Alfred Tennyson

by Peter Cash

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Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)

by

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
The bibliography of this student guide is commended.

FURTHER READING
Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, 1847.
Charles Dickens, Hard Times, 1854.
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Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 1891.

SCOPE OF TOPIC
"Tennyson, with all his temperament and artistic skill, is deficient in intellectual power; and no modern poet can make very much of his business unless he is pre-eminently strong in this." This 'modern' view, paying tribute to Tennyson's 'artistic skill', but criticising his lack of 'intellectual power', was expressed by Matthew Arnold in 1860.

To T. S. Eliot, it is "perfectly clear" that Tennyson is "a great poet": "He has three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety, and complete competence." Writing in 1936, Eliot was certain about Tennyson to an extent which has not been seen since.

In this Bookmark, one aim will be to focus – just as A-Level examination questions have often done – on Tennyson's "variety". In his Collected Works, there is an extraordinary variety of forms (rhyme-schemes, metres) and a bewildering variety of subject-matters. Partly because he lived so long, Tennyson wrote too much – much of it turgid and of questionable quality. All of it was in the 'Parnassian' style [= in accordance with nineteenth-century poetic diction] to which his contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins was objecting in his private letters.

Tennyson's intellect, then, was more than equal to the 'business' of versification; both T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden take the view that no "poet in English has ever had a finer ear for vowel sound". What Matthew Arnold means is that Tennyson's work is without any unifying theme. He means that Tennyson had little of his own to say and that he felt under pressure
exerted, no doubt, by the successful novelists of the 1830s and 1840s – to search among the social issues of his day for imposing subjects, not all of them amenable to poetic expression: for example, women’s rights (as explored in The Princess in 1847). Arnold, if you like, is arguing that Tennyson’s variety is a sign of his ultimate weakness. Not unsympathetic to that argument, this Bookmark comments on 14 poems (including three songs from The Princess) which illustrate the extent of Tennyson’s virtuosity. Tennyson’s 133-part elegy for Arthur Hallam – In Memoriam (1850) – is covered in the Longer Poems series of English Association Bookmarks (No 4).

Upon Wordsworth’s death in 1850, Tennyson became Poet Laureate. During the second half of his life, he was a national celebrity, his books of the 1850s selling as Beatles’ albums would do in the 1960s. His fame spread, resulting in his (reluctant) ennoblement in 1883: Alfred, 1st Baron Tennyson/Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

THE OWL (1830)

R. P. Hewett remarks that The Owl is “a light and lively lyric, enlivened by an energetic rhythm”. The Owl (a song among Tennyson’s juvenilia) has the air of a Shakespearean song, reminiscent especially of the song in Love’s Labour’s Lost: "When icicles hang by the wall ...." (Act V Scene 2). The subject of the song is a barn owl (tyto alba): although Tennyson may be concerned to write a “lively lyric”, he is aiming to suggest that this owl, perched in a church tower, is an alert, cunning and predatory force. The comment that the poem is “light and lively” stems from Tennyson’s use of repetition: in both stanzas, there recurs a line which is functional in the description of a cyclic activity. In the first stanza, the repeated line – ‘And the whirring sail goes round’ – enacts the incessant rotation of a windmill; in the second, the line – ‘Twice or thrice his roundelay’ – is mimetic of the continual crowing of a cockerel. Although in this respect the song is not dissimilar to that raucous French rondeau Frere Jacques, its purpose is to suggest that the eponymous owl is a bird for all seasons, a raptor who keeps his wits about him and rarely sleeps.

In both stanzas, there is a simple contrast between innocent diurnal activities (such as cats running home or ‘merry milkmaids’ closing gates) and the sinister nocturnal activities of the owl. There is an ominous undercurrent in the behaviour of the owl, something menacing which Tennyson’s iambic chorus –

    Alone and warming his five wits
    The white owl in the belfry sits

– seeks to convey. This couplet implies that ‘the white owl’ feels not only indifferent to all other forms of activity, but also superior to all animals and humans who perform them. There is a sense in which this owl, with ‘his five wits’, has extra-sensory perception and seems to preside imperiously and vigilantly over the rural world. The Owl, then, is a poem that singles out the barn owl (aka ‘church owl’) for special attention and seeks to suggest that this creature is an omniscient President of the Countryside: in other words, the poem reinforces the conventional image of a wise, old owl and pays tribute to his omnipotent wisdom. Rudimentary though this rhyme is, it exemplifies Tennyson’s “complete competence” (Eliot).

MARIANA (1830)

It was the art-critic John Ruskin who – in Modern Painters III (1856) – coined the term ‘pathetic fallacy’; he did so in order to criticise the growing tendency of both artists and writers to ascribe human emotions to non-human phenomena. It was, so Ruskin argued, a
**fallacy** to suggest (as Wordsworth and Tennyson regularly did) that human feelings could seek and find a sympathetic response in their natural surroundings; such sentimentality, he explained, created 'a falseness in our impressions of external things'. **Mariana** is a poem which illustrates the impact of this fallacy on Tennyson's work. In this poem, Tennyson aims to describe the atmosphere of a place in order to convey the mood of a person. The place which he describes is the 'moated grange' to which Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna refers in Act III Scene 2 of Shakespeare's **Measure for Measure** (1604).

Tennyson's eponymous heroine is a minor character in Shakespeare's play. Mariana, jilted fiancée of Angelo, is spending her best days in a solitary confinement at this 'lonely' location. By his description of this Gothic building, Tennyson seeks to convey her dejected mood: as Glennis Byron puts it, the poem is "a description of an abandoned woman's state of consciousness". It is by the sound of each verse that Tennyson creates her mood of deep despondency. His rhymes –

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With blackest moss the flower-pots
    Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
    That held the pear to the garden-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
    Uplifted was the clinking latch;
    Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange
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– are monosyllabic and monotonous and thus assist him in establishing a melancholy atmosphere. **Mariana** is an exercise in the vocabulary of gloom. It is by a deft use of adjectives that Tennyson colours this scene in dark hues. First, he uses superlatives ('With blackest moss', 'when thickest dark') in order to imply a state of deep depression; by using the superlative forms of 'black' and 'thick', he seeks to convey the dense gloom which hangs over both the garden and Mariana's prospects. Second, he uses a series of positive adjectives ironically to convey this negative atmosphere. Most notably, 'the rusted nails' and 'the broken sheds' suggest the effects of corrosion; other adjectives ('sad', 'unlifted', 'weeded and worn') are simple signs of neglect and deterioration. In short, Tennyson's diction depicts an environment of terminal decay.

It is by the sound of the chorus that Tennyson emphasises the bleak and desolate environment in which Mariana spends her days. The monotonous refrain –

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She only said, "My life is dreary,
    He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
    I would that I were dead!"
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– is repeated in order to suggest the monotony of Mariana's life. Here, the dull rhymes ('said'/dead') and the dour repetitions ('She said; she said' and 'aweary, aweary') give an overwhelming impression of dreariness and weariness with the world; collectively, these sound-effects establish the tedium of Mariana's existence. So stagnant is her life that it has ceased to be worth living.

Throughout the poem, Tennyson commits the pathetic fallacy: that is, he suggests fallaciously and intentionally that the atmospheric conditions are in sympathy with Mariana's disconsolate mood. In the second stanza, 'the flitting of the bats' is a sinister detail that enhances the Gothic atmosphere; it augments both the meteorological and spiritual gloom. In the third stanza, Tennyson adds a further air of spookiness; it is eerie that Mariana should hear an owl hoot as she awakes ('waking she heard the night-fowl crow') and eerier still that a cockerel should crow 'an hour ere light'. It is almost as if there is a clandestine evil in the grounds, something nasty in that broken wood-shed. In the fifth and sixth stanzas, Tennyson
writes as if the grange is actually haunted: ‘She saw the gusty shadow sway’, ‘The doors upon their hinges creaked’, ‘Old faces glimmered thro’ the doors’, ‘Old footsteps trod the upper floors’. The place is in urgent need of a ghost-buster.

Throughout the poem, Tennyson’s strategy anticipates the technique of a film director: he sets a scene and then lights it from different angles. In the third stanza, he emphasises how it must feel for Mariana to dwell in such abject isolation:

without hope of change,
   In sleep she seemed to walk forlorn,
   Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn
   About the lonely moated grange.

Because Mariana lives ‘without hope of change’, she is ‘forlorn’: that is, she is in despair. It is therefore inevitable that ‘cold winds’ should blow on the sound-track and that the personified ‘morn’ should shed little light; both aspects of her immediate surroundings communicate her plight. Glennis Byron observes that Mariana “appears fused with her setting”. The pictorial clarity of the setting reflects her dejection.

Eventually, Mariana’s despair grows to the point at which she contemplates suicide. In the fifth stanza, the remorseless ‘gray’ of the background (‘the glooming flats’, ‘the rounding gray’) evokes her suicidal mood:

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

Marian’s life, then, is overcast by a grim shadow: literally, it is ‘the shadow’ from the poplar tree which casts her room into a premature darkness; metaphorically, it is the shadow of Angelo’s rejection which lies over her and – so Shakespeare’s play works – disqualifies her from becoming the bride of any other man. Doomed to die a maid, she has nothing to live for. In this context, Mariana is a tragic figure. In the seventh and final stanza, Tennyson emphasises her own awareness of her tragedy; she is portrayed as knowing what this period of enforced seclusion has done to her. Her particular awareness that time (‘the slow clock ticking’) passes with an unnatural slowness for her causes both anguish and boredom; but this is nothing compared to ‘her sense’ that her personality has been altered by her claustrophobic experience. Her cry of despair –

Then, said she, “I am very dreary,
   He will not come,” she said;
   She wept, “I am aweary, aweary,
   O God, that I were dead!”

– is heightened and strengthened by the addition of ‘very’ and the introduction of ‘O God’. She realises that her sense of personal identity has been destroyed; her ordeal has left her without the capacity either to enjoy her life (symbolised by that ironic ‘sunbeam’) or to fling herself courageously into the moat (‘O God, that I were dead!’) Strangers to Measure for Measure may be glad to learn that God – in the shape of Duke Vincentio, disguised as a friar – does finally intervene and re-unite her with Angelo.

**ULYSSES (1833)**

The central fact of Tennyson’s poetical career (if not of his life) was the sudden death of his close friend Arthur Hallam on 15th September 1833. Hallam – whom Tennyson had met at Trinity College Cambridge in April 1829 – died in Vienna of a brain haemorrhage (a cerebral aneurysm); born on 1st February 1811, he was just twenty-two years of age.
Tennyson learned of Hallam’s death two weeks later (on 1st October 1833): from that moment, this early death became the central inspiration and preoccupation of his poetry. By 20th October 1833, Ulysses was complete.

Written (as it was) in the wake of Arthur Hallam’s sudden death, Ulysses – according to Tennyson’s letters – is about the necessity of “going forward and braving the struggle of life”; although it was ‘written under the sense of loss’, the poem is characterised by Tennyson’s feeling “that still life must be fought to the end”. In order to explore this attitude, Tennyson turns to his reading of classical literature. Despite his confession that the poem is “about myself”, he leans for his inspiration upon the legend of Ulysses as Homer relates it in Book IX of his Odyssey and as Dante re-tells it in Chapter XXVI of his Inferno, in order to express his personal ‘sense of loss’ and come to terms with his grief, Tennyson transforms himself into an appropriately heroic figure and endeavours in this persona to shape his attitude towards grief.

Ulysses is a dramatic monologue: as such, it reads like a speech from Act III of Hamlet or Book II of Paradise Lost. The soliloquy takes the form of a retrospect; in the poem, Ulysses, the great hero from the Trojan wars, is an old man who, having returned to Ithaca, is looking back upon his odyssey and in his ‘sleek old age’ (Odyssey, Book XI) trying to make sense of human experience. It is Christopher Ricks who explains that Tennyson had read H. F. Cary’s translation of Dante and points out that the speaker of the monologue finds himself in a situation more recognisable to Dante’s hero. In Inferno, Ulysses – who once had in him ‘the zeal/T’ explore the world and search the ways of life’ – has become ‘tardy with age’ and has been living on the Greek island of Ithaca for several years when the old desire to travel the world takes hold of him again. Tennyson’s poem takes up the story from this point: that is, the point at which Ulysses seeks to fire his companions with his renewed ‘zeal’ for life. He plans to ‘drink/Life to the lees’. Decoded, then, Ulysses’ speech is Tennyson’s attempt to exhort himself into “braving the struggle of life” after/without Arthur Hallam.

Tennyson’s poem is complex because its blank verse attempts to monitor the thought-processes of this injured individual: in other words, its iambic pentameters try to chart the movement of a mind engaged in the agonising act of thinking over past events. In order to capture his protagonist’s reflective mood, Tennyson must become subtle in his recourse to syntactical parallelism and develop a complicated syntax. Consequently, the first sentence of the poem – ‘It little profits that an idle king ....’ – fails to complete itself and thus suggests that Ulysses no longer finds life worth living. A series of negative adjectives (‘idle’, ‘still’, ‘barren’) reflects his mood of disenchantment. Ulysses is particularly disillusioned by his race, for it consists of men and women who seem incapable of understanding what a great man he has been: in short, he feels unappreciated [= unmotivated].

Tennyson’s use of mid-line colons and semi-colons indicates the complexity of Ulysses’ thought. What is complex about Ulysses’ thought lies in his sustained attempt to arrive at a sense of personal identity in his old age; through the difficult network of punctuation, he is to be imagined as struggling to answer this question: ‘Who am I now?’ For Ulysses’ old age, we may safely read Tennyson’s bereavement. Decoded, Tennyson is asking himself who he is without Hallam and how he can find the enthusiasm to rise out of his despondency, sail again through the ‘arch’ of experience and live the years that remain to him.

Into Ulysses’ myth (‘I cannot rest from travel!’) Tennyson encrypts his own ceaseless effort to recover his equanimity in the aftermath of Hallam’s death. Ulysses’ fear is that he is merely famous for having been famous: ‘I am become a name’. He is sensitive to the stigma that he is a has-been because there is nothing in his present life that illuminates his past: significantly, he is ‘by a still hearth’. He suspects himself of living on his past glories; he finds it extremely ‘dull’ to live a life of ‘idle’ retirement and reflects that he is merely breathing, not living: ‘As tho’ to breathe were life’. For this listless attitude, Ulysses/Tennyson admonishes himself.
In the event, he resolves to make the most of ‘every hour’ that he has left before the ‘eternal silence’. Such a resolution is in itself a heroic act; such heroism is entirely in keeping with Ulysses’ reputation: in other words, he remains a hero in his attitude towards old age [= his bereavement]. It would be ‘vile’ if ‘this gray spirit yearning in desire’ did not try its utmost ‘to follow knowledge like a sinking star’: that is, to ‘pursue virtue and knowledge high’ (as Dante put it).

Ulysses turns to the consolation of his son in the hope that Telemachus will succeed where he has failed: that is, in civilising such a ‘savage race’. He cheers himself up with the thought that Telemachus may educate ‘a rugged people’ and ‘subdue them to the useful and the good’. In his old age, Ulysses looks out upon ‘the dark broad seas’, remembers the heroic way in which he and his mariners (no fair-weather friends) contended with the varying weather-conditions (‘the thunder and the sunshine’) and decides that they can/should do so again. He reflects that old age has its compensations: as a result, he resolves – before he dies – to perform another ‘work of noble note’/ ‘to seek a newer world’. This quest (to ‘sail beyond the sunset’) is yet another heroic deed because, even though all atmospheric conditions are against him, he is determined to strive manfully/age with decorum; he wants to grow old gracefully, if not zealously.

Ultimately, Ulysses comprehends that moral courage is the only truly adequate response to human experience and will not give in to death: instead, he resolves to rage against the dying of the light. He seems determined to undertake one last adventure, consoling himself with the idea that he is what he is (‘that which we are, we are’). He accepts that he and his fellow sailors have been rendered physically weak, but refuses to let this frailty become an excuse for moral weakness: ‘To the dawn/Our poop we turned’ (Dante). Even though he is old, there is no weakening of Ulysses’ will (‘strong in will’). He/Tennyson has concluded that life is to be lived to the full until death actually arrives; he will not ‘yield’ to senility. At the end of his monologue, Ulysses’/Tennyson’s mood is a mood of heroic determination (‘to strive .... and not to yield’) totally in keeping with his character in his prime.

TITHONUS (1833)

“What is life to me! If I die (which the Tennysons never do)”
Emily Tennyson   Letter of 12th July 1834

“It is a strange feeling about those who are taken young that, while we are getting old and dusty, they are as they were.”
Benjamin Jowett   Letter of 10th April 1859

Tithonus, too, was written in the after-shock of Arthur Hallam’s death in September 1833 at the tender age of twenty-two. The history of its composition and publication are instructive; conceived in one version as Tithon, revised into another version to which scholars are still denied access, Tithonus saw the light of day only after W. M. Thackeray pressed the Poet Laureate to contribute a poem to the Cornhill Magazine in 1860. Tennyson assigned the poem to 1860 because he did not want to be thought to have dusted off a poem “written upwards of a quarter of a century ago”.

As it was “originally a pendent to Ulysses”, Tithon is coloured by the grief that both Tennyson and his sister Emily (Hallam’s fiancée) felt at the time of his death “a quarter of a century ago”. Emily’s sentiment, expressed in her letter to her brother, touches immediately upon his own ineluctable feeling that life without Hallam was not going to be worth living; moreover, it raises the prospect that their lives (since Tennysons never die) are likely to approach a condition of unendurability. While they are “getting old and dusty”, they will go on remembering Arthur as the “young” man that he was. For this reason, M. J. Donahue
(1949) airs the view that Tithonus is not so much "a mask for Tennyson" as a means by which he examines "the peculiar and individual nature of his own emotional injury".

In Tithonus, then, Tithonus is not a persona to the extent that Ulysses was; rather, he is a witness to a condition (not dissimilar to immortality) which brings an unending misery. In this poem, then, Tennyson endeavours to console himself with the idea that immortality might not be a blessing. To this end, he presents the persona of the Greek youth Tithonus who, beloved by the Goddess Aurora, received from her the gift of eternal life, but not eternal youth; as a result, he grew old and infirm, but – because he could not die – was (according to the myth) instead turned into a grasshopper.

Like Ulysses, Tithonus reads like a soliloquy from a Shakespearean play or a Book of Paradise Lost; it is a dramatic monologue in which Tennyson brings to life this mythological figure, endows him with a personal history and provides us with a psychological insight into his character. At the same time, Tennyson is trying through this remote, mythological persona to work out an answer to his own immediate grief/to find a self-supporting attitude to Hallam’s death: in short, to find a consolation.

It transpires that Tithonus – like Arthur Hallam – ‘was a handsome youth’. Indeed, Tithonus is a tragic figure because, although he need not fear death, he has to live every year of his life feeling older and older. This being so, he is in an ironic relationship with his environment; he exists in ironic relation to both the decaying woods (‘the woods decay’) and the dying swan (‘after many a summer dies the swan’). The supreme irony is that Tithonus envies his fellow creatures because he, unlike them, is deprived of the joy of dying.

The ‘cruel’ irony for Tithonus is that ‘immortality’, as opposed to mortality, ‘consumes’ him. Rather than die, Tithonus is forced to endure the long, drawn-out and withering process of ageing:

Me only cruel immortality
Consumes.

This being so, he is no longer a man, but a ‘white-haired shadow’: in other words, what is ‘cruel’ about ‘immortality’ is that it has made him merely a ‘gray shadow’ of the handsome creature that he once was; what is ‘cruel’ is that he can age, but not die. Given Hallam’s early death, Tennyson’s consolation is that he would not have wished this fate upon his friend. He should know: after all, it is an emotional condition approximate to the very anguish which he himself is having to endure.

After the first ten lines of blank verse, Tithonus’ monologue takes the course of a reproach to the Goddess Aurora for having seduced him with the prospect of eternal grandeur; rather like King Midas of Phrygia, Tithonus reproaches the gods for having granted him a wish that has rebounded on him. Aurora has granted him not ‘immortal youth’ but ‘immortal age’; in this oxymoron, we can hear him blame her for having landed him in this predicament; we may moreover be also able to hear Tennyson chastise his own gods for taking Hallam young and subjecting him to his own living death.

On reflection, Tithonus can see no reason why man should outstay his welcome on earth; on second thoughts, he has no wish to ‘vary from the kindly race of men’ and concludes that death is ‘meet for all’. Decoded, Tennyson is expressing his understanding of human mortality [namely, that man must die lest he be condemned to endure ‘immortal age’] and hoping that, in return for this understanding, he will be granted relief from his pain: to be exact, that this understanding will put his distress in a palliative context. Tithonus’/Tennyson’s wishful thinking takes the shape of a vision in which Aurora – rather like a veiled Boadicea – arrives in her chariot (pulled by a ‘wild team’ of horses) to restore his mortality .... But no:
The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.

Tithonus’/Tennyson’s condition is irreversible: that is, he must continue to endure his grief without respite for the foreseeable future – even to the crack of doom. In this respect, Tithonus is a notable expression of Victorian pessimism in that it fails to imagine a Benign Deity/a Benevolent Creator who might intervene out of pity and spare him further torment. For Tennyson, God is to be experienced only “as a terrifying absence” (J. Hillis Miller, 1963). Tithonus’ picture of Aurora’s arrival is of course a metaphor for the break of day. Dawn (in the form of Aurora’s chariot) arrives, but Tithonus is not in any condition to greet another day with optimism, for he feels that, since those ‘days far-off’, he has lost the identity of a man (‘if I be he that watched’) and yearns in vivid language for his past existence when he could feel his blood ‘glow with the glow’ of the crimson sky.

By sharp contrast with Ulysses’ mood, Tithonus’ mood is one of despair; he has given up all hope of returning to mortal life/to the ranks of ‘happy men that have the power to die’. In the final verse-paragraph, he tries desperately to ‘brave the struggle of life’/to come to terms with his fate among the ‘rosy shadows’. It culminates in a Keatsian plea for the simple ease of death –

Release me and restore me to the ground

– which goes unanswered. The long lines of Tithonus’ blank verse pan the consciousness of a man whose melancholy increases daily and whose envy of ordinary mortals (‘the happier dead’) becomes daily more acute. Ultimately, Tennyson’s iambic pentameters convey the blank desolation that he shares with his forlorn protagonist.

‘BREAK, BREAK, BREAK ....’ (1834)

Given the frequency with which Tennyson visited the seaside-resort of Mablethorpe, it is no surprise that Christopher Ricks assigns this poem to Spring 1834: that is, after Arthur Hallam’s sudden death, but before the Tennysons left Somersby in Lincolnshire for Epping in Surrey. The poem – of four quatrains – is both a lyric in that Tennyson gives voice to his grief and an ode in that he addresses the sea directly:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

From this imperative, it would seem that Tennyson has been staring at the North Sea and encouraging the waves that ‘break’ repeatedly over the ‘cold gray stones’: just as the literal waves go on crashing over the stones, so the waves of grief/misery continue to whelm over him. It is as if he is empathising with the stones, exhorting the waves to do their worst to them at the same time as he bravely exhorts the waves of emotion to do their worst to him. In the remorseless erosion of the stones, Tennyson finds a metaphor for the effect of his bereavement upon his consciousness. In this process, he finds an objective correlative for his otherwise-ineffable sorrow; it supplies him with a formula for his melancholy and thus enables him to express ‘thoughts’ which – like Wordsworth’s in his Ode – ‘lie too deep for tears’.

Other features of the marine landscape Tennyson integrates casually into the second and third quatrains. He selects three figures in order to forge poignant contrasts between them in their vocal happiness and himself in his unutterable sorrow: all in life is ‘well for the fisherman’s boy’ who ‘shouts’ playfully to his sister; all is equally ‘well for the sailor lad’ who ‘sings’ to himself in his boat. In both cases, the boy’s joy is articulated at the ironic expense of the melancholy poet who is staring silently out to sea and watching the ‘stately ships’ proceed to ‘their haven under the hill’. Tennyson himself can find no such port in a storm:
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.

He remains in turmoil, preoccupied with the loss of his friend whom he recalls here (as he does in *In Memoriam*) by reference to the touch of his hand and the sound of his voice; this is the 'hand/That can be clasped no more' [*Part VII*] and it becomes the mnemonic by which his loss is to be measured and mourned.

At the start of the fourth quatrain, Tennyson’s aim in repeating his imperative (‘Break, break, break’) is not to engage in “helpless gesturing” (Robin Mayhead) but once again to enact rhythmically the breaking of the waves upon the ‘crag’. On this occasion, though, he uses this lament to depict not the remorseless flow of his grief, but the continuous flow of life. Ruefully, he observes that it carries on regardless both of Hallam’s death and of his own distraught reaction to it. For this reason, he tries in the last lines to come to terms with the irretrievability of his loss: that is, to accept with calm that the day when he last felt Hallam’s ‘tender’ hand/last heard his voice ‘will never come back’ to him.

**THE LOTOS-EATERS** (1842)

First published in 1832, this poem – in its revised version of 1842 – relies for its context upon the abrupt death of Arthur Hallam in September 1833. Originally, Tennyson had gone for his inspiration to Homer’s *Odyssey* Book IX:

> We set foot on the land of the Lotus-eaters who eat a flowery food .... So they [Odysseus’ men] went straightaway and mingled with the Lotus-eaters and the Lotus-eaters did not plan death for my comrades, but gave them of the lotus to taste. And whosoever of them ate of the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus had no longer any wish to bring back word or to return, but there they were fain to abide among the lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus and forgetful of their homeward way. These men, therefore, I brought back perforce to the ships, weeping.

In the immediate wake of Hallam’s death, it ceases to be merely the literary re-working of a Greek myth and becomes in addition an exploration of a state of consciousness: to be exact, Tennyson finds himself suddenly interested in a frame of mind in which a man may be able to assuage the pain of bereavement. It is instructive that there exists a copy of the 1832 poem in Arthur Hallam’s handwriting (held by the University of Hawaii of all places); it therefore makes natural sense that Tennyson should have returned to this manuscript in his endeavour to come to terms with his friend’s death.

Tennyson had read Washington Irving’s *Columbus* (1828) and had been impressed by the description there of the idyllic life on Haiti. This description gives him the idea that there may indeed exist on earth

> a land

> In which it seemed always afternoon.

In his grief, it is attractive to Tennyson that there may be a condition of existence in which there is neither morning nor night: in other words, ‘afternoon’ becomes a metaphor for a state in which men can avoid extremes (neither pleasure nor pain) and dwell in a permanent state of equanimity. Furthermore, ‘always afternoon’ becomes an emblem of a timeless condition of existence in which men need no longer fear their rapid movement towards death.

*The Lotus-Eaters* is a descriptive poem in that Tennyson’s energy goes primarily into simple descriptions of this land in which ‘the languid air’ induces in Odysseus’ mariners a trance-like
state (‘a weary dream’) that creates the impression of a paradise. Decoded, this paradise (‘a land of streams’) is a state of mind in which Tennyson need experience no extremes of feeling; he is prepared to sacrifice pleasure if it means that he can staunch the flow of pain. The climate of the land is temperate: with its ‘wavering lights and shadows’, it represents the compromise condition towards which Tennyson aspires:

A land where all things always seemed the same!

The exclamation-mark indicates how devoutly he wishes for this consummation.

The musical movement of the rhymed iambic pentameters suggests the lull in activity for which Odysseus’ comrades have been longing. It is at this vulnerable point that the natives greet them:

Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.

They offer them ‘branches .... of that enchanted stem’; as a result, ‘whoso did receive of them/And taste’ fell ‘deep-asleep .... yet all awake’. The oxymoron indicates that Odysseus’ men have entered an indeterminate state of existence. Having eaten the flowery food, they no longer cherish the wish to return to the ‘alien shores’ of the real world ‘where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies’ (Keats) – or, as in Hallam’s case, not even that. After tasting ‘the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus’, they enter a condition of forgetfulness; forcibly reminded of the real world where comrades die, they will return to their ships ‘weeping’ (Homer).

In this respect, the mariners’ circumstances replicate Tennyson’s own. For this reason, he – in his own poem – shares their longing to go on living a life in which both food and feeling are bland. Like them, he wishes to remain

upon the yellow sand
Between the sun and moon upon the shore.

Like Ferdinand (in The Tempest), Odysseus’ men have ‘come unto these yellow sands’ and – in their enervated condition – been tempted to stay there, enjoying the mellow atmosphere: ‘between the sun’ (morning) ‘and moon’ (night). They feel too ‘weary’ [an adjective used three times in eight words] for active engagement in the world beyond ‘the wandering fields of barren foam’ [a Parnassian metonym for the ocean which echoes the loss of their desire to ‘roam’] and declare that they ‘will return no more’.

It is in the Choric Song (which follows) that the mariners further declare that “There is no joy but calm” and express their preference for a life of ‘dreamful ease’. With these sentiments, Tennyson may be thought to associate himself. Given the pain that it causes, he wants no more to do with the business of living in the real world ‘where but to think is to be full of sorrow’ (Keats); he, too, is thrice-weary of personal involvement with the ‘Fatherland’ and would rather withdraw to a remote dream-land where he can rest from toil. In this way prospers F. R. Leavis’ idea that, in Victorian poetry, “the actual world” (‘alien shores’) exists for the sole purpose of being ignored.

**THE LADY OF SHALOTT (1842)**

In this poem, Tennyson’s aim is to .... Because the poem is The Lady of Shalott, the sentence is unusually difficult to finish. Composing her summary of the poem, Glennis Byron writes: “Many critics have seen this as a poem about .... Some critics consider the poem an expression of ....” She tells us in turn what Post-Structuralist critics think, what Feminist critics have suggested and how Marxist critics have read the poem, concluding: “Perhaps it is
because the poem invites so many different readings that it has enjoyed a long popular appeal.” Her vague vocabulary – ‘many [unnamed] critics’, ‘some [unnamed] critics’, ‘perhaps’, ‘so many’ – gives the game away: here is a poem which, in spite of its long-lasting fame, defies confident exegesis.

It may therefore be helpful to inquire what Tennyson himself thought the poem was ‘about’. Originally, he claimed that the source for The Lady of Shalott was an Italian novella of 1321 entitled La Donna di Scalotta (LXXXII in the collection Cento Novelle Antiche): “Shalott was a softer sound than ‘Scalott’.” Christopher Ricks, however, notes that Tennyson’s narrative is true to this source only in respect of the Lady’s “funeral voyage” and he proceeds to quote what Tennyson had to say when it was pointed out to him that his narrative owes more to the story of Elaine, the daughter of Bernard of Astolat, who features in Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte d’Arthur (1470): “I doubt whether I should ever have put it in that shape if I had been then aware of the Maid of Astolat in Mort Arthur” and “The Lady of Shalott is evidently the Elaine of the Morte d’Arthur, but I do not think that I had ever heard of the latter when I wrote the former.”

The earliest known version of this story is La Mort Le Roi Artu (c. 1237): in this version, La Demoiselle d’Escalot dies of unrequited love for Sir Lancelot and drifts down a river to Camelot in a boat; it is recognizably this story that both Malory and Tennyson (360 years later) adapt to their own purposes. Given that nineteenth-century poets were exceptionally competitive versifiers, it can be argued that Tennyson’s aim in The Lady of Shalott is simply to tell this tale of unrequited love in an ambitious and original verse-form. In short, the poem is primarily a literary exercise.

Even so, Ricks observes that Tennyson adds to the tale five significant details: the island, the mirror, the woven tapestry, the curse and the song. Debate among critics is then renewed when it is supposed that, in Tennyson’s re-telling, the tale is allegorical: that the events have a meaning/signify a moral concern. Referring to the Lady, Tennyson himself explained that

the new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities.

The source for this quotation is Hallam Tennyson’s memoir of his father, published in 1897: are we, however, any the wiser? Can we now place upon the events of the poem any construction which goes beyond conjecture? Probably not. It may nevertheless be worth speculating that Tennyson had not remained unmoved by the mortality rate of Victorian women; it may not have escaped his notice that his female contemporaries tended to die not just prematurely, but young. Foremost among the ‘realities’ which the Lady of Shalott encounters is the reality of death.

Two eminent Victorian women give point to this speculation. When we think of Charlotte Bronte, we think of Haworth Parsonage, her sisters and Jane Eyre (1847); we do not perhaps know that, upon finally marrying a clergyman at the age of 38, she died within the year, almost certainly from the dehydrating effects of severe morning sickness. When we think of Mrs Beeton, author in 1861 of Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management, a guide to all aspects of running a household in Victorian Britain and subsequently a bible of good house-keeping, we perhaps think – in view of her subject-matter – of an elderly matron, passing on her acquired wisdom to younger wives. In fact, Isabella Beeton (1836-1865) did not live to see her 29th Birthday and this was because, after giving birth to her fourth child, she died from puerperal fever, caused by a septic infection of her genital passage, contracted from her husband Samuel, a respectable publisher, but also a frequenter of brothels. To the extent that they yield their innocence and become fatally involved in the world, they are both Ladies of Shalott.
The Lady of Shalott is a poem of four Parts. Both Part I and Part II comprise four stanzas; Part III comprises five stanzas; and Part IV comprises six stanzas. Each stanza is of nine lines, each rhyming aabcccb; such are the symmetries between these original stanzas that the b-rhyme between the fifth line and the ninth line is always 'Camelot'/of Shalott'; whereas the a-lines and the c-lines are always in iambic tetrameter, the b-lines are always trimeters. Given these mathematical correspondences between the stanzas, no attempt at exegesis [= at decoding the Arthurian narrative] should forget that Tennyson may simply be demonstrating his technical expertise/exhibiting his virtuosity. Quite ostentatiously, The Lady of Shalott is a work of art.

In Part I, Tennyson is concerned simply to set the scene. The setting is an eyot: that is, an islet in the mid-stream of a river (a feature not mentioned in the source-material). The introduction of this eyot is designed to indicate that the Lady of Shalott is isolated. It should always be borne in mind that Tennyson, in his re-telling of this prose romance, may be primarily concerned to give the kind of reading-pleasure that "an exact correspondent recurrence of accent and sound are calculated to excite" (S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV); audibly, he delights in meeting his contracts with his schemes of rhyme and metre. At the same time, Part I insists on the Lady's alienation and isolation from the world in which 'slow horses' pull 'heavy barges' and 'reapers' pile up sheaves of 'barley'. The function of 'the island in the river' is to 'imbower' her: that is, seclude her from industrial and agricultural life. The rhetorical questions of the third stanza ('But who ...?') suggest that nobody has actually seen her, even 'at the casement' of her 'gray' tower. Indeed, the Lady's existence is known 'only' to the reapers of 'the bearded barley' who 'hear a song' which she sings, breaking the silence.

In Part II, it becomes clear that something other than mere story-telling is going on. To the original narrative, Tennyson adds three features which ask for interpretation:

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot ....

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.

First, the Lady of Shalott is weaving a tapestry ('a magic web' into which, as we shall see, the 'colours' of the outside world are woven); second, she is aware that 'a curse is on her' (though she 'knows not what' it may be); and third, she is looking – as weavers did – at 'a mirror' in which images ('shadows') of the bustling activity in the outside world are reflected. Consistent with her confinement in a tower, the Lady's contact with the outside is not direct, but mediated through the mirror. In this mirror, a Chaucerian range of characters appears: 'surly village-churls', 'red cloaks of market girls', 'a troop of damsels', 'an abbot', 'a curly shepherd-lad', a 'long-haired page in crimson clad', 'knights riding two by two'. Here is an entire cross-section of mediaeval life with which she is involved only at a distance/indirectly. Accordingly, Tennyson informs us that 'she has no loyal knight and true'. It is this information that prepares us for the finale of Part II:

Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott.

Here, the dramatic picture is of the Lady of Shalott throwing down her weaving in frustration and declaring that she has had enough of doing things by halves: whilst she is still 'young',

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she wants to quit ‘the region of shadows’ and become fully involved in the bright life of Camelot. Put another way, the girl wants her piece of the romantic action. In the original version of 1832, Tennyson wrote that ‘She lives with little joy or fear’: in other words, Shalott is a colourless lotus-land (‘gray’) in which a damsel cannot feel any fits of passion, cannot experience any extremes of emotion. She has, however, been warned:

For often thro’ the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot.

There is a proleptic irony at the Lady’s expense, for the world [= Camelot] which she wants so badly to join is the mortal world in which there is ‘often’ a ‘funeral’.

Part III Tennyson dedicates to a description of the ‘dazzling’ figure of Sir Lancelot. Ricks observes that, for the Lady’s reaction to ‘bold Sir Lancelot’, Tennyson is deeply indebted to Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596): in particular, he has in mind Book III, Canto II, Stanzas 17-25 in which the chaste Britomart first catches sight of the ‘comely knight’ Arthegall in ‘a looking glasse’/’a mirrhour fayre’. Spenser’s Stanzas 24 and 25 are devoted to a description of Arthegall; in keeping with that image, Tennyson’s Lancelot likewise sports a shield on which there is the emblem of St George, patron saint of England: a red cross on ‘a yellow field’. Sir Lancelot cuts a dashing figure: on his horse’s bridle, gems glitter and bells ring ‘merrily’; from the belt across his shoulder, ‘a mighty silver bugle’ hangs; from his horse’s saddle, jewels shine ‘thick’; from his helmet, a feather plumes upwards ‘like a burning flame’. For this glamorous figure, Tennyson’s final simile is a ‘bearded meteor, trailing light’. He is no shadow, but a brilliant reality. The spectacle is enough to turn any maiden’s head: no sooner have his ‘broad clear brow’ and his ‘coal-black curls’ headed her way and ‘flashed into the crystal mirror’ than the Lady of Shalott – an embodiment of chastity, purity – conceives a natural longing to lose her maidenhead. The final stanza of Part III is memorable for the dramatic clarity of its rapid statements:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces through the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She looked down to Camelot.

The imagery of ‘the helmet and the plume’ is not so much an innuendo as an encoding of phallic promise. Now that she has experienced the excitement of sexual desire, the Lady of Shalott has lost patience with her virginity; she no longer wants to weave life, but to live it. At the same time, she is aware of the dangers that lost virginity entails; she understands that she participates in the living world at her peril. The violent cracking of the mirror signifies the Lady’s recognition that, in leaving Shalott, she is seriously tempting Fate:

Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
‘The curse is come upon me,’’ cried
The Lady of Shalott.

In Tennyson, ‘the curse’ is not likely to be the ‘the curse’ of menstruation – though it happens to be related to it. The post-pubescent/nubile damsel has been warned of the power of sexual longing; it is something with which women are cursed in that it leads to heart-break, infection and death. Consequently, she has taken the advice to keep herself to herself; she has remained sequestered in the tower, filtering her knowledge of Camelot through glass, for fear that, if she looks directly on the world, then its actual vibrancy will seduce her. To this extent, Sir Lancelot’s “Tirra lirra” (borrowed from Autolycus in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s
\textit{Tale}) is a siren song: once he catches her eye, ‘the curse’ of sexual yearning comes upon her and she is effectively doomed.

It is instructive that Book III of \textit{The Fairie Queene} is entitled ‘Chastity’. Like Ulysses’ faithful wife Penelope, the Lady of Shalott had substituted weaving for living and loving; she had tried, but failed to substitute art for life. What has happened in Part III is that Sir Lancelot has passed by her casement without looking up; as a result, she is to be imagined at her casement looking after her knight in shining armour as he rides obliviously towards Camelot. In Part IV, the Lady, ‘robed in snowy white’, leaves her island in the stream, boards a boat (on which she inscribes her name) and floats in stormy weather towards Camelot, singing her ‘mournful’ song and duly dying \textit{en route}. She dies a poetic death. The stately movement of the iambic verse conducts her downwards; on her way, autumn leaves – specifically from weeping willow-trees – begin to fall, inspiring pity for her. Her inscription ‘on the prow’ becomes her epitaph: in effect, “Here lies one who gave up her innocence/gave herself to a man”.

Dead on arrival, the Lady attracts sympathy from all classes of Camelot society: ‘knight and burgher, lord and dame’ come out ‘upon the wharfs’ to receive her. The ‘palace’ itself falls silent .... It is tragic that the Lady ‘looked down to Camelot’ [= engaged with the ‘realities’ of the world] only to be disappointed: upon conceiving an affection for Lancelot, she discovered to her chagrin that it was not requited – or, rather, not reciprocated in the same terms. According to this view, it is significant that Tennyson gives the final words of the poem to the Lancelot-figure:

\begin{quote}
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."
\end{quote}

In effect, he is the Lady’s widower. Although he is not unappreciative of her beauty, he is quite uncomprehending of the journey on which she felt impelled to embark – her maiden voyage, as it were; as a consequence, he rewards her ultimate sacrifice with a superficial compliment and a quick blessing. The complacent judgement which his words pass on her beauty is an indicator of his own obliviousness to her actual plight.

“Victorian poetry admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant and unpoetical and that no protest is worth making except the protest of withdrawal,” wrote F. R. Leavis in 1932. Following this famous lead, Leonée Ormond believes that Tennyson introduced the Arthurian material “as a valid setting for the study of the artist and the dangers of personal isolation”; she is arguing that the Lady’s isolation is a metaphor for the withdrawal from the world that the artist/writer finds necessary for his art. Since this is a poem about which it does not do to sound too authoritative, the two other options remain. First, the narrative may be altogether without a double meaning. In this connection, it is worth noting that the cancelled version of the second stanza of Part IV (1832) goes like this:

\begin{quote}
Though the squally eastwind keenly
Blew, with folded arms serenely
By the water stood the queenly
Lady of Shalott
\end{quote}

The exact correspondence between two adverbs and an unlikely adjective encourages the idea that Tennyson is essentially a wordsmith whose main interest is in rhyming. The second interpretation (as detailed above) will appeal more directly to the Feminist critics who are exercised by the Victorian treatment of women.
THE EAGLE (1851)

In this short poem, Tennyson’s aim is to convey the cosmic stature of the golden eagle. In the first tercet of iambic tetrameter, both the assonance (‘clasps the crag’) and the alliteration (‘crag with crooked hands’) serve to dramatise the awesome might of the bird. At once, Tennyson’s pronouns (‘he’, ‘him’) personify the bird; his talons become ‘hands’. In Tennyson’s cosmology, it is the altitude at which this bird of prey lives (‘close to the sun’) which then gives him a semi-divine status; literally, he belongs to a higher dimension. Consistent with this superior image, ‘the azure world’ (a grand metonym for the blue sky) obediently encircles him, supplies him with the vast background against which ‘he stands’, an imperious shape, surveying it from his eyrie. In both tercets, Tennyson’s rhymes (hands/lands/stands) are simple monosyllables designed to endow this raptor with an emphatic grandeur.

In the second tercet, Tennyson enlarges the scale of this aquiline figure still further: ‘beneath him’, the sea loses its lustre and appears ‘wrinkled’; it ‘crawls’ subserviently, is diminished. From his Olympian vantage-point, his supreme position, the eagle ‘watches’ and then descends upon his prey as if he is an elemental force. In Tennyson’s mythology, he is little less than god-like; aptly, the simile ‘like a thunderbolt’ compares him to the God, Jove.

THE SPLENDOUR FALLS (1853)

R. P. Hewett (A Choice of Poets, 1968) comments that, ‘above all, Tennyson was a devoted craftsman of poetic effect and had an exquisite ear’ and that ‘this can act negatively in hiding poverty of thought or feeling, but is at its best a source of great strength’. The Splendour Falls – added in 1853 to a very long, discursive poem entitled The Princess, first published in 1847 – is a case in point. In this song, Tennyson’s aim is not to set out an argument nor give shape to a thought, but to create an atmosphere. So eerie is this atmosphere that it might surround a castle in an ancient fairy-story:

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story ....

Tennyson’s simple adjectives (‘snowy’, ‘wild’, ‘far’, ‘yon’) are designed to suggest that this splendid castle exists in majestic seclusion/that it belongs to another, poetical world. From his unfolding description, it appears that the bleak landscape is to be located, if not on Irish moorland, then in ‘Elfland’ itself:

O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.

By this point of the song, it is also clear that the sound of Tennyson’s verse is to be primarily instrumental in creating this atmosphere of splendid isolation: so empty and remote is this landscape that ‘echoes’ may be readily imagined resounding across it. Indeed, Tennyson’s chorus repeats twice the present participle ‘dying’ in order to give the melancholy impression either of a bugle-sound fading away (that is, a last post for a lost past) or perhaps of a forlorn imperative that receives neither reply nor echo (that is, a cry for recognition in the universe that sadly goes unanswered).

On this first reading, The Splendour Falls articulates Tennyson’s longing for an age of Arthurian chivalry or mediaeval romance; he is yearning for the splendour of Britain’s heroic/romantic past and listening out for ‘echoes’ of it; on this reading, the tone of the song is little more than sentimental nostalgia. On the second reading, that imperative ‘blow’ is
issued in the frantic hope that it will produce a response: that out of the silence will ring an echo to prove that Elfland exists and extends a welcome to him. On this reading, that repeated participle serves only to give the impression that this hope is forlorn: that no bugle-horns blow out of Elfland and — long though the poet may listen — no echoes will answer it back. Consequently, the final image of the poem is of the poet stranded in his solitariness on the edge of an existentialist void.

**TEARS, IDLE TEARS** (1853)

_Tears, Idle Tears_ is a second song which was added to _The Princess_ in 1853. It is an attempt by Tennyson to explain to himself why there are occasions on which tears suddenly ‘gather to the eyes’. The eponymous tears are ‘idle’: that is, they well up involuntarily, spring into his eyes unbidden. Why, Tennyson wonders, should this be? The answer lies in the biographical background to the poem: apparently, he was moved to write it upon a visit to Tintern Abbey on the banks of the River Wye in Herefordshire:

> This song came to me on the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient.

Significantly, Arthur Hallam (1811-1833) is buried nearby; he was interred at Clevedon on 3rd January 1834. ‘Idle’ though Tennyson’s tears may appear, it is therefore likely that he _does_ ‘know ... what they mean’; they ‘mean’ that he continues to miss and mourn his friend. This biographical note explains that oxymoron ‘some divine despair’: even though he is in ‘despair’ because Hallam is dead, his ‘despair’ is ‘divine’ in that Hallam’s memory invokes it. It is ‘in looking on the happy Autumn-fields’ that he remembers him; from _In Memoriam_, we know that Tennyson associates Somersby’s autumnal hues (‘leaves that redden to the fall’) with Hallam’s sudden death – of which he learned on 1st October 1833. What Tennyson is remembering are things past: indeed, he borrows his chorus-line for each of the four verses from these lines in which Robert Southey (1774-1843) reflects upon his lost youth:

> Its idle hopes are o’er,
> Yet age remembers with a sigh
> The days that are no more.

The title of Southey’s poem is _Remembrance_.

The wider importance of _Tears, Idle Tears_ lies in Tennyson’s attempt to understand the power of nostalgia. He attributes human affection for ‘bygone memories’ (‘the days that are no more’) to our ‘sense of the abiding in the transient’: that is, to our awareness that the glories of this world pass inevitably away (‘s__ic transit gloria mundi’ ). In homage to Wordsworth’s _Ode_, he expresses here his own appreciation of the speed at which ‘shades of the prison house begin to close/Upon the growing boy’. It is at the thought of human transience that Tennyson grows lachrymose: although they remain ‘fresh’ in his memory, the days of his youth ‘are no more’. No sooner has he borne witness to ‘the first beam glittering on a sail’ than he is watching red sails in the sunset.

In _Tears, Idle Tears_, Tennyson meditates on ‘Death in Life’; to this meditation, the tempo of the blank verse lends a poise. In the third verse, he likens this ‘strange’ sensation to two phenomena: 1) ‘in dark summer dawns’, hearing ‘the earliest pipe of half-awakened birds’; 2) on one’s death-bed, seeing how ‘the casement slowly grows a glimmering square’. By these images, he attributes his ‘sad’ state not to a sentimental longing for the past, but to a living sense of mortality. Whenever bird-song, first light or a recollection of ‘first love’ lightens his darkening consciousness, he weeps ‘tears’ which – because there is a profound reason for them – are not so ‘idle’ after all.

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NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL (1853)

Like The Splendour Falls and Tears, Idle Tears, this song is also extracted from The Princess. Here, as there, Tennyson seeks by the musical effects of his verse to create the atmosphere of a romantic place; in this sense, his song – with its dense cluster of crepuscular images – is just a song at twilight. Here, the setting is such as may be found at either Harrington Hall or Well Vale in Tennyson’s own Lincolnshire; in these formal and ornamental settings, conditions – if the final imperatives of the song are to be believed – are entirely propitious for the consummation of a relationship between the poet and his ‘dearest’. Both the time (dusk) and the place (a landscaped garden) are perfectly right for them to plight their troths.

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal conforms immaculately to the nineteenth-century concept of the poetical. Ultimately, the fourteen-line song is unlike a sonnet because, being purely descriptive, it does not expand an argument; instead, it makes an anaphoric use of language purely for the musical pleasure that this pattern of repetition gives. In fact, the song takes the form of a ghazal. For this Persian form of verse, it has

the requisite number of couplets, the repetition of a single final word at short intervals to produce what is tantamount to rhyme .... and the standard images and ornaments of the Persian love-poem: roses, lilies, peacocks, the stars, the cypress.

John Killham

To Tennyson, the appeal of this form lies primarily in the scope that it allows him for the systematic organisation of sentence-structures. Indeed, seven sentences pursue an identical grammatical construction: that is, adverb + present-tense verb + article + adjective + noun. So rigid is his adherence to this formula (‘Now’ + subject and predicate self-consciously inverted) that the setting up of this network of syntactical parallels –

Now sleeps the crimson petal ....
Nor waves the cypress ....
Nor winks the gold fin ....

Now droops the milkwhite peacock ....

Now lies the Earth ....

Now slides the silent meteor ....

Now folds the lily .... ”

– itself becomes the supreme achievement of the exercise; such is Tennyson’s fondness for syntactical parallels that he takes additional delight in ensuring that his line-endings (‘with me’/’to me’/’unto me’/’in me’/’in me’) rhyme in the silent discipline of the ghazal. It is of almost secondary importance that this design (preposition + ‘me’) produces a harmonious texture which may in turn suggest a harmony between the poet and the person for whom he intends himself.

It is to this euphonious pattern of syntactical parallels that the sense-impressions of the summer night are subjugated. Exotic though it may be, each natural feature – the rose-petal, the cypress-tree, the goldfish, the peacock, the star, the lily – is not so much required to express or become an emblem of the poet’s passion as simply to find a fit position in one of the fourteen lines.
THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE (1854)

The Charge of the Light Brigade (first published in The Examiner on 9th December, 1854) is one of the most famous and memorable poems in the English language. This fame it owes both to the catastrophic event which it commemorates and to the dactylic rhythm (borrowed from Thomas Chatterton’s Song to Aella) which enacts this event for us.

The ‘charge of the Light Brigade’ (which took place in the Crimea on 25th October, 1854) is a catastrophe that has gone down in the annals of military history. Misunderstanding an order, Lord Cardigan led a cavalry brigade (of 607 ‘horse and hero’) in a charge of one-and-half miles against Russian artillery. According to the poet himself, The Charge was written (on 2nd December) after he had read a report of this disaster in The Times for 13th November which referred to “some hideous blunder”.

The Charge of the Light Brigade celebrates Victorian values: in particular, it eulogises and sentimentalises both the rigid discipline and the sheer bravery of the six hundred British soldiers who rode ‘into the valley of Death’ (as the soldiers themselves called it). Given that these sabre-rattling horsemen were out-numbered, out-manoeuvred and out-gunned, it is politically expedient that Tennyson – in his description of this massacre – should place the emphasis not upon the ‘blunder’, but upon the heroic feats of the cavalrymen whose obedience to orders sent them charging to their certain deaths. In this context, it is worth noting that the Victoria Cross (that rarest of military honours) is awarded ‘for valour’ on active service.

That Tennyson’s poem should have outlasted the era for which it was written says much for his virtues as a poet: in particular, for his “fine ear” (T. S. Eliot). The drama of the poem stems directly and uniquely from Tennyson’s control of rhyme and rhythm. From the outset, the beat of his dactyls –

Half a league, half a league,
    Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
     Rode the six hundred

– is designed to monitor the galloping advance of the 2,428 hooves towards the Russian guns one-and-a-half miles (‘half a league’) away; its systematic repetitions are metrical calculated to drum up a thunderous excitement. Nowhere is this technique more effective than in the second stanza where the thoughts racing through the men’s minds are assimilated into the pounding of the hoof-beats:

Their’s not to make reply,
    Their’s not to reason why,
Their’s but to do and die:
     Into the valley of Death
     Rode the six hundred.

Captured here is that unquestioning acceptance of authority upon which Great Britain based its military discipline and ran its empire. Concealed by that contraction (their’s) is the brutal attitude of the British class-structure to the men in the ranks: that ‘their [duty] is’ not to answer back, but to take for granted the divine wisdom of the orders issued by their superior officers. It would be pleasing to think that Tennyson (‘Their [place] is not to reason why’) is being ironic at the expense of Lord Cardigan and Lord Raglan’s ideas of themselves; unfortunately, it is more likely that he is endorsing this crass structure and simply praising the dead men for following their stupid orders.

In fact, Tennyson’s aim is to stir up patriotic fervour/reinforce public support for British participation in the Crimean War (1854-1856). Nowhere are his strategic repetitions of
monosyllabic rhymes and emphatic rhythms more dynamic than in the fifth stanza where the intensity of the action –

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered

– gives way to the solemnity of a body-count: ‘not/Not the six hundred’. The dramatic modulation of the phrasing –

They that had fought so well
Came thro’ the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred

– takes the casualties into horrifying account. In effect, these lines are no more than a simple re-working of the third stanza conducted in the bloody aftermath of the ‘wild charge’; the difference lies in the fatal change of tense from past historic (‘Boldly they rode so well’) to pluperfect (‘They that had fought so well’). The sentiment upon which the poem rests –

Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

– reminds Queen Victoria’s subjects that it is glorious to die for one’s country and insists that they ‘honour’ the Light Brigade for its nobility in having carried out this kamikaze charge. It would take another seventy years before this piety – Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori – would be exposed as a hypocritical piece of Victorian propaganda.

ODE ON THE DEATH OF THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON (1852)

Upon Wordsworth’s death in 1850, Tennyson became Poet Laureate. This position – which required him to pronounce in verse upon public events – he took with due seriousness: in effect, he was working in the tradition of the epic poets (such as Homer and Virgil) whose function was to record in verse the birth of their nations. It is worth noting that Homer (The Iliad) and Virgil (The Aeneid) were the first people to record the histories of the Greek and Roman nations; in this line, it became the Poet Laureate’s duty to mark significant developments in the life of his own nation.

Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, conqueror of Napoleon at Waterloo 1815 and British Prime Minister 1828-1830, died at the age of eighty-three on 14th September 1852. Newly appointed Poet Laureate, Tennyson felt that it was incumbent upon him to pen an ode that did justice to the heroic status of this ‘soldier firm’ and ‘statesman pure’. So protracted were the discussions of Wellington’s funeral that it did not take place until 18th November – for which occasion Tennyson had ready the nine parts of his poem.

In accordance with his role, Tennyson writes an ode that pays lavish tribute to the Duke of Wellington’s contribution to national life. In effect, it is a public elegy for a national hero:

Where shall we lay the man whom we deplore?
Here, in streaming London’s central roar.
Here, in Part II, he signals that ‘the man’ whose death they ‘deplore’ [= bewail, lament] is to be buried in St Paul’s Cathedral where both ‘those he wrought for’ and ‘those he fought for’ can come to pay their respects. Robin Mayhead considers that this occasional poem is exceptional: “one of Tennyson’s finest performances”. Here, however, the poem is already in trouble with that contrived rhyme between ‘wrought for’ (hideously poetic) and ‘fought for’.

In Part III, his versification struggles through more monosyllabic rhymes towards this anti-climax:

.... And let the mournful martial music blow;
The last great Englishman is low.

Dirge has become doggerel: that is, verse that plods towards conclusions in which usage (‘low’) is not fit for the dignified purpose of commemorating its subject: ‘the last great Englishman’. At these points, Tennyson’s diction can be heard straining for decorum.

During Part VIII, Tennyson’s Ode becomes in effect an ‘Ode to Duty’. In keeping with his public role, he proceeds to celebrate those Victorian values that the Duke of Wellington conspicuously embodied. Using archaic personification, he portrays the Iron Duke (the ‘ever-loyal iron leader’) as a fortunate individual

    on whom from both her open hands
    Lavish Honour showered all her stars
    And affluent Fortune emptied all her horn

but for whom nothing was more important than service of the state (‘saves or serves the state’). The Ode is Victorian propaganda. Running throughout Part VIII is a chorus –

    Not once or twice in our rough island-story
    The path of duty was the way to glory

– in which Tennyson contrives by means of litotes (‘Not once or twice .....’) to draw attention to the supreme virtues of an English gentleman: duty, self-sacrifice. As Tennyson constructs his story, Wellington became a great man because he managed to ‘deaden love of self’, keep to the straight-and-narrow mountain-path and scale ‘the toppling crags of Duty’; that ‘way’ – so the moral of the story goes – lies ‘glory’. For these pious reasons, Wellington is a ‘great example’ not only to Victorian Englishmen, but also to men of ‘every land’.

In Part IX, Tennyson does his duty and offers to a bereaved nation the consolation that came from the religious certainties of the age. Even though he is composing an elegy

    For one upon whose hand and heart and brain
    Once the weight and fate of Europe hung,

he is not dismayed because he recognises that a man’s mortal achievements must be viewed in a wider context – even when, like Wellington’s, they happen to be unique in the annals of military and political history. For this reason, Wellington’s funeral should – paradoxically – be a festival of rejoicing:

    Uplifted high in heart and hope are we,
    Until we doubt not that for one so true
    There must be other nobler work to do
    Than when he fought at Waterloo.

Even as ‘we’ are resting assured that God must have ‘other nobler work’ for Wellington to do, Tennyson’s statement (‘Than when he fought at Waterloo’) is plunging helplessly into bathos. To the dire end, his Ode struggles for felicity of expression:
Hush, the Dead March wails in the people’s ears:
The dark crowd moves, and there are sobs and tears:
The black earth yawns: the mortal disappears ....

His rhymes for ‘ears’ betray him into further phrases of doggerel: either rhythmically (“and there are sobs and tears”) or visually (“the mortal disappears”), his wording conjures up trite pictures of the scene for which its apparent grandeur has not prepared us. After the sound of the Funeral March, he invites us to listen to people blowing their noses in their handkerchiefs; after the grave opens, he writes as if Wellington’s corpse is part of some conjuring-trick. The effect is comic. Even in conclusion, Tennyson’s rhyme for ‘weave him’ produces

.... And in the vast cathedral leave him.
God accept him, Christ receive him.

It is as if ‘the dark crowd’ has had enough of Wellington and suddenly cleared off.

CROSSING THE BAR (1889)

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.”
Corinthians Chapter 1 Verse 8

Tennyson was an eminent Victorian; he was a pillar of the Victorian establishment in that he espoused the religious and social values of his age. Crossing the Bar (written three years before his death) is a religious poem in that it seeks to perfect an attitude to his imminent death in terms of his Christian faith. It is no surprise to learn that he wrote it at the age of 80 to mark his recovery from a serious illness in May 1889.

By 1889, Tennyson was living at Aldworth on the Isle of Wight; it was while crossing the Solent in October 1889 that Crossing the Bar was begun and finished. For an understanding of its strange title, it is necessary to know that a ‘bar’ is a ‘sand-bank at the mouth of harbour or estuary’ [Concise OED] and that it is used in Tennyson’s poetic diction to mean that point at which the open sea (‘the boundless deep’) begins. Given this usage, it becomes evident that in his traditional imagination the open sea is a metaphor for eternal life after death: that, in ‘crossing the bar’, he is dying.

Indeed, Tennyson’s metaphors in this poem are all traditional. At ‘sunset’, he hears ‘one clear call’: although ‘call’ is a nautical term appropriate to this setting, its metaphorical significance here is as a call from God. In this poem, Tennyson’s aim is to signal his readiness to answer this call: when he ‘puts out to sea’, he asks that there be no tidal resistance (‘no moaning’) but an absolute calm on ‘the boundless deep’. He has come to terms with his imminent ‘crossing’ to the other side; both metaphor (‘put out to sea’) and euphemistic metonym (‘boundless deep’) are used to illustrate this calm awareness that he has embarked on the ship of death.

In the third quatrain, Tennyson continues to illustrate his equanimity by traditional means. At ‘twilight’, he hears the ‘evening bell’ ring across the harbour: ‘And after that the dark!’ In effect, that exclamation-mark welcomes ‘the dark’. Looking forward to his night-crossing, he extends the metaphor of embarkation: because he is happy to die, he requests that there be no idle tears ‘when I embark’.

In the final quatrain, Tennyson accounts for this happiness at the ‘bourn’ of death. Lest a ship run aground, it was necessary that a pilot come aboard and steer it out to sea; in this conceit, Tennyson envisages that God is the pilot (‘my Pilot’/‘that Divine and Unseen Who is always guiding us’) who is steering his ship clear of the sand-bank (‘the bar’) at Aldworth’s harbour-mouth: “The pilot has been on board all the while, but in the dark I have
not seen him,” explained Tennyson to his son. His composure (expressed by his control of four iambic metres) emanates from his Christian ‘hope’ that, as St Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians promises, he will shortly meet his Maker ‘face to face’.

One of Tennyson’s final wishes concerned this poem:
“Mind you put Crossing the Bar at the end of all editions of my poems.”

APPENDIX

Peter Cash
SOMERSBY

In what sense these five buildings contribute to English life is any ingenious tourist’s guess. The approach may be through landscape that an exhaustive elegy embodies in metonymy, but here – in the muddy, midwinter Wolds – you’re not in any spot that ever even in Victoria’s reign – had much to do with history. No matter when you come, there’s never anybody about.

These days, the bridge which bumps across the narrow brook is of an anachronistic brick; even then, that ‘rivulet’, that ‘tinkling rill’, inspired no more than doggerel. What it bequeaths to posterity is not romantic, not even twee. From here, you can ramble or rev uphill.

Ramble in summer, as many do, you’re in a pastoral fiction. From the larches, a linnet sings; its mellifluous rhythms mock the moated grange. Like Cambridge choirs, bees and gnats rehearse inevitable murmurings.

Drive in midwinter, as we have done, the sky remains in folds. The Rectory hides behind its hedge. The greenstone church – irrelevant – squats asleep on its slope-top; only thickets of snowdrops fist through the graveyard grass.

We twist an iron ring and struggle in. The thirteen pews take shape. “How dark and strange!” Finally, we purchase
bland postcards of this picturesqueness
and sign the book in cold biro.

Even then, there’d have been little to spy
beneath the haggard cedar-limbs;
these days, there’s less ....
Why, then, may we be seen,
malingering up this lane,
listening out for a sonorous voice
that dully addressed a century
in an archaic diction
– the code of legends and hymns?
It isn’t our idea of erudite fun.
Stand too long and look,
an east-wind leaps and bites;
crows complain across the field.
We loiter, then, without intent
to understand this world?
Not quite:

above the brook,
we seek an inspiration
where the language of the nation
was perfected to death;
its terminal ornateness
brought a kind of greatness,
brings us to this bend:
not – so you might think – to mourn,
but to take in a place of birth,
contact a muse more suited to refine
than to invent ....
Somersby, we like to note, is not a dead-end;
three roads meander out.

**Somersby** is one of sixteen poems in Peter Cash’s **LINCOLNSHIRE CHURCHES**, published by Shoestring Press of Nottingham in 1998. Among the others are **Bag Enderby** and **Harrington**, places also closely connected with Tennyson.

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