

## Tennyson: Mood and Myth

SIMON S. PETCH

The Symbolist critical tradition has established Tennyson so firmly in literary history as a "poet of mood" that the phrase has become an uncritical orthodoxy. Radically unhelpful in itself, and reaching back as it does to the early reviews of Tennyson's work by Arthur Hallam and John Stuart Mill, it has paved the way for those such as F. R. Leavis, who see many of Tennyson's poems as a kind of unhealthy indulgence, as well as for those such as Harold Nicolson who see Tennyson's poetry as a literary substitute for valium, and who read it in a kind of "sad mechanic exercise,/Like dull narcotics". Tennyson's poems are undeniably at their most characteristic when they concern themselves with states of consciousness. But it is part of Tennyson's distinction that he was capable of fashioning these states into structures of more than purely subjective reference, that he made persistent efforts to develop his poetic moods into a social philosophy. He did this primarily through his use of myth.

Writing of Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot said of myth: "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."<sup>1</sup> This is worth quoting with reference to Tennyson because Eliot's words can, with very little modification, be applied to Tennyson's use of myth. In Tennyson's case, however, the impetus is more subjective than Eliot's comment suggests, for Tennyson used myth to control, order and shape his own feelings; but his attempts to use myth as a web into which his feelings could be woven led him to evolve, out of the very depths of his subjective experience, images of enormously and increasingly suggestive social significance.

Myth always attracted Tennyson, and it will be useful to examine initially what might be termed the mythologizing impulse in his poetic personality. "Tears, Idle Tears", a poem that may not seem to have much to do with myth, is certainly a poem that enables us to see why the label "poet of mood" has stuck. Representative in mood and technique of much that is finest in the poet's work, this lyrical celebration of the continuing reality of

1 T. S. Eliot, "Myth and Literary Classicism," *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds and Modern Literature*, ed. R. Ellman and C. Feidelson, New York 1965, p. 681. Originally entitled "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" the piece was first published in *The Dial*, cxxv (1923).

the past is one of Tennyson's best-known poems. His own comments explain both the poem's mood and its technique. "It was written at Tintern when the woods were all yellowing with autumn seen through the ruined windows. 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." He also said that the woe described in the poem was not real woe: "it was rather the yearning that young people occasionally experience for that which seems to have passed away from them for ever."<sup>2</sup>

Tennyson is here attempting to generalize an experience of whose acutely personal nature there can be no doubt, for Arthur Hallam was buried near Tintern. Tennyson makes every possible effort, both in the poem and in what he says about it, to ensure that the experience is not too specifically personal, or even too specific; and this very lack of the specific has resulted in some harsh critical knuckle-rapping. Leavis, for example, reproves Tennyson for vagueness and lack of particularity, but Leavis unfortunately weakens his case by misquoting the poem. By substituting "fades" for "grows" in his comments on the third stanza,<sup>3</sup> Leavis is effectively replacing a word with its exact opposite; in doing that he is destroying the interplay of life and death on which the stanza's meaning depends, and which affords a degree of complexity that Leavis cannot allow. To point this out is not to gloat pedantically over Leavis, or to offer an indictment of the general excellence of his essay. It is rather to suggest that his somewhat careless glance at Tennyson's poem has caused him to ignore what its author was trying to do, and Leavis's uneasiness with the poem (he says there is "nothing gross" about it yet he clearly dislikes its "uniform emotional fluid") supports this suggestion.

To say that the poem's vagueness *is* its point is to create a circular argument that gets nobody anywhere, so perhaps it is

- 2 Tennyson's comments, recorded by James Knowles and Frederick Locker-Lampson, are reprinted in part, with full reference to sources, by Christopher Ricks in his notes to the poem on pp. 784-5 of the Longmans Annotated Edition, *Poems of Tennyson*, London 1969. All quotations of the poetry are from this edition, hereafter referred to as *Poems*.
- 3 See Leavis' essay, "'Thought' and Emotional Quality," *Scrutiny*, xiii (1945-6), p. 59. The misquotation survives thirty years later in *The Living Principle*, London 1975, p. 79.

better to let Tennyson speak for himself. On the question of possible differing interpretations of his poetry, he said: "I hate to be tied down to say, 'This means *that*,' because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation." Attempts to interpret too specifically are necessarily limiting, because "Poetry is like shot-silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet."<sup>4</sup> The specifics and particularities of the reader's experience are needed to place the poem and to illuminate it. Failure to appreciate this is perhaps what has led F. W. Bateson and Christopher Ricks to point to a "schizophrenic" split in the poem. They interpret Tennyson as trying to bridge the gap between a personal and a public past, between "the subjective past of the poet's and reader's earlier life" and "the objective past of kings and monasteries."<sup>5</sup> The problem with this argument is that while Tennyson's intense feeling for his personal past does become more than *just* a private experience, the objective past in any historical sense never enters the poem at all. The poem moves in the indirection of myth rather than in the direction of any historical past, because in being given such a form that it transcends the particular feeling of loss and regret at Hallam's death (an event which is never mentioned in the poem) the personal past is effectively mythologized. While it does not refer in any sense to a mythical narrative or legend, the poem approximates to myth in the sense in which the word is defined by Roland Barthes: "Myth is a pure ideographic system, where the forms are still motivated by the concept which they represent while not yet, by a long way, covering the sum of its possibilities for representation."<sup>6</sup> The metaphorical form in which the poem is cast at once gives Tennyson's feelings a wide frame of reference to which the reader brings his own experience, and prevents us from locating the past of which he speaks in any particular historical context.

The metaphors, the precisely visualized vignettes that make up each stanza, dramatize a complicated dual interaction of life and

4 Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, one-volume edition, London 1899, p. 524; hereafter referred to as *Memoir*.

5 F. W. Bateson, "Romantic Schizophrenia: Tennyson's 'Tears, Idle Tears,'" *English Poetry. A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn, London 1966, p. 159; and C. Ricks, *Tennyson*, New York 1972, p. 200.

6 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, St Albans 1973, p. 127. The book was first published in French in 1957.

death, and of past and present. Independent of any specific personal past, they are equally independent of any objective historical past. The situations depicted have thus a general application which endows them with the timeless quality of myth and dream; and the "underworld" of the second stanza may refer simultaneously to a mythical underworld of the dead and to the subconscious recesses of the human memory. The days that are no more cannot be located in time. The poem's gentle movement away from the particular and the specific is illustrated by the way in which the personal pronoun "I" of the first stanza is replaced by the plural "we" of the second. Both then disappear; and the experience is generalized most completely through the increasing absence of personal pronouns, possessives, and even articles:

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 poem succeeds, not because it bridges the gap between a subjective and an objective past, which it never sets out to do, but because it raises Tennyson's own sense of the past to the level of general human experience represented by myth. His personal experience is as finely controlled and modified in this poem as in those of his poems which make direct use of mythical legend.

In "Tears, Idle Tears" the expression of a private, personal emotion has become public, general statement. There may be a sense in which this is true of all post-Romantic literature, but it is especially significant in Tennyson's case for two reasons: first, because the tension between public and private is the major theme of his life as well as of his work;<sup>7</sup> and second, because the tension is rarely resolved in the poetry except in terms of myth. Certainly, Tennyson never solved the problem of where he stood in relation to Victorian England, a problem which was an essential part of his life well before he became Poet Laureate. The country

7 The standard biographies, Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* and Charles Tennyson's *Alfred Tennyson*, London 1949, fail to analyse this conflict with sufficient penetration. Ricks, making use of previously unpublished material, is far more interesting than either. New biographies are currently being prepared by Robert B. Martin and Philip Henderson. On the vexed question of public and private in Tennyson's poetry, see also: P. F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After*, Chapel Hill 1948; J. H. Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet*, Cambridge Mass. 1960; and E. D. H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, Princeton 1952.

## SYDNEY STUDIES

boy from Lincolnshire who could not bring himself to honour the custom of reciting his prize poem before the Senate at Cambridge in 1829 gives us the clue both to the middle-aged hypochondriac who hesitated ponderously before accepting the Laureateship in 1850, and to the old man who dithered for almost twenty years before finally accepting a barony in 1883, and hence becoming (for only the last nine years of his long life) the mythical public figure of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The public bard who was mobbed at Dickens's funeral in 1870 had felt obliged, from 1853, to live on the Isle of Wight. The amusing stories of Tennyson pretending to be his own gardener and directing would-be visitors on endless chases after an imaginary Laureate also reveal a concern with privacy that became almost pathological, as Tennyson's growing fame caused him hysterically to denounce any critic who believed he had found a clue to the poet's life in his work. And of course that most celebrated public poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," is less a glorification of British Imperial heroism than it is an expression of the wish to die — that dark obsession running through Tennyson's poetry as strongly as what he called the black blood of the Tennysons flowed in his veins.

Myth was a perfect form of disguise. It was a way, for Tennyson, of cloaking the private with the public, of expressing the conflicting demands of individual desires and social duties, and of giving voice to the dilemma of withdrawal from or involvement in the life going on around him. More positively, it enabled him to place these personal concerns in a context whose implications were universal and whose reverberations were timeless. Self and society are continually at odds in Tennyson's poetry, but his awareness of this conflict was never so acute as in the years following Hallam's death in 1833, the years when Tennyson worked on his mythical poems. Any reconciliation of public and private therefore represented a considerable triumph to him, and myth unites the personal and the social as they are united nowhere else in Tennyson's work. Raising the social above the merely topical, the poet projects his personal preoccupations into a context of general awareness, thereby universalizing, enriching, and making accessible his subjective emotion.

The tensions remain, however, and they focus on the questions Tennyson was continually asking himself about his own social responsibilities. Tennyson may imply disapproval of the lotoseaters' refusal to return to their responsibilities, but the richly sensuous texture of the verse leaves no doubt that the poet (who

would later find his own island home) sympathizes with their plight:

Eating the Lotos day by day,  
To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,  
And tender curving lines of creamy spray;  
To lend our hearts and spirits wholly  
To the influence of mild-minded melancholy . . .

The repeated detail of the "downward smoke" emphasizes the island's unnaturalness, and the absence of the "Courage!" of the opening line is obvious enough; but the repeated "Let us alone" in the Choric Song suggests the appeal of the escape symbolized by the drug.

Similarly, Tennyson surely intends Ulysses as noble, and yet the apparently assertive statements of the poem are undercut by the wheeling rhythm, by Ulysses' obstinate refusal even to use the simple future tense,<sup>8</sup> and by the curiously halting syntax. The frequency with which Tennyson places an active or transitive verb at the end of a line is quite extraordinary; it ensures that the reader experiences a momentary hesitation in getting to the object of the verb, so that by the end of the poem we know instinctively that Ulysses will never get to his destination. The poem's finest line, "Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy," evokes a sense of what is irrevocably lost, and the journey is a journey to the past, to "see the great Achilles, whom we knew." In any case, there is a kind of hopelessness about it all:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.

The horizon is always the horizon: you can't get there from here. As Ulysses introduces his son Telemachus, to whom he is handing over his social duties, the terms he uses are either too vague to carry much weight ("useful," "good," "decent," "prudent") or somewhat negative: "blameless," "decent *not* to fail." And notwithstanding all the talk at the end of the poem about striving, seeking, and finding, the poem ends with a stressed negative, "*not* to yield."

In neither of these poems can the paradoxical elements be resolved. They have to be allowed to stand as expressions of the conflict they embody, for there is no ready solution to the seductive lure of the days that are no more. Yet "Tithonus," substantially of the same period and riven as it is with similar contradictions, does suggest that Tennyson was fighting towards

8 As Ricks has pointed out (*Tennyson*, p. 125).

## SYDNEY STUDIES

a solution that would fulfil his ideal conception of himself as a poet, a poet working within an encompassing social philosophy as a functioning member of society. In this poem, again, personal past and mythical past naturally and easily suggest each other, and again the memory of Arthur Hallam pervades the poem. Amid the empty silence surrounding Tithonus in the "ever-silent spaces of the East," such sounds as he does refer to stand out with vibrant clarity, and echo through the delicate cadences of the poem's decomposing language. Remembering his past in a passage which most potently suggests the truly erotic nature of his relationship with Aurora as it used to be, Tithonus can only compare her wild and sweet murmurings to the song of Apollo when Troy was built:

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart  
In days far-off, and with what other eyes  
I used to watch — if I be he that watched —  
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw  
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;  
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood  
Glow with the glow that slowly crimsoned all  
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,  
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm  
With kisses balmier than half-opening buds  
Of April, and could hear the lips that kissed  
Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,  
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,  
While Ilium like a mist rose into towers.

The various sense-impressions are focused and crystallized on the rising citadel of Troy. The comparison does illustrate the creative power of a human relationship, and in this context the phallic connotations of the image are, to a post-Freudian age, almost too obvious. But in speaking of something acutely personal Tithonus chooses a simile which suggests the artist in the process of building a civilization.

The city of Troy built to the music of Apollo is here used by Tennyson to fortify his own sense of the past. Indeed, the image rose as naturally from the depths of his sensibility as Troy rose to the music of Apollo, and no image exerted a more potent hold over his imagination. The first poem to bring him public recognition, "Timbuctoo" (which won the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge), is not so much about the city of Timbuctoo as about mythology in general; but Tennyson also mentions other mythical cities of the human memory:

Divinest Atalantis, whom the waves  
Have buried deep, and thou of later name

Imperial Eldorado roofed with gold:  
 Shadows to which, despite all shocks of Change,  
 All on-set of capricious Accident,  
 Men clung with yearning Hope which would not die.

Legendary rather than historical, Timbuctoo shares the mythical qualities of Atlantis and Eldorado, places which may never have existed in reality yet which endure for ever within the human mind.

Camelot is another such place. In "Gareth and Lynette," when Gareth arrives at Camelot, Merlin tells him

"For an ye heard a music, like enow  
 They are building still, seeing the city is built  
 To music, therefore never built at all,  
 And therefore built for ever."

Because of its mythical qualities, Camelot is simultaneously never built at all, yet built for ever — by the Muses, according to Tennyson's own note. The symbolic importance of such places to Tennyson was enduring, from the undergraduate who wrote of Timbuctoo to the Laureate who wrote of Camelot; and the cities of Troy and Thebes as types of the city built to music serve as the background for many of Tennyson's classical poems. The image grew from his personal experience. It came to stand for the days that are no more, which are ever-present but can never be recreated, and it developed into a symbol of all that Tennyson valued most. Furthermore, the extent to which the value of the image was associated with Tennyson's personal past is suggested by a fragment:

Here often, when a child, I lay reclined,  
 I took delight in this locality.  
 Here stood the infant Iliion of the mind,  
 And here the Grecian ships did seem to be.

The second stanza of the poem in the Trinity manuscript makes the mythological significance of the past more explicit:

Yet tho' perchance no tract of earth have more  
 Unlikeness to the fair Ionian plain,  
 I love the place that I have loved before.<sup>9</sup>

Personal past suggests the aura of a mythical past, and they blend in the image of the city built to the music of Apollo. The significance of this image to Tennyson is thus similar to that of the "passion of the past" he mentioned in connection with "Tears, Idle Tears." It came to mean all sorts of things to him: a uni-

9 Notebook 17, quoted by permission of the Trustees of the manuscripts and the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.



## SYDNEY STUDIES

versal ideal in a social form; a symbol of imaginative creativity; evidence that art can be socially useful; and even the proof that art is the creative impulse from which society is born. Personal ideal and transcendent symbol, the city built to music is the focal point for Tennyson's exploration of the relationship between individual desire and social responsibility. That relationship was the general context in which he needed to consider his function as a poet—and later, as *the* Poet—of nineteenth-century England.

In many of the classical poems on which Tennyson worked during the years following Hallam's death, the period known as the Ten Years' Silence, the presence of either Troy or Thebes<sup>10</sup> is used symbolically to corroborate the relationship of personal and social, and to point the far-reaching implications of personal actions and decisions. "Oenone," for example, is pervaded with a consciousness of the impending fall of Troy, an event which occurs as a direct result of the choice amongst the three goddesses Paris makes in the poem; for Aphrodite is offering him Helen, wife of Menelaus, whose abduction by Paris precipitated the Trojan war. A similar situation is the backbone of *Idylls of the King*, where Lancelot's illicit love for Guinevere has consequences identical to those following Paris's choice: the sensual undermining of the spiritual ideal of a city built to music.

The background of the fall of Troy remains constant throughout the many revisions of "Oenone." It is wholly characteristic of Tennyson that he should present intimations of a major social disaster from the viewpoint of an individual who is powerless to do anything about it, an innocent bystander whose personal tragedy is only part of a larger tragedy; but while Oenone's life-weariness may well be both a projection of Tennyson's temperamental melancholy and a dramatization of his lifelong political pessimism, the symbolic aura of the city of Troy extends Oenone's emotions into a broader social context. The sensuously erotic opening paragraph foreshadows the poem's major thematic implications as the description moves panoramically from the valley, to the sea, to the mountain and leads up to "Troas and Ilion's columned citadel,/The crown of Troas." The visual climax of the poem's opening is thus, appropriately, the poem's climactic symbol.

10 Thebes was built to the music of Amphion's lyre; see "Amphion," *Poems*, p. 685. The motif of the city built to music also appears in "Ilion, Ilion," *Poems*, p. 258.

Oenone then promises to

“build up all  
My sorrow with my song, as yonder walls  
Rose slowly to a music slowly breathed,  
A cloud that gathered shape.”

The simile, comparing as it does artistic creation with the building of a city to music, implies a relationship between aesthetic purpose and social ideal—a relationship which Tennyson himself always longed to fulfil. The poem ends with a premonition of the consequences of Paris's choice, as the final ominous prophecy looks ahead to the fall of Troy:

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

The greatest weakness of the poem, the embarrassingly Victorian Pallas Athene, suggests just how socially “relevant” Tennyson is trying to be. Her offer of “self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control” leading to “endurance” and “full-grown will” is a clear reflection of the Calvinistic streak in much Victorian thought. And perhaps it is hardly to be wondered at that Aphrodite's offer of “the fairest and most loving wife in Greece” is the offer Paris cannot refuse. Nevertheless his abandonment of himself to Aphrodite is at once the desertion of his own wife, the betrayal of the ideals represented by Pallas, and also the first rift in the foundations of Troy.

The socially didactic intention of “Tiresias” is equally marked. This poem was substantially written in 1833, but not until fifty years later did Tennyson publish it. At the time he was revising it for publication, his wife wrote to Edward Lear of the poem that her husband “has come to think that the world will receive lessons thus when it discards them in modern garb.”<sup>11</sup> The “les-son” is the danger of political anarchy:

I can hear  
Too plainly what full tides of onset sap  
Our seven high gates, and what a weight of war  
Rides on those ringing axles! jingle of bits,  
Shouts, arrows, tramp of the hornfooted horse

11 James O. Hoge (ed.), *The Letters of Emily Lady Tennyson*, London 1974, p. 327; hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

## SYDNEY STUDIES

That grind the glebe to powder! Stony showers  
Of that ear-stunning hail of Arês crash  
Along the sounding walls. Above, below,  
Shock after shock, the song-built towers and gates  
Reel, bruised and butted with the shuddering  
War-thunder of iron rams . . .

The remedy is self-sacrifice, as Tiresias tells Menœceus:

My son,  
No sound is breathed so potent to coerce,  
And to conciliate, as their names who dare  
For that sweet mother land which gave them birth  
Nobly to do, nobly to die. Their names,  
Graven on memorial columns, are a song  
Heard in the future; few, but more than wall  
And rampart, their examples reach a hand  
Far through all years, and everywhere they meet  
And kindle generous purpose, and the strength  
To mould it into action pure as theirs.

The related images of edifice and music recur throughout the poem. "No stone is fitted in yon marble girth," says Tiresias, "Whose echo shall not tongue thy glorious doom"; and of course Menœceus takes the obvious hint, with the result that Thebes remains intact.

The concept of social duty is strongly voiced in both "Oenone" and "Tiresias." The need for a sense of duty and an awareness of the fundamentally social nature of individual responsibility were always in Tennyson's mind, and they strengthened as his political pessimism deepened with age. Tennyson would surely have wished that his own word could save society from the anarchy he feared as Tiresias's had saved Thebes, but his own directly political pronouncements always had too much sabre-rattling about them to be effective. His upbringing under the shadow of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars probably fostered his political conservatism, but we must also remember that in later life Tennyson really did believe that things were breaking up. "You must not be surprised at anything that comes to pass in the next fifty years," he told his son in 1887. "All ages are ages of transition, but this is an awful moment of transition."<sup>12</sup> And indeed Tennyson's fears of impending disaster were so great that he probably would not have been surprised at what did actually happen between 1887 and 1937. Generally he distrusted politics, and his fears were inspired more by an uneasy awareness of change within the fabric of society than by specific-

12 *Memoir*, pp. 700-701.

ally political developments. Growing materialism was what he deplored most; and he spoke of the need for the individual to combat "the cynical indifference, the intellectual selfishness, the sloth of will, the utilitarian materialism of a transition age."<sup>13</sup>

His social philosophy focused on the individual consciousness rather than on political events, and his strongest attack on materialism is launched in another poem which draws on classical literature, "Lucretius," written (significantly) while Tennyson was in the midst of *Idylls of the King*. Lucretius' philosophic materialism is presented through Tennyson's exploration of Lucretius' subconscious mind, as the philosopher, under the influence of a love-potion, dreams of anarchic sensuality

"I saw the flaring atom-streams  
And torrents of her myriad universe,  
Ruining alone the illimitable inane,  
Fly on to clash together again, and make  
Another and another frame of things  
For ever."

He dreams of a process which ever continues, but which can never come to fulfilment. His third and climactic dream is the ultimate comment on his philosophy; and what he sees here is the destruction of Troy:

"Then, then, from utter gloom stood out the breasts,  
The breasts of Helen, and hoveringly a sword  
Now over and now under, now direct,  
Pointed itself to pierce, but sank down shamed  
At all that beauty; and as I stared, a fire,  
The fire that left a roofless Iliion,  
Shot out of them, and scorched me that I woke."

The sword pointed at Helen's breasts recalls Paris's choice of the sensual enjoyment offered him by Aphrodite in "Oenone"; and it also represents the consequences of that choice, the social strife and civic destruction of the Trojan war. Process without purpose, sensual enslavement, mindless materialism, the destruction of Troy are all fused in the poet's imagination.

As Lucretius says,

"some unseen monster lays  
His vast and filthy hands upon my will  
Wrenching it backward into his."

Similarly in "Merlin and Vivien," one of the earliest of Tennyson's Arthurian series to be completed, the poet dramatizes the sym-

13 *Memoir*, p. 525.

## SYDNEY STUDIES

bolic overthrow of Merlin's will,<sup>14</sup> and from that moment Camelot is doomed. As Arthur's ideal order reels back into the beast, what happens to the mind of Lucretius happens to an entire civilization, and the representative sin of one man leads to the destruction of an entire society.

*Idylls of the King* spans Tennyson's career, and the poem centres upon the poet's major symbolic image. Classically traditional though it is, the city built to music does have its imaginative foundations in the poet's own emotional life as an objectification of his beloved "passion of the past." Troy, Thebes and Camelot are all used symbolically in the exploration of relationships between self and society, and the genesis of that exploration is a radiation of the poet's personal concerns and emotions. Mood is extended into myth in such a way as to vindicate Emily Tennyson's wonderfully direct response to a reviewer: "He is too human to be merely a subjective poet."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Tennyson's brilliant dialect poem "Northern Farmer, New Style" is ample proof of his capacity to write directly and colloquially about the effects of the encroaching materialism he so detested. For the most part, however, his social concerns emerge in the poetry by his placing a symbolic utopia in a context of catastrophe, and then engaging a speaker in a meditation so that the reader's attention is focused primarily on a certain type of consciousness. Standing boldly behind everything is a universal ideal which is relevant to both the individual and society, as well as to the artist. Above all, Tennyson wanted to feel useful; and he must have been heartened by the words of his friend Thomas Carlyle who wrote, in *Sartor Resartus*: "Not only was Thebes built by the music of an Orpheus; but without the music of some inspired Orpheus was no city ever built, no work that man glories in ever done."

14 See Tennyson's main source, the Vulgate *Merlin* (throughout which the word *will* is used constantly), reprinted in Ricks's headnote to the poem, *Poems*, pp. 1594-5.

15 *Letters*, p. 76.