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## Absurdity and Metaphysical Rebellion in the Philosophies of Albert Camus and Omar Khayyam

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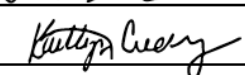
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**Absurdity and Metaphysical Rebellion in the Philosophies of  
Albert Camus and Omar Khayyam**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

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Lynn Alsatie

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### Abstract

The first time Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* were brought to the Western world, it was through a translation from their original Persian to English by Edward Fitzgerald in 1859. Over the next century, Khayyam's verses saw extraordinary popular success among intellectuals both in England and beyond. This paper, however, explores what these verses meant to Persians in Omar Khayyam's context, long before the quatrains reached the West. Although whether the meaning of his poetry is esoteric or hedonistic in nature is debated, his quatrains express an existential longing and grieving that can be compared to parallel feelings described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. In this project, I explore the similarities in the notion of the absurd as defined by Albert Camus with the expressions of absurd experience in *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*. Through this exploration of the absurdist experience across cultures and centuries, I propose Omar Khayyam's Ruba'iyat as an example that the spirit of metaphysical rebellion can exist in a non-Western context, and that it existed nearly a millennium before Albert Camus developed it as an idea in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Absurdity and Metaphysical Rebellion in the Philosophies of Albert Camus and Omar Khayyam**

The anguish felt by an individual whose absurd existence has become clear to him is a human experience that cannot be held by the boundaries of temporality or culture. The absurd, as defined by 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Albert Camus, is the feeling one experiences upon becoming conscious to a world that begs desperately for explanation, but cannot ever be explained. It is an innate part of the human experience for one to react instinctively to the wrongs and rights that occur in the world with a ‘why?’ and to be met with infuriating silence or unsatisfying explanations coming from science or religion. Human beings project an ideal onto the world, and the world consistently disappoints them without explanation. Throughout one of his earlier works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus meditates on the implications of the act of suicide in response to the absurd. He comes to a final conclusion, deduced from absurdist reasoning, that one must renounce suicide and instead bravely confront the desperate encounter between the human search for answers and a universe that remains silent. Later in his life, Camus develops on these conclusions in *The Rebel* (1956), this time exploring the implications of the act of rebellion in response to facing the absurd. Camus’ rebel is a man who “confronts an order of things which oppresses him, with the insistence on a kind of right not to be oppressed beyond the limit he can tolerate” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 13). This oppression can be political oppression, or an exertion of authority beyond the limit where it begins to infringe on the rights of others. It can also be the oppression that man experiences from the absurd condition he finds himself in, feeling frustrated by the universe. Camus calls this man who rebels against the absurd the metaphysical rebel, who the rebels against “his condition and against the whole of creation” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 14). Key to Camus’ idea of the metaphysical rebel is the fact that his

rebellion is not solely for him, it is for all who suffer like him, because although suffering in the absurdist experience can be an isolated individual act, the movement of metaphysical rebellion emphasizes suffering as a collective experience (Camus, *The Rebel*, 22). At the beginning of *The Rebel*, Camus specifies that he will focus on examples of rebellion and revolution in the societies of Western Europe to illustrate characteristics of the metaphysical rebel, arguing that “the problem of rebellion...has no meaning except within our own Western society” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 20). He explains that this is because “the spirit of rebellion” can only exist in a society whose claims to follow justice only conceal its actual inequalities. It has no place in an Indian or central African context, for example, because there, tradition and myth exist to quell the existential frustrations of the people. In this thesis, I argue that this is false. Just as the absurd is a universal experience of the human condition, regardless of culture, so is the confrontation of it and the problem of rebelling against it.

The example I will employ is that of Omar Khayyam, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Persian astronomer, mathematician, philosopher, and poet who is best known in the West for his profound quatrains of poetry called the “Ruba’iyat<sup>1</sup>”. The translation of his poetry from Persian to English by Edward Fitzgerald brought Khayyam’s work to the West for the first time in 1859. This translation, created for the purpose of entertaining British Orientalist circles, did little to lessen the confusion surrounding Omar Khayyam’s character and the meanings of his Ruba’iyat. Fitzgerald’s translation accentuated the hedonistic themes in Khayyam’s poetry, making it representative of an exciting Oriental exoticism (Baghfalaki). In their original form, Khayyam’s verses held within them bottomless oceans of ambiguity, allowing for his own laments of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ruba’iyat is the plural form of the word Ruba’i, which literally means “quatrain” in Persian.

absurd, as well as his expressions of frustrations with the Islamic orthodoxy in a context where it was dangerous for him to do so. Khayyam's writing of the Ruba'iyat may have endangered his life and his legitimacy as a scholar of his time, but the spread of his quatrains across Persia resulted in a ripple effect across Khorasan and the rest of Persia. It contributed to a wider use of the quatrain-style of poetry by the Persian people to express criticism of hypocritical religious jurists who imposed restrictive prohibitions and doctrine. The Ruba'iyat also expressed existential despair and longing, as well as dissatisfaction with the explanations of scientists and religious scholars who, according to Khayyam, only distracted from the ambiguity of reality. This is not to say that all Persian individuals who memorized and relayed quatrains during Khayyam's time and afterwards were agnostic existentialists who consistently struggled with confrontation of the absurd in the same way the characters of Camus' novels did. In fact, Khayyam's quatrains were interpreted in many different ways by many individuals, and it is exactly their malleability that has allowed them to traverse across many lands and times to touch the hearts of diverse groups of people with seemingly irreconcilable beliefs, such as atheist hedonists and religious Islamic Sufis<sup>2</sup>. Khayyam's quatrains were memorized by so many people that the few hundred he wrote turned into the thousands that are now attributed to him, as people crafted new quatrains to express their own sentiments, ones that mirrored those of Khayyam. During Khayyam's context, religious dogmatism was on the rise in both scholarly circles and in political ones, and the sentiments of contempt against the attempts of dogmatists to solidify the "rights" and "wrongs" of religious practice were present in Persian society. In this thesis, I will show that the content of Omar Khayyam's poetry contains expressions of his experience in

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<sup>2</sup> Sufism refers to Islamic mysticism, whose adherents often focus more on achieving the spiritual experience of being with God than on traditional Islamic doctrine.

confronting the absurd, and the conclusion that he reaches in these quatrains is similar to that which Camus reaches after identifying and confronting the absurd. Similar to Albert Camus' Rebel, Omar Khayyam expresses a rebellion against all that is not life-affirming, all that serves to distract from life's experience in the present moment. This, in addition to the popularity of Khayyam's verses among those who also related to this experience, is proof that the spirit of rebellion existed in Khayyam's non-Western context, because of and not despite the presence of religion and tradition in Persian society.

### **The Life of Omar Khayyam**

Omar Khayyam was born on 18 May 1048 in Nishapur, the metropolitan capital of a north-eastern province of Persia called Khorasan. He was recorded to have lived until the year 1131 (Tirtha, 109). Khayyam's father, reported by some biographers to have been a Zoroastrian tent-maker who had converted to Sunni Islam early in his life, placed Khayyam as a child under the tutorage of the local mosque's Imam, Mawlana Qadi Muhammad. He studied Quranic sciences, Arabic grammar, and literature. The Imam saw potential in the boy, who was a quick learner, and sent him to continue his studies with another scholar, Khawjah Abu'l-Hasan Al Anbari al-Hakim. Under the instruction of this new teacher, Khayyam studied mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, and traditional cosmological doctrines, such as the major work of Ptolemy, *Almagest*. As the most gifted student of al-Hakim, he was encouraged to seek the patronage of Imam Muwaffaq Nayshaburi, a court philosopher who was known to teach the children of the nobility. In a meeting between the two, Khayyam convinced him of his worthiness to study with him, entering the patronage of this master and proceeding to spend many years studying Quranic studies and jurisprudence. Finally, with another well-known court scholar, Sheikh Muhammad Mansur, Khayyam studied philosophy, being exposed for the first



time to the writings of Avicenna. He became an avid adherent to Avicenna's school of thought, referring to him repeatedly in his works as "my master" or "my teacher". He would go on to later publish philosophical treatises that expressed support for the rationalism that characterized the works of Avicenna and other Aristotelian philosophers in a time when the formal Islamic Orthodoxy named the Peripatetic philosophers heretics (Aminrazavi, 200-223).

At the age of 26, Khayyam had gained the favor of Sultan Malik Shah, as well as other Seljuk leaders whose attention he received for his few but impressive mathematical treatises. Early in his life, he was credited with being the first to give a method of solving quadratic equations that led to a way to solve all real roots of cubic equations. With his position as the head of an observatory in Ispahan, capital of the Seljuk empire in 1074, Khayyam became even more known in the royal scholarly circles of his time. Two years later, he completed his reform of the Persian calendar to a true solar calendar, commissioned by the sultan. Khayyam's fame as a scholar spread across the empire, and he was referred to with titles such as "Ghiyath al-Din" (Patron of Faith) and "Hujjat al-Haqq (Evidence of the Truth), indicating his perceived authority as a religious figure by many in his community. He was known to have been "shy and sensitive, with a bad temper, an impatient man with little interest in sharing his knowledge with others" (Aminrazavi, 25). His first enemies were perhaps made during this time, when many aspiring scholars discovered that Khayyam had very little interest in teaching, and that he accepted very few students. Secluding himself in his study for the vast majority of his time, Khayyam did not like to participate in the scholarly debates of Nishapur, especially those surrounding theology. Some historians have attributed Khayyam's hesitance to teach students or to participate in the academic circles of his contemporaries as signs of not wanting his own ideas to be particularly

conspicuous in these communities. He was justified in being cautious, as he made many more opponents in the future due to his philosophical works, and much more so, to his Ruba'iyat.

### **The Seljuk Empire and Islamic Scientific Innovation**

When it comes to explaining the context in which Khayyam lived, it is impossible to avoid the vast number of conflicting historical accounts for this period. What is known and agreed upon by the majority of biographers and historians writing about Khayyam is that he earned a bad reputation in the view of his contemporaries and other scholars in the Sultan's court due to his criticisms of all forms of religion and to the religious skepticism he expresses in the Ruba'iyat. When Sultan Malik Shah lost his life in an assassination, Khayyam lost the protection he had in the court, and foreseeing danger to his life as the accusations of his heresy began to be more prominent and serious, he left to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. When he returned, he became even more reclusive than before until his death in 1131. He left behind five mathematical treatises, nine philosophical treatises, and a diversity of identities and reputations due to his refusal to join any group or fit completely into any particular school of thought (Aminrazavi).

To explain the context in which Khayyam had a bad reputation, felt frustrated with rising religious dogmatism, and feared for his safety at one point in his life at least, there are three main historical accounts I will discuss. The first is the traditional Orientalist account that Islamic civilization reached its "Golden Era" in the tenth century, and then began its decline in the century after that. This viewpoint claims that religious dogmatism rose spontaneously and that Sufism, a more "free" and "libertarian" way of Islam that had become popular among the general population was co-opted by an Orthodox scholar named Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). He is blamed for decline of science and rationalism in the Islamic world after the golden era because his attempts to bring Sufism into the Orthodoxy were argued to limit the scope of what religious

practice can look like, even with the spiritual liberalism of Sufism. More importantly, Al-Ghazali is accused of attacking philosophers in his work called *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (The Incoherence of Philosophers). In this work, he is said to argue that philosophers have no ability give rational explanations for metaphysical arguments, which can only be explained by religion. He is also commonly accused of rejecting mathematics and listing the evils that arise from studying mathematics in his work *Fatihah al-Ulum* (The Beginning of Sciences). This viewpoint blames Al-Ghazali and other proponents of religious orthodoxy for killing critical thinking and scientific, philosophical, and mathematical innovations (Aydin).

Upon further examination, though, it seems unlikely that one man's criticisms could lead to strict anti-science religious orthodoxy everywhere in the Islamic world and bring about the downfall of rational thought entirely. In his book *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*, George Saliba provides a detailed critique of this classical narrative. He explains that firstly, the Orientalists that argue religious orthodoxy was to blame for the downfall of science are operating under the European paradigm of a conflict between religious and science. In the eleventh century Islamic world, this sharp distinction and consequent conflict between religion and science does not apply. The Muslim scholars of the time believed that their religion encouraged scientific inquiry, and that these studies do not create a conflict of faith, but rather evolve the way the metaphysics defined in religion might be understood. Secondly, Saliba cites examples of many thirteenth and fourteenth century scientists who were also religious authorities and contributed to scientific discoveries in mathematics, medicine, physics, astronomy, and philosophy, hundreds of years after the argued "downfall" of Islamic civilization. Saliba argues the golden age of Islamic astronomy was actually in the thirteenth to sixteenth century, hundreds of years after Ghazali. Historians have also found strong connections between

the Muslim astronomers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and Copernicus, a Polish astronomer of the sixteenth century, proving that there was still a continuous transfer of knowledge from the Islamic civilization to Europe long after Ghazali's time. Also, a textual analysis of Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifah* shows that he has been gravely misunderstood. Ghazali attacks not philosophy nor philosophers themselves, but rather the methodology of philosophers who proposed doctrines conflicting with religious principles. He lists twenty philosophical doctrines, explains them in a way that renders them comprehensible to the average person, and then criticizes them for not providing valid and rigorous proofs for their propositions. He begins all of this, though, by writing, "Regarding mathematical sciences, there is no sense in denying them or disagreeing with them. For these reduce in the final analysis to arithmetic and geometry. As regards to logical sciences, these are concerned with examining the instrument of thought in intelligible things. There is no significant disagreement encountered in these" (Saliba, 211). Therefore, Ghazali's views cannot be used to argue against the study of mathematics or logic. George Saliba makes the claim that the downfall of Islamic civilization came not from religious dogmatism that made the study of science sinful, but rather the onset of a race between Europe and the rest of the world in the sixteenth century, a race in which the Islamic world lost (Saliba, 254).

While this account may be much more accurate, it still does not answer the question of why Khayyam's environment became increasingly menacing to him. Al-Ghazali and Khayyam met throughout their lifetimes and clashed over a number of issues both within their works and, arguably, with regards to their personalities. This was so well known that a number of historians relay the following story that spread during and after Khayyam's lifetime:

"It is said Ghazzālī studied with Khayyam for a number of years, but due to the orthodox and reputation of Ghazzālī the controversial views of Khayyam, Ghazzālī went Khayyam's home early the morning before anyone would see

him. Khayyam, intending to reveal Ghazzālī's hypocrisy, asked a man with a drum to stand on the rooftop and to beat on it when Khayyam gave the sign. One day upon Ghazzālī's departure, Khayyam signaled the man to on his drum whereby people gathered to see that Ghazzālī, who apparently questioned Khayyam's faith privately, was nevertheless studying with him" (Aminrazavi, 26).

Although the legitimacy of this story is debated, it displays the tension that was seen between the two men publically. Al-Ghazali spent his life as an orthodox theologian of the Ash'arite school of thought, which emphasized certainty with regards to religious matters, contrasting with Khayyam's expressions of doubt in the Ruba'iyat. Khayyam had also disagreed with many Ash'arite teachings, the importance of the relationship between God and his attributes, or the promise of an afterlife where one is punished or rewarded. Since Al-Ghazali experienced his own religious doubt near the end of his life as he was teaching in Baghdad it is theorized that it might have stemmed from seeds of doubt planted in his earlier encounters with Khayyam. Al-Ghazali's large role in history when it comes to religious dogmatism leads me to the third and most likely historical account of Omar Khayyam's environment.

The early Seljuk sultans demanded to receive diplomas from caliphs in order to legalize their rule as well as acquire prestige by playing the role of "defenders of Islam" (Cambridge University, 206). They wanted to reaffirm the caliph as the head of the Islamic community, as well as incorporate the sultanate as a necessary element into the ideal of Islamic government. Al-Ghazali helped the Seljuk sultans with this goal by formulating a new relationship between the caliphate and the sultanate. "From this stemmed a new system of administration composed of a series of interconnected jurisdictions whose stability depended, not on a separation of the civil arm from the military, but on orthodoxy or "right religion" and the personal loyalty of sultan to caliph and of subordinate officials to the sultan" (Cambridge University, 207). Therefore, the power of the Seljuks rested upon the Shari'a and Orthodox religion specifically, making

obedience to the sultan “incumbent upon men, and, conversely, opposition and enmity towards them were unseemly...” (Cambridge University, 208). This system developed by Al-Ghazali for the empire, with its emphasis on opposition to Sunni Orthodox Islam being equivalent to state opposition, was especially desirable to the Seljuks during this time due to the threateningly increasing numbers of the local Shiite Ismaili group, who would use infiltration, bribery, and violence to capture small Seljuk areas of Persia. This group was arguably the greatest internal threat to the Seljuks during this time. It was one of their assassins who killed Nizam Al-Mulk, the vizier of Sultan Malik Shah’s father and a powerful member of the Seljuk sultanate.

Therefore, the growing power of the Islamic Orthodoxy during Khayyam’s time was likely instigated not by a sudden and spontaneous rejection of reason by all known scholars, but instead by legislative changes that were made to equate “correct” Orthodox religious practice with loyalty to the sultan, and other ways of practicing the Islamic faith as treason. As the fear of the Ismaili group grew, so did the voices of religious dogmatists, whose concrete ways of practicing the faith were seen by the Seljuk sultanate as effective in protecting the empire from the growing Shiite group. However, the growing frustrations of the people due to this new way of administration may have led to more individuals joining the group.

Khayyam was a religious scholar at the same status as any of the orthodox scholars who spoke in the court scholarly debates, but his ability to study, write, and live in the study given to him by the sultan all depended on his favor in the sultan’s eyes. With the threat of the Ismailis to the sultanate and Islamic orthodoxy being brought as the solution, it would have been dangerous for Khayyam to criticize the Orthodoxy more openly, as this would be seen as disloyalty to the sultan, even if Khayyam was only critical of the Orthodox ideas and not of the sultanate itself (Heath-Stubbs, 22). Additionally, Khayyam’s poetry expresses his rejection of certitude in

theological matters, which he thought to be unattainable, no matter how intensely his Orthodox contemporaries debated theology. As Mehdi Aminrazavi explains in his biography of Omar Khayyam, “While he (Khayyam) does not provide a systematic theological response to these theological issues, he does offer a rebuttal in poetic form; and it is in this context that the Ruba’iyat can be regarded as an intellectual response to the theological debates of his time. It was Khayyam’s way to be engaged in these issues without being recognized as party to the conflict. He advocated freedom of thought... his poems may have shielded him from possibly being harmed” (Aminrazavi, 59). The poetic form of Khayyam’s responses to the theological debates not only protected him by keeping him withdrawn to the conflict, but this specific poetic form, the ruba’i style, allowed for enough ambiguity in meaning for Khayyam to express his own personal experience in wrestling with the philosophical and theological questions of his time.

### **The Ruba’i Style of Poetry**

A quatrain, or “ruba’i” is a two-lined stanza in which the two lines are each broken up into two hemistiches, making up four lines all together. The first, second, and last of the lines must rhyme at the last word. This style of poetry is believed to have been developed approximately within the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The legend of its founding, told by a thirteenth-century manual of Persian poetry describes an early poet of Persia walking through a city that is today known as Ghazni, Afghanistan. He sees some young boys playing a game of marbles using walnuts, and one of the boys says, “Rolling, rolling it is running to the end of the lane” (ar-Razi). This line gave the poet the basis for the ruba’i meters. The development of this style of poetry brought an escape from a monorhymed pattern that had dominated in the region at the time. Court poets were expected to follow Arabic models of poetry to create exhausting panegyrics in praise of the sultan that began with drawn-out sequences of regret over separation from a

beloved which then developed into praises of the ruler. In contrast to the lengthy narrative poems that constrained the poet to a single rhyming letter at the end of each line, the ruba'i allowed for individuals to create a short string of quick and striking lines that expressed feeling or opinion in a witty way. The force of the ruba'i, according to Peter Avery, "lay in the capacity to make a short and telling statement" (Avery and Stubbs, 7). Each ruba'i is a separate poem that stands alone, not needing preceding or succeeding stanzas to accompany it in the lesson it strikes into the reader. It usually begins with a reflective opening in the first three lines, leading up to a fourth that, in the words of the Persian poet Sa'ib, "thrusts the fingernail into the heart" (Avery and Stubbs, 7). The ruba'i became very popular throughout the centuries after its creation, "eagerly taken up by both 'the educated and the uneducated, the pure and the debauched, to be used for purposes good and bad' (ar-Razi). Ordinary individuals found in the ruba'i style something more direct and simple, and its popularity grew amongst even poets themselves because it gave them a means of expression in which they did not have to suppress personal feelings, beliefs, or doubts (Avery and Stubbs, 9). Four lines were easy to memorize and relay, giving even the illiterate a chance to participate in the formation and propagation of ruba'iyat. The composition of a quatrain was easy relative to the lengthy and complicated poems of the time, and it was not created in hope of a reward from a king or a noble. Through ruba'iyat, individuals were free to express criticism of the rising dogmatism during the time without endangering themselves, as the ruba'iyat were spread through society anonymously. They often mocked the "hypocrisy and lack of genuine human understanding displayed frequently by arid scholastics and wrangling religious jurisprudents (Avery and Stubbs, 10). The ruba'iyat acted as a vehicle of expression that was not limited to criticisms of ideas and individuals, covering all forms of the human experience.



This explains the universality and timelessness of many of Khayyam's verses, as his own quatrains were expressions of universal sentiments of experiencing the absurd. Considering the unique characteristics of the ruba'i style, Khayyam likely chose to write his poetry in the ruba'i form on purpose. This form of poetry thrives off of the power of ambiguity, something that characterized Omar Khayyam's reputation, his Ruba'iyat, and consequently, the thousands of ruba'iyat whose creation was inspired by him. The ruba'i form allowed Khayyam's metaphysical rebellion to be a communal act, because it made it possible for others to rebel against the Islamic Orthodoxy through construction or recitation of quatrains that dared to criticize the religious scholars of the time. For Khayyam, this rebellion against the Orthodoxy was simultaneously a metaphysical rebellion, because in his poetry, the Khayyam portrays the Orthodox Islamic explanations of man's relationship to the universe as useless and unsatisfying in the face of the absurd.

### **A Note on Translation**

Translation of a text like Omar Khayyam's Ruba'iyat cripples the meanings conveyed by its words and the poetic devices it uses for them regardless of the quality of a translation or the language to which it is translated. Therefore, a translation is best chosen depending on what is being analyzed. For example, the famous translation by Edward Fitzgerald highlights the artistic beauty that is inherent in the original Persian verses, often developing on the literal translation to create something as rich in emotion and poignancy as the original text, although very far from accuracy in terms of its literal meaning. Fitzgerald's translation is one that expresses the quatrains in the spirit of Khayyam as Fitzgerald understood him, sometimes straying from the actual translations of Khayyam's words. There are many translations, such as that of Paramhansa Yogananda that serve to emphasize the Sufi mysticism that some interpret in Khayyam's words.

I will discuss the interpretations of Sufism in Khayyam's poetry later in my essay, as the possibility of his work containing purposeful Sufi elements raises a number of consequences in its comparison to Albert Camus' ideas of absurdity and rebellion. For my purposes, I am using a translation by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs that attempts to give "as literal an English version of the Persian originals as readability and intelligibility permit" (Avery and Heath-Stubbs, 32). Avery and Heath-Stubbs focus on a literal translation of Khayyam's words to prioritize two elements above all else: what it is the original quatrains actually want to convey, and the "hard directness" with which they do this. This is done at the expense of the poetic quality that characterized Khayyam's work so as not to allow anything to obscure from the powerful lessons Khayyam sought to express.

### **The Absurd in Khayyam's Ruba'iyat**

**Becoming Conscious of the Absurd.** Central to Albert Camus' idea of the absurd is his argument that any knowledge must be based upon immediate human experience. Any meaning that would be inherent in the world, if it is to exist, earns its legitimacy by an individual's knowledge of it. An individual can only "know" this meaning based upon their own experience of it, not upon any kind of leap to a set of transcendental values. Any transcendental meaning cannot have significance in the human experience, where it can never be truly known. As Camus describes, "I don't know whether this world has meaning that transcends it. But I do know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38). Khayyam reflects this same sentiment when he addresses the Islamic Orthodox belief that God knows that which human beings cannot reason. This belief is meant to

comfort believers who struggle with questioning the meaning of life and death. In response Khayyam says:

*If the heart could grasp the meaning of life,  
In death it would know the mystery of God;  
Today when you are in possession of yourself, you know nothing.  
Tomorrow when you leave yourself behind, what will you know? (5)<sup>3</sup>*

This quatrain can be interpreted to argue that human beings ask the universe for a meaning for their existence, and they themselves often construct this meaning to be something that has to do with God, attributing to him all the phenomena they cannot make sense of. However, Khayyam argues that since to “know” or to “grasp” is a human experience, it does not make sense that humans, after they die and in Islamic theology presumably become souls, will know the very things that they could not know in the realm where knowing was invented. If these Islamic metaphysical explanations were true, the knowledge of them from direct experience should be possible in both life and death, not only in death.

If there is a meaning to the world that also transcends it, Camus similarly writes that it is impossible to know this meaning, as one cannot know that which is transcendent. “An examination of ‘immediate personal experience’—and one which stops within this realm – reveals that man’s relation to the world can only be described as absurd. The absurdity is not in man himself nor in the world by itself, but in the relation between man and the world” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 23). Because man longs to know the world’s meaning and through human

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<sup>3</sup> Quatrains cited according to their numbering in *The Ruba’iyat of Omar Khayyam* Translated by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs

experience, cannot ever obtain the knowledge of it, he finds himself in a situation that is absurd.

Khayyam's experience of absurdity can be seen in these two quatrains:

*Although I have a handsome face and colour,  
Cheek like the tulips, form like the cypress,  
It is not clear why the Eternal Painter  
thus tricked me out for the dusty show-booth of earth (1).*

*He began my creation with constraint,  
By giving me life he added only confusion;  
We depart reluctantly still not knowing  
The aim of birth, death, existence, departure (2).*

In the first, Khayyam displays the absurd feeling human beings have that they do not belong on this earth. Khayyam expresses that he feels too beautiful or important in contrast to the earth, which in this context can be synonymous with "the universe" in Camus' words. This universe which is full of constant indications that its nature is irreconcilable with the human being, which is absurd because the human being came from the earth just as any other animal did. Within the second quatrain, Khayyam exactly why the experience of life in this universe is absurd. With life comes the desire to search for answers and to know, but human beings are stripped from being before they are ever able to come to conclusions about why they are born, why they live, and why they must die.

Camus agrees that if man is to be, he is forced to experience his being in this world, and his experience of being in this world involves basic longings. As he explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "Man longs for security in his being, immortal life; the world offers death. Man longs

for knowledge, but the world remains opaque, a mystery” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11).

Khayyam expresses his own entrapment in the following quatrain:

*I am not free one single day from bondage to the world,  
Get not one breath of joy from all my existence;  
I have served a long apprenticeship to Time  
But am still no master of this world's business (211).*

This quatrain can be interpreted to express that the relationship Khayyam has with the world is one he did not choose to enter. He may have thought that spending more time in this experience by having a longer life would help him eventually find answers to the existential questions that plagued him, but time itself proved him wrong. In two other quatrains he says,

*If my coming here were my will, I would not have come,  
Also, if my departure were my will, how should I go?  
Nothing could be better in this ruined lodging,  
Than not to have come, not to be, not to go (17).*

*Since all a man gets in this place of two doors  
Is only a heart of sorrow and the giving up of life,  
He who never lived a moment is happy –  
The man is at peace whose mother never bore him (217).*

Khayyam again expresses his frustration at being put in the absurd situation against his will. Like Camus, he acknowledges that although suicide is an option, it would have been better to have not come to the absurd situation in the first place, as that is the only way man would not have to experience the perpetual conflict between his needs and the universe. Camus argues that a

reasonable relationship between man and the world would involve a world that fulfills the man's fundamental needs. After all, it is the only world in which man can experience his being. But this relationship is unreasonable, it is absurd because man is forced to experience his basic longings in a world that does not provide fulfillment to these yearnings (Caraway, 126). Omar Khayyam explores this idea repeatedly with the theme of mortality:

*Get up and leave the passing world's regret,  
Be glad and make a moment pass in glee:  
If the world's nature had a hint of fidelity,  
Your turn would not come for you at all, as it did for others (124).*

*Before you are taken in ambush,  
Order the rose hued wine to be fetched;  
You're not gold, you silly fool,  
To be buried in the ground and then brought out again (181).*

Khayyam expresses in the both of these quatrains a reminder that life must end for every individual, and although human life feels extremely meaningful and important to the human being, the universe does not share this feeling. Life ends for all, no matter who they are. In the third line of the first quatrain, Khayyam expresses the image of "fidelity" that human beings project onto the universe, even though the universe does not know fidelity from betrayal. Mortality, to Khayyam, is a grand betrayal from the universe. Although this world does not provide man answers, it is all he knows, and it is difficult for him to understand that this human experience, in which he can live feeling that his life is all there is, is what inevitably kills him. It is absurd that man cannot understand this, and that he grasps desperately at life despite his

feeling of misplacement in the universe. In both quatrains, Khayyam advises the individual to hastily seek pleasure in the present moment upon the reminder of his own mortality. This response to the absurd is one Khayyam shares with Camus, which can be seen in the coming sections on confrontation of the absurd.

**Confrontation of the Absurd.** The tumultuous relationship between man and the world gives rise to what Albert Camus argues is the most important question in philosophy: can man find life absurd and still go on living? Camus argues that the man who has awakened to absurdity has two options: suicide or recovery. The two forms of suicide which Camus describes are physical suicide and philosophical suicide. Physical suicide, he explains, is always an option, but the act in itself is an admission that the absurd cannot be lived with. It is a weak response to the force the absurd exerts on man, as it allows man to swiftly escape his condition, while robbing himself of his life. Philosophical suicide, on the other hand, is much more common among those who have become conscious of the absurd because it allows them to remain physically alive while also avoiding enduring the absurd. A man commits philosophical suicide when he takes a “leap of faith” in which he chooses to believe in something that cannot be known through human experience for the purpose of receiving the answers he so desperately desires. Camus expresses that in philosophical suicide, the individual creates their own answers so that the silence of universe can be forgotten or avoided (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*). In several quatrains, Khayyam criticizes the religious scholars of his time for closing their eyes to the fact the ambiguity that characterizes man’s existential experience. Khayyam sees their attempts to argue over matters of theology that can never be truly proven as ways for them to avoid feeling the unease of not knowing.

*Those who dominated the circle of learning and culture –*

*In the company of the perfect became lamps among their peers,  
By daylight they could not escape from the darkness,  
So they told a fable, and went to sleep (12).*

*The captives of intellect and of the nice distinction,  
Worrying about Being and Non-Being themselves become nothing  
You with the news, go and seek out the juice of the vine,  
Those without it wither before they're ripe (84).*

The first quatrain describes the scholars Khayyam may have been exposed to in court academic circles. He illustrates that although these scholars helped to bring others “light”, by giving the scientific or theological explanations to existential questions, the scholars themselves could not escape from the darkness. This “darkness” is their own troubling experience of the absurd, which they hide from their students and contemporaries. To escape from this darkness, Khayyam describes that they tell “fables” and go to sleep. This parallels the experience Camus describes of those who commit philosophical suicide by choosing to believe in fiction in order to escape the absurd. Suicide in all its forms, according to Camus, are only cowardly ways to avoid the continuous confrontation with the absurd after one has become conscious of it. Recovery, the second option, is the rejection of all types of suicide and the determination to live in perpetual contemplation of the absurd. It is followed by three consequences: revolt, freedom and passion (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22).

Revolt is living in a way that keeps the absurd alive. After becoming conscious of the absurd, man must maintain contemplation of his relationship to the universe and how it manifests in his subjective experience. Living with the absurd is living with a tension that man himself



maintains. This gives life its value and beauty, because the experience allows man to see the world as transparently as possible, without the blinders brought by philosophical suicide. “To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19). Life is more vivid, more intense without the use of explanations that relieve man of the weight of his own life and cripple him from experiencing it completely. Revolt creates and maintains proof of man’s only truth, defiance against the force of an absurdity that threatens to disturb him to the point of suicide.

As highlighted before, the Orthodox scholars to which Omar Khayyam responded to in many of his quatrains clung stubbornly to fabricated certitude on the matters that disturbed them. In the following quatrain, Khayyam emphasizes that the relinquishing of this certitude is where true courage is shown:

*I saw a waster sitting on a patch of ground,  
Heedless of belief and unbelief, the world and faith –  
No God, no Truth, no Divine Law, no Certitude:  
Who in either of the worlds has the courage of his man? (104).*

In a context starkly different to that of Camus in both time and place, Khayyam identified that it takes a great amount of courage to let go of all certainty in matters that cannot be directly known through human experience. Like Camus, Khayyam also emphasizes that to relinquish morality and one’s future to transcendental ideas is useless.

*The good and evil that are in man’s heart,  
The joy and sorrow that are our fortune and destiny,  
Do not impute them to the wheel of heaven because, in the light of reason,  
The wheel is a thousand times more helpless than you (34).*

The “wheel of heaven” in this quatrain is the illusion of fate that is conjured by those who would like to make certain the existence of answers that transcend the human experience. Khayyam implies that just as human beings cannot adequately explain the matters of morality or the events of the future that can cause happiness or sorrow, neither can these transcendental values. The “wheel of heaven” can also be interpreted to represent the universe itself, which in the face of reason, can give no more of an answer to these matters than human beings can.

After living in constant confrontation of the absurd, man must face the problem of metaphysical liberty. This is the second consequence Camus identifies, freedom. Before becoming conscious of the absurd, man’s freedom may have come from a transcendental idea or God, or the evasive freedom to work toward a future goal. Now, freedom comes from the only certainties man has: death and the absurd. With the understanding that man has only this present life for certain and that any transcendental values cannot be proven true, man can see that the future has no meaning or purpose for him. In Khayyam’s poetry, living in the present moment is symbolized by the drinking of wine, which was forbidden during his time under the Islamic principles of Seljuk rule. In this way, exalting both wine and the experience of drinking wine was another way in which Khayyam responded to the religious dogmatism around him. He was protected by the ambiguity of what wine meant as a symbol in Persian poetry (Aminrazavi, 142). Many Persian poets often used intoxication to express their feelings towards a loved one, comparing their experiences with them the beloved to the drinking of forbidden wine (Saeidi and Unwin, 98). Others, namely those within the Sufi tradition, used wine as a symbol for the Divine, expressing intoxication as the experience of becoming one with the Divine (Saeidi and Unwin, 100). In Khayyam’s context, there is strong evidence that he did not belong to any Sufi group, and he criticized their ideas within his

works. Wine and drinking wine in Khayyam's poetry is consistently used as a symbol for the sacredness of the present moment.

*My rule of life is to drink and be merry.  
To be free from belief and unbelief is my religion:  
I asked the Bride of Destiny her bride-price,  
'Your joyous heart,' she said (75).*

Khayyam expresses here his devotion to a path devoid of the certitude that comes from belief and disbelief. By saying he is "free" from this certitude, he displays a parallel between his philosophy and Camus' on the limiting nature of living life while clinging to certain beliefs. In this quatrain, the "Bride of Destiny" refers to the universe. When Khayyam asks for the cost of his reconciliation with this universe, she tells him that it would cost him his happiness. Similarly, Camus explains that it is impossible for man to reconcile with a universe that alienates him, and he emphasizes that "the present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man" (Myth of Sisyphus, 22).

*Come friend, let us lose tomorrow's grief  
And seize this moment of life.  
Tomorrow, this ancient inn abandoned,  
We shall be equal with those born seven thousand years ago! (113).*

In this quatrain, Khayyam calls for "seizing" the present moment because in the future, mortality is inevitable. Khayyam does not call for an escape from man's understanding of mortality. Instead, like Camus, he uses it as a reason to take advantage of the present. Because Khayyam mentions "tomorrow's grief" as something that he still has and wants to let go of, this quatrain expresses what separates Camus' consequences of freedom and passion. In the stage of freedom, man has

only begun to let go of expectations and worries surrounding the future. In passion, he has completely moved past them, understanding the present moment to be the only certitude.

In the stage of passion, man strives to take advantage of the present moment completely, breaking free completely from the entanglements of the future. The future can no longer rob the man of his present. As Camus explains, “Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present” (Camus, *The Rebel*, 33). Freedom and passion are intertwined experiences, with freedom emphasizing the initial realization that future and past have little importance, and passion bringing the absurd individual to focus all their energy on the present moment. Omar Khayyam’s quatrains concerning the focus on the present moment often express both of these experiences in a single quatrain. Khayyam calls for enjoyment of the present moment because man’s experience is absurd, and not despite this absurdity. In almost every quatrain that calls for drinking wine and exalting the present moment, Khayyam gives a reminder of mortality and the absurd for the purpose of employing these few certainties man has as the reason why he should desperately embrace the present.

*Drink wine, this is life eternal,*

*This, all that youth will give you:*

*It is the season for wine, roses and friends drinking together,*

*Be happy for this moment – it is all life is (120).*

*Khayyam, if you are drunk on wine, enjoy it,*

*If you are with the tulip cheeked, enjoy her:*

*Since the world’s business ends in nothing,*

*Think that you are not, and, while you are, enjoy it (135).*

*Today, tomorrow is not within your reach,  
 To think of it is only morbid:  
 If the heart is awake, do not waste this moment –  
 There is no proof of life's continuance (133).*

*Don't seek to recall yesterday that is past  
 Nor repine for tomorrow which has not yet come;  
 Don't build your hopes on the past or the future,  
 Be happy now and don't live on wind (215).*

These quatrains, some of Khayyam's most famous, all express what Camus describes as exhausting the present moment because of the absurd. "The absurd and the extra life it involves therefore do not depend on a man's will, but on its contrary, which is death" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22). The extra "lucidity" found in man's experience after he decides to live in constant consciousness of the absurd is argued to depend wholly upon the fact of his impending death. The present moment becomes superior to all else in life because it must end inevitably. Within the last quatrain of those displayed above, where, Khayyam says one must not build hopes upon past or future, he is likely responding to the Islamic Orthodoxy's focus on the afterlife at the expense of the present moment. The religious rulings upheld by the Orthodoxy forbade the hedonistic elements of Khayyam's poetry, which he used to express man's passionate embrace of the present.

### **Rebellion in the Ruba'iyat**

Khayyam becomes a metaphysical rebel in Camus' terms when he, as an absurd man, takes his experience of confronting the absurd and then interacts with the world around him through this

perspective. Camus' rebel is not one who rebels to gain power or to attempt immortality. In the example Camus gives in *The Rebel* of the slave rebelling against his master, the slave does not rebel in order to become the master and to render the master into a slave. He rebels against oppression and for life (Caraway, 130). Khayyam is a rebel because he rebels against the religious dogmatism that sought to give concrete explanations of the world and the human experience for all and that silenced dissenting voices. He did not rebel to take political power, or to become more conspicuous as a scholar. He did not rebel to gain fame or to become immortal through his works (Aminrazavi, 133). He rebelled for life and against the avoidance of the absurd, thus his rebellion was a metaphysical rebellion. Metaphysical rebellion is a communal act, and the rebel does not overcome absurdity, but what he does is affirm life as the only value in the absurd experience. "In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. (Camus, *The Rebel*, 22). In this section is where the bulk of Khayyam's philosophical responses to his contemporaries can be found. These are also the verses that helped earn Khayyam his bad reputation among the religious elites, but at the same time spread throughout Persia as expressions of shared sentiments towards the hypocrisy and impracticality of the rising Orthodoxy and their ideas.

*Go only the way of tavern-roisterers,*

*Seek for girls, wine and music:*

*Wine-cup in hand, the wine-skin on the shoulder,*

*Drink the wine, my darling, and stop chattering (96).*

As stated before, one way Khayyam responded to the scholarly debates of his time was through explicit expressions of hedonism. While drinking wine could sometimes be interpreted as the mystical connection with God and not actually committing the sin of drinking alcohol, Khayyam's references to spending time in taverns with women and music are more difficult to pin down as innocent. These verses of hedonism still contain a worship of the present moment and a call to "stop chattering" or to stop trying to make sense of the human experience.

*Oh Canon Jurist, we work better than you,*

*With all this drunkenness, we're more sober:*

*You drink men's blood, we, the vine's,*

*Be honest – which of us is the more bloodthirsty? (85).*

The "Canon Jurist" is interpreted by Avery and Heath-Stubbs to be anyone who issued judicial degrees, called fatwas. Fatwas would be issued according to interpretations of Muslim Law which the Caliph, Mufti, or Qazi (judge) were allowed to give (Avery and Heath-Stubbs, 65). This quatrain is indicated by Avery and Heath-Stubbs to be of questionable attribution to Khayyam, which makes sense given his position under the Sultan that would have been endangered if he were to directly criticize the entire order of Islamic jurisdiction. However, the fact that it is attributed to Khayyam shows that he had a certain reputation in the eyes of others at the time. Although it may or not have been written by Khayyam himself, this quatrain is indicative of the collective nature of Khayyam's rebellion. He not only rebels for life and for others, he does it in a form that others can emulate as well, as seen by the many quatrains with a political or absurdist nature that were created by others but are attributed to him. More likely to be of Khayyam's composition are the following quatrains concerning hypocrisy.

*Drinking wine and consorting with good fellows*

*Is better than practicing the ascetic's hypocrisy;  
 If the lover and drunkard are to be among the damned  
 Then no one will see the face of heaven (222).*

*A religious man said to a whore, 'You're drunk,  
 Caught every moment in a different snare.'  
 She replied, 'Oh Shaikh, I am what you say,  
 Are you what you seem?' (86)*

In the first quatrain, Khayyam raises above all else the value of authenticity in a man's life. He challenges the idea that the religious ascetic who renounces all worldly pleasures is really doing so for the reasons he says he is. A religious ascetic would choose this life because of his devotion to God. But as Khayyam expresses in other quatrains, how is one to know if this the way to show devotion to God? What proof is there within the human experience that God comes close to the ascetic and not the lover or drunkard? These expressions of outward asceticism and abstention from the pleasures of the world are only illusions, Khayyam conveys. Again in the second quatrain, the hypocrisy of the religious man is challenged by the woman. While the hypocritical actions of the religious individuals are not blatantly shown in Khayyam's quatrains, he is referring to the religious who fabricate what they worship and display it as the only truth, raising themselves above others who do not act in the same way.

To emphasize the importance of the present moment, Khayyam criticizes the ideas of afterlife that are held so dearly to the Orthodoxy. The rising movement of the Ismailis under the Seljuks, along with the spread of Khayyam's critical quatrains, is indicative of an underlying discontent in the population with the direction the Orthodoxy was taking the society (Cambridge



University). Those who treat the existence of an afterlife as certain and demand that others do the same are given the ability to oppress others. This is because they can demand that people practice religion in a specific way, even if the practice is lacking in reason, because they can always refer to threats of hell and promises of heavenly rewards when faced with criticism. Questioning of faith ends when it is preached that questioning will take the individual to hell. This is why Khayyam directly challenges the afterlife that is promised by the Orthodoxy in order to display how these theoretical ideas distract from what is actually concrete in human experience: the present moment.

*Nobody, heart, has seen heaven or hell,  
Tell me, dear, who has returned from there?  
Our hopes and fears are on something of which,  
My dear, there is no indication but the name (91).*

*They promise there will be Paradise and the houri-eyed,  
Where clear wine and honey will flow:  
Should we prefer wine and a lover, what's the harm?  
Are not these the final recompense? (88).*

The Quran contains verses promising beautiful female lovers called “houris” and rivers that flow with honey and wine to those who reach heaven after death (52:20). Khayyam challenges this promise, saying that even if it is true, what is the harm in enjoying these pleasures on earth as well? The preceding ruba’i serves as an important reminder that the earth is the only place where one can be sure these things will be enjoyed.

*If I'm drunk on forbidden wine, so I am!*  
*And if I'm an unbeliever, a pagan or idolater, so I am!*  
*Every sect has its own suspicions of me,*  
*I myself am just what I am (74).*

In this quatrain, one of Khayyam's most famous, he makes explicit the growing suspicions surrounding his reputation as a scholar and as a Muslim. As an absurd man, Khayyam pays no importance to the perceptions of others. Who he is cannot be captured by the perceptions others have had of him, because his own experience in the present moment is all he is and all he will ever be.

The notion of afterlife in the Persian context is especially important in proving that the spirit of rebellion can exist outside of Western society. Albert Camus sets the parameters of where the spirit of rebellion can exist as such: "...the spirit of rebellion finds few means of expression in societies where inequalities are very great (the Hindu caste system) or, again, in those where there is absolute equality (certain primitive societies). The spirit of rebellion can exist only in a society where a theoretical equality conceals great factual inequalities (Camus, *The Rebel*, 5). The hierarchy that existed among the Persian people, the religious and scientific scholars, and the Sultan's court during Khayyam's time constitutes neither an absolute equality nor an inequality comparable to what would be found in the Hindu caste system. The inequalities present under the Seljuk rule that caused Khayyam to rebel stemmed from the rising in power of the Orthodox scholars, who as explained before, helped the empire transform its system of administration to rest upon the "right religion" (Cambridge University). As seen in Khayyam's criticisms in his *Ruba'iyat*, some of these same religious scholars were known to be hypocrites,

employing threats of hellfire to scare others into practicing faith in a specific way, while at the same time secretly doing the same things they claimed to be forbidden. They preached theoretical equality of all human beings in the face of God, but acted as if they were the exception, enjoying the riches and pleasures of being in the favor of the sultan while condemning others for enjoying these same pleasures. The actual inequality existed between the people and the religious elite. It was this inequality that Khayyam spoke out against when citing the confrontation between the “whore” and the religious man, or when he says that “If the lover and drunkard are to be among the damned/ Then no one will see the face of heaven” (222).

### **Sufism and Other Interpretations of the Ruba’iyat**

Sufism, the Islamic form of mysticism, is an experiential practice in which the goal of the individual is to come closer to the Divine, or God. While some interpret Khayyam’s Rubai’yat to include elements of Sufism, using wine as a symbol of the Divine, many others point out that Khayyam criticized Sufism in his treatises, mocked Sufi ascetics in his Ruba’iyat, and never associated with any Sufi group. In Khayyam’s context, those who desired to pursue the spiritual aspects of Islam usually joined a Sufi order, which generally required a Sufi master, a distinctive way of spiritual practice, and a long line of individuals who traced back to someone who was said to have learned from the Prophet Muhammed himself or one of his disciples. In the story known about Khayyam fleeing to Mecca for pilgrimage after Sultan Malik Shah lost his life in an assassination, it is said that during his journey he was approached by a Sufi order who had heard of his Ruba’iyat and his controversial reputation. When they asked him if he would like join them, he refused. Khayyam seemed determined to not involve himself in any religious group, which some say is characteristic of his own form of Sufism. In his extensive biography on Khayyam,

Aminrazavi writes, “Khayyam, one may argue, belongs to the Sufism of love. Antinomian statements and behavior, belittling of religious law and putting emphasis on the truth... as opposed to law..., is the salient feature of this school of Sufism. fits well within this esoteric paradigm, for his emphasis on love constitutes the core of the human condition; nothing else matters, not the story behind creation or destiny. What is at stake here is one’s mode of being in the world, the nature of the relationship between the lover and the beloved, the way we are, one might say” (Aminrazavi, 109). In the Sufi context, the lover is the individual and the beloved is traditionally God. For Khayyam, interpreting his poetry in a Sufi way would suggest that his experience of being with God is expressed as his very experience of living in the present. In this case, the God that Khayyam believes in is not the same transcendental being Camus writes of. This God does not seem to provide any metaphysical explanation or buffer against experiencing the absurd. If Khayyam’s way of experiencing God is simply exhausting the present moment, the line between his mysticism and Albert Camus’ philosophy proves to be a thin one. The idea of this line and all it contains is a complicated topic and can result in another discussion entirely. However, concerning the problem of rebellion, the possibility of Khayyam believing in this type of Divinity does not invalidate his experience of the absurd, nor his actions of metaphysical rebellion. To argue that the present moment is all that can be counted as holy in the human experience, even if the present moment is full of sorrow and confusion, still strongly parallels Camus’ revolt in the face of the absurd. Additionally, Khayyam’s way of experiencing the divine is experiencing the divine in this human experience, and his experience of the divine is not meant to escape from the absurd, it is instead the confrontation of it. This Divine cannot exist without Khayyam himself experiencing it. This means Khayyam’s metaphysical rebellion is still legitimate because firstly, he lives with the absurd in defiance. Secondly, Khayyam rebels against that which is not affirming

of life and of the present moment. By writing the Ruba'iyat, he rebels against the religious Orthodoxy that seeks to establish certitude on existential matters and to limit the ways in which other individuals can practice their religion. Finally, the ruba'i style that Khayyam chose allowed him to effectively render the act of metaphysical rebellion a communal one, as thousands of other Persians were able to express their own feelings through Khayyam's words, or through using his name for protection.

### **Conclusion**

Through the content of Khayyam's quatrains, and the ambiguity of his reputation, one can see that these quatrains were not only philosophical responses and criticisms to the scholarly debates of Khayyam's time. Khayyam's quatrains traverse time and culture, and remain relevant today due to their expressions of a universal existential experience. Albert Camus identified this same human experience nearly a thousand years later when he developed his philosophy of absurdism. The "spirit of rebellion" that Camus describes to be limited to Western societies is proven, by the existence of the Ruba'iyat, to instead exist in any society in which man realizes the absurd. Today, millions of people all over the world who can recite Khayyam's quatrains from heart, each individual understanding them in a different way. Sufi mystics read and study his quatrains, emphasizing themes they believe to symbolize a union with God. Meanwhile, nightclubs and casinos name their establishments after Khayyam, displaying flashing signs of wine cups and celebrating his verses from a hedonistic perspective. Thus, Khayyam's rebellion against the life-denying certitude the Orthodoxy upheld perpetuates to this day, as no matter how many scholars study Khayyam and try to understand who he was, no one can, with certainty, pin down his identity or philosophical positions. Khayyam's identity and his quatrains both exist with certitude only

within the confines of a single moment's experience. Outside of this, they serve to eternalize the ambiguity of the absurd experience, one Khayyam was committed to.

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