"THE SPHERE OF COMMON DUTIES": THE DOMESTIC SOLUTION IN TENNYSON'S POETRY

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Perhaps the most damning statement ever made about Tennyson appears in William Faulkner's *Light in August*. It is made in reference to the Reverend Gail Hightower, one of the most ineffectual characters in the Faulknerian world. Betrayed by his wife (who was later killed in Memphis) and drummed from his church by his congregation, Hightower has become a complete recluse and misanthropist, incapable of sharing with any other human being, a man haunted by phantoms and for whom prayer is no longer possible. Sitting by the window, unafraid but hating the darkness, he thinks to himself:

'I should never have let myself get out of the habit of prayer.' He turns from the window. One wall of the study is lined with books. He pauses before them, seeking, until he finds the one which he wants. It is Tennyson. It is dog-eared. He has had it ever since the seminary. He sits beneath the lamp and opens it. It does not take long. Soon the fine galloping language, the gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts begins to swim smooth and swift and peaceful. It is better than praying without having to bother to think aloud. It is like listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language which he does not even need to not understand.²

The eunuch-in-a-cathedral view of Tennyson, essentially Stracheyan, is one that persisted until 1950, the watershed in the reaction against the poet. The reaction itself need not here be rehearsed. Anticipated by Tennyson,³ it gained its greatest momentum in the years following the First World War when the Victorians ceased being "Great" and became "Eminent"—in the best ironic sense. From 1917, when the term "re-

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 12th of May 1971.


action” was first applied with reference to Tennyson by A. C. Bradley, to 1948, when Paull Franklin Baum published the first scholarly book on the poet, the adjectives most frequently applied to disparage the Laureate were “Victorian”, “melancholic”, and “stupid”. And during these decades there were really only three important attempts to rescue Tennyson from these charges—by Alfred Noyes (1923), Humbert Wolfe (1930), and T. S. Eliot (1936). Eliot’s judgement in his famous essay on In Memoriam—that Tennyson was a “great” poet because he possessed the three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: “abundance, variety, and complete competence”—was more than an act of critical charity; it was a generous acknowledgement by one of the greatest poets in English in the twentieth century of his indebtedness to one of the greatest poets in English of the nineteenth. Though he was not consistent in his praise, Eliot was perfectly willing to accept Tennyson on his own terms, as a Victorian poet: “We may not admire his aims,” Eliot says, “but whatever he sets out to do, he succeeds in doing, with a mastery which gives us the sense of confidence that is one of the major pleasures of poetry.”


3 For Tennyson’s melancholia see especially Harold Nicolson, Tennyson: Aspects of His Life Character and Poetry (London, 1923); W. H. Auden in his introduction to his selection of Tennyson’s poetry (London, 1946) wrote: “... in youth he looked like a gypsy; in age like a dirty old monk; he had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet; he was also undoubtedly the stupidest; there was little about melancholia that he didn’t know; there was little else that he did” (p. x).

4 Noyes’s Lowell lecture on “Tennyson and Some Recent Critics” was collected in Some Aspects of Modern Poetry (London, 1924); Humbert Wolfe’s Tennyson appeared in “The Poets on the Poets” series (London, 1934); Eliot’s essay, written to introduce a selection from Tennyson, was collected in Selected Essays: New Edition (London, 1950).

5 Eliot, p. 286.
was for Victorian England the less he would inevitably be for all time."  

Baum's view might be dismissed as petulant or idiosyncratic were it central only to the reaction; paradoxically, however, it also dominates the revival that has been underway during the past two decades—a revival whose main impetus has been to make Tennyson respectable as a modern rather than as a Victorian poet.

The revival began in earnest with A. J. Carr's essay on "Tennyson as a Modern Poet", published in 1950. Building on the reaction itself and following the Nicolsonian formula of separating the modern cream from the Victorian milk in Tennyson's poetry, Carr saw Tennyson as a true though unconscious precursor of twentieth-century literary sensibility, who "shows and hides, as if in embryo, a master theme of Joyce's Ulysses", a "moody self-consciousness" and the "sense of loss"; who "forecasts Yeats's interest in the private myth"; who "apprehended in advance of Aldous Huxley the uses of mysticism to castigate materialistic culture"; and who, "in Maud, at least . . . prepared the way for the verse of Eliot's 'Preludes' and 'Prufrock'". In short, Tennyson possessed the divided sensibility in which both "private and public worlds are fused".

Of course, Carr was not all approving: Tennyson had a masterly bathetic side; in his idyllic mood he employed an art that, echoing Frost, "looks neither far out nor in deep" and he was too inclined to further this art at the expense of "tragic perspectives that a genuine dualism might have afforded"; and, of course, "he kept to the mainstream of his culture", working out remorselessly the fatal consequences of the "romantic tradition", bankrupting "its style by his lavish expenditures", and reducing "its intellectual ambitions to the accidents of individual perceptions and personal blindness". Still, after Tennyson, there was "the deluge, the spreading chaos of 'modern art'," and Tennyson was "one of its makers".

There is no question but Carr's essay falls into that category

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1 Baum, p. 289.
3 Carr, p. 42.
4 Carr, passim, but especially pp. 60-64.
that in scholarly parlance is referred to as seminal. Just how seminal, however, has not been fully recognized; for the impact of the article was not alone on Tennyson studies: it redirected the whole approach to the subject of Victorian poetry and literature. Carr's achievement has proved enormous in the development of subsequent critical theory. His choice of "modern" as the standard against which qualitative judgements can be measured not only provides a yardstick for distinguishing the literary successes and failures of the last century, it also helps to establish a continuity, reaching backwards, to account for the superiority of contemporary over Victorian sensibility. Thus—and this inference is implicit in those quotations already cited—Joyce, Yeats, Huxley, and Eliot were not so much influenced as anticipated by Tennyson and other nineteenth-century writers, who when they were at their best were most modern and when they were Victorian were almost inevitably bad. Carr's intention was almost certainly other than I have described; he was honestly and seriously attempting to restore Tennyson to the ranks of the critically acceptable, to rescue him from the obloquy of the reaction, and to revive a concern with some of Tennyson's poems. Yet in its own way, Carr's defence was itself in the tradition of the reaction, and more damaging perhaps because it offered sophisticated explanations to replace the simplistic assumptions that long before Carr had already taken on something of the character of a myth about the Victorians.

Carr's main contribution to the study of Tennyson and of Victorian poetry in general was that by providing an entrée acceptable to the modern critic he made it once again a legitimate enterprise. In elaborating this view, later writers have increasingly emphasized those elements in the modern condition which were shared by Victorian writers—tension, alienation, duality, ambiguity, paradox, irony, ambivalence, contradiction, insecurity—to demonstrate how very much at odds the Victorians were with the spirit of their age, or how manfully they struggled to retain their integrity against pressures to compromise and conform. A quick survey of the titles of a few of the critical studies will underscore this dominant emphasis in the criticism
of the last two decades: *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, The Age of Paradox, The Poetry of Experience, The Victorian Debate, The Divided Self,* and *Victorian Revolutionaries.*\(^1\) The influence of two of these works—*The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* and *The Poetry of Experience*—has been especially important. In the first, E. D. H. Johnson stresses the "double awareness" of the major Victorian poets and sees Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold as representative of their age precisely because "in their best work they habitually appealed not to, but against the prevailing mores . . .".\(^2\) Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* conveys in its subtitle—*The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*—the bias of his study, but his distinction between a poetry which is verifiable through outside values, universally accepted, and modern poetry in which values are essentially existential, has advanced appreciably our understanding of the evolution of aesthetic ideas and of the forms through which they are expressed.

In so far as the achievement of modern criticism has been to clarify our understanding of the continuity of the literature of the last hundred and fifty years, by tracing the common forces which, since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of democratic institutions, have shaped the creative imagination, it has had a constructive and salutary effect. Certainly, the way in which the major Victorian poets and novelists are read today is vastly more rewarding aesthetically than when the novels and poems were seen merely as social documents. Yet there is an inherent danger in pressing too relentlessly the cultural consanguinity of the two periods. The similarities between them must never be allowed to obscure their palpable differences, and the critic must constantly repress his tendency to superimpose his own sensibilities upon the literature of the past. Propinquity itself can have a distorting effect where the Victorians are concerned (as it did during the reaction), and any monolithic vision of a continuous modernity—especially when it is accompanied by


\(^2\) Johnson, p. ix.
critical assumptions that convey value judgements—must be qualified by a clear recognition of the assumptions underlying that vision. In the first place, it is presumptuous, self-conscious, and retrospective. The Victorians also regarded themselves and their own age as modern, but their orientation to the world they lived in was radically different from our own. Victorian and modern, then, are hardly critical terms; they are chronological labels which differ essentially in kind: the one is fixed and static, the other relative, shifting, and variable, having something of the quality of metaphor. So that it is one thing to talk about a Victorian modern (or even a modern Victorian), quite another to talk about a modern in the contemporary, twentieth-century sense.

Clearly there are vital resemblances between the two periods, but the differences can be illustrated quite simply. Langbaum points out that "whatever the difference between the literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they are connected by their view of the world as meaningless, by their response to the same wilderness".¹ The theory of the Victorian wasteland has won considerable currency since it was first introduced by Curtis Dahl in 1955,² and there is no doubt that the image does operate in much of the poetry as a symbolic extension of the themes of loss, isolation, despair, or frustration. It does not follow, however, that either most of the Victorians or even those creative writers in whose works the image recurs with some frequency construed their world as totally meaningless. Like the poem from which the image derives, the idea, and the view of life that it articulates, is post-Victorian—modern; applied either to the age as a whole or to individual writers such as Tennyson or Dickens, it is a kind of intellectual back-formation that explains neither the Victorian dilemma nor the modern malaise because it fails in the crucial area of discrimination. And the qualifications necessary to give the generalization sufficient elasticity to enable one to apply it critically as a link

¹ Langbaum, p. 11.
between the two periods involve a comparison of the controlling differences between them.

The fact is that the Victorians by and large had not yet achieved that condition of hollowness ascribed by Eliot to the inhabitants of the twentieth-century wasteland. If they found few practical solutions to the problems that beset them, they were at least still capable of framing the questions. The inarticulateness of Prufrock is a distinctly modern characteristic—which may partially explain Eliot's praise for the quality of Tennyson's doubt in *In Memoriam*, which he found more convincing than its faith.\(^1\) Whether Tennyson would have concurred is another matter. Concepts such as the "larger hope" hardly satisfy the modern critic, who finds formulae such as the Ancient Sage's advice to "cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt" either the commitment to a false optimism or simply insincere. Perhaps because modern man has come so close to being overwhelmed by some of the problems with which the Victorians managed to cope, he sees their solutions as facile and compromising; but these areas define adequately enough the vast hiatus which exists between the world views of the two eras.

Writers such as Tennyson and Dickens offer illuminating illustrations of these irreconcilable differences. In terms of their critical histories, both men have had parallel careers. Both experienced in the early decades of this century a long period of decline; both have undergone marked revivals (commencing at about the same time), which have generated sizable libraries of research and critical analyses; and both have been subjected to an almost identical metamorphosis, the design of which is to transform Victorian caterpillars into modern butterflies. It is certainly true that neither writer accepted uncritically the milieu in which he lived: both were hostile to the dehumanizing forces at work in society, and both found a voice to castigate contemporary evils. In their respective demonic visions they were, as modern commentators point out, representative Victorians, dedicated to struggle and protest. If such a commitment is tantamount to being modern, they were in this sense modern. But they were also representative Victorians in quite

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\(^1\) Eliot, p. 294.
another, and opposite, way, and each possessed what M. K. Goldberg has called (in reference to Dickens) a celestial vision,\(^1\) a balancing view of the world that emphasizes the other side of human duality, that focuses on the virtues of life rather than the vices, that is essentially optimistic rather than pessimistic, that believes in the verities, the hopes, and the sentiments of the human heart. Contemporary criticism, need I say, is less responsive to this celestial vision. The high point in any Dickens novel for the modern critic is that dark, satanic, symbolic, Kafkaesque passage in which human life is depicted as a microcosm of the garden of evil; Tiny Tim, the death of Little Nell or Little Paul, and the happy ending of *Great Expectations* are, at best, sources of embarrassment, examples of the sentimental failure of romanticism when thought and feeling are merely juxtaposed rather than fused.\(^2\) At his best, in the early dramatic monologues, in *In Memoriam*, and in *Maud*, Tennyson dramatizes through dream, myth or madness the plight of the individual, man or artist, struggling against social and cosmic forces beyond his control. Such works receive most of the critical attention and almost all the critical acclaim; those poems in which another and sunnier vision of life is depicted, are not only beneath contempt, they are in the main beneath comment.

Arnold accused Wordsworth of averting his eyes "from half of human fate", because he did not possess a tragic vision. Dickens and Tennyson certainly did, but it was not exclusive; always in the background, beneath the veneer of social and moral corruption, lay the undefiled territory of the heart. The failure of so much contemporary criticism of the Victorians is its unwillingness, or inability, to recognize and respond to this alternative to the Victorian wasteland.

II

Reviewing Angus Wilson's *The World of Charles Dickens* in a popular magazine, John Fowles, the author of *The French*  
\(^1\)In a forthcoming book on Carlyle and Dickens to be published by the University of Georgia Press.  
\(^2\)Paraphrased from Langbaum, p. 40.
Lieutenant's Woman, makes a most curious comment: "Literature", he says, "is a field where to understand cannot be to forgive, and [Wilson] does not forgive his master his failings." This reversal of the old "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner" cliché is arresting not only because it seems so manifestly to contradict Fowles's own assessment of the Victorians in his bestselling novel, but because in its premise it is at least as moral as it is critical. Fowles's "Bill of Impeachment" against Dickens, which he acknowledges he drafted before encountering Wilson's study, can with very little accommodation be made applicable to Tennyson—"sentimentality, facetiousness, prudery, political and social schizophrenia, overproduction, dictatorship of character over plot, and ... an almost complete inability to invent intelligent, independent women"; for Tennyson, like Dickens, belonged to that group of Victorian "bigheads", which Fowles identifies as writing "as if they were standing in for God", a stance, he argues, that "doesn't quite allow us to rate them by standards more divine than human". That Fowles's strictures so neatly epitomize much of what has already been said in this paper is not, of course, accidental, and they provide a convenient transition into those aspects of Tennyson's Victorianism which I now wish to examine.

Tennyson is the domestic poet par excellence in English. His pre-occupation with domestic themes and subjects—women, love, friendship, marriage, familial relationships—and with their religious, social, and political extensions is central to any informed understanding of his poetry. "Upon the sacredness of home life," Hallam Tennyson wrote, "he would maintain that the stability and greatness of a nation largely depend; and one of the secrets of his power over mankind was his true joy in the family duties and affections." But the domestic element in Tennyson's poetry goes well beyond matters relating to the hearth, the heart, and the home: it is the stabilizing force in individual life, the protection afforded by a civilized order in society, and the assurance of a purposeful meaning in the universe. Its concomitants are those values on which the Victorians placed

2 Memoir, i. 189.
so high a premium—virtue, integrity, loyalty, duty, discipline, chastity, honour—values which Tennyson thought of as universal, the humanizing denominators that bridge distinctions of sex, class, generations, and even nations.

How central to Tennyson's whole world view and indeed to his working aesthetic the domestic vision is, however, has never been fully explored, partly because it is too exclusively identified with the English Idyls, partly because it is so incompatible with the modern received view of the poet. Some critics have pursued in limited ways various aspects of the domestic theme, but in the main Tennyson's domestic poems, and particularly the English Idyls, are not held in high regard, despite the fact that the idyllic form, in a wide spectrum of variations, dominates Tennyson's poetry from *The Lover's Tale* to "The Death of Oenone", and is manifest in all the major poems—*The Princess*, *In Memoriam*, *Maud*, and *Idylls of the King*. In fact, stripping from it Baum's disparaging intent, the idyllic strain can be said to be "the Tennyson line" for as Philip Drew has pointed out, "Poems like 'Edwin Morris' and 'Enoch Arden' are so challengingly Tennysonian that, if we cannot respond to them, we can hardly lay claim to respond to Tennyson". What is most surprising about the response of the commentators, however, is not their reaction to the simplicity of the "Idylls of the

1 Throughout I have used the one-l spelling to distinguish the English Idyls from *Idylls of the King*. This distinction was adopted by Hallam Tennyson in the Eversley edition of his father's works. Tennyson himself subtitled "The brook," in the *Maud* volume, "An Idyl", but he was not as consistent in maintaining the distinction as Sir Charles Tennyson suggests in his biography (London, 1949, p. 285). "Sea Dreams", for example, was subtitled "An Idyll" when it first appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1860.


Hearth", or their rejection of the sentimentality of the emotions expressed in them, or their dislike of contemporary subjects, or even their dismissal of the poems on aesthetic grounds—what surprises is the almost uniform assumption that in using this genre, Tennyson was consciously or unconsciously being insincere. Three examples will make the point. For Baum, they represent a "sentimental strain [with emphasis on strain]..." which made Victorian hearts bleed easily and which Tennyson came to rely upon hereafter to satisfy his numerous following. A sincere insincerity made him falsely true" is Baum's perverse conclusion.¹ In the opinion of Jerome H. Buckley, Tennyson turned to the contemporary idyls "with no very full engagement." In them, he "catered to the vogue for the actualistic genre study and the self-consciously applied 'modern touches' of homely sentiment or current idiom," and these poems have justifiably been suffered to die.² Clyde Ryals makes no attempt to soften his opinion that many of the idyls are "dross": "As for the domestic idylls, their flavor is that of the machine: they lack the force of personal conviction, their production seemingly stemming not from a centric need but from a peripheral demand."³

If Paul Franklin Baum's evaluation were correct—that the idyls are no more than

...little pictures, glimpses, guesses, incidents or angles of this our common experience, with emphasis on the simple, the easy, the familiar: a miscellany; the work of an enquiring, eager, sensitive mind without a penetrating vision or profound convictions or a philosophical understanding⁴

—then these poems would no longer invite attention. But they are clearly more than that. As Valerie Pitt has indicated, in the only study which has made any attempt to pursue the concept of order as an organic principle in Tennyson's work,

¹ Baum, p. 146.
⁴ Baum, p. 175. "The Laureate pieces" and "the genre idylls", Baum concluded later on, "are parts of a picture and may be useful to the historian of manners; they are interesting as the products of a poet who was fulfilling an obligation or who had nothing better to write about; they are in truth the earthy part of Tennyson and have already gone to their native dust, whence only for the purposes of a general review may they be for a moment removed" (p. 247).
It is foolish to laugh at Tennyson’s concern with domestic relationships—they were at the forefront of the Victorian ethical tableau, they are the basis of a literary convention, and Tennyson uses that convention, as most poets use the conventions of their period, as the medium of something else.¹

It is precisely that “something else” which must now be examined and the examination involves three stages: first, a consideration of the mode of the domestic idyl—its characteristics and development and its relationship to other forms used by Tennyson; second, a survey of Tennyson’s domestic vision—its assumptions, its relevance to the ethos out of which it grew, and its centrality to the whole corpus of Tennyson’s writings; third, an analysis of that phenomenon toward which this whole argument has been directed: the domestic solution in the poetry of Tennyson.

What Valerie Pitt identifies as the major problem in Tennyson’s public poems—“that, although there was a body of common sentiment, there was no available poetic convention in which to express it”²—is equally true of the English Idyls, the narrative-dramatic mode that dominated the second volume of Poems (1842). The 1842 collection is, of course, the culmination of Tennyson’s early poetic career because it is both retrospective and anticipatory; it provides as does no other an opportunity for review while at the same time pointing to the development that will lead to the Laureateship and beyond. By this date, Tennyson had sounded his major themes, settled on the three principal subjects of his poetry—domestic, classical, and medieval—experienced and absorbed the principal event in his imaginative life—the death of Hallam—and attained a poetic maturity clearly evident in the revisions of the earliest published poems. He had also found modes adequate to the expression of his themes and compatible with his own sense of his poetic mission. Chief among these is the idyl which is a close cousin of the dramatic monologue, and these two forms account for the large majority of new poems in the 1842 collection.

One needs constantly to be reminded that Tennyson is not exclusively a lyric poet. In fact, his purely lyrical period is concentrated in the first two volumes of 1830 and 1832, which

contain almost no poems that can be labelled narrative or dramatic in a strict sense. Several of the mood poems in these early volumes may be construed as seed narratives, in which an underlying action, or rather a situation, is implied in the description rather than depicted, but even the "Lady" poems, whose heroines can be seen as the nuclei of the later idyls, are seldom realized in dramatic terms; they tend to remain, as R. H. Horne called them, "transcendentalisms of the senses". From 1842 on, the narrative-dramatic modes predominate in the poetry. Tennyson certainly does not abandon the lyric, but he utilizes it largely in conjunction with other forms. Sometimes it is restricted almost wholly to descriptive passages, as in *Idylls of the King*, where it is embodied in the very texture of the language; sometimes it provides a kind of tonal or intercalary relief, as in the songs of *The Princess* or in "The Brook". In *Maud* and *In Memoriam* it is organic to the inherent drama of the two poems—the vehicle of the intensely personal emotions contained within the narrative frame of *In Memoriam*, a mood substitution for dramatic personae in the monodrama *Maud*.

By comparison with the textural extravagance of many of the early poems, such as "The Lady of Shalott", "The Hesperides", "The Lotos-Easters", and "The Palace of Art", the domestic idyls are intentionally stark, militantly anti-lyrical. Pared of all surface decoration, they are marked by an almost total absence of characterization, an economy of narration, and a stylistic simplicity and directness that sets them apart both from the lush psychic or natural landscapes of those poems already mentioned and from the dramatic monologues. They are nonetheless distinctly Tennysonian, the plain-style counterparts of his more ornate productions. Like so many other forms which Tennyson used in his early poetry, the domestic idyl, first evolved in "The Miller's Daughter" in the 1832 volume, was experimental. Tennyson continued to employ the form throughout his lifetime, but the truly remarkable feature of the idyls is their variety, a variety both of style and treatment which is

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at least as important as the narrative and thematic similarities that link them as a recognizable genre; and what is too frequently lost sight of in discussing them as a group is the real affinity which they have with all of Tennyson’s works.

Even if discussion is limited to the dozen or so poems written by 1842 which may be classed as domestic idyls, this variety is immediately apparent. Metrically the poems range from tetrameter quatrains (in “The Miller’s Daughter”) to irregular couplets (in “The Flight” and “Locksley Hall”) to blank verse (in “The Gardener’s Daughter”, “Audley Court”, and “Edwin Morris”); and several employ the device of intercalary songs. Point of view varies from omniscient to first person narrator to dialogue. Structurally they are even more varied: “Morte d’Arthur,” with its introductory “Epic” and epilogue and “Godiva” are frame poems with a nineteenth-century setting; “The Miller’s Daughter”, “The May Queen”, and “The Flight” are limp dramatic monologues; “The Day Dream” is a fantasy, “The Talking Oak” and “Walking to the Mail” dialogues, “Locksley Hall” a soliloquy; and “The Lord of Burleigh” and “Edward Gray” bear close resemblance to the ballad. “The Gardener’s Daughter”, “Edwin Morris”, and “Audley Court” are more difficult to classify. The first is almost exclusively descriptive, a mood reconstruction that, especially when coupled with “The Antechamber” which precedes it in Ricks’s edition,¹ clearly has strong biographical overtones. “Edwin Morris”, the most sophisticated of the early idyls, is told through a first-person narrator, but the poem is a dramatic study in contrasts, related in the first part by varying attitudes expressed by the narrator, Morris, and Edward Bull the curate on the subject of women and love, followed in the second part by a cynical love-narrative exemplum that provides an ironic commentary on the earlier discussion. “Audley Court” dramatizes, in the songs of the aristocratic narrator and Francis Hale, the farmer’s son, two views of contemporary life and society, within a picnic framework not unlike that in

¹ All quotations from Tennyson’s poetry are taken from Christopher Ricks’s edition, The Poems of Tennyson in the “Longman’s Annotated English Poets” series (London, 1969).
The Princess. In later idyls, Tennyson repeated some of these techniques, but he also introduced new variations, in the expanded treatment of "Enoch Arden" and "Alymer's Field", in the interlacing of narrative and lyric in "The Brook", and in the use of dialect in the two "Northern Farmers", "The Village Wife", "The Spinster's Sweet Arts", and other poems.

Set against this technical variety in the idyls are the common themes that unite them, and in this regard the form itself has the virtue of complete appropriateness. Most of the idyls treat that most universal of all human themes—love and marriage, in a contemporary setting. But even here there is a great variety in the delineation of situations. "The Miller's Daughter" alone of the early idyls presents a picture of domestic bliss, uncomplicated by those natural and social forces which tend to subvert the domestic ideal. The narrator-husband, anticipating death and hopeful that he and his wife "may die the self-same day," reviews in retrospect his wooing and winning of Alice, the miller's daughter, and the long, contented life they have had together. An orphan of the squire, the narrator before he "dreamed [the] pleasant dream" (1.46) was "long and listless"; love awakened him and gave "motion" to his being. The reflex of Alice's beauteous form lures him to love,

and love dispelled the fear
That I should die an early death. (lines 89-90)

At first he demurs, apprehensive whether she will give him "vow for vow" and fearful that his mother will forbid the marriage, feeling that "I might have looked a little higher" (line 140). The enlightened mother, however, recognizing that "I must love her for your sake", directs the boy to fetch Alice. Alice then herself demurs, "fearful that [she] should not please."

"I loved you," the husband says, "better for your fears" (lines 148-9), as he moves from his recreation of the past to the present. He then bids Alice sing the "foolish song" he composed on their bridal day, a conventional doggerel of love and intimacy in which he is envious of her ear-rings, girdle, and necklace because of their physical propinquity. The "early rage" of Love, he says, had made him a rhymster in youth and
makes him garrulous in old age, caught up in sweet recall. Returning to the present,

... now those vivid hours are gone,
Like mine own life to me thou art,
Where Past and Present, wound in one,
Do make a garland for the heart: (lines 195-9)

he bids her sing "that other song" made when he was "Half-angered with [his] happy lot" (lines 199-200), the gist of which is that "Love the gift is Love the debt" (line 207).

Love is hurt with jar and fret.
Love is made a vague regret.
Eyes with idle tears are wet.
Idle habit links us yet.
What is love? for we forget.
Ah, no! no! (lines 209-14)

Experience both happy and sad (they have lost a child) and long familiarity have tempered passion, so that now

The kiss,
The woven arms, seem but to be
Weak symbols of the settled bliss,
The comfort, I have found in thee: (lines 231-4)

They have now become "Two spirits in one equal mind" (line 236), and as he ends his monologue, they wander forth at sunset across the vale to the old mill where in death the "somewhat in this world amiss/ Shall be unriddled..." and where the "somewhat [that] flows to us in life" will be "taken quite away" (lines 19-24).

"The Miller's Daughter" is certainly a sentimental poem, evincing all those weaknesses that are associated with the domestic idyls, but it marked the beginning of a new mode in Tennyson's poetry, and it provides an interesting contrast with most of the later idyls in which the course of true love hardly ever runs smooth. The view of life expressed in the poem, where simple virtues are extolled as the principle source of happiness, is no longer in vogue, but here, J. W. Croker's observations notwithstanding, Tennyson was indulging both a personal and a

1 In his review of Poems (1833) in the Quarterly Review (April 1833), Croker wrote: "Millers' Daughters, poor things, have been so generally betrayed by their sweethearts, that it is refreshing to find that Mr. Tennyson has united
very Victorian vision of an ideal life, expressed in pastoral terms.

Tennyson does not often resort to such unqualified representations of the domestic vision. More normal are those situations in which the ideal is corrupted by the loss of love or friendship. Whereas love is construed throughout Tennyson’s poetry as an ennobling force leading to action, the beneficent effects of love tend in the poetry to be frustrated by a multitude of causes, including vicissitude itself, one of Tennyson’s most important themes. Chief among these are desertion (as in the two Mariana poems, “Forlorn”, and “Charity”), death (as in “Despair”, Maud, In Memoriam, and “The First Quarrel”), rejection (as in “Romney’s Remorse” and “Oenone”), pride (as in “The May Queen”), infidelity or betrayal (as in Idylls of the King), enforced separation (as in “Enoch Arden”), and, especially in the domestic idyls, the miseries of enforced marriage, a social theme reflecting the class distinctions and the pre-occupation with materialism that militated against Tennyson’s own suit with Rosa Baring. On this subject Tennyson can become virulent, and it lies at the very heart of his satiric attacks on the cash nexus, even in those poems, such as “Sea-Dreams” and “Northern Farmer: New Style” where it is unrelated (or only marginally related) to the subject of marriage. This mercenary threat to human relationships, the “Aylmerism” of his finest domestic idyl outside Maud, is indicted in poem after poem—as “the rentroll cupid of our rainy isles” in “Edwin Morris” (line 104), as “the tyrant vassal of a tyrant vice” in “The Flight” (line 25), and as “This filthy marriage-hindering Mammon made/The harlot of the cities” in “Aylmer’s Field” (lines 374-5). “Aylmerism” is the blight of lovers, and it blasts both the man and the woman: it is the source of the
himself to his miller’s daughter in lawful wedlock, and the poem is a history of his courtship and wedding . . . [beginning] with a sketch of his own birth, parentage, and personal appearance . . . .” Reprinted in Jump, p. 72.

1 See Ralph Rader, Tennyson’s Maud: The Biographical Genesis (Berkeley, 1963) for a full account of the poetic effects of this episode in Tennyson’s life.

2 The best examination of Tennyson’s hostility to commercialism and materialism is Thomas J. Assad’s article on the poems in the Enoch Arden volume, already cited.
hero's despair in "Locksley Hall", where "Every gate is thronged with suitors, [and] the markets overflow" (line 101); and indirectly (as we learn in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After") it is the cause of Amy's premature death in childbirth. Unlike Edith in "Aylmer's Field", who steadfastly refuses the suitors her father chooses to dispel her love for Leolin, and who dies with her lover's name on her lips, Amy in "Locksley Hall", the "Puppet to a father's threat, and servile to a shrewish tongue" (line 42), and Letty Hill in "Edwin Morris" are too timid to remain steadfast in their loves against the pressures of a selfish materialism. As Maud would in all likelihood have become had the hero not engaged in duel with that "lump of earth", her brother, Amy and Letty Hill and their respective lovers are the victims of a social corruption that by destroying the domestic order upon which true happiness depends leads either to death or personal misery. That this theme has wider connotations, however, beyond the sentimentalized frameworks of the stories themselves is indicated not only by its reiteration in virtually all the domestic idyls, but also by the ending of a poem such as "Aylmer's Field", where instead of a continued flourishing line of Aylmers, the progeny of a happy union between Edith and Leolin, ideally matched devotees of social reform and good works, there is only an "open field". Marriages, the mother of the infant with "the tender pink five-beaded baby-soles" (line 186) whispers, "are made in Heaven" (line 188). It is a trite observation and it has exposed Tennyson to considerable abuse, but it is the key to his domestic vision, which must now be summarized.

III

In his reverence for pure womanhood, his belief in the regenerative values of love, his commitment to the sanctity of the home and family, his consistent faith in what he called the "Eternal Truths" (the providence of God, the freedom of the human will, and the immortality of the soul), and in his strong sense of duty and distrust of passion, Tennyson was as completely

\textsuperscript{1} Memoir, i. 311.
representative of his age as was Ruskin, say, writing in *Sesame and Lilies*:

This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love,—so far as it is this... it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home.

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermillion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless.¹

Though Tennyson never waxed so poetical in prose on the values of the home, he would certainly have subscribed whole-heartedly to the sentiments that Ruskin enshrines. But Tennyson’s view of women is more romanticized than Ruskin’s, whose discussion of the woman’s “true place and power” is closer to Edward Bull’s “God made the woman for the man,/ And for the good and increase of the world” (“Edwin Morris”, lines 43-44):

... she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of human error. So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman.²

Ruskin wanted “a woman, in any rank of life, ... to know whatever her husband is likely to know, but to know it in a different way ... for daily and helpful use.”³ Tennyson, like the narrator in “Edwin Morris”, pitches his pipe a little higher:

She must train herself to do the large work that lies before her, even though she may not be destined to be wife or mother, cultivating her understanding not her memory only, her imagination in its highest phases, her inborn spirituality

² Idem.
³ Ibid. p. 128.
and her sympathy with all that is pure, noble and beautiful, rather than mere social accomplishments; then and then only will she further the progress of humanity, then and then only men will continue to hold her in reverence.¹

Tennyson's world view, then, is essentially domicentric rather than egocentric (if that coinage may be allowed). As such, it is so perfectly consonant with the ruling Victorian assumptions about the role of women, the value of love and marriage, and the social necessity of the home and family that there can be no question of his making concessions to current values to which he did not personally subscribe. The surviving fragments of his destroyed letters to Emily Selwood and his recorded comments preserved by Hallam in the Memoir, and the poetry itself, provide abundant evidence both of his commitment to the domestic virtues and to the sincerity with which he espoused them.

What principally interests the student of Tennyson's poetry, of course, is the way in which the poet's world view is incorporated into his work, whether in fact he transmutes into literary terms the values to which he adhered in life, and if so the particular ways in which they are employed. In discussing the domestic idyl, I have tried to demonstrate that, in that genre at least these values are integral to the subject and the form. We have seen that Tennyson argues for a concept of order that moves along an ascending hierarchical ladder from personal security, through familial stability, to a higher order in the state and in the cosmos, and I have suggested that this vision in its entirety can be referred to as domestic. The love-marriage nexus is at the very centre of the vision, principally because its effect is a humanizing one which links man not only within the individual relationship but to his kind. The fullest statement of the vision that appears in the poetry is contained in Arthur's words when he confronts Guinevere in her convent sanctuary at Almesbury. His "purpose of his life", he says, was to create,

In that fair Order of my Table Round,
A glorious company, the flower of men,
To serve as model for the mighty world,
And be the fair beginning of a time.

¹ Memoir, i. 250.
I made them lay their hands in mine and swear
To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honour his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her; for indeed I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.

("Guinevere", lines 460-80)

"Fair Order", and "all that makes a man", and one might add,
"the whole round earth in every way/ Bound by gold chains
about the feet of God" ("The Passing of Arthur", lines 422-3)—
these are the ideals of Tennyson's domestic vision. But because
they are ideals, because the vision is basically Edenic, Tennyson
seldom brings it into vivid focus. Like Arthur's vow, which
exact from men a fealty of which very few are capable, the
vision is rarely realizable. In the domestic idyls or in other
poems where the vision is applied to contemporary situations it
is apt to be too facile or too commonplace—as it is, for example,
in the vignette in "The Two Voices" of the family on its way
to church that silences the voice of despair and launches the
second that "see[s] the end, and know[s] the good" (line 432); or in the ending of The Princess, where a situation is projected
that brings "the statelier Eden back to men" (line 277). Dis­tanced through the perspective of time, however, either past
or future, and conjoined with those techniques that Tennyson
so frequently employs to heighten or expand perception—
myth, dream, vision, madness—it assumes a greater dimension
and is more convincing, though less overtly recognizable.
But the domestic vision is a constant underlying theme through­
out the poetry. It unites poems as disparate as the English
Idyls, "Ulysses", "Enoch Arden", Maud, In Memoriam, and
Idylls of the King, and it is perhaps the most didactic element in Tennyson’s art. “I would I were”, the narrator in “Audley Court” sings in his song to Ellen Aubrey, “The pilot of the darkness and the dream” (lines 70-71). Tennyson may well have interpreted his own poetic mission along just such a line, as he pursued those ethical and moral solutions that are the practical manifestations of the domestic vision.

The “parabolic drift” that Tennyson acknowledges as running through Idylls of the King actually defines a broader technique operating within the poetry. Because Tennyson is essentially a subjective poet, the drift, at least in part, is seen as biographical, and critics have been quick to seize on these recurring themes which define the inner tensions of the poet struggling to resolve conflicting attitudes toward art, loss, and the larger issues of life, and to discover poetic styles suitable to their expression. The result is that almost all Tennyson’s discussed poems tend to be read as disguised statements reflecting the poet’s personal response to his own sense of isolation, alienation, doubt, and despair, deriving from those more prominent known sources that inspired his poetic imagination. Modern criticism has unquestionably produced, following these lines, some exciting readings of individual poems and identified patterns in the poetry that extend the boundaries of critical appreciation. One of the most persistent patterns, however, the domestic theme, requires much more attention than it has received.

The theme makes its appearance early in Tennyson’s poetry. I have discussed elsewhere, in conjunction with “St. Simeon Stylites”, Tennyson’s pursuit of the dehumanizing effects of pride in several of the more highly regarded poems from the early works 1: “Oenone”, “The Palace of Art”, “The Lotus-Eaters”, “Ulysses”, and “Tithonus”. In every instance, save “Ulysses”, which presents a more complicated problem, the protagonist has isolated himself from his kind by a conscious denial of his humanity. Not all of the poems actually present the inevitable nemesis, but in most instances it is im-

1 See William E. Fredeman, “‘A Sign Betwixt the Meadow and the Cloud’ : The Ironic Apotheosis of Tennyson’s ‘Saint Simeon Stylites’”, University of Toronto Quarterly, xxxviii (1968), 69-83.
licit either in the action itself or in the ironic denouement. What is interesting about these poems is the fact that, while they can certainly be read as reflections of the poet’s individual condition, they all urge a more universal application, and they offer a solution which either positively or negatively lays emphasis on the importance of values associated with a common humanity. In rejecting Oenone, for example, Paris renounces those virtues connected with “sovereign power”—“self-respect, self-knowledge, self-control” (line 142). The hubris, that leads him to aspire “to judge the gods,” has, indeed, cosmic ramifications; for had he heeded the ethical maxim of Pallas,

To live by law,
Acting the law we live by without fear;
And because right is right,
(lines 145-7)

his had not been the crime that “half unpeopled Ilion” (“The Death of Oenone”, line 61). The full extent of Paris’ defection and his nemesis are not explored in the 1832 poem, which ends with Oenone’s pledge of revenge—“I will not die alone” (line 242)—and with the prophetic fire that dances before the wild Cassandra. Sixty years later, in “The Death of Oenone”, however, where the marriage bond between the pair is made more explicit, Paris’ sins are mirrored both in the natural imagery and in his own physical decay. No longer “beauteous as a God”, Paris is “Lame, crooked, reeling, livid... like the wraith of his dead self” (lines 25-29). And when he pleads for her help after he is struck by a poisoned arrow, Oenone admonishes him, “‘Adulterer,/ Go back to thine adulteress and die!’” (lines 47-48). In an ironic twist at the end of “The Death of Oenone”, Tennyson intensifies the meaning of both works, for Oenone, who at the outset of the second poem is half mad, follows Paris into the flames:

The morning light of happy marriage broke
Through all the clouded years of widowhood,
And muffling up her comely head, and crying
‘Husband!’ she leapt upon the funeral pile,
And mixt herself with him and past in fire.
(lines 102-6)

Oenone’s sacrifice is the final result of Paris’ rejection of
human love, and neither his pathetic plea (reminiscent of Guido’s to Pompilia)—

"Oenone, by thy love which once was mine,  
Help, heal me. I am poisoned to the heart."

(lines 45-46)

—nor his excuse that “Man is but the slave of Fate” (line 44) mitigates his guilt and his responsibility. And it is perhaps significant that in his sequel Tennyson explored the death not of Paris, which would have been the logical consequence given the end of the first poem, but of Oenone. Like the mariners in “The Lotos-Eaters” or the proud Soul in “The Palace of Art”, both of whom aspire to the supra-human condition, Paris is “careless of mankind”; and all these characters may well ask, with Tithonus, for different reasons consequent upon their individual actions,

Why should a man desire in any way  
To vary from the kindly race of men . . . ?  
("Tithonus", lines 28-29)

“Ulysses”, as I have said, presents complications. The poem has always been regarded as one of Tennyson’s finest, but his own comments about it leave ultimately ambiguous his intent in portraying the insatiable old mariner. However one interprets Ulysses’ desire for boundless knowledge and experience or the meaning of his final voyage, and however one reconciles these with Tennyson’s comments that the poem gave his feelings about the “need for going forward, and braving the struggles of life”, and his linking of the poem with “Tithonus” and In Memoriam, the third section of the poem involves an abnegation of domestic responsibility that does not go unpunished or that is not without dire consequences elsewhere in Tennyson.¹ “On God and Godlike men we build our trust” Tennyson says in the Wellington Ode (line 266), and it is difficult, given the implied comparison in “Ulysses,” not to feel that the contrast between father and son in the poem is dramatized for a purpose.

If Ulysses is construed as a hero figure, how is Telemachus to

¹ The chief example is of course Idylls of the King, but even in “Enoch Arden” where the motivation for leaving is unimpeachable, the consequences are unhappy.
be interpreted?\(^1\) Completely egocentric, Ulysses, in turning over the "sceptre and the isle" to Telemachus, is clearly shirking his domestic responsibilities—as King, husband, and father; and if the voyage at the end is other than metaphorical, he is also deserting both his family and his people by recycling those travels which he embarked on initially as a responsible venture. Had the voyage a worthy or even a specific goal in view, other than the fulfilment of some vague selfish quest—it would be possible perhaps to see Ulysses as a kind of Galahad figure; but lacking this there is only the high rhetoric of the closing lines to convey a purpose. “Centred in the sphere/Of common duties” (lines 39-40), Telemachus must assume those burdens relinquished by his father: “to make mild a rugged people,... to subdue them to the useful and the good... [and] to pay meet adoration to [Ulysses’] household gods” (lines 36-42)—in short, to be a king. The comparison with Arthur in “The Holy Grail” is inescapable at this point, and if Arthur represents Tennyson’s ideal, Ulysses (in my view) cannot. When challenged that had he seen the sight, he too would have sworn the vow, Arthur replies:

Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
That which he rules, and is but as the hind
To whom a space of land is given to plow,
Who may not wander from the allotted field
Before his work be done...

(lines 901-5)

For Arthur, as for Wellington, “the path of duty [was] the way to glory” (line 202).

In “Ulysses”, the domestic theme is crucial to the interpretation of the poem, as it is in “Oenone”; and in both poems, the implications go well beyond personal relationships to that social and moral order that encompasses the lives of men. How vital this order is in Tennyson’s world view can be seen in all those poems in which the solution for alienation and isolation is commitment to another person, the race of men, or

\(^1\) I follow in the main outline E. J. Chiasson’s interpretation in “Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’—a Reinterpretation”, originally published in University of Toronto Quarterly, xxiii (1954), 402-9, reprinted in Killham, but depart from it in several respects.
a common cause, and in others in which the absence of this commitment wreaks personal or widespread destruction. It is not possible on this occasion to engage all these poems analytically, but in some variation the solution figures in a great many of Tennyson's poems—including "The Palace of Art", "Locksley Hall", The Princess, In Memoriam, Maud, Idylls of the King, and, of course, the English Idyls. And it is at least as important in the consideration of his poetry as alienation, which by minimizing the Victorian elements in Tennyson's art has distorted one of its basic functions.

Tennyson's domestic vision is grounded on a faith in human contact and a belief in those emotional ties which link men one to another. It presumes the existence of value in a world where the ties that bind are forever under assault. If his views, to a cynical age threatened with extinction either by nuclear war or by the excesses of a surfeit of personal freedom, seem naive, it is no wonder. From his vantage in the Victorian world he could hardly envision social and moral fragmentation of the magnitude that confronts us in the present; but while he would doubtless be surprised and tormented by the complexities of the issues facing man in the twentieth-century, from the evidence of the poetry I somehow do not think that he would be overwhelmed.

IV

Having begun this address with a quotation from William Faulkner, I should like to conclude with another. The passage is very famous, and it may well be one of the finest expressions of literary faith ever written. It is a glowing tribute to human dignity and human endurance, and it insists unashamedly on the validity of those human values that are the cornerstone of Tennyson's own commitment. Tennyson never made, in or out of the Laureateship, about his own work or about literature in general, a statement of comparable significance, but his poetry testifies throughout to a similar concern with those matters of the spirit about which Faulkner is speaking. And this concern,

1 See C. R. Sanders's essay, "Tennyson and the Human Hand", previously cited.
this preoccupation with unalterable and universal values that have little to do with sophistication of world view or style may be a more relevant link between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than any attempt to update Tennyson as a modern poet.

Here is Faulkner's statement, an excerpt from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, words in which Tennyson certainly would have concurred:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.¹

¹ Reprinted in Essays Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner, ed. James B. Meriwether (London, 1967), pp. 119-20. I should like to acknowledge the assistance of Professor John D. Rosenberg and Christopher Ricks and of Simon Nowell-Smith in the preparation of this paper.