, one last piece of evidence still remains, evidence that motivated the present study and that refers to the final "Yes" of *Ulysses* and its origin in the *Rubáiyát.* It is not now my intention to interrupt my line of argument and debate the diverse interpretations that the final "Yes" has inspired among critics, although I find Lyman's proposal very suggestive, considering as she does that the final "Yes" is a statement of the human imagination and of life itself.[9] What I want to propose is something completely different, namely a hypothesis on the origin of that "Yes" which opens "Penelope" and closes *Ulysses.* And this is the point I have wanted to reach from the beginning, since as I see it, the answer can be found in *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which Joyce knew so well. The quatrain that would confirm the hypothesis is number XLII and reads as follows:

> And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
> End in what All begins and ends in—Yes;
> Think then you are TO-DAY what YESTERDAY
> You were—TO-MORROW you shall not be less. (102)

The first two lines would be the key point to the closing of *Ulysses*, that final "Yes". Surprisingly, that "Yes" had already been brought forward in the "Sirens" episode, in a revealing way to my understanding. The fragment in question begins with the words assigned to Simon Dedalus and reads**:**

> —By Jove, he mused, I often wanted to see the Mourne Mountains. Must be a great tonic in the air down there. But a long threatening comes at last, they say. Yes. Yes.
>
> Yes. He fingered shreds of hair, her maidenhair, her mermaid's, into the bowl. Chips. Shreds. Musing. Mute.
>
> None nought said nothing. Yes. (*U* 11.219-24)

What are we to make of the final line above when we compare it with the second verse of the quatrain by Omar Khayyám quoted above: "End in what All begins and ends in—Yes"?

Not surprisingly, the word "Yes" received special attention on the part of Joyce, since in the last eight lines of the 1961 new Random House edition nine incorporations of "Yes" with regard to the manuscript appear.[10] Consequently, and to conclude, the origin of that final "Yes" of *Ulysses***,** in view of the evidence presented above, could well have come from the quoted quatrain of Omar Khayyám, a work that Joyce knew very well, as we have seen.

Notes

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[1] See Dick Davis, "Introduction", in Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, ed. Dick Davies (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989) 1.

[2] Davis 1.

[3] E. M. Forster had one of these copies, which his aunt had given him and which, having lent it to an Oriental friend, the novelist regretted losing: "I still miss that lovely book and I wish I possessed it". See E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 306.

[4] Omar Khayyám, *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: A Critical Edition*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald, ed. Christopher Decker (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997 [1879]) 96. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[5] Information related to Joyce's knowledge of Irish mythology and his attitude in regard to the Irish Revival can be found in María Tymoczko's "The Broken Lights of Irish Myth: Joyce's Knowledge of Early Irish Literature", *James Joyce Quarterly* 29 (Summer 1992) 763-774 and in L. H. Platt's "Joyce and the Anglo-Irish Revival: The Triestine Lectures", *James Joyce Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1992) 259-266.

[6] See Weldon Thornton, *Allusions in "Ulysses"* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1968 [1961]) 359 and Don Gifford with Robert J. Seidman, *"Ulysses" Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's "Ulysses"* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988 [1974]) 454.

[7] Adaline Glasheen, *Third Census of "Finnegans Wake"* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977).

[8] See Thomas E. Connolly, *The Personal Library of James Joyce* (Buffalo: U of Buffalo P, 1995) entry 103. The edition Joyce owned is Edward Fitzgerald, trans., *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (London: George G. Harrat and Co. Ltd., n.d.).

[9] See Stephany Lyman, "Revision and Intention in Joyce's 'Penelope'", *James Joyce Quarterly* 20.2 (Winter 1983) 193-200.

[10] Lyman 194.