The word "melancholy" has often been associated with the poetry of Tennyson. Eliot, in his essay on *In Memoriam*, says, "Tennyson is the great master of metric, as well as of melancholy; I do not think that any poet in English has ever had a finer ear for vowel sound, as well as a subtler feeling for some moods of anguish." Auden makes a similar though less flattering observation: Tennyson, he says, "had the finest ear perhaps, of any English poet." But Auden adds, "he was undoubtedly the stupidest; there was little about melancholy that he didn't know; there was little else that he did." The general tendency in Tennyson criticism, when speaking of melancholy and Tennyson, is to ascribe the emotional state to the poet and then praise the poet for his ability to represent in his verse the psychology of this state. Critics tend to view melancholy as a personal attribute of the poet rather than as an idea or a problem the poet chose to explore. The critical approach to melancholy in Tennyson's poetry has largely been biographical, or medical and psychological. The two best recent biographies, those of Ricks and Martin, stress the history of medical and psychological problems in the Tennyson family—the notorious "black blood" of the Tennysons—and point out how these prob-
lems shaped the sensibility of the young poet and the central concerns of his poetry. Another recent critical work, *Tennyson and Madness* by Ann Colley, approaches the problem of melancholy in Tennyson's poetry by way of Victorian medical, psychological, and philosophical theories and attitudes about madness. This type of critical perspective provides a needed corrective to the misconceived and oversimplified view of Tennyson as the comfortable and complacent poet laureate of Victorian England. The critical revision began with Harold Nicolson's biography in the twenties: he suggested that the view of Tennyson as the public poet of Victorian pieties needed to be qualified by renewed attention to Tennyson as a subjective poet of dark and brooding vision. E. D. H. Johnson later developed this view in his study of the ambivalent nature of the Victorian poetic imagination, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*. In his view, Tennyson is a divided poet: he is both a public poet of Victorian optimism and a solitary and melancholy poet of vision. Johnson's study is especially valuable in the way it relates melancholy to the poet's exploration of the nature of his art; there is the suggestion in Johnson's study that melancholy constitutes in Tennyson's work a kind of poetics. The idea of melancholy will be pursued here less in its biographical and psychological dimensions than in its triple role as, first, an idea and form within literary tradition; second, an idea and form in Tennyson's developments and transformations of this tradition; and third, a concept that plays a part in Tennyson's theory of poetry itself. Our concern is Tennyson's pastoral art and the poetics of melancholy.

In "Mariana," Tennyson deals with both the psychological economy and the poetic dynamics of melancholy. A number of critics have discussed the psychological dimensions of the poem. Jerome Buckley calls it a "study in frustration." John Stuart Mill, in his essay on Tennyson for the *London Review* in 1835, said of "Mariana":

Words surely never excited a more vivid feeling of physical and spiritual dreariness: and not dreariness alone—for that might be felt under many other circumstances of solitude—but the dreariness which speaks not merely of being far from human converse and sympathy, but of being deserted by it.

W. David Shaw looks at "Mariana" from a somewhat different slant when he says that Mariana is "actively engaged in imagining her
annihilation, defying the nothingness by filling it with images she knows.” “Mariana” is, however, more than simply a study of personality. James Kincaid provides a useful hint of how Mariana’s psychology ties in with several other concerns of Tennyson: he suggests that the irony of the poem is brought about by the images of Mariana’s “youth and hope” being connected with pastoral conventions that are “distorted.” This point deserves to be pursued.

“Mariana” is a character study, certainly. But it is also an early example of Tennyson’s self-conscious treatment of certain genre conventions (types of imagery and figurative language) associated with pastoral melancholy. The poem suggests some of the ways Tennyson works with traditional conventions and also goes beyond them. “Mariana” examines the idea of the poet’s task, and the melancholy of the solitary artist confronting the aesthetic “community” created by the poetic texts from the pastoral tradition that lies behind these texts.

In order to understand the nature of the “textual community” that lies behind “Mariana,” we need to turn to the poem’s sources. In his edition of The Poems of Tennyson, Christopher Ricks lists numerous sources for the poem, preeminent among them Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure and Keats’s “Isabella.” The poem’s epigraph, “Mariana in the moated grange,” is not a direct quotation, but Tennyson does draw on a passage from Shakespeare’s play. Ricks sees the function of the allusion to Shakespeare as being that of contrast. In the play, Angelo does finally wed Mariana, whereas in the poem we sense that there will be no such happy outcome. In terms of style, Ricks points to Keats’s “Isabella” for its quality of melancholy pensiveness: “She weeps alone for pleasure not to be; / Sadly she wept until the night came on. . . . / And so she pined and so she died forlorn.”

Robert Pattison, in Tennyson and Tradition, also stresses Shakespeare as a source: he notes that Tennyson chose to pair “Mariana” with “Isabel” in his editions of the poems. According to Pattison, “Isabel is a model of chastity in contrast to Mariana’s withering sexuality.” In addition to these important sources, there are, on the level of form and style, other textual debts in “Mariana.” Paul Turner observes the similarity between “He cometh not” and a line from “Leonine Elegiacs”: “she cometh not morning or even.” Turner then suggests that the basic struc-
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ture of the poem is like that of Ovid’s Heroides, his verse epistles from abandoned women of renown. Finally, Turner says that the refrain may also have been suggested to Tennyson by the refrain in Theocritus’s Idyll II (where the sorceress uses a refrain as a part of a spell in the hopes of calling back the lover who has abandoned her). We begin to observe the mixture of genres, styles, and forms that shape “Mariana.” Pattison describes this quality thus:

Part of the fascination of “Mariana” is its playful distinction of form. Somewhat like a ballad, it is not a ballad; somewhat lyrical, it is too detached in its narrative to be truly a lyric. We can recognize “Mariana” for what it really is, of course, from Tennyson’s later work. It is an idyll.

Behind Keats and Shakespeare in “Mariana” lies Theocritus, the inventor of pastoral. Some of the more subtle literary debts in “Mariana” come from much later examples of the pastoral tradition in English literature that combine descriptions of nature with moods of melancholy, but they all stem, to a certain degree, from Theocritus. Traces of these influences will help make clear the path that Tennyson follows from the pastoral melancholy of the classical idyll of Theocritus and Virgil up to Keats and then beyond.

The subtle melancholy of the classical pastoral idyll is bound up with the description of nature, as it is in “Mariana.” As many critics have observed, Tennyson’s poem is more a description of a place than of a person. In his article for the London Review, Mill remarks on Tennyson’s skill with “scene-painting”:

not the mere power of producing those rather vapid species of composition usually termed descriptive poetry—for there is not in these volumes one passage of pure description; but the power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it, and to summon up the state of feeling itself, with a force not to be surpassed by anything but reality.

We can add to Mill’s comments, those of Jerome Buckley on the representation of nature in “Mariana”: “the mode of rendering the emotion in lyric form through the expressionist description of setting is characteristically the poet’s own.” One final critical obser-
vation on the quality of nature in "Mariana" that will be of use in this analysis comes from Tennyson's recent biographer, Robert Bernard Martin: "It is nature unnaturally constrained and distorted by man." One can take this point even further. The "constraints" and "distortions" in the representation of nature are not only bound up with the melancholy of the figure within the poem but with the melancholy inherent in Tennyson's relation as a poet to the forms, images, and figurative strategies of the pastoral tradition.

The first stanza of "Mariana" provides an example of the quality and structure of feeling produced by Tennyson's representation of nature:

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'

As Mill points out, the purpose and effect of the scene are different from what we find in much descriptive poetry. It is worth looking carefully at the nature of these differences, because they are very much related to the pastoral tradition. We can compare this stanza with a passage from an eighteenth-century poem that belongs in the tradition of both descriptive poetry and pastoral melancholy:

Haste, Fancy, from the scenes of folly,
To meet the matron Melancholy,
Goddess of the tearful eye,
That loves to fold her arms, and sigh;
Let us with silent footsteps go
To charnels and the house of woe,
To Gothic churches, vaults, and tombs,
Where each sad night some virgin comes.
This is from Joseph Warton’s “Ode to Fancy,” an example of the graveyard school of poetry in the eighteenth century. As with other poems of this type, there is the obligatory invocation to the personification of melancholy, and a solitary human figure within a dark and forbidding landscape. Most of these poems, as Amy Reed has shown in her study of Gray’s *Elegy*, associate the landscape with melancholy. The typical themes explored in this genre are the death theme, the retirement theme, and the complaint of life.20

At first glance, the comparison of Tennyson’s “Mariana” with this type of poetry may seem invidious. Tennyson’s poem does not contain a church or a graveyard, nor does it contain any personified figures such as Fancy or Melancholy. Yet the mood is as somber and pensive as anything one finds in the Warton brothers, or in Edward Young, Dyer, Thomson, and Gray. Death, the retirement from the world, and the complaint of life are all central to the way Tennyson represents nature and presents Mariana’s emotional state. Warton is useful to us here because he is a transitional figure who stands between mid-eighteenth-century neoclassicism and late-eighteenth-to-early-nineteenth-century Romanticism. Tennyson’s pastoral melancholy has affinities with both schools. There are certain similarities, certain continuities, in feeling and structure between Warton’s “Ode” and “Mariana,” but the differences are even more suggestive. In terms of figurative language, Warton freely uses apostrophe and personification. Warton follows, without self-consciousness or uneasiness, the rhetorical traditions for representing melancholy. Melancholy here is not so much a person or a place as it is an idea. The “Goddess of the tearful eye” is not a realistic figure; she is an iconographic symbol. Warton is saying something here about the relationship between fancy and melancholy. What is crucial, however, in terms of this discussion, is that he is saying it by means of an allegory that is constituted by a whole set of poetic conventions. The apostrophe to the female figure is conventional: both Reed and Sickels give numerous examples of the image of the “tearful eye” in the poetry of melancholy. In addition, most readers acquainted with British literary tradition will recognize the significance of the image of the folded arms: it is one of the principal figurative gestures that signify the melan-
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cholic. We find it in the frontispiece of Burton's *Anatomy*. The following description of the Renaissance playwright John Ford provides another witty example of this convention: "Deep in a dump John Ford was got / With folded arms and melancholy hat." We can see, then, the extent to which Warton's "Ode" is indebted to the whole tradition of melancholy poetry in English (and, in its description of and retirement to nature, to the pastoral tradition also). What does the poem tell us, by comparison, about Tennyson's departures from these traditions? Do the conventions in "Mariana" constitute a different type altogether of figurative representation?

Unlike Warton's "Ode," "Mariana" is extremely specific and contains detailed natural description. In the first stanza, Tennyson takes great care to choose the word that evokes the anxiousness and desolation of the woman. The moss is not simply "black" but "blackest." The superlative conveys the color but also emphasizes the tangible existence of the moss. The flower-plots are not covered or overgrown but "thickly crusted." This first image is detailed and precise: with an almost microscopic scrutiny, it brings the reader within the world of the landscape. Tennyson apparently dispenses here with formalities of apostrophe and personification in order to decrease the psychological distance between reader/subject/poet.

It is significant as well that Tennyson opens the poem with a startling abruptness. "Mariana" begins as if in mid-sentence with a preposition. Without setting the scene in any conventional sense, Tennyson begins with the details. In this, he draws away from eighteenth-century descriptive poetry, which tends to order the descriptive structure so that it moves from the larger, generalized representation, to the smaller perspective, with its closer details. The poet also departs here from even as important an influence as Keats. Keats, too, moves away from the representation of nature through personification. Moreover, along with Wordsworth, Keats places a new emphasis on a realistic representation of nature in language that conveys sensuous, concrete detail. Indeed, as George H. Ford has demonstrated, this emphasis is one of the main qualities that Tennyson learned from Keats. In a significant way, however, Tennyson diverges from both the eighteenth-century poets and Keats. Keats tends to use a kind of "camera eye," moving from the larger scene to its component parts. Along with the eighteenth-
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century poets, Keats represents nature and landscape as essentially a continuity of images. In "Mariana," Tennyson disrupts or distorts this sense of spatial continuity.

The first images in "Mariana" are discrete. They stand apart from a larger context. They are disorienting.

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted.

This type of natural description, with its fragmented, disconnected quality, is a crucial aspect of the Tennysonian landscape of melancholy; furthermore, it constitutes a symbol of the poet's melancholy sense that he is an exile from the very traditions he draws upon. To adopt Martin's words about the quality of nature in this poem, the poet feels "constrained" by the conventions of tradition, and in the process of re-representing them, he "distorts" them. The melancholia of the poetic voice in "Mariana" is the result of the poet's sense that he is apart from the community of tradition. This, in turn, results in the disfigurations and distortions of the conventions of pastoral melancholy itself. He can refer to these conventions and echo them, but the re-creation of the concerns of traditional pastoral and melancholy poetry will be imbued with artifice. We can observe, then, that in the association of melancholy and nature, there is a curious circularity of structure and feeling when we proceed from the eighteenth-century descriptive poets to Keats and then to Tennyson. The eighteenth-century poetry of melancholy (and, tangentially, of pastoral) tends to invest the natural scene with allegorical significance, using iconographic elements long associated with the idea of melancholy. Their landscapes are symbolic of concepts drawn from the philosophy and psychology of melancholy in its various forms: the retirement theme, the death theme, the complaint of life, the love lament. In Keats, the relation of melancholy and description changes in part because of the richness of detail and the objectively concrete realism of his representations of nature, and because his descriptions work more to evoke moods and feelings than to symbolize certain set ideas, philosophical or otherwise. This is to say that Keats uses natural description to create not so much a philosophical or moral allegory, as a faithful depiction of man, nature, and process that is less sym-
bolic than realistic. We can concede an allegorical aspect, certainly, to the Keatsian description of nature, but it remains a highly personal allegory of nature and artist, mind and world, subject and object (his images of nature turn back upon themselves, are both sign and signified).

Keats's transformation of pastoral melancholy involves an internalization within the solitary poet of the problems that in eighteenth-century melancholy poetry were external abstractions. This internalization also records a shift from the classic pastoral idyll, which explored similar problems but through a community of human figures and a community of tradition within which the poet felt at home. In addition, Keatsian melancholy is the result of both this internalization and the poet's troubling sense of alienation from this community of texts. Paradoxically, the intensity of his literal representation of the pastoral landscape becomes the figuration of an allegory about the poet's sense of apartness from the very texts that help produce that literal representation. One of the conclusions to be drawn from these observations is that in Keats, pastoral melancholy is both literal and figurative, realistic and allegorical. Tennyson goes even further in the exploration of this dichotomy. In Tennysonian natural description the realism, by virtue of its fragmentation and its discrete positioning, is also figurative, but not in the way that Warton's poem is figurative. Warton draws upon the iconography of tradition to convey abstract ideas (in this case about the nature of fancy and melancholy). His method is in line with the tradition going back to Renaissance allegory. Tennyson, following Keats, further pursues personal lyric, the exploration of the individual state of mind. Moreover, as we have observed in the first stanza of "Mariana," his natural descriptions are, like those of Keats, realistic.

In a curious way, however, Tennyson also turns toward the allegorical mode. The types of fragmentation, framing, and distancing that we observe in the first stanza of "Mariana" are adapted, in part, from the Theocritean idyll, and they play a crucial role in the transformation of the romantic and Victorian lyric of personal utterance and natural description, into the poetry of symbolism of Mallarmé and Eliot. Tennyson was highly conscious of the tensions involved in the development and transformation of these genre
conventions, and thus, his poetry assumed an allegorical cast. Keats’s allegory of melancholy centers on process. In Tennyson’s allegory of melancholy, the focus is on the discontinuity of process.

Tennyson not only feels a sense of alienation from the community of tradition, but he questions the coherence and even the existence of this textual community. The literary conventions of tradition, which ought to work as responsive and reciprocal supports for the present work of the poet, become instead discontinuous fragments that are the allegorical signs of the apartness of the poet. These fragmented images also suggest the poet’s fear that the textual community itself may be an illusion. Tennyson’s representation of nature confronts this problem. It is through the fragmentation of the pastoral world that Tennyson realizes the fragmentation of tradition. For example, the first two lines of “Mariana” image a natural process that has outgrown its use: moss has overtaken the flower-plots. It is an image of nature and pastoral that comes after the Keatsian abundance and sensuousness. It is the plenitude of nature and poetry crossing over to impoverishment. The fragmented images of impoverishment continue in the next lines:

The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.

Tennyson originally used the word “peach” rather than “pear,” and Ricks quotes the poet’s explanation: “‘peach’ spoils the desolation of the picture. It is not characteristic of the scenery I had in mind.” The comment reveals how carefully Tennyson chose his words in order to produce this effect of “desolation.” We note, in addition, how the desolation of the scene is further effected by the disconnectedness of lines 3 and 4 from lines 1 and 2. What is the connection between the gable-wall and the flower-plots? At the outset the answer is none: the reader has little sense of how these fragmented images fit together. The natural scene does not cohere, and this lack of coherence contributes to the mood of barrenness. The rhyme scheme ABAB provides a certain binding element, as does the use of internal rhyme: we note the use of “crusted” and “rusted” to bind the first four lines together. But it is significant that this binding is brought about by images of decay. Despite these formal elements of coherence and despite the precision of detail, the description is
still primarily one of disparate images that create a subtle emotional symbolism. It is the symbolic landscape of melancholy.

Tennyson uses the symbolic landscape of melancholy effectively elsewhere in the poem. Here follows the example of stanza four:

About a stone-cast from the wall
    A sluice with blackened waters slept,
And o'er it many, round and small,
    The clustered marish-mosses crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
    All silver-green with gnarled bark:
For leagues no other tree did mark
    The level waste, the rounding gray.

Like stanza one, stanza four contains extremely precise details, such as the "sluice with blackened waters" and the "clustered marish-mosses," or the poplar which is "silver-green" and "gnarled." The description of the wasteland as "the rounding gray" is especially fine in the way it conveys the overwhelming bleakness of the scene, and in the way it encompasses all the figures and objects contained within it. It is important to observe, however, that Tennyson's description is so concrete, so intense in its focus, that the details become animated. The waters "slept" and the mosses "crept." There is a progressive animation, a progressive anthropomorphism, of the landscape in "Mariana," as if the absence of anything human is ultimately replaced by the nonhuman objects acquiring human form. This is a strange effect and highly characteristic of Tennysonian natural description, with its strong reliance on pathetic fallacy. The effect is very different from the personification of nature in eighteenth-century pastoral melancholy, and also from the movement toward an increasing realism in such English Romantics as Wordsworth and Keats. Tennyson's landscape is real and symbolic. It is literal and figurative. It is mimetic and allegorical at the same time. In Tennyson's early poems, the pastoral landscape (and its constraints and distortions) is finally the visual figure for his troubled poetics. Having drawn upon the concretely realized pastoral world of the Romantics, Tennyson felt uneasy with the abstract personifications and allegorical moralizing of the eighteenth-century melancholy poets. However, as a latecomer to the tradition (like the Alex-
andrian poets themselves who invented the pastoral idyll), Tennyson possessed a critical consciousness of the limitations of all genre conventions. This consciousness makes it difficult for him to produce a landscape that is entirely at ease with its own status as realistic representation. For Tennyson, "realism" itself is a figure, and that is a subtle but crucial difference from Keats. Tennyson is both inside and outside the boundaries of natural description as defined by his predecessors; therefore, he feels a sense of aesthetic estrangement that gets translated into the description itself. Robert Bernard Martin speaks of the scene in this poem as the image of Mariana's "deserted state." The scene also images Tennyson's "deserted state," his sense of exile from the very traditions he wishes to return to. The form of the landscape becomes the form of the poet's melancholia.

In Tennyson's ironic transformation of pastoral melancholy in "Mariana," the locus amoenus (here, the farm) fails to provide the respite from everyday suffering that Rosenmeyer and Poggioli describe as characteristic of the genre. Instead, retirement to the pleasance is both the embodiment and the cause of Mariana's suffering. In a sense, "Mariana" is about the retirement theme gone bad. Tennyson here reverses the laments of displacement and disinheritance from the land found, for example, in Virgil's Eclogues. The Virgilian singer often laments exile from home (as Meliboeus does in the first Eclogue). Paradoxically, Mariana laments not this type of exile, but the fact that she is bound to home. The locus amoenus has turned into a place of entrapment. The difference is one of community. The Virgilian singer laments not simply the loss of the farm but the loss of the family and friends associated with it, as he goes into exile. Mariana, too, laments the loss of a loved one, but his refusal to return transforms the pastoral retreat into Mariana's place of exile. Moreover, she becomes a type for the poet who also feels no longer at home in tradition. In turning the pastoral retreat into the place of exile, Tennyson is acknowledging the extent to which he is an exile from the poetic traditions that the pastoral retreat embodies.

The use of the refrain in "Mariana" produces a similar effect. Ricks says the "refrains tell of the passing of time—they kill time." He goes on to quote from an article written in 1831 by W. J. Fox:
The poem takes us through the circuit of four-and-twenty hours of this dreary life. Through all the changes of the night and day she has but one feeling, the variation of which is only by different degrees of acuteness and intensity in the misery it produces; and again and again we feel, before its repetition, the coming of the melancholy burden.

The refrain is integral to the evocation of Mariana's state of mind. As Martin Dodsworth has argued, repetition in Tennyson's poetry, including refrains such as this one, emphasizes the human figure's isolation from the surrounding scene and also the poet's distance from that human figure. The present discussion of refrain will start from a different perspective. Theocritus frequently uses the refrain as a poetic device in the Idylls, and Virgil uses refrain in the eighth Eclogue. Paul Turner suggests that the refrain in "Mariana" stems from Tennyson's "Leonine Elegiacs" but also from Theocritus's Idyll II. If Tennyson is drawing upon the classic pastoral idyll in his use of the refrain, then the device becomes yet another key to the poet's relation to the pastoral melancholy tradition.

In a later chapter, we will see that Tennyson's use of the Theocritean idyll in one of the songs from The Princess is related to Tennyson's exploration of contemporary feminist themes and the female rejection of domesticity. Something like this is at work in "Mariana," as well. The transformation of the pastoral retreat into the decaying farm is a sign not only of Mariana's despair and sense of desertion but of her active rejection of traditional ideas of home. The quality of active protest inheres also in her refrain. This in turn has bearing on Tennyson's poetics of melancholy; just as Mariana transforms home in the traditional sense, Tennyson transforms the poetic conventions of the traditional pastoral idyll. Mariana is unwilling to accept the bucolic retreat without protest. She is suffering from love-melancholy, but there is an element of parody in it.

She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'

The refrain goes beyond the pastoral love lament or pastoral elegy in its exaggerated longing for death, a longing for death that is the
result not simply of her abandonment but of her rejection of tradition in the form of the retreat or “home.” This leads to her sense of exile within tradition, and to her awareness that she has no alternative tradition to look toward. Of course, Tennyson here, as in *The Princess*, has mixed feelings about the feminist wish to break with tradition. The refrain also works as a criticism of Mariana, in that it suggests her unwillingness to pursue actively other possibilities, to move away from the dependence on the lover who will never return. The refrain is the figural representation in language of her idée fixe. What is ironic about Mariana’s relation to pastoral melancholy as a tradition is her sense of being outside the conventions and yet trapped by them all the same. She does not believe in them, but she is doomed to repeat them.

Such is also Tennyson’s situation as a poet. Tennyson has always been viewed as a poet drawn to the major traditions of Western literature. But the fact that he is a very traditional poet in many ways, should not blind us to the tensions within his relation to tradition, nor to how those tensions lead to poetic innovation. His development and transformation of pastoral melancholy (as here in “Mariana”) offer a paradigm for his troubled sense that the great traditions are in the past, and while he can look back to them with longing and nostalgia, just as Mariana looks back to her lover, they will never return. In this sense, despite his traditionalism, Tennyson is not a part of the textual community to which he alludes, and his poetry becomes a melancholy commentary on his very sense of exile from the literature out of which his own poetry originates. Repetition and refrain in “Mariana” have to do with Tennyson’s compulsion to act out again and again the scenes of the poet’s suffering. On one level, these scenes are the poetic texts that lie like a palimpsest beneath his own text. The pastoral landscape is many-layered. There is the realism of description, the concreteness of detail, that we find in Keats. Beneath this there is the allegorization of melancholy that goes back to eighteenth-century poetic practice, and even earlier to Renaissance allegory: Mariana as the displaced figure of personified Melancholy, Warton’s “goddess of the tearful eye.” But behind the “literal” representation of the landscape that owes its debts to the English Romantics, and behind the forced rhetorical allegory of the earlier melancholy tradition,
there is a kind of poetic thought that is different from both of these modes. Mariana’s landscape of melancholy and Mariana’s refrain are types for Tennyson’s highly self-conscious poetic practice.

Mariana’s inability to stem the transformation of the landscape from one of abundance to desolation is the very problem Tennyson faces in his use of pastoral melancholy itself. In addition, Mariana’s refrain suggests the stifling repetition that the poet fears. Her inability to break free of her obsession with the lover who will never return (in other words, to break free of the past) is analogous to the poet’s concern about this danger in his relation to the poetic texts of the past that have shaped his own voice. Mariana’s obsessional repetition constitutes her denial that she is the creator of her own suffering. She displaces her responsibility onto her absent lover. Unwilling to acknowledge this responsibility, her voice says the same words over and over: she cannot say anything new. This is what Tennyson fears as he uses the conventions of the pastoral and melancholy traditions. The return to the past is a source of power, a landscape of poetic abundance, but it is a past of which the poet can never be a part; instead, he is apart from it. The isolation from the past and the return to it can become mere repetition which is desolating. In this sense, Mariana has fallen prey to the pattern of desolation that Tennyson fears for his own poetry. Mariana has created her landscape of melancholy but now it entraps her. The pastoral love lament, which in its classical guise was meant to ease the singer’s suffering, is now the very form in language of her entrapment.

If, however, Mariana is, in one sense, an image of what Tennyson fears in using the conventions of poetic tradition, in another sense, she is an image of how he may free himself from potential entrapment in worn-out literary forms. Mariana is defined by certain conventions of pastoral such as the landscape and the refrain, but she also actively works to redefine those same conventions; thus, Mariana is a type for the work of the poet. As the farm decays around her, we realize this occurs because she refuses to maintain it. Yet her refusal in itself is a form of creation. She is the creator of her pastoral landscape because her vision of it is highly self-conscious and highly selective (just as Tennyson’s vision of tradition is):
She could not look on the sweet heaven,
    Either at morn or eventide.
After the flitting of the bats,
    When thickest dark did trance the sky,
She drew her casement-curtain by,
    And glanced athwart the glooming flats.

We observe that the landscape can offer the sight of the “sweet heaven,” but she is unable or unwilling to see it. There is a large element of volition in the way she perceives the landscape. In this stanza, there is a traditional landscape of melancholy, but it is “framed” (a very common device in Tennyson’s poetry, and, logically enough, in the Theocritean idyll). The emphasis is on her creation of the scene through her selective vision, through her active disruption of the continuity of the landscape: “She drew her casement curtain by / And glanced athwart the glooming flats.” Critics often speak of Mariana’s passivity, but the verbs here are active; furthermore, by placing her beside the casement and by having her view the landscape through the window, Tennyson is emphasizing the ideas of perspective and framing, with all the choices and limitations these ideas imply. Mariana consciously limits herself. There is the implication here that her melancholy is self-created, is perhaps the conscious acting out of a conventional attitude. If Mariana is a substitute figure for the poet, it is possible that Tennyson sees himself as acting out a conventional attitude also. He is consciously choosing to echo the conventions of the poetry of melancholy and wondering about the extent to which these conventions undermine the authenticity of his poetic voice. The sense that the poetic voice in “Mariana” may only be adopting a self-conscious pose, as Mariana herself does, is one of the secondary subjects pursued by the poem.

The early poem “Mariana” affords a paradigm for certain transformations of pastoral and melancholy poetry that look ahead to new directions that English poetry will take after Tennyson. One passage from “Mariana” is exemplary of two of these directions:

All day within the dreamy house,
    The doors upon their hinges creaked;
The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse
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Behind the mouldering wainscot shrieked,
Or from the crevice peered about.
Old faces glimmered through the doors,
Old footsteps trod the upper floors,
Old voices called her from without.

The passage is a proleptic model for two directions that the modern poet will take to represent his estrangement from society and from the community of texts that constitute poetic tradition. As Wimsatt and several other critics have pointed out, certain types of poetic structures and imagery in Tennyson look ahead to the symbolic method of Eliot. This passage is a good example. The poet uses words and images to evoke moods that are, paradoxically, beyond language; moreover, the surreal juxtaposition of incongruous and jarring images—the “blue fly”; the mouse; the spectral figures and voices—will be developed by Eliot in such poems as *The Waste Land*. Hardy is the other direction toward which the passage points. Like this passage from “Mariana,” much of Hardy’s poetry involves the representation of landscape and external world as the forms that both contain and signify the past. Many of his poems describe objects that have been worn down through human use and through the passing of time itself. One other observation is worth noting: this moment in “Mariana” is one in which the country house (a topos related to the pastoral idyll and the georgic) begins to fall apart. Many of Hardy’s poems, and even some of Eliot’s, have roots in the pastoral conventions that Tennyson is exploring here.

The passage from “Mariana” serves as a fitting conclusion to our discussion of the poem because it looks ahead to new traditions and also back to old ones. The decaying house, with its strange juxtaposition of animals, objects, and sounds, reveals the types of discontinuity and fragmentation of conventions that are a sign of the poet’s estrangement from the community of texts that embody those conventions in the poetry of the past. The old sounds here are sounds of the past, but they are now the cause of Mariana’s (and the poet’s) estrangement, rather than a source of assurance. What the passage figures is the profound separation between Mariana and the house, and between Tennyson and the “old voices” of the poetry of the past. The “old voices” are the source of the poet’s
creativity but also of his melancholy. These are the voices of pastoral melancholy that ultimately go back to Virgil and Theocritus.

One of the principal thematic sources of melancholy in Tennyson's poetry is love. Important criticism has been written on the social and biographical roots of Tennyson's fascination with the difficulties of love; the unhappy affair with Rosa Baring has been seen as the impetus for some of Tennyson's best work on the aberrations of personality in the throes of love. In such poems as "Locksley Hall" and *Maud*, Tennyson represents love-melancholy in distinctly Victorian terms: here the poet emphasizes the social impediments to love and marriage in Victorian society, and he explores the abnormal states of mind (including melancholia) that thwarted love can produce. Tennyson views the latter concern in these poems in the light of Victorian society's renewed interest in the medical and psychological explanations for such states. However, there is another type of poem in Tennyson that deals with love-melancholy in ways that are more closely associated with poetic traditions of the past. Love-melancholy has always been a major theme in the melancholy tradition in English literature: Burton devotes an entire book in the *Anatomy* to it, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the love-lament was one strand in the large tradition of melancholy poetry. The pastoral love-lament can be traced to such classical writers as Ovid, Virgil, and Theocritus.

In a number of Tennyson's poems, the poet brings together the tradition of pastoral love poetry in English with classical themes, and the pastoral love-lament of the Greek and Latin idyll. The poem "Œnone" is one example of Tennyson's use of a classical story involving the theme of love and of the classical pastoral love-lament. "Œnone" is marred by Tennyson's lapses into didactic moralizing in several passages, passages where the poet's sophisticated distance from his materials collapses. The poem has also been derided as being overly Keatsian in its sensuousness. In his critical review of the 1833 *Poems*, Bulwer-Lytton spoke of "Œnone" and
"The Hesperides" as "of the best Cockney classic and Keatsian to the marrow." Even as sympathetic a student of Keats's influence on Tennyson as George H. Ford remarks on the "diffuseness" of the poem as being comparable to early Keats: "We find the same difficulty in tracing out Endymion's feelings for Diana amidst the luxuriant settings of Keats's poem as we do in following Ænone's lament against the background of the vale of Ida. Both are suffused in the pictorial, 'like bees in their own sweetness drown'd.'" The influence of Keats in 'Ænone' is undeniable, but a number of Tennyson's literary debts in the poem lie elsewhere.

Over twenty years ago, Paul Turner in "Some Ancient Light on Tennyson's 'Ænone'" showed the extent to which the poem is modeled on classical sources and pointed out Tennyson's specific echoes and allusions to these sources. The poem is a pastoral love-lament based primarily on Ænone's epistle in Ovid's *Heroides*. Tennyson also drew upon passages from Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*. However, the poem is not simply an idyllic medley or pastiche of classical forms and imagery. It is an investigation of the modern poet's ('modern' here means Victorian) relation to those forms and images. The poem is highly relevant to this general argument about Tennyson and the poetics of melancholy, not simply because it contains a depiction of love-melancholy, but because Tennyson here explores the nature of the Ovidian epistle, the Theocritean idyll, and the pastoral tradition from the vantage point of the Romantic and post-Romantic poetic tradition in England: he explores how these forms constitute models for the modern poet and are simultaneously forms of limitation to the modern imagination. Such forms exact demands on the poet's desire for original creation. Paul Turner suggests this critical perspective when he says "Ænone" "is a distillation not of life but of literature. . . . Tennyson's reactions to poetry were unusually intense, and such reactions form the chief subject matter of 'Ænone.'"

Tennyson bases "Ænone" on the classic story of the Judgment of Paris. Having to choose between Here, Athene, and Aphrodite, Paris gives the golden apple to the fairest. He chooses Aphrodite and wins Helen. Tennyson, like Ovid, decides to present the story from the perspective of Ænone, the nymph whom Paris abandons for Helen. In Ovid's *Heroides*, Ænone's epistle is a love-lament
that gives her response to the loss of Paris and to the fatal choice that he makes. It is, therefore, fitting that Tennyson opens his poem with the traditional setting of the pastoral love-lament:

There lies a vale in Ida, lovelier
Than all the valleys of Ionian hills.
The swimming vapour slopes athwart the glen,
Puts forth an arm, and creeps from pine to pine,
And loiters, slowly drawn. On either hand
The lawns and meadow-ledges midway down
Hang rich in flowers, and far below them roars
The long brook falling through the cloven ravine
In cataract after cataract to the sea.
Behind the valley topmost Gargarus
Stands up and takes the morning: but in front
The gorges, opening wide apart, reveal
Troas and Ilium's columned citadel,
The crown of Troas.

Tennyson bases his scene here on Paris's description of the setting of the judgment in his letter to Helen in the *Heroides*:

There is a place in the woody vales of midmost Ida, far from trodden paths and covered over with pine and ilex. . . . From here, reclining against a tree, I was looking forth upon the walls and lofty roofs of the Dardanian city, and upon the sea. . . .

Ovid begins the description with the valley and closes it with the view of Troy (in between are two lines describing flocks of animals grazing on the grass). This compression of description gives way in Tennyson's "OEnone" to a more elaborately detailed picture. Turner ascribes the additions to Tennyson's wish to make the setting even "lovelier." Turner's use of quotation marks here suggests that this is simply word-painting, perhaps the indulgence in Keatsian sensuousness.

If we look closely at Tennyson's additions, however, we observe that he is doing something different and more interesting than mere word-painting. We observed how, in "Mariana," Tennyson "defamiliarizes" the landscape. Tennyson creates a similar sense of estrangement in the first verse paragraph of "OEnone." He effects this estrangement of the landscape in part by his use of pathetic
fallacy—a type of figurative language used with great frequency by Tennyson. There is nothing in Ovid’s description like the “swimming vapour.” Tennyson describes the mists in human terms: he emphasizes the eerily human aspect of the natural scene through words like “loiter,” “creeps,” “puts forth.” The mists are alive with activity: the vapor is “swimming” and “slopes athwart the glen.” The Victorian poet replaces the clarity and economy of Ovid’s description of the scene (an example of the Ovidian locus amoenus) with a more lushly descriptive style that fuses precision of detail with what can best be described as a kind of visionary strangeness. At least one aspect of this style is the result of the influence of Keats. The richness is Keatsian, but the strangeness is not.

Douglas Bush says the difference between Tennyson and Keats is one of style and feeling:

If we turn to “CEnone” after “Endymion,” we are aware at once of Tennyson’s cool and conscious artistic detachment; even where Keats is writing badly, the intensity may be mawkish and uncontrolled, but it is intensity, and he seldom fails to apprehend myth with warm human sympathy. Tennyson’s sympathy partly evaporates in a concern for style."

Another way of looking at this distinction, however, is to see Tennyson’s concern here as that of a poet with the idea of genre conventions—myth, allegory, pastoral melancholy—rather than with the emotions and feelings usually associated with these conventions. Tennyson is interested in the idea of the pastoral love-lament as a set of poetic conventions (forms and tropes). Thus, his concern for style has less to do with an absence of feeling than with an active interrogation of the poet’s relation to tradition. Tennyson’s “artistic detachment” can be interpreted, from another perspective, as his sense of estrangement from tradition. The visionary strangeness of nature in this opening scene of “CEnone” is the result of Tennyson’s use of the pastoral idyll as a group of conventions with which he can no longer have complete emotional affinity. The language of artifice, the heavy reliance on pathetic fallacy, is the figurative expression for the poet’s sense of the artifice that inheres in his relation to the past texts upon which he draws. Tennyson elaborates on Ovid’s scene of the Judgment of Paris not simply
to make a lovelier picture, but to emphasize the scene as a picture, to emphasize the scene as a framing device. In describing the setting of the judgment, Tennyson takes fourteen lines, Ovid six. The circumlocution is intentional on Tennyson's part. Tennyson opens up a space through language between the initial naming of the landscape—"There lies a vale in Ida"—and the closing perspective on Troy—"the gorges, opening wide apart, reveal / Troas and Ilion's columned citadel, / The crown of Troas." The framing device serves to distance both poet and reader from the emotional utterance of ÓEnone that follows. It is an example of what Martin Dodsworth calls Tennyson's distancing "himself from the morbidity of his subject." As Dodsworth says, "The excellence of 'ÓEnone' lies in the internal consistency that enables us . . . to stand outside it and see the heroine for what she is." 

In the first stanza of "ÓEnone," then, Tennyson is opening up a space through language, framing the story, emphasizing the poet's distance from ÓEnone's emotion. The frame is a standard device of the Theocritean idyll, one that Tennyson uses frequently. The device suggests detachment from the subject matter, but in Tennyson's case it reveals something else as well. When Tennyson uses the frame at the beginning of "ÓEnone," it indicates not simply the creation of distance from ÓEnone through language, but a distance from language itself. Conventional types of language and imagery become the subject that Tennyson examines in a detached way through the space of the frame; furthermore, this framing and detachment suggests a certain lack of ease on the poet's part before the conventional language and imagery he is using in the passage. In a number of ways, the representations of nature in "ÓEnone" have much to tell us about Tennyson's complex relation to the traditions of pastoral and melancholy poetry. Indeed, in this opening description in "ÓEnone," we can observe types of language and imagery that have affinities with eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century pastoral melancholy as well as with Ovid and Theocritus. The richly detailed description goes back to Keats, but also further back to the lesser poets of the eighteenth century:

here vine-clad hills
Lay forth their purple store, and sunny vales
In prospect vast their level laps expand,
Amid whose beauties glistening Athens tow'rs.
Tho' thro' the blissful scenes Ilissus roll
His rage-inspiring flood, whose winding marge
The thick-wove laurel shades; tho' roseate Morn
Pour all her splendours on th' empurpled scene;

He views the piles of fall'n Persepolis
In deep arrangement hide the darksome plain.\textsuperscript{41}

(251–62)

This is from Thomas Warton's "The Pleasures of Melancholy" (1745). In the ornate blank verse, the richly adjectival descriptions, and the imagery of sublime, distant perspectives, we see the connection with the opening of "OEnone." When we also acknowledge Warton's great debt to Milton here, we can then note that Tennyson is not only drawing upon Theocritus, Ovid, and the classical idyll, but upon the line of English pastoral melancholy that goes from Keats, to the eighteenth-century descriptive poets, back to Milton. The development of pastoral melancholy from Milton to Warton and then to Keats is a complex one involving many important changes. Behind Milton's ornate style and landscape descriptions lies the rigorous moral vision of his Christianity. In Warton (midway into the eighteenth century) the moral and religious context of natural description begins to recede, as Eleanor Sickels points out, to be replaced by an artificial and abstract representation of nature that indulges in sentimentalism.\textsuperscript{42} Warton is part of a shift from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neoclassicism to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romanticism, a shift that has been described as a period of sentiment and sensibility. This is classicism in its decadent stage, or Romanticism in its infancy. Warton's representation of landscape and its concomitant melancholy has neither the simple economy of the Theocritean or Ovidian landscape, nor the grandeur of the sublime in Milton or the Romantic poets; here the descriptions of nature are merely the form of an attenuated cultivation of sentiment. This type of description has implications for Tennyson's detachment from the conventions of pastoral melancholy. But another example, from James Thomson's \textit{The Seasons} (1730), will make the contrast even clearer:
The pastoral melancholy of Thomson and Warton signals the new emphasis on the solitary figure in a desolate scene that is a departure from seventeenth-century English pastoral, but it also suggests the increasing artificiality of the form. The conventions are beginning to rigidify into didactic abstractions. While the Romantics drew upon this growing sense of withdrawal and solitude in mid- and late-eighteenth-century pastoral, they struggled against artifice and false sentiment. Tennyson, however, as different as he is from Thomson or Warton, is interested in what happens to the conventions of pastoral melancholy when the artifice of those conventions has become patent. Thomson and Warton represent the beginnings of that problem in the history of pastoral melancholy. The point is not that Tennyson, in his setting the scene for CEnone’s love-lament, drew directly upon these poets, but that he was highly conscious of the extent to which the writing of nature had become artificial in such poets (and even, in certain ways, in the romantics), and that his retreat into a perspective of detachment (as through the device of the frame) is both the outcome of and the response to his awareness of this development.

The difference between Tennyson’s association of landscape and melancholy in “CEnone,” and their association in Thomson and Warton rests in the following: in Thomson and Warton, there is no critical distance between the poetic voice, the scene, and the melancholy mood; in Tennyson the distance among these three elements is enormous. We can see the distinction by noting how, in “CEnone,” Tennyson subtly modulates from the poet’s opening frame description to CEnone’s melancholy lament:

Hither came at noon
Mournful CEnone, wandering forlorn
Of Paris, once her playmate on the hills.
Her cheek had lost the rose, and round her neck
Floated her hair or seemed to float in rest.
She, leaning on a fragment twined with vine,
Sang to the stillness, till the mountain-shade
Sloped downward to her seat from the upper cliff.

‘O mother Ida, many-fountained Ida,
Dear mother Ida, harken ere I die.
For now the noonday quiet holds the hill:
The grasshopper is silent in the grass:
The lizard, with his shadow on the stone,
Rests like a shadow, and the winds are dead.
The purple flower droops: the golden bee
Is lily-craddled: I alone awake.
My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love,
My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim,
And I am all aweary of my life.’

W. David Shaw says, “The impersonal descriptive poet of the
proem does not know how the more personal sequel will develop.”
This is the measure of his distance from his subject. But the in­
teresting thing about “Œnone” is the way the language of Œnone’s
monologue also negates the possibility of mere sentimentality, the
bane of eighteenth-century pastoral melancholy. In the two stan­
zas quoted above, there are aspects to the language which distance
Œnone both from the landscape she describes and from her own
emotion. Paul Turner has shown that this passage is densely packed
with classical echoes and allusions: Tennyson uses phrases and im­
ages from Ovid, Virgil, Bion, and Theocritus in the passage. Turner
suggests that the description of her face combines Bion’s descrip­
tion of the dying Adonis, “the rose leaves his lips,” with Virgil’s
description of Aeneas’s glimpse of Dido in Hell, “aut videt aut
vidisse putat” (he sees or fancies he has seen), and with Ovid’s
description of Cassandra in the Heroides as “diffusis comis” (“with
her hair all over the place”). Turner says, “All three expressions are
combined to describe Œnone.”

Her cheek had lost the rose, and round her neck
Floated her hair or seemed to float in rest.

(11.17–18)
The allusions make CEnone a figure constituted by poetic convention instead of a “real person.” This ironically qualifies any potential indulgence, on the part of the reader, in sentimental emotionalism about her plight. In addition, the sense of artifice that inheres in the manner in which her identity is constituted produces a distance between CEnone as a figure and the emotion she expresses. Another example of this can be found in the refrain—“O mother Ida, many-fountained Ida, / Dear mother Ida, harken ere I die”—that Turner suggests is derived from Theocritus’s *Idyll* II. Dodsworth says, “The monotony of the often-heard refrain is an equivalent for the excessive feelings to which CEnone gives expression.” There is much sense in this idea, but one can argue, as Dodsworth does elsewhere in the same essay, that the monotony of the refrain is not the equivalent for the feelings, but is a way of ironically qualifying them, by virtue of the artifice and distance produced by the device of the refrain itself. In this light, the refrain is yet another example of how Tennyson undercuts emotion by means of the highly conscious use of poetic conventions.

There is one more classical allusion in the above-quoted passage from “CEnone” that we should look at. Tennyson closes CEnone’s introduction in the second stanza with the following image: “till the mountain-shade / Sloped downward to her seat from the upper cliff.” Turner points to the final line of Virgil, *Eclogue* I: “maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae” (longer shadows fall from the mountain heights). In Virgil’s first *Eclogue*, Meliboeus has been evicted from his farm. Tityrus offers him lodging for the night, but the image of the “taller shadows” suggests the somber future that Meliboeus will face as an exile from his home. The image from Virgil is an apt one for CEnone’s sense of abandonment and also for the impending troubles that will fall on the classical world as a result of Paris’s choice. However, Tennyson’s use of the image functions in another way, as well. As a “quoted” image from the classical tradition, the falling shadows create a sense of distance between CEnone and the landscape, just as the Theocritean refrain creates a sense of distance between her and her emotions. Like Meliboeus, CEnone has become an exile in the landscape that had been home:

“. . . I will rise and go

Down into Troy, and ere the stars come forth
Talk with the wild Cassandra, for she says
A fire dances before her, and a sound
Rings ever in her ears of armed men.
What this may be I know not, but I know
That, wheresoe’er I am by night and day,
All earth and air seem only burning fire.”

The austere dignity of these lines takes the reader far away from the effusive emotion that mars earlier passages in her monologue, and from the potential sentimentality in the opening descriptive frame. It is a measure of the poem’s irony that it is CEnone herself and the language she speaks that create the necessary distance. CEnone’s sense of distance from both her emotions and the landscape is analogous to Tennyson’s sense of detachment from the materials of the poem. But rather than seeing this as simply a withdrawal into a preoccupation with style, as Bush does, we may view this distance as the very form that his relation to traditions of pastoral melancholy takes. “CEnone” is one early example of Tennyson’s creation of a new language of pastoral idyll. The poet brings about this achievement, in part, by “quoting” or manipulating classical sources and examples of the tradition of the romantic picturesque. As with the Theocritean idyll, which is the primary model for this form, Tennyson’s new language of pastoral always contains within it a subtle but abiding sense of melancholy.

“The Lotos-Eaters” is pastoral melancholy in the state of decadence. It contains many of the conventional topoi of melancholy and pastoral poetry: the retirement theme; the death theme; the complaint of life; the pastoral retreat; the opposition between reality and pleasure, work and play; the freedom of the retreat; the sense of nostalgia. Unlike “Mariana” and “CEnone,” however, this poem does not directly draw upon the classical idyll as a source. The poem takes its start from the Odyssey, Book IX:

on the tenth day we landed
in the country of the Lotus-Eaters, who live on a flowering
food, and there we set foot on the mainland, and fetched water
and my companions soon took their supper there by the fast
ships.
But after we had tasted of food and drink, then I sent
some of my companions ahead, telling them to find out
what men, eaters of bread, might live here in this country.
I chose two men, and sent a third with them, as a herald.
My men went on and presently met the Lotus-Eaters,
nor did these Lotus-Eaters have any thought of destroying
our companions, but they only gave them lotus to taste of.
But any of them who ate the honey-sweet fruit of lotus
was unwilling to take any message back, or to go
away, but they wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating
people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home. I myself
took these men back weeping, by force, to where the ships
were. . . .”48

Out of this material, Tennyson created his exploration of the
pleasurable melancholy of complete isolation and withdrawal from
the world, and of the undeniable attractions (as well as the dan­
gers) that such withdrawal entails for the poet. Critics have inter­
preted the poem’s significance in a variety of ways. Arthur J. Carr
says, “Exactly because it is managed as an episode in the return of
Ulysses to the responsibilities of Ithaca, Tennyson could follow
very far the impulses to ‘slothful ease’ and vague erotic happiness.”49
On the other hand, Bush has little good to say of it: “‘The Lotos-
Eaters’ in its total effect is an incomparably pretty account of spiritual
disintegration.”50 W. David Shaw notes the mariners’ awareness of
“the essential anguish of being in time,” and says the poem is about
the “failure to take the lessons of the wavering world outside, the
world of quick decay and change, back into the timeless land of
the Lotos.”51 Finally, Tennyson’s biographer, Robert Bernard Mar­
tin, views the poem as one that belongs with a group of early
poems in which there is a conflict between the “external world”
and the “world of the imagination.” In Martin’s view, in the early
poems the world of pleasure and imagination wins out against Ten­
nyson’s moral stance.52 This reading is borne out by Alan Grob’s
analysis of the revisions Tennyson made from the 1832 edition to
the 1842 edition. Grob suggests that in the early version of the
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poem, Lotos-Land is presented as the place of isolation necessary for poetic creation, but Tennyson adds two passages in the later version that serve as moral criticism of this view of art.53 What makes "The Lotos-Eaters" such an interesting poem is Tennyson's ability to refrain from making distinct moral judgments, and his willingness to explore the legitimate value of Lotos-Land as well as its dangers.

In addition to its exploration of the possibilities and failures inherent in certain types of moral and aesthetic values, "The Lotos-Eaters" is about pastoral melancholy as a group of literary conventions. At the outset, we can observe that the land of the lotos-eaters is a variant of the traditional pastoral retreat:

'Courage!' he said, and pointed toward the land,
'This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon.'
In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.

The poet creates his landscape through repetition. One observes the near chiasmus in lines 3 and 4: the mariners reach the shore in the afternoon, but the land is a place "in which it seemed always afternoon." The rhetorical structure as well as the temporal structure is tautological; it turns back upon itself. The syntactical organization here does not develop or grow, but simply represents at its end its own beginning. There is a pleasing sense of symmetry about such rhetorical structures, initially; but, as the poem progresses, this sense gives way to one of stagnation, not unlike that found in the repetitive structure of "Mariana." In addition, there is a quality of deceptiveness, of falsity, about the landscape. Tennyson's use of the word "seemed" is a sign of that illusiveness. It is a very Spenserian word, which is appropriate because, as a number of critics have pointed out, the poem as a whole is very Spenserian (by way of Keats). Spenser frequently uses the word "seemed" and its variants in connection with the type of "good place" that masks
its opposite. In such episodes, the word serves as a warning that the benign appearance of the natural scene contains within or behind it potentially evil and dangerous forces. Tennyson's use of the word in the opening description of this poem suggests that the land of the lotos-eaters may contain equally dangerous powers. At the very opening of "The Lotos-Eaters," then, nature is structured through language to be deceptive as well as tautological.

Spenser points toward a related aspect of the landscape of the lotos-eaters. *The Faerie Queene* contains numerous examples of the type of pastoral retreat that is negative in its easefulness and luxuriance, questionable in its morality. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson's language stresses this side of pastoral. The air is "languid" and "swoons" (examples, yet again, of the poet's heavy reliance on pathetic fallacy). The air is "breathing like one that hath a weary dream," a simile that emphasizes the anthropomorphism of nature. These images and figures of rhetoric help create the proper atmosphere, but their significance goes beyond mere atmospheric word-painting. The poet represents the ambivalent moral value that inheres in this type of pastoral scene and in this type of melancholy. Poggioli says the traditional pleasance of pastoral is a place of refreshment, replenishment, and renewal. The pleasance of Lotos-Land is not one of renewal but of stifling repetition. In classical pastoral, the human figure goes to the retreat to feel the bond between man and nature, and also the difference between them. He goes to renew his sense of humanity. But the pastoral of the Lotos-Land is structured by tautological sameness, not difference. Time never changes; it is always the same. And man is not distinct from but the same as the organic life of the earth. This is not the way Theocritus structures the relation between man and landscape:

*Over our heads many poplars and loftily towering elm trees*
*Soughed as they stirred in the breezes, while nearby the numinous water  
Laughed as it flowed from the cave of the nymphs with a metrical chatter,  
Whilst all about in the shadowy branches the smoky cicadas  
Worked at their chirruping—they had their labour cut out for them!  
Far off  
Out of the thick-set brambles the tree frog croaked in a whisper;*
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Linnets and larks were intoning their tunes, and the wooddove made moan.

Busy and buzzing, the bees hovered over the musical waters.

Everything exhaled an odour of bounteous summer and harvest.

Pears at our feet, also apples on every side in abundance

Rolled, and the branches were bowed to the earth with their burden

of damsons.55

(11.134-44)

This is from *Idyll* VII. Rosenmeyer says the passage is atypical of the economy and concision of the Theocritean *locus amoenus*, and he types this a *locus uberrimus*. But the very abundance and lushness of the scene bring it closer to what Tennyson is getting at in “The Lotos-Eaters.” For our purposes this can serve as a Theocritean pleasance.56 But ultimately how different it is from Lotos-Land. The Theocritean breeze cools the forehead and stirs the trees to life. Theocritus does use pathetic fallacy, sparingly, but only to convey the quickness and activity of the natural world, as in “the numinous water / Laughed as it flowed.” In Tennyson’s poem, the poet uses pathetic fallacy to express the passivity and languor of nature, its decay and ultimate terminus in death. In “The Lotos-Eaters,” the human figures are submerged within and become identical with this languorous nature. In *Idyll* VII, the human figures afford us the perspective on nature: there is a separation between the human figures and the landscape that signifies the proper separation between human life and the organic life of nature—the two are not identical. The people in the Theocritean landscape enjoy an ease that is a respite from work but not an eternal escape from it. As Rosenmeyer points out, there is a straightforwardness, a kind of naïveté and innocence about the Theocritean landscape.57 This is rather different from the slightly insidious lure of desire and pleasure in the land of the lotos.

Tennyson’s rhetoric and syntax represent desire and pleasure in “The Lotos-Eaters” as duplicitous. The pastoral retreat is tautological. It has no purpose outside of itself. The first stanza ends as follows:

the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.
The stanza ends with the word “seem,” emphasizing, as it did in line 4, that the appearance of the natural scene is deceptive. In the stanza’s closure, the rhetorical structure and syntactic organization are, as with lines 3 and 4, that of repetition. In lines 3 and 4, there is the repetition of “afternoon” broken in the middle by “seemed.” In line 9, there is the repetition of the word “fall” broken in the middle by “pause.” The rhetorical elegance in conveying the sense of carefully interrupted movement, and the repetitions of line 9, contribute to the formal power of the verse but also to the troubling sense of artifice. The whole picture is too highly wrought. It creates a tension in the language that works against the mellifluous ease that supposedly characterizes the poem. “The Lotos-Eaters” is, as James Kincaid says, “a poem about release, the effect of which is to increase tension. . . . We are unable to resist the appeal of the mariners and equally unable to yield to it.”

There has always been a sense of artifice, of self-consciousness, in the pastoral idyll, as Rosenmeyer suggests in his study of Theocritus. In Theocritus and Virgil, however, this artifice defuses tension. Contradictions tend to be worked out through patterns of nostalgia and desire, in ways that are poignantly human. In “The Lotos-Eaters,” the poet does not work out contradictions this way, despite the heavily laden nostalgia and desire within the poem. The latter emotions here assume an inhuman form. Tennyson takes the sense of artifice to an extreme point that calls into question the values of pastoral itself. Another example of this language of artifice in the poem is Tennyson’s use of the simile word “like.” (The repetition of the phrase “like a downward smoke” in lines 8 and 10 is an instance of this.) To be “like” something is, obviously, not to be the thing itself. The poet’s use of simile contributes to the sense of illusiveness about this landscape. At the same time, for one term in the comparison of a simile to be too much “like” the other term is equally delusive, since the two terms of comparison in a simile are not identical. The nature of simile in the poem leads to the even more troubling anthropomorphism and pathetic fallacy in the figuration of the scene, the ultimate implication of which is that man and nature are the same: “A land where all things always seemed the same!” The word “seemed” appears again, and in conjunction with “same.” Turner suggests an echo of Lucretius.
The Poet's Melancholy

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here: "eadem sunt omnia semper" (all are always the same).

The phrase occurs in Book III of De Rerum Natura in the passage where Nature argues that life is not worth living and that death is the acceptable alternative. Likewise, pastoral nature in the land of the lotos-eaters does not renew the mariners' sense of humanity; it takes it away from them and puts them on the level of the non-conscious organic life that does not have to think or act or suffer, as men do. The desire expressed in the Choric Song is in its primary sense the desire to be like the natural scene itself.

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud
With winds upon the branch, and there
Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
Sun-steeped at noon, and in the moon
Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow
Falls, and floats adown the air.
Lo! sweetened with the summer light,
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
Drops in a silent autumn night.
All its allotted length of days,
The flower ripens in its place,
Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,
Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil.

The leaf "takes no care" and the flower "hath no toil." In section 2 of the Choric Song, the singers ask, "All things else have rest: why should we toil alone?" The singers are either unaware or choose to ignore the implications of the comparison. Human beings, the comparison suggests, should be as inanimate, as passive, as lacking in consciousness, as the natural world. Further, the natural world is ultimately here an emblem for death itself. This view is a complete reversal of pastoral values. As Panofsky has shown in his discussion of the phrase "et in arcadia ego," death is a part of the pastoral world. It is not, however, a wished-for end or a means of escape from responsibility. We recall the singer in Virgil Eclogue III: "o pueri (fugite hinc!), later anguis in herba" (boys, flee from here; a snake lies in the grass). In the pastoral tradition, one cannot escape death, and while the retreat to the pleasance is where one mitigates sorrow and loss, the singers in Theocritus and Virgil never escape the
human duties implied by these emotions. They may feel love-melancholy, nostalgia, or the pain of loss, but these emotions are not ends in themselves: their value lies in how they lead the singer back into the social community where humanity is fully realized. In “The Lotos-Eaters,” the pleasance serves another purpose. Here the natural world itself causes melancholy, and it is melancholy of an alluring and destructive sort.

The melancholy in “The Lotos-Eaters” is related more to certain kinds of pastoral retreats found in Spenser than to those of Theocritus and Virgil. A number of critics have pointed out the strong echoes of Spenser in Tennyson’s poem. One echo is of Phaedria’s floating island in Book II, Canto 6. The floating island is a false retreat of idleness and barren sensuality: here everything is “framed fit, / for to allure fraile mind to carelesse ease.” Phaedria argues that the plants and flowers of nature do not struggle or work, so why should man? Spenser’s counterargument here and throughout suggests that to give in to easy pleasure—and to abandon the heroic quest for the virtues which, ideally, make man God’s representative on earth—implies a debasement of what it means to be human, and constitutes moral and imaginative death. This idea is made clear in one of the other key passages in Spenser to which Tennyson is indebted for his representation of Lotus-Land: Redcrosse’s confrontation with Despair in Book I. Despair tries to persuade Redcrosse that suicide is not only acceptable but is part of God’s plan, since “did not he all create / To die againe?” Despair’s argument continues:

Then do no further goe, no further stray,
But here lie downe, and to thy rest betake,
Th’ill to prevent, that life ensewen may.
For what hath life, that may it loved make,
And gives not rather cause it to forsake?
Fear, sike, age, losse, labour, sorrow, strife,
Paine, hunger, cold, that makes the hart to quake;
And ever fickle fortune rageth rife,

All which, and thousands mo do make a loathsome life.

(The Faerie Queene, I. 9. 44)

The ultimate significance of the Choric Song parallels the fallacious argument of Despair. Life is full of unhappiness and suffering, but
nature in its passivity and acceptance of death shows man the way to escape. Furthermore, because decay and death in nature are part of God’s plan, nature’s end (that is, death) is, so the argument goes, therefore man’s aim. It is both morally acceptable and wise to cultivate a death-like state.

“The Lotos-Eaters” is an ambivalent poem because the truth of the pastoral landscape is not disassociated from the allure of Spenserian despair. As James Kincaid remarks, “Despite all the negative indications, it is, at the same time, difficult to resist an appeal which is so shrewdly grounded in a comic impulse: the desire for peace and order.” The poem is both a condemnation of “mild-minded melancholy” and a qualified validation of it through pastoral song. The Choric Song is, in certain ways, analogous to the songs the shepherds sing in classical pastoral. One of Tennyson’s concerns in “The Lotos-Eaters” is with what has happened to the pastoral idea in the language of modern poetry, and the melancholy in the poem is as much the result of his awareness of the limiting power of poetic conventions as it is a type of moral thematics (in this sense the poem is closely related to the aesthetic struggle in “The Palace of Art”). Part of this poem’s ambivalence lies in the way Tennyson uses such conventions as the idea of pastoral song itself. We can observe that the impetus to pastoral song is quite different from early examples of the form. Here is how Virgil leads the singer into his song in Eclogue III:

(Sing then, because we sit together on soft grass,
and every field now, every tree is burgeoning;
now woods are leafing, now the year is loveliest.)

Here the natural world blooms with healthy growth, and the poet’s song is the direct result of his pleasure in nature and friendship. In contrast, the Choric Song in Tennyson is a dark parody of pastoral inspiration. In Virgil, the pastoral song often celebrates nature as home—the natural scene and the singer’s home are one and the same. Conversely, pastoral lament explores the loss of this home. In “The Lotos-Eaters,” however, the pastoral celebration is not about home but about the impossibility of ever returning home. The song begins with the singers contemplating their “escape” within a pastoral scene that is not home but exile:
And all at once they sang, 'Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam.'

The song aspires to the passive acceptance of melancholy nostalgia of exile, a state of mind actively mourned in Virgil. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson transforms the pastoral song that should celebrate man's place in nature, into the celebration of his placelessness, of nature as the place of exile. Virgilian melancholy involves deep feeling for home, community, loved ones (as in Aeneas's tears before the pictures of the Trojan War on the walls of Carthage), but the mild-eyed melancholy of the lotos-eaters is so indulgent in its feeling that one fears there really is no feeling there at all—emotion is a narcotic like the lotos itself. Furthermore, the nature that gives rise to pastoral song in Tennyson's poem is not a nature of burgeoning growth and refreshing ease like that found in *Eclogue* III. Rather, the poet represents nature in a language of beautiful but tired decadence:

There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentler on the spirit lies,
Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.

Here are cool mosses deep,
And through the moss the ivies creep,
And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep.

The metrical finesse, the skillful repetition of images and rhyme-words, the gentle lyricism of sound should not deter us from confronting the song's sense. "Sweet sleep" means death, and this is death's lullaby. Like Despair in Spenser, the singers of the Choric Song present the passage from life to death as an attractive one. However, the repetition and mellifluousness of the vowel sounds and alliteration produce a cloying effect. As with the opening description of Lotos-Land, the emphasis here is on the persistent sameness of nature, in which life and death become identical.
Despite its surface attractions, the lyricism of this song is ultimately unappealing. The repetition of sounds in this pastoral song constitutes yet another example of how this is "A land where all things always seemed the same." The repetition of sounds does not, however, strengthen the argument of the Choric Song; rather, it serves to attenuate it. Tennyson's transformation of the traditional pastoral song is another example of how he uses poetic conventions to distance himself from the subject of his poems. His highly self-conscious use of traditional pastoral strategies and the changes he effects in these strategies contain a large degree of irony. In "The Lotus-Eaters," this irony distances and qualifies the melancholy nostalgia of the inhabitants of Lotos-Land. As elsewhere in his poetry, Tennyson here addresses the nature of melancholy nostalgia by means of poetic nostalgia that mocks itself (mocks in the sense that it is a double or imitation of nostalgia, and in the sense of its being Tennyson's ironic and darkly comedic knowledge of the limitations of melancholy both as emotion and as poetic strategy).

In terms of the Choric Song, part of the poetics of melancholy nostalgia in "The Lotus-Eaters" involves the very idea of sound itself. The attenuation of sound in the Choric Song weakens, as it were, the argument that the chorus sings. Here are the sounds Odysseus's sailors hear after they eat the enchanted fruit proffered by the lotos-eaters:

    to him the gushing of the wave
    Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
    On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
    His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;
    And deep-asleep he seemed yet all awake,
    And music in his ears his beating heart did make.

The sounds of nature become distant and "alien," and the sounds of one's companions are "like voices from the grave." These sounds are "far far away." The phrase occurs often in Tennyson's poetry; it is the refrain of a late poem of the same title:

    What charm in words, a charm no words could give?
    O dying words, can Music make you live
    Far-far-away?
The phrase also occurs in the poet’s description of the “passion of the past” in “The Ancient Sage”:

‘Lost and gone and lost and gone!’
A breath, a whisper—some divine farewell—
Desolate sweetness—far and far away—

In Hallam Tennyson’s *A Memoir* (I, 11), Tennyson is quoted as saying, “Before I could read I was in the habit on a stormy day of spreading my arms to the wind and the words ‘far far away’ had always a strange charm for me.” Critics have devoted much attention to this important phrase. A. Dwight Culler discusses it in terms of Tennyson’s fascination for the significance of sounds and his ideas about mystic unity. Culler remarks:

Both by their form and by their meaning they suggest a world beyond life and death where the antinomies of this world will be reconciled. There, birth and death, joy and pain, the human and the divine, will be one, but how this will happen is as mysterious as the phrase itself. . .

The phrase “far far away” signifies a mystical state of mind the poet was always striving for. In the context of “The Lotos-Eaters,” however, the phrase bears looking at from a slightly different perspective. Indeed, it has something to tell us about the nature of pastoral melancholy in Tennyson’s early poetry. On the one hand, the words “far far away” represent the aspect of pastoral that leads to renewal. It is the aspect that one student of pastoral has traced to the nostalgia for childhood, with its innocence and imagination. When Tennyson uses the words “far far away,” he is always looking back to childhood. However, these words also can suggest the “desolate sweetness” not only of the loss of childhood, but of life itself. This is the significance of the words in “The Lotos-Eaters.”

The world becomes “far far away” to those who eat the lotos, because they have acquiesced to death itself:

To muse and brood and live again in memory,
With those old faces of our infancy
Heaped over with a mound of grass,
Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass!
Memory broods over the dead, over the past that is “far far away,” but not in the strains of elegy. The gentle sounds of their song indicate the singers’ yielding to the pleasures of death:

Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?

.................................

All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.

The Choric Song fuses the pleasure principle and the death principle. The two become one and the same. In “The Lotos-Eaters,” the phrase “far far away” signifies the longing for death, but to the extent that it represents and comments on the actual attenuation of sound and voice in this new “pastoral song,” it also represents Tennyson’s distance from the traditional elements of pastoral. Tennyson’s dark irony here works through his bringing together elements of pastoral melancholy that go back through Keats, Spenser, Virgil, and Theocritus. But he embodies these elements in a language and style that, in a highly self-conscious way, are decadent. Behind the “mild-eyed melancholy” of the lotos-eaters lies Tennyson’s melancholy recognition that the pastoral pleasance, if merely repeated as a trope, is a type of repetition that leads to poetic death. As Tennyson, in later poems, continued to explore the pastoral idyll form and melancholy as a mood and as a poetics, he would reject the dark and dreamful ease of poetic repetition and move further past conventions toward his own type of pastoral melancholy.