

# Tennyson, we can not live in art essay sample



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The age of Tennyson was one of great flux, both in terms of technology and ideas, and art cannot be imagined to have escaped the effects of this unprecedented development. R. C. Trench's assertion to Tennyson reflects not only of the continuing debate over the nature and status of art but the new popularity and respect for science in the mid nineteenth century; 'we cannot live in art' can be seen both as an appeal against the insularity and unrealistic outlook of art and its creators, and perhaps also to hint at the question of 'usefulness', which seemed to some to swing in favour of the new discoveries and rapid advance of science, rather than to the older artistic disciplines.

In 1820 Thomas Love Peacock published an essay in the periodical 'Ollier's Literary Miscellany' exhorting able men to stop wasting their time by writing poetry and turn their talents to science in order to make a positive difference to the world around them. Seen in this way poetry, and indeed other arts, seem frivolous, selfish, and decidedly conservative; an image which Shelley was quick to deny in his response, 'A Defence of Poetry'.

He argued that poets have ever been quick to react to -or even unconsciously anticipate as the 'hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration' - significant national development and, inspired by it, guide and influence the masses through poetry reflecting 'the spirit of the age... Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World'.

Tennyson was a great admirer of Shelley's poetry, but as he moved further and further from the theories of the Aestheticians, he became increasingly aware of the public role of the poet as a voice for social issues rather than

simply a creator of beauty for beauty's sake, ideas which can be seen to develop in his work. It would be an over simplification to suggest that Tennyson's early work was, as his close friend Arthur Hallam implied in his review of ' Poems, Chiefly Lyrical', entirely absorbed with sensation.

Hallam believed that the greatest poetic minds were in tune with Nature to such an extent that they had no need to reflect upon the sordid concerns of everyday life in order to write, instead they ' felt' the beauties of nature as poetry in their ' world of images'1 (the implication being that true poets unconsciously live in art) and he roundly praised the new collection for such aesthetics.

On one level he is right for ' Mariana' for example is full of images such as the ' shriek[ing]' mouse and the creeping of the ' marish mosses' created by the painfully sensitive mind of Mariana herself, although they appear initially to be objective description by the third person narrator.

The distortion of the smallest sounds, such as the more probable squeaking of the mouse, warns that personal perception and imagery can often pervert the truth, a concept which conflicts with Hallam's enthusiasm for imagery and suggests that even at this stage Tennyson was concerned that his poetry should accurately communicate ideas rather than simply work on the aesthetic level.

There is a superfluity of sensation in the poem, but the language used, which almost seems to relish the depressing decay ' With blackest moss the flower-plots Were thickly crusted one and all:' ere in the use of extremes and alliteration, the context, and the strangeness of time in the poem -it races

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her further and further from hope, yet all around her is slowing down and petrifying- all combine to give the negative impression that sensation in the poem is a product of misery and depression, an introverted phenomenon born out of lonely solitude as opposed to the beautiful, vital spark of Hallam's theory.

Ideas of imagery and sensation are treated in a similar way in 'The Lotos-Eaters', the choric song leaps from one sensation to another and the island appears to them such a world of images There is sweet music here that softer falls Than petals from blown roses on the grass Or night-dews on still waters between walls'. yet this abundance only begins when the drugged Lotos Eaters begin to speak, the previous stanzas are far more literal and the poetic imagery within them much scarcer.

The effect of this sudden luxuriance of sensation is almost soporific after the more straight forward descriptions it follows and, with the contextual knowledge that the speakers are drugged, works against the seduction of the lines to give the impression that it is accompanied by an abandonment of will and personal discipline.

It is also perhaps noteworthy that much of Tennyson's work appears to have been inspired by sensations created by reading the work of earlier artists - Mariana by a character in Shakespeare's 'Measure for Measure' 'the moated grange was no particular grange, but one which rose to the music of Shakespeare's words' (Tennyson), The Lady of Shallott by an Italian novelette 'Danna di Scalotta' and Ulysses by Homer's Iliad- and not by the sensations inspired in him by nature as Hallam believed. Although he looked

to art for ideas, it was at least external inspiration as opposed to the introverted private ' world of images'

The Palace of Art, published in 1832, is Tennyson's specific response to Trench's statement, prefaced by a prologue addressed to him, ' a sort of allegory' warning, superficially at least, of the dangers of immersing and isolating one's soul in the beauty of art, both for the art and the soul. There is no differentiation between art, philosophy and history; all are within the sumptuous palace by virtue of their aesthetic value for the soul to admire and keep pure, yet the beauty is meaningless and lifeless, sending the her into a state of miserable madness and eventually forcing her, temporarily at least, back to reality.

This disregard for discipline, age or origin is a key part of the doctrine of asceticism that Tennyson was keen to distance himself from. The palace, brimming over with beauty, oppresses the soul, bringing home the emptiness of her existence, for she has separated the beauty from its context, from the knowledge and truth which Tennyson believed were interdependent, rejected Love and has become hubristic and selfish I sit as God holding no form of creed, But contemplating all' with Milton, Dante, Plato and the other artists represented within as her gods (line 196). Isobel Armstrong notes that she turns away from the many fountains and springs so beloved of the Romantic poets as a sign of energy and creative force, instead preferring to ' burn incense to herself in self worship'2.

It is telling that although the soul is initially simply an allegory, by the end of the poem she has developed too much of a tortured, indeed soulful,

personality to fit this description and, although the narrative voice remains a detached observer throughout, it is possible to see elements of Tennyson himself in this soul, with its elitist desire to shut art away from those who might defile it, as in 'The Poet's Mind', conflicting with the fear of the art becoming stagnant, beautiful yet useless.

In attempting to defend poetry, and himself, from the charge of ultimately pointless beauty he has made the tone of 'The Palace of Art' far more measured, the imagery less intense, the metre more regular and the stanzas shorter than in much of his previous work in order to convey the important, yet ultimately unconvincing, moral message.

They neither distract attention from nor undermine the seriousness of this, the brief stanzas effectively fragmenting the Palace into brief, passionless points representative of the meaningless artefacts within it, the monotonous rhythm and rhyme and the flat effect of the short fourth line intensifying this sterile, depressing effect. Although the message of the poem is clear cut the weakness inherent in the bathetic ending and the vacillating guilt of the soul, particularly in lines 229-232 which end with 'Laughter at her self-scorn. seem to suggest that Tennyson himself was not convinced by it, or at least could think of no more adequate solution to the elitism of art in an age which was no longer prepared to see its creators as legislators or prophets.

The firm resolution of the soul's rejection of the palace is rendered improbable by the stubbornly rising rhythm and unrepentant sentiment of the last two lines of the poem, and although she talks of returning there with

others this is surely missing the point; the palace and the art within it must be opened and available to all if it is to survive, not just a privileged few.

Tennyson's growing commitment to socially relevant poetry can also be seen in, amongst others, 'The Lady of Shalott', published in the same year and often seen as a companion poem, relating as it does the unfortunate fate of a solitary artist cut off from reality in a world entirely devoted to the mystical beauty of her weaving. However, unlike the soul of 'The Palace of Art' there is no pleasure in her involuntary isolation except in the glimpses of the outside world that come to her as she weaves 'But in her web she still delights To weave the mirror's magic sights... suggesting that she would rather be amongst the people who pass her by "I am half sick of shadows" said The Lady of Shalott. '.

Her captivity, and the fact that she lives on the condition of the repression of her sexuality may be indicative that Tennyson was attempting a veiled comment on the subjugation of women, although the young lovers and the 'troop of damsels glad' do not support this idea unless he was concerned also with the hierarchical structure of not just Camelot, but also contemporary society, and forced labour in general ... the reaper weary, Piling sheaves in uplands airy,'. Isobel Armstrong suggests that Tennyson is exploring the idea that it is not until the oppressed realise that others have freedom where they do not that they recognise their exploitation as such and can act to precipitate change, whatever the nature of their situation.

The Lady of Shalott is not actively unhappy with her lot until it becomes evident to her that the 'young lovers lately wed' have something that she

lacks, a feeling that becomes stronger when she connects this absence in her life with her attraction to the glowing, glittering Sir Lancelot, yet when she tries to break free she is doomed to death by the curse of society; ' The sexual politics of the poem suggest that the sensuous freedom of femininity which can break the bonds of custom is severely restricted, and has repercussions in the wider politics of oppression.

Others see the poem as representing nothing but Tennyson's preoccupation with legend and an idealised romantic past, an excuse for more of the purely aesthetic imagery and language ' the most striking thing about these poems is the quality and nature of the poet's awareness of their apparent triviality... the decorated surface of decadent art, and its choice of subject, inform us fully of their specification, and with complete confidence that this is the way things ought to be -art for art's sake.

4. This idea of Tennyson the Aesthetic however seems wholly unconvincing when one considers his sweeping revisions, mainly in the direction of strengthening the cultural context and relevance of much of his earlier work when it was republished in 1842. ' The Palace of Art' was given a stanza describing a painting of labouring ' reapers at their sultry toil' for the soul to admire and she becomes yet more detached from life itself, oblivious to the context of suffering, seeing only the beauty of the art.

Final lines emphasising the division and differences between the sexes were added to ' The Lady of Shalott', replacing the 1832 ending where she is allowed to finish the poem with ' The charm is broken utterly'; in the later edition of the last verse Lancelot and his knights react with utter





I paced along: The woods were fill'd so full with song  
There seem'd no room for sense of wrong. ' . The new direction of social comment in Tennyson's poetry was noted in fellow Apostle James Spedding's review in the 'Quarterly' ' All that is of true and lasting worth in poetry, must have its root in a sound view of human life and the condition of man in the world; a just feeling with regard to the things in which we are all concerned'.

Tennyson was less troubled than many of his contemporaries by the conflicts springing up between science and religion, as is evident in poems such as ' Supposed Confessions of a Second Rate Mind' in which he indirectly voices his uncertainties about Christianity, and in the almost god like status the poet is raised to in ' The Poet's Mind', praised and protected by the language of the sacred. His willingness to embrace scientific developments may have stemmed partly from his determination to keep art relevant as well as his undoubted interest in the new discoveries.

Gilmour reports that not only did Tennyson read and write poetry inspired by the works of those at the forefront of research such as Lyell and Chambers (parts of In Memoriam for example), but that he was ' by far the poet most frequently quoted by scientists'<sup>5</sup>, proving that art and science could co-exist and even make use of one another in the less specialised and technically advanced science of the early Victorian period if only both were able to accept the value of the other.

It is clear that, despite the sentiments expressed in ' The Poet's Mind', Tennyson was never an Aesthetician (the tension between the beauty of the imagery and the context are obvious even in early poetry such as Mariana)

but he did move away from the so called Poems of Sensation, where the beauty of the words was accompanied by more oblique and less culturally relevant themes, to work obviously influenced by, and commenting on, contemporary issues.

The unconvincing moral stance of ' The Palace of Art' and the gradual seeping of Tennysonian personality into the purportedly allegorical soul however reflects his own inability to resolve the problems in the relationship between life and art.

He was committed to the idea of art remaining relevant to everyday life rather than being reduced to aesthetic objects to be admired by a privileged few yet, as he was well aware, his whole life was lived through art, he continuously sought solace from reality in his poetry, and his popular success was based on the loveliness of his poetry rather than on any deep meanings within it, explaining the evident ambivalence of the moral in ' The Palace of Art'.

Tennyson agreed that we cannot live in art but he himself could not break free from the attraction of that exclusive inner world of imagery and beauty, and this is evident in the tensions in his work.