Myths of Exile: Tennyson's Poetry of Loss

Pastoral melancholy takes many forms in Tennyson. One of the most interesting and successful forms occurs when he incorporates elements of pastoral within the recreation of a story from classical legend and myth. "Oenone" and "The Lotos-Eaters" are early examples of this confluence of forms and traditions. In these poems, Tennyson is less interested in exploring the uses of mythology as it relates to his poetics of melancholy than in exploring specific transformations of pastoral conventions, especially those conventions that deal with the attractions of the pastoral retreat and those that link the description of landscape to the psychology of the love-lament and the elegy. In later poems in which Tennyson draws upon mythology for his story, the poet becomes increasingly interested in how the idea of myth itself, and the modern artist's relation to myth, contribute to the representation of his melancholy disinheritance from tradition. The return to myth constitutes, in Tennyson's view, one type of exile from the poetry of the past.

Richard Jenkyns has described the peculiar sense of the "death of poetry" that had been felt by the Romantics but emerged most powerfully after the English Romantic poets had either died or withdrawn from the poetic fray. Referring to Victorian writers like Ten-
Jenkyns, Ruskin, and Dickens, Jenkyns observes: “The distinctive tone in English life which we call Victorian was set by men whose characters were formed at a time when it seemed that English poetry had sunk into insignificance. This feeling, or the memory of it, persisted a long time.” He goes on to observe Tennyson’s acute consciousness of the lackluster present and its meager literary achievements in the face of literature of the classical age. Jenkyns points, as an example, to the frame of “Morte d’Arthur.” The poet, Everard Hall, has decided to abandon his plan to write an epic on King Arthur:

Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,
Nor we those times; and why should any man
Remodel models?

But this is precisely what Tennyson does again and again—he remodels models; moreover, many of his finest poems are the result of this process. As Douglas Bush observes:

When Tennyson treats much the same subject in an ancient and in a modern setting he is almost invariably superior, greatly superior, in the former. The antique fable taps that authentic vein of his poetic inspiration, his classical memories; it limits the range of thought and allusion, forbids anything in the nature of modern realism, and compels concentration on the universal and more or less symbolic aspects of the theme.

This is true of his use of classical subjects and classical poetic forms in general, and is especially pertinent to his use of particular myths. But it is not exactly the exclusion of the modern element, as Bush appears to suggest, that makes for the success of his mythological poems; rather it is the play or tension between realism and myth, between modernity and tradition, that defines the unique power of his achievement. Tennyson’s treatment of mythology is sophisticated because he uses it to explore the relation of his modernity to literary history, and his use of myth is melancholy because he bears a profound awareness of what the modern poet qua modern has lost and can never recover.

This sense of loss, of disinheritance, that underlies his treatment of mythology is analogous to the melancholy nostalgia found in
his use of pastoral conventions, and not surprisingly, he often com­
bines the two modes. Tennyson’s awareness that his poetry of melan­
choly was closely related to the modern (i.e., Victorian) perspec­
tive on mythology was, however, not shared by all students of
mythology in the Victorian period; indeed, much of the Victorian
interest in classical mythology worked with a different set of as­
sumptions. There was a great renewal of interest in myth, but the
work being done on myth was often of a scientific or historicist
nature. Myths were understood to represent the childhood of man
or the origin of human history. In 1822, Hartley Coleridge would
speak of myths as follows: “That youth is flown for ever. We are
grown up to serious manhood, and are wedded to reality.” While
there was a renewal of interest in mythology during the period, the
myths themselves as presented to the Victorian reading public were
often bowdlerized, deprived of their power to represent ideas of
a violent or sexual nature. In his discussion of Victorian attitudes
toward Greek mythology, Frank Turner quotes two twentieth-
century students of the history of mythology who perceive a sig­
nificant shift from the romantic period:

If the Romantic reappraisal of myth included an affirmation of the
Dionysian, the violent, the sexual, and the darkly fatalistic elements
of myth, it therefore included within its appraisal the whole irra­
tional side of myth. . . . But the Victorian revaluation of myth
largely ignored or rejected this entire side of myth, and in filtering
myth through a mesh of decorous and sunny gentility, robbed the
subject of much of its seriousness, much of its dignity, much of its
capacity to nourish tragedy. . .

The Victorians were rewriting myth and to do so involved choices
that reflected on their understanding of what it meant to be mod­
ern. We can cite a revealing comment by A. C. Bradley: “The prob­
lem is to reshape the material they give us, that it may express
ideas, feelings, experiences, interesting to us, in a form natural and
poetically attractive to us.” Bradley sees the problem as being suc­
cessfully dealt with by Tennyson in his poem “Ulysses,” a poem,
in Bradley’s view, both mythic and intensely modern. The reshap­
ing of myth, therefore, did not have to lapse into gentility; indeed,
there was another side to the Victorian attitude toward mythol­
ogy, one which freed the imagination rather than limited it.
As James Kissane shows in his essay “Victorian Mythology,” there was a struggle in the Victorian period between the scientific and historicist study of myth in terms of origins, on the one hand, and on the other, an aesthetic view in which myth is a highly organized and structured form that embodies the artistic imagination. In the latter view, one does not perceive myths as representing history or moral allegories. Kissane points to the first two volumes of the History of Greece by George Grote as an example of the new attitude whereby myths are seen as “a special product of the imagination and feelings, radically distinct from history and philosophy.”

In fact, much of the historical work devoted to myth at this time did not so much lessen the value of myth as shift that value from myth as a source for discovering the origins of human history to myth as an artistic form of great imaginative force that was, in a sense, ahistorical. Grote countered the scientific interest in origins with his emphasis on mythopoeia and the life of the mind. For Kissane the three great exemplars of the aesthetic approach to myth in the Victorian period are John Ruskin, John Addington Symonds, and Walter Pater. In Studies of the Greek Poets (1873), Symonds remarks, “The truth to be looked for in myths is psychological, not historical, aesthetic rather than positive.” Kissane points out that Symonds is intrigued by “the mingling of the natural and moral worlds” in mythology. Myth, in Symonds words, is “Humanity defined upon the borderland of nature.” Kissane goes on to observe that, in The Queen of Air (1869), Ruskin argued for the universal spiritual value of classical myth as the expression of a good and noble people. But the most important discussion of the aesthetic value of myth for our purposes is that of Pater in Greek Studies.

Pater sees three aesthetic and spiritual stages within classical myth. The myth of Demeter and Persephone, he suggests, exemplifies these phases:

There is first its half-conscious, instinctive or mystical, phase, in which, under the form of an unwritten legend, living from mouth to mouth, and with details changing as it passes from place to place, there lie certain primitive impressions of the phenomena of the natural world. We may trace it next in its conscious, poetical or literary, phase, in which the poets become the depositaries of the
vague instinctive product of the popular imagination, and handle it with a purely literary interest, fixing its outlines, and simplifying or developing its situations. Thirdly, the myth passes into the ethical phase, in which the persons and the incidents of the poetical narrative are realised as abstract symbols, because intensely characteristic examples, of moral and spiritual conditions.\textsuperscript{12}

We find even more important analogues for Tennyson's use of mythology in two other areas of concern in Pater's essay on "Demeter and Persephone." The first is his emphasis on myth as a special kind of thinking in language, a type of language that bears comparison with the language Tennyson uses in his re-creation of myth. This bears as well on the language of Tennysonian pastoral. It has to do with an intensely close relation between meaning and image:

The personification of abstract ideas by modern painters or sculptors, of wealth, of commerce, of health, for instance, shocks, in most cases, the aesthetic sense, as something conventional or rhetorical, as a mere transparent allegory, or figure of speech, which could please almost no one. On the other hand, such symbolical representations under the form of human persons, as Giotto's \textit{Virtues} and \textit{Vices} at Padua, or his \textit{Saint Poverty} at Assisi, or the series of the planets in certain early Italian engravings, are profoundly poetical and impressive. They seem to be something more than mere symbolism and to be connected with some peculiarly sympathetic penetration on the part of the artist into the subjects he intended to depict. Symbolism intense as this, is the creation of a special temper, in which a certain simplicity, taking all things literally, \textit{au pied de la lettre}, is united to a vivid pre-occupation with the aesthetic beauty of the image itself, the \textit{figured} side of figurative expression, the \textit{form} of the metaphor.\textsuperscript{13}

Pater's comments get to the heart of Tennyson's interest in mythology (and his concern with the question of modernity in its relation to literary history). The aesthetic stance that is intensely literal and yet drawn back to a larger consideration of the form, the figurative nature of his language, the "penetration" of the artist into his subjects and yet the detachment too (as he sees his subjects also as symbols of abstract ideas), define not only the age of Giotto
and the mythic imagination of the Greeks, but also the sensibility of Tennyson himself.

There is one more passage from Pater’s essay that has relevance to our discussion of Tennyson’s mythological poems. It deals specifically with the myth of Demeter and Persephone as it relates to the “romantic” side of the Greek mind. The passage is long but its pertinence to Tennyson’s use of mythology justifies quotation in full:

The “worship of sorrow,” as Goethe called it, is sometimes supposed to have almost no place in the religion of the Greeks. Their religion has been represented as a religion of mere cheerfulness, the worship by an untroubled, unreflecting humanity, conscious of no deeper needs, of the embodiments of its own joyous activity. It helped to hide out of their sight those traces of decay and weariness of which the Greeks were constitutionally shy, to keep them from peeping too curiously into certain shadowy places, appropriate enough to the gloomy imagination of the middle age; and it hardly proposed to itself to give consolation to people who, in truth, were never “sick or sorry.” But this familiar view of Greek religion is based on a consideration of a part only of what is known concerning it, and really involves a misconception, akin to that which underestimates the influence of the romantic spirit generally, in Greek poetry and art; as if Greek art had dealt exclusively with human nature in its sanity, suppressing all motives of strangeness, all the beauty which is born of difficulty, permitting nothing but an Olympian, though perhaps, somewhat wearisome calm. . . . [T]he legend of Demeter and Persephone, perhaps the most popular of all Greek legends, is sufficient to show that the “worship of sorrow” was not without its function in Greek religion; their legend is a legend made by and for sorrowful, wistful, anxious people; while the most important artistic monuments of that legend sufficiently prove that the Romantic spirit was really at work in the minds of the Greek artists, extracting by a kind of subtle alchemy, a beauty, not without the elements of tranquility, of dignity and order, out of a matter, at first sight painful and strange.14

The sorrow that Pater sees in the myth of Demeter and Persephone is one that Tennyson felt. Pater’s analysis of the myth’s blend of abstraction and realism, of figurative and literal language, defines
an analogue for the form of language taken by Tennyson's poetics of melancholy. Classical mythology contained themes that held a perennial fascination for Tennyson: loss, religious doubt, the question of immortality. Classical myth contained an aesthetic characterized by penetration and detachment. This aesthetic suited Tennyson's troubled sense of disinheritance from tradition, and it contributed to his poetics of melancholy.

"Ulysses" is a turning point in Tennyson's development of a new idyll. It is also central to an understanding of Tennyson's treatment of mythological subjects. In his essay "Old Mythology in Modern Poetry," A. C. Bradley speaks of "Ulysses" as follows: "How can the heart that beats in our time find expression in the legend, as the spirit of the old Greek was mirrored in it years ago? . . . [T]his is the question Mr. Tennyson has answered for us, not in an exposition or an allegory, but by recreating; so that he gives us a poem on an 'ancient subject' as we roughly say, yet modern to the core." Tennyson's "Ulysses" is not only a poem that takes myth as a source, it is a poem about myth. It is also a poem very much related to Tennyson's overall transformation of the pastoral idyll. A dramatic monologue, like "Cleonone," "Tithonus," and "Demeter and Persephone," its origins go back to certain classical forms. In his article "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," A. Dwight Culler has argued that the monodrama derives from the classical rhetorical exercise of prosopopoeia, examples of which in classical literature are Ovid's *Heroides* and before that the Alexandrian idyll. A Tennyson poem such as "Ulysses" combines mythology with the classical pastoral idyll one associates with Theocritus. As Culler notes, the idyll as a literary form was especially amenable to Tennyson because of his modern sense that the great poetry had already been written, a view that parallels the Alexandrian perspective on the classical epic. Furthermore, as Richard Jenkyns observes, in much of his poetry, Tennyson deliberately contrasts his efforts with the greater models of the classic age; thus, in *In Memoriam*, says Jenkyns, "He stresses the contrast between the vitality of the early
Myths of Exile

poets and his own frailty in order to bring out the pathos of the human condition, in his own time of doubts and uncertainties. But what is involved here is not simply a contrast between past and present; rather, it is Tennyson's recognition of affinity with a specific classical form: the idyll. As Culler points out, in the 1830s Tennyson was already thinking about writing poems in the form of brief epics: "I felt certain of one point then; if I meant to make any mark at all, it must be by shortness, for the men before me had been so diffuse, and most of the big things except 'King Arthur' had been done." Culler argues that this attitude types Tennyson as a "Victorian Alexandrian." Poems such as "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" are modelled on the idylls or "little epics" of Callimachus and Theocritus. Such a line of poetic descent also has ramifications for Tennyson's treatment of myth. The Alexandrians, Culler observes, "took a new approach to myth":

Writing for a highly cultivated audience in the great research center of Alexandria, they were little inclined simply to tell over again the stories that had already been told by Homer and the Greek dramatists. If they could not find new stories, they would at least seek out little known aspects of the old stories and would tell them from a novel point of view. . . . In this focusing upon one little portion of the story with the rest sketched in briefly or by cryptic allusion, they naturally produced what, from a traditional point of view, was a one-sided or asymmetrical treatment of the myth. This they often intensified by odd forms, by the digression or the poem-within-the-poem, with the result that what was formally a subordinate part of the story became thematically the most important. For they were primarily interested in using old myths as the materials of art—in creating out of narratives that a previous generation had taken rather seriously something that would be shapely, intense, learned, and graceful. This was the "serious" modern poetry of the Alexandrian age.

Combine the detached artistic perspective of the Theocritean idyll with the sorrow and melancholy that Pater rightly perceives within the Greek mythic imagination, and we begin to get a sense of the mixture of generic forms and the singular and complex emotional effects that Tennyson was striving to produce in such poems based on myth as "Ulysses."
One cannot ignore the biographical side to "Ulysses." Tennyson wrote the poem after the death of Hallam, and he made two important comments about the poem:

"Ulysses" . . . gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam.*

There is more about myself in "Ulysses" which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. It was more written with the feeling of loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam.*

The note of heroism in these comments suggests the Homeric Ulysses. Yet, in Alexandrian style, Tennyson has chosen a more unusual recounting of the myth. In the eleventh book of *The Odyssey,* Tiresias tells Ulysses that after returning to Ithaca and slaying the suitors, he will take one more voyage and die peacefully at sea. The idea of Ulysses's last journey had great currency during the classical age and was also dealt with by writers in the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Dante pursued this aspect of the myth in the *Inferno* when the poet encounters Ulysses in the eighth circle; this is Tennyson's principal source, and he probably relied on the Cary translation. In Dante, Ulysses describes his final journey beyond the pillars of Hercules, the *ne plus ultra* of the Medieval world, and then tells of his ship's sinking at the limits of the world.

Few Tennyson poems have elicited more diversity of critical opinion than "Ulysses." Many of the differences of interpretation center on the moral nature of Ulysses and on Tennyson's attitude toward his speaker. W. W. Robson, in "The Dilemma of Tennyson," argues that the poem exemplifies the tension in Tennyson's poetry between the socially responsible public poet and the private poet during a period of sorrow and loss; in his view, the style and form, the technique, is at odds with the ethos of heroism and struggle. As Robson puts it, "There is a radical discrepancy between the strenuousness aspired to, and the medium in which the aspiration is expressed." E. J. Chiasson, on the other hand, sees Tennyson as critical of his speaker. Chiasson finds fault not with the poem but with Ulysses: in his view, the poem is "a dramatic portrayal of a type of human being who held a set of ideas which Tennyson
regarded as destructive of the whole fabric of society.”

For Chiasson, Ulysses does not represent the heroic struggle Tennyson felt the need for after the death of Hallam, but represents instead the antithesis of that struggle through his moral and social irresponsibility. E. D. H. Johnson is less harsh but basically concurs with this view. Ulysses pursues, says Johnson, “a line of conduct which cannot be justified in any but the most individualistic terms.” On the other hand, Douglas Bush emphasizes the heroism of Ulysses: in “Ulysses” says Bush, “the forces of order and courage win a hard victory over the dark mood of chaos and defeat.”

Bush also hints at Ulysses as a poet figure, “endowed with a nineteenth-century elegiac sensibility and magnanimous reflectiveness, a capacity for not only seeking experience but interpreting it.” Some critics have been more interested in the psychology of the speaker and the relation of this psychology to Tennyson’s aesthetic, rather than in the poem’s moral stance. Langbaum, for example, sees the poem as typical of a large group of poems in Tennyson involving the idea of “weariness” and a “longing for rest.” Langbaum observes that Tennyson places great emphasis on Ulysses’ age and his “yearning toward disappearance, extinction,” and that “Tennyson’s Ulysses holds out death in one form or another as the inevitable goal of the journey.”

Along similar lines is a passage by Goldwin Smith written in 1855:

You may trace the hues of this character tinging everything in the poems. Even the Homeric Ulysses, the man of purpose and action, seeking with most definite aim to regain his own home and that of his companions, becomes a “hungry heart,” roaming aimlessly to “lands beyond the sunset” in the vain hope of being “washed down by the gulf to the Happy Isles,” merely to relieve his ennui and dragging his companions with him. We say he roams aimlessly—we should rather say, he intends to roam, but stands for ever a listless and melancholy figure on the shore.

The dialectic between heroic struggle and melancholy passivity will be the focus of this discussion:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mere and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

Our first response is to read these lines as indicating Ulysses's arrogance and social irresponsibility. But while these elements are there, they do not predominate in the way some critics have argued. We need to keep in mind Tennyson's treatment of Ulysses as a mythic figure here. "Ulysses" is a meditation on the three levels of classical myth outlined by Pater, and as a mythical figure, Ulysses himself contains both literal and figurative meaning. The myth of Ulysses is a myth of heroism, but Tennyson's interest lies in the end of heroism, the waning of Ulysses's power and the waning of the power of myth itself. In subtle ways, this aspect of the poem looks ahead to Arthur in the Idylls of the King. In Tennyson's epic, Arthur represents a king's declining power and also the way the savage, bestial wasteland begins to return as the Round Table falls apart. In certain ways, Ulysses confronts similar problems: his attitude could be viewed as arrogance toward his people and his wife, but it is better understood as his recognition of the powerlessness of old age. Ulysses's descriptive language, then, is not so much a comment on Ithaca as on his own waning strength and influence. He is "idle," and he resides by a "still hearth" and "barren crags." The images of powerlessness, stasis, and desolation reflect on his own state. Ulysses is not arrogant in this passage, but expresses an acute consciousness of his own losses. When he refers to Penelope, "Matched with an aged wife," he is not so much critical of her as of his own condition: they are "matched" because he too is "aged."

When critics speak of Ulysses's haughty condescension, they forget the way Tennyson is dealing with a mythic figure and the life of a myth. The opening lines of the poem are not heroic and grand but prosaic and mundane; they tell us something about the course the myth has run. Ulysses as a figure of power is demystified. Myth is brought down to the level of domestic details and the drudgery of governorship. This language constitutes not simply Ulysses's attitude toward life on Ithaca but toward the life of his own myth. The language also embodies Tennyson's attitude toward myth: he calls the value of myth into question through a diminution to a language of domestic realism. Ulysses's sense of failing power works
on the secondary level as a comment on the failing power of myth itself; thus, the poem is both more symbolic and more literal than it is often made out to be, and therein lies the relevance of Pater’s discussion of the allegorical figures of Giotto. In representing Ulysses’s life on his return to Ithaca, Tennyson uses a language of extreme literalness, or as Pater puts it language *au pied de la lettre.* We get a Ulysses who speaks at the level of any man about his wife and daily work. But because Ulysses is a mythic figure, situated in the context of the heroic voyage just completed and the final voyage on which he is about to embark, there is a strangeness to this type of literal representation. As a mythic hero, Ulysses is not simply a literal figure but an allegorical abstraction for heroic power. He is an example of the “intense” symbolism that Pater sees in Giotto and Greek myth. The literalness of Tennyson’s representation of the Ulysses myth is the symbolic embodiment of the myth’s failing power. When Ulysses speaks of ruling the people of Ithaca—“I mete and dole / Unequal laws unto a savage race / That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me”—the tone is not one of superciliousness but of exasperation at his own ineffectualness, a powerlessness conveyed by a startlingly literal type of language. There is a prosaic quality about “mete” and “dole,” uncharacteristic of a mythical hero and suggestive of Ulysses’s diminution. The language of drab realism mocks the mythical hero and, conversely, his old age and dwindling power mock the language of myth. Moreover, when he admits that the Ithacans “know not” him, he is, in part, commenting on their uncivilized state, certainly, but also on his inability to gain their recognition. They do not know him because he now lacks the authority to make himself known.

Ulysses as a symbol of power and authority is closely related to Tennyson’s finest poem of mourning, “Tears, Idle Tears.” The tears are idle because they cannot signify, cannot embody in language, the meaning of the speaker’s grief. Their “idleness” connotes an absence of meaning and power. Ulysses is an idle king not because he feels superior to the Ithacans, but because he feels his own insignificance. He has become a cipher. His age and his weakness drain him of meaning as a mythical figure, and he becomes idle because his function as a figure within myth no longer has much weight. Ulysses is a sign of empty meaning just as the idle tears
are a sign of the absent meaning of that speaker's grief. In "Tears, Idle Tears," the speaker attempts to give meaning to the absence of meaning emblematized by the tears themselves. In "Ulysses," the speaker attempts to give new meaning to himself as a figure of myth. At the outset of the poem, he has lost his heroism and power, and the diminished language of the first verse paragraph is the representation of this loss. The first verse paragraph of the poem is not about Ulysses's haughty disregard for the Ithacans and for the social responsibilities of leadership. It is about Ulysses's awareness of his own failing power as a hero and as a figure in mythical language: his idleness or absence of meaning.

The poem describes not simply a quest for adventure stemming from intellectual curiosity or boredom with life on Ithaca, but a quest to recover the power of myth itself, a quest to regain the language of symbolic heroism. Ulysses's monologue constitutes both an elegy on the loss of mythical language and an attempt to recover it. Through the journey, Ulysses hopes to recover the power of his figure within the realm of myth, and the power of the language of myth itself.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honoured of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

The elegiac sense derives from Ulysses's contrast of the great heroism of the past with the diminished values of his present life on Ithaca. But Tennyson conveys the plenitude of life in the second verse paragraph not solely through contrasting the fullness of the external world (i.e., the distant regions he has travelled) with the "barren crags" of Ithaca; rather, he contrasts the plenitude of Ulysses's meaning and significance, as figure of myth and emblem
of mythic language, with his emptiness or idleness as literal king and husband amid the drab realism of Ithaca. They key moment in the second verse paragraph, and it constitutes an important realization on Ulysses's part, occurs when he says, "I am become a name." For Ulysses, to be a "name" is to recognize the self as mythic figure but at a stage when the myth of the self is in decline. He begins to view himself as a myth. But in so doing, he is no longer fully within the world of myth but outside of it. We repeatedly find this pattern in Tennyson's poems. The speaker begins to look at him- or herself as if from the outside, viewing the self as a convention and often, in fact, as a literary convention. The speaker's division within the self is, in turn, figured forth through the self's sense of exile from its surrounding world, from the external landscape of home. This division within the speaker's self, and the speaker's sense of exile from the native landscape, both become figures for the poet's sense of exile and disinheritance from his home in poetic tradition. Ulysses is a figure for the poet who wishes to recover the power of literary tradition in his own work, but fears that his attempts to do so will end in failure.

Ithaca is not simply a place of "limitation," to use Culler's word. It is an emblem for the pastoral retreat that has failed and from which Ulysses feels psychologically banished. His place within this tradition has become idle or empty. The people do not know him there. But on his earlier travels, when he was within his own myth, he was "honoured of them all." The language changes between the two worlds of paragraphs one and two: it takes on power as Ulysses moves away from the domestic and civil scene of Ithaca to the places of mythical adventure. There is a world of difference between the prose-like literalness of the first verse paragraph and this line from verse paragraph two: "Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy." This line both carries him back through memory to youthful heroism and also prefigures the projected heroism he wishes to recover in his future journey. The language of this line is meant to recover the power of myth, and the language is both literal and figurative in its intense penetration into Ulysses's longing for his lost place within the conventions of myth. To reside before the "still hearth" at Ithaca is to live no longer inside the conventions of myth and to possess no longer the power those conven-
tions bestow upon the inhabitants of the world of myth. In Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” Ithaca is a place of powerlessness, a place of realism that diminishes the life of the imagination. Indeed, Tennyson’s great ironic contribution to the Ulysses story is that the return to Ithaca is actually a psychic banishment and exile. Ulysses has been banished from the myth of his own heroism.

In Tennyson’s poem, Ithaca is a place of limitation, and Ulysses symbolizes the need to go beyond all limits. The line about the plains of Troy is, on the level of language, a journey beyond limitation. W. David Shaw describes the unique quality of line 17 as follows:

Because the termini of the chain—the windswept ruin and the ring of a proud and boisterous (a “windy”) people—are overspecified, they free the mind from overelaboration of the intermediate stages. The space filled by years of war is collapsed into a direct confrontation of pride and ruin.

As Shaw says, the line’s rhetoric involves both “heroic” and “elegiac” styles: it images both Troy as heroic city and Troy in ruins after the fall. This combination of the heroic and elegiac, of pride and ruin, characterizes not simply this one-line depiction of Troy, but conveys the contradictory nature of Ulysses’s mythic status as well. He is now a proud ruin, a king but an idle one, just as Troy is now a windy city because it is empty and fallen. The identity between man, language, and place is one followed throughout the poem and helps create its blend of heroism and melancholy. In the opening paragraph, Ulysses is bound up with images of Ithaca and with a style of realistic language that constitutes the diminishment of myth. Then in the second paragraph, the language assumes the heroism of myth, and Ulysses becomes that myth’s hero, albeit only in memory. This stage reaches a tentative conclusion with line 17, which paradoxically signifies heroism at its height as it also figures heroism’s demise and ruin. The powerful rhetoric of this line fails to hide the fact that “windy Troy” circles back to “idle king,” as images of emptiness and powerlessness define both city and man. Ulysses himself is aware of this identity between man and place:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Myths of Exile

Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.

The first of the above-quoted lines reveals Ulysses's recognition that his identity is bound up with the places of his mythic achievements; the latter three lines suggest how his identity is bound up with the life and death of the language of myth itself. Matthew Arnold first pointed out the unusual relation of the language of these lines to epic and myth: "It is no blame to their rhythm, which belongs to another order of movement than Homer's but it is true that these three lines by themselves take up nearly as much time as a whole book of the Iliad." The slowness of time in these lines, the enervation of the language itself, combines the heroism of epic and myth with the melancholy sense of the fading away of life. The fading "margin" projects future adventure, future journeys, but it also images Ulysses's distance from the heroism of his past. The imagery suggests that while he may try to move, once again, toward the "untravelled world" of myth, this world will continually recede from his approach. Tennyson qualifies his attempt, in these lines, at the grand epic style of the Iliad through the enervation of the language, and the language mirrors Ulysses's own age and fading power. Ulysses is as far from the adventures of the Iliad, as far from his own past mythic stature, as Tennyson is from writing a new classical epic. The heart of these lines lies in the elegiac sense of both hero and poet as being outside of the myths they wish to inhabit. The language of myth and epic is no longer within their power, and they need to find other kinds of language, other conventions, to represent their experience. If one of Tennyson's principal concerns is, to use Richard Jenkyns's phrase, the "death of poetry," this problem finds its literary analogue in Ulysses's concern for the death of his own myth, the fact that he has "become a name." Ironically, his attempt to regain the power of myth through the imagery of his travels, only serves to heighten the sense of elegiac distance from these past adventures. Yet, in one sense, Ulysses's language is not distant from his own myth. Certain qualities of the language and imagery prefigure the final journey described by Dante's Ulysses: the "untravelled world" and the fading "margin" are figures for the limitations of heroism and knowledge beyond which
Dante’s Ulysses will go in his final journey to death. As Shaw describes this passage: “It presents Ulysses engaged in the most strenuous activity of all—spectacularly envisioning his own deline.” This comment shows the direction in which Ulysses’s heroism is going. Ulysses becomes a poet figure, a singer of his own elegy in which the language of adventure translates into a language of melancholy and grief. Dante’s Ulysses, too, is in a sense a poet figure, and this fact explains Tennyson’s interest in Dante’s representation of the myth. For Dante’s Ulysses speaks from the land of the dead and describes, in effect, how his own myth finally achieves its closure. And he, too, speaks in a language that is both heroic and elegiac, because he knows the final outcome of his own story.

Tennyson’s Ulysses has not yet taken that final journey, but a sense of melancholy at the foreshadowed ending begins to emerge as the poem progresses:

And this gray spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.

Tennyson combines Ulysses’s heroic exhortation to his men with images of their death: the “sinking star” foreshadows the sinking of the ship that ends Ulysses’s story in Dante. In alluding to Dante’s treatment of the myth, Tennyson suggests how Ulysses’ death is also the ending or death of the myth itself. Indeed, the final paragraph of the poem puts great emphasis on this sense of closure:

Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices.

We see how reductive it is to view Ulysses as haughty or condescending toward the Ithacans, Penelope, or Telemachus. The earlier words were spoken by a Ulysses who was being false to himself, a Ulysses of literal language rather than of figurative power. Now we see that Ulysses can never exist at the literal level, but only on the level of a symbolic representation of heroism. He can exist
only in myth, but now his myth confronts the final myth of death, which also brings the end of language and of myth itself. The melancholy of the final verse paragraph involves Ulysses’s knowledge that the only mythical act of heroism left is one of actively seeking his own end.

It may be that the gulf will wash us down:  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.

We recall Carlyle’s comment on the passage: “These lines do not make me weep, but there is in me what would fill whole Lachrymatories as I read.” The poignancy of the lines lies partly in our knowledge that his end will be to sink into oblivion beyond the world’s limits. His destination will not be the Isles of the Blest but, if we follow Dante’s account, the eighth circle of the Malebolge, for those guilty of deceit. And this knowledge gives the heroism of the closing a highly ambiguous quality:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

As Christopher Ricks points out, here is one of Tennyson’s typically inconclusive conclusions. We are not certain that Ulysses knows what his fate will be. Moreover, we are not certain that we know, in this particular rendering of the Ulysses myth, what his end will be. What we are certain of, however, is Ulysses’s ironic sense of describing the life and death of his own myth. His is a language of elegiac self-consciousness, a language of melancholy, which stems from his recognition that he is now only capable of looking back retrospectively at the self that was a mythic figure, and he is incapable of existing as an active figure of power within the realm of myth itself. His myth has disinherited him. His separation from myth parallels Tennyson’s separation from Hallam, and, most important, Tennyson’s separation from the literary traditions of myth that he invokes in this group of poems written soon after
the death of Hallam. A poem that explores the way the poet has become irrevocably detached from certain forms and conventions, “Ulysses” moves Tennyson further in the direction of his new idyll.

“Tithonus” is an expanded and revised version of “Tithon,” which is one of a group of poems Tennyson wrote after the death of Hallam in 1833. “Tithonus” explores the nature of death and the possibilities of human resignation or action in the face of suffering and defeat. Tennyson drew upon the myth of the love between a mortal and Aurora, the goddess of the dawn. His probable source was the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite. In the myth, Tithonus and Aurora are so much in love that the mortal asks the goddess for immortality so he can be with her forever. Aurora grants his wish, but gives him eternal life only, not eternal youth. Tithonus is thus fated to remain forever alive but forever aging. Tennyson describes the myth as follows: Tithonus was “beloved by Aurora who gave him eternal life but not eternal youth. He grew old and infirm, and as he would not die, according to the legend, was turned into a grasshopper.” Tennyson uses this last aspect of the myth in his poem “The Grasshopper,” but he avoids such a conclusion in “Tithonus.” It is easy to see why the story would appeal to Tennyson after the death of Hallam: the contrasts between man and the gods, mortality and immortality, youth and age, are central preoccupations of the poet at this period. The problem of immortality had been a concern of Hallam himself and one he dealt with in his Theodicea Novissima. Tennyson would return to the question of immortality again and again in the years following Hallam’s death, as he wrote the lyrics that would eventually be brought together in In Memoriam.

The Tithonus story not only involves the problem of immortality but explores the difficulties of love and of human aspirations toward the divine. Both issues were in Tennyson’s mind during this period of loss and grief; moreover, the story contrasts youth and age at a time when Tennyson began to see what age and loss of youth meant, having by now experienced the death of his father
as well as of Hallam. Jowett comments on this transformation from youth to age in a letter to Tennyson, after the former had visited Hallam's grave: "It is a strange feeling about those who are taken young that while we are getting older and dusty they are as they were." Hallam's death was bound up in the minds of his friends with the memory of youth. At the same time, Tennyson's thoughts of Hallam often involved the desire to be reunited with Hallam in death. The desire for death as escape had been one of the earliest and most intense preoccupations of Tennyson's poetry, and "Tithonus" is one of the most complex explorations of that desire that we have in his work. Again, the biographical detail is not irrelevant here: Tennyson's sister Emily was engaged to Hallam. During the time of mourning, she said, "What is life to me! if I die (which the Tennysons never do)." Tennyson at times also felt the worthlessness of life and the attractions of death. The myth of Tithonus had the paradoxical quality of affirming and negating both of these feelings at the same time.

In addition to the biographical context, a word about the sources is in order. The principal source is the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite. Ricks also points to two references to the Tithonus story in Horace's Odes. Tithonus is mentioned in I.28, a meditation on the inevitability of death. In II.16, Horace uses Tithonus as an example of the type of suffering that all human beings must to some extent learn to bear. Despite the classical source and background of Tennyson's "Tithonus," in the language and imagery of the poem itself there are fewer actual allusions or echoes of classical literature than in some of the other Tennyson poems on classical mythological subjects. Nevertheless, in style and form "Tithonus" does resemble the classical idyll and epyllion (or little epic), and the principal debts here are to Theocritus and Virgil. Douglas Bush calls "Tithonus" "perhaps the most Virgilian of all Tennyson's poems. . . . The stately phrase and rhythm, the opulent but not profane decoration, the conscious art that governs the curve of the whole poem and weighs every syllable, all this is Virgilian. . . . [T]he pathos inherent in the simple cycle of human life is felt and rendered not only with Virgilian dignity and beauty, but with Virgilian pity and tenderness." "Tithonus" is one of Tennyson's great poems of melancholy and mourning. It reveals its debts to Virgil in this regard.
The melancholy of “Tithonus” comes also by way of Keats and the Romantics. The desire for escape and immortality and the pattern of return to the poetry of the earth are quintessentially Keatsian. Bush notes the debt to Keats here, especially stylistically. He points to the similarity in these lines: “Man comes and tills the fields and lies beneath” (“Tithonus,” 3) and “Of peaceful sway above man’s harvesting” (Hyperion, I.110). The concrete and sympathetic identification of man, the seasons, and the earth is one Tennyson gets in part from Keats. The melancholy of “Tithonus” has much in common with the moments of despair in the great Romantic crisis lyrics. The Virgilian aspect of the poem’s melancholy is undoubtedly there, but “Tithonus” also contains the poet’s melancholy relation to tradition, the latter stemming from Romanticism and the poet’s wavering faith about the poetic task. As Dwight Culler observes, “Tithonus”

is about a poet who feels his poetic powers failing. . . . For “Tithonus” is Tennyson’s “Dejection: An Ode”; it is the negative part of his “Resolution and Independence,” of his “Tintern Abbey” or “Immortality Ode.” With the death of Hallam he lost Joy, that active, sacred power by which the poet creates worlds about him, by which he glorifies the earth. To the poet the loss of Joy is the loss of the imagination.

One more point about the melancholy of “Tithonus” is related to a problem in the history of poetic truth as explored by W. J. Bate and Harold Bloom: the poet’s sense of “the burden of the past.” The melancholy of the poet, the fear of failing poetic power, is in part the result of his awe and admiration for the poets who have preceded him, and of his need to find the originality of his own voice within the many strands of earlier voices from which his own poetry is woven. As Bate puts it, “if you are exhorted to be ‘original’ at all costs, how do you take even the first step—especially if what you have been taught most to admire (and what in fact you really do most admire) is best typified by those very predecessors from whom you must now distinguish yourself?” The melancholy so prevalent in Tennyson’s work is bound up with this problem of originality, and the form taken by this problem within the language of the poems themselves is the transformation and develop-
ment of certain types of poetic conventions. In “Tithonus,” the exploration of certain themes such as death and immortality, youth and age, memory and the frustration of love, works along with the poet’s melancholy exploration of poetic tradition, and the spiritual and aesthetic resolutions that it offers involve loss as well as gain.

We have been exploring Tennyson’s poetics of melancholy in a group of poems that draw upon the conventions of the pastoral tradition. This seems the right approach to begin with in reading “Tithonus.” “Tithonus” is both a pastoral love-lament with Virgilian and Theocritean elements, and an elegy (though here, paradoxically, an elegy for the “immortality” of the self rather than the mortality of another). In keeping with these traditions, “Tithonus” opens with a landscape from nature:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

The grand style of these opening lines derives in part from the repetition, anaphora, and use of conjunctives. Tennyson emphasizes nature as repetition that terminates in death. He compresses within the image of each line a cycle of life that achieves its closure in the ground. Note the final words of the first three lines: “fall,” “ground,” “beneath.” In terms of tone, here is a combination of a certain rhetorical elegance with simplicity and understatement. In line three, the poet conveys the entire life of a man, from birth to work to death: “Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath.” This type of rhetorical economy, which resonates in the mind, produces the Virgilian pathos of the poem, and this form of language has more to do with the Virgilian epic than with the eclogues that most closely follow the pastoral idyll form.

Yet the opening docs have affinities with elegy. The whole sense
here is of closure, of ending, that the proper terminus of life in nature is death. In terms of pastoral tradition, the poem is both a meditation on and response to the image of death in Virgil's third Eclogue:

Qui legetis flores et humi nascentia fraga
frigides, o pueri (fugite hinc!) latet anguis in herba.

(You who gather flowers and strawberries,
away from here, boys; a snake lies in the grass.)

Even arcadia cannot preserve the innocent child from danger and death. Tennyson, however, transfigures pastoral elegiac conventions in his opening by having death be not something to be fled but something to be desired. One of the great ironies of “Tithonus” is that death itself becomes the arcadia or the pastoral pleasance from which the speaker is exiled and for which he mourns.

There is a sense of rightness about the representation of the cycle of death and life in nature at the opening of “Tithonus.” The speaker perceives death as part of nature and as the proper end of life. The tone of voice here suggests not merely acquiescence but equanimity at this state of things. The speaker’s perspective is a distant one, a perspective that can, at least for the moment, encompass a mythic sense of origins and ends. The opening four lines possess the mythic largeness of vision found in the two eclogues of Virgil which depart most radically from the Theocritean pastoral norm: Eclogue VI and the Messianic Eclogue IV. One of the ways Tennyson both responds to and transforms the Virgilian image of death is through its exploration as both cosmic myth of beginning and ending, and its prosaic relation to natural cycles of nature and of the life of man. In “Tithonus,” death is both a natural fact and a type of mythic break with all experience that precedes it. The singer at the beginning of “Tithonus” sings of a world coming to an end in a manner that mirrors in reverse the mythic song of the world’s beginning that Silenus sings in Eclogue VI:

For he sang how, through the great void, were brought together the seeds of earth, and air, and sea, and streaming fire withal; how from these elements came all beginnings and even the young globe of the world grew into a mass...
how next the earth is awed at the new sun shining and from the
uplifted clouds fall showers; when first woods begin to arise. . . .

Silenus sings of the trees beginning to rise for the first time. Tithonus sings of their decay and fall. He sings of the ending of things, not the beginning. In Eclogue VI, Silenus sings of the origin of the world of which he is happily a part, but Tithonus sings of the end of a world from which he is inalterably separated. His song is about the desire for an ending that he will never achieve, and his end or death is perpetual and unceasing: “Me only cruel immortality / Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms.” Line 5 is one of the great ironic moments in Tennyson. Where one expects “cruel love” or “cruel death,” one finds instead a word that denotes a usually desirable state: “immortality.” The line shifts the mood and imagery in a very different direction from lines 1 through 4: despite the elegiac sense of ending in the first four lines, there is also a sense of the substantiality of man, nature, and song. The language describing the cycles of time and nature in the first four lines grounds human existence in a satisfying and sanctifying reality. This reality is that of the song itself, as emphasized by the “burthen” that the vapors weep and by the image of the dying swan. The paradox of substantiality in the song or “burthen” of the vapors and in the song of the swan lies in their being songs of ending and death, but ones which are effected through the living processes of nature. Mists and vapors and dying birds are real things in the living world. Their reality contrasts with the disembodiedness of the immortal world, and their language of song contrasts with, as Ricks points out, the disquieting silence of the immortal realm in which Tithonus now resides.

In contrast to the decaying woods and the death of the man who works in the fields, the place Tithonus now inhabits is intangible, unreal, and silent. He is a “shadow” who lives in a “dream” world of “mists” and “gleaming halls.” Tithonus now lives at the “limit of the world” where Aurora rises, bringing the dawn. But the immortality he achieves is simply the hypostasis of nature’s decay into an unending state of suffering. He is “consumed” by it. He “withers slowly.” He has become a “white-haired shadow.” The unnaturalness of this state contrasts with the appropriateness
of the natural cycle, imaged at the poem's opening, in which death and life lead to each other in a relation of productive reciprocity. This reciprocity defines, as well, the difference in language and song between the two worlds.

Like the elegies of Bion and Moschus, the song of lamentation in the opening four lines mourns the passing of life, but as an act of communal affirmation of the order of things. Paradoxically, the opening description of the inescapability of death in nature constitutes a language of life's affirmation that offers a sharp contrast with the silence that characterizes the world of immortality. The poet suggests here that when death is withdrawn from the world of nature, pastoral song withdraws also. Tithonus's new pastoral retreat is at "the quiet limit of the world." "Limit" here means both the edge of the world from which Aurora, as dawn, emerges, and the way immortality limits the nature of the world and the nature of pastoral song. The quietness is a sign of Tithonus's exclusion from the community of nature, and the celebration of this exclusion in the language of pastoral. Tennyson equates his melancholy exile from pastoral with Tithonus's exile from humanity, and Tithonus's nostalgia is very much the poet's own:

Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—
So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
Who madest him thy chosen, that he seemed
To his great heart none other than a God!
I asked thee, 'Give me immortality.'
Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men who care not how they give.

One observes the nostalgic distance here, the contrast between the "gray shadow" and the youth who was once "glorious in his beauty." Ricks points out that Tennyson has the speaker describe the imagery from his mortal youth in the third person to increase the sense of distance between his present and former state: "his beauty," "him thy chosen," "he seemed." One also observes here Tithonus's narcissism. The phrase "So glorious in his beauty" is a surprising revelation of his self-love, when what would be more appropriate at this point would be a description of the beauty of Aurora and his love for her. Tithonus will later describe with deep
feeling his youthful love for Aurora, but what he conveys here is a selfish sense of the loss of his own youth. Even more troubling is his description of youthful aspiration. His heart is “great” not with love for Aurora but with aspirations to divinity: “he seemed / To his great heart none other than a God!” With this yearning, he asks Aurora for immortality. In a curious way, however, the gods fail Tithonus. Despite the supposed love between Tithonus and Aurora, when she grants his wish she evinces a coldness and indifferent violence toward her mortal lover:

Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men who care not how they give.
But thy strong Hours indignant worked their wills,
And beat me down and marred and wasted me,
And though they could not end me, left me maimed
To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was, in ashes.

There is a metonymic connection between the cruelty of immortality and the cruelty of the goddess Aurora. Tennyson’s description suggests Aurora is not only unthinking in her granting of his request, but may have actually known what the consequences of this request would be. Because the poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by Tithonus, there is an ambiguity in the description of Aurora. This ambiguity centers on the violence of his transformation: Is it her responsibility, or is his indulgent pathos in retrospect a reaction to the suffering he brought upon himself? The phrase “thy strong Hours” would seem to implicate Aurora as the cause of his suffering. It may well be, however, that he wishes to displace onto her his own guilt for the choice he made: he is the one who wished to be immortal, and if the terms of that wish’s fulfillment are more than he bargained for, the responsibility rests with Tithonus, not Aurora. At least from his perspective, however, the gods and his own state of immortality have failed him, have not lived up to their envisioned promise. That the failure actually rests with Tithonus, and that this failure is analogous to a pattern of expectation and disillusionment, emulation and rebellion, in the poet’s relation to literary history, constitutes Tennyson’s larger meditation within the poem.
"Tithonus" contains a tension between sympathy and judgment, between identification and detachment, a tension that Langbaum considers characteristic of the dramatic monologue form.44 This tension, moreover, helps to define Tennyson’s consciousness of pastoral tradition within the poem. The fact that “Tithonus” is a dramatic monologue is one indication of the poem’s formal debts to the classical idyll. Dwight Culler suggests the dramatic monologue is not as exclusively modern a form as Langbaum suggests: Culler argues that this form has roots both in the classical epistle, especially the Heroides of Ovid, and in the pastoral idyll of Virgil and Theocritus.55

In the pastoral idyll, a tension often exists between the longing of the singer and the poet’s detachment from the singer through the artifice of the idyll’s form and language. In “Tithonus,” Tennyson pushes that tension further in the direction of the modern dramatic monologue but also toward a kind of aesthetic meta-language about his own relation to poetic tradition. In the character of Tithonus, he creates an ironic contrast between traditional expectations of naivete associated with the figures in the pastoral world and a more troubling sense that the speaker is both calculating and self-deluding.

Yet it would be a mistake to place too great an emphasis on the negative side of Tithonus’s character and on the negative side of Tennyson’s transformation of the pastoral idyll. Even in the second verse paragraph, there are hints of the genuine love between Tithonus and Aurora that partially redeem his overreaching egotism. In a subtle image, Tennyson conveys the pain Aurora feels at the irrevocability of Tithonus’s state of exile: “those tremulous eyes that fill with tears / To hear me.” However much Aurora may be implicated in his transformation, she does not wish for him to suffer. Tithonus’s awareness of her sympathy is probably what enables him to state one of the central realizations of the poem:

Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men,
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

Here is where “Tithonus” mirrors “Ulysses.” Ulysses, of course, says the exact opposite. It is a measure of Tennyson’s sophistication
and of the complexity of both poems that neither of the views espoused by the two speakers is entirely “right.” In “Tithonus,” there is a sense of this desire for pause as a desire to return to the cycles of nature and human life. Tithonus wants to return to his proper place in the scheme of things. But his desire for an ending, a final closure, is another manifestation of the suicidal impulse for escape so often found in Tennyson’s poems, as in, for example, “The Lotus-Eaters” and “The Two Voices.” The true suicidal impulse for Tithonus is not his wish to pause and rest, but his initial desire to escape the limitations of human kind. Tithonus’s perceptions about what he has lost are not sentimental distortions of the past, but constitute the painful recognition of the value of the limits that he wished to exceed.

Jacob Korg says “Tithonus” is about the dangers of fulfillment, but the real irony of the poem is not that fulfillment is dangerous, but that there are true and false ideas about what constitutes fulfillment and Tithonus has chosen a false idea. The sophistication of the poem, however, centers on the fact that the true idea and the false idea are closely related and might even appear indistinguishable. As Robert Pattison points out, the state of fulfillment Tithonus yearns for is not dissimilar to the positive idyllic state represented in “The Gardener’s Daughter.” In fact, it can be useful to compare passages from the two poems. The first passage from Tennyson’s earlier English idyll shows the delicate balance required to achieve the pastoral world in the modern age:

Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite
Beyond it, blooms the garden that I love.

The second passage from “The Gardener’s Daughter” presents one of the finest images of pastoral love in Tennyson:

For up the porch there grew an Eastern rose,
That, flowering high, the last night’s gale had caught,
And blown across the walk. One arm aloft—
Gowned in pure white, that fitted to the shape—
Holding the bush, to fix it back, she stood,
A single stream of all her soft brown hair
Poured on one side: the shadow of the flowers
Stole all the golden gloss, and, wavering
Lovingly lower, trembled on her waist—
Ah, happy shade—and still went wavering down,
But, ere it touched a foot, that might have danced
The greensward into greener circles, dipt,
And mixed with shadows of the common ground!
But the full day dwelt on her brows, and sunned
Her violet eyes, and all her Hebe bloom,
And doubled his own warmth against her lips,
And on the bounteous wave of such a breast
As never pencil drew. Half light, half shade,
She stood, a sight to make an old man young.

These lines bear comparison with the following passage from “Tithonus”:

Ay me! Ay me! with what another heart
In days far-off, and with what other eyes
I used to watch—if I be he that watched—
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood
Glow with the glow that slowly crimsoned all
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
Of April.

Each moment creates a picture that stops time through the power of pastoral love represented in art. But in both poems, in different ways, there is a sense in which this type of immortality or timelessness through pastoral love and art is doomed to failure. Though “The Gardener’s Daughter” is not a somber meditation on death like “Tithonus,” there is, nevertheless, an elegiac sense of lost youth that qualifies the vision of timelessness in the garden state, and thus, qualifies the power of love and pastoral art. This qualification occurs in the final line of the passage, when the speaker says, “a sight to make an old man young.” It is an old man’s vision of remembered love.

In “Tithonus,” the vision of pastoral love is also a remembered one, though here not from a stance of old age and approaching death but from the perspective of the eternally aging and never dying
Tithonus. His remembered vision of pastoral love constitutes an
elegy on his lost youth, but it also constitutes his recognition of
the danger of wishing to make that moment of pastoral love timeless
and outside of death. Indeed, the poem closes not with the vision
of love in the pastoral garden, but with Tennyson's great vision of
Tithonus's longing to return to the cycles of seasons and the com­
munity of people from which he had earlier desired to escape:

Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

"Tithonus" is Tennyson's ironic transformation of the melan­
choly of pastoral elegy, in which the melancholy derives not from
the loss of another but from the inability to lose one's self. The
poem divides into two pastoral worlds: the world of earth and
death with its seasons of nature and the life of man, and the false
pastoral of immortality that can only remember life as a kind of
framed picture from which the deathless inhabitant is excluded.
The melancholy in the pastoral world of earth inheres in death's
necessity, but that inherence is also a kind of affirmation, as the
poetry of the earth attests (the sympathetic response in language
of nature to man's loss contributes to a community of human feel­
ing). "Tithonus" begins and ends with this poetry of the earth.
The false pastoral world involves the exile from nature and from
language as exemplified by Tithonus's inhuman and silent habita­
tion at the quiet limit of the world.

In such a world, the only art is one of elegiac remembrance, the
framed "picture" of lines 50 through 63. In this passage, as in the
picture of the beloved in "The Gardener's Daughter," the speaker
is irrevocably detached from the remembered scene, the timeless­
ness of which mirrors his exile from the temporality of human life.
and death. The scenes are emblems of the speaker's inhumanly
deathless state, and his melancholy yearning is not for the scene's
timelessness but for his return to time and mortality. The latter
kind of pastoral is, then, false for all its attractions, and it serves
as a reminder to the poet of his own detachment from the com-
munity of poetic tradition. The poet's melancholy, like that of
Tithonus, is bound up with his invocation of pastoral conventions
from the outside, as framed picture, rather than from the inside
as lived experience. Tithonus's myth of exile is also Tennyson's.

"Demeter and Persephone" (1889) is one of Tennyson's best-
known late poems based on classical myth. He wrote the poem
after the death of his son Lionel. It therefore parallels poems like
"Ulysses" and "Tithon" which Tennyson wrote after the death of
Hallam. As in those poems of the 1830s (and the revised "Tithonus"
of 1860), Tennyson uses a story from classical mythology to struc-
ture his representation of his own mourning and recovery in the
face of great loss. The basic story of Demeter and Persephone con-
cerns Persephone's ravishment and abduction by Dis, god of the
underworld. Demeter, her mother, goes in search of her, and when
she discovers her whereabouts, she, as goddess of the harvest,
makes all living things fail and die. Zeus enacts a compromise in
which Persephone will spend part of the year on earth with her
mother and part of the year with Dis in the underworld.

There are numerous classical sources for the myth. The most
important sources for Tennyson's poem are the Homeric "Hymn
to Demeter," Ovid's Metamorphoses (Book V), and Ovid's recount-
ing of the story in Book IV of his Fasti (April, the Games of Ceres).
Douglas Bush points, as well, to Claudian's "Rape of Proserpine,"
a fragment of which Tennyson had translated in his youth.58 In A
Memoir, Hallam Tennyson says "Demeter and Persephone" "was
written at my request, because I knew my father considered Demeter
one of the most beautiful types of womanhood."59 R. C. Jebb, a
classicist, helped Tennyson with the sources, and Tennyson wrote
a dedicatory poem to Jebb which precedes the longer poem. The
dedication is worth quoting because it sheds light on Tennyson’s attitude about the modern poet’s handling of myth and the way modern poetry relates, in general, to poetic tradition.

Fair things are slow to fade away,
Bear witness you, that yesterday
   From out the Ghost of Pindar in you
Rolled an Olympian; and they say
That here the torpid mummy wheat
Of Egypt bore a grain as sweet
   As that which gilds the glebe of England,
Sunned with a summer of milder heat.

So may this legend for awhile,
If greeted by your classic smile,
   Though dead in its Trinacrian Enna,
Blossom again on a colder isle.

“To Professor Jebb” is a revealing poem. Tennyson sees Jebb as a fellow poet who uses classical sources: Jebb had written a Pindaric ode in Greek for the eight-hundredth anniversary of the University of Bologna, thus the reference to the “Ghost of Pindar.” The jaunty wit, the cheerful camaraderie of fellow writers of poems based on classical models, fails to conceal the elegiac note, the note of Tennyson’s abiding sense of disinheritance from the traditions he so admires. Even the opening line of “To Professor Jebb,” which is meant to convey art’s power to resist time, actually connotes its opposite: “Fair things are slow to fade away.” It is an image of poetic diminishment, in that the classical stories and poetic forms may be slow to fade yet they do fade. The poet further emphasizes his sense of distance from poetic tradition through the words “Ghost” and “torpid,” and by the final two lines, in which the myth may, “Though dead in its Trinacrian Enna, / Blossom again on colder isle.” The myth in its classical form, says the poet, is dead, but he hopes that it will “blossom again” in the new form he has created; however, the poet qualifies this hope in the final two words. “Colder isle” evokes the barren ground in which the myth will have to take root: the words suggest that the land and the times are inhospitable to such efforts. The poem becomes a sign of Tennyson’s consciousness that his relation to myth and to tradition is that of an exile.
In addition, the poem creates a parallel between death and rebirth in the myth itself, and poetic death and rebirth. This parallel implies that one of the attractions of the Demeter and Persephone myth, for Tennyson, was its complex tension between death and creation, a tension that mirrored his concerns about imaginative death and life as he tried to work out a balance between tradition and originality.

"Demeter and Persephone," then, is as much about the poet's relation to tradition (and about his poetics of melancholy) as it is about the thematics within the myth itself. Tennyson's comments about the poem suggest his awareness that the poem reflects his poetics and the relation between modernity and tradition: "I will write it, but when I write an antique like this I must put it into a frame—something modern about it. It is no use giving a mere réchauffé of old legends." In this comment we begin to sense the connection between Tennyson's detachment from his subject matter and his sense of apartness from tradition. The fond superciliousness of the words used to describe the myth is a sign of the poet's troubled relation to the poetry of the past: "an antique like this," "old legends." Perhaps unwittingly, the condescension reveals Tennyson's awe before the power of the myths and poetry of the classical age, as well as his fear of being unable to create new and valuable poetry out of the earlier texts.

The idea of the frame exemplifies his modern sophistication but also his malaise at being outside the community of literature and myth upon which he draws. He is, as a modern, outside the frame; the myth lies within the frame, at the center of tradition. The frame is a poetic device used to bring the myth back to life. But it simultaneously suggests the slow fading away of the life of the legend, the imaginative death that inheres in it, as the poet can only represent myth in a detached and distanced way. Tennyson's use of the frame is one of the ways his re-creation of the myth of Demeter and Persephone comes to embody his poetry of melancholy, his own myth of exile and disinheritance.

Tennyson criticism has offered various interpretations of "Demeter and Persephone." Jerome Buckley sees the poem as focusing on the problem of identity and religious belief: "banished from love (typified by her mother, Demeter) Persephone has lost her true iden-
tity, and it is the burden of the idyll to demonstrate that love can restore the self and so transcend the force of death and hell. In Buckley’s view, the image of the “new dispensation” at the close serves for Tennyson a “deeply personal religious need.” Douglas Bush speaks of “Tennyson’s mellow Virgilian sense of the rhythm of the seasons and the life of man.” Bush emphasizes, at the same time, the dark side of the poem: “Over Tennyson’s less buoyant optimism lies the shadow of the hard eternities, of the Fates who spin the lives of men and know not why they spin.” On the other hand, in *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, E. D. H. Johnson views the poem more positively in terms of Tennyson’s psychology of creative process:

Persephone, appearing in dream, explains that her periodic withdrawal from the phenomenal world into the nether region of shadows does not really involve a loss, but is mysteriously necessitated by the process of creation. When interpreted this way, “Demeter and Persephone” becomes a symbolic representation of Tennyson’s entire poetic career. Beneath his artistic productivity lay dark depths of consciousness on communion with which, rather than any external stimulus, depended his will to create.

Two critical essays, by G. Robert Stange and James Kissane, place the poem in the context of Tennyson and the Victorians’ understanding of and attitudes about mythology. Stange points out the poem’s similarities to Sir James George Frazer’s discussion of the myth in *The Golden Bough* (the first volume of which did not appear until after the publication of Tennyson’s poem). In Stange’s view, all of Tennyson’s poems on Greek and Roman themes are “symbolic narratives of separation, either from an object of love or from the natural course of life.” James Kissane, on the other hand, argues, in his essay “Victorian Mythology,” that the poem has affinities with Pater’s essay “Demeter and Persephone” in *Greek Studies*. In Kissane’s view, the poem contains the three phases—natural, poetical, ethical—that Pater describes in the original myth. Both Frazer’s later work and Pater’s earlier essay stress the dark and melancholy aspects of the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Tennyson’s poem begins near the end of the story. Demeter’s dramatic monologue opens with a description of Persephone’s return from the underworld:
Faint as a climate-changing bird that flies
All night across the darkness, and at dawn
Falls at the threshold of her native land,
And can no more, thou camest, O my child,
Led upward by the God of ghosts and dreams,
Who laid thee at Eleusis, dazed and dumb
With passing through at once from state to state,
Until I brought thee hither, that the day,
When here thy hands let fall the gathered flower,
Might break through clouded memories once again
On thy lost self. A sudden nightingale
Saw thee, and flashed into a frolic of song
And welcome; and a gleam as of the moon,
When first she peers along the tremulous deep,
Fled wavering o'er thy face, and chased away
That shadow of a likeness to the king
Of shadows, thy dark mate. Persephone!
Queen of the dead no more—my child! Thine eyes
Again were human-godlike, and the Sun
Burst from a swimming fleece of winter gray,
And robed thee in his day from head to feet—
'Mother!' and I was folded in thine arms.

The structure of imagery and the quality of feeling and emotion in Tennyson's opening qualify the idea of return and rebirth. We see this qualification in the simile of the bird with which Demeter describes Persephone's return. The simile involves an opposition between "darkness" and "dawn," between "falls" and "flies," and it is a subtle and complex image for Persephone's bewilderment as she returns to life from death, after having lived in Hades with Dis. But the image involves more. The figurative language depicts the way her hope of return changes with the consciousness of death. This consciousness of death makes the return itself a kind of "fall," as the bird "Falls on the threshold of her native land"; moreover, the simile figures forth a state of exile. The fact that the bird is "climate-changing" suggests moving from country to country, which Persephone does, but it also suggests that the bird (like Persephone) is no longer at home in any country.

Persephone exists in a permanent state of displacement. The word "threshold" emphasizes this point. When the bird finally
does reach her home, she is still just outside of it. Her consciousness of death places her, spiritually, at the “threshold of her native land.” This image for Persephone’s return, then, implies that after having seen the realm of death she can never fully return to the upper world—she remains in a state of exile. The pattern of alliteration links the two sides of the rebirth/death relation: “faunt,” “flies,” “falls”; “darkness,” “dawn”; “ran no more,” “camest.” There is an alternation here between verbs of action and verbs denoting the cessation of action, and between substantives suggesting hope and suggesting loss of hope. This pattern, in combination with the image of the “threshold,” is the embodiment in language of Demeter’s perception that Persephone’s return is a partial one: the pattern of imagery and alliteration signifies the consciousness of exile.

Persephone is, moreover, in a state of confusion and passivity. Tennyson signals Persephone’s passivity through the verbs for which she is the passive object. She is “led upward” by Hermes. She is “laid” at Eleusis by Hermes. And Demeter says to her, “I brought thee hither.” Her sense of placelessness makes it impossible for her to act on her own; it also makes it impossible for her to speak. Not only is she confused or “dazed” by her “climate-changing,” she is “dumb.” While Persephone’s silence is the measure of her loss, it also marks out her possession of a kind of inchoate power. Silence can be a kind of detachment, a kind of wisdom, that lies beyond language. In this, Persephone looks back to such silent figures as the “maid” of “Come Down, O Maid.” One of the areas of concern in the poem centers on the power to be gained in life and language by “passing through at once from state to state.” This sense of passing through different worlds describes the movement from death to the return to the middle state of earth, but it suggests also the movement of the poet between tradition and modernity. Like Persephone, the poet passes through a palimpsest, of times and of language, that gives these temporal worlds form. In this regard, it is curious and significant that Tennyson’s representation of Demeter’s effort to bring Persephone back into the world underwent three stages of revision, before he settled on the passage as it now stands. Here follow those three states:

1. I brought thee hither that a glance
   At thy last sight on earth, the flowery gleam
Of Enna, might have power to disentrance
Thy senses.

2. I brought thee hither, to the fields
Where thou and thy sea-nymphs were used to roam
And thy scared hands let fall the gathered flower,
For here thy last bright day beneath the sun
Might float across my memory and unfold
The sleeping sense.

3. I brought thee hither, where thy hands
Let fall the gathered flowers, that here again
Thy last bright hours of sunshine upon earth
Might break on darkened memories.

In his discussion of the revisions, Jerome Buckley notes the shift from prose-like explanation to concrete imagery in the second passage. Then follows the exclusion of irrelevancies and tightening in the third passage. This tightening, finally, leads to the shift from memory to the “lost self” of the passage in its last form. As Buckley observes, the changes are more than stylistic: there is a shift of emphasis from recovering the senses and recovering memories to recovering the identity of the self. Buckley interprets this shift as tying in with the religious theme of love overcoming the forces of hell and death. But one can view the change to the “lost self” in terms of the nature of art itself. The image of the “lost self” constitutes an emblem of the poet’s confused identity as he “gathers the flowers” of poetic tradition. Indeed, even Buckley notes how the second version of the passage enables Tennyson to incorporate an echo of an important passage from Milton. In its first state, the passage contains the image of the “flowery gleam.” But in its second state, Tennyson changes this to “thy scared hands let fall the gathered flower.” This is an echo of Paradise Lost, Book IV:

Not that faire field
Of Enna, where Proserpin gath’ring flours
Her self a fairer Floure by gloomie Dis
Was gather’d, which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world.

Of Eden strive.
As G. Robert Stange points out, this passage from Milton was a favorite of Tennyson's, and he frequently read it aloud. Its importance to our reading of "Demeter and Persephone" is twofold: it is yet another example of Tennyson's debt to the pastoral tradition and his use of the locus amoenus topos. Stange offers one interpretation of the significance of this type of garden imagery in Tennyson's poetry:

Imaginary places analogous to the Eden garden are abundant in Tennyson's poems; they usually suggest a refuge from active life, a retreat to the past (as in "The Hesperides" and Maud) or a sacred bower of poetic inspiration (as in "The Poet's Mind"). In Tennyson's poetry both heights and depths suggest danger and death; the valley, the sheltered plain, represent the fruitful life. The secluded valley of Enna is reminiscent of the enclosed, shadowy garden, or the tropical islands of the other poems.¹

Stange's noting of the recurrence of the image is accurate, but his description of the image's function and meaning is too simple. Tennyson often qualifies the image of the garden or pleasance in negative ways, and while the images of heights and depths often appear to be places of danger and death, they can be places of power and creativity as well. Tennyson's representation of the vale of Enna and his allusion to the Miltonic description of it are not meant to suggest that the middle state to which Persephone returns is an Eden garden. The irony of Persephone's return rests in the darkness and danger she brings back with her into the upper world. At the same time, when the poet gathers the flowers of tradition and builds tropes on Milton's contrast of the Eden garden and the fields of Enna, he is, like Persephone, passing from one literary state of mind to another, yet he is not entirely at home in either. The pleasance Tennyson describes here is not exactly the Enna of classical myth where nature "falls," nor is it the Garden of Christian myth where man falls. Just as Persephone is in between the state of hell and the state of earth, the poet's representation of the pastoral retreat suggests the tense poise of the artist between classical and Christian myths of fall and redemption. Simultaneously, on the level of literary history, this tension constitutes an image of the poet on the "threshold" of the community of poetic tradi-
tions that are his home, the place from which he originates as a poet, but from which he has fallen, and before which he can only look as at a place he has lost. Persephone "let fall the gathered flower" when the violent side of nature first manifested itself in her abduction by Dis. In Tennyson's parable of the poet, the poet lets fall the gathered flowers when he realizes that Enna or the pastoral retreat has become the emblem for his division into two opposing literary states of mind: the past of "old legends," and the present of a detached modernity in which the old conventions are distanced and framed. In this sense, the allusion to Milton's fields of Enna works as another framing device, a sign of the poet's fall from Milton's pastoral world and from a fixed identity within it. Tennyson is no longer within pastoral but on its threshold. The phrases "falls on the threshold" and "let fall the gathered flower" implicate the poet in a troubled relationship to poetic representation, just as Persephone's fall implicates all creative growth in the death force that lies in the underworld.²

The return of Persephone to the light of day is overshadowed by the darkness of death that she can never entirely abandon. This is analogous to Tennyson's sense that his modernity is overshadowed by the poetry of the past, a contrast that seems to signal, in Richard Jenkyns's phrase, the "death of poetry."³ There is violence and melancholy in Persephone's return from Hades and in the poet's return and turning away from poetic tradition. The poet images this violence in the language of the opening passage of the poem: he describes Persephone as moving through and against a force of resistance that is in part her own passive inability to realize life again after having been in the world of the dead. Demeter brings her back to the fields of Enna so, as she tells her, the day "Might break through clouded memories once again / On thy lost self."

There is a subtle kind of violence in the very process of reviving life. The image of "breaking through" repeats the initial act that drew her down to Hades: Dis's act of rape. As W. David Shaw puts it: "When the goddess Demeter is first reunited with her daughter, she must revive painful memories of the rape, so that in their pastoral paradise the countervailing reflections of hell, like repressed material under psychoanalysis, may be brought into focus and
Tennyson chooses to have Demeter bring Persephone back to Enna rather than simply to have them be reunited at Eleusis. It is a significant choice. The fields of Enna are not the paradise on earth but the place where this paradise is lost, where innocence is violated and violence “breaks through.”

We see, then, the pastoral landscape itself is bound up with violence and suffering. The return to life and the reunion in love of mother and daughter are defined by that violence. In fact, the reunion cannot be brought about without a psychological violence analogous to the physical violence that occurred earlier in the same pastoral scene. The pastoral scene becomes (in both an emotional and an aesthetic sense) a place of violent confrontation from which both the protagonists and the poet wish to free themselves.

If, as Stange suggests, “Demeter and Persephone” is about the “penetration” to secret wisdom, the poem holds out the troubling possibility that this wisdom may result from the breaking into and breaking away from the natural order itself. Tennyson metonymically transfers this penetration from Dis to Persephone. If he has unnaturally ravished her, she has, against the order of things, entered the depths of Hades and returned to the earth bearing within her the wisdom of that experience. Her initial act of gathering flowers leads to her acquiring a singular knowledge, and Tennyson sees a parallel between her initial act and the act of the poet, whose gathering of images and tropes from the past “breaks through” and disrupts tradition, though it enables him to return with a singular kind of language. Persephone’s penetration, and the poet’s, to wisdom is somber and melancholy because of their recognition of the violence enacted in the acquiring of this wisdom. In this sense, “Demeter and Persephone” is a melancholy poem, and it is no accident that Tennyson alludes to an iconographic symbol from the melancholy tradition in the passage that immediately follows the echo of Milton’s description of the garden:

A sudden nightingale
Saw thee, and flashed into a frolic of song
And welcome.

There is a double-sidedness to this image, as there was earlier to the image of the fields of Enna. The song of the nightingale func-
tions as a sign of happiness here at the return of Persephone. The nightingale can be a symbol of love, but it has strong associations with the idea of melancholy. In addition, the nightingale sings at night. Persephone initially emerges from the darkness of the underworld to darkness on earth. Her return, then, is bound up from the start with symbols having negative connotations. Darkness is one of these symbols; the nightingale is another.

One finds the Tennysonian nightingale in a early sonnet ("Check Every Outflash"), where he combines it in a very conventional way with love and "mild-minded Melancholy." The nightingale has a long-standing iconographic association with the melancholy tradition, and coming immediately after Tennyson’s allusion to Milton, the bird brings to mind "Il Penseroso." In "Il Penseroso," Milton associates the nightingale with the "Goddess, sage and holy . . . divinest Melancholy." In "Il Penseroso," Milton links melancholy with the wisdom of the isolated thinker, and the nightingale becomes a type for the solitary artist. In introducing the image of the nightingale at this particular point in "Demeter and Persephone," Tennyson is associating the melancholy knowledge that Persephone has acquired in the underworld with the melancholy knowledge of the poet. The character of this knowledge assumes further definition in the second passage, which describes the return to the fields of Enna:

So in this pleasant vale we stand again,
The field of Enna, now once more ablaze
With flowers that brighten as thy footstep falls,
All flowers—but for one black blur of earth
Left by that closing chasm, through which the car
Of dark Aidoneus rising rapt thee hence.
And here, my child, though folded in thine arms,
I feel the deathless heart of motherhood
Within me shudder, lest the naked glebe
Should yawn once more into the gulf, and thence
The shrilly whinnyings of the team of Hell,
Ascending, pierce the glad and songful air,
And all at once their arched necks, midnight-maned,
Jet upward through the mid-day blossom. No!
For, see, thy foot has touched it; all the space
Of blank earth-baldness clothes itself afresh,
This is a powerful image of the violence that inheres in the pastoral pleasance in its fallen state. Persephone's return "again" to the "pleasant vale" is a fall: "as thy footstep falls" echoes the earlier "falls on the threshold" and "thy hands let fall the gathered flower." The pleasant vale is not as pleasant as it once was: it has undergone a violent transformation. Tennyson closely links Persephone's fall to the forceful appearance, the rising up, of the powers of the lower world. We see the violent disruptiveness in such lines as "dark Aïdoneus rising rapt thee hence." The complexity of image here mirrors the complexity of her achievement of wisdom. Now, for Persephone, myth signals man's irrecoverable fall from innocence and the ideas of rebirth and return are defined by that loss.

The imagery of the pastoral retreat in this passage suggests the need to open up to knowledge, but such a receptivity is complic­catedly close to unwished-for ravishment. The vale of Enna undulates in a series of openings and closures: "one black blur of earth / Left by that closing chasm"; "lest the naked glebe / Should yawn once more into the gulf." These are images simultaneously of the pressures of violation and healing. In the world of fallen pastoral, the earth remains scarred: there remains a "black blur," a "space / Of blank earth baldness" that the returning flowers cannot cover.

Tennyson combines the negative aspects of violence and violation with the sorrowful death-consciousness that brings wisdom. This juxtaposition defines the pastoral retreat. Just as the return to the fields of Enna facilitates the "breaking through" of memories so that Persephone can reenter the middle state, the actual healing or recuperation of the pastoral locus amoenus involves intrusive violence. We note, as well, that the image of "breaking through" memories that Demeter hopes will heal Persephone parallels in this second passage the team of hell, which she fears will again "pierce the glad and songful air." The poet links both processes, that of ravishment and that of recovery, to the rebirth of nature in the pastoral garden: the "blank earth-baldness clothes itself afresh, / And breaks into the crocus-purple hour / That saw thee vanish." Ten-
nyson does not equate Persephone’s rape, in a positive sense, with her acquisition of wisdom or with the rebirth of nature (as imaged by the breaking forth of flowers), but the confluence of the three types of imagery, and the three processes, does suggest a dark and melancholy awareness on the poet’s part that the innocence of human nature, and the innocence of the pastoral world, inevitably fall into a complex relation with evil. Demeter now recognizes that violence and pain are not only constituents of the pastoral world, but are actually necessary stages to be gone through in order to recover pastoral, albeit in a fallen form. This is one of the ways Ten- nyson emphasizes the melancholy in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Sir James George Frazer would, a few years later, place a similar emphasis on the dark side of nature in the myth:

We do no indignity to the myth of Demeter and Persephone—one of the few myths in which the sunshine and clarity of the Greek genius are crossed by the shadow and mystery of death—when we trace its origin to some of the most familiar, yet eternally affecting aspects of nature, to the melancholy gloom and decay of autumn and to the freshness, the brightness, and the verdure of spring.

This transformation of pastoral, this recognition of violence and evil as an almost organic component of the pastoral scene, also describes in “Demeter and Persephone” the path out of which originates artistic vision. Persephone’s return to the fallen pastoral world constitutes an image of the solitary artist who has seen evil and thereby attains a profound vision that can be translated into art. Her isolation, as Stange observes, and her new power are aspects of the poet’s creativity. Persephone’s transformation from child to queen suggests her new power. Demeter’s denial, “Queen of the dead no more,” only serves to emphasize Persephone’s magisterial presence. Yet this power isolates her from humanity: like the “climate-changing” bird, her passing from state to state has given her knowledge, but it also means she can no longer clearly locate her identity within one state. She has become the isolated artist on the “threshold.” Even the description of her eyes as she recovers sight in the daylight world—“Those eyes / Again were human-godlike”—suggests the isolation that is the result of her ambiguous identity. Just as she passes from state to state, from Hades to Earth,
her own identity wavers between the godlike and the human. Now, however, she can never be one or the other. Her journey to Hades and her return have forever set her apart from both men and gods:

Child, those imperial disimpassioned eyes
Awed even me at first, thy mother-eyes
That oft had seen the serpent-wanded power
Draw downward into Hades with his drift
Of flickering spectres, lighted from below
By the red race of fiery Phlegethon;
But when before have Gods or men beheld
The Life that had descended re-arise,
And lighted from above by the Sun?

As Stange observes, the phrase “imperial disimpassioned eyes” not only conveys Persephone’s power as a queen who has witnessed the realm of death, it is a telling description of the stance of the poet himself. Like Persephone, the poet’s detachment is not the result of complete absence of feeling but stems, rather, from his sense of being outside or between the ordinary realms of experience. The poet is “disimpassioned” because he has the melancholy wisdom that comes from being outside the exclusive knowledge associated with particular genres or types of figurative language (these being the literary equivalent of the states through which Persephone passes). The barriers that separate diverse worlds of experience have been broken in Persephone’s journey, and the poet, as he shifts from classical myth to its representation from the perspective of the modern “frame,” realizes in his work a similar breaking down of boundaries and conventions. What is especially interesting about Persephone as a figure for the poet (whose state of exile is both a source of melancholy and of power) is that Tennyson metonymically transfers the very same figure to Demeter, who undergoes a similar period of “climate-changing”:

Child, when thou wert gone,
I envied human wives, and nested birds,
Yea, the cubbed lioness; went in search of thee
Through many a palace, many a cot, and gave
Breast to ailing infants in the night,
And set the mother waking in amaze
To find her sick one whole; and forth again
Among the wail of midnight winds, and cried,
‘Where is my loved one? Wherefore do ye wail?’
And out from all the night an answer shrilled,
‘We know not, and we know not why we wail.’
I climbed on all the cliffs of all the seas,
And asked the waves that moan about the world
‘Where? do ye make your moaning for my child?’
And round from all the world the voices came,
‘We know not, and we know not why we moan.’
‘Where? and I stared from every eagle-peak,
I thrided the black heart of all the woods,
I peered through tomb and cave, and in the storms
Of Autumn swept across the city, and heard
The murmur of their temples chanting me,
Me, me, the desolate Mother!

We find the story of Demeter’s wanderings in search of Persephone in the classical sources of the myth such as the Fasti, but through compression and elision of detail, Tennyson emphasizes her swift movement from place to place. Demeter imitates Persephone by becoming a wanderer between worlds. In this way, Demeter comes to language through suffering in a manner that parallels Persephone’s return to language, as signalled by the song of the nightingale. The language that Demeter now uses as she searches for Persephone is the language of pastoral elegy. In the images of her calling to the winds and to the sea-waves, Tennyson draws on the Homeric Hymn and Ovid’s Metamorphoses. However, the language and imagery of this passage derive not from these sources alone but from the classical pastoral elegy and its English successors. Tennyson uses variants of the pastoral device of the refrain and of the call and response. In addition, the passage involves the pathetic fallacy, which is used infrequently in Theocritus but plays an important part in the elegies by Bion and Moschus:

‘Alack for the Cyprian,’ cry all the hills, and the oak trees, ‘Alas for Adonis.’ The rivers wail for Aphrodite’s sorrows; the springs weep for Adonis on the hills. The flowers turn brown for grief.”
That is from Bion’s “Lament for Adonis,” and here is the opening of Moschus’ “Lament for Bion”:

Wail sorrowfully, ye glades and waters of the Dorians; weep rivers, for our beloved Bion. Now make lament, all green things; now moan, all groves, and, flowers expire with unkempt clusters. Now, roses and anemones, don mourning crimson; speak out thy letters, hyacinth, and add more cries of sorrow to thy petals. The fair singer is dead.  

When Demeter calls to the anthropomorphized nature, she does get a response, but it is not a response that validates her grief. Nor does the response provide the answer to her question. Tennyson uses the conventions of the pastoral elegy, but also makes some significant changes. In Bion and Moschus, the representation of nature through the pathetic fallacy emphasizes nature’s sympathetic identification with man, the way the whole world grieves for the person who is gone. The language of nature’s response confirms the speaker’s sense that his language of grief has meaning. In Tennyson’s poem, the pastoral conventions of elegy do not serve this purpose. The poet uses pathetic fallacy to represent nature’s grief, but the grief of the winds and the waves is not the result of Persephone’s disappearance. Their grief has some other cause, one they themselves are unaware of.

Variations of the call-and-response structure and the language of pathetic fallacy create, in Bion and Moschus, a community of feeling. In “Demeter and Persephone,” however, the different parts of nature do not understand the meaning of their feelings, nor can they provide sympathy or answers for Demeter. The conventions that in the classical elegy create a bond between man’s sorrow and nature, here emphasize man’s exile from nature. Nature’s response to man’s grief describes not sympathetic identification, but a pessimistic expression of the meaninglessness of grief itself: “We know not, and we know not why we wail”, “We know not, and we know not why we moan.” The language of nature does not relieve Demeter’s sorrow but compounds the mystery of grief, suggests a frightening absence of meaning at the core of all natural life. Pathetic fallacy here signifies a separation of man from nature, and a separation of both man and nature from meaning.
Ultimately, Demeter’s alienation from nature and her sorrow at Persephone’s absence lead her to a wasteland and visions of hell on earth. In her journey, the sorrowing mother (mater dolorosa) moves from the simple, elemental landscape of the classical pastoral elegy, to a landscape that in certain respects is like the conventional eighteenth-century landscape of melancholy, and then to the modern wasteland which presages Eliot. Lines 58 through 67 constitute the classical landscape of pastoral elegy. Lines 68 and 69—“I thridded the black heart of all the woods, / I peered through tomb and cave”—contain iconographic elements of the melancholy tradition from Milton’s “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” right up to Gray. The emphasis in these lines is on the Gothic aspect of nature (with darkness and evil conveyed by the epithet “black heart”); and there is a nod toward the graveyard school in “I peered through tomb and cave.” This passage exemplifies, in a compressed form, Tennyson’s “journey” from the classical elegy to the melancholy descriptive poetry that comes to the fore in the middle and late eighteenth century. Demeter, as sorrowing mother and type for the poet, cannot stop there; for no answer has been provided as to Persephone’s whereabouts. She moves on to the city as spiritual wasteland: “and in the storms / Of Autumn swept across the city, and heard / The murmur of the temples chanting me, / Me, me, the desolate Mother.” Here she turns in maternal grief but also, like the poet turning from conventions which have provided no answers, to the city-jungle as hell on earth:

And fled by many a waste, forlorn of man,
And grieved for man through all my grief for thee,—
The jungle rooted in his shattered hearth,
The serpent coiled about his broken shaft,
The scorpion crawling over naked skulls;—
I saw the tiger in the ruined fane
Spring from his fallen God...

Just as Persephone’s journey to knowledge involves the disruption of the pastoral locus amoenus symbolized by the fields of Enna, Demeter’s journey moves from an order of nature from which she is now alienated—the winds, seas, eagle-peak—to a natural world characterized by violent disorder. Her journey is also a literary one
from the conventions of pastoral elegy to the breakdown of those conventions, as they fail to provide the answer to Demeter’s grief.

Demeter discovers that neither nature nor man’s conventionalization of nature in traditional types of figurative language provides meaning in the face of her daughter’s absence. Nature, language, and the gods, fail her. In terms of the last, the image of the “fallen God” prefigures the religious doubt that slowly emerges in Demeter as she discovers where Persephone is. If Demeter perceives a failure in nature to explain Persephone’s absence, and a failure in the poetic conventions of pastoral elegy to mitigate and bestow meaning on her sorrow, she also perceives a failure in the religious structures and myths that have defined her entire world and even her identity. These three areas of failure define the melancholy of “Demeter and Persephone.” Tennyson was drawn to the myth of Demeter and Persephone because it is a myth about the failure of myth itself to give order and coherence to the world. Pater refers to this sense of failure in Greek myth, and to where it eventually led, when he says in “Winckelmann”: “Scarcely a wild or melancholy note of the medieval church but was anticipated by Greek polytheism.”

Demeter confronts the limits of myth when she confronts the Fates (a passage almost Hardian in its pessimism):

but trace of thee
I saw not; and far on, and, following out
A league of labyrinthine darkness, came
On three grey heads beneath a gleaming rift.
‘Where?’ and I heard one voice from all the three,
‘We know not for we spin the lives of men,
And not of Gods, and know not why we spin!
There is a Fate beyond us.’ Nothing knew.

It is fitting that in this final realization of the failure of classical myth, the poet echoes Virgil’s Messianic Eclipses:

“Taelia saecla” suis dixerunt “currite” fusi
concordes stabili fatorum numine Parcae.
(‘Ages such as these, glide on!’ cried to their spindles the Fates, voicing in unison the fixed will of Destiny. [trans. Fairclough])

Eclipses IV has been interpreted as prefiguring the birth of Christ and can, thus, be viewed as an important turn in literary history
(at least retrospectively) from the classical world of mythic gods to modern Christianity. The irony of Tennyson’s allusion is that the Fates in Virgil give voice to hopeful prophecy: the years and Destiny are bringing the return of the Golden Age. In contrast, the Fates in “Demeter and Persephone” see the lives of men and even the larger Fate that controls those lives as inexplicable. They signal the end of an age, not a new beginning. In a sense, Tennyson chooses to divide in two his allusion to the Messianic Eclogue by having the Fates speak only of their lack of knowledge (this image constitutes the nadir of Demeter’s journey and her realization that even the mythic gods are no longer of any use to her), and by displacing the prophecy of the new dispensation to a later point in the poem, when Demeter and Persephone have been reunited. Here, however, the prophecy is not of a new dispensation (Tennyson’s modern “frame”), but of a spectral vision of evil and innocence bound up with each other:

“The Bright one in the highest
Is brother of the Dark one in the lowest,
And Bright and Dark have sworn that I, the child
Of thee, the great Earth-Mother, thee, the Power
That lifts her buried life from gloom to bloom,
Should be for ever and for evermore
The Bride of Darkness.”

The lines, “The Bright one in the highest / Is brother of the Dark one in the lowest,” constitute, in epigrammatic form, the melancholy knowledge that Demeter has discovered in her journey. Nature has failed her, and so have the gods. She expresses her bitterness on realizing that failure (her sense of alienation from and emotional superiority to the gods, who have shown their violent and evil side in Persephone’s ravishment) in the following passage:

Then I, Earth-Goddess, cursed the Gods of Heaven.

The man, that only lives and loves an hour,
Seemed nobler than their hard Eternities.

Demeter’s alienation from the gods increases her alienation from nature. Earlier, nature had failed her by being unable to tell her where Persephone had gone and by being unable to sympatheti-
cally grieve with and for her. There nature contained its own inexplic­

icable sorrow. Now, Demeter, in turn, fails nature:

My quick tears killed the flower, my ravings hushed
The bird, and lost in utter grief I failed
To send my life through olive-yard and vine
And golden grain, my gift to helpless man.

When one of the gods loses faith in the efficacy of their own
myths, the system of belief and the order of nature cease to func­
tion. As belief withdraws, the procreativeness of nature withdraws
also. While the myth ultimately reestablishes the order of the gods
in the compromise granted by Zeus (in which three-quarters of the
year Persephone resides in the middle state of earth with her mother,
and one-quarter is spent in Hades with her husband Dis), Tennyson's
interest in the myth does not lie in the explanation of the
cycle of the seasons and the growth, harvest, and decay of nature,
all of which Frazer emphasizes in his discussion; rather, Tennyson's
interest lies in the way the symbolic journeys of both mother and
daughter are types of a loss of faith and innocence which qualify
new belief through a consciousness of evil and suffering. This sense
of loss contributes to Tennyson's modern “frame”:

Yet I, Earth-Goddess, am but ill-content
With them, who still are highest. Those gray heads,
What meant they by their ‘Fate beyond the Fates’
But younger kindlier Gods to bear us down,
..................................................... Gods,
To quench, not hurl the thunderbolt, to stay,
Not spread the plague, the famine. . . .

This is Tennyson's modern version of the prophecy of the golden
age found in Virgil, Eclogue IV. Demeter's visions of a troubling
sort of autumnal peace qualify this prophecy. The two autumn
scenes toward the close of the poem contain within them a sense
of withdrawal from the belief in the beneficence of nature, which
the prophecy of a new dispensation does not dispel:

Once more the reaper in the gleam of dawn
Will see me by the landmark far away,
Blessing his field, or seated in the dusk
Myths of Exile

Of even, by the lonely threshing-floor,
Rejoicing in the harvest and the grange.

The poet echoes Keats's "To Autumn," a poem that Tennyson returned to again and again. "To Autumn" takes as its subject the closure of pastoral, yet it does not so much close as fade slowly away. Its melancholy derives from the image of a creativity whose full achievement also constitutes its demise. In "Demeter and Persephone," Tennyson's imagery of the rebirth of nature, reunion of mother and daughter, and even the autumnal scenes of peace, work alongside the melancholy sense that as these events come, or may come, to pass they are also passing away. At the poem's close, Demeter expresses the hope that Persephone will "see no more" the "silent field of Asphodel." Even this hope suggests how the consciousness of evil and suffering has marked forever the pastoral scene of love and innocence. In Tennyson's melancholy idyll, the fields of Asphodel and the fields of Enna now define and determine each other.