



KHAYYAM, OMAR VIII. ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS

No other Persian poet has enjoyed such enduring fame in Italy as has Omar Khayyam ('Omar Kayyām). Italian libraries hold only four manuscripts (15th-17th centuries) that together contain eighteen quatrains ascribed to Khayyam, one of which is thought to be unattested elsewhere (Piemontese, 1989, pp. 134-35, 292, 303-4, 339-40; Bertucci). The first English and German versions of some of Khayyam's quatrains had already appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, but the encounter with and reception of, Khayyam's poetic work in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, was the result of the translation and rewriting of the English poet Edward FitzGerald (q.v.; d. 1883) in the years 1859-79. Thus, in Italy, the more scholarly approach to Khayyam's work by a few dedicated Iranists at a fitful pace over many decades has had to contend with the overbearing heritage of the so-called FitzOmar, which has been ardently loved, discussed, translated, and recast into Italian many times. This dual process of reception has taken place in two intense phases: the two decades leading up to World War I, and the two decades immediately following World War II.

In the first key period, around the year 1890, a few samples of Khayyam's quatrains were translated directly from Persian in the context of academic or occasional publications by scholars: Italo Pizzi, professor of Persian at Turin University (5 quatrains in 1887, and 60 quatrains in his *Storia della poesia persiana*, 1894, from Nicolas's edition; these were inserted, together with some



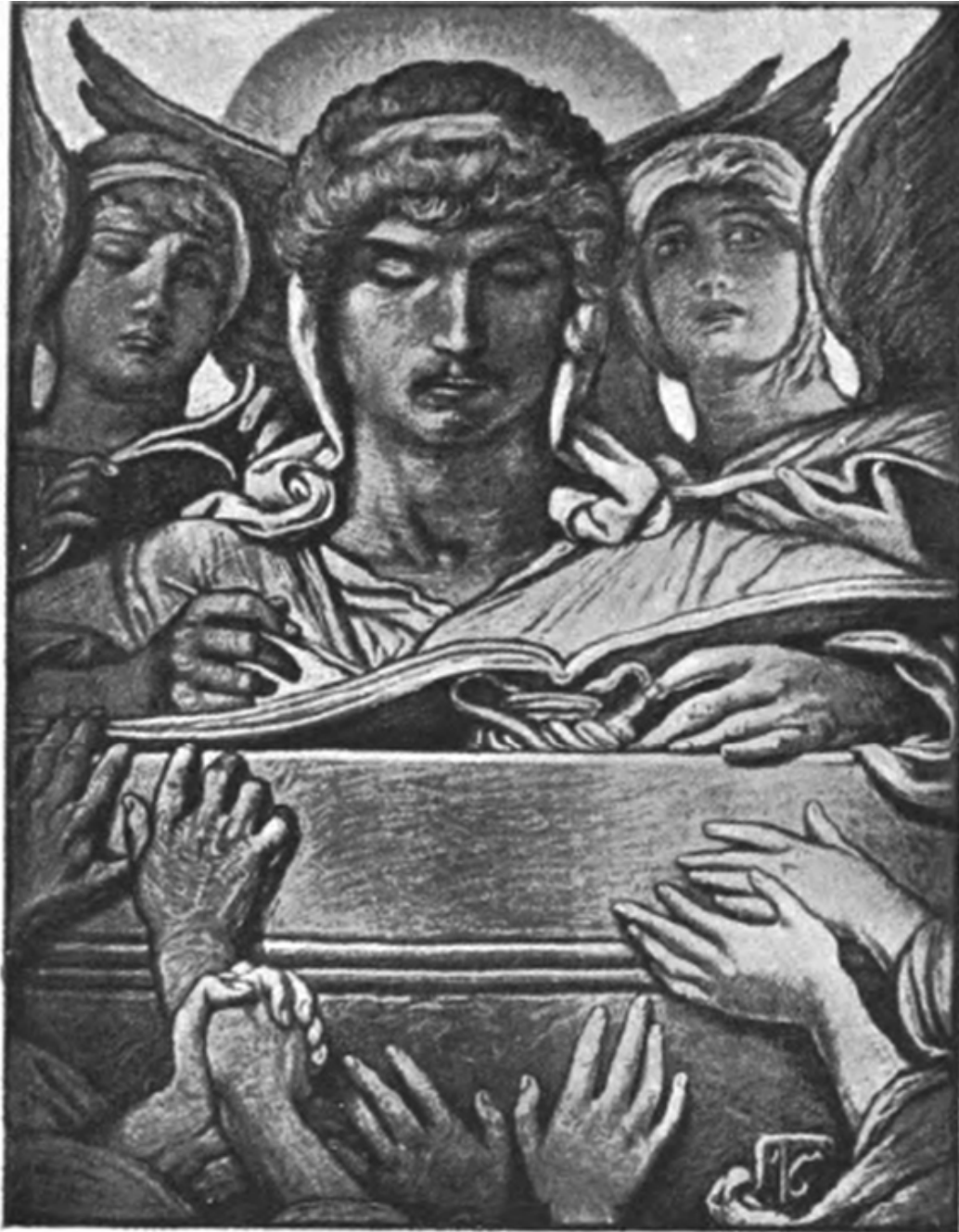
historical notes by Pizzi from the same book, in Dole's revised edition of his comparative work, II, pp. 536-56), and Pizzi's disciple and brother-in-law Vittorio Rugarli, a close friend of the Italian poet Giosuè Carducci, who also drew on Nicolas's edition to produce two small wedding booklets in 1895, containing 12 and 10 quatrains respectively. However, the call to Khayyam's writings was only heeded decisively within the intellectual networks of the Italian bourgeoisie upon the discovery and popularization of FitzGerald's work. This process took place mainly in the literary milieu of Italian Decadentism tied to the figure of the writer and poet, and, later, politician, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and eventually came on the trail of the aestheticist-oriented reading promoted in Victorian England by Charles Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites. Indeed, it was D'Annunzio's close friend and collaborator, Adolfo De Bosis, who published the first essay on FitzGerald's third edition of Khayyam with illustrations by Elihu Vedder in the journal *Il Convito* (June 1895); it included the Italian translation of fifteen quatrains from FitzGerald's English version.

The first complete translations of FitzGerald's work were produced later. One was by Diego Angeli, a collaborator on *Il Convito*, in two editions around 1910 (PLATE I), including the 101 quatrains of FitzGerald's third edition; these were severely criticized for the translator's alleged poor knowledge of English. Another was by Fulvia Faruffini in 1914, containing the 75 quatrains of FitzGerald's first edition. Within the context of general fascination and appreciation shown by most intellectuals toward the newly discovered universal "poet philosopher," only a few critical voices emerged, including the eminent literary critic Emilio Cecchi, who considered the Khayyam-FitzGerald enterprise as an exotic *mis-en-scène* submerged in aestheticism and mysticism, and thus the fruit of dangerous cultural decay. The third notable translation from FitzGerald was the valuable work of Mario Chini, first published in the journal *Nuova rassegna di letterature moderne* in 1907, then in a successful volume in 1916; it still drew on FitzGerald's third edition, but it was the first version to provide an accurate literary and historical profile of both the original Persian poet and the English translator.

In between these two channels of reception (the first one little developed by then), one can discern a few other attempts at translating and presenting Khayyam's work to an Italian audience, using sources other than the original Persian texts and FitzGerald's editions. Edward Heron-Allen's (q.v.) English revision of the Bodleian manuscript that had been the basis of FitzGerald's



work was the source of an indirect translation by Vittorio Gottardi (1903: 155 quatrains through Grolleau's French version; this happens to be the first collection of Khayyam's poems in a volume); it also provided the text for Tommaso Cannizzaro's 1916 translation (158 quatrains). It is not clear which language provided the basis for the widely disseminated version by Massimo Spiritini (two editions, one in 1907 under the pen name Massimo da Zevio, the other in 1924, enlarged from 77 to 84 quatrains, in a larger collection of Persian lyrics; in 1939, he republished a selection of slightly revised quatrains in an anthology of world poetry). A poet himself and a translator from various European languages, Spiritini claimed that his translation was the result of the collaboration with "a friend from Hamadan" (Spiritini, 1924, p. 52); we nevertheless can rule out the possibility that he himself knew some Persian.



« L'eterno scrittore scrive, e come ha scritto volta la pagina :
ma tutta la vostra pietà e tutto il vostro sapere non po-
tranno deciderlo a cancellare solo una riga, nè tutte le vostre
lacrime laveranno una sola parola di quanto ha scritto ».

Disegno di E. Vedder (dal Convito).



Khayyám, Versione di Diego Angeli, Bergamo, n.d., reproducing one of Elihu Vedder's illustrations for the journal *Il Convito*. It depicts FitzGerald's quatrain 76 (in the 2nd edition): "The Moving Finger writes...."

At this early stage of Italian acquaintance with Khayyam, the Persian poet generally was presented and welcomed as a hero of human free thought, a sceptical enemy of hypocrisy and of religious and social ties, a sort of genius of atheism and a martyr of philosophy. In the context of Italy's deeply classical culture, frequent comparisons were made with Latin poets such as Lucretius, on account of certain Epicurean traits attributed to Khayyam's philosophy, and Horace, by way of his Anacreontic and apparently hedonistic lyric poetry. Some commentators pushed the matter even further, in creating audacious bonds with modern authors like François Rabelais, Voltaire, Giacomo Leopardi, and many others (e.g., Spiritini, 1907; Chini, p. XVII; De Lorenzo, pp. 116-31)

This phase also witnessed the production of a few notable poetic tributes to the figure of Khayyam—a testament to his emerging, cross-culture literary status. The first one (1890) was the fruit of Turin's scholarly environment, composed by the poet and professor of Italian literature, Arturo Graf, who was a colleague of Italo Pizzi (although, actually, this is a paraphrase of FitzGerald's quatrain XXIX, inserted in a wider poem). The other tributes are rooted in the milieu of Decadentism and its literary offshoots: They are the four-section poem "L'immortalità" (Immortality) by Giovanni Pascoli (1896), who learned about the Persian poet at the time of his collaboration with the journal *Il Convito*, and the poem "A Omar Khayyám" (To Omar Khayyam), by Vincenzo Cardarelli, composed in 1914, but published in 1942. References to Khayyam henceforth have been quite frequent in texts by Italian writers across many genres. Moreover, following the example of such English composers as Liza Lehmann and others, some compositions for piano and voice based on Khayyam's verses also appeared in Italy, like the ones by Elsa Olivieri Sangiacomo (1919), wife of the famous composer Ottorino Respighi; Francesco Santoliquido (1920); Giacomo Benvenuti (1929); and Guido Guerrini (1948). A later one by Azio Corghi (1966), based on four quatrains, was written for a male chorus.

With the exception of a couple of little-circulated collections of quatrains taken from FitzGerald in the early 1930s, the interwar period represents a break in the circulation of Khayyam's thought and poetry on the Italian peninsula,



possibly because it was felt that it would contrast with the dominant pragmatic ideologies of the Fascist era. Then, after the end of World War II, with the establishment of new schools of Iranian studies at universities in Italy (see ITALY xiv), further progress was made with the first large collection of quatrains translated directly from Persian. In 1944, Francesco Gabrieli (q.v.), who was mainly an Arabist but also worked on Persian sources, published a volume with historical introduction and annotations. This work, subsequently re-published in 1973 with various reprints, was based on Bertalan Csillik's editions of the Parisian manuscripts, through a comparison with the one at the Bodleian Library, and included 307 quatrains. The careful prose rendering of the poems by Gabrieli was praised by his friend and colleague, Alessandro Bausani (q.v.), who nevertheless did not refrain from adding a second scholarly edition of Khayyam's quatrains in Italian, published in 1956, with numerous reprints. Bausani's selection of 282 poems is based on Moḥammad-'Ali Foruḡi's and Arthur Arberry's (qq.v.) editions, and it constitutes an excellent example of faithful translation and poetic expression in elegant and rhythmic Italian. Among the meaningful contributions of Bausani's critical "Introduction" is the attempt to reallocate Khayyam's poetry in its proper historical world and ideological context, overtaking the simplistic interpretive dichotomy between the mystical Khayyam and the atheistic hedonist. According to Bausani (p. xxi), "In the Islamic concept of the world dominated by casualism and occasionalism, the three ways of faith, despair, and irony, are not too far one from another, and in Khayyam the emphasis on each one of these three could well depend on the moment's mood."

After the war, a second wave of collections of Khayyam's quatrains appeared, again by way of a number of intermediary languages. These collections often were mainly based on FitzGerald, but sometimes they were taken from other versions as well, such as the very popular French one by Franz Toussaint, issued in 1924 (apparently used for his translation by the classical philologist and poet Alessandro Zazzaretta, in 1948, republished in 1966). A well-known publication was promoted by Pierre Pascal, at that time chancellor of the Iranian embassy to the Holy See, who translated from Persian 453 quatrains, mainly from the controversial Cambridge University Library and Chester Beatty Library (q.v.) manuscripts, into both French (Rome, 1958) and Italian (Turin, 1960, with the collaboration of G. Degli Alberti).

Without counting the selections of quatrains appearing in various anthologies of Persian or world literature, whose sources are generally hardly traceable, a



number of other collections of Khayyam's poems have been published, with evidence of a renewed vogue during the 1990s and 2000s. These include an interesting attempt at a comparative translation and rewriting from French, English, and Italian (by C. Gasparini, 1991), as well as two versions of Paramahansa Yogananda's spiritual commentary to the *Quatrains* (1995), a quite successful recasting from various sources (by H. Haidar, 1997), and an Italian version (1999) of the much-debated translation produced in 1967 by Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah. An approximate estimate identifies up to twenty-eight different volumes in Italian (to 2013) devoted to Khayyam's poetry that include at least seventy-five quatrains (that is, the number in FitzGerald's first edition), of which about half depend directly on one of FitzGerald's English versions. This estimation remains approximate because of the difficulty in ascertaining the existence of collections of a commercial nature and scope, often with misleading titles. In recent years some multilingual editions have been published in Iran, which include Italian translations by anonymous authors (Coumans, pp. 196-204). However, despite the lack of continuity in dedicated Khayyamian studies within Italian scholarship to date, Gabrieli's and Bausani's versions of the 1940s and 1950s remain the most solid and reliable reference works for reading Khayyam in the Italian language.

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