Given Charles Kingsley’s dissatisfaction with the eclecticism of much post-Romantic poetry, it is remarkable that he regarded *The Princess*—a self-consciously eclectic work—as a great synthetic achievement: “[Tennyson] makes his ‘Medley’ a mirror of the nineteenth century, possessed of its own new art and science, its own new temptations and aspirations, and yet grounded on, and continually striving to reproduce, the forms and experiences of all past time” (250). Tennyson avoids what Kingsley identifies as the chief errors of his fellow poets—superficial knowledge, false religious feeling, philosophical confusion, rampant literary borrowing, and intellectual laziness—all familiar symptoms of a pervasive, naïve eclecticism. He works with the same materials and under similar exigencies to create unity from potentially chaotic variety, and to make a “Medley” of the discordant music of his age. Aubrey De Vere’s October 1849 review of *The Princess* for the *Edinburgh Review* likewise praises Tennyson’s capacity for capturing the spirit of the nineteenth century, and for doing what no one else seemed capable of doing: rendering the age a fit subject for poetry. The genius of Tennyson’s synthesis, as Kingsley saw it, was in grounding the “temptations and aspirations” of the nineteenth century on “the forms and experiences of all past time.” De Vere’s analysis extends the idea of the age as “medley” when he credits
Tennyson with writing a poem that successfully combines widely different genres and moods. In asserting that the poem partakes of the eclectic character of the age, De Vere pays tribute to Tennyson’s ability to evoke one of the defining features of modern life:

If a man were to scrutinise the external features of our time, for the purpose of characterising it compendiously, he would be tempted, we suspect, to give up the task before long, and to pronounce the age a Medley. It would be hard to specify the character of our Philosophy, including as it does fragments of all systems, sometimes at open war, and sometimes eclectically combined. Not less various is the texture of Society among us, in which time-honoured traditions are blended with innovations which a few months make antiquated. [...] As heterogeneous in its character is Art among us. Here we have an imitation of the antique, there a revival of the middle ages; [...] By what term could we describe the architecture of the day? In our rising cities we find a Gothic church close to a Byzantine fane or an Italian basilica; and in their immediate neighbourhood a town hall like a Greek temple, a mansion like a Roman palace, and a clubhouse after the fashion of Louis XIV. The age in which we live may have a character of its own; but that character is not written in its face. (204)

As was so often the case during the nineteenth century, critics would invoke the heterogeneity—or outward eclecticism—of Victorian architecture in an effort to describe the inner character of the age. Here De Vere equates architectural with philosophical eclecticism, and connects them both to a more expansive “texture of Society,” which readily combines the antique and the innovative. By designating his poem “A Medley,” Tennyson captures the particular quality of an age that cannot be characterized easily in any other way. It is tempting to see, as De Vere does, Tennyson’s classification of *The Princess* as part of an overall design—a poem that self-consciously “resembles the age,” speaks the age’s eclectic dialect, and performs its attendant crises. But not all readers of *The Princess* were willing to see “depths where there [were] none” (Chretien 203). C. P. Chretien’s April 1849 review in the *Christian Remembrancer* raises an uncomfortable question about the poem, which has never been resolved: was the appellation of “medley” an afterthought, a kind of justification for the long poem’s obvious, unresolved heterogeneity? Or is “medley” meant to draw attention to the “unity of purpose which methodises its variegated exterior” (De Vere 204)? In other words, does the poem merely reflect the eclecticism of the age, or is it coping with that eclecticism self-consciously through its eclectic form?
Two oft-quoted anecdotes from Tennyson’s life reveal his ambivalent feelings about the most-revised of his long poems. In late December 1847 he wrote to his friend Edward FitzGerald, “My Book is out and I hate it and so no doubt will you” (Letters I:281). During the weeks leading up to the publication of *The Princess: A Medley* on Christmas day, Tennyson was visiting Carlyle, who wrote to Emerson about the poet and the poem: “a truly interesting Son of Earth, and Son of Heaven,—who has almost lost his way, among the will-o’wisps, I doubt; and may flounder ever deeper, over neck and nose at last among the quagmires that abound!” (qtd. in Letters I:281n). Carlyle worried, too, that “spinning rhymes” and calling them “high Art” would never furnish Tennyson with the great task he needed (281n). As Arnold would later say about writing poetry in general, the times were against him. Hallam Tennyson records in the *Memoir* that FitzGerald and Carlyle “gave up all hopes of him after ‘The Princess’” (I:253). Serious poetry, it was thought, should not muddy itself too much in the present age, or it would not outlast its generation; but was the poem serious—was it original—because it arrested for a moment the fast-flowing stream of the present? His son also records a conversation Tennyson had with Frederick Locker-Lampson in 1869 in which “He talked of ‘The Princess’ with something of regret, of its fine blank verse, and the many good things in it: ‘but,’ said he, ‘though truly original, it is, after all, only a medley’” (Memoir II:70–71). If Locker-Lampson’s memory of the poet’s phrasing is accurate, Tennyson, like many of his reviewers, was forced to acknowledge an irresolvable something at the heart of this strange poem. It was original—it was “only” a medley. The originality of the poem lay precisely in using the medley form to represent what was unintelligible by any other means—and by no other means could he extricate himself from the “quagmire” of the present.

Contrary to what was widely believed at the time and to what still passes as common knowledge on the subject, *The Princess* was not a critical failure.\(^1\) Granted, Tennyson was disappointed at the poem’s reception—at the consensus that *The Princess* did not live up to the expectations raised by the *Poems* of 1832 and 1842. But the majority of critics who weighed in between January 1848 and October 1849 liked the poem, even as they lamented the misapplication of Tennyson’s remarkable powers to what seemed more a collection of headlines than a work of art. Even those critics who praised the beauty and sentiment of *The Princess* could find little justification for its extreme heterogeneity, both thematic and formal. Rather than debating the controversial content of the poem, many reviewers found themselves embroiled in controversy about form and style. Even his staunchest supporters conceded that they would have to
wait still longer for the great moral poem they believed their hero would produce.

In its bare outline, *The Princess* looked like it would supply this lack. The main poem relates the story of a young prince who was betrothed at birth to Princess Ida, who, having reached the age suitable for marrying, is instead intent on founding a university for women over which she will preside. Despite the promise of an epic struggle between male and female that is finally resolved to everyone’s satisfaction, reviewers were uneasy about the juxtaposition of comic and tragic elements, and modern and traditional values. And some critics wondered why Tennyson presented his serious message about the education and status of women in the form of a burlesque. The Prologue even in its shorter 1847 incarnation did explain the poem’s formal structure, and many reviewers complained that *The Princess* lacked unity of purpose. The unusually broad range of sources informing the poem—debates on the Woman Question, discoveries in the sciences, classical mythology, the *Arabian Nights*, to name just a few—provoked attacks on the poem’s anachronisms and moral confusion. But as John Killham in his study of Tennyson’s sources concedes, the poet’s “eclecticism in choice of materials represented the state of current taste and thinking” (276). We do indeed see a world of differences at Vivian Park (the setting of the framing story), but we see that its diverse elements do not clash. We witness the breakdown of communication between tradition and modernity and between men and women, but we see commonalty and continuity reestablished between them. Tennyson’s eclecticism in this poem works on two levels: first, he canvasses “the state of current taste and thinking” (the manifest eclecticism of Victorian culture, apparent in its art, philosophy, religion, and politics) and brings that variety into the poem; and then he blends these diverse elements in order to achieve a progressive synthesis of past and present, male and female, heroic and mock-heroic. The poem thus provided critics with an occasion to rehearse the principal arguments for and against eclecticism. Two critical responses in particular, those of Chretien and De Vere, show that in the debate over the nature of Tennyson’s genius, and the success or failure of this poem in particular, eclecticism was becoming as serious an issue in poetry at mid-century as it was already in architecture and philosophy.

**Eclecticism at Cambridge**

In the late 1820s, when Tennyson was at Cambridge, a professor at the Sorbonne, Victor Cousin, delivered a series of blockbuster lectures on the history of philosophy. Underlying Cousin’s narrative was the conviction that
by analyzing the history of philosophy eclectically, one could identify the truths unifying the different schools. It was simply a matter of discovering what was constant in this history, and putting aside what did not seem to fit. The philosophical battles that had, he felt, falsely opposed German idealism, Scottish common sense, and French psychology would cease; and the ideological détente that followed would provide the foundation for a political juste milieu—a happy medium that blended republican principles with monarchical rule. Although Cousin himself was always careful to describe eclecticism as a method rather than a school, he became identified personally with an eclectic philosophy whose fortunes were inextricably linked to the July Monarchy. As a philosophical approach, eclecticism was equated in British minds entirely with what they regarded as the instability of the French nation in the post-Revolutionary period. More seriously, the eclectic method of discovering truth struck some British philosophers, such as William Hamilton and George Henry Lewes, as an unhealthy compound of dilettantism and pedantry, without the element of genuine conviction. In Britain the rise of eclecticism signaled a loss of faith in authority, combined with a sense of the wholeness of the past seen against the fragmentariness of the present. Could an eclectic method overcome the naïve eclecticism of a society that seemed to pick and choose at random from the past, unaware of how this style clashed with that or how this idea was irreconcilable with that one? In spite of the unpopularity of French thought in Britain, eclecticism became the most congenial intellectual tool of a pragmatic age. The eclectic looked for compromises and avoided conflicts, which explained the predominance of liberalism in politics and latitudinarianism in religion, of mixed styles in architecture and painting, and of hybrid genres, such as the novel, in literature.

During his years at Cambridge, Tennyson became involved with the “Apostles,” a society of gifted undergraduates who had embraced the spirit, if not the letter, of the eclectic philosophy that was thriving across the Channel. The early influence of F. D. Maurice had instilled within successive generations of members a consistent set of liberal values and a “spirit of the society” that Henry Sidgwick described as the “belief that we can learn, and a determination that we will learn from people of the most opposite opinions” (qtd. in Allen 4). Maurice’s own spiritual development represents an extreme version of the transformation most Apostles experienced. The son of a Unitarian clergyman whose tolerance of all beliefs worked against the effectiveness of his own teachings, and the brother of several evangelical sisters, Frederick Maurice spent his life searching for unity and avoiding controversy: “He came to think that every form of human belief might be seen to contain elements of truth that might be discovered by close analysis of the form and by an attempt to sympathize...
with those who held to it” (Allen 70). The process of “painfully honest self-scrutiny” (70) undertaken by all Apostles was merely the first step toward social regeneration; the Apostles’ educational program, a crucial supplement to the narrow curriculum of Cambridge, included the study of modern literature, from which one would gain an understanding of the operations of the divine principle at work in the world. Like Cousin of the Sorbonne, who found his political middle way in the July Monarchy, Maurice eventually found his theological juste milieu in the Established Church, which was broad enough, he felt, to include all Christian believers. Cousin and Maurice taught their followers to canvass a range of opinions and finally to rest in compromise and unity, comfortably in the middle.

Peter Allen’s intimate account of the Apostles’ early years offers compelling portraits of the many young men who underwent such spiritual transformations as a result of their association with the “Conversazione Society.” A category of experience that might rightly be described as eclectic, the dialectical self-scrutiny undertaken by the Apostles carried individuals from the point of (generally) radical beliefs to confusion and uncertainty to inclusively liberal beliefs. Jane Carlyle, one of the less charitable critics of Maurice and the “mystics,” said that members such as John Sterling simply “wanted back-bone” (89). Thomas Carlyle preferred to call his friend’s susceptibility to new influences and impressions a “gift for imaginative sympathy” (89). Both Sterling and Maurice wrote novels about young men whose spiritual quests led them to adopt and to reject one system of thought after another; but this was a process of spiritual awakening that would fit them for the vital project of social regeneration—they were to join Coleridge’s “clerisy.” The necessity of eclecticism in youth was central to educational projects from the Royal Academy of Art to Newman’s Idea of a University. Only by canvassing a range of belief within a controlled environment could a youth emerge as an individual whose opinions might genuinely be described as his own. At the very least, then, the Apostles gave Tennyson a “loosely consistent set of values” with which his work would enter into conversation. The “spirit of the society” haunted the twilight space wherein the poet described a moment of waking to consciousness again and again—a moment of waking that was essential to what I characterize as the Apostolic transformation. In The Princess Tennyson gave this spiritual transformation a generic form—the medley.

The Eclectic Poetics of The Princess

Even as Tennyson inclined toward eclecticism intellectually and temperamentally, he did not find it easy to rest in the condition of being eclectic. In
Part V of *The Princess*, it is difficult not to hear an echo of his earlier poem on the dangers of solipsism, “The Palace of Art,” when Princess Ida rages, “Far off from men I built a fold for them [women]; / I stored it full of rich memorial; / I fenced it round with gallant institutes, / And biting laws to scare the beasts of prey, / And prosper’d, till a rout of saucy boys / Brake on us at our books, and marr’d our peace, . . .” (V:380–85). While the Princess’s university is no “lordly pleasure-house” (“Palace” 1), she does create a space in which women might “reign . . . apart” (14) and where the world’s treasures of knowledge and art have been sifted to create a self-reflecting, self-fulfilling narrative. If Cousin’s image of the eclectic philosopher was an internal eye, then in “The Palace of Art” Tennyson gives us the soul as an all-seeing, self-sustaining eclectic: “I take possession of man’s mind and deed. / I care not what the sects may bawl. / I sit as God holding no form of creed, / But contemplating all” (209–12). The Princess does not pretend to be above professing a creed, but, in establishing the university, she extricates herself from the entanglements of history and family, to sit in judgment on the world. Consequently, both the Princess and the feminized soul of the earlier poem succumb to a kind of “death in life”—a stagnation or loss of consciousness worse than death—before reengaging with the world. Tennyson keeps the dangers of eclecticism firmly in mind for the reader, even as the overall movement of the poem supports the Princess’s eclectic aim. Instead of an enclosed, self-devouring eclecticism, Tennyson models the dialectical eclecticism of the Cambridge Apostles; and, as a careful reading of the poem will demonstrate, the medley is anything but an indiscriminate collection of the age’s tropes and artifacts.

As Tennyson sets the stage for the entertainment that is the core narrative of *The Princess*, he draws upon the collegiate model of the debate in a story passed among several narrators, each of whom might inflect the story with his own interpretation or alter its course toward a particular outcome. In practice, we have in *The Princess* a single poet-narrator who has unified the seven parts of the story in a single style, leaving the characters’ voices to provide the dialectics. The auditors and narrators of the framing story (and inevitably the readers who are pulled into that frame) are likely to sympathize with the troubles of the characters and to identify with the various positions taken by them. Sympathy, and even susceptibility, were vital elements in the character of a Cambridge Apostle, especially in his approach to handling controversy, and Tennyson constructs his dialectics with the intention of making the reader see the mixed situations of the medley as natural and inevitable, and any ideological extreme as untenable. The primary, contending forces involved in the framing and core narratives of *The Princess* form three pairs: tradition and modernity, or the proper relationship between past and present; male and female, or the
relative strength of each in shaping our identity; and the heroic and mock-heroic, or the power of generic conventions in shaping ideology. Tennyson makes these rigid dichotomies meaningful by showing how we engage eclectically with variety and that achieving synthesis must always involve compromise between like elements, not the exclusion of difference.

In the Prologue Tennyson establishes a complex dialectic between naïve eclecticism and the eclecticism that can be achieved only through an effort at selection and combination. Since volitional eclecticism usually constitutes an effort to cope with the burden of the historical inheritance, Tennyson’s use of historical material in the framing story provides an index of his commitment to an eclectic outlook. The opening lines of the Prologue not only describe the setting, Vivian Park, but also invoke the tradition of the country house poem, which had been popular in English poetry during the Renaissance. While less explicitly a poem of praise than, say, Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst,” the Prologue does present an exemplary scene of the times, commends the generosity of the host, surveys the riches of the house and its collections, and describes the joy of the common people who take advantage of a summer holiday on the park grounds. Combining the generic features of the country house poem with the memory of a feast of the Mechanics’ Institute that he had witnessed at the Lushingtons’ house in 1842, Tennyson brings the past forward into the present. In order to make the marriage between the tradition of country hospitality and social and scientific progress as natural as possible, Tennyson has to choose the elements of that union very carefully, so that a scene “Strange . . . and smacking of the time” (1. 89) becomes reassuringly familiar.

The Prologue continually reinforces the poet’s underlying eclecticism. Herbert F. Tucker has referred to the modern scene at Vivian-place as “a Crystal Palace without the walls” (354) and, though The Princess predates that quintessential Victorian edifice, this is an especially apt image of what Tennyson wants to accomplish. The reader is led from the lawn and the Mechanics’ Institute into the house, where an apparently random collection of artifacts contributes to a distinctively modern harmony:

Walter show’d the house,
Greek, set with busts. From vases in the hall
Flowers of all heavens, lovelier than their names,
Grew side by side; and on the pavement lay
Carved stones of the Abbey-ruin in the park,
Huge Ammonites and the first bones of time;
And on the tables every clime and age
Jumbled together; cels and calumets,
Claymore and snow-shoe, toys in lava, fans
Of sandal, amber, ancient rosaries,
Laborious orient ivory sphere in sphere,
The cursed Malayan crease and battle-clubs
From the isles of palm; and higher on the walls,
Betwixt the monstrous horns of elk and deer,
His own forefathers’ arms and armour hung. (Prol.:10–24)

Eclecticism in art and architecture was meant to preserve the values attached to the different styles; the eclecticism of the collection operates in like manner. The Greek Revival house “set with busts” reaches back to a place remote from modern Britain both temporally and geographically, and contains the figures of great men whose ideas and actions have presumably influenced the evolution of Vivian Park. Here and throughout the Prologue, Tennyson links the long history of the family (“forefathers’ arms and armour”) and national traditions to an even more expansive geological time. Paired with the shell of an extinct mollusk, the ammonite, the ruins of the abbey are among “the first bones of time.” In the collection, objects of “every clime and age” are “jumbled together,” but instead of clashing they seem to open up and reveal each other. For example, softening the violence of the instruments of war (Celts, claymore, Malayan crease, battle-clubs) are the more peaceful objects in Sir Walter’s collection (calumets, snowshoe, fans, rosaries, carved ivory). What would seem to be a collection without meaning, without a narrative—in other words, naïve eclecticism—becomes instead dialectical and expressive.

The effort to combine eclectically the values of past and present continues throughout the Prologue, culminating in the story of a princess who defies the spirit of her age, before reconciling with it. On his tour of the house and its collections, the poet-narrator picks up “a hoard of tales that dealt with knights / Half-legend, half-historic counts and kings . . .” (Prol.:29–30) and a woman warrior, figures all from the family’s proud history. From the “half-legend, half-historic,” the party moves to the half-modern scene of the summer holiday. Significantly, he “kept the book and had [his] finger in it— / Down thro’ the park” (53–54), so that even as he looks upon the wondrous present, the poet holds open the door to the past. Instead of portraying the scientific displays as potentially disrupting the world of tradition invoked by the country house poem, the poet’s figurative language brings the alien into the existing order:

Strange was the sight to me;
For all the sloping pasture murmur’d, sown

147
With happy faces and with holiday.
There moved the multitude, a thousand heads;
The patient leaders of their Institute
Taught them with facts. One rear’d a font of stone
And drew, from butts of water on the slope,
The fountain of the moment, playing, now
A twisted snake, and now a rain of pearls,
Or steep-up spout whereon the gilded ball
Danced like a wisp; and somewhat lower down
A man with knobs and wires and vials fired
A cannon; Echo answer’d in her sleep
From hollow fields; and here were telescopes
For azure views; and there a group of girls
In circle waited, whom the electric shock
Dislink’d with shrieks and laughter; round the lake
A little clock-work steamer paddling plied
And shook the lilies; perch’d about the knolls
A dozen angry models jetted steam;
A petty railway ran; a fire-balloon
Rose gem-like up before the dusky groves
And dropt a fairy parachute and past;
And there thro’ twenty posts of telegraph
They flash’d a saucy message to and fro
Between the mimic stations; so that sport
Went hand in hand with science; [. . . ] (Prol.:54–80)

The poet-narrator offers up the strange sights that modern science has produced, but with the intention of seeing them integrated into the familiar cultural landscape, even of transforming science into a kind of fairy tale or myth (“rain of pearls,” “gilded ball,” “danced like a wisp,” “Echo answer’d,” and “a fire-balloon / Rose gem-like up before the dusky groves / And dropt a fairy parachute”). Young girls still giggle in shifting cliques, even if they have been moved by electricity rather than gossip. Children still play on the water with toy boats, though they might be powered by steam. Young men and women still flirt and court, even if the messages are not whispered into warm ears, but passed into the telegraph. Incorporating aspects of modern life into the most pleasing configuration of traditional social relations, Tennyson models in the Prologue on the level of society what he illustrates in the main tale on the level of the individual, namely that we will all be better off if we blend the diverse elements of which we are composed, rather than forcing them into conflict. Just as attendees of
the Great Exhibition were meant to return to their homes feeling renewed optimism about the progress of their age, readers of *The Princess* were supposed to feel that the plenitude of the present could not be captured in any single style and that the generic and stylistic inclusiveness of the poem pointed the way to new possibilities for the art of poetry.

Throughout the Prologue the reader feels the shifting of temporal sands as the poet-narrator moves back and forth, as it seems, between past and present. After gazing long upon the modern scene, the group of friends, “satiated at length / Came to the ruins” (90–91). Quite deliberately, the poet-narrator frames a scene from within the ruins that blends past and present, creating the *juste milieu* that he has been seeking, neither past nor present but both together: “High-arch’d and ivy-claspt, / Of finest Gothic lighter than a fire, / Thro’ one wide chasm of time and frost they gave / The park, the crowd, the house; but all within / The sward was trim as any garden lawn” (91–95). Within the theatrical space of the ruins, the host and his college friends, his sister, their Aunt Elizabeth, and various other ladies gather for a feast. Tennyson contrasts the liveliness of the young people with the serenity of the tomb where they will have their meal, as if to draw attention to the entirely commonplace idea of the persistence of human generation. Even when individual efforts fail and empires fall, the next generation waits to take their place; but the transfer of the life force does not travel in one direction only. Described as “Half child, half woman” (Prol.:101), Lilia, the host’s sister—a key figure in the poem, drapes the broken statue of her ancestor Sir Ralph with an orange scarf, “That made the old warrior from his ivied nook / Glow like a sunbeam” (Prol.:104–5).

In this poem, Tennyson often shows how the living restore life to the dead, and so does not commit the error Kingsley so detested, of “ignoring the Present to fall back on a cold and galvanised Medievalism” (250). Lilia’s playfulness when she warms the statue with her scarf; the poet-narrator’s finger in the ancient text; and the feast upon the tomb—all are gestures of restorative sympathy, a reaching out to the past, without surrendering to it. Following the pattern of the Prologue, the core narrative must strike a balance between admiration for what William Morris might have called the strong colors of the past and the necessity of living in the present:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Heroic seems our princess as required—} \\
\text{But something made to suit with time and place,} \\
\text{A Gothic ruin and a Grecian house,} \\
\text{A talk of college and of ladies’ rights,} \\
\text{A feudal knight in silken masquerade,} \\
\text{And, yonder, shrieks and strange experiments}
\end{align*}
\]

149
Part II: Eclectic Victorians

For which the good Sir Ralph had burnt them all—
This were a medley! (Prol.:223–30)

The present lends its own colors to old subjects and links ideas that gain in power from their juxtaposition. What makes eclecticism seem seductive to some and incoherent to others is its presumption that one can have, to paraphrase Voltaire, the best of all possible worlds. Rather than dismissing such idealism as naïve or ridiculous, Tennyson puts forward a vision of historical change as medley—evolution not revolution. Who would be happier to return to a time when they would be burnt for practicing science? Change should be welcomed, as long as it is tended like a garden—nurtured and loved, but clipped and pruned when required.

When the central narrative begins, we see that neither the Prince nor the Princess has learned to live with a medley of past and present. One of Tennyson’s later revisions, the addition of the Prince’s “weird seizures,” underscores the attitude toward history displayed in the Prologue—one cannot begin to live until one lives in the present. Burdened by a hereditary malady, the Prince suffers from waking dreams, seems to walk among ghosts, and cannot tell truth from shadow. While the Prince’s “fancies” keep him a prisoner in an insubstantial past, the Princess’s fancies have more troubling consequences, for they concern the future. In attempting to bring about a Renaissance for women, the Princess selects from a largely mythical past. Any theory-driven picking and choosing seems doomed to failure; even the Princess acknowledges that she works in shadow, knowing only parts of the whole.

‘... but we that are not all,
As parts, can see but parts, now this, now that,
And live, perforce, from thought to thought, and make
One act a phantom of succession. Thus
Our weakness somehow shapes the shadow, Time;
But in the shadow will we work, and mould
The woman to the fuller day.’ (III:309–14)

As Tennyson must have learned from his Apostle friends, one had to test one’s opinions, to discover their origins, and whether there was any truth in them. If one were surrounded only with flatterers and inferiors, it was unlikely that one would grow to maturity holding opinions that were mostly truthful; but instead, one would likely happen, by solitary reading and thinking, into opinions that were partly right and partly wrong. Encouraged by her theory-obsessed mentor Lady Blanche, and her fond
friend Lady Psyche, Princess Ida was unlikely to weigh her convictions against any dissenting authorities—until she met the Prince.

The song “Tears, Idle Tears” and Princess Ida’s response to it take up more explicitly the question of history’s relevance in the present age. When a young woman sings of “Tears [that] 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” (IV:22–25), Princess Ida answers this heartfelt song disdainfully:

“If indeed there haunt
About the moulder’d lodges of the past
So sweet a voice and vague, fatal to men,
Well needs it we should cram our ears with wool
And so pace by. But thine are fancies hatch’d
In silken-folded idleness; nor is it
Wiser to weep a true occasion lost,
But trim our sails, and let old bygones be,
While down the streams that float us each and all
To the issue, goes, like glittering bergs of ice,
Throne after throne, and molten on the waste
Becomes a cloud; for all things serve their time
Toward that great year of equal mights and rights.
Nor would I fight with iron laws, in the end
Found golden. Let the past be past, let be
Their cancell’d Babels; tho’ rough kex break
The starr’d mosaic, and the beard-blown goat
Hang on the shaft, and the wild fig-tree split
Their monstrous idols, care not while we hear
A trumpet in the distance pealing news
Of better, and Hope, a poised eagle, burns
Above the unrisen morrow.” (IV:44–65)

The attitude of the Princess to history represents an extreme that the poem is meant to overcome. As Carlyle wrote, the present is “the living sum-total of the whole Past” and so the past is always with us—that scene now muted, this now shining brightly. In the two decades preceding Tennyson’s composition of The Princess, medieval and classical scenes obtruded regularly upon the public imagination, most notably the Eglinton Tournament of 1839. Tennyson would have heard of or witnessed such attempts to “bring the Middle Age forward” (as Kingsley put it), which rarely satisfied the nostalgia of the instigators and highlighted the futility of trying
to recover medieval (or classical) vitality. These efforts struck many as “fancies hatch’d / In silken-folded idleness,” but Tennyson’s view is more moderate. The Princess is a theorist, who believes that she can resist the feelings engendered by history and “the days that are no more.” But in becoming a fully developed human being, she cannot look exclusively toward the future, and she must do more than gather up those bits of the past that justify her powerful Hope (such as the list of great women in Psyche’s history lesson).

In Part VII, when the Prince is recovering from his battle wounds, the Princess reads “to herself” the famous idyll “Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height” (VII:177). She has been on the mountain, but she must now return to the valley, where love dwells. What good are her theories if not brought back to earth? What good the treasures of her college if not shared? As in the “Palace of Art,” where the soul retires to a “cottage in the vale,” Princess Ida abandons the mastering, panoramic view, and chooses the occluded and intimate view below. When the Prince finds love, he loses his doubts, and “all the past / Melts mist-like into this bright hour” (VII:334–35). In this mutual completion, Tennyson suggests that the soul grows richer not from mastery or possession, and certainly not from isolation, but from the many-sided development afforded by love, the true seeing.

Medley as “Symbolic Form”

Eileen Tess Johnston has written of the way that “medley,” with its dual meaning of “mêlée” and “mixture,” “gives symbolic form to the whole of The Princess” (568). Not only is the poem itself a literary medley, but it also promotes a concept of the individual as mixture within the mêlée of social life: “The entire central tale [ . . . ] presents the substitution of mêlées with medleys, of confusions with mixtures, of combats, literal and figurative, inward and outward, with creative interchange” (563). The two meanings of medley mirror the Janus-face of nineteenth-century eclecticism—the volitional and the naïve. The original meaning of medley, dating back to the fourteenth century, related exclusively to combat, especially “hand-to-hand fighting between two parties of combatants” (OED). We can demonstrate Tennyson’s awareness of the archaic meaning of medley in his use of “mellay,” a Middle English variant of medley (563; OED): “Down / From those two bulks at Arac’s side, and down / From Arac’s arm, as from a giant’s flail, / The large blows rain’d, as here and everywhere / He rode the mellay, lord of the ringing lists” (V:491). As medley’s derivative
meaning of “mixture” evolved, a “disparaging sense” soon attached to it. In this later sense, which became dominant as early as the seventeenth century, a medley was a “heterogeneous combination or mixture (of things)” or “a mixed company (of persons differing in rank, occupation, etc.)” (OED). Taken more broadly, as part of the symbolic structure of the entire work, Tennyson prompts his readers to consider the degree to which the heterogeneous elements of the poem (past and present, male and female, heroic and mock-heroic) remain in conflict or finally harmonize, leaving open the question of whether the poem performs the positive, now rarely used, meaning of medley, namely “A cloth woven with [ . . . ] different colours or shades” (OED).

As a prominent aspect of his philosophy of medley, Tennyson illustrates the Princess’s journey from self-contained, one-dimensional individual to integrated, eclectic self. In promoting this idea of self as medley, he employs the motif of the lost child as a link throughout the entire poem. Significantly, the necessity of losing the child is one of the principal arguments of the poem’s feminist voices, a “theory” that must be undermined in order to achieve reconciliation between male and female. In Part I, when the Prince first wonders about the “fancies” (I:94) that make the Princess refuse to marry him, he hears from her father that Lady Psyche and Lady Blanche “fed her theories . . . Maintaining that with equal husbandry / The woman were an equal to the man” (I:129–30). Since women “had but been, she thought, / As children; they must lose the child, assume / The woman” (I: 135–37). Her fervor on this point leads her to produce “odes / About this losing of the child” (I:139–40). When the Prince arrives at the college disguised as a woman, paying compliments to the Princess, his “language proves [him] still the child” (II:44)—when men flatter women thus, they are treating them as either children or fools.

The seriousness of Princess Ida’s argument against such degrading treatment is not entirely discounted by the poet-narrator, but the interpolated songs (sung by the women) do offer a counterpoint to the Princess’s theories. The first song, “As thro’ the land at eve we went,” tells of a husband and wife who have quarreled without knowing why; the falling-out is a blessing in disguise when they “kiss again with tears” above the grave of the child “We lost in other years” (I:254, 256). The cause of separation is the thing forgotten, while the child and the shared memories of the past unite them. When Psyche recognizes her brother Florian in Part II, we see the same process unfold. At first Psyche maintains her separate-ness from him, declaring that she has “no country, none; / If any, this; but none, Whate’er I was / Disrooted, what I am is grafted here” (II:200–202). This denial of the past is a denial of the child and sister that she
was, a requirement, she believes, of becoming a fully developed woman; but Tennyson means for us to see that Psyche has lost more than she has gained—disrooted, grafted, she is no more a whole person. (Later in the narrative, when she loses her baby, we see the psychic damage she sustains before recovering the child inside and outside herself.) Florian recalls her as “brother-sister Psyche, both in one” (II:236), intimating that the future Psyche prophesied in her lecture had already come to be: “everywhere / Two heads in council, two beside the hearth, Two in the tangled business of the world . . .” (II:155–57). As in the song, when the lovers “kiss again with tears,” Psyche and Florian kiss and “betwixt them blossom’d up / From out a common vein of memory / Sweet household talk, and phrases of the hearth” (II:292–94). Their reunion prefigures the other unions of the poem, just as the mother in “Sweet and low, sweet and low,” the song that follows Part II, promises her baby that its father will come home soon.

Much of the core narrative of *The Princess* concerns the means by which we develop an authentic self, whether it is by integrating our past and present selves, or by acknowledging the admixture of male and female in each of us. The prototype for Princess Ida comes from the past—a woman warrior larger than life—and the character that the seven male narrators create seems particularly inauthentic because she strives after greatness, wanting her deeds to live on into the future. Setting aside the question of whether Tennyson was sympathetic to feminist goals, it is still possible to consider the importance of the issue of authenticity in his underlying philosophy of medley—why can we not simply select the elements that we want to make up our personality? During one of his seizures, the Prince sees Ida as a “hollow show” and “Her college and her maidens empty masks” (III:169, 171); and in the same moment sees himself as “the shadow of a dream, / For all things were and were not” (III:172–73). When the college collapses following the battle between their two countries and the maidens rush to help the fallen soldiers, the narrator wants the reversion to seem inevitable. The Prince saw the maidens as empty masks, because they tried to conceal their true selves beneath the aspect of the scholar; but they could not simply choose to cut themselves off from their past selves or, Tennyson no doubt wants the reader to see, from their femininity. Ida’s new persona is a hollow show and the girl she once was is her “dead self” (III:205); but neither does the Prince yet possess a stable identity, trapped as he is among the ghosts. When the wounded Prince kisses Ida, she glows, like the statue of Sir Ralph, coming to life again: “Her falser self split from her like a robe / And left her woman” (VII:146). Lest this resolution seem an utter denial of Ida’s ambitions, and of a true dialectic within the poem, Tennyson has prepared the reader for a more nuanced handling of the hero and heroine’s union. Defending the Princess before the battle, the
Prince makes the case to his father that women “have as many differences” as men (V:173) and must be accorded “More breadth of culture” (V:180). His father opposes change because he fears confusion between the sexes, the muddle of a middle:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword, and for the needle she;
Man with the head, and woman with the heart;
Man to command, and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (V:437–41)

This is precisely the kind of extremist position that Tennyson’s eclecticism is meant to overcome. At this moment, the Prince sees his father the king, the soldiers’ camp, and the college all turned to hollow shows: “I seem’d to move in old memorial tilts, / And doing battle with forgotten ghosts, / To dream myself the shadow of a dream” (V:467–70). The repetition of his seizures at moments when the Princess and his father have been rigid, unyielding, and one-dimensional underscores the need for the happy medium of like in difference that is the goal of the poem:

For woman is not undevelopd man,
But diverse. Could we make her as the man,
Sweet Love were slain; his dearest bond is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
The man be more of woman, she of man;
He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world;
She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care,
Nor lose the childish in the larger mind;
Till at the last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words;
And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time,
Sit side by side, full-summ’d in all their powers,
Dispensing harvest, sowing the to-be,
Self-reverent each and reverencing each,
Distinct in individualities,
But like each other even as those who love. (VII:259–76)

It would be too easy to dismiss this passage as a clear articulation of a doctrine of separate spheres such as Ruskin sets out in “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865), seductive precisely because women seem powerful within their
special sphere of, say, “childward care.” That does not seem to be what Tennyson is after here. Instead he presents the culmination of the idea of the self as medley, a complex tune whose notes do not readily blend with another’s music, but that will over time and with practice seamlessly interweave as each catches the other’s melody. The woman and the man do not surrender individuality or distinctiveness, but reverence themselves and each other; they grow more like, more in harmony, as they love.

This sense of emergent harmony is what Tennyson wanted to hear in his own poem, and he struggled with a sense of failure—worried that *The Princess* was cacophony and unresolved conflict instead of interwoven harmonies. While most readers could accept the objectives of blending past and present, and male and female, it was much more difficult for them to admire Tennyson’s generic mixture. The Princess and the Prince might have been heroic, but in making them “to suit with time and place,” he injected a degree of mockery that made it hard to swallow the high-flown sentiments his characters expressed. For example, in Part IV, after the Princess has complained of men’s mock-love and the mock-Hymen who sang of it, the poet-narrator describes several scenes in unmistakably comic fashion. When the Princess falls into the river, and the Prince pulls her to safety, he is “Oaring one arm, and bearing in my left / The weight of all the hopes of half the world” (IV:164–65). Looking out for the Amazon pursuit, the unmasked Florian hides “behind a Judith, [and] underneath / The head of Holofernes peep’d and saw . . .” (IV:207–8); while the Prince surrenders to the Goddess of Memory: “At last I hook’d my ankle in a vine / That claspt the feet of a Mnemosyne, / And falling on my face was caught and known” (IV:248–50). Taken before the Princess, the seriousness of her words makes the comedy that has just played out seem particularly sour. Women are the “laughing-stocks of Time, / Whose brains are in their hands and in their heels, / But fit to flaunt, to dress, to dance, to thrum, / To tramp, to scream, to burnish, and to scour, / For ever slaves at home and fools abroad” (IV:496–500). If the poet-narrator has been making light of the Princess's gravity, and poking fun at the idols of the women’s college, then what are we to make of Ida’s demand that women be taken seriously as the capable equals of men? Struck by another of his seizures, the Prince sees “The Princess with her monstrous woman-guard, / The jest and earnest working side by side” (IV:540–41), making the reader quite certain of the poet’s self-conscious mixing of the heroic and the mock-heroic. In the Prologue, it was clear that the heroic would be associated with traditional form, but the reverence for tradition was to be coupled with the mock-heroic of the modern sensibility. It was no longer possible to have the purity of heroism, unmixed with a conviction that
this nineteenth century was not a heroic age. To pretend otherwise would be fatal to Tennyson’s purpose, which was not to present a sham Middle Ages, but rather to show the strands of the past woven into the present. When Ida moans that she has “made [her]self a queen of farce” (VII:228), Tennyson does not want us to take her for a fool, or to believe that her dreams were foolish, but to see that she did take herself too seriously. This was a kind of intellectual and emotional rigidity that had to be avoided. The poet-narrator acknowledges, finally, the problem with tone, that he had “wrestle[d] with the burlesque,” sensing that the women “wish’d for something real” (Conc.:16, 18). Why, his critics ask, did he not make the Princess “true-heroic” and “true-sublime”? The framework of the poem made such purity impossible, and so he “moved as in a strange diagonal” between “the mockers and the realists” (VII:227, 224). Such a mixture was, however, typical of the mode of argument used by Cambridge Apostles. As Henry Sidgwick explained, “it was rather a point of the apostolic mind to understand how much suggestion and instruction may be derived from what is in form a jest—even in dealing with the gravest matters” (qtd. in Allen 6). For example, in the early 1830s when the political situation was at its most volatile, some of the Apostles helped to put out fires in the countryside near Cambridge and wrote a mock-heroic poem about rick-burning to commemorate their deeds; but as Peter Allen notes, they “pause in their comic treatment of these events to reveal their sympathy for the distressed and rebellious agricultural workers” (122). For the Apostles, the comic mode was available both as a means to defuse the tensions inherent in the situation, and to satirize the ideological extremes that had brought the nation to such an impasse.

An example of serious play not unlike the Apostles’ poem “Swing, at Cambridge,” The Princess tries the fit of various styles of “dress” and various poetic modes. Both formally and thematically, Tennyson creates a persuasive picture of inclusiveness. Instead of seeing such eclecticism as naïve, he makes it a requirement for human progress. His self-conscious structuring of the poem as medley, with its multiple significations of mixture, mêlée, and mélange, marks a significant attempt to formulate a poetics adequate to the nineteenth century, that is, a poetics of eclecticism.

The Critical Debate on Tennyson’s Eclecticism

In the first half of this chapter, I have considered the extent to which eclecticism was abroad as an idea in the 1820s and how essential it was as a mode of thought among the Cambridge Apostles. I also examined
the varieties of eclecticism in *The Princess*, particularly how Tennyson uses volitional eclecticism to avoid ideological extremes and achieve compromise—a mélange or medley. He models a theory of poetry based on the philosophical underpinnings of the idea of medley, which shares with philosophical eclecticism its sense of human knowledge and experience as a unified field. His effort represents, I believe, a conscious decision to make use of the medley form to create something quite original, a poetics that would represent the nineteenth century to itself. In the second half of this chapter, I want to analyze two reviews of the poem that bring into sharper focus what was at stake for Tennyson in making eclecticism a central issue in the poem as well as its creative inspiration.

Criticism of *The Princess* was sharply divided between those who discerned a unifying design in the poem—Tennyson was being deliberately eclectic—and those who could find no unity in the poem and saw in it only a grotesque reflection of perplexed modernity. In approaching Tennyson’s poem as medley, C. P. Chretien and Aubrey De Vere reach opposite conclusions about the medley’s effectiveness as poetry. Chretien regards the poem’s eclecticism as limiting its significance to the present only, whereas De Vere discerns in the poet’s versatility a trait common to poetic genius throughout history. Sensitive to the peculiar character of the age, both reviewers acknowledge that Tennyson’s genius is perhaps uniquely suited to represent and express it. For Chretien, however, this compatibility is no cause for rejoicing or for elevating Tennyson to the poetic pantheon: “The present is so exclusively his sphere that he cannot transcend it,” and thus he can never become the “poet of our common humanity” (220). Unlike Kingsley, who praised Tennyson’s grounding of the aspirations of the present on the foundation of all past and present times, Chretien asserts that Tennyson does not grasp that which is “permanent in human nature” (220) and, furthermore, that he lacks the power to synthesize the material of history: “He knows that age succeeds to age, blowing before it a noise of tongues and deeds, of creeds and systems. But he is never bold enough to hope that he has discovered the key which can open the mystery of the world, and detect order in its confusion” (220). As figures for the confusion he perceives in Tennyson’s mind—a disorder that the poet, on some level, allows to persist—Chretien depends on tropes of architecture and design. In an ironic reflection of the Prologue of *The Princess* with its miscellaneous collection of persons and artifacts—“A Gothic ruin and a Grecian house”—he begins by comparing the mind of the poet to a cathedral, which, seen from the outside, “should impress us with the multiplicity of its parts” and, seen from the inside, “should be eminently one”: “Here we should trace, in its full solemnity, that Form which all variety of detail

158
must vary without concealing. Here, the diversity of individual taste is to be lost in the majesty of the mastermind. In that capacious area, all are instinctively to look one way, to think one thought, and wonder” (201). Chretien imagines that a poet should have, like Christianity, a single great idea that he or she transmits to posterity. Even if the message is dispersed throughout many different poems, there should be an underlying unity—a “master mind”—that connects them all.

Because Tennyson’s principal gesture in *The Princess* looks to Chretien like “fantastic playfulness” (202–3) and not like moral mastery, this long work reproduces the “faults and beauties” of Tennyson’s shorter works, “an alteration in degree, but not in kind; an improvement, if any, which was not a development” (202). The improvement Chretien has in mind does not raise Tennyson above his old level among the poets, but only places him “in a larger and more ornate niche” (202). Tennyson’s ornamentation in *The Princess*, since it does not augment the unity of the work, and, like many Victorian buildings, suffers from excessive heterogeneity, is taken as proof that the great poem promised by the early “fragments” would never come. Unlike the cathedrals whose walls show the accretion of history—“the noise of tongues and deeds, of creeds and systems”—*The Princess* fails to master its inheritance. Tennyson’s work confirms Chretien in his belief that the “Tennysonians” have been persisting for too long under the delusion that the beautiful moments his poetry gave them would not simply burn out, but would feed poetry’s eternal flame. Chretien asks his readers what this fantastic, disordered collection signifies beyond the individuality of its collector:

Here was an antique statue glittering in the whiteness of its marble, and there a picture, somewhat Rubenesque, in a gold frame; on the one hand, Haroun Alraschid sat, in “merriment of kingly pride,” under a canopy; on the other, a weather-beaten S. Simeon prayed, harangued, and soliloquized from the top of his pillar. Sometimes the poet’s scroll displayed combinations of grave words—good, and beauty, and duty, and love, and so forth—which puzzled the metaphysician, who endeavoured to make their meaning definite; a turn of the leaf brought the reader to some lucubrations of a half profane, half maudlin tone, and a very vinous and questionable morality. What does it all mean? we asked; or rather, what does the author mean? Is he content that his mind, as reflected in his volumes, should rival an auction room, or an embryo museum, both in the multifariousness and confusion of its beauties? Are the pictures never to be hung up, the statues never to be placed in their niches? Shall the caliph, and the pillar saint, and the Will Waterproof, be crowded together in a capacious tent,
or picnic in common on the sward? Shall we never be shown how abstract philosophical speculation is made to bear on the beauties of nature, or cast a reflected light over dim pictures of imaginary ladies, some as sensuous, and all as sleepy, as any that Lely drew? (201)

Resembling nothing so much as a cabinet of curiosities (or “Palace of Art”), Tennyson’s poetry has more in common with those “embryo museums” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than it does with the modern, rational, didactic museum. The cabinet of curiosity lacks any organizing principle beyond the peculiar mind of the individual collector, while the collections of modern museums both result from and proceed according to a master narrative. In one of the most impressive instances of the tension between eclecticism and a merely eclectic world, the Victorians expended a great deal of effort in converting curiosities into ordered collections, even as the tide of miscellaneous goods threatened to overwhelm them. As Chretien’s analysis suggests, Tennyson fails to be eclectic, and only reflects the eclectic confusion of modern life. Like many of his contemporaries, he seems to suffer from what Thomas Hardy would call, in his 1881 novel A Laodicean, “the malady of unlimited appreciativeness,” a condition affecting those whose pleasure in the variety of the historical inheritance renders them incapable of ordering it, or selecting from it the necessary preliminaries to achieving a functional synthesis. Though Chretien acknowledges the distinct modernity of Tennyson’s mental “auction room,” he will not admit that the conditions producing Tennyson will prevail in the future, thus permitting unborn generations to appreciate “the poet of today.” The “specimens of fossil beauty” (218) found throughout Tennyson’s works have not been reanimated, and serve only to “adorn” the present; therefore, the “mine of conceits” (221) that is The Princess will itself one day be a curiosity, since, as poetry, it cannot speak to the future. Chretien picks up here on several important themes related to the critique of eclecticism: it is inauthentic, because it seeks to bring together things and ideas not organically related; it is the result of taste, rather than feeling, since passion is needed to reanimate the dead; it is merely picking and choosing from old styles, rather than synthesizing an authentic new style.

Alongside the critique of material eclecticism in the nineteenth century, there frequently appears a flanking attack on intellectual eclecticism and its analogous confusions. Anticipating one of the symptoms of modern poetry Kingsley scrutinizes in “The Prevailing Epidemic,” and strengthening his claim that Tennyson’s intricate beauties do not conceal any depth of meaning, Chretien also exposes Tennyson’s dubious use of abstract, philosophical language. Far from casting illumination on the “multifari-
ous” beauties of his poetry, Tennyson’s philosophical dalliances compound the “confusion.” The “combinations of grave words” only “puzzle[ ] the metaphysicians” without leading them to a single thought that would dissipate the Tennysonian fog. Chretien’s irritation with Tennyson’s “philosophical” digressions stems at least partly from the critic’s perception that the poet is attempting to exceed his ability. Tennyson’s reputation rests (as Chretien believes it should) on his facility with language, a talent that for Chretien is more a matter of mechanical skill than profound insight. If Tennyson possessed a great mind, then his “fluency” would signify “something far higher than a mere facility in using well-assorted words,” and would “proceed[ ] from no skill in mechanical contrivance, but from an intellectual harmony” (205). The mechanical perfection of poetic language that Chretien observes in Tennyson had, of course, long been a cause for worry among those critics who believed that the best days of the art were past, and never to be recovered. Dryden’s refinements of poetic language looked patently inferior to Macaulay, whose preference for Milton derived from the older poet’s apparent isolation from the poetic fashions of his day. Peacock reckoned that the fashionable poets (the imitators, the refiners of language, the men of the Silver Age) had gained in mechanical skill what they had lost in passion. Tennyson, it would seem, could only amplify their perfection, or fall off from it. All his skill with the “instrument” avails him nothing without passion, which “like lightning, fuses and blends things most unlike with each other” (209). Chretien denounces Tennyson’s introduction of antique and foreign expressions as one of the least successful attempts to blend old and new within *The Princess*; these Greek constructions might exhibit his erudition and provide a novel source of interest, but they chiefly highlight the lack of integration that on every level mars the poem. Even Tennyson’s famous ability to render landscape realistically meets with Chretien’s disapproval. Immediately after praising Tennyson for “tread[ing] in the very steps of nature,” Chretien asserts that such “microscopic delineation is, to a great extent, artificial.” He then sharpens his portrait of Tennyson as effeminate minstrel, a poet concerned only with the instrument, and never with the air: “These drawings with a fine point are necessarily wanting in power. They betray at every turn the labour of composition. No one could suspect Mr Tennyson of being a rapid writer, and throwing off his best passages without a sense of effort. This is one reason why he fails in his attempts to express strong emotion. He betrays none of the characteristic quickness of passion. However great his subject, he knows but one method of treating it. He sits down calmly before hero, saint, or villain, and draws his portrait, stroke by stroke, as a lady would paint a flower” (207). Eclecticism has been associated with
the stylistic chaos of material culture, and with the strife of religious and
philosophical dissent; now, after building a picture of Tennyson’s mind
as an “auction room” and his philosophy as multifarious and confused,
Chretien asks his readers to judge the poet’s fluency with language as yet
another aspect of his modernity—and his eclecticism. Recalling Kingsley’s
preoccupation with the effeminacy of modern poets, evident, he thought,
in their lack of affective power, and in their mental confusion, Chretien’s
denigration of Tennyson’s skill as effeminate is revealing: Tennyson’s
effeminacy and his unfitness to create a poem that will be heard through
the ages are symptoms of the same disease—“the prevailing epidemic” as
Kingsley deems it—which produce the same negative result, a meaning-
less poem.

If C. P. Chretien traces Tennyson’s weaknesses as a poet to his tendency
to overpower a subject with the peculiarities of his own mind, Aubrey De
Vere finds in the poetry of Tennyson the very model of genius at work.
Rather than attributing the expression of modern sensibility found in Ten-
nyson’s works to transient features of the age, De Vere recognizes that Ten-
nyson reveals more to us of future humanity than of past. He credits “the
Versatility of [Tennyson’s] imagination” (211) with holding together the
“discordant materials” (209) of a poem whose design canvasses the entire
scene of nineteenth-century life. A kind of “English Decameron” (205),
the poem travels swiftly among scenes of science, classical and medieval
history, education, art, politics, and the trials of modern love, by means of
“imperceptible gradations and continual delicate variations of key” (King-
sley, “Tennyson” 250). De Vere concedes that only the genius of a Tenny-
son could successfully modulate such variety without becoming ridiculous:
“Any but the most delicate execution in this respect would have produced
a very coarse, not to say grotesque, effect. The humorous and the serious
are, however, seldom here found antithetically opposed to each other; but
blend rather, like the different shades of some fine material shifted in the
light” (205). This positive evaluation of the poem’s heterogeneity stands
in sharp contrast to Chretien’s, which emphasized Tennyson’s failure to
“blend” the old and the new, the comic and the tragic; De Vere rather
commends the poem’s ingenious combinations, which justify his high
opinion of Tennyson. The versatility to which De Vere refers the success of
The Princess places Tennyson, he argues, firmly within the great tradition
of English poetry.

De Vere uses the opportunity of reviewing new editions of the works
of Shelley and Keats alongside The Princess to position Tennyson in rela-
tion to “ideal” and “national” schools of poetry, and to predict that the
greatest of living poets will eventually overtake the Romantics’ lofty repu-
In his definition of versatility, De Vere is careful to delineate its positive and negative tendencies; and in this respect, his explanation of the strengths and weaknesses of the “versatile” imagination parallels descriptions of the “eclectic” imagination: “Versatility is sometimes indeed in poetry as in life, only the exercise of that imitative power which betrays a want of individuality, original conception, and tenacity of purpose. In such cases it proceeds from quick and volatile sympathies vividly open to external impressions, and from that clear untroubled mind, which, being all surface, apprehends and reflects all forms of thought, but is incapable of receiving a principle or resting in a conclusion. Poetry thus produced is the result neither of genius nor of high ability; but of that cleverness which bears often more resemblance to the former than to the latter” (212). If the poet is pliant before every impression, and resists no one and nothing, then the words flowing from his or her pen must be as superficial as the thoughts from which they spring. De Vere’s “negative” versatility invites comparison to the philosophical eclecticism that comes under attack during roughly the same period. G. H. Lewes and Hippolyte Taine worried that Victor Cousin’s genius for reflecting and imitating the precepts of various systems of thought would hasten the destruction of all philosophy, and all system. They contended that Cousin selected the best from others’ philosophies because he had no original system of his own—no original genius, but only the semblance of it. To borrow De Vere’s terms, Cousin “apprehends and reflects all forms of thought, but is incapable of receiving a principle or resting in a conclusion” (212); in fact, Cousin teaches that the eclectic can never rest in any conclusion, but must continually revise the truths he has discovered through contact with new ideas. The dialectic so central to Cousin’s eclecticism, and certainly influenced by his long association with Hegel, is crucial both to De Vere’s theory of poetic genius and to the structure of The Princess. Tennyson’s detractors argued that he mirrored the perplexity of modern life without offering his readers any higher ground—to apprehend the character of the age, to erect a new philosophy, or to found a new school of poetry. These are the worries, too, of Kingsley in “The Prevailing Epidemic”: the self-absorbed ramblings of too many modern poets betray the “want of individuality, original conception, and tenacity of purpose” that De Vere recognizes as the negative tendency of a versatile imagination. But versatility, De Vere argues, is also a “high poetic attribute” that Tennyson possesses in greater abundance than any other living poet: “It consists in mobility of temperament united to a large mind, and an imagination that diffuses or concentrates itself at will” (212). While Chretien might agree with De Vere as to Tennyson’s versatility, he bases his case against Tennyson’s place in literary history on his lack of mastery.
over his “multifarious” subjects. Versatility without a mastering gesture leads only to restless confusion.

De Vere interprets Tennyson’s output (up through The Princess) in exactly opposite terms: Tennyson’s “‘various talents’ are united with ‘the single mind,’ [giving him] ‘moral might and mastery o’er mankind’” (212), and a coherent poetic vision. The versatility capable of achieving genuine synthesis, of “resting” in a conclusion, “enables the poet to apply his own experience, analogically and by imaginative induction, to regions unknown and forms of life untried,—at once passing into the being of others and retaining his own” (212). (Not coincidentally, this is precisely what Tennyson says in The Princess about men and women joined in love.) Being able to undergo the influence of diverse impressions, and still retain an inner core of self, seems essential both to an eclectic-critical method and to Tennyson’s approach to poetry, as De Vere understands it. As proof of Tennyson’s likely high position in the annals of his art, De Vere refers his readers to Tennyson’s ability to create characters who combine “attributes of universality and individuality,” appealing both to common humanity, which does not lose its essential contour over time, and to the peculiar character of the age. In other words, Tennyson eclectically combines those features of human nature that will endure, and explores the external features of the age alongside them, helping to determine what the nineteenth century will bequeath to posterity. De Vere emphasizes that having only the ability to portray realistically individual character does not make a poet great; equally, any attempt to exist solely upon the ambrosia of the universal leads to a “want of moral depth and tenacity.” Poets who neglect the reality of their own time “remain for ever but imitators” (212); therefore, the poet who would speak to his fellows and to posterity must successfully navigate the unknown in the mundane vessel of his own time and place. Among recent poets Tennyson is unusual, De Vere believes, in his exploration of ordinary human “affections which depend not on instinct or imagination alone, but which, growing out of the heart, are modified by circumstance and association, and constitute the varied texture of social existence” (226). For De Vere, it is Tennyson’s “versatility of heart” that makes him almost uniquely able to sympathize with persons caught up in the particular circumstances of life in the nineteenth century.

As Isobel Armstrong argues in Victorian Scrutinies, the “sympathy” so highly valued by De Vere is more than an expression; it forms part of a pragmatic critical vocabulary, which placed “emphasis [. . . ] almost invariably on the human or social reference of the work of art, on its effect on the reader, and hence on the needs of the reader” (6). According to Armstrong, for Victorian critics sympathy was “the faculty of sharing and understand-
ing the situation of another person by being able to change places with him
in imagination” (9). In Tennyson this “faculty of sharing” was no doubt
instinctive, but was also reinforced in his character by his interactions with
the Apostles. The greatest poets of necessity possess the largest sympathies,
and these sympathies derive from “versatility of heart.” De Vere believes
that all great poets, whenever and wherever they live, share this fundamen-
tal trait, a “vital power” common to “poetical periods” in history: “when
men have ceased to be pressed down by the selfish wants of savage life, and
not yet hardened and made selfish by the conventions of over civilization,
the imagination has a versatility and sympathy, a vital power, which at
other periods is quite unknown” (213). Like the historians Macaulay and
Carlyle, De Vere links natural religion and natural poetry to periods when
imaginative sympathy predominates; however, he asserts that, along with
only a few other modern poets, Tennyson retains the capacity for sympa-
thy that makes great poetry possible.

Confident that poetry will continue as long as the faculties producing it
exist within at least one person, De Vere disagrees with those who believe
that “modern England does not contain the materials of poetry”: “those
materials unquestionably are obscured by the rubbish that now overlays
them; and to extricate and exhibit them requires […] unusual poetic dis-
cernment” (227). Tennyson, of course, is unusually capable of “extricat[ing]
and exhibit[ing]” the poetic aspects of modern life. While the youthful Ten-
nyson’s versatility might have been of a more pliable character, in maturity
his gift shows itself in a widening sympathy with the circumstances of his
age and country. De Vere considers the early eclectic phase as a necessary
one in the evolution of Tennyson’s poetic powers:

The versatility of a very young poet is indeed but a part of his docility. He
will listen, with the susceptive faith of youth, successively to each of the
great masters of song; and the echo which remains in his ear will in some
degree modulate his tone. He will trace every path in which the Muse has
trod, in the hope of reaching that point from which they diverge; and it
is well that he should try all things, provided he hold fast to that which
is best. The infancy of the life poetic, like that of all life, learns much by
unconscious imitation; but it can only so learn when the poet possesses
those high faculties which seek, through imitation, only to work out their
own development. True genius will soon cast aside whatever is alien to its
individual nature; while, on the other hand, incorporating into its proper
substance all poetic elements that are truly congenial, it will blend them
also with each other, and stamp upon them a unity of its own. The poet
will be original when he wields collectively the powers that were once his
only alternately; and versatility will then have been exalted into a higher gift,—that of comprehensiveness. (213)

As a picture of artistic development, this passage hints at the central role of eclecticism in forming a personal style. Greater than the sum of one’s education, and yet bearing some structural similarities to it, eclecticism enables an artist to develop an individual style; the artist must acquire an intimate knowledge of the traditions of his or her art, imitate its greatest masters, and possess the genius to withstand their influence. The artist of genius discards “whatever is alien” and incorporates whatever is “congenial,” “blend[ing]” these elements in a unified creation—an idea of genius that was central in the Renaissance, but which became controversial in the eighteenth century with the shift to a Romantic conception of originality. De Vere conveys a powerful sense both of the artist’s stature relative to history and the enlargement of the artist who “wields” its riches; he also suggests how comparatively rare must be the birth and maturation of a true artist, especially as history increases the number of potential stylistic models. Although most critics would have recognized that not all great works of art were immediately available for imitation, in the nineteenth century they were unlikely to cordon off any historical period as being irrelevant to contemporary artistic production; in fact, the greatest difficulty artists such as Tennyson confronted was the superabundance of history, that nothing would be excluded from speculation and appropriation. For De Vere, the nineteenth century shows its poetic versatility in its ceaseless effort to find new sources of poetic inspiration; the materials of poetry seemingly exhausted, the age invents a world of its own: “All regions of the earth have been ransacked for the materials of poetry—Persia, Arabia, Hindostan, Iceland: it has been the ambition of the poet to reproduce the forms and manners, if not the mind, of the remotest lands; and where the imagination has been content to tread on English soil, it has commonly taken refuge in some remote period of our history, and recounted the Saxon legend, the chivalrous exploit, or the feuds of border warfare” (214). Far from judging such eclectic form and content as symptomatic of the confusion of the age or, worse, as signaling the death of poetry, De Vere hails this romantic eclecticism as proof of the health of the art. Furthermore, a poet’s choice of subject will depend not on the circumstances of the age, but primarily on his or her “moral nature, and the preponderance in it of a vivid sympathy with reality on the one hand, or on the other, of an ardent aspiration after the ideal” (214). De Vere’s delineation of the “ideal” and “national” schools of poetry (the former concerned with embodying the abstract and the latter focused on reality) leads him to the crowning
instance of Tennyson’s supremacy: while at first he resembled his immediate precursors, Keats and Shelley, whose poetry seemed “distilled from poetry, rather than drawn from the living sources of life and truth” (227), Tennyson has progressed from ideal abstractions to “robust and characteristic” national sentiments.

In De Vere’s view, Tennyson’s greatness derives from his amplitude, his wider view and greater variety in representing the natural, moral, and intellectual spheres of human existence. Combining a thorough comprehension of timeless human nature with an acute recognition of the aspirations of his own age, Tennyson thus achieves the desired synthesis of antique and modern sentiment, ideal and national humanity. In evaluating the general thrust of De Vere’s argument, it is evident that he did not need The Princess to convince him that Tennyson would ultimately have “taken his place among the true poets of his country” (227); but the particular features of this long poem did allow De Vere to demonstrate Tennyson’s progress from youthful to mature “versatility,” and, more specifically, the poet’s masterful investigation of modern attitudes against the background of an eclectic historicism.

When Walter Pater wrote in 1888, “In this late day certainly, no critical process can be conducted reasonably without eclecticism,” he had in mind as his “justifying example” the poetry of Tennyson: “How illustrative of monosyllabic effect, of sonorous Latin, of the phraseology of science, of metaphysic, of colloquialism even, are the writings of Tennyson; yet with what fine, fastidious scholarship throughout!” (Appreciations 17). Pater never doubted that Tennyson’s versatility was a sign of his greatness. In his view literature was not the transcription of “mere fact, but of fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms” (10). In The Princess Tennyson grasped the complexity of this “soul-fact” through his eclecticism. Despite the sincerity of the convictions that underlie Chretien’s analysis of the poem, or perhaps because of them, he is unable to perceive that Tennyson’s medley is more than a collection of unrelated facts—the mental “auction room” he thought an apt representation of the poet’s mind—but rather reality modified by taste and feeling. The eclecticism that seemed to be picking and choosing, a “mine of conceits,” is the foundation of Tennyson’s originality; it is the source of his creativity. The very commonness of naïve eclecticism hints at the difficulty of the eclectic process, and the rarity of this form of genius. Although Tennyson did not intend to make the form of his poem an issue of
contention, it was inevitable that his medley would provoke anxious discussion about the intellectual and material eclecticism of the age, particularly as it touched upon moral questions. Tennyson was keenly aware of the dangers of a solitary and solipsistic eclecticism, as we see in “The Palace of Art,” and *The Princess* strains with the effort to find its *juste milieu*. Even in the present age, with our noted fondness for problem texts, no one would want to argue that *The Princess* is the great work of Tennyson’s maturity; but because it is less than perfect, and betrays the poet’s struggles with form, it gives us a template with which to approach a far greater work such as *In Memoriam*, which is no less eclectic than its precursor. It, too, canvasses dialectically “the state of current taste and thinking,” before finally resting in synthesis. There, finally, Tennyson’s eclecticism brings him to a religious compromise that would come to represent the spiritual aspiration of an entire generation, and to a poetic form that would give his generation its voice.