

THE LIFE STYLE OF ALFRED TENNYSON

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PROLOGUE: TENNYSON'S GREAT ESCAPE

Tennyson hated literary biographers and desperately tried to avoid their clutches. "What business has the public to want to know all about Byron's wildnesses?" he once ranted. "He has given them fine work, and they ought to be satisfied."¹ But Byron's poetry, as much as it reveals about the man, has never satisfied the curiosity of his readers; and neither has Tennyson's. Since Tennyson's death, no less than fourteen full or partial biographies of the poet have been published. Two of these, Hallam Tennyson's Memoir (1897) and Sir Charles Tennyson's Alfred Tennyson (1949), are factually indispensable to the Tennyson scholar. A third, Sir Harold Nicolson's Tennyson (1922), is useful for its attempt to defend Tennyson's relevance in this century. But most of the others are the collections of gossip that Tennyson detested and that he took steps to avert. As death was approaching, he instructed his son, Hallam, to burn a substantial portion of his letters and other biographical material, and said that, if necessary, the incidents of his life should be given as briefly as possible but with sufficient notes to preclude the chance of further biographies.² Hallam realized the impossibility of such a demand, and according to a possibly apocryphal story, snatched many of the Tennyson papers from the fire at the last moment. And so, instead of putting future biographers out of business, Hallam provided

¹Hallam Tennyson, Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son (New York, 1897), II, 165. Hereafter cited as Memoir.

²Memoir, I, xii, xvi.

them with a massive body of uninterpreted facts and anecdotes,—about the interpretation of which, Hallam's successors have not felt his humility. But as the steady appearance of Tennyson biographies would indicate, there has been a pervasive dissatisfaction with the results of the interpretation; despite all of the lives we have of the poet, it seems as if he has indeed succeeded in escaping the postmortem characterization he so hated.

Because of Tennyson's great escape, the following general statement made by Jerome H. Buckley about a current deficiency in Victorian scholarship has much validity when applied to Tennyson studies: "the essential character of all but a few of the great poets eludes us; we know scarcely any of them as we know the great Romantics. We need therefore fresh biographies, assimilating the many details at our disposal, lives which will show us the poets at work as poets rather than merely supply amusement through chronicles of eccentricities different from our own."³ The Life Style of Alfred Tennyson is an attempt to answer Buckley's challenge through the application of Alfred Adler's individual psychology to biography and literary study. This approach seems especially relevant to the peculiar deficiency in Victorian period biography, for Adlerian theory emphasizes the very aspect which is most lacking in the majority of studies we now have--the essential character of the subject.

Tennyson's earlier biographers have touched on his essential character, but in a fragmentary and inconsistent way. Two impressions of the

³Jerome H. Buckley, "General Materials," The Victorian Poets: A Guide to Research, ed. Frederic E. Faverty (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 28.

poet are thus gained in reading the various lives. The major image is that of a Victorian saint, a man who upheld the ideals of a period in which ideals, like the Crystal Palace, glittered on the outside and sparkled on the inside, but proved to be drafty, gross, and devoid of any lasting worth. This is the impression given by most of the turn-of-the-century biographies written by Benson, Weld, Lounsbury, and others. And it is also given by such a recent work as Joanna Richardson's The Pre-Eminent Victorian (1962). The second impression, and the one that has most appealed to twentieth century readers of Tennyson, is that of a brooding, schizophrenic, English Dostoevsky, given to long periods of despondency accentuated by the conflict between the private and public aspects of his personality. This is the image put forth by Nicolson, Baum, Buckley, and even, in most instances, Sir Charles Tennyson. Both impressions are essentially valid, but neither alone presents the complete Tennyson, for his personality constituted an intricate interweaving of his idealism and his black-bloodedness.

Tennyson's life was dominated by one central theme, the ideal society, a theme that was recurrently thwarted by a counter theme, what in "The Palace of Art" he called "the riddle of the painful earth."⁴ Out of Tennyson's concern for the ideal society, the world vision it led to, and the depression brought about by the frustration of his apocalyptic dream, came a distinctive response pattern which can be seen as his life

⁴Tennyson's treatment of the riddle is studied in detail by Willson Emery Wood in an unpublished dissertation, "Alfred Tennyson and His Riddle of the Universe" (George Peabody, 1954).

style. As early as the age of five or six, he developed a way of living which, more than anything else, determined the nature of his poetry, his thought, and his role as the most representative figure of his age. He was at once an idealist and something of a neurotic pessimist, a child of his century and yet a forerunner of subsequent generations of poets. He fervently hoped for a better world, yet at the same time realized that the world is a painful place, that human attainments are limited, and that the postulation of any sort of ideal seems preposterously absurd.

What has been missed in the analysis of Tennyson's life is the delicate balance he struck between his idealism and his awareness of all the questions implied by the riddle. Recent commentators, it seems, have made much of Tennyson's depression and doubt; but not enough has been made of the core of idealism which was just as central to his life. Nicolson wrote, for example, that "We find him throughout his life endeavouring in anguish to rid himself of this obsession of Space and Time, of this crushing immensity, of this dread of eventual annihilation."⁵ Throughout Tennyson's poetry and his life are, to be sure, numerous instances when anguish and despair have the upper hand. Yet Tennyson was adamant in his conviction that the instinct of the soul attests to a need for the far-off goal of a better England, a better world, and an improved humanity. In his persistent belief in his ideal, and in his equally persistent doubt of the significance of human hopes and dreams in the immensity of the universe, he neither achieved the lasting mystic ecstasy of

⁵Sir Harold Nicolson, Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character, and Poetry (London, 1922), p. 270.

Christina Rossetti, nor did he submit to the sad agnosticism which attracted Clough. Like his own King Arthur, he struck a compromise between the two; and in this compromise lies his essential character.

PART ONE: ALFRED TENNYSON, SECRET AGENT

I

Early in July, 1830, Tennyson set out with Arthur Hallam on the only real adventure of his life, an adventure which symbolizes his way of living both in his earlier and later years. Tennyson had decided to take part in a proposed Spanish revolution as a secret agent, hoping through his services to help bring about a more democratic government in Spain. Hallam and Tennyson had had enough of Cambridge life, and wanted to test the political idealism which they had so strongly affirmed during debates in a club called "The Apostles," a group of intellectuals to which they belonged.

While Tennyson was at Cambridge, the University environs were frequented, as were London and Oxford, by a shabby, discontented group of Spanish exiles, some of whom earned a meager living by teaching their native language. The Spaniards were refugees from the tyranny of Ferdinand VII, who had torn up the Spanish Constitution in 1823 and reinstated the Inquisition. Throughout the 1820's, these exiles wandered up and down the English streets, mumbling discontentedly and plotting a return to their homeland. "Daily in the cold spring air, under skies so unlike their own," wrote Carlyle, "you could see a group of fifty or a hundred stately tragic figures, in proud threadbare cloaks; perambulating, mostly with closed lips, the broad pavements of Euston Square and the regions about St. Pancras new Church."¹ The leader of this group was

¹Thomas Carlyle, Life of John Sterling, Scribner's Edition (New York, 1900), p. 64.

General Torrijos, a diplomatic, courtly man who was regarded at the time as "a kind of living romance."² Torrijos and his ragged followers were largely without realistic hope or direction until they gained the sympathy of John Sterling, then editor and owner, along with Frederick Maurice, of The Atheneum. With the young Sterling working to build up English support for a Spanish revolution, the prospects of Torrijos's followers began to improve.

Sterling, Torrijos, and others, among them Tennyson and Hallam, concluded that if a small guerrilla force could be landed in Spain, there might be a good chance of arousing the people to revolt against Ferdinand. But first there was the problem of how to finance the expedition. Sterling contributed as much as he could of his own money, and then approached his friends in the Apostles, from whom he obtained considerable donations. Tennyson, less able to contribute money than most of his companions, was willing to take part in the expedition himself. Even with the eager response of the Apostles and other support, Sterling and Torrijos still did not have enough money to launch their project, much less sustain the raiders once they landed.

Just at the point when the whole plot seemed impossible, the sudden appearance of Sterling's cousin, Robert Boyd, changed the exiles' outlook. Boyd, a young man with Byronic intentions, had just resigned his commission in the Indian Army, and as Charles Tennyson put it, "found himself . . . with a sum of £5,000, a craving for adventure, and nothing to

²Carlyle, p. 67.

do."³ An Ulster comrade had told Boyd that in a creek on the Irish coast lay a wrecked and worn out royal gun brig which had been condemned and was being offered for sale. The friend wanted Boyd to buy the ship and turn privateer; but Boyd had nobler ambitions and decided to wait until he could find a more worthwhile cause before parting with his cash. When Boyd told his cousin about his dreams and the gun-brig in the Irish creek, Sterling had a quick reply. "If you want an adventure of the Seaking sort, and propose to lay your money and your life into such a game," said Sterling, "here is Torrijos and Spain at his back; here is a Golden Fleece to conquer, worth twenty Eastern Archipelagos."⁴ Boyd demanded to meet Torrijos at once; and in a few hours the revolutionists had both a ship and sufficient operating money. The wrecked brig was soon forgotten, however, and an abler vessel obtained in the Thames.

The plans for the expedition were settled within a few weeks. When the ship was ready, it was to drop down the Thames and to take on Torrijos and his army of fifty adventurers at Deal. Sterling, Boyd and a few other Englishmen were to accompany them. But Sterling's health failed at the last minute and he was unable to go. He consequently took upon himself the final arrangements, supervising the sailors on the ship before it sailed, and making certain that the supplies were in order.

Despite all the caution taken by Sterling and his friends, the Spanish government somehow learned of the proposed operation and notified

³Sir Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 93. Hereafter cited as Tennyson.

⁴Carlyle, p. 70.

the English authorities. A few days before the planned date of departure, Sterling looked up from his preparatory work to see a gang of armed men climbing aboard the ship. The vessel was declared seized in the King's name and nobody was to move until all names were given, the ship searched, and the intentions of the voyage declared. Sterling realized at once that he had to take some action or his professional career as well as the expedition would be ruined. He managed to signal a passing wherry, without attracting the attention of the Thames Police, and leaped from the ship into the smaller boat. "Stop!" shouted a policeman from the ship's deck. "Why stop? What use have you for me, or I for you?" shouted Sterling as the wherry began to pull away. "Stop, or I'll shoot you!" screamed the policeman as he drew his pistol. "No you won't," said Sterling. "I will," said the policeman. "If you do you'll be hanged at the next Maidstone Assizes, then; that's all," replied Sterling. The policeman was too dumbfounded to shoot, and Sterling reached the shore.⁵

Sterling made his way to Deal as fast as he could. Torrijos was faced with a rapid decision. The ship was lost and, if the guerrillas remained in Deal much longer, they would surely be arrested. No alternative was left except to take whatever passage could be obtained that night from Deal. The Spaniards and their English companions split up, getting shipping however they could in a variety of ships as private passengers. Their point of assembly was to be Gibraltar; and one by one they reassembled there.⁶ Boyd, a few Regent Street democrats, fifty

⁵Carlyle, p. 73.

⁶Carlyle, p. 73.

picked Spaniards, and Torrijos, were ready to begin their private war of liberation.

Tennyson's part in the revolution came after a series of blundering and abortive efforts by Torrijos. Attempts on Cadiz, the lines of St. Roch, and other places were thwarted before more than a few shots could be fired.⁷ Much worse, the invasion was threatened more by a lack of weapons and money than by the Royalist opposition. This was in late June and early July, the time when Hallam and Tennyson disappeared from London. Apparently, none of Tennyson's relatives knew where he was going. His mother believed that he had left their Somersby home to seek medical advice in London. Tennyson's mission was to carry money and coded instructions into the Pyrenees and there make contact with a band of northern Spaniards who had agreed to work with Torrijos.

Tennyson and Hallam travelled, continually fearful of detection, across France and into the mountains. The Spanish Government had been forced to engage in a few shooting encounters with the revolutionaries and knew that efforts were being made to supply the insurgents from England. When the two young men finally made contact with the Spaniards, much of the romance drained away from the adventure. Torrijos and Ojeda, the northern leader, were widely separated and had difficulty in coordinating their movements. Ojeda was also jealous of Torrijos and less than eager to obey the orders contained in the cyphered message. Ojeda frankly expressed to Tennyson a desire, "Couper le gorge à tous les curés," and

⁷Carlyle, p. 75.

added with his hand on his chest, "mais vous connaissez mon coeur!"⁸

With that remark, Tennyson's role as a secret agent ended, his message disregarded and his person insulted.

In late September Tennyson and Hallam returned to England, talking about a "wild and bustling time."⁹ A few days after landing in England, Tennyson received word that John Kemble, one of the Englishmen who went to join Torrijos, had been captured and was to be put on trial for his life. Tennyson posted for miles through the early dawn trying to find some official at Lincoln or elsewhere who could help to save Kemble. After driving himself to exhaustion, Tennyson learned that the report was false and that his frenzied effort had been for nothing.¹⁰ It was one of the few distressing rumors that was to prove false. On the last night of November, 1831, Torrijos and his men were forced to leave Gibraltar, which had been a place of refuge from which to launch their attacks on the Spanish coast. Because of a fresh uprising against the crown by one of the leading Spanish generals, the British Governor felt compelled to issue an order declaring that Gibraltar could not shelter the rebels.¹¹ In addition, the Spanish Government had been thrown into a mood of fearful agitation by the Three Days' Revolution in France, and was putting pressure on British Diplomats to end the aid the rebels were getting from English sympathizers, as well as to stop harboring the revolutionists on

⁸Tennyson, p. 95.

⁹Tennyson, p. 95.

¹⁰Memoir, I, 54.

¹¹Memoir, I, 54.

Gibraltar.¹² Torrijos and his men had to set sail for Malaga in two small ships. At once they were pursued by Spanish guardships and were forced to run ashore at Fuengirola near Malaga. They set up their defenses in a farmhouse but were quickly surrounded by an overwhelming number of troops and had to surrender. Torrijos, Boyd, and fifty-four others were shot by a firing squad a few days later on the Esplanade of Malaga.¹³

Hallam was dejected by the adventure and by the failure of the revolution; Tennyson, on the other hand, seemed to thrive on the mission and was not deeply despondent about the outcome. He improved in health and came back talking of the beauty of the Pyrenees. "For him the journey, abortive though its main purpose was," wrote Charles Tennyson, "undoubtedly proved one of the formative experiences of his life."¹⁴ It was such an important event in his life because it meant involvement in a scheme to bring about a more ideal society in Spain. It meant facing the many problems that block human aspiration on earth (distance, lack of understanding between different nationalities, the apathy of the masses, and in Ojeda's jealousy, the perversity of human nature) and striving to bring about the ideal. At the same time, Tennyson's almost fatalistic belief that the operation would not succeed appeared in his lack of deep sorrow or surprise upon learning of the sad incident on the Esplanade. Through the entire adventure, as in most of the other events of Tennyson's

¹²Tennyson, p. 95.

¹³Carlyle, p. 88.

¹⁴Tennyson, p. 95.

life, runs the theme of the ideal. Never before did he engage on such a direct expression of his life objectives; and he was never to do so afterward. But, in a way, much of his earlier and later life follows the pattern of his devotion to Torrijos and the mission to Ojeda. There is the embracement of the plan to effect the ideal, a confrontation with the painful earth, a knowledge of the impracticality of it all, and eventual resignation to the defeat. And Tennyson's role, especially in his poetry, was often that of a secret agent bringing a cyphered message about the ideal society to men who were, like Ojeda, indisposed to listen.

II

The idealism which proved to be such a motivating force in Tennyson's mission to Spain, goes back to his boyhood and has its origins in his family situation. An alcoholic, rationalistic clergyman for a father, an emotional pietist for a mother, and a brood of brothers and sisters, some of whom were precocious and some of whom were deranged, provided an environment for the young Tennyson which acquainted him very early with the noblest human aspirations and the most distressing realities of human frailty.

Dr. George Tennyson, the poet's father, was a disturbed man, given to self pity and impulsive rages, burdened with a large family, and married to a woman whose character was antithetical to his own. Dr. Tennyson had ample reason to be disturbed. Born the first child of an aristocratic father, he was denied patrimony of the estate because his father thought him less capable than a younger brother. Although his father secured him a number of profitable livings within the church, Dr.

Tennyson was naturally dissatisfied with his condition and with the wasting of his substantial talents in obscure rural parishes. He was a preacher of exceptional ability, and showed some promise of becoming a church scholar. He was widely read in English, Greek, and Latin, and knew Syrian and Hebrew as well as French, Spanish, Italian, and German.¹⁵ Even though his religious views were not orthodox (he refused, for example, to read the Athanasian Creed and was opposed to the doctrine of eternal punishment), he worked hard at his duties as a parish clergyman and earned a great deal of fame as a preacher, his extant sermons possessing "a sonority and rhythm not unbecoming the father of poets."¹⁶ As his family grew and he became increasingly discontented, he found more and more comfort in liquor, to the destruction of his health and to the dismay of Mrs. Tennyson. He frequently abused his wife and children with his language, and was found one night with a knife and a loaded gun in his room, threatening to kill his son Frederick, who had just been rusticated from Cambridge, and then to use the weapons on the rest of the family.¹⁷ His life was continually broken by such moods of violent aggressiveness opposed to other moods of tenderness toward his family and devotion to his parish.

In contrast to her husband, Elizabeth Tennyson was described by Edward Fitzgerald as "One of the most innocent and tenderhearted ladies I ever saw."¹⁸ She was one of the beauties of the county in which she

¹⁵Tennyson, p. 12.

¹⁶Tennyson, p. 14.

¹⁷Tennyson, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸Memoir, I, 17.

grew up and was reported to have had twenty-five offers of marriage. Her attitude toward religion was one of evangelical pietism and threw her from the first into opposition to her husband's distaste for any excessive emotion in religion. She achieved such local notoriety for her sensitivity that farm boys would bring their dogs to her window and beat them, hoping that she would give them money to let the animals alone.¹⁹ She followed the pietist revival during the years after the Napoleonic wars with interest, applauding the establishment of Edward Irving's mission at Hatton Garden in 1822, and the publication of Keble's Christian Year in 1827²⁰-- events that her husband viewed with little enjoyment. While Dr. Tennyson read the classics or continental literature, Mrs. Tennyson paged through the Bible, Mrs. Hemans, and Beattie's Calendar. Where her husband was practical, she was impractical; where he was violent and abusive, she was tender and loving; and where he was rationalistic about religion, she was emotional. She countered his inconsistency of character with her own steadfastness, and managed to keep their large family together. Tennyson undoubtedly got much of his concern for the painfulness of the human condition from his father, and his vague, emotional hope for the future good from his mother. Dr. Tennyson won the young poet's fear and respect; but his mother earned his love.

The incompatibility of George and Elizabeth Tennyson certainly did not extend to their sexual relationship; in all, they had twelve children, eleven of whom survived. Alfred, born in 1809, was the fourth. He was

¹⁹Tennyson, p. 14.

²⁰Tennyson, p. 48.

preceded by George (died in infancy), Frederick, and Charles, and followed by four brothers (Edward, Arthur, Septimus, and Horatio) and four sisters (Mary, Emily, Matilda, and Cecilia). All of the children were born within fourteen years of each other, consequently entering into intense competition among themselves. The three older brothers were extremely precocious and began matching poems with each other before they were ten years old. The younger children lacked the intense brilliance of Frederick, Charles, and Alfred, and felt obscured by their older brothers and slighted by the greater attention Dr. Tennyson paid to his three geniuses.

The family conditions probably had a lot to do with the mental and emotional instability which dogged most of the children when they became adults. Frederick was rusticated from Cambridge for cutting chapel and for impertinence; he later became an Anglo-Israelite and a spiritualist.²¹ Charles, Alfred's favorite brother, developed a nervous disorder after leaving Cambridge. A doctor recommended opium and before long Charles became an addict.²² Edward's mental health degenerated while he was still in his teens and he was found to be "plainly unfit for any thrift."²³ In 1832, a doctor recommended that Edward be sent to Lincoln Asylum. This proposal was rejected; but arrangements were made for him to live with a doctor at York under the pretense of studying medicine. This plan did not work, the maladjustment became acute, and Edward was confined until his

²¹Tennyson, pp. 59, 341.

²²Tennyson, p. 128.

²³Tennyson, p. 108.

death in 1890.²⁴ Arthur was troubled by alcoholism in much the same way as his father and displayed some of Edward's nervous instability. In 1843 his alcoholism became so bad that he had to return home for a cure.²⁵ Septimus also was a victim of the curious nervous instability of the Tennysons. Dante Gabriel Rossetti told an anecdote of a visitor who, upon entering a drawing room, saw a large, unkempt man arise from the hearth rug where he had been stretched out, advance with an extended hand, and grimly say: "I am Septimus, the most morbid of the Tennysons."²⁶ Alfred, in a letter to his uncle, described Septimus's condition in some detail, writing: "He is subject to fits of the most gloomy despondency accompanied with tears--or rather he spends whole days in this manner, complaining that he is neglected by all his relations and blindly resigning himself to every morbid influence."²⁷ Septimus never was able to overcome his melancholia, and his life was lived without direction and without a profession. Horatio was the most adventurous of the brothers, setting out in 1837 to farm in Tasmania. But the venture failed and he was back home by 1843 with dim prospects and, as Edward Fitzgerald remarked, "seeming rather unused to the Planet."²⁸ Despite the financial problems Horatio had to face during the rest of his life, he did not develop the acute melancholia of his brothers; he was perhaps the most

²⁴Tennyson, p. 127.

²⁵Tennyson, p. 199.

²⁶Tennyson, p. 199.

²⁷Tennyson, p. 150.

²⁸Tennyson, p. 199.

mentally stable of all the Tennysons, with the exception of Alfred.

The sisters shared some of the precocity and instability of the brothers. Mary, Emilia, and Cecilia were devoted to literature and wrote verse;²⁹ but they were also somewhat overly intense, at least in the opinion of their grandfather, George Tennyson, who thought that "the girls were such bluestockings and so odd altogether, it seemed most unlikely that any young man of position would come forward to marry any of them."³⁰ Mary was regarded as "Very handsome, very quiet, very amiable, but not very gay."³¹ She was engaged to John Heath of the Apostles in 1835; but the relationship was soon broken off. She later married and lived a fairly placid life. She reportedly "shared more than any of Alfred's sisters in his poetic imagination and capacity for mystical experience."³² Emily is the most famous of the sisters, primarily because she was engaged to Arthur Hallam. She was a victim of the psychosomatic ailments which afflicted other members of her family, and during times of enforced separation from Hallam in their engagement, she suffered mysterious pains in her side.³³ With Hallam's death in 1833, she lapsed into a state of depression. Unlike Edward and Septimus, she was able to overcome her weakness and eventually made a satisfactory marriage. There is no evidence of any disorder on the part of Cecilia. She married Edmund

²⁹Tennyson, p. 46.

³⁰Tennyson, p. 110.

³¹Tennyson, p. 149.

³²Tennyson, p. 476.

³³Tennyson, p. 111.

Lushington in 1842 and apparently lived a quiet life. The wedding, of course, is the subject of the epithalamion which concludes In Memoriam. Matilda was the quietest and most obscure of Tennyson's brothers and sisters. She never married and lived to be 100, dying in 1913. She became obsessed with religion from time to time, displaying the characteristic family morbidity. She also developed an abnormal passion for the famous opera singer Theresa Tietjens; among her papers were a few scraps of verse about the singer's death, and a sheet of mourning paper in which was enfolded a lock of Theresa's hair. On the paper was written: "This paper holds my beloved Theresa's hair--I have kissed it many times."³⁴

Tennyson grew up sharing in the genius and the madness of his immediate relations. During his early years and even into his late teens, the family was almost a closed circle. The children were anomalies in the country parishes where they lived and did not often associate with children of their own age outside of the family. There was an abundance of love and sympathy felt by the children for each other and, at its best, the family seemed like an ideal environment to the poet. Charles, Frederick, and Alfred provided each other with intellectual companionship and walked through the fields shouting verses to each other. Later, all of the children joined in composing serial stories, each taking a daily installment. Dr. Tennyson, when out of his black moods, became a devoted instructor to his children and, in a large measure, their precocity can be attributed to his willingness to undertake their education. Mrs. Tennyson tempered her husband's tough-minded method of pedagogy with her

³⁴Tennyson, p. 504.

patient emphasis on the spiritual significance of what they were learning. She was particularly influential on the young poet in her insistence on a religious depth in his juvenile poetry. But at its worst, the family situation became very painful for Tennyson. His father's unkindness and injustice afflicted the boy's nerves and health, and brought about severe depression. Several times Tennyson left the rectory at night after one of his father's fits, fell onto a grave in the churchyard, and prayed to be beneath the sod himself.³⁵

As Tennyson grew up, his family environment gradually worsened. During the years 1822-27, his father lapsed deeper into his alcoholism, and Tennyson found himself divided between the conflicting demands and personalities of his parents. By his own testimony, Tennyson indicated that he passed through "moods of misery unutterable."³⁶ His brothers and sisters tended to alternate between moods of extreme joy and extreme depression. Tennyson himself was subject to great and sudden shifts from happiness to despair. "I remember," he said as an old man, "that sometimes in the middle of the dance a great and sudden sadness would come over me and I would leave the dance and wander away beneath the stars, or sit gloomily and abstractly below stairs. I used to wonder then what demon it was that drove me forth and took all pleasure from my blood."³⁷ He remembered that the pleasure was taken out of one of his first trips

³⁵Memoir, I, 15.

³⁶Memoir, I, 40.

³⁷Tennyson, pp. 102-103.

to London when he was suddenly struck with the thought that all the inhabitants of the city and all the members of the multitude brushing shoulders with him would, within a few years, be stark in their coffins.³⁸

The family was a paradigm to Tennyson of the outside world he was eventually to experience. His father's character is much like the character of God that is represented in the later poetry with its continual debate over whether God is a tyrant or a loving father. The pietism of his mother, with its reassuring love and continual emphasis on the otherworldly nature of human life, found its way into the "spiritual meaning" which plays such a large part in his poetry. And, of course, his mother's belief that God is love, is the view that usually won out in Tennyson's metaphysical speculation. The happier moments in the family, when the intense aesthetic companionship of the three older brothers and the rapt admiration of the sisters combined with a rare intellectual and religious balance struck by the mother and father, were emblematic of the ideal society which Tennyson adopted as his life objective--perhaps because it was the first life he knew. At the same time there was the puzzling inconsistency of his father's behavior and the manic depression of his brothers and sisters which confronted him as a boy. Why, with all the intelligence and physical strength and beauty of the family, must their life with each other always tend toward sadness and outbursts of anger? Why must a pleasant evening around the mother be broken by a drunken outburst from the father? These were questions Tennyson had to deal with from the first moments of his consciousness; they were questions which

³⁸Memoir, I, 40.

oppressed him in one form or another until his death. As the poet grew up, an increasing split between the father and the rest of the family occurred. This can in part be seen as the source of Tennyson's sense of isolation, another major theme in his poetry. Not only was the family isolated from the other families in the parish; it was also cut off from the drunken father. In Tennyson's poetry there is the corresponding idea of man on earth isolated from the universe and alienated from a God that seems at times irresponsible or at least capricious.

III

The greatest of all parallels that can be drawn between Tennyson's family and his later conception of the world is the manner in which poetry became central to his adjustment within the familial microcosm. Poetry early became the major way in which Tennyson asserted his personality in a situation which at times threatened to overwhelm him. By the age of four or five he was already chanting impromptu poetry. On a windy day he would spread his arms and say: "I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind."³⁹ Another of his favorite phrases which he would often repeat was "far, far away."⁴⁰ His belief in special inspiration for the poet and his concern with both spatial and temporal distance are obviously foreshadowed in these pronouncements of the child. His first written verse was composed during a period of sickness as a response to a challenge. One Sunday when he was eight years old, Tennyson was kept home

³⁹Tennyson, p. 25.

⁴⁰Tennyson, p. 25.

by a cold while the rest of the family went to church. Charles challenged him to write some poetry during the time he would be left alone, giving the praise of flowers as a subject. When the family returned from church, they were greeted by the young poet displaying two sides of a slate covered with blank verse lines in imitation of Thomson. All the startled Charles could say was "You've done it."⁴¹ His early ability for versification won him the notice of his relatives, although their approbation was not entirely whole-hearted. When his grandmother died, his grandfather requested that he write a poem on her death. After reading the poem, the old gentleman rewarded Tennyson with half a guinea, telling him: "Here is half a guinea for you, the first you have ever earned by poetry, and take my word for it, the last."⁴² Tennyson's father recognized his son's ability with more perception than did the grandfather. Dr. Tennyson was eager to read Alfred's poetry and to offer him sympathetic advice. He even bound with his own hands the notebooks in which the boy poet wrote out his early verse. Tennyson learned, while very young, that his poetry was almost always a sure way to please his father and earn his respect. His poetry in those childhood years often seems to take on the appearance of a peace offering, for when Dr. Tennyson was pleased with his son's efforts, his rages were forestalled, and Alfred's security temporarily assured.

The influence of Tennyson's father on his poetry was intensified after 1820, when Dr. Tennyson took upon himself the education of Alfred

⁴¹Tennyson, p. 25.

⁴²Memoir, I, 13.

and Charles. The boys had received their primary instruction at the Louth Grammar School under a system of learning which included whipping as a large part of the curriculum; and despite the recurrent irascibility of their father, the boys were glad to escape to his tutelage. It seems from the single-minded and fierce attention Dr. Tennyson gave to their education that he was trying to compensate for his unrealized ambitions and the failure to use his own abilities.⁴³ "I have known some satisfaction in thinking that my boys will turn out to be clever men," he wrote in an 1824 letter to his brother. "Phoenix-like, I trust (though I don't think myself a Phoenix) they will spring from my ashes, in consequence of the exertions I have bestowed upon them."⁴⁴ Dr. Tennyson had both a passion for literature and an excellent library. His method of instruction was to turn the boys loose in the library and then to advise their plan of reading. Under this arrangement, they read the standard Greek and Latin classics as well as Spenser, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Milton, Pope, Thomson, Collins, Gray, Campbell, Macpherson, Byron, and Scott. Dr. Tennyson made certain that they were introduced to Dante through Boyd's translation of the Inferno. Just as influential were a number of more exotic books, among them Galland's Arabian Nights; Savary's Letters from Egypt; William Jones's Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian translations; Sale's Koran; Ulloah's Voyages; Brand's Observations on Popular Antiquities; and Jacob Bryant's Analysis of Ancient Mythology.

⁴³Tennyson, p. 31.

⁴⁴Tennyson, p. 31.

And there were, of course, such works as the modern reprint of Morte d' Arthur, the Decameron, Orlando Furioso, Don Quixote, and Mrs. Barbauld's fifty volumes of the British novelists.⁴⁵ It is quite plain from the reading Dr. Tennyson prescribed for his sons that the resurrection he foresaw for himself through them was to be a literary one.

By the age of ten or eleven, Tennyson was beginning to produce poetry in quantity; and under the stimulation of his father's instruction and library, the volume of poetry he turned out between 1820 and 1828 is amazing. One of the relics of this period of production is a quarto notebook, sixty-three pages long, entirely in Latin, and divided into three sections: Vol. I, 1820, The Poetry of Tennyson; Vol. II, The Lyrical Poetry of Tennyson; and Vol. III, The Prose Writings of Tennyson. By the age of eleven, Tennyson was already thinking of himself as a poet with a shelf of works to his credit.⁴⁶ Some of his early poetry was oral. In her old age, his sister Cecilia would tell of how Alfred would set her, when she was little more than a baby and he eight or nine, on his knee, Arthur and Matilda leaning on each side of him, and then tell them "legends of knights and heroes among untravelled forests rescuing distressed damsels, or on gigantic mountains fighting with dragons. . . ."⁴⁷ But most of his composition was with pen and ink. "About ten or eleven Pope's Homer's Iliad became a favourite of mine," Tennyson wrote in a note to his

⁴⁵Tennyson, p. 32.

⁴⁶Tennyson, p. 33.

⁴⁷Memoir, I, 5.

son, Hallam, in 1890, "and I wrote hundreds and hundreds of lines in the regular Popeian metre, nay could even improvise them."⁴⁸ In the same note, Tennyson told of other poetry he wrote during his adolescence. "At about twelve and onward I wrote an epic of six thousand lines a la Walter Scott,--full of battles, dealing too with sea and mountain scenery,--with Scott's regularity of octo-syllables and his occasional varieties," continued Tennyson, "Though the performance was very likely worth nothing I never felt myself more truly inspired. I wrote as much as seventy lines at one time, and used to go shouting them about the fields in the dark."⁴⁹ Other poems written in the 1820-1828 period include the remarkably Miltonic "Armageddon," at least two blank-verse plays (The Devil and the Lady and another which has not survived), a variety of poems in Latin and Greek metres, some shorter poems in English, and the lyrics which went into Poems by Two Brothers, Tennyson's first published volume.

Almost all of Tennyson's early poems deal with the same themes and problems of his later poetry. They are filled with agonizing passages on mortal fate, speculation about God and the nature of evil, visions of the future of humanity, and a concern for the ideal society. Just as impressive as the thematic maturity is the care with which the poems, even in an unfinished state, seem to have been written. Tennyson took himself, his subject matter, and his poetry seriously from his very first attempts. In his earliest verse and in his latest, Tennyson apparently wrote with a

⁴⁸Memoir, I, 11.

⁴⁹Memoir, I, 12.

sense of divine calling, feeling that he was to be a poet and nothing else. And there is very little evidence that he ever considered any other profession except that of poet. Poetry became a distinctive aspect of his life by the age of four or five and remained so throughout the following years. Equally distinctive was the sort of poetry he wrote: serious, carefully composed verse, which almost always returns to a variation on the themes of the riddle and the ideal.

Tennyson's free translation, at the age of fifteen, of the first ninety-three lines of Claudian's De Raptu Proserpinae into one hundred-thirty-three lines of rhymed English couplets is one of his most precocious and thematically typical early poems. The passage selected for translation contains most of the questions Tennyson dealt with time after time in later poems. For example, the nature of God is taken up in the poem, and the tentative conclusion drawn in the final line is that Jove can be called: "That haughty God who sways the realms above. . . ." ⁵⁰ Another question concerns the origin of natural law, the poet mentioning how "laws to man are giv'n, and acorns yield/To the rich produce of the golden field." What makes the poem of special interest, however, is the interpretation of Pluto's demand for a wife as a defiance of Heaven by Hell: "Hell's haughty Lord in times of old began/To rouse 'gainst Heav'n the terrors of his clan" because he felt it was unfair that he alone, of all the gods, "Should lead a dull and melancholy life,/Without the fond

⁵⁰All quotations from Tennyson's early poems in this section are from Alfred Tennyson, The Devil and the Lady and Unpublished Early Poems, ed. Sir Charles Tennyson (Bloomington, Indiana, 1964).

endearments of a wife." Running through the poem is a threat of impending chaos for all of the creatures caught between Heaven and Hell in the dispute of Pluto and Jove. The monsters of Hell are roused to arms, Tisiphone, one of the Furies, calls up the dead, and the poet concludes that "Now had all nature gone to wrack again. . . ." Only the Fates are able to restrain Pluto. They plead with him to "Break not, ah! break not with unholy deed/That peace our laws have fix'd, our threats decreed," and assure him that Jove will grant his wish for a wife. The poem breaks off with Pluto's plea for conjugal felicity being sent to Jove. The translation apparently ends at that point because the part of Claudian's reinterpretation of the myth that most appealed to Tennyson also ends there. Claudian, through the use of the Proserpine myth, tried to express certain ideas about the claims of Hell on Heaven and the preservation of natural order in the world. The major contention is that "haughty Jove" must be flexible enough to yield to the demands of the lower Olympians when the alternative is cosmic disaster. This is heady material indeed for a fifteen-year-old boy to handle in a free translation; but Tennyson demonstrated that he knew the full import of the original poem by expanding the section which deals with the impending revolt and disorder to show the need for Jove's acquiescence.

"Armageddon," written about the same time as the translation of Claudian, is an even more striking poem. There is a curious obliteration in the first nine lines of the manuscript, leaving only these disjointed phrases: "Prophecy whose mighty grasp . . . ings whose capacious soul . . . illimitable abyss . . . bottomless futurity . . . giant figures

that shall pace . . . of its stage-- whose subtle ken . . . the doubly darkened firmament . . . to come with all its burning stars. . . ." The nouns Prophecy, soul, abyss, futurity, firmament, and stars, and the adjectives mighty, capacious, illimitable, bottomless, and giant indicate the breadth of Tennyson's intellectual concern in the poem and in most of his thought. It is a poem in which the boyish Tennyson put on the mantle of Milton and attempted to assume the role of poet-as-prophet. For subject matter he chose the last great battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. For the setting he chose the earth, but only as the focal point of the universe. And his vision swept back and forth over the entire expanse of human time, finally settling on the events foreshadowing the moment when time shall have a stop. Again, as in the translation of Claudian, there is a brooding sense of impending chaos; and the major conflict is between heaven and hell with man caught in the middle. The poem opens with the poet claiming an inspiration which enabled him to acquire "knowledge of the Latter Times." The poet then describes himself standing on a mountain overlooking the valley in which the great battle is to take place. After depicting the tents of God in the East and the tents of Satan in the West, he launches into an account of a visit from an angel who explains to him what is to come. After about five-hundred lines, the poem breaks off with the battle yet to take place.

As is often the case with fragments, "Armageddon" achieves such unity that someone reading the poem, unaware of its incompleteness and not too suspicious of the ellipsis with which it ends, might think it to be complete. From the standpoint of Tennyson's development as a poet, the

poem is in a sense complete, for it attempts to do as much as almost any of his other poems. First of all, there is the emphasis on the role of the poet as an inspired prophet. Tennyson as a youth set his mind toward the kind of knowledge that could only be attained and transmitted in a poetic vision. The opening tribute to the source of his inspiration and the section describing the visit from the angel are attempts to indicate that the vision has been attained. The account of the angel opening the poet's eyes represents a wish fulfillment on the part of Tennyson for the sort of knowledge he sought throughout his life to obtain. After the angel says "Open thine eyes and see," the poet's soul is said to "grow godlike" and his "mental eye grew large" so that he seemed to be standing "Upon the outward verge and bound alone/Of God's omniscience." He became able to see the smallest atom in the air and the cities on the moon. He could hear and understand men talking in unknown tongues, and perceive "notes of busy Life in distant worlds." His mind seemed filled with the most infinite ideas so that all sense of time, being, and place was lost in the swell of his enormous conceptions. He became "a part of the Unchangeable,/A scintillation of Eternal Mind." His transfiguration was so great that he remarks: "Yea! in that hour I could have fallen down/Before my own strong soul and worshipp'd it." This conception of the poetic vision is certainly an exaggerated one; but it was an attempt by the young poet to gain an insight into the enigmas of the universe--or at least an attempt to express what the poet must be able to know and see if he is to be a prophet or a seer and if he is to satisfy his own desire for knowledge about the nature of his world. If the poet is to face the riddle of

the painful earth, he must be able to see as the inspired poet in "Armageddon" does. This is, of course, impossible in actuality. How then is a poet to fulfill his function as seer and prophet? That was the question Tennyson wanted to answer when he wrote the poem and for years afterward. The answer that eventually came was perhaps embodied in the use of myth and allegory later worked into The Idylls of the King. The poet can see; but not with his own eyes, and not directly.

The view of man which comes out in "Armageddon" is just as basic to Tennyson's later thought and poetry as is his concern with the poetic vision and the role of the poet as a seer. In the third section of "Armageddon," the angel addresses the poet as "The Everlasting Man," saying that the human spirit, whether it is limited in action, capable of the greatest knowledge, or joined to the body from a previous carnation, is nevertheless "deathless as its God's own life" and "Burns on with inextinguishable strength." Here in this youthful poem can be seen Tennyson's flat assumption that the human soul is eternal and that, like God Himself, it is capable of realizing the most fabulous potentialities. Tennyson's conception of man became crystallized very early; man, to Tennyson, was mostly spirit with a little bit of flesh--and the flesh could be transcended through poetry, the poet being able to take the sympathetic and sensitive reader with him to the mountain which overlooks the valley of Megiddo and enable him to visualize the Day of the Lord. If the poet can make the reader sense what this might be like, he can also make him sense what the ideal society might be like, or how man must think of himself if he is to attain it. In such a conception of man as is put forth in "Armageddon," Tennyson was implying a system of ethics in which the

first proposition is that man must believe in his eternal nature. Once this is realized, the path of conduct becomes the path of progress toward the greatest possible achievements (understanding the nature of the earth, understanding human nature, building a better society, and moving toward God); for man, in Tennyson's view, has the time in which to work, time which stretches from this world to the next and embraces the City of God on Earth as well as the City of God in Heaven.

"The Coach of Death" is another poem Tennyson wrote at the age of fourteen or fifteen, and like the translation of Claudian and "Armageddon," it makes use of myth and folklore to sound another variation on the theme of the riddle and the ideal. The poem is an out-and-out imitation of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, employing macabre description and even the ballad stanza, although the regularity of the four-line pattern and the abab rime scheme differs from Coleridge. Most of the 132-line fragment is devoted to describing a dark coach which waits at the door of an old inn to carry off souls to hell. As the coach pulls out, it is contrasted to the silvery-bright Paradise Coach, which is carrying souls heavenward. The poem, even though it is an imitation and a boyish experiment, attempts to probe, through the use of symbols, into the nature of death. As in "Armageddon," Tennyson tried to assure his readers that he was capable of engaging in such metaphysical visualizing, writing that he, as a poet, has a burning heart which enables him to cast his eyes over the gloomy earth, listen to the "Thick sobs and short shrill screams arise/Along the sunless waste," and then "To draw strange comfort from the earth,/strange beauties from the sky." The poet, according to Tennyson, can confront

the riddle of the painful earth and squeeze out of all the agony he sees and hears a message of comfort, truth, and beauty.

In "The Coach of Death," a highly significant contrast is drawn between the grim realities of human existence and the beauty and freshness of the earth. The travellers in the coach lift their eyes from the gloomy waste of the underworld and see far above them "the green verge of the pleasant earth" with its summer plains, shining seas, and happy firesides. The pleasant earth seems impossibly unrelated to the underworld and its barkless trees; yet the coach is setting out on its journey up the snowy highway of mortality and will pay its unwelcome visit to some house where a man or woman or child will exchange the green earth for black death. This same sort of contrast is drawn in "The Outcast," a poem Tennyson wrote when he was seventeen. The persona of the poem mentions the beauty of his father's groves and hills with their bright colors and early-morning sunlight, but remarks that he will not return to this pleasantness because his human experience has turned the earth's beauty to ugliness. The broken stile, the wavy paths, the hawthorn trees, and the chattering brook bring only "Lone images of varied pain" to his "worn mind and fevered brain." For Tennyson, the agony of human life has much of its source in this awful contrast between the beauty of the earth and the painful thoughts and depressing attitudes which color a man's perception of the beauty. In the midst of the brightest summer day, the coach of death may stop. Despite the prospects of a rich inheritance, a young man cannot return to his father's estate because of the depressing associations which the groves and hills bring to mind. The young Tennyson saw

that the earth is a paradise, but a fool's paradise because only a fool can enjoy it. The sensitive, thoughtful man, when he looks at the beauty, cannot forget the horrible aspects of his life and the lives of all men. But still there is the tantalizing beauty, the hearty optimism which comes out of a bright fall day and good health. How can we embrace the beauty and maintain the cheerful attitude? Only by becoming better men and by improving our way of living, concluded the young Tennyson.

Another poem written about the same time as "The Outcast" offers a suggestion of how humans and the human condition can become better. The poem is entitled, "In Deep and Solemn Dreams," and the central idea is that dreams of the society for which we long have an enchanting power which makes our dreamless moments "Hopeless, heartless, and forlorn." The persona of the poem tells how in his deepest and most profound dreams he envisions "Great cities by an ocean blue" with "sheeny spires and turrets mixt," a veritable "City of the Blest." The city is peopled with the persona's most ideal people, those who have become perfect in love to him through death. When this dream fades, another takes its place. The second dream is of "A careless, free and happy crowd" freed from the press of mortal worries and eager to join in fellowship with the happy poet. This dream also fades and leaves the poet in the darkness he dreads. The poem ends at this point, but there is the implication that dreams of the kind of world we would like to live in serve us as a motivating factor. The dreamer can do two things to alleviate his forlorn feeling. He can attempt to dream again; but this will only lead to the feeling of hopelessness as the dream fades. Or he can seek to make the dream a re-

ality by engaging in some sort of activity which will seek to bring about the "Great cities by an ocean blue."

Accompanying the young Tennyson's conviction that man is eternal and that human vision must be directed toward solving the riddle of his own existence and building a better environment for himself was an overwhelming and agonizing sense of responsibility which became in itself a source of anguish. This is reflected in the poem, "Perdidi Diem," which dates from about the same time as "In Deep and Solemn Dreams." The poem opens with the poet describing himself as a carcass in the coffin of his flesh, his soul "but th' eternal mystic lamp,/Lighting that charnel damp." His nature is compared to that of the owl: "As darkness, dark ourselves and loving night,/ . . . Night-owls whose organs were not made for light." Because of the way he was created, the poet feels compelled to pore upon the mysteries of his own infinite nature and torment his spirit with an insatiable longing to understand the riddle of his being and the riddle of the earth. In the night he sees some young ravens fluttering in agony on the ground after having fallen from their nest; and in the agony he experiences as he watches them in wretchedness, he asks: "What is the death of life if this be not to die?" But at the same time he knows that to him "a Power is given,/An effluence of serenest fire from Heaven" which gives him an existence pulsating to the musical fire of God's heart. And this power sustains him because it makes him sense that all existence is part of "one life, one heart, one glow." All creation is symbolized in a cone and the topmost plane of the cone is God, with his pulsations extending to the very base.

But the most famous and most impressive of all Tennyson's early work is The Devil and the Lady, the first draft of which was probably composed when he was fourteen. The play, written in blank verse, tells of a magician named Magus who is called away on a mysterious errand and leaves his wife in the care of the Devil. After sending the wife to bed, the Devil disguises himself in her clothes, admits her lovers to the house, and toys with them until the magician returns, when the play breaks off. As a drama, The Devil and the Lady suffers from the same defects as Tennyson's later plays: too much dialogue and not enough action, abortive attempts at humor, too much imitation of Shakespearian idiom, and a willingness to sacrifice dramatic unity in order to insert purple passages. Nevertheless, it is a brilliant piece of writing for a boy of fourteen, particularly in the way the different characters--a lawyer, a chemist, a soldier, a mathematician, a sailor, and a monk--are made to speak in the trade jargon peculiar to each.

Like the other early poems, The Devil and the Lady foreshadows much of Tennyson's mature thought. "The play opens," wrote Charles Tennyson, "with an invocation to 'omnipotent love' conceived as the Ruler of the Universe and 'vast link of the Creation'--an idea absolutely basic to all the poet's thought and continually repeated during his long life, as, for example, in the preface to In Memoriam and the sonnet 'Doubt and Prayer' included in his posthumous volume, The Death of Oenone."⁵¹ Another basic idea is the conception, also put forth in "Perdidi Diem,"

⁵¹Tennyson, p. 43.

that God fills all space and that all life is thus held in common as a part of God. A component of this idea is the belief, emphasized in one of the Devil's speeches, that spiritual existence is the only reality and that the reality of matter is only an illusion. Later, especially in In Memoriam, Tennyson was to balance the idea of God as omnipotent love with the belief in the spiritual being as the only reality, and find in them enough strength to overcome the anxiety brought about by the pre-Darwinian theories of evolution, the discoveries in astronomy, and the general tendency for science to reduce the stature of man. Unless such anxiety is overcome, the postulation of an ideal is meaningless; and Tennyson at fourteen apparently realized this, or was at least beginning to.

Tennyson's prolific output of poetry from the age of eleven on gradually led him to consider publication; and in 1827 his first published verse appeared in a thin volume entitled Poems by Two Brothers. The volume actually should have been called Poems by Three Brothers because Frederiek as well as Charles and Alfred contributed to it. The significance of the volume has long been overlooked, primarily because most of Alfred's contributions were not among his best, or even his good, poetry. Charles Tennyson noted, for example, that the poems "are almost all exercises in the fashionable styles of the day, particularly those of Gray, Byron, Moore, and Scott, showing little trace of his emotional condition at the time and far less similarity to the mature Tennyson than even The Devil and the Lady."⁵² Such poems as "The Coach of Death," which were

⁵²Tennyson, p. 49.

written by the time the volume came out but omitted from it because they were considered to be aesthetically offensive to the public taste, are certainly better than the poems Tennyson chose to publish in 1827. But the subject matter of a majority of Tennyson's poems in the volume points to his social idealism with much more directness than most of the early poetry. Several of the poems, for example, are laments for the fall of once-superior civilizations, dealing with such matters as Pizarro's destruction of the Peruvians, the fall of Jerusalem, and the fall of Babylon. Others are addresses sympathizing with politically-oppressed nationalities; Tennyson encourages the Greeks to revolt against the Turks, and praises the Spaniards in their rebellion against King Ferdinand. And other poems, such as "Alexander and the High Priest," "The Druid's Prophecies," and "The Vision of King Charles the Eleventh of Sweden" deal with the ideal society in more visionary terms. The concern for a better social order which motivated Tennyson to devote himself to the Spanish cause can be seen in these poems as nowhere else in his youthful work. They reveal that his emotional condition at the time was not dominated by the moody introspection and metaphysical speculation that predominates in much of the other poetry he wrote during the period. His evident concern with the destruction of past civilizations before they could approach the ideal, his advocacy of revolution to start a nationality moving toward the ideal, and his visions of what the future might hold for an improved mankind all have a great deal of similarity to the attitudes held when he later wrote the Idylls of the King and the dramas. Even though the versification, imagery, and symbolism of Tennyson's ef-

forts in Poems by Two Brothers are not handled well, and even if the poems seem derivative, the themes were central to his personality and his thinking at the time the book came out.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Tennyson's juvenilia is that almost none of the poems were written as exercises. For the most part, they were all seriously conceived and executed, and dealt with major philosophical and religious problems. At an age when most boys of his generation were playing cricket, Tennyson was sitting in his father's library trying to write poems in which he meditated on the nature of God, the influence of natural law on man, the origin of mortal agony, and the possibility of a better world peopled by better men. Out of the seriousness with which these questions were pondered, came a recognizable thematic style in most of the poetry written by the time Tennyson was seventeen. As in "Armageddon," "Perdidi Diem," and "The Coach of Death," there is the conviction that the poet receives special inspiration or possesses a special power which enables him to see and feel what the average man can only dimly comprehend. Tennyson demanded that the reader take him seriously because his poetry is given a mystic seriousness by some force outside himself. Another element of Tennyson's style is the devotion to the belief that the human soul is eternal and co-existent with God, a belief which is continually called into doubt by the spectacle of the painful world. But because humanity shares more of God's nature than the nature of the material creation, there is always the hope that a civilization will be developed to overcome the painful aspects of our life. Mankind has the potential, thought Tennyson, to establish a society which would

thrive on love, not anguish; and it became a primary purpose in his poetry to make people aware of their potentiality. Magus the magician in The Devil and the Lady was able, through his knowledge, to force the power of evil to protect his wife's innocence; Tennyson thought that all men, if they were willing to strive toward the sort of knowledge symbolized by Magus's magic, could convert what is now evil into a force for the good. Again and again in the poetry that followed "Armageddon," "Perdidi Diem," "The Coach of Death," and The Devil and the Lady, Tennyson reiterated his sense of inspiration, the eternal nature of the soul, the question of human anguish, and the belief that we can somehow make things better.

The young man who could risk his life for the sake of a band of Spanish revolutionaries as well as the young man who spent more time outside the dance than within, is present in Tennyson's teenage poems. Just as the verse took on a distinctive style by the time Poems by Two Brothers was published, so too did Tennyson's way of living take on a style of its own, for the poems were central to his life, and in many ways, his youthful experience was central to the poetry. He very early began to live for the sake of writing poetry, perhaps because he realized that for him writing poetry was essential to living. At first the poetry was a way of securing and maintaining his position in a competitive family situation which made him feel threatened by children above and below. Then it became a way of winning his father's approval. And with his first publication, it became a way of winning the approval of the world. Despite the expansion of its function, however, the roots of Tennyson's poetry and its characteristic subject matter go back to the situation in which it

originated, a situation broken up into moments of agony and bitterness among the members of the Tennyson family, and moments of loving rapport. Out of the bitterness came an awareness of the painful earth; out of the moments of joy and love came a realization that human beings can establish an ideal relationship with one another. Once these opposing factors became even vaguely a part of Tennyson's consciousness, his life style began to take shape. And by the time Tennyson reached the age of fourteen we can see already the Tennyson of twenty, the Tennyson of thirty, of fifty, and of eighty. But we can see only the outline; the role had been cast but the acting was yet to be done.

IV

On February 20, 1828, the closed circle of the Tennyson family was broken when Alfred and Charles matriculated at Trinity College. Tennyson left the old rectory at Somersby to begin the most intense period of his poetic development. When he entered Cambridge, he was a shy, seedily dressed youth who was saved from nondistinction only by the volume of schoolboy verse he had published with Charles and Frederick. When he left his college in 1833 without taking a degree, he was regarded as one of the greatest student poets ever to be enrolled and had to his credit a volume of his own verse, Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, which had received some favorable reviews. But more importantly, while at Cambridge Tennyson passed under the influence of a group of brilliant young men who were to have a lasting effect on his thought and on his development as a poet. These friends, most of whom were members of the fabled Apostle's Club, were to reinforce Tennyson's self-concept so strongly that not even the

death of his father, threat of poverty for his immediate family, and the loss of his best friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, could deter him from fulfilling what he felt to be his destiny as a poet. The life style which had developed in the rectory thus carried over into the Cambridge years, acquiring greater consistency and amplitude as Tennyson grew older.

Although the prospect of the university promised an escape for Tennyson from the difficult conditions at the rectory, it soon posed another problem--loneliness. At first he felt more isolated than he ever had at Somersby. As happens to most young men away from home for the first time, the moments of happiness he had known with his family seemed to outweigh the moments of hatred and bitterness. Of course, much of his initial anguish at Cambridge can be attributed to his shyness. The first time Alfred and Charles went for dinner at the College Hall, they were so panicked by the confusion of strange faces that they turned back to their rooms without eating.⁵³ This shyness was a problem for Tennyson all through his life. Even when he had been the dominant literary figure in England for forty years and had associated with royalty, statesmen, and noted figures in almost all fields, "his sensibility was so extreme that introduction to strangers often inflicted him with a paroxysm of self-consciousness."⁵⁴

Tennyson's shyness was at first increased by the suddenness with which he seemed to have stepped out of the small world of his childhood

⁵³Tennyson, p. 55.

⁵⁴Tennyson, p. 55.

into a world where reform measures, Milton, Canning, Euripides, ghosts, Shelley, and William Whewell suddenly confronted him with frightening confusion. He was aided tremendously, however, by his intense desire to learn, and in a short time he began to make an impression on the other students. Despite his homesickness, he continued to work on his poems, experimented with Latin and Greek verse, and began for the first time a rigorous study of history and natural science. And as always, his social idealism showed through. He supported the Anti-Slavery Convention, advocated the abolition of subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles, and voiced his admiration of Canning, Peel, and the Duke of Wellington.⁵⁵ His adjustment to college life was further aided by his appearance, which commanded admiration and attention from the first. By 1828 he was over six feet tall, dark-skinned, broad-shouldered, and had a magnificent head. Others drew the same conclusion as W. H. Thompson, later Master of Trinity, who said upon first seeing Tennyson: "That man must be a poet."⁵⁶

Tennyson's background of family strife, fits of melancholia combined with moments of visionary hopefulness, and his initial feelings of anxiety at leaving Somersby were perhaps major factors in the friendship that developed between him and Arthur Henry Hallam, a friendship that did much to alleviate Tennyson's loneliness at Cambridge. Unlike Tennyson, Hallam came from a happy and cultured home. His father, Henry Hallam, was a leading historian, a literary scholar, and a man of wealth. He and his wife were as one in their devotion to their children, and spared

⁵⁵Memoir, I, 41.

⁵⁶Tennyson, p. 56.

no expense in Hallam's education.⁵⁷ When Hallam entered Cambridge in October, 1828, he had been reading French and Latin since the age of nine, had written several tragedies, had attained a reputation as the best poet and debater at Eton, and had spent eight months in Italy, where he accumulated an extensive knowledge of Italian art and literature.⁵⁸ Tennyson was greatly in need of a friend when Hallam arrived, particularly a friend who possessed the congenial family background he lacked, for Tennyson's family relations were especially strained at this time. In December, 1828, Frederick, Tennyson's oldest brother, had been rusticated from Trinity College for missing chapel and behaving insolently to the Master of the College.⁵⁹ Although Dr. Tennyson thought the penalty too severe, his son's rustication was nevertheless a serious blow. With Frederick's dogmatic and aggressive character back at Somersby to irritate his father, and the elder Tennyson's brooding over his son's rustication, conditions at the rectory rapidly worsened. Dr. Tennyson abused his wife and children with more vituperation than ever and Tennyson was constantly troubled during his first year at Cambridge by reports from home of his father's violence. "The thought of these things," wrote Charles Tennyson, "would cause the depression, which had haunted him since adolescence, to descend upon him like a storm, and with it a conviction of his own sinfulness, and an agonizing realization that he was drifting away from the

⁵⁷Tennyson, p. 63.

⁵⁸Tennyson, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁹Tennyson, p. 59.

religion which meant so much to his beloved mother, and without which it was so hard to endure those bitter times of distress at the Rectory and to find a meaning and a purpose in human existence."⁶⁰ Friendship with Hallam helped Tennyson to take his thought off Somersby and gave him the reassurance of concurrence as he developed his religious thinking away from his mother's pietism and toward the unreassuring but honest belief that "There lives more faith in honest doubt,/Believe me, than in half the creeds."

Tennyson's friendship with Hallam quickly alleviated his loneliness, drew him from the fringes and into the center of college life, and certainly contributed more to his development as a poet than any other human contact he made. It is worth noting that there was less of Tennyson's depression during the years 1829-1833 than in most of the other periods of his life. This apparent stability of disposition is striking when the number of unfortunate events in which he was involved is recounted. The Spanish revolution in which Tennyson, Hallam, and other Apostles assisted against Ferdinand VII ended in tragic failure. Hallam became engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emily, but was forbidden by the elder Hallam to see or correspond with her for a year. In 1831 Tennyson's father died. Tennyson's grandfather was pressing him and his brother Charles to take holy orders. It was discovered that the two brothers had acquired substantial debts at Cambridge, and Tennyson was forced to come down without taking his degree. Christopher North criticized Tennyson's first solo volume,

⁶⁰Tennyson, p. 66.

Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, and called its author a member of the Cockney School. Edward Tennyson, Alfred's brother, suffered a nervous breakdown. Hallam's father and George Tennyson, Tennyson's grandfather, had difficulty over Emily's marriage settlement. Tennyson's brother Charles became an opium addict. And Poems, Tennyson's second major volume, was savagely attacked by Croker in the Quarterly Review of April, 1833. That Tennyson, given as he was to black moods, maintained a steady output of poetry, and a relatively placid mental state even though such a number of disconcerting events took place, is a tribute to the strength of his friendship with Hallam.

But even during the happy years Tennyson enjoyed with Hallam, there is evidence of the ever-present vein of despondency in Tennyson's nature. His behavior in courtship at this time is described as varying "between romantic compliment and sudden lapses into gloom."⁶¹ In 1831, intensive study as well as worry occasioned by the financial distress accompanying the death of Dr. Tennyson brought about a mental uneasiness which affected Tennyson's physical health. He began to fear he was going blind,⁶² a fear that understandably enough made him despondent. The cold and exact manner in which Tennyson's grandfather set about clearing the Doctor's debts and the liabilities at Cambridge, and providing an allowance for Tennyson's mother was also very disquieting to Tennyson's mind. Hallam, after taking his degree and beginning to read law in London, wrote to Emily in

⁶¹Tennyson, p. 102.

⁶²Tennyson, p. 112.

January of 1832, asking her to help him in bringing Tennyson "to better hopes and more steady purposes. . . . I would sacrifice all my own peace to see you and him in peace with yourselves and with God."⁶³ When the 1832 volume, Poems by Alfred Tennyson, came out and was sneered at by all of the major critics, "the cloud of depression settled on him once more."⁶⁴ About this time, Tennyson even ended a congratulation to his Aunt Russell on the birth of a grandson with these words: "I hope for his own peace of mind he will have as little of the Tennyson about him as possible."⁶⁵ But these relatively minor lapses into gloom were trivial compared to the generally buoyant mood maintained during his Cambridge years.

Hallam's influence on Tennyson was so great partially because their temperaments were both marked by similar idealism. "It is simple truth," wrote Gladstone, "that Arthur Henry Hallam was a spirit so exceptional that everything with which he was brought into relation during his shortened passage through this world, came to be, through this contact, glorified by a touch of the ideal."⁶⁶ For Tennyson, the ideal meant a better world. For Hallam, it was something closer to the ideal which Dante symbolized in Beatrice, an otherworldly love-object. Hallam's infatuation with a series of girls, which eventually culminated in his engagement to Emily Tennyson, indicates that, like Shelley, he tried to seek in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal. But the ideal-

⁶³Tennyson, p. 117.

⁶⁴Tennyson, p. 136.

⁶⁵Tennyson, p. 136.

⁶⁶Tennyson, p. 64.

ism of the two friends is basically much the same. Both saw the need for themselves to keep an unobtainable objective in view because the effort to attain it enriched their lives and intensified their devotion to learning and art. And Tennyson himself, by coming into contact with Hallam, was glorified by a touch of the ideal--so much so that, because of Hallam's enthusiastic puffing of Tennyson's poetry, in 1833 there was actually a debate among students at the Cambridge Union on the question: "Tennyson or Milton, which the greater poet?"⁶⁷

It was to Hallam's influence that Tennyson probably owed his membership in the Apostles. When Hallam was elected to the club on May 9, 1829, it was only a week later, on May 16th, that Tennyson was voted membership. Hallam had associated with various members of the club during his days at Eton and no doubt made use of his friendships to get the poet into the group. The influence the club had on Tennyson could be indicated by a roll call of the members in 1829 alone. There was John Kemble, who became one of the leading authorities in the nineteenth century on Old English literature. Richard Chenevix Trench became Dean of Westminster, was later made Archbishop of Dublin, and led the Irish Church through the crisis of its disestablishment. Richard Monckton Milnes was famous for a generation as a London social figure and managed to find time to edit and publish the first biography and collected edition of Keats. James Spedding was to retire from the Colonial Office to devote himself to a biography and critical edition of Francis Bacon. Edmund Lushington became Professor of Greek at Glasgow. W. H. Thompson, just as much a scholar as

⁶⁷Memoir, I, 91.

Lushington, became Master of Trinity College.⁶⁸ These, the principal members of the club, matched wits with Tennyson, listened to his poetry, and were the first of his generation to proclaim him as a major poet. They provided him with a sympathetic audience, nourished him with ideas, and eliminated the narrow bookishness which had threatened to be a nearly fatal consequence of his precocious and secluded years at the rectory.

The Apostles debated on politics, read Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Butler, Hume, Bentham, Descartes, and Kant, and argued about such questions as the origin of evil, the source of morality, and the personality of God.⁶⁹ The subject matter of many of the debates centered around the same questions as much of Tennyson's poetry. The minutes of one meeting, for example, show the Apostles discussing and later voting on these questions: "Is an intelligible First Cause deducible from the phenomena of the Universe?" "Is there any rule of moral action beyond general expediency?"⁷⁰ The first question, of course, deals with the riddle of the earth, and the second with the possibility of an ideal influencing ethical action. Tennyson voted no to the first and aye to the second. But the meetings were not the dull gatherings of young men trying to weary themselves with unanswerable and somewhat pretentious questions that they might at first seem to be. "Last Saturday we had an Apostolic dinner when we had the honour, among other things of drinking your health," wrote one of the Apostles to Tennyson concerning a meeting the poet could not

⁶⁸Tennyson, pp. 70-71.

⁶⁹Memoir, I, 43-44.

⁷⁰Memoir, I, 44.

attend. "Edmund Lushington and I went away tolerably early; but most of them stayed till past two. John Heath volunteered a song; Kemble got into a passion about nothing but quickly jumped on again; Blakesley was afraid the Proctor might come in; and Thompson poured large quantities of salt upon Douglas Heath's head because he talked nonsense."⁷¹

Hallam was one of the more enthusiastic members of the Apostles, and his most significant writing, the essay "Theodicaea Novissima," was composed to be read at a meeting of the club. In the essay, he treated a characteristic Apostolic subject: the existence of moral evil in the world. His answer was derived from the same belief in omnipotent love that was fundamental to most of Tennyson's speculation.⁷² Hallam was usually to be found in some other club member's room discussing and propounding similar beliefs. "Arthur Hallam could take in the most abstruse ideas with the utmost rapidity and insight, and had a marvellous power of work and thought, and a wide range of knowledge," said Tennyson. "On one occasion, I remember, he mastered a difficult book of Descartes at a single sitting."⁷³ The breadth of Hallam's interest and ambitions during his membership in the Apostles is evident in a project he was inspired to undertake while under the influence of the club. With one or two of his scholarly friends, he began a translation of Dante's Vita Nuova with notes and prefaces.⁷⁴ Such enterprises as this, combined with

⁷¹Memoir, I, 44.

⁷²Tennyson, p. 82.

⁷³Memoir, I, 45.

⁷⁴Memoir, I, 44-45.

his overwhelming brilliance, soon made Hallam one of the central figures in the group.

Tennyson, in contrast to his friend, was one of the most outwardly unenthusiastic members of the Apostles. He got off to an awkward start in the club, being elected too late in the summer term of 1829 to attend more than a few meetings. And soon after the autumn term began, he was fined five shillings for missing meetings.⁷⁵ According to the rules, he was expected to read an essay at one of the gatherings, but when his turn came, even though he had a paper on "Ghosts" written, he could not be brought to read it. This was a breach of the club rules and Tennyson had to resign his membership.⁷⁶ He was not really dismissed from the club, however, and was allowed to attend the meetings as a noncontributor to the essay sessions. Douglas Heath, one of the Apostles, wrote that he remembered Tennyson at the meetings, "sitting in front of the fire, smoking and meditating, and now and then mingling in the conversation. I cannot satisfy myself as to the time when I became an Apostle, or when I made acquaintance with A. T. My belief is that he had already become an honorary member extraordinary."⁷⁷ Tennyson was known for his ability to listen calmly to a discussion and suddenly contribute a word or an observation that changed the whole course of the dialogue. One night, for example, he broke in with a theory that the "development of the human body

⁷⁵Tennyson, p. 83.

⁷⁶Tennyson, p. 83.

⁷⁷Memoir, I, 43.

might possibly be traced from the radiated, vermicular, molluscos, and vertebrate organisms."⁷⁸ Although Coleridge and others had propounded similar theories, Tennyson was nevertheless making the point over thirty years before Darwin's Descent of Man.

Although Tennyson was hesitant about reading essays to the Apostles, he did not show a similar shyness about his poetry, which the club members received with enthusiasm. The extent of their enthusiasm can be seen in some of the letters they wrote in 1832. Charles Merivale wrote to Thompson that "The Palace of Art" was read to each man as soon as he came back from vacation. "Though the least eminent of the Tennysonian Rhapsodists," he adds, "I have converted by my readings both my brother and your friend (or enemy?) Richardson to faith in the 'Lotos-eaters.' They rather scoff at the former (the 'Palace of Art'), and ask whether 'The abysmal depths of personality' means the Times newspaper?"⁷⁹ In another letter written to Thompson, Spedding wrote: "We talk out of the 'Palace of Art,' and the 'Legend of Fair Women.' The great Alfred is here (in London), i.e. in Southampton Row, smoking all the day, and we went from this house on a pilgrimage to see him. . . ."⁸⁰ On July 18, 1832, Spedding wrote again: "I say, a new volume by A.T. is in preparation, and will, I suppose, be out in Autumn. In the meantime I have no copy of the 'Palace of Art,' but shall be happy to repeat it to you when you come; no copy of the

⁷⁸Memoir, I, 44.

⁷⁹Memoir, I, 87.

⁸⁰Memoir, I, 86.

'Legend of Fair Women,' but can repeat about a dozen stanzas which are of the finest. . . ."81 As in his family situation, Tennyson found poetry to be a way of asserting himself at Cambridge; and through it he gained the recognition and respect of his peers. Almost every new poem he wrote was circulated among the Apostles and eagerly discussed. His sensitivity, however, made him especially disdainful of criticism. Despite the principle of free speech upon which the society was founded, he would permit disapproval to be expressed only by silence.82

In the summer of 1830, Tennyson collected some of the poems he had written for the enjoyment of the Apostles and published them in the volume, Poems, Chiefly Lyrical. These poems show a continuation of the themes treated in his juvenile poetry, but with an increased mastery of metrics and sophistication of phrase. The choice of metaphysical subjects in such pieces as "The Mystic," and "A Spirit Haunts the Year's Last Hours," is in a measure due to the influence of the Apostles, but from the earlier poetry it is clear that the concern about such subject matter was a part of Tennyson's thinking from his boyhood onward. What differs is that there is a feeling of immediacy in the poems, a feeling that the questions under discussion are of immediate and profound significance to the poet as he wrote about them. In the earlier verse, such as "The Coach of Death," the prospect of death does not seem to be directly confronting the poet. But in many of the poems in the 1830 volumes, Tennyson was writing about

81 Memoir, I, 86-87.

82 Tennyson, p. 85.

death and madness as distinct possibilities in the present. That curious poem, "The Supposed Confessions of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind Not in Unity with Itself" is an example.

"The Supposed Confessions" shows, as no other Cambridge poem does, the conflict Tennyson passed through in trying to reconcile the riddle of the painful earth to his idealism. In the poem, Tennyson presents a persona who is anguishing over his painful condition in the world, certain of nothing, but finding comfort through persisting in his questioning. Although by no means a polished example of Tennyson's verse, "The Supposed Confessions" treats most of the elements in Tennyson's thinking during his college years and serves as a prototype for many later first-person poems in which personal conflicts are set forth through the guise of a persona.

Like Tennyson himself during his Cambridge days, the persona is despondent, torn by a fear of having betrayed his mother, thrown into intense anguish by his persistent religious doubt, but too honest to enfold himself in the religious tradition of his class. His predicament is one which Tennyson saw for every man, a predicament in which a man feels himself bound up in a particular time and place, having at the same time aspirations and hopes about a more ideal condition and way of living, but suffering intense guilt because of a belief that somehow, somewhere, there has been a personal failure. In the midst of such conflict, the only certainty that appears is the reality of the riddle. To Tennyson, there seemed to be only one path a man could follow, and that was the path of the riddle, for only out of questioning and doubt can movement toward the far-off goal of an ideal society come about. Underneath this hope is the

conviction that human destiny, so far as the poet can see, is to question with no certainty of ever finding an answer. This destiny is what makes the hope involved in the search less than an immediate comfort; for man, if he is to lift himself out of his present condition, must face the riddle or he cannot make the earth any less painful. If he were to throw himself into the everyday pursuit of property, money, and position, he could easily lose himself in the immediacy of things and thus take his mind off his anguish. But, according to Tennyson, the authentic man does not do this; he faces the riddle and all of its pain. And this is why, in faltering moments, he cries out with the young man in "The Supposed Confessions":

O weary life! O weary death!
 O spirit and heart made desolate!
 O damned vacillating state! I, 18⁸³

This cry appears in poem after poem as an echo of the search for the answer to the riddle and as a counter theme to the optimism associated with Tennyson's idealism.

The direct confrontation of the riddle and the ideal as it appears in "The Supposed Confessions" changed little in basic outline in later poems. In other pieces such as "St. Simeon Stylites," "Locksley Hall," "In Memoriam," Maud, Enoch Arden, "Aylmer's Field," "The Voyage," "Lucretius," The Idylls of the King, "Despair," "The Wreck," and Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, the pattern is that of present agony, an awareness

⁸³Volume and page numbers, unless otherwise specified, refer to Alfred Tennyson, The Works of Tennyson, annot. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ed. Hallam Tennyson, Eversley Edition, 9 vols. (London, 1908). Most Tennyson scholars accept this edition as standard.

of what might have been, and an overall sense of guilt. What did change, however, is the finesse with which Tennyson handled the basic situation. In "The Supposed Confessions," the technique is quite straightforward and simple. Little attempt was made to separate the persona from Tennyson himself, and except for the statement that the mother is dead, there is no difference between Tennyson's own condition when he wrote the poem and that of the persona. In later poems, the point of view is most often third person, thus giving the conflict stature as a universal human phenomenon: it becomes the human condition rather than Tennyson's personal problem. Another later development, notably in The Idylls, is another level of conflict in the juxtaposition of characters who are engaged in different interpretations of the search.

The major difference, then, between Tennyson's juvenile poems and the poems he wrote at Cambridge was his realization that he was becoming involved in the search to answer the riddle and that the conclusions he came to in his poetry were to have a direct influence on whether or not he and his fellows were going to become better men and whether or not human conditions were to be improved. Just as the persona in the "Supposed Confessions" has to wriggle out of his personal dilemma and face the riddle and the future beyond, so Tennyson felt he had to overcome the depression brought on by the eccentricities of his family and face his future as a poet. He realized that it was time for him to "look into the laws/Of life and death" (I, 18) and analyze and compare until understanding comes.

Tennyson's increasing sense of involvement can be seen perhaps no

better than in "The Palace of Art," one of the most important poems to appear in the 1832 volume, for it is the first poem in which the phrase "riddle of the painful earth" appeared. The phrase occurs in a stanza which is at once the link and transition between a description of the soul's blissful isolation and the subsequent description of the moral deterioration resulting from an attempt to live entirely in a world of art. Several things should be noticed about the function of the riddle. It is first presented as a thought which cannot be repressed and must be dealt with. But when the soul finally realizes the sterility of her isolation, the riddle causes her to be cast into the uneasiness, insecurity, and confusion the Palace was built to avoid. The enigma of the riddle persistently plagues the artist who tries to divorce his art from the world he is placed in; and once it is faced and its pervasiveness realized, it reveals the bare bones of art for art's sake.

The phrase had approximately the same function in Tennyson's life as it does in the poem. Like the psyche figure in "The Palace of Art," Tennyson in his formative years at Cambridge and during his friendship with Arthur Hallam showed signs of trying to make art a world unto itself and to utilize it as a protection from the disturbing, distasteful, and demoralizing problems presented to him by the real world. The reality of this tendency was apparent to Tennyson's friends; and Richard Trench, one of the Cambridge Apostles, was compelled to say to him: "Tennyson, we cannot live in art."⁸⁴

⁸⁴Memoir, I, 118.

"The Palace of Art" was written in acknowledgment of Trench's warning, and the poem serves to symbolize Tennyson's own inner experience through the representation of the isolated maiden as his soul. The decorations of the Palace stand for the heritage of nineteenth century culture. Comfortable within this heritage, the self-embracing soul is able to look down on the everyday struggle that has produced the culture.⁸⁵ But when the riddle presents itself, this comfort becomes discomfort, for the mind sensitive enough to beauty to construct the Palace cannot avoid being sensitive to the painful world--a world that penetrates even the Palace.

"The Palace of Art" thus serves to illustrate the importance of the riddle of the painful earth as a shaping influence on both Tennyson's life and on his work. It first occurred in a poem which is devoted to an exposition of what the artist's relationship to the world should be. And it occurred at a time when Tennyson was trying to determine what sort of poetry he would devote himself to writing. Just as the riddle altered the outlook of the psyche figure in the poem, so it altered Tennyson's outlook: it initiated a change from calm, complacent enjoyment of the fruits of culture, to a fierce, raging, desperate questioning of the sort which produces and nurtures culture. Tennyson himself went through this process while at Cambridge and accepted a role which had been latent ever since his first poems, a role in which the poet becomes a sort of secret agent carrying coded messages to his fellows from a nebulous source of inspiration, the messages nearly always dealing with how men should live

⁸⁵Lionel Stevenson, "The 'high-born maiden' Symbol in Tennyson," PMLA, LXIII (1948), 235.

and work to bring about the ideal society, and sometimes presenting a visionary glimpse of the heavenly city itself.

Such an exalted view of the poetic function is quite directly stated in the famous poem, "The Poet." The poem is about the legendary "golden clime" in which poetry was first born, a time when the poet was gifted with an inspiration which enabled him to see a special pattern in the confusion of life and death, good and evil, and the human ego. This pattern is "The marvel of the everlasting will,/An open scroll" (I, 58). From his inspiration, the poet was able to fashion "winged shafts of truth" (I, 59). The poet served as a catalyst; out of his truth came more truth, and soon "the world/Like one great garden show'd" (I, 59). Because of the poet's power, men were able to see the great design of the universe, and the result was freedom and wisdom, a freedom and wisdom unstained with blood. In this poem, Tennyson not only maintained that poetry sustains culture; he also maintained that poetry is the very source of all social progress.

Tennyson saw the role of the poet as a mighty one, but at the same time he realized that the poet's position in a culture is very precarious. This is evident in the "The Poet's Mind," a companion poem to "The Poet." For the poet to be effective as an agent for culture, his mind must not be vexed by persons of shallow wit or else his source of inspiration will be cut off:

Clear and bright it should be ever,
Flowing like a crystal river,
Bright as light, and clear as wind. (I, 61)

The metaphor of society as a garden, which appears in "The Poet," is

carried over into this poem with a good deal of amplification. The poet is symbolized as "a purple mountain/Which stands in the distance yonder" (I, 62). In the center of the garden is a fountain which "is ever drawn/From the brain of the purple mountain" (I, 62). And the mountain itself draws the water "from heaven above" (I, 62). But the beautiful garden can be easily destroyed if those unsympathetic to poetry are allowed to enter:

Dark-brow'd sophist, come not anear;
 All the place is holy ground;
 Hollow smile and frozen sneer
 Come not here. . . .
 The flowers would faint at your cruel cheer. (I, 61)

For the garden, with all its magnificence, to be preserved, the sacredness of its life-giver, the purple mountain with its spring, must be honored. Sophistry, with its cruel comfort, can only destroy what the poet has engendered and sustained, for the sophist's ear is dead to the poet's "song of undying love" (I,62).

Through the metaphor of the garden as it is used in "The Poet" and "The Poet's Mind," Tennyson explicitly put forth his conception of the relationship between the poet and society, a conception that was again stated at greater length in "The Palace of Art." The poet, according to Tennyson, draws his power from heaven, transforms it in his poetry, and energizes civilization. This was the sort of poet he tried to be. And at the age of twenty-four, with two volumes of verse behind him, the support of a group of young men who were among the brightest in their generation (and later proved it), and secure in the friendship of Arthur Henry Hallam, the way ahead looked clear.

PART TWO: THE GHOST OF ARTHUR HALLAM

I

One evening in mid-September of 1833, Mary and Matilda Tennyson were walking along a country lane in front of the rectory at Somersby. It was late twilight and the long shadows cast by the already vanished sun were turning into indefinite patches of blackness. The girls were talking idly, neither paying much attention to what was being said. There was little excitement at the rectory. Alfred was spending much of his time writing, his mother was brooding over the family's money worries, and Emily was the quietest of all, for Arthur Hallam, her husband to be, was in Italy with his father. Arthur had spent several weeks at the rectory during the summer, weeks that were passed courting Emily, talking to Alfred, and entertaining the fatherless and somewhat disrupted Tennyson family. After he left at the end of July, the family tempo slowed and the atmosphere seemed especially dull to Mary and Matilda. They both missed the presence of Arthur and were looking forward to his return when he would marry Emily and become more than just a guest at the rectory. Because of the growing darkness, they stepped off the lane and began walking toward the rectory. At once, almost as if in unison, they both stopped and turned around; a tall figure, completely clothed in white, was approaching. As the figure passed, the sisters recognized the unmistakable gait and the head thrown back in contemplation; it looked like Arthur Hallam. The girls were too surprised to move until the ghostly form had passed; then they started running after it. But as fast as they attempted to follow, they were unable to gain on it. At

last the figure seemed to pass through the hedge at a spot the girls could easily enough mark. But when they reached the point where the figure disappeared, they found no break in the hedge. Matilda stared at the ground for a moment, looked hesitatingly about, burst into tears, and ran all the way back to the rectory.¹

Tennyson was unable to make anything of the incident until October 1. He knew that Matilda was an exceptionally imaginative girl and that she could easily be led to mistake a bush or an animal for a ghost. But it was strange that the usually more restrained Mary would also have seen the white phenomenon. He wondered about their story for a few days and then uneasily dismissed it. On the first day of October, Matilda stopped at the postoffice while returning from her dancing lesson at Spilsby. There was a letter for Alfred from Italy; she was glad to see it because she knew it must carry news of Arthur. The handwriting was not his, but she did not pay much attention to that. When she entered the rectory, she found Alfred sitting at the table in the Gothic dining room. She gave him the letter and then went upstairs to take off her hat. He paused a moment before opening it, suspicious of the handwriting, then quickly broke the seal. As soon as he had read the first two sentences of the strange script, the tall white figure in the lane made sense. The letter was from Arthur's uncle, Henry Elton, and began: "At the desire of a most afflicted family, I write to you because they are unequal from the grief into which they have fallen to do it themselves. Your friend,

¹Tennyson, pp. 144-145.

sir, and my much-loved nephew, Arthur Hallam, is no more."² When he finished the letter, Tennyson left the room. A few minutes later, he asked that Emily be sent to him; she was the first he told of the news.³

All the painfulness of human existence seemed to hit Tennyson at once with Hallam's death. The sense of involvement in human affairs which had developed during the Cambridge years and the immediacy of the social and metaphysical problems treated in his college poetry were but foreshadowings of the anguish into which Hallam's death threw him. The problem of the relationship between the artist and society, the need for a better community of men, and even the awful contrast between the earth's beauty and the melancholy reaction of human beings to it, were paled by the awful issues brought forth by the loss of Hallam. "Arthur seemed to tread the earth as a spirit from some better world,"⁴ wrote his father in the introduction to Arthur's posthumous volume of essays and poems. And Tennyson had to agree, asking himself from the first moment of comprehending the October 1 letter what kind of a world and what kind of a power would permit such a youth as Arthur Hallam to die just as he was beginning to fulfill his high promise. Hallam Tennyson wrote of his father that the "overwhelming sorrow . . . for a while blotted out all joy from his life and made him long for death, in spite of his feeling that he was in some

²Memoir, I, 105.

³Tennyson, pp. 144-145.

⁴Arthur Henry Hallam, Remains in Verse and Prose, ed. Henry Hallam (Boston, 1863), p. 48.

measure a help and comfort to his sister."⁵ Again and again Tennyson had to ask himself whether all of man's hopes are to end as those of Arthur Hallam, cut off in the prime of health by a force so sinister that even the autopsy was somewhat uncertain. For the first time, Tennyson began to feel crushed by the riddle of the painful earth. Perhaps there was no answer. Perhaps all human effort is in vain. Perhaps Arthur Hallam's life was no more than it suddenly appeared to be--just a momentary eddy in the stream of time.

Hallam's death came at what would seem to be the worst possible time for Tennyson. He had gotten his start as a poet with two volumes of verse out by 1833. But his reputation was by no means established and had actually deteriorated after the 1832 volume.

The 1830 poems had immediately received two short, but favorable, reviews in the Spectator and the Atlas.⁶ It was also, of course, highly acclaimed by Tennyson's fellow students at Cambridge. As the volume became better known, other appreciative notices were given it. At the end of February and the beginning of March, 1831, Leigh Hunt devoted four issues of the Tattler to the poetry of Charles and Alfred, writing that he had not "seen such poetical writing since the last volume of Mr. Keats."⁷ One of the most perceptive reviews was by Sir John Bowring in the Westminster Review of January, 1831. He recognized the strong note of social idealism in Tennyson's poetry and urged him to consecrate his poetry to

⁵Memoir, I, 109.

⁶Tennyson, p. 92.

⁷Tennyson, p. 114.

the improvement of his country and the world.⁸ But the most lavish praise came from the pen of Arthur Hallam, who talked Edward Moxon, publisher of the furtive Englishman's Magazine, into publishing an essay entitled "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson." Unlike Bowring, Hallam emphasized Tennyson's devotion to beauty for its own sake and compared some of the passages in the volume to Milton and Aeschylus.⁹ Paradoxically Hallam's excessive praise, more than the deficiencies in Tennyson's poetry, occasioned the only real attack on the volume. In May, 1832, Professor John Wilson, who wrote under the pen name of "Christopher North," blasted Tennyson in Blackwood's Magazine, calling his poetry "a perfect specimen of the super-hyperbolic ultra-extravagance of outrageous Cockney eulogistic foolishness."¹⁰ Hallam calmed Tennyson's anger at the attack and told him that the review, even if it was not encouraging, attracted attention to the poet. But Tennyson lost some of his boyish certainty and labored hard at polishing the poems which appeared in December, 1832.

The new volume fell from the press almost stillborn, even though it was far superior to Poems, Chiefly Lyrical and contained some of Tennyson's most famous pieces, such as "The Lotos Eaters," "The Palace of Art," and "The Lady of Shalott." Almost all of the critics pronounced it inferior to its predecessor, and despite a satirical epigram directed against

⁸Tennyson, p. 114.

⁹Tennyson, p. 115.

¹⁰Tennyson, p. 120.

"fusty Christopher," Wilson refused even to acknowledge the volume in Blackwood's. John Lockhart in the Quarterly Review made up for Wilson's silence with a malicious attack; and two years after the volume came out, a third of the copies remained unsold.¹¹ Arthur Hallam was there to console his friend, however, and pointed out that Samuel Rogers had pronounced Tennyson to be the most promising poet of the time, that the Lockhart article kept Tennyson before the public, and that Cambridge was still behind him.¹² Although this comfort was slight, it enabled Tennyson to continue writing. But when Hallam died, the prop fell away, and Tennyson began to think that his career as a poet was over.

At first unable to face the prospect of going on with his work, Tennyson eventually found himself retiring to his study and expressing his grief in verse. A few days after the burial of Arthur on January 3, 1834, Tennyson jotted down a few lines in his notebook, then paused to read them over:

Where is the voice I loved? ah where
Is that dear hand that I would press?
Lo! the broad heavens cold and bare,
The stars that know not my distress!
The Vapour labours up the sky,
Uncertain forms are darkly moved!
Larger than human passes by
The shadow of the man I loved,
And clasps his hands, as one that prays!¹³

The white figure in the rectory lane had come back to haunt Tennyson again--

¹¹Tennyson, p. 137.

¹²Tennyson, p. 141.

¹³Memoir, I, 107.

as it was to during the next seventeen years. The appearance of the spectre offered assurance of Hallam's survival to Tennyson. At the same time the awful indifference of "the broad heavens cold and bare" drove the poet to the depths of pessimism. Again, even in the most depressing personal loss he was to experience, Tennyson was caught in the conflict between future hope and the coldness of present reality. Slowly, and with doubts of his ability to go on, he turned to his poetry just as he had turned to it as a child growing up in a neurotic family, and just as he had turned to it as a shy country boy at Cambridge.

II

As he labored over his poetry in the years following the loss of Hallam, Tennyson struggled to lay that white spectre in the lane to rest. The ghost of Arthur Hallam was far more real to Tennyson than it was to the two sisters who had actually seen it. They could perhaps accept it as proof that their beloved Arthur still somehow survived. But for the poet, the spectre became a symbol of his own unfulfilled and somewhat nebulous hopes for the future and also seemed to represent his fear that all human aspiration would eventually end in aimless and shadowy wandering in obscure country paths. One of the first poems that he began when he was able to start work again was "The Two Voices." This poem was first titled "Thoughts of a Suicide," a title which reflects the depth of Tennyson's depression at the time. In it, Tennyson dealt with his grief and anxiety with an immediacy that does not appear in In Memoriam. While In Memoriam is a retrospective view, at least in the final form Tennyson gave it, of the journey from despair to hope following Hallam's

death, "The Two Voices" is more of an on-the-spot treatment of what Tennyson went through in 1833 and 1834.

Despite the title, there are actually three voices in "The Two Voices"; and out of the dialogue between these voices develops a conflict which was central to Tennyson's thought in this crucial period. The time-honored interpretation of the voices has the first voice as the voice of scepticism (that is the annotation given by Hallam Tennyson), the second voice as the voice of faith, and the third voice as Tennyson himself. The three voices are really different aspects of Tennyson's thinking as he attempted to reconcile the scepticism which resulted from Hallam's death to the hope and optimism that played such a heavy role in his previous years. Tennyson seems to have accepted, metaphorically at least, the time-honored triune theory of personality with its idea of the self caught between two contending forces. This theory appeared in the medieval idea of man's existence being a middle ground between heaven and hell, and in the more sentimental belief in a good angel and a bad angel for every man. It also appeared much later in Freud's conception of the id, the ego, and the superego. As in all of the theories, the effort in "The Two Voices" is toward reconciliation of the forces, a reconciliation that Tennyson also had to effect for himself. The poem thus parallels what most likely took place within Tennyson's mind as he sought to build a new life after 1833.

The overwhelming power of the grief Tennyson first felt upon reading that brief letter on October 1 is indicated by the amount of space given in the poem to the voice of despair and scepticism. "Thou art so

full of misery," asks the voice in its first utterance, "Were it better not to be?" (I, 122). This appeal to suicide occurs in the opening stanza of the poem and shows the immediacy of the temptation. The voice does not receive a sympathetic response to its appeal, for the persona has a lofty conception of the human form and refuses to "cast in endless shade/ What is so wonderfully made" (I, 122). But the voice takes up the argument and attempts to convince the persona that man may not be what he thinks. The voice points out that as for being well made, the dragonfly surpasses man both in beauty and efficiency. And even though the human race does have the intelligence the lower forms lack, the scale of knowledge is so infinite that man has not gained a real height, nor moved closer to absolute knowledge in any substantial way. The persona is forced to look at the insignificant time spanned by his own life and admit, rather painfully, that his share of endless time is not of much significance. Worst of all, the voice points out that there is little probability that the persona, or any other man, will ever answer the riddle toward which all of his intellectual effort has been directed:

Yet hadst thou, thro' enduring pain,
Link'd month to month with such a chain
Of knitted purport, all were vain.

Thou hadst not between death and birth
Dissolved the riddle of the earth.
So were thy labour little-worth. (I, 130)

The arguments of the voice are so potent and so biting that they indicate the extreme anguish and despair Tennyson had to endure during the period when he wrote the poem.

Tennyson, like the persona in the poem, did not give himself up to

the subtleties of the voice; but he passed through an excruciating experience in dealing with it. To yield to despair would have been to disrupt the whole stream of his life, to cut himself off from his past, and to abandon the goals around which that past was structured. The struggle was between chaos and consistency, between insanity and sanity. Just as the persona in the poem begins to counter the suggestions of the voice with opposing thoughts, so too must Tennyson have carried on the battle against despair. The persona thus deadens the thought that the dragonfly is more wonderfully made than man by asserting that man is the highest work of creation. The fear that there may be higher created beings in the universe is countered with the thought that there can be no other planet exactly like the earth and no other being exactly like man. Although he cannot say that mankind in general has moved much closer, if at all, to absolute knowledge, he can cite the example of a man like Stephen who, through tremendous effort, "Saw distant gates of Eden gleam" and heard "The murmur of the fountain head" (I, 132). The thought that his own lifetime is swallowed up in infinitude and that it, like his father's life seemed to be, is a "life of nothings," is assuaged by the conclusion that such a thought is "No certain clearness, but at best/A vague suspicion of the breast" (I, 138). All of these arguments the persona can handle without much trouble.

The real threat to the persona, as it was to Tennyson, is the realization that progress in human knowledge seems at the moment impossible. What good can come out of facing the riddle of the painful earth if no answer of any kind will ever be found? The persona must admit:

I toil beneath the curse,
 But, knowing not the universe,
 I fear to slide from bad to worse.

And that in seeking to undo
 One riddle, and to find the true,
 I knit a hundred others new. (I, 133)

Out of the realization that the riddle will never be answered arises the persona's greatest anguish, for he fears that all effort is useless and wonders about the worth of going on. Why then, he asks, are men so unwilling to die? If pain is such an awful reality, and perhaps the only reality, as the voice maintains, why don't men seek the cessation of pain in death? The answer which the persona gives is the turning point in the poem, as it must have been in this period of Tennyson's life. He concludes that no man has ever sincerely longed for death:

'T is life, whereof our nerves are scant,
 O, life, not death, for which we pant;
 More life, and fuller, that I want. (I, 141)

Men want a better life, a better society than they have at the present; and the persona, as a representative man, is no exception. This represents a return to the dominant theme in Tennyson's life before Hallam's death and is a reaffirmation of what the search to find an answer to the riddle is all about. It is not merely a search to find an answer for the sake of the answer itself. It is a search for a fuller life, a search for a better way of living, and a search for a more ideal society. But how is a man ever to move toward such a life since he toils "beneath the curse" and the effort to answer the riddle seems hopeless? The answer is given symbolically as the persona stands at his window on a Sabbath morning.

The father, mother, and child the persona sees walking to church

are representative of the three aspects of himself; in the unity of the family he sees the unity he must achieve if he is to move toward a fuller life, to move, as the family does, "On to God's house" (I, 141). He achieves this unity by listening to the second voice, the voice of hope and faith, which gives him sufficient optimism to go on with his life. The second voice balances the grim reality of the first voice with the shadowy unreality of the poetic vision, assuring the persona that somehow the voice can "see the end, and know the good" (I, 142) even though it may not speak of what it knows. Just as the father, mother, and child walk hand in hand, so the three aspects of the persona's personality--the voice of tough-minded scepticism, the voice of hope and the poetic imagination, and the self--are reconciled. Out of this reconciliation can come the concentration of energy necessary to move on toward God's house, on toward the ideal society.

In "The Two Voices," Tennyson can be seen facing the most pressing problems brought about by the loss of Hallam. Suicide, despair, and fragmentation of his life along with possible insanity were immediate threats to the poet. Tennyson was able to pull himself together, much as the persona does, and to look to the future again. But there were many other temptations and difficulties he would have to overcome before the ghost of Arthur Hallam could be laid to rest.

III

Tennyson was troubled by another temptation during the months and years immediately after October 1, 1833, a temptation which was in many ways almost as debilitating as the temptation to commit suicide. This

was the temptation to glory in his sense of loss and to set himself aside as one who has suffered intensely, and who, because of his suffering, deserves some sort of saint-like award. Like the problem of suicide, this problem is treated in a poem, "St. Simeon Stylites." St. Simeon was the saint who sought to earn forgiveness for his sins and salvation for his soul by spending over thirty years in penance on top of a series of pillars. Fitzgerald noted that "St. Simeon" was "one of the poems A. T. would read with grotesque Grimness, especially at such passages as 'Coughs, Aches, Stiches, etc.,' laughing aloud at times."¹⁴ What Fitzgerald failed to note was the double ring in Tennyson's laughter--the poet was laughing at the saint, but he was also laughing at himself, for when he wrote the poem he was trying to overcome, through ridicule, the temptation to achieve recognition by torturing himself over the loss of Hallam. Tennyson saw at once the selfishness and the hypocrisy in such a way of living and attacked it by satirizing St. Simeon, seemingly hoping to give himself strength to begin once again working toward the goals he had postulated as a youth.

Another poem which reveals the struggle Tennyson had with the impulse to isolate himself from the world and to abandon the idealism of his youth is "Locksley Hall." Although not published until the 1842 volume, the poem was most probably written in 1835.¹⁵ Ever since the poem appeared, attempts have been made to find a love affair in Tennyson's life

¹⁴ Alfred Tennyson, The Works of Tennyson (London, 1908), II, 304.

¹⁵ Tennyson, p. 194.

to parallel that of the youth in the poem. All such attempts have been unsuccessful, primarily because the situation of lost love and disillusionment is only roughly analagous to Tennyson's own situation in the years after 1833. The hero of the poem may actually have been patterned after Tennyson's brother, Frederick, who did have a love affair with a girl who bore some resemblance to the Amy of the poem.¹⁶ But the problem of isolation and despair that the hero of the poem faces is symbolical of the same problem that Tennyson had to deal with. Like the youth in "Locksley Hall," Tennyson had lost a love in Hallam which had occupied a central position in his life and had sustained his vision of the future. What was he to do? Was he to step out of the stream of progress and spend his days feeling sorry for himself, or was he to plunge forward once again? As in "The Two Voices" and "St. Simeon Stylites" the answer was for going on.

"Locksley Hall" is a poem in which Tennyson sought to reassure himself of the validity of his goals through loud and direct affirmation of the famous vision of "all the wonder that would be." This vision differs considerably from the visions of such poems as "The Supposed Confessions," and "The Two Voices." In each of those poems, the vision is virtually unstated; it is a search for an answer to the riddle of the painful earth, and all of the consequences involved in that search, highly personal, and its outcome not very explicit. But the persona of "Locksley Hall" sees not just a vague personal possibility, but a fairly definite hope for his

¹⁶Tennyson, p. 194.

race. His is a "Vision of the World" (II, 44), involving not himself alone but, as he says, also "Men, my brothers, men the workers, ever reaping something new" (II, 44). With "Locksley Hall," it seems as if Tennyson stopped seeing the search to answer the riddle as a pilgrimage by an isolated artist through a wasteland but as a journey undertaken by a multitude with the stakes being the improvement of the race and the creation of an ideal society as well as the salvation of the individual. Even though the great disappointment in his past made Tennyson doubt his idealism, in "Locksley Hall" the final verdict is in favor of the search as a long-term proposition involving the corporate effort of many people. "Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs," is the affirmation of the persona, "And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the suns" (II, 45). Tennyson once again was able to see a purpose behind the frantic activity of mankind, and discerned progress in the increasing complexity and breadth of human thought. He saw a steady stream of men devoting themselves to the acquisition of knowledge, asking the questions that have to be asked, and striving to build a better destiny for man on earth.

Tennyson went beyond a mere mention of what this destiny would be to make his highly acclaimed prophecy concerning "the Vision of the world." This is really a vision of the ideal society and represents his most explicit statement of what would transpire if men aspired to the ideal by first facing the riddle of the earth. The prophecy has three parts. First, out of the widening knowledge of men shall come technological achievements which will provide the vehicles for a greatly increased

world trade; this will result in a wider distribution of the world's goods. Second, the expanded opportunities for trade will lead to greed; and war, utilizing the new technology for weaponry, will result. Third, the war will be resolved through a world federation of governments "And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law" (II, 45). Such is the vision that Tennyson saw, and except for the bit about universal law, history has followed the general pattern of his prediction.

The vision of "Locksley Hall" has been widely attacked for being hopelessly optimistic and representative of the Victorian willingness to ignore the baser aspects of human nature. But Tennyson did not put forth the vision with the glibness of which he has often been accused. He realized that the acceptance of the vision depended on the eye through which it was viewed. He admitted that when he was in the depths of his depression, he had an

Eye, to which all order festers, all things here are out of joint:
Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point:

Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion creeping nigher,
Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.
(I, 45)

In such a depressed condition, all control seemed to be absent from the world. The images of festered order and things out of joint are images of pain and are effectively utilized to convey Tennyson's increased realization, after Hallam's death, of what a painful planet the earth is. Even science, which to Tennyson was one of the prime factors in building an ideal society, seemed painfully slow. And civilization with its plodding history and cons of agonizing advance could be portrayed by the despairing poet in the symbol of a sleepy man nodding before a dying fire

while the forces of barbarism creep closer. Just as the young man in the poem has to overcome his jaundiced eye, so too did Tennyson have to ascend out of his gloom before his idealism could be reasserted and expanded into the grandiose vision of the future. Tennyson knew that most men did not share his vision, even in what was supposed to be an age of optimism. What he maintained in "Locksley Hall" was that if they could somehow get the jaundice out of their eyes, they also would see what he saw. So it is not really the vision which is excessively optimistic, but Tennyson's hope that other men would somehow obtain the clear eyes of the poet.

The way in which the mortal jaundice can be cured is quite simple in conception but not so simple in execution. The cure involves, as it is outlined in "Locksley Hall," a sacrifice of the past and the present to the future in the adoption of a style of life which is essentially Tennyson's own--the devotion of the self to the future improvement of society. The persona of the poem finds the solution for his dilemma in following the mighty wind of progress. He overcomes the temptation of the past by realizing that Amy is lost to him forever. He overcomes the temptation of the present, the temptation to escape to a tropical isle and live in pagan idleness, by admitting that he is not "a beast with lower pleasures" or a "beast with lower pains" (II, 48) but a human being, "the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time" (II, 49), and must engage in the search to which mankind is heir. And at last he commits himself wholeheartedly to the future, proclaiming: "Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,/Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change" (II, 49). This is the way a man must live,

thought Tennyson; and until more men adopt such a way of living, the vision would remain just a vision.

Tennyson's reassertion of his hope for the future is seen in many of the minor poems written in the same years as "The Two Voices," "St. Simeon," and "Locksley Hall." Such poems include "You Ask Me, Why, Tho' Ill at Ease," "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights," "Love Thou Thy Land, with Love Far-Brought," "The Golden Year," "L'Envoi," and "The Poet's Song." The three patriotic poems, "You Ask Me, Why," "Of Old Sat Freedom," and "Love Thou Thy Land," reiterate Tennyson's belief in the present reality and future possibility of social progress through the slow but persistent growth of freedom in England. "The Golden Year" deals quite directly with the poet's vision of social progress and the realist's contention that all such progress seems illusory. In the poem, Leonard the poet puts forth a vision of all things moving onward toward that pleasant time when:

. . . wealth no more shall rest in mounded heaps,
 But smit with freer light shall slowly melt
 In many streams to fatten lower lands,
 And light shall spread, and man be liker man
 Thro' all the season of the golden year. (II, 23)

Leonard himself remarks that, as he ages, he wonders when and if the golden year will ever come. James, the aged laborer, is unsympathetic to Leonard's dream and remarks:

What stuff is this!
 Old writers push'd the happy season back,--
 The more fools they,--we forward: dreamers both.
 (II, 24-25)

But while James is scornful of the poet's optimism, he is aware of another sort of vision, the vision of the worker: "That unto him who works, and

feels he works,/ This same grand year is ever at the doors" (II, 25). Again, in this poem, Tennyson tried to balance the impossibility of ever solving the riddle or of bringing the golden year about with the necessity and virtue of working on anyway. The power of the laborer's vision is emphasized in the last stanza of the poem in which, just as James concludes his pronouncement, blasting is heard in the slate quarry high above. The point is clear: while the poet's idealism feeds on ink and paper, the laborer's thrives on blasting powder; but their objective is nevertheless the same--the golden year. In the "L'Envoi" section of "The Day-Dream," the slowness and invisibility of human progress, which James laments in "The Golden Year," is tempered with the famous observation that "we are Ancients of the earth,/And in the morning of the times" (II, 69). And in "The Poet's Song," Tennyson re-emphasized the role of the poet taken by Leonard in "The Golden Year." The poet's uniqueness, contended Tennyson, resides in his prophetic power: "For he sings of what the world will be/ When the years have died away" (II, 140). Such is the sort of poet Tennyson tried to be in these poems, and in most of the major ones that followed.

IV

Even though Tennyson continually returned to his idealism as he worked on his poetry during the 1830's and 1840's and tried to fill what he considered to be the poet's role and function, he had serious doubts about whether he would ever be popular enough to make more than a minor contribution to the establishment of the society which he envisioned. He was discouraged by the severe critical attacks which were made on his 1830

and 1832 volumes, was continually plagued with the problem of how to earn a living, and as a final humiliation, was refused the hand of the girl he wanted to marry because her father thought that Tennyson's future as a poet was without the sort of promise necessary to undertake the support of a wife and family. These problems were not as psychologically central to the poet as his disturbance over the death of Hallam, but until they were at least partially resolved he could not turn his full attention to the primary problem of that shadowy figure in white who ceaselessly dogged his thinking and writing in the years leading up to 1850.

Without Hallam's support, Tennyson did not want to face the critical abuse he was certain he would receive if he chose to publish another volume. Because of the virulence which resulted from Hallam's overly lavish praise of Poems, Tennyson was shy about any sort of notice, both good and bad. "John Heath writes me word that Mill is going to review me in a new Magazine, to be called the London Review, and favourably," he wrote in 1835 to James Spedding; "but it is the last thing I wish for, and I would that you or some other who may be friends of Mill would hint as much to him."¹⁷ He went on to write, and underlined the statement for emphasis, that he did not "wish to be dragged forward again in any shape before the reading public at present. . . ."¹⁸ He was even reluctant to send an obscure poem to the annuals which were continually pressing him for contributions. When R. M. Milnes wrote in 1836 to tell

¹⁷Memoir, I, 145.

¹⁸Memoir, I, 145.

Tennyson that Lord Northampton had half a promise from Milnes that Tennyson would contribute a poem to a charity book being gotten up for the impoverished family of a dead writer, the poet angered his friend with the answer: "Three summers back, provoked by the incivility of editors, I swore an oath that I would never again have to do with their vapid books. . . ." ¹⁹ And then he added: "how should such a modest man as I see my small name in collocation with the great ones of Southey, Wordsworth, R. M. M., etc., and not feel myself a barndoor fowl among peacocks?" ²⁰ Tennyson was both afraid of the critics and skeptical of his own ability; even with all of the pressure exerted by his friends to publish, it was 1842, and then haltingly and with many reservations, before he could be brought to bring out another volume.

Tennyson's refusal to publish in the late 1830's and early 1840's, while it relieved his anxiety about the threat of criticism, led to another sort of anxiety which tended to cancel out whatever benefit he received from avoiding public notice. This was the fear that in not publishing he was trying to escape from the responsibility he felt as a poet and that he was wasting his youth in idleness. As he did with most of his fears, Tennyson externalized this one in a poem, "The Vision of Sin." Along with "The Palace of Art," "The Two Voices," and "St. Simeon," "The Vision" is said to be one of the four poems in which he tried to set out a theory of life for himself. ²¹ Like all of these poems, it deals with

¹⁹Memoir, I, 158.

²⁰Memoir, I, 158.

²¹Tennyson, p. 194.

the role of the artist in society, but in this case with an artist who gives himself up to license and pleasure and stifles his art in self-seeking grossness. Tennyson's own note on the poem points out its most important aspects as well as providing a good summary of its content: "This describes the soul of a youth who has given himself up to pleasure and Epicureanism. He at length is worn out and wrapt in the mists of satiety. Afterwards he grows into a cynical old man afflicted with the 'curse of nature,' and joining in the Feast of Death. Then we see the landscape which symbolizes God, Law and the future life."²² Throughout the poem is a depressing mood of wasted talent and shattered idealism. The title of the poem indicates that it utilizes a typical Tennysonian device, the vision; but what is seen is not the positive possibility of "Locksley Hall" but the negative possibility which awaits the poet who turns away from his artistic responsibility. Part of the poem's nightmarish quality derives from the rapid transition from a description of a young poet getting off his overburdened Pegasus to a subsequent description of him as an old man whose Pegasus has turned into a "brute" (II, 126). The implication is that once the poet abandons his Pegasus in youth and gives up the prospect of artistic accomplishment, it is but a short step to old age and broken dreams. With old age comes pessimism; and the pessimism of the decrepit poet is just the sort that would have been most depressing to Tennyson when he wrote the poem, for the old man has lost all hope of bringing about a better world. He mocks the dignity

²² Alfred Tennyson, The Works of Tennyson, II (London, 1908), 354.

of humanity, the principle of order in the universe, friendship, virtue, and religion, concluding with a scornful laugh at what all of these add up to--the ideal society:

Drink to lofty hopes that cool--
 Visions of a perfect State:
 Drink we, last, the public fool,
 Frantic love and frantic hate. (II, 131)

All social idealism, says the old man, is doomed to be lost amid the scurrying love and hate of humanity. And Tennyson feared that in the limbo he then occupied, a limbo in which he was caught between his painful love for Hallam and the biting hatred of the critics, he too might turn into a cynical old man who would come to call his youthful hopes "my mockeries of the world" (II, 133).

Tennyson could get out of this limbo in only one way, and his friends knew it--he had to start publishing again. Friends like George Venables, a lifelong intimate of Thackeray and a fellow Apostle, repeatedly urged Tennyson not to be careless of his possible fame and influence.²³ Carlyle hoped to turn Tennyson's idle genius to better work than poetry, encouraging him to devote his attention to prose, telling him that he was "a life-guardsmen spoilt by making poetry."²⁴ But most of Tennyson's associates had no intention of turning him away from his poetry. Their great fear was that his unwillingness to negotiate with a printer was going to result in the loss of too many poems which he wrote and then carelessly tossed aside or circulated haphazardly in manuscript.

²³Memoir, I, 165.

²⁴Memoir, I, 188.

Despite the personal appeals of such friends as Venables, Milnes, and Fitzgerald, it was pressure from sympathetic readers in America that finally brought Tennyson to publish. In 1838, Emerson urged C. C. Little & Co. of Boston to reprint the 1830 and 1832 volumes. Tennyson received a letter from the company in May of that year proposing the project; but, probably because of his protestations, the reprint did not appear.²⁵ The enthusiasm for Tennyson's work did not die out in America, however, and in early 1841 he received another letter which threatened that if he would not publish in England, Little & Brown, the successors of C. C. Little & Co., would do it for him.²⁶ Tennyson finally capitulated under such pressure and agreed to publish corrected versions of the best poems in his earlier volumes and certain new poems. These were to be brought out in England with copies to be sent to an American publisher. Even with such promises made, in the end Fitzgerald had to carry him off with violence to complete the final arrangements in the offices of Moxon, the printer.²⁷

Although the sale of the eight-hundred copies published in the twin volumes of 1842 was slow (by September, four months after publication, only five-hundred of the eight-hundred copies were sold),²⁸ Tennyson was once more before the public and his reputation could undergo fresh development. Many of the reviewers were hostile, but in a stodgy

²⁵Tennyson, p. 179.

²⁶Tennyson, p. 188.

²⁷Tennyson, p. 191.

²⁸Tennyson, p. 196.

way that did not have much influence with the new generation of writers and critics then coming into power. Such critics as H. F. Chorley in The Atheneum and William Jerdan in the Literary Gazette mouthed all the hackneyed cliches picked up from Christopher North about Tennyson's feeble thought and his flowery affectation.²⁹ But the most perceptive and generally most influential article was the long and sympathetic essay written by James Spedding for the Edinburgh Review. Spedding emphasized the improvements Tennyson made in his old poems and pointed out the mystical appeal Tennyson's poetry holds for the heart of his reader. Spedding also was aware of Tennyson's social interest and wrote of Tennyson's art "having its root deep in the pensive heart, a heart accustomed to meditate earnestly and feed truly upon the prime duties and interests of man."³⁰ Even more important was the reception the 1842 volumes received from other writers of Tennyson's generation. The book reached Ruskin, Rossetti, Arnold and others. It made Carlyle a devoted reader of Tennyson's poetry. And Dickens, himself in the first flush of success, sent a copy of his novels to Tennyson.³¹ After ten years of silence, Tennyson had once more found his voice; and to his surprise, he had also found some listeners.

The 1842 volumes were successful in every area except that vital one of money. Immediately after publication and for a few years beyond, Tennyson did not find himself much better off financially than he was

²⁹Tennyson, p. 196.

³⁰Tennyson, p. 196.

³¹Tennyson, p. 197.

before; and his condition had been desperate enough then. It was 1840 before all of the legal complications which had stemmed from the death of old Dr. Tennyson could be straightened out. Tennyson possessed, after disposing of some land left him and adding the proceeds to a legacy of five hundred pounds, total assets of three-thousand pounds. He quickly disposed of this amount in a scheme which was almost as bizarre as his expedition to Spain.

In July, 1840, Tennyson made what was to prove ultimately a disastrous acquaintance while on a tour through a madhouse. Dr. Matthew Allen, the proprietor of the asylum at Fairmead, was introduced to Tennyson and then, in turn, introduced Tennyson to a patented process for carving wood by machinery. It was just the sort of thing to appeal to the poet. The process, if perfected, would enable all Englishmen to have the beauty of hand-carved furniture in their homes at a factory-carved price. This represented both a chance to help improve the cultural level of the people and a chance for Tennyson to make some money; and he went for it almost at once. He rounded up his slight fortune and turned it over to Allen, assured that within twelve months his three-thousand would be worth ten-thousand and that within five years he would have a yearly income at least that large.³² But in 1841, the agent who was to have bought the patent for the investors absconded with the money entrusted to him.

When it became plain in 1842 that the project had failed and that his fortune was gone, Tennyson lapsed into such a mood of depression that

³²Tennyson, pp. 186-188.

for a time his friends doubted whether he would live.³³ Tennyson himself wrote: "I have drunk one of those most bitter draughts out of the cup of life, which go near to make men hate the world they move in."³⁴ The effect of the disaster was to send him to a hydropathic hospital. On the way, he stopped to see Fitzgerald, who wrote that "He looked and said he was ill: I have never seen him so hopeless. . . . He would scarcely see any of us and went away suddenly."³⁵ While in the hospital, Tennyson wrote to Fitzgerald about the terrible depression he had passed through after the fiasco with Allen. "The perpetual panic and horror of the last two years," Tennyson wrote, "had steeped my nerves in poison: now I am left a beggar, but I am somewhat better off in nerves. . . . They were so bad six weeks ago that I could not have written this, and to have to write a letter on that accursed business threw me into a kind of convulsion. I went through Hell."³⁶ He began to doubt whether he would ever be able to support himself in England and started to think about moving to Italy, where he was certain he could get along on much less.³⁷

With his future once again threatened, despite the growing popularity of the 1842 volumes, Tennyson's friends took it upon themselves to make certain that he stayed in England and that he began his next

³³Memoir, I, 221.

³⁴Memoir, I, 221.

³⁵Tennyson, p. 201.

³⁶Tennyson, p. 201.

³⁷Tennyson, p. 201.

volume. Fitzgerald, Carlyle, and others began puffing the idea of a Civil List pension for Tennyson, the very idea of which was at first offensive to the poet. Carlyle was one of the strongest advocates and managed to buttonhole Richard Monckton Milnes, who was then a member of Parliament, about the matter. When Milnes protested that his constituents would think that Tennyson was a poor relation of some sort and that the whole thing would look like a put-up job, Carlyle replied: "Richard Milnes, on the day of judgment, when the Lord asks you why you didn't get that pension for Alfred Tennyson, it will not do to lay the blame on your constituents; it is you that will be damned."³⁸ The most effective support, however, came from Henry Hallam and Gladstone, who both wrote to Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, urging him to recognize Tennyson. The old poet, Samuel Rogers, lent his backing, and Peel was warm to the suggestion. The Prime Minister protested that he could not make a Civil List grant because all of the money for the year had already been committed. But he could make a relief grant of two hundred pounds from another fund, if this would be acceptable to the poet and his backers.³⁹ Tennyson at first refused, but at last, after talking it over time after time, accepted. A few days later he received a letter from Peel which began: "I rejoice that you have enabled me to fulfill the intentions of Parliament by advising the Crown to confer a mark of Royal Favour on one

³⁸Hallam Tennyson, Materials for a Life of A. T. Collected for My Children (printed but not published, London, 1895[?]), I, 298. Hereafter cited as Materials.

³⁹Tennyson, p. 206.

who has devoted to worthy purposes great intellectual powers."⁴⁰ Tennyson did not feel entirely right about the pension even after he had accepted it, and spent some anguished moments writing half-apologetic letters to people he thought might be a little suspicious of his action. In a letter to the Rev. H. Rawnsley dated 1845, for example, he wrote: "I have done nothing slavish to get it: I never even solicited for it either by myself or thro' others. . . . And Peel tells me "I need not by it be fettered in the public expression of any opinion I choose to take up."⁴¹ But as soon as the second thoughts wore away, he was able to stop brooding over the wood-carving disaster and get back to work.

The pension, though it solved Tennyson's personal needs at the time, was not enough to enable him formally to take up a matter which had suffered from his impecuniousness as much as his poetry had--the courtship of Emily Sellwood. Tennyson had met Emily in 1830, when she was seventeen, and was struck at once with the strange, unearthly quality of her beauty. In that first encounter, Emily and Arthur Hallam, while walking in the forest near Somersby Rectory, met Tennyson at a turn in the path; the poet stopped, stared at the girl for a moment, and quite spontaneously asked: "Are you a Dryad or an Oread wandering here?"⁴² Apparently in love as well as in government, Tennyson longed for something better than reality; and Emily always seemed to him more like a creature from elf-

⁴⁰Materials, I, 297.

⁴¹Materials, I, 299.

⁴²Memoir, I, 148.

land than from merry middle earth. He was not at an age nor in a position to think of doing anything more about Emily's beauty than to wonder at it in 1830. But in 1836, when he took her into the church as a bridesmaid at the wedding of his brother Charles and her sister Louisa, he suddenly decided that he was ready to make a bride out of the bridesmaid, a decision he memorialized in these lines:

O happy bridesmaid, make a happy bride!
 For all at once a pleasant truth I learn'd,
 For, while the tender service made thee weep,
 I loved thee for the tear thou couldst not hide,
 And prest thy hand, and knew the press return'd,
 And thought, 'My life is sick of single sleep:
 O happy bridesmaid, make a happy bride!' (I, 113)

Their engagement followed and they looked forward to marrying as soon as Tennyson's financial condition would permit. A few years passed without any improvement in the poet's resources; and because of his unwillingness to publish, there seemed little hope that they ever would. At last, in 1840, Emily's father felt compelled to call off the engagement and forbade all correspondence between the two.⁴³

The broken engagement became another source of intense anxiety for Tennyson, an anxiety which was amplified by the place Emily had come to occupy in his life during the betrothal period. Tennyson had made her, in a much more tender and less bantering way, assume the same role as Hallam had earlier. He sounded his new ideas with her and sought from her the unquestioning and loyal praise that he thought he could never expect from the critics. His letters to her during the 1836-1840 period

⁴³Memoir, I, 176.

reflect how much of a sounding board she had become to him. In the letters he discussed Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, travel, religion, death, space and time, mystic communion with nature, and, of course, the weather. Through all of the correspondence, in one way or another, runs the recurring themes of his poetry and his life, his sense of wonder at the mystery and riddle of the earth and his allegiance to the future with the prospect of improvement it holds. In one of the letters he gave a wide-eyed account of a huge fireball which raced up the valley and seemed to explode over the Tennyson's pond in the midst of a thunderstorm. In another letter he asked Emily a question which was bound up in the knot of questions implied in his riddle of the painful earth: "Why has God created souls knowing they would sin and suffer?"⁴⁴ "Annihilate within yourself these two dreams of Space and Time," he wrote in the philosophical tone many of his letters took on. "To me often the far-off world seems nearer than the present, for in the present is always something unreal and indistinct, but the other seems a good solid planet, rolling round its green hills and paradises to the harmony of more steadfast laws."⁴⁵ He went on to emphasize the pervasiveness of his dream for a better world by explaining how his idealism remained, despite the threat inherent in the apparent realities of the present world and its gruesome riddle: "There steam up from about me mists of weakness, or sin, or despondency, and roll between me and the far planet, but it is there

⁴⁴Memoir, I, 170.

⁴⁵Memoir, I, 171-172.

still."⁴⁶ And in yet another assertion of his personality he states: "The far future has been my world always."⁴⁷ At a time when his poetry was not being placed before the public and when he desperately needed the devoted ear which Hallam had provided, Emily was there to listen and to advise--but mostly listen. When this outlet was cut off by the action of Mr. Sellwood, Tennyson was afflicted with a despondency almost as great as when Hallam died.

The breaking off of the engagement, more than the loss of his fortune a few years later, seems to have been the real start of the overwhelming black-bloodedness on the part of the poet which so many of his contemporaries noticed in the 1840's. Shortly after Tennyson was forced to stop writing to Emily, he was reported by Fitzgerald to have been "really ill in a nervous way, what with an hereditary tenderness of nerve and having spoiled what strength he had by excessive smoking . . . poor fellow, he is quite magnanimous and noble natured, with no meanness or vanity or affectation whatever, but very perverse, according to the nature of his illness."⁴⁸ He began, for the first time, seriously to lose confidence in himself as a poet. Even though R. H. Horne in his New Spirit of the Age (1844) stated that Tennyson's position as a major poet of the century was firmly established, Tennyson himself thought otherwise, sincerely feeling that his friend, Coventry Patmore, would surpass

⁴⁶ Memoir, I, 172.

⁴⁷ Memoir, I, 168.

⁴⁸ Tennyson, p. 184.

him.⁴⁹ He often talked with desperate frankness about his verse. Aubrey de Vere reported that the poet would decry "the foolish facility of Tennysonian verse," maintaining that he would trade every word he had written for Suckling's reputation.⁵⁰ All this led his friends to doubt whether he had either the physical or mental health to continue the rigorous application for him--never a facile versifier--to write poetry. And it was such concern, of course, that prompted them to secure him a pension.

Although the pension proved to be a great relief to Tennyson, he still was unable to marry. This fact, along with his lifelong moodiness, did not permit the buoyant recovery Fitzgerald and others had hoped the pension would bring about. When Milnes proposed to introduce him to the Duke of Wellington in 1846 at Bath House, Tennyson refused, remarking darkly: "Why should the great Duke be bothered with a poor poet like me?"⁵¹ The friendship Tennyson struck up with Patmore at this time offered some relief, but the younger poet, to maintain the friendship, had to adapt himself to moods of black depression and much wandering about the streets at night.⁵² Sir Charles Tennyson wrote that "During these walks, or while the friends sat over a simple meal in some suburban tavern, Tennyson often sank into a gloomy reverie, which would fall upon him and put a stop to all conversation. His dark eyes would suddenly set

⁴⁹Tennyson, p. 201

⁵⁰Tennyson, p. 204.

⁵¹Tennyson, p. 212.

⁵²Tennyson, p. 214.

like those of a man who sees a vision and no further sound would pass from his lips, perhaps for an hour."⁵³ Tennyson also began to fear that he was growing old and became very sensitive to remarks about his changing appearance. Jane Brookfield, wife of W. H. Brookfield of the Apostles, told an anecdote about Tennyson's reaction to a remark by Moxon that Tennyson would soon be as bald as Spedding. Tennyson brooded over the comment, which was made on a Switzerland tour in 1846, until he returned to England. He then put himself under the care of a Mrs. Porter, who rubbed his head and pulled out dead hairs at an hourly rate.⁵⁴ Only marriage seemed to promise relief for him; and in 1846 such relief appeared to be many years off.

Tennyson's concern about his own marriage led him, quite apparently, to think about the place of marriage in society and of what the ideal relationship should be between men and women. Out of such thinking came his first long poem, The Princess. While the poem was being written, Tennyson said that the two great social questions then facing England were the plight of the poor man and the higher education of women. Before the second question could be resolved, he thought that women had to learn that "woman is not undeveloped man, but diverse."⁵⁵ Hallam Tennyson stated that his father believed that the sooner women realize this, "the better it will be for the progress of the world."⁵⁶ What the relationship

⁵³Tennyson, p. 214.

⁵⁴Tennyson, p. 215.

⁵⁵Memoir, I, 249.

⁵⁶Memoir, I, 249.

should be between man and woman if society is to improve is summed up in the famous lines about the diverse equality of the sexes:

[Let] this proud watchword rest
Of equal; seeing either sex alone
Is half itself, and in true marriage lies
Nor equal, nor unequal: each fulfills
Defect in each, and always thought in thought,
Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,
The single pure and perfect animal,
The two-cell'd heart beating, with one full stroke,
Life. (IV, 136)

Only when woman assumes her place beside man and strives to excel in the abilities peculiar to her sex will she further human progress, thought Tennyson. On the other hand, man must fulfill his responsibility in equal fashion by loving only one maiden and loving her truly. Tennyson saw the sexual relationship, as expressed through marriage, to be central to human development and the continuance of culture. From the right sort of marriage will come, thought Tennyson, high thought, courtliness, love of truth, and, eventually, "the crowing race of humankind" (IV, 135). And that was the kind of marriage he hoped to have with Emily Sellwood--if the engagement could ever be renewed.

Appropriately enough, the publication of The Princess and its success contributed a great deal to the materialization of Tennyson's marriage. The first edition, which was published in November, 1847, consisted of two thousand copies, all of which were sold in the next year. Less than twelve months after the first date of publication, a second edition was issued.⁵⁷ As the poem began to gain public favor, Tennyson

⁵⁷Tennyson, p. 224.

found himself suddenly besieged with more dinner engagements than he could handle. In the midst of his new-found fame he was forced to admit to Fitzgerald that he had been "be-dined usque ad nauseum."⁵⁸ A third edition of the poem was needed by the final months of 1849 and he further increased its popularity by the addition of the inter-sectional lyrics.⁵⁹ With the publication of the third edition in February, 1850, Tennyson's income rose to about five-hundred pounds a year. He also had in rough form the poems which later made up In Memoriam and was offered three-hundred pounds in advance for them by Moxon.⁶⁰ His financial condition had improved so much that he felt at last he could seek to renew the engagement with Emily. He met his brother Charles, who had married Louisa Sellwood, in London during December, 1849, and it is likely that he asked Charles to inform the Sellwoods that the once-penniless poet was now flourishing.⁶¹ Tennyson's future father-in-law condescended to look with greater favor on him; but it required more than The Princess to make Mr. Sellwood completely accept Tennyson as a good enough man for Emily.

While The Princess brought Tennyson within reach of Emily again, another poem, In Memoriam, clinched the engagement. When Mr. Sellwood forced the two lovers to stop writing in 1839, he was suspicious of the poet's shaggy locks, Bohemian style of living, and slightly ambiguous

⁵⁸Tennyson, p. 224.

⁵⁹Tennyson, p. 234.

⁶⁰Tennyson, p. 240.

⁶¹Tennyson, p. 240.

religious position. It was the latter quality which was almost as distressing to Mr. Sellwood as Tennyson's inability to earn a living. Realizing this, Drummond Rawnsley, one of the friends to whom Tennyson sent a preliminary printing of In Memoriam (then titled The Elegies), passed the poem on to his wife Catherine, Emily's cousin, who obtained Tennyson's permission to send it on to Emily. The indirect manner in which Emily obtained the poem indicates the distant relationship she and the poet had as late as April, 1850. As the Rawnsleys had hoped, the poem reached the desk of Mr. Sellwood; and it appears that a reading of the poem finally convinced both Mr. Sellwood and Emily that Tennyson was their man.⁶²

With his new popularity overcoming the hostility of the critics, his money problems resolved, and Emily soon to be his wife, Tennyson, in the spring of 1850, was ready to complete the task he had been working at since the first day of October, 1833--to lay at rest the ghost of Arthur Hallam. This he did as he set about preparing In Memoriam for publication.

V

Tennyson in In Memoriam attempted, as one critic has rightly said, to effect "the synthesis of a nightmare with a vision of felicity, drawing on two great myths, the myth of Progress and the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth to accomplish this."⁶³ The nightmare is, of course, all of the fear

⁶²Tennyson, p. 243.

⁶³John D. Rosenberg, "The Two Kingdoms of In Memoriam," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LVIII (1959), 235.

and despair that developed out of Hallam's death and what it meant to Tennyson. The vision of felicity is Tennyson's hope for a better world, a more ideal society. The nightmare represented, as nightmares usually do, a severe disruption in Tennyson's pattern of living. He had to find some way, in the years after 1833, to reconcile the death of Hallam to the social idealism he had cherished from his boyhood onward. He wrestled with this problem in "The Two Voices," "St. Simeon," "Locksley Hall" and other poems; but it was in In Memoriam that he attacked it head-on and finally evolved a working synthesis of his grief and hope. In the process, he also managed to synthesize the thought of his times (so much so that Jerome H. Buckley has called the poem a Victorian Essay on Man)⁶⁴ while at the same time, through the use of the elegiac devices, placing his personal sorrow within the larger framework of the English pastoral tradition.

Perhaps the best word to use in explaining what In Memoriam meant to Tennyson and what it still means to us is the word unity. Even a casual first reading of the poem is sufficient to notice the effort Tennyson made to give In Memoriam balance and completeness. There are first of all three Christmas sections which divide the work into four internal parts, each part representing a movement toward a restored personality.⁶⁵ Then there are the prologue and epilogue, written to introduce, set off,

⁶⁴J. H. Buckley, Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 108. Hereafter cited as Buckley.

⁶⁵A. C. Bradley, A Commentary on Tennyson's "In Memoriam" (London, 1901), p. 31.

and conclude the main parts of the poem. Besides such obvious unifying elements, there is also the more subtle effect of the imagery. The two most recurrent images are water and the hand. Water was used by Tennyson in the traditional manner, as a symbol of changeless change--"dead lake," "Godless deep," "Lethean springs," "spires of ice." As Buckley has commented: "Water is everywhere the token both of man's mutability and of the infinite amorphous oneness of nature which mocks the transient human being."⁶⁶ The hand was used in various ways, most often to signify the lasting bond of friendship between Tennyson and Hallam. Another unifying device is the use of the pastoral motif with the poet appearing in the guise of a shepherd, picturing life as a path or track, appealing to Urania after the pattern of Shelley in Adonais, finding in nature an analogue for untimely death, and drawing on the Adonis myth by suggesting that a red or purple flower may spring from Hallam's grave.⁶⁷ The overall unity of the poem, to which all of these elements contribute, is the theme of change.⁶⁸ There is a change in the poet's spirit from Christmas to Christmas. The grief and joy are expressed in changing ways in the composite poems. The somber tone of the prologue is changed to joyfulness in the epilogue. The water and hand imagery appears in continually changing forms. And the pastoral element is muffled and subdued-- a change from the rather obvious use of it in Lycidas and Adonais and an

⁶⁶Buckley, p. 113.

⁶⁷Buckley, pp. 115-116.

⁶⁸Jonathan Bishop, "The Unity of 'In Memoriam,'" Victorian Newsletter, No. 21 (Spring, 1962), p. 9.

explanation for why so many readers have missed it altogether. All of the unifying elements as they contribute to the theme of change are used, of course, to emphasize the change the "I" of the poem undergoes. Just as Tennyson brought the short poems he wrote over many years into the unity of In Memoriam, so too did he pull himself together during those same years and managed to unify himself. And because of this, the poem occupied a place in Tennyson's life much like The Prelude did in the life of Wordsworth.⁶⁹

Tennyson found out a great deal about himself as he was writing In Memoriam. He learned first of all that if he was to continue as a poet and to express the world vision he had formulated as a youth, he would have to grapple with the crippling fact of death, the significance of which only fully struck him when Hallam died. But worse than the fact of death itself was the meaning of it. To Tennyson, death was an enigma in a world created by a God who also created life, and this is one of the major paradoxes set forth in the prologue: "Thou madest Life in man and brute;/Thou madest Death" (III, 39). Death was intricately bound up in Tennyson's riddle of the painful earth and he knew, because of this, he could not hope to understand it. But in striving for some comprehension of its meaning while he wrote In Memoriam, he was driven at last to assert his belief in immortality, a belief which is central to the poem and was central to his personal religion. The turning point in the poem comes in section LXXXV where the poet can flatly state:

⁶⁹Buckley, p. 108.

The great Intelligences fair
 That range above our mortal state,
 In circle round the blessed gate,
 Received and gave him welcome there. . . .(III, 119)

When Tennyson could believe that Hallam still lived, he himself could find the strength to live on. Hoxie Fairchild has suggested that perhaps immortality was Tennyson's strongest belief because it was his deepest dread; the afterlife seemed to make this life bearable for the poet.⁷⁰ There was one difficulty, however: Tennyson's belief both in a loving God and in immortality derived from inner feelings and could not be supported by reasonable proof. To keep his spirits up, he needed faith, which in turn demanded a strong effort of the will;⁷¹ and sometimes Tennyson's will was not up to the effort. In section XCV, for example, where the poet describes a mystic experience in which the dead Hallam touched him as he sat alone on the lawn one evening, his doubt is strong enough to cancel even such an overwhelming experience: "At length my trance/Was cancell'd, stricken thro with doubt" (III, 137). Tennyson learned that he must assert his belief if he was to overcome the enigma of death, but he also learned that he must somehow develop a will strong enough to maintain his faith.

Will, in In Memoriam, is the dynamism which is the base of all upward movement, that is, movement from sorrow to hope. Will is also the dynamism which sustains the effort to answer the riddle and the attempt

⁷⁰Hoxie N. Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry (New York, 1957), IV, 114-115.

⁷¹Fairchild, IV, 114-115.

to build a better world. It is more than merely the power to choose; it is power itself. That is why in the last section of the poem, Tennyson referred to it as "living" (III, 176). Like all forms of energy, it can not be destroyed; it shall "endure/When all that seems shall suffer shock" (III, 176). Even when a man is stricken with the worst kind of pain this world can inflict on him--the pain of separation through death from someone who is loved--the living will shall:

Rise in the spiritual rock,
Flow thro' our deeds and make them pure,

That we may lift from out of dust
A voice as unto him that hears,
A cry above the conquer'd years
To one that with us works, and trust,

With faith that comes of self-control,
The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved,
And all we flow from, soul in soul. (III, 176)

The will enables a man to face the pain of his existence; and through questioning the nature and meaning of the pain, a man may be able to lift himself out of the dust to which pain would seem to condemn him, address the God who not only ordained that man should seek to know the answer to the riddle and thus improve his condition but who also works with man in the search, and trust that what is learned, though immediately unprovable, will be proved when he becomes one with God. This is why the voice of the poem begins the movement away from sorrow and toward hope with the lines: "With morning wakes the will, and cries,/'Thou shalt not be the fool of loss'" (III, 44). At this point, the persona faces his pain and starts on the path to wholeness; this is one of the turning points of the poem, just as a similar resolution was a turning point in Tennyson's life.

Belief in immortality and a reassertion of the will still were not enough for Tennyson to pull himself together; he needed somehow to formulate a conception of the universe in which the misfortunes of human life, as evidenced in the death of Hallam, the dismal implications of certain contemporary scientific discoveries, and his social idealism could be reconciled. As Tennyson considered the apparently hopeless condition of himself and his fellows, born to die and sometimes even cut off before they have begun to live, he could find no answer. Nor could he discern, at first, any assuring truths in the new scientific knowledge for either life or art. He read Lyell, studied the nebular hypothesis and did not find evidence of the kind of God he wanted to worship. What was most distressing to Tennyson in his scientific reading was the suggestion that it was entirely possible, judging from the pattern of the earth's history as geology was beginning to reveal it, that human life could eventually cease altogether. This fear is revealed in In Memoriam where Nature is personified proclaiming: "A thousand types are gone;/I care for nothing, all shall go" (III, 92). In the same section Tennyson presented a sad picture of humanity trusting that God is love but in the end decimated by "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (III, 93). What was Tennyson to do in the face of such depressing conclusions? Slowly and painfully, as he wrote the other sections of the poem, he came to believe that by intuition alone, by his believing heart, he could answer the negations of the Godless Nature revealed by science.⁷² Like his contemporary, Kierkegaard,

⁷²Buckley, p. 118.

Tennyson had finally to make a leap of faith, concluding that: "God is love, transcendent, all-pervading! We do not get this faith from Nature or the world. If we look at Nature alone, full of perfection and imperfection, she tells us that God is disease, murder and rapine. We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us. . . ."73

Once this leap was made, he could synthesize Hallam's death, the testimony of science, and his vision of the future; for the concept of a loving God implied unseen purpose in untimely death, demanded that the testimony of science fit into some larger pattern, and offered hopeful fulfillment (in one way or another) of Tennyson's vision of felicity.

With a God of love as a central aspect of Tennyson's belief, he was able to employ the theory of evolution to harmonize his thought. In the idea of evolution which he had known about long before Darwin's version was foreshadowed in Chambers's Vestiges of the Creation (1844), he saw scientific evidence of design on earth and of a divine purpose guiding the universe.⁷⁴ He also saw a way of explaining Hallam's death by suggesting that the dead youth had appeared to give us a glimpse of the higher type of man that would eventually evolve. God did not permit him to remain until the age of genuine and full accomplishment because the world was not yet ready for him. Hallam, instead, was permitted briefly to appear as "The herald of a higher race" (III, 165). This appearance also seemed to be evidence, to Tennyson, that the society he longed for

⁷³Memoir, I, 314.

⁷⁴Tennyson, p. 250.

may someday become a reality when more men like Hallam are born. And better men, it will be remembered, are the crucial ingredient in Tennyson's social vision and a prime objective of his poetic labors. Tennyson thus saw mankind evolving toward the higher type Hallam represented, an evolution he tried to stimulate through the impassioned plea he directed to all mankind in section CXVII:

Arise and fly
The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die. (III, 166)

Out of his strengthened belief in a God of love, his conception of purpose in Hallam's death, and the scientific support the theory of evolution gave to his apocalyptic vision, came a full-throated proclamation of his idealism:

And 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, ev'n tho' thrice again
The red fool-fury of the Seine
Should pile her barricades with dead. (III, 172)

Tennyson had heard the "deeper voice" of his loving God silence the incipient first voice of "The Two Voices" and had once more come to believe that a higher human society would yet come about (even if there might be a few more French revolutions).

VI

The publication of In Memoriam was a momentous event for Tennyson. It brought him world-wide fame, silenced most of the critics, vastly

increased his income, led to the Poet Laureateship, and secured the hand of Emily Sellwood. Tennyson had five thousand copies of the poem printed for the first edition; all were sold out within a few weeks. One month later, in July, a second edition was issued and a third in November. Within a few months after the initial publication, at least sixty thousand copies were in circulation.⁷⁵ It was quoted from the pulpit, numbers of keys to its meaning appeared, and it was considered by the multitude to be the inspired utterance of a prophet.⁷⁶ Lady Augusta Bruce, one of Queen Victoria's ladies-in-waiting, in a letter written after Prince Albert's death, wrote: "I am again to add that In Memoriam is still the only book, besides religious books, to which Her Majesty turns for comfort."⁷⁷ To most Victorians, the poem effectively treated just what The Cambridge History of English Literature says it does: life and death, immortality, sorrow and sin, and the justification of God's ways to men.⁷⁸ To many, the balance Tennyson struck between science and religion, along with the apotheosis of Hallam, seemed to be the "New Mythos" Carlyle had maintained was needed to revitalize Christianity in the modern world.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Tennyson, p. 248.

⁷⁶Martin S. Day, History of English Literature (New York, 1964), III, 24.

⁷⁷Tennyson, p. 338.

⁷⁸The Cambridge History of English Literature, ed. by A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (New York, 1908), XIII, 35.

⁷⁹Clyde de L. Ryals, "The 'Heavenly Friend': The 'New Mythos' of In Memoriam," Personalist, XLIII (1962), 384.

Years afterward, such men as Bishop Westcott and Professor Henry Sidgwick could still make sweeping claims for the poem's effectiveness. "As I look at my original copy of 'In Memoriam,'" wrote the Bishop to Hallam Tennyson near the end of the century, "I recognize that what impressed me most was your father's splendid faith (in the face of the frankest acknowledgment of every difficulty) in the growing purpose and sum of life, and in the noble destiny of the individual man. . . . This faith has now largely entered into our common life. . . ." ⁸⁰ Writing at the same time, the Professor stated: "What 'In Memoriam' did for us, for me at least, in this struggle was to impress on us the ineradicable conviction that humanity will not and cannot acquiesce in a godless world." ⁸¹ But perhaps the appreciation which most pleased Tennyson was this one: "I have read the poems through and through and through and to me they were and they are ever more and more a spirit monument grand and beautiful, in whose presence I feel admiration and delight, not unmixed with awe." ⁸² Such was the reaction of Emily Sellwood, a reaction which prompted her to accept once again his proposal of marriage. The ceremony took place a few months later at Shiplake. In Memoriam was indeed a major event for the poet.

But while In Memoriam enabled Tennyson to improve greatly his position in the world, its psychological significance was even greater, for in

⁸⁰Memoir, I, 300.

⁸¹Memoir, I, 302.

⁸²Tennyson, p. 242.

it he finally managed to lay the ghost of Arthur Hallam to rest. Although the memory of Hallam retained a prominent place in his thinking throughout the remainder of his life, it was never again to have the debilitating effect it had between 1833 and 1850. Even though Tennyson probably never was able to think of his lost friend without a moment of anguish, the pain was lost in his larger hope for the future. It is quite possible to see Tennyson's apotheosis of Hallam as an attempt to alter the image of that white, shadowy, silent wraith in the lane at Somersby. Hallam thus becomes a giant-sized figure striding the decks of a magnificent ship, a form standing in the rising sun, a spirit mixed with God and Nature, and, most of all, the herald of a higher race. But, more importantly, Tennyson managed to quiet his own fears and to evolve out of all his brooding over Hallam a philosophy which made him, in the eyes of his contemporaries, the spokesman of his age. Like the "one" he wrote about in section XCVI of the poem, Tennyson

. . . faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;
And Power was with him in the night. . . . (III, 139)

PART THREE: PRINCE ALBERT'S KISS

I

One night, early in November of 1850, Tennyson said good-night to Emily, then several months pregnant, and fell asleep. His rest was untroubled by the tormented dreams that had afflicted him in the days and years when he was mourning Hallam. But as he slept, a shadowy figure took form in his drowsing mind; at first, perhaps he thought it was the form of Hallam come back once again to haunt him. But the medals on the chest of the figure and the aristocratic dress had never belonged to Hallam; nor did the somewhat stiff, foreign bearing. The figure moved closer and seemed to be standing over him with a look of silent admiration. Tennyson felt himself unable to move or speak. After gazing on the poet for a few minutes, the figure, in the Continental gesture of respect, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Tennyson at once realized that it was Prince Albert. "Very kind but very German," remarked Tennyson, suddenly regaining the ability to speak. Prince Albert then became indistinct and slowly faded away. Tennyson drifted back into a dreamless sleep with a vague sense of having been given a momentous honor. He awoke with a feeling of expectancy--an expectancy which was immediately fulfilled when a letter was brought into his bedroom. The letter was from Windsor Castle and offered him the Poet Laureateship;¹ Tennyson had received a kiss of approval from the Empire.

Tennyson hesitated over the offer for a day, writing a letter of acceptance and a letter of rejection, and talking over the matter with

¹Materials, II, 44.

his friends.² Much of his hesitation was due, no doubt, to his realization that he was the second choice. After Wordsworth had died in the spring of 1850, Samuel Rogers, then eighty-seven years old, was offered the post. He refused, pleading his great age. The discussion about the position then lapsed into controversy, with Mrs. Browning and Leigh Hunt being touted as the prime candidates. Tennyson seemed, to most observers, to be running a distant third. Hunt was so anxious for the position that his Autobiography, published in June, set forth at length the problem of his suitability for the Laureateship. But over the summer, the Tennyson supporters began to gain influence, primarily because of In Memoriam. Prince Albert read the poem with enthusiasm and recommended it highly to the Queen. Bit by bit Tennyson's reputation grew as the debate continued; and it soon became clear that he was the poet most favored by the royal family and by the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, as well. And on November 5, the letter was written to the poet. What was he to do? He was the second man to be asked; the post carried a small sinecure of scarcely one-hundred pounds a year which Milnes had assured him would be swallowed up the first year in the cost of court dress and the patent alone;³ and acceptance would mean greatly disturbing the blissful quietness of his new marriage. But, on the other hand, the Laureateship promised a wider audience for his poetry, and perhaps more influence for his social pronouncements. He had struggled since his boyhood to assert himself through his verse, and suddenly he was confronted with the chance

²Materials, II, 44-45.

³Memoir, I, 336.

to assert himself and his idealism in a much more publicized way than ever before. There was only one consistent action he could take: he accepted.

Tennyson had enjoyed a small amount of fame and recognition before he became Laureate; but his readers, prior to In Memoriam at least, were few and he had developed somewhat of a scholar-gypsy reputation.⁴ William Howitt, for example, in Homes and Haunts of the English Poets (1847), wrote of Tennyson: "It is possible that you may have come across him in a country inn with a foot on each hob of the fireplace, a volume of Greek in one hand, his meerschaum in the other . . . pondering a lay for eternity."⁵ He was known to the English public, but only as a somewhat obscure and secretive provincial poet. And because he disliked writing letters, he tended to discourage much of the personal response his poetry obtained. This was somewhat costly to his reputation, but it preserved his privacy.

Once Tennyson accepted the Laureateship, his seclusion and privacy ended. Within a few days, he was swamped with letters. "I have dozens of letters to write this afternoon," he informed Rawnsley, "and I cannot help wishing that I could hire the electric telegraph once a month, and so work off my scores with the wires at whatever expense."⁶ Almost immediately, would-be poets began sending him samples of their work, hoping

⁴Tennyson, p. 217.

⁵Quoted in Alfred Tennyson, p. 217.

⁶Memoir, I, 336.

to secure his approval and recommendation. "I get such shoals of poems that I am almost crazed with them," he wrote; "the two hundred million poets of Great Britain deluge me daily with poems: truly the Laureateship is no sinecure."⁷ His circle of acquaintances increased enormously and by March, 1851, he was staying at Sir Alexander Duff Gordon's, going to an evening party given by Lord John Russell, and being introduced to the Duke of Argyll.⁸ And on March 6th, he attended the Queen's levee.⁹ He began to make some important new literary acquaintances, among them that of William Allingham, the poet and essayist.¹⁰ Gradually, as the laurels of his new office settled, he became the central figure in the literary world of the period; but he began to feel that he was no longer his own man.

His home was besieged by a daily flow of visitors, many of whom represented almost all degrees of literary eccentricity. A Waterloo veteran showed up at the gate one day with a twelve-canto epic he had written on the battle. The poem was incredibly bad, primarily because the old soldier had had to teach himself to read and write before he could begin.¹¹ More welcome was a visit from Swinburne, whom Tennyson liked because, as he remarked, "he did not press upon me any verses of

⁷Memoir, I, 337.

⁸Memoir, I, 339.

⁹Tennyson, p. 261.

¹⁰Tennyson, p. 263.

¹¹Tennyson, p. 267.

his own."¹² Others who came to call and were welcomed included the minor American poet, F. G. Tuckerman; Benjamin Jowett, with whom a lengthy friendship was struck up; John Tyndall; Lewis Carroll; the American writer, Bayard Taylor; A. H. Clough; Edward Lear; and J. E. Millais. Tennyson's home soon became a mecca for writers visiting from other countries. In addition to Tuckerman and Taylor, Longfellow and Turgenev paid Tennyson respectful calls. Even after he moved to Farringford on the Isle of Wight in 1853, the great number of visitors continued, and Tennyson was obliged, several times, to escape to the continent to get away from the tiring attention he was receiving.

But even on his trips, he was not able to attain the anonymity he desired. On a trip to Portugal in 1859, though he took care to write his name as "E. Tennyson" in the hotel register, his identity was somehow discovered anyway.¹³ In his diary of the trip, he wrote: "and yesterday even the Duke of Saldanha came into the salle à manger, described himself as 'having fought under the great Duke . . . as having married two English wives, both perfect women,' etc., and ended with seizing my hand and crying out 'Who does not know England's Poet Laureate?'"¹⁴ More characteristic were the interruptions of privacy Tennyson suffered while on a tour of Cornwall and the Scilly Isles in 1860. As he sat on the deck of a little river steamer, the captain came forward with a bottle and said that he was aware of what a distinguished passenger he had on board and

¹²Tennyson, p. 312.

¹³Tennyson, p. 319.

¹⁴Memoir, I, 440-441.

that some young men on the other side of the ship and he would be greatly honored if the poet would take a tumbler of stout with them. Tennyson hesitated for a moment and then graciously accepted. He drank off a glass of liquor, thanked the young men, and returned to his seat. A short while later, the captain appeared again, this time saying that there were some ladies in the cabin who would like to meet the Laureate. Tennyson asked to be excused, pleading that he could not stand up straight in the cabin. The women would not be defeated by such a refusal. One by one, they presented themselves half-length in the hatchway, smiled at Tennyson and then disappeared. "It was like the crowned figures who appear and vanish in Macbeth,"¹⁵ he later remarked. Even worse than unsolicited introductions were the pens and papers autograph hunters shoved at him while he was travelling. Once, in comical fury, he declared that he believed "every crime and every vice in the world were connected with the passion for autographs and anecdotes and records."¹⁶ It seemed as if no matter where he travelled someone always recognized him or managed to find out who he was.

Partially because of his presence, the Isle of Wight became less and less isolated. Lodging houses and small villas began to spring up around Freshwater Bay near Farringford. As his correspondence with the Queen increased, so did national curiosity about the poet. Tourists started to come to the Isle in increasing numbers every summer, interrupting Tennyson's work and destroying the regularity of life he found

¹⁵Memoir, I, 464.

¹⁶Tennyson, p. 339.

essential to writing.¹⁷ One day he was actually chased along the road by two fat women and sixteen children.¹⁸ This and other incidents (such as faces peering over the garden wall) forced the Tennysons in 1866 to look for a suitable location for a summer home. They finally found thirty-six acres on the southern slope of Blackdown that appeared to be sufficiently remote--three and a half miles from the tiny town of Haslemere and on such a steep slope that, when driving up, it was necessary to get out and walk.¹⁹ But even in Blackdown the tourists ferreted Tennyson out; and eventually he gave up, coming to accept their attention as a fact of his life.

His admirers did not always limit themselves to seeking his acquaintance, asking for his autograph, or even chasing him down a road. In 1852 he learned that a woman in Richmond was claiming that he had married and then deserted her. She was trying to secure a subscription on her behalf so that she could become matron of an emigrant ship. In addition, she composed poetry on pink stationery. Tennyson called her maneuvers nothing but one of the "fraudulent schemes for raising the wind which rogues and harlots have resort to, and instead of being elected matron of an emigrant ship, she ought rather to be chucked overboard."²⁰ He offered to meet the woman any day she wanted if she

¹⁷Tennyson, p. 339.

¹⁸Tennyson, p. 346.

¹⁹Tennyson, p. 369.

²⁰Tennyson, p. 273.

insisted on pressing the accusations; but in the face of such direct action, the woman backed down.²¹

But amidst all the sensational attention Tennyson received from would-be poets, nobility, tourists, gawkers, and frauds, was a steady flow of genuine tribute. Writing about a visit to Farringford in 1857, Bayard Taylor had this to say about the poet: "I thought of a remark I once heard from the lips of a distinguished English author (Thackeray) that 'Tennyson was the wisest man he knew,' and could well believe that he was sincere in making it."²² Nathaniel Hawthorne saw, but did not meet Tennyson at the Manchester Exhibition in 1857; even so, the poet's appearance alone was enough to draw such a remark from Hawthorne as: "Gazing at him with all my eyes I liked him well, and rejoiced more in him than in all the wonders of the Exhibition."²³ Mrs. Marian Bradley, wife of Granville Bradley, the Headmaster of Marlborough and Dean of Westminster, echoed Hawthorne's comment in her reminiscences: "There is a look in his face like a bright burning light behind it, like an inward fire that might consume his very life."²⁴ Rossetti wrote that Tennyson "is quite as glorious in his way as Browning in his, and perhaps of the two even more impressive on the whole personally."²⁵ Sydney Dobell, when asked by his brother-in-law to describe Tennyson, said: "If he were

²¹Tennyson, p. 273.

²²Memoir, I, 419.

²³Memoir, I, 421.

²⁴Memoir, I, 469.

²⁵Memoir, I, 390.

pointed out to you as the man who had written the Iliad, you would answer, 'I can well believe it.'"²⁶ There was something about Tennyson's appearance and personality, as well as his poetry, that tremendously impressed his contemporaries; and their descriptions of him greatly indicate this.

As his popularity increased, Tennyson could not have helped feeling that he had received a mandate from the people to write for their improvement and for the glory of the Empire. Interest in poetry was probably never higher in England than during the years Tennyson represented the British literary world. Because of all the attention he received, he was well aware of the concern for poetry and faced the Laureateship with a great sense of responsibility. He was right in assuming that what he wrote, what he said, and how he acted would have considerable influence on his times. He therefore was determined not only to sit in the Laureate's chair, but to write while he was in it. The public poems written by previous Laureates from Wordsworth and Southey back through the eighteenth and into the seventeenth centuries were mostly flaccid and soporific (Dryden, of course, being the major exception). But Tennyson set out to change the image of the Laureate by writing his official poems as major pieces of his canon, rather than occasional public exercises such as Southey's abortive Laureate poetry had been. As a result, such a poem as "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" takes on much of its power because it is an attempt by Tennyson to relate the fact of the Duke's death to the poet's personal vision. Tennyson was one

²⁶Memoir, I, 355.

of the few sincere Laureates because his official poetry was also officially himself and in accordance with his way of living. When he was offered the post he felt that he had received a kiss of approval from the Empire; he undertook the job with intense dedication, feeling that he must somehow fulfill the trust the people had placed in him.

Once the spirit of Hallam had hovered over Tennyson as he wrote; now it was the shadowy form of Prince Albert as he had appeared in that strangely precognitive dream of November, 1850. Hallam was laid to rest with the publication of In Memoriam; but Prince Albert and what he represented to Tennyson could never be handled in the same way. Prince Albert, to Tennyson, became a symbol of public devotion to the national ideals. In the "Dedication" prefacing the Idylls of the King, Tennyson called Prince Albert "my king's ideal knight" (V, 1). The Prince embodied the sort of life style that Tennyson advocated; he was "Laborious for [England's] people and her poor" and a "Voice in the rich dawn of an ampler day" (V, 2). Hallam had represented potential; the Prince exemplified how a man might live in anticipation of a better world to come. Tennyson was extremely flattered that such a man would have advocated him for the Laureateship and perhaps more than a little aware of the closeness of their hopes for the future. Despite the many misfortunes Tennyson was to experience in the years to come, he was conscious of Prince Albert's kiss for the rest of his life. As much as he would have liked to escape from the publicity his new responsibility brought, he could not forget that he, like the Prince, had to make a "sublime repression of himself" (V, 2) for the good of the Empire. He could no longer be Alfred Tennyson

the scholar gypsy, pursuing his own interests in provincial obscurity; he was now, and forevermore, Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate.

II

Tennyson was not overly eager to begin writing Laureate verse. It was two years after he took office before he produced the first poem. And in the entire forty-two years of his appointment, he produced little more than a dozen official poems, not all of which are by any means among his most famous or even his best verse. Such late works as the "Epitaph of Lord Stratford de Redcliffe," and "To H. R. H. Princess Beatrice" are among his more obscure. But what is most important, from the standpoint of his career and reputation as Laureate, is that the first three pieces he wrote, "The Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and "Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition," were among his most successful works. Although Tennyson got off to a slow start as Laureate, and wrote relatively few poems while holding the post, the potency of his initial poems made both the critics and public alike realize that he was not going to regard the Laureateship as a mere sinecure.

As an indication of the seriousness with which he took his position, Tennyson waited until there was a sufficiently important event for him to write about before producing his first functionary poem, the Wellington ode. In addition to being stirred by the death of the Duke, Tennyson realized the symbolic value of the aged statesman. It was fitting that the Laureate of the high Victorian period, a period of rapid change, should have written his first official poem on the death of a man who had

come to represent the old order. Wellington, in his brilliant generalship during the Napoleonic Wars, his statesmanship afterward, his initial opposition and then gradual yielding to reform, and in his half-century of devotion to the maintenance and development of the Empire, symbolized the generation that had brought England to her mid-century greatness. By writing a poem about the Duke, Tennyson would be able to pay tribute to this older generation, while at the same time pointing toward the future and urging his own generation to move forward and build on what Wellington and his contemporaries had left behind. He set to work on the poem at once, and by November 18, the day of the funeral, ten-thousand copies were printed in pamphlet form and made available for two shillings each.²⁷

In characteristic Tennysonian fashion, the ode deals less with the past than with the future. The ostensible purpose of the poem is to pay tribute to the dead Duke; but Tennyson did this not so much by praising the Duke's accomplishments as by reflecting on what those accomplishments would mean for Englishmen in the days to come. Tennyson mentioned the Duke's role as "state oracle" (II, 211), as "statesman-warrior" (II, 211), and as "The great World-victor's victor" (II, 211). He went on to point out the Duke's personal qualities, his self-sacrifice, his "well-attemper'd frame" (II, 213), and his "iron nerve" (II, 212). He even compared the Duke's accomplishments to those of Nelson. Through the first six stanzas, Tennyson emphasized that it was well for Englishmen to stand mourning the great Duke as the funeral procession passed; the nation had indeed lost a

²⁷Tennyson, p. 271.

great man. But with stanza VII, the Laureate turned his attention to the people, declaring that England had a debt to pay men like Wellington who devoted themselves to the Empire, "To those great men who fought, and kept it ours" (II, 216). Englishmen must pray, declared Tennyson, for strength to carry on the great work to which the Duke had given himself. The statesmen who will be directly responsible for building upon the Duke's labors were given special encouragement by the poet:

O Statesmen, guard us, guard the eye, the soul
 Of Europe, keep our noble England whole,
 And save the one true seed of freedom sown
 Betwixt a people and their ancient throne,
 That sober freedom out of which there springs
 Our loyal passion for our temperate kings;
 For, saving that, ye help to save mankind
 Till public wrong be crumbled into dust,
 And drill the raw world for the march of mind,
 Till crowds at length be sane and crowns be just.
(II, 216-217)

Once again Tennyson put forth his vision of the future and the ideal society he hoped it would bring, but put it forth in the form of a plea for the statesmen to meet the conditions which he felt were necessary to bring his dream of felicity about.

Tennyson saw a pattern in the great Duke's life that he thought statesmen and all Englishmen, for that matter, should try to emulate. Wellington, according to Tennyson, was one who lived a life of self-sacrifice, devoting himself entirely to the improvement of the state. Out of such a way of living, contended Tennyson, would come the highest honor and glory a man could attain:

Yea, let all good things await
 Him who cares not to be great,
 But as he saves or serves the state. (II, 218)

And those who will follow in the footsteps of the Duke and learn to live as he did will find, in one fashion or another, such a reward as the Duke's. Tennyson thought that history bore this out:

Not once or twice in our rough island-story
 The path of duty was the way to glory:
 He that walks it, only thirsting
 For the right, and learns to deaden
 Love of self, before his journey closes,
 He shall find the stubborn thistle bursting
 Into glossy purples, which outredden
 All voluptuous garden-roses. (II, 218)

The Duke was seen by Tennyson as a magnificent symbol of what a man can be, just as Hallam was seen as a symbol of what man may eventually become; and it was of greatest concern to the poet that men take to heart the example of Wellington:

But while the races of mankind endure,
 Let his great example stand
 Colossal, seen of every land,
 And keep the soldier firm, the statesman pure:
 Till in all lands and thro' all human story
 The path of duty be the way to glory. (II, 219)

Wellington was the kind of statesman Tennyson's vision fed upon, a fact which he succinctly admitted in the line: "On God and Godlike men we build our trust" (II, 221).

Tennyson found a symbol of another kind in his next important Laureate poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." The Duke was a symbol of self-sacrifice leading onward to victory; the Light Brigade was a symbol of self-sacrifice leading to defeat. But out of the Light Brigade's grapeshot-shattered charge came a glory of another kind than Wellington's, the glory of the little men who are sometimes the victims of their unquestioning allegiance to their country. The painful sig-

nificance of the charge struck Tennyson as he read a description of it in the Times of December 2, 1854, and he wrote the poem at once, choosing the meter from the phrase, "some one had blundered," which appeared in the news story.²⁸ "My heart almost burst," he wrote afterward, "with indignation at the accursed mismanagement of our noble little Army, the flower of our men."²⁹ The poem had a double effect of warning the officers who had blundered that people back home would not tolerate such bungling errors and of letting the soldiers know that their self-sacrifice was intensely appreciated. In this way Tennyson hoped to aid the progress of the war and bring England back to peace again.

The overwhelming success of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was fuel for Tennyson's personal devotion to the Laureateship. He realized that what he wrote could bring about concrete results, even as far away as the Crimea. He received, for example, a message from an army chaplain, who was assigned to the military hospital at Scutari, requesting copies of the poem for distribution among the troops. The chaplain reported that he had read the poem to the men and that it had an encouraging effect on them all. "Half are singing it and all want to have it in black and white, so as to read what has so taken them," he wrote.³⁰ Tennyson ordered a thousand copies to be printed for the soldiers, and wrote of the men in the short preface printed on the fly-leaf: "No writing of mine

²⁸Memoir, I, 381.

²⁹Tennyson, p. 288.

³⁰Memoir, I, 386.

can add to the glory they have acquired in the Crimea; but if what I have heard be true they will not be displeased to receive these copies from me, and to know that those who sit at home love and honour them."³¹ Tennyson received one particularly flattering report about the effect of the poem on a man who had actually ridden in the charge. The trooper was in the hospital at Scutari, suffering from a horse-kick in the chest received some time after the battle of Balaclava. He was depressed and not shaking off the wound as he should have. One day the poem was read to the patient; the man was roused out of his stupor at once and began a spirited account of his own part in the suicidal gallop. Within a few days he asked the doctor to discharge him from the hospital, pronouncing himself restored to health.³² The story may have been exaggerated, but it impressed upon Tennyson more than ever the worth of his labors as Laureate. "Your office, as you discharge it," wrote the chaplain, "can do more than encourage, it can comfort and inspire our soldiers. The poet can now make heroes, just as in days of yore, if he will."³³ Tennyson had made heroes out of the Light Brigade; but his hope was that he might be able to inspire all of England to the heroic task of making their country and the world a better place in which to live.

He returned to the explicit treatment of his better-world theme in the third of his Laureate poems, the "Ode Sung at the Opening of the International Exhibition." Despite his natural interest in the display of

³¹Memoir, I, 386.

³²Memoir, I, 387-388.

³³Tennyson, p. 288.

human progress which was to take place at the Exhibition, Tennyson began writing the ode with a measure of trepidation. First of all, he did not like to have his subjects chosen for him. "I have half consented to write a little ode on the opening of the International Exhibition," he said in an 1861 letter to the Duke of Argyll. "The commissioners prest me: I should never have volunteered; for I hate a subject given me, and still more if that subject be a public one."³⁴ Second, having to write the ode to be set to music was a source of irritation, for he was without experience in such a matter.³⁵ But once he began work on the ode, he entered into it with enthusiasm, for it was almost a perfect opportunity to reiterate, once again, his vision of the future. As wondrous as the many inventions displayed were, Tennyson saw in the Exhibition a stimulus to dream of what may yet be accomplished:

Is the goal so far away?
Far, how far no tongue can say,
Let us dream our dream to-day. (II, 229)

As in the Wellington ode, the vision of the future is combined with a plea to the statesmen and the thinkers in the Empire to meet the challenge offered by Tennyson's social idealism:

O ye, the wise who think, the wise who reign,
From growing commerce loose her latest chain,
And let the fair white-wing'd peacemaker fly
To happy havens under all the sky,
And mix the seasons and the golden hours;
Till each man find his own in all men's good.
And all men work in noble brotherhood,

³⁴ Memoir, I, 477.

³⁵ Tennyson, p. 332.

Breaking their mailed fleets and armed towers,
 And ruling by obeying Nature's powers,
 And gathering all the fruits of earth and crown'd
 with all her flowers. (II, 229-230)

These lines and the entire poem were sung to Sterndale Bennett's setting in the spring of 1862 at the opening of the Exhibition. It was Tennyson's hope that the message contained in the ode would be sung all over the earth.

Tennyson's triumph as Poet Laureate can be attributed to the qualities found in the Wellington ode, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and the Exhibition ode. These qualities were summarized in a letter written to the poet by Henry Taylor. The comments in the letter were devoted to the Wellington ode, but apply equally well to the other two poems: "It has a greatness worthy of its theme and an absolute simplicity and truth, with all the poetic passion of your nature moving beneath."³⁶ In the three poems, Tennyson matched his theme to the subject matter, realized the symbolic value of the events he was celebrating, refrained from overwriting, and related the poetic content to the noble ideals which were basic to his personal dedication. The result was a kind of poetry which so struck the public that the office of Poet Laureate attained more prestige and influence than it ever had before, or has ever had since; for it was the Laureate who buried the great Duke, who made heroes of the Light Brigade, who opened the International Exhibition, and, most importantly, who pointed the way to a better England and a better world.

³⁶Tennyson, p. 273.

III

Just as Tennyson changed the image of the Laureateship, so did the position change him in a number of subtle ways that became less and less subtle as 1850 receded into the past. He did not greatly alter in any manner the social ideal he had postulated since his childhood, but he did begin to doubt whether England, and perhaps the world in general, was making any progress toward it. The problem was one which usually afflicts a prophet of progress at one time or another. "At the heart of every theory of progress," W. W. Wagar has written, "lies a conception of the ultimate good, and progress is thought to occur in proportion as the ultimate good triumphs in history."³⁷ And as Tennyson viewed events in England and the world in the decades after the mid-century, he saw the ultimate good (better men, better institutions, and thus a better society) losing out almost everywhere. There were several reasons for Tennyson's growing awareness that somehow human events were not developing the way he thought they should. Association with men of power and affairs gave him more of an insight into the nature of government than he had before becoming Laureate. In the reform measures leading to extension of the franchise, he saw England placing herself into the hands of the mediocre, not the best, men. He was greatly distressed over the increasing disruption within the Empire. The inconclusive, bungling nature of the Crimean War made him long for the leadership of assertive, victory-or-defeat men like Wellington. He saw a decline in morality which to him indicated the loss

³⁷W. Warren Wagar, "Modern Views of the Origins of the Idea of Progress," Journal of the History of Ideas, XXVIII (January-March, 1967), 55-56.

of national idealism, a loss which he believed would lead to chaos and disaster. And last of all, but extremely important, the riddle and pain of human existence were continually kept before him by a succession of personal losses. All of these factors combined to change Tennyson from the hopeful visionary of 1850 to the splenetic prophet of the 1870's.

As Tennyson's contacts and friends increased after he became Laureate, he began to move in social circles that had been denied him in the years before; and he began to realize the great gaps in governmental machinery between the poor and the rich, the aristocracy and the people, and even between the members of Parliament and the constituency that had elected them. Government was clumsy enough in just trying to keep the country operating; getting the nation moving toward an ideal seemed like an almost impossible task for Parliament and its turgid ways of handling business. In talking to members of Parliament, government officials, and the peerage, Tennyson was struck by the lack of visionary fervor at almost all levels of society. Most members of Parliament limited their thinking to the period between elections, the officials wanted to stay in office, and most of the nobility resisted any change whatsoever. He admired the character of the Queen and the Prince Consort, respected (at least at first) both Gladstone and Disraeli, and became friends with such statesmen as George Campbell, Duke of Argyll; but he soon realized that for all of their devotion to the future good, they were repeatedly forced to attend to the practical, every-day matters of maintaining things as they were. It seemed to take enough of their effort just to keep the country from sliding backward, much less pushing it forward. There was so much

to thwart the idealist. The factory system instead of improving the condition of the poor--those it was supposed to help the most--had led to their exploitation by the upper classes. The materialist philosophy of Mill and Spencer was beginning to gain influence among the lawmakers and threatened to take over the universities. And as Tennyson talked to those who were in a position to do something about all of this, he found that plausible and positive answers were hard to find.

But while none of the present leaders had many worthwhile solutions, Tennyson saw the rapid extension of the franchise as a movement away from the possibility of ever coming up with what the country needed. A central idea in Tennyson's social theory was his belief that no real progress could result until men were improved. He thought that humanity was evolving toward a higher level, but that this evolution was manifested in his time only in the cases of such obviously superior men as Hallam, Wellington, and Prince Albert. It was his belief that such men should be sought out and entrusted with power, for only they would be able to see the vision of an ideal society clearly enough to implement it. But the extension of the franchise beyond the provision of 1832 seemed to the poet to be directly controverting his hope that England be ruled by its intellectually and morally elite. In 1832, he had been in favor of reform, and when news of the passing of the bill reached the rectory, he had run out with his brothers and sisters in the night to ring the church bells.³⁸ Over the years, however, he had seen that the capitalists who were mostly

³⁸ Memoir, I, 93.

affected by the bill, were barely able to exercise the responsibility of voting. Any extension of the franchise below them would be the worst of follies, he thought; yet the increasing agitation for further reform in the 1850's and 1860's convinced him that extension would soon come-- and it did in 1867. Instead of choosing to be ruled by her best, England was throwing herself into the power of her worst, he concluded. Such a conclusion gradually changed his outlook from optimism to pessimism.

Tennyson's suspicions about British decline were strengthened by an increasing amount of friction within the Empire. Factions in Canada were urging that ties be cut with England; Indian troops revolted in Sepoy in the 1850's, necessitating the India Act of 1858; and England's imperial ventures all over the world were beginning to show signs of faltering. Tennyson's distress over these events was indicated in his subscription to the defense of Governor Eyre in October, 1866. Eyre had violently suppressed a revolt in Jamaica, excusing his butchery on the grounds that he was saving the island for the Crown. Many Englishmen, however, were revolted by Eyre's bloody manner of restoring order, and a group known as the Jamaica Committee, to which Herbert Spencer, J. S. Mill, Tom Hughes, and T. H. Huxley, belonged, had brought a prosecution for murder against him.³⁹ Despite the rather obvious injustice and brutality on the part of Eyre, Tennyson valued the maintenance of the Empire so highly that he offered to support the defense. Although he stated that he did not endorse all of Eyre's measures, in his letter to the Defense Committee he nevertheless wrote: "I sent my small subscription as a tribute to the

³⁹Tennyson, p. 366.

nobleness of the man, and as a protest against the spirit in which a servant of the State, who has saved to us one of the Islands of the Empire, and many English lives, seems to be hunted down."⁴⁰ And then he added: "In the meantime, the outbreak of our Indian Mutiny remains as a warning to all but madmen against want of vigour and swift decisiveness."⁴¹ So serious was Tennyson's fear that Great Britain would be torn apart that he was willing to compromise human values to keep it together.

Another sign Tennyson took as evidence of British decline was the bungling and inconclusiveness of the Crimean war. After overcoming incompetent leadership and faulty supply lines, British troops, along with the Allies, were finally able to capture the fortress of Sebastopol on the Black Sea. The result of all this suffering appeared to be negative. At the Treaty of Paris in 1856, all Russian and Turkish conquests were restored, the Black Sea was declared neutralized, Turkey's freedom guaranteed, and the Danube River was given over to the control of an international commission.⁴² England, it seemed, had gained practically nothing in return for all of the dead soldiers invested in the war, and had demonstrated to the world the vital weaknesses in her army; the glory of Waterloo was a far cry from the muddled victory at Sebastopol.

A number of short poems written in the early 1850's indicate the

⁴⁰Memoir, II, 40-41.

⁴¹Memoir, II, 41.

⁴²J. A. Rickard, History of England, 11th ed., College Outline Series (New York, 1953), p. 183.

frenzied concern Tennyson had, even then, over the deterioration of the Empire. With all of the talk of a French invasion after Louis Napoleon's coup d'etat, Tennyson felt called upon to encourage Englishmen to prepare to defend their country, and wrote "Britons, Guard Your Own," "The Third of February, 1852," and "Hands All Round" for John Forster's Examiner in 1852.⁴³ These extremely patriotic poems have the shrill ring of fear in them, fear that unless provoked by such dramatic cries, Englishmen would not meet the threat to their national security as they have done in the past. There is almost an implication by Tennyson, the prophet of progress, that his countrymen have retrogressed.

Indeed, in the area of public morals and religion, he was certain that retrogression was a fact. One evening in 1877 while at a ballet, he became so disgusted at the scanty dress of the ballerinas that he left his box "in agony at the degradation of the age."⁴⁴ The growing influence of French art began to be another source of disgust to him with its choice of sordid subjects and realistic depiction of sexuality.⁴⁵ Another source of concern was the rationalist movement being led by such writers as John Morley, Leslie Stephen, Frederick Harrison, and W. K. Clifford, a movement which openly threatened the spiritual and idealistic interpretation of life.⁴⁶ During this time, Gladstone remarked to the poet that

⁴³Tennyson, p. 265.

⁴⁴Tennyson, p. 437.

⁴⁵Tennyson, p. 460.

⁴⁶Tennyson, p. 454.

"The next fifty years are very dark on all sides. . . . There is a want of uprightness, a growing unscrupulousness that troubles me."⁴⁷ Tennyson was disposed to agree, as much as he disliked doing so.

While Tennyson was witnessing what he considered the decline of the Empire and the thwarting of his idealism, the counter-theme in his life, the riddle of the painful earth, arose to plague him in a series of personal losses and problems. The death in birth of his first child, a son, brought sorrow into Tennyson's marriage within a year after the wedding. Tennyson characteristically despaired not as much in the death itself as in the relationship between the nameless child and the world into which he was born. He wrote this about the birth:

It was Easter Sunday and at his birth I heard
the great roll of the organ, of the uplifted psalm
(in the Chapel adjoining the house) . . . Dead as he was
I felt proud of him. To-day when I write this down,
the remembrance of it rather overcomes me; but I am
glad that I have seen him, dear little nameless one
that hast lived tho' thou hast never breathed, I,
thy father, love thee and weep over thee, tho' thou
hast no place in the Universe. Who knows? It may be
that thou hast
God's will be done.⁴⁸

Tennyson was aware of the cruel irony in the loss of his son on the day when Christ's triumph over death was being celebrated in a chapel a few yards away. Such awareness led him back to the old questions about the nature of the God who would permit a helpless infant to strangle while being born. "He lay like a little warrior, having fought the fight, and

⁴⁷ Tennyson, p. 460.

⁴⁸ ibid., I, 340.

failed, with his hands clenched, and a frown on his brow," he wrote three years later in a letter which indicates the lasting effect of the death on him. "If my latest born were to die to-night, I do not think that I should suffer so much as I did, looking on that noble little fellow who had never seen the light."⁴⁹ The image of the dead baby as "a little warrior" is emblematic of one way in which Tennyson increasingly came to see man fighting, like the child, against impossible odds; and the "frown on his brow" is emblematic of the puzzlement Tennyson felt in pondering the impossible meaning of "the fight." Event after event in the years to come was to perplex Tennyson with the same enigma of pain and injustice he saw then in his still-born child.

With the publication of Maud in July, 1855, a series of events nearly as upsetting as the death of the child occurred in rapid succession. The first of these was the attack on the poem by the critics and the general reprobation with which the monodrama was received by the public. Added to the disapproval of the critics were anonymous letters, such as this one: "Sir, I used to worship you, but now I hate you. I loathe and detest you. You beast! So you've taken to imitating Longfellow. Yours in aversion."⁵⁰ When the critical and public scorn was at its height, he suffered another shock in the news that Harry Lushington, his best friend since the death of Arthur Hallam, had died. This was a loss that lay heavily on Tennyson for years afterwards. Not only was Lushing-

⁴⁹Memoir, I, 375.

⁵⁰Memoir, I, 400.

ton his closest of friends, he was also the only friend to whom he repeatedly turned for advice and for criticism of his work.⁵¹ Other woes included a rumor that the bank in which he had his savings might break. More depressing by far were the deaths in the 1850's, 1860's, and early 1870's of a host of friends and relatives--Edward Moxon, Henry Hallam, Arthur Hugh Clough, Prince Albert, Thackeray, Stephen Spring-Rice, Tennyson's mother, his brother Septimus, Emily's father, and Sir John Simeon. The loss of close friends and relatives is something most have to cope with as old age comes on; but for Tennyson, with his extreme sensibility, his tendency toward depression, and his acute meditation over the pains and ills men are subject to on earth, the series of deaths was particularly difficult to endure. Each death reawakened his anxiety about God, man, immortality, the nature of the world, and the significance of human life.

Tennyson's depression following each of these deaths was of several types, with each type reflecting a different aspect of his thought. Clough's death caused Tennyson to re-evaluate his own doubts concerning religion. Clough found it impossible to accept Christian belief, but could not find an adequate substitute, and was driven against the wall of his unbelief by an insatiable will to believe; this was a wall Tennyson knew well. Prince Albert's death served as an example of the inexorability of human fate, the riddle which is the final bafflement for all men, prince or pauper. At Thackeray's death, Tennyson grieved for the

⁵¹Tennyson, pp. 287-288.

years of accomplishment denied the novelist, the injustice of which was terribly evident to the poet. Yet when Tennyson's mother died, he was struck by the justice of death if one were ready for it as she was. The loss of Stephen Spring-Rice reminded Tennyson that he was aging, and that within a few years there would be hardly a trace of the old Trinity set on earth--this despite all their ambitions, talent, and efforts. The sense of waste Tennyson felt at the death of Septimus was different from that he felt at Thackeray's death. Unlike Thackeray, Septimus did not seem to have had a chance. Even though he had charm and promise, he was so afflicted by poor health and an inherent nervous weakness that he was unable to utilize his abilities. The death of Simeon was the most painful because Tennyson at once realized the need he felt for someone he could take into his confidence and the difficulty of finding such a person. It took many years to build up the friendship with Simeon; and then in the spring of 1870 it was abruptly ended. To Tennyson it seemed cruel that a man must be forced back into himself at last, despite his need for otherness. It is easy to understand why Tennyson was troubled during this period by weeks of depression in which he could not work.

Maud is a poem which reflects much of Tennyson's attitude toward his personal anguish and what he considered to be the failures of England in the years after he became Laureate. It is a poem harshly depicting the social milieu of England in the 1850's and boldly attacks the lack of idealism in the country. In his condemnation of his nation's spiritual bankruptcy, Tennyson, as Arthur J. Carr has written, prepared the way in

Maud for the verse of Eliot's "Preludes," and "Prufrock."⁵² At the same time, Maud is completely Tennysonian, manifesting all of the characteristics outlined by W. H. Auden's introduction to his selection of Tennyson's poems--an act of desertion by marriage or death, a cruel antagonist, an accidental crime, a thief, and the contrast of a barren landscape of loneliness and passion to the fertile and calm landscape of joy and contentment.⁵³ It is a poem that Tennyson thought of as one of his favorites and best, and it is the one that he most often liked to read aloud when called upon by friends to present some of his verse. The poem was an intensely personal matter with him. Mrs. Carlyle remarked that he was "strangely excited about Maud . . . as sensitive to criticisms as if they were imputations on his honor."⁵⁴ So many of his attitudes and frustrations were written into Maud that Tennyson was bound to feel that perhaps his personality showed through it too clearly; this was why he took the criticism of the poem to be "imputations." But precisely because the poem is so implicitly personal, it gives an insight into the mood of its author while he was writing it in 1854; what Tennyson's mood was, however, is a matter of some debate.

Much of the problem concerning Tennyson's disposition while he wrote Maud revolves around the problem of the poem's theme. John Killham

⁵²Arthur J. Carr, "Tennyson as a Modern Poet," Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, ed. John Killham (London, 1960), p. 42.

⁵³W. H. Auden, "Introduction," A Selection from the Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (Garden City, New York, 1944), p. xv.

⁵⁴Charles R. Sanders, "Carlyle and Tennyson," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 92.

believes that the theme is the attainment of psychic balance through love and that such an attainment must involve facing violence and death as part of the human lot."⁵⁵ Ralph W. Rader in his perceptive study, Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis, maintains that the theme revolves around an image in which were blended Tennyson's memories of Rosa Baring, Sophy Rawnsley, and Emily Sellwood, the three women he had loved, as a "long search for an ideal and idealizing love."⁵⁶ Roy P. Basler, using Freudian psychology as a base of departure, sees the poem as descriptive of the "reintegration of personality by means of sublimation and a complete swing from an extreme indulgence in private hysteria to a modified indulgence in public madness."⁵⁷ None of these interpretations take into account Tennyson's lifelong social idealism and the disillusionment he was beginning to feel in the 1850's over England's failure to move toward the ideal. The poem does involve the attainment of psychic balance, certainly does draw upon Tennyson's love experiences, and there is a reintegration of personality that does take place. But underlying all of these themes is the basic one in Tennyson's poetry and in his life: the assertion, in the face of all the pain and horror of human existence, of the hope for a better world and the devotion of the hero toward that end.

⁵⁵ John Killham, "Tennyson's Maud--The Function of the Imagery," Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, ed. John Killham (London, 1960), p. 228.

⁵⁶ Ralph W. Rader, Tennyson's "Maud": The Biographical Genesis (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), pp. 98-99.

⁵⁷ Roy P. Basler, Sex, Symbolism, and Psychology in Literature (New Brunswick, N. J., 1948), p. 91.

Tennyson told his son Hallam that we see the hero of *Maud* "when he has at length passed through the fiery furnace, and has recovered his reason, giving himself up to work for the good of mankind through the unselfishness born of his great passion."⁵⁸ But the mood of the poet was not a joyful, optimistic one, even though the ideal is asserted, for the manner of assertion is ironic. Instead of following the great wind of progress seaward and helping to bring about all the wonder that will be, as does the hero of "Locksley Hall," the hero in *Maud* marches off to fight an abortive and bungling war. Instead of helping to heal imperfect mankind, he must kill. Yet out of this will come a better England and a better world. How Tennyson could hold such an ironic attitude is reflective of the mood the condition of England had thrown him into, a condition which is detailed early in the poem.

The England which Tennyson depicts is a country festering in its own stagnation, a stagnation resulting from a failure to move forward. The blessings of peace have been turned into a curse with both pickpockets and businessmen waging an evil warfare of gain against their countrymen; the nation is plagued by injustice and disorder:

And the vitriol madness flushes up in the ruffian's head,
Till the filthy by-lane rings to the yell of the trampled wife,
And chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread,
And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life. . . .
(IV, 148)

Englishmen, instead of rising above the level of nature, have sunk back into bestiality, and the hero remarks that he is living in "a world of plunder and prey" (IV, 158). From what he sees in the painful world

⁵⁸Memoir, I, 396.

around him, the hero must conclude that "we men are a little breed" (IV, 158). Man is supposed to have evolved from a lower form to a higher, but it seems as if evolution hung fire before the job was finished and humanity is left in a hopelessly stagnant condition:

As nine months go to the shaping an infant ripe for his birth,
So many a million of ages have gone to the making of man:
He now is first, but is he the last? is he not too base?
(IV, 159)

Because of his baseness, man is not progressing toward an understanding of the universe. The scientist is given over to glory and vanity, the poet to folly and vice; and without science and poetry, the only means we have of penetrating the veil of our existence, God's ways remain dark and terrifying. This sordid view of England indicates Tennyson's doubts about the soundness of English culture; he was certain that there was something foul in the atmosphere of the times, and he longed for some way of cleansing the polluted air.

Tennyson's solution for England's problems was his perennial one; the country needed better men, he thought, especially in positions of leadership:

Ah God, for a man with heart, head, hand,
Like some of the simple great ones gone
For ever and ever by,
One still strong man in a blatant land,
Whatever they call him, what care I,
Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat--one
Who can rule and dare not lie. (IV, 175-176)

But where was England to get such men? The hero of Maud realizes that perhaps some of the responsibility is on himself; he must first become a better man and then hope that others will do the same. This is why he utters the plea: "And ah for a man to arise in me,/That the man I am

may cease to be!" (IV, 176). And the hero does become a better man, passing from the egotism of the poem's opening in which he sees the evil of the times primarily in the light of how it has deprived him of a father and of an inheritance, to the poem's conclusion in which he decides to fight evil for the good of mankind; he passes from egotism to idealism, and this, to Tennyson, was a sure sign of redemption, a redemption upon which much of the poet's hope for humanity was based.

The irony Tennyson tried to convey in Maud by suggesting that war would lead to hope for the future and that war was therefore to be preferred to peaceful stagnation, ironically backfired on him. The hero of the poem, like most of Tennyson's heroes, achieves a vision; his vision is "of a hope for the world in the coming wars" (IV, 227) and "Of a land that has lost for a little her lust of gold,/And love of a peace that was full of wrongs and shames" (IV, 229). The battles he is to fight are to be for a noble purpose, to break the bonds of tyranny, and to be "the purpose of God" (IV, 230). Killham is right in saying that in judging the poem as a work of art, historical judgments of the futility of the Crimean War should not enter. The War as it is used in the poem was undoubtedly meant by Tennyson to symbolize a war against tyranny and the defense of the good.⁵⁹ But there can be little doubt that Tennyson believed the Crimean War would shake the nation out of its degenerative stupor and bring about a vigorous and progressive outlook. Although the disastrous outcome of the war does not affect the poem, it did affect

⁵⁹ Killham, "Tennyson's Maud," p.222.

Tennyson himself; he realized that instead of sparking the country to regain lost glory, it had resulted in demoralization through the tremendous loss of prestige involved in the contrast between Waterloo and Sebastopol. The poem was in print saying one thing about the war; the war itself, however, said something about the poem. And the whole thing made Tennyson look and feel a little foolish.

Maud is a good poem with which to illustrate the change in attitude that came over Tennyson soon after he became Laureate. Like such pre-Laureate poems as "Edwin Morris" and "Locksley Hall," it utilizes the story of the disappointed suitor common to Tennyson's poetry. But the virulent attack upon corruption within English society, the tooth-gnashing hatred of the protagonist, the impulsive murder, and the ironic praise of war set Maud apart. The change in the treatment of the story implies that the author of Maud had also changed. Gone is the confident vision of all the wonder that will be, and gone is the powerful sense of the mighty wind of progress. In their place is a conception of a stagnant culture needing a war to jolt it out of its stupor, and of a humanity needing to generate its own wind of progress through myriads of individual decisions to fight for the right. Tennyson's association with public figures, his growing fear of what reform would lead to, the disruption within the Empire, the humiliation coming out of the Crimean War, the decline of morality, and all of his personal sorrow convinced him more than ever of man's need to pursue the riddle of the painful earth and to build thereby a better society, yet at the same time made him see that humanity in general and Englishmen in particular seemed incapable of

doing either. But he would not give up his dream; his life had been structured around his vision ever since his boyhood, and he--if no one else--was determined to pursue it. The pursuit became more haggard and more desperate; and Tennyson was certainly more jaded toward it. Nevertheless, he went on to teach men the need for the ideal, devoting his masterpiece, The Idylls of the King to that purpose. But as in Maud, the theme of optimism began to give way to the theme of frustration in which the fires of hell always seem to break out of the morning sun just as it is rising on Eden.

IV

"It's too hopeful, this poem, more than I am myself," Tennyson told his friend James Knowles about In Memoriam shortly after it was published. "I think of adding another to it, a speculative one . . . showing that all the arguments are about as good on one side as the other, and thus throw man back more on the primitive impulses and feelings."⁶⁰ Although Tennyson did not specify what additional poem he had in mind, The Idylls of the King is the work that most closely fits the description,⁶¹ for with its mythic structure and veiled allegory, it does rely on primeval, scarcely verbalized emotions and feelings to make its point, a subtle and complex point involving Tennyson's view of history. Because of its interweaving of paradox and ambiguity, and the cautious, drawn-out manner of composition, the Idylls in many ways gives, as Hallam Tennyson

⁶⁰James Knowles, "A Personal Reminiscence of Tennyson," Nineteenth Century, XXXIII (1893), 182.

⁶¹Clyde de L. Ryals, "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King," ELH, XXX (1963), p. 56.

has pointed out, "the innermost being" of Tennyson more fully than In Memoriam or any other poem.⁶²

The Idylls was virtually a lifelong project for Tennyson and represents a summing-up of his thought and a concentration of his talent. "The vision of Arthur as I have drawn him had come upon me when little more than a boy I first lighted upon Malory,"⁶³ he once remarked. This would make the composition of the poem, from its first conception to its final form in 1889, take up over seventy-five years. The writing of the Idylls was an extremely plastic process, with the content and structure of the poem as we now have it changing as the times and Tennyson's own outlook changed. It represents an attempt by the poet to relate the mythical material of the Arthurian romances to the fluid, rapidly changing, and often violently disruptive culture in which he lived; the result is a poem made out of the whole fabric of a century, a fabric which became the material of Tennyson's life.

Much of the reason for the long delay in the completion of the poem was the difficulty Tennyson had in making the Arthurian myth relevant to his times; he even doubted whether the material could be made relevant.⁶⁴ This doubt is evident in "The Epic," the prefatory poem to the first idyll he wrote, "Morte d'Arthur." When in the "Morte" the question of why the poet Everard Hall burned his epic of King Arthur is asked, this answer is given:

⁶²Materials, III, 201 (viii).

⁶³Materials, III, 201 (viii).

⁶⁴Sir Charles Tennyson, "The Idylls of the King," Twentieth Century, CLXI (1957), p. 279.

He thought that nothing new was said, or else
 Something so said 't was nothing--that a truth
 Looks freshest in the fashion of the day. . . . (I, 254)

The lines reveal that possibly as early as 1833 Tennyson was having difficulty in settling on a method of reworking the tales of King Arthur into a modern epic. Also in "The Epic" is a hint that Tennyson may have already written an epic and then destroyed it because it did not carry enough contemporary meaning. After finishing "Morte d'Arthur" in the 1830's, Tennyson did not resume work on King Arthur until late in the 1850's. The reason for his rather sudden resumption of the subject could well have been the change of attitude that came about after he was named Poet Laureate. Perhaps with the decline of his optimism he began to see a way of making the Arthurian myth take on vast implications in the nineteenth century. Like Arthur, Tennyson had envisioned and sought to implement, through his poetry, an ideal society; but what little progress had been made through humanitarian reform was being negated by the savagery of commerce and the dissolution of the Empire. Tennyson's own concept of history suddenly seemed to him to be symbolized in the frustration of Arthur and the failure to maintain Camelot.

With the problem of relevance tentatively resolved, Tennyson set to work on the Idylls and all but completed the poem in two bursts of energy, the first from shortly after the publication of Maud in 1855 to June 1859, and the second from 1868 to 1874. The four poems resulting from the first burst--"Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere"--were published in 1859. Their appearance together carefully obscured the place they had in the epic scheme, for they appeared to be four isolated

studies of female character. But from the internal structure of the poems, it is plain that Tennyson had carefully given them a place within a greater structure, the further development of which was delayed until 1868 by his uncertainty about how to handle the Grail legend. A third-person point of view would imply belief in the Grail on the part of the poet, or would at least give an overly-naive flavor, thought Tennyson; so at last he hit upon the device of putting the story into the mouth of Sir Percivale, thus overcoming the problem of belief and viewpoint in one stroke. New titles were given the four old idylls when the poems of the second period of composition were published in 1870, the order of arrangement becoming: "The Coming of Arthur," "Geraint and Enid," "Merlin and Vivien," "Lancelot and Elaine," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," "Guinevere," and "The Passing of Arthur." "Gareth and Lynette" and "The Last Tournament" were published in a small volume in 1871. The 1873 edition of Tennyson's collected works had the Idylls in nearly the final form except for "Balin and Balan" which did not appear until the Tiresias volume of 1885. Tennyson solved the numerical problem by dividing "Geraint and Enid" into two parts, and the whole series was finally published as a unit in 1889, over fifty-five years after he had begun "Morte d'Arthur."⁶⁵

The response to the Idylls was one of mutual enthusiasm on the part of the public, critics, and friends alike. Ten thousand copies of the 1859 volume were sold within the first week.⁶⁶ With only a few excep-

⁶⁵Sir Charles Tennyson, "The Idylls," pp. 277-286.

⁶⁶Materials, III, 275.

tions, the criticism was favorable. Even Blackwoods, which had been antagonistic toward Tennyson from the start of his career, did an about-face: "The pure and lofty sentiment as well as the delight furnished by these idylls will add to the debt which his country already owes to her worthy son, Alfred Tennyson."⁶⁷ Tennyson's friends and relatives were certain that he had produced his greatest work. Prince Albert wanted his copy autographed.⁶⁸ Charles Kingsley wrote that Walter, the proprietor of the Times and a Tennyson detractor, had been so struck by the Idylls that "He thought them the finest modern poem. There was nothing he did not, or would not say in praise of them. He now classed the four great English poets as Shakespeare, Spenser, Byron, Tennyson, and so on. . . ."⁶⁹ Tennyson's mother thought that her somewhat Bohemian and unorthodox son had at last caught the meaning of the true faith:

It does indeed give me the purest satisfaction to notice that a spirit of Christianity is perceptible through the whole volume. . . . O dearest Ally how fervently have I prayed for years that our merciful Redeemer would intercede with our Heavenly Father to grant thee his Holy Spirit to urge thee to employ the talents he has given thee in His service by taking every opportunity of endeavoring to impress the precepts of his Holy Word on the minds of others.⁷⁰

"The applause of the 'Idylls' goes on crescendo, and so far as I can hear without exception," wrote the Duke of Argyll. "Macaulay has repeated to me several times an expression of his great admiration. . . . Gladstone,

⁶⁷Tennyson, p. 318.

⁶⁸Materials, III, 273.

⁶⁹Materials, III, 273-274.

⁷⁰Materials, III, 254.

by the bye . . . has spoken to me, and has written to the Duchess of Sutherland that the impression of the power and beauty of these Poems increases daily in reading them."⁷¹ As the praise continued to pour in, and as the number of volumes sold continued to increase, it was evident that Tennyson's popularity had entirely recovered from the disastrous effects of Maud.

But after the overt polemicism of Maud, the Idylls of 1859 must have seemed somewhat pallid and perhaps a little mysterious. Tennyson, the social prophet, whose poems had been full of exhortations to progress, appeared to have thrown it all over for a quartet of psychological studies dealing with medieval femininity. It looked like a reaction to the unfavorable reception of Maud, an opinion which still has some advocates, such as Edgar F. Shannon, Jr.:

From the reception of the poem [Maud] it was apparent that he had misjudged his audience and had projected his poetry too deeply into the realms of abnormal psychology, politics, and opinion. Hurt and annoyed, he withdrew from the troublesome nineteenth century to his favorite era, the past, and diffidently began the protracted process of casting in mellifluous splendor the Idylls of the King.⁷²

To others, the Idylls may have seemed to be a poetic busy-work, pretty, but without the conciseness of the earlier and shorter poems; this is another opinion that still remains popular among critics who see in the Idylls the "deadened tone of an essentially lyric poet who, in an anxiety shared by wife and friends as to what a laureate should be doing next,

⁷¹Materials, III, 250-251.

⁷²Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "The Critical Reception of Tennyson's 'Maud,'" PMLA, LXVIII (1953), 414.

had set himself doggedly to extended story telling."⁷³ Those who believed that the poem was written in reaction to Maud were partially right, for Tennyson learned that open condemnation of society would get him nowhere. He came to realize that his awareness of the deficiencies in English culture, and the very nature of the culture itself, were best expressed indirectly, through the use of myth and allegory. But those who believed that the Idylls is a set of laborious, disconnected stories were wrong, for there is a consistent, carefully developed thematic meaning in the poem that the piecemeal publication concealed to all but the most discerning critics.

With the Idylls, Tennyson assumed, poetically at least, the secret-agent role which he had acted on his trip to the Pyrenees with Hallam in 1830. He was trying to convey a message to the people of England in the Idylls that he hoped would lead to a revolution other than the one he had supported against Ferdinand VII, a revolution in which men would come to see the vital part idealism plays in history and come to govern their lives accordingly. If men would do this, thought Tennyson, they would become better, and possibly, with the aid of evolution, some day be able to sustain the ideal society and thus break out of the fatal cycle of glory, ruin, and restoration which has dominated history. The message had to be coded, however, so that it would not fall into the hands of the enemy, the unimaginative reviewers and the laissez-faire men of commerce who had ridiculed and laughed down Maud. Only the men who

⁷³Warren Beck, "Clouds upon Camelot," English Journal, XLV (1956), 453.

were capable of becoming better would be able to read and understand the Idylls, those men who could perceive the world vision underlying the mythic structure of the poem and who would allow themselves to be taught in the primitive but essential way that myth teaches about the beginning, end, and ultimate prospect of humanity.

So well did Tennyson conceal his message that the mythic implications of the poem have not been realized until fairly recently. Even such a highly respected friend of Tennyson, the Duke of Argyll, underestimated the Idylls. "I think my prediction is coming true," wrote the Duke, "that your 'Idylls of the King' will be understood and admired by many who are incapable of understanding and appreciating many of your other works."⁷⁴ Admired they were; understood they were not. Two twentieth-century critics have found an apparently intentional use of myth in the Idylls that, so far as has been determined, Tennyson's contemporaries missed altogether. Jacob Korg has contended that Tennyson adapted the Maimed King myth which was explicitly used by Malory. The Maimed King, according to Korg, "appears in the last few Idylls and in the 'Morte d'Arthur' as a figure obscurely wounded whose disability carries the whole realm to destruction."⁷⁵ In Malory, the Maimed King is healed by Galahad and the kingdom is made whole; but in Tennyson there is no healing and only indefinite things are said about Arthur's resurrection.⁷⁶ Tennyson does

⁷⁴Materials, III, 247.

⁷⁵Jacob Korg, "The Pattern of Fatality in Tennyson's Poetry," Victorian Newsletter, No. 14 (Fall, 1958), p. 11.

⁷⁶Korg, p. 11.

not complete the myth, thus implying that Arthur's healer is yet to appear. Who will the healer be? A consistent guess would be the evolved man of In Memoriam, the man who can restore the ideal that Arthur could not sustain. The other critic, Henry Kozicki, sees Arthur as the "Year-Daemon" arriving in the spring, rising to greatness in the summer, decaying in the fall, and dying in the winter, thereby fulfilling the cycle of the dying god who comes to bear the sins of the community. Kozicki also points out that in the ancient vegetation rites, the young Zeus will rise with the spring;⁷⁷ and Kozicki supports this by citing the last line of the poem: "And the new sun rose bringing the new year." Tennyson himself indicated his use of the Year-Daemon by drawing attention in a manuscript note to the seasonal structure of the poem--Arthur arrives on the night of the New Year, is married in May, the vision of the Holy Grail appears on a summer night, the Last Tournament takes place in autumn, and Arthur dies at midnight in mid-winter.⁷⁸ The two myths fit together very significantly because the incompleteness of the Maimed King story suggests that if the healer arrives, the cyclical pattern implied in the Year-Daemon myth will be broken. This seems to be the essence of the coded message Tennyson was trying to deliver; it was in keeping with his experience that the message was accepted no more readily than his 1830 dispatch was received by Ojeda, the guerrilla leader in the Pyrenees.

Tennyson's conception of humanity eventually breaking out of the cycle of history when the new man will arise, bears a certain degree of

⁷⁷ Henry Kozicki, "Tennyson's Idylls of the King as Tragic Drama," Victorian Poetry, IV, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), 20.

⁷⁸ Memoir, II, 133.

resemblance to Yeats's idea of the Great Wheel. Yeats saw history to be revolving in cycles of two thousand years, with each revolution mounting toward the Great Year of the thirteenth revolution when life will break out of the Wheel altogether. The difference between the two metaphoric systems is that Yeats's Great Year is supposedly inexorably coming, while Tennyson's vision of the healing of the Maimed King throws much of the responsibility for the millennium on mankind. Somehow humanity has to rise to the level where it will be able to maintain its ideals; the slight possibility of this ever happening is what makes Tennyson's veiled hope more pessimistic than optimistic.

The way in which Tennyson conceived his Arthur is indicative of the pessimistic view he held of the world while writing the Idylls. Arthur is introduced into a paradox from the very beginning of the Idylls. He sets out to found an ideal society based on freedom but learns, to his despair, that he cannot have a kingdom of free men because his subjects do not will the ideal as he does. Arthur must deal with the awful paradox of his reality: "how can a redeemer work his will without violating the will of others?"⁷⁹ Arthur finds that he has tried to create and sustain an ideal society on men whose will is contrary to his. He is content with self-deception for a time, but at last he must face the fact of an adulterous queen, knights who have broken their vows, and civil war. "For the imposition of his heroic authority, his will upon reality meant the denial to others of their own moral responsibility," writes Ryals.

⁷⁹Ryals, "Moral Paradox," p. 55.

"Arthur stands, finally in moral terms as both the hero and the villain of the Idylls of the King."⁸⁰ Arthur fails to redeem the world because in its present condition it is irredeemable; better knights must arise.

Another indication of Tennyson's pessimism concerning the present world is the dominant imagery in the poem, the imagery of the beast. "To strengthen the moral effects of recording man's demise and to focus more sharply on the grim implications of a humanity in bondage to the Passions," writes Edward Engelberg, "Tennyson fills the Idylls with a consistent image--the image of the beast . . . to point up the old medieval and Renaissance view of man divided against himself by divine strivings and a bestial disposition."⁸¹ The image is strong in the first book of the Idylls but weakens as Arthur subdues for a time the bestial element in his kingdom; but it returns with increasing frequency in the later books as the kingdom dissolves.⁸² This ebb and flow of imagery suggests what was a persistent question for Tennyson: Does mankind rise out of the beast only to return again? The pattern of the Idylls indicates Tennyson's answer, based on his observation of Victorian England and its decline, would be in the affirmative. Not that he believed that man inevitably had to degenerate into an animal again; there would be hope, he maintained, if men could somehow follow the classical ideals of "Self-reverence, self-knowledge, and self-control" set forth in "Oenone." But in the Idylls, Arthur's knights and his ladies reject or ignore

⁸⁰Ryals, "Moral Paradox," p. 67.

⁸¹Edward Engelberg, "The Beast Image in Tennyson's Idylls of the King," ELH, XXII (1955), 287.

⁸²Engelberg, p. 287.

these disciplines; their society is consequently doomed; and "the Idylls end with a bang not a whimper amidst the growling and roaring echoes of fallen man."⁸³

Perhaps the most caustic of Tennyson's indictments of the present world in the Idylls is the treatment he gives the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere. One of the greatest ironies in the poem develops out of Arthur's statement in the first book that with Guinevere at his side he will be able to make the world have light and live; this statement is then followed by tales about falsehood in marriage and all the disaster it brings.⁸⁴ There are two implications in the failure of Arthur's marriage. The first is an obvious attack on what Tennyson took to be the increasing disrespect for marriage in English society and the consequent increase in the number of broken marriages. As one critic has written: "It is evident that marriage, in Tennyson, represents a whole life for man, the basis for a whole society."⁸⁵ Without sound marriages, thought Tennyson, there could be not even the beginning of a sound society. The second implication is that Arthur, representing human idealism, cannot find a suitable match in present humanity, represented by Guinevere, simply because the two are incompatible. Arthur and Guinevere do not have any children because Guinevere is too base for Arthur's precious

⁸³Engelberg, p. 292.

⁸⁴Johnson W. Stacy, "The Theme of Marriage in Tennyson," Victorian Newsletter, No. 12 (Autumn, 1957), pp. 8-9.

⁸⁵Stacy, p. 10.

seed; mankind continually fails to achieve an improved world because humanity is not yet fertile enough to nurture the ideal. And until mankind evolves onto a higher level, there can be little hope, for Tennyson "felt strongly that only with the inspiration of ideals can a man combat the cynical indifference, the intellectual selfishness, the sloth of will, the utilitarian materialism of a transition age."⁸⁶

Tennyson's experience at Cambridge with the Apostles may have been another factor in the theme of disillusionment that runs through the Idylls. The emotional climate in the club was somewhat similar to that of the Round Table. The Apostles, like King Arthur's knights, felt that they had a mission to enlighten the world. As evidence of this, Betty Miller cites a letter to Tennyson from fellow-Apostle Joseph Blakesley in which a candidate for membership in the club is objected to because he lacks sufficient earnestness to contribute to an organization which Blakesley hopes will "do much for the world."⁸⁷ But by the time Tennyson was writing the Idylls, he realized that not much had been done and that the world was still the same old world. For all their youthful idealism, the achievements of most of the Apostles was slight. Sterling, Charles Buller, and Arthur Hallam died young. Thomas Sunderland went insane. Blakesley, Charles Merivale, and Henry Alford each attained only a deanery. Henry Lushington died with no distinction. James Spedding devoted twenty-six years to refuting Macaulay's views of Francis Bacon.

⁸⁶ Materials, III, 201 (ix).

⁸⁷ Betty Miller, "Camelot at Cambridge," Twentieth Century, CLXIII (1958), p. 146.

And Jack Kemble never realized his promise.⁸⁸ Certainly, several members of the club, including Tennyson, did attain distinction; Richard Trench, Richard Monckton Milnes, and W. H. Thompson made significant contributions to their generation, and the work of Spedding and Kemble was not without genuine merit. But what the group had set out to do and what it had actually accomplished were two different things; and Tennyson knew it. Just as In Memoriam was an elegy to the memory of Arthur Hallam, so too the Idylls may have been an elegy to the memory of the Apostles.

But for all of Tennyson's pessimism, there is still the hidden hope expressed in the Idylls that somehow, sometime, a world more receptive to Arthur will come about. The hope is so subtly and obscurely presented, however, that we may at times tend to agree with Jacob Korg that "in spite of what he professed to believe, Tennyson could not rid himself of the profound conviction that somehow ill would be the final goal of good."⁸⁹ At other times, when disgusted with the seeming confusion of the allegorical structure, we may concur with Baum in saying that Tennyson "drifted down to many-towered Camelot with the Lady of Shallott, bringing in one pocket his Malory and in another a small parcel of allegory."⁹⁰ But in the last analysis, F. E. L. Priestly is right in maintaining that the poem is not an attempt to escape from the world by castigating it or by providing another world of fantasy, but an effort to deal with the

⁸⁸Miller, p. 147.

⁸⁹Korg, p. 8.

⁹⁰Paul F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, 1948), p. 207.

problems of the time.⁹¹ And the major problem, as Tennyson saw it, was a decline in idealism, and a loss of faith in the future of humanity. The purpose of the Idylls was to teach men the need of idealism and to show how the ideal society, even if attained, will be destroyed by the inability of humanity in its present state to respond to the ideal. Mankind, maintained Tennyson, must get ready to receive Arthur before Camelot can once again rise. How can this be done? Tennyson gave the answer in his own commentary on the poem, a commentary later paraphrased by his son:

Guided by the voice within, the Ideal Soul looks out into the Infinite for the highest Ideal; and finds it nowhere realized so mightily as in the "Word who wrought with human hands the creed of creeds." But for Arthur, as for everyone who believes in the Word however interpreted, arises the question, "How can I in my little life, in my small measure, and in my limited sphere reflect this highest ideal?" From the answer to this question come the strength of life, its beauty, and above all its helpfulness to the world. . . . man's duty is to forget self in the service of others and to let visions come and go. . . .⁹²

If men will forget themselves as the Word (Jesus, or God acting) did in the service of others and in working toward a better world, a process of self-evolution will begin to take place. So long as men will adhere to such a spiritual value, progress will result; but they must always remember that "The tragic collapse of Arthur's work in the Idylls is an allegory of the collapse of society, of a nation, and of the individual, which must follow the loss of spiritual values."⁹³

⁹¹F. E. L. Priestley, "Tennyson's Idylls," Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson, ed. John Killham (London, 1960), p. 239.

⁹²Materials, III, 201 (ix-x, xiv).

⁹³Priestley, p. 242.

Tennyson devoted a major portion of his life to working on the Idylls and the poem represents the fullest statement of his mature philosophy and his most complete poetic vision. But despite the scope of the Idylls, Tennyson's longest poem, as do most of his major poems, depends for its thematic structure on the basic theme of his life. As one perceptive critic has noted: "Among the most salient traits of the Idylls, exclusive for the time being of more technical matters, there may be discerned certain major Tennysonian motifs. The theme of the ideal society, which the poet had previously made such an integral component of The Princess and Maud, becomes possibly the most pervasive of these."⁹⁴ He used the theme in a negative fashion, attempting to show his readers the consequences of not making it the central theme of their own lives. But at the same time he told them that they were not yet ready to embrace it completely and that until they changed, all kingdoms would go the way of Arthur's. And then, for those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, he threw in a secret message that perhaps some day, if the best men try to become better, humanity will break out of the cyclical pattern of the Idylls, the ideal society will become a reality, and Arthur will return--this time to stay. Conspicuously absent, however, was an explicit vision of all the wonder that will be. The dynamic optimism which closes "Locksley Hall" and In Memoriam has changed into the but's and if's that conclude "The Passing of Arthur." Only the central theme remained the same, both for the poems and the poet who wrote them.

⁹⁴Nancy M. Engbretsen, "The Thematic Evolution of 'The Idylls of the King,'" Victorian Newsletter, No. 26 (Fall, 1964), p. 2.

V

By 1874, with the Idylls lacking only the final touches, Tennyson had reached an impasse in his career. He had earned the post of Poet Laureate on the strength of his superb lyric poetry. He had learned how to accept and live with his enormous popularity. He had, through the sincerity of his Laureate verse, restored the office to a level of prestige it had not enjoyed since the days of Dryden. And, though greatly disillusioned by certain failures within the Empire, he had managed to adjust his vision of the future to the realities of the times (and in the process produced the only successful epic poem of his century). In all of these accomplishments he had upheld, in one degree or another, the social idealism which had marked his life since boyhood. But Tennyson was dissatisfied; he did not feel that he had utilized his ability to the fullest in the projection of his vision through the lyric and epic mediums, nor had he demonstrated that he deserved to be ranked with the greatest of English poets. So in his sixties, at the height of his success, he set out to prove himself just as he did as a child in the rectory at Somersby, as a youth at Cambridge, and as Poet Laureate. He abandoned the form in which he had displayed his greatest ability, the lyric, ceased tinkering with his epic, and turned his attention to the drama. It is strange that the plays he wrote are almost entirely lacking in crisis, for the abortive effort of writing them produced the major crisis of his life.

PART FOUR: "MR. TENNYSON'S ABOMINABLE CARICATURE"

I

Amid the flare of gaslights and before a crowd so rabid with excitement that the pit doors were broken down before the first performance, the most controversial play of the 1882 season opened on November 11 at London's Globe Theatre. The title: The Promise of May. The author: Alfred Tennyson. The play had been eagerly awaited for two reasons. First, it had been billed as a new departure in drama, a "village tragedy" in which the tragic elements traditionally associated with aristocratic heroes are dramatically linked to events in the lives of ordinary people. Tennyson was not aware of the early work of Ibsen, but he apparently sensed the drift modern drama was taking and attempted to introduce an innovation of his own. Second, the play also had been billed as an attack on socialism, one of the most widely debated subjects of the time. It looked as if Tennyson had all the ingredients for a money-making drama and both the playwright and the players were looking forward to a long and profitable run.

Despite a restless and often angry crowd, the first few performances of The Promise of May were before a full and generally appreciative house. The story line was sufficiently simple and mawkish, with just enough naughtiness to give the play popular appeal. As the plot develops, a young girl is seduced by a smooth-talking city fellow, the seducer runs off, and the girl leaves a note saying that her body will be found in the river. Years later both seducer and girl return. The seducer under

a false name and disguised by a beard, tries to make love to the girl's older sister. Suddenly, he is confronted by the seduced, the girl dies of shock, and the degenerate spoiler of womanhood grovels in repentance at the feet of the older sister. The plot with its open treatment of illicit love had plenty of shock value, but what made the play more shocking to an influential segment of the audience was the characterization of Philip Edgar, the seducer, who seemed to be a caricature of the typical Victorian freethinker. In his first appearance on the stage, Edgar mouths such sentiments as "What can a man, then, live for but sensations" (VII, 267). "And if my pleasure breed another's pain./Well--is not that the course of Nature . . ." (VII, 269). When he begins to fear that his victim will try to force marriage on him, he remarks: "Marriage is but an old tradition. I hate/Traditions. . ." (VII, 277). He adds that when the storm of revolution comes, marriage will be swept away, along with such other outdated traditions as thrones, churches, and rank; and free-love will be the rule. Right and wrong is a relative matter to him: "one time's vice may be/The virtue of another" (VII, 278). And his vision of the future is based on a thesis which is directly opposed to the thesis of the better man on which Tennyson's hopes for the future rested. Edgar outlines his vision to the girl:

And when the man,
The child of evolution, flings aside
His swaddling bands, the morals of the tribe,
He, following his own instincts as his God,
Will enter on the larger golden age;
No pleasure then taboo'd; for when the tide
Of full democracy has overwhelm'd
This Old world, from that flood will rise the New
Like the Love-goddess, with no bridal veil,

Ring, trinket of the Church, but naked Nature
In all her loveliness. (VII, 280)

The girl asks him what he means and Edgar explains:

That, if we did not strain to make ourselves
Better and higher than Nature, we might be
As happy as the bees there at their honey
In these sweet blossoms. (VII, 281)

Tennyson's own philosophy could not have been more openly controverted than in these two speeches of Edgar's. The thought was common enough in the period, however, and was certainly among the stock-in-trade of the freethinking movement.

What was offensive to the freethinkers in the audience was not Edgar's ideas, but his character. It seemed as if Tennyson were trying to show that accepting the cant of the freethinkers would lead to the moral degeneracy manifested in Edgar. There was no doubt among the freethinkers that Tennyson was throwing a blanket charge against them, labeling them as men who utilized the free-and-easy morality of their sect to justify their bestiality. They were further infuriated by the way in which Hermann Vezin, the actor, played the part of Edgar. Instead of speaking his soliloquies in a natural way, Vezin gave the impression that he was reading them from a book, and that all of Edgar's ideas were second-hand.¹ Resentment against the play itself, and especially against Vezin's interpretation, rose through the first two performances. Finally, on the third or fourth night, the inevitable explosion took place. The Marquis of

¹Tennyson, p. 464.

Queensbury, president of the British Secular Union, a leading free-thought organization, stood up in the middle of the play and protested "Mr. Tennyson's abominable caricature."² The theatre erupted in a confusion of shouts for and against the play, and it was only after a long delay that it could go on. A few days later Tennyson received the following resolution from the Battersea Secular Society, another group of freethinkers:

Resolved: That this meeting of the Battersea Secular Society and branch of the National Secular Society desires to express its hearty thanks to the Marquis of Queensbury for his manly protest against the abominable libels upon the principles of Free-thought contained in the character of Edgar in Mr. Tennyson's "Promise of May" as represented at the Globe Theatre. Copies to be sent to Mr. Tennyson, The Marquis of Queensbury, and the Press.³

Tennyson had succeeded in arousing one of the most influential segments of English thought against him; and for the first time in his life he was thrust into open and loud-spoken opposition against the tendency of his times.

Tennyson fulminated and growled at his critics, maintaining that they had grossly misinterpreted his character. He pointed out that he did not conceive of Edgar as a freethinker led to crime by communism, nor as an honest radical, nor as a sincere believer in Schopenhauer; Edgar is simply not sincere in anything.⁴ And this is the point he tried to make in the dialogue between Harold (Edgar's assumed name) and Dora (the older sister) late in the play:

²Materials, IV, 18.

³Materials, IV, 20.

⁴Materials, IV, 18.

Harold. I . . . have been call'd a Socialist,
A Communist, a Nihilist--what you will!--

Dora. What are all these?

Harold. Utopian idiotcies.
They did not last three Junes. Such rampant weeds
Strangle each other, die, and make the soil
For Caesars, Cromwells, and Napoleons
To root their power in. I have freed myself
From all such dreams, and some will say because
I have inherited my uncle. (Vii, 341)

Now that Edgar has become a capitalist and is no longer a have-not, he is ready to cast aside all of his old free-thought ideologies. The implication is plain: socialism, communism, even nihilism, have their roots in jealousy and self-pity. Earlier in the play, Edgar explains that he became a freethinker when his father disinherited him after learning of his affair with a tenant girl; this explanation removes what touch of nobility or romanticism his role as a sincere freethinker might have given him. Freethinking, according to Tennyson's interpretation of it in the play, arises out of baseness and perpetuates its source. Tennyson protested that this rather obvious implication of the plan was not meant to be a sweeping condemnation of the whole movement. "I meant Edgar to be a shallow enough theorist," he wrote in a letter, "of course not one of the 'ordinary freethinkers.'"⁵ But his critics would not accept his protests and his explanations. It was plain to them that he was no longer the poet-prophet in the vanguard of the times.

In attacking freethinking, which was one of the basic ingredients in the growing sympathy for socialism, Tennyson threw himself across the ringing grooves of change only to find that the express was steaming down

⁵Materials, IV, 21.

the line much faster than he had thought. Socialism in England was just getting underway when The Promise of May was produced, but already it had gained sufficient momentum to carry it far into the twentieth century. Even during the last two decades of Tennyson's century, socialist thought had enough force behind it so that it gained adherents and programs regardless of whether a liberal or conservative ministry was in power. The working classes acquired public libraries, baths and wash-houses, parks, gardens, and lodging houses, all of which were maintained out of public rates. Utilities such as gas, electricity, water, and tramways were municipalized. Slum conditions were improved through the work of Charles Booth and his statistical investigations into London life. The growing Salvation Army movement furthered humanitarian reform. John Burns of the Battersea Secular Society, the Progressive Party of the London County Council, and the Sidney Webbs and the Fabian Society managed to squeeze socialistic legislation out of the liberal and conservative governments year after year. Other factors such as Henry George's Progress and Poverty, Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, and the extension of Trade Union interest into the unskilled trades all contributed to the vigor and effectiveness of English socialism.⁶ "On the whole I think I am rather glad of the row," said Tennyson in the midst of the controversy over the play, "for it shows I have not drawn a bow at a venture."⁷ He was perhaps more right than he realized in saying that The Promise of May had not been

⁶G. M. Trevelyan, History of England, Doubleday Anchor Books (Garden City, New York, 1952), III, 249-250.

⁷Materials, III, 21.

a chance shot; he had attacked the very heart of the late Victorian Zeitgeist, an attack for which he was to pay heavily both in his own century and in the next.

For a time, Tennyson did not realize what he had done to his own reputation with The Promise of May. At first he raged at the condition of the English theatre. "The English drama is at its lowest ebb, and the dramatic criticism (as far as I have seen it) follows the ebb instead of bearing that light which should lead it back to the flow," he wrote. "I had a feeling that I would strive (in my plays) to bring the true Drama of character and life back again."⁸ But gradually he began to see that it was not the type of play which he had written so much as its content that was disapproved of; and he changed his statement about the low ebb of English theatre to this: "The British drama must be in a low state indeed, if, as certain dramatic critics have lately hinted, none of the moral and social questions of the time ought to be touched upon in a modern play."⁹ He had touched upon such questions but not in a way that would have redeemed him with future critics as Ibsen's treatment of the woman question in A Doll's House had done for the Norwegian dramatist. Ibsen took the progressive view of the controversy he chose to write about, while Tennyson took a reactionary stand. Ibsen was eventually vindicated because the Zeitgeist was on his side; Tennyson was left with the reputation of a Victorian fogey, a reputation which the past forty

⁸Materials, III, 20.

⁹Materials, III, 21.

years of scholarship has struggled without complete success to overcome. Tennyson tried to thumb his nose at the "ruffians in the gallery"¹⁰ by quoting Milton's sonnet:

I did but prompt the age to quit their clogs
 [Their melodrams, their sensationalisms, their burlesque]
 When straight a barbarous noise environs me
 Of owls and asses, cuckoos, apes and dogs,
 But this is got by casting pearls to hogs.¹¹

But the "ruffians" were doing the thumbing, for The Promise of May was no pearl and Tennyson, it seemed, had disqualified himself as an intellect they could respect.

Because of the violent way in which the young intellectuals hooted down The Promise of May and dismissed its author, Lord Queensbury's protest has taken on a double meaning. From that night on, Tennyson himself became more and more an "abominable caricature" of all that the younger generation disliked in the older generation. To young men such as the turn-of-the-century characters in Joyce's Ulysses, Tennyson became "Alfred Lawn Tennyson," the bewhiskered poetic gamesman who toyed in an idle way with metrical effects, let meaning fall where it would, and somehow confused hanky-panky in Camelot with the decline of the Empire. Newspapers began to run contests for the best Tennyson parody, Tennyson's volumes were to be found more and more on vicarage window seats and less and less in the pockets of college boys, and the old Cambridge debate--"Milton or Tennyson, which the greater poet?"--became an amusing footnote in literary history. Even over eighty years after the play was produced, the

¹⁰Materials, III, 21.

¹¹Quoted in Materials, III, 21.

introduction of Tennyson's name into bookish conversation still often draws a groan or a you-can't-be-serious smile. In thoughtful reconsideration of Tennyson's life, it appears that Tennyson's venture into the drama, more than anything else, contributed to the demise of his reputation.

Even though very few people, scholars included, have ever bothered to read The Promise of May, its effect on Tennyson has lingered because, after its production, the reading of Tennyson was no longer fashionable among the young men who had another sort of vision than the social idealism which Tennyson entertained. Literary fashion, perhaps best understood as compatibility between a writer and his time, has always influenced the value of an author's stock; and the reaction to The Promise of May knocked the bottom out of the Tennyson market, for it took away the audience he could most hope to influence--the younger thinkers and writers. He was still Poet Laureate, but no longer the Laureate of all the people; he had alienated those who count the most to a poet who envisioned himself as a prophet trying to bring about an ideal society and a better world. Tennyson still had his old generals in the fight for the Right; but he had no troops.

Tennyson's dramatic ambitions, like the Promise of May itself, folded under the attack of the freethinkers and never revived. To Tennyson's disappointment, the play closed after only five weeks. Although he touched up parts of his earlier plays, notably Becket, he never again turned his hand to the drama. There was a sad finality about the failure of his last play, a finality which he symbolized by halting its printing and distributing the type. He was finished as a playwright, and he re-

alized that his last play was not even worth publishing--not because he thought it to be without merit, but because he knew that nobody would read it. And because the nation would not read a work which he thought would set her back on the right track, he sadly feared that the Empire, like the type for The Promise of May, would end up in the hellbox.

II

What could have prompted Tennyson at the age of sixty-five to begin work on his first play, Queen Mary, and thus precipitate the crisis that culminated ten years later when the Marquis of Queensbury rose from his seat in the Globe Theatre? He set out on a new career which, while it drew the enthusiastic praise of his friends, led to widespread disapprobation by almost all Tennyson scholars and, in his own time, to scores of humiliating parodies which appeared daily in the press. Despite the foolhardiness of the adventure, it seems that Tennyson was motivated to write for the stage for two reasons, the first more basic to his way of living than the second. Queen Mary, Harold, and Becket, the historical trilogy, and to some extent The Promise of May were written to drive home to the English people, as Tennyson thought only drama could do, his more recent thought on the two standard Tennysonian themes of the riddle and the ideal society. The trilogy, especially, was to present a supplement to the theory of history put forth in the Idylls. The other plays, The Falcon, The Cup, and The Foresters seem to have been written for an entirely different reason--to make money. And the irony of ironies to Tennyson was that the serious plays, the trilogy, into which he had poured the substance of his personality and what he considered his most profound historical reflec-

tions, were failures, while the loosely written potboilers all enjoyed long runs on the stage.

With a few exceptions, notably Fitzgerald, Tennyson's friends provided the encouragement which helped to keep him writing plays during so much of his old age. Browning, in what is certainly an overestimate of Queen Mary, wrote to the Laureate: "Conception, execution, the whole and the parts, I see nowhere the shade of a fault."¹² Gladstone liked the patriotic aspects of the play: "I cannot but be glad that, in turning to historic themes, you have struck a note for the nation."¹³ And Mrs. S. J. Bateman, the manageress of the Lyceum Theatre, sent this telegram on the opening night, April 18, 1876: "play received with great enthusiasm. You were called for loudly and the only regret was you were not there."¹⁴ Longfellow was enthusiastic over Harold: "I have just been reading your 'Harold' and am delighted with its freshness, strength and beauty. Like 'Boadicea' it is a voice out of the Past, sonorous, strange, semi-barbaric."¹⁵ Browning's applause was as uncritical as usual: "another great work, wise, good and beautiful. The scene where Harold is overborne to take the oath is perfect, for one instance."¹⁶ Fitzgerald, however, had

¹²Materials, III, 270.

¹³Materials, III, 271.

¹⁴Materials, III, 278. Tennyson's shyness kept him away on opening night. He told Mrs. Brotherton, a Farringford neighbor, that he would not see the play at all unless he could somehow smuggle himself in. Mrs. Brotherton said that the crowd would recognize him anyway and would yell for him to take a bow. "They might yell and be damned," he replied (Tennyson, p. 430).

¹⁵Materials, III, 289.

¹⁶Materials, III, 290.

his reservations: "'Harold' came, King Harold. But I still yearn after a Fairy Prince who came from other skies than these rainy ones, with his joyful eyes, 'foxfooted step,' and his mantle glittering on the rocks."¹⁷ Becket received the greatest praise of all from Tennyson's cohorts. "I have no hesitation in saying that whatever the critics of to-day may think or say," wrote G. H. Lewes, "the critics of tomorrow will unanimously declare Alfred Tennyson to be a great dramatic genius."¹⁸ The historian John Richard Green, author of The English People, said that all his research had not given him as vivid a conception of Henry II and his court as had the play.¹⁹ "One cannot imagine a more vivid, a more perfectly faithful picture than it gives both of Henry and of Thomas," claimed Professor J. Bryce. "Truth in history is naturally truth in poetry; but you have made the characters of the two men shine out in a way which . . . goes beyond and perfects history."²⁰

Even the weaker plays received gushing praise from the Tennyson devotees. "The vulgar public will probably call it dull," wrote Hamilton Aide of The Falcon; "those who have any sense of subtle and tender beauty will rejoice greatly at the introduction of a higher and more refined element upon the modern stage."²¹ Sir Dighton Probyn, Master of the Prince

¹⁷ Materials, III, 297.

¹⁸ Materials, III, 301.

¹⁹ Materials, III, 301.

²⁰ Materials, III, 311.

²¹ Materials, III, 399.

of Wales's household, wrote to Tennyson that "Both the Prince and Princess were delighted with the play. They thought it one of the prettiest pieces they had ever seen on the Stage and Her Royal Highness read every word of the manuscript with very great interest."²² Henry Irving, who handled the stage directions and devised the scenery as well as acting in The Cup, wrote of it to the poet: "I hope that the splendid success of your grand Tragedy will be followed by other triumphs equally great."²³ And Ellen Terry, who played the part of Camma, thanked him for his "great little play."²⁴ The Foresters, which now seems entirely without merit and which had to travel to America for its first production, did not go without its share of adulation. Ada Rehan, who played Maid Marian in the New York production, wrote that being in the play made her "feel for the time a happier and better woman."²⁵ Horace Furness, the American Shakespeare scholar, had this to say after seeing the play: "It was charming, charming from beginning to end. . . . I had to leave in the midnight train for home, and during two hours' driving through the black night, I smoked and reflected on the unalloyed charm of such a drama."²⁶ Although some of these praises were made after Tennyson had stopped writing his plays, the overwhelming support of his friends was much needed and thankfully received as a buffer against the equally overwhelming public and critical disapproval.

²²Materials, III, 401.

²³Memoir, II, 258.

²⁴Memoir, II, 258.

²⁵Memoir, II, 396.

²⁶Memoir, II, 397.

Tennyson's public was astonished by Queen Mary. The play was such a break with what they had come to expect from their Laureate that they did not quite know what to say or think about his new development into a field that was still considered suspect by the country parsons and prim ladies who had read with devotion In Memoriam and The Idylls. Many of Tennyson's readers did not like having to change the conception they had held of the poet ever since he had become a public figure. To them, the dramas "seemed like a rash attempt to become the rival of his own fame."²⁷

Tennyson's contemporary critics, especially those who wrote the many volumes that appeared shortly after his death, reflect much of the public astonishment and uncertainty about the plays. Edward Campbell Tainsh, for example, in his 1893 study of Tennyson, wrote: "The plays now form between a third and a fourth of the total writing of their author. That is a very curious phenomenon."²⁸ The plays themselves were a curious phenomenon to Tainsh and his fellows. They did not know how to relate them either to their author or to the period. Stopford A. Brooke in an 1894 book with the significant title of Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life does not even mention the dramas; apparently, he could find no way to relate them to modern life. "It was as though a musician who had reached almost perfection on the violin took up at threescore the practice of the organ,"²⁹ wrote Arthur Benson, expressing the surprise

²⁷Henry Van Dyke, The Poetry of Tennyson (New York, 1909), p. 222.

²⁸Edward Campbell Tainsh, A Study of the Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate (London, 1893), p. 300.

²⁹Arthur Christopher Benson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1907), pp. 57-58.

many felt at Tennyson's switch from the lyric to the drama. Early Tennyson scholars found themselves agreeing with Benson that "the plays, though the execution is faultless, somehow lack interest; the wood is laid in order but the fire does not kindle."³⁰ But many others were quick to point out more explicitly what is wrong with Tennyson's dramatic canon.

Lack of humor, faulty characterization, inability to update the historical material, and flatly asserted dislike were among the reasons critics gave for finding fault with the dramas. Stephen Gwynn in his Tennyson: A Critical Study (1899) ran the gamut of objections. He dismissed The Falcon, The Foresters, and The Promise of May as trifles, writing, among other things, that the fairy interlude in The Foresters "is perhaps the worst thing Tennyson ever wrote: and that The Promise of May "gave rise to the witty saying that the poet-laureate after filling the world with his verse, was now emptying the Globe with his prose."³¹ The Cup contains a good dramatic situation, according to Gwynn, but it added nothing to Tennyson's reputation because the characters do not live. He concluded that Tennyson's dramatic fame must therefore rest on the historical trilogy.³² But Queen Mary lacks humor; he had scant praise for Becket; and as for Harold, "there are few things in the language so nearly

³⁰Benson, p. 59.

³¹Stephen Gwynn, Tennyson: A Critical Study (London, 1899), p. 185.

³²Gwynn, pp. 186-189.

excellent throughout that are so uninteresting to read."³³ Another disgruntled Tennysonian, writing in 1893, maintained that Tennyson failed to give his historical material a present attraction and that the poet "possessed the dramatic instinct but not the dramatic faculty."³⁴ There was some praise but most of it consisted of inane comments like "the historical plays contain some of Tennyson's best thoughts"³⁵ or such unsound and now-ridiculous predictions as "it is not too daring to predict that the day is coming when the study of Shakespeare's historical plays will be reckoned no more important to an understanding of English history than the study of Tennyson's Trilogy."³⁶ Tennyson's plays did not receive much sympathetic criticism from Victorian critics, and the pattern has remained much the same ever since.

Most recent studies of Tennyson either disdainfully skip over the plays or, at best, give them some cautious attention. Baum asserted that Tennyson's venture into drama bordered on folly. Valerie Pitt wrote of the historical trilogy: "Two of the plays, Harold and Becket, are worthless; the third, and the first composed, Queen Mary, though rambling and tediously Shakespearian, leaves on the mind not the image of Rome, or of England, but of the unfortunate Mary."³⁷ Nicolson in his biography of the

³³Gwynn, pp. 191-197.

³⁴J. Cuming Walters, Tennyson: Poet, Philosopher, Idealist (London, 1893), p. 166.

³⁵Walters, p. 167.

³⁶Van Dyke, p. 226.

³⁷Valerie Pitt, Tennyson Laureate (Toronto, 1963), p. 222.

poet mentioned the plays only in passing. And Fausset in a biography that appeared at about the same time wrote that the plays neither express any new ideas nor possess the characterization that would make them live.³⁸ Buckley in Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet devoted a chapter to the plays but admitted that no amount of editing could make Queen Mary coherent, that Harold's character is too uncomplicated to make good drama, that Tennyson failed in The Falcon to give an old story the new emotion it needed, and that The Cup succeeded only because of Irving's production.³⁹ Critical opinion, both old and new, is that the plays are almost without value; but to Tennyson's parodists they were priceless.

The parodists, as did the critics, questioned the wisdom of Tennyson's turning to drama and also pointed out his crucial flaw as a dramatist --his inability to make his characters live. Before The Promise of May had made its debut, The World of November 1, 1882, published the following parody of "Will Waterproof's Lyrical Monologue," a parody which sums up much of the critical attitude toward Tennyson's plays:

I've grown in public praise and pence,
 Since those port-soaking days,
 But that eternal want of sense
 Will set me writing plays.
 Queen Mary died in Philip's spite,
 The Falcon proved no soarer;
 The Cup was not a bumper quite,
 But--here is one to Dora!⁴⁰

³⁸ Hugh L'Anson Faussett, Tennyson, A Modern Portrait (New York, 1923), p. 258.

³⁹ Buckley, pp. 200-209.

⁴⁰ J. Postma, Tennyson As Seen by His Parodists (Amsterdam, 1926), p. 74.

Earlier, The World had published another parody to ridicule Tennyson's weak characterization:

And we vowed no more, as heretofore,
to care for what was human,
But pretty Pagan puppets take for
simple men and women.⁴¹

The parody was directed at The Cup but applied equally well to the other plays. Like most of Tennyson's readers, the parodists thought that where Tennyson had gone wrong was in leaving his primarily lyrical forms for the drama. One wit, in the midst of the abuse being levelled at The Promise of May, even made it clear that he thought Tennyson deserved the treatment he was receiving for having attempted to succeed in a genre for which he had no talent:

I hold it truth, that he who flings
His harp aside, to try the bones,
Will somehow find that paving stones
Are levelled at his neatest things.⁴²

The parodists mirrored much of the contemporary attitude toward the plays and their ridicule was often more irritating to the Laureate than some of the serious criticisms which appeared elsewhere. He had expected more than laughter for the works into which he had poured so much of his declining energy; and all too often laughter was the only response he got. It was a discouraging response to what he considered to be some important dramatic comment on England's past, present, and future.

Of Harold, Becket, and Queen Mary Tennyson said: "This trilogy of

⁴¹Postma, p. 71.

⁴²Postma, p. 71.

plays portrays the making of England."⁴³ He wanted to be certain that no one would miss the meaning of the trilogy. The Idylls had been fabricated out of British myth; Harold, Becket and Queen Mary were structured upon British history. By its mythical nature, the Idylls presents a veiled and often indefinite view of history, not what history is but what history is like. The historical plays represent an attempt to show, by carefully chosen example, what history, particularly British history, is. In the Idylls is a story about the establishment, maintenance, and eventual decline of a social ideal; the pattern is neat and easily discernible. In the plays, however, while each deals with a tragic fall, the ideals involved are confused, the heroes are lacking in Arthurian grandeur, and the plots revolve around low points in English history. But out of such unheroic confusion emerged a nation. The making of England, according to Tennyson, did not occur once and for all in neat fashion as did the making of Camelot; England is continually in the making. This is why he treated subject matter of the same type in each of the three plays: Harold's loss to William the Conqueror, Becket's death, and Queen Mary's abortive reign paradoxically were three crucial events in the making of England. By molding such a paradox into the form of historical tragedy, Tennyson hoped to give a lesson to the Empire, impress upon the British people their duty to the nation, present an allegory for the times, express his theory of history in more concrete fashion than he had in the Idylls, and show how pathetically the vision of felicity is usually

⁴³Materials, III, 259.

glimpsed amid the swirl of actual events. But as sincere as such hopes were, their realization was precluded by the public failure of the plays.

The main interest of the trilogy, wrote one early critic, "lies not so much in the characters as in their concentrated presentment of some critical period in the 'rough island story.'"⁴⁴ Tennyson, in his own comments on the plays, indicated what his interpretation of the three critical periods was. The plot of Harold deals with the conflict between the Danes, the Saxons, and the Normans, and the awakening of the English people and clergy from slumber by the Norman Conquest. Becket involves the struggle between the crown and the church. And Mary, he said, concerns the "dawning of a new age, after the domination of hierarchies, the era of the freedom of the individual represented by such men as Cranmer, Bagenhall and Wyatt."⁴⁵ Unlike Shakespeare, Tennyson gave more emphasis to the great issues involved than to the characters themselves.⁴⁶ While this decidedly weakened the plays, it indicates Tennyson's overriding concern for the factors that shape and have shaped English society. Because the emphasis is not on character, the plays must be regarded as historical tragedy, the real objects of dramatic treatment being political parties, social classes, and cultural forces instead of individuals.⁴⁷

In writing historical instead of personal tragedy, Tennyson intended to offer his countrymen a number of lessons. First of all, he

⁴⁴Gwynn, p. 189.

⁴⁵Materials, III, 259.

⁴⁶Gwynn, p. 189.

⁴⁷Walters, pp.225-226.

wanted them to know and appreciate the present meaning and effect that crucial historical events have. The need for such a lesson was evident to him when he visited Battle Abbey in 1876 and saw tourists who did not seem to much care what had happened to Harold. Tennyson turned to his son, Hallam, and said: "Another England now we come and go,/A nation's fall has grown a summer show."⁴⁸ To Tennyson the attitude of the tourists was proof of the growing lack of seriousness in the country. Indifference to the past indicated indifference to the present, and both would lead to catastrophe in the future, he thought. So he wrote Harold to teach that "those tragic days were . . . the prelude of a new birth for England; and we are what we have been, and what we are through the fusion of races which followed."⁴⁹ Accordingly, Becket was designed to teach that the contest of wills between Becket and Henry II resulted, eventually, in an England free from foreign (papal) intervention, and Queen Mary to teach the value of a strong and protestant monarch who would be willing, as Elizabeth was and Mary was not, to listen to her great men, her Cranmers, her Bagenhalls, and her Wyatts. There are also a number of minor lessons in the dramas. In Harold, for example, the "conflict of Norman and Saxon is shown, not as the victory of a higher civilization over a lower, but as a triumph of forces united under a single will over a kingdom distracted by too many princelings."⁵⁰ The

⁴⁸Materials, III, 281.

⁴⁹Materials, III, 281.

⁵⁰Gwynn, p. 195.

implications of such a lesson for an empire that was becoming more and more disorganized are patent. But whether teaching the relevance of history or finding parables for the times in what had happened long ago, Tennyson wanted to re-awaken a spirit of national fervor which he believed to have been stifled by the indifference of the British to what they had been, what they are, and what they will be.

The confusion, agony, spilled blood, and tragic death which figure so heavily in the trilogy were given such prominence by Tennyson because he wanted to impress upon the public their duty to uphold the greatness of a country that had gone through such painful struggle in being born and re-born.⁵¹ Most Englishmen, like the tourists at Battle Abbey, he thought had forgotten, in their present prosperity and placid lives, the tragedies out of which their nineteenth-century culture had been fashioned. Harold had died with a Norman arrow in his eye, Becket had been murdered by King Henry's henchmen, and Queen Mary, herself a victim of misguided religious fanaticism, had nearly caused all England to be victimized. But England continued to develop into a great nation despite these sad episodes; and because she could endure, her greatness followed. Harold had to die so that new vigor would develop out of the union of the Normans and the English. Becket had to die even though he was a religious idealist, for the ideals of the Roman Church were (to Tennyson) insidious. And Queen Mary had to leave the throne to Elizabeth if England was to free herself from medieval terrorism and become a modern nation. Tennyson

⁵¹J. B. Stoane, Tennyson (London, 1966), p. 139.

thought that it was the duty of the English people to be concerned enough about the present state of the nation so that the deaths of his dramatic heroes would remain tragic and not become pathetic. If England continued to decline, it would only be because her people were no longer willing to accept and endure the agony of continually re-making the nation. The Harolds will be killed, the Becketts murdered, and the Marys unlamented; but there must be a William or a Henry or an Elizabeth willing to pick up the pieces and say, as Elizabeth does, "we will make England great" (VIII, 206).

Tennyson also chose the confused periods of the trilogy because they bore a great deal of resemblance, in a parabolic way, to his own century. The Rev. Frederick M. Powell, a Welsh parson, asked Tennyson about Harold: "Is it not an allegory, Sir, of the times in which we live, is not Harold our English people now halting between two opinions?"⁵² The parson was right; in Harold Tennyson wrote of a man hesitating between defending the old way of life or yielding to the new. In rapidly changing England of the nineteenth century, such hesitation was a common thing for many. Tennyson tried to draw several other parallels as well in the plays. The freeing of England from Rome, which is a theme in both Becket and Queen Mary, was thus given added meaning because of the Oxford Movement.⁵³ Harold's unwillingness to narrow his thought was meant to be emblematic of the Victorian broad-church stand against dogmatism.⁵⁴ And the disastrous

⁵²Materials, III, 294-295.

⁵³Steane, p. 139.

⁵⁴Buckley, p. 203.

consequences of Edward the Confessor's withdrawal from social responsibility in Harold was to point out the error of making religion an escape from patriotic duty. Tennyson saw an essential similarity in all periods of history, including his own, a similarity which made it possible for him to adhere strictly to historical detail yet make eleventh-century problems seem much like those of the nineteenth; this similarity also contributed significantly to the theory of history which runs through the trilogy.

This theory is most completely expressed through the dominant metaphor of Harold, the metaphor of growth. Tennyson introduced the metaphor in the prefatory sonnet, "Show-Day at Battle Abbey, 1876." The sonnet is structured around the image of the garden, the implication of which is stressed in the first four lines of the sestet.

O Garden blossoming out of English blood!
 O strange hate-healer Time! We stroll and stare
 Where might made right eight hundred years ago;
 Might, right ay, good, so all things make for good. . . .
 (VIII, 211)

The garden which is England has grown on English blood, a paradox which has been made reality by the strange pattern of both disaster and triumph resulting in good for the nation. It is almost as if the country needs to die periodically if it is to attain new vigor. Such is the apparent meaning of Edward's vision in which the growth metaphor is given its fullest development:

The green tree!
 Then a great Angel past along the highest
 Crying, 'the doom of England,' and at once
 He stood beside me, in his grasp a sword
 Of lightnings, wherewithal he cleft the tree
 From off the bearing trunk, and hurl'd it from him,

Three fields away, and then he dash'd and drench'd,
 He dyed, he soak'd the trunk with human blood,
 And brought the sunder'd tree again, and set it
 Straight on the trunk, that thus baptized in blood
 Grew ever high and higher, beyond my seeing,
 And shot out sidelong boughs across the deep
 That dropt themselves, and rooted in far isles
 Beyond my seeing: and the great Angel rose
 And past again along the highest crying
 'The doom of England!' (VIII, 268-269)

The doom of England is to grow into greatness out of seeming defeat, to gain strength from the blood of her own people, and to become the nucleus of a great empire. The angel symbolizes the supernatural forces Tennyson saw behind the pattern of English history, forces which he did not want Englishmen to ignore as they looked to the future. The times may be bleak, disillusionment and despair may be on all sides as in the days of Harold, but the good would somehow result--history testified to this--in similar situation after similar situation. Out of such a theory Tennyson hoped Englishmen would find the strength and assurance necessary to uphold the ideal of a greater country. He had found an answer to the latent pessimism of the Idylls; the old order recurrently passes away but a better order always seems to take its place, at least in English history. There is nothing about England breaking out of the cycle as there is in the Idylls because Tennyson was dealing in fact, not myth, trying to show how England was made, not how it could have been made or will be made.

Outside of appealing to the possibility of divine guidance, Tennyson did not attempt to explain in the plays why the paradox of good coming out of apparent tragedy should be so much a part of English history. Once again he found himself up against the riddle of the painful earth

and could not find an answer. Why, in a muddled, miserable world where the heroes take false oaths like Harold, or mistake the national good like Becket, or the heroines are love-starved devotees of a false religion like Queen Mary, the good should work out, is something Tennyson does not explain. The riddle is there and it thwarts the personal ideals of Harold, Becket, and Mary, but leaves the ultimate ideal of a better nation unaffected. In this, there was another lesson: the social ideal is apparently the only one that will ever come close to realization; the wise man, suggested Tennyson, will devote his energies accordingly.

One of the ironies serving as a counterpoint to the theme of growth is the pathetic way in which the vision of the future is glimpsed amid the press of the violent present. Caught up in the strife between church and state, with no easy or immediate solution available, all too often the hope for the future turns into a reactionary wish-fulfillment such as that expressed by an anonymous voice in the night as Queen Mary lies dying:

What am I? One who cries continually with
sweat and tears to the Lord God that it would
please Him out of His infinite love to break down
all kingship and queenship, all priesthood and
prelacy; to cancel and abolish all bonds of
human allegiance, all the magistracy, all the nobles,
and all the wealthy; and to send us
again, according to His promise, the one King,
the Christ, and all things in common, as in the day
of the first church, when Christ Jesus was King.
(VIII, 197)

A similar wish-fulfillment is expressed in more graphic terms by a beggar in Becket:

Becket shall be king, and the Holy Father shall
be king, and the world shall live by the King's

venison and the bread o' the Lord, and there
 shall be no more poor forever. Hurrah! Vive le Roy!
 That's the English of it. (IX, 86)

But Tennyson, like Shakespeare, was an upholder of order; the solution for human woes was not seen by him to be the elimination of social classes or the yielding of all secular power into the hands of the church, but the establishment of better rapport between the classes and between church and state. Becket's folly is that he seeks to elevate the church to a supreme position in England. "Now the glory of the Church/Hath swallowed up the glory of the King," (IX, 69) says Becket. Henry, on the other hand, to whom Tennyson was obviously sympathetic, conceives of the relationship between church and state as a partnership. Henry says of Becket: "I . . . Hoped, were he chosen archbishop, Church and Crown,/Two sisters gliding in an equal dance . . ." (IX, 60). What was needed, thought Tennyson, was a more perfectly executed dance with more perfect dancers, not broken music and solo steps.

But for all of the ideas and energy Tennyson threw into the writing of his trilogy, his own personal hopes for his future as a dramatist were not realized. Neither Queen Mary, Harold, nor Becket were successful as stage productions in his lifetime; and because the vehicles failed, he failed to impress upon the British people the lessons he intended the plays to carry. Queen Mary, because it was the first drama he wrote, was eagerly awaited by the public--a public that was soon to be disappointed. The drama opened at the Lyceum on April 18, 1876, and ran only until May 13 of the same year. It did enjoy a long run in both Australia and

America,⁵⁵ but only because of no competition from other plays. Harold was published in November, 1876, sold poorly, was never produced in Tennyson's lifetime, and had to wait until 1928 before reaching the stage.⁵⁶ Part of the reason for Irving's rejection of Harold was that the play had no suitable part for him, and the women's parts were unattractive to the leading actresses;⁵⁷ but no doubt Irving was reluctant to touch Harold after the short and generally dismal run of Queen Mary. Becket was published in November, 1884 (it had been printed but not published in 1879), and for a time seemed to be doomed to the same fate as Harold. "You want a reply concerning 'a Becket,' Irving wrote to Hallam Tennyson, after reading the play. "Nothing could give me more pleasure than to produce it, but when I might be able to do so I cannot possibly say."⁵⁸ He added that the nightly cost of producing the play would be 135 pounds while the returns would be only 150.⁵⁹ Tennyson tinkered with the play for almost ten years, hearing just before his death in 1892 that his labors finally were to be rewarded. Irving produced an edited version of Becket on February 6, 1893, and the play ran for 112 nights with Irving himself playing Becket and Ellen Terry taking the part of Rosamund.⁶⁰ But Tennyson did not live

⁵⁵George O. Marshall, Jr., A Tennyson Handbook (New York, 1963), p. 181.

⁵⁶Marshall, p. 182.

⁵⁷Tennyson, p. 435.

⁵⁸Materials, III, 307.

⁵⁹Materials, III, 309.

⁶⁰Marshall, p. 202.

to see the triumph.

The trilogy took a long time to write and produced very little income for the Laureate; by 1878 he found himself in a precarious financial position. Queen Mary failed to bring in the stage revenue he had hoped for, and its sale along with that of Harold did not exceed twenty thousand copies altogether.⁶¹ His expenses were not as modest as in 1850; he had two country houses to maintain, frequent trips to London because of his plays, and the yearly excursions abroad he found necessary for his work. Amid the difficulties caused by the failure of his plays to make money, he had to get a new publishing agreement with Kegan Paul, who had taken over Henry S. King's business. King's firm had contracted to pay five thousand pounds a year for the right to publish Tennyson's earlier works; but King had been losing money on the venture and Tennyson had to settle for less than three thousand a year from Kegan. Things were so desperate in 1878 that Tennyson had to tell Mrs. Moxon, the widow of his old publisher, that he would have to stop paying her annuity at the end of the year.⁶²

After rejecting Becket for the first time, Irving suggested that Tennyson try his hand at a shorter piece which would stand a better chance of success on the nineteenth-century stage.⁶³ A short, popular play was not the sort of thing Tennyson wanted to write, and he was depressed be-

⁶¹Tennyson, p. 444.

⁶²Tennyson, p. 444.

⁶³Tennyson, p. 446.

cause he could not find an audience for the nationally vital fare of the trilogy; but his pocketbook left him less than a whole choice. He took Irving's advice and wrote two short plays, The Falcon and The Cup, both of which turned out to be his greatest public successes and both of which are nearly devoid of the social idealism which is the thematic basis for almost all of his major work. The Falcon was produced at the St. James Theatre in December, 1879, and ran for sixty-seven nights; The Cup opened at the Lyceum on January 3, 1881, and ran for approximately one-hundred-thirty nights.⁶⁴ The success of The Cup was due more to the stage effects than to the way it was written. One reviewer, for example, devoted his most enthusiastic acclaim to the changing colors of the mountains in the backdrop, the pagan ceremonies enacted before your eyes, the elegant costume of Ellen Terry, and the myrtles which blossomed on stage.⁶⁵ And The Falcon, with its Italian setting, probably succeeded for much the same reason.

Tennyson tried to re-introduce his social concern into the third of his lesser plays, The Foresters; and, significantly, it is the only one of the minor plays not to have had an English production in Tennyson's lifetime. Like The Falcon and The Cup, it was written on Irving's suggestion, Irving even sending the poet material about Robin Hood.⁶⁶ Tennyson tried to treat, in more popular form, the "making of England" motif

⁶⁴Marshall, p. 201.

⁶⁵Buckley, p. 209.

⁶⁶Tennyson, p. 458.

used in the trilogy. "In 'The Foresters,'" wrote Tennyson, "I have sketched the state of the people in another great transition period of the making of England, when the barons sided with the people and eventually won for them the Magna Charta."⁶⁷ The play was written as an exemplum, using ballads, dances, and masque-like scenes, to show how widely separated social classes can function together to improve their common lot and the lot of all England. But Irving would not buy it; he quite rightly said that it was not sensational enough for the English stage.⁶⁸ The play was finally taken by Augustin Daly who gave it a very successful run in America. But when he produced it in London in 1893, it flopped.⁶⁹ Apparently, the public would not listen to Tennyson's lessons in national idealism even when the music to which they were sung was composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan.

The fourth of Tennyson's potboilers is The Promise of May in which he refused to return to the simple ingredients which had made money for him in The Falcon and The Cup. The result was disastrous. "It was most painful, there being a brutal Bradlaugh gallery and pit who jeered and hissed and greeted with peals of laughter the special points of pathos, morality or tragedy," Mary Gladstone wrote of the first night's performance. "There are obvious defects in the play which would make it specially unacceptable to the 19th Century audience. It was miserable

⁶⁷Materials, III, 259.

⁶⁸Tennyson, p. 458.

⁶⁹Marshall, p. 241.

work."⁷⁰ Tennyson was not ready to admit that The Promise of May or any of his other plays were as miserable as Mrs. Gladstone believed; but he was ready to write something that would at least pay.

III

Should a reader unacquainted with Tennyson be presented with In Memoriam and then asked to read The Promise of May or The Foresters, he would most likely applaud the author of the elegy as a masterful poet and brand the author of the plays as a woeful hack. To his contemporaries who knew that the poet and the playwright were the same man, the contrast between the earlier masterpieces and the dismal dramas was more than a hypothetical question. They knew that there was a tremendous deterioration of artistic effect in Tennyson's work; but they did not know whether the decline was the result of senility or merely the result of a venture into an area for which the poet had insufficient ability. They were uncertain of what to think about Queen Mary when it came out; by the time The Promise of May had been dragged across the boards, they were uncertain of what to think about the author of that pitiful spectacle. But one important group, the young intellectuals and would-be intellectuals, experienced no uncertainty. To them, Tennyson had proven himself to be a hopeless case of mid-century stuffiness with all of his talk about national ideals and his agonizing view of English history. For the freethinkers, the issue was individual freedom, the freedom to embrace any thought and

⁷⁰ Mary Gladstone, Mary Gladstone (Mrs. Drew): Her Diaries and Letters, ed. Lucy Masterman (London, 1930), p. 273. Quoted by Marshall, p. 224.

way of life whatsoever as long as it was not overtly harmful to others. For the socialists, the issue was first of all to make certain that everyone had enough to eat, a decent place to live, and sufficient clothing. To Tennyson, the freethinkers were following a policy which would lead to anarchy, and the socialists lacked sufficient vision. Consequently, he would have none of them, and they would have none of him. With both the young and the old, those who thought he never had anything worth saying and those who still respected his thought but did not like the way it was being expressed, he was in trouble; his old followers would not buy his plays to read, and his young opponents laughed them off the stage.

This crisis was, in many ways, more serious than the earlier one that occurred after Arthur Hallam's death. In 1882, Tennyson was seventy-three years old. Although his was a hearty old age, he naturally did not have the strength for the second crisis that he had for the first. More important, in 1882 he had greater expenses than he perhaps ever had dreamed of having in 1833. Not only was it psychologically necessary for him to recover from his failure as a dramatist, it was also financially necessary--his creditors were on his back. His reputation, which had risen so rapidly and so high after he became Laureate, had dropped to the point where he was a public joke in certain circles and newspapers were advertising prizes for the best Tennyson parody. And the younger generation of poets, such as Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne, as well as the new generation which was to be led by Wilde (whose Poems appeared in 1881), had begun to challenge his eminence as a stylist. It all looked like too much of a challenge for a man of seventy-three to handle; but Tennyson

reacted just as he did in 1833--he turned to his poetry and once again found his strength.

As volume after volume of verse came from the presses after he abandoned his dramatic writing, Tennyson showed his old readers that his second-rate plays were more the result of misdirected energy than of a decline in poetic power. He proved to them that he was still the greatest living poet. But to the young, he remained a sad caricature of a way of thought that had become history, for they were unwilling to read his new poems. And they were quite right in assuming that his old ways of thinking would not change. Just as his idealism gained depth after 1833, so it took on larger dimensions of expression after 1882 as death moved nearer and the Camelot of his hopeful vision seemed farther away than ever.

PART FIVE: LORD TENNYSON ON THE CROSS BENCHES

I

On March 11, 1884, the Duke of Argyll and Lord Kenmare introduced a new member to the House of Lords; with hesitation, second thoughts, and fears that he was making a monumental fool of himself, yet at the same time giving an impression of great dignity, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, took his place in what he considered to be the most august ruling body in the world. "How can I take off a cocked hat and bow three times in the House of Lords?" he asked an old friend. "I don't like this cocked hat business at all."¹ But when the time came, he performed his ceremonial duties with impressive grace, the seriousness with which he regarded his new duties apparent to all. "Since we have no American referendum (with a two-thirds majority necessary before any constitutional change is undertaken), what safeguard is there against the destruction of the Constitution and the disruption of the whole Empire, except a chamber like the House of Lords?"² he once asked. After devoting a lifetime of poetic energy to arousing English statesmen to the needs of the Empire, he was, at the age of seventy-four, involved in issues which he could previously only indirectly influence. But his involvement was not one-sided or hampered by party affiliation. Amid a murmur of surprise and disappointment, he took his seat on the cross benches to show that he

¹Tennyson, p. 474.

²Materials, IV, 76.

felt obligated to neither party; his vote was to be cast for the good of the Empire, not for party gain. He told Gladstone that he could not pledge himself to a party; party allegiance was made "too much of a god in these days,"³ said the poet. So Tennyson sat alone, honored to be in the House, humbled by responsibilities which he felt too old to assume, but as in all of his major undertakings an idealist, overlooking the political exigencies of party loyalty in his visionary loyalty to Great Britain.

The formality of introducing the Poet Laureate to the House of Lords was a short process in comparison to the effort involved in persuading him to accept the barony in 1883. He had been offered a peerage several times before, but had always refused. When a letter came in 1873 offering a barony from the Queen, Tennyson declined the honor for himself, saying that although he preferred to remain plain "Mr." he would like to see his son Hallam receive the title. This was without precedent, replied Gladstone, but he would see what he could do, which was nothing.⁴ Another offer was made, this time by Disraeli, in 1874, and Tennyson again expressed his desire that Hallam become the first Lord Tennyson. Like Gladstone, Disraeli wrote back that such a procedure was simply not in order.⁵ Despite Tennyson's repeated refusals, Queen Victoria was so anxious to honor her favorite poet that in 1883 she suggested to Glad-

³Memoir, II, 303.

⁴Memoir, II, 145.

⁵Memoir, II, 161-163.

stone that he again approach the Laureate. Gladstone, never one to use the same tactics twice, especially if the first method failed, was more subtle in making the offer to Tennyson this time.

Tennyson and Gladstone had planned to take a cruise to Scandinavia in September aboard the Pembroke Castle, which Lord Currie had put at their disposal; and Gladstone decided to let Tennyson know about the Queen's wishes sometime during the voyage. Tennyson's spirits were usually so aroused while at sea that Gladstone could not ever expect to catch him in a better mood. The trip started out just the way Gladstone had hoped it would. Tennyson and Hallam met Gladstone and his wife at Chester. From there to Barrow they travelled in a triumphal procession. When they boarded a tug to be taken out to the Pembroke Castle, thousands lined the shore cheering for "Gladstone" and "Tennyson."⁶ They steamed north to Scotland, past the headlands of Skye to Gairloch and on to Kirkwall, where a delegation of the city fathers came aboard and asked the Prime Minister and the Laureate to accept the freedom of the town. Tennyson and Gladstone were rowed ashore to walk through the narrow winding streets, past the Orkney and Shetland wool shops, to the Cathedral of St. Magness and its huge stone pillars. They were driven ten miles to a Pict burial ground and then returned to the city where Gladstone made a speech acknowledging for both himself and Tennyson the honor done them. Gladstone, realizing the respect Tennyson had for public office, was careful to praise the accomplishments of the poet over those of the Prime Minister.

⁶Materials, IV, 38.

"Mr. Tennyson's life and labours correspond in point of time as nearly as possible to my own," began Gladstone, "but Mr. Tennyson's exertions have been on a higher plane of human action than my own. He has worked on a higher field, and his work will be more durable."⁷ Flattery, coming from Gladstone, and on such an occasion, for once increased Tennyson's mellowness instead of repulsing him as it usually did; and as they steamed away from Kirkwall into the North Sea, not even a dense fog could depress the poet. As Tennyson stood on the stern that evening after the fog had lifted, the lane of moonlit sea behind the ship seemed, as he remarked, "like a glorious river rushing to the city of God."⁸ They stopped at Christiansand in Norway and, after an excursion by carriage to see a cataract, departed for Copenhagen amid shrill sharp cheers that sounded to Tennyson like the English war cry at the battle of Senlac, "Harou! Harou!"⁹ More cheers awaited them when they reached Copenhagen where the sailors on the colliers shouted their admiration for the English visitors. An invitation arrived, after the Pembroke Castle was anchored, from the King of Denmark for dinner at the Castle of Fredensborg outside the city. Other guests included the Czar and Czarina of Russia, the Princess of Wales, and Princess Mary of Hanover. Another day, the royal party came to luncheon on the Pembroke Castle and heard Tennyson read "The Bugle Song."¹⁰ With all of the distinguished attention Tennyson

⁷Memoir, II, 280.

⁸Materials, IV, 44.

⁹Materials, IV, 44.

¹⁰Materials, IV, 45-46.

received, along with the beauty of the Scandinavian coast and the bright fall weather, he was relaxed, pleased, and cheerful as the ship left Copenhagen for the return voyage to England. Gladstone quite rightly concluded that the time had arrived to make known the Queen's offer.

Even with the groundwork laid, Gladstone still proceeded with caution; he did not want to be repulsed again. He found Hallam reading by the bulwarks of the Pembroke Castle, and asked him to take a stroll around the deck. After a few indirect remarks, the Prime Minister told him about the barony and then asked: "Do you think that your father would accept it?"¹¹ Hallam said at first that he did not know, then said that his father might accept for the sake of literature, and finally agreed to put the matter before the Laureate. Gladstone tried to set him at his ease by jokingly saying that his only hesitation was that Tennyson might want to wear his huge wide-awake hat in the House, but Hallam had to let a day pass before he could approach his father. When at last he told the poet, he was met with an indefinite answer and left the cabin, saying no more about the offer. When Hallam returned, he found Gladstone and Tennyson discussing Homer. He indicated to Gladstone that Tennyson knew what was in the air, and the Prime Minister at once began to urge acceptance. Tennyson shook his head, said he felt nervous about such a change, that he did not want to be anything but "Mr." and that he was too old to take an effective part in the House. He went on shaking his head, making objections, but neither accepting nor refusing. Hallam, anxious to get an answer one way or the other, sent Sir

¹¹Materials, IV, 71.

Arthur Gordon to talk the Laureate into a definite reply. Gordon returned just as perplexed as Hallam. The younger Tennyson then sent Algernon West on the same mission. West came back with an answer, but it was not a clear one. After dinner, Hallam began to discuss the barony with his father only to be interrupted by a surprisingly brief protestation: "By Gladstone's advice I have consented to take the peerage, but for my own part I shall regret my simple name all my life."¹² Gladstone's strategy had paid off, but getting the poet to accept the barony was one of the statesman's most difficult diplomatic accomplishments.

Tennyson later explained his delay in accepting the peerage this way: "For myself I felt, especially in the dark days that may be coming on, that a peerage might possibly be more of a disadvantage than an advantage to my sons. . . ." ¹³ He did not like the trend of the times with power being solidified more and more in the lower classes; he had a Burkean fear that something like the French Revolution might be the result of the various socialistic movements. But he accepted the Queen's offer because he saw an opportunity to help avert national chaos. He believed that the House of Lords was one of the few bastions against revolution left in England. As Hallam Tennyson wrote: "He looked upon the House of Lords as foremost in debating power, a stable, wise and moderating influence in these changeful democratic days."¹⁴ His alertness to the

¹² Materials, IV, 74.

¹³ Materials, IV, 75.

¹⁴ Materials, IV, 76.

needs of his country had always greatly influenced the subjects he chose for his poetry; now he saw a way in which he could directly contribute to the stability of England and the preservation of the Empire.

As usually happened whenever Tennyson emerged into public view, his acceptance of the peerage was greeted with hoots from the press. He knew that this would be a consequence of yielding to Gladstone, and quietly submitted to the attacks. Truth printed a bitter essay in which the hope was expressed that Tennyson would now be able to relinquish the Civil List pension he had held for thirty-nine years.¹⁵ The most telling blows, however, were levelled by the parodists. The Secular Review, for example, published an excessively virulent parody of "The May Queen":

You must wake and call me early, call me early, Vicky dear;
 Tomorrow will be the silliest day we've seen for many a year,
 For I'm a lackey and a prig, Vicky, that sham and shoddy reveres,
 And I'm to be one of the Peers, Vicky, I'm to be one of the Peers.¹⁶

But Tennyson had been attacked and parodied many times before; he did not let Truth, The Secular Review, and other publications disturb him as they once had. He was comforted by the fact that he had refused the barony in younger years when it would have been much more of a social advantage to him; and his acceptance, when it came, had been made more out of a sense of concern for the nation than out of a sense of concern for himself.

Tennyson was not allowed to rest for very long once he had taken his place on the cross benches. Ironically, though he had entered the

¹⁵Alfred Tennyson, p. 473.

¹⁶Postma, p. 53.

House of Lords out of a belief that it was virtually the last institution preserving the nation from rule by the masses, the first measure he was called upon to vote for was an extension of the franchise. Throughout his life he had believed in entrusting power to the wisest and best men in the country. Just as only the best of men were ready to evolve onto a higher level, so too were they (and they only) able to make the decisions which would enable the country to evolve into a better nation. He thought that the results of the 1832 and 1867 reform bills had been almost entirely negative and that to extend the franchise lower into the social classes would mean to lower England into her grave. But he was aware of the pressure behind the Third Reform Bill. With the failure of Joseph Arch to start agricultural laborers' trade unions in the 1870's, the condition of the farm workers had actually worsened as the importation of produce from America increased. And the condition of the miners was hardly any better.¹⁷ These two large labor groups were becoming more and more restless without representation in Parliament; and unless they were enfranchised within a short time, many observers feared that a more vicious rebellion than the French Revolution would erupt. But more than the issue of justice for the farm workers and miners and more than the prospect of a revolution were at stake; the very survival of the House of Lords hung in the balance.

When Gladstone, in early July, 1884, called on Tennyson to vote against Lord Salisbury's motion that further extension of the franchise should result only if accompanied by proposals for redistribution which

¹⁷Trevelyan, III, 243.

would be acceptable to the House of Lords, he explained that if such a demand were made, there would be so much opposition that the House could end up dismantled or, at best, with a greatly changed constitution.¹⁸ Tennyson did not want to support any extension of the vote, because he thought that this in itself would eventually lead to a loss of influence for the House. But, with all of the public pressure, he knew that extension could not be delayed. If he were to vote in favor of a new Reform Bill, however, he would do so only if some measure for redistribution, to settle the often-opposing claims of town and country, be included or implied; and he told Gladstone so, urging him to go to Commons and say, "When the Lords have passed the second reading of the Franchise Bill, we pledge ourselves to lay on the table our Redistribution Bill."¹⁹ This would take the pressure off the House of Lords and at the same time insure passage of the Bill. Gladstone took Tennyson's advice, secured a suitable pledge from Commons, and the Third Reform Bill became law, Tennyson voting affirmatively.

Even though he at last supported the new franchise measure, Tennyson was hesitant about what it might lead to. "Perhaps it is the one step on the road to the new social condition that is surely coming on the world," he said. "In England common sense has carried the day without great upheavals, and I believe that English common sense will save us still if our statesmen be not idiotic."²⁰ But he still feared the

¹⁸Alfred Tennyson, p. 477.

¹⁹Alfred Tennyson, p. 478.

²⁰Materials, IV, 75.

possibility of revolution, even if the demands of the masses were met. "If there is a revolution it will be world-wide, the mightiest ever known," he said. "May I not live to see it."²¹ Perhaps the trend of the times was for the best and was part of the evolutionary path England would follow to increased greatness; but perhaps the nation was enfranchising itself to destruction--he did not know.

Tennyson did have some definite ideas about what course the nation should follow, however, and expressed them in a poem called "Freedom," published in the December, 1884, issue of Macmillan's Magazine as a statement of his political principles. The poem is really a restatement of the ideals of his lifelong vision:

O follower of the Vision, still
 In motion to the distant gleam,
 Howe'er blind force and brainless will
 May jar thy golden dream

Of Knowledge fusing class with class,
 Of civic Hate no more to be,
 Of Love to leaven all the mass,
 Till every soul be free. . . . (VI, 338)

As usual, he emphasized that freedom is to broaden slowly down; that the world he longs for will come about slowly, the processes of change following the pattern of "Nature," not the violent change advocated by "Men loud against all forms of power" (VI, 339). He spoke out against the "lawless crown" and the "lawless crowd" (VI, 339) alike, both of which he considered irreconcilable to freedom. But the way in which Tennyson restated these ideas, which run through his canon, reveals the fear he held for their

²¹Materials, IV, 75.

realization. Each of the ideas is linked to its mid-Victorian antithesis. The golden dream is paired in the same stanza with blind force and brainless will, Knowledge with Hate, Nature with fierce and fast changes, public good with the party cry, and the ever-growing mind with the grave. He perceived that the political ideals he treasured were going out of fashion along with his wide-awake hat; and he was doubtful about what the outcome would be.

Doubtful as he was about the path England was taking, Tennyson was unwilling to state that the only way to the golden dream was his way. For a man who showed such consistency in his social thought, he was remarkably undogmatic about the practical necessities of social action. He did not find much to approve of in the way the English government was being run in the 1880's and early 1890's, but he did not give up hope that somehow the nation would continue to evolve. He had lived through most of the century without seeing any of his youthful hopes for the future realized. Indeed, he sensed that instead of moving toward the Parliament of Man, his country and the world were moving toward World War I, although he could not supply the title. But there were still enough stabilizing influences left in England to keep his old vision alive. There were, for instance, still the House of Lords and the Crown. The Church was going out and the agnosticism of Huxley was coming in, to be sure; but common sense was an English virtue that would remain to carry the nation through, he hoped. All around him were powerful new forces which threatened to sweep his entire generation away; but there were counter-measures and compromises which those who held to the old conservatism

could use. Such a compromise was the redistribution pledge he suggested to Gladstone during the Third Reform Bill controversy. Whether the delaying tactics would work for very long was another question. As in the House of Lords, his position was on the cross benches: he would neither concede the defeat of his old dreams nor accept the victory of the new isms; but neither would he rigidly defend the old, nor sweepingly castigate the new. He was on the cross benches of the times; and as he faced the heightened reality of his own death at a time when the pace of the national life was beginning to leave an Englishman of his class and influence scarcely enough leisure to die, he wanted to be identified as neither reactionary nor radical. Like Tiresias, his prophecy had been ignored--but this did not make him wrong, only disappointed.

II

Aside from his disappointment at the poor response to his vision of all the wonder that would be, Tennyson had no reason to be disappointed in the quality of his life and work during his final years. To the surprise of critics and public alike, he found a new source of poetic energy after his abortive venture into drama, and produced five volumes of verse which are almost on the same level as the volumes written when his strength was at its height. In these volumes. Tennyson continued to structure his work around the old apocalypse of his youth and middle years, but with some significant variations. The ebullient confidence of "Locksley Hall" is replaced by an apologetic, almost hangdog note. Many of his late poems deal with the theme of rejection. In others there is a resignation of the poet to a realization of the insignificance of

his contribution to the future of the race. As he grew older, he became less and less the citizen of the world and more than ever a nationalist, seemingly devoted to a policy of British insularity. Perhaps as a consequence of the dimming of his world-vision, at times his idea of the better man yielded to the perverse idea of the English as a super race. His doubts about the future of humanity as a whole seemed to increase in proportion to his isolationism, and a high proportion of his final poems verge on jingoism. But tempering these unwelcome tendencies was a quiet concern for his own destiny as a human being in facing death and the prospect of immortality. Because unfulfilled hope, a sense of rejection and failure, feverish nationalism, and the nearness of death were so much a part of the late Victorian milieu, particularly among the older generation, Tennyson regained many of his old readers, and gradually resolved the financial problems brought on by the failure of his plays at the box office.

"May'st thou never be wrong'd by the name that is mine!" (VI, 67) is the last line in the dedicatory poem Tennyson wrote to his grandson, Alfred, and placed on the first page of Ballads and Other Poems, the volume published in 1880. when the disapproval of the dramas was nearing its height. The apologetic tone of the dedication is evidence of the Laureate's shaken confidence in himself and his fear that his reputation might have been irreparably damaged--which, of course, it was. But for all of the shakiness with which the volume begins, Tennyson need not have been so unconfident, for Ballads demonstrated, quite clearly, that he had lost none of his lyrical powers; and, as sales of the volume picked up, he was

encouraged to turn away from the drama to the genre for which his abilities were really best suited. His playwrighting did not diminish without leaving its effect, however; an impressive number of his poems, beginning with Ballads, are in what is essentially a dramatic form.

"Columbus," the poem which sets the thematic keynote for the entire volume, is a good example of how Tennyson's dramatic writing influenced his subsequent poetry. Columbus is the speaker in the poem, carrying on a monologue while in chains. Like Tennyson, Columbus was a man who dedicated his life to his country and the world, attempting to extend the range of the empire and widen the outlook of humanity. But he ended in shackles, rejected by his countrymen, and left with an audience that had shrivelled to a single curious nobleman. Tennyson found much with which to sympathize in the plight of Columbus--his pennilessness, his pains, and his noble idealism. Most of all, Tennyson could sympathize with Columbus's willingness to set out on another adventure:

. . . tell the King, that I,
Rack'd as I am with gout, and wrench'd with pains
Gain'd in the service of His Highness, yet
Am ready to sail forth on one last voyage,
And readier, if the King would hear, to lead
One last crusade against the Saracen,
And save the Holy Sepulchre from thrall. (VI, 165)

It is not insignificant that Tennyson too suffered from gout; but it is more significant that, in his old age and depressed by the way the public had rejected his dramas, he was willing to set out on another voyage like Columbus, to devote one final burst of energy to a great cause. Ballads was the first result of this burst and was followed by Tiresias, and Other Poems in 1885, Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, etc. in 1886,

Demeter and Other Poems in 1889, and The Death of Oenone, Akbar's Dream and Other Poems in 1892. Throughout these volumes, Tennyson utilized a dramatic motif as he did in "Columbus" to carry on, as it were, a lengthy and indirect analysis of his life.

This analysis, devoted to his rejection by the public and the subsequent reduction of his accomplishment, is illustrated in such poems as "The Dead Prophet," Tiresias, and the epilogue to "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava." All three poems deal with poet-prophet figures who are the subjects of scorn and whose work is considered to be of questionable value. "The Dead Prophet," which appeared in the Tiresias volume, concerns a dead visionary who "sung not alone of an old sun set, / But a sun coming up in his youth" (VI, 320). But now that his days of greatness are over, all of his faults are opened to public view, and the people are glad to see his imperfections. Despite the contributions he had made and the effort he had devoted to the people "in lifting them out of the slime, / And showing them, souls have wings" (VI, 318), he is rejected and his work discredited. Although not a dramatic monologue, "The Dead Prophet" is cast in the form of a brief scenario. Tiresias, however, is a monologue, portraying another rejected prophet, but with much better artistry. As Douglas Bush has mentioned, Tennyson presented Tiresias in much the same way T.S. Eliot was later to do in The Waste Land-- as a figure oppressed by an ignoble and sordid world, yet retaining a desire for an impossible ideal mingled with a remembered vision.²² Like Tiresias,

²²Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (New York, 1937), p. 219.

Tennyson had yearned "for larger glimpses of that more than man/Which rolls the heavens, and lifts and lays the deep" (VI, 205). He had wanted "to scale the highest of the heights/With some strange hope to see the nearer God" (VI, 205). But what Tiresias had seen was the naked beauty of Pallas Athena climbing from her bath; and because he had seen more than it is ordinarily permitted a mortal to see, a curse descended on him: "Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much,/And speak the truth that no man may believe" (VI, 206). Tennyson, who claimed to have seen a vision of overwhelming beauty since his youth, had begun to believe that the unwillingness of his countrymen to listen to his prophecies must have been due to some sort of curse that descends upon any seer who has perhaps seen too deeply into the secret beauty and meaning of the universe. Certainly his warning that "the tyranny of one/Was prelude to the tyranny of all" and that "the tyranny of all/Led backward to the tyranny of one" (VI, 206-207) had been rejected by the English just as the Thebans had rejected Tiresias's warning. Instead of pursuing a course of moderation in extending the franchise, the English were wildly giving themselves up to the tyranny of the masses, he thought. And all of the effort he had devoted to trying to convince them that freedom should broaden slowly down, seemed to have been in vain. In the epilogue to "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade," he makes the sad conclusion that even his poetry itself will eventually amount to nothing: "Song will vanish in the Vast" (VI, 313). Neither his reputation nor his verse can hope to survive:

. . . for Homer's fame,
 Tho' carved in harder stone--
 The falling drop will make his name
 As mortal as my own. (VI, 313)

But neither Tiresias nor the poet who speaks in the epilogue are ready to abandon their visionary roles. With the enemy at the gates of Thebes, Tiresias makes a final, desperate use of his eloquence to convince the young Menoeceus of the necessity for self-sacrifice if the city is to be saved. And the poet of the epilogue, though he is accused by Irene, the other speaker in the dialogue, of being a war-monger, can defend himself by saying: "The song that nerves a nation's heart,/Is in itself a deed" (VI, 314). Despite rejection and a fear that his work might in the end amount to nothing, Tennyson was not willing, as bleak as the analysis of his life seemed to be, to abandon his lifelong goals.

But while he maintained his life objectives to the end, the last years of his career saw him gradually narrowing his scope and becoming more nationalistic than cosmopolitan. As late as 1885, he was still able to versify his hopes for the future of the world. In the epilogue to "The Heavy Brigade" he could express the wish:

I would that wars should cease,
I would the globe from end to end
Might sow and reap in peace
And some new Spirit o'erbear the old,
Or Trade re-frain the Powers
From war with kindly links of gold,
Or Love with wreaths of flowers. (VI, 311-313)

And in an 1880 poem, "To Victor Hugo," he was able to visualize the day when "England, France, all man to be/Will make one people ere man's race be run" (VI, 184). But more and more, he lapsed toward the sentiment of "Hands All Round": "That man's the best Cosmopolite/Who loves his native country best" (VI, 335). And the sympathy for the French, which was an important part of the tribute to Hugo, turned into the scorn of "Beautiful

City" in which he called Paris "the centre and crater of European confusion" and remarked to the French "How often your Re-volution has proven but E-volution/Roll'd again back on itself in the tides of a civic insanity" (VII, 115).

Tennyson's insularity manifested itself in the fervid imperial pronouncements, actually bordering on jingoism, that found their way into many of his later poems. "One of the deepest desires of his life was to help the realisation of the ideal of an Empire by the most intimate union of every part of our British Empire," wrote Hallam Tennyson in a letter to the Colonial Institute after his father's death. "He believed that every different member so united would, with a heightening of individuality to each member, give such strength and greatness and stability to the whole as would make our Empire a faithful and fearless leader in all that is good throughout the world."²³ Such a belief prompted the boisterous conclusion of the poem written to celebrate the opening of the Indian and Colonial Exhibition:

Britain's myriad voices call,
 'Sons, be welded each and all
 Into one imperial whole,
 One with Britain, heart and soul!
 One life, one flag, one fleet, one throne!'
 Britons, hold your own! (VI, 347)

He had given up much of his hope in the other nations of the world, but he still believed that the British Empire--if it held together--by its power and example might serve to counter the chaos which reigned over a majority of the earth. But he was fearful that Englishmen would betray

²³Materials, III, 337.

their trust and let the Empire go to ruin. In 1883, apprehensive that Gladstone was not showing enough concern about the Empire, Tennyson sent him Seeley's The Expansion of England.²⁴ Upon reading some articles in the Pall Mall Gazette during April of 1885 about the weakness of the navy, he was aroused to write the shrill stanzas of "The Fleet" for the Times.²⁵ Maintenance of a strong fleet was the one essential condition for the continuance of the Empire, and Tennyson was indignant that the nation could allow any diminution of its sea power. When he heard about a politician who had advocated Home Rule for Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, he exclaimed: "What a bad statesman! How unlike Edward I. He should learn the fable of the man with the bundle of faggots. As long as the faggots are bound together in the bundle there was no breaking them; taking each separately, it snapt at once."²⁶ The Empire seemed to be one of the last forces for good left in the world and Tennyson was almost obsessed with the need for preserving it.

Out of Tennyson's nationalism and his extreme devotion to the Empire developed another attitude which was much less welcome. This was a belief that he toyed with from time to time that the English were a super race. It occurs only indirectly in his poetry but quite directly in the biographical materials. In "The Revenge," a poem in the 1880 volume, when Sir Richard Grenville's crew asks him whether they will stay to fight

²⁴Materials, IV, 71.

²⁵Materials, IV, 88.

²⁶Materials, IV, 424-425.

the Spanish fleet single-handedly, Sir Richard replies:

We be all good English men.
Let us bang these dogs of Seville, the children
of the devil,
For I never turn'd my back upon Don or devil yet. (VI, 98)

The superiority of the English is implied with less fustian but with more bluntness in another poem from the 1880 volume, "The Defence of Lucknow":

Handful of men as we were, we were
English in heart and in limb,
Strong with the strength of the race
to command, to obey, to endure. . . . (VI, 141)

Tennyson was apparently impressed with the ability of the English to fight when vastly outnumbered, for both poems deal with such situations.

Another aspect of his race that impressed him was its tremendous imperialistic success, founded on an Aenean hardiness to which he paid tribute in "Hands All Round": "We sail'd wherever ship could sail,/We founded many a mighty state" (VI, 336). This hardiness he considered to be a genetic characteristic of the race, a characteristic the ancient Britons possessed and which had been passed down through the generations. Tennyson alluded to this belief in the Indian and Colonial Exhibition poem:

May we find, as ages run,
The mother featured in the son;
And may yours forever be
That old strength and constancy
Which has made your fathers great
In our ancient island State. . . . (VI, 345-346)

But he was more willing to state his belief in English superiority while talking informally to friends than he was willing to in his poetry. He expressed, for example, a strong agreement with Lord Russell that the English race was "destined to be the greatest among races."²⁷ And when

²⁷Memoir, II, 223.

Tennyson said that "The craven fear of being great" was the worst sin of certain British statesmen, Lord Russell shouted that there must be no niggardliness about defense; "If need were, we should be able to stand alone," Russell cried.²⁸ Tennyson's contemporaries were well aware of his extreme nationalism and some, such as F. W. H. Myers, who wrote to Hallam in 1885 about it, thought his attitude to be one of his greatest assets: ". . . whatever else shall pass from us, Tennyson shall remain. His rhythm also shall 'sound for ever of imperial' England; shall be the voice and symbol of this age of mighty workings, this world-overrunning race."²⁹ If such pronouncements sound like proto-Nazism, it should not be surprising, for Tennyson's idealism was part of the same nineteenth-century climate that inspired Nietzsche.

Tennyson was saved from a whole-hearted endorsement of England as the home of the master race by that always-present aspect of his personality which forced him to look candidly at what was going on around him. By considering such historical events as the final battle of the Revenge and the defense of Lucknow, he could discern a quality in the English which he believed to be unique. And when in a fervently nationalistic mood with such a devout patriot as Lord Russell, he could praise his nation and its people without limit. But when he thought about the England he had dreamed of in his youth and compared that dream to the present condition of the country, he found very little to praise. The old paradox of the ideal and the riddle was there to confront him. Ideally, the

²⁸ Memoir, II, 223.

²⁹ Materials, IV, 116.

English have the qualities to be a super race and could build the City of God on earth; but everywhere he looked, these qualities were either absent or, at best, hidden. As he had grown older, he had narrowed his hopes for a better world to hopes for a better England. He knew that he was not to see an improved world in his lifetime; but he thought there might be a chance of seeing an improved England. Even in the narrowed hope, however, he was disappointed, a disappointment that contributed to the great fin de siècle malaise of Locksley Hall Sixty Years After.

The second Locksley Hall is another of the dramatic self-analyses which characterize the last period of Tennyson's career. Unlike other introspective poems such as "Columbus" and Tiresias, the analysis is expanded to include the whole century as well as Tennyson himself. Lord Lytton, in a letter to Mary Anderson, wrote that "the poem in its entirety has a peculiar historical importance as the impersonation of the emotional life of a whole generation."³⁰ In the portrayal of the attitudes of his generation toward their own times, Tennyson resorted to one of his common themes--the old yielding to the new. In the poem, the old man who is the speaker addresses himself to his grandson, evaluates the social history of the generation that is about to die, and then symbolically turns the future over to the boy. As he talks, the old man ranges over the entire catalogue of his frustrations and fears, mentioning the blasted love of his youth, the now-dissipated energy of his young manhood, dead friends and relatives, his need for belief in an afterlife, the way in which progress has seemed to stale, the degeneration of the

³⁰Memoir, II, 330.

country, the limitations forced on his hope by reality, the uncertainty of his prophetic vision, and the death of the age. But, as Tennyson pointed out, the old man is not pessimistic; instead, he has a stronger faith in God and in human goodness than he had as a young man.³¹

The old man's faith has increased because of a single development within himself, a development which is more than enough to overcome his anguish at the failure of his youthful hopes. He can think of no other age so crammed with menace, madness, and lies than his own. A new dark age, but without the solace of the medieval church, seems to have developed. The realistic and naturalistic movements in literature appear to be leading man back to the bestiality from which he supposedly had risen. Evolution may be a fact, but reversion is also a fact. And the vision of felicity which he once stated with such positiveness must now be followed by question marks:

All diseases quench'd by Science, no man
halt, or deaf or blind;
Stronger ever born of weaker, lustier body,
larger mind?

Earth at last a warless world, a single race,
a single tongue--
I have seen her far away--for is not Earth as
yet so young? (VI, 293)

The prospect of a better world and an improved humanity is controverted by almost everything he has seen or read in the course of his long life. But one experience has convinced him that he need not despair. As a youth, he had hated the man who won Amy from him. But as he matured, he

³¹Materials, IV, 144.

gradually changed that hatred into love. Now an old man, he has come to realize that such a change is what really constitutes human progress and is what human hope must be based upon: "I that loathed have come to love him. Love will conquer at the last" (VI, 304). If one man can become better, even if in only one way, that man can find a basis for faith. And that is the advice he offers his generation in Locksley Hall Sixty Years After.

A comparison of the plots of the two Locksley Hall poems reveals the extent of the romantic retrenchment Tennyson went through in the forty years that separated the two companion pieces. The hero of the first poem is a youth who decides to forget his disappointment in love by engaging himself, on a romantically grand scale, in the momentous march of progress which was just beginning. In the second poem, the aged hero's dilemma is solved by a quiet realization of what, after eighty years of turmoil, he has really accomplished. The first "Locksley Hall" is almost Byronic in plot; the second more closely resembles a short story by Henry James in which the resolution is usually in the form of a thought instead of an overt response. Such a change can be partially attributed to Tennyson's interest in the development of fictional technique among the writers who had attained prominence in the second half of the century. He read George Eliot, Zola, and especially James, who was a personal friend, with great curiosity. But the change was perhaps due more to the restriction of his outlook and the concentration of his energy that took place as he approached his death. He never forgot the vision of the future around which so much of his life and work were structured, but he

quite understandably devoted much of his thought in his final years to what his own prospect might be.

Tennyson's personal life in his last years was devoted much of the time to carrying on a lengthy dialogue about death. He discussed immortality with aged peasants, talked with churchmen about God and death, meditated on the importance of the afterlife in Christian belief, compared ideas with his friends, sometimes came out with fervent defenses of the belief in immortality, and planned bizarre poems on man and death. He once went to visit an old laborer of ninety and came back saying, "He tells me that he is waiting for death and is quite ready. What a sin it would be if anyone were to disturb that old man's faith."³² The Bishop of Ripon said that a few months before death, the poet walked with him in the ballroom of Farringford and talked at length on God and death. "It is hard to believe in God; but it is harder not to believe,"³³ Tennyson told the Bishop. After the christening of Aubrey Tennyson, Hallam Tennyson's child, on May 2, 1891, Lady Mary Glyn, one of the guests, "walked with A. T. on the Down, and they talked of life and the after-life, subjects always now nearest his heart."³⁴ In June of 1892, Tennyson told Miss Melville Lee, a young lady who had come to visit him, an anecdote about a discussion he once had with Carlyle and Lord Houghton on immortality. Carlyle had said: "Why should we expect a hereafter?"

³²Materials, IV, 187.

³³Materials, IV, 245.

³⁴Materials, IV, 272.

Life is like a man who spends one night at an inn. He sleeps in his bed at the inn one night, leaves the next day and another man takes his place and sleeps in his bed that he vacated." Tennyson said that it is so, but that the traveller leaves fully expecting to sleep elsewhere the next night. "Yes, you have got him there," said Lord Houghton.³⁵ He did not always look upon death with such optimism, however. A few years before he died, he thought of writing a poem on one of the Egyptian legends in which despair and death are said to be a consequence of man's mad desire to probe the secret of the universe.³⁶ Although he never wrote the poem, he did work his dialogue on death into much of his last-decade poetry.

The themes of death and of what awaits humanity beyond the grave are so pervasive in the final poems that the whole of the Oenone volume, for example, leaves the impression that almost all of the poems in it form a thematic unit.³⁷ The volume opens with the poem "June Bracken and Heather," a lyric dedicated to Lady Tennyson and to a love that has endured unto old age and which is still fresh amid the growing gloom of death, and closes with "Crossing the Bar." In between these two pieces, which set the tone of the volume, are such poems as The Death of Oenone, "St. Telemachus," Akbar's Dream, "The Bandit's Death," "Charity," "Doubt and Prayer," "Faith," "The Silent Voices," "God and the Universe," and

³⁵ Materials, IV, 355.

³⁶ Materials, IV, 242.

³⁷ Buckley, p. 252.

"The Death of the Duke of Clarence and Avondale"--all devoted to an extension of the dialogue on death. Although there are a few variations, a tone of affirmation sounds throughout the poems, an affirmation that the poet does hope to see his Pilot face to face. But this affirmation is not glibly wrought; the emphasis throughout is on the word hope. A similar emphasis appears in the death poems of the earlier volumes: "De Profundis," "The Ancient Sage," "Vastness," "By an Evolutionist," and "The Play." Even when thinking about death and immortality, Tennyson found himself sitting on the cross benches, unable to align himself decisively with any sect or creed.

Akbar's Dream is the best poem with which to illustrate Tennyson's final attitude toward the termination of human life. In the notes to the poem, Tennyson explained that Akbar was a sixteenth-century Mogul emperor who "invented a new eclectic religion by which he hoped to unite all creeds, castes, and peoples".³⁸ Like Tennyson himself, Akbar was a cross-bencher, refusing to endorse any of the many religions that contested for dominance in his empire. Instead, he was interested in discerning a common denominator among the warring sects; and at last he found it--love:

I let men worship as they will, I reap
 No revenue from the field of unbelief.
 I cull from every faith and race the best
 And bravest soul for counsellor and friend.
 I loathe the very name of infidel.
 I stagger at the Koran and the sword.
 I shudder at the Christian and the stake;

³⁸Alfred Tennyson, The Works of Tennyson (London, 1908), VII, 149.

Yet "Alla," says their sacred book, "is Love,"
 And when the Goan Padre quoting Him,
 Issa Ben Mariam, his own prophet, cried
 "Love one another little ones" and "bless"
 Whom? even "your persecutors"! there methought
 The cloud was rifted by a purer gleam
 Than glances from the sun of our Islam. (VII, 142)

Love is the only constant Akbar can find amid the contesting doctrines of Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and the other religions which he has studied. More important, love is the only aspect of Godhood and religion he can whole-heartedly accept as an element of true belief. There is nothing definite in the poem about the nature of life after death or what a man must do to attain salvation and eternal peace. But because God is love, Akbar can hope that everything will turn out for the best, a hope that was essentially Tennyson's own. "It is impossible," he once said, "to imagine that the Almighty will ask you, when you come before Him in the next life what your particular form of creed was."³⁹ And when his last book was in proof, he told Hallam he had come to see that the ultimate expression of his faith at the end of his life was "That Love which is and was/My Father and my Brother and my God."⁴⁰

In addition to the natural tendency for an old man, who knows he cannot expect to live much longer, to dwell upon the problems surrounding human mortality, Tennyson's concern about death was increased by the loss of his son, Lionel, who died of a lingering jungle fever while on his way home from India in 1886. What was particularly depressing to Tennyson

³⁹ Memoir, I, 309.

⁴⁰ Memoir, I, 312.

about Lionel's death was the waste of the young man's abilities. Hallam Tennyson's Memoir indicates the impact the death had on his father by reporting that "Sometimes when he was with us alone he would say, 'The thought of Lionel's death tears me to pieces, he was so full of promise and so young.'⁴¹" The blow was severely damaging to Tennyson and the grief at Lionel's early death weighed heavily on him during his remaining years.

Like most of the other events of his life, Tennyson's sorrow over Lionel, as well as his dialogue on death, his tendency toward nationalism, his sense of rejection and failure, and his loss of confidence in himself and in his vision, became subject matter for masterful poetry; and because of this, he gradually recovered from the loss of fame and fortune he had suffered in the failure of his dramas. Perhaps it was due to the public's appreciation of the artistic achievement in his post-1880 poetry, or perhaps it was due to his treatment of themes with which his aging generation was becoming preoccupied; but for whatever the reason, the sales of his last volumes picked up tremendously. Ballads almost at once began to rival the famous Enoch Arden volume of 1864 in popularity.⁴² And by 1889, his literary stock had so increased that twenty thousand copies of Demeter and Other Poems were sold in the first week after publication.⁴³ The critics were generally very sympathetic to all of the volumes, with the exception of Locksley Hall Sixty Years After; his old readers were

⁴¹Memoir, II, 324.

⁴²Tennyson, p. 456.

⁴³Memoir, I, xxi.

delighted to find him returning to lyrical poems; and the precariousness of his financial condition was soon no longer a matter of concern. Tennyson had shown a vitality virtually unprecedented in literary history and had amazingly pulled himself out of what had seemed a hopeless situation for a man well into his seventies to cope with.

III

These final years were ones in which the success of the last volumes, the easing of satirical attack in deference to age, the continual flow of mail, tributes from admirers, and the vitality which persisted until his final year, did little to change the essential nature of Tennyson. The deaths of his old friends, Browning and Allingham, in 1889 disturbed him just as crushingly as the deaths in earlier years had done. And his depressed brooding on the prospect of society, the condition of the Empire, the relationship between man and God, the great amount of evil in the world, the deterioration of Western morality, the problem of religious doubt, the meaning of the many personal sorrows he had passed through and which lingered with him yet, the value of his work, and the bitter pain which was all around him in the world persisted to the end. It is a brave and honest man who can admit, only a few weeks before his death at the age of eighty-three that, in his attempts to pray, "he felt as though God did not hear him."⁴⁴ For a man who wanted to believe in a personal, anxiety-easing God as much as Tennyson did, such a reflection must have been the final and ultimate anguish, the riddle of which he did

⁴⁴Tennyson, p. 530.

not solve. But for all the potency of the riddle, Tennyson retained the core of his idealism surprisingly intact, and manifested its retention in both his poetry and his life during his last years.

Tennyson continued to deal with his vision of the future in many of his late poems much as he did in the earlier poetry. One of the central points of his idealism was that if society is to improve, men must become better and that such a change in humanity can come about if man would strive to purge himself of his bestial tendencies. This idea recurs in "The Ancient Sage" (1855): "But curb the beast would cast thee in the mire,/And leave the hot swamp of voluptuousness . . ." (VI, 248). And it also occurs in "By an Evolutionist" (1889):

I have climb'd to the snows of Age, and I gaze
 at a field in the Past,
 Where I sank with the body at times in the sloughs
 of a low desire,
 But I hear no yelp of the beast, and the Man is
 quiet at last
 As he stands on the heights of his life with a
 glimpse of a height that is higher. (VII, 110-111)

Another aspect of Tennyson's thought was the idea that man must strive to bring the chaos of his own society into line with God's cosmos. Accordingly, he advised the Duke of Argyll in 1881 to so exercise his will that it would make "This ever-changing world of circumstance,/In changing, chime with never-changing Law" (VI, 334). The change Tennyson desired could come about, however, only if it were a gradual change patterned after the developments of benign Nature. Such a pattern of change set the theme of "Politics," (1889) in which Tennyson offered this reflection to statesmen: "Up hill 'Too-slow' will need the whip,/Down hill 'Too-quick' the chain" (VII, 114). And similar advice was offered in the

closing stanza of "The Progress of Spring" (1889): "A simpler, saner lesson might he learn/Who reads thy gradual process, Holy Spring. . . ." (VII, 91). The ultimate pattern of world-wide change involving every aspect of the universe was, of course, that of evolution to Tennyson, a doctrine which occurs in rather standard Tennysonian fashion in "The Ring" (1889):

Æonian Evolution, swift or slow,
Through all the spheres--an ever opening height,
An ever lessening earth. . . . (VII, 38)

But Tennyson always believed that man could help his own evolution along by striving to live better, by a selfless devotion to the needs of others-- a theme which occurs in Locksley Hall Sixty Years After and in "St. Telemachus" (1892). The old persona in Locksley Hall Sixty Years After admits that the social contribution of the man who won Amy away from him was greater than his own, for the rival "Strove for sixty widow'd years to help his homelier brother men,/Served the poor, and built the cottage, raised the school, and drain'd the fen" (VI, 303). Telemachus was the saint who left his hermitage when he was told that he was living a life of "self-suppression, not of selfless love" (VII, 136), journeyed to the Coliseum in Rome, and attempted to stop the battles of the gladiators. He was stoned to death by the crowd, but his example so shamed the Romans that Honorius decreed the end of the contests.

One of the most pervasive ideas in Tennyson's poetry is the contention that much of human progress depends on man's willingness to face the riddle of the earth and to make use of the secrets he discovers. Although there is a falling off of this theme in his later poetry, it is by no

means absent. It appears, for example, as enthusiastically as ever in "Mechanophilus," a poem written "In the time of the first railways" (VII, 180) but not published until 1892:

As we surpass our father's skill,
 Our sons will shame our own
 A thousand things are hidden still
 And not a hundred known.

And had some prophet spoken true
 Of all we shall achieve,
 The wonders were so wildly new
 That no man would believe.

Meanwhile, my brothers, work, and wield
 The forces of to-day,
 And plow the Present like a field,
 And garner all you may!

You, what the cultured surface grows,
 Dispense with careful hands:
 Deep under deep for ever goes,
 Heaven over heaven expands. (VII, 181)

But the optimism of these lines is tempered in such poems as "A Voice Spake Out of the Skies" (1892) in which there is a Hardy-like despair at the failure of man to penetrate to the heart of the riddle:

A Voice spake out of the skies
 To a just man and a wise--
 'The world and all within it
 Will only last a minute!'
 And a begger began to cry
 'Food, food or I die!'
 Is it worth his while to eat,
 Or mine to give him meat,
 If the world and all within it
 Were nothing the next minute? (VII, 187)

Tennyson was eager to praise the accomplishments of science and to note the type of progress so brought about; but he knew and admitted that not much knowledge of the inner meaning of the world had been gained. Again, he was caught between the reality of the riddle and the blissful prospect

of yet-unrealized human progress.

While Tennyson continued to present in the later poems many of his old ideas in much the same manner, some of his old concerns were fused with newer ones to form a few additional themes. A major belief of his later years, the insistence on the existence of a God of love, for example, was fused to the old hope for a better world. Evidence of this fusion occurs in "Despair," a poem in the Tiresias volume. The speaker in the poem is a man who had been driven to attempt suicide by the fatalistic teachings of a Calvinist sect. In the midst of his diatribe against the horror of human existence, the narrator suddenly hits upon a thought which was a natural development of Tennyson's thinking at this time: "were there a God, as you say,/His love would have power over hell till it utterly vanish'd away" (VI, 235). Since the speaker earlier in the poem says that earth itself is hell, the implication is quite clear that if there is a God of love, He would be gradually improving the world. This implication is developed more metaphorically in "The Play," first published in 1889:

Act first, this Earth, a stage so gloom'd with woe
 You all but sicken at the shifting scenes.
 And yet be patient. Our Playwright may show
 In some fifth Act what this wild Drama means. (VII, 117)

Another fusion of ideas that took place in the years after 1880 was the mingling of the theme of the ideal society with the theme of the after life. This fusion was so complete that it is difficult to determine, in such poems as "The Progress of Spring," whether Tennyson was writing of the ideal society or the after life, or if he was implying that the ideal society can only exist beyond the grave:

And men have hopes, which race the restless blood,
That after many changes may succeed
Life which is Life indeed. (VII, 91)

It could be that Tennyson found comfort in a belief that his hope for an ideal society would be realized in heaven; if so, the extrapolation of his vision into the spiritual world would logically follow.

But Tennyson seems to have found more relief from his despair at the failure of a better world to be achieved in his lifetime by returning to the old idea that he and his contemporaries were but ancients of the earth and in the morning of the times. The comfort he found in this theme is reflected in the enthusiasm of the two poems which treat it most extensively, "The Dawn," and "The Making of Man," both first published in 1892 and written fairly late. "The Dawn" takes as its epigraph a remark by an Egyptian priest to Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, "You are but children," and as its metaphor the "Day" of the human race:

Dawn not Day!
Is it Shame, so few should have climb'd from the dens
in the level below
Men, with a heart and a soul, no slaves of a four-
footed will?
But if twenty million of summers are stored in the
sunlight still,
We are far from the noon of man, there is time for the
race to grow. (VII, 175)

"The Making of Man" is a continuation of the same theme:

Where is one that, born of woman, altogether can escape
From the lower world within him, moods of tiger, or of ape?
Man as yet is being made, and ere the crowning Age of ages,
Shall not æon after æon pass and touch him into shape?

All about him shadow still, but while the races flower
and fade,
Prophet-eyes may catch a glory slowly gaining on the shade,
Till the peoples all are one, and all their voices blend
in choric
Hallelujah to the Maker 'It is finish'd. Man is made.' (VII, 177)

Once again Tennyson found himself taking his own advice and clinging to the sunnier side of doubt as he had advocated in Locksley Hall Sixty Years After. He was never so much of an egotist to believe that his lifetime had been long enough or his experience sufficiently broad to enable him to categorically condemn the inability of his age to improve the human condition; even as a pessimist, he was a cross-bencher.

For all his persistent optimism, Tennyson could not repress the sense of gloom he felt at the condition of his country and the world as he grew older. His friends left many records of this depressed brooding over the state of things. Bishop Phillips Brooks visited the poet at Farringford in 1883 and later reported that "Tennyson was inclined to be misanthropic, talked about Socialism, atheism and another great catastrophe like the French Revolution coming on the world."⁴⁵ Queen Victoria's private journal, recording a conversation with the poet in the same year, contains a similar account of the poet's mood: ". . . and then he spoke with horror of the unbelievers and philosophers who would make you believe there was no other world, no Immortality, who tried to explain all away in a miserable manner. . . . He spoke of Ireland and the wickedness in ill using poor animals, 'I am afraid I think the world is darkened; I dare say it will brighten again.'"⁴⁶

Much of his depression was due to intense concern about the decline of religion, the weakness of the nation's defenses, the perversity of cer-

⁴⁵Materials, IV, 66.

⁴⁶Materials, IV, 423.

tain literary trends, and the generally shaky condition of English society. In a letter to Bosworth Smith, written on December 12, 1885, Tennyson expressed his fear of Disestablishment: "With you I believe that the Disestablishment of the Church would prelude the downfall of much that is greatest and best in England. Abuses there are, no doubt, in the Church, as elsewhere, but these are not past remedy."⁴⁷ In his usual manner, Tennyson preferred to remedy the ills of the present system rather than abolish the Church altogether. But he knew that the problem was more than the inefficiency and injustice of the Church as it then existed; the nature of belief itself was changing. "What will people come to in a hundred years, do you think they will give up all religious forms and go and sit in silence in the churches listening to the organs?" he asked Warren, the president of Magdalen College, Oxford, in April, 1892.⁴⁸ He had no doubts, however, about what the people would come to if England did not keep her guard up. He republished "Riflemen Form!" in the Oenone volume because he thought the need for a strong Volunteer movement was greater than ever. And his contention that the Fleet must be kept up and strengthened became a subject that he almost beat to death; a typical statement was this one made in 1886: ". . . one naval defeat for us would mean that we should at once sink into a third-rate power."⁴⁹ The condition of literature was another favorite topic. He was able to accept the

⁴⁷Materials, IV, 121.

⁴⁸Materials, IV, 342.

⁴⁹Materials, IV, 141.

realism of George Eliot, Henry James, and others; but he abominated the naturalism of Zola. "I agree with Wordsworth that Art is selection," he said. "Look at Zola for instance, he shows the evils of the world without the ideal. His Art becomes monstrous therefore. . . ."50 To Tennyson, the increasing emphasis on the evils of the world in literature and the de-emphasis of idealism were but symptomatic of the cultural deterioration which was destroying the inner structure of English and European society. When it was pointed out to him that, because of the greater mingling of the social classes, the structure appeared to be stronger than it had been in the time of rigid class divisions, he would acknowledge that there seemed to be greater unity in society than in his younger days; but then he would add: "The whole of Society at present is too like a jelly, when it is touched, it shakes from base to summit."51

Tennyson believed that much of the blame for the jelly-like structure of late Victorian society could be attributed to the too-rapid acceptance of democratic innovations. He simply did not think that total democracy is a stable form of government. In 1888, he explained the basis for this contention at some length:

I do not in the least mind if England, when the people are less ignorant and more experienced, eventually becomes a democracy supposing it is better that it should do so. But after seasons of violent and unreasoning democracy and bureaucracy comes the iron rule of a Cromwell. Babble and gabble, and a democracy led by demagogues being liberty is utter nonsense. We must push forward. The march of progress is irresistible. But Freedom ought to broaden slowly down as much as possible.

50 Materials, IV, 165.

51 Materials, IV, 166.

Let these demagogues who stir up the strikes for their own ends remember, 'Liberty forgetful of others is licence and nothing better than treason.' The hero of the morning is too often the traitor of the afternoon. It was the mob who smashed the Duke of Wellington's windows on the anniversary of Waterloo. As Goethe says, 'The worst thing in the world is ignorance in motion.' 52

The tempo of the whole world, it seemed to the poet, was speeding up faster than rationality could keep pace. The reasoned debate and slow change he advocated were swallowed in babble and gabble. But he was not entirely unsympathetic to the ultra-Radicals who were demanding a different order. "Stagnation is more dangerous than Revolution," he said.⁵³ Sudden change, however, leads to as much loss as gain, he thought. "Action and Reaction is the miserable see-saw of our child-world," he maintained. "If these extreme men had their way, the end of the century would be plunged in blood, a universal French Revolution."⁵⁴ What Tennyson thought the Radicals did not keep in mind was that even in a democracy there must be superior men to serve as leaders. "Men of experience and weight and wisdom should come forward," he said. "They who will not be ruled by the rudder will in the end be ruled by the rock."⁵⁵ And he was fond of reciting a poem called "Captain Guide":

There be rocks old and new!
There a haven full in view!
Art thou wise? Art thou true?

⁵² Materials, IV, 166.

⁵³ Materials, IV, 167.

⁵⁴ Materials, IV, 167.

⁵⁵ Materials, IV, 167.

Then in change of wind and tide
List no longer to the crew!
 Captain guide!⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Tennyson could discern no Wellington or Arthur Hallam in the men who were seeking the captaincy.

The old aristocracy, even though it possessed its moral defects, had nevertheless been able to produce its Wellingtons when the occasion demanded; but the new order in which the masses were becoming the aristocrats of power seemed to Tennyson to be failing to produce men who were willing to devote themselves selflessly to the country and the Empire. Too often, their loyalty extended only to the limits of party advantage. "Politics were to my father the good of the world and passionately did he feel for all that concerned what he considered the welfare of the Empire," wrote Hallam Tennyson. "The mere working for party, as far as his own conviction went was to him unintelligible, as well as the love of power and rule for their own sakes."⁵⁷ His ideal of government was that "all should work conscientiously and harmoniously together for the common weal, each with such differing power as had been given to each man, recognizing the value of the difference. . . ."⁵⁸ But without the great man, the lesser links in the chain of government would fall to a single level of mediocrity; and that was just what he thought was happening, or perhaps had already happened, to England.

⁵⁶Materials, IV, 167.

⁵⁷Materials, IV, 426.

⁵⁸Materials, IV, 426.

But Tennyson was not ready to give himself over to despair. There was always the hope that a great man would arise or that the masses would live up to the challenge extended to them as they received more power. More realistically, however, Tennyson, as Carlyle had done before him, thought that since the old order had passed away, a partial solution for the problems brought on by the new way of running the country might be found in a better relationship between capital and labor.⁵⁹ Although he deplored most of the results of industrialization, he thought that the world which had come out of the factory system was not without its better points. He believed, for example, that the industrialization, with its concentration of an expanded population, would impose an obligation upon all classes to live as brethren.⁶⁰ But he was not content merely to hold some beliefs about what could be done to alleviate current problems, or to look on the brighter side of conditions which he did not really like; he was willing, even as an old man, to engage himself in social action. When he was disturbed, for instance, about the lack of opportunity for poor boys, he discussed with General Gordon the possibility of starting a camp or home at which the boys could receive training to enter the army or to prepare them to emigrate. He wrote to the Duke of Cambridge about the idea in 1885, and allowed Hallam to send a letter to the Times giving the origin of the proposal. Out of this discussion and largely because of Tennyson's efforts, the Gordon Boys' Home

⁵⁹Materials, IV, 167.

⁶⁰William Clark Gordon, The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time (Chicago, 1906), p. 230.

was founded.⁶¹ He was also interested in forming a company to buy land in England and later resell it at low prices to agricultural laborers. "He believed that the agricultural laborer must be persuaded to remain in the country," wrote Hallam, "and he was convinced that to give him a vested interest in the land he tilled was the best means not only of persuading him, but of increasing the stability of the Empire."⁶² Partly as a result of Tennyson's concern for the farm workers, a group of them was taken by Arnold White to South Africa and later called "The Tennyson Colony."⁶³

Even though he took direct action to help overcome many of the injustices around him, he thought that his primary duty was to exert his influence through his poetry. He felt a sense of mission as a poet and believed that one of the greatest functions of the poet is to recall statesmen to truth and duty.⁶⁴ Because of this conviction, among the compliments he was most pleased to receive were those, such as the following letter from Lord Napier of Magdala, praising him not for his triumph as an artist but for his service to the Empire: "May that Pen which never fails to call upon England when she hesitates to remember her ancient renown, her great inheritance and her real power, to spurn craven counsels! may that Pen flourish for many new years to come."⁶⁵

⁶¹Materials, IV, 87.

⁶²Materials, IV, 88.

⁶³Materials, IV, 88.

⁶⁴Gordon, p. 24.

⁶⁵Materials, IV, 201.

Tennyson was not willing, despite all his sense of mission, to choose sides on a great many of the issues of his day. "In projects for the extension of the suffrage he took no part," explained Jowett; "it was another kind of ideal, much more distant on which his eye was fixed."⁶⁶ His ideal was often obscured to his contemporaries and even such a perceptive tribute as that paid by Arthur Sidgwick, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in an address read at Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, on October 30, 1909, somewhat misses the mark: "It is easy to idealize freedom, revolution, or war. . . . But the praise of ordered liberty, of settled government, of political moderation, is far harder to idealize in poetry. It has been the peculiar aim of Tennyson to be the constitutional, and in this sense the national, poet."⁶⁷

Tennyson did idealize settled government and political moderation, but not as ends in themselves; he advocated them because they formed the best political climate, he thought, for bringing about the ideal society. Jowett, who was one of the most discerning of Tennyson's friends, showed a deep understanding of the poet's attitudes when he wrote that "'Locksley Hall' although spoken in the character of a disappointed lover, contains the sum of his politics when he was a young man, and though he wrote an epilogue to the poem sixty years later, the point of view from which he regarded the world in this poem was never really altered, but only underwent the natural change of old age."⁶⁸ The basis of Tennyson's political

⁶⁶Materials, IV, 443.

⁶⁷Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson and His Friends (London, 1911), p. 331.

⁶⁸Materials, IV, 443.

views when he wrote "Locksley Hall" was the vision of all the wonder that would be. And in Locksley Hall Sixty Years After, for all its castigation of the times, Tennyson returned to the same vision, admittedly with question marks, and turned over responsibility for the future to the younger generation with the advice of "Forward." Jowett sensed that Tennyson's passion for a better world formed the core of his personality and made him more than a constitutional poet; he was a millennial poet.

The centrality of Tennyson's ideal was manifested time after time in his last years at moments when it would seem impossible that he could have been worried about the realization of an improved society or the deterioration of what little progress had been made. "Our last telegram was from Colombo, 'no improvement;'" he wrote to the Queen during Lionel's fatal illness. And then, with no more break than a semicolon, he launched into a discussion of the Empire: "but in this pause, as it were between life and death, since your Majesty touches upon the disastrous policy of the day, I may say, that I wish I may be in my own grave beyond sight and hearing when an English army fires upon the Loyalists of Ulster."⁶⁹ Even when overwrought at his son's fever, Tennyson's thoughts were not far from the central aspect of his life.

The pervasiveness of his ideal also came out in the first serious illness of his life. In September of 1888, an attack of rheumatic gout was brought on by walking in the rain, and Tennyson was restricted to his sofa at a south window where he lay looking on the landscape and saying

⁶⁹Materials, IV, 411.

that he felt as if he were staring into another world.⁷⁰ Hallam kept a diary of his father's sickness for the doctors; and in the diary are many examples of Tennyson's repeated reversion to aspects of his ideal. For November 8 Hallam recorded: "He liked hearing Lord Derby's speech, and quite agreed with him as to a nation's disarmament being the sign for immediate war."⁷¹ On November 23 Hallam read to him the Emperor of Germany's pacific speech. Hallam thought the poet was asleep at the end, but he momentarily woke up, said "Wait till Russia makes a move, and we go to sleep," and then went to sleep himself.⁷² On November 30 he "talked of the enormous importation of fruit into England and could not conceive why our farmers do not take to growing fruit and eggs."⁷³ For December 10 Hallam wrote: "He was quite delighted to hear that Persia had opened the Karun to international commerce at the persuasion of England."⁷⁴ The same day, Tennyson also "talked about a letter from Mont-eagle, and wished that the government would make railways to the wildest parts of Ireland to help the poorest Irish. He was interested too about the Allotments which we were appointing for the villagers here."⁷⁵ On December 11 the poet talked about Fiske's Destiny of Man.⁷⁶ On December

⁷⁰Materials, IV, 189.

⁷¹Materials, IV, 190.

⁷²Materials, IV, 195-196.

⁷³Materials, IV, 197.

⁷⁴Materials, IV, 198.

⁷⁵Materials, IV, 198.

⁷⁶Materials, IV, 198.

12 he said he had dreamed "that he built a succession of gorgeous pagodas right up to heaven."⁷⁷ On February 5 while talking about his pervasive hopefulness, he said, "Hope is the kiss of the future."⁷⁸ And for March 14 Hallam wrote: "We had been reading some of Bryce, and his account did not seem to us to be in favor of republican government."⁷⁹ Amid pain and weakness, Tennyson could not avoid talking of what was central to his hopes and desires.

To the surprise of physicians and friends alike, Tennyson recovered from his near-fatal attack, and went on to enjoy several more years of good health. By May of 1889 he had gained enough strength to take a cruise on Lord Brassey's Sunbeam,⁸⁰ and soon he was tramping about with as long a stride as ever. F. T. Palgrave attested to the poet's vigor at this time: "And (at all but eighty) so great were his physical powers that he led me down one of his favourite walks to the Sussex weald some 400 feet below the house, and then climbed up the hill, with steps that allowed no hesitation to his companions, and resting only here and there."⁸¹ Even in the year of his death, Tennyson was sufficiently strong to take a cruise in Colonel Crozier's yacht, the Assegai, to Frederick Tennyson's home in Jersey. But Tennyson knew that his strength was once again failing and the brothers parted sensing that it was for the last time.

⁷⁷Materials, IV, 205.

⁷⁸Materials, IV, 209.

⁷⁹Materials, IV, 210.

⁸⁰Materials, IV, 210.

⁸¹Materials, IV, 323.

"Goodnight, true brother here, good morrow there," said Tennyson.⁸²

Palgrave was also able to record the decline of Tennyson's vigor in the last year of the poet's life, and sadly wrote: "Daily . . . did I accompany him in a narrower two-mile circuit of his fields and farms and cottages."⁸³ His walks at Aldworth dwindled more and more until he spent most of his time in the summer houses.⁸⁴ By early fall the crisis was fast approaching, and at the end of the first week in October, Dr. Dabbs, Tennyson's physician, published his final bulletin to a worried nation:

The tendency to fatal syncope may be said to have really commenced about 10 a.m. on Wednesday, and on Thursday, October 6th, at 1:35, the great poet breathed his last. Nothing could have been more striking than the scene during the last few hours. On the bed a figure of breathing marble, flooded and bathed in the light of the full moon streaming through the oriel window; his hand clasping the Shakespeare which he had asked for but recently, and which he had kept by him to the end; the moonlight, the majestic figure as he lay there, 'drawing thicker breath' irresistibly brought to our minds his own 'Passing of Arthur.'⁸⁵

On October 12 Tennyson was buried next to Browning and in front of the Chaucer monument in Westminster Abbey.

Even as he approached death, his persistent reversion to his ideal was evident. After he fell sick on Wednesday, September 29, he read Miss Swanwick's new book, Poets as the Interpreters of the Age. On Friday, in one of his last moments of clear consciousness, he asked Hallam's wife to

⁸²Materials, IV, 350.

⁸³Materials, IV, 326.

⁸⁴Materials, IV, 357.

⁸⁵Materials, IV, 433.

read him an article in the Times on the colonization of Uganda. He said that he "looked forward to the day when South Africa would be welded into one mighty state, linked in a strict federation with England."⁸⁶ He could hardly speak, his pulse rose to 150, and he was forced to go to bed immediately after discussing the article.⁸⁷ His thought rapidly became more disconnected in the following days, but he insisted on looking over the proofs of his final volume, despite being unable to read more than a few words at a time.⁸⁸ He was dying and he knew it; but he was as much concerned with the condition of the Empire and his sense of mission as a poet as he was with the prospect of his own death. The ultimate riddle of human existence was not enough of a deterrent to keep him from looking to the future and holding to the greater hope.

IV

Tennyson wrote the best conclusion for his life in a poem called "The Dreamer," published in the Oenone volume. The poem is such a cogent summary of the way Tennyson lived that it would have been a more consistent choice for the final position in editions of his poetry than "Crossing the Bar."

"The Dreamer"

On a midnight in midwinter when all but the winds
were dead,

⁸⁶Memoir, II, 425.

⁸⁷Materials, IV, 429.

⁸⁸Memoir, II, 426-427.

'The meek shall inherit the earth,' was a Scripture
 that rang thro' his head,
 Till he dream'd that a Voice of the Earth went
 wailingly past him and said:

'I am losing the light of my Youth
 And the Vision that led me of old,
 And I clash with an iron Truth,
 When I make for an Age of Gold,
 And I would that my race were run,
 For teeming with liars, and madmen, and knaves,
 And wearied of Autocrats, Anarchs, and Slaves,
 And darken'd with doubts of a Faith that saves,
 And crimson with battles, and hollow with graves,
 To the wail of my winds, and the moan of my waves
 I whirl, and I follow the Sun.'

Was it only the wind of the Night shrilling out
 Desolation and wrong
 Thro' a dream of the dark? Yet he thought that he
 answer'd her wail with a song--

Moaning your losses, O Earth,
 Heart-weary and overdone!
 But all's well that ends well,
 Whirl, and follow the Sun!

He is racing from heaven to heaven
 And less will be lost than won,
 For all's well that ends well,
 Whirl, and follow the Sun!

The Reign of the Meek upon earth,
 O weary one, has it begun?
 But all's well that ends well,
 Whirl, and follow the Sun!

For moans will have grown sphere-music
 Or ever your race be run!
 And all's well that ends well,
 Whirl, and follow the Sun! (VII, 178-179)

Tennyson returned to the old motif of the two voices, the voices of the riddle and the ideal, to summarize the pattern of living that finally landed him on the cross benches of old age--a seat he did not remain in for long. He knew that the visionary fervor of his youth had dimmed,

that his hopes for the millennium in his own lifetime were wrecked by the sad fact that most of his fellows were unwilling to improve themselves or their world, and that his own doubts kept him from a satisfying faith. But underneath it all was a firm conviction that "a divine purpose was manifesting itself even through darkness and the ways of evil."⁸⁹ Because of this conviction, he was able to continue fulfilling what he took to be his mission as a poet until the verge of death, writing of the age to come, keeping a sharp eye on the Empire, and following the sun of his ideal.

⁸⁹Walters, p. 199.

EPILOGUE: THE TABLELAND OF LIFE

"Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances," Tennyson once said in commenting on the Idylls of the King. "It is not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of generations."¹ The same might be said of Tennyson himself as the tableland of his life is reconstructed, for his biography is a symbolic biography of the generations since the late eighteenth century, all of which have been caught up in the doctrine of progress. This, of course, includes our own and, most likely, several yet to come.

As a young man, Tennyson embraced the spirit of the revolutionary generation preceding his own. Wordsworth went to France to take part in the Revolution; Blake and Coleridge remained in England but voiced their enthusiasm for the ideals, if not the results, of the revolutionaries across the Channel. Accordingly, Tennyson's first great adventure took him to the Pyrenees as a secret agent engaged in a plot to overthrow the Spanish government. Along with the great Romantics, he believed, while a youth, that the world could be improved through revolution.

But like the later Wordsworth, Blake, and Coleridge, Tennyson's zest for violent measures in the name of progress diminished and he became an advocate of reform much as Shelley did, embracing the attitudes of the generation which linked Wordsworth's generation to his own. When

¹Materials, III, 201 (xii).

the first Reform Bill was passed, Tennyson enthusiastically rang the bells in the parish tower, believing and hoping that he was ringing in a better world.

The prospect of the better world through reform was dimmed, almost as soon as it materialized, by the death of Arthur Hallam. Tennyson was emotionally crippled for at least three years after the loss of Hallam and did not fully recover until 1850. His personal sorrow did not throw him out of touch with his times, however; it was the factor which actually led him to produce the poem his contemporaries adopted as their song--In Memoriam. The Laureateship was his reward, and he became, for forty-two years, England's Poet.

While Laureate, and in many of the poems written before he accepted the honor, Tennyson was remarkably able to capture and express the moods and themes of his generation. "To be typically great, a man must be, as Tennyson was, profoundly in sympathy with the chief preoccupations of his time," wrote G. M. Young; "and the preoccupation of the Victorian mind, the points to which it swung most constantly and anxiously, were on the one side theological and moral, on the other social."² Binding these two points together was the central issue of "What was the standing of personality, the finite human personality, in a world which every year was revealing itself more clearly as a process of perpetual flux?"³ Tennyson's In Memoriam seemed to reconcile the theological, moral,

²G. M. Young, "The Greatest Victorian," Victorian Essays, ed. W. D. Hancock (London, 1962), p. 124.

³G. M. Young, "The Age of Tennyson," Victorian Essays, ed. W. D. Hancock (London, 1962), p. 59.

and social problems of the age as well as to clear up the mid-Victorian sense of depersonalization. Like F. D. Maurice, his theology aimed toward a knowledge of God and not the inculcation of religion and dogma.⁴ Tennyson believed that God manifested Himself through a type, Christ, and that His plan consisted of a succession of types in accordance with evolution and directed toward the eventual achievement of an ideal society. Morality thus hinged on an ethic of each man so living that self-improvement would take place. And the future of society, in turn, depended on the collective improvement of humanity. In Tennyson's modification of evolution, the individual subsequently came to play the central role--a role his readers were reassured to find themselves in.

Perhaps more than that of any poet, Tennyson's poetry and thought were supremely adjusted to the world in which he lived. Because of the shift from agriculture to industry in the nation's economy, a great many of the urban dwellers in the period originally had come from the farm. Tennyson's descriptive power gave him a great appeal to the transplanted country-bred who still considered a rural landscape the ultimate in beauty.⁵ If his descriptions of pastoral scenes and characters often seem overly emotional, it is only because they were composed in a highly emotional age for a highly emotional reader. As one commentator has written: ". . . in his dealings with this period a historian must take

⁴See W. Merlin Davies, An Introduction to F. D. Maurice's Theology (London, 1964), p. 3.

⁵Young, "The Age of Tennyson," p. 52.

into account an emotionalism which was more general and more easily excited than anything he knows today."⁶ Tennyson understood this emotionalism, knew how to appeal to it, and won the tears of his public. But he was equally able to appeal to the intellect of the times, particularly to the aristocracy of intellect that began to form at mid-century. A particular type of middle class family, the Gurneys, Frys, Gaskells, Hoares, Hodgkins, Foxes, Barclays, Wedgwoods, Macaulays, Trevelyan, Arnolds, Huxleys, and Darwins, began to intermarry and produced a high proportion of the Victorian scholars and teachers. These families became the new intelligentsia, stable, devoted to gradual reform of present institutions, and able to comprehend sympathetically both business and government. Evangelicalism was the strongest ingredient in the spirit of the class; from it came their dedication, their purposeful living, their idea of the Great Taskmaster, and their conscience. There was a near-universal sense among these families of a mission to improve the world. Because of the Quaker derivation which many of the houses could claim, the doctrine of following the inner light also had its influence.⁷ Tennyson, with his pietist mother, was well prepared to comprehend the evangelical spirit of the new aristocracy, their sense of mission was essentially his own, and his indebtedness to the concept of the inner light is

⁶G. S. R. Kitson Clark, "The Romantic Element--1830 to 1850," Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan, ed. J. H. Plumb (London, 1955), p. 229.

⁷N. G. Annan, "The Intellectual Aristocracy," Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan, ed. J. H. Plumb (London, 1955), pp. 243-246.

shown in such poems as "Follow the Gleam." When he became Laureate, he also became a member of this class, and for at least twenty years after was its poetic voice. His poetry and his thought thus came to harmonize with both the Victorian emotion and the Victorian intellect.

In many respects, Tennyson created the illusions by which the Victorians lived. As Viscount Asher recollected, "What appealed to us was the mystic, undefined, and slightly nervous belief that all is well, that 'In Memoriam' shared with Omar Khayyám and Browning."⁸ He did not hesitate to depict the present imperfection of mankind and to deal with social injustice. But he never deviated significantly, at least in his most popular poems, from the belief that progress was leading humanity to a magnificent future and that what was accomplished in the Victorian age was to be the groundwork for the millennium. While he was impressing his countrymen with their importance, he also reminded them of the evangelical virtue of humility: "In Tennyson the complexities of the immediate are justly handled, and the vast future always remembered in terms of which man as at present constituted remains a 'raw recruit.'"⁹ They would be the precursors of the age to come, but only if they realized their yet-primitive level of development and strived to work out the beast within them, cautioned the Laureate.

But the illusions which Tennyson created gradually faded out of

⁸Viscount Esher, "Tennyson's Influence on His Times," Essays by Divers Hands, XXVIII (1956), 45.

⁹"A Great National Poet: England at War: Tennyson's Mystic Imperialism," Times Literary Supplement (October 10, 1942), p. 498.

fashion as his generation grew older. New poets, new ideas, and a changing world began to supplant what Young has called "The Age of Tennyson." Tennyson permanently tarnished his reputation by writing his dramas, most of which were dismissed by the younger intellectuals as leaky vessels for reactionary ideas. And the poet's character was itself brought into question. "Is Tennyson expressing himself or exploiting himself? That is the doubt already audible in the 1870's, which grew and culminated in the great revulsion from the Laureate and all his ways which is characteristic of the last century and the beginning of this,"¹⁰ wrote Young.

The public disillusionment with the Laureate was equally paralleled by the Laureate's disillusionment with the public. Tennyson's increasing dissatisfaction with the trend of the times, as he lived through his final years, was due to what was all along an imperfect bond between himself and the middle class. As Granville Hicks has emphasized, "Tennyson accepted the middle-class dogma of progress, but he considered himself a disciple of Carlyle, and his increasing distrust of democracy, his devotion to the Crown, and his imperialism were doctrines of which Carlyle could approve."¹¹ As the middle class became more and more aligned with democracy, sought to reduce the influence and power of the Crown, and made imperialism more a matter of money than mission, Tennyson became less and less sympathetic, and eventually wrote Locksley Hall Sixty Years After. It has been said that the Victorian period can be divided into two parts--the early

¹⁰Young, "The Age of Tennyson," p. 56.

¹¹Granville Hicks, Figures of Transition (New York, 1939), p. 34.

Victorian age of production and the late Victorian age of finance.¹²

Tennyson was inspired by the first part but disenchanted by the second, and laid the blame for the change on a rejection of social idealism by the middle class. Progress became a matter of per cent instead of a matter of patriotism and religion, thought Tennyson. More and more as the century drew to a close, the belief in progress raised awkward questions like "progress whither?"¹³ Danger was in the air for all such idealists as the poet, and he knew it. He saw the late Victorian intelligence breaking away from the ideal which he had upheld. Self-sacrifice, improvement of the individual and the race, and the devotion to the achievement of some remote society gave way to self-realization, self-culture, and the nurture of Pater's gem-like flame.¹⁴

Tennyson was not cut off from the next generation merely because he lost confidence in it, however; his influence as a literary figure lingered and many of his themes became the stock in trade of twentieth-century writers. Arthur J. Carr has pointed out the extent of his relevance to us: ". . . he is our true precursor. He shows and hides, as if in embryo, a master theme of Joyce's Ulysses--the accentuated moody self-consciousness and the sense of loss that mark Stephen Dedalus. He forecasts Yeats's interest in the private myth. He apprehended in advance of

¹²G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London, 1936), pp. 6-7.

¹³Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement (London, 1959), p. 401.

¹⁴G. M. Young, "The Victorian Noon-Time," Victorian Essays, ed. W. D. Handcock (London, 1962), p. 141.

Aldous Huxley the use of mysticism to castigate materialistic culture. And in Maud, at least, he prepared the way for Eliot's 'Preludes' and 'Prufrock.' At some crucial points Tennyson is a modern poet. . . .¹⁵ His experimentation with a wide variety of verse forms, his pervasive concern for the riddle of the painful earth, his frequent use of paradox, and his existential despair are other aspects that align him with the twentieth-century spirit.

But it is Tennyson's conception of the tableland of life, the way he represented it in his poetry, and the way he journeyed across it in his life that most brings him into direct relationship with the Lost Generation, the Beat Generation, and the Cool Generation. Like him, subsequent generations have not accepted the traditional religious explanations of the mystery of birth and the mystery of death. All we can know, seems to be the agreement, are the struggles and performances in this world. But whether it is Robert Jordan sacrificing his life in a Spanish mountain pass that others may live, Jack Kerouac seeing visions of angels on Mount Hozomeen, or Herzog settling down to endure what remains of his life, the verdict is that it all counts for something; but where it all will lead is another matter. Tennyson ended his life on the cross benches of the times, a position which twentieth-century man has inherited. Tennyson concluded that progress had not stopped, even though it did not seem to be taking the course he would have preferred. But he did not sweepingly condemn the course history was taking; he lingered on the peak of his years and watched what was happening, lamenting the failure of his idealism, but hoping that all would end well. So too do we sit

¹⁵Carr, p. 42.

on our cross benches, looking back on two world wars, fearing that we are on the verge of a third, longing for something to trust in and a cause to endorse, yet nevertheless believing what Norman Mailer, in An American Dream, says we believe--that somehow everything will turn out all right. Progress is our most important product and the Great Society is supposed to be our dream; but like Tennyson, we have our non-partisan doubts with which to temper our mystic hopes.

The story of Tennyson is in many ways the story of Western culture since the French Revolution. He lived as Western man has by-and-large lived since 1789, with the vision of an improved humanity and a better world always before him. But as he lived on, the goal seemed to become more distant instead of closer; and instead of any genuine improvement in humanity, there seemed to be regression. His dreams went much the same way as the dreams of Godwin, Comte, Marx, Bergson, and perhaps even Lyndon Johnson's, have gone. Scientific progress has indeed resulted from facing the riddle of the earth; but the subsequent moral and spiritual development which Tennyson hoped from such effort has failed to come about. And so the life style of our culture has led us to the place Tennyson's life style led him: standing on the tableland of life amid the wreckage of Camelot yet hoping that Arthur's wound will someday be healed.

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