Tennyson: 'The Lady of Shalott', 'Mariana', 'The Palace of Art'.

T.S.Eliot began his essay on ‘In Memoriam’ with one of the least intelligent of his critical pronouncements:

> Tennyson is a great poet for reasons that are perfectly clear. He has three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety, and complete competence. [*Selected Essays* 328]

Surely one expects from ‘the greatest poets’ something more than competence, however abundant and varied. Nor does Eliot in the rest of the essay make any attempt to demonstrate this complete competence. The only clue he gives us is the phrase ‘his unique and unerring feeling for the sounds of words’.

Tennyson was certainly capable of writing very beautiful verse, lyrics which demand to be set to music; but that is a capacity he shares with more minor than major poets. The major poet cannot allow himself to be seduced by the beautiful sounds of words for their own sake. Tennyson certainly erred when he allowed himself to turn his feeling for the sounds of words into what amounts to little more than a party trick – his ‘murmur of bees in immemorial elms’ and so on are mere showing off. At his worst his feeling for the sounds of words supplants all the other components of poetry. Content, if any, exists only that the style might have something to play upon. And what is competence in a poet if not the perfect fitting of style and content (as in Eliot’s own verse)? What use is style if it is not wholly at the service of content?

To be aware during a play that one is hearing and watching great acting is in fact to be watching incompetent acting – acting for the greater glory of the actor at the expense of the play. Similarly to be constantly aware of a poet’s feeling for the sounds of words is to be distracted from paying attention to their meaning.

F.R.Leavis wrote:

> Actually, Tennyson’s feeling for the sounds of words was extremely limited and limiting: the ear he had cultivated for vowel sound was a filter that kept out all ‘music’ of any subtlety or complexity and cut him off from most of the expressive resources of the English language. [*Scrutiny* V.i.86]

Our touchstone of what those resources are is, of course, Shakespeare. The most Tennysonian lines in Shakespeare are spoken by Othello. When Othello says:

> Like to the Pontic sea,
> Whose icy current and compulsive course
> Ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
> To the Propontic and the Hellespont

and later:

> Yet I’ll not shed her blood;
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

And smooth as monumental alabaster.

he is using his feeling for the sounds of words as a filter to keep out any thoughts or feelings which might undermine his sense of his own assurance and renown. He mistakes his mastery of words for a mastery of his situation. Even at the end, when he knows what he has done and should admit that he is 'ignorant as dirt', he is still shoring up his stature with resplendent words. The only appropriate words at such a time are such words as Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Lear:

> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never.

This last is surely, in its context, the greatest and most styleless line ever written.

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The best critics of poetry have always been poets. It is fascinating to look at the response to Tennyson of the greatest of his contemporaries, Gerard Manley Hopkins, as evidenced in several long passages in his letters. At the age of twenty Hopkins coined the very useful critical term Parnassian, with particular reference to Tennyson:

> I think then the language of verse may be divided into three kinds. The first and highest is poetry proper, the language of inspiration. The word inspiration need cause no difficulty. I mean by it a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or receptive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or to strike into it unasked. … The second kind I call Parnassian. It can only be spoken by poets, but is not in the highest sense poetry. It does not require the mood of mind in which the poetry of inspiration is written. It is spoken on and from the level of a poet's mind, not, as in the other case, when the inspiration which is the gift of genius raises him above himself. …Parnassian then is that language which genius speaks as fitted to its exaltation, and place among other genius, but does not sing in its flights. Great men, poets I mean, have each their own dialect as it were of Parnassian, formed generally as they go on writing, and at last, they can see things in this Parnassian way and describe them in this Parnassian tongue, without further effort of inspiration. In a poet's particular kind of Parnassian lies most of his style, of his manner, his mannerism if you like.

Hopkins then quotes a passage from Tennyson's 'Enoch Arden' which contains such lines as 'the lustre of the long convolvuluses'. He claims that poets pall on us because too high a proportion of their work is Parnassian; that Shakespeare does not pall because he writes so little Parnassian; that Wordsworth writes an 'intolerable deal of' Parnassian; and that it is the high proportion of Parnassian in Tennyson which has led to the need for the adjective 'Tennysonian'.

Fifteen years later Hopkins had become more severe about Tennyson, who provoked some prime examples of Hopkins' exuberant mockery:

> To me his poetry appears 'chryselephantine'; always of precious mental material and each verse a work of art, no botchy places, not only so but no half wrought or low-toned ones, no drab, no brown-holland; but the form, though fine, not the perfect artist's form, not equal to the material. When the inspiration is genuine, arising from personal feeling, as in *In Memoriam*, a divine work,

> he is at his best, or when he is rhyming pure and simple imagination, without afterthought, as in the 'Lady of Shalott', 'Sir Galahad', the 'Dream of Fair Women', or 'Palace of Art'. But the want of perfect form in the imagination comes damagingly out when he undertakes longer works of fancy, as his Idylls: they are unreal in motive and incorrect, uncanonical so to say, in detail and keepings. He shd. have called them *Charades from the Middle Ages* (dedicated by permission to H.R.H. etc). The Galahad of one of the later ones is quite a fantastic charade-playing trumpery Galahad, merely playing the fool over Christian heroism. Each scene is a triumph of language and bright picturesque, but just like a charade – where real lace and good silks and real jewellery are used, because the actors are private persons and wealthy, but it is acting all the same and not only so but the make-up has less pretence of correct keeping than at Drury Lane. His opinions too are not original, often not independent even, and they sink into vulgarity: not only 'Locksley Hall' but 'Maud' is an ungentlemanly row and 'Aylmer's Field' is an ungentlemanly row and the 'Princess' is an ungentlemanly row. To be sure this gives him vogue, popularity, but not that sort of ascendency Goethe had or even Burns, scoundrel as the first was, not to say the second; but then they spoke out of the real human rakishness of their hearts and everybody recognised the really beating, though rascal, vein. And in his rhetorical pieces he is at his worst, as the 'Lord of Burleigh' and 'Lady Clare Vere de Vere' (downright haberdasher).

However much tiresome Parnassian we detect in Tennyson, it cannot detract from the achievement of the poems of true inspiration (as Hopkins defines it), the poems where Tennyson's feeling for the sounds of words does give him access to the most expressive resources of the English language, and where form perfectly serves content: such poems as 'The Lady of Shalott', 'The Lotos-Eaters' and 'Ulysses'.

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One of the most useful phrases coined by Eliot was 'objective correlative'. Eliot had no time for poetry which consisted of 'undisciplined squads of emotion'. Perhaps the most important for him of all the necessary poetic disciplines was the objective correlative, that is some image or concrete embodiment which transforms an emotion from a purely subjective, even private matter into something the reader can recognize as belonging to the world available to all of us – a part of common human experience. Eliot notoriously accused *Hamlet* of being 'an artistic failure' because Shakespeare had failed to find objective correlatives for the turbulent feelings about female sexuality which were obviously troubling him at the time.

One of the Tennyson poems Eliot praises highly is 'Mariana'. There is certainly no shortage of objective correlatives here. In fact one might say that the poem consists of nothing else but objective correlatives for Mariana's frustration and depression. Tennyson lifted Mariana from *Measure for Measure,* where she is presented as a 'dejected lady' who has long lamented the desertion of her lover in a 'moated grange'. Mariana's emotion, unlike Hamlet's, is very simple and commonplace. For Shakespeare the fact that the grange is 'moated' – cut off from all intercourse with the surrounding world – is objective correlative enough. Tennyson's Mariana is developed from Shakespeare's only by losing hope and wishing to die, which makes her emotion even simpler: literally more monotonous. Yet Tennyson accumulates over thirty objective correlatives for it, conscripting every detail not only of the grange itself and its garden, but of the surrounding flora and fauna, the landscape of 'glooming flats', and the weather. It is the exact poetic equivalent of a pre-Raphaelite painting, where equal skill is bestowed on every fold of a garment, every leaf. There is, in fact, a wonderful painting of Mariana by Millais, painted in 1851, which adds to Tennyson's portrait the acute

backache suffered by Mariana through standing perpetually in the same position gazing out of the window.

Tennyson seems to have little interest in Mariana except as a template upon which he can embroider his striking images. She and the poem exist for the sake of those images. It could be said that 'Mariana' is an artistic failure for the opposite reason to *Hamlet*: that it has insufficient content to sustain the weight of all these objective correlatives. But this would surely be too harsh. Almost every image is marvellously effective, technically brilliant. Eliot drew attention to the loss the line would have suffered had Tennyson written 'The blue fly sang in the pane' rather than 'sung'. Every flower-pot is encrusted with black moss, as though the dead moss is itself in mourning for the flowers which should have been nourished there, as flowers of love should have blossomed in the body and spirit of Mariana. Everything is similarly, unnaturally, denied the possibility of performing the function for which it was created. The rusted nails cannot hold, the broken sheds cannot keep out the weather and the weeds. The latch remains unlifted. There is not only the mastery of expressive sounds of words, but, of course, of expressive rhythms. 'From the dark fen the oxen's low / Came to her' would not have been half as plangent had the sentence not been drawn over the line ending.

Though the images are not progressive, but merely accumulate, that, in itself, mimes the accumulation of minutes, days and years weighing Mariana down. They are like dead leaves first disbranched from the tree of life, then blown at the wind's mercy, then slowly rotting: like the passage of time in a Beckett play: 'Moment upon moment, pattering down, … and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life' [*Endgame*]. Perhaps the strongest of all the images, certainly the most strongly sexual, is

> The shadow of the poplar fell
> Upon her bed, across her brow.

If we were to substitute, say, 'aspen' for 'poplar', the lines would lose all meaning. The deprivation is of body, mind and spirit. Hers is a wasted life in a waste land.

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The image of a woman isolated from the world, with no relationships and no sexual life, clearly aroused Tennyson's imagination. Very soon after 'Mariana' came 'The Lady of Shalott'. But the two poems are very different. The most obvious difference is that whereas 'Mariana' is a static tableau, 'The Lady of Shalott' is a highly dramatic narrative poem. The Lady's condition changes violently almost line by line. The motivation in 'Mariana' could hardly be simpler: the woman has been deserted by her lover and devotes the rest of her life to waiting for his return with ever-dwindling hope. The motivation in 'The Lady of Shalott' is complex and mysterious. The element of story-telling imposed a necessary discipline on Tennyson: images had to do their work quickly and economically or the fast-moving drama would leave them behind. 'Mariana' was a tour-de-force in evocative imagery, a musical exercise in which Tennyson perfected his craft. 'The Lady of Shalott' vindicates that craft by putting it entirely at the service of the poem's content. The imagery and trappings are still musical and evocative, but there is nothing too much. They are not merely descriptive and atmospheric, but

symbolic, constituting, as a developing sequence, a pattern just below the surface of the poem, enriching it with deeper, more complex meanings.

The landscape of ‘Mariana’ was deserted and sterile, like the woman herself. But at the opening of ‘The Lady of Shalott’ we are shown a fertile landscape busy with varied human activity. There are reapers, shepherd-lads, village girls, market churls, monks and knights. The perpetual flow of the river seems to correspond with the flow of life on its banks; and as the river flows only one way (‘down to Camelot’), so Camelot seems to be the focus, the raison d’être, of all the human activity. All human life is here, and the lady sees it all in her mirror and transforms it into art.

Though the woman lives in isolation and spends her life gazing (via the mirror) out of the window, there is no suggestion that she has been deserted; nor is she ‘aweary’, still less suicidal. She delights in her art, transforming the shadows of the world in her mirror into a magic web, ‘and little other care hath she’. She is defined, however, as set apart from the general flow of life in several ways. She lives on a ‘silent isle’, literally isolated, in a rigid, colourless building, with its ‘four gray walls, and four gray towers’. There she lives ‘imbowered’, which suggests an unnatural degree of protection from the world, perhaps even imprisonment. She has no intercourse with those who pass, and has never been seen by them. Nevertheless her song is cheerful. Those who hear it think she must belong to the world of fairy.

It is not until part two that we hear of the curse, and then only as something of which the lady has heard a whisper. The rumour has too little substance to spoil her enjoyment of her weaving. That she inhabits a world of ‘shadows’ disturbs the reader, but not, as yet, the lady. The first hint of dissatisfaction comes in relation to the knights who ride by (‘She hath no loyal knight and true’), and the sight of ‘two young lovers lately wed’. Now she is ‘half-sick’ of shadows, because she realizes unconsciously that she can never be loved or wed by a shadow.

There has been a timeless quality about the first two parts of the poem. Time is not a factor. Everything is described as happening ‘sometimes’, and the days are indistinguishable from each other. Suddenly at the start of part three the language becomes charged with sexual energy:

> A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
> He rose between the barley-sheaves,
> The sun came dazzling through the leaves,
> And flamed upon the brazen greaves
> Of bold Sir Lancelot.

Sir Lancelot belongs to the world of action in time. He is the embodiment of the generating but dangerous energies of the sun:

> The helmet and the helmet-feather
> Burned like one burning flame together.

Whitman spoke of Tennyson as ‘a gentleman of the first degree, boating, fishing and shooting genteelly through nature, admiring the ladies, and talking to them, in company, with that elaborate half-choked deference that is to be made up by the terrible licence of

men amongst themselves'. There is certainly nothing genteel or half-choked about the language Tennyson uses here to thrust Lancelot's sexuality into the face of the reader: a 'mighty silver bugle' is slung from his 'blazoned baldric'. This is far from the high-minded romantic ideal of a 'noble knight and true'. It is Lancelot the faithless adulterer. The reader familiar with *The Winter's Tale* will recognize that 'tirra lirra' is sung by Autolycus in a context of tumbling in the hay with his whores. Lancelot bursts into the lady's hitherto almost drugged consciousness like a 'bearded meteor, trailing light'.

After this revelation and awakening it is no longer possible for the lady to live with shadows, reflections in her mirror. Yet her irresistible urge to see Lancelot in the flesh immediately destroys her mirror and her loom. The curse, she realizes too late, is true. Yet the curse had been, perhaps, for her own protection, since she cannot survive exposure to the real world. To commit herself to the river of time and change is, for her, to die. By the time her boat reaches Camelot she is no more than a frozen 'shape'. Lancelot admires her lovely face for a moment, then turns away to his world of heat and action.

This reading of the poem clearly will not do. If Tennyson's objective were to tell an Arthurian tale, he would be guilty of gross incompetence. He has left out the body of the story. In a genuine Arthurian romance the main interest would be the curse. We need to know what the lady's life was like before the curse, who placed the curse upon her and what she did to bring it upon her, why she has been left largely in ignorance of the fact that she is cursed at all. That Tennyson shows no interest in giving us any of this information suggests that he has other purposes in mind, that the curse is not merely a traditional element in a medieval romance but has a wider, less specific reference.

According to Ted Hughes the poet is in the business of finding metaphors for his own nature. Tennyson's nature was plagued by doubts, not least doubts about his own vocation as poet. Part of him saw the role of poet as high and privileged, creating aesthetic pleasure as a balm to soothe the soul tormented by the world's horrors, sorrows and losses. In 'In Memoriam' he wrote:

> But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
> A use in measured language lies;
> The sad mechanic exercise,
> Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

But another part of him agreed with Keats that 'the poet and the dreamer are distinct'. In 'The Fall of Hyperion' Keats has the High Prophetess of Poetry say to him that none can become a true poet

> But those to whom the miseries of the world
> Are misery, and will not let them rest.
> All else who find a haven in the world,
> Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,
> If by a chance into this fane they come,
> Rot on the pavement where thou rottedst half.

It is not the task of the poet to provide a haven or seek a lotos-land. Magic casements and faery lands are products of mere fancy, which seeks to provide an escape from reality. Imagination plunges into reality at its most painful and recalcitrant. Like those of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner the stories it tells are not what the wedding-guest wants to hear, since, in Eliot's words 'humankind cannot bear very much reality'.

Once we begin to think about 'The Lady of Shalott' from this larger, more allegorical perspective, the representative significance of the lady's situation becomes obvious. By transforming images drawn from real life into a beautiful rich tapestry, she is clearly the type of the artist, as conceived in the late Romantic period. She does not set up her loom in the midst of life, or even at the open window, because the artist, in order to be able to see the whole pattern and transform it into the objective serenity of art, the aesthetic mode, cannot afford to expose herself to life's accidents, tribulations and temptations. She must attempt to detach herself from time, chance and death. The super-sensitive artist would be defiled by the world of mud and blood, too easy a victim of the fever and the fret. Art stands against Nature as a mode of being cleansed of life's impurities. It must therefore protect itself against Nature by building around itself several layers of insulation: first the barrier of water, then the walls of her stoutly built tower, then the mirror – the self-imposed prohibition against looking at life directly (i.e.realistically). She is not concerned with real life, but with a selective, distanced and framed reflection of it. Her objective is to transform life into art, art bearing to life the relation of distraction or palliative. Art is immune from all the ills of the world, and offers an escape from them or balm against them, and an alternative set of values of which the beautiful is paramount.

The sheltered life of the artist is very pleasant, until she becomes aware of the terrible price which is being exacted in exchange for her gift, the frustration of her own deepest needs for contact and intercourse with the rest of life. No man or woman is an island. The realization dawns that life itself is defined by relationships with everything else that lives. The curse of the calling of the isolated artist is that it becomes a slow suicide. But the artist is ill-fitted to plunge back into the mainstream of life, and to do so would be fatal to her art.

Tennyson has not left out an explanation of the curse, but has embodied it just below the narrative surface of the poem. Any reader who doubts this reading need only look at another poem written at much the same time in which the same theme is the overt subject: 'The Palace of Art'. There the speaker proposes to build his soul 'a lordly pleasure-house, / Wherein at ease for aye to dwell'. His soul will 'live alone unto herself … while the world runs round and round'. Here life is completely transformed into art, defeating time:

> Below was all mosaic choicely planned
> With cycles of the human tale
> Of this wide world, the times of every land
> So wrought they will not fail.

Here the soul seems for a while to thrive, and scorns as swine those who are satisfied to live in the unclean, chaotic world beyond her tower:

Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,
Joying to feel herself alive,
Lord over Nature, Lord of the visible earth,
Lord of the senses five.

'O God-like isolation which art mine,
I can but count thee perfect gain,
What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
That range on yonder plain.

In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,
They graze and wallow, breed and sleep;
And oft some brainless devil enters in,
And drives them to the deep.'

For three years she prospers; then the curse comes upon her. Unknown to herself, the sources of her life are drying up. 'Lest she should fail and perish utterly' God plagues her with sore despair:

Deep dread and loathing of her solitude
Fell on her, from which mood was born
Scorn of herself.

Her palace now seems to her peopled by phantasms, nightmares and corpses. Her own soul seems 'a spot of dull stagnation, without light / Or power of movement'. She longs to hear a human voice. Her insulation, 'inwrapt tenfold', has exiled her from God. She has committed the ultimate crime. As she abandons her tower she thinks: 'I have found a new land/ But I die'.

However, in this poem the lady does not die. She resolves to live in 'a cottage in the vale' to mourn and pray. Yet she does not entirely repudiate her palace of art:

'Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt.'

The crucial words are, of course, 'with others'. Art can be redeemed if it is restored to the world of relationships and becomes a humble expression of the whole web of interdependencies which constitute life.

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