



KHAYYAM, OMAR VI. FRENCH TRANSLATIONS OF THE

Omar Khayyam's Arabic treatise on algebra, *Maqāla fi'l-jabr wa'l-moqābala* (see KHAYYAM xiv. AS MATHEMATICIAN), translated by Franz Woepcke (1826-64) as *L'Algèbre d'Omar Alkhayyâmî* (Paris, 1851), was the first of Khayyam's works to appear in a French translation. He was therefore first known as a scientist in France. His quatrains were translated a short time later. Thereafter, he achieved fame as a great poet and one of the most frequently translated. From 1857 to 2010, there were no fewer than 119 translations of the quatrains (Coumans, p. 45), the majority based on the original Persian text but some relying on the famous English version by Edward FitzGerald (q.v.; 1809-1883).

The first translation of his poems was by Joseph Héliodore Garcin de Tassy (1794-1878), published in the *Journal Asiatique* (5th ser., 9, January 1857, pp. 548-54) as "Note sur les Rubâ'iyât de 'Omar Khaïyâm." Only ten quatrains were translated, each preceded by the Persian original based on the Bodleian Library manuscript (Ouseley 140) at Oxford, dating from 1460. A comprehensive volume of the French translation of the quatrains was published a decade later, in 1867. It was commissioned by Napoleon III and carried out by Jean-Baptiste Nicolas (1814-75). No other translation appeared until 1900, but since then, Khayyam has been regularly translated into French.

Jean-Baptiste Nicolas worked as an interpreter (dragoman) at the French



legation in Persia, and was later appointed as the French consul in Rasht (see FRANCE iii. RELATIONS WITH PERSIA 1787-1918). He first published a translation of fifty quatrains in 1863, and a more comprehensive edition in 1867 with 464 quatrains, including the original Persian text (Figure 1). His translation had a great impact on the perception of Khayyam in France, instigating a debate about Khayyam's personality and philosophical beliefs. In the introduction, Nicolas presents Khayyam's work as "so essentially abstract in its philosophical thoughts, so strangely mystical in its figurative expressions (too often presented [by its interpreters] in the form of a repellant materialism)," (*si essentiellement abstrait dans ses pensées philosophiques, si étrangement mystique dans ses expressions figurées [trop souvent présentées sous des formes d'un matérialisme repoussant]*," preface, p. I). According to Nicolas, the quatrains have to be understood through the prism of Sufism. He frequented Sufi circles in Iran and was acquainted with their spiritual notions. His symbolic interpretation of the poems was markedly different from FitzGerald's point of view, as the latter contended that Khayyam's poetry had to be read literally, from a materialistic point of view. Subsequently, the perception of Khayyam's quatrains in England and in France differed widely. Although the French philosopher Ernest Renan (1823-92) praised Nicolas' translation, he took a stance in favor of FitzGerald's literal reading and paid homage to Khayyam's subtle attitude, preserving "the free genius of Persia" (*le libre génie de la Perse*) in spite of the Arab Muslim conquest which had brought a new mode of thinking (pp. 56-57). The poet and dramatist Théophile Gautier (1811-72) wrote a long article in *Le Moniteur universel* of 8 December 1867 (reprinted in idem, *L'orient: Tome second*, 1877, pp. 57-72) commenting favorably on Nicolas' translation: "the work is now as perfect as possible" (*l'ouvrage est maintenant aussi parfait que possible*," p. 58). He agreed with Nicolas that Khayyam was a Sufi (pp. 62-71), though he conceded that the references to wine in several poems should be taken at their face value and not systematically interpreted as symbols of divinity (p. 70).



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یکنان بدو روز اگر شود حاصل مرد وز کوزه شکسته دمر آن سرد
 محکوم کم از خودی چرا باید بود یا خدمت چون خودی چرا باید کرد

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تا زهره و مه در آسمان گشت پدید بهترزی لعل کسی هیچ ندید
 من در غم زنی فروشان کایشان به زانچه فروشند چه خواهند خرید

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آنانکه محیط فضل و آداب شدند از جمیع کال ذمیع اصحاب شدند
 ره زین شب تاریک نبردند برون نگفتند فسانه و در خواب شدند

رباعیات حکم خیام در دارالمرکز رشت حسب الترمایش عالیجاه تجدد

و تجدد قراة

مقرب السطان سرکار نیکولا تروسمول دولت بهیة فرانسه تحریر شد

که در کارخانه پاریس مطبوع گردد

حرره محمد اسمعیل ابن

تجد

ابراهیم

فی شهر رمضان

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Figure 1. Title page and end page of Nicolas' edition and translation of the Robā'iyāt of Omar Khayyam.

Translators of Khayyam came from different backgrounds and can be divided into three groups. Apart from the orientalists and scholars of Iranian studies including Nicolas himself, who formed the most significant group, there were poets and writers, some of whom lacked sufficient knowledge of Persian to translate directly and relied instead on FitzGerald's English version. Emile Désiron's version (1959) is the most celebrated. This raises the question of the accuracy of a translation based on another translation, particularly since the FitzGerald version is well known to be a *belle infidèle* as he is prone to take great liberties with the original. The third group consists of Iranians (scholars, writers, or poets) resident in France or in Iran. Most of these translations appeared from the 1980s onward, but a few were written earlier. For instance,



Abolgassem Etessam-Zadeh (Abu'l-Qāsem E'teṣām-zāda)'s *Les Rubaiyat d'Omar Khayyam* was published in Tehran by the publishing house of Beroukhim (Beruḳim) in 1931 and in France by Maurice d'Hartoy in 1934. The translation won an award from the *Académie française*, which praised its high quality. Other translations were collaborations, such as Claude Anet and Mirza Muhammad's *Les 144 quatrains d'Omar Khayyam*, published by Éditions de la Sirène in Paris in 1920. Although his full name does not appear in this edition, in an article in *La Revue de Paris* (60, 1 December 1920, p. 597, n. 1) on Omar Khayyam, Anet acknowledged the distinguished scholar Moḥammad Qazvini (q.v.; 1877-1949) as his erudite collaborator.

The choice of the manuscripts and the poems to translate poses its own problems. The number of quatrains varies greatly from one translation to another: Nicolas translated 464 quatrains, while Gilbert Lazard's translation contains 101 poems (*Cent un quatrains de libre pensée*, Paris: Gallimard, 2002). This contrast reflects the multitude of available manuscripts and the large differences among them. In addition, the question of authenticity of all the poems adds further to the problem. It is not possible to establish a trend in the manuscripts used for all the French translations of Khayyam. For example, Nicolas does not mention which manuscript he had used. He was not a philologist like his contemporary Jules Mohl (1800-1876), who translated Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* and clearly cites the manuscripts he had used and the philological difficulties he had encountered. Some translators did not note whether or not they had used FitzGerald's version. For instance, Charles Grolleau (1867-1940), the Belgian translator of G. K. Chesterton and Oscar Wilde, implied in the title of his translation that it had been translated from Persian, but he quoted FitzGerald's translation in his introduction and admitted to using the literal English translation that Edward Heron-Allen (q.v.; 1861-1943) had edited in 1899, based on the Bodleian manuscript (*Les quatrains d'Omar Kháyýám: traduits du persan sur le manuscrit conservé à la «Bodleian Library» d'Oxford, publiés avec une introduction et des notes*, Paris: Carrington, 1902, p. 26).

The translators had to think about the various ways of translating the poetic language of Khayyam, and their choices differed considerably. Some opted to translate the quatrains into a more or less poetic prose. This was especially the case for the first translators. Garcin de Tassy (1857) and Nicolas (1867) chose plain prose, without even seeking assonance or suchlike stylistic effects. Charles Grolleau (1902) brought only a typographic appearance of verses to



his work, and the lines were bereft of meter or rhyme. He used some alliteration and presented a text similar to a prose poem. Anet and Muhammad (1920), and Franz Toussaint (1924) translated the quatrains into poetic prose.

For those who chose a verse translation, further questions arose regarding the choice of meter and rhyme. Concerning the rhyme, it is often an “aaba” structure, i.e. an imitation of the Persian structure of rhymes in a quatrain (for example, de Marthold, 1910; Etesam-Zadeh, 1931). Some translators chose another scheme, such as Jean Lahor (Henri Casalis’ pseudonym) with rhymes in “aabb” and Jean Ruillier (2000), who employed, in addition to the Persian “aaba,” the rhymes “abba,” “aabb,” and “abab,” which correspond more closely to rhyme schemes in French. For the meter, almost all of the poetic translations present a twelve-syllable meter, which is the common French alexandrine. However, as Gilbert Lazard has pointed out, this French meter does not fit the task: the alexandrine is a solemn meter and fails to convey the lightness of the Persian quatrain (introduction pp. 15-16). He therefore opted for the French *huitain* (eight-line stanza) of heptasyllables, using assonances more than real rhymes. He referred to Pierre Seghers’ translation (1982), in which he chose poems in four octosyllables without rhymes. Some other translators proposed a translation in free verse, with or without rhymes, depending on the poem, and with no fixed meter (e.g. Fouladvand, 1960). This choice of free verse avoids the “unforgiving laws of our metric,” which forces translations to stray far from the original text, as Anet and Muhammad noted in the introduction to their 1920 translation (“*lois impitoyables de notre métrique*,” p. 3). Arthur Guy (1935) tried to imitate the Persian meter, using alternation between short and long syllables, explaining that, even if short and long vowels do not exist in the French language, there are long syllables by position (before two or more consonants).

These translations made it possible for the cultured readership in France, and particularly writers and poets, to become acquainted with Khayyam. Some authors explicitly noted the influence of Khayyam on their work, using his name in the title, or him as a character. Maurice Bouchor wrote a play *Le songe de Khéyam* in 1892. The anarchist poet Laurent Tailhade published the essay *Omar Khayyam ou les poisons de l’intelligence* in 1905, in which he praised Khayyam’s thoughts, but also blamed him for his overindulgence in wine. Employing Toussaint’s translation (1924), the musician Jean Cras composed a piece of chamber music *Cinq Robayat* for piano and baritone in



1924 (see KHAYYAM xiii. MUSICAL WORKS BASED ON THE *RUBAIYAT*). Khayyam is the main protagonist in the novel *Samarcande*, published in 1988 by Amin Maalouf, a Lebanese author writing in French.

The influence is obvious in other authors' work. The already mentioned Jean Lahor published a translation of Khayyam in *En Orient* in 1907. The first part of the book consists of the re-editing of *Les quatrains d'Al-Ghazali*, which was first edited in 1896 and consists of Lahor's poems written as if Ġazāli (q.v.) had composed quatrains in the style of Khayyam. In another work, *L'Illusion* (1888), there are sometimes very similar verses to Khayyam, and the poet used the same imagery: beautiful bodies that have turned into clay, dialogues between the dead and the living who will soon be called to join them in death. In *Sub tegmine fagi* (1913), Jean Bernard freely adapted twenty-one quatrains. In *CVII quatrains*, published by Alexandre Arnoux in 1943, Khayyam's influence is omnipresent, both in themes (death, the place of the human being in the universe, the fragility of existence) and in the form of a single quatrain itself, which does not exist in French poetic tradition. *Les roses de la nuit*, published by Jean Kobs in 1953, deals with the same themes.

Sometimes the influence of Khayyam is less perceptible, and it is difficult to ascertain proof of its existence. However, it is well known that Théophile Gautier, André Gide, and Marguerite Yourcenar were thoroughly acquainted with Khayyam's quatrains. In the case of Théophile Gautier, the imprint of Khayyam on his writing was limited because he had discovered the poet when almost of all his works had been written. Concerning Gide, he indicated in the journal *Parse* (1921, pp. 33-34) that he was influenced by Persian literature, especially Sa'di, Ferdowsi, Hafez (qq.v.) and Khayyam. Indeed, Hassan Honarmandi (pp. 6-26) shows that some passages in *Les nourritures terrestres* (1897) subtly reflect Khayyam. Marguerite Yourcenar explained in *Carnets de notes de "Mémoires d'Hadrien"* (1951) that, aside from the Roman emperor Hadrian, the only historical character she was tempted to write on was Khayyam.

As for the popularity of these numerous translations, Jos Coumans has shown in the statistical part of his study (p. 46), that the third most frequently published and re-edited translation (after the two English translations, FitzGerald's and Whinfield's) is Nicolas'. This is the case not only regarding other French translations, but compared with all Khayyam's translations into foreign languages. Additionally, some of the translations into other languages, such as Italian, were based on this French edition. This said, it should be



pointed out that some later translations do more justice to Khayyam than Nicolas' pioneering rendering.

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