

ART AND ARTIFICE IN 'THE PALACE OF ART'

By TAIJI YAMADA*

It strikes me as a strange coincidence that two distinguished modern critics, F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks, in their brief mention of Victorian poetry, should both have singled out Tennyson's poem 'The Palace of Art' for critical comment. In *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), Leavis, while admitting that Tennyson did his best in wrestling solemnly with the 'problems of the age', asserts that "the habits, conventions and techniques that he found congenial are not those of a poet who could have exposed himself freely to the rigours of the contemporary climate,"¹ and that the most characteristic mode of Victorian poetry in general is the mode of withdrawal. In illustration of this assertion, he cites, among few other poems by Victorian poets, Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' and says bluntly, "the explicit moral of this poem is that withdrawal will not do; but when he comes to the moral Tennyson's art breaks down: the poetry belongs to the palace."² It is interesting to note further that in his next book, *Revaluation* (1936), an application of the critical principles stated in *New Bearings* to the exploration of tradition and development in English poetry, he has this to say:

On the nineteenth century I offer no general chapter.... There seemed little point in going on to deal with Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelites in detail. They do not, in fact, lend themselves readily to the critical method of this book; and that it should be so is, I will risk suggesting, a reflection upon them rather than upon the method: their verse doesn't offer, characteristically, any very interesting local life for inspection.³

This unappreciative, if not hostile, view of Leavis's that Tennyson's poetry does not bear local analysis was to inhibit proper criticism of his poetry for a long time to come. In fact, a recent critic, in his short survey of Tennyson's poetry made in 1958, more than twenty years after the publication of *New Bearings* and *Revaluation*, is still under the shadow of Leavis, frankly admitting the debt he owes, in his discussion of 'The Palace of Art,' to the hints thrown out by his master Leavis.⁴

The other critic, Cleanth Brooks, whom I coupled with Leavis at the beginning of this

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¹ F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London, 1932), p. 15.

² Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³ Leavis, *Revaluation* (London, 1936), p. 16.

⁴ Robin Mayhead, 'Tennyson,' in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Volume 6, p. 244.

essay, seems to have much the same view of Victorian poetry as Leavis. In his *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), Brooks applied I.A. Richards's distinction between inclusive and exclusive poetry to a wide range of works, defined Victorian poetry as 'a poetry of sharp exclusions,' and suggested that 'The Palace of Art' failed in synthesizing the two possible ways of living. Brooks's discussion of the poem is worth quoting in full:

In the poem, the soul is permitted to inhabit the pleasure house for several years before her selfishness is made to turn her joy into bitterness. But the reader, one should not forget, is allowed to indulge himself in the beauties also. The poet describes the details of the palace with loving enjoyment, and the reader is expected to find them beautiful too. It is in this inventory of the palace that the reader is expected to find the imagery, the description, the concrete, and the poetic. Poet and reader having tarried awhile in the Ivory Tower, the edifying moral is appended and didacticism is complied with.⁵

As compared with Leavis's blunt statement, this looks like a well-considered opinion. But the patronizing tone in which it is couched hardly seems to do justice to the texture of the poem. Assumptions about Victorian poetry might be said to have adversely affected the performance of this subtle critic. It is curious and unfortunate, at any rate, that both Brooks and Leavis, in discussing Tennyson, confined themselves to one of his early, and by no means most successful, poems. Nevertheless, I submit that the poem itself is a more interesting piece of work than the cursory treatment of both the critics seems to suggest, and it is the intention of this essay to read it with as close attention as possible.

It was Harold Nicolson who, in his critical biography of Tennyson published in 1923, proposed that 'of all poets, Tennyson should be read very carelessly or not at all,'⁶ and his reading of Tennyson has since enjoyed a wide, but perhaps unfortunate influence. I rather hold with H.M. McLuhan who, characterizing Tennyson's poetry as 'picturesque poetry', declared:

Tennyson never fails to compose his larger picture with the utmost care for the texture and placing of objects (and words as objects), light and shade. So that the enjoyment of his best poetry calls for the most patient and alert attention. The derision which was once shed indiscriminately on his 'accuracy' and his flagwaving reflects a recent period when, for various reasons, it was thought that art could be taken at the gallop. We are not likely to repeat that mistake. But Tennyson now deserves to be re-read and revalued with the aid of recovered reading ability. And it will be the Tennyson of the precise ear and eye who will provide the most unexpected and persistent enjoyment.⁷

Reversing Nicolson I would say that 'of all poets, Tennyson should be read very carefully or not at all.'

⁵ Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1965; first published in 1939 by the University of North Carolina Press), p. 240.

⁶ Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson. Aspects of his Life, Character and Poetry* (London, 1923), p. 233.

⁷ H.M. McLuhan, 'Tennyson and Picturesque Poetry' in *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson* (London, 1960), p. 81.

'The Palace of Art' first appeared in *Poems* (dated 1833, but published in December of the preceding year), and was practically re-written before being reprinted in 1842 edition. The first version consisted of 304 lines in 76 numbered stanzas of four lines each, each stanza rhyming abab. The revised version is a poem of 296 lines in 74 stanzas with the same rhyme scheme. The revised version did not completely alter the organization of the poem, but it did illustrate how much Tennyson had matured artistically during 'the ten years' silence.' An examination of the rejected stanzas intimates that Tennyson wished particularly to avoid the sensuous pleasures. The original version, for example, contained the following stanzas describing the sensuous delights of the palate:

And richly feast within thy palacehall,
 Like to the dainty bird that sups,
 Lodged in the lustrous crown-imperial
 Draining the honeycups.

* * *

With piles of flavoured fruits in basket-twine
 Of gold, unheaped, crushing down
 Muskscented blooms—all taste—grape, ground or pine——
 In bunch, or singlegrown——

Our growths, and such as brooding Indian heats
 Make out of crimson blossoms deep,
 Ambrosial pulps and juices, sweets from sweets
 Sunchanged, when seawinds sleep.

Cleared of these and many other extravagant stanzas and drastically amended, the final version is a far more chastened composition than the original version. As W.J. Rolfe said, "The poet wisely decided to allow his luxurious 'soul' none but intellectual joys."⁸ In fact, the poem itself says that the 'soul' held her 'intellectual throne' (line 216).

This poem is prefaced by dedicatory lines to probably Richard Chenevix Trench, a fellow Cambridge Apostle and later archbishop of Dublin, who said to the poet, when they were at Trinity together, "Tennyson, we cannot live in art." The dedication describes the following poem as 'a sort of allegory...of...A sinful soul possessed of many gifts...that did love beauty only,' and declares that 'he that shuts Love out, in turn shall be / Shut out from Love.' And in 1890 Tennyson wrote: "'The Palace of Art' is the embodiment of my own belief that the Godlike life is with man and for man."⁹ Thus we have three clues to the interpretation of this poem outside the poem itself, but we need not be swayed by them in our reading of it: the key to it, if there is, must be sought in the poem itself.

The poem opens with the following lines:

I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
 Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.

⁸ Ed., *The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1898), p. 803n.

⁹ Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (London, 1899), pp. 118-119.

This at once reminds us of the opening lines of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'¹⁰:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree.

In comparison with Coleridge's forcible words, how feeble and how hollow Tennyson's sound! Was it with deliberation that Tennyson opened his poem in this enervated manner? Did he think that it was in character with the luxurious 'soul' to live in the pleasure-house thus languidly introduced? Or else, was he psychologically blocked from introducing the house of pleasure as forcibly as Coleridge had done? These and many other questions will present themselves as we read the opening lines of Tennyson's in the light of Coleridge. Further, when the poet says 'for aye,' and then assures the soul that 'all is well,' it seems that he is being ironical, for the soul is to fail after the lapse of only three years.

The pleasure-house completed, the poet is ready to promise:

My soul would live alone unto herself
In her high palace there.

Here is intimated the soul's utter isolation and overweening pride. This hubris of hers is to lead in due course of time to her cry at once exultant and hollow-sounding:

O God-like isolation which art mine. (l. 197)

The soul's identification of herself with God is the almost-fatal sin which is to bring punishment on her. And how false and unnatural a position she is in, is suggested by the poet urging her 'Reign thou, a quiet *king*,' and by her answering to him like a vassal, '*Trust me*, in bliss I shall abide.' (Both italics are mine.)

In the second section (lines 21-52), in which is described the beauty of the elaborately designed courtyards and outward parts of the palace, religious phraseology predominates. The palace looks as if modelled after a monastery with its 'cloisters,' 'incense,' 'statues' (icons), 'deep-set windows stain'd,' and 'spires.' This is in keeping with the nature of the soul, not a religious soul who is cultivating her spiritual self, but an aesthetic soul who is indulging her sensuous self—an ironical touch again. The final stanza of this section is portentous:

Likewise the deep-set windows, stain'd and traced,
Would seem slow-flaming crimson fires
From shadow'd grotts of arches interlaced,
And tipt with frost-like spires.

¹⁰ 'The Palace of Art' clearly echoes 'Kubla Khan': instead of Coleridge's 'walls and towers' we have 'ranged ramparts' in Tennyson; for 'sunny spots of greenery,' there are 'cool green courts'; instead of a 'chasm' from which is forced 'a mighty fountain,' we have a 'golden gorge of dragons' from which spouts forth 'a flood of fountain-foam'; instead of 'many an incense-bearing tree' we have a 'A cloud of incense'; instead of 'caves' and 'caverns' we have 'shaded grotts.'

This description is no doubt beautiful, but not simply beautiful: 'slow-flaming crimson fires' suggest hellfire. It is this kind of finesse that makes the poem worth close reading.

The soul (who is *sole*) passes from room to room through grateful gloom; she is 'well-pleased' to do so, for all the rooms are hung with tapestries depicting various aspects of nature, 'as fit for every mood of mind.' The first landscape looks serene enough:

For some were hung with arras green and blue,
Showing a gaudy summer-morn,
Where with puff'd cheek the belted hunter blew
His wreathed bugle-horn.

But why is the summer morning is 'gaudy,' not fresh? And doesn't the hunter refer to Orion, who was the victim of various cruel fates and associated with storm? Serenity is totally absent in the second picture, where terror is intensified by a wonderful imprecision:

One seem'd all dark and red—a tract of sand,
And some one pacing there alone,
Who paced for ever in a glimmering land,
Lit with a low large moon.

Who is the man that is pacing in the picture? It might be the shadow of the soul itself—in limbo. The third picture depicts the angry sea waves dashing against the craggy coast—a symbol of the mind in turmoil? In the fourth picture 'a full-fed river winding slow' suggests a snake, with storm clouds gathering in the background—a most ominous picture. Next comes temporary relief (and a reminder of ordinary human activity) in a picture of reapers at harvest time—'at their sultry toil,' to which the soul is quite indifferent. Then follows a threatening wasteland:

...foreground black with stones and slags,
Beyond, a line of heights, and higher
All barr'd with long white cloud the scornful crags,
And highest, snow and fire.

The landscape catalogue ends with a slow stanza in which a quiet 'English home' is in the gloaming, where contentment is being taken over by complacency 'softer than sleep.' These pictures are not just descriptions of scenes but immediate impressionistic evocations in which it is the state of the mind of the protagonist that is central.

In the gallery of religious and mythological pictures, various religions and legends are indiscriminately prettified or sentimentalized. No competent reader fails to mistake the irony that is behind each picture. Christianity is sentimentalized into a picture of the Virgin Mary 'smiling, babe in arm,' beside a crucifix; Islam and Hinduism are cheapened by focus on Houris and Cama, the Indian Eros. St. Cecily, a Christian martyr who was sentenced to be stifled in the bathroom of her own house and was finally beheaded, sleeps tranquilly, 'wound with white roses.' The 'deep-wounded' King Arthur lies dying, but the picture pretends he is 'dozing,' 'watched by weeping queens,' and the final pictures

of Europa and Ganymede are abduction scenes disguised and smothered in opulence:

Or sweet Europa's mantle blew unclasp'd,
 From off her shoulder backward borne:
 From one hand droop'd a crocus: one hand grasp'd
 The mild bull's golden horn.

Or else flush'd Ganymede, his rosy thigh
 Half-buried in the Eagle's down,
 Sole as a flying star shot thro' the sky
 Above the pillar'd town.

These picturesque, poised descriptions are seductive indeed, but a moment's reflection pulls us up short, and we realize that they are rendered too consciously beautiful, even luscious, the palace protesting its beauties too much.

Close to the soul's own throne hang the portraits of 'wise men'—those of great poets and philosophers. It is characteristic of her that she surrounds herself not with their books but with 'choice' paintings of them. Shakespeare is 'bland and mild' like a genial old man; Dante grasps 'his song'—The Divine Comedy(?) is reduced into a song-book! Plato and Francis Bacon, 'the first of those who know' are present only in art, their mighty voices rendered mute, and 'all those names, that...were / Full-welling fountain-heads of change,' are 'blazon'd fair / In diverse raiment strange.'

'Cycles of the human tale,' that is, chief events of history involving agony and strife, are merely subjects for mosaics on the floor, trampled by the soul, unconcerned whether 'the world have peace or wars.' Then those great bells, which are placed in the tower and ring mysteriously of themselves, begin to chime. (They seem to refer to the soul's ultimate dependence for inspiration upon God.) She takes her throne and sings, but sings alone, untroubled by the fact that there is no one to hear her song:

No nightingale delighteth to prolong
 Her low preamble all alone,
 More than my soul to hear her echo'd song
 Throb thro' the ribbed stone.

Well-content with her own song, in her self-sufficiency she feels herself 'Lord over Nature, Lord of the visible earth, / Lord of the senses five,' and exults in her 'God-like isolation.' To such an elevated being as herself, the common run of humanity are mere swine whose fate is to be viewed with callous objectivity. If a *übermensch* there be, she is one in defiance of sex, and is irreverent enough to boast in the end:

I take possession of man's mind and deed.
 I care not what the sects may brawl.
 I sit as God holding no form of creed,
 But contemplating all.

In exalting herself above her kind and arrogating to herself divine powers, she commits a foolish blaspemy.

After three years of unruffled self-absorption, disillusionment sets in. Horrible ghosts and phantoms now haunt the isolated soul; the kingdom of her thought is bankrupt, and her palace of art is transformed into a charnel-house:

...in dark corners of her palace stood
Uncertain shapes; and unawares
On white-eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood,
And horrible nightmares,

And hollow shades, enclosing hearts of flame,
And, with dim fretted foreheads all,
On corpses three-months-old at noon she came,
That stood against the wall.

All this, however, is not meant for a punishment merely but, we are told, for a divine providence that she should not 'fail and perish utterly.' Retribution has an ironic fitness: the soul who had gloried in her 'Godlike isolation' now feels 'exiled from eternal God.'

But the most insistent or the most interesting aspect of the last part is not so much that of a divine visitation as that of an internal, self-generated corruption:

A spot of dull stagnation, without light
Or power of movement, seem'd my soul.
* * *
A still salt pool, lock'd in with bars of sand,
Left on the shore; that hears all night
The plunging seas draw backward from the land
Their moon-led waters white.

The guilt with which the poet charges her now is not centered in the enjoyment of art but in more orthodox vices:

Back on herself her serpent *pride* had curl'd.
* * *
Inwrap tenfold in *slothful* shame. (Both italics are mine)

Tennyson reduced Trench's warning "Tennyson, we cannot live in art," not to the statement of an absolute opposition between aesthetics and morals, but to a view of things in which 'Art' equals self-indulgence of a particular kind, and 'live' means 'live in contact with one's fellows.' The temptation into which the soul had fallen was not beauty as beauty, but beauty as a means of withdrawal, as the medium of a fantasy world.

In the slough in which she now writhes, all that she can do is to cry for salvation. She, who has been guilty of 'serpent pride' and has disdained to commune with common humanity, must come down from her high palace to 'a cottage in the vale.' If the poem

had been concluded here, its logic would have been consistent. As it is, the poem ends a wistful plea of the soul:

 'Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
 So lightly, beautifully built:
 Perchance I may return with others there
 When I have purged my guilt.'

As my reading of this poem has shown, the palace condemns itself all the time subtly but amply enough. The poem's logic seems rather to demand that the palace be blown up with a bang or built anew 'with others' after the soul has purged her guilt of hubris. Whatever interpretation may be put on it, the last stanza is a blot on the poem. But to dismiss the whole poem as a failure as Leavis and Brooks seem to do is an impertinence, to say the least of it, because for most of its length 'The Palace of Art' is 'so lightly, beautifully built,' in which theme and image are delicately fused.