

TWO POEMS

Donald A. Yates

In January of 1965, Jorge Luis Borges published the first of the following poems in the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación*. When I received a clipping of the verse in East Lansing, I decided to attempt an English version, which subsequently appeared in the pages of *Tropos*, a quarterly publication of the Department of Romance Languages at Michigan State University.

The second poem was published, also in *La Nación*, in August of 1967. I arrived in Buenos Aires in the early days of that month to spend a year as a Fulbright Visiting Lecturer in American Literature at three Argentine universities. I had known Borges since my first trip to Argentina in 1962 and when I saw his “Rubaiyat”, I asked him if I might see if I could bring it into English, preserving the rhyme and meter. He urged me to give it a try. Several days later I brought him my version. He asked me to leave it and said that he and his mother would go over it. (Since the mid-fifties, when Borges lost his sight for the purposes of reading and writing, she had been his constant assistant, reading to him and taking his dictation.)

The next time I saw him he returned the translation and thanked me for my interest said that he and his mother had made only a few marginal notations to the text. I have incorporated them into my version and offer it here. It has not appeared in print before.

While translating “Rubaiyat”, I experienced a heady sensation when I reached the fifth quatrain and suddenly realized that, following along a far-reaching trail of texts and translators—FitzGerald had brought Omar Khayyam’s ancient Persian verses into English, Borges’s father Jorge Guillermo Borges had subsequently done the first translation of the

Rubaiyat into Spanish, and Borges had carefully revised his father's lines and, in turn, had written a new *Rubaiyat* that I was now bringing back into the language of FitzGerald—once again the “vain search in the garden” evoked in these lines was reemerging. Borges smiled when I told him.

TO A SWORD IN YORK MINSTER

238

Within its steel lives on the virile man,
Now cosmic dust, who in the wars
Of unkind seas and ravaged lands
Wielded it, all in vain, against death.

Vain, too, was death. Here is that man,
Viking fair and fierce who came.
Drawn by epic destiny;
His sword is now his image and his name.

Despite death's long embrace and exile's hold
His brutal hand still grasps the steel
And I am but a ghostly shade before this warrior

Whose ghost is here. I am but an instant
And that instant is ash, not diamond.
And only the past is true.

RUBAIYAT

May in these words resound that Persian's verse
To call to mind that Time is but diverse
Out-spinning of the eager dreams we are,
Those dreams the secret Dreamer weaves, disperse,

Again be it confirmed that fire is ash,
And flesh is dust, the rippling river's flash
An image of your life and my life too,
As on it flows—a slow, eternal dash.

Again be it confirmed that pride's proud tower,
Built for the ages, has, like wind, no power
To last, and for the hidden One who stays,
A hundred years of toil is but an hour.

Here be it shown the nightingale so bright
That sings, sings once, just once in deepest night.
And all the stars surrounding in the dark
With avaricious zeal withhold their light.

And let the moon shine brightly in the lines
Wrought by your hand, just as the moon inclines
And hovers in your garden's night. The same
Shall seek you out in vain as light declines.

Beneath the moon of evening's gathering shade
May be in quiet pools your features made,
And here in mirrored waters be for you
Some certain timeless images displayed.

May here again the Persian's moon be led
And with it gold by long-lost sunsets shed.
Today is yesterday. You are all men
Whose face is dust. You are together dead.

Translated by Donald A. Yates
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