

***Divining Desire: Tennyson and the Poetics of Transcendence*, by James W. Hood. Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate, 2000.**

“One of the best reasons for dubbing Tennyson the representative man of Victoria’s England may be that his *My Secret Life* can never be written” (2); as Hood goes on to explain, this is because any juicy private papers or diaries were censored or destroyed, so his private erotic history can never be known. Nor did Tennyson make public any theories of poetics. The point of this study is that it “negotiates these twin Tennysonian silences” (3)—silences on erotics and on poetics; that is, his lack of erotic discourse, and his silence on poetry and art. Both of these strands, so elusive in the life, can nevertheless be found interwoven throughout the poetry, and Hood aims to foreground them in new ways, for naturally both subjects have been amply pursued in Tennysonian criticism over the last few decades.

“Over and over, Tennyson engages art and eros in textual intercourse; unknitting the vexing crux born of this union reveals fundamental features of the landscape of Victorian desire” (4). This sentence—jauntily mixing metaphors by the horns—gives the flavour of Hood’s style. He has interesting and sensible things to say about Tennyson, but he sometimes strains a little too much after jokey effects. He has a habit of interlarding his prose with submerged half-quotes from other poets, from Keats to Dylan Thomas (as here): “His characters continually engage in erotically-charged quests . . . believing in love . . . as the force that drives their broken selves through the green fuse of wholeness” (9). Or, writing of Elaine in the *Idylls*: “Tennyson carefully describes the perpetual season of her discontented fantasizing” (178). This mannerism can distract rather than instruct the reader.

On the positive side Hood rightly stresses the importance for Tennyson’s poetry of its nineteenth-century Christian cultural context, arguing that he was as much a product of a post-Enlightenment Christian culture as of a Romantic one. At the same time he admits the justice of Robert Polhemus’s argument (in another context) for giving due weight to the shift in Victorian culture away from the belief in the transforming power of God’s love toward faith in the transforming power of human erotic love. For Hood the Tennysonian “voice of desire” expresses “a longing for wholeness, meaning, truth, and transcendence” (5), and his book “aims to delineate the features of the Tennysonian search to transcend the limitations of mortality, mutability, and uncertainty.” One might take issue with this reading of Tennyson’s poetry in the light of Christopher Ricks’s persuasive argument (in his 1972 study) that Tennyson’s love of the “penultimate moment,” the moment just before commitment, before certainty, before fixity, offers the key to his psyche as expressed in his art. Certainly Tennyson seems to me to prefer fully to inhabit mutability and uncertainty, to shrink from finality, in all of his finest poems. But it seems that Hood means to argue that in so inhabiting these areas of flux, through his art Tennyson achieves transcendence, claiming that though his characters never achieve it, the poems as artefacts do. “He knows the fixity to be a fiction” (191). This itself is an argument that appears to put his man right back on the Romantic side of the fence, yet Hood sidesteps cleverly to connect him to the medieval mystic tradition whereby ecstatic union with the divine

links spirituality and eroticism. He then proceeds to work through the implications of a tricky double entendre in "divine," arguing on the one hand that the poems attempt to perfect desire in divine fashion, and on the other, that they try to "divine" the nature of desire itself.

His discussion of *Maud* is crucial in his argument, as it is a poem which has always divided critics. Hood deals with the vexed question of Maud's (the character's) insubstantiality by an ingenious deployment of this argument about the divine. Desire must always be "divined" (made divine, and therefore unearthly) for eros to retain its transcendent power: it would destroy eros if desire were to achieve bodily satisfaction. This is not so far, surely, from the Lacanian view of desire as a lack that must always remain so in order for desire to be sustained. The element of woman-worship in Tennyson's poetry implied by Hood's argument is certainly there: the tendency is always to imbue the desire for the feminine with something reverential. Yet I feel Hood goes too far in aligning Tennyson's treatment of women with Ruskin's in that pre-eminently silly essay, "Of Queens' Gardens," which constantly seeks to blame women for all of men's transgressions, particularly of the code of honour. Whatever else he might be, Tennyson is not a blamer. On the other hand I do find Hood's view of the famously controversial ending of *Maud* (where the hero goes off, after Maud's death and his own recovery from madness, to fight in the Crimean war) refreshing and convincing. "What makes readers uncomfortable about the ending of *Maud* . . . is not that Tennyson becomes too bellicose or that the ending is wrong artistically, but rather that the end of the poem is too right psychologically" (151). As he goes on to say, war provides the ultimate sublimatory vehicle for masculine sexual aggression. But in putting this case, the argument about divine transcendence sinks rather out of sight.

Many of the details of Hood's readings of individual poems are illuminating and insightful, but for this reader at least, the argument about "divining the divine" never really gets off the ground. To end up with the claim that "The poems yearn for, but never find, the absolutely secure port they always seek" (191) does not seem to me to have brought us any distance beyond Ricks's *aperçu* about the poet's obsession with the penultimate moment. But Hood immediately follows up with what, for him, is an aside to his thesis, yet for me carries the mark of what is more valuable in his book: "Tennyson's poetry fell from critical grace in part because the pathos of yearning went out of style." This remark is typical of Hood's ability to chart a very knowledgeable path through the thickets of Tennysonian criticism from his own time to the present day.

Virginia Blain
