Working through Memory and Forgetting

in Victorian Literature

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Figure 1: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Mnemosyne* (1868)
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"There is a goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne; but none of Forgetting," Richard Holmes writes in "A Meander Through Memory and Forgetting," "Yet there should be, as they are twin sisters, twin powers, and walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty over us and who we are, all the way until death" (95). It is hard to avoid the Victorian Mnemosyne, who makes regular guest appearances in the period's photography and art (Julia Margaret Cameron and Dante Gabriel Rossetti both produced works with the title *Mnemosyne*), but we should also remember her shadowy twin. For if the nineteenth century was busy with writers exploring memory's lurking tenacity and shaping force, the same writers were equally attracted to its unpredictable lapses and blind spots. Throughout the period these twin powers worked closely together, quarrelling or collaborating, and for many writers this was not only a matter of psychological or philosophical enquiry. It was also a matter of style.

The cultural importance of memory to Victorian readers was evident in the many books and pamphlets that claimed to teach "Mnemotechny" (Miles), "Phrenotypics" (Spurgeon), or other systems of mnemonics. This wasn't a wholly new phenomenon – Richard Grey's *Memoria Technica,* first published in 1730, remained in print for over a century, with a revised edition being issued as late as 1861 – but such works found an especially eager readership in the Victorian atmosphere of self-help. They also chimed with several other attempts in the period to investigate and exploit memory's mysterious hidden workings. New

technologies such as the photograph – famously characterised by Oliver Wendell Holmes as "the mirror with a memory" (74) – and later the phonograph added an uncanny persistence to what had previously been as hard to capture as a fistful of smoke. Meanwhile, mechanistic models of the mind stressed its ability to retain what might seem to have passed us by. It was a human camera: "Absolute as a photograph," according to E. S. Dallas, "the mind refuses nought" (Taylor and Shuttleworth 149), while the phrase "photographic memory" came into general use towards the end of the century. More accurately, the mind was a palimpsest, a text that could make discontinuous impressions appear simultaneously present, allowing historical sequence and causality to be replaced by unreliable rhythms of skipping and lingering. And as memory came to be seen as an increasingly complicated branching power, so language was forced to work ever harder to keep up, with the addition of new phrases that included "memory-haunted" (1845), "memory book" (1868), "muscular memory" (1883), "memory work" (1884), "memory lapse" (1893), "memory span" (1897), "memory-trace" (1901), and many more.

Viewed in this context, even well-known works of Victorian literature acquire a new sheen of unfamiliarity. For example, when Lewis Carroll's Alice falls down a rabbit hole into Wonderland, she notices that the sides of the hole "were filled with cupboards and book-shelves," with "maps and pictures hung upon pegs"; as she is passing, she picks up a jar labeled "ORANGE MARMALADE" (12-13). At the end of the story, we learn that she has been dreaming, and her initial tumble represents a pun of the kind Carroll could never resist: she is falling asleep. In doing so, she is also reviewing her past in a series of muddled snapshots: her maps and pictures come from the schoolroom; the marmalade comes from the breakfast table. In effect, the scene is like an unconscious version of the memory game that the French conjurer Robert-Houdin used to play with his son in order to train him for their "second sight" act, by walking past a shop window and seeing how many items he could recall. The difference here is that Alice's mind is both the shopkeeper and the passing child; the only items on display are those she has already stored on what Carroll would later refer to as memory's "odd corners and shelves" (*Letters* 2:688).

Figure 2: "Alice found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well"
Illustration: William Henry Romaine Walker, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1908)

A more complicated example of the same phenomenon occurs when Dickens's David Copperfield imagines returning to his old home:

> . . . it pained me to think of the dear old place as altogether abandoned; of the weeds growing tall in the garden, and the fallen leaves lying thick and wet upon the paths. I imagined how the winds of winter would howl round it; how the cold rain would beat upon the window-glass, how the moon would make ghosts on the walls of the empty rooms, watching their solitude all night. I thought afresh of the grave in the churchyard, underneath the tree: and it seemed as if the house were dead too, now, and all connected with my father and mother were faded away. (241)

Fading away, perhaps, but not altogether dead and gone. In 1856, Dickens would publish an article on "A Way to Remember" in *Household Words* that recommended "the association of ideas" as a powerful aid to recollection: remember *a*, the writer advised, and that will help call up *b*, followed by *c*, and so on (Heraud 616). What this earlier passage shows is that similar associative chains might couple a speaker to his past in a far less welcome way, and these might be audible in how he speaks as well as in what he says: in the syntax of his sentences, the acoustic texture of his voice. A sudden historical gulp in the narrator's throat, "as if the house were dead too, *now*," is picked up and refracted through the *hows* of the passage, and these *hows* then continue to revolve around the *howl* of the wind. Part of the narrative's psychological drama, these internal echoes occupy a threshold between conscious and repressed knowledge; as Adam Piette has observed, in a discussion of the way that prose's sound patterns can mimic the workings of memory, such echoes mark the stresses of David's childhood that give an involuntary inflection to his adult voice (17-18). And when we come across this description, it snags on our ears too, meaning that even as the narrative is propelling us forward its sounds keep summoning us back.

If such techniques can generate delicate local effects in prose, they are central to the very form of poetry, so perhaps it is not surprising that so many Victorian poets gravitated to memory as a subject. Walter Savage Landor, L. E. L., Edmund Gosse, D. G. and Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning are just some of those who wrote poems entitled "Memory," in addition to Matthew Arnold's "A Memory-Picture," Thomas Hardy's "Memory and I," William Barnes's "Memory's Stores," and many others. Often these were self-consciously compact in form (many were sonnets), which allowed memory to be both a subject and an important mode of transmission. What they shared was a practical understanding of the demands and freedoms of poetic form that made it one of memory's natural homes.

Poetry's formal structures are especially good at capturing small associative links, and showing how they contribute to the deepening grooves of a speaker's consciousness. A number of Victorian writers found this an attractive idea. Frances Power Cobbe, for example, explained in "The Fallacies of Memory" (1867) that one way to avoid recollections being distorted over time was to place them in regular verse; in this way "The trace they make in the memory each time they are repeated is marked precisely in the same furrow" (Taylor and Shuttleworth 153). But of course sounding out an idea through repetition is not only something that many poems facilitate. It is something they enact. As Don Paterson has wittily pointed out, "A poem is a little machine for remembering itself" (184), because formal devices such as rhythm, refrain, rhyme, and so on, move the writing on while turning back on themselves. When the speaker of Tennyson's "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" urges

himself "Forward," he also tells himself to "remember how the course of Time will swerve, / Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward streaming curve" (*Poems* 3:158), and as his choice of "turn" might remind us, drawing on the Latin root of "verse" as "vertere" ("to turn"), this is what all regular poems do. Even jingles such as "Remember, remember, the fifth of November" provide compact models of recollection, by forging acoustic links in their own form, and more complicated poems work in a similar way. Rhyme disrupts linear reading by asking us to check ourselves: it thickens the texture of sound at selected points, alerting us to the fact that although writing is printed evenly across the page, life is far more uneven in the demands it makes on us, or that we make on it. And because a poem's most striking rhymes usually coincide with line endings, they are little acts of memory that occur just as the verse is preparing to test itself against a moment of silence and blankness; we read the final word of a line such as "remember how the course of Time will swerve," anticipate how the course of the poem's syntax may also swerve or stumble, and then our eyes have to cross a miniature version of what Shakespeare in *Richard III* calls "the swallowing Gulfe of dark Forgetfulnesse, and deepe Oblivion" (III.vii) before we can continue. That is, if a poem is a little machine for remembering itself, it is one that is always on the verge of breaking down and breaking apart.

Tennyson's verse often tests out the acoustic shape of this idea. By all accounts his own memory was exceptional: in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir*, it is variously described as "admirable," "wonderful," "capacious," and "marvellous" (2:201, 335, 463, 525). It has an equally rich metaphorical life in his poetry. In "The Lover's Tale," it is a "magic cirque" and a "land of promise" flowing with milk and honey; it is stored in "granaries" and set with "gems" (*Poems* 1:367, 341, 334, 339). But memory was more than just a theme for Tennyson; it was also an important compositional method. Christopher Ricks has pointed out that, throughout Tennyson's career, textual self-borrowings provided him with "a way of qualifying his own past without disowning it" (*Allusion* 187). He gives the example of "Locksley Hall": "this is truth the poet sings / That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happy things" (*Poems* 2:123), which is itself a remembrance of a passage in Dante that Tennyson had quoted in his earliest surviving letter. Ricks's conclusion is that "it was on the subject of time that Tennyson wrote those lines of his which are most likely to stand against time," to which one might add that the internal chime of "sings" and "remembering" also draws attention to a more particular act of historical resistance. It was on the subject of memory that Tennyson wrote those lines through which he asserted his own sustained and sustaining powers of memory.

One of Tennyson's earliest surviving poems, "Memory! dear enchanter" (1827), was originally prefaced by a quotation from the *Spectator*: "The Memory is perpetually looking back when we have nothing present to entertain us: it is like those repositories in animals that are filled with stores of food, on which they may ruminate when their present pasture fails" (*Poems* 1:94). It is probably no coincidence that this sounds like a proleptic summary of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, because Tennyson too was attracted to the idea that memory was central to the growth of a poet's mind. Not only did different poems draw on the same store of memory; each poem was itself a literary store from which he could retrieve and rework individual lines. For example:

> Round every palm-tree, springing
>   With bright fruit in the waste,
> A mournful asp is clinging,
>   Which sours it to our taste. (*Poems* 1:95)

This finds an echo in another early fragment about memory ("Memory [Ay me!]"), where Tennyson's speaker describes how his spirit is:

> As a hungry serpent coiled
> Round a palm-tree in the wild,
> When his bakèd jaws are bare . . . (*Poems* 1:288)

In both poems the stress falls upon a present that it barren and unfulfilled, but both are kept going by what else coils and clings – an image that spills over the invisible boundary that usually keeps individual poems distinct from each other.

A similar pattern reaches back and forth across Tennyson's career. In his "Ode to Memory" (1830), he anticipates a future in which he will live "with youthful fancy re-inspired" (*Poems* 1:235), and that is also how he tended to treat memories of his earlier work. Thus "The Lover's Tale" includes the phrase "A centred, glory-circled memory" (*Poems* 1:345), which was incorporated verbatim from "Timbuctoo"; similarly, in "The Lotos-Eaters" the mariners groggily anticipate being able "To lend our hearts and spirits wholly / To the influence of mild-minded melancholy; / To muse and brood and live again in memory," and in the background Tennyson can be heard rehearsing the seductive sameness of this life, because the poem's opening lines were adapted from an early sonnet that urged the reader to "give up wholly / Thy spirit to mild-minded Melancholy" (*Poems* 1:473, 322-23). In poem after poem, retrieving lines about memory allowed Tennyson to remould the anonymous drift of time to fit more personal timescales. Going back became a stimulus to going on.

In his most successful writing, this compositional pattern also intersected with poetry's linear appearance on the page: its visible backtracking and looping refrains. In "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," first published in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), the nightingale's song is described as "withholding time" (*Poems* 1:228), and this is also what Tennyson's poem sets out to achieve for itself. (A miniature version of the idea is carried in the title of Tennyson's volume, with the momentary stutter of Chief*ly Ly*rical cueing our ears to recognise the importance of repetition and return in what follows.) Consider the opening:

> When the breeze of a joyful dawn blew free
> In the silken sail of infancy,
> The tide of time flowed back with me,
>   The forward-flowing tide of time; . . . (*Poems* 1:226)

Time flows on, and the indented fourth line draws us on; but "forward-flowing" also echoes "flowed back," and so draws us back. "The forward-flowing tide of time" breaks the previous rhyme pattern, and it is the first fully regular line in the poem – appropriately, because rhythm is a motor that keeps verse moving, but also makes it easier to remember. However, there is also a more private textual memory working between Tennyson's lines, because Arthur Hallam had already used the phrase "tide of time" in his poem "A Farewell to the South," written after the holiday he had shared with Tennyson in southern Europe (24). When Hallam reviewed *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, he used "Recollections of the Arabian Nights" to illustrate his thesis that "no poet can be fairly judged of by fragments, least of all a poet like Mr. Tennyson, whose mind conceives nothing isolated, nothing abrupt, but every part with reference to some other part, and in subservience to the idea of the whole" (189). What the overlap of voices in "tide of time" suggests is that Tennyson agreed. Surviving textual traces could stand in for shared human memories, but these memories only made sense once they took their place within a larger literary structure. As the "tide of time" in line 3 is picked up

and placed in a different position in line 4, so Tennyson alerts us to the idea that both memories and verse can be moved by the swell and ebb of human thought, periodicities, that outlast any particular utterance.

And of course both can fail. I have already suggested one way in which verse can sound out memory's gaps – through the supplementary form of punctuation that is provided by line-endings, those small visual hiccups that the eye pauses over before moving on – and this also animates Tennyson's writing in poems such as "To J. S.":

> Vain solace! Memory standing near
>   Cast down her eyes, and in her throat
> Her voice seemed distant, and a tear
>   Dropt on the letters as I wrote. (*Poems* 1:506)

The beautifully achieved delay of "tear / Dropt" and the successful reaching back of "tear" to "near" cannot quite muffle the threat of memory losing touch with its object. This too is something that Tennyson's poetry often finds itself confronting. "Mix not memory with doubt" (*Poems* 2:574), *Maud*'s speaker urges himself, but often that is exactly what Tennyson does, by writing in a way that reveals his doubts about the power of memory to store up the past, or the wisdom of trying to restore it in the present. An early clue is provided in "Tithon," because it begins "Ay me! ay me!" (*Poems* 1:620), which is a doubling of the way Tennyson had previously begun his fragment on "Memory" ("Ay me!"), and then proceeds by offering a set of anguished variations on that earlier fragment's question "Why at break of cheerful day / Doth my spirit faint away [?]" (*Poems* 1:286). Tithonus's spirit faints away because he cannot escape the break of cheerful day: she is Aurora, goddess of the dawn and his lover forever. "The gods themselves cannot recall their gifts," Tithonus laments – cannot undo what is done, in other words, although with a pun flickering on "recall" to suggest their breezy indifference to the consequences of their actions – and his body is now so withered he has no "Enjoyment save through memory" (*Poems* 1:621). Yet even that pleasure seems to be escaping him: in the revised "Tithonus," the only other fragment of direct speech he remembers is his original request to "Give me immortality," and it is this line that subsequently haunts everything else he says. Only now does he realise that "immortality" had the sound of "me" hidden inside it all along; only now is he aware that "me" cannot be stretched out indefinitely without losing its meaning.

In some ways it isn't surprising that Tennyson was awkwardly attracted to these relations between remembering and forgetting. His poems often incorporate alternatives to themselves, literary rivals or dialogic counter-voices, which sometimes take the form of explicit debate, as in "The Two Voices," and at other times come close to threatening their own eloquence. Even *In Memoriam*, which is one of the period's most sustained pleas for the powers of remembrance, frequently interrupts itself with warnings about the fragility of individual human memory and the waywardness of cultural memory. Probably Tennyson's most surprising claim about the poem was "I think of adding another to it . . . showing that all the arguments are about as good on one side as the other" (*Poems* 1:312), but this is something he had already found space for in the version he published in 1850. Between the lines of *In Memoriam*, an unwritten *In Oblivion* keeps trying to make its voice heard. Tennyson, "when he should have been broken-hearted," according to Verlaine, "had many reminiscences" (Yeats 118). This is a witty way of complaining about the sheer length of *In Memoriam*, but one anxiety that bubbles away under the surface of Tennyson's writing is that a long poem may be needed to withstand time's relentless powers of attrition:

What hope is here for modern rhyme
    To him, who turns a musing eye
    On songs, and deeds, and lives, that lie
Foreshortened in the tract of time?

These mortal lullabies of pain
    May bind a book, may line a box,
     May serve to curl a maiden's locks;
Or when a thousand moons shall wane

A man upon a stall may find,
    And, passing, turn the page that tells
    A grief, then changed to something else,
Sung by a long-forgotten mind. (*Poems* 2:390)

We turn the pages of books, but over time pages too can turn, becoming strange to us, as interest in their subject fades, language moves on, and the past becomes less accessible to us. Nor are the memories of individuals immune from this threat. The great hope of *In Memoriam* is that Tennyson and Hallam will be reunited, and this is something the poem often rehearses by bringing their voices together on the page, like a textual version of the moment in *The Princess* when Florian and his sister Psyche meet again after a long separation: "betwixt them blossomed up / From out a common vein of memory / Sweet household talk, and phrases of the hearth, / And far allusion" (*Poems* 2:214). Tennyson's greatest fear in *In Memoriam* is that such a reunion will be impossible. If memories can so easily drift and become discontinuous, even he and Hallam might eventually forget each other. "Does my old friend remember me?" (*Poems* 2:380), the final line of section LXIV, is a question to which the rest of the poem offers many responses but no conclusive answer. For the idea that *In Memoriam* continues to circle around, in a movement that alternately highlights the problem and avoids it, is that death is not only an event. It is also a process: the slow decay of memories that link people to each other and couple them to their own pasts. If this is something Tennyson challenges himself to overcome, by writing a long poem over an extended period of time, he also confronts us with it in our reading, as the poem's cumulative patterns and crosshatched echoes gradually emerge in the movement from line to line, and each rhyme (a feature of verse which Hallam had already pointed out "[contains] in itself a constant appeal to Memory and to Hope," 222) measures the unpredictable drag of the past against the uncertain pull of the future. He reminds us that he never more fully lived up to T. S. Eliot's characterisation of him as "The Voice of His Time" (212) than when he was trying to find a voice for time's abrasions.

Tennyson's contemporaries also set out to explore the power of forgetting in their writing. For some it was an explicit topic of argument. Psychologists such as Théodule Ribot and William James pointed out that our remembrance of the past necessarily involved a process of abridgement or foreshortening, while older models of memory that saw it as a wax tablet neutrally accepting all impressions were increasingly complicated by metaphors that characterised it rather as "a finger-mark traced on shifting sand" (Frances Power Cobbe, in Taylor and Shuttleworth 151) or as sheets of paper that were easily torn or stuck together. Indeed, one article published in the eighth issue of *Mind* (1877) distinguished between six different varieties of forgetfulness, and pointed out that the mind's leakiness was not only inevitable. It was also necessary. Forgetfulness allowed the meaningless proliferation of mental images to be replaced by discrimination and a sense of proportion; selection required rejection (Verdon 442-43).

Forgetfulness could also be drawn upon as an imaginative resource. In Hardy's short lyric "Tess's Lament," published in *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901), the speaker confesses that "I would that folk forgot me quite" and wishes that she could "shrink from sight" (*Poetical Works* 1:216), and she does so in a poem that has already whittled down the complex life of Hardy's novel to a series of momentary sighs and cries. By contrast, some longer works used their sheer size as an opportunity to lose readers in a thicket of details, deliberately exploiting the fact that we are bound to forget much of what passes before our eyes. These are narratives that relish redundancy, or at least the illusion that even if they are not giving us more than we can take in, they are giving us more than we can store. Put simply, if a poem is a little machine for remembering itself, the Victorian novel is often a much larger machine for forgetting itself.

Gillian Beer has written well about the detective novel in this context, pointing out that it is "a form that draws the reader's attention to his or her own processes of forgetting and of inattention" (75). That is, while the detective is tasked with reconstituting scattered events, the process of reading similarly involves recovering lost clues, restoring a fully imagined life to what initially passed us by. The same process is also central to other novels that deal with how partial are the mind's attempts to sift and fix experience. Serialised novels, in particular, often asked their original readers to cast their minds back weeks or months in order to establish what needed to be remembered and what could safely be abandoned. For example, in *Great Expectations* Pip describes the "dust-coloured" coat worn by Orlick: "The watchman made more light of the matter than I did," he explains, "not having my reason for attaching weight to it" (300). However, one question that confronts the reader is how to tell which details *can* be made light of, and which carry more lasting weight. Told to take "particular notice" of Jaggers's housekeeper, Pip looks at her "attentively"; then she is told to show off her wrist, and she appeals to Jaggers "with her eyes attentively and entreatingly fixed upon him" (196). More than twenty pages later, when Estella is icily rejecting Pip's overtures, he asks himself "What *was* it that was borne in upon my mind when she stood still and looked attentively at me?" (217). One word – "attentively" – is the trigger that would give him the answer he is seeking, but it would take an unusually attentive reader to make the connection before he does. Although it presents itself as a confession, Pip's narrative works through a peculiar combination of straightforwardness and stealth; indeed, when he describes Jaggers pushing Miss Havisham in her chair with one hand, and putting the other in his trouser-pocket "as if the pocket were full of secrets" (220), it could be Dickens describing his own narrative methods. What is being kept from us as the plot develops? What are we keeping from ourselves? Reading the novel is like playing a game of hide and seek, but without being sure whether something is strategically being concealed from us or we are merely the victims of our own patchy memories.

Of course, the relationship between memory and forgetting in Victorian writing was not always a serious business. It could also produce structural jokes, like the one in Charles Swain's poem "The Cup of Regret" (1849), in which the refrain "Is there a day we're not something forgetting?" (118) is repeated in a manner that might reflect either a finger-jabbing insistence or merely a type of literary absent-mindedness, as if the speaker was returning to the same line as one might tap one's pockets in the search for a missing set of keys. In the case of Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, however, this kind of playfulness is elevated to a high pitch of literary sophistication. According to Dick Davis, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the poem, the result is a translation of "memorable intensity" (3); paradoxically, it achieves this effect by embracing the idea that everything should be forgotten, including itself.

In July 1857, FitzGerald wrote to George Borrow (an appropriate name in the circumstances) asking to see his manuscript of the *Rubáiyát*: "You shall have Omar back directly, or whenever you want him, and I should really like to make you a copy (taking my time) of the best Quatrains" (*Letters* 2:291). It is tempting to see "taking my time" as a wry private joke, coming from a writer who much preferred taking his time to taking chances or even to taking opportunities. Yet FitzGerald's phrase is also an accurate outline of the translation he would go on to publish in 1859. (In the discussion that follows, I quote from Christopher Decker's 1997 critical edition.) Few poems are as time-obsessed as the *Rubáiyát*; even fewer manage their obsessions with such a light touch. FitzGerald's original preface concludes by remarking that Omar "fell back upon TODAY … as the only Ground he got to stand upon, however momentarily slipping from under his Feet" (9). The idea that time is on the move is potentially funny, as if we progressed through life on a series of stepping-stones that kept turning into banana skins, but it is also potentially threatening. As the poem continues, FitzGerald's AABA quatrains start to take on the look of limericks, and "time" is gradually invested with the same menace as a word like "they" in Edward Lear's poems: an anonymous force that is as irresistible as the return of each stanza's final rhyme. FitzGerald's conclusion was that "the Result is sad enough: saddest perhaps when most ostentatiously merry," but there are also quatrains where the anonymous march of time is made more hospitable to human needs:

> Ah, fill the Cup: – what boots it to repeat
> How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
>   Unborn TO-MORROW, and dead YESTERDAY,
> Why fret about them if TO-DAY be sweet! (15)

Tempus fugit. Yet these lines provide more than just another example of what FitzGerald earlier refers to (across a typically playful line-break) as "fugitive / Articulation" (15). "Feet" is always a self-conscious word to put into a metrical poem, because poems, like people, use feet to move on, just as FitzGerald's underlying metre mimics the steady tread of time. The syntax too moves on, while incorporating a search for some underlying order: "boots" prepares the way for "feet," in one of the speaker's many flashes of boozy wit, and we might also notice that the rhyme is self-consciously generated by "repeat," so that even as the speaker is urging us to live from moment to moment, his voice is quietly reminding us that some moments are more charged with significance than others, some more likely to be dwelt on and returned to. Like all printed verse, in other words, the quatrain offers itself as both a process and a pattern; it is doubly a time-beater.

These two impulses do not always sit happily together in FitzGerald's verse. A. C. Benson suggested as much when he described how the *Rubáiyát* was composed by bringing together independent quatrains or *rubai*: "FitzGerald by selection and arrangement made a certain progression or series out of them, tracing in vague outline a soul's history" (101). "Progression or series" nicely catches at the twin drives of FitzGerald's translation, narrative development and lyrical snapshots, just as readers of the *Rubáiyát* sometimes seem undecided over whether it is one poem or many, a unified dramatic monologue or a set of freestanding epigrams. In some ways this tension between movement and arrest reflects a much larger struggle in FitzGerald's imagination. The greatest compliment he could pay to a piece of writing was to say that it had "go," i.e. energy or drive. His own poems, on the other hand, more often reflect his mood when he wrote to Edward Cowell that "My '*Go*' (such as it was) is *gone*" (*Letters* 2:318). His first original poem establishes a pattern for what would follow:

> 'Tis a sad sight
>   To see the year dying;
> When autumn's last wind
>   Sets the yellow wood sighing
>   Sighing, oh sighing! (*Letters* 1:98)

This starts promisingly, as "sight" and "dying" collapse into "sighing," but then stutters to a halt with "Sighing, oh sighing," so that even as the verse lingers on the sadness of decay it attempts to resist change in its own form. The same pattern would be repeated with variations throughout FitzGerald's career, in which he kept returning to the same old ideas and words – words like "old," in fact, which happily combined age and familiarity – in order to prove that, as he claimed in one letter, although "I scarce knew that I was so constant in my Affections … I do *not* change in literary cases" (*Letters* 4:55). Just as he regularly returned to Cambridge, renting the same rooms he had occupied as an undergraduate, and carefully kept up the same friendships and habits he had enjoyed as a young man, so on paper he deliberately remained in a rut of his own making.

To take just one example, the epigrammatic quality of the *Rubáiyát* can partly be explained by the fact that some of its most telling images had already been rehearsed in FitzGerald's earlier work *Euphranor* (1851), in which young men are described as being "like persons who are drunk with wine," and the fuzz on their lips is compared to the irresistible sprouting of the natural world:

> And this delightful Herb whose tender Green
> Fledges the River's Lip on which we lean –
>   Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
> From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen! (*Rubáiyát* 12)

> 'Scarce the Down upon their lips, you see,' (said I,) 'Freshmen; – so that you, Euphranor, who are now Bachelor of Arts, and whose upper lip at least begins to show the stubble of repeated harvests, are, alas, fast declining from that golden prime of Knighthood . . . ' (*Letters and Literary Remains* 6:193)

At one stage, FitzGerald seems to have contemplated publishing a collection of lyrics on the subject of "Paradise," and it might be argued that this is exactly what he did in the *Rubáiyát*, producing a set of reflections that were rooted in the pleasures of a very physical kind of Paradise – a word that in Persian originally meant an enclosed park or garden. At the same time, FitzGerald's return to some of his favourite metaphors allowed him to describe the inevitability of decay without ever succumbing to it. By filling his poem with an elegant set of variations on these metaphors, he could comfort himself with the thought that even if nature's flowers only flung their treasure on the air once, the same was not true of a literary anthology. Its treasure grew in direct proportion to how widely it was distributed.

If FitzGerald's fondness for literary commonplaces provided him with one way of resisting what *In Memoriam* describes as time's power of "foreshortening," another was his knack for cutting down other people's works so that they could be grasped at a single glance. One of the scrapbooks that he assembled included a clipping from a modern edition of Thomas Fuller's *History of the University of Cambridge* (originally published in 1655), in which Fuller explained that "It is the advantage of a small book that the author's eye may in a manner be incumbent at once over it all, from the beginning to the end thereof" (290). The appeal of this passage to FitzGerald probably lay in the fact that it had not only been

reprinted many times in its original context, but had also been echoed in Wordsworth's *Prelude* ("Incumbent o'er the surface of past time," 138), thereby proving that the judicious rewriting of earlier texts could strip away superfluous material and expose their time-travelling core. These are the moments that are especially charged with latent energy, helping to give a work its "go." They are also central to FitzGerald's model of translation.

Writing to Cowell as he first set to work on his manuscript, he confessed that he was "still harping on our old Studies" (*Letters* 2:273). The allusion to Polonius is not altogether unexpected from a man who had already published a book entitled *Polonius* (1852), but it hints at one direction his translation would take: towards what the subtitle to *Polonius* calls "A Collection of Wise Saws and Modern Instances." This is one impulse behind the composition of the *Rubáiyát*: a drive towards the discontinuous fragment or freestanding proverb. The competing impulse is one that FitzGerald outlined when he explained why he added some extra quatrains to his original version of the poem: "It gives me a *Spurt* to look what I can do further with Omar; adding some Quatrains, which may do more harm than good. But a few more will, at any rate, allow for the Idea of *Time passing* while the Poet talks, and while his Humour changes" (*Letters* 3:360). Where these impulses come together is in FitzGerald's exploration of memory and forgetting.

I am not the first person to have noticed that the *Rubáiyát* is concerned with how much slips through our heads as well as down our throats; in a recent article, Erik Gray has argued that this is a poem that works principally by misremembering itself, as the speaker drinks more and his voice stumbles back to earlier ideas without ever successfully recapturing them. All I would add is that FitzGerald's verbal games concentrate a good deal of the pattern I have been suggesting is present in much Victorian literature: remembering and forgetting as "twin powers" that work unstably in tandem. His poem reveals how rich and unfixed this pattern could be even when writers were relying on the same literary resources: allusion, rhythm, line-endings, and so on. FitzGerald's comment on Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was that "I am always remembering, and always forgetting it" (*Letters and Literary Remains* 6:245), and it might be argued that he sought a similar balance in his own poem, from the fact that it is a translation that keeps detaching itself from its source, to a whole grammar of absence in words such as "unseen," "unravel'd," "unborn," "unpermitted," "unfolded," "unaware," "unfrequented," and others, all of which state what is not the case while unavoidably calling up the ghost of a more fulfilling alternative.

When A. C. Benson assessed FitzGerald's life, he concluded that it was one "singularly devoid of incident … not rich in results, not fruitful in example"; the years "passed slowly and easily, while [he] flitted hither and thither like a great shy moth" (24). A faint echo of the *Rubáiyát* reminds us that a writer can leave behind a slight yet lasting touch: "Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days / Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays: / Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays" (17). Yet the very delicacy of this textual trace also reminds us why else a writer's life may not be rich in results or fruitful in example: not because of any lack of skill, but simply because we no longer have access either to their work or to a way of thinking that makes it live. It is for this reason that the nineteenth-century discourse outlined in these pages might be viewed as more than just another strand of the period's thinking. For the "twin powers" of memory and forgetting which "walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty" are not only central to our lives as individuals. They also lie at the heart of our activities as a community of scholars.

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