Allegories of One's Own Mind

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Edward Fitzgerald was an exact contemporary of Tennyson and the Brownings, as well as a close friend of Thackeray and Carlyle, and he was probably the most melancholy member of this set of marked melancholics. Unlike Tennyson and the Brownings, however, Fitzgerald was an agnostic, and consequently he lacked the strong sense of conscience and duty that might have disciplined and given shape to his anomic imagination. As a result, Fitzgerald saw himself as effeminate, as less a potential “masculine” poet than a mere “feminine” man of taste. As a result, his life and poetic career strikingly reflect the gradual transition of Victorian England from a culture of production to a commodity culture: a major element in his melancholy is his own personal abandonment of original poetry and his sad resignation to a life of passive connoisseurship of aesthetic commodities. Fittingly, his greatest poetic production, “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,” became not only one of the great poems of the age, but in its various manifestations in giftbook editions, one of its greatest aesthetic commodities. With absurd appropriateness, my voice-recognition software recognizes “Omar Khayyam” as “Hallmark I am.”

Fitzgerald’s own scant original poetry, lacking the striving and moral earnestness of his contemporaries, settled into a distinctly minor key of melancholy in insignificant reveries of passive melancholia such as “The Meadows in Spring”:

’Tis a sad sight
To see the year dying:

Chapter Five

Edward Fitzgerald: Melancholy, Orientalism, Aestheticism
When Autumn’s last wind
Sets the yellow wood sighing
Sighing, ah sighing. (Letters, 1: 98)

The poem seems to epitomize Fitzgerald’s life, as described by A. C. Benson: “a melancholy life it was. ‘His life,’ said one of his friends, ‘is a succession of sighs, each stifled ere half-uttered; for the uselessness of sighing is as evident to him as the reason for it’” (177). Fitzgerald stifled his poetic sighing because, like Arnold, he believed that the melancholy of his age and his own temperament were unpoetic.

Fitzgerald would probably not have diverted his melancholy into more significant works than “The Meadows in Spring” if he had not found himself in sympathy with the Persian texts introduced to him by E. B. Cowell. It was seemingly inevitable that Fitzgerald would be introduced to Orientalism in one form or another: not only Tennyson but also Fitzgerald’s other Cambridge contemporaries were all finding relief from the rigor of Victorian masculine earnestness in detours through the supposedly effeminate and lushly sensual East. In a letter to Frederick Tennyson, Fitzgerald sardonically put it, “Ye Gods! In Shakespeare’s day the nuisance was the Monsieur Travellers who had ‘swum in a gundello’; but now the bores are those who have smoked tschibouques with a Peshaw! Deuce take it: I say ‘tis better to stick to muddy Suffolk” (Letters, 1: 480). Fitzgerald did stick to muddy Suffolk, but touched perhaps with the traditional scholar’s melancholy, he could not resist being drawn into the study of Persia by Cowell, and, in particular, into the study of a Persian allegory by Jámi that might almost have been a model for such melancholy allegories as Shelley’s *Alastor* and Keats’s *Endymion*. According to Fitzgerald, Jámi’s “Saláman and Absál” was an allegory of “Persian Mysticism—perhaps the grand Mystery of all Religions” (Letters, 2: 219). Like *Alastor* and *Endymion*, Jámi’s poem, or at least Fitzgerald’s translation of it, is an allegory of the growth of the protagonist’s mind spurred by erotic desire and pursuit of a lost ego-ideal (Lacan’s phallus) in the form of a female beauty who seems an image of his own soul. Inevitably, erotic love “infected all his soul with melancholy” (Arberry, 71). Like Endymion, Saláman finds erotic satisfaction with his beloved, Absá, but unlike Endymion’s beloved, Absá, is not a goddess, and sexual gratification, as in courtly love, can only short-circuit any quest for full self-realization in wisdom. The meaning of Saláman’s plight is provided by a Sage in language suggestive of Shelley’s *Alastor* and of Ficino’s neo-Platonic model of desire.
for a phantasmic erotic ideal that is degrading and bestial if the lover settles for a material embodiment, but leads to the highest wisdom if not short-circuited by sexual gratification:

The Mighty Hand that mix'd thy Dust inscribed
The Character of Wisdom on thy Heart;
Oh Cleanse thy Bosom of Material Form,
And turn the Mirror of the Soul to SPIRIT,
Until it be with SPIRIT all possesed,
Drown'd in the Light of Intellectual Truth.
Oh veil thine Eyes from Mortal Paramour,
And follow not her Step! (76)

Salámán's SPIRIT is willing, but his flesh is weak, and he flees the dictates of conscience as represented by his father “in the Name of God” (75). The resultant conflict between his conscience and his desire is inevitably a will-destroying melancholy:

Unto the Soul that is confused by Love
Comes Sorrow after Sorrow—most of all
To Love whose only Friendship is Reproof,
And overmuch of Counsel—whereby Love
Grows stubborn, and increases the Disease.
Love unreproved is a delicious food;
Reproved, is Feeding on one's own Heart's Blood. (77–78)

Like Keats’s Endymion, Salámán weds himself to Sorrow, flees the dictates of conscience, and once again finds blissful repletion, this time on a paradisal isle. This sensual idyll, of course, is precisely the temptation that lures a prince from his duty or tempts a Victorian poet to “some paradisal isle” as in “Locksley Hall,” or a reclusive, melancholy scholar-poet like Fitzgerald to sensual but emasculating Eastern idylls. The temptation is so great that it can be ended only by magic, in this case a supreme act of the father’s will:

To Gracelessness Ungracious he became,
And, quite to shatter his rebellious Lust,
Upon Salámán all his WILL discharged.
And LO! SALÁMÁN to his Mistress turn’d,
But could not reach her—look’d and look’d again,
And palpitated tow’rd her—but in Vain!
Oh Misery! what to the Bankrupt worse
Than Gold he cannot reach! To one Athirst
Than Fountain to the Eye and Lip forbid!—
Or than Heaven opened to the Eyes in Hell! (83)

In the Persian original this telepathy is merely magic, but for the Victorian Fitzgerald, as he explains in a note, it is the newest science: “He Mesmerizes Him!” (83n). The result, in either case, is that Salámán becomes Shelley’s Poet seeking his vision of the soul within his soul, or an Endymion seeking the unattainable Cynthia, or more literally the prince seeking the character of Wisdom on his heart, turning the mirror of the soul to SPIRIT. In short, “Salámán and Absál,” in Fitzgerald’s translation, turns out to be a remarkable reenactment of melancholy Romantic allegories of desire turned to the purposes of Wisdom and, further, of the Victorian exercise of manly self-control, enslaving sensuality to the stern control of “WILL.”

“Salámán and Absál,” however, does not end with Shelleyan longing for an ideal that cannot be reached because it is already internalized, but rather with a final allegorical movement that, like Endymion, allows a magical happiness by wedding the protagonist to an erotic object that is both a beautiful woman and the highest ideal. An allegory of ideology itself, it represents the imaginary solution of an insoluble problem.² Salámán builds a magic fire and enters it with Absál, but the flame passing him, consumed ABSÁL like Straw,
Died his Divided Self, and there survived
His Individual; and, like a Body
From which the Soul is parted, all alone. (86)

Actually, as the poem later makes clear when expounding the allegory, what dies in the flame is not the soul but the body’s sensuality; the fire is

Ascetic Discipline
That burns away the Animal Alloy,
Till all the Dross of MATTER be consumed,
And the Essential Soul, its raiment clean
Of Mortal Taint, be left. (94–95)

Not surprisingly, the consummation of Absál is a torment to Salámán, who is a wiser but a sadder man. Still, in a deft pre-Freudian turn, this newer melancholy is not only like mourning but is mourning, so the pathological condition of melancholy without an apparent cause and therefore without limit is replaced by the “normal” condition of grief. Salámán goes from
illness to health. Further, the Sage, assuming the role of therapist, is able by an act of will to engender a mourning like melancholia that will lead beyond the phantasm of sensual, erotic love to the better and higher libidinal object of the highest beauty and Wisdom. The Sage repeatedly raises a “Fantom Image” of Absál to pacify Salámán’s grief, but then annihilates it and replaces Absál with “a Celestial love; / ZUHRAH . . . the Lustre of the Stars” (89). The allegory hardly needs the explication that Jámi, and Fitzgerald, provide:

what is ZUHRAH?—that Divine Perfection,
Wherewith the Soul inspir’d and all array’d
In Intellectual Light is Royal blest,
And mounts THE THRONE, and wears THE CROWN, and reigns
Lord of the Empire of Humanity. (95)

Fitzgerald’s “Salámán and Absál” is not a great poem, and it certainly cannot compete with his “Rubaiyat,” but it is nevertheless a remarkable documentation of the intersection of late Romantic, early Victorian melancholy with a languorous desire for sensual pleasure and beauty best explored by an Oriental detour that subjects both effeminate longing and the East to the mastery of conscience. In an overtly allegorical form it represents both the erotic quests of Alastor and Endymion and also the major concerns of Pauline, Paracelsus, Maud, and Sonnets from the Portuguese: brooding on erotic desire that is ultimately a yearning for wholeness of being and that, barring magic or divine intervention, is sustainable only as the melancholy of “Infinite passion, and the pain / of finite hearts that yearn.”

Fitzgerald was one of Tennyson’s few friends who disagreed with Trench’s dictum “Tennyson, we cannot live in art!” Rather, like Tennyson’s soul in “The Palace of Art,” he attempted to remove himself from the demands of Victorian life and live in a quiet aesthetic reverie—if not in a palace of art, at least in a suburban grange akin to Tennyson’s “cottage in the vale” (“Palace of Art,” 291). He was, however, troubled in conscience by this withdrawal from an active to a contemplative life, viewing it at times as effeminate self-indulgence and casting himself into a chaste and ascetically disciplined life of melancholy contemplation. He was troubled even that his poetic and scholarly Orientalism was mere sensual self-indulgence since he saw “effeminate Persian” as antithetical to vigorously English “masculine thought” (Letters, 2: 190), and he even had reservations about appropriating the exotic East as a kind of aesthetic courtesan: “there’s all Turkey, Greece, and the East to be prostituted . . . ; and I fear we shan’t hear the end of it in our lifetimes. Suffolk turnips seem to be so
classical compared to all that sort of thing” (Letters, 1: 550). Consequently, it is entirely appropriate that he was attracted to Jámi’s allegory with its magical cure for melancholy and surprising kinship with the Keatsian, Shelleyan poetry of sensation celebrated by Hallam.

Fitzgerald’s poetry of sensation provides a clear link between the Victorianism of Hallam and Tennyson and the later Victorian aestheticism and decadence primarily through the publication and reception of “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,” but both Tennyson and Fitzgerald saw art for art’s sake as a kind of unmanly hedonism, and Fitzgerald worried that the “Rubaiyat” might be self-indulgent in this way. His sense of the moral value of “Salámán and Absál” and of the possibly corrupting effect of the “Rubaiyat” are both implied in his agreement to publish a fourth edition only on condition that it be bound with “Salámán and Absál,” perhaps as an allegorical corrective pointing from sensual pleasure to Wisdom—or at least, in a Keatsian way, to a beauty that is not valued for its own sake, but because, in the vision of Zuhrah, beauty is truth. To the extent that he could control publication of the “Rubaiyat,” Fitzgerald eventually stipulated that it not be published except “in more reputable Company,” with “Salámán by way of Chaperon” (Letters, 4: 73).

“Salámán and Absál” may be seen as an allegorical justification of strenuous melancholy as a path to Wisdom, but Fitzgerald wrote the “Rubaiyat” in what he called a mood of “self-contented indolence” (Letters, 2: 50), more like sloth than like the heroic action that he believed necessary to the poet who would write a great poem. His advice to Tennyson had been to overcome the hypochondriacal melancholy indolence of an exhausted civilization, to “fly from England and go among savages” (Letters, 1: 623). Only in that way could he reinvigorate the poetic tradition with fresh blood—just what Lady Ellerton had told the poet to do in Kingsley’s Alton Locke, but he himself turned rather guiltily to the exhausted vein of a great civilization that he believed had been in decline for many centuries. Thinking himself incapable of writing a great original poem, he tried to assuage his melancholy by immersing himself in the languorous, sensual mood of poetic melancholia, dealing in his own susceptibilities by reading and translating the works of kindred spirits. His first exercise in translation, in fact, was with Lucretius, and he found solace for his sadness in other melancholy Epicureans as well, particularly Omar Khayyam: “Omar breathes a sort of Consolation to me! Poor Fellow; I think of him, and Olivier Basselin, and Anacreon; lighter Shadows among the Shades, perhaps, over which Lucretius presides so grimly” (Letters, 2: 273).

Fitzgerald was at the most melancholy period in his life when he began to read Omar Khayyam. As a letter to Thackeray indicates, his indolence
was anything but self-contented: “Life every day seems a more total failure and mess to me: but it is yet bearable: and I am become a sad Epicurean—just desirous to keep on the windy side of bother and pain” (Letters, 2: 75). The tradition of melancholy as a self-indulgently indolent luxury was consolation, but like Arnold, Fitzgerald saw it as unpoetic.

Just as Arnold said of “The Scholar Gypsy” that “Homer animates—Shakespeare animates—the Gipsy Scholar at best awakens a pleasing melancholy,” Fitzgerald also believed that poetry should animate, or should at the very least be vigorous. As he frequently repeated, in poetry “all is got if ‘go’ is got” (Letters, 2: 74), and he had lost what little “go” he had ever had. Unlike Arnold, who blamed the unpoetic age for his inability to write animating poetry, Fitzgerald blamed himself—he could have gone among savages or at least struggled on in the “vigorous North,” but he chose instead to “go on puddling away faintly at Persian” and luxuriating in “the Sweetmeat, Childish Oriental World” (Letters, 2: 184). For this reason the resultant poem, the “Rubaiyat,” is, as Christopher Decker has said,

one of the best poems ever written about the condition of not being a great poet. . . . It praises humility not because it is Christian to do so, but because the humble life is one in which disappointment is so reduced as to assume the features of contentment. For Fitzgerald, rhyme’s vexation was less a dull narcotic, numbing pain than a way of taming the fierceness of boredom and loss. (Rubaiyat, xx)

Unlike Browning, Fitzgerald seemed content with being a failure like Andrea del Sarto, but ironically, his retreat into melancholy produced a great poem after all. He had given up the idea of writing a great original poem, but his translation of Omar Khayyam is itself an original poem, inspired by Khayyam but recreating the Persian in his own image and producing a single unified English poem out of Khayyam’s disconnected Persian quatrains. Scholars have disagreed about the extent to which Omar Khayyam was a religious poet or was indeed the sad Epicurean that Fitzgerald thought him, but Fitzgerald himself was sure that, as Iago said of Desdemona, the wine he drank was made of grapes, that he wrote “without any Pretense at divine Allegory: his wine is the veritable juice of the grape” (Rubaiyat, 6). In any case, Fitzgerald was not concerned to make an accurate translation but to “tesselate” the “scattered” Persian quatrains into a “very pretty Eclogue,” though one with an un-Christian and un-Victorian moral (Letters, 2: 294), and “As to my making Omar worse than he is in that Stanza about Forgiveness—you [Cowell] know I have translated none [of the quatrains] literally, and have generally mashed
up two—or more—into one” (Letters, 3: 68). What Fitzgerald saw in Omar Khayyam was his own nineteenth-century skepticism, melancholia, and Epicureanism, and he therefore appropriated it as not only a kindred spirit but even as an intellectual property; writing to Cowell, he asserted that “in truth I take old Omar rather more as my property than yours: he and I are more akin, are we not? You see all [his] Beauty, but you can’t feel with him in some respects as I do” (Letters, 2: 305). Strikingly, in a letter to Cowell, Fitzgerald, the Victorian “Hamlet of literature” (Benson, 188), expressed his own immoral skepticism not only behind the mask of Omar Khayyam but also behind the mask of Hamlet’s melancholy madness: “I think you would almost feel obliged to leave out the part of Hamlet in representing him to your Audience: for fear of Mischief. Now I do not wish to show Hamlet at his maddest but mad he must be shown, or he is no Hamlet at all” (Letters, 2: 305).

The reference to Hamlet is especially important because it indicates how Fitzgerald was not, as he thought, disabled by unpoetic melancholy but empowered by the “imagination penetrative” of melancholy, epitomized by Hamlet’s apostrophe to Yorick’s skull. That Fitzgerald had precisely this apostrophe in mind is evident when he alludes to it in describing his “Epicurean Infidel” as a “poor little Persian Epicurean, who sings the old standing Religion of the World. ‘Let us make the best of To-day,—who can answer for To-morrow!’ To this complexion does one come at last?” (Letters, 2: 277).

The dominant theme of Fitzgerald’s “Rubaiyat” is not Omar Khayyam’s but is the theme of Hamlet’s graveyard musings—that human life is returned to dust for any base use: “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away” (V.i.213–14). The “Rubaiyat” finds a better use for Caesar’s clay, though life’s insignificance and transience is no less sharply felt:

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head. (xviii)

Like Ruskin, Fitzgerald broods most particularly on a Hamlet-like consideration of the lips that once had kissed:

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! (xix)
The most insistent image of the “Rubaiyat” ineluctably summons Yorick’s lips in tracing the clay lips of the wine cup to clay lips that once had laughed and kissed in life:

Then to this earthen Bowl did I adjourn
My Lip the secret Well of Life to learn:
    And Lip to Lip it murmur’d—“While you live
Drink!—for once dead you never shall return.”

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer’d, once did live,
    And merry-make; and the cold Lip I kiss’d
How many Kisses might it take—and give!

For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watch’d the Potter thumping his wet Clay
    And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur’d—“Gently, Brother, gently, pray!” (xxxiv–xxxvi)

The melancholy lesson taught by the lip of the wine cup is entirely orthodox, merely that the body is dust and will to dust return, but Fitzgerald’s agnosticism is suggested in a nihilism that also seems to doubt the immortality of the soul: “Thou art but what / Thou Shalt be—Nothing” (xlvii). Also, the still more subversive moral is that God wickedly made life in order to damn it. The stanza in which Fitzgerald may have made Omar “worse than he is” expresses this conviction:

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the snake;
    For all the Sins wherewith the Face of Man
Is blackened, Man’s Forgiveness give—and take! (lviii)

The close ties of the “Rubaiyat” to Hamlet enable us to see it as an example of melancholic allegory. Seeing the clay lips of the wine bowl as signs of living lips and their dissolution into dust, Omar Khayyam sees as the Benjaminian allegorist to whom nature appears “not in bud and bloom but in the overripeness and decay of its creation . . . As eternal transience.” 4 The ultimate melancholy emblem is Yorick’s skull or, in Benjamin’s term, a “death’s head . . . The figure of man’s most extreme subjection to nature” (Origin, 166). Further, regarded as a translation, Fitzgerald’s poem is implicitly allegorical in the sense that it uses language in which the words are at a double remove, at least, from the things signi-
fied. Fitzgerald's comments on his mode of translation emphasize the removal of signifier from signified in a striking way; other translators, he remarked, "try to render [elegant Persian] into elegant English; but I think it should be translated **something** as the Bible is translated, preserving the Oriental Idiom. It should be kept as Oriental as possible, only using the most idiomatic Saxon **words** to convey the Eastern metaphor" (Letters, 2: 119). The reference to the Bible is to the most authoritative of English texts, but it subverts the authority of even the Bible with the reminder that the vigorous English words are already at a remove from the Oriental idiom, let alone the signified Truth. Further, it undermines the authority of Fitzgerald's English appropriation of Persian thought by stressing, first, the metaphoric character of the Eastern text and thus the originary separation of signifier from signified in the substitutions of emblem for identification, and second, the separation of Saxon words from Oriental idiom. All in all Fitzgerald's theory of translation emphasizes the Benjaminian or deManian sense of the ghostly emptiness of all language in which the sign can only be "**repetition** . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority" (de Man, **Blindness**, 207).

Clearly the "Rubaiyat" epitomizes many of the various implications of poetic melancholy in the Victorian age. In the first place, it is bred in the Victorian sense of identification with the melancholy Hamlet, and it represents the "imagination penetrative" identified with Hamlet. Beyond this, it seeks poetic authority through an Oriental detour that will imitate the Bible's cultural authority as it subverts the Bible and even the logos underpinning Western thought by its anticipation, like Browning's, of the post-structuralist theory of language as an allegorical chain of signifiers forever removing itself further from lost and unrecoverable origins.

The great cultural importance of Fitzgerald's "Rubaiyat" is not merely in its exemplification of the Victorian age's melancholy agnosticism but in its exemplary severing of poetic beauty from any kind of Christian duty: it demonstrates that skepticism and pessimism were not poetically disabling but could be the very stuff of poetic beauty. The story of the Victorian reception of the "Rubaiyat" has been often told, but a brief review of it here will help to establish the transition from Tennysonian melancholy to the art-for-art's-sake aestheticism of Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites and finally to the "New Hedonism" of Pater's aestheticism and Wilde's decadence. Not expecting much, if anything, in the way of sales, Fitzgerald anonymously printed 250 copies of the "Rubaiyat" at his own expense with the antiquarian bookseller Bernard Quaritch, and after taking a few copies for distribution to friends he left the bulk of the edition with Quaritch. The demand was nil, and the pamphlets languished in
Quaritch's shop until the poem was “discovered” by the Pre-Raphaelites. Swinburne’s account of this discovery cannot be regarded as gospel truth, but it will do to summon the spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm:

Two friends of Rossetti’s—Mr. Whitley Stokes and Mr. Ormsby—told him (he told me) of this wonderful little pamphlet for sale on a stall . . . to which Mr. Quaritch, finding that the British public unanimously declined to give a shilling for it, had relegated it to be disposed of for a penny. Having read it, Rossetti and I invested upwards of sixpence apiece—or possibly threepence—I would not wish to exaggerate our extravagance—in copies at that not exorbitant price. Next day we thought we might get some more for presents among friends—but the man at the stall asked twopence! Rossetti expostulated with him in terms of such humorously indignant remonstrance as none but he could ever have commanded. We took a few, and left him. In a week or two, if I’m not mistaken, the remaining copies were sold at a guinea; I have since—as I dare say you have—seen copies offered for a still more extravagant price. (Letters, 6: 188)

Swinburne, Rossetti, and others paid tribute to the “Rubaiyat” by raising its commodity value but more significantly by raising its cultural value. Swinburne paid the even greater compliment of imitation, using the stanza form of the “Rubaiyat” for one of his most important poems, “Laus Veneris,” the title poem of the first edition of Poems and Ballads, the book that outraged Victorian morality and contributed importantly to the aestheticist and decadent late Victorian reevaluation of the relation of the arts to morality and to the social order. Like the “Rubaiyat,” “Laus Veneris” represents an embrace of languorous beauty at the expense of moral striving. “Laus Veneris” is Swinburne’s version of the Tannhäuser legend and recounts the knight’s deliberate choice of the pagan Venus and sensual mortality over the Christian religion, asceticism, and the empty promise of immortal, if ethereal, life. Swinburne’s poem, with its explicitly sensual refusal of Christ, is far more shocking than Fitzgerald’s “sad Epicureanism”:

Alas, Lord, surely thou art great and fair.
But, lo, her wonderfully woven hair!
And thou didst heal us with thy piteous kiss;
But see now, Lord, her mouth is lovelier. (ll.17–20)

The moral difference between Fitzgerald’s and Swinburne’s poems may be most clearly seen in the moral connotations of the technically synony-
mous terms Epicureanism and hedonism. Walter Pater famously remarked that the word “hedonism” should be avoided around those who do not know Greek because its connotations are so emphatically of immoral sensuality as opposed to the Greek ideal of calm and avoidance of pain. Fitzgerald’s poem is sensual with the melancholy dignity of Epicurean Stoicism; Swinburne’s poem, on the other hand, courts the moral notoriety of hedonism, and because it vigorously pits the strictures of conscience against sensual indulgence, its sadomasochism represents a far more intense, pathological melancholy:

Alas thy beauty! for thy mouth’s sweet sake
My soul is bitter to me, my limbs quake
As water, as the flesh of men that weep
As their heart’s vein whose heart goes nigh to break. (ll.145–48)

A full discussion of Pre-Raphaelitism and aestheticism is beyond the scope of the present study, but it is very much to the point to note that Fitzgerald, far from being the end of a line of melancholy poetics, clearly connects Tennyson’s early Victorian poetry of sensation to the sensualism of late Victorian poetry and poetics. Fitzgerald’s and Tennyson’s commitment to early and mid-Victorian ideals of masculine vigor made them ambivalent about indulgence in the lassitude of melancholia, but for the Pre-Raphaelites and aestheticists, the commitment to art, and particularly to sensual beauty as an aesthetic ideal, led to a positive celebration of melancholy even as a pathological condition, a disease. “Laus Veneris,” like William Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere,” very specifically represents what Pater described as the defining characteristic of aesthetic poetry: “the deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover” (191). In his much quieter, more decorous way, Fitzgerald made the same choice through Omar Khayyam’s call for “a Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and thou” rather than the promise of Paradise (xi). It is no wonder that the aesthetic school admired Fitzgerald, whose life and poetry seem defined in Pater’s definition of aesthetic poetry as melancholy: “it is that inversion of homesickness known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies” (190). Oddly, and no doubt coincidentally, Pater’s language echoes Paracelsus’s longing for a “form of life unknown.” In lines that seem to sum up the “Rubaiyat,” Pater further characterized aesthetic poetry as the “continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life. This is contrasted with the bloom of the world, and gives new seduction to it—the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death” (198). Pater’s most notorious exposition of aesthetic Epicureanism brings us full circle back to melancholy as “the
emotion of the trapped,” the emotion of Mariana or of the Soul in “The Palace of Art.” Unlike the melancholy of high Victorianism, however, the late-century melancholy of “art for art’s sake,” intimated in Fitzgerald’s translations and explicit in the work of Pater, Swinburne, Rossetti, and Wilde, has more or less resolved the dialectic of social conscience and Romantic self by adopting a late Romanticism that sets aside conscience, as it sets aside social purpose, as irrelevant to the purposes of art. Pater’s prescription for the aesthetic life, for “success in life,” entirely sets aside all that lies outside the “abysmal deeps of personality” as it prescribes hedonistic immersion in solipsistic reverie: “to burn always” with a hard, gemlike flame in the ecstatic reception of the “impressions, images, sensations” that constitute all experience:

[Ex]perience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (160)

The emotion of the trapped carried to its utmost pitch of intensity, a kind of acute melancholia, is an exaggerated version of sad Epicureanism: it is what Dorian Gray called the “new hedonism,” and it is a condition explicitly characterized elsewhere in Pater’s work as a disease, the “malady of reverie.” By century’s end the Wordsworthian, Coleridgean paradigm of a healthy imagination has been transformed through various stages of melancholia to the notion of poetic imagination as morbidly diseased.

Pater’s definition of aesthetic poetry, in fact, is a fair definition of melancholy itself as the emotion of the trapped: “a passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief—” (193). This passion, a strong narcotic, like a poison in the blood, obviously heightens Fitzgerald’s melancholy reverie, or even Mariana’s, to a pitch approaching insanity, like a “beautiful disease or disorder of the senses” (192), but it originates in a Keatsian as well as Fitzgeraldian and profoundly Swinburnean sense that awareness of the finality of death intensifies the sense of beauty. In Wallace Stevens’s phrase, “Death is the mother of beauty” (“Sunday Morning”) or in Fitzgerald’s, “never blows so red / the rose as where some buried Caesar bled” (xviii).

Finally, seeing the nineteenth-century poetic tradition as it passes from Tennyson’s generation through Fitzgerald and into the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde clarifies the often-noted gender transgressiveness in late-
century aestheticism. From Tennyson’s association of melancholy sensibility with women and Hallam’s sense of the transgressive nature of indulgence in melancholy, poetic sensibility had been figured as potentially unmanly, a loss of vigor and self-control in exchange for appropriating a female or even Oriental erotic reverie. As Fitzgerald saw it, such effeminate melancholy was disabling to masculine, poetic creativity and led him to a resigned acceptance of the devolution of the poet to the mere aesthete, the womanly man of taste: “I pretend to no Genius, but to Taste: which, according to my aphorism, is the feminine of Genius” (Letters, 1: 669).

The resolution of the gender ambiguities attending melancholy and genius may, perhaps, be glimpsed in the deliberate assumption by the homoerotic Pater, Wilde, and others, of the highest aesthetic sensibility in a disease, a disorder of the senses, as late-century science constructed the discourse of homosexuality, and of a homosexual identity. This is not the place to discuss the late Victorian imbrication of the discourse of melancholia and sexology, but only to note that the disengagement of poetry from the severe moralism of the Victorian age in “art for art’s sake” and decadence results in a lassitude commonly regarded as melancholy, but much diminished from the fierce dialectic of conscience and mutinous feeling that I have been exploring. The disengagement, moreover, is also a disengagement from the central moral, ethical, and ideological values of the age, and it marks the marginalization of poetry from public discourse that remains with us over a century later.