

RICHARD FRANCIS BURTON

The Vallico Academy Lecture Series

0. SERIES OPENING: BEFORE THE COLD OPEN

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Good evening. Thank you all for coming. So, this evening is designed to celebrate the unofficial opening of the Vallico Academy (successor to the so-called Towler Institute and the Apuan Alps Centre for Physics opened more than twenty years ago in 2005). The opening is unofficial because it isn't really open - you are 'test guests' - and to mark the occasion I've prepared a series of five lectures to listen to while you're here. As there's less than ten of you, and I don't even really know if you're interested, you may wonder why I bothered. Well to be honest with you, it's basically just to kick me up the arse. Since I left Cambridge ten years ago now, I haven't given any talks at all and I've kind of got out of the habit, which I felt was a pity because I used to enjoy it. Any and all feedback will be greatly appreciated. So here we go.

Five lectures to listen to. You can tell me on what evenings you want to listen to them - entirely up to you. And I'll tell you honestly now: on the surface, they will look like five completely different subjects. First talk is about a Victorian explorer. Then, it's Plotinus and two thousand years of buried philosophy. After that, quantum mechanics. Then something stranger still involving universal consciousness. And right at the end, a piece of neuroscience with some observations about how to live your life.

But this isn't just five unrelated talks I happened to have slides for. There's a single question running underneath all five evenings, and on purpose I'm going to keep what it is to myself, partly because it's more fun to let you spot it yourselves, and partly because by the time I do tell you, in the final lecture, you'll already have seen it from four completely different directions: through a life lived to its absolute limit, through philosophers and mystics, through physicists who got called insane for asking an honest question, and through whatever it actually is that's happening when you're conscious of anything at all.

So: the rules of the game are up on the screen, and I'll only add one piece of advice. The clue is never going to be a fact you could write down; it lives in the telling, in what kind of story each of these turns out to be. Keep half an eye on that and you'll be fine. Let's meet our first character.

1. COLD OPEN

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Here he is. Richard Francis Burton. Explorer! Linguist! Scandal! A man who lived as if attention itself were the only thing worth disciplining. Which is a slightly odd subtitle, you might think, but all will become clear.

A quick note first about photos. As this man was born in the early 1820s well before the invention of photography, there are only about thirty photos of him in existence, many of them of very poor quality. So one of the delights of preparing this lecture was in using very carefully crafted AI prompts to restore them, removing any artefacts, and making it look as if it was taken with a modern camera. First example on the left here, the one on the right is a painting. I've never seen anyone do this online properly, so you guys tonight may be the first people to see him more or less as he was in the 1800s in over 130 years.

On occasion for a bit of dramatic license, and with apologies to him, I have also used AI to put him in situations in his life where he was never photographed. This is actually quite fun, and I'm sure he would have agreed.

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So picture this. It's 1853. A man is standing in the courtyard of the holiest site in Islam, in the city of Mecca, a city no Christian is legally permitted to enter, on pain of death, as it has been for over a thousand years (and still is today, possibly without the death part, though you never know!). He's circling the Kaaba with several thousand other pilgrims, reciting the prayers from memory in flawless Arabic, dressed as an Afghan physician. Underneath his robes, he has, some time earlier, had himself circumcised, purely so that if anyone insists on checking, the story holds. He is carrying a compass hidden in a false compartment of his Koran case so he can secretly take bearings on the holy sites for the Royal Geographical Society back in London, who have no idea whether he is alive or dead, because there's no way to send word, and won't be for months.

If anyone in that crowd had worked out who he actually was (a serving British Army officer, the son of a Hertfordshire gentleman, christened in the Church of England) he would have been torn apart on the spot. Not arrested. Not deported. Killed, immediately, by the crowd around him.

He survived. He came home. He wrote a three-volume account of it, including measurements of the Kaaba itself, which to this day remains one of the only firsthand European descriptions of the interior of that building ever published, because almost nobody else has ever been mad enough, or skilled enough, or *both*, to attempt it.

That man's name was Richard Francis Burton, and the Mecca pilgrimage is not even the most dangerous thing he did with his life. Before he was finished he'd be almost killed in a four against two hundred battle in Somaliland, walk into a forbidden city no European had survived entering, almost discover the source of the Nile, become, depending on who you believe, the most fluent linguist Britain has ever produced, translate the Kama Sutra and the *complete*, unexpurgated Arabian Nights into English, fence at international level, do a hundred other things that no-one else would ever dream of doing, write sixty books and countless articles, and die, eventually, of a heart attack in Trieste, at which point his wife burned much of what he hadn't yet published.

So, who was this person, and what does a life like that actually take?

2. FORMATION

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He was born in Torquay in 1821, to an army officer father of restless Anglo-Irish stock and a wealthy Hertfordshire heiress mother, and from the age of four, the family simply never stopped moving: France, then England, then Italy, then round again, years at a time in each, with a rotating cast of private tutors instead of a school. The slide has the itinerary, the languages it left him with, and the famous rumour about the Gypsy girl, which may be true or may be an early piece of the Burton legend, manufactured by the man himself. What I'd point you at instead is the bottom of the slide, those three short lines, because they name what this childhood cost: every ordinary source of belonging, gone before he was old enough to miss it. That is the making of a man who could put on another culture like a coat; it is also the making of a man who was never again entirely at home anywhere, England included. Keep both halves in mind tonight.

2A. OXFORD INTERLUDE

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Then, in 1840, his family sent him to Oxford. It went badly almost immediately. The moustache incident on the slide happened in his very first term at Trinity: the other undergraduates had never seen anything like it, one of them laughed, and Burton's response was to demand satisfaction with swords, which tells you how well he understood English university life. He fenced, hunted, taught himself Arabic because the university wouldn't, and considered the formal teaching second-rate.

It came to a head in April 1842, over the steeplechase business you can read up there. The distinction that matters is the one the slide hasn't room for: the others who went to the races apologised and were merely "rusticated", suspended with a chance to return. Burton, offered the same soft landing, chose instead to deliver the assembled dons a lecture on the difference between discipline and treating grown men as infants, and that was that: out, permanently, no way back. The exit itself, horse, carriage and flower beds, was pure theatre, and he knew it; he was composing his own legend on the way out of the gate.

His own verdict on himself, written later with characteristic self-mockery, was that he was now "fit for nothing but to be shot at for six pence a day." So that's what he arranged: his old Oxford friends, already serving with the East India Company, got him a posting too, and in 1842, with no degree and no regrets, Richard Francis Burton sailed for India.

2B. QUICK INTERLUDE: THE LANGUAGES

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Before we go further, just sit with this for a moment; by the end of his life, this is the full tally: twenty-nine languages, and eleven further dialects on top of that. Several of these well enough that he could pass completely as a native speaker among people who'd spoken the language their entire lives.

Let's just pause there and consider what that means. From everyone who knew him, he wasn't just claiming he could speak Gujarati, for example, because he could say the equivalent of "Je m'appelle Burton. Je peux avoir une biere, s'il vous plait." He apparently really could speak these languages very well. Now how the hell did even he do that? Most of you lot can barely even speak one language and you have available complete dictionaries and vocabularies, real teachers,

artificially intelligent infinitely patient teachers on a device in your pocket, everything you could possibly need. And you still can't do it. Burton didn't have any of that, so he listened, really listened, he embedded himself in a culture and paid attention.

In a way it's analogous to the way that a child who lands in a new country soaks a language up out of the air; start before about ten and you end up indistinguishable from a native; start much later and, however clever you are, you almost never do, and the accent door closes earliest of all.

A few years ago a study of two thirds of a million English speakers put numbers on what every immigrant family already knows: the machinery for absorbing a language whole survives childhood and then, for nearly all of us, quietly shuts down.

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Now look at Burton. At thirty-two he passed the most unforgiving language exam ever devised: weeks among native speakers at Mecca, where one slipped vowel meant death, and nobody heard the Englishman. Whatever shuts down in the rest of us seems never to have shut down in him. And notice how he learned: not the adult's way, holding the language at arm's length as an object to be studied, but the child's way, by climbing inside it: the bazaar, the clothes, the food, the prayers, everything.

So it seems there are two different ways of paying attention: one that grasps rules, and one that absorbs the whole. And unlike almost every body else Burton spent his whole life doing it the second way.

Some people think those two ways of attending live, roughly speaking, in different halves of the brain. I'm going to leave that thought exactly where it is, but keep hold of it: it's the first sighting of something this whole series will keep circling.

One more thing, because it's too good not to tell you. During a quiet patch in India, by his wife Isabel's own account, Burton got tired of human company and set up an alternative household: monkeys, about forty of them, of assorted ages and species. He sat them on chairs at his own table, had them served like guests, and addressed each one according to its rank; the staffing structure and the state of the linguistic research programme are on the slide. What I love is the seriousness of it. This is not a man keeping pets. This is a man running a small research institute with a staff of forty, and when the paperwork later went up in flames, the loss he mourned was the loss to science.

3. INDIA AND THE BROTHELS

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India is where Burton becomes Burton. He's posted to Sindh - a big chunk of what was then British India but now Pakistan in the hinterland of Karachi, essentially the Indus valley - under the command of General Sir Charles Napier, and immediately starts disappearing into the local population so completely that nobody can tell he isn't one of them: he learns Hindustani, then Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Persian, classical Arabic, all in his first few years.

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Before going further, you need to know Napier properly. His most famous quote concerned the lovely Indian practice of suttee, which means effectively that if I died you would have to strap my wife on a bonfire and set her on fire, for uh.. religious reasons. So the priests of the province came to Napier to explain that widow-burning carried the sanction of centuries and was not his to interfere with. His recorded reply was: *"Be it so. This burning of widows is your custom; prepare the funeral pyre. But my nation has also a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them, and confiscate all their property. My carpenters shall therefore erect gibbets on which to hang all concerned when the widow is consumed. Let us all act according to our national customs."* And that was the end of widow-burning in Sindh.

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Bonus Napier story, with a twist: the one-word dispatch on the slide is probably the most famous joke in British military history. Geddit? *"Peccavi"*: Latin for "I have sinned", claiming to have conquered Sindh. It is also, sadly, completely made up. Napier never sent it. The real author was sixteen-year-old Catherine Winkworth of Manchester, who tried the pun on her Latin tutor; the tutor liked it enough to post it off to a brand-new satirical magazine by the name of *Punch*, and *Punch* ran it as genuine news. The Empire then spent the best part of a century congratulating its general on a joke written by a schoolgirl.

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Now, the most famous story from this period, and it isn't a legend, it happened. Napier wanted to know whether British officers were using Karachi's male brothels, and tasked Burton, the only officer who could pass as a native, with going undercover and writing a detailed report: locations, prices, clientele, all of it. Burton did the job with characteristic thoroughness, and Napier kept his word: while Sindh remained his to govern, the report went no further than his own files.

Then - sadly - Napier went home, and the report sat on in the files like an unexploded shell. In 1847 the incoming civilian administration opened the drawer, read what was inside with mounting horror, and forwarded it to Bombay under a cover note proposing that its author be dismissed from the service. The orders saved his commission, but not his name: the word quietly went round Bombay that Burton was not a man to be advanced. Two years later he was passed over for an interpreter's post he was, by a mile, the best-qualified officer in India to hold, in favour of a junior man with one language, and he only learned the real reason afterwards. The rejection, he wrote years later, "broke my heart." He left India in 1849, sick and embittered, at twenty-eight. No copy of the report has ever surfaced, so every lurid claim about its contents, up to and including the suggestion that Burton's research was uh.. participatory, is guesswork. But the damage was real, and it followed him for the rest of his life.

4. MECCA

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We heard at the start of the talk about Burton's grand lunatic plan to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca in disguise. So let's see what actually happened.

He left England in April 1853 travelling as "Mirza Abdullah", the Persian identity left over from his India days; by Egypt he had thought better of it, a Persian standing out too much on the Mecca road, and he swapped nationalities mid-journey for an Afghan one, chosen precisely because an Afghan's Arabic is allowed to be imperfect. So this is his route on the fold-out map from his book. Starting at Suez, he sailed down the red sea as far as the port of Yanbu. He went first inland to Medina, then joined a pilgrim caravan to Mecca, caravans routinely attacked by bandits, so simply arriving was its own achievement.

And here's where he arrived. Mecca as it was in 1853. A bit smaller than it is now. That object is the Kaaba, where the faithful perform the tawaf, walking around it seven times anticlockwise, symbolizing that Allah is the centre of your life and universe.

14-15

Burton is in perfect disguise, speaks Arabic like a native, has memorized a considerable fraction of the Koran, skin hennaed, no foreskin, prayers off by heart. Will he be detected? Here's some pictures of him all made-up. What do you think?

So, he entered Mecca on 11 September 1853, performed the ihram (essentially having a wash, putting on the required outfit, and saying some words), and the next morning saw the Kaaba for the first time. For six days he did everything a real pilgrim does: the tawaf, kissing the Black Stone, the stoning of the Devil at Mount Arafat, all the while quietly taking measurements and notes with instruments and paper slips hidden in his clothing and his Koran case. His account remains one of the only detailed firsthand European descriptions of the Kaaba's interior ever published.

One more story, given with the same honesty as the brothel story: a persistent rumour, recorded in some obituaries, claimed Burton was nearly exposed mid-pilgrimage when someone noticed he'd taken a piss standing rather than squatting, and that he killed the witness to keep his secret. Burton denied it flatly, and pointed out that murdering a man in the middle of Mecca would be a spectacularly stupid way to avoid attention. But by his own admission, he sometimes rather enjoyed letting people believe it anyway.

By the time his money ran out and he made a seventeen-hour camel dash to Jeddah to quietly reveal himself to the British vice-consul, the thing was complete, and complete by the book: every rite performed, every obligation discharged, nothing skipped. What that earned him is on the slide, and he claimed it without a flicker of embarrassment for the rest of his days: the title, and the turban that goes with it.

5. AFRICA: HARAR AND THE NILE

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So what would Burton do next. He tells us in his book 'First Footsteps in East Africa' - backed by the Royal Geographical Society he led an expedition to Somaliland and the forbidden city of Harar. [explain map]

Harar first, January 1855. The prophecy is on the slide: the city stands until a Christian passes its gates. It had a perfect record, because everyone who might have tested it was dead. Burton's plan was characteristically deranged: get inside in disguise, and then, at the precise moment when running had stopped being possible, tell them exactly who he was. The Emir, perhaps too surprised to reach for the executioner, settled on hospitality instead, of the special kind Burton described afterwards: honoured guest on the surface, hostage underneath. Ten days of that. Then incredibly they let him ride away, and the prophecy quietly retired.

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The real violence came after. After nearly dying of thirst on the way back, he rejoined his army companions Lieutenants Speke, Stroyan, and Herne at a camp near the port of Berbera on the north coast of Somaliland. In fairly short order local tensions boiled over. On the night of 19 April 1855, their camp was attacked by around two hundred Somali warriors. Stroyan was speared through the heart and killed outright. Speke took a stab wound in the shoulder, got clubbed down and tied up, got repeatedly tortured by a man gently and deliberately stabbing him with a spear ten more times including an awful wound in his thigh, then somehow he got up and escaped only by punching his way free with bound hands. What happened to Burton was even more spectacular: he got a spear straight through his head, the point entering by one cheek and leaving by the other, and he escaped by sprinting into the darkness with the shaft still transfixing his jaw. Later, it took them four hours to remove it, handle at one end, barb at the other. The mark it left never faded, and he never wanted it to; he wore it the way other men wear medals.

Do you like my AI photograph? It took me around 57 attempts to get Grok to produce this, it kept censoring me! "This image is too violent. Try a different idea." I have no idea why it allowed this one!

That night also planted a grudge between Burton and Speke that would fester for years. What happened was this. Early on in the attack Speke ducked under a tent flap to get a better view of the attackers, Burton - who was an exceptionally brave and aggressive fighter - concluded Speke was trying to hide or retreat and shouted at him to stand firm, at which point Speke charged into the fighting. But the damage was done, John Speke believed Burton had accused him of cowardice, and Burton didn't help by repeating the allegation in later written accounts.

19-20

Which makes it all the more remarkable that Burton and Speke then became partners in one of the greatest exploration projects of the nineteenth century.

Remember, this is 1856. Everyone knew the Nile had to begin somewhere in the African interior. It flowed thousands of kilometres north into Egypt, but where did all that water come from? The question had fascinated people since the time of the ancient Greeks. Philosophers had guessed. Geographers had argued. Expeditions had failed. The picture shows Roman soldiers sent by the Emperor Nero 2000 years, arriving at the Sudd, a massive swamp the size of England which is completely impenetrable by boats. What lay beyond the Sudd? No-one knew.

The Royal Geographical Society decided it was time to replace speculation with measurement. They commissioned Burton to lead an expedition into the unexplored lake region of East Africa,

not by sailing down the Nile, but by 'going round the back'. They hoped that it might finally answer one of geography's oldest questions: where is the source of the River Nile?

This map shows just how little Europeans actually knew. Around the edges, the coastlines are reasonably accurate. Ships had been sailing those waters for centuries. North of Khartoum, the Nile itself was well known. But look at the middle. Almost nothing. The entire Great Lakes region is essentially a blank space. Europeans knew there had to be lakes somewhere inland because Arab traders spoke of them, but nobody had mapped them with any confidence. Nobody knew how many lakes there were, how large they were, whether they were connected, or whether one of them fed the Nile. For nearly two thousand years, the source of the world's longest river had remained one of the great unsolved mysteries.

So Burton was commissioned to go 'round the back' to find the Nile source. In effect, that means starting from Zanzibar, off the coast of modern Tanzania. Not a British colony at that time - it was an independent sultanate ruled by an Arab dynasty from Oman - but we maintained a consulate there and it was a good base for them to start from. See Burton's two-volume book *Zanzibar, City, Island, and Coast*.

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And Burton's companion was, once again, John Hanning Speke, the same officer who had survived the massacre at Berbera after being stabbed at least eleven times. Once he had recovered from his wounds, he volunteered to go back into Africa with Burton.

Despite their similarly superb facial hair, in many ways the two men could hardly have been more different. Burton was a linguist, an anthropologist before the word really existed, fascinated by people, languages, religions and cultures. Speke was a soldier and a hunter. Practical. Methodical. Direct. He was far happier stalking antelope than discussing Persian poetry. Yet each possessed qualities the other lacked. Burton admired Speke's endurance and fieldcraft. Speke respected Burton's astonishing intellect and experience. It was never an easy partnership. There was mutual respect, mutual irritation, and beneath the surface a rivalry that had been quietly growing ever since Berbera.

In June 1857 they sailed from Zanzibar and began the expedition that would make both of them famous.

22-23

The expedition left Zanzibar with around one hundred and fifty porters, an armed escort, interpreters, guides, scientific instruments, trade goods, and enough equipment to remain in the interior for many months. Progress was painfully slow. Disease struck almost immediately. By the time they reached Kazeh (modern Tabora) in November 1857, Burton was desperately ill with malaria and other tropical diseases. At one point he was partially paralysed and had to be carried. Even so, they pressed on.

In February 1858 they became the first Europeans to stand on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. It was a remarkable geographical discovery, but neither man was in any condition to explore it properly. Both were exhausted, fever-ridden, and too ill to circumnavigate the lake or determine whether it had any connection to the Nile. Following a disgusting episode of a giant beetle

burying into Speke's head through his eardrum, they left, and not before time. They set off back the way they had come, and when they returned to Tabora, there came the moment that changed everything.

The expedition split. Burton remained behind to recover. Speke headed north with a small party to investigate reports of another enormous lake: one that no European had ever seen.

He found it. He named it Lake Victoria, and came straight back again. Burton had been waiting at Tabora for six weeks, and they set off again on the very long journey home. Cutting a very long story short, Speke got back to London first to announce, alone, that he'd found the true source. Burton was livid, both at being scooped and because he genuinely doubted the evidence.

There is a movie about this expedition called *Mountains of the Moon*, it holds the attention and gives you some period atmosphere but it's a bit shit and I don't particularly recommend it. It totally fails to capture Burton properly, and if my memory serves even makes him into an Irishman.

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What happened in between is the part usually skipped. The Royal Geographical Society heard both men out and backed the younger one: it was Speke they sent back to Africa in 1860, with James Grant, while Burton watched from England. That second expedition took three years. Speke worked up the western side of his lake, and in July 1862 stood at a set of falls on the lake's northern rim, named them after the Society's president, and saw with his own eyes a great river leaving the lake and setting off north. His message home became famous: "The Nile is settled." Except it wasn't, quite. He had never sailed around the lake, so no one could yet swear it was one lake rather than several; and on the long march down to Egypt he had been forced away from the riverbank for whole stretches, which let his critics, Burton loudest among them, argue that the river he left and the river he rejoined need not be the same water. The geography said Speke. The logic said not proven. That is the question the British Association convened at Bath to settle, six years after the two men had stood on the shore of Tanganyika together.

It became one of the bitterest feuds in British exploration history, and ended in the strangest, darkest way imaginable. The bare sequence is on the slide; what the slide can't give you is the atmosphere. Bath, September 1864, was billed as the scientific prizefight of the decade, and the hall was expected to be full. Instead, the day before, the two men found themselves seated almost within touching distance at a warm-up session, and after a quarter of an hour of it Speke made the announcement you can read up there and left the hall. He spent that afternoon with a shotgun on his uncle's estate, and hauling himself over a field wall he took the charge in his chest. Twenty-four hours before the great debate, its other half was dead. The coroner called it an accident, and on the mechanics he was probably right. Burton lived another twenty-six years, never once said the other word in public, and never once stopped implying it.

25-26

And now the ending nobody at Bath could have known, and it makes the rivalry sadder still: *neither man had actually won*. Speke had the right lake and the wrong concept. Water does pour out of Victoria into the White Nile, but water also pours in, and the question of where a river rises

simply moves upstream, to whichever feeder carries it furthest. Follow the biggest one and you leave the lake behind altogether. Christopher Ondaatje's 1998 book *Journey to the Source of the Nile* chased that logic through Rwanda and Burundi, and Levison Wood began his great walk at the exact spot the logic ends: the stream, the forest and the gloriously anticlimactic signboard you see on the slide.

So the quarrel that consumed both reputations, and perhaps one life, was fought over the wrong patch of ground entirely. The true answer lay a country further west all along, under trees neither man would ever stand beneath.

5A. THE MISSING YEARS: A QUICK LIST, NOT A STORY

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There's a sixteen-year stretch between Speke's death in 1864 and the sex-scholar era we're about to get to, and I want to be honest rather than just skip over it as if nothing happened: an enormous amount happened. I'm not going to tell you any of these stories properly tonight: partly for time, partly because every single one of them has its own entire book, written by Burton himself, sitting upstairs in the Academy library. If anything in this list grabs you, that's where to go.

In rough order: in 1860, before even finishing with Speke, Burton took himself across the American continent to spend a month among the Mormons of Utah, interviewed Brigham Young in person, and wrote an entire sympathetic study of them, *The City of the Saints*, sympathetic largely, it's been suggested, because he had no more patience for mainstream American moralism than he did for English moralism. In 1861 he married Isabel Arundell and was posted as consul to Fernando Po, in West Africa, a posting nobody else wanted, because the climate was considered lethal for Europeans, which is exactly why it suited him. From there he explored Dahomey and the Cameroons, met the King of Dahomey in person, and wrote *A Mission to Gelele*, the book containing the racial material we'll get to shortly. In 1865 he and Isabel were reunited in Santos, Brazil, where he paddled the São Francisco from its source down to the Paulo Afonso Falls and twice talked his way onto the battlefields of the war in Paraguay. In 1869 came the appointment he had spent his whole career angling for: consul in Damascus, the heart of the Arab world he loved, where he made genuine friendships with figures like the Algerian resistance leader Abd al-Qadir, before regional politics and Ottoman suspicion got him recalled in 1871. He even found time, in 1872, for a summer expedition to Iceland, which produced a book called *Ultima Thule*. And finally, that same year, came Trieste: the quiet, undemanding consular post in Austria-Hungary where he'd spend the rest of his life, which everyone including Burton himself regarded as being put out to pasture, but which handed him, for the first time in decades, long unbroken years at a writing desk.

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Time for a quick word on the Burton library we have here. The standard bibliography, at Burtoniana.org, puts his output at sixty published books once you count the ones that appeared after his death. You can get much higher than that if you stop treating multi-volume books as single books. Many of his books were multi-volume editions, each the size of a normal book. Chasing the complete set in original editions is a collector's rabbit hole with no visible bottom.

There's one called 'Stone Talk' that's so rare that it would cost you around 20000 dollars to own one, if one ever even came on the market. It's rare because his wife destroyed most of them! It was a political satire that she believed would offend certain politicians who could negatively affect her husband's career. So most of mine are not first, or even second, editions, and many of them are modern reprints, so one might say the collection has been assembled on the cheap. The shelves also hold most of the biographies, related books like Ondaatje's Nile quest, and even a few novels starring Burton as a main character.

Anyway, it's in Trieste, broke, sidelined, and increasingly desperate for income, that the final act of Burton's life begins.

6. THE SCHOLAR OF SEX

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By the 1880s Burton was broke and surrounded by Victorian obscenity law. So he and his friend Forster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot invented a publishing house that barely existed in any normal sense, "The Kama Shashtra Society", circulating books privately to subscribers rather than selling them in shops, sidestepping the Obscene Publications Act almost entirely. I love this photo of Burton by the way, a really poor quality photograph made new again by AI.

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Through it: the Kama Sutra (the small print on the slide is overblown: the celebrated name on the front could read some Sanskrit, but not well enough to produce an authoritative scholarly translation of Kama Sutra unaided, and he relied considerably on work of Indian scholars, but he rewrote it in his distinctive literary style and added extensive notes). What he didn't do was produce this magnificent pop-up edition which I found in the library the other day! I had forgotten we had it; look the authors are actually listed as R.F. Burton and F.W. Arbuthnot. I will now proceed to demonstrate the pop-ups; anyone who reads this online will have to use their imagination..

He also produced The Perfumed Garden, which goes into even more lurid details; and the great uncensored Arabian Nights - magnificently titled "The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night", all sixteen volumes of it, whose subscription list achieved something no expedition, consulship or bestseller ever had: it made Burton seriously wealthy.

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What does "properly rich in his sixties" actually mean? £10,000 in 1887 is roughly £1.5 million in today's money, earned in a single year from pre-orders for a book about sex that no reputable publisher would touch.

Tucked into that Arabian Nights translation was his "Terminal Essay," containing the "Sotadic Zone" theory, which the slide summarises: the claim, roughly, that same-sex behaviour follows latitude and climate, appearing in every population a given band crosses, rather than belonging to anybody in particular. The lefties would have you in jail without your feet touching the floor if you published such a thing today, but set it against what respectable Victorian opinion held (that this was simply the vice of certain foreign races) and the basic move (natural variation explained

by geography rather than sin) looks genuinely modern; modern enough to get the essay banned and quietly dropped from the reprints.

7. THE "SAVAGES" QUESTION

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Speaking about lefties, Burton has obviously now been cancelled. The most recent biography I read was just a revisionist hit job, so if you've never heard of him that's one of the reasons why. (If you want to read a biography that's actually interested in Burton the man, stop at Mary S. Lovells marvellous 'A Rage to Live'). It's not just that he was a British imperialist, he was also in their view, a racist. And to be fair, you can't blame them. Even in Victorian times, there was a question of whether you could call people 'savages' just because they were stone-age pastoralists who tried to violently kill you if you crossed their territory and could be bribed with glass beads, and most people thought that you shouldn't, on account of it being a bit mean.

And in his writings on Dahomey in West Africa, Burton laid out an explicit hierarchy of races, with Black Africans placed near the bottom of it. Throughout his African books, "savages" appears constantly. That was his stated, developed position, and it wasn't an outlier; it was close to the educated mainstream of his era.

The grounds for it weren't mysterious. Britain in the 1860s had steam locomotives crossing the country in hours, ocean-going steamships, the telegraph, the printing press turning out a national literature, parliamentary government, structural engineering producing things like the Crystal Palace and St Pancras. The societies Burton encountered in the interior of East Africa had none of this. By the measure Victorians actually used (industrial and technological capacity, the built environment, a literate civil culture) the gap was real, not imagined, and it's what they pointed to directly when explaining their own sense of where they stood relative to everyone else.

Worth setting alongside that, briefly, that despite my jibe about the stone-age, the societies in question weren't undifferentiated wilderness either. Burton's own book, *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, describes his caravan moving along an Arab-Nyamwezi trade route that had operated for decades before he arrived, with its own porters and customary tolls, and Unyamwezi as a region that had, in living memory, been "united under a single sovereign." Iron-working (the source of the spear that went through Burton's face at Berbera) had existed in the region for well over a thousand years. None of that changes the technological gap above; it's just a separate fact about what was actually there, distinct from the industrial and political comparison Victorians were making.

The violence Burton documents was real too, and a good deal of it tracked the East African slave trade, which had been running through these same caravan routes for decades and had given local populations direct, recent reasons to fear armed foreign parties. That's a cause, stated plainly, not a verdict on anyone's character.

So: Burton held a racial hierarchy that was mainstream for his time, grounded in a real and substantial technological and institutional gap he could see with his own eyes, alongside a separate set of facts about political organisation and metallurgy in the societies he was describing,

and a separate set of facts about why some of his receptions were hostile. All of it's true at once, and none of it cancels any of the rest out.

There are entries on the other side of the ledger too, and they were anything but mainstream for the era. He learned the languages, and documented marriage customs and oral literature with an ethnographic care most of his contemporaries never bothered with. He argued against the slave trade in print. And when he finally held a scrap of official power, in Damascus, part of what got him recalled was refusing to help moneylenders imprison peasant debtors; defending the oppressed turned out to be a sackable offence. A man of his time in his vocabulary, ahead of his time in his methods.

And in case anyone suspects the slide's line about the dozens of women is modern exaggeration, it comes from Burton's own pen. In a notebook of comic verse from his India years, written at about twenty-six, he boasts of flirting with "about a mile of Whites, Browns and Reds," catalogues lovers from Bokhara, Muscat, Baghdad and Aden, and reports that "the Nubians and the Abyssinians sent me at least a score of minions." It is a young man's self-mythology, but it is his testimony, not mine. And keep that notebook in mind, because it comes back at the end of tonight, in the last place you would expect.

8. DEATH, THE BURNING, AND THE TOMB

33

He died on 20 October 1890 in Trieste, of a heart attack, and the way it actually happened is better than the legend. The legend says he died at his desk in the middle of a sentence. The record says this: on the Sunday afternoon he was one page from the end of *The Scented Garden*, and he told Isabel, "Tomorrow I shall have finished this, and I promise you I shall never write another book on this subject. I will take to our biography." That same afternoon - and Sam will like this - he found a robin drowning in the garden water tank, warmed it in his hands, and carried it around inside his fur coat until it recovered. He dined well, laughed, joked, talked about the flat they would take in London, and went to bed at nine. The pain started at midnight; he called it gout. At half past four in the morning, while he and Isabel were still laughing and talking between the spasms, the heart attack came. His last words were to her: "Chloroform, ether, or I am a dead man." The doctor declared him dead at seven am. Isabel, keeping an old promise between them that dated from a Damascus story about a man buried alive, had a nerve in his arm tested with electricity to be certain. Look at the photographs. Dr Baker took them. The medal on the chain at his throat is one Isabel gave him before he left for Africa with Speke, more than thirty years earlier. He never took it off. And here is the thing I most want you to hear over these pictures. The notebook poem cataloguing his love affairs written at twenty-six, which I just mentioned, ends like this: "Yet am I not content? I am. I've had my day, I've lived my life, and now expect my night." He wrote his own ending more than forty years before he needed it.

34

Now the burning, and here the hit-job problem I mentioned earlier comes home, because almost everything you have heard about it is the hit job. First, what she actually did. Three years before his death, at Cannes, when a heart attack nearly killed him, Isabel baptised him herself with a

glass of water while he lay unconscious. She owned up the same afternoon, and instead of the eruption you might expect from Burton she got a laugh: "Now that was superfluous if only you knew." The paperwork, it turned out, already existed: years before, in his own hand, he had agreed that her Church could claim him at the end; and at the last, the young priest they fetched dithered over a body that was barely, or no longer, alive before administering the rites. Eight weeks before he died, sharp as ever and deep in Catullus, Burton signed another document: every book, paper and manuscript to his wife, "to be dealt with entirely at her discretion," his sole helper for thirty years. He had already burned his own early drafts of *The Scented Garden*, with Isabel helping. He left her a list of things to destroy.

So what actually went into the fire? Two manuscript copies of *The Scented Garden*, a fortnight or so after he died, and the burning itself was the opposite of a frenzy: it was clerical. She worked through it page by page at the grate in his room, and before each sheet went in she transcribed from it, keeping a record even of what she was destroying. A publisher's offer of six thousand guineas was on the table; she turned it down flat. Hold that number against another one: after the funeral was paid for, Burton's entire estate proved at one hundred and eighty-eight pounds, fifteen shillings and a penny. She burned a fortune she badly needed. Her reasons, in her own words: alive, he could have defended the book; dead, it could only misrepresent him, and it would end up sold off cheap in the pornography shops of Holywell Street. You can disagree with her. Swinburne never forgave her. But notice what she did NOT burn: his diaries. They went back to London in the packing cases, she paid to have some of them typed so she could read them, and they were destroyed only after her own death in 1896, by her executors, on an instruction that carried the words "as Dick instructed." The great Trieste holocaust of diaries and manuscripts never happened.

So where does the story come from? From the household. Burton's live-in doctor and a pair of hangers-on spent the weeks after his death trying to bully a dying widow into producing the manuscript they were convinced she had hidden: staged quarrels, extorted payments, even reported visions of Burton's ghost walking the streets without his hat. When she stood her ground they took their version to the press, to Burton's furious family, and eventually to the biographer Thomas Wright, whose 1906 book set the legend in stone. The first Burton hit job was written over a century ago, and it was aimed at his wife. So when the slide says both things are true, it means it here too: she really did burn a book he spent his last years on, against six thousand guineas, and she really was the most loyal collaborator he ever had, acting on authority he had signed into her hands. She was not a simple woman either.

35

His body came home by sea in the new year and lay in the crypt at St Mary Magdalen's, Mortlake, until June, while Isabel designed and built the strangest, most wonderful monument in any English churchyard: a mausoleum carved as a full-sized desert tent, every rope, peg and fold of the canvas rendered in grey Gloucestershire stone with white Italian marble dressings, and cut to a pattern Burton himself had drawn years before in Syria, a tent built tall because he was sick of stooping: a frieze of gilded crescents and stars, and a marble crucifix over the door. In the roof she hung festoons of camel bells brought from the desert, strung there, she wrote, "in honour of his poem *Kasidah*," so that opening the door sets them tinkling, the sound of the desert in a Surrey

churchyard. A small rear window and a fixed ladder let you climb up and look directly in at the two coffins, side by side, exactly as he asked: "to lie in a tent, side by side." I have actually done this! It was quite a spiritual experience to see the two of them lying there alone, in a room that hasn't been opened since the 1890s.

36

Isabel died in 1896 and joined him, by her own instructions, embalmed the old way specifically so she could stay above ground beside him, having bought space in an adjoining vault for two more bodies in case some future revolution ever threatened English graves. They're still there now, side by side, in a stone tent in a quiet churchyard in southwest London.

At her funeral, as her coffin was carried into the tent, the camel bells in the roof tinkled over the voices of the priest and the choir. And she had already written her own last line. Her biography of Richard, the whole two volumes, ends like this: "I am waiting to join his Caravan. I am waiting for a welcome sound. The tinkling of his Camel-Bell." Hold that sound. You're about to hear where it comes from.

If anyone asks what the poem says: Farewell, Dear Friend, Dead Hero, and Guide! Could We but Weep for You, Our Tears Would Be The Brightest Tribute to a Memory Of One Who Sailed the Seven Seas So Wide, And Braved the Fiery Sands and Mountain Side. Through You, the East Unlocked Her Golden Gate; Through You, We Glanced at Daring, Dark and Grand. Your Dust Lies Quiet in the English Land, While Your Free Soul Explores the Vast and Great, Untamed, Unconquered by the Laws of Fate. (a memorial poem written by his friend, the Irish-born poet and novelist Justin Huntly McCarthy.)

9. THE KASIDAH: BRIDGE INTO THE POETRY SECTION

37

Before we close tonight, I want to talk about poetry, starting with Burton's own, because almost nobody knows he wrote any.

In 1880, on his way back from one of his journeys, Burton wrote a long philosophical poem called *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi*, and ran it under a false flag: the title page offered it as his rendering of a Persian original. No Persian original existed. The mask mattered, because it let a serving British consul put into verse what no respectable Victorian gentleman could have signed his own name to. The scholar Idries Shah later called it one of the most interesting pieces of Western Sufi literature ever produced: not bad for a man pretending the whole time he hadn't really written it.

Sufism, very briefly: it's the mystical, inward-facing strand of Islam, less concerned with law and ritual than with direct, personal experience of the divine, often through poetry, music, and paradox. Burton wasn't a tourist in it. He actually underwent the *chilla* (the formal retreat required for initiation into the Qadiriyya Sufi order), one of dozens of religious experiences he genuinely put his body through rather than just read about, alongside attending Catholic Mass, being initiated as a Naga Brahmin, and converting, at different points, to both Sikhism and Islam. He just couldn't leave a belief system alone without actually living inside it for a while.

Here's the couplet I want you to actually remember tonight, because it's the closest thing Burton left us to a personal creed:

"Do what thy manhood bids thee do, from none but self expect applause; He noblest lives and noblest dies who makes and keeps his self-made laws."

No appeal to God, no appeal to society, no appeal to what anyone else thinks of you. Just: decide what a man should do, and do it, and judge yourself by your own standard. That's Burton in two lines.

And there is a second stanza on the slide, because you have already met it, in stone:

"All other Life is living Death, a world where none but Phantoms dwell, A breath, a wind, a sound, a voice, a tinkling of the camel-bell."

That is the bell in the roof of the tomb at Mortlake. Isabel strung the bells there in honour of this poem, and she ended her book about him still waiting to hear his. And it leads directly into what I want to say next.

10. THE POETRY SEGMENT

38

So why does any of this matter to you: why memorise poetry at all, in an age where you can summon any line you want on a phone in three seconds?

Because the value was never the party trick of recall; any phone can do retrieval. A poem you carry is furniture of the mind: it's with you in the dark, on a mountainside, in a waiting room, in every place a screen is dead or unwelcome. And the getting of it matters as much as the having. Verse pushes back: it refuses the approximate, so you find out fast whether you've genuinely done the work, and doing that work again and again is training of a very particular kind, the same muscle, scaled down, that Burton was applying to his languages. A memorised poem will also lend you words at the exact moments your own give out, and when you're young your own words give out constantly; that's half of what those years are. The last reason is baser and more useful, and since the slide states it plainly I'll just add this: it's an old, slightly out-of-fashion form of authority, and it still works.

39

If you'd like to go further and actually try writing some, the book on the slide, by Stephen Fry no less, is the one I'd put into your hands, and getting hold of it could not be simpler, because we have a copy in the classical education section of the Academy library. And the main point is that unlike most poetry books he's trying to teach you how to write your own poetry like Burton rather than merely appreciating that of other people. Its whole approach is fun and exactly right for what I'm telling you: it teaches you to actually scan a line (to feel where the stresses fall) and then walks you through real metrical forms and rhyme schemes rather than just telling you to "express yourself" and hoping for the best.

And I'll say this plainly and you're welcome to argue with me about it afterward: proper poetry rhymes. I know there's a whole twentieth-century tradition of free verse that will tell you rhyme is

a crutch, a Victorian relic, beneath a serious poet. I think that's mostly an excuse for people who can't be bothered to do the harder, more disciplined thing. A rhyme scheme is a constraint, and constraints are where craft actually happens. Pick a form. Pick a rhyme scheme; even just simple couplets, AABB, is a perfectly respectable place to start. Then make your meaning fit inside it. That's the whole game, and it's a genuinely satisfying one once you get the hang of it.

Fry's opening move, by the way, is to confess to writing poetry the way a man confesses to a crime, and his roll-call of respectable hobbies is instructive: Churchill painted, Einstein played the violin, Hemingway shot things, and nobody blushed; only verse trips the national embarrassment reflex. His entry requirement is one every person in this room already meets: if you can read and speak English, you qualify. And he opens with a rule that asks nothing of you but patience, worth quoting exactly as he gives it: take your time. You cannot read a poem too slowly.

So for those of you who don't know what a metrical form is, consider iambic pentameter, the basis of a great deal of verse in English.

ti-TUM ti-TUM ti-TUM ti-TUM ti TUM

A double syllable with stress on the second syllable (ti-TUM) is called an IAMB. Five of them in a row and you've got iambic pentameter.

*I haven't time to take your call right now,
So leave a message when you hear the tone.*

So I followed his advice and I wrote a poem.

Anyone who has read Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* will recall that the Captain of the Vogon Constructor Fleet that destroyed the Earth (spoiler!) had a very interesting method of torture that he used to mentally destroy his victims. He would strap them into a chair, and read his own poetry to them. So that's what I'm going to do..!

Just to explain the background so you get the references. Years ago in Florence I found a quasi-underground ex glove factory turned into a bathroom store that I thought would be ideal for Samantha's new art gallery. She agreed and I organized the work. Painting it black throughout, installing toilets, fitting pumps and water drainage systems, high speed ethernet cabling, all the glamorous stuff. We got about three quarters of the way through and we started to reach the limitations of the workers we were using. Mohamed, now the effective CEO of Samantha's company came in at this point and brought in some more expensive people to finish everything off in a proper arty way and the result was Keil Space, Florence's premier contemporary art gallery and temple of contemplation. When it was done he asked me what I thought of it, but all I could think of was the sewage pipes exploding the other week, and the annoying Italian workers, the idiot neighbour who insisted on blocking our only external window by putting his bloody garden bench in front of it, and all the dust and cracks in the wall and dampness that still needed to be fixed, and in short anything but art. The poem therefore tells the story of my annoyance (but I end up being nice and telling him he did a great job).

So now you know what it's about here it is.

*What say you, asks Mohamed, of this work?
And I have to say I really cannot tell.
For mere months ago I gazed into the murk
And all that I could think of was the smell.
For Giulio the plumber with no brains
Had only gone and opened up the drains.
And there rose unwelcome up and out the pit
A stinking warm Vesuvius of shit.
The valiant perfume diffusor fought like mad
But its efforts only served to make it sad
For overwhelmed they were, its bergamot and musk
By the odour of Beelzebub's anus.*

*But what really, asks Mohamed, do you think.
For I really do not care about the stink?
Tis gone and hopefully for good
At least until the next unwanted flood.
So what say you, asks Mohamed, of Keil Space?
What is it your opinion of this place?*

*Well could it be I'm not the one to ask?
For witness I have borne to each small task.
While in Keil Space I look around and see
The leaks, the dust, the cracks, the lavatory..
Each rusty rail, each protruding nail, the lying network guy.
The workers who steal and never work, it's enough to make you cry.*

*And don't get me started, please, I beg,
On the stupid twat who sadly lives upstairs.
For I rue the day, I really do,
that he meddled in our affairs
"I'm going to stick your stupid bench
Right up your stupid arse."
That's what I was forced to write to him
As if I had no class..
The Eyeties they have this effect on you
They make you really sad.
And so I'd rather set up a gallery
In Kabul or Baghdad.*

*Just fucking tell me, screams Mohamed, about Keil Space!
And as I gaze into his gentle bearded face
I say, well..*

*If it's good enough for the Emir of Qatar
Tis clear that you, my friend, and Sam shall go so far.
You will have earned and deserve a bucket load of cash
To spend on good rum, and sodomy, and the lash.
Will it send you mad and lead you down the drain
Into an ecstasy of speedboats and cocaine,
Two bellyfuls of good red wine and hock
And some young girl's mouth around your cock?*

No, I think not..

*For all who care to ask can understand
That Mohamed is a very nice young man.
A genius of marketing, a charmer and our chum.
He has contacts. He is street. He loves his mum.
The rain of hotel room keys he ignores
And the girls that threw them, yes of course..
For his inner mind is set on higher things..
The love of wisdom and all the good that brings
This work is to the glory of Allah
Subhanahu wa ta'ala
And Keil Space it is a Temple to the Lord
A portal to more dimensions long and broad.
Bohr, Bohm and Einstein, raised from the ground
Would doubtless find this place profound.
And were they to be returned from Hell
Michelangelo and da Vinci would as well..*

So that'll do.

I thank you.

So I just told you rhyme is mandatory: most of this poem holds tight rhymed couplets all the way through, including the line about spending the gallery's future earnings on "good rum, and sodomy, and the lash", a deliberate twist on the old line about the traditions of the Royal Navy, redeployed onto a marketing director instead of a sailor. The one section that goes loose (the bit about the man upstairs) deliberately breaks its own rhyme scheme entirely. There are many places where I deliberately break the metrical structure as well, all for a bit of variety, you can judge whether it works.

41

I asked Grok what it thought of my poem. It liked it! I was so happy..! It said the tradition my poem is squatting in, without paying rent, is mock-heroic: Byron's Don Juan is the great example, epic machinery wheeled out for unheroic material, which is how a burst sewer ends up with its own Vesuvius in dignified pentameter and a perfume diffuser gets awarded the epic hero's "valiant". The forced rhymes are part of the same joke, and the tradition even has a name for

them, hudibrastic, after a seventeenth-century satire that rhymed as badly as possible on purpose: lavatory with see, musk with anus, and at the pious summit, Allah rhymed clean across two languages with Subhanahu wa ta'ala. One trick from the poem didn't fit on the slide: chopping a line with full stops until it talks like a salesman: "He has contacts. He is street. He loves his mum." And here is the honest taxonomy of rule-breaking: a constraint you break knowingly is a choice; one you break by accident is a mistake; and the third category, where my poem mostly lives, is the accident you notice afterwards and decide to keep. Eliot said the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the freest verse, advancing menacingly as we doze and withdrawing as we rouse. The ghost is the point. No ghost, no haunting.

11. THE SHAKESPEARE: TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

42

And finally, we're going to talk about memorizing other people's poetry!

From Mohamed now to Achilles, and a considerable step up in poet. The situation, for anyone who doesn't know the play or the Brad-Pitt movie: the Greeks under Agamemnon are besieging Troy to recover his brother's wife Helen, kidnapped by the Trojan prince Paris, the 'face that launched a thousand ships' (straight back to Greece if reports of the new Odyssey film are to be believed). Anyhow, the Greek war machine has stalled because its best fighter Achilles aka Brad Pitt is sulking in his tent, because he doesn't like Agamemnon, and it falls to the cleverest man in the army Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin) to go in and wake him up, not with flattery, but with the coldest truth there is about reputation: stop moving, and the world forgets you.

Odysseus is played by Sean Bean in the movie, so given that Odysseus is a provincial from Ithaca he speaks in a Yorkshire accent. I'm sure there's some equivalent in ancient Greek.

*Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-sized monster of ingratitudes:
Those scraps are good deeds past; which are devour'd
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
As done: perseverance, dear my lord,
Keeps honour bright: to have done is to hang
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
In monumental mockery. Take the instant way;
For honour travels in a strait so narrow,
Where one but goes abreast: keep then the path;
For emulation hath a thousand sons
That one by one pursue: if you give way,
Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,
Like to an enter'd tide, they all rush by
And leave you hindmost;
Or like a gallant horse fall'n in first rank,
Lie there for pavement to the abject rear,*

*O'er-run and trampled on: then what they do in present,
Though less than yours in past, must o'ertop yours;
For time is like a fashionable host
That slightly shakes his parting guest by the hand,
And with his arms outstretch'd, as he would fly,
Grasps in the comer: welcome ever smiles,
And farewell goes out sighing. O, let not virtue seek
Remuneration for the thing it was;
For beauty, wit,
High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,
Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time.
One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,
That all with one consent praise new-born gawds,
Though they are made and moulded of things past,
And give to dust that is a little gilt
More laud than gilt o'er-dusted.
The present eye praises the present object.
Then marvel not, thou great and complete man,
That all the Greeks begin to worship Ajax;
Since things in motion sooner catch the eye
Than what not stirs. The cry went once on thee,
And still it might, and yet it may again,
If thou wouldst not entomb thyself alive
And case thy reputation in thy tent;
Whose glorious deeds, but in these fields of late,
Made emulous missions 'mongst the gods themselves
And drave great Mars to faction.*

(Then he goes on for a while about the inadvisability of Achilles banging Trojan girls, then..)

*Farewell, my lord: I as your lover speak;
The fool slides o'er the ice that you should break.*

43

Let me tell you where that top line on the slide comes from, because it's the best thing anyone has discovered about this. Helga and Tony Noice, an actress and a psychologist, spent twenty years asking how actors do the impossible, and found that the good ones never sit down to memorise at all. They break the speech into beats and ask, of every line, what the character is trying to DO with it, and the words then come along for free, hooked to that chain of intentions; when the researchers forced actors to rote-learn instead, they got worse. Understanding is the mnemonic. Which is why the first job is boring: know every word. Does anyone know what "calumniating" means in the speech you just heard? It really helps if you do. The Elizabethans are the proof of the whole method: a playing company put on a different play nearly every afternoon and a new one

every couple of weeks, and no actor ever saw a full script; you got a scroll carrying nothing but your part, plus a word or two of warning about when it was coming, and the verse itself was the technology that made that survivable: the pentameter line is a net under the actor, because a stumble leaves a hole exactly one word-shape wide, and the rhythm tells you what will fit in it. The rest is Victorian-laboratory stuff that still holds: testing yourself cold beats rereading every time, spacing the attempts over days beats one heroic evening, and sleep does half the work without being asked. My own protocol, for what it's worth: paraphrase it, walk it, say it out loud until the neighbours complain, and carry the first-letter card the slide describes until the day it starts to feel insulting. That, for the record, is exactly how I learned the one you just heard, which should calibrate your expectations of the method's upper limit.

[For reference: You know the word 'calumny' as slander, possibly. The word "calumniating" is an adjective derived from the verb calumniate, which means to slander, spread malicious lies, or make false, declamatory accusations. In this context, Shakespeare is personifying time as a bitter enemy that actively slanders and ruins legacies by causing the world to quickly forget the great things people have done in the past.]

12. CLOSING: THE SEED

44

Right. You've just watched me try to write my own poem and try to recite some Shakespeare, and I've told you to go and write some yourself (with Fry's help) and learn some verse off by heart. Before we finish, I want to ask a slightly odd question: why does that even matter?

So there's a theory (a serious, heavyweight, 1,500-page, slightly terrifying theory) that the brain has two fundamentally different ways of paying attention to the world, and that almost everything interesting about a person, a culture, or a civilisation depends on which one is currently in charge. One mode narrows, isolates, categorises, manipulates: brilliant for fixing a carburettor, hopeless at anything requiring you to hold a whole, ambiguous, living thing in your head at once. The other does the opposite: broad, contextual, comfortable with paradox, the only one that can fall in love with something, or be moved by a poem, or disappear into twenty-nine languages and a dozen cultures the way Burton did without losing himself.

Burton, on this theory, is what a human being looks like when that second mode runs the whole show for an entire lifetime, which is rare, and which is exactly the kind of person Victorian England didn't quite know what to do with.

I'm not going to say more tonight; it's the subject of the last lecture in this series. But hold onto the image: two ways of paying attention. We're going to meet it again: in the philosophers next time, in the physicists the time after, and absolutely in stuff about consciousness in the lecture after that. By the time we reach that final evening, you'll have seen it four times before I've even told you its name.

And just to finish off, because I like them so much, I'm going to show you my remaining AI restorations that I couldn't fit in the main body of the lecture..

NOTES AND SOURCES

Three places where the record is thinner, or more interesting, than the talk had time for. Source throughout: Mary S. Lovell, A Rage to Live (1998).

1. The Damascus recall (slides 27, 32, 33)

Burton was recalled from Damascus in August 1871, and it was not one scandal but an accumulation of enemies made simultaneously. He refused to help Levantine moneylenders imprison peasant debtors, which turned powerful commercial interests against him. The Ottoman governor, Rashid Pasha, decided Burton's constant journeys around Syria made him a spy and campaigned for his removal. And his own ambassador in Constantinople added complaints rather than protection.

The one-line version in general circulation, that he was expelled for siding with Arabs against Christian settlers, is not supported by Lovell.

Whether the recall was fair: even the Foreign Office treated it as awkward. Burton was given Trieste as a consolation posting rather than dismissed, which is not what happens to a consul who has actually disgraced himself.

2. The volumes arithmetic (slides 30, 31)

The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night appeared in ten volumes (1885), followed by six volumes of Supplemental Nights (1886–88): sixteen in all. The set is often given as ten.

The £10,000 is the reported subscription income in roughly the first year (1887): on the order of a million pounds and more in today's money, earned in his sixties, after a lifetime of being underpaid. How it was legal: private subscription through the Kama Shashtra Society, nominally printed abroad, sold only to subscribers. The Obscene Publications Act 1857 reached publication for sale, not private clubs. Barely.

3. What Lovell does and does not support

The hand tattoo often attributed to Burton has no support in Lovell.

The Quran: about a quarter of it memorised, learned across the India years. The figure of 12,000 lines, sometimes quoted, overstates it.

The disguise: skin stained with henna and walnut juice is attested. Mirza Abdullah of Bushire was the Persian identity Burton had worn for years in India; in Egypt, judging a Persian too conspicuous on the Mecca road, he restyled himself as a wandering Afghan dervish and doctor.

The instruments: the compass and watch travelled hidden in a Quran carrying-case with secret compartments. The sextant was a separate instrument, abandoned mid-journey after it aroused suspicion. The two are often conflated.

The Karachi report (slide 11) was ordered by Napier and kept out of Bombay while Napier governed Sindh. Pringle's civilian administration found it in the files in 1847 and recommended

Burton's dismissal; he survived because he had acted under orders, but the stain contributed to the 1848 rejection of his interpreter application, which he said broke his heart, and to his departure from India in 1849. The document itself has never been located. Claims about its contents, including Burton's personal participation, are inference, and the talk says so.

The Speke wounds at Berbera: eleven stab wounds. The version in which he is bayonnetted through the thighs is not supported.