During the past decades, the reputation of Jan Hendrik Leopold (1865-1925) has grown considerably. In his own lifetime he was a marginalized figure but is now considered one of the most significant poets in Dutch literature around 1900, if not in all Dutch literature. He published much of his work in *De nieuwe gids*, a journal that at that time was the preserve of the “*Tachtigers*,” a group of writers committed to releasing Dutch literature from what was seen as its provincial isolation. Characterized by a shot of Keats and Shelley (also revived in 1880s Britain), a shot of Swinburne and Rossetti, and a shot of Emile Zola, the *Tachtigers* contrived a renewal of Dutch literature that can be compared with the effect of the contemporary Symbolist movement in France.

The *Tachtigers*, mostly age-peers of Leopold, started publishing early in life. Some of them had brought out “*Collected Works*” by 1893, the year of Leopold’s debut. By then the group was beginning to disintegrate. Previously, in the eighties, the highest aim of their poetry (and much of their prose) was to fix into poetic language that complex physio-psychological phenomenon called ‘*stemming*’ (‘mood’), that was understood to be as deep as it is fleeting. This mood was seen as a coming-together of one very specific and complex sensuous gestation with what came to be termed “the movement of the soul.” After 1893 the work of many Dutch poets started to focus on exploring new, fixed and operative connections in the world, life, and literature. Such poets read Spinoza, and then turned if not to William Morris as an intermediate step, then to Karl Marx. Or Plato. Or Neo-Plato. Or Buddha.

The poetry Leopold published between 1893 and 1900 was not yet touched by this development, but neither did it show much affinity with the poetry of the *Tachtigers* before 1893. Most of Leopold’s poetry from this time takes the form of very complex love-lyrics. Often these poems were collected in series in which an almost erased narrative contributes to the overall coherence of these poems. The techniques used to create this coherence showcased a new refinement in Dutch poetry, and testify to Leopold’s acquaintance with contemporaneous French poets such as Verlaine and Mallarmé. The salutary feature of these series is not so much
love itself as a realization of the final impossibility of love. The object of this poetry thus becomes human existence as reflected in poetic art.

All Leopold’s work is characterized by the theme of human solitariness. Until 1900, as we have seen, he explores that theme with the assistance of the final impossibility of love. In the period that followed he published no poetry, turning instead to philosophy. From 1906 Leopold began to publish poetry again, for the time being piecemeal, a poetry that in many respects differs from his work prior to 1900. Three long poems, each consisting of about 200 lines, form the main body of his work between 1906 and 1915. During this period he also published adaptations (via French, German or English translations) of Persian and Arabic poets, and wrote a small number of his own poems, which have become extremely well-known, clearly inspired by “the East.” When, in 1914, Leopold published his first and only collection, *Verzen*, he gave these adaptations and his own Eastern-inspired work the section title “Oostersch” or “Eastern.”

Central to Leopold’s “Eastern” adaptations are his redactions of quatrains from Ūmar Khayyām. They won considerable attention, even among readers for whom, then and now, his own poems are too “hermetic.” As a result, Leopold’s Ūmar adaptations have a prominent place in the current assessment of his poetry.

I mentioned Verlaine and Mallarmé as inspirations for Leopold’s earlier poetry. I should add Rossetti (who brought to general attention Edward FitzGerald’s *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*). I should also mention Oscar Wilde, along with the Dutch poet and Tachtiger Herman Gorter, who around 1890 embarked on a poetic adventure that has become known as “sensitivism”: here everything turns on the most intense possible identification of the unique moment. That is the world of the “Conclusion” to Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. In it, what is already a heightened fleeting poetic experience can acquire the nature of an epiphany, something apparent in much of Leopold’s earlier poetry. It is the poetry itself, poetry as “meta-theme,” in complete conformity with Walter Pater, which also plays a key role here. This is a poetry that breeds an internal coherence that one knows has no existence outside the poetry, or the art.

After 1900, Leopold began to read Spinoza and Descartes, as well as Bacon, Locke, Leibniz, Kant and Hume, and even Herbert Spencer, alongside the Stoics and Epicurus. Leopold, a graduate of the University of Leiden, was an outstanding classicist, a specialist in the Stoics, who until recently was the only Dutch scholar to have contributed to the Oxford Classical Texts series, on Marcus Aurelius. The goal of all this reading in philosophy was an attempt to escape the tyranny of passion evident in Leopold’s love-poetry. Instead, he would strive after a clear philosophical thought-process, one that can penetrate, with undisturbed serenity, to the core of the coherence between man and world, and the meaningfulness of
human existence itself. The personal, fleeting, and fortuitous must from now on give way to “the universal and permanent,” as Leopold expresses it in a piece on Spinoza. He wrote a book on Spinoza’s Latin (Spinoza’s thought is, for Leopold, in many respects a direct development of Stoicism). During this period even Leopold’s closest friends began to feel some alienation from the fanaticism with which Leopold assaulted the world with the rightness of philosophy.

In 1906, then, Leopold took up publishing poetry again, with the long poem “Kinderpartij.” My reading of this poem (partly based on archival research) is that “Kinderpartij” comprises Leopold’s poetic synthesis of the philosophical systems that he had studied during the previous five years. These systems are central to his basic premise: the problem of human solitariness versus universal coherence. Indeed, it is the reason why, absenting himself from his poetic vocation, he had consulted the philosophical canon. If I may reduce this abundant work (in my view Leopold’s major poetic achievement) to the philosophical statement that it manifestly is not, “Kinderpartij” works in the following manner. The coherence we so eagerly seek in reality is no more than what Thomas Huxley in his monograph about David Hume (a book that is one of the sources for “Kinderpartij”) calls “an orderly phantasmagoria.” Supposed unity is the result of our own imagination, it is not epistemological in nature. Every human being is alone in a world of apparent forms. It is impossible to find any definitive connections: there is only a kind of order in change. Yet it is that insight that itself legitimizes artistry. If the world is no more than an orderly phantasmagoria that proceeds from the “I,” then the distinction between reality and the work of the imagination disappears, and the work of art is the best that can be made of reality. But the claims of an art that can assume the secrets of the macrocosm in an artistic microcosm that corresponds to it are evanescent. If all knowledge, whether philosophical or religious, that claims absolute validity is unmasked, then the only consolation lies in art and its illusions.

This somewhat lengthy introduction about Leopold leads us to Leopold and 'Umar. It is precisely at this point in Leopold’s development – a release from philosophical purism and a return to the poetic – that his acquaintance with 'Umar Khayyâm may be placed. The pessimistic Epicureanism in the direction to which Leopold’s thinking evolves (it says much that his reading as a classicist proceeds from the Stoics to Epicurus and Lucretius) rests seamlessly on the thought-world of 'Umar – at least on the Omar that emerges from J.K.M. Shizari’s short book The Life of Omar Al-Khayyâmi, published in London and Edinburgh in 1905. This Omar is not just amenable to Leopold’s new insights: I contend that this 'Umar contributed to the articulation of these new insights.

From his correspondence, it appears that Leopold had discovered Omar at the end of 1904. The next year he made diary notes on the Heinemann
edition of FitzGerald’s The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. In March 1906 Leopold published an article about ʿUmar, an article indebted to the portrayal of ʿUmar in Shirazi’s 1905 monograph. I shall now look more closely at that article.

Leopold compares ʿUmar and Spinoza, Leopold’s hero since 1900. In the conceptualization of both writers that Leopold develops here, both thinkers move without compromise to the very borders of knowledge. In so doing, both ignored the taboos that were imposed on them by the current religious orthodoxies of their socio-cultural milieus. Both were hated by the masses, and sought and admired only by a few, the cultural élite. Both accepted the final consequences of their thinking – Leopold calls this “determinism” – “with everything that concerns man’s destiny that is enclosed there.” For ʿUmar this means that he can come to accept the senselessness of human existence, and the bitter certainty that every human longing is both useless and powerless in its achievement. In this way “the cup and the beloved” achieve their status in this poetry; they participate in an existential tragedy, precisely because – while man would so gladly wish it were otherwise – “the fleeting moment” of the beloved “[is] the only certainty man is given” (I’m quoting Leopold in the following):

This is the original sense that [forms] the ground-bass of the at times so expressive Rubáiyát. The inward sorrow, the bitter reality, is audible throughout all the joy, for even as he apostrophizes the Cup and the Beloved, the fleeting moment is the only certainty man is given.

The wine in ʿUmar’s Cup is, for Shirazi, little wine and much more metaphor. Leopold pursues this view still further.

It is curious that Leopold manages to forge a synthesis between his old hero Spinoza and the newly discovered ʿUmar, given the profound difference between the subject-matter of their thinking. ʿUmar’s insight that the fleeting moment is the only certainty allotted to man would seem completely at odds with the thought-world of Spinoza. But there is a marvellous convergence with what is evidenced in “Kinderpartij,” completed while Leopold was already preoccupied with ʿUmar. The sceptical thought that seems in control in “Kinderpartij” is, I think, connected to the thought of David Hume – at least as that was interpreted at the beginning of the twentieth century. And that in its turn permits an effortless connection with the thought of ʿUmar as Leopold here summarizes it: only the momentary is certain, beyond that there is nothing, and what is certain is that no profounder sense is to be discerned from anything whatever. The two forms of thought seem to meld with each other in Leopold. The connection Leopold makes between Spinoza and ʿUmar concerns not so much the subject-matter of their thought, as the manner in which that thought is experienced.
and lived by its thinkers: that is, their refusal to compromise, and their preparedness to antagonize the masses where they deem that necessary. Leopold then directly invokes a third presence, the speaker of Ecclesiastes with its central wisdom “All is vanity.” We then come to an interesting postulate by Leopold in the context of a symposium on the legacy of ʿUmar Khayyām. He suggests that these three thinkers, ʿUmar, the Dutch Jew Spinoza, and the speaker of Ecclesiastes, all of them united in their refusal to compromise, must have been driven by an “Eastern life-force” which underpins and accepts “absolute reality.” On the other hand Leopold conceives of a “Western spirit” that “sought a compromise and attempted to evade the irrefutable.”

I suggest that this distinction Leopold, writing on ʿUmar, makes here between “Eastern” and “Western,” is a milestone in his own intellectual history. Western philosophers such as Descartes, Hume and Kant remained, despite all that they achieved in their attempts to reach the unknowable, nevertheless, and counter-productively, able to allow room for the current religious attitudes of their society and culture. In the world of Leopold’s Shirazi-based reading of ʿUmar, this was by definition flawed reasoning. In confrontation with this ʿUmar, the Kants, and all the other guardians of western thought, appear as opportunists.

It is in this connection, and in the context of ʿUmar, that the term “Eastern” first appears in Leopold. This does not represent the exotic world of heavily aromatic roses and fountains, but a tragic and aristocratic nihilism that consistently accepts its own lack of viability while simultaneously able to drink from the cup. As we have seen, this entails a rejection of the Western thought that Leopold had pursued for years, and that finally evaded him when the least flicker of opportunism could be detected. In the development of Leopold’s poetry from this point until his death in 1925, a marked increase in the element of the “Eastern” can be determined. Saʿdī, Hāfīz, and Sufi mysticism become incorporated in all kinds of Eastern-minded poetry. And in much of his uncompleted work, Leopold searches for the roots of Christianity in connections with pre-Islamitic, Eastern-Hellenistic mystical thought.

I should add that a comparable dualism is to be found in Shirazi himself. Shirazi views the earlier Persia, with its open spirituality, in which religion was kept strictly apart from and science and upbringing, with a kind of nostalgia. The later Islamicized Persia, in which the spirit was subjugated and religious dogma enforced by the sword, was not for him. ʿUmar had continually to flee his persecutors, because he understands God as no more than a blind, relentless force. Such a view was anathema. Against the tide of opinion of most of the ʿUmar scholars of his day, Shirazi believed that ʿUmar was not a Sufi. Admittedly ʿUmar borrowed some of the language of the Sufis, but in contrast to them, agnosticism rather than belief is the key to his work. Human responsibility has no basis for ʿUmar: everything

BITTER CERTAINTY: J.H. LEOPOLD ON ʿUMAR KHAYYĀM

133
comes down to “the quarrel of the universe.” The beauty of the evanescent – the rose, the wine, the poetry – is all that remains in a world that exists not in harmony but in strife.

That absolute zero now reached, the poem can begin to bloom again. But it stands for nothing other than what it is. Indeed Shirazi’s ‘Umar takes his place completely fittingly in Leopold’s development, as a catalyst of the first order in that long process that took him away from his attempt to penetrate the inner recesses of reality (in the view that they represent a meaningful coherence) towards the opposite of this attempt, the final recognition of a “given” that is, as he terms it in his best-known poem “Cheops” (1914), “barren desert and idleness.” In that poem the pyramid of Cheops is devalued. Always an art-work of the highest order, “living form,” it lacks from now on the power to point to whatever had legitimized the creation of the art-work. What had appeared in its greatness to represent truth and coherence has had to give way to what should from the very beginning have been small in scale, without pretensions bigger than itself and existing in no profounder sense than that.