\* Orientalia\*



Edward Fitzgerald, the Brothers Tennyson, et al.

(Oscar plays the Compere)

\*

From *Feux D’artifice: an Evening with the Poets*

(*Further Revelations of Oscar Wilde,* III)

*[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/persian_classical_music.mp33)*And here *Charles Tennyson* drops in

And sings the dream of opium

♫

He still can not quite wake up from,

Fond of the Lilith of old sin.

***Lachrymae Papaveris***

*The moon is weeping poppy tears*

*Tonight; a pale and ghostly soma*

*Sends into transcendental coma*

*The life of things, their hopes and fears.*



*O lachrymae papaveris,*

*You are the tears of joy, releasing*

*The world’s pent pain in a heart-easing*

*Narcotic milk of mother-bliss!*

*O gift of Thoth, who planted you*

*Deep in the night skies of the mind,*

*Pale bell or bulb who bleed such kind*

*Hypnosis and white witches’ brew:*

*Through the hard walls of waking bleed*

*For me, and seep into my soul.*

*Come, fill its dark and empty bowl*

*Brimful, and be in me the seed*

*Of legendary dreams! O sleep*

*My sleep with me, my temples crown*

*With poppies, lead me, lead me down*

*Into the enchantment of the Deep!*

\*

*FitzGerald* joins the company

And speaks in accents rather gayer

And like an Orientalist’s prayer

Is his narcotic melody.

***The Night of Nights***

*The Night of nights is come! The gates,* Laylat Al-Qadr*, a holy day on the Moslem*

*The secret portals, open are lunar calendar marking the night on which*

*(All other skies but doors ajar): the first verses of the Koran were dictated*

*Now sweeter taste the pomegranates. to Mahomet in his cave on Mount Hira.*

***[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/rimsky-korsakov_scheherazade_2__2.mp33)****It comes, the rare Event, the Rite!*

♫

*Call mad Rasheed from out his tent*

*To cry unto the firmament,*

*‘Of nights this is the only Night!’*

*Now will the moon in fullest splendour .*

*Dip his pale hair in water, in bowls,*

*In wine, in chalices and souls*

*As he glides o’er us, calm and tender.*

*For like a djinn in slippers slipping*

*Over the carpets in his glide,*

*In through the window he will slide,*

*Into our eyes his pallour dripping.*

*Blue-eyed Circassian slave-boys, bring*

*The hookah, syrups, and sweet dates!*

 *Let us pass through the garden gates*

*And listen to the bulbul sing!*

Addendum:

*No perfume has so sweet a scent*

*To bitter hearts and spirits gloomy,*

*Even the mystic words of Rumi,*

*Than Attar’s ‘The Bird Parliament’,*

*That sovereign masterpiece of Persian.*

*Read it but once, ‘twill set you free,*

*But do it deeply—ça sufi!*

*(Make sure you read it in* my *version.*)

\*

***Tennyson’s Tribute to FitzGerald***

*My friend, who was so crafty at turning*

*A Persian phrase to English pure*

*And undefiled, deserves a* tour

*Of loving* force *to* Rubiyat *turning*.

And so Lord Alfred searched into

His distant youthful memories

And immemorial nerve-cells: These

Strange lines he did from granite hew.

***Nefertiti***



*The crescent moon, a tilted, courtly smile,*

*Hangs from its little chain above the Nile.*

*Guards march between the coumns in the hall*

*Or stand with spear in hand along the aisle.*

*Pharaoh has nodded off; the harps have ceased.*

*You share your bed with me, a lowly priest!*

*How with your nakedness you bless my body!*

*But look: the god is reddening in the east.*

*You know, my Queen! His Greatness, AKHENATEN,*

*(*Madman*, my brethren whisper,* misbegotten!*)*

*Has eyes and ears in every palace nook:*

*To these, a wall of stone is thinnest cotton.*



*So I must leave you now, Beautiful One.*

*They’ll miss me at the Temple of the Sun.*

*The slave they send will find me in the tavern*

*Draining a bowl of bitter oblivion—*

*How could I see you seated on your throne*

*Beside this* thing *that claims you as his own?*

*Tonight, I swear it, at the edge of town*

*I’ll carve a curse into his boundary stone!*

\*

Encore! But draw your inspiration

Directly now, I pray, from those

*Arabian Nights* that blushed the rose

Of a young bard’s imagination!

***Tennyson’s Sonnet***

*Oh for the times of good Haroun*

*When magic-carpet-riding heroes*

*Flew o’er the minarets of Eros*

*Hither and thither ‘neath the moon!*

*The heart danced to a different tune*

*When lover met with lover: she rose*

*To kiss him through her veil, her sheer rose*

*Veil, ah, she was his bliss and boon!*

*Not Haroun’s days are these we live in.*

*In motor cars the young men ply*

*The busy streets, nor see the sky,*

*Nor have a dream they can believe in*

*Save the Main Chance. O Muse, dreams die!*

*These words are widow’s weeds to grieve in.—*

Dear Alfred, you were ever given

To melancholy reverie!

\*

From out the *The Rubaiyat* I borrow

A page, and in old *Khayyam*’s guise

Sing of the world that made me wise

By teaching me how love and sorrow

Walk hand in hand into the grave;

And how that form called the *ghazal*

Became Ghazala, Muse of all

My trouble. For I was her slave!

***Ghazala***

*With a glance you converted me: I am your worshipper, sweet Ghazala!*

*For love is a feast, and the soul is never replete, Ghazala.*

*Oh I could draw down the crescent moon for a sword and slay*

*Fifty infidels!* You *give me strength for this feat, Ghazala.*

*How it thrills me to touch your skin, it is smooth as the merchant’s silk,*

*Dark as the garden where we secretly meet, Ghazala!*

*What joy to lie with my head on your breast in the cool of the night!*

*But before the muèzzin’s first call I take to the street, Ghazala.*

*I weep to leave you behind on your scented cedar bed,*

*But your husband is watchful, we must be discreet, Ghazala.*

*When Allah is on my lips, your name sings high in my heart.*

*But a thief haunts life’s crowded bazaar, and his fingers are fleet, Ghazala.*

*TIME pockets the hours—even I, your defender, Oz-Khàr, cannot stop him.*

*Alas, that your beauty must wither like drought-stricken wheat****,*** *Ghazala!*

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/fauré_les_roses_d'ispahan.mp33)

♫

***Oz-Khàr Khayyam’s Ghazal of the Desert***

*Some tears alight on the ground as a feather will land on a stone.*

*I am darkness, a shadow remains where I placed my hand on a stone.*

*Some yield to the tide of their blood, some cling to their place by the fire,*

*But I have sought out the desert and taken my stand on a stone.*

*Among the locusts I think of the seas I have crossed: One is much*

*Like the other, my friends; think how puddles contract and expand on a stone.*

*You, Ghazala, who drew down the moon for me once, for your beauty*

*Befuddled me: I am the outcast it pleased you to strand on a stone.*

*From my heart’s bitter quarry I gouge out a pillar of pride where my wounds*

*May be written, as God might inscribe a ferocious command on a stone.*

*My griefs assemble and swear a blood oath to each other, they gather*

*In moonlight and howl, like some ancient brotherly band, on a stone.*

*When the lion-faced wind, that teethed on the ridges, scares up the grit*

*And the fury, I crouch in the brunt of it, sprinkling sand on a stone.*

*\**

**

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/rimsky-korsakov_scheherazade_2__1.mp33)***Oz-Khàr Khayyam’s Ghazal Concerning the Truth***

*If there were such a thing, friends, I would speak, would yell the Truth—   
If there were such a thing—if I could taste and smell the Truth!*

*Scholars, my dear Jalal, with their choice phrases, can they buy,   
And Merchants, with their silks and spices, can they sell the Truth?*

*There is a wise man who insists that it is deep, Hassan.   
What do we see, then, at the bottom of a well? The Truth?*

♫

*We see false heavens, Màhmed, and a fool’s-gold coin that blinds us  
Like the Evil Eye. What, is a mad old Jinni’s spell the Truth?*

*Suppose that such a thing exists: Is it so frail, Shabazz?  
How easily the Mighty seem to quash and quell the Truth!*

*Yet think, Yaghoob: The Sultan’s man, with rack and screw, who wrings   
An answer from the hardiest soul, can he compel the Truth?*

*Allah perplexes me, Rasheed: He sometimes lets the True*

*Believer go astray, and shows an Infidel the Truth.*

*I had a love, Mamoon. Comely she was—and faithless, too.   
Beauty is specious: Would you call a painted shell the Truth?*

*The maundering dreamer, who sees ghosts in moonlight: Who are we,   
Jamsheed, to teach him, or the madman in his cell, the Truth?*

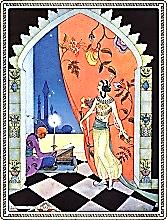
*Philosophers write much, Habeeb, but finally, do they teach us*

*More than small children do who cannot even spell ‘the Truth’?*

*Akbar, you know my mind: I hold all things to be Illusion   
Save Death. For Heaven sends us lofty lies, but Hell, the Truth.*

*Pay no attention to your old Khayyam, pass me the wine,   
My friends! Have you not heard that poets never tell the Truth?*

\*



*[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/sumerian_music_1.mp33)Rossetti,* bard of *Nineveh,*

Told us an old tale he made fresh

About the great King Gilgamesh,

A magical epic elegy:

***Gilgamesh***

*Somewhere across the desert sand,*

*If tales were true, flourished a land*

♫

*Of sacred gardens… Far from Sumer*

*He trekked to prove the ancient rumour,*

*Scorning the granary hours and weeks*

*The little mouse of maintenance ekes.*

*Two-thirds a god, a mighty king,*

*And yet in fine a mortal thing,*

*He dreamt a star fell on his back*

*That bid him leave the beaten track.*

*Heavy it was, and gave no rest*

*But he must go upon his quest.*

*The gods had put to death his friend:*

*That* Enkidu *should meet this end!*

*Heart’s brother! Gilgamesh in grief*

*To see strength frail as any leaf*

*Resolved that he would never be*

*The victim of mortality.*

*Beyond the bosom of the mountains*

*Lies Dilmun Isle—the flowers, the fountains!*

*Here, Utnapishtim, ancient-young,*

*Perpetuates his bliss among*

*Elixirs gushing down in streams*

*To pool a capital of dreams.*

*To win that bliss the King must leap*

*The limbic hurdle of his sleep.*

*Counting the days he lay in bed,*

*His host heaped up a wall of bread.*

*It grew a green beard while he slept.*

*He woke at last, and saw, and wept.*

*A magic plant was given him—*

*And stole while he took a swiim.*

*It heals a snake, not Gilgamesh.*

*But disillusion of the flesh?*

That *he was free to take, and took*

*Back to his city of Uruk.*

**Then he by magic spirited

Us all to the dry land of Sumer

And played the delicate exhumer

Of treasures of the ancient dead:

***The Royal Cemetery at Ur***

*Root delicately into the pit. Work surgically with brush and trowel.*

*It is dense with the mothers-and-the-fathers-in-the-earth.*

*Help the earliness shed its tiers. Piece the tesserae, connect the bones.*

Ur V.

*Time of the lawgivers. It cost you five shekels to cut off a slave’s toe,*

*ten for an ear. A foreign power had carted off the word for canal.*

*Finally, the city was destroyed. Everywhere you looked you saw a canal.*

Ur IV.  
*Pictographs were slowly leeching out their pictures. Colourful, specious*

*religions were founded on a dare. They worshipped a goddess on a hook,*

*a martyr of meat. They splashed temple walls with a riot of vulgar clay cones.*

Ur III.

*Words were images of the halos around things. An oafish barbarian*

*reigned for fifty years. A rebarbative prude, he outlawed the lovely*

*erotic cylinder seals and poisoned the city dreamworks.*

Ur II.

*Fall of the tree gods: Their forked feet had tasted too much death. The substance*

*of deity was wedged in the grain of things. A branch grew from the word* branch.

*Day and night, furtive priests were gnawing away at the oracles flourishing there.*

Ur I.

*End here, at the beginning, where they who have most to bear bear it most lightly.*

*They eat dates. Princesses marry gods and make love to captains, patriarchs walk*

*about in woolen skirts. The soul has a tree-roots-and-barley smell… Canals carve*

*through the tongue’s moist clay and out among the palm gardens, weeping for Puabi*

*in her mineral robe. Here is the Goat God! Here is the Harp with a Gold Bull’s Head!*

*Still in the hands of the one who sang and sings it all: the skeletal musician: the poet.*

\*



*[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/szymanowski_roxana.mp33)****The Temple Singer***

♫

I. ***Curator and Priest***

*Have I shown you the figurine*

*of the temple singer,*

*the High Priestess, the Princess?   
  
Hold it in your hand for a moment.*

*Imagine the sound*

*of her voice,*

*how simple and clean!*

*An arrow piercing*

*a sheet of rain.*

*Water from a source*

*high in the cedar forests.*

*A fountain that surges*

*to the height of its yearning   
and falls away.*

*She was betrothed to a god.*

*We fell in love and broke*

*the Sacred Law.*

*\**

*Consider this blue world   
pasted on the ceiling*

*in lapis patches:  
It is my Never-Healing Heaven,   
positioned over its white wounds.*

*I reach out my upturned palms,*

*try to remember the ancient prayer.   
  
Dry rain sifting   
from a tessellate sky  
dusts my hair with fine*

*powder.*

*I have forgotten the names of my gods.*

**II.** ***Empty Room, Open Window***

******

*This clay tablet:   
I riddled it with signs   
fresh as love-bites once—  
shaped like your sex:* *They meant You.*

*I rub the clay*

*like flint to ignite  
one scintilla   
of that sunburnt noon   
and the desert sand relieves   
and there rises once again   
a city of towers and temples, gardens*

*and canals and the fragrant warmth of dreams.*

*Oh the swelling of that day  
and the minute of the hour   
and the scent of roses in a bowl!*

You *naked on your bed of cedar,*

*your beauty   
burning in its fire   
like a sacrifice,*You*, reaching out your arms to me!*

*And the scent of roses in a bowl.*

*[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/sumerian_music_2.mp33)\**

*Night falls. Moonlight   
slips into the room   
through the window,  
spreads itself over the floor,*

♫

*the bed. We shiver*

*in that bone light.  
  
‘My husband is here, the god,*

*my Lord Nana-Sin.  
It will not go well with me, Love’.*

*\**

*Empty room.   
Open window.   
  
Nothing.*

**III. *Cedar and Pine***

*Here in this alcove   
absence takes the shape   
of tallow smoke.*

*One memory is another   
and their sum: oblivion.*

*Did I once write a poem*

*for a temple singer?  
I have known many temple singers.*

*And now once again it is You*

*and only You*

*walking beside me   
in the cool of the morning   
in the garden by the river.*

*\**

*I think of the curved planks   
you were admiring on the wharf that day   
when you said to the shipwright:   
‘I have never seen wood sanded so smooth’.   
You turned to me in the midday air   
and whispered in my ear:*

*‘Smell the wood, Love, and it is only you and I*

*up in the mountains, among the cedar and pine’.   
  
And I am still perhaps a little jealous   
that in full view of the appreciative youth   
you ran your slender fingers   
over a curvilinear, unassuming grace—  
seaworthy work of his hands.*

\*

*O my Belovèd,* *rise before me*

*in a robe made of midday’s roses,*   
*rise before me*   
*wearing bracelets of sunlight—*

*You, whose memory*

*is the ancient honey*   
*in my hive of dreams!*IV. ***Water and Stone***

**

*Spring rain shrinks   
from the garden statuary.   
  
The last bead drops   
down and away.*

*The soil drinks it.   
  
Worm wine. Root manna.*

*Wet stains grow vague on the balustrades.   
A faint chromatic mist floats   
from the roof of the portico.*

*The sandstone’s salmon color   
will be restored.*

*Not yet. There is a seeping-in.*

*The stone drinks*

*and its thirst is not yet slaked.   
  
A puddle steams on a marble slab,   
withdraws inward from the sun,   
dragging along its unwilling   
surface tension.  
  
Gone.   
  
The stone has a jet sheen.   
Here an idea of water subsists.   
  
Is it still wet?*

*\**

*Come before me in my mind’s eye*   
*just once more, Belovèd,*   
*stand and be golden in the morning light*  
*so that I may gaze at you and smile*   
  
*because I am so bitterly happy.*

V. ***Starlight, Morning Light***

*At night, when the sky is clear,  
I can pick you out among  
the crowd of your companions,   
unreachable, the Stellified:*

*Sealed in the ark of your distance*

*like a secret thing.*

*You who are dead here,   
in my living,   
live there, long after I died.*

*\**

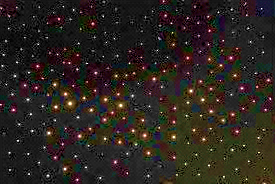
*Daybreak.   
You are sitting by the window   
combing your hair.   
  
Sunlight,   
its shower of arrows,   
softens to a bodiless caress*

*passing over you.*

\*

*You, Atalỳa, my Belovèd,*   
*You by the window*   
*there!*

\*

******

**Note:**

## The song on page 6 is by Gabriel Fauré: *Les roses d’Ispahan,* Op. 39, No. 4. Text by Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lile. Barbara Hendricks, soprano, Michel Dalberto, piano.

Les roses d'Ispahan dans leur gaîne de mousse,

Les jasmins de Mossoul, les fleurs de l'oranger,

Ont un parfum moins frais, ont une odeur moins douce,

Ô blanche Léïlah! que ton souffle léger.

Ta lèvre est de corail et ton rire léger

Sonne mieux que l'eau vive et d'une voix plus douce.

Mieux que le vent joyeux qui berce l'oranger,

Mieux que l'oiseau qui chante au bord d'un nid de mousse.

Mais le subtile odeur des roses dans leur mousse,

La brise qui se joue autour de l'oranger

Et l'eau vive qui flue avec sa plainte douce

Ont un charme plus sûr que ton amour léger!

Ô Leïlah! depuis que de leur vol léger

Tous les baisers ont fui de ta lèvre si douce

Il n'est plus de parfum dans le pâle oranger,

Ni de céleste arome aux roses dans leur mousse.

L'oiseau, sur le duvet humide et sur la mousse,

Ne chante plus parmi la rose et l'oranger;

L'eau vive des jardins n'a plus de chanson douce,

L'aube ne dore plus le ciel pur et léger.

Oh! que ton jeune amour, ce papillon léger,

Revienne vers mon coeur d'une aile prompte et douce.

Et qu'il parfume encor les fleurs de l'oranger,

Les roses d'Ispahan dans leur gaîne de mousse.

The roses of Ispahan in their sheath of moss,

the jasmines of Mosul, the orange blossoms,

have a fragrance less fresh, an aroma less sweet,

O pale Leila, than your light breath!

Your lips are coral and your light laughter

has a softer and lovelier sound than rippling water,

lovelier than the joyous breeze that rocks the orange-tree,

lovelier than the bird that sings near its nest of moss.

But the subtle fragrance of the roses in their moss,

the breeze that plays around the orange-tree

and the spring-water flowing with its plaintive murmur

have a more certain charm than your fickle love!

O Leila, ever since in their airy flight

all the kisses have fled from your lips so sweet,

there is no longer any fragrance from the pale orange-tree,

no heavenly aroma from the roses in the moss.

The bird, in its nest of moist feathers or moss,

sings no more among the roses and orange-trees;

the springs in the gardens have lost their soft song;

and dawn no longer gilds the pure and weightless sky.

Oh, if only your youthful love, that light butterfly,

would return to my heart on swift and gentle wings,

and perfume once more the orange blossom

and the roses of Ispahan in their sheath of moss.

trans. Peter Low