III

Songs from The Princess

IN THIS CHAPTER WE WILL EXPLORE HOW TENNYSON'S SENSE OF EXILE FROM TRADITION HELPS TO DETERMINE THE WAY HE STRUCTURES EMOTION (ESPECIALLY MELANCHOLY) IN HIS POEMS. THE EMphasis HERE WILL BE ON THE INTERACTION IN TENNYSON'S POETRY BETWEEN HIS SENSE OF TRADITION AND STRUCTURES OF EMOTION, HOW THEY SHAPE EACH OTHER. TWO SONGS FROM THE PRINCESS, "TEARS, IDLE TEARS" AND "COME DOWN, O MAID," ARE TO BE EXAMINED FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE. THE FIRST OF THESE LYRICS CONTAINS LESS DIRECT ALLUSIONS TO THE PASTORAL TRADITION BUT EXHIBITS CONNECTIONS TO THIS TRADITION NONETHELESS, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF THE POEM'S REPRESENTATION OF MELANCHOLY: "TEARS, IDLE TEARS" IS THE POEM THAT BEST EXEMPLIFIES THE STRUCTURES OF EMOTION IN THE MELANCHOLY POETICS OF TENNYSON. THE SECOND LYRIC, "COME DOWN, O MAID," IS DIRECTLY INDEBTED TO PASTORAL CONVENTIONS AND CONTAINS MANY ECHOES OF THE CLASSICAL PASTORAL WRITERS. IT IS PROBABLY TENNYSON'S MOST THEOCRITEAN POEM, AND IT WILL BE APPROACHED HERE IN TERMS OF HOW TENNYSON ADAPTS THE IDYLL FORM TO EXPLORE CERTAIN EMOTIONAL STATES OF MIND, AND HOW, IN THE PROCESS, HE CREATES A NEW KIND OF MELANCHOLY IDYLL. IN THESE TWO POEMS, TENNYSON TAKES THE FORM AND FEELING OF BOTH PASTORAL CONVENTIONS AND THE MELANCHOLY MODE IN A NEW DIRECTION.

Several questions arise in regard to "Tears, Idle Tears." What exactly is the nature of the emotion it describes? How do the formal structures of language and image in the poem represent these emo-
Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more.

The nature of the emotion described here has been the subject of much debate among the critics. That the poem conveys strong emotion has not been disputed, however. The predominance of feeling has been the basis of objections to the poem, such as Leavis's: Leavis says the poem conveys "emotion for its own sake without a justifying situation." But Douglas Bush links the strong emotion in Tennyson to Virgil: "Their best work is essentially elegiac, the product of a temperamental melancholy, a brooding wistful sense of the past." Bush goes on to say of "Tears, Idle Tears": "It is at such moments that he writes as Virgil would have written." Bush justifies Tennyson's emphasis on pure emotion, but we still need to inquire about the specific nature of this emotion in "Tears, Idle Tears." In his well-known essay on the poem, Cleanth Brooks
observes the ambiguity and paradox in the poem, and describes the emotion as "the sense of being irrevocably barred out from the human world." Graham Hough says, "the theme is an almost objectless regret." Spitzer considers the "divine despair" of the poem to be the despair of the God of Death in Life, which, he goes on to say, reveals Tennyson's "intense disharmony with reality." Despite the differences among these critics, they all agree that Tennyson's achievement here lies in his ability to embody this emotion, as difficult to describe as this emotion is, in language and imagery that constitute a sophisticated and complex poetic structure.

Brooks was the first to observe the elements of paradox and ambiguity in the poem, and they are nowhere more evident than in the way Tennyson represents emotion. The key description of emotion in the first stanza is the near oxymoron of "divine despair." This, the speaker says, is the source of the tears. But what sort of feeling is described by "divine despair"? The word "despair" comes from the Latin desperare and denotes reversal of hope, yet hopelessness is not the best way of describing the emotion and mood of "Tears, Idle Tears." Tennyson has linked "despair" with the word "divine," which suggests, as Spitzer argues, a deity but also something sacred and good. The emotion is not simply sadness or resignation; it involves a power that sanctifies human experience, and such power is the opposite of despair. Tennyson even qualifies the image of the tears, which ought to be a clear sign of sadness, with the adjective "idle." Even without knowledge of its classical source, "idle" reverberates with meaning. Various critics have asked why the tears are "idle." "Idle" can mean worthless or useless; in Middle English it means void or empty. The word may connote that the tears are without signification—are a kind of cipher. The apparent lack of meaning is itself part of the image's significance. In the first stanza, the speaker does not know the tears' meaning; the inability to define this sign, to articulate this mood, is the emotional and intellectual crux of the first stanza. To understand the meaning of this gesture and image requires that the speaker actively pursue a series of thoughts. The poet emphasizes the speaker's active search for meaning in stanza one through the verbs: "know," "rise," "gather," "looking," and "thinking." This mental activity is the effort to fill in the absent meaning in the void for which the tears are an em-
problem. Furthermore, the verbs suggest that the speaker’s experience produces something other than resignation or hopelessness. Resignation would bring with it passivity, not the kind of active, curious attention that the speaker evinces. Even to say “I know not” shows an awareness of an absence of meaning that needs to be filled. The negative construction suggests its desired opposite: the speaker’s need to know what the tears mean. The opening stanza of “Tears, Idle Tears” does not simply represent a vague sense of melancholy, but shows the speaker’s rigorous acts of thought and inquiry into the significance of this mood.

The inquiry into melancholy’s meaning constitutes a type of creative power, a source of poetic inspiration for Tennyson. This power and inspiration is nowhere more in evidence than in “Tears, Idle Tears.” At the same time, while Tennyson is drawn to the poetic conventions associated with the representation of melancholy, he also feels apart from them. Consequently, his poetry about melancholy is also about the melancholy of poetic disinheritance. In order to understand the emotion in “Tears, Idle Tears” and to understand the way the poet structures this emotion through language and image, it is not sufficient to speak of the loss of Hallam or the poet’s “passion of the past,” as important as these are. One must look at the conventions of the poetry of melancholy, conventions which constitute the poet’s inheritance and, simultaneously, his sense of alienation. J. W. Mackail has a brief but illuminating discussion of the relation of Tennyson to Theocritus in his Lectures on Greek Poetry. Mackail says that “Tears, Idle Tears” is “completely in the Theocritean manner . . . the style, the movement, the enriched, subtitled, and refracted embodiment of emotion, though applied to a different subject, are precisely those of the twelfth idyll.” Given Tennyson’s debts to Theocritus, it may seem inconsistent to go against Mackail’s judgment on “Tears, Idle Tears.” However, while elements of the classical pastoral elegy, love-lament, and the Greek pothos, or longing, that we associate with Theocritus clearly influence the general form of “Tears, Idle Tears,” the true emotional debts here lie with the Romantics, especially Wordsworth and Keats. In glancing at the poem’s relation to these poets, we can see the meaning of the poem’s melancholy.

Tennyson says of the poem: “This song came to me on the yel-
lowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient.” As commentators have pointed out, Tintern Abbey is near Clevedon, where Hallam was buried. The memories have a personal basis in Tennyson’s mourning over the death of Hallam. Hough notes that section 19 of *In Memoriam* was also written at Tintern Abbey:

The Wye is hushed nor moved along,
   And hushed my deepest grief of all,
   When filled with tears that cannot fall,
   I brim with sorrow drowning song.10

“Tears, Idle Tears” is about this personal grief, but it is also about a more general sense of memory, the past, and, specifically, the poetry of the past. The poem that informs Tennyson’s song is, of course, Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” Wordsworth describes the loss of the elemental communion with nature experienced in his youth, but there is little sense of “deepest grief” here:

other gifts
   Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
   Abundant recompense.

The recompense is the ability to look on nature and hear the “still, sad music of humanity.” In “Tintern Abbey,” memory of the past, in a manner that looks ahead to Proust, creates a deeper spiritual bond between man and world than can be experienced in the present. The “green pastoral landscape” becomes dearer as the poet’s sense of the past deepens. This is a different configuration of emotion than that found in “Tears, Idle Tears.” As James Kissane says, there is a “deep incongruity” between Wordsworth’s poem and Tennyson’s: “there is in Tennyson’s poem none of his predecessor’s serene confidence that the ‘wild ecstasies’ of the past ‘shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure’ and that memory is but ‘a dwelling place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies.’”11 Kissane’s point fits in with our general argument about Tennyson and melancholy; memory becomes the “dwelling place” where the melancholy poet meditates on his distance from “all sweet sounds and harmonies.” In Wordsworth, poetry and song still validate the poet’s place within the world and within poetic tradition. In Tennyson,
the attenuation of song and the distance from the world are the signs of the poet’s placelessness. Contrasting “Tintern Abbey” and “Tears, Idle Tears,” Kissane remarks that the latter

perhaps typifying a later stage of the Romantic sensibility, comes from an imaginative world where the self cannot know communion or continuity save in the unmitigable need to experience them.17

In Tennyson, it is not simply the sense of continuity that the poet needs to experience but even the sense of grief itself. This is the significance of the “tears” being “idle”; they connote an absence of meaning and an emotional absence. The speaker cannot even experience a sense of continuity with his grief, and he desperately needs to. Wordsworth’s “green pastoral landscape” evokes a sense of sadness in the speaker, but also joy. The tenuous and vague imagery in Tennyson’s song implies, on the other hand, that nature can evoke neither sadness nor joy in the speaker. The depth of feeling in the poem arises from his inability to feel a part of the world, including the natural world, that surrounds him. We can see the difference with Wordsworth, if we look at one more passage from the latter, this time from “Intimations of Immortality”:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Wordsworth here describes a complex relation between nature (“flower”) and mind (“thoughts”) and emotion (“tears”). The green world (i.e., the pastoral world) has an effect on the mind that goes beyond emotion. But this “sinking” pattern, which Hartman has shown to be pervasive in Wordsworth, gives way to a rising up, not of tears, but of language.18 In Wordsworth the deep thoughts that occur in the mind’s relation to world are a source of poetic inspiration. The complex relation between world, mind, emotion, and language ultimately suggests a reciprocity between man and nature that subsumes the grief man feels. This reciprocity is missing in “Tears, Idle Tears,” because the speaker experiences the emotion but not the thoughts that should go with the emotion. His tears reverse Wordsworth’s formula. Tennyson’s speaker experiences tears that are too deep for thoughts.

The Wordsworthian speaker looks on the landscape of pastoral
and this landscape gives rise to thoughts, thoughts he then puts into language. Keats is more aware of the way nature can limit the poet's powers of language: the sadness the poet feels before nature's limiting power in "To Autumn" involves a diminution of song that is his final paradoxical statement of poetry's decline when the poet is at the apex of his powers. In both of these Romantic poets, however, nature is the form the imagination takes in the process of poetic creation. The representation of nature becomes a way of structuring the representation of emotion in the Romantic lyric. Does Tennyson use the representation of nature to structure the emotions in "Tears, Idle Tears" in a way similar to the Romantics, and what sort of emotion does that structure produce? We are back to that question again, but this time it can be approached via the representations of nature. Brooks says the principal structure in "Tears, Idle Tears" is one of paradox, meaning that the representation of nature in the poem is paradoxical. One can see the double-sided pull in the images of nature in the opening stanza, where the tears rise:

In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

W. David Shaw, in his discussion of the poem, speaks of the "pastoral oxymorons of inner weather." The phrase "happy Autumn-fields" is an example of such a "pastoral oxymoron." The poet describes the Autumn-fields as "happy." Yet autumn is usually associated in poetic tradition with other emotions, especially melancholy. There is a great passage in *The Seasons* by James Thomson, a poet Tennyson knew well, that, in the pastoral melancholy tradition, brings together the season, the landscape, and the relation of melancholy to the powers of poetic creativity.

Fled is the blasted Verdure of the Fields;
And, shrunk into their Beds, the flowery Race
Their sunny Robes resign. Even what remain'd
Of bolder Fruits, falls from the naked Tree;
And Woods, Fields, Gardens, Orchards, all around
The desolated Prospect thrills the Soul.

He comes! he comes! in every Breeze the Power
Of Philosophic Melancholy comes!
His near Approach the sudden-starting Tear,
The glowing Cheek, the mild dejected Air,
The softened Feature, and the beating Heart,
Pierc'd deep with many a virtuous pang, declare.
O'er all the Soul his sacred influence breathes!
Inflames Imagination; thro' the Breast
Infuses every Tenderness; and far
Beyond dim Earth exalts the swelling Thought.15

("Autumn," 11.998–1013)

While one cannot prove Tennyson had this specific passage in mind when he wrote his own song of autumnal melancholy, Thomson lies behind Wordsworth and is an important representative of the melancholy tradition being addressed in "Tears, Idle Tears." Though marred by such things as the ornate periphrasis of "Their sunny Robes resign," the passage looks ahead to what M. H. Abrams has described as the "correspondent breeze" in Romantic nature poetry.16 The "desolated prospect" of the autumn landscape yields a "sacred influence" that "inflames imagination." "Philosophic Melancholy" with his "sudden-starting Tear" is a force of poetic inspiration. The sharp differences between the autumnal melancholy in Thomson and in Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" are a measure of the distance Tennyson has traveled from Romanticism in his understanding and representation of nature, melancholy, and the language of the poet.

The representation of nature in "Tears, Idle Tears" is not simply paradoxical; it is ironic. When the poet speaks of the "happy Autumn-fields," he is making an ironic comment about the landscape, the quality of his emotion, and his relation to poetic tradition. In the passage from Thomson, looking at the "Prospect" leads to the emotion ("Philosophic Melancholy"), which, in turn, leads to the "influence" that "inflames Imagination." Sight, emotion, and thought work with each other in the act of poetic creation. A similar structure was seen in the passages from Wordsworth. But there is a division in Tennyson. As Kissane points out, there is a "dramatic contrast between looking on the happy autumn-fields and thinking of the days that are no more. Sensation and reflection are disconnected."17 There is a two-fold irony in this. First, it is the irony of alluding to a season conventionally associated with melancholy (both in life and literary history) as "happy." Second, there
is an irony in that the happy natural landscape produces the opposite feeling within the speaker: he is sad. Just as there is an absence of meaning in the tears that are idle or void, there is an absence of continuity between perception and emotion. Finally, this absence of continuity defines the poet’s relation to Romantic melancholy. The poet alludes to the conventions, but he does not feel them: they are only empty forms, like the cipher-tears. The speaker’s relation to nature is comparable to his relation to traditions of melancholy poetry. Just as there is, in Kissane’s words, a “disparity between the plenitude of external nature and the desolation of the conscious self,” there is a disparity between the rich poetic traditions upon which Tennyson bases the poem and the poet’s inner sense of impoverishment as he faces those traditions and attempts to give them new meaning and new feeling. Assad has shown with great care how the pattern of rhythm in the lyric moves from despair to hope and back to despair. In his view, Tennyson’s use of stress structures the poem as a tension between opposites. We have just seen how this tension works on the thematic level in the contrast between poetic plenitude and impoverishment.

This tension of opposites—emotional, metric, literary, historic—serves as a paradigm for this overall argument about the specific nature of Tennysonian melancholia. It is a sadness that is aware of itself as a sadness. Thus, the poet begins to represent the emotion through a language of convention, a system of literary codes, that can then be manipulated, by the detached poet, in sophisticated ways. In “Tears, Idle Tears,” as with some of the other Tennyson poems we have examined, the melancholy tradition begins to acquire a sophisticated sense of the artifices of its own language. Behind stanza one, in terms of literary history, lie primarily Wordsworth and Keats, and secondarily, the whole line of melancholy-descriptive poets of which Thomson is one example. But Tennyson’s literary debt and its ensuing melancholia are not simple things to define. In “Tears, Idle Tears,” Tennyson does not simply draw upon the Wordsworthian meditation on nature viewed from a temporal retrospect. The wildness the speaker feels in the final stanza has a vague kinship to the Wordsworthian sense of power that comes from nature and “rises” and “gathers” in the poet. The “despair” is “divine” because it is power, not simply passivity.
From Keats, Tennyson gets his sense of natural process as the prefiguration of the poet's ending. Thus, "happy Autumn-fields" signifies both the abundance of nature and the austerity that swiftly follows the season's harvest. Moreover, the emblem of natural process is, too, a figure of the poetic process. For the poet, the cessation of creativity is the greatest source of melancholy, greater even than the memories of time lost. The end of creativity is a sign of the poet's mortality. If, however, "Tears, Idle Tears" is Keatsian in its emphasis on the diminishment inherent in both natural and poetic process, as in the final stanza of "To Autumn," it is also Keatsian in its antithesis of death and deathless song, as in, of course, the "Ode to a Nightingale":

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

In Keats's poem, the "charm'd magic casements" open on "faery lands forlorn," and the word "forlorn" brings the speaker back from oblivion and potential death to the world of process. Keats intertwines two sides of human consciousness: passive lack of consciousness versus conscious creativity, and death versus process—these define each other. In Tennyson's stanza, however, the two sides do not so much define each other as ironically negate each other. This irony works on a small scale in the phrase, "so sad, so strange," which Shaw calls a "pastoral oxymoron." The sadness and strangeness are the result of awakening life being perceived through the eyes of death. Shaw notes that the grammatical structure of the poem is a series of similes, and this stanza is the second in the series. The speaker uses the simile to describe the emotion experienced in looking at the landscape and thinking of times past. Unlike Keats's poem, however, the antitheses are not united in this simile. Brooks says of the passage, "the dead past seems to the living man as unfamiliar and fresh in its sadness as the living present seems to the dying man." His view neglects the diminishment of sound and sight in the imagery. This diminishment of the world heard through "dying ears" and seen through "dying eyes" (a diminish-
ment that Assad shows to be at work in the actual stress patterns of this line, with its fading ending) suggests the radical separation the speaker feels from the world.\textsuperscript{22} The diminishment is yet another sign of the speaker's sense of disinheritance from the world; we can see that the nature of his disinheritance is different from the Keatsian fusion of oblivion and consciousness. In Keats, these differences blend; in Tennyson, they remain in a state of tension.

In the first line of stanza three, Tennyson describes the slowly emerging light of the early morning with the phrase, "dark summer dawns." The phrase is, like "divine despair" and "happy Autumn-fields," a near oxymoron. "Dawn" connotes light, the opposite of "dark." The symbolic opposition is apparent. The poet represents nature here as embodying hope and beginnings, but also as embodying sadness and despair. The dawn is a beginning, but in its darkness it is also an ending; the image presages the crucial "Death in Life" of the fourth stanza. The tension of opposites, the way death and life, passivity and process, are juxtaposed but never fused, constitutes the form of language that Tennyson's poetics of melancholy takes. The tension is, moreover, analogous to the tension of Tennyson's consciousness of the poetic past as he tries to create for himself a poetic present. In stanza three, the poetic tension centers on how Tennyson moves beyond Keats's nightingale of oblivion and the magic casement that draws the earlier poet back into the world of time. It is no accident that this stanza contains an image of birds' song: "The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds." If we take Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as an analogue, we observe crucial differences. In Keats, the song of the bird lures the speaker away from the world to a pastoral retreat of darkness, where he tastes the sensation of being "half in love with easeful death." The song of the "half-awakened birds" in "Tears, Idle Tears" works in the opposite way. The song constitutes not the seductiveness of death, but the struggle for life. There is an antithetical energy between the awakening life of the birds and the fading away of the dying man, yet there is no need to emphasize the dying person; indeed, the poet himself does not. His emphasis is on the arc of sound in the song, from its source to its conclusion. The poet stresses the birds' song's earliness and "half-awakedness." From this perspective, the song of the bird is a type for poetic song, and it
suggests the origin and priority of poetic song in the face of death. This affirmation, however, is one that remains aware of the signs of mortality imprinted on the very character of its song. The song will fade because the life of man will fade, and even the meter embodies this "fading" at the line-endings.

In "Tears, Idle Tears," the "earliest pipe of half-awakened birds" is an emblem of pastoral beginnings, and the "dying ears" is an emblem of a poetic consciousness sadly aware of how the moment of first awakening in the life of the poet is irretrievably past. The sense of distance between man and song in stanza three serves as a figure for Tennyson's distance from the pastoral tradition he is alluding to here. Tennyson creates ironic pastoral through such devices as what Shaw calls the "pastoral oxymoron," and through the diminishment of sight and sound as a way of conveying the poet's ending. In terms of the latter, "Tears, Idle Tears" looks back to the closing stanza of "To Autumn." There is a melancholy poetics in Keats's work, but what distinguishes the two poets in terms of the melancholy tradition and the melancholy of poetic creation is that Keats quite sincerely discovers the sober facts of process and mortality within his poems. For Keats, these discoveries are a question of emotion as well as of thought. In contrast, Tennyson realized from the start that there was no pure song outside of mortality. In addition, he was far more conscious of poetic conventions as images from the past that can never again be present; thus, he was far more melancholy about his own originality.

It is in this sense that much of Tennyson's poetry contains a secondary level of meaning, an allegory about the poet's uneasiness: the fear that his aesthetic "medley" of mixed genres, conventions, and figures is the result of an acute awareness of tradition, which diminishes the sincerity of the emotion being expressed. The melancholy irony of "Tears, Idle Tears" is a result of the sense of the past in life and poetry as being irretrievable. But the melancholy comedy, to borrow Kincaid's terms, of the poem rests in the sense that the very awareness of the inability to recover the past can be life-affirming. This is, perhaps, what Tennyson means when he says the poem conveys the "abiding in the transient." "Thinking of the days that are no more" is a different statement from simply saying "these days are no more." The poet's active search for the meaning
of the past, his attempt to fill in the absent meaning emblematized by the image of the tears, brings the past into the present, and turns convention into new creation. Stanza three suggests the pathos of mortality and the pathos of the poet's sense of disinheritance from literary history. Even so, the stanza also suggests the hope that lives in song and poetry. The apparent fading of vision also implies a more positive vision within it: "The casement slowly grows a glimmering square."

In one sense, the image is the objective correlative for the fading strength of the dying person. In another sense, however, it is an image of vision coming back to life: the "glimmering light" slowly "grows." What appears initially to be a sign of death can be interpreted as a sign of the rebirth of hope which points to a central fact about the melancholy in "Tears, Idle Tears." While the poem contains a sadness which originates in the recognition of mortality, there is also a movement toward hope. For example, the near oxymorons are ironic, but they also transform seemingly negative words into potentially positive ones. We have just looked at one example, in the images that seem to signal despair but contain a measure of hope, such as the song of the awakening birds and the glowing light in the casement.

Part of the more hopeful emotion that lies within the poem's melancholy has to do with Tennyson's understanding of memory. He describes it as follows:

It is what I have always felt even from a boy, and what as a boy I called "the passion of the past." And it is so always with me now; it is the distance that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move.²⁴

We see the strong sense of nostalgia in his comments, and how that nostalgia fits in with this poem. Nostalgia, as Laurence Lerner has shown, is an important component of the melancholy tradition.²⁵ The pastoral nostalgia of "Tears, Idle Tears" is part of a complex of emotion related to Tennyson's understanding of memory's significance to the act of poetic creation. Nostalgia becomes a form of creative power rather than passive despair. The poet evinces this power in the final stanza of the poem:

Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more.

The passage involves a series of similes in which the speaker compares the melancholy imagination to love. The similes themselves constitute the first level of this imaginative activity. The phrase "hopeless fancy feigned" connotes the second level of the imaginative act. The speaker describes a person who loves someone who does not respond in kind, but rather who loves another. This person then imagines the kisses that will never actually take place. The structure of emotion, then, in this stanza involves two acts of the imagination: first, the simile "dear as remembered kisses" that links the love idea to the initial movement of feeling that gives rise to tears in stanza one; and second, the person imagining love that will never actually occur. The phrase "hopeless fancy feigned" is important because it suggests something about the relation of melancholy and the imagination in the poem as a whole. Remembered moments are like "fancy." They are acts of the imagination that bring pleasure as well as sadness. This notion is behind Tennyson’s comments about "the passion of the past," as well. The sense of distance Tennyson speaks of, and his view of the past as a "picture," suggest how the passion of the past is bound up with imaginative re-creation. It is this imaginative re-creation of the past which constitutes its true source of fascination for Tennyson. The passion of the past is also the passion of the poet. In this sense, "Tears, Idle Tears" possesses a kind of dark humor in which sadness is both real and a feigned fancy. As imaginative constructs, the images from the past are poetic images, conventions that Tennyson consciously alludes to, and this constitutes their charm and their distance. Despite the appearance of deeply felt sadness, there are always levels of artifice in Tennyson’s poems about melancholy. Such artifice is far less evident in Keats because of his relative lack of self-consciousness of genre conventions, in the sense of feeling at home with those conventions rather than apart from them. In Tennyson’s case, it is not a question of false sentiment, but of a willingness to explore the nature of poetic tradition in ways that do not always take its conventions entirely seriously. Tennyson, then, is
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between the nonironic melancholy poetry found in the Romantics, except for Byron, who is a special case, being as much a neoclassicist as a Romantic, and the dark irony of Hardian melancholy.

We have yet to look at the classical source for the most important image in the poem: the "tears." While we have looked at the poem's melancholy primarily from the perspective of Tennyson's relation to Romanticism, and to certain images from Keats and Wordsworth, a strong case can be made that the poem's emotion has deep affinities with one of the classical writers. Douglas Bush (and before him W. P. Mustard) points out that the "idle tears" come from Virgil's *Aeneid.* The most telling instance of the image, in terms of Tennyson's poem, comes in Book II, when Aeneas looks at the pictures of the Trojan War on the walls of Carthage. He weeps over the images of his city's destruction:

"Here, too, the honorable finds its due
and there are tears for passing things; here, too,
things mortal touch the mind. Forget your fears;
this fame will bring you some deliverance."
He speaks. With many tears and sighs he feeds
his soul on what is nothing but a picture.

Aeneas's tears are for passing things, but they are also for the way the work of art honors what has past. This is one of the great examples in Western literature of *ecphrasis,* in which the literary representation of something is figured forth as a work of art. Ecphrasis has affinities with the epyllion, or little picture, which is a variant of the pastoral idyll genre. Both ecphrasis and the epyllion involve the Theocritean framing of the picture being described. Theocritean framing is a device Tennyson uses frequently: we find it in such different works as the "Morte d'Arthur" and "The Gardener's Daughter." As in Theocritus, the principal function of framing in Tennyson is to create a sense of detachment between poetic voice and subject; however, this moment of ecphrasis in Virgil combines the element of detachment derived from the framed representation of the picture and the pathos that comes from Aeneas's deep feeling. The moment is exemplary of a similar combination of detachment and deep feeling in "Tears, Idle Tears." Martin Dodsworth describes this aspect of framing in Tennyson:
The frame has a special attraction to Tennyson because it marks not merely the discontinuity of the poem with the world of everyday experience but also of the inward nature of its subject matter. The poems tend to center on states of mind and on dramatic changes of heart, the action takes place within the speaker as much as outside him.28

But what Dodsworth describes is the opposite of the effect Theocritus achieves through framing and ecphrasis. And Tennyson is very close to Theocritus in many ways. In Tennyson, framing can suggest the inner state of mind of the subject, but it can also define the poet's distance from that state. Such is even the case with the moment from Virgil that he alludes to through the image of the tears. The pathos created by the scene of Aeneas before the pictures of the fall of Troy involves certain kinds of detachment. Aeneas looks at the representation of a place that no longer exists, a place that he cannot return to. In this instance, the device of ecphrasis is the sign of his state of exile. In alluding to Aeneas's tears, Tennyson also alludes to his sense of exile from the meaning of his own grief—the "idle" tears constitute the absence of that meaning. He is also alluding to his sense of poetic disinheritance; however, this moment of ecphrasis in the Aeneid prefigures Aeneas's building of a new city. This prefiguring is analogous to Tennyson's attempt to forge out of his poetic disinheritance a place within tradition. He achieves that place through the creation of his new idyll, of which "Tears, Idle Tears" is itself one of the finest examples.

"Come Down, O Maid" is a poem about female sexuality, male perception of women, and a dialectic of melancholy and joy mediated by the language of poetic tradition. The lyric represents a struggle between male power and female power through language, and addresses a number of the themes dealt with throughout The Princess. As with many of his idylls, Tennyson frames this song. The narrative context in which Princess Ida nurses the Prince back to health after the battle creates the frame. First she read "Now Sleeps
the Crimson Petal," and then "she found a small Sweet Idyl, and once more, as low she read:"

"Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height:
What pleasure lives in height (the shepherd sang)
In height and cold, the splendour of the hills?
But cease to move so near the Heavens, and cease
To glide a sunbeam by the blasted Pine,
To sit a star upon the sparkling spire;
And come, for Love is of the valley, come,
For Love is of the valley, come thou down
And find him; by the happy threshold, he,
Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,
Or red with spirited purple of the vats,
Or foxlike in the vine; nor cares to walk
With Death and Morning on the silver horns,
Nor wilt thou snare him in the white ravine,
Nor find him dropt upon the firths of ice,
That huddling slant in furrow-cloven falls
To roll the torrent out of dusky doors:
But follow; let the torrent dance thee down
To find him in the valley; let the wild
Lean-headed Eagles yelp alone, and leave
The monstrous ledges there to slope, and spill
Their thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke,
That like a broken purpose waste in air:
So waste not thou; but come; for all the vales
Await thee; azure pillars of the hearth
Arise to thee; the children call, and I
Thy shepherd pipe, and sweet is every sound,
Sweetest thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees."

Critics have differed over the lyric's interpretation. Valerie Pitt says that in its juxtaposition with the sexual awakening symbolized by "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal," the poem is "not so much an address to an idealist as to a virgin." In Pitt's view, "Maid" is a celebration of the "fruitfulness of marriage." Gerhard Joseph views the poem, and The Princess as a whole, as a sexual contest and a
contest of genres. The entire work is, in his view, a "barely dis­guised psychomachy." Of Ida's reading of this song, Joseph says:

Her egosim approaches the haughtiness of the soul ensconced in her mountainous Palace of Art and of Lady Clare Vere de Vere among her halls and towers. In her song at the conclusion of The Princess she beautifully recapitulates that by now familiar descent of the proud artist's psyche from the heights in Tennyson's early poetry into the valley of Victorian love in his later work.  

James Kincaid further pursues this idea of the lyric as a contest of styles but in terms of his scheme of comic and ironic patterns:

The poem presents most clearly the opposition between two kinds of comedy: the heroic world of the cold and splendid mountain, and the domestic pastoral world of the valley.

We will be less interested in the marriage theme than in the idea of sexual contest and contests of styles, and how the two relate to Tennyson's understanding of the traditions of pastoral and melancholy poetry.

It is important to stress the qualifying irony in the very context of the poem's reading. Ida reads a poem which is a song sung by a male voice—a shepherd. The shepherd sings to the female figure of the maid. Ida is giving voice to what is a male song of courtship and also a male commentary on female aspirations and independence. There is an interesting irony here in that a male writer (Tennyson) is describing a female reader (Ida), who is reading a song in which the principal speaker is male (the shepherd) singing to or wooing a female (the maid). The complexities of sexual dialogue and intertwining of voices imply, as Joseph suggests, a sexual contest, but one that is very much related to poetic language and poetic voice. The song involves sexual struggles in three senses: first, defining what it means to be male and female; second, defining and apportioning power between the two; and third, defining female and male relationships to poetic language and poetic conventions. The poet undertakes all three tasks in "Come Down, O Maid."

Tennyson comments, "'Come down, O maid' is said to be taken from Theocritus, but there is no real likeness except perhaps in the Greek Idyllic feeling." The denial—like many of Tennyson's com-
ments on questions of influence—needs to be taken seriously but not necessarily accepted. Pattison has shown how, in many instances, Tennyson’s denials of influences ascribed to his works by critics are then later assimilated into his own accounts of the poems.\textsuperscript{35} In this specific case, it is fair to say there is a strong Theocritean element to the poem. In his \textit{Lectures on Greek Poetry}, J. W. Mackail says that “Come Down, O Maid” is very similar to the songs of Lycidas and Thyrsis in Theocritus.\textsuperscript{36} Christopher Ricks’s edition of the \textit{Poems} notes echoes of Theocritus, Virgil, Ovid, and Milton, among others. Paul Turner says the song is “pervasively Theocritean, but most closely related to \textit{Idyll XI}, where Polyphemus, seated on his high rock beneath the white snows of Mount Etna, tells the sea-nymph Galatea that he will learn to swim, in order to discover ‘what pleasure you can find in living in the deep.’”\textsuperscript{37} The notion of the song as both love-lament and act of seduction derives from the idyll and pastoral tradition. In addition, Theocritus and Virgil often incorporate the song within a contest between singers. In Tennyson’s new idyll, however, the contest has as much to do with the relative powers of female and male as it has to do with the power of the singer, yet the two are intimately related. They are related through the idea of voice, and it is with the question of voice that we must begin.

The poem opens with the shepherd’s voice. His voice utters words that are ambiguous in tone and meaning: “Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height.” In one sense, the opening line is hortatory. The verbal construction of the opening clause is in the imperative mood. However, the second half of this first sentence is interrogatory. The sentence is a mixture of command and question. Even the apostrophe “O maid” is a mixture of emotions and meanings. On the one hand, the shepherd’s apostrophe is a diminutive, a gesture of condescension. From that perspective, the shepherd utters the first clause in a voice of superiority. But the apostrophe is double-sided, as is the complete sentence. The voice of the shepherd, and his apostrophizing of the maid, is slightly worshipful in tone. The mixed emotion and mixed tone are not at all dissimilar to the qualities of voice found in Polyphemus’s song to Galatea in \textit{Idyll XI}. In “Come Down, O Maid,” the maid is not simply a diminutive creature but a powerful figure before
whom the shepherd bows down in awe: it is worth observing that he is looking up at her as she stands on the mountain heights. From this second perspective, then, the first clause takes on the quality of a request rather than a command. This tension in the voice between request and command, between the apostrophe as diminution or idolization, is one key to the poem. Does the shepherd view the maid as a small, helpless creature or as a figure of power? Within the context of the narrative of *The Princess*, the maid serves as a central image for Tennyson’s exploration of female identity and female power. Tennyson is asking, “What does it mean for the maid to come down from the mountain height?” On the most basic narrative level, to come down from the height means that Ida will now abandon her dream of a woman’s college completely apart from men. Her descent is the recognition of her need for the companionship and love of men. One could even carry this line of interpretation so far as to say, as Kissane does, that “this descent involves a change in Ida from feminist to female.” Such would seem to be the basic meaning of the song, and the voice of the shepherd then becomes a voice of male censoriousness advocating female submission; however, as John Killham has demonstrated in his study of the feminist and political background to *The Princess*, Tennyson’s position in the poem is not as unqualifiably anti-feminist as initially appears. As a paradigm for the sexual contest and the related contest of poetic styles in *The Princess*, “Come Down, O Maid” qualifies the anti-feminist view in a number of ways.

The first type of qualification within the song has to do with the relative power of speaker and subject. If we look at the language of the opening sentence, we see that the voice of the shepherd evinces powerlessness as well as power before the maid. The speaker links the substantive words of power with the maid. He emphasizes her power through the emphatic repetition of the word “height”: “height” is the closing word of the first line, the closing word of the second line before the parenthetical comment, and one of the nouns in the prepositional phrase in line three. In its association with the noun “maid,” the word “height” transforms the former from a descriptive diminutive to a substantive word of power. The language of the shepherd’s song bestows power
on the female figure. To be on the mountain height is to be powerful, to be above the common realm in a positive as well as negative sense.

The shepherd's song stresses the negative connotations of the maid's distance and aloofness; however, through the language of his song, we do not feel that her distance is necessarily a negative attribute. Rather, it is a power to be desired. And her silence strengthens the impressiveness of her power. In terms of the dramatic structure of the lyric, she is the silent listener. Her silence accrues to her power. As there is a sublimity in her "height," there is a sublimity in the way she is beyond language itself. Indeed, there is an important reversal in terms of the contest of literary styles played out in the larger narrative text. Within "Come Down, O Maid," the female figure is not the figure of gentle lyricism but of epic heroism. She is a woman of few words.

The poem's pastoral melancholy lies within the shepherd's voice—his need, in effect, to plead with her. When he sings, "What pleasure lives in height . . . / In height and cold, the splendour of the hills?" he intends the question to be rhetorical, a statement of a negative fact. The answer is supposed to be that no pleasure lies there. But is the voice of the shepherd persuasive? Probably not. When we change the clause from the interrogative mood to declarative statement, we are struck by how weak a statement it is. The shepherd's statement is weak to just that degree that the image he evokes is actually one of an admirable strength. Although he wants his question to suggest that the maid in her isolation cannot experience pleasure, the image he uses to describe her place of isolation connotes pleasure rather than displeasure. The "splendour of the hills," because it is an image of power and strength, signifies the pleasure the maid derives from the space she inhabits. In the first sentence of the lyric, the shepherd's argument, then, is as follows: the maid, in order to be fully human, must descend from the position of power (the "height" and "splendour of the hills") to one of weakness ("down" in the valley where Love is). He urges her to give up the "cold" aloofness that is a sign of her power and independence, and to accept a lower position of dependence and powerlessness. The very terms of his argument, however, suggest a counterargument: the female should maintain this desired position of "splen-
dour.” The language and imagery of the opening sentence function as a thematic and stylistic prelude to the entire lyric.

The opening question receives fuller elaboration in the following twenty-eight lines, lines that constitute one lengthy sentence made up of a complex series of phrases and clauses. The second sentence, like the first, opens in the imperative mood:

But cease to move so near the Heavens, and cease
To glide a sunbeam by the blasted Pine,
To sit a star upon the sparkling spire.

As the shepherd begins to give voice to his plea in more elaborate and specific terms, the language continues to undermine his argument. The first clause begins with the conjunction “but.” This is significant for two reasons: first, it suggests elaboration, and second, it implies qualification. As with the shepherd’s first sentence, the emotion and meaning here continue to be a mixture of command and question. The imagery contained within his first rhetorical question undercuts his line of reasoning. Here, as the second sentence opens, the conjunction “but” looks both back to that first sentence, as if to further qualify it, and forward, as a subtly negative factor in the ensuing clause; furthermore, the conjunction combines with the negative denotation of the verb “cease.” This combination makes the shepherd’s meaning in the ensuing series of clauses one that is strong in its denunciations but weak in its affirmations. The shepherd questions the pleasures of the mountain heights in the first sentence, but in the following clauses he offers no alternative. The singer’s expressive language involves a type of limitation; specifically, the limitation of the powers and freedoms of the maid. The imperative “cease,” however, paradoxically emphasizes its opposite. The literal meaning of the verbal constructions denotes a sense of movement being closed off, but the true emphasis falls on the infinitives: “to move,” “to glide,” “to sit.” At the same time, the elision of “like” in clauses two and three turns the figure from simile to metaphor, producing a strong metonymic identification between the female figure and certain aspects of the natural world. Together, the emphatic infinitives and the elided similes associate the maid with a powerful and agile sense of movement through a sublime and picturesque landscape. We begin to
observe a strong contrast between the melancholy lament of the shepherd and the powerful heroism of the maid.

From the seventh line on, however, the tone begins to change.

And come, for Love is of the valley, come,
For Love is of the valley, come thou down
And find him. . . .

The quality of tone in the verb “come” is here no longer the mixture of command and plea that the same verb signified in the opening line. Nor does the verb have the harshly negative connotations of “cease.” In lines seven and eight, the verbal repetition has the rhetorically formal dignity of a gracious invitation. The poet develops this graciousness through the lyricism of the parenthetical clause to which the verb is joined: “for Love is of the valley.” The elegiac note is tempered by the light mellifluousness of the verse produced by the vowel sounds and assonance: o, i, a, combined with the labial m and the l. At this moment, the voice of the shepherd turns from negation to affirmation. The gentle lyricism is the equivalent in language of the warm domesticity that lies in the valley. It is no accident that as the shepherd begins to sing of the descent into the valley, the song assumes a Keatsian autumnal richness: the poet signals this Keatsian quality by a subtle modulation from the repeated verb “come,” with its parenthetical clause (“for Love is of the valley”), to the more active imperative “find,” and its direct object “him.” At this moment, we realize the poet is not simply speaking of love as an abstraction but as a personification, and it is in this moment that the song takes a Keatsian turn:

by the happy threshold, he,
Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,
Or red with spirited purple of the vats,
Or foxlike in the vine. . . .

This is the language of Keats’s autumn pastoral, with the rhetorical formality, which is Keats by way of Milton, in the inversion of subject and phrase in “by the happy threshold, he,” and also with the anaphora in lines 10 through 12: Or . . . Or . . . Or. In addition to the formal tone, there is the Keatsian sense of natural abundance, of organic plenitude, as Love walks “hand in hand
with Plenty in the maize." Even the grammar of the passage, with a series of phrases, conveys the effect of abundance both of place and activity.

We begin to see the value of the alternative the shepherd offers the maid, for the passage serves to counteract with its own kind of gentle power the sublimities of the mountain heights. Yet almost in spite of itself the description turns back to those very same mountain heights:

nor cares to walk
With Death and Morning on the silver horns,
Nor wilt thou snare him in the white ravine,
Nor find him dropt upon the firths of ice,
That huddling slant in furrow-cloven falls
To roll the torrent out of dusky doors.

The shepherd says, this is a place where Love does not care to walk. But, as in the opening lines, the supposedly negative description has a kind of power that makes it seem desirable for the maid to remain there, rather than descend. Ruskin spoke of the passage with admiration: "Perhaps one of the most wonderful pieces of sight in all literature is—Nay, that's just it; I was going to say a bit of Tennyson—the piece of Alp in The Princess." Hallam Tennyson comments that the song "is descriptive of the waste Alpine heights and gorges and of the sweet rich valley below." These adjectives do not fully describe the tension that results from the attractiveness of both of these worlds. Tennyson associates Love and Plenty with a landscape of Keatsian autumnal abundance. At the same time, however, he associates Death and Morning with the sublime landscapes found in Romantic songs to the awful power of nature, such as section one of The Prelude, "Kubla Khan," and "Mont Blanc." The shepherd's language of pastoral love continues to work against itself by invoking an opposite world of nature that is sublime and powerful. Furthermore, this powerful natural world is, by metonymic association, the austere power of the female figure in the poem. This is not a simple opposition, in either ethical or aesthetic terms. The qualities of language, image, and voice in the shepherd's song enable Tennyson to avoid simplistic formulas. We can see this in the next passage, in which he associates the female figure with the power of nature:
let the wild
Lean-headed Eagles yelp alone.

Earlier, the shepherd’s song had identified the maid with a star and with the light of the sun. Now he links her with the formidable power of the eagles. The lines possess that peculiar Tennysonian quality of being preternaturally realistic and, at the same time, symbolic. The image also shows how the poet avoided the patronizing didacticism that marred an earlier juxtaposition of this image and theme. In “Rosalind,” Tennyson also used the eagle as a sign of female freedom but in a much more supercilious way:

Come down, come home, my Rosalind,
My gay young hawk, my Rosalind:
Too long you keep the upper skies;
Too long you roam and wheel at will;
But we must hood your random eyes,
That care not whom they kill.

When we have lured you from above,
And that delight of frolic flight, by day and night,
From North to South,
We’ll bind you fast in silken cords,
And kiss away the bitter words
From off your rosy mouth.

What saves the shepherd’s use of the wild bird image from this kind of saccharine conventionality is the unsentimental opposition between pastoral domesticity and the romantic sublime. No longer is the female figure a “young hawk” who “frolics” in “delight.” On the contrary, the maid is linked with eagles that are “wild” and “yelp alone” amid the height and cold. Hallam Tennyson’s description of the “waste heights” of the poem suggests the way the song is allied to the British tradition of sublime and frighteningly solitary descriptive poetry. “Come Down, O Maid” is not only a sexual contest, but a contest in poetic styles and genres. The stress on the sublime picturesque saves the melancholy love-lament from insipid sentimentality. The tension of opposites allows the poet to draw upon the conventions of pastoral melancholy without falling prey to them. As James Kincaid puts it: “The poem . . . revivifies
pastoral clichés. The new comedy, in fact works by asking that clichés be deliberately accepted as such. One of the ways that Tennyson does this in the song is through the confluence of sexual contest and stylistic contests. Through this conjunction, there is an ironic reversal in which the poet associates melancholy passivity with the male figure, and sublime heroism with the female figure. Melancholy passivity has often been associated with male figures in the traditional pastoral love-lament, but in the context of The Princess, it affords a startling thematic and stylistic reversal, nevertheless. Just as there are two sexual identities in the song, there are two kinds of landscape and two kinds of poetic language, and the poet is hesitant about designating the relative value of each term in these three paired relationships. There is a language of pastoral melancholy here, but also a language of sublime picturesque. The intertwining of the two transcends the conventions of both.

After the image of the eagles, the poet continues to explore the interrelation of melancholy passivity and sublime power through the representation of the natural scene:

and leave

The monstrous ledges there to slope, and spill
Their thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke.
That like a broken purpose waste in air:
So waste not thou. . . .

Hallam Tennyson’s comment is especially appropriate here in his contrast between the “waste Alpine heights and gorges and the sweet rich valleys below.” The contrast in this comment and in the song seems patently clear in its designation of relative value to the two landscapes, but in the song, that clarity is apparent rather than actual. Once again, there is an attractiveness to the landscape he is urging her to abandon. The adjective “monstrous” might seem pejorative, but again, it suggests the power of nature and the power of the female. The verbs “slope” and “spill” also connote powerful activity. “Dangling” could be understood as softening or diminishing the sense of active force described in the previous line, and the verb “waste” further strengthens the sense of a cessation of activity and the idea of dwindling power. When we think carefully, though, about the picture the speaker describes here, we realize it is not
The language of the shepherd’s song can be misleading. There is a manipulative quality to his song. His figurative association of maid and waterfall supposedly suggests her wasted life, but the figure turns back against itself. His attempt to transform the sublime power of the woman and her active sexual force into a picture of desolation and waste fails. Through his song, elemental forces of nature, such as sexuality, death, time, (all mysterious primitive energies that he paradoxically associates with the diminutive little “maid”) are defused and civilized. The shepherd’s pastoral art works against the primitive, natural world in which the female figure resides. In this lyric, the pastoral impulse describes not so much a withdrawal to the pastoral pleasance as a withdrawal from it. In
his study of Theocritus, Thomas Rosenmeyer says that the lyricism of Theocritean pastoral is “distributive,” “disengaged,” “cool.” The lyricism of the pastoral singer in “Come Down, O Maid” is different from this: it is engaged in seducing the maid, and instead of a cool detachment, the language offers, in W. David Shaw’s words, “pastoral warmth.” The shepherd’s song, far from promising a revitalization of the maid’s life, offers, in disguise, its diminishment. The pastoral of marital domesticity here displaces the promise of the retreat to nature. Apart from the context of The Princess, within the world of the lyric, this poem is ultimately a false pastoral of sentimental melancholy:

pillars of the hearth
Arise to thee; the children call, and I
Thy shepherd pipe, and sweet is every sound....

The shepherd’s pastoral song is, finally, an argument for marriage and domesticity. The argument is entirely appropriate in the context of the narrative. Ida will give up her scheme for a woman’s college apart from men and will marry the Prince. Many critics view this outcome as a victory of healthy love over proud isolation. Thus, Kissane comments: “the Prince and Princess, in taking possession of each other, and of their true selves, represent unity and wholeness.” One can, moreover, read this marital and sexual unity as a type for the larger unity Tennyson sought in the world and through his art. This is Pitt’s argument: “Marriage, then, the relationship between man and woman, was fast becoming Tennyson’s symbol of relationship with the world. It was his escape from isolation.” Finally, Culler sees the arc of relationship in The Princess and in this lyric as closely tied to Tennyson’s aesthetic development:

Princess Ida, then, though a figure in a fable about the education of women, is also a symbol of the development of Tennyson’s poetry. When he melted her heart and persuaded her to come down into the valley, marry, and have a child, he was essentially asking her to take up her abode in the English Idyl.

The lyric is more ambiguous than these comments would lead us to believe. Killham’s study has shown that Tennyson’s position on the “woman question” in The Princess is highly equivocal.
Numerous passages in the narrative suggest that female independence and power are ideas that need to be taken seriously. At the poem's close, moreover, it is far from certain that Ida has made the right choice. The poet suggests alternative possibilities for the future of female/male relationships. Such qualifications about the nature of female identity and the extent of female power are clearly evident within "Come Down, O Maid."

Tennyson qualifies the shepherd's image of domestic bliss and love in the valley in several ways: first, by the attractiveness of the representation of the alternative world in the mountain heights; second, by the sense of power the speaker associates with the maid as she resides in those heights; third, by the ambiguous nature of the envisioned pastoral domesticity at the close. The poem's closure is central to the lyric's meaning, because it involves an important transformation of the previous images and ideas. It is the shepherd's most specific representation of the world that he has offered to the maid throughout, but now he conveys it through positive statement rather than negative commands. The closure also involves a subtle shift from a direct address to the maid to a more seemingly neutral kind of description:

and sweet is every sound,
Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

The final two lines are justly famous. As Ricks observes, however, there is a "sense that such mellifluousness is too gratified, too limited, a skill."

The beauty of these lines should not distract us from the entire picture the shepherd's song creates. In this closure, the singer finally names himself a "shepherd," and that emphasizes the sense of artifice that surrounds the song. We begin to feel that the singer is not a shepherd at all, but one who is simply using a poetic convention; we recall that in the context of the narrative, it is Ida who reads this "sweet Idyl." Artifice has always been a part of the idyll form, but in "Come Down, O Maid" it is so extensive that it raises doubts about the nature of the singer's invitation to the maid. There is something not only artificial about
the shepherd’s invocation of the “pillars of the hearth,” but cloying in its domesticity as well. Once again, the shepherd’s language, his rhetorical elegance, belies his picture of domestic simplicity, signals the dangerous seductiveness of his song. The clause, “and sweet is every sound” follows “and I / Thy shepherd pipe.” The next line contains a variant of “sweet” and then, in a chiasmic reversal of the clause in the preceding line, “every sound is sweet.” The rhetorical artifice casts a shadow of falseness over this picture of domestic happiness and love: the sounds are too sweet. When compared to the earlier mountain heights and rolling torrent, the description seems insipid. Toward the closure of the song, the shepherd returns to earlier images but deprives them of their power (just as he wishes to deprive the maid of hers). In the mountain heights, there is a “torrent” and a “thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke.” The shepherd produces a diminutive double of this image in his domestic scene: “Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn.”

We feel a sense of diminishment in the shepherd’s voice as he turns from the mountain heights to the “pillars of the hearth” and the domestic “lawn.” One of the ironies of “Come Down, O Maid” is that the shepherd speaks as if the maid ought to be sad and lonely in her isolation, but the song actually becomes sad when he descends to the valley.

The poem opens with, “she found a small / Sweet Idyl, and once more, as low, she read,” and closes, “So she low-toned.” The frame reveals Ida’s implicit unhappiness with the shepherd’s view. On the one hand, her low voice does signal acquiescence: her realization that she “had failed / In sweet humility.” On the other hand, her “low-tone” is an imitation of the shepherd’s melancholy, especially of the lyric’s close, an imitation that reveals her desire to reject it. Ida unconsciously identifies with the maid on the mountain heights, with the eagles that “yelp alone,” with the torrential waterfall. This helps explain why the shepherd’s scene of pastoral domesticity is tinged with melancholy, a scene which ought to be joyful if pleasure really does lie in the valley. The melancholy also belongs to Ida; she is unhappy, perhaps without even being aware of it, about capitulating to the Prince. The final two lines evoke an aura of defeat. Tennyson’s use of vowel sounds, alliteration, labials, and assonance produces a closure of “sweet” rich sound, but
it is a closure that is attenuated. The voice of the shepherd moves from a lively lyricism to a tonal quality associated with elegy. The slow withdrawal of human presence from the scene qualifies the image of domestic happiness. In the earlier description of the mountain heights, the shepherd directed a monologue at the maid; both maid and shepherd were part of the scene. In the final lines of the song, this is no longer the case. After the words “I / Thy shepherd pipe,” there is a shift from human voice to sound. We could even say pure sound, without human voice. The shepherd’s voice withdraws. The phrase “Sweeter thy voice” signals the last moment in which the speaker and his subject meet. After this, the voice of the shepherd moves away from the maid, and the natural scene moves away from the voice of the shepherd. One feels a sense of distance between voice and scene, and the voice itself fades. The diminishing voice of the singer serves as a contrast to the more energetic “yelp” of the eagles, and also to the actively agile verbs associated with the maid early on in the song. The nouns at the close, “moan” and “murmuring,” are passive and tinged with sadness. As human presence withdraws, the description of nature becomes elegiac. One of the important ironies of “Come Down, O Maid” is that the loneliness and distance the shepherd explicitly ascribes to the maid in her splendid isolation are the very qualities that implicitly define the domestic pastoral scene in the valley at the poem’s closure.

Tennyson’s lyric “Come Down, O Maid” constitutes a paradigmatic moment in the history of the transformation of melancholy as a literary idea. We can best see this in a comparison with another crucial moment in this history—Keats’s “To Autumn.” The comparison tells us much about Tennyson’s relation to Keats, to tradition, and to certain developments in the poetry of melancholy.

There are other poems by Tennyson that are more deeply indebted to Keats. George Ford, in *Keats and the Victorians*, demonstrates the strong presence of Keatsian language, especially in the early work of Tennyson. Why, then, compare “Come Down, O
Maid,” a poem of Tennyson’s middle years, with “To Autumn”? Tennyson’s song constitutes one moment of culmination in the poet’s exploration of melancholy, the poet, and tradition. It is closely tied to “To Autumn,” a poem that represents a transitory ending moment in the melancholy tradition, but that also turns that tradition in a new direction. There are deep and strong affinities between the two poems.

“To Autumn” is Keats’s greatest evocation of the natural world of “process,” to use the term of Bate and Perkins, and humanity’s close kinship to this process.\footnote{51}

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o’er-brimmed their clammy cells.

Douglas Bush notes an echo of Theocritus’s \textit{Idyll} VII in the opening line.\footnote{52} There are numerous echoes of classical pastoral throughout: \textit{Idyll} VII is especially important, because it is a celebration of the abundance of nature, as is Keats’s “To Autumn.” While both “To Autumn” and \textit{Idyll} VII celebrate the harvest of autumnal abundance, there are as many differences as there are similarities between the two poems. In Keats’s opening stanza, the mood is subdued, the voice muted. In Theocritus, the tone is lively and even celebratory: the speaker and his friends are on their way to a thanksgiving festival in honor of Demeter. In terms of the development of melancholy pastoral, the differences between the two poems are significant. In Theocritus’s \textit{Idyll} VII, the figure of melancholy does not appear, but other goddesses associated with nature do. The way Theocritus structures the representation of nature, man, and gods is relevant to our understanding of melancholy in Keats’s poem. In \textit{Idyll} VII, the jaunty light-heartedness
of the human figures separates them from the potential sadness of the natural landscape:

I and Eucritus however, resuming our way to the homestead
Of Phrasidamus—and with us diminutive, pretty Amyntas—
Soon were outstretched at full length on deep couches of sweet-smelling rushes,
And were enjoying ourselves at our ease amid newly-cut vine leaves.53
(11.130–33)

The poet positions the human figures within the natural setting, but there is little sense of the Romantic subject/object relation. As Rosenmeyer says, the “paratactic naiveté sees to it that the lyricism, such as it is, does not turn private or ego-centered.”54 Rosenmeyer also suggests that Theocritan pastoral involves “perception of a world that is not continuous, but a series of discrete units.”55 We see in Idyll VII that the human figures are separate from the landscape; moreover, man and landscape are each separate from the gods:

Just such a drink as you goddesses mixed for us then at the picnic
Next to the altar of Deo the queen of the threshing floor? Let me
Also implant once again the great winnowing-shovel atop the
Pile as She smiles, holding poppies in one hand and sheaves in the other.56
(11.152–55)

Demeter is an allegorical figure here. While she does possess human attributes, there is a great distance and difference between her and the people who worship her, and between her and the natural world to which she stands as figure.

The structure between man, nature, and the gods is very different in “To Autumn.” There are no human figures to begin with, apart from the figure of the poet as conveyed by the poetic voice. The personifications of natural forces possess human attributes, but possess also the very real qualities of the natural world itself. The poetic voice (or human presence), the personified god and goddess figures, and the natural world, exist in a much closer and more ambiguous relation than in Idyll VII. The poet figures forth this intimacy right at the opening, with the poetic voice directly addressing the season. The speaker does not name Autumn in the
first stanza, but she is the figure addressed and is, therefore, brought onto almost the same level as the speaker. This levelling effect makes the goddesslike figure an almost human one as well. Autumn is one of the final goddess figures in Keats, and as with the others, Keats allies her in subtle ways to the figure of melancholy. These figures constitute a crucial point of transition from the personified Melancholy of the eighteenth century, such as the sentimental “goddess of the tearful eye” of Joseph Warton. The figure in Keats is something other than a personification of a state of mind. At the same time, Keats’s goddesses are not as completely separate from human concerns as the abstract and emblematic Demeter of Theocritus.

Keats naturalizes and incorporates the goddess figure within organic process, and the figure also becomes an aspect of the poet’s mind as he works with tradition and moves beyond it. In the second line of “To Autumn,” the phrase “Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun” suggests the season possesses one of the most human qualities of all: the ability to engage in friendship. The word “maturing” likewise endows the sun with a human quality. The poetic voice at the opening of “To Autumn” speaks to a female goddess figure who is also extremely human in her various qualities. This involves a different approach from that of Theocritus in Idyll VII. In Theocritus, the goddess of nature is a ritualistic emblem in the context of a social and public event—the harvest festival. In Keats’s poem, nature is the object of solitary communion with the poetic voice. These two differences (that Keats’s goddess is more human and more natural; that the poetic voice exists in a much closer relation to the goddess figure) help to account for the greater sense of melancholy in Keats’s poem, despite the fact that both he and Theocritus celebrate nature’s plenitude.

Keats allies the figure of Autumn, like the other female goddesses of power in his poems, to the idea of melancholy. His Autumn is a figure of melancholy in part because she is no longer part of a social ritual within a community (as in Idyll VII), no longer an aspect of rites that give a sense of continuity in the midst of change. The poem is a solitary act of homage to the season, not a communal festival; however, what Keats represents is not simply the season and natural process: he explores the end of a tradition. “To Autumn” is a poem of an emphatically austere closure. It is a poem
about endings. When compared with *Idyll* VII, it offers a curious reversal of sequence. In *Idyll* VII, the images of the bees and the wood-dove suggest subdued song; along with Lycidas’s lament, this moment achieves the idea of pastoral melancholy. The poet follows these images, however, with the lively picture of abundant harvest. Finally, the poem closes with the personified goddess of the harvest. “To Autumn” uses similar elements, but arranges them in a different way. Stanza one opens with the address to the season, and this address builds to a rich description of autumnal abundance. Then in the second stanza, the personified figure of Autumn goes through actions and gestures associated with the season. This is the closest the poem comes to the emblematic image of the goddess Deo at the end of *Idyll* VII. Stanza three contains the muted sights and sounds of the season. The stanza echoes in a special way these lines from Theocritus’s idyll:

Far off
Out of the thick-set brambles the tree-frog croaked in a whisper;
Linnets and larks were intoning their tunes, and the wood-dove made moan.
Busy and buzzing, the bees hovered over the musical waters.57
(11.138–41)

Virgil’s first *Eclogue* also contains lines that may have been in Keats’s mind when he wrote “To Autumn.” The wood-dove’s moan in both Theocritus and Virgil, however, is a soothing reassurance of the peace to be found in the pastoral retreat. In contrast, the quiet sounds that bring “To Autumn” to a close are intimations of mortality. “To Autumn” begins with the imagery of plenitude that ends *Idyll* VII, and it ends with the austere music that is just barely hinted at in middle passages of Theocritus’s poem.

Keats draws here upon the imagery of pastoral celebration, but shifts those images toward the melancholy found in pastoral elegy. In addition, Keats structures the poem so that the isolated poetic voice directly addresses the personified season. Through the device of personification, the poet makes the season into a female figure of power, one allied to the other powerful females in Keats’s work. As Kermode and Vendler argue in different ways, these female figures
are closely related, both to each other and to the idea of melancholy. We can view Autumn as the final transformation of the goddess Melancholy in Keats, and this signals a crucial shift in his conception of melancholy itself. "To Autumn" exemplifies the division that the figure of melancholy undergoes in Keats's work: one half of the figure is internalized into the poet's mind; the other half is reassimilated into the natural world of process. In terms of the former, the division involves not only the poetic voice addressing Autumn, but a dialogue of the mind with itself. Autumn/Melancholy is an aspect of the poet's mind. Bate says the theme of the first stanza is "ripeness, of growth now reaching its climax." True enough, and this ripeness is also the poet's sense of the culminating ripeness of his poetic powers and the power of literary tradition itself. The sense of fruitful abundance is troubling in its nearness to decay and death, and the imagery comes close to being a metaphor for the poet's fear of failure before the plenitude of tradition.

Here in stanza one, the pastoral impulse turns inward, and the pastoral scene works as an emblem for the melancholy of the poet who both admires the plenitude of experience embodied in tradition, and who suffers the consciousness of how fragile and transient is all human experience before the fact of death. Nature and tradition here reach a point of surfeit; only decay and death lie beyond it. In "To Autumn," the Keatsian pastoral moment is no longer the place where the poet goes to escape death; it is the place he comes to in order to face it. There is something stifling about the imagery in stanza one. Its fullness is burdensome. This burdensomeness parallels the poet's fear of the stifling of his own voice retrospectively before tradition, and proleptically before impending death. Keats's Autumn is a displaced figure of Melancholy, because autumn affords the perfect complex of images of ripeness perilously close to dissolution that defines the moment in his own poetics of melancholy. Rather than being an escape or a retreat, rather than being the place where the singer revives, the pastoral landscape is both the cause and the representation of the singer's burden. There is a fragile balance here, though, because Keats so closely associates Autumn with the landscape, that the allegorical personification recedes before the richly descriptive imagery of process in nature. Ultimately, the personified Autumn, who is also
the final form that Melancholy takes in Keats, becomes the poet in his relation to nature and to poetry. The allegorical goddess withdraws, to be replaced by the solitary figure within the landscape who confronts the potential cessation of all poetic sound. In the figural progression of the poem, personified Autumn disappears or dissolves into her voice or “song,” and then that, too, fades away.

Tennyson’s “Come Down, O Maid” continues Keats’s transformation of the idea of melancholy in poetic tradition. Like “To Autumn,” Tennyson’s song draws upon the pastoral of Theocritus and Virgil and the British traditions of pastoral and melancholy poetry. While Tennyson does not invoke the actual figure of Melancholy in the poem, the emotions and themes associated with the figure constitute an important subliminal presence. Just as Autumn is one of a series of female goddess figures associated with melancholy in Keats’s mind, Tennyson associates the personifications in “Come Down, O Maid” through the language and imagery that describe them with the poetry of melancholy.

We have already noted the Keatsian imagery in Tennyson’s poem, and the general critical recognition of Tennyson’s debt to Keats. The similarities, however, are not simply a matter of echoes in language and imagery. Both poems are meditations on the pastoral idea. Keats and Tennyson incorporate a strain of melancholy that underlies Theocritean pastoral within the epistemology of their poetic practice. The parallels and divergences in their use of pastoral melancholy are illuminating not only for what these tell us about the two poets: they show us how certain literary conventions are passed from one poet to the other. There are differences between the two poems, certainly. Tennyson’s lyric is, on the primary level, a love song; Keats’s ode is a descriptive nature poem (though to say that is to be very reductive).

By definition, a lyric gives voice to personal emotion, while an ode is a more public form of utterance. Even these differences, however, when looked at in terms of the two specific poems, yield
similarities. Tennyson himself describes “Come Down, O Maid” as a “sweet Idyl.” As the term suggests, the poem draws on the idyll form as created largely by Theocritus. It is a song, but held within a frame. Unlike the conventional lyric, the Theocritean idyll involves a certain distancing of emotion and a simultaneous recognition of levels of artifice involved in the lyric performance. This aspect of the poem moves Tennyson’s lyric closer to the more public, formal poetic forms, such as the ode. The Theocritean idyll, which lies behind “Come Down, O Maid,” is a public performance and not simply a private utterance of deeply personal emotion. On the other hand, Keats’s odes move that genre away from formal public verse, to verse that embodies the poet’s personal concerns; Keats further moves the ode away from public celebration to private introspection.

After Romanticism, Tennyson moves the short poem back toward a more public form. The Tennysonian idyll and the Keatsian ode are not as disparate generically as they at first appear; moreover, while “Come Down, O Maid” is a type of love song, it is one that locates its figures within a natural landscape that the speaker describes with care and in great detail. Like “To Autumn,” Tennyson’s song is a descriptive nature poem, of a sort. Furthermore, in both poems the landscape works as a symbolic field in which various aspects of the poet’s task interact, as it were. Finally, one of the most crucial areas of shared concern and shared conventions centers on the two poets’ use of personification. Personification, as Rosenmeyer notes, is almost wholly absent in Theocritean pastoral, but it is a standard feature of eighteenth-century pastoral and melancholy poetry. In stanza two of “To Autumn,” Keats creates a personified season without even resorting to the name itself.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Sparès the next swath and all its twined flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
If stanza one is largely tactile, stanza two is largely visual. Through a series of closely described visual details and scenes, the poet represents Autumn as a figure with human attributes and as a process within nature itself; however, this personified Autumn is subtly ambiguous. Unlike, say, Theocritus’s Demeter, Autumn is not an allegorical figure: Autumn is not an emblem for the season, but the season itself. The personified figure’s relation to the season is not one of correspondence between two different levels of meaning (i.e., allegorical figure with its abstract meaning/actual season in its concrete detail); rather, the poet actually constitutes the personification through these concrete details. Keats’s use of personification suggests human moods and attitudes: he conveys the figure’s humanness through such details as the word “careless” modifying “thee.” Such descriptive details shift the figure from allegory to realism, and from abstract concepts to the embodiment of human emotion. Another example is the phrase “Thy hair soft-lifted.” It is almost too delicate and too human an image to fit within the category of personification. In a similar manner, the ensuing visual scenes describe acts that are more human than allegorical. Autumn is sound asleep on a half-reaped furrow (the noontime rest is a standard pastoral trope). Autumn walks across a brook balancing her harvest-laden head. Finally, Autumn sits beside the cider press watching “with patient look.” When we paraphrase the stanza this way, it sounds almost comical. There is a reason for that. Keats is pushing the allegorical concept in the direction of human motivations and moods. In so doing, the poet is making the personified figure not only in the image of nature but in his own image. What happens to personification in “To Autumn” is the internalizing of the female figure of power and melancholy into the poet’s self. We observe the strong intimacy between the poetic voice and the figure the voice describes. In this way, the eighteenth-century philosophical allegory of nature is rehumanized. There are two aspects to this transformation. First, the personification is so realistically human, so endowed with the emotions and motivations we associate with people, that it is hard to see the figure of Autumn as an abstract
symbol. Second, in using the ode as a vehicle for personal lyric utterance, there is a strong sense of intimacy between voice and subject when the voice addresses Autumn.

In “To Autumn,” the act of personification is, for Keats, the confrontation with his muse and with the powerful and melancholy realization of the limits imposed on his poetic voice by time and nature. The poem is Keats’s reconciliation with Melancholy as his true muse. Ultimately, then, “To Autumn” traces a path, from the philosophical and moral allegories found in the eighteenth-century writers of pastoral, to the allegories of nature in Romanticism, which in turn become allegories of art. We locate the melancholy of “To Autumn” in the poet’s awareness of the limits to his art, and it is this type of melancholy that Tennyson and Hardy would continue to explore.

Personification and its relation to the melancholia of the poet assume a slightly different form and function in “Come Down, O Maid.” In the Keats ode, the figure of personification is also the silent figure addressed by the poetic voice. In Tennyson’s song, the shepherd does not address a personified figure, though the maid’s status hovers ambiguously between the figurative and the literal; however, the shepherd’s description of the landscape involves a series of personifications that he closely associates with the maid. Here follows the central passage:

For Love is of the valley, come thou down
And find him; by the happy threshold, he,
Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,
Or red with spirited purple in the vats,
Or foxlike in the vine; nor cares to walk
With Death and Morning on the silver horns.

There are four personified figures in the passage: Love, Plenty, Death, Morning. The central figure is Love. As figurative language and as idea, this personification serves as the mediating form between the shepherd and the maid. There is an element of duplicity in the shepherd’s use of personification. Love becomes a mask; the shepherd and his desire lie behind it. The function of personification in the lyric is thus very different from that of “To Autumn.” The voice in Keats’s poem discovers through the form of figurative
language his own fulfillment as a poet, as well as the cessation of this fulfillment. In "Come Down, O Maid," though, personification is not a discovering but a covering over of the shepherd's will before the maid whom he wishes to seduce. In one sense, Tennyson returns to a more traditional conception of personification, in which there is a fairly sharp distinction between the figure and the reality the figure represents. The figure of personified Love is a consciously manipulated symbol used for a specific purpose by the singer. This explains, in part, Love's lack of attributes: there is a lack here of the details that make Keats's Autumn so human.

The picture in the passage just quoted resembles stanza two of "To Autumn" in its broad outlines, but the specific function and effect of the language and imagery are different. Love walks "hand in hand with Plenty," just as Autumn conspires with his "close bosom-friend the sun." But Tennyson's figures stand out; they are disconnected from the scene. The speaker does not address the figures in a tone of intimacy, nor do their qualities merge with the external reality they are meant to represent. Rather, we get a sense of the arbitrary placement of the figures in the scene. This discontinuity, this emphasis on the separateness of voice and subject, and of figure and landscape, is very Theocritean; it is also an important departure from the Romantic fusion of subject and object. There is a symbolic structure to the passage: Love joins with Plenty on one side, and Death joins with the Morning on the other. Tennyson separates out aspects of life and nature that Keats joined together. In "To Autumn," the abundance of the harvest is bound up with time and death. The poem's formal structure, as Bate points out, is one of "stasis" and "process." In "Come Down, O Maid," on the other hand, the poet separates death and time (the latter signified by Morning) from birth and unity (Love) and from fruitful growth (Plenty).

The shepherd creates this miniature allegory. He chooses to place the aspects of mortality on the mountain heights, where the maid stands. In his song, he creates a false dichotomy between the powers of birth and growth, and the powers of decay and death. The falseness of this division (a falseness signalled by the very way he uses personification) reveals the duplicity inherent in the language of his song. Keats's complex union—of growth and decay,
birth and death, poetic sound and poetic silence—through a personified figure (in which figurative and literal language, and figurative and literal experience, merge) is replaced in Tennyson's poem by a sense of disunity. The poet produces this disharmony through the use of personification for the personal ends of the shepherd: Tennyson emphasizes the artifice of the literary figure as the singer uses it as part of his attempt to seduce the maid through language. If "To Autumn" is an allegory of nature humanized by personified Autumn as an image of the poet, "Come Down, O Maid" is an allegory of the dehumanization of a poet figure who is too self-consciously aware of the artifice of all language, and who then chooses to manipulate these artifices to further mystify others. The shepherd is a poet in bad faith.

The shepherd is Tennyson's image for a false kind of poet (an aspect of his own poetic self that he feared) who uses language to escape from reality into cliché rather than to enter fully into this reality in all its complexity—the latter being Keats's achievement in "To Autumn." At their deepest level, both of these works are allegories about the poet's task. That this task can involve types of seductive inauthenticity is figured in the closure of the shepherd's song:

and I
Thy shepherd pipe, and sweet is every sound,
Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Like "To Autumn," "Come Down, O Maid" ends with an emphasis on song and sound. There is an echo here of Virgil Eclogue I: *nee gemere aeria cessabit turtur ab ulmo* (Nor will the turtledove cease moaning in the high elm). Tennyson also alludes to Theocritus's seventh Idyll here; however, Tennyson's echoes of key texts in the pastoral tradition only serve to point out the extent to which the shepherd's song distorts and overturns the pastoral ideal. The plangent tones of this close contain the implication that the pastoral retreat to the "pillars of the hearth," where the singer hopes to lure the maid, cannot shelter anyone from time and
death. This fact was, of course, a principal cause of the vague melancholy in Theocritean and Virgilian pastoral, but the great irony here is that the shepherd is either unaware of or chooses to ignore the signification of his closure. When the shepherd sings, "I / Thy shepherd pipe," he means to welcome the maid to the valley. The gesture typifies one aspect of the pastoral tradition, but its meaning here is atypical. This moment should be the most celebratory, the happiest, in the song: the maid has come down to the valley, has passed the "threshold," and has become part of the community of love and "sweet" domesticity. The shepherd has attained his end. The structure of feeling and emotion at the close, however, seems somehow different from the promise he initially held out to her. It is ironic that when the shepherd finally turns from the negative exhortations to abandon the mountain wastes and heights, and actually describes this valley he has promised her, his song becomes less forceful, less sure of itself. The final three lines of the song represent a scene that qualifies in important ways the shepherd’s allegorical division of Love, Plenty / Death, Morning. The symbolically structured landscape held within it the hope that in the valley love and growth could escape time and death. The song’s close tells a different story:

Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

The power and energy of the waterfall cascading down the mountains have been tamed and domesticated into "rivulets" moving through the "lawn." As the waterfall was an image of the maid’s power and independence, this line inevitably constitutes a major diminution of her power. It also implies, however, the diminution in the shepherd’s power to deceive both her and himself about the nature of his pastoral song. There is an acknowledgement, however unwilling and unwitting, that the pastoral retreat he holds out to her does contain unpleasurable things such as death. The close brings forward through the language of his song the shepherd’s melancholy recognition of his own duplicity. An exemplary passage in the traditions of pastoral and melancholy poetry, it also reveals Tennyson’s internalization—and in this he goes further than Keats—of
such melancholy ideas as the poet’s self-conscious recognition of the limitations of his art.

The closing sounds in “Come Down, O Maid” image the shepherd’s diminishing powers of song. This is, of course, not the same thing as the power of the poem or of Tennyson, because the paradox here is that the lines of poetry representing this diminishment constitute a poetic achievement of great strength. The dove’s “moan” and the “murmuring” of the bees echo the now-subdued voice of the shepherd. At this moment, the song quietly descends toward stasis and death. Even the adjectives “immemorial” and “innumerable” contain within them the implication of their opposites: dwindling numbers and mortality. In the final lines, then, the shepherd discovers to the maid that the valley is a place not only of love but of melancholy. Love and melancholy meet here as they once did in an early poem of Tennyson’s:

speak low, and give up wholly
Thy spirit to mild-minded Melancholy;
This is the place. Through yonder poplar alley,
Below, the blue-green river windeth slowly,
   But in the middle of the somber valley,
The crisped waters whisper musically,
And all the haunted place is dark and holy.
The nightingale, with long and low preamble,
Warbled from yonder knoll of solemn larches

When in this valley first I told my love.

In this early sonnet (“Check Every Outflash, Every Ruder Sally”), Tennyson closely and somewhat unimaginatively follows the traditional topoi of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century melancholy poetry. There is the dark and secluded natural scene. The poet also suggests supernatural presences with the words “haunted place.” Along with the owl, the nightingale is one of the iconographic figures in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poem of melancholy. The most important example of the last is in “Il Penseroso”: “Sweet Bird that shunn’st the noise of folly, / Most musical, most melancholy.” We find the romantic response to this emblem of melancholy in Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” and, of course, in Keats’s ode. Most important of all here, is the personified figure
of Melancholy herself: “give up wholly / Thy spirit to mild-minded Melancholy.” The figure of personified Melancholy within this type of iconographic landscape constitutes a central aspect of the idea of melancholy in English poetic tradition. In addition to Milton’s “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” one later finds this complex of images in such representative eighteenth-century poets as Thomson, Thomas and Joseph Warton, and Gray.

Tennyson’s early sonnet shows us some of the ways the poet changed his handling of the theme of melancholy in a later meditation on the pastoral tradition. What transformations occur in the development from “Check Every Outflash” to “Come Down, O Maid”? The key change involves the shepherd’s conscious attempt to hide the melancholy nature of love in the valley. In the early sonnet, the connection between love and melancholy is clear, and it follows the tradition of love-melancholy going back to Burton. The shepherd’s song of seduction, on the other hand, involves the elision of the figure of melancholy from the landscape associated with love (i.e., the valley). Nevertheless, the figure comes back to haunt the scene at the close of the song. In “Check Every Outflash,” the personification of melancholy makes the idea a philosophical abstraction that exists apart from the voice of the poet or the landscape that the voice describes. In this respect, the treatment of melancholy is much like that of Thomson or the Warton brothers. On the other hand, in “Come Down, O Maid” what initially appears to be the abandonment of the idea entirely, turns out to be a highly significant transformation of it. In the poem’s closure, Tennyson naturalizes the figure of melancholy into the landscape; the moaning doves and buzzing bees are conventions of classical pastoral melancholy. But at the same time, Tennyson internalizes the figure of melancholy into the singer’s voice. The “moan” and “murmuring” are signs of the singer’s melancholy awareness of the diminishment, the fading, of his song. In other words, Tennyson does not really elide the personification of Melancholy but merely displaces it onto the voice of the poet, and, finally, onto the poet’s consciousness of his work. There is one more aspect to this transformation. In the traditional poem of melancholy, the speaker directly addresses the personified figure. In Tennyson’s song, the shepherd does not address a personification but an actual female
figure, and one does not associate this person with the iconographic landscape of melancholy, but with the sublime and picturesque landscape that connotes power and freedom. He transfers the idea of melancholy from the female figure to the male poet figure. His pastoral landscape at the end closely follows the iconography of the melancholy tradition. The shepherd's song tries to elude melancholy, just as it tries to avoid time and death, but all three forces return at the poem's closure. The form the language takes at the end suggests the inevitability of the very idea that the singer wished to evade; the somber tones of the shepherd's melancholy in the last three lines of the poem are the result of a literary idea's returning in spite of itself.

There is a sense of return here. In Keats and Tennyson, the conventions of melancholy become associated with and even become the images for the poet figure's troubling sense of the limitations of his voice when confronted by mortality and by the daunting heritage of literary history itself. "Come Down, O Maid" is not simply a sentimental love lyric; it is one of Tennyson's more somber meditations on how a poet can go astray or be false to his art through the conscious manipulation of traditional figures, tropes, and genre conventions. Tennyson's sense of the artifice of these conventions enables him to explore certain themes and emotions in new ways, and to explore the nature of his own poetics.