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AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT.

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ROMANTIC TO MODERN

TENNYSON'S AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

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ROMANTIC TO MODERN  
TENNYSON'S AESTHETIC AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

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ROMANTIC TO MODERN  
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INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism of the Victorian period has changed its tone considerably in the last twenty years. Since the general rejection of the Victorians led by the new critics who wished to recapture what was to them the major tradition of English poetry, a tradition largely submerged during the nineteenth century, more recent criticism has been seeking a tradition that will link the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Frank Kermode, for instance, has shown in The Romantic Image that the early twentieth century revolt against Romanticism was in fact a Romantic revolt, a revolt conditioned by and perpetuating basically Romantic attitudes. E. D. H. Johnson, in his Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, has dealt with the themes of isolation and alienation of the artist as they appear in Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, themes which these writers begin to recognize are not merely the problems of the artist but of modern man. John Holloway's Victorian Sage begins with the recognition of "our increased respect for and interest in" the Victorians, which, he suggests, "comes from a sense that their problems, both social and speculative, remain largely unsolved"<sup>1</sup> and, the book maintains, extremely relevant to us.

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<sup>1</sup>John Holloway, The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument (London: Macmillan Co., 1953), p. 2.

Langbaum's Poetry of Experience, Peckham's Beyond the Tragic Vision, Miller's The Disappearance of God are all grappling with decidedly modern problems and finding it necessary to examine intensively the writers of the nineteenth century in order to understand those problems.

What J. H. Miller calls an "all-important quality of modern times" is "the historical sense,"<sup>2</sup> which is one of the many symptoms of the alienation of modern man. Alienation is, of course, a universal human problem, a problem which often turns man's vision backward to the past in order to make sense out of the present, resulting in myths like Eden or The Golden Age. But modern man's alienation is intense enough to cut him off even from the myths. His attempt, therefore, to discover where he is in terms of where he has been has resulted in an increasingly critical examination of and interest in the past, in the sources, the varying manifestations, the development of his problems. The increasing interest in the Victorian Age is one of the many manifestations of the modern historical sense, and an especially appropriate one since the nineteenth century is the setting for the rise of that sense.

The Victorians looked back to the Middle Ages when "the Sea of Faith" was "at the full, and 'round earth's shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled,"<sup>3</sup> and attempted to define the present in terms of the disintegration of the medieval synthesis. The early twentieth century continued the quest for recapturing the past, maintaining an interest in the Middle Ages, especially in the romance, ranging further back

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<sup>2</sup>J. Hillis Miller, The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," The Poetical Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950)

to man's primitive sources in myth and language, and reaching forward to the High Renaissance artistic synthesis. And the mid-twentieth century has turned back to the nineteenth, to the figures who first grasped, dealt with, and in some ways created the problems central to modern man, especially his alienation from God, from nature, from his fellow man, and from himself. In the last twenty years the realization has become more prevalent that the Victorian Age has not been outgrown by the twentieth century, or in Walter E. Houghton's words,

that Victorian optimism is still a basic attitude, though the excitement is gone; that our 'age of anxiety' suffers from many of the same fears that shook the optimistic surface of Victorian life; that our skepticism is merely a more radical form of the doubt which was even then mining the eternal verities; that the sense of loneliness and isolation we are so aware of was already felt and poignantly expressed by the Victorians; that in their age lie the immediate roots of our commercial spirit, our anti-intellectualism, our appeal to force; and that even the hurry and pressure under which we live is a century old, and Victorian leisure is a myth.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best attempt made so far to link the nineteenth with the twentieth century is Langbaum's Poetry of Experience. In his first chapter, "Romanticism as a Modern Tradition," Langbaum points out that Romanticism was more than an exuberant reaction against an unsatisfactory Enlightenment world view, for

the scientific and critical effort of the Enlightenment . . . , in its desire to separate fact from the values of a crumbling tradition, separated fact from all values--bequeathing a world in which fact is a measurable quantity while value is man-made and illusory. Such a world offers no objective verification for just the perceptions by which men live, perceptions of beauty, goodness, and spirit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. xiv.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 11.



By the end of the eighteenth century the Enlightenment world view was becoming not only unsatisfactory but horrifying for its meaninglessness, the absence in it of those "perceptions by which men live."

Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" best expresses the conditions under which Romanticism developed and which gave it its peculiarly modern flavor. For underlying the affirmations of Romanticism was the contrary, the negative possibility, the vision of the "inanimate cold world," symbolized by

the rushing of an host in rout,  
With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds--  
At once they groan with pain and shudder with the cold.

It is the same vision as Arnold's "darkling plain . . . where ignorant armies clash by night" and MacLeish's mad carnival in "The End of the World," the purposeless and inane activity that both conceals and reveals "nothing, nothing, nothing--nothing at all." A few figures of the nineteenth century, the major voices of the Romantic movement, were already quite forthrightly facing the void, the possibility of nothingness, and attempting to find a way out of it.

Central to the Romantic way out was an idea that has since become a commonplace of existential thinking, the notion that experience is not, and should not be encouraged to be, reducible to a function of the rational faculty; rather experience involves the total person. The Romantics further recognized the radical subjectivity of the human condition, the fact that truth, as we know it, is not apprehended as it exists in itself but is the product of man's shaping consciousness, what the Romantics called the Imagination. But more than that, Langbaum shows with Carlyle how "the romantic quality of mind grows out of a

total crisis of personality,"<sup>6</sup> a fall into a vision of the world as the void, nothingness, meaninglessness, in which Teufelsdröckh sees the universe as "all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb."<sup>7</sup> But the individual begins to rise out of this state, as Langbaum says, "when he discovers his own feelings and his own will as a source of value in an otherwise meaningless universe."<sup>8</sup> This amounts to a fundamentally existential affirmation of the self which initiates the reconstructive process, the giving of value to the universe by the individual.

Langbaum, however, somewhat overemphasizes the existential nature of Romanticism when he maintains that the position the Romantic finally arrives at is one that has been chosen; what marks the Romanticist, he says, is "the subjective ground of his commitment, the fact that he never forgets his commitment has been chosen."<sup>9</sup> Now generalizations about a movement like Romanticism are always dangerous, and so are counter-generalizations, but Langbaum's attempt to show Romanticism as a modern tradition neglects some of its essential characteristics, characteristics which it is necessary for us to see in order to understand the contribution of the Victorians and especially of Tennyson.

Throughout Romanticism we find a paradox in the notion of vision; or, as Wordsworth puts it, vision is something we half create and half perceive. Central to the Romantic experience is the sudden apprehension of a truth, a truth that is overpowering because it is felt, apprehended

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<sup>6</sup>Langbaum, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

totally, or in Coleridge's terms, synthetically, with thought and feeling unified. The paradox involved in such an experience is the fact that although the subjective ground of vision, the creative function of the imagination, is emphasized, the experience is also seen as something given, something that exists outside of the seer and that can be discovered by adjusting one's sensibilities to a new kind of perception. The paradox, simply stated, is that the imagination creates what is eternally existent. In Kantian terms, the Romantic seeks to break through the phenomenal into the noumenal, to grasp, to know the final reality underlying phenomena. Generally speaking, the Romanticism of the first 30 years of the nineteenth century can be distinguished from the modern tradition in that it did not accept the fact that mortal man can never possess the noumenal, that for better or worse the human position is limited to the phenomenal.

Notable exceptions to these general characteristics are Keats and Coleridge. For Keats, however, the position finally arrived at is ambiguous. His notion of negative capability suspends the intellect and the will so that the poet never commits himself. If the reader wishes to call the "Ode to a Nightingale" a penetration across the threshold between the phenomenal and the noumenal, he is perfectly free to do so, but for Keats it might as well have been a dream. Keats makes no commitment, chooses no position, merely presents us with the experience.

Coleridge, on the other hand, particularly Coleridge the prose writer, anticipated the Victorians and the existentialists. Like the rest of the Romantics, he was attempting to formulate what Langbaum calls

a new kind of empiricism, one which takes into account the totality of human experience rather than limiting itself to the selected and analyzed experience of the scientist. Coleridge affirmed the existence of spiritual realities, but he did so in a phenomenological manner. The foundation for his belief in God as the ultimate ground of value was what he called the inner witness of the human spirit, the apprehension of what Carl Jung, many years later in Psychology and Religion, would call numinosum, the experience of "a dynamic existence or effect not caused by an arbitrary act of the will."<sup>10</sup> Such an experience, Jung says, is as "real," as much a psychic fact, as a man's perception of an elephant. What Coleridge saw, however, was that there was as much of a problem involved in asserting the final cause of numinosum as of the perception of an elephant. The gap between the experience and its ground, between a phenomenon and a supposed noumenon, Coleridge recognized, could only be bridged by faith, which must exist in doubt and which is arrived at by a definite commitment, an act of choice. But with the exception of Keats and Coleridge, the Romantics sought to arrive at truth through vision and failed to recognize fully the problem of choice which follows vision.

Central to what this essay hopes to show is the fact that Tennyson took this step beyond the Romantics and attempted to grapple with the problem of creating truth, not so much unconsciously through the ecstasy of imaginative intuition as consciously through the anguish of choice and commitment. To develop this idea, however, we must go

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<sup>10</sup>Carl Gustav Jung, Psychology and Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 4.

back to some more general problems relating to Tennyson's image among critics.

A major problem of Tennyson criticism has its beginning in a series of comments by one of his contemporaries, Edward Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was highly enthusiastic about Tennyson's work up to and including the 1842 volume, after which he seems to have become more and more disappointed. He felt that what followed that volume lacked "the old champagne flavor,"<sup>11</sup> "the Spontaneous Go,"<sup>12</sup> of the earlier work. Of In Memoriam he said that "the Impetus, the Lyrical estrus, is gone . . . . It is the cursed inactivity of this nineteenth century which has spoiled Alfred, I mean spoiled him for the great work he ought now to be entering upon."<sup>13</sup> Fitzgerald's comments are the precursors of what became general critical notions in the twentieth century: that Tennyson gradually became weaker as a poet as his years advanced; that he failed to live up to the promise of his earlier work; that his milieu had something to do with this failure, somehow corroded his art; and further, something which Fitzgerald would not have said, that Tennyson's being influenced by his age was a compromise, a capitulation, a sell-out.

The worst of these charges, what we can call the sell-out theory, has met more with reaction than with acceptance. With the exception of brief discussions and comments, like Heath-Stubbs' charge that both Tennyson and Browning were "fundamentally . . . dishonest,"<sup>14</sup> the only

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<sup>11</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals, "The Poet as Critic: Appraisals of Tennyson by His Contemporaries," Tennessee Studies in Literature, VII (1962), 114.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 115.      <sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>14</sup>John Heath-Stubbs, The Darkling Plain: A Study of the Later Fortunes of Romanticism in English Poetry (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950), p. 99.

extended attack on Tennyson in these terms is Paull F. Baum's Tennyson Sixty Years After, in which he claims that the poet had "bartered half his artistic soul"<sup>15</sup> by 1832.

Much more damaging has been the charge that Tennyson failed because he was lacking in intelligence. Nicolson speaks of the conflict "between the remarkable depth and originality of his poetic temperament and the shallowness and timidity of his practical intelligence."<sup>16</sup> Auden calls him "undoubtedly the stupidist"<sup>17</sup> of English poets. Heath-Stubbs calls him "intellectually unsatisfying."<sup>18</sup>

More illuminating and accurate is Grierson, who sees a major source for Tennyson's problem in a division between head and heart,<sup>19</sup> which in turn leads us through Eliot's notion of dissociation of sensibilities to the most recent and satisfying treatments of Tennyson. Arthur Carr, Robert Langbaum, and E. D. H. Johnson all see Tennyson as suffering from a characteristically modern problem, which relates, as we have noted earlier, to the break-down of traditional values, to the divided sensibility which is the inheritance of the modern world from the Enlightenment. But a major question that still remains open is to what extent he saw, as opposed to being blindly victimized by, its problems, and to what extent his answers are satisfying, both intellec-

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<sup>15</sup>Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), p. 73.

<sup>16</sup>Edgar Hill Duncan, "Tennyson: A Modern Appraisal," Tennessee Studies in Literature, IV (1959), 14.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Heath-Stubbs, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup>Duncan, TSL, IV, 14.

tually and emotionally.

To answer such a question the best approach is one similar to that of John Holloway in his Victorian Sage. Holloway recognizes that "the fashion for thinking that in Victorian culture there was nothing of any value, nothing which does not warrant supercilious exposure, is happily passing." We have now reached the point where we can see the Victorians as deserving "not embarrassed disregard but respect and thoughtful attention," for "they are sufficiently remote from us not now to labour their errors and inconsistencies, but to set instead about an objective understanding of what they did."<sup>20</sup>

And it is especially appropriate to make use of Holloway's approach because Tennyson became in many ways, although Holloway does not discuss him, a Victorian sage, one of a large number of figures who "sought (among other things) to express notions about the world, man's situation in it, and how he should live."<sup>21</sup> Now this fact, of course, is one of the major causes for the twentieth century's disregard of Tennyson: he is too prosaic, they say, too much given to propounding notions instead of giving us poetry. But Holloway suggests a view of the Victorian sage which links him with the artist.

The sages, men like Carlyle, Disraeli, Newman, Arnold, were all profoundly affected by romantic thought, especially as it relates to the nature of truth, the inadequacy of logic, and the function of the imagination. The sage usually feels that he possesses a special kind

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<sup>20</sup>Holloway, pp. 1-2.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

of insight. For instance, Carlyle, Holloway says,

emphasizes that he has answers to ultimate questions; that his answers offer themselves to imagination rather than logic; that they are not recondite, for everyone can read them in his own heart, from 'a felt indubitable certainty of Experience'; and finally that failure to do so is a kind of blindness and a kind of viciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly utilitarian abstractions are the constant butt of Disraeli, while Arnold mentions

the essential simplicity of the knowledge that matters to him, and how it is something which cannot be learnt off like an abstract formula, but must come gradually alive in our minds, through a right disposition, chiefly.<sup>23</sup>

In Newman the point is more fully developed. He does not wish, nor does he think it possible, to bring about a conversion by a smart syllogism.

Instead, he thought, various arguments for limited truths accumulate one by one, until at last the enquirer simply finds his mind, under their legitimate influence, converging irresistibly on a whole philosophical or religious or moral outlook.<sup>24</sup>

Such an achievement leads to what Newman calls "Real Assent," which is

directed towards assertions based on the whole trend of our experience; and because of this foundation, their meaning is too rich to be sharply limited, always liable to be unfolded further, and likely to vary from one person to another in exact content. It is a meaning which arises for the individual out of his own history, and exists for him in vivid particular images that bring his belief to life . . . .<sup>25</sup>

This kind of thinking, Holloway says,

seems steadily to be gaining interest and prestige--so much so, in fact, that modern admirers tend at times to exalt it indiscriminately . . . .<sup>26</sup>

The reason for such an interest is simply the fact that it bears very

<sup>22</sup>Holloway, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 8.



close affinities to modern thought. "Real Assent" is little different from what modern existentialists would call "authentic commitment." The difference is more one of degree than of kind: modern writers tend to emphasize the nature of "truth for me," the exclusively individual character of a man's entrance into a genuine life, while the Victorians tended to think of the truth they discovered as universally applicable. Yet the Victorians still emphasize the individual discovery of their truth, the fact that each man must discover it in his own heart. And the existentialists struggle to find a way out of what seems, even to them, the reduction of mere subjectivity.

But the nature of this way of thinking creates a double problem for the thinker: both to arrive at the truth and to give it expression. And the kind of truth involved can be expressed only by artistic means. Holloway suggests that what gave meaning to the sage's view of life "lay in the actual words of the original, in the sage's own use of language, not in what can survive summarizings of their 'content,'" which means for Holloway that "to work by quickening the reader to a new capacity for experience is to work in the mode of the artist in words."<sup>27</sup> Nor need the sage limit himself to language, for all the tools of the artist, mythos, ethos, diancia, offer themselves to his use. It is this need for giving expression to a complex truth or world view, one that demands the revelation of a more total kind of experience than mere analysis, that has turned many existentialists, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Sartre, Camus, into autobiographers and writers of fiction and which leads commentators on existentialism back to Plato, Augustine,

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<sup>27</sup>Holloway, p. 10.

Pascal, and we might add, Carlyle and Newman.

Moreover, existential writers, especially Sartre, emphasize the social mission of the artist. Hazel Barnes in her Literature of Possibility draws these conclusions from Sartre:

The function of literature, he claims, is to lead society to reflect upon itself. 'Through literature, the collectivity turns to reflection and meditation; it acquires an unhappy consciousness, an unstable image of itself which it forever seeks to modify and improve.' Thus the purpose of those writers whom Sartre approves is to change the world.<sup>28</sup>

The only difference between this and the Victorian notion of the social mission of the sage is the modern emphasis on the subversive function of the artist. The modern writer tends more to give his audience "an unstable image of itself" so that it will forever seek "to modify and improve" itself, rather than to show the way toward improvement in an explicit manner.

Tennyson's development occurred in a context in which the notion of the sage was being linked with the function of the artist, a combination which produced, as it does today, a great deal of confusion about the destiny and function of the poet. A poet needs both an ontology and an aesthetic, either implicitly or explicitly, and the nineteenth century was a time in which the lack of certain foundations for art forced upon the artist the responsibility of creating his own. Indeed this responsibility has not ceased with the end of the century, for Blake, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and the existential writers are all examples of the artist's need to create not only art, not only an aesthetic, but an ontology as well. And whether the artist's final

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<sup>28</sup>Hazel Barnes, The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. 13.

position be as original as those of Blake or Stevens or Sartre, he still has to achieve the ultimately creative act of choice and commitment.

In the following chapter we shall examine these problems as they are to be seen in Tennyson's earlier work and the means by which he attempted to deal with them.

## CHAPTER I

### THE ARTIST AND THE WORLD

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE POET'S HUMANITY

J. H. Buckley's critical biography, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, begins with the following statement:

All his life Tennyson remembered standing as a small child with outstretched arms on the gale-swept lawn at Somersby and crying in wild delight, "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind." The experience was scarcely unique, for countless children have given themselves to the wind's will; but the child Tennyson attached an unusual significance to the gesture. To him the voice was already the call of the imagination borne in upon his sharpened senses from some remote realm beyond all sensuous measurement.<sup>1</sup>

This statement suggests that Tennyson's earliest impulses pushed him toward a basically romantic notion of himself as artist, and we mean "romantic" here in terms similar to Kermode's discussion in The Romantic Image. He sought the image of beauty, "a radiant truth out of space and time,"<sup>2</sup>

Fantastic beauty; such as lurks  
In some wild poet, when he works  
Without a conscience or an aim.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jerome H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Kermode, The Romantic Image (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>In Memoriam, XXXIV. This and subsequent citations from Tennyson, unless otherwise indicated, are from W. J. Rolfe (ed.), The Poems of Tennyson, Cambridge Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1898).

Such a quest was inspired in part by Tennyson's mystical propensities, which, according to his own testimony, were present with him from his earliest recollections. "A kind of waking trance I have frequently had," he said on one occasion,

quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me thro' repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were, out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction but the only true life.<sup>4</sup>

Again William Allingham reports Tennyson as saying, "In my boyhood I had intuitions of Immortality--inexpressible! I have never been able to express them. I shall try some day."<sup>5</sup>

The call of such intuitions led Tennyson in the direction of what Robert Preyer calls "oracular poetry," which is essentially the quest for Kermode's "Romantic Image." "The search for fantastic beauty," Preyer says, "takes place in the mindless depths of the psyche; and what it hopes to uncover there . . . is the landscape of vision and the images of a new apocalypse."<sup>6</sup> In a similar manner Kermode sees the major image of the Romantic artist as the inward-looking, expressionless face, symbolized in the figure of Moneta in the second draft of Keats' Hyperion: her eyes are "half closed" and seem "visionless entire," for

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<sup>4</sup>Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son (New York: Macmillan Co., 1911), I, 320. Cited hereafter as Memoir.

<sup>5</sup>William Allingham: A Diary, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (London: Macmillan Co., 1907), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Preyer, "Tennyson as an Oracular Poet," Modern Philology, LV (1957-1958), 239.

they are turned inward to the "high tragedy/ In the dark secret chambers of the skull." This image is symbolic of the artist turning inward, where he discovers a transcendent joy and a quasi-mystical knowledge in a vision which attracts him, demands his exclusive devotion, and ultimately consumes him.<sup>7</sup>

The desire to delve into "the mindless depths of the psyche," "the dark secret chambers of the skull," is revealed very early in Tennyson's work. Among the selections in the Unpublished Early Poems is the "Ode: O Bosky Brook," which Charles Tennyson speculates was written as early as 1823.<sup>8</sup> The poem begins with a brook, but it soon takes us, by following the wanderings of the stream, into "a mountain tarn's unbroken sleep," which becomes the major symbol of the poem:

when day's manhood wears his crown  
Of hottest rays in Heaven's windy Hall,  
To one who pryeth curiously down,  
From underneath the infathomable pall  
And pressure of the upright wave,  
The abiding eyes of Space, from forth the grave  
Of that black Element,  
Whine out like wonderful gleams  
Of thrilling and mysterious beauty, sent  
From gay shapes sparkling thro' the gloom of dreams.

Clyde Ryals suggests that here "Tennyson, anticipating the French symbolists, was attempting to make his scenery the reflection of le paysage interieur."<sup>9</sup> The suggestion that the tarn is symbolic of the

<sup>7</sup>Kermode, pp. 8-10.

<sup>8</sup>Unpublished Early Poems, ed. Sir Charles Tennyson, originally published in 1931; reprinted in The Devil and the Lady and Unpublished Early Poems, ed. Sir Charles Tennyson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

<sup>9</sup>Clyde de L. Ryals, Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 27.

mind is enforced later on in the poem when Tennyson praises the personification of "venerable dark! august obscure!" who is

the mother of all thought,  
Which wells not freely from the mind's recess  
When the sharp sunlight occupies the sense  
With this fair world's exceeding comeliness . . . .

What is important here is the vision of the mind as a darkness, "the unfathomable pall," from the depths of which stream images of light, "the abiding eyes of space," "wonderful gleams," "gay shapes sparkling." It would indeed be remarkable if Tennyson so young had already read Coleridge or Herder, Novalis or Schelling; but nevertheless in this poem there is the symbolic germ of the notion that the dark recesses of the mind are sources of illumination, that perhaps the unconscious is the well-head of the divine in man, the link between man and God. And he anticipates DeQuincey's assertion that "the infinity of astronomical space and time is the mirror image of 'the infinity of the world within.'"<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the poem reveals that Tennyson, a poet heavily praised for his ability to capture natural phenomena in precise images, was in his earliest verse rejecting "the fair world's exceeding comeliness" as an obstruction which dams up the free welling of thought from the mind's dark recess.

In any case, Tennyson is "one who pryeth curiously down" into the psyche, seeking some "thrilling and mysterious beauty" which lies underneath, like the Kraken, awaiting release. Such an endeavor would not result in a reflective kind of poetry, but in one which aspires to a sort of magical utterance by means of which a transcendent beauty

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<sup>10</sup>Miller, p. 27.

might be imaged forth. This is a notion of poetry that stands in a direct line of development between Blake and Yeats.

The closeness of such an aesthetic to Tennyson may be illustrated further by a review published in 1831 in which Arthur Hallam praises what he calls "poets of sensation rather than reflection":

Susceptible to the slightest impulse from external nature, their fine organs trembled into emotion at colors, and sounds, and movements, unperceived . . . by duller temperaments . . . . We are decidedly of the opinion that the heights and depths of art are more within the reach of those who have received from nature the "fearful and wonderful" constitution we have described, whose poetry is a sort of magic.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in the same review Hallam argues:

It is not true, as the exclusive admirers of Mr. Wordsworth would have it, that the highest species of poetry is the reflective; it is a gross fallacy, that because certain opinions are acute or profound, the expression of them by the imagination must be eminently beautiful. Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied, during its periods of creation, by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art.<sup>12</sup>

Such a view of poetry is not, however, pure aestheticism, any more than was Coleridge's assertion that the "immediate" object of poetry is pleasure, not truth. Again in the same review Hallam praises Tennyson for, among other things, "the elevated habits of thought implied in these compositions" which make them "more impressive to our minds than if the author had drawn up a set of opinions in verse, and sought to instruct the understanding rather than communicate the love of beauty to the heart."<sup>13</sup> Hallam still dislikes the discursive and the reflective, but he voices a fairly conventional romantic justification for

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<sup>11</sup>Arthur Hallam, Englishman's Magazine, I (1831), 616-628; quoted from Preyer, p. 245.

<sup>12</sup>Preyer, MP, LV, 246.

<sup>13</sup>Memoir, I, 50.



Tennyson's kind of poetry: that the revelation by a poet of beauty is valuable, not only for its own sake, but because it naturally inspires the love of beauty in readers. Moreover, a further justification was expressed by F. D. Maurice:

The poet is the great interpreter of nature's mystery, not by narrowing them into the grasp of the understanding, but by connecting each of them with feeling . . . . He sympathizes with all phenomena by his intuition of all principle; and his mind is a mirror which catches and images the whole scheme and working of the world . . . . It is his high calling to interpret those universal truths which exist on earth only in the forms of his creation.<sup>14</sup>

In effect, Maurice is stating the Coleridgian position that the poet's capacity to synthesize creates a beauty which is truth. But the weakness of the Romantic position is inherent in Maurice's last line. Underlying his notions is an awareness of something like what J. H. Miller calls "the disappearance of God." Nineteenth century man, feeling his inadequacy, his alienation from God, looks to a prophet or seer, the poet, as a means of revelation of universal truths "which exist on earth only in the forms of his creation." Poetry, therefore, must be more than magical; it must be hieratic, prophetic, revelatory, and the function of the poet is semi-religious.

Faced with such a task, inspired to perform it both by his own disposition and by the most "modern" Romantic criticism, Tennyson discovered some terrible difficulties which became apparent in his poetry. These difficulties derive, first of all, however, out of the oracular position itself. For instance, in Romanticism the quest for beauty, for the image, is identical with the quest for insight into a transcendent

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<sup>14</sup>Preyer, MP, LV, 246.

world of permanence, which in effect is an attempt to cross the threshold between the phenomenal and the noumenal, to discover Maurice's universal truth. This series of identities can only be maintained by an ontological assumption, the belief that Being is good and that the true and the beautiful are one. But in the context of an age from which God has disappeared, the identity between the true and the beautiful must be revealed as an assumption. It is thus that the celebrated Victorian doubt has its greatest impact upon aesthetics.

Tennyson could not easily make such an assumption. In a letter written in the summer of 1831, Hallam tells Tennyson: "You say pathetically, 'Alas for me! I have more of the Beautiful than the Good!' Remember to your comfort that God has given you to see the difference. Many a poet has gone on blindly in his artistic pride."<sup>15</sup> A difference is assumed here between the beautiful and the good, a difference that presents an important problem to Tennyson as a poet, but most especially to Tennyson as a man: if to pursue the beautiful is not to pursue the good, then the poet is cut off from what is, at least for Tennyson, the primary pursuit of life; indeed the whole relation between art and life is called into question.

The problems involved in Tennyson's quest may be seen in much of his early poetry, but the first works which deal specifically with the poet appear during the Cambridge period. "Timbuctoo" reveals Tennyson's quest for the transcendent world of beauty and some of the problems associated with that quest. It begins with the poet musing "on legends quaint and old/ Which whilome won the hearts of all on earth." Central

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<sup>15</sup>Memoir, I, 81.

to the theme of the poem is the question of the reality of such visions of perfection as Atalantis, Eldorado, and Timbuctoo, an answer to which is suggested early in the poem. These legends, he says, "had their being in the heart of man"; they are

Shadows to which, despite all shocks of change,  
All on-set of capricious accident,  
Men clung with yearning hope which would not die.

There follows a lengthy homeric simile in which this hope is compared to that of an Athenian priestess, who, while her city crumbles about her, kneels before Athena's image, whose eyes "wear no light but that where-with/ Her [the priestess'] fantasy informs them." The suggestion is quite clear that faith in such legends and in the gods is at this point seen as the expression of man's need and hope and the creation of man's imagination.

A young Seraph then appears and charges:

Thy sense is clogg'd with dull mortality;  
Thy spirit fetter'd with the bond of clay:  
Open thine eyes and see.

Then ensues the vision of the heavenly city, after which the Seraph explains that he is

the Spirit,  
The permeating life which courseth through  
All th' intricate and labyrinthine veins  
Of the great vine of Fable,

whose purpose it is to teach man "to attain/ By shadowing forth the Unattainable." The suggestion is that man's hopes for and imaginative visions of perfection have a transcendently real source.

Yet this affirmation contains a trace of ambiguity. The poet first of all suggests the problem confronting all mystics who attempt to relate their experiences of an imageless reality in a language drawn

from images:

I know not if I shape  
These things with accurate similitude  
From visible objects, for but dimly now,  
Less vivid than a half-forgotten dream,  
The memory of that mental excellence  
Comes o'er me, and it may be I entwine  
The indecision of my present mind  
With its past clearness . . . .

That "indecision of my present mind" is not relieved, and the Seraph's last words near the end of the poem reveal the hopelessness of the search for a physical basis for the affirmation. "The time is well-nigh come," he says,

When I must render up this glorious home  
To keen Discovery: soon yon brilliant towers  
Shall darken with the waving of her Wand;  
Darken, and shrink and shiver into huts,  
Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand,  
Low-built, mud-walled, barbarian settlements.  
How changed from this fair city!

The Seraph's last words with their wasteland imagery bring us back to the vision from the point of view of mortality, and the poet's last words leave us there:

Thus far the Spirit:  
Then parted heavenward on the wing: and I  
Was left alone on Calpe, and the moon  
Had fallen from the night, and all was dark!

A vision of great beauty has been revealed and snatched away, leaving the poet desolate and alone. The vision is not exactly "stricken through with doubt," to anticipate In Memoriam, but there is significantly no reaffirmation from this side of mortality, and we are left in a state of stunned darkness.

The trace of doubt in "Timbuctoo" reveals a problem which is central to an understanding of Tennyson's early aesthetic and which

See'st thou yon river, whose translucent wave,  
Forth issuing from the darkness, windeth through  
The argent streets o' the city, imaging  
The soft inversion of her tremulous domes,  
Her gardens frequent with the stately palms,  
Her pagods hung with music of sweet bells,  
. . . . .  
                    Lo! how he passeth by,  
And gulphs himself in sands, as not enduring  
To carry through the world those waves, which bore  
The reflex of my city in their depths.

Now the fact that the river cannot retain the image of the city may simply refer to the speaker's difficulty in communicating the vision, but the fact that the river is engulfed by sand suggests that, more

than the ability to communicate, the vision itself is lost. And the sense of loss anticipated here is confirmed in the last image of the poem, "the moon/ Had fallen from the night, and all was dark." The assurance, the clarity of vision are lost, and the poet is left in a waste of darkness, which is the world as seen from mortality. The problem plaguing Tennyson is to maintain the assurance and clarity of vision of the mystic state, to make it flow into the world of everyday. This is an all but impossible task, but one which Tennyson was young enough to attempt.

We can see that first kind of vision, with its signs of clarity, assurance, and the unity of truth and beauty in one of the 1830 poems, "The Poet."<sup>16</sup> The poet in this poem is described in the third person as a kind of mystic, which indicates the union of the religious and aesthetic visions. He is one who "saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill," one before whom lies "The marvel of the everlasting will,/ An open scroll." Tennyson makes use of images which recall the "Ode to the West Wind" and Shelley's desire that his "dead thoughts" be driven "over the universe/ Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth," when he speaks in "The Poet" of "the viewless arrows of his thoughts" which are blown from his silver tongue" till they fall earthward "like arrow-seeds of the field flower," take root, and produce new flowers. Just as Shelley hopes that his words may be "the trumpet of a prophecy," Tennyson sees the poet's words as the weapon with which "Freedom . . . shook the world." This takes place because "Heaven flowed upon the soul in many

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<sup>16</sup>"The 1830 poems" refers to those originally published in Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, 1830.

dreams/ Of high desire," which recalls "Timbuctoo," where the divine spirit teaches man "to attain/ By shadowing forth the Unattainable." And these dreams of high desire are in "The Poet" the means by which "truth was multiplied on truth," just as in "Timbuctoo" the paradisaal legends are "Deep-rooted in the living soil of truth."

The vision that underlies this poem, then, is the same as that spoken by the Seraph in "Timbuctoo," with the addition of the poet's Shelleyan desire to communicate his vision, to change the world so that the river might carry the reflection of the city out into the desert and cause it to bloom. This is the fullest and clearest expression of the oracular position, the expression of the union of the functions of poet, prophet, mystic, and priest.

But in the midst of this synthesis we can see its disintegration. In "The Mystic" we can see one of the problems which Frank Kermode discusses in The Romantic Image, the incommunicableness of the vision and the resulting isolation of the artist. Unlike "The Poet," which suggests that the poet is one who can change the world, "The Mystic" describes a man set completely apart by his vision.

The mystic, like the oracular poet, is one who has felt "the vanities of after and before," one who views "imperishable presences serene" through the gates of life and death. But his description is accompanied by scorn for the rest of mankind,

Ye who knew him not; he was not one of ye,  
 Ye scorned him with an undiscerning scorn:  
 Ye could not read the marvel in his eye,  
 The still serene abstraction.

Here the synthesis is broken; the mystic is only that--neither poet, priest, nor prophet. Yet his isolation is not unhappy; rather he rests

content in his "still serene abstraction." This is an attitude which Tennyson will later reject as a proud and selfish attempt to escape from the responsibility of living, which is probably why he suppressed the poem.

In "The Poet's Mind" scorn is again expressed toward those who do not understand the poet's vision, but that scorn is indicative of a different kind of weakening of the oracular position. The poem is addressed to those who would "Vex . . . the poet's mind" with their "shallow wit." It anticipates "The Hesperides" in its description of the poet's mind, the imagination, as a holy place, a garden which must be defended from the entrance of one who threatens its beauty, in this case not Heracles but the "dark-brow'd sophist," who is commanded to come not near:

All the place is holy ground;  
Hollow smile and frozen sneer  
Come not here.  
Holy water will I pour  
Into every spicy flower  
Of the laurel-shrubs that hedge it around.  
The flowers would faint at your cruel cheer.  
. . . . .  
In the heart of the garden the merry bird chants.  
It would fall to the ground if you came in.

In starkest contrast to "The Mystic" is the insecurity of the poet's vision in this poem. His mind contains not "imperishable presences serene," but fragile visions, and the scorn for those who cannot enter in is mixed here with fear. The poet's mind is supposed to be "clear and bright . . . / Flowing like a crystal river," but its flow can be cut off by the intrusion of a skeptical attitude.

In the garden of the mind is a fountain which is drawn "from the brain" of a purple mountain, which in turn draws its water "from heaven



above." These images seem to suggest a divine origin for the water, the vivifying principle of the garden, although the symbols are less certain, more mysterious than the explicit statements of "Timbuctoo" and "The Poet." As a result the clear vision of "The Poet" is darkened in "The Poet's Mind": the poet is cut off from communication with some; the certain ground of his vision is called into doubt by its impermanence and its obscure origins; and the synthesis of the aesthetic and the religious is imbalanced to the detriment of the religious.

In "The Hesperides" the ambiguity is even greater. Here the mystery and magic of poetry are enforced by the incantatory power of the verse and the ambiguity which results from the imagistic technique employed by the poet. This is a perfect example of Hallam's ideal of the poem of sensation, the utterance of which is "a sort of magic." But before we delve into that twilight garden, it would be well to look back to see how Tennyson arrived there.

We have begun this discussion of Tennyson's poetry with his Cambridge period, for it was there that he began the conscious effort to shape some kind of aesthetic. But his development of an aesthetic was conditioned greatly by attitudes and tendencies that came into being well before and which indicate some of the forces that impelled him along his artistic quest.

The Byronic influence on the young Tennyson has often been pointed out. The sense of the poet's being an outcast, accursed, set apart from the rest of mankind by his guilt, is evident in lines like these from "Remorse" in Poems by Two Brothers (1827):

And I was cursed from my birth,  
A reptile made to creep on earth,

A hopeless outcast born to die  
A living death eternally.

Clyde Ryals has pointed out the predominance of Byronic themes of exile and guilt in the 1827 volume, themes which W. D. Paden says are "indicative of his own emotional state rather than of conventional literary imitation."<sup>17</sup> Evident in these poems and in the Unpublished Early Poems is a profound disaffection with life, a feeling which affects directly Tennyson's quest for beauty.

With the exception of "Armageddon,"<sup>18</sup> the major means of illumination in Tennyson's early poetry is not mystic trance but dreams, which are sought as a means of deliverance from the cares of life. In the early "In Deep and Solemn Dreams,"<sup>19</sup> he speaks of viewing in dream the "City of the Blest," wherein are contained "sunny faces of lost days." These are, however, "forms that live but in the mind." The contrast between sleeping and waking is explicit: sleep is "tearless" with joy, as opposed to waking, "the hollow dark I dread." Sleep is associated, through the technique of the mask of age, with the lost innocence of youth. From the point of view of the young Tennyson (around fifteen when this poem is written), the memory is of a kind of pre-conscious state before the discovery of adolescent guilt and remorse.

The same theme is revealed in another poem written about the same time, "Perdidi Diem."<sup>20</sup> Here again there is the conviction of guilt which makes of the speaker an outcast:

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<sup>17</sup>W. D. Paden, Tennyson in Egypt: A Study of the Imagery in his Earlier Work ("University of Kansas Humanistic Studies," No. 27; Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1942), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup>Unpublished Early Poems.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

My being is a vacant worthlessness,  
A carcass in the coffin of this flesh.

And again guilt manifests itself in the desire for a kind of pre-conscious innocence, the feeling that consciousness is a kind of curse. Consciousness, he says, provides just enough light to view his emptiness, which otherwise "we had not felt/ As darkness, dark ourselves and loving night."

In several of the pieces in Poems by Two Brothers the theme continues. In "Memory," again behind the mask of age, Tennyson regrets the loss of innocence and the nature of life which is characterized by the presence of pain and sorrow behind every beauty and joy: "In every rose of life . . . there lurks a canker"; a "mournful asp" clings to every palm tree, souring the taste of its fruit; "poison shrubs" drop their "dark dew" into every fountain which man thinks undefiled. In "Remorse" the theme of the curse of consciousness recurs when the speaker wishes

That I might sleep, and never wake  
Unto the thrill of conscious fear.

The sense of loss, isolation, guilt continues in "I Wander in Darkness and Sorrow," "The Exile's Harp," "Written by an Exile of Bassorah."

These themes, in contrast to those of the 1830 volume which we have discussed, reveal a second motivation for the quest for beauty, a quest which begins to reveal a pattern. That quest is first of all motivated by the desire for escape from time, from consciousness, from guilt, a desire grounded on a vision of the imagination as quite frankly the mind's creation and of the world of ordinary life as a basis only for despair. From this position another emerges, encouraged by Tennyson's Cambridge associations, which rests on the belief that the quest for

beauty is involved with the possibility of attaining insight into a transcendently real world where truth and beauty are one. This position, revealed in poems like "The Mystic" and "The Poet," is, however, stricken through with doubt as to whether the vision is only a dream. In the face of this doubt, Tennyson achieves in some of the pieces of the 1830 volume a kind of Keatsian suspension and synthesis. This third position involves the suspension of the ontological question and a pursuit of beauty for its own sake, with no attempt to assert the truth or falsity of the vision. We shall henceforth call the first of these positions or attitudes the "escapist," the second the "oracular," and the third the "aesthetic."

Robert Preyer, in an article entitled "Tennyson As an Oracular Poet," to which we referred earlier, discusses the oracular position as one which seems to include both the second and third positions we have just outlined, but there is a great deal of difference between the quest for beauty for the sake of truth and for its own sake, a difference which is essential to an understanding of the changes which take place between the 1830 and the 1832 volumes,<sup>21</sup> for that difference, as we shall see when we look into the 1832 volume, was the major source of the uneasiness Tennyson displayed in that volume about the efficacy of his quest.

But the distinction between the aesthetic and the oracular positions is often a tenuous one in practice. For the truth revealed in an oracular poem is shrouded in mystery; and since the oracular

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<sup>21</sup>The volume entitled simply Poems bore the date 1833 but appeared in December, 1832, and is generally referred to as the 1832 edition.

position encompasses the aesthetic, since both create a poetry with the magical qualities Hallam praised, we will find it difficult to definitely classify many poems in terms of these distinctions. Indeed both oracular and aesthetic poems may reveal an escapist motive behind them.

A fairly good example of an aesthetic poem is "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," which portrays a place of sensual fulfillment, a garden of delight infused with

. . . something which possessed  
The darkness of the world, delight,  
Life, anguish, death, immortal love,  
Ceasing not, mingled, unrepress'd,  
Apart from place, withholding time . . . .

The poem, reminiscent of "Kubla Khan" in its attempted reconciliation of discordant qualities, gives us no indication that the palace of the good Haroun Alraschid is paradise or anything but a vision of beauty created by the imagination of the poet for his own, and perhaps others', entertainment.

The aesthetic position shows most clearly its affinities with the escapist position in "The Merman" and "The Mermaid." The speaker in "The Merman" wishes to be the solitary king of the sea, sitting and singing alone by day, but playing among the mermaids by night, pursuing and capturing them. The speaker of "The Mermaid" likewise wishes to sit and sing to herself by day, but to be pursued and caught by the merman king by night. The two poems are epitomes of masculine and feminine narcissistic wish-fulfillment flavored with adolescent sexual fantasy.

One of the finest poems of the 1830 volume is "The Dying Swan." It portrays the swan's journey down a river through images of desolation

toward death. But its death-song

took the soul  
Of that place with joy  
Hidden in sorrow

until the banks of the stream "flooded over with eddying song." The poem makes no statement, assumes no ontology, but it captures some of the beauty and joy that derive from the imaginative perception even of sorrow and pain. The poem expresses not so much an escape from sorrow, but an aesthetic transcendence of it.

More common, however, are poems where the magic of beauty tends toward escapism. "The Sea Fairies" translates Haroun Alraschid's palace to the vision of the happy isles, reminiscent of the garden of "The Poet's Mind" and anticipating "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters." The Sea Fairies are voices luring mariners to shore, where they will "Know danger and trouble and toil no more." Indeed to land there would be to escape from the certainty of pain:

Ye will not find so happy a shore,  
Weary mariners! all the world o'er;  
Oh! fly no more!  
Hearken ye, hearken ye, sorrow shall darken ye,  
Danger and trouble and toil no more.

The incantatory quality of the verse introduces us to a world of dream and peace and beauty, but one which cannot avoid the association, although there is no explicit indication, with the Siren's song and the possibility that to land there would be destructive.

And this brings us again to "The Hesperides," a poem not published until 1832 but written, according to Hallam Tennyson's Memoir, between 1829 and 1831, before "The Lotos-Eaters" and "The Lady of Shalott," and therefore a fitting transition piece between the volumes

of 1830 and 1832.

Thus far we have traced the development in Tennyson of what we have called the oracular position. We have seen that position threatened by doubt of the validity of the vision; we have seen the poet's attempt to evade that doubt by the development of what we have called an aesthetic position; and we have seen the tendency toward escapism that underlay both drives. But we must remind ourselves of the fact that we have been following a logical order of development, which does not reflect the chronological development of Tennyson as a poet. "The Poet" and "The Mystic" are in the same volume with "Recollections from the Arabian Nights" and "The Sea Fairies." All of these are experiments in poeisis, experiments not only in technique but in theory, indications of Tennyson's questioning of himself and his work as to what he ought to try to be. Moreover, it is not at all clear that Tennyson was aware of the cleavage between the oracular and aesthetic positions until "The Hesperides."

"The Hesperides" is most commonly seen as Tennyson's major statement of the extreme aesthetic position. J. H. Buckley sums up the predominant critical opinion when he calls the poem Tennyson's

most eloquent defense of a pure poetry isolated from the rude touch of men. In its self-subsistent mythology, the sacred tree is the counterpart of the aesthetic ideal, and the daughters of Herperus who guard the tree, with the help of their father and an inexorable dragon, are the correlatives of the artist or, more generally, of the mind devoutly dedicated to the imaginative life.<sup>22</sup>

Clyde Ryals, "equating the apple with poetry and the Sisters with the poet," sees Tennyson as saying "that the source of poetic inspiration

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<sup>22</sup>Buckley, p. 47.

is the world of art, and he insists here once again on the isolation of the artist."<sup>23</sup>

The identification of the symbols is clear enough, but the conclusions drawn as to Tennyson's attitude toward these symbols is highly questionable. If we investigate a comparison between this poem and "The Poet's Mind," we can clarify the difficulty here. In the latter poem the intruder into the garden of the imagination is called a "dark-brow'd sophist"; he is clearly destructive, for Tennyson elaborates on the effects of his entry: flowers faint, plants are blighted, the merry bird falls to the ground, the fountain dries up. Now in "The Hesperides" the "one from the East," supposedly Heracles, is usually identified with the sophist or an ordinary man with no imagination. Or we could push the analogy back to "Timbuctoo," where the imaginative vision of beauty, the paradisaal city, is rendered up to "keen Discovery," who reveals the mud huts of a barbarian settlement. Here again the intruder is a destroyer of imaginative beauty. G. Robert Stange, in an article which established what we have called the predominant critical opinion, speaks in this regard of "the essential fact that the golden fruit and the garden itself are to be protected from ordinary humanity."<sup>24</sup>

But if we look at the poem itself, asking what would be the result of the apple's theft, we find in the second stanza of the sister's song,

If the golden apple be taken,  
The world will be overwise.

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<sup>23</sup>Ryals, Theme and Symbol . . . , p. 77.

<sup>24</sup>G. Robert Stange, "Tennyson's Garden of Art: A Study of The Hesperides," PMLA, LXVII (1952), 735.



This is an ambiguous enough statement, but we get more in the third stanza:

Father Hesper, Father Hesper, watch, watch, night and day,  
Lest the old wound of the world be healed,  
The glory unsealed,  
The golden apple stolen away,  
And the ancient secret revealed.

These lines have been assiduously avoided by most critics, but they are in the poem nonetheless, and they indicate the inconsistency of viewing Heracles as identical with the sophist or the mind of ordinary man. In fact they suggest a position antithetical to that of the sisters, but a far different antithesis from what has been suggested before. For the sisters are hoarders of wisdom:

Honor comes with mystery;  
Hoarded wisdom brings delight.

And if "the old wound of the world" can be healed by the disclosure of the mystery, if Heracles is the instrument of the necessary revelation, then the intruder in this poem comes closer to the oracular poet, the prophet, than he does to the philistine. And the poem, although eloquent, is not exactly a "defense of a pure poetry isolated from the rude touch of men."

The sister's incantation, as Buckley suggests, "rises magically to celebrate the harmony, the aesthetic oneness, of their western world,"<sup>25</sup> but it is not Tennyson who is speaking. Tennyson's position is far from clear on the issue; and, in keeping with the fact that the poem is a dramatic monologue, the poet makes no commitment. But it is quite clear that at least a certain kind of beauty is being opposed to

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<sup>25</sup>Buckley, p. 47.

what seems to be the good. It is not surprising that at about the same time the poem must have been written, Tennyson was complaining to Hallam, "Alas for me! I have more of the Beautiful than the Good!"

And the issue is an important one, for here is where we can see most clearly the grounds for our earlier assertion that aesthetics must be grounded upon an ontology. The strength of Tennyson's guilt feelings in his earliest verse is indicative of a strong moral feeling in the poet, a definite desire to be good. If there were a possibility of the poet's changing the world, unsealing the glory, revealing the secret that would heal the world's old wound, Tennyson would most certainly endeavor to do so, although the depth of his disaffection with life would not make the choice an easy one. But the choice depends on whether he can believe that the universe has any meaning at all.

In a recent article on "The Lotos-Eaters" Alan Grob illuminates the problem:

If a pure poetry unadulterated by non-poetic concerns provides a just representation of reality, then such a concept as teleology or the notion that a moral and providential power forms the underlying ground of things must obviously be set aside . . . . the poet even as priest acts in what Joyce was later to call the service of mortal beauty, basing his metaphysic on sensation and recognizing that the individual life evolves only to end.<sup>26</sup>

Grob goes on to point out that "the universe reflected in the micro-cosmic structure of the valley" of Lotos Land, which works as well for the structure of "The Hesperides,"

is one in which knowledge is compounded wholly of sensation and where ethical absolutes are no longer valid, but where significant experience is still possible through awareness

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<sup>26</sup>Alan Grob, "Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters*: Two Versions of Art," *Modern Philology*, LXII (1964), 124.

of the beauty that is given off by a process that is without purpose or meaning.<sup>27</sup>

Tennyson in "The Hesperides" is beginning to recognize the fact that the enchantment of the aesthetic life is drawing him into a position in which the ethical life is not merely suspended, but obliterated. It is an aesthetic which demands, as Kermode has suggested, a total commitment not only to art but to the proposition that only art has meaning. And it is very probable that for this reason Tennyson placed the mariners in "The Lotos-Eaters" in a position where their decision must be final, where their commitment to the imaginative life must be made for all time. Indeed the conflict is hardly the simple opposition between art and society; rather it is grounded in the profoundest of philosophical problems, the nature of man and the meaning of life.

Three of the major poems of the 1832 edition, "The Lotos-Eaters," "The Lady of Shalott," and "The Palace of Art," deal further with varying aspects of this general problem. We shall examine "The Lotos-Eaters" first because it presents what could be called the most uncommitted attitude of the three poems toward the aesthetic position, at least in its 1832 version, and Tennyson's development moves in the direction of the rejection of that position.

This poem, like many of those of 1832, was later revised for the 1842 edition. But whereas the changes in most of the others seem to have involved primarily polishing of the verses, the contrast between the two versions of "The Lotos-Eaters" is thematically significant, as Alan Grob has pointed out in a recent article to which we have already

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<sup>27</sup>Grob, MP, LXII, 125.

referred. In that later revision Tennyson, by a few changes and some fairly extensive additions, quite clearly makes the speakers of the choric monologue ironically reveal themselves, as Langbaum puts it, as "men who have rejected life for an infantile voluptuousness."<sup>28</sup> But in the earlier version, as Grob points out, Tennyson's position "is best described as uncertain, even ambivalent."<sup>29</sup>

In the later version the attractions of Lotos land are balanced, perhaps overbalanced, by the call of duty and responsibility, which is so effective as to render the mariners' acquiescence in the lure of the lotos more the result of weakness of will than of free choice. In the new sixth stanza of the 1842 version the mariners complain,

The Gods are hard to reconcile;  
'Tis hard to settle order once again,<sup>30</sup>

which strongly suggests that they are indolently avoiding a task only because it is difficult. The poem presents the mariners' aestheticism, their belief, in Grob's terms, that individual life is without substance or order, that significant experience is possible only "through awareness of beauty that is given off by a process that is without purpose or meaning," and renders that position suspect by the implication that aesthetic order is not the only order, only the easiest to settle.

But no such suggestion is to be found in the earlier version, where the emphasis, as in "The Hesperides," is on the beauty, the aesthetic wholeness of the world of the imagination. Again, however,

<sup>28</sup>Langbaum, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup>Grob, MP, LXII, 118.

<sup>30</sup>"The Lotos-Eaters," lines 81-82. Subsequent quotations from this and the other longer poems are cited by parenthetical line references according to the Cambridge Edition, Supra, p. 15, Note 3.

as in "The Hesperides," there is a note, a hint, of disturbance. In that poem it was the suggestion of the possibility of the poet playing the prophet; in "The Lotos-Eaters" it is the recognition, which we have noted earlier, that devotion to the aesthetic ideal involves an obliteration of the ethical life: "What pleasure can we have/ To war with evil?" (48-49). In both poems the disturbing implications of aestheticism are presented with just enough emphasis to reveal an underlying recognition on the poet's part, but not enough to constitute a case against that position. This is why Grob describes Tennyson's position as "uncertain, even ambivalent." Moreover, "The Lotos-Eaters" suggests that the amorality of this kind of artistic quest, its violation of traditionally accepted standards of behavior, was not enough to turn Tennyson against it. It would take, as we shall see, a more penetrating understanding of the emptiness of aestheticism to lead Tennyson to reject it.

In "The Lady of Shalott" Tennyson presents his clearest and in some ways most effective symbol of the isolated artist. Its theme, "the maladjustment of the aesthetic spirit to the conditions of ordinary living,"<sup>31</sup> has been pointed out often enough, but it needs further clarification. It is important, first of all, because it is the strongest presentation as yet, despite its paradoxical context, of the inadequacy of the aesthetic position. It is of greater importance as it relates to our view of Tennyson because of the kind of inadequacy it reveals.

A critical line of the poem which concludes Part II and is

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<sup>31</sup>Buckley, p. 49.

followed immediately by the appearance of Lancelot is, "I am half sick of shadows." This repeats the image appearing in the second stanza of Part II, "And moving thro' a mirror clear/ . . . / Shadows of the world appear." This image suggests that the lady is the type of the purely aesthetic imagination, that in which the vision of beauty is a source of delight for its own sake, regardless of its claim to truth or reality. Moreover, such questions as the reality or significance of her activity are suspended or ignored, for "little other care hath she" beyond weaving steadily. And the climax of the poem is precipitated not by the appearance of Lancelot but by the lady becoming "half sick of shadows." Tennyson suggests here that the aesthetic position as a way of life--it has certainly become a way of life for the lady--contains within it the seeds of its own destruction. Despite its somewhat tautological claims to wholeness, unity, completeness, self-sufficiency, it is ultimately insufficient to satisfy totally human needs. Its exclusive pursuit leads to boredom, ennui, and in this sense the poem points toward the dead end which aestheticism will reach at the end of the century. Yet, critics have said, the poem poses a paradox, the irreconcilability of life and art. The poem presents the beauty and value of the idealized world of art, recognizes, however, its insufficiency by itself, but recognizes also the destructive power that life, the world of involvement with humanity, has upon art.

But there is another way of looking at this paradox, as way which Tennyson may well have perceived. For the greatest art does not derive solely out of an idealized vision any more than it does out of a photographic mirroring of the world; rather it derives out of the clash

between the two. The Lady achieves her most meaningful artistic triumph not in the tower but on the river, in her death song and in the tragic image of beauty which she portrays on her way down the river. Somewhat as in "The Dying Swan," pain is transformed into beauty; but whereas in that earlier poem pain becomes beautiful merely by means of its expressiveness, in "The Lady of Shalott" pain and suffering are transformed into a beauty which is also meaningful, for they are embodied in a tragic vision of the limitations of the human condition. The poem does not embody the need for an escape from life but suggests how, through an immersion in life, with the resulting clash between the two worlds of life and art, there may emerge not death but an art which embodies the tragic sense of life.

"The Palace of Art" is still being seen as primarily an allegorical representation of Tennyson's abandonment of art in favor of social consciousness. In George O. Marshall's recently published handbook, the poem is described as illustrating "his decision to swerve from the Keatsian obsession with beauty . . . to become the oracle of his age, the poet as teacher."<sup>32</sup> The assumptions underlying Marshall's statement are revealed in a comment made earlier in the book about "The Poet": "Perhaps if Tennyson had continued to be the poet of beauty, as he was in his early poetry, and less the oracle he describes in this poem, his poetry would not be so objectionable to the post-Victorian world."<sup>33</sup>

But "The Palace of Art," although Tennyson's clearest rejection

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<sup>32</sup>George O. Marshall, Jr., A Tennyson Handbook (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

of the aesthetic position, reveals that that rejection was based not on his social conscience, but on direct experience of the psychological inadequacies of that position. The Soul's reformation was not inspired by a conventional conformity to traditional morality but by an understanding based on direct experience of the human insufficiency of aestheticism. This is a point well analyzed in a recent article by William Cadbury. Critics have seen the first two hundred odd lines of the poem as an "idyllic museum of Western culture,"<sup>34</sup> a sequence of dissociated but "exquisite panel pictures,"<sup>35</sup> in which Tennyson indulges all his aesthetic impulses before rejecting them in an emotionally contradictory but very moral and proper resolution which violates the poem's unity and renders it an artistic failure. In fact this poem has been seen as a kind of type of the way in which Victorian moralism is supposed to have destroyed Tennyson's art.

But Cadbury, beginning with the noblest of critical assumptions, that the poet just may have been aware of what he was doing, discovers that the dissociation of those panel pictures is functional and thematically significant. The palace and the Soul which dwells there are types of the purely aesthetic spirit, one which has arbitrarily limited itself to that which is aesthetically pleasing. Its vision is therefore fragmented, each scene offering an aesthetic whole, but none of the scenes relating to any other. Or as Cadbury puts it, "No scene in the palace of art can lead to any other for Soul or reader, but must simply change

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<sup>34</sup>Arthur J. Carr, "Tennyson as a Modern Poet," University of Toronto Quarterly, XIX (1950), 369.

<sup>35</sup>Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 202.



to it. And the implication is clear: The Soul is unable to develop emotionally, because the arrangement of the palace gives no way to do so."<sup>36</sup> And the fragmentation of the Soul's vision reflects its symbolic function as the type of a fragmented personality: "Palace and Soul are not representative of a complete human psyche, but of its reduction, the result of arbitrary limitation of response to the aesthetically pleasing."<sup>37</sup>

This theme is carried through and manifests itself further in the contrast between the aesthetic vision and the vision of the Soul after the disintegration of the palace. The change in the Soul from happiness to despair is not only teleologically but psychologically inevitable:

Lest she should fail and perish utterly,  
 God, before whom ever lie bare  
 The abysmal deeps of personality,  
 Plagues her with sore despair. (221-224)

God is the remote cause of the Soul's breakdown, but the proximate cause involves the nature of the psyche itself. God works through nature as the abysmal deeps of personality take their toll. The image of depth is important, for the Soul had been living on a level that can best be described as shallow, and for several reasons.

One of the symptoms of the Soul's despair is a loss of identity; she is "Lost to her place and name" (264). The loss of identity follows from the Soul's isolation. This is a pattern of development which is revealed through what Cadbury calls recapitulated images, similar images

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<sup>36</sup>William Cadbury, "Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' and the Rhetoric of Structures," Criticism, VII (1965), 25.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

which appear both in the earlier and later parts of the poem but with starkly contrasting emotional connotations. The most effective of these is the aesthetically pleasant painting, which recalls some of Casper David Friedrich's, of

a tract of sand,  
And someone pacing there alone,  
Who passed for ever in a glimmering land,  
Lit with a low large moon. (65-68)

A similar image occurs in the Soul's despair:

As in strange lands a traveller walking slow,  
In doubt and great perplexity,  
A little before moonrise hears the low  
Moan of an unknown sea. (277-280)

In the latter the image of isolation is not a mere picture but a symbol. It does not present mere emotional connotations which the viewer senses at a pleasant distance, but embodies a situation and a feeling in which the speaker is directly and deeply involved. To use Coleridgean terms, whereas the former tickles the fancy, the latter probes into imaginative depths. The Soul's punishment, which is to live the situations she had formerly delightedly contemplated, may appear to some too pat, smelling of poetic justice, yet it is psychologically valid. Cadbury describes the Soul as having arbitrarily limited its responses to the aesthetically pleasing, having excluded from its consciousness "the elements of personality which are not contained in the sublime codifications of art,"<sup>38</sup> which appears very much like the Freudian notion of suppression. The images of horror which appear to plague the Soul are not intruders from outside but emerge from "dark corners of her palace" (237). The impulses, the elements of personality that have been suppressed,

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<sup>38</sup>Cadbury, Criticism, VII, 26.

because of that suppression, that separation from the whole personality, inevitably return to consciousness, themselves distorted and distorting the fragmented world the psyche had pridefully attempted to construct for itself.

Indeed part of what Tennyson reveals is the fact that the kind of pride of which the Soul is guilty is a psychological as well as a theological sin. Her proud isolation leaves the Soul unable to relate herself to anything but herself, which must necessarily lead to loss of identity. Tennyson's rejection of aestheticism is therefore based on his recognition of the fact that that way lay madness. He is arguing not so much that the artist's isolation is immoral, but that it is, by the very nature of the human psyche, inherently unstable and conducive to madness, that the poet who wishes to retain his sanity cannot let himself be bound up in a pure aestheticism, but must find some way of reconciling the inner with the outer, the ideal of beauty with the fact of the world, "the mind's recess," to recall an image from the early "Ode: O Bosky Brook," with "the fair world's exceeding comeliness."

And more than the problem of the poet's sanity, if Cadbury is correct, the poem points to the larger problem of his humanity. Cadbury maintains that a better notion of the poem's theme, which would include the various implications of palace and poem and make sense of the Soul's escape, would be to see the artistic problem as a special case of the larger problems of time and change. The poem expresses, Cadbury says,

the necessity for acceptance of change as a part of the human condition . . . . The Soul here is bad not because she worships art, but because she uses art to escape from change, to find the

apart, a quiet king,  
Still as, while Saturn whirls, his steadfast shade  
Sleeps on his luminous ring, (14-16)

And death and life she hated equally,  
And nothing saw, for her despair,  
But dreadful time, dreadful eternity,  
No comfort anywhere;

Her pain derives from the fact that she is in time, part of the "one

<sup>39</sup>Cadbury, *Criticism*, VII, 30.

fix'd law," but "with the choral starry dance/ Join'd not" (253-256).

Her escape from this plight follows naturally enough. As Cadbury puts it,

when she can recognize her bondage, the Soul is ripe for an effective expiation, because the point in the poem is always that this Soul is, know it or not, in time like other souls. So recognition of her condition implies the condition's end, because it asks only acceptance.<sup>40</sup>

It is for this reason that "it is not disturbingly unrealistic for us that the Soul can simply throw 'her royal robes away' (290) and ask for 'a cottage in the vale . . ./ Where I may mourn and pray' (291-292)."<sup>41</sup>

Many critics have found the conclusion to the poem unsatisfactory because they have read the poem as an allegory expressing Tennyson's commitment to a sense of social responsibility, to the role of speaking for his age, and then they complain that the "cottage in the vale" is an inadequate symbol for this notion. Indeed it is inadequate for that notion because the poem does not deal with that theme. In Cadbury's terms, the cottage, a traditional symbol of humility and natural simplicity, becomes "the cottage of unity, time, and process,"<sup>42</sup> and the Soul's repentance there is an appropriate symbol of her acceptance of the human condition.

And that acceptance of the human condition produces broad ramifications in terms of Tennyson's aesthetic. Art of course seeks the timeless, the universal, but not so much in itself as in the way in which the timeless contains or is contained within time. In an age of faith, to those for whom God is immanent the creatures of time are intimately connected with the timeless, and the two are integrated in

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<sup>40</sup>Cadbury, Criticism, VII, 32.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

art. To those for whom God is transcendent, art, if it embodies an escape from time, is supported by the sense of the reality, indeed the personality, of the timeless to which the artist aspires. But as faith declines, the ideal of timelessness embodied in formal unity and beauty loses its connection with both spiritual and material reality and seems to be sought for its own sake and for its function as a means of escaping time.

When the quest for formal unity and beauty dominates the artist to the exclusion of all other considerations, he can only achieve his kind of purely aesthetic vision through distance, through separation, through a more and more tenuous involvement with the objects of his vision. He is led to contemplate love without himself loving, pain without himself suffering, life without himself living, and the operation of the artistic imagination is debased into mere dilettantism. Art becomes detached from both man and God and dissolves into a kind of evanescent, dream-like irrelevance, the infinite but closed province of the isolated artist.

But there is also the possibility of this process reversing itself. For without faith the escape from time is an escape into nothingness from which the mind, unless it is drugged as with lotos by its own fancies into some kind of catatonic stupor, recoils back into time. This is the kind of experience Tennyson undergoes and portrays in "The Palace of Art." Having experienced that nothingness which results from an escape from time unsupported by faith, he recoils, recognizing the need to reconnect art with something more substantial, with life, with fact, with man, with the totality of human experience, if at all possible, with God.

This process can be seen likewise in more familiar Romantic terms, the mechanic-organic antithesis. The Romantic idealization of organicism, originally associated with the return to Nature, was essentially a vitalistic reaction against the sterility and death associated with mechanism, rationalism, and industrialization. But, to use Frank Kermode's terms, as the Image of beauty began, as early as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and to a greater extent in Keats, to be disassociated from Nature, "organic" became an ambiguous term. By the time we arrive at Yeats, the term must be applied to art with care. Kermode, for instance, points out that the Image is organic in that it is alive as opposed to the death associated with the mechanical; it is a unity which is fluid and suggestive, living a life of its own and radiating possibilities. But it is not organic in the sense that it exists apart from organic life; it belongs to no natural order of things, and it is in this sense dead; its life derives from its participation in another, to the hopeful poet a higher, non-organic order of being. "The Image is 'dead, yet flesh and bone'; un-vital, yet describable, almost necessarily, in terms of vitality."<sup>43</sup>

This is the notion of art which Tennyson rejected, and we have outlined the process by means of which this rejection took place. Although a man with mystical tendencies, Tennyson was not a thorough-going mystic. The uncertainty of his faith darkened his conception of the order of being of which his imagination partook. Without the mystical assurance of divine involvement in his vision, the sense of that vision's height began to seem more a prideful illusion than a glorious

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<sup>43</sup>Kermode, p. 92.

emancipation, and its separation from organic life undermined its claim to vitality. He seems to have seen that the Image, for all its claims to vitality, had much of the fixity which is death, something which Keats may have glimpsed when he called the Grecian urn a "cold pastoral." And Tennyson's reaction was essentially vitalistic, a reaffirmation of the necessity of the artist's finding value in life, not outside of it, the same affirmation that we find voiced more intensely and for different reasons in "The Two Voices":

'Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,  
O, life, not death, for which we pant;  
More life, and fuller, that I want. (397-399)

It would be wrong to assume that Tennyson was totally unconcerned about his audience; the soul wishes that others might return with her to the palace. But the poem suggests that Tennyson's primary concern is not whether he will be an oracle or even a teacher but whether he can be a man.

Certainly the conclusion of "The Palace of Art" is still somewhat ambiguous. Tennyson does not tell us how he is to set about reconciling art and life, although we may have seen the outline of a possibility in "The Lady of Shalott." In fact the theme of Tennyson's longest work, Idylls of the King, centers in the tragic clash between the ideal and the real. All he tells us here, however, is that that reconciliation must be attempted. And artist though he will continue to strive to be, he has cast his lot with man. But his poetry does not indicate that this decision was any kind of capitulation to outside social and moral pressures, nor does it imply any kind of dishonesty or intellectual weakness on his part; rather his decision was based to



all appearances on personal experience, on the inner necessity of his own spirit, on a penetratingly honest and perceptive understanding of the nature of the human soul, and on what could legitimately be called a courageous acceptance and affirmation of his own humanity.

We will find Tennyson's poetry henceforth centering in an examination of man. Poetry becomes a tool for perception and expression of an imaginative view of the human condition. We will find man viewed at times with Wordsworthian simplicity, at times ironically, at times with despair. Indeed Tennyson will display an imaginative grasp of a remarkable range of attitudes. But despite his awareness of the complexity of human experience, Tennyson was short on negative capability. He needed something firmer in the way of commitment than the ontologically vague notion of "the human condition," especially after the death of Hallam, which struck him so closely and so purged him of whatever was left of an ability to indifferently "sit as God holding no form of creed,/ But contemplating all" from a comfortable distance. Negative capability is a notion that has been in fashion among critics as a standard of excellence for poetry for the better part of this century. But the recent spread of existential ideas has made commitment, if not fashionable, at least tolerated, and by some respected. If we can admit that commitment is not in itself despicable or artistically inappropriate, then our only task is to examine whether Tennyson's was a genuine commitment or an acquiescence in another kind of second-rate certitude. This will be the task of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER II

### DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

#### THE WAY TOWARD RELIGIOUS AFFIRMATION

Before we can examine the nature and the validity of Tennyson's religious views, it is necessary to recall the importance of his questions. Much has been done in the way of examining Tennyson's ideas in the limited historical context of the Victorian age, but too little has been done in an attempt to see this poet and the Victorian age in general not as an isolated phenomenon of literary history but as an important chapter in the development of the modern world. George O. Marshall comments that the popularity of In Memoriam "has diminished with the present-day disregard of the great soul-searching problems which concerned the Victorians,"<sup>1</sup> as if the poem dealt only with exclusively Victorian problems. But the problem of religious faith is anything but a dead issue.

Indeed the nature of faith is perhaps the major issue of modern theology, and one which has filtered down to disturb the popular consciousness. For what characterizes modernity with regard to the problem of faith is a critical approach. Naive faith, the uncritical acceptance of dogma or of family tradition, is largely a thing of the past. The

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<sup>1</sup>Marshall, p. 122

would-be believer, summed up in Auden's characterization of ours as "an age of exhausted whoredom groping for its God," wishes for the certainty of vision. In spite of the average intelligent man's suspicion, if not contempt, for the emotionalism of revivalism, if he seeks faith, he wishes for some kind of overpowering sense of assurance. But this is denied to the critical mind, and if he wanders from Kierkegaard through the gamut of modern theologians, he finds the mystery of faith centering on the word "commitment," which is by definition an act of the will. The will to believe is central to the act of faith from William James to Miguel de Unamuno, and unless the seeker chooses to escape the problem and refuses to consider the contradictory possibilities, which in existential terms is to pursue an unauthentic life, he must forever live in a state of paradox, a firm commitment to a faith which vacillates, a condition which creates what Unamuno calls "the tragic sense of life."

Tennyson in many ways anticipates the religious existentialists, and his first important poem which concerns the problem of faith, "Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind," begins to reveal his modernity in the terms in which we have defined it.

The poem is dated to some extent in so far as part of the speaker's problem derives out of his guilty feelings about the fact that he entertains doubts. It would be more characteristic of the nineteenth century than of the twentieth to look upon doubt as devil born and to see a willful refusal to think about the problem of faith as a legitimate solution. Carlyle is attacking a similar kind of closed mindedness when he says of Teufelsdröckh in the depths of the latter's despair before the Everlasting Nay, "perhaps at no era of his life was he more

decisively the Servant of Goodness, the Servant of God, than even now when doubting God's existence."<sup>2</sup>

But though the speaker of "Supposed Confessions" hopes that "from doubt at length/ Truth may stand forth unmoved of change" (143-144), from the point of view of despair, this is a very distant, even a seemingly unlikely, hope. The speaker hungers for a common faith, for a child's naive acceptance that "knows/ Nothing beyond his mother's eyes" (43-44), even for an animal-like unconsciousness that knows not the problem of doubt, like that of the ox, which

Feeds in the herb, and sleeps, or fills  
The horned valleys all about,  
And hollows of the fringed hills  
In summer heats, with placid lows  
Unfearing, till his own blood flows  
About his hoof. (151-156)

Passages such as these anticipate "The Lotos-Eaters" and the connection we have already seen between sensualism, escapism, and aestheticism. But the speaker suffers from what we have also earlier described as the curse of consciousness, the apparent inability to stop thinking and doubting. The implication is not exactly that Tennyson has experienced the death of God, but he has experienced the birth of the modern critical spirit.

Certainly a critical intellect is not original with Tennyson, but the Victorians, the heirs to Romanticism, were in the peculiar situation of rising to critical intelligence while carrying with them the tradition of empiricism, a strong suspicion of the adequacy of reason, and a strong sense of the importance of the whole man, of the feelings

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<sup>2</sup>The Works of Thomas Carlyle, ed. H. D. Traill (New York: Scribners, 1898-1901), I, 131.

and the will in their relation to perception and reason. Such a combination of tendencies of thought was the beginning of a new critical method, what Langbaum calls a radically corrected and enlarged empiricism, which would develop into phenomenology.

With the "Supposed Confessions," however, Tennyson only reveals through the persona of the speaker his sense of being trapped by his own critical mind. He does not as yet accept his sense of doubt; he perceives the contingency of his situation, suffers anxiety, but has not as yet found the courage to accept anxiety as the human condition.

And there is also revealed in this poem the first hint of another attitude, one which is more typically Victorian, but the isolation and identification of which may lead us to a clearer understanding of what is genuinely modern and universal about Tennyson's religious views. The crucial lines are the following:

Ay me! I fear  
All may not doubt, but everywhere  
Some must clasp idols. Yet, my God,  
Whom call I idol? (177-180)

The elucidation of what is crucial about these lines will take some space.

First of all these lines betray the early period of their composition by the Byronic sense of the speaker that he is one of a kind, the doubter in a society dominated by a common faith, the outcast, the exile who betrays his mother's faith. Yet the Byronic pose is not merely adolescent posturing but in a sense an accurate description. There are a few instances of radical doubters during the twenties in England, especially among the university undergraduates, but there is evidence only of growing, not widespread, disintegration of faith in the thirties

and even the forties, again primarily among the highly educated youth. Indeed as late as 1864 Arnold displays in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" the loneliness of the critical intellect: "whoever sets himself to see things as they really are will find himself one of a very small circle."<sup>3</sup> As Peckham has pointed out in Beyond the Tragic Vision, cultural movements take place on limited levels. Many Victorians, and this is true to an only slightly lesser degree today, had not as yet experienced the Enlightenment, much less the breakdown of that world view, and Tennyson's doubt places him amid the intellectual vanguard of his age.

There are also symptoms of the existence in Victorian England of a kind of intellectual aristocracy which demanded more of itself than it expected from others. Carlyle had described in Sartor Resartus an individual's personal quest for faith and identity, yet in Past and Present, he rejects the Socratic dictum, "Know thyself," and suggests that for the great mass of men the best solution to psychological and philosophical problems is to forget about them, to flee from self-consciousness and immerse oneself in some useful labor, in the midst of which task the world will inevitably assume a meaningful order. "Doubt, of whatever kind," Carlyle says in Past and Present, "can be ended by Action alone."<sup>4</sup> Yet this is hardly the way in which Teufelsdröckh triumphed over doubt. This is not so much a contradiction as an indication of an intellectual double standard which is in keeping with Carlyle's

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew Arnold, Complete Prose Works, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960-in process), III, 274.

<sup>4</sup>Carlyle, Works, X, 198.

aristocratic leanings. On the one hand there were the heroes, prophets, saviors, sages, who could successfully make the descent into hell and return triumphant; on the other hand there were the masses, those whose humanity needed to be recognized in the spirit of brotherhood, though they be "a confused rabble of Worst, or at lowest, clearly enough, of Worse,"<sup>5</sup> and need guidance "by mild persuasion, or by the severest tyranny so-called."<sup>6</sup>

Tennyson's double standard is not so stark, nor does it derive out of a confident assumption of the position of sage, but it is implied in that line, "Some must clasp idols." It is clear enough that the speaker of "Supposed Confessions" cannot do so, but this is a source more of regret than of pride. Tennyson always envied and respected the individual of naive faith. He knew such faith was not for him; his mind was too critical, his intelligence too honest to fool himself in that regard. But his mind had little trace of the smug, and he was not inclined to wish his sufferings on anyone else who was otherwise happy and good. He would attack a kind of faith which seemed to him pernicious, like the presumption of St. Simon Stylites or the doctrine of election and reprobation in "Despair," where he seems to be climbing even further out on a limb to attack the notion of Hell, though he does so under the protection of the dramatic monologue. But he exhibits a kind of nostalgic admiration for those of simple faith in "Supposed Confessions," "The Two Voices," in several of the English Idylls, and in In Memoriam, to name a few.

Such portraits have been a major stumbling block to critics of

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<sup>5</sup>Carlyle, Works, X, 198.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., X, 218.

Tennyson; they have been seen not as simply less successful subjects for poetry but as indicative of a variety of fundamental weaknesses varying from sentimentality to intellectual dishonesty, charges which have colored many readers' views and determined their attitudes toward the whole corpus of Tennyson's works.

But if Tennyson is sentimental at times, he is certainly not dishonest, and if we wish to call him weak, his weakness is more basic, more human, more indicative of genuine problems which faced his age. For the weakness is Tennyson's insecurity about the universal applicability of his own critical method. Doubt may be a way toward a stronger, perhaps even a more mature, faith, but the Victorians were aware that doubt was a terrible risk, that it could lead as well to disintegration and despair, to a permanent entrapment in the pit. Many took the leap into the pit, dealt manfully with the monsters that lay in wait below, but few were anxious to drag others behind them. Tennyson apparently experienced a similar hesitancy, but it did not have as decisive an effect upon his art as some would suppose.

One of the major qualities of a large body of twentieth century literature is its subversive tendencies. There are certainly indications of the subversive in much Victorian literature, but generally the major Victorian intellectuals, at least before the fin de siècle, were aware enough of a disturbing sense of disintegration about them and insecure enough about what historically would ensue, to feel it unnecessary to hasten the process by any violent iconoclasm.

This condition is perhaps a major source of G. M. Young's charge that In Memoriam typifies the mid-Victorian mind's "incapacity to follow



any chain of reasoning which seems likely to result in an unpleasant conclusion."<sup>7</sup> Walter E. Houghton questions this attitude by asking whether this was "because the poet was too prudent to risk publicly, or too timid to draw privately, the final deduction." He suggests in answer to his own question,

Was it not both? If "the ablest and tenderest minds are afraid to think deeply," as Greg reported, "because they know not where deep thought might land them," are not both fears involved? Was it only deference to public opinion which made "the most sensible and well-informed men" whom Emerson met in England "possess the power of thinking just so far as the bishop in religious matters," and talk with courage and logic on free trade or geology but not on the English Church? Was it not also their own apprehensions, warning them where, and where not, they could pursue the truth in safety without endangering their peace of mind or the stability of society?<sup>8</sup>

Houghton supports the contention made earlier that Tennyson's reticence derived at least in part from his unwillingness to upset society, not because he sought popularity but because he did not wish to make worse an already unstable situation. But Houghton still leaves Tennyson with the charge that he was also "too timid to draw privately the final deduction."

It is not clear in either context what, exactly, Young means by the "unpleasant conclusion" or Houghton by "the final deduction" which Tennyson was afraid to pursue, but perhaps an examination of some of the poetry will clarify the problem. Houghton raises a specific issue, that of the English Church. There is little in the way of an overt attack upon the English Church in Tennyson's works, but there are strong

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<sup>7</sup>G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 75.

<sup>8</sup>Houghton, p. 135.

indications within his published works that his private attitude was, if not contemptuous, at best condescendingly tolerant toward it. If Christianity, the religion and not a mere ethic, is impossible without the historical Christ and the doctrines of the redemptive effect of his incarnation and resurrection, then Tennyson is not a Christian. He is looking in In Memoriam for "a faith beyond the forms of faith," which places his quest outside the limits of any orthodoxy, and despite the fact that the elegy was a popular source for selected quotations in contemporary sermons, no critical study of the poem has succeeded in establishing the poet's orthodoxy. Tennyson is looking for the Christ that is to be; his poem has nothing whatever to do with the Christ that was; and the word "Christ" is only a convenient symbol for the notion of human spiritual perfection.

One might ask where that leaves the church, and perhaps an answer is implicit in the 1842 "Morte d'Arthur" and its companion piece, "The Epic." In "The Epic," which presents the first half of the idyll's frame, the contemporary setting in which the story of Arthur's death is told, the narrator tells us that the conversation in Francis Allen's parlor wandered to "How all the old honor had from Christmas gone," which led to the narrator's dozing and the parson's fulminations,

taking wide and wider sweeps,  
 Now harping on the church-commissioners,  
 Now hawking at geology and schism;  
 Until I woke, and found him settled down  
 Upon the general decay of faith  
 Right thro' the world: 'at home was little left,  
 And none abroad; there was no anchor, none,  
 To hold by,' (114-21)

Significantly the parson falls asleep during the narrative concerning Arthur's death, a tale about the passing away of an old order which

yields place to the new, as yet unknown. Just what exactly the old order corresponds to in the contemporary setting is somewhat ambiguous, although it is clear enough that Tennyson is setting up some kind of correspondence between the death of Arthur and the general decay of faith. The conclusion, back again in the contemporary setting, suggests an affirmation, the sense of some kind of renewal of faith, but the question remains unclear, a faith in what? Arthur had affirmed a faith in God, in prayer, in the notion that despite the sense of decay, of retardation, "the whole round earth is every way/ Bound by golden chains about the feet of God" (306), and that the old order's death is a yielding place to the new; in effect it is an affirmation of a faith in rebirth in the face of apparent death, which accounts in part for the connection between the narrator's joy and the final pealing of the Christmas bells. But is Tennyson speaking simply of a decline and revival of faith or really of an old order dying and being replaced by a new?

Tennyson is ambiguous enough to leave the poem open to a notion like Carlyle's, whose *Teufelsdröckh* berates Voltaire:

Sufficiently hast thou demonstrated this proposition, considerable or otherwise: That the Mythos of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth . . . . But what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythos, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live?<sup>9</sup>

The bulk of Tennyson's poetry reveals little that is specifically Christian, although it is obvious enough that he held in reverence "the divine Spirit of that Religion," its ethic and the New Testament vision of a

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<sup>9</sup>Carlyle, *Works*, I, 154.

God not of wrath but of love. And looking ahead to In Memoriam, which Buckley also points out "is not a defense of any formal creed but an apology for a general 'Faith beyond the forms of Faith,'" <sup>10</sup> it would not be unlikely to see "The Epic" and the "Morte d'Arthur" as suggesting the death of the old Christian mythus and an affirmation of a faith to which a non-Christian could respond as well as a Christian. Indeed Arthur is a rather suspicious Christ figure, but he is clearly enough a symbol of order or the quest for order, of a rather non-specific divine spirit dwelling in man and working to make the spirit manifest in life and action. And curiously similar to the image implied by the translation of sartor resartus, "the tailor retailored," we are presented at the conclusion of the "Morte d'Arthur" with the narrator's vision of Arthur reclothed as a Victorian gentleman, renewing the ideals of faith, the spiritual, and right conduct in a contemporary guise.

If Tennyson did feel privately that the church was defunct, then we have cleared him of the charge of private timidity and we have explained, by the notion of his fear of upsetting social stability, why he was not as blatant and outspoken as Carlyle in his rejection of the old mythus. But the answer is not so simple as that. The poem is more suggestive than conclusive, and we can at most maintain that Tennyson was aware of such a possibility. It is clear enough that the Christian mythus did not exert a strong hold on him or on many of his contemporaries and that he experienced a sense of spiritual precariousness without that hold, but he was not willing to draw "the final deduction," to throw it out completely and set himself against it for the simple reason

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<sup>10</sup>Buckley, p. 127.

that there was no logical necessity for drawing such a deduction. Both Young and Houghton seem to be speaking from a point of view conditioned by their certainty that certain deductions and conclusions are final and inevitable; their certainty, I submit, is open to question.

Tennyson was aware of the failure of the church to face contemporary problems and to satisfy the needs of faith. He reveals this in portraits like the parson in "The Epic," the hell-and-damnation sermonizer in "Sea Dreams," the words of the distressed narrator of Maud,

But the churchmen fain would kill their church,  
As the churches have killed their Christ. (II, 266-267)

But he was also aware of attempts like that of F. D. Maurice, who later became his close personal friend and the godfather of his child, to reanimate the church, to bring it into open and honest confrontation with the new critical spirit, and to make it again exert a living force on men's hearts and minds. Tennyson supported Maurice; he could not have seen the heterodox churchman's efforts as anything less than noble; but he did not commit himself to the pursuit of Maurice's ends. For Tennyson was committed to his own personal quest, a faith based on a broader intellectual and psychological foundation which was more compatible with his own personality, a faith which might be adaptable to but not conditioned or limited by Christian orthodoxy. If he did find himself unsatisfied by organized religion, there was certainly no necessity for his concluding that organized religion was dead, and the same is true of the Christian mythus. In other words, Tennyson was quietly unorthodox.

The fact that Tennyson was unorthodox goes far to clear him of the charge of private timidity, but the apparent quietude of his unor-

thodoxy raises the further question of his reasons, not for silence, but for what seems to be whispering. Most of his biographies, especially the latest by Buckley, adequately refute the notion that the poet was courting public favor. But we are still left with two possibilities: that his reticence reflected an open, critical, and experimental spirit which was quicker to receive ideas than to declare conclusions, or that he intentionally presented his more subversive ideas as through a glass darkly for fear of upsetting society. We could propose an answer like Houghton's and ask, Was it not both? But the impossibility of making a definite choice is perhaps more indicative of the fact that most of Tennyson criticism during this century has been trammelled by the intentional fallacy, not because his poetry has been falsely justified in intentional terms, but because his intentions have so often been attacked. The last several pages bear witness to the difficulties of escaping these bonds. The purpose of this discussion, however, has not been to justify or evaluate Tennyson in terms of his intention, but to clear the air enough so that we can look freshly at his work.

But the notion of Tennyson's quiet unorthodoxy may serve another purpose. There is a hint of such an idea when E. D. H. Johnson suggests "in passing" that "it is perhaps worthy of surmise whether, in greeting In Memoriam as an authoritative rebuttal to the modern spirit of scientific scepticism, the Victorian age ever seriously examined the nature of the evidence on which the laureate had erected his case."<sup>11</sup> The absence of such an examination would explain why so many orthodox

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<sup>11</sup>E. D. H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 37.

thinkers could find In Memoriam so inspirational. Indeed quiet unorthodoxy is not easily recognized; it took close to two centuries for critics to discover that Milton was an Arian. And many twentieth century attitudes toward Tennyson, and toward Browning as well, have been conditioned by reactions against the naive, uncritical adulation of the poet by many of his contemporaries.

Certainly a poet's orthodoxy or lack of it is not a valid measure of his artistry or of the validity of his ideas. But perhaps we have begun to answer the questions raised in the Introduction, to what extent Tennyson was the passive victim of his age and to what extent he saw, as opposed to being blindly victimized by, its problems. Unorthodoxy is at least to some degree a measure of a man's awareness and independence of spirit. If we can relieve ourselves of the preconceived notions of Tennyson's blindness or timidity, we can open the way for a fresh appraisal of his work. And such an appraisal is perhaps more necessary with regard to his theology than it is with regard to his aesthetic.

"The Two Voices" is Tennyson's major religious poem before In Memoriam and anticipates the longer work in its examination of the mystery of faith and its relation to personality. The faith that is dealt with, however, is again not specifically related to Christianity. It poses a question more basic even than whether there is a god, perhaps the ultimate question, why live?

But before examining the theme of the poem it is necessary to consider its structure and the relationship of its structure to the poetic endeavor of the nineteenth century. We have so far relied heavily on Langbaum for a definition of the aims of nineteenth century poetry,

its search for a way of seeing, its critical examination of human subjectivity, its quest for a form in which to embody its vision, which Langbaum sees as culminating in the dramatic monologue and thereby revealing the Romantic origins of the modern tradition. But Langbaum's study is by no means a complete examination of the Romantic tradition. In an article called "Tennyson and the Romantics," Patricia M. Ball voices a similar reservation:

Mr. Langbaum's illuminating argument leads him to an equally valuable discussion on the dramatic monologue as a favorite vehicle for nineteenth-century poets in their continual trying-out of experience, and hence we begin to see where the real debt of Victorian to Romantic is to be found. Though it is convincing and satisfying to reach a genealogy in this way, it is also dangerous because there is a temptation to stop too soon and to take a partial revelation for a complete history, so failing to allow for the complexity of such indebtedness. While The Poetry of Experience presents an argument which may be accepted as fundamental, it is suggestive rather than a comprehensive study, and much of its value to me lies in this.<sup>12</sup>

Miss Ball goes on to identify the dramatic monologue with the product, in Keats' words, of "the camelion poet" as opposed to the "Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime," and shows how both the subjective and objective poets, commonly identified in Romantic criticism with Milton and Shakespeare respectively, are equally praised and embody, in Coleridge's phrase, "two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain."

These then are two valid modes of pursuing the essential qualities of self. Miss Ball is certainly correct in reminding us that it is as legitimate for the poet to delve inward to his own psyche as to extend his consciousness into other personalities, but she fails to note that Langbaum's admiration of the dramatic monologue does not rest merely

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<sup>12</sup>Patricia M. Ball, "Tennyson and the Romantics," Victorian Poetry, I (1963), 8.



on its objectivity, on the fact that it is, as she says, "an oblique way to self-consciousness."<sup>13</sup> Langbaum sees the dramatic monologue as a way of reconciling opposites, of synthesizing the subjective and the objective, of placing the reader both inside and outside the speaker at the same time so that he experiences an illuminating tension between sympathy and judgment. *And this effect reflects the modern awareness and analysis of subjectivity by placing the reader close to the speaker, involving the reader in a particular perspective, while at the same time holding the reader at a distance where he can critically examine the speaker's view as a perspective and not a final statement.*

Miss Ball has a valid point to make, but her essay does not really clarify Langbaum's deficiency. What he does not adequately examine is the fact that an effect similar to that of the dramatic monologue --he defines the form primarily in terms of its effect--can be achieved by what appears to be a more subjective kind of poem. Browning's major technique is to put us in another self which embodies an extraordinary perspective. Tennyson achieves a similar effect by placing us within a self more nearly resembling his own, but one in which, as the poem develops, the perspective changes as that self undergoes some kind of transformation.

The transformation of the self and the resulting change in perspective is certainly a common theme of Romantic poetry. It is inherent in the Romantic preoccupation with perspective and most in evidence in poems like Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Dejection: An Ode," which deal with

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<sup>13</sup>Ball, Victorian Poetry, I, 10.

that crisis in personality which occurs when the poet falls into and rises out of dejection. But this is a subject to which the dramatic monologue is not perfectly adapted. At least most of Browning's dramatic monologues give us a particular perspective which does not change. When Browning does deal with a changing perspective, as in "Saul," the poem becomes more a first-person narrative than, strictly speaking, a dramatic monologue.

But just as the dramatic monologue represents the way in which the "camelion poet" takes the subjective into account, so too what Langbaum calls the dramatic lyric underwent a development by means of which "the egotistical sublime" tended toward the objective. Langbaum uses the term dramatic lyric to point out how what seem to be the most subjective Romantic lyrics are not direct representations of the poet's experience, but experience shaped and modified by the artist's dramatic sense. Moreover, the dramatic lyric is more of a new departure from the traditional lyric in so far as the former is a dramatic representation of a revelatory experience. Langbaum speaks of

the difference between the traditional lyric in which the poet sets forth his already formulated idea either epigrammatically or logically (proposing a question, say, and answering it), and the new kind of lyric in which the poet discovers his idea through a dialectical interchange with the external world.<sup>14</sup>

The latter is the dramatic lyric, the poetry of experience, built upon the synthesis of the subjective and objective, the internal and external, projection and reception, and most characteristically culminating in the discovery of some value or meaning which defies formulation because it is so intimately associated with the particular experience which the

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<sup>14</sup>Langbaum, p. 53.

poem portrays.

Langbaum sees the dramatic monologue developing out of the dramatic lyric and, symptomatic of a deepening crisis of values, detaching the artist from his creation so that the reader is projected into another consciousness, a character, and experiences a set of values not absolute but deriving out of that particular individual's perspective and personality.

But the dramatic monologue is not the only form into which the dramatic lyric or the poetry of experience could develop. The dramatic monologue, while continuing the attempt to reconcile subject and object, does so by leaning toward a more objective technique which involves the artist's preoccupation with the revelation of character. The dramatic lyric, however, contains within it the potentiality for a further intensification of the subjective, which likewise aims at a reconciliation of subject and object, but exhibits a preoccupation with the development or transformation of character. This is a form--for want of a better term we shall call it the lyric monologue--which focuses not so much on the reconciliation between the inner and the outer, but derives its conflict out of the opposing aspects of a single personality, the inward struggles of a divided self.

The special kind of objectivity to be found in such a form is inherent in the notion of transformation and its implications of changing perspectives. The poem may be built around a single change of perspective or it may deal with a whole series of changes, and perhaps the latter, as it is exhibited in In Memoriam, will more clearly illustrate the point. Each lyric of the elegy is a whole in itself, present-

ing a limited perspective which we accept on its own terms. But as we read each lyric and discover the perspective changing as the personality of the speaker changes, our views of all the preceeding lyrics change, become modified and remodified. We are sympathetically involved in each one, but the growing awareness of transformation sets us also at a distance so that judgment can operate, and the net effect is very similar to what Langbaum describes with respect to the dramatic monologue. Moreover, we are not being presented with an already formulated idea, but a series of lyrics, to paraphrase Langbaum, in which the speaker discovers himself through a dialectical interchange among the conflicting forces of his own personality.

In these terms both the lyric monologue and the dramatic monologue exhibit the same Romantic goal, the reconciliation of the subjective and the objective, but they approach that goal from different directions and exhibit in their greatest nineteenth century exemplars, Tennyson and Browning, differing preoccupations, the latter with the panorama of human personalities, the former with the transformations of a single personality.

Tennyson's approach and technique is further indicated by his longest dramatic monologue, Maud, which he described as a kind of drama where "different phases of passion in one poem take the place of different characters."<sup>15</sup> The same words could be applied to In Memoriam, and the peculiar flavor of Maud, its lack of similarity to anything which Browning did, suggests Tennyson's interest in transformation and the fact that in this case he approached the dramatic monologue with a

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<sup>15</sup>Memoir, I, 396.

technique derived from the lyric monologue and modified it accordingly.

The lyric monologue as we have defined it is therefore a form adapted to a desire to delve inward, an interest in the personality in transformation, and a need for some kind of aesthetic distancing that makes possible a critical examination of subjectivity. It is one of many forms which Tennyson develops by means of which he can do justice to the complexity of human personality and contain and order his own inner tensions and conflicting perspectives in a dialectic which moves critically and objectively toward an ultimately subjective affirmation.

We can see this in "The Palace of Art," where the speaker seems to revel with such satisfaction in his palace that many critics have been led to suppose that what Tennyson really wanted was the palace and that the poem's denouement represents a capitulation to external forces. We have already argued against this position on other grounds, but in terms of this discussion of the lyric monologue, it would follow that the dramatic effect and objectivity with which the changing perspectives are presented would intensify to the degree that the reader feels the fullness of the speaker's commitment to each perspective along the way. It is necessary for us to become fully involved with the Soul's prideful perspective before we can understand, and more, experience, the weaknesses and the disintegration of that perspective. And appropriately the conclusion to the poem does not obliterate but modifies the former perspectives. We are not being presented with two separate and mutually exclusive pictures, but one upon which, as the poem develops, another is superimposed. The evil with which the poem deals is not inherent in art but in the Soul's attitude toward it, so that the poem

need not conclude with a rejection of art but with an altered perspective toward it.

What is especially characteristic of the lyric monologue is the fact that the personality of the speaker is undergoing movement, change, and the action is almost exclusively internal; whereas more characteristic of the dramatic monologue is the presentation of a personality in stasis, in the fixity not of death but of a fully realized consciousness with a definite albeit complex perspective. Perhaps it would be simpler to speak of the two forms as one, the dramatic monologue, containing subjective and objective focuses for the basically similar attempt to critically examine human subjectivity. But the terms are not so important as the need to recognize the objectively critical and dramatic qualities of some of Tennyson's apparently subjective poems.

"The Two Voices" deals with the problem of suicide, with the question, as was suggested earlier, why live? It is also an early study, to be expanded later in In Memoriam, of the subjective ground of the commitment to life made from the point of view of radical doubt. The major portion of the poem, the debate between the speaker and the first voice, is an examination of the rational grounds for faith, which are found wanting. First, attempts to find some basis for value in man, in his lordship over nature, his individuality, his hopes for progress, end in the conclusion spoken by the first voice:

Much less this dreamer, deaf and blind,  
 Named man, may hope some truth to find,  
 That bears relation to the mind. (175-177)

The speaker goes on to examine the phenomenon of faith, especially those whose faith reached a degree of assurance which seemed almost a kind of

knowledge. These are described as having achieved "calm, to whom was given/ The joy that mixes man with Heaven" (209-210), who saw "distant gates of Eden gleam,/ And did not dream it was a dream" (212-213), men who were unafflicted by doubts, whose faith was like Stephen's, "an unquenched fire." The voice of doubt answers somewhat cryptically,

Not that the grounds of hope were fix'd,  
The elements were kindlier mix'd. (227-229)

The implication here is that even for such men as these, there was no certain basis for faith; rather their minds were so constituted as simply to be free of doubt. The image of a kindly mixture of elements suggests something close to the notion of the chemical origins of attitudes, which only intensifies the mystery of the gap between the individual who possesses faith and the individual who does not and implies that that difference is only the accident of a purely mechanical nature.

Indeed, the voice goes on to argue, the testimony of sense gives us no suggestion of the dead being anything but dead. Yet the speaker questions whether we can account for the urge to believe in spite of sense:

Who forged that other influence,  
That heat of inward evidence  
By which he doubts against the sense? (283-285)

Here Tennyson begins to develop the limited answer which will finally end in stalemate with the first voice. Just as the testimony of sense suggests the possibility that behind the veil there is nothing, so too the heat of inward evidence, just as doubtfully, shadows forth the possibility of a glory behind the veil. Descartes' argument for the existence of God, "That type of perfect in his mind," which "In nature can he nowhere find" (292-293), is certainly not for Tennyson, as it was for

Descartes, any kind of proof, yet it is one of many notions which

vex  
His reason, . . . perplex  
With motions, checks and counterchecks, (298-300)

and suggest "Vast images in glimmering dawn" (305) which are "Half-shown, . . . broken, and withdrawn" (306).

And with the rise, not exactly of hope, but of the possibility of hope, the speaker is free to recognize that his inner debate is the result not of any desire for death, but of an intense though frustrated desire for "more life, and fuller" (399). Yet this recognition still leaves the speaker "as one forlorn" (400).

The transformation which follows is not an unfamiliar one. We can find it in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" among others. Tennyson perhaps uses a less effective symbol, but just as the mariner sees beauty in the water snakes and, momentarily losing his self-consciousness, blesses them, loves some other, the speaker of "The Two Voices" similarly blesses the family walking to church. The active powers of the mind have been worn down so that the mind is in a state of passive receptivity, at which point there occurs the irrational, unpremeditated act of blessing, an act of selfless admiration for another, which becomes the basis for a vague awareness, embodied in the second voice, of an absolute otherness, of "a hidden hope" (441) which feels,

altho' no tongue can prove,  
That every cloud, that spreads above  
And veileth love, itself is love. (445-447)

The affirmation in this poem is still psychologically quite close to the Romantics. As in Wordsworth and Coleridge, the transformation is based on the awareness that the kind of universal order, or



lack of it, which the mind perceives is dependent upon the observer's emotional state. For the Romantics the two major emotional states are joy and dejection, the former being the necessary condition for the apprehension of the highest truth. Tennyson seems to be following in this tradition, setting up the two perspectives and developing the transformation of the percipient from one to the other. And as with the Romantics, the vision of joy transcends reason, and is involved with a special "power" which "From out my sullen heart . . . broke" (443-444), a power much like Coleridge's notion of the Imagination "to feel, altho' no tongue can prove . . . ."

Tennyson therefore bases his affirmation on the inner witness of the human spirit, but it is an affirmation that embodies, as Elton Edward Smith suggests, more an "armistice"<sup>16</sup> than a solution. An indication of this and a harbinger of things to come is the last stanza of the poem, in which the speaker in his ecstasy asks why

I made choice  
To commune with that barren voice,  
Than him that said, 'Rejoice! Rejoice!

The question is a moot one, but the point is that to commune with either voice is an act of choosing, an irrational commitment to one of a pair of possibilities which are equally plausible in rational terms. This implies not so much a Tennyson who is antirational as one who is aware of the insufficiency of reason to satisfy the demands of a vital being, and the necessity of some kind of leap into faith.

The suggestion of the awareness of choice and commitment as the

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<sup>16</sup>Elton Edward Smith, The Two Voices: A Tennyson Study (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 17.

basis for faith is intensified in In Memoriam and more clearly separates Tennyson from the Romantics. As we pointed out in our introduction, Romanticism, especially that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, is concerned with a penetration into the noumenal, with the achievement of the peace that passeth understanding, with an attempt to find some basis for a sense of assurance about transcendental reality. But the nineteenth century generally moves in the direction of a higher degree of skepticism about the extent of human knowledge, and the noumenal slips further from man's grasp. We have seen Tennyson wrapped up in the Romantic quest, especially in "Timbuctoo," and we have noted his nostalgic desire for a naive faith, assured and untouched by doubt or insecurity, but we have also noted his inability to uncritically trust his mystical experiences, hopes, or intuitions. The result is a continuing tension, much like Unamuno's in The Tragic Sense of Life, between doubt and faith, reason and the will to believe, a tension which is especially revealed in In Memoriam.

In Memoriam is a poem which is too rich to admit of complete analysis, but it is, as Tennyson suggested, a "way of the soul," "a kind of Divina Comedia,"<sup>17</sup> which exhibits a progressive development. That development, however, cannot be represented by a straight line. What we are dealing with here is not so much the development of an idea or a set of ideas, but with the development of a personality with all its tensions and conflicts, its "different phases of passion" as well as its thoughts. Indeed there is throughout the poem a dialectic clash between thought and passion. Its progress is like the progress of the

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<sup>17</sup>Memoir, I, 304.

world described in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After":

Forward then, but still remember how the course of time will swerve,  
Crook and turn upon itself in many a backward streaming curve.  
(235-236)

The halting development of the poem is indicative of the seriousness of the problem, the intensity with which it is felt, the degree to which Tennyson is passionately involved.

Indeed there is very little indication that the poem can legitimately be placed, as Marshall does in his Tennyson Handbook, in a chapter entitled "Tennyson the Teacher." As Buckley points out, "Whatever its public overtone, In Memoriam was written to satisfy a private need."<sup>18</sup> Certainly the poem dealt with problems which were also public, but Tennyson was not grappling with them because they were public. T. S. Eliot reveals something of the relation between Tennyson's private quest and its public consequences in his essay on In Memoriam:

Apparently Tennyson's contemporaries, once they had accepted In Memoriam, regarded it as a message of hope and reassurance to their rather fading Christian faith. It happens now and then that a poet by some strange accident expresses the mood of his generation, at the same time that he is expressing a mood of his own which is quite remote from that of his generation. This is not a question of insincerity: there is an amalgam of yielding and opposition below the level of consciousness . . . . Nevertheless, I get a very different impression from In Memoriam from that which Tennyson's contemporaries seem to have got. It is of a very much more interesting and tragic Tennyson.<sup>19</sup>

This difference between the responses of Tennyson's age and our own we have noted before. And that more interesting and tragic Tennyson is also seen by W. H. Auden:

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<sup>18</sup>Buckley, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup>T. S. Eliot, "In Memoriam," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1950), pp. 291-292.

Two questions: Who am I? Why do I exist? and the panic fear of their remaining unanswered--doubt is much too intellectual and tame a term for such a vertigo of anxiety--seem to have obsessed him all his life.<sup>20</sup>

The tone of In Memoriam exhibits something much closer to Kierkegaardian anxiety than to the comparatively mild upset which the spectacle of a weakening faith inspired in the age. G. M. Young may be correct in describing the age as one which was learning, but

had not yet mastered, the lesson that truth lies not in the statement but in the process: it had a childlike craving for certitude, as if the natural end of every refuted dogma was to be replaced by another dogma.<sup>21</sup>

Tennyson certainly possessed the desire for certitude, but there is little indication that he ever achieved it or deceived himself into thinking he had, and he is certainly not, in In Memoriam, a creator of dogma. His "answers" are ambiguous, tenuous, and more than these, as we shall see, consciously so.

Most of the great elegies, from as early as Moschus, have had two central concerns. The first focuses on the person who has died, lamenting his loss, expressing grief, suggesting perhaps a consolation in his apotheosis. The second follows up the implications of the loss and faces from the point of view of the living the broader problems of death itself and the values which the fact of death calls into question. In Milton's "Lycidas," for instance, the question, "what boots it" to seek poetic fame, is asked not for the sake of Edward King but for Milton; and the final Christian apotheosis is designed not only as a

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<sup>20</sup>W. H. Auden, "Introduction," A Selection from the Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. Auden (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1944), p. xvi.

<sup>21</sup>Young, p. 75.

consolation for his death but as a renewal of the promise of redemption for all good men.

Indeed, Milton has often been accused of having been more concerned with resolving such problems for himself than he was with expressing grief about the death of King. But however we may wish to resolve this issue with regard to Milton's elegy, there is no elegy in which these two concerns are more thoroughly fused than they are in In Memoriam. It is the intensity of Tennyson's grief and sense of loss which gives rise to the depressed state in which all values seem empty, and it is the problem of the perpetuation of his love for Hallam upon which hinges whatever consolation the poem offers.

Following A. C. Bradley's four-part division of the elegy (I-XXVII, XXVIII-LXXVII, LXXVIII-CIII, CIV-CXXXI),<sup>22</sup> the first major part deals with the poet's absorption in grief, a grief which may appear to be a rather morbid preoccupation. But there is an emotional, even a trace of a logical, necessity for this preoccupation which is clarified in I:

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd,  
 Let darkness keep her raven gloss,  
 Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,  
 To dance with Death, to beat the ground,

Than that the victor Hours should scorn  
 The long result of love, and boast,  
 'Behold the man that loved and lost,  
 But all he was is overworn.'

There is also a danger in such a preoccupation revealed in IV:

To sleep I give my powers away;  
 My will is bondsman to the dark;  
 I sit within a helmless bark . . . .

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<sup>22</sup>A. C. Bradley, A Commentary on Tennyson's "In Memoriam"  
 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929), pp. 30ff.

Such clouds of nameless trouble cross  
 All night below the darken'd eyes;  
 With morning wakes the will and cries,  
 'Thou shalt not be the fool of loss.'

The tension displayed in these two poems can be reduced to something like this. First, the poet must cling to grief, for in order to escape or evade it he will have to forget the past, the love that was, and "all he was" will be "overworn" by time. Second, Tennyson is aware of the risk involved when love clasps grief, for the absorption in grief, like the absorption in art in "The Palace of Art," can lead to his will becoming "bondsman to the dark," to a loss of control, perhaps even to insanity. The problem then is to avoid two different kinds of escapism, the escape from grief into forgetfulness of the past and the escape from consciousness into an all-consuming sense of grief.

The sense of loss of contact with reality is heightened in poems IX-XX, which deal with the return and burial of Hallam's body. In XII he calls upon time to

teach me, many years,  
 I do not suffer in a dream;  
 For now so strange do these things seem,  
 Mine eyes have leisure for their tears.

It seems so impossible that Hallam could be dead that the world without Hallam becomes dream-like, and in XIV, if Hallam were to step off the ship and greet him, "I should not feel it to be strange." He sees himself in XVI as suffering "calm despair and wild unrest," having become

that delirious man  
 Whose fancy fuses old and new,  
 And flashes into false and true,  
 And mingles all without a plan.

In poems XXI-XXVII the poet turns to a contemplation of the past, of the love that was, which leads in XXVII to the first major affirmation in

the poem. That affirmation begins in doubt, in the awareness, expressed in XXIV, that the glory of the past is largely a dream,

that the past will always win  
A glory from its being far,  
And orb into the perfect star  
We saw not when we moved therein.

But the past was joyful, he asserts, for

I loved the weight I had to bear,  
Because it needed help of love. (XXV)

The emotional center of what will become Tennyson's value structure is love, a central notion throughout the poem, asserted in I and reasserted in CXXVI, "Love is and was my lord and king." But more than a value, it is an absolute need, the ultimate source of value. And it is no abstraction but something existentially grounded in the demand of the spirit and concretely attached to a specific object, Hallam. And the recognition of the value of the past as deriving from the love that was leads Tennyson to a restatement in XXVI of the purpose stated in I, his desire "to prove/ No lapse of moons can canker Love." But the proof involved here is not logical; rather it is an existential commitment to making love survive by loving.

In XXVII the desire voiced in the "Supposed Confessions" for some kind of mindless, conscienceless ease is rejected. He does not envy, he says,

The captive void of noble rage,  
The linnet born within the cage,  
That never knew the summer woods,

or the beast,

Unfettered by the sense of crime,  
To whom a conscience never wakes.

This brings us to that statement so often quoted as to have become a

cliche,

'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.

But these lines are not merely a reaffirmation of the value of love; they assert that the painful struggle to make love survive is better than a mindless passionless peace.

We find in this first part of the elegy many of the themes which we have discovered in Tennyson's earliest poetry, the enchantment with the past, the innocence and joy associated with it, the fall from that peace, and the curse of consciousness which makes the past only a painful mockery of the impotent present. But here in In Memoriam consciousness is embraced, and the desire to escape into the past or the world of the imagination (the two are identified in the glory which the past wins "from being far") is overridden by the acceptance of the challenge to create a continuity between the past and the present, to fuse the two in some kind of meaningful relation by means of which the past can be consciously retained in memory without precluding or fettering the present and the future.

Thus what might have been a morbid clinging to grief becomes a positive act, a way of accepting the challenge of the voyage, to refer back to the imagery of "The Lotos-Eaters." Tennyson is not, as we said, falling back on some kind of abstract love to which he can appeal, but recognizing that the survival of love for him is dependent upon his loving and his willingness to accept the pain and loss that goes with it.

An indication of Tennyson's mature vision is the fact that the value of the past which must be made to survive is not a passive peace



and innocence but an active living love.

Ryals suggests a similar rejection of escapism in his discussion of this portion of the poem:

But Tennyson does not permit himself to escape entirely from present reality: in his previous poetry he had fought too hard with his escapist tendencies to turn completely away from what he was now beginning to recognize as his duty as a poet.<sup>23</sup>

The point is somewhat clouded, however, by that stubborn notion of Tennyson's duty as a poet. There is no indication until the last third of the elegy that Tennyson is impelled by any sense of duty as a poet. The references to poetry from poem V, where the only "use in measured language" is to numb his pain, to LXXXV, where he speaks of "verse that brings myself relief," indicate that it is not his function as a poet which preoccupies him, but his survival as a whole man. Certainly, as Ryals points out, the struggle here is a continuation of the conflicts expressed in his earlier poetry, but as we pointed out in our discussions of poems like "The Lotos-Eaters" and "The Palace of Art," the problem of art is a secondary manifestation of larger human problems. And this is clearer in In Memoriam than it was in "The Palace of Art," for the central question in the elegy is not how to be an artist but how to live. The center of interest is that personal quest for value of which the poem is a record. And although there are indications later on that his quest for value shaped the notion of his function as poet, there is no indication that his "duty as poet" determined the course of development of the "I" of the elegy.

The commitment expressed in XXVII, however, is only a beginning.

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<sup>23</sup>Ryals, Theme and Symbol . . . , p. 203.

Little of the pain or doubt is eased; it is only accepted, and the celebration of the first Christmas after Hallam's death, which introduces us to Bradley's Part II of the elegy, is a sorrowful one. It concludes with a call for rebirth of hope, which leads us to the major concern of this part of the elegy, the problem of immortality. The notion of rebirth raised in the Christmas poems calls to mind Lazarus (XXXI), the man who has been beyond the veil, but Lazarus' silence about his journey makes him a symbol of the impenetrability of the mystery rather than of any real triumph over it.

The search for an answer again thrusts the poet back into his own consciousness (XXXIV):

My own dim life should teach me this,  
That life shall live for evermore,  
Else earth is darkness at the core,  
And dust and ashes all that is.

The world without immortality is only

Fantastic beauty; such as lurks  
In some wild poet, when he works  
Without a conscience or an aim.

If this were God, he asks, "What then were God to such as I?"

Eleanor Mattes suggests that Tennyson's argument for immortality is based "on the rationalist deduction that man's sense of deathlessness is a guarantee of it, since this sense was implanted by a just Maker Who would not deceive."<sup>24</sup> But Tennyson recognized in "The Two Voices" that the sense of deathlessness was a mystic gleam "Like glimpses of forgotten dreams," no more reliable as proof than the "vague suspicion of the breast" that ours is "A life of nothings, nothing worth." And

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<sup>24</sup>Eleanor Bustin Mattes, "In Memoriam": The Way of a Soul (New York: Exposition Press, 1951), p. 97.

the continuing doubts expressed in subsequent poems of the elegy, the specific denial in XLVII that he has proved anything, the obvious inadequacy of reason as a solution to any of the "grave doubts" of the elegy, indicate that Tennyson is not employing the rationalist argument. Indeed to argue that life must be immortal, otherwise life would be meaningless, is to beg a central question which the elegy raises, whether life is meaningful. One could conclude from this that Tennyson was simply a weak thinker, but the tone of this passage and indeed of the whole elegy would indicate that Tennyson's argument is close to that which Unamuno develops in The Tragic Sense of Life.

Unamuno sees man as being characterized by his hunger for immortality, his desire to perpetuate himself. He echoes Kierkegaard's statement that "the man who exists is infinitely interested in existing,"<sup>25</sup> which sounds much like Tennyson's "More life, and fuller, that I want." Yet he is also aware that it is "a tragic fate, without a doubt, to have to base the affirmation of immortality upon the insecure and slippery foundation of the desire for immortality."<sup>26</sup> It is indeed a slippery foundation, because "This question of the immortality of the soul, of the persistence of the individual consciousness, is not rational, it falls outside reason. As a problem, and whatever solution it may receive, it is irrational."<sup>27</sup>

But it is also a problem which demands an answer, and Unamuno's development of one is similar to Tennyson's:

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<sup>25</sup>Miguel de Unamuno, The Tragic Sense of Life, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (New York: Dover, 1954), p. 109.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

If at the death of the body which sustains me, and which I call mine to distinguish it from the self that is I, my consciousness returns to the absolute unconsciousness from which it sprang, and if a like fate befalls all my brothers in humanity, then is our toil-worn human race nothing but a fatidical procession of phantoms, going from nothingness to nothingness, and humanitarianism the most inhuman thing know . . . . If we all die utterly, wherefore does everything exist? Wherefore? It is the Wherefore of the Sphinx; it is the Wherefore that corrodes the marrow of the Soul; it is the begetter of that anguish which gives us the love of hope.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise in Tennyson the belief in immortality, toward which we are moving in the elegy, is based on that admittedly slippery foundation of the desire, the soul's desperate need, for immortality. This necessity is enforced in XXXV, where another pair of voices challenge the position arrived at in XXVII, the commitment to the perpetuation of love by loving. If some voice should murmur that "Man dies, nor is there hope in dust," he should answer,

Yet even here  
But for one hour, O Love, I strive  
To keep so sweet a thing alive.

But this answer is insufficient, and Love replies that Love's sweetness will change, "Half-dead to know that I shall die." For Tennyson the fullness of the value of love depends upon its immortality. Without it,

Love had not been,  
Or been in narrowest working shut,  
  
Mere fellowship of sluggish moods,  
Or in his coarsest Satyr-shape  
Had bruised the herb and crush'd the grape,  
And bask'd and batten'd in the woods.

Again the belief in immortality is based on the intensity of the spirit's demand, and Tennyson's faith, hesitatingly asserted in XXXVI, reveals

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<sup>28</sup>Unamuno, pp. 42-43.

him as one of those, as Unamuno describes them, in whom "the zeal for perpetuity overrides the doubt of realizing it, and their superabundance of life overflows upon the other side of death,"<sup>29</sup> and not as one who has rationalized himself into some kind of second-rate certitude. This affirmation of faith, more in spite of than because of reason, is an indication of Tennyson's honesty and of his existential approach to the problem.

Poems XL-XLVII continue this kind of approach, now grappling with the kind of immortality that lies on the other side of death. Again the problem centers in the personal, the need for the sense of his love for Hallam being reciprocal. He is disturbed by "the difference" (XL) between himself and Hallam. He feels cut off, left behind, sensing that Hallam has "turn'd to something strange," and he is troubled by

A spectral doubt which makes me cold,  
That I shall be thy mate no more. (XLI)

The answer again derives from the needs of the spirit. Poem XLV portrays the maturation process of a child as the discovery of the self, of an individual identity. The child "learns the use of 'I' and 'me,' / And finds 'I am not what I see,'" which is something like Keats' notion of the world as "a vale of Soul-making." This process would be fruitless if there were no continuity between life and death, if man had "to learn himself anew / Beyond the second birth of death." Likewise in XLVII the notion of the individual soul "Remerging in the general Soul," being lost in the All or the One, "Is faith as vague as all unsweet."

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<sup>29</sup>Unamuno, p. 51.

T. S. Eliot complains that the renewal which Tennyson desires beyond death "seems at best but a continuance or a substitute for the joys of friendship upon earth. His desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life; his concern is for the loss of man rather than the gain of God."<sup>30</sup> Eliot's point is well taken, but his attitude is not necessarily correct. For Tennyson the vision of the afterlife is shaped in a way much as it is for Unamuno: "A beatific vision," he says,

a loving contemplation in which the soul is absorbed in God and, as it were, lost in Him, appears either as an annihilation of self or as a prolonged tedium to our natural way of feeling. And hence a certain feeling which we not infrequently observe and which has more than once expressed itself in satires, not altogether free from irreverence or perhaps impiety, with reference to the heaven of eternal glory as a place of eternal boredom.<sup>31</sup>

On the contrary, Unamuno goes on,

Our fundamental feeling is our longing not to lose the sense of the continuity of our consciousness, not to break the concatenation of our memories, the feeling of our own personal concrete identity, even though we may be gradually being absorbed in God, enriching Him.<sup>32</sup>

Immortality without such a continuity of consciousness and survival of identity is for Unamuno as it is for Tennyson vain and unsatisfying.

The similarity between Tennyson and Unamuno is more than a superficial one. The central problem of modern theology is to revitalize faith by steering between the Scylla and Charibdis of rationalism and naivete. Naivete, as we have already pointed out, is impossible to the critical mind. And rationalism is sterile: the God of reason, as

<sup>30</sup>T. S. Eliot, p. 292.

<sup>31</sup>Unamuno, p. 228.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

Kierkegaard pointed out, can only be admired as a rational construct, which spells the death of religion and of the religious spirit. Tennyson's question, which we quoted earlier, "What then were God to such as I?" becomes the ultimate existential question which thrusts upon man the responsibility of recreating, of bringing back into view, the God who has disappeared or been argued out of existence. The only way open for such a quest is a critical reexamination of the individual soul and the use of an understanding of its nature and needs, its desires, hopes, and sources of pain to construct a God whom man can love--if he can also make the leap of faith, which is especially difficult when one is aware that he is creating the very faith into which he leaps. And Tennyson is aware of the need for such a leap; after he asserts his tenuous faith in immortality and outlines the kind of immortality which he seeks, there follows poem XLVIII, which begins,

If these brief lays, of Sorrow born,  
 Were taken to be such as closed  
 Grave doubts and answers here proposed,  
 Then were these such as men might scorn.

The doubts are not closed; they continue to exist in a state of tension with the will to believe.

And closely following these affirmations is the expression of perhaps the deepest, certainly the most dramatically intense, doubts in the elegy. Poem LIV develops the notion.

O, yet we trust that somehow good  
 Will be the final goal of ill,

which concludes with an anguished affirmation in doubt:

Behold, we know not anything;  
 I can but trust that good shall fall  
 At last--far off--at last, to all,  
 And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream; but what am I?  
 An infant crying in the night;  
 An infant crying for the light,  
 And with no language but a cry.

Again as in XLVIII we are reminded of the limited bases for the affirmations made earlier, commitments of the soul made out of the soul's desperate sense of loss and estrangement. And the pain is not relieved but intensified in LV and LVI, where nature is seen as utterly failing to substantiate any of these hopes, careless both of the individual and of the type in her impersonal evolutionary movement. And the poet wonders finally whether man, nature's latest work,

Who trusted God was love indeed  
 And love Creation's final law--  
 Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw,  
 With ravine, shriek'd against his creed--

whether man too will be "blown about the desert dust,/ Or seal'd within the iron hills." If such were the case, life would be "as futile then as frail." The only answer is the vague suggestion of the last line, "Behind the veil, behind the veil."

In the face of what appears to be more than a lack of evidence for his faith, an overwhelming body of evidence to the contrary, Tennyson still clings to that faith. This might be seen, in G. M. Young's terms, to exhibit an "incapacity to follow any chain of reasoning which seems likely to result in an unpleasant conclusion." But such a judgment fails to understand the religious mind. Kierkegaard reveals something of the kind of process Tennyson is going through in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript.

For Kierkegaard truth resides in subjectivity, and the truth of any answer to a question of existential import is dependent not on what



is said but on how it is said:

When one man investigates objectively the problem of immortality, and another embraces an uncertainty with the passion of the infinite: where is there most truth, and who has the greater certainty? The one has entered upon a never-ending approximation, for the certainty of immortality lies precisely in the subjectivity of the individual; the other is immortal, and fights for his immortality by struggling with the uncertainty.<sup>33</sup>

The validity of the "inward how" depends for Kierkegaard on this "passion of the infinite," and truth he defines as follows: "An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual."<sup>34</sup> Truth becomes a venture, "the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite."<sup>35</sup> What we are watching in Tennyson's In Memoriam is just this "appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness." And the fact that Tennyson is so fully aware of the objective uncertainty of his position, especially exhibited in poems LIV-LVI, is for Kierkegaard the measure of its inwardness and therefore of its "truth":

When subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth, the truth objectively defined becomes a paradox; and the fact that the truth is objectively a paradox shows in its turn that subjectivity is the truth. For the objective situation is repellent; and the expression for the objective repulsion constitutes the tension and the measure of the corresponding inwardness.<sup>36</sup>

The faith in immortality survives, therefore, in spite of, and perhaps because of, the fact that the doubts of reason are not answered. And while the inwardness of the poet's commitment is being intensified, we find him also opening outwardly. Unamuno points out that the quest for

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<sup>33</sup>A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: Random House, 1946), pp. 212-213.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

answers to such problems is not strictly speaking philosophical; it is existential: "I need it in order to live."<sup>37</sup> And the progressive appropriation of faith must manifest itself in a fuller life, an expansion of relationships, which means in terms of Tennyson's poem a gradual easing of the bondage to grief. We have seen the first step in that direction in XXVII, where grief becomes not an end in itself but a means to the end of perpetuating love. The next step is revealed in LXVII, where

The shade by which my life was crost,  
Which makes a desert in the mind,  
Has made me kindly with my kind.

Grief, the consciousness of death, the inward voyage, the personal quest, all these also reveal the seeker's common humanity and intensify his capacity for compassion. This is part of the movement toward the declaration of CVIII, "I will not shut me from my kind."

But the major focus is still on Hallam, and the major direction of movement remains inward. Poems LXVIII-LXXI reveal the beginning of the growing preoccupation with the inner experiences of dream, trance, and mystic vision by means of which Tennyson seeks to penetrate behind the veil. In LXIX he relates a vague anticipatory vision in dream of a transformation of grief into joy, but the first anniversary of Hallam's death in LXXII begins by apostrophizing the "dim dawn" which "howlest, issuing out of night," prelude to what is still a "disastrous day" of "joyless gray."

The second Christmas, however, which begins Part III of the elegy, reveals a growing sense of tranquility. It is not, Tennyson insists, that regret has died, but that,

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<sup>37</sup>Unamuno, p. 47.

mixt with all this mystic frame,  
 Her deep relations are the same,  
 But with long use her tears are dry. (LXXVIII)

And the desire for communion with the dead reappears and becomes the major theme of this part of the elegy. This quest is one again which wavers, complicated by doubts. When it was first raised, near the end of Part II, Tennyson had referred to sleep as "kinsman . . . to death and trance/ And madness" (LXXI), and following his call for the dead Hallam to visit him in XC and XCI, he recognizes in XCII that if he should see Hallam in a vision, he would "count it vain/ As but the canker of the brain." The vision that will come in XCV is further prepared for by a kind of surrender in XCIII: "I shall not see thee," a giving up of the possibility, followed immediately by another invocation, "Descend, and touch, and enter," followed again in XCIV by a denial of the possibility. Poem XCV brings us to the vision.

It begins unobtrusively, with an evening spent in company with friends who depart one by one and leave the poet alone reading some of Hallam's letters. The scene begins to be transformed in a way which recapitulates the process of the whole elegy:

And strangely on the silence broke  
 The silent-speaking words, and strange  
 Was love's dumb cry defying change  
 To test his worth; and strangely spoke

The faith, the vigor, bold to dwell  
 On doubts that drive the coward back,  
 And keen thro' wordy snares to track  
 Suggestion to her inmost cell.

The commitment to the perpetuation of love, the faith asserted in the face of doubt, which drives the spirit inward, break through into a vision in which "The living soul was flashed on mine." And more than

the vision of Hallam, the poet "came on that which is, and caught/ The deep pulsations of the world." This mystical experience takes us, by a transcendental route, into the noumenal, which would seem to deny our earlier contention that Tennyson's method is largely phenomenological. But as Jung pointed out in a passage to which we referred earlier, the sense of being in contact with the noumenal is itself a phenomenon.

This may appear to be a rather specious argument, but it appears to be the way in which Tennyson handles the experience. The trance is "cancell'd, stricken thro' with doubt," which suggests that it is being seen objectively, but it is also appropriated inwardly, subjectively affirmed. That affirmation can be analyzed further by a comparison between the mystical experience as it appears here and in earlier poems. In "Timbuctoo," for instance, the immature Tennyson was preoccupied with two desires which we observed before, to perpetuate the imaginative intensity and sense of assurance of the vision, and to use that vision prophetically, to teach man to attain "by shadowing forth the Unattainable." We have seen how these two desires developed into opposing forces, since the desire to teach demanded a movement outward, while the desire to sustain the vision was undermined by the sense of its clashing with reality, which forced the poet inward to a private imaginative world where he sought "for aye to dwell." But the fact that the vision is affirmed in In Memoriam while the doubts are recognized indicates that Tennyson is discovering a new direction. He saw in "The Palace of Art" and "The Lady of Shalott" that the vision could not be sustained imaginatively without cutting the self off from reality, depriving it of its sense of identity, and distorting the vision itself.

Here in In Memoriam he is beginning to suggest that the vision can be sustained if not imaginatively then by an act of the will.

The problem at this point is simplified by the fact that Tennyson is not concerned with his function as poet, and the affirmation remains a personal one, one by means of which he is beginning to shape his life. But the personal vision has its effect on his vision of himself as poet, an effect which is revealed in the second major visionary experience, the dream of reunion with Hallam in CIII.

The dream, like the trance experience of XCV, presents somewhat of a recapitulation, this time allegorically, of some of the processes through which Tennyson has gone and toward which he is moving. He sees himself dwelling within a hall along with a group of maidens, whom Tennyson identified with the Muses, and more, with "everything that made life beautiful here."<sup>38</sup> They sing to a veiled statue of Hallam "of what is wise and good/ And graceful," until a dove arrives with a "summons from the sea," an invitation to an allegorical voyage.

The symbols here are hardly transparent, but there are some fairly obvious similarities with previous poems. The maidens recall the Sea-Fairies and the daughters of Hesperus; the hall recalls the palace of art and the Lady of Shalott's tower; and the voyage appears in "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," "The Sea-Fairies," "The Lotos-Eaters," and "Ulysses." The symbol of the greatest thematic importance, however, is the last, the voyage.

In Tennyson's earlier poetry the voyage usually occurs as one pole of a dialectic opposition with some kind of symbol of rest. "Recol-

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<sup>38</sup>Rolfe's note, p. 830.

lections of the Arabian Nights," one of the earliest manifestations of the symbol, is an exception; it is a voyage in more than a voyage to anything. The nominal object of the journey is the palace of the good Haroun Alraschid, but the center of interest is the voyage itself as a symbol of the exotic wanderings of the imagination. More characteristically, in "The Sea-Fairies" and "The Lotos-Eaters" the voyage is associated with the changing and painful shocks and storms of a life in time as opposed to the timeless peace of the island of imaginative joy and fulfillment. We have watched Tennyson develop toward the recognition in "The Palace of Art" that somehow the life in time has got to be reconciled with the timeless vision. Without that reconciliation, the life in time is only a senseless wandering and the timeless vision is a slothful sterility. We have watched an analogue to this awareness developing in In Memoriam, where the apparent meaninglessness of life inspires the temptation to escape from time into the past. Indeed the religious and poetic visions are similar in their development, and we can see a movement toward a solution in "Ulysses." The poem does not embody a solution but it suggests in its symbols the way in which the images of stasis and motion are becoming merged in Tennyson's mind.

Ulysses' second voyage, seen in terms of Tennyson's earlier poetry, is confusing. It does not fit clearly into the same dialectic as "The Sea-Fairies" and "The Lotos-Eaters," for here the voyage is not set over against a symbol of stasis or timelessness. The two major alternatives, represented by Ulysses and Telemachus, embody instead two different kinds of motion, and the image of stasis, "the Happy Isles," retreats into the distance of a vague possibility. The way of Telemachus,

the commitment to a life of social action, is recognized for its nobility, but neither Ulysses nor Tennyson is ready to give up the poetic way. It has often been suggested that Ulysses' voyage is symbolic of Tennyson's dedication to the imaginative life, but what has not been clearly enough explained is the kind of imaginative life of which the poet speaks, and what has not been clearly enough recognized is the fact that the poem suggests an altered notion of that life. It had before, as we just pointed out, been associated with timelessness, with stasis, with a state of being. But here in "Ulysses" it is associated with time, with motion, with a process of becoming.

The commitment of Ulysses is certainly not as yet Tennyson's, especially when the poem is seen in company with its companion piece, "Tithonus," in which the eternally aging and world-weary speaker wishes for the peaceful release of death. But "Ulysses" does reveal that Tennyson is beginning to see that the imaginative life, distorted when thought to offer the total joy of timeless peace, could be revitalized when seen to offer the limited joy of a meaningful struggle in time. And the vagueness of the possibility of reaching the Happy Isles suggests that the reality of the end imagined is not so important as its nobility and the way in which that end can be made to shape "some work of noble note . . . / Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods." This is the commitment of a man, "Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will," to take the risk of creating value.

The implication of such a quest, and especially of the symbols in terms of which it is presented, is that the values sought had to be broader than the merely aesthetic. As we have pointed out before,

Tennyson's task is first to shape his life, and only secondarily to shape his art; a poet is, after all, a man who writes poetry, and Tennyson had to seek a broader foundation for value out of which an aesthetic could develop. And this quest we have been watching come to fruition in In Memoriam.

Significantly enough, in CIII the poet isolated with his muses begins to grow when he leaves the hall and sets out on the voyage. It is also significant that "The maidens gather'd strength and grace/ And presence lordlier than before," "And I myself . . . wax'd in every limb" in the midst of the voyage, before Hallam or his ship is sighted. This suggests that his growth both as a man and as a poet is the result not of the achievement of an imaginative state but of the immersion in an imaginative process, the commitment to the voyage.

After Hallam's ship is sighted and boarded by the poet, the maidens complain about being left behind and Hallam bids them enter. As Tennyson himself suggested, this implies the survival, as well as the value, of "everything that made life beautiful here," which "we may hope may pass on with us beyond the grave."<sup>39</sup> It is a hope much like one of Keats' "favorite speculations," expressed in the well-known letter to Benjamin Bailey, "that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we call happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated."<sup>40</sup> This is indicative further of Tennyson's desire to maintain what we have called the aesthetic position, but qualified by a

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<sup>39</sup>Rolfe's note, p. 830.

<sup>40</sup>The Letters of John Keats, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Reeves & Turner, 1895), p. 53.



larger imaginative vision whereby sensual delight, beauty, and art are contained within but subordinated to a more general value structure. The center of that value structure seems to be the personality of the poet and its growth and development toward some transcendent fruition of the self in union with the object of love.

But in order to understand Tennyson's special kind of transcendentalism, it is necessary to recognize his continuing skepticism: in poem CXX, "I trust I have not wasted breath:/ I think we are not wholly brain";<sup>41</sup> and in CXXVIII, "But in my spirit will I dwell,/ And dream my dream, and hold it true." His skepticism clarifies the fact that he is not living in a timeless world but toward it. The summons from the sea and the consequent movement from the hall to the voyaging ship is the acceptance of the challenge to struggle toward transcendence. The vision of the union with Hallam is not the union itself but a suggestion of the fulfillment to come, like the "fair vision" of "The Voyage" of 1864, "the gleam" of "Merlin and the Gleam" of 1884, the hoped-for end which remains always out of reach. There is no guarantee of the reality of the vision, however, and the acceptance of that lack of guarantee indicates that the seeker is time-bound. But the life in time is given meaning by the commitment to embodying value in time by living that value and by the faith which sees such a life to be moving toward an ultimate transcendence of time in eternity.

What in effect we are moving toward in Tennyson is the recognition, which began with Romanticism and developed into existentialism, that the ultimately creative act is not poetry but living, just as the

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<sup>41</sup>My Italics.

Romantic problem of the poet's alienation from society was not a purely aesthetic problem but a prelude to the problem of modern man's estrangement and alienation.

In Part IV, the last section of the elegy, Tennyson attempts to go beyond the development of the individual to seek in the world itself an analogue to his own development, both what he has achieved and yet hopes for. We find a hint of things to come in CIII, where the maidens sing on the voyage of "the death of war" and "the history/ Of that great race that is to be." Yet the vision of the progress of man which Tennyson portrays in this section of the elegy is again presented more as a challenge than as a necessary process.

The idea begins with praise of Hallam in CIX-CXIII which leads in CXIV to the expression of a wish:

I would the great world grew like thee,  
Who grewest not alone in power  
And knowledge, but by year and hour  
In reverence and in charity.

The pattern of development is similar to what we have seen before; out of the recognition of value there arises the desire for the perpetuation of that value, and from that desire comes the beginning of an affirmation. Hallam's growth in goodness on earth leads to the "trust" expressed in CXVIII

that those we call the dead  
Are breathers of an ampler day  
For ever nobler ends.

The belief in Hallam's continued development is portrayed in terms of the notion of the evolutionary development of the earth, which leads in turn to the notion of man as

The herald of a higher race,

And of himself in higher place.

But man's progress as seen here is qualified by an important "if":

If so he type this work of time

Within himself, from more to more;  
Or, crowned with attributes of woe  
Like glories, move his course, and show  
That life is not as idle ore,

But iron dug from central gloom,  
And heated hot with burning fears,  
And dipt in baths of hissing tears,  
And batter'd with the shocks of doom

To shape and use.

Tennyson is not here looking upon the progressive evolution of man as a necessary process, but one which has become linked by the very nature of man with the human will. Man is the herald of a higher race if he "type within himself" the work of time, if he can incorporate within himself on the conscious level that progress which time has achieved on the unconscious level, if he can "move his course" to show that life is something "To shape and use." Again the emphasis is on man's struggle through an act of will to create a meaningful life. And the predominance in Tennyson of hope (CXXV) and love (CXXVI) leads to the assertion in CXXVII that

All is well, tho' faith and form  
Be sunder'd in the night of fear;  
Well roars the storm to those that hear  
A deeper voice across the storm,

Proclaiming social truth shall spread,  
And justice, even tho' thrice again  
The red fool-fury of the Seine  
Should pile her barricades with dead.

Before we dismiss all notions of progress as foolish, and the contemporary interest in a thinker like Chardin would indicate that the

notion is not entirely dead, it is important to notice the kind of balanced care with which Tennyson develops what he admits is "the lesser faith/ That sees the course of human things."

He has outgrown that transcendental naivete which sees the new world just around the next corner. Nor is it to be discovered by a simple opening of the eyes to the divine world that lies before us. Rather the divine world, if there is such, is apprehended more through faith and commitment than through vision. And what is apprehended is only a faint glimmer which is the seed of faith rather than any basis for certitude. The kind of progress for which Tennyson is looking is also important: certainly knowledge will accumulate, but knowledge alone is a

wild Pallas from the brain  
Of demons, firey hot to burst  
All barriers in her onward race  
For power. (CXIV)

Material progress is vain if it is not accompanied by the growth of wisdom, a higher power which Tennyson links with reverence and charity.

Moreover, faith's vision of the new world toward which man moves, only weakly based on the sketchy evidence of evolution, is placed far ahead in time, where setbacks cannot touch it. Indeed Tennyson is ready for the repetition of "the red fool-fury of the Seine," for his is a vision of a progressive struggle, failing at times, and objectively dim, though affirmed through the eye of faith and the ear that hears "A deeper voice across the storm." Though he hints that progress is divinely directed, it is contingent upon the human commitment to it, man's will to be more. Such a vision is an immeasurably greater challenge than it is a comfort. And finally Tennyson is aware that the whole notion is

only an imaginative possibility: "Behold I dream a dream of good,/ And mingle all the world with thee" (CXXIX). Yet it is a vision like that of immortality to which Tennyson commits himself and in terms of which he shapes his life.

Certainly many of the values which Tennyson affirms are traditional, like love, the soul and its immortality, progress, nobility of spirit, "the grand old name of gentleman." But whether the values affirmed are traditional or not is not so important as the "inward how," the manner in which they are affirmed. And Tennyson's notion of the creative life achieved through the commitment to the discovery and perpetuation of value found in the self and in its confrontation with experience is a fairly clear forshadowing of the authentic commitment of religious existentialism. What Tennyson saw more clearly than any of his predecessors was that life itself is the product of the imagination, that it lies before man as something to shape and use, and that the disappearance of God has thrust upon all men, not merely the poet, the responsibility and the necessity of creating something meaningful out of it.

What this means for Tennyson's art is none too clear. Throughout In Memoriam, although there is a general rising movement toward the joyful affirmation of the conclusion, every affirmation except the last is followed by the recognition of its uncertainty. It is appropriate for the poem to end on a major chord, but the pattern of recognizing the tenuousness of the affirmations is so well established--indeed it is the formal pattern of the lyric monologue as we have defined it--that we are taken back from the conclusion to the prologue, where "we have but

faith" and the poet prays that the "beam in darkness" will grow. We have described Tennyson in the position of being firmly committed to a faith which vacillates, and the result is also an art which fluctuates. Certainly he has rejected what we have called the escapist position; we have shown him clinging to the love of beauty, though without the exclusiveness of the aesthetic position. His attempt to immerse himself in time takes him away from the oracular position, and although he continues to undergo occasional experiences of trance and dream, the affirmations that derive from them are commitments that arise in doubt and not oracular pronouncements. Indeed there is no name for the position with regard to his poetry at which Tennyson arrives in In Memoriam, but some of its characteristics can be further sketched.

Robert Preyer maintains that after Tennyson abandoned the oracular position, "he turned to the writing of mundane domestic idylls and conversation pieces,"<sup>42</sup> which is partially true. His commitment to the life in time encouraged an interest in domestic realism, and his search for value in time led him at times to mundane plots and "noble" characters which tended more to illustrate ready-made ideas than to involve the reader in any effective dramatic conflict or any real discovery or illumination. But Tennyson's weaknesses derive from his particular kind of faith, which is also a source of his continuing strength.

There are times when he writes from the point of view of the conclusion to In Memoriam or the second of "The Two Voices," "I see the end, and know the good." Most of the domestic idylls follow this tone, and the poet's sense of assurance of value makes him a somewhat tiresome

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<sup>42</sup>Preyer, p. 251.

sage. But Tennyson's faith is not static; though assured at times, it is never certain. Indeed there are indications in poems like "The Voyage," "The Ancient Sage," "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," and "Vastness," that his doubts continued and deepened and the strain necessary for affirmation increased as the rift between the world that was and the hoped-for world widened. The result is at times a poetry of real dramatic tension. Whereas the domestic idylls tend to give us encouraging incidents along the voyage, those poems which give us the voyage itself involve us in fuller and deeper experience where conflicts are dramatically realized and where the poem can create a sense of discovery and illumination.

There are many themes in Tennyson's poetry after In Memoriam, and continued experiments in form and versification, but the major poetic purpose involves the immersion of art in time and centers on the continuing quest for value. In the following chapter we shall examine one of Tennyson's most successful attempts along these lines, Idylls of the King, in order to show that his affirmations did not cripple his poetic faculties, but opened new areas for fruitful exploration.

### CHAPTER III

#### VALUE AND THE WASTELAND

#### THE PROBLEM OF CONTINUING AFFIRMATION

Idylls of the King can be seen as a dramatic test of some of the attitudes and affirmations developed in In Memoriam. Its central theme is the attempt to create an order in time, to bring the ideal in contact with the real, to shape both the individual life and the life of a whole society in terms of a vision of value. And its conclusion is tragic, involving the recognition of the impossibility of a perfect fusion of the real and ideal and the affirmation, in spite of that impossibility, of the worth of such an attempt.

The struggle to fuse the real and the ideal is a theme that has been recognized in recent criticism of the Idylls. F. E. L. Priestley comments,

Man's task is not to pierce through the evil of appearances and brush it aside; it is to recognize the relationship of appearance to an ideal reality which he cannot fully know, and to work in the realm of phenomena toward more complete actualization of the ideal in so far as he knows it.<sup>1</sup>

Elton Edward Smith also recognizes this struggle and sees a greater degree of tension in

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<sup>1</sup>F. E. L. Priestley, "Tennyson's Idylls," Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, ed. John Killham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 251.



the conflict between dedication to an ascetic ideal and absorption in a compromised actuality. Both poles are and remain tormentingly real for Tennyson and create a real war of sense with soul, rather than a sham battle meant to indicate that the opposing forces were actually on the same side all the time.<sup>2</sup>

And Buckley has seen this struggle as Tennyson's attempt "to interpret rather than to escape the larger spiritual crisis of his culture."<sup>3</sup> The Idylls' major theme, which "traces the rise of a purposeful order and the gradual catastrophic betrayal of its sustaining idealism," Buckley says, "stands as an oblique warning, if not a direct ultimatum, to nineteenth century England."<sup>4</sup>

The Idylls is not a perfectly unified work, a point which Paull F. Baum has belabored to the extent of denying it any unity or coherence of meaning as well as any unity or coherence of structure; all that remains, he says, is "many brilliant passages, many splendid descriptions, many fine fragments of narrative."<sup>5</sup> But although the Idylls has some deficiencies, it is not nearly so fragmentary as Baum maintains. Priestley grapples with this problem, pointing out how most of its weaknesses grow out of its piecemeal composition. The poem went through three stages of composition, he explains, beginning with the "Morte d'Arthur," written in the thirties and published in 1842. Stage two was the four idylls of 1859, which included "Enid," "Nimue" ("Vivien"), "Elaine," and "Guinevere," and seemed to emphasize the theme stated in the title-page of the first proofs, The True and the False: Four Idylls of the King. "Tennyson's final intention," Priestley goes on,

appears ten years later, with the provision of the main frame-

<sup>2</sup>Smith, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Buckley, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>5</sup>Baum, p. 213.

work of symbolic allegory in "The Coming of Arthur," "The Holy Grail," and "The Passing of Arthur." "Pelleas and Ettarre" and the later poems complete the pattern, but however unified the total structure has been made thematically, the treatment remains heterogeneous. "Lancelot and Elaine" belongs quite clearly to a different genre from "The Holy Grail"--to the genre of "Enoch Arden" or "Aylmer's Field," not to that of "The Vision of Sin."<sup>6</sup>

This method of composition introduced, Priestley says, "inconsistencies which only complete revision and a larger measure of rewriting of the earlier idylls could have removed."<sup>7</sup>

But Priestley argues that there is a perceivable pattern in the twelve poems, governed by the purpose of using the Arthurian cycle "as a medium for the discussion of problems which are both contemporary and perennial,"<sup>8</sup> and shaped by a loose and complex allegory. Indeed there are indications in Tennyson's comments about the Idylls that as the poems took shape his symbols, at first strictly allegorical, expanded to richer significance which broke the bounds of allegorical equation.

His earliest notes on an Arthurian project, the plan for a five-act drama with which he played in the thirties, equated Arthur with religious faith, Mordred with the skeptical understanding, Merlin with science, the Round Table with liberal institutions.<sup>9</sup> And later in the 1872 dedication, "To the Queen," his reference to the poem as "this old imperfect tale,/ New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul," was an open invitation to allegorical interpretations which the poet later rejected: "They have taken my hobby, and ridden it too hard, and have

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<sup>6</sup>Priestley, Critical Essays . . . , p. 240.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Memoir, II, 123.

explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical or perhaps a parabolic drift in the poem."<sup>10</sup> Again he said, "I hate to be tied down to say, 'This means that,' because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation."<sup>11</sup>

But Tennyson did suggest the direction of the parabolic drift of the Idylls: "Camelot for instance, a city of shadowy places, is everywhere symbolic of the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of the spiritual development of man."<sup>12</sup> And again he said,

The whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of generations.<sup>13</sup>

This last quotation indicates the breadth of scope of the Idylls. It is an investigation of "the tableland of life," by means of a symbolic narrative, but it is not an allegory.

The distinction we are laboring here, that between symbol and allegory, is a fairly common one today, but one which was a long time in being applied to Tennyson's Idylls. Samuel C. Burchell came close to such a distinction in an article published in 1953. Dissatisfied with studies of the poem like Henry Alford's<sup>14</sup> and Conde Pallen's,<sup>15</sup> which expand the theme of "Sense at war with Soul" as the dominant allegorical pattern, and reacting against Baum's attack on the inconsistency of the Idylls' allegory, Burchell recognized that the purely allegorical

<sup>10</sup>Memoir, II, 126-127.   <sup>11</sup>Ibid., II, 127.   <sup>12</sup>Ibid.   <sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Henry Alford, "The Idylls of the King," The Contemporary Review, XIII (1870), 104-125.

<sup>15</sup>Conde Benoist Pallen, The Meaning of the Idylls of the King (New York: American Book Co., 1904).

approach "makes far too much of the moral allegory and does not take into consideration the haphazard construction of the poem,"<sup>16</sup> and the resulting fact that several of the idylls simply do not fit into such a strictly allegorical interpretation. Consequently, he sees the poem as "an allegory at a distance," which is "not an allegory at all in the true sense but rather a story with two levels of interpretation."<sup>17</sup> It is "the symbolic study of a decadent society from its rise to its fall, when it dragged down even that perfect prince who formed it."<sup>18</sup>

Burchell does not make a clear distinction between symbolism and allegory, but it is already implicit in another of Tennyson's statements quoted in the Memoir which immediately follows his comment, quoted above, on the symbolic significance of Camelot: "Yet there is no single fact or incident in the 'Idylls,' however seemingly mystical, which cannot be explained as without any mystery or allegory whatever." In other words, the characters and incidents exist first of all in their own right, while suggesting further levels of interpretation. Tennyson's association of Camelot with "the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions" and "the spiritual development of man" is far too broad to constitute one side of an allegorical equation, and indicates that the symbol possesses the multivalence and suggestiveness of symbolism rather than the definiteness of allegory. Priestley comes to a similar conclusion when he applies Cleanth Brooks' comment on The Waste Land to the Idylls:

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<sup>16</sup>Samuel C. Burchell, "Tennyson's 'Allegory in the Distance,'" PMLA, LXVIII (1953), 421.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 422.

The symbols resist complete equation with a simple meaning . . . . The poem would undoubtedly be "clearer" if every symbol had one, unequivocal meaning; but the poem would be thinner, and less honest. For the poet has not been content to develop a didactic allegory in which the symbols are two-dimensional items adding up directly to the sum of the general scheme.<sup>19</sup>

If we look at the Idylls, therefore, as a symbolic narrative, we can avoid being frozen in the "Sense at war with Soul" theme and recognize this as one of many themes in a richly symbolic study of the rise and fall of a civilization.

The themes of the twelve poems tend to reveal a series of dialectical opposites--sense and soul, shadow and substance, appearance and reality, doubt and faith, selfishness and selflessness, truth and falsity--but the major overriding theme centers in the attempt to maintain Arthur's order, the alternative to which seems to be complete disorder. It is the theme expressed likewise in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," and one which continued to be a central concern of the poet from In Memoriam to the end of his days: "Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos! who can tell how all will end?" asks the narrator of "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After," and it is not merely a question but the ultimate choice upon which individual and social life depends for Tennyson.

We have seen in In Memoriam that the order and meaning of the life of the individual depends upon his commitment to values which immediately derive out of the experience of inner needs, for love, for order, for the achievement and perpetuation of identity and individual consciousness. But the soul also demands guarantees, assurances of the genuineness and authenticity of the values which it holds and toward

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<sup>19</sup>Priestley, Critical Essays . . . , p. 241.

which it aspires. As we have seen in In Memoriam, however, there are no such guarantees, and the notion of authenticity of values shifts in Tennyson from a dependence on their eternal existence apart from man to an analysis of the manner in which they are held or inwardly appropriated by man. This is part of the history of the development of modern axiology and the inevitable result of the clash between the critical mind and the continuing need for some kind of value structure.

These problems are introduced in the first poem of the Idylls, "The Coming of Arthur," and continued throughout the whole in the repeated doubts about the authenticity of Arthur's claim to the throne. England before Arthur is referred to as "wasted" (7), "waste" (20), a "Wilderness" (10), a garden where wolves wallowed (25), a "dark land" (92), a "dead world" (93); in short it is a chaotic wasteland into which Arthur introduces order, the sense of cosmos, through the binding of his men with vows, commitments to live a life by values. To doubt Arthur is on the symbolic level to doubt the authenticity of those values, but there is no guarantee of their authenticity.

When Leodogran, faced with Arthur's request for the hand of Guinevere, wonders about Arthur's origins, he is given three stories, all of which are doubtful. Bedivere's story of the illicit conception of Arthur on Ygerne by Uther is belied by the fact that Ygerne, her husband Gorlois, and even Uther were all dark, while Arthur is fair. Bellicent's vision of Arthur's transfiguration with the "three fair queens" and the Lady of the Lake and the story of the manner in which Arthur acquired Excalibur appeal to Leodogran, but they are far from conclusive. Even Bley's story, related by Bellicent, of the mystic

origins of Arthur, a babe washed up the shore to Merlin from a heavenly ship, its decks "Bright with a shining people" (375), is clouded by the fact that Bleys is now dead and Merlin answers questions about the incident only "In riddling triplets of old time" (401). Leodogran's final decision is prompted by a dream in which he sees Arthur crowned, but the doubtful stories, visions, and dreams all indicate that we must look for Arthur's authenticity in ways other than examining his origins.

Part of the answer is indicated in "Gareth and Lynette." Resisting her son's desire to follow Arthur, Bellicent objects that Arthur is not proven king, to which Gareth replies,

Not proven, who swept the dust of ruin'd Rome  
From off the threshold of the realm, and crush'd  
The Idolaters, and made the people free?  
Who shall be king save him who makes us free? (133-136)

In other words, Arthur is to be measured by his effects, and in these terms we can see some of the multivalence of Arthur as symbol.

In "The Coming of Arthur" Arthur seems at times to be almost the allegorical symbol of Soul, and Guinevere, who is the embodiment of "all earth's beauty," the allegorical symbol of Flesh, especially when Arthur declares,

. . . for saving I be join'd  
To her that is the fairest under heaven,  
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,  
And cannot will my will nor work my work  
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm  
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,  
Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live. (84-93)

But it is not an abstraction which Gareth admires; it is a man, a living embodiment of value, observable in the realm which Arthur has

created, in the justice which Arthur metes out, in the personal contact which reveals kindness and honor in action. And this difference is not merely one between idylls but one which is perceivable throughout the whole. In "The Coming of Arthur," in the lines immediately preceding the lengthy quotation above, Arthur cries,

What happiness to reign a lonely king,  
 Vext--O ye stars that shudder over me,  
 O earth that soundest hollow under me,  
 Vext with waste dreams? (81-84)

We find here a foreshadowing of the lonely doubting man we will see more clearly in "The Passing of Arthur," and the suggestion of the alienated idealist whose imaginative vision of order and value is sterile without its being somehow embodied in life, realized in creative action. Arthur is a man, like Tennyson and unlike Galahad, who dreams a dream of good but knows it only in so far as he can make it dwell on earth, who possesses perhaps doubtful insights into a timeless order but strives to create an order in time, in a city which, in Merlin's words in "Gareth and Lynette,"

They are building still, seeing the city is built  
 To music, therefore never built at all,  
 And therefore built forever. (272-274)

Arthur is a man committed, in a more socially active and political way, to the kind of creative life outlined in In Memoriam. And since he and his realm embody value in time, they are subject to change, to decay as well as growth, and the city which is never built but always being built suggests the continuing struggle and the constant need for reaffirmation.

The attempt to create a cosmos is complicated, however, by problems other than the authenticity of Arthur. Indeed the problem of



authenticity expands into the related problem of doubt and faith, since little that is really authentic can be proven, or, as it is put in "The Ancient Sage," "Nothing worthy of proving can be proven." These problems are dealt with apart from Arthur in "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid," where Geraint's demand for proof of Enid's faithfulness almost destroys himself and his wife.

These idylls are often seen as the beginning of the effects of Guinevere's unfaithfulness, but the problem antedates even the rumor of her infidelity and first reveals itself in Geraint's demand before his wedding that Enid ride with him to Camelot "in her faded silk" (762) in order to "prove such force in her" (805) that he "could rest, a rock in ebbs and flows,/ Fixt on her faith" (812-813). What Geraint is looking for is a real second-rate certitude; in Sartre's terms, he seeks the impenetrability and solidity of a rock, of a thing, and cannot accept the fact that consciousness includes doubt. Such rock-like certitude is impossible for a living, thinking being, and his declaration as he leaves for his wedding,

Now, therefore, I do rest,  
A prophet certain of my prophecy,  
That never shadow of mistrust can cross  
Between us, (813-816)

is heavily ironic in the face of his later mistrust of Enid, which results in that bizzare journey with Enid walking silently ahead of her mounted lord.

"Balin and Balan," the next idyll but the last to be written, is one of the most ironic and one which deals further with the effects of doubt and examines the nature of truth in terms that are similar to those in In Memoriam. Balin is the victim of an intensely passionate

and impulsive nature which is difficult for him to control. Indeed he is associated with nature in the larger sense, for his shield bears a "rough beast . . ./ Langued gules, and toothed with grinning savagery" (192-193), which echoes "Nature, red in tooth and claw" in In Memoriam. He is hardly a symbol of nature itself, however, but perhaps of the natural man undisciplined and lacking in self-control. Striving to civilize himself, he attempts to emulate the gentle manhood of Lancelot and fixes upon Guinevere as the symbol of the grace and purity toward which he aspires. His attempts are undermined, however, when he witnesses a scene in which Lancelot and Guinevere appear more like damsel and lover than like queen and subject, and in a state of gloom he dashes out of the castle, "mad for strange adventure" (284).

Balin seems to be one of those, to refer back to the "Supposed Confessions," who must clasp idols, but he makes the mistake of choosing a human idol. The adventures which follow involve his despairing attempt to keep his idol inviolate, against his own doubts, the hissing insinuations of Garlon, and the temptations of Vivien. But Tennyson handles the question of Guinevere's purity in a curious and ambiguous fashion. The scene Balin witnessed between her and Lancelot offered grounds for suspicion, but there was no overt act which would have made the truth certain. Before we hear Garlon's condemnation of the queen, we find him associated with black magic (299-300), and his opinion of the queen is compromised by his obviously evil nature. Vivien's story of Lancelot's kissing Guinevere, supposedly witnessed by her squire, is a lie, revealed in the narrator's comment, "She lied with ease" (517), and in Vivien's conversation with her squire, "Who never sawest Caerleon upon

Usk" (561), where the incident was supposed to have taken place. And finally, the mortally wounded Balan reports the words of a servant of King Pellam's castle, that "a wanton damsel" who wanders about the wood, most likely Vivien, dallies with Garlon "in the mouth of Hell" (598-604). Balan concludes,

Foul are their lives, foul are their lips; they lied.  
Pure as our own true mother is our Queen. (605-606)

By putting a kind of distorted truth in the mouths of liars, Tennyson so confuses the point that the reader must assure himself, through his knowledge of subsequent events, that Guinevere was in fact unfaithful. But the confusion is functional and suggests that Guinevere's "real" state of purity or impurity is beside the point. It involves further a look behind a statement like that of In Memoriam, CXXIII:

But in my spirit will I dwell,  
And dream my dream, and hold it true;  
For tho' my lips may breathe adieu,  
I cannot think the thing farewell.

The tone of the conclusion of this idyll suggests, in spite of the irony, that Balin has achieved a kind of triumph in his renewed faith in Guinevere. Even though we may know that Guinevere was in fact false, that objectively her purity was a dream, for Balin this does not really matter because his is a subjective kind of truth, appropriated inwardly and independent of fact. But Balin's tragic error was to base his faith on something human, on a purity which could prove untrue, so that it is a deficient faith, one by means of which he can die, but not one in terms of which he could live except by willful blindness. At the point of Balin's death the purity of Guinevere is an objective un-

certainty which, in Kierkegaardian terms, is embraced with the passion of the infinite. But insofar as it is something capable of being seen as false with objective certainty, perhaps at some later point in time, it does not attain the paradox of faith; the paradox is in fact only a contradiction, which results in the irony of misplaced faith. In short, Balin has triumphed, but his is not the way, though it suggests that the ultimate triumph is to be found in the direction of inwardness.

The problems relating to faith and trust intensify as we proceed through the next three idylls toward the dissolution of an order which grows more dreamlike. That order, as we have seen, depends upon a creative affirmation of value by means of which life and the world are shaped into meaningful structures, but this creative struggle is everywhere faced with irreconcilables which undermine the attempt, stubborn obstacles which resist idealization.

Some are too slow to believe, like Geraint and those who doubt Arthur. But Tennyson is not so naive as to suppose that a mere commitment to any faith is adequate to the achievement of order. Balin's faith, as well as Pelleas', is too dependent upon the purity of its manifestation in time, so that it cannot stand up to the shocks of change. In "Merlin and Vivien," Merlin, weary of life and disillusioned by prophetic glimmerings of "a doom that ever poised itself to fall" (189), the dissolution of Arthur's order, loses the sharpness of vision that distinguishes between what can and cannot be trusted and falls victim to Vivien. Elaine, as Balin put his trust in Guinevere, puts hers in Lancelot, but unlike Balin, her faith is untouched by doubt; she maintains to the last a vision of Lancelot as "One peerless, without stain,"

"God's best/ And greatest" (1084-1087). And further, still unlike Balin, she has the opportunity to live beyond her mistaken affirmation, to dwell "in fantasy" (396) in her tower, and to reveal by her death the irreconcilability of life with her dream of good.

Elaine has often been compared with the Lady of Shalott, and because hers is a similar story, she has often been associated with the artist or the artistic imagination. But such an interpretation seems thin and inconsistent; rather Elaine is a good illustration of the fact that Tennyson's notions of the creative imagination, as was pointed out in Chapter II, have expanded outside the merely artistic to the way in which the imagination creatively shapes the life of each individual. Elaine's is not the problem of the artist but that of the naive idealist who would have the world other than what it is. In fact this is the problem of many of the major characters in the poem, of Balin and Pelleas, and, without the naivete, of Dagonet, the fool, and of Arthur, the grandest of fools.

The struggle to achieve a creative life in time is illuminated by the contrasting struggle portrayed in "The Holy Grail" to escape time, for the escape from time and process is the major motivation for most of the seekers. The notion of the Grail is introduced to Arthur's court as it passes from the confessor of Percivale's sister, an old priest who wishes "that it would come/ And heal the world of all their wickedness" (93-94). The maiden achieves a vision of the Grail, and encourages her brother

to fast and pray,  
And tell thy brother knights to fast and pray,  
That so perchance the vision may be seen  
By thee and those, and all the world be healed. (125-128)

The expectations expressed here echo the hopes of the oracular poet which we saw in "The Hesperides":

Lest the old wound of the world be healed,  
The glory unsealed,  
The golden apple stolen away,  
And the ancient secret revealed.

But in "The Holy Grail" the poet's attitude is less ambiguous. The vision can be achieved by Galahad and Percivale and fleetingly by Bors and Lancelot, but it is not for the rest of the knights. This point, as it is developed through the idyll, goes far toward explaining some of the apparent contradictions in Tennyson's attitudes toward life and transcendence, the world of time and that of the timeless.

Tennyson sees man as bound by time within a process which culminates, it is hoped, in a release from time. That process is outlined in a series of sculptures in Arthur's hall described by Percivale:

And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt  
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall;  
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,  
And in the second men are slaying beasts,  
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,  
And on the fourth are men with growing wings. (232-237)

But time can only be transcended through a process which works in time. Most of Arthur's knights are somewhere between the second and third levels of this process. But they seek to leap to the fourth, to transcend human nature before they have perfected it. If, however, time can be redeemed, the old wound of the world be healed, it will not be by any sudden transformation; it can happen only in and through time, and it is for this reason that Galahad can save only himself.

Tennyson's handling of the Grail legend has often been criticized, especially by twentieth century critics who have approached Tenny-

son by the road which leads From Ritual to Romance to myth criticism. This is not to disparage Jesse L. Weston's book, but characteristic of the response it inspires is F. O. Matthiessen's comment in The Achievement of T. S. Eliot that the Grail legend in The Waste Land takes on "a rich depth of primitive force that was wholly lost by Tennyson's denatured picture-book version."<sup>20</sup> One need not argue whether Eliot's poem has any primitive force, but one can argue whether the legend can be used only in Weston's terms. It is certainly obvious enough that Tennyson's Galahad does not achieve the status of the sacrificial hero archetype who restores the waste land and renders it again a paradisaal garden. But this is not what is wrong about Tennyson's use of the legend; it is what is different, what is Tennysonian, what is Victorian, and what is in many ways as "modern" as the new mythology.

Certainly Galahad typifies the death-rebirth archetype on the individual level, for Galahad, unlike Merlin, who also sat in "the Siege Perilous," is he who can lose himself to save himself. But as applied to the waste land in general, the death-rebirth archetype is as irrelevant to Tennyson's version of the Grail legend as it is to Camus' Myth of Sisyphus. Indeed Eliot uses the legend ironically as he portrays a land in which even the hope for redemption has paled into nothingness. Tennyson likewise, in his own way, sees the great mass of modern man as cut off from the redemptive power of the Grail. For Eliot in The Waste Land there is no Galahad; for Tennyson Galahad can save only himself. Both use the legend to portray and to intensify the sense of man's alien-

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<sup>20</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 37.

ation from God. And despite the critics' delight in the unifying power of myth, the greater mass of modern literature exhibits a loss of faith in the possibility of redemption and, as with Tennyson, the quest for a way to endure our alienation, to shape the waste land of the life in time instead of transcending it.

Tennyson's theology, if we can call it that, is certainly not transparent, nor is it likely that Tennyson himself had developed any thoroughly systematic approach to the problem; but "The Holy Grail" is among the most fruitful sources of his thoughts, and it is possible to abstract further some of his basic ideas. In keeping with that fundamental condition which underlies his struggles and which we have been emphasizing all along, the disappearance of God, Tennyson emphasizes, somewhat like Kierkegaard, the enormous gap between the finite and the infinite. To succeed in the quest for the Grail, all the things of the earth must become as ashes and shadows, all relationships must dissolve into nothingness except that between man and God, which is why Galahad's is a one-way journey and the oracular possibility is precluded. Similarly, just as God is so far removed, so is redemption, and it is symptomatic of this removal that Christ becomes all but imperceptible in Tennyson, just as he becomes for Arnold only an exemplary man. Among other movements, we can see many of the thinkers of the nineteenth century moving like Tennyson from traditional Christianity toward a vaguely Christian humanism. The result is not, however, the atheism of Nietzsche, although the symptoms are similar. Since man is cut off from any clear sense of the presence of God or of his redemptive power, the responsibility for redeeming time is thrust back on man. This is



not the absolute freedom and responsibility which Nietzsche proclaims, but it suggests an increased measure of both.

Lancelot, for instance, seeks the Grail in the hope of receiving divine help to conquer his sin:

but in me lived a sin  
So strange, of such a kind, that all of pure,  
Noble, and knightly in me twined and clung  
Round that one sin, until the wholesome flower  
And poisonous grew together, each as each,  
Not to be pluck'd asunder; and when thy knights  
Swore, I swore with them only in the hope  
That I could touch or see the Holy Grail  
They might be pluck'd asunder. (769-777)

But, he continues,

Then I spake  
To one most holy saint, who wept and said  
That, save they could be pluck'd asunder, all  
My quest were but in vain. (777-780)

In other words, Lancelot has to cleanse himself; the Grail will not do it for him. And perhaps here we can see more clearly what we mean by Tennyson's tragic sense of life. In orthodox Christian terms the problem that Tennyson sets up for Lancelot is impossible; indeed it would be the sin of presumption for a man to suppose he could save himself, and in orthodox terms this is the sin of humanism. At the same time, in a world from which God has disappeared, it is a task which man must assume--or presume. The result of the tension between Tennyson's orthodox desire to fall back on faith and his unorthodox sense of the need to assume responsibility is the Victorian counterpart to Kierkegaard's notion of fear and trembling. The fact that Tennyson did not proclaim this responsibility with the liberated joy of a Nietzsche or the complacent confidence of a thorough-going humanist is symptomatic of his awareness of the tragic implications of the necessity of man's

assumption of a seemingly impossible burden.

One of the weaknesses of religion, according to atheistic existentialists like Sartre, is the fact that it relieves man of much of the responsibility for his acts and looks to some divine force to heal the old wound of the world. But the hopes of Percivale's sister are not to be fulfilled. God remains apart, and it is clear that man cannot easily be transformed into Keats' nightingale to soar into transcendental realms. If man would soar it would have to be by means of something like Camelot which he has built. And it must also be built with the awareness of the transience of man's structures, with the lack of any certitude about their endurance.

But as much as these conditions themselves, it is the refusal to accept them, which brings about the breaking of Arthur's order. Lance-  
lot complains in "The Holy Grail" about the way in which his sin trammels him and regresses to the wish of the "Supposed Confessions" for escape from the curse of consciousness:

Happier are those that welter in their sin,  
Swine in the mud, that cannot see for slime,  
Slime of the ditch. (767-769)

Unable to escape that curse, he is too honorable to defend his own evil by slaying Pelleas, but too shamed to defend the good. He therefore becomes an ineffectual judge in "The Last Tournament," where "He saw the laws that ruled the tournament/ Broken, but spake not" (160-161). He cannot follow Tristram's advice,

Great brother, thou nor I have made the world;  
Be happy in thy fair Queen as I in mine, (203-204)

and accept the bestial state of the world, nor can he bring himself to struggle to change either himself or the world. The only response left

to him is the contempt with which he hands Tristram the prize, intended for the purest of Arthur's knights, "Like a dry bone cast to some hungry hound" (196).

The decay of Arthur's order brings us to the major question posed by the Idylls, how we are to evaluate Arthur himself and the nature of the apparent triumph in his passing. We have placed Arthur among the idealists who would have the world other than it is, and we have examined some of these idealists, showing the weaknesses in their hopes, the dreamlike qualities of the visions of the world as seen by Balin and Elaine and Pelleas. But Arthur's world is likewise dreamlike, a theme which runs throughout the whole of the Idylls. Leodogran's faith in Arthur is based on reported visions and his own dream. Gareth's companions, struck with fear before Camelot, cry, "Lord, there is no such city anywhere,/ But all a vision" (203-204). Merlin does not dispel their doubts when he calls it enchanted, "For there is nothing in it as it seems/ Saving the king" (260-261). And later in "Merlin and Vivien" he calls Arthur the

stainless gentleman,  
Who wouldst against thine own eye-witness fain  
Have all men true and leal, all women pure! (791-793)

In "The Holy Grail" Percivale speaks of Arthur's rushing back to Camelot,

In horror lest the work by Merlin wrought,  
Dreamlike, should on the sudden vanish, wrapt  
In unremorseful folds of rolling fire. (259-261)

But it is also apparent that all of life, as Tennyson sees it, had a kind of dreamlike insubstantiality about it, from the dream of good of In Memoriam to the surrealistic nightmare of "The Vision of Sin." What then is the difference between dreams?

We have noted that both Elaine and Balin erred in placing too much faith in man, and Arthur is often criticized in the Idylls for the same error. We have quoted Merlin's lament that Arthur would, "against his own eye-witness, fain/ Have all men true and leal, all women pure." Tristram likewise complains that "The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself." Yet there are indications that Arthur's expectations were limited and that the failure of many of his knights involved the attempt to go beyond them. The minstrel who stops at Tintagil in "Merlin and Vivien" tells Mark and Vivien of the new custom among Arthur's knights, modeled on the supposed relation between Lancelot and Guinevere, of a virgin love, a denial of the flesh which aspires to a pure spirituality:

So passionate for an utter purity  
Beyond the limit of their bond are these,  
For Arthur bound them not to singleness. (26-28)

The conflict between soul and flesh throughout the Idylls grows out of the attempt to unite the two, and the emphasis on either pole, except for the special case of Galahad, is potentially destructive. The same problem arises with regard to the Grail quest, where the attempt to transcend the flesh is recognized by Arthur as overreaching.

Although it is far easier to state generally than to define precisely, what Tennyson seems to be getting at is the need for a kind of idealism which looks to the perfection of human nature. It recognizes and accepts the fundamental limitations of man's being time-bound, a being in the world who is flesh-bound, but it calls upon the individual to live beyond himself. This may appear to be simply a contradiction, and in terms of most of traditional philosophy, especially the rationalism of the Enlightenment, it is. But part of the problem of the nine-

teenth century, as we have already seen, is the fact that it has begun to outgrow traditional philosophy, to discover that the philosophical tradition has, in Heidegger's terms, alienated man from Being. Shelley is an excellent example of this in that his aristocratic background and training associate him more closely than any of the Romantics with eighteenth century rationalism, which clashes with his spiritual needs to produce the strongest sense of all the Romantics of his not belonging in this world but in some other. The task of modern philosophy from that point is clear: to find a way in which man can achieve a meaningful existence in the world.

Part of the reason for this problem is the fact that in the tradition man's being is largely fixed, his essence placed before his existence. Much of the confusion of nineteenth century thought derives out of the fact that a shift in thinking is going on from an emphasis on essence to one on existence, and though the categories, the dialectical tools, the terms, had yet to be developed, some of the poets achieved an imaginative insight into the situation.

We have observed Tennyson's concentration on man's being in time, on the acceptance of human limitations, but we also see Tennyson calling upon man to strive for what he calls a higher self through the exercise of the creative, value-giving powers which man possesses. We can see these two impulses likewise in Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre goes further than Tennyson in not simply doubting but negating the possibility of man's transcendence of his humanity and more starkly emphasizing man's thralldom to time. But Sartre goes beyond despair in a way not unlike Tennyson:

There is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it . . . . What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards . . . . Man is nothing else but that what he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.<sup>21</sup>

This is something like the task which Tennyson sets before us in terms of the creative life and the perfection of humanity. But the existential triumph is not achieved in the simple affirmation of a faith or a dream of the future, especially if such an affirmation naively neglects whatever might deny it. To live in fantasy like Elaine, without being aware that it is perhaps only a dream, is in existential terms an inauthentic life. Although Tennyson does not go so far as to condemn Elaine, her affirmation is clearly sterile, one like Balin's which cannot be lived by. The authenticity of Arthur's original affirmation is somewhat compromised by the indications--his condemnation of Guinevere and his despair in the early part of "The Passing of Arthur"--that he expected his dream to be fully realized in time. But there is little indication that Tennyson was lacking in awareness.

Tennyson has often been accused of naively celebrating conventional values in both In Memoriam and the Idylls. But he had celebrated "the grand old name of gentleman" in In Memoriam, CXI, aware that that name had been

Defamed by every charlatan,  
And soil'd with all ignoble use.

He is likewise aware in the Idylls that conventional morality can be

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<sup>21</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 290-291.

hypocritical. The challenge of the Red Knight in "The Last Tournament" reveals this awareness:

Tell thou the King and all his liars that I  
 Have founded my Round Table in the North,  
 And whatsoever his own knights have sworn  
 My knights have sworn the counter to it--and say  
 My tower is full of harlots, like his court,  
 But mine are worthier, seeing they profess  
 To be none other than themselves--and say  
 My knights are all adulterers like his own,  
 But mine are truer, seeing they profess  
 To be none other. (77-88)

The truth of the knight's words is borne out by the battle which follows as a result of this challenge. In that battle Arthur's knights fight in the most bestial fashion, first attacking the fallen Red Knight:

Then the knights, who watch'd him, roar'd  
 And shouted and leapt down upon the fallen,  
 There trampled out his face from being known,  
 And sank his head in mire, and slimed themselves. (467-470)

Arthur's attempts to stop the carnage are vain, and at the end of the battle "in the heart of Arthur pain was lord" (485). This battle stands in stark contrast to the earlier victory in "The Coming of Arthur," where the enemy

swerved and brake  
 Flying, and Arthur call'd to stay the brands  
 That hack'd among the flyers, 'Ho! they yield!'  
 So like a painted battle the war stood  
 Silenced, the living quiet as the dead,  
 And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord. (118-123)

The battle with the Red Knight is one of many symptoms of the disintegration of Arthur's order, of his loss of control over his knights and they over themselves. It is likewise symbolic of a psychological disintegration, the way in which rigid morality, hypocrisy, and despair over the struggle between spirit and flesh can combine to produce a desire to annihilate the flesh, an ultimately self-destructive desire.

Again, though Tennyson's morality may be reduced to a set of fairly conventional codes of behavior, his emphasis on the manner in which that morality is to be pursued and his understanding of the ways in which it can be distorted reveal that his attitude toward morality is not naive. Indeed the Red Knight's challenge could be read as an indictment against contemporary Victorian society. But Tennyson, in keeping with the quiet nature of his subversive and unorthodox tendencies, is more inclined to offer challenges than to lay down indictments.

And the challenge which Tennyson offers in "The Last Tournament" in the face of the reversion of Arthur's order back to the waste land is not an easy one. Again it is difficult to assess the extent of Arthur's awareness, but Dagonet seems to speak for Tennyson. Dagonet, Arthur's fool, is "his one true knight--/ Sole follower of the vows" (302-303), and refers to the king as

my brother fool, the king of fools!  
 Conceits himself as God that he can make  
 Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk  
 From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs,  
 And men from beasts--long live the king of fools! (354-358)

These lines are of central importance to the understanding of Arthur's tragedy and Tennyson's approach to value. The values which Arthur pursues are irrational, presumptive, and perhaps incapable of realization. They are values which mark Arthur as a fool, but Arthur's is a tragic folly because it ennobles him. Indeed Arthur is in many ways a modern tragic hero and his is an existential triumph.

We have already noted the similarity between Tennyson's and Unamuno's notions of the source of human value, and Unamuno, again in a manner similar to Tennyson, looks to Don Quixote as the type of the



modern hero, the man, as Unamuno sees him, who dwells in the midst of a battle between reason and spirit, affirming in Pascal's terms the truths of the heart which reason cannot understand. And Unamuno's challenge to mankind serves as a startlingly apt comment on the Idylls. He quotes and then revises Senancour as follows:

"Man is perishable. That may be; but let us perish resisting, and if 't is nothingness that awaits us do not let us so act that it shall be a just fate." Change this sentence from its negative to the positive form--"And if it is nothing that awaits us, let us so act that it shall be an unjust fate"--and you get the firmest basis for action for the man who cannot or will not be a dogmatist.<sup>22</sup>

And again:

If it is nothingness that awaits us, let us make an injustice of it; let us fight against destiny, even though without hope of victory; let us fight against it quixotically.

And not only do we fight against destiny in longing for what is irrational, but in acting in such a way that we make ourselves irreplaceable, in impressing our seal and mark upon others, in acting upon our neighbors in order to dominate them, in giving ourselves to them in order that we may eternalize ourselves so far as we can.<sup>23</sup>

This is exactly what Arthur does, and perhaps it explains why Arthur appears at times to be the presumptive overreacher who is punished with failure for his prideful expectations. Such a view cannot be reconciled with Tennyson's apparently wholehearted sympathy with Arthur's endeavour. But we can reconcile Arthur's grandeur with his presumption if we see him, as I believe Tennyson saw him, as gloriously presumptive, quixotically heroic, failing not because he was being punished but because it is the tragic fate of man in the heroic act of creating himself and his world.

This view also explains why this story of the birth and death of

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<sup>22</sup>Unamuno, p. 263.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

an ideal order cannot be read as much in the way of political comment. If Arthur had made some kind of practical mistake, we could take him as a kind of object lesson in what not to do and find some clear indication pointing to the way in which such an order could be preserved. But there is no indication of the possibility of such a reading, no suggestion that if Arthur had expected and demanded just so much and no more, tensions would have relaxed enough so that some semblance of his order could have been maintained. For Tennyson as for Unamuno there is no possibility of compromise between flesh and spirit, doubt and faith, reason and the will to believe, no way, for instance, to reconcile the naturalistic world view of Tristram with Dagonet's adherence to Arthur's dream; each can only see the other as a fool. Nor is there any possibility of relieving the tension by removing one of the forces, annihilating the flesh, for instance, to free the spirit. The choice between cosmos and chaos is an either-or proposition which cannot, at least in this life, escape the condition of warfare, the quixotic struggle to live so that if nothingness is our fate it shall be an unjust fate.

It is Arthur's final triumph in "The Passing of Arthur" that he affirms the values by which he has lived in spite of the failure to permanently realize them in time. And his affirmations grow out of doubt and are affirmed in spite of continuing doubt. Bedivere stands here in contrast to Arthur as another example of the type of man who demands some kind of certitude, a record or relic more sure than the "empty breath/ And rumors of a doubt" (267-268) which is all that will be left of Arthur if Excalibur is lost. Bedivere desires on the symbolic level an external, objective guarantee of the authenticity of the values

which Arthur represents. But it is the tragic fate of man to live without such certitude, to be forced to affirm, as Arthur does, in spite of doubt.

Immediately following his final affirmation, that "the whole round earth is every way/ Bound by gold chains about the feet of God," Arthur bids farewell to Bedivere and says,

I am going a long way  
With these thou seest--if indeed I go--  
For all my mind is clouded with a doubt--  
To the island-valley of Avilion. (424-427)

And this continuing doubt brings us to Unamuno again and to a theme which we have been pursuing throughout this chapter:

But he who believes that he is sailing, perhaps without a set course, on an unstable raft, must not be dismayed if the raft gives way beneath his feet and threatens to sink. Such a one thinks that he acts, not because he deems his principle of action to be true, but in order to make it true, in order to prove its truth, in order to create his own spiritual world.<sup>24</sup>

Morse Peckham, commenting briefly on the Idylls in Beyond the Tragic Vision, says that on the surface it conforms with middleclass morality;

that is its exoteric face. But beneath, esoterically, it is an utterly disillusioned demonstration, like the Ring, that society cannot be redeemed, that its ills cannot be healed, that the transcendental hero violates those he presses into his service, and that the artist-hero must forever remain alienated.<sup>25</sup>

Much of this is true, but there is more to Tennyson's attitude. He may be disenchanted, but not disillusioned. Certainly the Idylls demon-

<sup>24</sup>Unamuno, p. 262.

<sup>25</sup>Morse Peckham, Beyond the Tragic Vision: The Quest for Identity in the Nineteenth Century (New York: George Braziller, 1962), p. 293.

strates the failure of the transcendental hero, if we must call Arthur that, to redeem society, but the note of hope with which it concludes indicates that despair is not the inevitable conclusion. If Arthur is indeed the highest, holiest manhood, and if there is perhaps a kind of evolutionary progression through which man is passing, then society may ultimately be redeemed not by a single hero but by all men becoming heroes, becoming Arthurs. Bedivere is in such a position at the end of the poem, left alone to face the task of creating his own spiritual world.

Such a task is not easy, nor does it hold out any certainty of fulfillment; but if God is not known in the world and there is no expectation of his revealing himself, if the transcendental hero cannot depart, discover the ancient secret, and unseal the glory that will heal the world's old wound, then it is the only way left in which value can be brought into the wasteland. However conventional Tennyson may appear at times in his affirmations, underlying them is the recognition of their uncertain origins in man's inner life and of their contingency, the fact that their permanence is dependent on continuing affirmation, which offers the challenge to individual men to make real the idea of spiritual progress through the creative life. W. David Shaw comes to a similar conclusion in the most recently published article on the Idylls:

Even after their defeat in the great battle of the West, the idealists must continue to create new order out of nature, and they must keep re-creating it. For this is the only way in which they can participate in the divine, which seems at times (as at the end of "The Holy Grail") to be merely a projection of an infinite and unlimited humanity. According to this more radical and apocalyptic view, truth is itself a human creation which the idealists must rediscover in each succeeding age. The real meaning of Arthur's second coming is that for the spirit he represents there can be no past or future but only a continuing present.

Tennyson's Arthurian myth is designed to lead to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see not our past legends, but the total cultural form of our present life as it is involved in the same venture of civilizing nature and investing the waste land with the flesh and blood of our own redeeming vision.<sup>26</sup>

And the artist-hero is alienated only in a very qualified sense. As we have seen, Tennyson does not deal with the artist-hero as such in the Idylls, since the notion of the creative life calls upon all men to assume the creative burden. The hero does suffer alienation because of the dreamlike quality of the order toward which he aspires, the subjective ground of his commitment, and the failure to realize his dream, but Tennyson does not seem to be able to rest content with the conclusion of utter alienation. Arthur's dream involves unity, a world order, and his final affirmation, that the world is "Bound by golden chains about the feet of God," reaffirms that dream.

This may be a matter of Tennyson's refusing to draw the final deduction, but as we suggested earlier, there is perhaps no such thing as a final deduction. Sartre faces a similar problem in "Existentialism Is a Humanism" when he moves from the notion of the individual responsibility of each man to choose himself to the responsibility which binds men together:

When we say that a man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be.<sup>27</sup>

For Sartre this larger responsibility is the basis of a full realization

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<sup>26</sup>W. David Shaw, "The Idealist's Dilemma in Idylls of the King," Victorian Poetry, V (1967), 53.

<sup>27</sup>Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 291.

of what existentialists mean by the word anguish:

The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows--When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind--in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

And further,

Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do." If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish.<sup>29</sup>

It is just this kind of anguish, in addition to the anxiety that we have already described about his identity and immortality, which plagued Tennyson and many of the major Victorian writers throughout their lives. But it also reveals the fact that Tennyson's desire to achieve meaningful involvement with humanity is not a mistaken denial of the supposed inevitable alienation of the artist, but part of an existentially valid and authentic pursuit of selfhood. Perhaps the sense of seriousness and responsibility about commitments which we find in so many of the major Victorians is not so particularly Victorian after all, and the kind of anguish which Sartre describes accounts for the existence in Tennyson and others of the seemingly contradictory senses of alienation and involvement.

Such a view, moreover, makes it possible for us to see Tennyson as not a teacher or preacher or dogmatist, but as a man who, in pursuing his own humanity, recognized his involvement with all men. Indeed it is difficult to reconcile the word "dogmatic" with Tennyson's very

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<sup>28</sup>Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 292. <sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

apparent and intense sense of doubt; and the kind of anguish which Sartre describes provides a more plausible analogue in terms of which we can see his honesty and modernity.

Certainly an art conditioned by this kind of anguish runs the risk of becoming dogmatic. The poet who writes as though he is choosing for all men will especially appear to be dogmatic in those poems which exhibit the state of commitment rather than the process out of which commitment arises. But such lapses are perhaps the price the artist runs the risk of paying for his humanity; perhaps it is also the price art must sometimes pay for relevance. In his best poetry, however, Tennyson reveals his awareness of the process; his major affirmations were not based on a Romantic leap into the noumenal or on a passive falling back on tradition and convention, but on a courageous and creative commitment in spite of doubt to those values which could answer the needs of his humanity. As Tennyson saw it, the answer to the question of whether life is chaos or cosmos resides in man's will, in his capacity to choose and create, and in his courage to assume the burden of the voyage in terms of a hoped for but uncertain end.

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