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ALFRED TENNYSON

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

In writing this brief sketch of the Life of Tennyson, and this attempt to appreciate his work, I have rested almost entirely on the Biography by Lord Tennyson (with his kind permission) and on the text of the Poems. As to the Life, doubtless current anecdotes, not given in the Biography, are known to me, and to most people. But as they must also be familiar to the author of the Biography, I have not thought it desirable to include what he rejected. The works of the "localisers" I have not read: Tennyson disliked these researches, as a rule, and they appear to be unessential, and often hazardous. The professed commentators I have not consulted. It appeared better to give one's own impressions of the Poems, unaffected by the impressions of others, except in one or two cases where matters of fact rather than of taste seemed to be in question. Thus on two or three points I have ventured to differ from a distinguished living critic, and have given the reasons for my dissent. Professor Bradley's *Commentary on In Memoriam* [1] came out after this sketch was in print. Many of the comments cited by Mr Bradley from his predecessors appear to justify my neglect of these curious inquirers. The "difficulties" which they raise are not likely, as a rule, to present themselves to persons who read poetry "for human pleasure."

I have not often dwelt on parallels to be found in the works of earlier poets. In many cases Tennyson deliberately reproduced passages from Greek, Latin, and old Italian writers, just as Virgil did in the case of Homer, Theocritus, Apollonius Rhodius, and others. There are, doubtless, instances in which a phrase is unconsciously reproduced by automatic memory, from an English poet. But I am less inclined than Mr Bradley to think that unconscious reminiscence is more common in Tennyson than in the poets generally. I have not closely examined Keats and Shelley, for example, to see how far they were influenced by unconscious memory. But Scott, confessedly, was apt to reproduce the phrases of others, and once unwittingly borrowed from a poem by the valet of one of his friends! I believe that many of the alleged borrowings in Tennyson are either no true parallels at all or are the unavoidable coincidences of expression which must inevitably occur. The poet himself stated, in a lively phrase, his opinion of the hunters after parallels, and I confess that I am much of his mind. They often remind me of Mr Punch's parody on an unfriendly review of Alexander Smith —

> "Most *women* have *no character* at all." – Pope.
> "No *character* that servant *woman* asked." – Smith.

I have to thank Mr Edmund Gosse and Mr Vernon Rendall for their kindness in reading my proof-sheets. They have saved me from some errors, but I may have occasionally retained matter which, for one reason or another, did not recommend itself to them. In no case are they responsible for the opinions expressed, or for the critical estimates. They are those of a Tennysonian, and, no doubt, would be other than they are if the writer were younger than he is. It does not follow that they would necessarily be more correct, though probably they would be more in vogue. The point of view must shift with each generation of readers, as ideas or beliefs go in or out of fashion, are accepted, rejected, or rehabilitated. To one age Tennyson may seem weakly superstitious; to another needlessly sceptical. After all, what he must live by is, not his opinions, but his poetry. The poetry of Milton survives his ideas; whatever may be the fate of the ideas of Tennyson his poetry must endure.

[1] Macmillan & Co.

I
BOYHOOD – CAMBRIDGE – EARLY POEMS

The life and work of Tennyson present something like the normal type of what, in circumstances as fortunate as mortals may expect, the life and work of a modern poet ought to be. A modern poet, one says, because even poetry is now affected by the division of labour. We do not look to the poet for a large share in the practical activities of existence: we do not expect him, like Æschylus and Sophocles, Theognis and Alcæus, to take a conspicuous part in politics and war; or even, as in the Age of Anne, to shine among wits and in society. Life has become, perhaps, too specialised for such multifarious activities. Indeed, even in ancient days, as a Celtic proverb and as the picture of life in the Homeric epics prove, the poet was already a man apart – not foremost among statesmen and rather backward among warriors. If we agree with a not unpopular opinion, the poet ought to be a kind of "Titanic" force, wrecking himself on his own passions and on the nature of things, as did Byron, Burns, Marlowe, and Musset. But Tennyson's career followed lines really more normal, the lines of the life of Wordsworth, wisdom and self-control directing the course of a long, sane, sound, and fortunate existence. The great physical strength which is commonly the basis of great mental vigour was not ruined in Tennyson by poverty and passion, as in the case of Burns, nor in forced literary labour, as in those of Scott and Dickens. For long he was poor, like Wordsworth and Southey, but never destitute. He made his early effort: he had his time of great sorrow, and trial, and apparent failure. With practical wisdom he conquered circumstances; he became eminent; he outlived reaction against his genius; he died in the fulness of a happy age and of renown. This full-orbed life, with not a few years of sorrow and stress, is what Nature seems to intend for the career of a divine minstrel. If Tennyson missed the "one crowded hour of glorious life," he had not to be content in "an age without a name."

It was not Tennyson's lot to illustrate any modern theory of the origin of genius. Born in 1809 of a Lincolnshire family, long connected with the soil but inconspicuous in history, Tennyson had nothing Celtic in his blood, as far as pedigrees prove. This is unfortunate for one school of theorists. His mother (genius is presumed to be derived from mothers) had a genius merely for moral excellence and for religion. She is described in the poem of *Isabel*, and was "a remarkable and saintly woman." In the male line, the family was not (as the families of genius ought to be) brief of life and unhealthy. "The Tennysons never die," said the sister who was betrothed to Arthur Hallam. The father, a clergyman, was, says his grandson, "a man of great ability," and his "excellent library" was an element in the education of his family. "My father was a poet," Tennyson said, "and could write regular verse very skilfully." In physical type the sons were tall, strong, and unusually dark: Tennyson, when abroad, was not taken for an Englishman; at home, strangers thought him "foreign." Most of the children had the temperament, and several of the sons had some of the accomplishments, of genius: whence derived by way of heredity is a question beyond conjecture, for the father's accomplishment was not unusual. As Walton says of the poet and the angler, they "were born to be so": we know no more.

The region in which the paternal hamlet of Somersby lies, "a land of quiet villages, large fields, grey hillsides, and noble tall-towered churches, on the lower slope of a Lincolnshire wold," does not appear to have been rich in romantic legend and tradition. The folk-lore of Lincolnshire, of which examples have been published, does seem to have a peculiar poetry of its own, but it was rather the humorous than the poetical aspect of the country-people that Tennyson appears to have known. In brief, we have nothing to inform us as to how genius came into that generation of Tennysons which was born between 1807 and 1819. A source and a cause there must have been, but these things are hidden, except from popular science.

Precocity is not a sign of genius, but genius is perhaps always accompanied by precocity. This is especially notable in the cases of painting, music, and mathematics; but in the matter of literature genius may chiefly show itself in acquisition, as in Sir Walter Scott, who when a boy knew much, but did little that would attract notice. As a child and a boy young Tennyson was remarked both for acquisition and performance. His own reminiscences of his childhood varied somewhat in detail. In one place we learn that at the age of eight he covered a slate with blank verse in the manner of Jamie Thomson, the only poet with whom he was then acquainted. In another passage he says, "The first poetry that moved me was my own at five years old. When I was eight I remember making a line I thought grander than Campbell, or Byron, or Scott. I rolled it out, it was this —

'With slaughterous sons of thunder rolled the flood' —

great nonsense, of course, but I thought it fine!"

It *was* fine, and was thoroughly Tennysonian. Scott, Campbell, and Byron probably never produced a line with the qualities of this nonsense verse. "Before I could read I was in the habit on a stormy day of spreading my arms to the wind and crying out, 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind,' and the words 'far, far away' had always a strange charm for me." A late lyric has this overword, *Far*, *far away*!

A boy of eight who knew the contemporary poets was more or less precocious. Tennyson also knew Pope, and wrote hundreds of lines in Pope's measure. At twelve the boy produced an epic, in Scott's manner, of some six thousand lines. He "never felt himself more truly inspired," for the sense of "inspiration" (as the late Mr Myers has argued in an essay on the "Mechanism of Genius") has little to do with the actual value of the product. At fourteen Tennyson wrote a drama in blank verse. A chorus from this play (as one guesses), a piece from "an unpublished drama written very early," is published in the volume of 1830: —

"The varied earth, the moving heaven,
The rapid waste of roving sea,
The fountain-pregnant mountains riven
To shapes of wildest anarchy,
By secret fire and midnight storms
That wander round their windy cones."

These lines are already Tennysonian. There is the classical transcript, "the varied earth," *dædala tellus*. There is the geological interest in the forces that shape the hills. There is the use of the favourite word "windy," and later in the piece —

"The troublous autumn's *sallow* gloom."

The young poet from boyhood was original in his manner.

Byron made him *blasé* at fourteen. Then Byron died, and Tennyson scratched on a rock "Byron is dead," on "a day when the whole world seemed darkened for me." Later he considered Byron's poetry "too much akin to rhetoric." "Byron is not an artist or a thinker, or a creator in the higher sense, but a strong personality; he is endlessly clever, and is now unduly depreciated." He "did give the world another heart and new pulses, and so we are kept going." But "he was dominated by Byron till he was seventeen, when he put him away altogether."

In his boyhood, despite the sufferings which he endured for a while at school at Louth; despite bullying from big boys and masters, Tennyson would "shout his verses to the skies." "Well, Arthur, I mean to be famous," he used to say to one of his brothers. He observed nature very closely by the brook and the thundering sea-shores: he was never a sportsman, and his angling was in the manner of the lover of *The Miller's Daughter*. He was seventeen (1826) when *Poems by Two Brothers* (himself and his brother Frederick) was published with the date 1827. These poems contain, as far as I have

been able to discover, nothing really Tennysonian. What he had done in his own manner was omitted, "being thought too much out of the common for the public taste." The young poet had already saving common-sense, and understood the public. Fragments of the true gold are found in the volume of 1830, others are preserved in the Biography. The ballad suggested by *The Bride of Lammermoor* was not unworthy of Beddoes, and that novel, one cannot but think, suggested the opening situation in *Maud*, where the hero is a modern Master of Ravenswood in his relation to the rich interloping family and the beautiful daughter. To this point we shall return. It does not appear that Tennyson was conscious in *Maud* of the suggestion from Scott, and the coincidence may be merely accidental.

The Lover's Tale, published in 1879, was mainly a work of the poet's nineteenth year. A few copies had been printed for friends. One of these, with errors of the press, and without the intended alterations, was pirated by an unhappy man in 1875. In old age Tennyson brought out the work of his boyhood. "It was written before I had ever seen Shelley, though it is called Shelleyan," he said; and indeed he believed that his work had never been imitative, after his earliest efforts in the manner of Thomson and of Scott. The only things in *The Lover's Tale* which would suggest that the poet here followed Shelley are the Italian scene of the story, the character of the versification, and the extraordinary luxuriance and exuberance of the imagery. [2] As early as 1868 Tennyson heard that written copies of *The Lover's Tale* were in circulation. He then remarked, as to the exuberance of the piece: "Allowance must be made for abundance of youth. It is rich and full, but there are mistakes in it… The poem is the breath of young love."

How truly Tennysonian the manner is may be understood even from the opening lines, full of the original cadences which were to become so familiar: —

> "Here far away, seen from the topmost cliff,
> Filling with purple gloom the vacancies
> Between the tufted hills, the sloping seas
> Hung in mid-heaven, and half way down rare sails,
> White as white clouds, floated from sky to sky."

The narrative in parts one and two (which alone were written in youth) is so choked with images and descriptions as to be almost obscure. It is the story, practically, of a love like that of Paul and Virginia, but the love is not returned by the girl, who prefers the friend of the narrator. Like the hero of *Maud*, the speaker has a period of madness and illusion; while the third part, "The Golden Supper" – suggested by a story of Boccaccio, and written in maturity – is put in the mouth of another narrator, and is in a different style. The discarded lover, visiting the vault which contains the body of his lady, finds her alive, and restores her to her husband. The whole finished legend is necessarily not among the author's masterpieces. But perhaps not even Keats in his earliest work displayed more of promise, and gave more assurance of genius. Here and there come turns and phrases, "all the charm of all the Muses," which remind a reader of things later well known in pieces more mature. Such lines are —

> "Strange to me and sweet,
> Sweet through strange years,"

and —

> "Like to a low-hung and a fiery sky
> Hung round with *ragged rims* and burning folds."

[2] To the present writer, as to others, *The Lover's Tale* appeared to be imitative of Shelley, but if Tennyson had never read Shelley, *cadit quæstio*.

And —

> "Like sounds without the twilight realm of dreams,
> Which wander round the bases of the hills."

We also note close observation of nature in the curious phrase —

> "Cries of the partridge like a rusty key
> Turned in a lock."

Of this kind was Tennyson's adolescent vein, when he left

> "The poplars four
> That stood beside his father's door,"

the Somersby brook, and the mills and granges, the seas of the Lincolnshire coast, and the hills and dales among the wolds, for Cambridge. He was well read in old and contemporary English literature, and in the classics. Already he was acquainted with the singular trance-like condition to which his poems occasionally allude, a subject for comment later. He matriculated at Trinity, with his brother Charles, on February 20, 1828, and had an interview of a not quite friendly sort with a proctor before he wore the gown.

That Tennyson should go to Cambridge, not to Oxford, was part of the nature of things, by which Cambridge educates the majority of English poets, whereas Oxford has only "turned out" a few – like Shelley. At that time, as in Macaulay's day, the path of university honours at Cambridge lay through Mathematics, and, except for his prize poem in 1829, Tennyson took no honours at all. His classical reading was pursued as literature, not as a course of grammar and philology. No English poet, at least since Milton, had been better read in the classics; but Tennyson's studies did not aim at the gaining of academic distinction. His aspect was such that Thompson, later Master of Trinity, on first seeing him come into hall, said, "That man must be a poet." Like Byron, Shelley, and probably Coleridge, Tennyson looked the poet that he was: "Six feet high, broad-chested, strong-limbed, his face Shakespearian and with deep eyelids, his forehead ample, crowned with dark wavy hair, his head finely poised."

Not much is recorded of Tennyson as an undergraduate. In our days efforts would have been made to enlist so promising a recruit in one of the college boats; but rowing was in its infancy. It is a peculiarity of the universities that little flocks of men of unusual ability come up at intervals together, breaking the monotony of idlers, prize scholars, and honours men. Such a group appeared at Balliol in Matthew Arnold's time, and rather later, at various colleges, in the dawn of Pre-Raphaelitism. The Tennysons – Alfred, Frederick, and Charles – were members of such a set. There was Arthur Hallam, son of the historian, from Eton; there was Spedding, the editor and biographer of Bacon; Milnes (Lord Houghton), Blakesley (Dean of Lincoln), Thompson, Merivale, Trench (a poet, and later, Archbishop of Dublin), Brookfield, Buller, and, after Tennyson the greatest, Thackeray, a contemporary if not an "Apostle." Charles Buller's, like Hallam's, was to be an "unfulfilled renown." Of Hallam, whose name is for ever linked with his own, Tennyson said that he would have been a great man, but not a great poet; "he was as near perfection as mortal man could be." His scanty remains are chiefly notable for his divination of Tennyson as a great poet; for the rest, we can only trust the author of *In Memoriam* and the verdict of tradition.

The studies of the poet at this time included original composition in Greek and Latin verse, history, and a theme that he alone has made poetical, natural science. All poetry has its roots in the

age before natural science was more than a series of nature-myths. The poets have usually, like Keats, regretted the days when

> "There was an awful rainbow once in heaven,"

when the hills and streams were not yet "dispeopled of their dreams." Tennyson, on the other hand, was already finding material for poetry in the world as seen through microscope and telescope, and as developed through "æonian" processes of evolution. In a notebook, mixed with Greek, is a poem on the Moon – not the moon of Selene, "the orbed Maiden," but of astronomical science. *In Memoriam* recalls the conversations on labour and politics, discussions of the age of the Reform Bill, of rick-burning (expected to "make taters cheaper"), and of Catholic emancipation; also the emancipation of such negroes as had not yet tasted the blessings of freedom. In politics Tennyson was what he remained, a patriot, a friend of freedom, a foe of disorder. His politics, he said, were those "of Shakespeare, Bacon, and every sane man." He was one of the Society of Apostles, and characteristically contributed an essay on Ghosts. Only the preface survives: it is not written in a scientific style; but bids us "not assume that any vision *is* baseless." Perhaps the author went on to discuss "veridical hallucinations," but his ideas about these things must be considered later.

It was by his father's wish that Tennyson competed for the English prize poem. The theme, Timbuctoo, was not inspiring. Thackeray wrote a good parody of the ordinary prize poem in Pope's metre: —

> "I see her sons the hill of glory mount,
> And sell their sugars on their own account;
> Prone to her feet the prostrate nations come,
> Sue for her rice and barter for her rum."

Tennyson's work was not much more serious: he merely patched up an old piece, in blank verse, on the battle of Armageddon. The poem is not destitute of Tennysonian cadence, and ends, not inappropriately, with "All was night." Indeed, all *was* night.

An ingenious myth accounts for Tennyson's success: At Oxford, says Charles Wordsworth, the author was more likely to have been rusticated than rewarded. But already (1829) Arthur Hallam told Mr Gladstone that Tennyson "promised fair to be the greatest poet of our generation, perhaps of our century."

In 1830 Tennyson published the first volume of which he was sole author. Browning's *Pauline* was of the year 1833. It was the very dead hours of the Muses. The great Mr Murray had ceased, as one despairing of song, to publish poetry. Bulwer Lytton, in the preface to *Paul Clifford* (1830), announced that poetry, with every other form of literature except the Novel, was unremunerative and unread. Coleridge and Scott were silent: indeed Sir Walter was near his death; Wordsworth had shot his bolt, though an arrow or two were left in the quiver. Keats, Shelley, and Byron were dead; Milman's brief vogue was departing. It seemed as if novels alone could appeal to readers, so great a change in taste had been wrought by the sixteen years of Waverley romances. The slim volume of Tennyson was naturally neglected, though Leigh Hunt reviewed it in the *Tatler*. Hallam's comments in the *Englishman's Magazine*, though enthusiastic (as was right and natural), were judicious. "The author imitates no one." Coleridge did not read all the book, but noted "things of a good deal of beauty. The misfortune is that he has begun to write verses without very well understanding what metre is." As Tennyson said in 1890, "So I, an old man, who get a poem or poems every day, might cast a casual glance at a book, and seeing something which I could not scan or understand, might possibly decide against the book without further consideration." As a rule, the said books are worthless. The number of versifiers makes it hard, indeed, for the poet to win recognition. One little new book of rhyme is so like another, and almost all are of so little interest!

The rare book that differs from the rest has a *bizarrerie* with its originality, and in the poems of 1830 there was, assuredly, more than enough of the bizarre. There were no hyphens in the double epithets, and words like "tendriltwine" seemed provokingly affected. A kind of lusciousness, like that of Keats when under the influence of Leigh Hunt, may here and there be observed. Such faults as these catch the indifferent eye when a new book is first opened, and the volume of 1830 was probably condemned by almost every reader of the previous generation who deigned to afford it a glance. Out of fifty-six pieces only twenty-three were reprinted in the two volumes of 1842, which won for Tennyson the general recognition of the world of letters. Five or six of the pieces then left out were added as *Juvenilia* in the collected works of 1871, 1872. The whole mass deserves the attention of students of the poet's development.

This early volume may be said to contain, in the germ, all the great original qualities of Tennyson, except the humour of his rural studies and the elaboration of his Idylls. For example, in *Mariana* we first note what may be called his perfection and accomplishment. The very few alterations made later are verbal. The moated grange of Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, and her mood of desertion and despair, are elaborated by a precision of truth and with a perfection of harmony worthy of Shakespeare himself, and minutely studied from the natural scenes in which the poet was born. If these verses alone survived out of the wreck of Victorian literature, they would demonstrate the greatness of the author as clearly as do the fragments of Sappho. *Isabel* (a study of the poet's mother) is almost as remarkable in its stately dignity; while *Recollections of the Arabian Nights* attest the power of refined luxury in romantic description, and herald the unmatched beauty of *The Lotos-Eaters*. *The Poet*, again, is a picture of that which Tennyson himself was to fulfil; and *Oriana* is a revival of romance, and of the ballad, not limited to the ballad form as in its prototype, *Helen of Kirkconnell*. Curious and exquisite experiment in metre is indicated in the *Leonine Elegiacs*, in *Claribel*, and several other poems. Qualities which were not for long to find public expression, speculative powers brooding, in various moods, on ultimate and insoluble questions, were attested by *The Mystic*, and *Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with Itself*, an unlucky title of a remarkable performance. "In this, the most agitated of all his poems, we find the soul urging onward

> 'Thro' utter dark a full-sail'd skiff,
> Unpiloted i' the echoing dance
> Of reboant whirlwinds;'

and to the question, 'Why not believe, then?' we have as answer a simile of the sea, which cannot slumber like a mountain tarn, or

> 'Draw down into his vexed pools
> All that blue heaven which hues and paves'

the tranquil inland mere." [3]
The poet longs for the faith of his infant days and of his mother —

> "Thy mild deep eyes upraised, that knew
> The beauty and repose of faith,
> And the clear spirit shining thro'."

That faith is already shaken, and the long struggle for belief has already begun.

[3] F. W. H. Myers, *Science and a Future Life*, p. 133.

Tennyson, according to Matthew Arnold, was not *un esprit puissant*. Other and younger critics, who have attained to a cock-certain mood of negation, are apt to blame him because, in fact, he did not finally agree with their opinions. If a man is necessarily a weakling or a hypocrite because, after trying all things, he is not an atheist or a materialist, then the reproach of insincerity or of feebleness of mind must rest upon Tennyson. But it is manifest that, almost in boyhood, he had already faced the ideas which, to one of his character, almost meant despair: he had not kept his eyes closed. To his extremely self-satisfied accusers we might answer, in lines from this earliest volume (*The Mystic*): —

> "Ye scorn him with an undiscerning scorn;
> Ye cannot read the marvel in his eye,
> The still serene abstraction."

He would behold

> "One shadow in the midst of a great light,
> One reflex from eternity on time,
> One mighty countenance of perfect calm,
> Awful with most invariable eyes."

His mystic of these boyish years —

> "Often lying broad awake, and yet
> Remaining from the body, and apart
> In intellect and power and will, hath heard
> Time flowing in the middle of the night,
> And all things creeping to a day of doom."

In this poem, never republished by the author, is an attempt to express an experience which in later years he more than once endeavoured to set forth in articulate speech, an experience which was destined to colour his finial speculations on ultimate problems of God and of the soul. We shall later have to discuss the opinion of an eminent critic, Mr Frederic Harrison, that Tennyson's ideas, theological, evolutionary, and generally speculative, "followed, rather than created, the current ideas of his time." "The train of thought" (in *In Memoriam*), writes Mr Harrison, "is essentially that with which ordinary English readers had been made familiar by F. D. Maurice, Professor Jowett, Dr Martineau, *Ecce Homo*, *Hypatia*." Of these influences only Maurice, and Maurice only orally, could have reached the author of *The Mystic* and the *Supposed Confessions*. *Ecce Homo*, *Hypatia*, Mr Jowett, were all in the bosom of the future when *In Memoriam* was written. Now, *The Mystic* and the *Supposed Confessions* are prior to *In Memoriam*, earlier than 1830. Yet they already contain the chief speculative tendencies of *In Memoriam*; the growing doubts caused by evolutionary ideas (then familiar to Tennyson, though not to "ordinary English readers"), the longing for a return to childlike faith, and the mystical experiences which helped Tennyson to recover a faith that abode with him. In these things he was original. Even as an undergraduate he was not following "a train of thought made familiar" by authors who had not yet written a line, and by books which had not yet been published.

So much, then, of the poet that was to be and of the philosopher existed in the little volume of the undergraduate. In *The Mystic* we notice a phrase, two words long, which was later to be made familiar, "Daughters of time, divinely tall," reproduced in the picture of Helen: —

> "A daughter of the Gods, divinely tall,
> And most divinely fair."

The reflective pieces are certainly of more interest now (though they seem to have satisfied the poet less) than the gallery of airy fairy Lilians, Adelines, Rosalinds, and Eleänores: —

> "Daughters of dreams and of stories,"

like

> "Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores,
> Félise, and Yolande, and Juliette."

Cambridge, which he was soon to leave, did not satisfy the poet. Oxford did not satisfy Gibbon, or later, Shelley; and young men of genius are not, in fact, usually content with universities which, perhaps, are doing their best, but are neither governed nor populated by minds of the highest and most original class.

> "You that do profess to teach
> And teach us nothing, feeding not the heart."

The universities, in fact, teach a good deal of that which can be learned, but the best things cannot be taught. The universities give men leisure, books, and companionship, to learn for themselves. All tutors cannot be, and at that time few dreamed of being, men like Jowett and T. H. Green, Gamaliels at whose feet undergraduates sat with enthusiasm, "did *eagerly* frequent," like Omar Khayyám. In later years Tennyson found closer relations between dons and undergraduates, and recorded his affection for his university. She had supplied him with such companionship as is rare, and permitted him to "catch the blossom of the flying terms," even if tutors and lecturers were creatures of routine, *terriblement enfonces dans la matière*, like the sire of Madelon and Cathos, that honourable citizen.

Tennyson just missed, by going down, a visit of Wordsworth to Cambridge. The old enthusiast of revolution was justifying passive obedience: thirty years had turned the almost Jacobin into an almost Jacobite. Such is the triumph of time. In the summer of 1830 Tennyson, with Hallam, visited the Pyrenees. The purpose was political – to aid some Spanish rebels. The fruit is seen in *Œnone* and *Mariana in the South*.

In March 1831 Tennyson lost his father. "He slept in the dead man's bed, earnestly desiring to see his ghost, but no ghost came." "You see," he said, "ghosts do not generally come to imaginative people;" a remark very true, though ghosts are attributed to "imagination." Whatever causes these phantasms, it is not the kind of *phantasia* which is consciously exercised by the poet. Coleridge had seen far too many ghosts to believe in them; and Coleridge and Donne apart, with the hallucinations of Goethe and Shelley, who met themselves, what poet ever did "see a ghost"? One who saw Tennyson as he wandered alone at this period called him "a mysterious being, seemingly lifted high above other mortals, and having a power of intercourse with the spirit world not granted to others." But it was the world of the poet, not of the "medium."

The Tennysons stayed on at the parsonage for six years. But, anticipating their removal, Arthur Hallam in 1831 dealt in prophecy about the identification in the district of places in his friend's poems – "critic after critic will trace the wanderings of the brook," as, – in fact, critic after critic has done. Tennyson disliked – these "localisers." The poet's walks were shared by Arthur Hallam, then affianced to his sister Emily.

II.
POEMS OF 1831–1833

By 1832 most of the poems of Tennyson's second volume were circulating in MS. among his friends, and no poet ever had friends more encouraging. Perhaps bards of to-day do not find an eagerness among their acquaintance for effusions in manuscript, or in proof-sheets. The charmed volume appeared at the end of the year (dated 1833), and Hallam denounced as "infamous" Lockhart's review in the *Quarterly*. Infamous or not, it is extremely diverting. How Lockhart could miss the great and abundant poetry remains a marvel. Ten years later the Scorpion repented, and invited Sterling to review any book he pleased, for the purpose of enabling him to praise the two volumes of 1842, which he did gladly. Lockhart hated all affectation and "preciosity," of which the new book was not destitute. He had been among Wordsworth's most ardent admirers when Wordsworth had few, but the memories of the war with the "Cockney School" clung to him, the war with Leigh Hunt, and now he gave himself up to satire. Probably he thought that the poet was a member of a London clique. There is really no excuse for Lockhart, except that he *did* repent, that much of his banter was amusing, and that, above all, his censures were accepted by the poet, who altered, later, many passages of a fine absurdity criticised by the infamous reviewer. One could name great prose-writers, historians, who never altered the wondrous errors to which their attention was called by critics. Prose-writers have been more sensitively attached to their glaring blunders in verifiable facts than was this very sensitive poet to his occasional lapses in taste.

The Lady of Shalott, even in its early form, was more than enough to give assurance of a poet. In effect it is even more poetical, in a mysterious way, if infinitely less human, than the later treatment of the same or a similar legend in *Elaine*. It has the charm of Coleridge, and an allegory of the fatal escape from the world of dreams and shadows into that of realities may have been really present to the mind of the young poet, aware that he was "living in phantasy." The alterations are usually for the better. The daffodil is not an aquatic plant, as the poet seems to assert in the first form —

"The yellow-leavèd water-lily,
The green sheathed daffodilly,
Tremble in the water chilly,
Round about Shalott."

Nobody can prefer to keep

"Though the squally east wind keenly
Blew, with folded arms serenely
By the water stood the queenly
Lady of Shalott."

However stoical the Lady may have been, the reader is too seriously sympathetic with her inevitable discomfort —

"All raimented in snowy white
That loosely flew,"

as she was. The original conclusion was distressing; we were dropped from the airs of mysterious romance: —

"They crossed themselves, their stars they blest,
Knight, minstrel, abbot, squire, and guest;
There lay a parchment on her breast,
That puzzled more than all the rest
The well-fed wits at Camelot."

Hitherto we have been "puzzled," but as with the sublime incoherences of a dream. Now we meet well-fed wits, who say, "Bless my stars!" as perhaps we should also have done in the circumstances – a dead lady arriving, in a very cold east wind, alone in a boat, for "her blood was frozen slowly," as was natural, granting the weather and the lady's airy costume. It is certainly matter of surprise that the young poet's vision broke up in this humorous manner. And, after all, it is less surprising that the Scorpion, finding such matter in a new little book by a new young man, was more sensitive to the absurdity than to the romance. But no lover of poetry should have been blind to the almost flawless excellence of *Mariana in the South*, inspired by the landscape of the Provençal tour with Arthur Hallam. In consequence of Lockhart's censures, or in deference to the maturer taste of the poet, *The Miller's Daughter* was greatly altered before 1842. It is one of the earliest, if not the very earliest, of Tennyson's domestic English idylls, poems with conspicuous beauties, but not without sacrifices to that Muse of the home affections on whom Sir Barnes Newcome delivered his famous lecture. The seventh stanza perhaps hardly deserved to be altered, as it is, so as to bring in "minnows" where "fish" had been the reading, and where "trout" would best recall an English chalk stream. To the angler the rising trout, which left the poet cold, is at least as welcome as the "reflex of a beauteous form." "Every woman seems an angel at the water-side," said "that good old angler, now with God," Thomas Todd Stoddart, and so "the long and listless boy" found it to be. It is no wonder that the mother was "*slowly* brought to yield consent to my desire." The domestic affections, in fact, do not adapt themselves so well to poetry as the passion, unique in Tennyson, of *Fatima*. The critics who hunt for parallels or plagiarisms will note —

"O Love, O fire! once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul thro'
My lips,"

and will observe Mr Browning's

"Once he kissed
My soul out in a fiery mist."

As to *Œnone*, the scenery of that earliest of the classical idylls is borrowed from the Pyrenees and the tour with Hallam. "It is possible that the poem may have been suggested by Beattie's *Judgment of Paris*," says Mr Collins; it is also possible that the tale which

"Quintus Calaber
Somewhat lazily handled of old"

may have reached Tennyson's mind from an older writer than Beattie. He is at least as likely to have been familiar with Greek myth as with the lamented "Minstrel." The form of 1833, greatly altered in 1842, contained such unlucky phrases as "cedar shadowy," and "snowycoloured," "marblecold," "violet-eyed" – easy spoils of criticism. The alterations which converted a beautiful but faulty into a beautiful and flawless poem perhaps obscure the significance of Œnone's "I will not die

alone," which in the earlier volume directly refers to the foreseen end of all as narrated in Tennyson's late piece, *The Death of Œnone*. The whole poem brings to mind the glowing hues of Titian and the famous Homeric lines on the divine wedlock of Zeus and Hera.

The allegory or moral of *The Palace of Art* does not need explanation. Not many of the poems owe more to revision. The early stanza about Isaiah, with fierce Ezekiel, and "Eastern Confutzee," did undeniably remind the reader, as Lockhart said, of *The Groves of Blarney*.

> "With statues gracing that noble place in,
> All haythen goddesses most rare,
> Petrarch, Plato, and Nebuchadnezzar,
> All standing naked in the open air."

In the early version the Soul, being too much "up to date,"

> "Lit white streams of dazzling gas,"

like Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford.

> "Thus her intense, untold delight,
> In deep or vivid colour, smell, and sound,
> Was flattered day and night."

Lockhart was not fond of Sir Walter's experiments in gas, the "smell" gave him no "deep, untold delight," and his "infamous review" was biassed by these circumstances.

The volume of 1833 was in nothing more remarkable than in its proof of the many-sidedness of the author. He offered mediæval romance, and classical perfection touched with the romantic spirit, and domestic idyll, of which *The May Queen* is probably the most popular example. The "mysterious being," conversant with "the spiritual world," might have been expected to disdain topics well within the range of Eliza Cook. He did not despise but elevated them, and thereby did more to introduce himself to the wide English public than he could have done by a century of *Fatimas* or *Lotos-Eaters*. On the other hand, a taste more fastidious, or more perverse, will scarcely be satisfied with pathos which in process of time has come to seem "obvious." The pathos of early death in the prime of beauty is less obvious in Homer, where Achilles is to be the victim, or in the laments of the Anthology, where we only know that the dead bride or maiden was fair; but the poor May Queen is of her nature rather commonplace.

> "That good man, the clergyman, has told me words of peace,"

strikes a note rather resembling the Tennysonian parody of Wordsworth —

> "A Mr Wilkinson, a clergyman."

The Lotos-Eaters, of course, is at the opposite pole of the poet's genius. A few plain verses of the *Odyssey*, almost bald in their reticence, are the *point de repère* of the most magical vision expressed in the most musical verse. Here is the languid charm of Spenser, enriched with many classical memories, and pictures of natural beauty gorgeously yet delicately painted. After the excision of some verses, rather fantastical, in 1842, the poem became a flawless masterpiece, – one of the eternal possessions of song.

On the other hand, the opening of *The Dream of Fair Women* was marred in 1833 by the grotesque introductory verses about "a man that sails in a balloon." Young as Tennyson was, these freakish passages are a psychological marvel in the work of one who did not lack the saving sense of humour. The poet, wafted on the wing and "pinion that the Theban eagle bear," cannot conceivably be likened to an aeronaut waving flags out of a balloon – except in a spirit of self-mockery which was

not Tennyson's. His remarkable self-discipline in excising the fantastic and superfluous, and reducing his work to its classical perfection of thought and form, is nowhere more remarkable than in this magnificent vision. It is probably by mere accidental coincidence of thought that, in the verses *To J. S.* (James Spedding), Tennyson reproduces the noble speech on the warrior's death which Sir Walter Scott places in the lips of the great Dundee: "It is the memory which the soldier leaves behind him, like the long train of light that follows the sunken sun, *that* is all that is worth caring for," the light which lingers eternally on the hills of Atholl. Tennyson's lines are a close parallel: —

"His memory long will live alone
In all our hearts, as mournful light
That broods above the fallen sun,
And dwells in heaven half the night."

Though Tennyson disliked the exhibition of "the chips of the workshop," we have commented on them, on the early readings of the early volumes. They may be regarded more properly as the sketches of a master than as "chips," and do more than merely engage the idle curiosity of the fanatics of first editions. They prove that the poet was studious of perfection, and wisely studious, for his alterations, unlike those of some authors, were almost invariably for the better, the saner, the more mature in taste. The early readings are also worth notice, because they partially explain, by their occasionally fantastic and humourless character, the lack of early and general recognition of the poet's genius. The native prejudice of mankind is not in favour of a new poet. Of new poets there are always so many, most of them bad, that nature has protected mankind by an armour of suspiciousness. The world, and Lockhart, easily found good reasons for distrusting this new claimant of the ivy and the bays: moreover, since about 1814 there had been a reaction against new poetry. The market was glutted. Scott had set everybody on reading, and too many on writing, novels. The great reaction of the century against all forms of literature except prose fiction had begun. Near the very date of Tennyson's first volume Bulwer Lytton, as we saw, had frankly explained that he wrote novels because nobody would look at anything else. Tennyson had to overcome this universal, or all but universal, indifference to new poetry, and, after being silent for ten years, overcome it he did – a remarkable victory of art and of patient courage. Times were even worse for poets than to-day. Three hundred copies of the new volume were sold! But Tennyson's friends were not puffers in league with pushing publishers.

Meanwhile the poet in 1833 went on quietly and undefeated with his work. He composed *The Gardener's Daughter*, and was at work on the *Morte d'Arthur*, suppressed till the ninth year, on the Horatian plan. Many poems were produced (and even written out, which a number of his pieces never were), and were left in manuscript till they appeared in the Biography. Most of these are so little worthy of the author that the marvel is how he came to write them – in what uninspired hours. Unlike Wordsworth, he could weed the tares from his wheat. His studies were in Greek, German, Italian, history (a little), and chemistry, botany, and electricity – "cross-grained Muses," these last.

It was on September 15, 1833, that Arthur Hallam died. Unheralded by sign or symptom of disease as it was, the news fell like a thunderbolt from a serene sky. Tennyson's and Hallam's love had been "passing the love of women." A blow like this drives a man on the rocks of the ultimate, the insoluble problems of destiny. "Is this the end?" Nourished as on the milk of lions, on the elevating and strengthening doctrines of popular science, trained from childhood to forego hope and attend evening lectures, the young critics of our generation find Tennyson a weakling because he had hopes and fears concerning the ultimate renewal of what was more than half his life – his friendship.

"That faith I fain would keep,
That hope I'll not forego:

Eternal be the sleep —
Unless to waken so,"

wrote Lockhart, and the verses echoed ceaselessly in the widowed heart of Carlyle. These men, it is part of the duty of critics later born to remember, were not children or cowards, though they dreamed, and hoped, and feared. We ought to make allowance for failings incident to an age not yet fully enlightened by popular science, and still undivorced from spiritual ideas that are as old as the human race, and perhaps not likely to perish while that race exists. Now and then even scientific men have been mistaken, especially when they have declined to examine evidence, as in this problem of the transcendental nature of the human spirit they usually do. At all events Tennyson was unconvinced that death is the end, and shortly after the fatal tidings arrived from Vienna he began to write fragments in verse preluding to the poem of *In Memoriam*. He also began, in a mood of great misery, *The Two Voices*; *or*, *Thoughts of a Suicide*. The poem seems to have been partly done by September 1834, when Spedding commented on it, and on the beautiful *Sir Galahad*, "intended for something of a male counterpart to *St Agnes*." The *Morte d'Arthur* Tennyson then thought "the best thing I have managed lately." Very early in 1835 many stanzas of *In Memoriam* had taken form. "I do not wish to be dragged forward in any shape before the reading public at present," wrote the poet, when he heard that Mill desired to write on him. His *Œnone* he had brought to its new perfection, and did not desire comments on work now several years old. He also wrote his *Ulysses* and his *Tithonus*.

If ever the term "morbid" could have been applied to Tennyson, it would have been in the years immediately following the death of Arthur Hallam. But the application would have been unjust. True, the poet was living out of the world; he was unhappy, and he was, as people say, "doing nothing." He was so poor that he sold his Chancellor's prize gold medal, and he did not

"Scan his whole horizon
In quest of what he could clap eyes on,"

in the way of money-making, which another poet describes as the normal attitude of all men as well as of pirates. A careless observer would have thought that the poet was dawdling. But he dwelt in no Castle of Indolence; he studied, he composed, he corrected his verses: like Sir Walter in Liddesdale, "he was making himsel' a' the time." He did not neglect the movements of the great world in that dawn of discontent with the philosophy of commercialism. But it was not his vocation to plunge into the fray, and on to platforms.

It is a very rare thing anywhere, especially in England, for a man deliberately to choose poetry as the duty of his life, and to remain loyal, as a consequence, to the bride of St Francis – Poverty. This loyalty Tennyson maintained, even under the temptation to make money in recognised ways presented by his new-born love for his future wife, Miss Emily Sellwood. They had first met in 1830, when she, a girl of seventeen, seemed to him like "a Dryad or an Oread wandering here." But admiration became the affection of a lifetime when Tennyson met Miss Sellwood as bridesmaid to her sister, the bride of his brother Charles, in 1836. The poet could not afford to marry, and, like the hero of *Locksley Hall*, he may have asked himself, "What is that which I should do?" By 1840 he had done nothing tangible and lucrative, and correspondence between the lovers was forbidden. That neither dreamed of Tennyson's deserting poetry for a more normal profession proved of great benefit to the world. The course is one which could only be justified by the absolute certainty of possessing genius.

III.
1837–1842

In 1837 the Tennysons left the old rectory; till 1840 they lived at High Beech in Epping Forest, and after a brief stay at Tunbridge Wells went to Boxley, near Maidstone.

It appears that at last the poet had "beat his music out," though his friends "still tried to cheer him." But the man who wrote *Ulysses* when his grief was fresh could not be suspected of declining into a hypochondriac. "If I mean to make my mark at all, it must be by shortness," he said at this time; "for the men before me had been so diffuse, and most of the big things, except *King Arthur*, had been done." The age had not *la tête épique*: Poe had announced the paradox that there is no such thing as a long poem, and even in dealing with Arthur, Tennyson followed the example of Theocritus in writing, not an epic, but epic idylls. Long poems suit an age of listeners, for which they were originally composed, or of leisure and few books. At present epics are read for duty's sake, not for the only valid reason, "for human pleasure," in FitzGerald's phrase.

Between 1838 and 1840 Tennyson made some brief tours in England with FitzGerald, and, coming from Coventry, wrote *Godiva*. His engagement with Miss Sellwood seemed to be adjourned *sine die*, as they were forbidden to correspond.

By 1841 Tennyson was living at Mablethorpe on the Lincolnshire coast; working at his volumes of 1842, much urged by FitzGerald and American admirers, who had heard of the poet through Emerson. Moxon was to be the publisher, himself something of a poet; but early in 1842 he had not yet received the MS. Perhaps Emerson heard of Tennyson through Carlyle, who, says Sterling, "said more in your praise than in any one's except Cromwell, and an American backwoodsman who has killed thirty or forty people with a bowie-knife." Carlyle at this time was much attached to Lockhart, editor of the *Quarterly Review*, and it may have been Carlyle who converted Lockhart to admiration of his old victim. Carlyle had very little more appreciation of Keats than had Byron, or (in early days) Lockhart, and it was probably as much the man of heroic physical mould, "a life-guardsman spoilt by making poetry," and the unaffected companion over a pipe, as the poet, that attracted him in Tennyson. As we saw, when the two triumphant volumes of 1842 did appear, Lockhart asked Sterling to review whatever book he pleased (meaning the Poems) in the *Quarterly*. The praise of Sterling may seem lukewarm to us, especially when compared with that of Spedding in the *Edinburgh*. But Sterling, and Lockhart too, were obliged to "gang warily." Lockhart had, to his constant annoyance, "a partner, Mr Croker," and I have heard from the late Dean Boyle that Mr Croker was much annoyed by even the mild applause yielded in the *Quarterly* to the author of the *Morte d'Arthur*.

While preparing the volumes of 1842 at Boxley, Tennyson's life was divided between London and the society of his brother-in-law, Mr Edmund Lushington, the great Greek scholar and Professor of Greek at Glasgow University. There was in Mr Lushington's personal aspect, and noble simplicity of manner and character, something that strongly resembled Tennyson himself. Among their common friends were Lord Houghton (Monckton Milnes), Mr Lear of the *Book of Nonsense* ("with such a pencil, such a pen"), Mr Venables (who at school modified the profile of Thackeray), and Lord Kelvin. In town Tennyson met his friends at The Cock, which he rendered classic; among them were Thackeray, Forster, Maclise, and Dickens. The times were stirring: social agitation, and "Carol philosophy" in Dickens, with growls from Carlyle, marked the period. There was also a kind of optimism in the air, a prophetic optimism, not yet fulfilled.

"Fly, happy happy sails, and bear the Press!"

That mission no longer strikes us as exquisitely felicitous. "The mission of the Cross," and of the missionaries, means international complications; and "the markets of the Golden Year" are precisely the most fruitful causes of wars and rumours of wars: —

"Sea and air are dark
With great contrivances of Power."

Tennyson's was not an unmitigated optimism, and had no special confidence in

"The herd, wild hearts and feeble wings
That every sophister can lime."

His political poetry, in fact, was very unlike the socialist chants of Mr William Morris, or *Songs before Sunrise*. He had nothing to say about

"The blood on the hands of the King,
And the lie on the lips of the Priest."

The hands of Presidents have not always been unstained; nor are statements of a mythical nature confined to the lips of the clergy. The poet was anxious that freedom should "broaden down," but "slowly," not with indelicate haste. Persons who are more in a hurry will never care for the political poems, and it is certain that Tennyson did not feel sympathetically inclined towards the Iberian patriot who said that his darling desire was "to cut the throats of all the *curés*," like some Covenanters of old. "Mais vous connaissez mon cœur" – "and a pretty black one it is," thought young Tennyson. So cautious in youth, during his Pyrenean tour with Hallam in 1830, Tennyson could not become a convinced revolutionary later. We must accept him with his limitations: nor must we confuse him with the hero of his *Locksley Hall*, one of the most popular, and most parodied, of the poems of 1842: full of beautiful images and "confusions of a wasted youth," a youth dramatically conceived, and in no way autobiographical.

In so marvellous a treasure of precious things as the volumes of 1842, perhaps none is more splendid, perfect, and perdurable than the *Morte d'Arthur*. It had been written seven years earlier, and pronounced by the poet "not bad." Tennyson was never, perhaps, a very deep Arthurian student. A little cheap copy of Malory was his companion. [4] He does not appear to have gone deeply into the French and German "literature of the subject." Malory's compilation (1485) from French and English sources, with the *Mabinogion* of Lady Charlotte Guest, sufficed for him as materials. The whole poem, enshrined in the memory of all lovers of verse, is richly studded, as the hilt of Excalibur, with classical memories. "A faint Homeric echo" it is not, nor a Virgilian echo, but the absolute voice of old romance, a thing that might have been chanted by

"The lonely maiden of the Lake"

when

"Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps,
Upon the hidden bases of the hills."

Perhaps the most exquisite adaptation of all are the lines from the *Odyssey*—

"Where falls not hail nor rain, nor any snow."

"Softly through the flutes of the Grecians" came first these Elysian numbers, then through Lucretius, then through Tennyson's own *Lucretius*, then in Mr Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*: —

[4] The writer knew this edition before he knew Tennyson's poems.

"Lands indiscoverable in the unheard-of west
Round which the strong stream of a sacred sea
Rolls without wind for ever, and the snow
There shows not her white wings and windy feet,
Nor thunder nor swift rain saith anything,
Nor the sun burns, but all things rest and thrive."

So fortunate in their transmission through poets have been the lines of "the Ionian father of the rest," the greatest of them all.

In the variety of excellences which marks Tennyson, the new English idylls of 1842 hold their prominent place. Nothing can be more exquisite and more English than the picture of "the garden that I love." Theocritus cannot be surpassed; but the idyll matches to the seventh of his, where it is most closely followed, and possesses such a picture of a girl as the Sicilian never tried to paint.

Dora is another idyll, resembling the work of a Wordsworth in a clime softer than that of the Fells. The lays of Edwin Morris and Edward Bull are not among the more enduring of even the playful poems. The *St Simeon Stylites* appears "made to the hand" of the author of *Men and Women* rather than of Tennyson. The grotesque vanity of the anchorite is so remote from us, that we can scarcely judge of the truth of the picture, though the East has still her parallels to St Simeon. From the almost, perhaps quite, incredible ascetic the poet lightly turns to "society verse" lifted up into the air of poetry, in the charm of *The Talking Oak*, and the happy flitting sketches of actual history; and thence to the strength and passion of *Love and Duty*. Shall

"Sin itself be found
The cloudy porch oft opening on the Sun?"

That this is the province of sin is a pretty popular modern moral. But Honour is the better part, and here was a poet who had the courage to say so; though, to be sure, the words ring strange in an age when highly respectable matrons assure us that "passion," like charity, covers a multitude of sins. *Love and Duty*, we must admit, is "early Victorian."

The *Ulysses* is almost a rival to the *Morte d'Arthur*. It is of an early date, after Arthur Hallam's death, and Thackeray speaks of the poet chanting his

"Great Achilles whom we knew,"

as if he thought that this was in Cambridge days. But it is later than these. Tennyson said, "*Ulysses* was written soon after Arthur Hallam's death, and gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life, perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam*." Assuredly the expression is more simple, and more noble, and the personal emotion more dignified for the classic veil. When the plaintive Pessimist ("'proud of the title,' as the Living Skeleton said when they showed him") tells us that "not to have been born is best," we may answer with Ulysses —

"Life piled on life
Were all too little."

The Ulysses of Tennyson, of course, is Dante's Ulysses, not Homer's Odysseus, who brought home to Ithaca not one of his mariners. His last known adventure, the journey to the land of men who knew not the savour of salt, Odysseus was to make on foot and alone; so spake the ghost of Tiresias within the poplar pale of Persephone.

The Two Voices expresses the contest of doubts and griefs with the spirit of endurance and joy which speaks alone in *Ulysses*. The man who is unhappy, but does not want to put an end to himself, has certainly the better of the argument with the despairing Voice. The arguments of "that barren Voice" are, indeed, remarkably deficient in cogency and logic, if we can bring ourselves to strip the

discussion of its poetry. The original title, *Thoughts of a Suicide*, was inappropriate. The suicidal suggestions are promptly faced and confuted, and the mood of the author is throughout that of one who thinks life worth living: —

> "Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
> No life that breathes with human breath
> Has ever truly long'd for death.
>
> 'Tis life whereof our nerves are scant,
> Oh life, not death, for which we pant;
> More life, and fuller, that I want."

This appears to be a satisfactory reply to the persons who eke out a livelihood by publishing pessimistic books, and hooting, as the great Alexandre Dumas says, at the great drama of Life.

With *The Day-Dream* (of The Sleeping Beauty) Tennyson again displays his matchless range of powers. Verse of Society rises into a charmed and musical fantasy, passing from the Berlin-wool work of the period

> ("Take the broidery frame, and add
> A crimson to the quaint Macaw")

into the enchanted land of the fable: princes immortal, princesses eternally young and fair. The *St Agnes* and *Sir Galahad*, companion pieces, contain the romance, as *St Simeon Stylites* shows the repulsive side of asceticism; for the saint and the knight are young, beautiful, and eager as St Theresa in her childhood. It has been said, I do not know on what authority, that the poet had no recollection of composing *Sir Galahad*, any more than Scott remembered composing *The Bride of Lammermoor*, or Thackeray parts of *Pendennis*. The haunting of Tennyson's mind by the Arthurian legends prompted also the lovely fragment on the Queen's last Maying, *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, a thing of perfect charm and music. The ballads of *Lady Clare* and *The Lord of Burleigh* are not examples of the poet in his strength; for his power and fantasy we must turn to *The Vision of Sin*, where the early passages have the languid voluptuous music of *The Lotos-Eaters*, with the ethical element superadded, while the portion beginning —

> "Wrinkled ostler, grim and thin!"

is in parts reminiscent of Burns's *Jolly Beggars*. In *Break*, *Break*, *Break*, we hear a note prelusive to *In Memoriam*, much of which was already composed.

The Poems of 1842 are always vocal in the memories of all readers of English verse. None are more familiar, at least to men of the generations which immediately followed Tennyson's. FitzGerald was apt to think that the poet never again attained the same level, and I venture to suppose that he never rose above it. For FitzGerald's opinion, right or wrong, it is easy to account. He had seen all the pieces in manuscript; they were his cherished possession before the world knew them. *C'est mon homme*, he might have said of Tennyson, as Boileau said of Molière. Before the public awoke FitzGerald had "discovered Tennyson," and that at the age most open to poetry and most enthusiastic in friendship. Again, the Poems of 1842 were *short*, while *The Princess*, *Maud*, and *The Idylls of the King* were relatively long, and, with *In Memoriam*, possessed unity of subject. They lacked the rich, the unexampled variety of topic, treatment, and theme which marks the Poems of 1842. These were all reasons why FitzGerald should think that the two slim green volumes held the poet's work at its highest level. Perhaps he was not wrong, after all.

IV.
1842–848 – THE PRINCESS

The Poems, and such criticisms as those of Spedding and Sterling, gave Tennyson his place. All the world of letters heard of him. Dean Bradley tells us how he took Oxford by storm in the days of the undergraduateship of Clough and Matthew Arnold. Probably both of these young writers did not share the undergraduate enthusiasm. Mr Arnold, we know, did not reckon Tennyson *un esprit puissant*. Like Wordsworth (who thought Tennyson "decidedly the first of our living poets… he has expressed in the strongest terms his gratitude to my writings"), Arnold was no fervent admirer of his contemporaries. Besides, if Tennyson's work is "a criticism of Life," the moral criticism, so far, was hidden in flowers, like the sword of Aristogiton at the feast. But, on the whole, Tennyson had won the young men who cared for poetry, though Sir Robert Peel had never heard of him: and to win the young, as Theocritus desired to do, is more than half the battle. On September 8, 1842, the poet was able to tell Mr Lushington that "500 of my books are sold; according to Moxon's brother, I have made a sensation." The sales were not like those of *Childe Harold* or *Marmion*; but for some twenty years new poetry had not sold at all. Novels had come in about 1814, and few wanted or bought recent verse. But Carlyle was converted. He spoke no more of a spoiled guardsman. "If you knew what my relation has been to the thing called 'English Poetry' for many years back, you would think such a fact" (his pleasure in the book) "surprising." Carlyle had been living (as Mrs Carlyle too well knew) in Oliver Cromwell, a hero who probably took no delight in *Lycidas* or *Comus*, in Lovelace or Carew. "I would give all my poetry to have made one song like that," said Tennyson of Lovelace's *Althea*. But Noll would have disregarded them all alike, and Carlyle was full of the spirit of the Protector. To conquer him was indeed a victory for Tennyson; while Dickens, not a reading man, expressed his "earnest and sincere homage."

But Tennyson was not successful in the modern way. Nobody "interviewed" him. His photograph, of course, with disquisitions on his pipes and slippers, did not adorn the literary press. His literary income was not magnified by penny-a-liners. He did not become a lion; he never would roar and shake his mane in drawing-rooms. Lockhart held that Society was the most agreeable form of the stage: the dresses and actresses incomparably the prettiest. But Tennyson liked Society no better than did General Gordon. He had friends enough, and no desire for new acquaintances. Indeed, his fortune was shattered at this time by a strange investment in wood-carving by machinery. Ruskin had only just begun to write, and wood-carving by machinery was still deemed an enterprise at once philanthropic and æsthetic. "My father's worldly goods were all gone," says Lord Tennyson. The poet's health suffered extremely: he tried a fashionable "cure" at Cheltenham, where he saw miracles of healing, but underwent none. In September 1845 Peel was moved by Lord Houghton to recommend the poet for a pension (£200 annually). "I have done nothing slavish to get it: I never even solicited for it either by myself or others." Like Dr Johnson, he honourably accepted what was offered in honour. For some reason many persons who write in the press are always maddened when such good fortune, however small, however well merited, falls to a brother in letters. They, of course, were "causelessly bitter." "Let them rave!"

If few of the rewards of literary success arrived, the penalties at once began, and only ceased with the poet's existence. "If you only knew what a nuisance these volumes of verse are! Rascals send me theirs per post from America, and I have more than once been knocked up out of bed to pay three or four shillings for books of which I can't get through one page, for of all books the most insipid reading is second-rate verse."

Would that versifiers took the warning! Tennyson had not sent his little firstlings to Coleridge and Wordsworth: they are only the hopeless rhymers who bombard men of letters with their lyrics and tragedies.

Mr Browning was a sufferer. To one young twitterer he replied in the usual way. The bard wrote acknowledging the letter, but asking for a definite criticism. "I do not think myself a Shakespeare or a Milton, but I *know* I am better than Mr Coventry Patmore or Mr Austin Dobson." Mr Browning tried to procrastinate: he was already deeply engaged with earlier arrivals of volumes of song. The poet was hurt, not angry; he had expected other things from Mr Browning: *he* ought to know his duty to youth. At the intercession of a relation Mr Browning now did his best, and the minstrel, satisfied at last, repeated his conviction of his superiority to the authors of *The Angel in the House* and *Beau Brocade*. Probably no man, not even Mr Gladstone, ever suffered so much from minstrels as Tennyson. He did not suffer them gladly.

In 1846 the Poems reached their fourth edition. Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton (bitten by what fly who knows?) attacked Tennyson in *The New Timon*, a forgotten satire. We do not understand the ways of that generation. The cheap and spiteful *genre* of satire, its forged morality, its sham indignation, its appeal to the ape-like passions, has gone out. Lytton had suffered many things (not in verse) from Jeames Yellowplush: I do not know that he hit back at Thackeray, but he "passed it on" to Thackeray's old college companion. Tennyson, for once, replied (in *Punch*: the verses were sent thither by John Forster); the answer was one of magnificent contempt. But he soon decided that

> "The noblest answer unto such
> Is perfect stillness when they brawl."

Long afterwards the poet dedicated a work to the son of Lord Lytton. He replied to no more satirists. [5] Our difficulty, of course, is to conceive such an attack coming from a man of Lytton's position and genius. He was no hungry hack, and could, and did, do infinitely better things than "stand in a false following" of Pope. Probably Lytton had a false idea that Tennyson was a rich man, a branch of his family being affluent, and so resented the little pension. The poet was so far from rich in 1846, and even after the publication of *The Princess*, that his marriage had still to be deferred for four years.

On reading *The Princess* afresh one is impressed, despite old familiarity, with the extraordinary influence of its beauty. Here are, indeed, the best words best placed, and that curious felicity of style which makes every line a marvel, and an eternal possession. It is as if Tennyson had taken the advice which Keats gave to Shelley, "Load every rift with ore." To choose but one or two examples, how the purest and freshest impression of nature is re-created in mind and memory by the picture of Melissa with

> "All her thoughts as fair within her eyes,
> As bottom agates seen to wave and float
> In crystal currents of clear morning seas."

The lyric, "Tears, idle tears," is far beyond praise: once read it seems like a thing that has always existed in the world of poetic archetypes, and has now been not so much composed as discovered and revealed. The many pictures and similitudes in *The Princess* have a magical gorgeousness: —

> "From the illumined hall
> Long lanes of splendour slanted o'er a press
> Of snowy shoulders, thick as herded ewes,

[5] The author of the spiteful letters was an unpublished anonymous person.

And rainbow robes, and gems and gem-like eyes,
And gold and golden heads; they to and fro
Fluctuated, as flowers in storm, some red, some pale."

The "small sweet Idyll" from

"A volume of the poets of her land"

pure Theocritus. It has been admirably rendered into Greek by Mr Gilbert Murray. The exquisite beauties of style are not less exquisitely blended in the confusions of a dream, for a dream is the thing most akin to *The Princess*. Time does not exist in the realm of Gama, or in the ideal university of Ida. We have a bookless North, severed but by a frontier pillar from a golden and learned South. The arts, from architecture to miniature-painting, are in their highest perfection, while knights still tourney in armour, and the quarrel of two nations is decided as in the gentle and joyous passage of arms at Ashby de la Zouche. Such confusions are purposefully dream-like: the vision being a composite thing, as dreams are, haunted by the modern scene of the holiday in the park, the "gallant glorious chronicle," the Abbey, and that "old crusading knight austere," Sir Ralph. The seven narrators of the scheme are like the "split personalities" of dreams, and the whole scheme is of great technical skill. The earlier editions lacked the beautiful songs of the ladies, and that additional trait of dream, the strange trance-like seizures of the Prince: "fallings from us, vanishings," in Wordsworthian phrase; instances of "dissociation," in modern psychological terminology. Tennyson himself, like Shelley and Wordsworth, had experience of this kind of dreaming awake which he attributes to his Prince, to strengthen the shadowy yet brilliant character of his romance. It is a thing of normal and natural *points de repère*; of daylight suggestion, touched as with the magnifying and intensifying elements of haschish-begotten phantasmagoria. In the same way opium raised into the region of brilliant vision that passage of Purchas which Coleridge was reading before he dreamed *Kubla Khan*. But in Tennyson the effects were deliberately sought and secured.

One might conjecture, though Lord Tennyson says nothing on the subject, that among the suggestions for *The Princess* was the opening of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Here the King of Navarre devises the College of Recluses, which is broken up by the arrival of the Princess of France, Rosaline, and the other ladies: —

King. Our Court shall be a little Academe,

Still and contemplative in living art.
You three, Biron, Domain, and Longaville,
Have sworn for three years' term to live with me,
My fellow-scholars, and to keep those statutes.

* * * * *

Biron. That is, to live and study here three years.
But there are other strict observances;
As, not to see a woman in that term.

* * * * *

[*Reads*] 'That no woman shalt come within a mile of my Court:' Hath this been proclaimed?

Long. Four days ago.

Biron. Let's see the penalty. [*Reads*] 'On pain of losing her tongue.'

The Princess then arrives with her ladies, as the Prince does with Cyril and Florian, as Charles did, with Buckingham, in Spain. The conclusion of Shakespeare is Tennyson's conclusion —

"We cannot cross the cause why we are born."

The later poet reverses the attitude of the sexes in *Love's Labour's Lost*: it is the women who make and break the vow; and the women in *The Princess* insist on the "grand, epic, homicidal" scenes, while the men are debarred, more or less, from a sportive treatment of the subject. The tavern catch of Cyril; the laughable pursuit of the Prince by the feminine Proctors; the draggled appearance of the adventurers in female garb, are concessions to the humour of the situation. Shakespeare would certainly have given us the song of Cyril at the picnic, and comic enough the effect would have been on the stage. It may be a gross employment, but *The Princess*, with the pretty chorus of girl undergraduates,

"In colours gayer than the morning mist,"

went reasonably well in opera. Merely considered as a romantic fiction, *The Princess* presents higher proofs of original narrative genius than any other such attempt by its author.

The poem is far from being deficient in that human interest which Shelley said that it was as vain to ask from *him*, as to seek to buy a leg of mutton at a gin-shop. The characters, the protagonists, with Cyril, Melissa, Lady Blanche, the child Aglaia, King Gama, the other king, Arac, and the hero's mother – beautifully studied from the mother of the poet – are all sufficiently human. But they seem to waver in the magic air, "as all the golden autumn woodland reels" athwart the fires of autumn leaves. For these reasons, and because of the designed fantasy of the whole composition, *The Princess* is essentially a poem for the true lovers of poetry, of Spenser and of Coleridge. The serious motive, the question of Woman, her wrongs, her rights, her education, her capabilities, was not "in the air" in 1847. To be sure it had often been "in the air." The Alexandrian Platonists, the Renaissance, even the age of Anne, had their emancipated and learned ladies. Early Greece had Sappho, Corinna, and Erinna, the first the chief of lyric poets, even in her fragments, the two others applauded by all Hellas. The French Revolution had begotten Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and in France George Sand was prominent and emancipated enough while the poet wrote. But, the question of love apart, George Sand was "very, very woman," shining as a domestic character and fond of needlework. England was not excited about the question which has since produced so many disputants, inevitably shrill, and has not been greatly meddled with by women of genius, George Eliot or Mrs Oliphant. The poem, in the public indifference as to feminine education, came rather prematurely. We have now ladies' colleges, not in haunts remote from man, but by the sedged banks of Cam and Cherwell. There have been no revolutionary results: no boys have spied these chaste nests, with echoing romantic consequences. The beauty and splendour of the Princess's university have not arisen in light and colour, and it is only at St Andrews that girls wear the academic and becoming costume of the scarlet gown. The real is far below the ideal, but the real in 1847 seemed eminently remote, or even impossible.

The learned Princess herself was not on our level as to knowledge and the past of womankind. She knew not of their masterly position in the law of ancient Egypt. Gynæocracy and matriarchy, the woman the head of the savage or prehistoric group, were things hidden from her. She "glanced

at the Lycian custom," but not at the Pictish, a custom which would have suited George Sand to a marvel. She maligned the Hottentots.

"The highest is the measure of the man,
And not the Kaffir, Hottentot, Malay."

The Hottentots had long ago anticipated the Princess and her shrill modern sisterhood. If we take the Greeks, or even ourselves, we may say, with Dampier (1689), "The Hodmadods, though a nasty people, yet are gentlemen to these" as regards the position of women. Let us hear Mr Hartland: "In every Hottentot's house the wife is supreme. Her husband, poor fellow, though he may wield wide power and influence out of doors, at home dare not even take a mouthful of sour-milk out of the household vat without her permission.. The highest oath a man can take is to swear by his eldest sister, and if he abuses this name he forfeits to her his finest goods and sheep."

However, in 1847 England had not yet thought of imitating the Hodmadods. Consequently, and by reason of the purely literary and elaborately fantastical character of *The Princess*, it was not of a nature to increase the poet's fame and success. "My book is out, and I hate it, and so no doubt will you," Tennyson wrote to FitzGerald, who hated it and said so. "Like Carlyle, I gave up all hopes of him after *The Princess*," indeed it was not apt to conciliate Carlyle. "None of the songs had the old champagne flavour," said Fitz; and Lord Tennyson adds, "Nothing either by Thackeray or by my father met FitzGerald's approbation unless he had first seen it in manuscript." This prejudice was very human. Lord Tennyson remarks, as to the poet's meaning in this work, born too early, that "the sooner woman finds out, before the great educational movement begins, that 'woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse,' the better it will be for the progress of the world."

But probably the "educational movement" will not make much difference to womankind on the whole. The old Platonic remark that woman "does the same things as man, but not so well," will eternally hold good, at least in the arts, and in letters, except in rare cases of genius. A new Jeanne d'Arc, the most signal example of absolute genius in history, will not come again; and the ages have waited vainly for a new Sappho or a new Jane Austen. Literature, poetry, painting, have always been fields open to woman. But two names exhaust the roll of women of the highest rank in letters – Sappho and Jane Austen. And "when did woman ever yet invent?" In "arts of government" Elizabeth had courage, and just saving sense enough to yield to Cecil at the eleventh hour, and escape the fate of "her sister and her foe," the beautiful unhappy queen who told her ladies that she dared to look on whatever men dared to do, and herself would do it if her strength so served her." [6]

[6] The Lennox MSS.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.