Chapter Two

Tennyson’s Hollow Oes and Aes

I. The Abyss of Sorrow

As has always been recognized, Alfred Tennyson’s characteristic mood and poetic mode was melancholy. He himself often spoke of the “black blood of the Tennysons,” and in the brilliant essay that ushered him onto the literary stage in 1831, Arthur Hallam described him as a “poet of sensation” in the line of Shelley and Keats, and a poet of the “melancholy, which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry” (190). Early-twentieth-century criticism tended to see him as a poet with little to say but with a remarkable virtuosity for expressing the mood of melancholy. In fact, once Harold Nicolson generated the “two Tennysons” concept in 1923, the “Tennyson problem” for criticism was to separate the “real Tennyson,” the melancholy mystic of the wolds, from the factitious Tennyson, the dull-witted spokesman of Victorian values. In effect, the two-Tennyson theory has long distinguished between Tennyson’s intimate self and his public “character,” his depth of feeling and his conscience.

Among the critics of this period, T. S. Eliot offered the most eloquent account of the two Tennysons and also came closest to fusing them back into one: the Victorian period, he wrote,

had, for the most part, no hold on permanent things, or permanent truths about man and God and life and death. The surface of Tennyson stirred about with his time; and he had nothing to which to hold fast except his unique and unerring feeling for the sound of words. But in this he had something that no one else had. Tennyson’s surface, his technical accomplishment, is intimate with his depths: what we most quickly see about Tennyson is that which moves between the surface and the depths, that which is of slight importance. By looking innocently at the surface we are most likely to come to the depths, to the abyss of sorrow. (“In Memoriam,” 620)
Eliot’s “one body of water theory” almost seems to unite Tennyson’s surface “character” with his deep self, but his metaphor preserves the lurking dualism, since surface and depth signify language and feeling. Like all major post-Enlightenment poets, Tennyson attempted to fuse the two, the inner self, or subject, and the public world of language, the subjective and the objective, but Eliot can only explain how this is done by recapitulating Hallam’s notion that the sheer sounds of the verse communicate “shades of fine emotion in the human heart . . . which are too subtle and too rapid to admit of corresponding phrases” (Hallam, 194). On the other hand, Tennyson’s use of surfaces to conjure depths, especially within an “abyss of sorrow,” suggests that he was writing in the melancholy allegorical mode, that the surface is semblance, a painted veil. The surface that “stirs about with his time” is the Carlylean time-vesture, the ideological character of the age, the conscience and public character of the poet. Like Thomson’s, Tennyson’s poetry is allegorical as it seeks to reveal “that void of darkness and old terror” beneath “life’s pleasant veil of various error.”

Later twentieth-century criticism of Tennyson tended to preserve the old notion of two Tennysons in one way or another. For Christopher Ricks, as well as other critics of the last generation, Tennyson is “the poet of the nursery,” whose essential self (his depths) are purely “natural” and pre-ideological, something like Adorno’s “primordial human nature,” and the factitious Tennyson is the superficial overlay of Victorian cant. The problem remains, however, of explaining how Tennyson manages to express “primordial human nature” through the public discourse of language. One solution seems to be offered by turning to Julia Kristeva’s theory that the divided self, the subject split between conscious and unconscious, expresses itself in a poetic language in which the conscious mind speaks in the “language of the Father,” and the unconscious speaks in a “semiotic” mode, a natural language of rhythm and sound patterning that refers not to conscious rationality but to the Platonic *chora*, the “unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted” (*Desire*, 133). Kristeva’s theory is especially suggestive for Tennyson since it seems to explain the often noted discrepancy between Tennyson’s apparent ideological meanings and his subversive emotions, conveyed from the abyss of sorrow in prosodic measure. Moreover, since “semiotic” language is associated by Kristeva with the babbling of infants, her theory would enable us to hold on to the notion of Tennyson as the poet of the nursery, uttering a language that must be authoritative because it is utterly “natural,” uncorrupted by ideology. Unfortunately, however, even if Kristeva’s theory is accepted, the prelinguistic utterances of the semiotic would not be comprehensible in the public domain of symbolic language, and, in any case, though Tennyson’s
unconscious mind and even his poetic rhythms may often work against his apparent meaning, his unconscious is not purely “natural” but is also subject to ideology. Despite Kristeva, it remains unclear, in Eliot’s terms, how the surface expresses the depths, the “abyss of sorrow,” in comprehensible terms. For my purposes the issue is clearer if we resolve Tennyson’s “two selves” into the single but conflicted melancholy self, the conscience turned against the oceanic depths. From this point of view, the “surface” expresses the conscience, or character, always available to the symbolic order of language, and the “depths” are intimated allegorically. In short, the two-Tennyson problem is the problem of Victorian melancholy.

As Carlyle might put it, the “surface” of Tennyson consists wholly of the outward trappings of socially available discourses, but beneath them lies a “basis of darkness . . . [that] stretches down fearfully to the regions of death and Night” (Works, 28: 4). Carlyle’s account of the darkness of infinite depths and the “blindness” needed to perceive them suggests the inadequacy of Eliot’s visual approach to Tennyson’s depths. Eliot’s analysis founders, I think, on his use of visual metaphors to describe responses to Tennyson’s poetry—we look through the surfaces to the depths, but trying to do this only brings us to an undergraduate notion of peeling off the superficial and apparently superfluous “level” of language to get at the hidden meaning beneath, as though poetry were a palimpsest on which the words are a mere encumbrance to be cleared away before getting to a hidden meaning that must somehow exist prior to language. The common though misleading metaphor that speaks of levels of meaning has a kind of Tennysonian sanction, since Tennyson himself speaks of words that half-conceal and half-reveal the thought within, but if we read his surface as allegorical we do not look past words to another level but look at them as signifiers of an anterior, lost meaning—the abyss of sorrow available to the penetrative imagination, perhaps even a feminine chora, which would help to explain Tennyson’s characteristic use of women as allegorical signifiers of the melancholy depths of things.

Eliot’s aural response is probably more helpful than his visual imagery, since one cannot simply look through the veil of Tennyson’s surfaces, let alone “plough it aside,” as Ruskin would seem to suggest. Though I will argue that Tennyson’s poetry is ultimately allegorical, the allegorical mode is supplemented by another element of melancholy poetics suggested by Hallam’s and Eliot’s perception of the communicative possibilities of sound and rhythm. As Herbert Tucker argues, Tennyson’s “unnamable” depths are accessible in his rhythms. Drawing on Tennyson’s many references to a “measure of doom,” to “Aeonian music measuring out / The steps of Time, the shocks of Chance—/ The blows of Death,” Tucker argues that Tennyson’s “rhythms imitate the experience of unconditional
being, which he feels as a pulse at the core of consciousness and intuits at its outer limits as a patterned, governing force; they also express the deep if restricted range of moods that arise in owning the fatal necessity which that experience discloses” (Tennyson, 30).

Of course Tennyson is here allegorizing the abstractions of doom and death with the sensual imagery of music, but it is true that readers must sound the depths of Tennyson’s verse to identify the sensual veil of the allegory. A similar contention has been strongly argued by Matthew Campbell, though Campbell approaches Tennyson less by sounding the depth of his melancholy than by stressing the “rhythm of his will” when Tennyson speaks as the advocate of his age’s and his own strong will to self-control. For Campbell, the occurrences of rhythmic lassitude or hesitation in Tennyson’s verse are measures of the poet’s sense of the resistance that must be overcome by the strong will. Campbell and Tucker may not agree on which of Tennyson’s rhythmic tendencies to use as a baseline, but both suggest that, as Campbell puts it, the sonic qualities of Tennyson’s verse communicate “a concern with sounding a sense of self or character” (4–5). In my terms, of course, “self” and “character” are not synonymous, but character is the “strong will to self control,” so I would recast Campbell’s argument slightly by suggesting that the “rhythm of will” is the imposition of the constraints of character on the self. The poet’s inwardness is expressed or contained in the pulses of his measures, which are, at times, described as the pulses of his own heart beating. Armstrong and Tucker both note that at his most “visionary” Tennyson is also at his most solipsistic. In his youthful “Armageddon,” vision offers no visual image at all (Tucker, Tennyson, 44) but the speaker, attuned to his own heartbeat, affirms that

There was a beating in the atmosphere,  
An indefinable pulsation  
Inaudible to outward sense, but felt  
Through the deep heart of every living thing,  
As if the great heart of the Universe  
Heaved with tumultuous throbbings on the vast  
Suspense of some grand issue. (iv. 28–34)

For Tucker, “this ontological throb is the Tennysonian signature . . . it communicates the poet’s need to find in the rhythmic evidence of his own heartbeat a means of sympathetic contact with a power beyond anything he could see or touch” (Tennyson, 48). This does sound very much like Tennyson was, or felt himself to be, reverberating or echoing some anteri-
or truth, possibly something like what Adorno calls “primordial human nature,” and it certainly seems to be the case that he was representing his own inmost emotions, perhaps even his unconscious, in the throbblings of his verse. Ideally a reader would sound the depths of Tennyson’s poetry and of his inmost self precisely because the depths sound themselves, as Tennyson says in “The Epic,” by the poet’s “mouthing out his hollow oes and aes, / Deep chested music” (50–51). These echoic, resounding vowels are, like his “Aeonian” measures, a hallmark of his verse and seem a direct expression from his “abyss of sorrow,” from the “abysmal deeps of Personality” (“Palace of Art,” Poems, 1: 223).

Tennyson would seem, in Kristeva’s terms, to have pioneered a “specific economy of imaginary discourses . . . [that] are constitutively very close to depression and at the same time show a shift from depression to possible meaning” (Black Sun, 100). These discourses include the transmutation of the *imaginary* into artifice specifically through “the means of prosody, the language beyond language that inserts into the sign the rhythm and alliteration of semiotic processes . . . which unsettles naming and, by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign, affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing” (Black Sun, 97). Kristeva’s attempt to identify a language beyond language is inevitably obscure, but her emphasis on the ability of poetic artifice, and particularly rhythm, to express the truth of melancholy is consistent with Hallam’s and Tucker’s analyses of the acoustics of Tennyson’s melancholy verse and with the perception most notoriously expressed by Eliot that although Tennyson had little of note to say, as the “saddest of English poets” he was able to communicate from the abyss of sorrow because of his remarkable “technical accomplishment.”

Matthew Rowlinson’s intricate psychoanalytic reading of “Armageddon” as allegorical is more helpful than Kristeva’s generalizations. Rowlinson’s account is much too involved to recapitulate here, but he sees Tennyson’s visionary mode as an attempt to recover a vision, a memory, of an ideal that is always already lost and that only ever existed as an ego-ideal. Though Rowlinson does not associate the poem with “Kubla Khan,” he does note that the ideal is imagined as a fabulously splendid city presided over by an “oriental despot,” in a version of the “imperial sublime” (45), and we may be reminded of Coleridge’s “Abyssinian maid” by Tennyson’s attempts to recover the visionary city “represented . . . as a woman.” Moreover, just as the “shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves” in Coleridge’s poem, the vision of Armageddon “is visible as [a woman] only as a reflection in a river” (47). Rowlinson’s reading of the poem as allegory is far more psychoanalytically technical than anything I
propose, but it is consistent with seeing the reflected vision as *schein* or semblance, and the poem generally as melancholy allegory in the tradition I have traced.

The poetics of melancholy, adumbrated in “Armageddon,” anticipate a thematic interest in exotic Orientalism that I discuss more fully in the next section, but first the remarkable “technical accomplishment” that enabled Tennyson to speak from the “abyss of sorrow” may be described through close examination of his poetry, and for the remainder of this section I will look at a few of his best poems to discuss both the characteristics of his prosody and the subjective “truth” of the melancholia it expresses. Tennyson’s most explicit poem to express these concerns is the beautiful lyric from *The Princess*, “Tears, Idle Tears.”

“Tears, Idle Tears” appears, somewhat incongruously, at a point in *The Princess* when Princess Ida calls for a cheerful song to “lightlier move / The minutes” (iv. 17–18) over the preprandial wine. For Tennyson, if not for Princess Ida, the music of the lyrical mode does not abridge the time but rather sounds the abyss, as the singer of the lyric is immediately engulfed in her own melancholy music:

> Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
> Tears from the depths 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. 21–25)

Speaking through the medium of a nameless woman, Tennyson sounds the depths of an impersonal, apparently universal sorrow that lies too deep for words but wells from the depths to drown the self in tears. The nameless singer has no identity, no character, beyond the “divine despair” that speaks itself through her in the form of tears. Rather like the Indian maid of *Endymion*, she is simply a personification of sadness, and far from providing amusement for an idle moment, she brings a corpse to the feast, the corpse of dead love, days that are no more, the “Death in Life” (iv. 40) of the past buried in memory. Though the singer presents herself as the medium of “divine despair,” the consolation of melancholy presents itself, in language suggestive of Benjamin’s emphasis on ruins and corpses, as a spirit that “haunt[s] / About the moulder’d lodges of the past” (iv. 44–45), as a “death’s-head at the wine” (iv. 69).

The “divine despair” is allegorized as universal, but correspondences with *In Memoriam* indicate that the poem allegorizes Tennyson’s own grief for the death of Arthur Hallam, that it gains its force as an allegory of the poet’s own mind. The “fair ship” bearing “lost Arthur’s loved remains” in
In Memoriam (ix. 1–3) is strongly paralleled in the second stanza of “Tears, Idle Tears”:

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge,
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more. (iv. 26–30)

More subtly, yet even more significantly, the imagery of the third stanza allegorizes and generalizes the personal grief expressed in In Memoriam by the melancholy brooding on Hallam's tomb and coating it over with the semblance of divine glory, what Wordsworth called the “gleam, / The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration and the Poet's dream” (“Elegiac Stanzas,”ll.14–16):

When on my bed the moonlight falls,
I know that in thy place of rest
By that broad water of the west,
There comes a glory on the walls:

Thy marble bright in dark appears,
As slowly steals a silver flame
Along the letters of thy name,
And o'er the number of thy years.

The mystic glory swims away;
From off my bed the moonlight dies;
And closing eaves of wearied eyes,
I sleep till dusk is dipt in gray:

And then I know the mist is drawn
A lucid veil from coast to coast,
And in the dark church like a ghost
Thy tablet glimmers to the dawn. (lxvii. 1–16)

In the song from The Princess this fantasy of the risen spirit is evoked by the matter-of-fact and seemingly less meaningful image of the dawn slowly illuminating the bedroom window: the “divine despair” is

sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more. (iv. 31–35)

The passage from *The Princess* replaces the wholly imagined glimmer of Hallam's tomb with the perfectly familiar, matter-of-fact “glimmering square” of the casement, providing an allegorical signifier of subjective grief with an enigmatic image from the object world and demonstrating, in Benjamin's terms, the power of the melancholic gaze to transform an image “incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own” into “something different: a key to a realm of hidden knowledge” (see chapter 1, section II). Though spoken through an already allegorized figure of “divine despair,” the lyric is manifestly an allegory of the poet's own mind, and its images, incapable of speaking any universal truth, speak with the absolute ontological authority of subjective truth.

Tennyson provided several explanations of the poem, as well as of the phrase “divine despair,” including the comment that “This song came to me on the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient” (*Poems*, 2: 232n). The remark obviously invites comparison with “Tintern Abbey,” but Tennyson’s poem darkens Wordsworth’s nostalgia, replacing its renovating virtue with a deeper melancholy that does not renovate but does provide the transient individual a sense of communion with an abiding, eternal power, and of separation from it in the transience of mortality. As the last stanza makes clear, the poem is not a tribute to renovating power but a lament for irredeemable loss:

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. (iv. 36–40)

Nostalgia can only bring the dead past into the life of the present as the corpse of dead love. In another comment on the poem, however, Tennyson hinted at a more positive, though no more expressible reading of melancholy inwardness: “It is in a way like St. Paul’s ‘groanings which cannot be uttered’ . . . It is what I always have felt even from a boy, and what as a boy I called the ‘passion of the past’” (Poems, 3: 32n). “Groanings” hardly seems a reassuring word, but this explanation at least carries a theological hope, like St. Paul’s, that once freed from the transient, from “the body of this death” (Romans 7:24), the self may fully
reach its union with the “abiding.” The poem’s mourning for the self expressed as a passion for the past thematizes melancholy as a source of transpersonal authority on the basis of idiosyncratic personal associations but also, on the surface, in the apparently wholly natural form of felt sensation, tears. In this way melancholy is its own seal of authenticity, not produced by the mere individual but coming to him from an unimpeachable if unidentifiable source.

In “Tears, Idle Tears,” but even more obviously in “Mariana,” “The Lady of Shalott,” and “The Palace of Art,” Tennyson represents melancholy as theorized by Adorno: “Inwardness is the historical prison of primordial human nature. The emotion of the trapped is melancholy. In melancholy truth represents itself, and the movement of melancholy is one toward the delivery of lost ‘meaning.’ A truly dialectical notion. For if truth presents itself in melancholy, it indeed presents itself to pure inwardness exclusively as semblance” (60–61). Quite possibly something like “primordial human nature” is what Tennyson had in mind by “the abiding,” though more likely he was thinking of a transcendent cosmic power made immanent in the emotion of melancholy. Tennyson’s decision to mimic the sensibilities of women, particularly of abandoned women, to represent the emotion of the trapped, however, is not “natural” but a response to the Victorian gender ideology that saw women as more subject to emotional lability than men and also more or less literally entrapped them in the domestic parlor and, more abstractly, in confined roles within the social structure. It is perhaps worth noting that Kierkegaard, who largely inspired Adorno’s thought on melancholy, in the long section of Either/Or entitled “Silhouettes” centered one of his most extensive meditations on the dialectic of inwardness in the analysis of the sensibilities of three imagined women abandoned by their lovers. Tennyson’s imagining of the melancholy Mariana is no more purely natural than Kierkegaard’s imaginative creation of three complex female melancholics—both assume that women are more a prey to sensations than men because they are less reflective and intellectual and more at the mercy of circumstances. Instead of a dialectical movement of inwardness, however, Tennyson represents the emotion of the trapped as a helpless emotional emptiness and stasis.

Mariana is not physically trapped in the moated grange, but from the first stanza it is clear that she is stuck there:

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She only said, “My life is dreary,
He cometh not,” she said;
She said, “I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!” (11.1–12)

The moat is presumably not filled with crocodiles, and the latch is “unlifted,” not “unliftable”: evidently the most oppressive physical restraints on Mariana are the “shadow of the poplar” that “fell / Upon her head, across her brow” (11.55–56) and the “thick-moted sunbeam” that “lay / Athwart the chambers” (11.78–79). Even Mariana should be able to fight her way through a shadow and a sunbeam, so students reading the poem make a kind of sense when they ask, “why doesn’t she just leave and find the guy?” But the question misses the point. As an objectified image of the poet’s “imaginary,” she is segregated from the faculty of will and is not trapped in the grange but in her own brooding passivity, by her own melancholy. John Stuart Mill famously selected “Mariana” as the poem that best represented Tennyson’s “power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it, and to summon up the feeling itself, with a power not to be surpassed by anything but reality” (“Tennyson’s Poems,” 561–62). Mill’s remark suggests that Tennyson’s scenery, his visible surface, is to be read as a bodily forth of the inward invisible as in melancholy. It is a form of allegory in which the subjectivity fixates on the “a priori object[s]” that represent its phenomenology. In “Mariana” the strong emotion is melancholia, and James Richardson’s superb reading of the poem reveals some of the ways Tennyson created it through the setting:

[R]ead “With blackest moss the flower-plots were thickly crust-
ed,” one thinks of Keats’s “To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-
trees”—in both lines, moss is not just an object, but something that happens. Similarly, the nails are “rusted,” not “rusty,” and the thatch is in an ambiguous disarray because “weeded,” a word that usually means “cleared of weeds,” is forced to mean “weedy” as well. Things have happened to helpless objects, and there is a sense of causeless effect. Not “no one lifted the latch,” but “unlifted was the clinking latch,” which refuses even to imagine a being capable of working a latch. Its silent clinking therefore becomes a ghostly attack. Similarly, nails work loose often enough but having them fall emphasizes the unpredictability of a Tennysonian world in which the stabilizing forces of friction and process often fail. (45)
As Richardson’s description makes clear, the poems creates its feeling of melancholy through images of decay as Mariana's mind fixates on transience and her grange visibly decomposes into a ruin. The entire setting is an allegorical emblem of decomposition and the mortality of all things human.

Mariana projects her own sense of helplessness on the poem’s objects, or, rather, Tennyson projects a sense of melancholy onto Mariana, who projects it onto the objects. Numerous critics have described how Tennyson’s prosodic virtuosity further engenders the state of helpless entrapment: rhythmically, the iambic tetrameter lines are slowed by strong caesuras: “With blackest moss // the flower-plots / Were thickly crusted // one and all.” Even the three syllables of “one and all” must be further stretched to match the length of the longer feet. Similarly, the verse is further slowed, even to a stop, as the stanza reaches the refrain with its trimeter lines that must be stretched to match the rhythm of the dominant tetrameter. The verse is further slowed by the heavy punctuation of the refrain and by the long vowel sounds—not only the “hollow oes and aes” but especially the interminable “ees” of “dreary . . . aweary, aweary.” The rhyme scheme adds further to the sense of stasis with its constant resoundings of the long vowels and with the echoing double rhymes of the refrain. In addition, and most obviously, the repetition of the almost unvarying and always wearying refrain at the end of every stanza generates a frustrated sense of always returning to where we started. Combined with Tennyson’s masterful orchestration of vowels, diphthongs, and impeding consonant clusters, the sound of the verse effectively sounds Mariana’s depths. The cumulative effect of the dense patterning of sound is, as Tucker well describes it (reversing the negative polarity of Pound’s complaint about the “gumminess” of Victorian verse), a kind of “‘gum’ or mucilage of a rare vocalic and consonantal music” in which “discretely observed details are held together by the power of sound” (Tennyson, 73), and, for that matter, Mariana is herself stuck in place, trapped in the poem’s viscous language and in her own obsessive refrain. The echoic sounds, moreover, suggest a kind of hollowness at the core of Mariana’s consciousness, a desolation that bespeaks the loss at the origin of desire. What Mariana most obviously has lost is the absent lover, but as the discreteness of the observed detail implies, she more fundamentally lacks the organizing power of a shaping will or fully coherent self. Tennyson’s imitation of a female passivity and sensibility, of Mariana’s melancholy, is embodied in the poem’s stasis, its lack of a “rhythm of will” (see Campbell, 71–85). In this claustrophobic sense of entrapment each object seems to lie crushingly athwart Mariana’s consciousness and, as Carol Christ says, the “mesmerizing” “acuteness” of the objects “conveys the blankness of a
mind that under prolonged emotional strain seizes upon any object to find some release. Only through the sensation of objects can Mariana escape her despair within. Yet the sharpness of the images shows this impression is painful as well. The isolation of images from each other suggests her own isolation” (19–20).

As Christ discusses at length, in Victorian literature grief and melancholy frequently produce a heightening of sensation at the expense of reflection. This form of brooding is most conspicuously present in “Mariana,” in the speaker of Maud brooding on a seashell, and in Rossetti’s speaker in “My Sister’s Sleep” and, especially, “The Woodspurge,” but it is also evident in Ruskin’s turning the precisely observed details of Pre-Raphaelite painting into narratives, in the paintings themselves, and even in Lockwood’s analogy comparing a prisoner’s scrutiny of a spider with country dwellers’ observations of their neighbors in the prison of rural isolation. Intense melancholic brooding generally lacks the organizing will to produce narrative on the order of Wuthering Heights, but it does engender a hyperesthesia like that in Hallam’s poetics of sensation as described by Armstrong: “Since self is composed of ‘fragments of being,’ and is ‘the common character’ of a series of ‘momentary beings,’ the way to transform ‘self’ or consciousness is to attack through sensation the ‘ligatures’ of habitual thought which bind the self in a coherent chain of association” (Victorian Poetry, 63). The experienced self is, of course, the coherent self bound by the ligatures of habitual thought, except when sensation overwhelms reflection in the blankness of melancholy; for Hallam the “ultimate fact of consciousness [is] that the soul exists as one subject in various successive states” (137). Consequently, loosing the ligatures of thought may have the possibly salutary effect of subverting ideology, as Armstrong suggests, but it obliterates the unified self, and brings about the loss of the ego-ideal theorized by Freud as the fundamental characteristic of melancholy. On the other hand, this melancholic hyperesthesia is obviously a heightening of the aesthetic sense, and it indicates one strong reason for the close link in Victorian poetry between melancholy and poetic sensibility in a tendency to articulate dead but enigmatic objects into an allegorical structure representative of feeling. This link is still more clearly apparent in “The Palace of Art,” in which the soul is separated from the organizing self (“I”) of the speaker:

I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.
I said, “O Soul, make merry and carouse,
Dear soul, for all is well!” (ll.1–4)
The soul is an aesthete who does not possess the will to make distinctions among her many artistic treasures. Without a will, she is also without a self since, as J. F. Ferrier argued, a person without a “will . . . is not a conscious or percipient being, not an ego” (Campbell, 69). The opening stanza of “The Palace of Art” obviously draws on the aesthetic pipe dream of “Kubla Khan,” but more significantly it anticipates the aesthetic hedonism of “The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam” and the “new hedonism” of late Victorian aestheticism. But this hyperesthesia inevitably turns out to be its own punishment, the stagnant entrapment of solipsistic melancholy, a hell found in the “abysmal deeps of Personality” (“The Palace of Art,” 1.223).

As is implicit in “Mariana” and explicit in “The Palace of Art,” Tennyson’s representation of the aesthetic reveries of entrapped women is a form of melancholy brooding on death, or at least “Death in Life.” Mariana is, in effect, buried alive in the moated grange, and the soul in her pleasure house is ultimately seen as a corpse “mouldering with the dull earth’s mouldering sod” (1.261) and “Shut up as in a crumbling tomb, girt round / With blackness as a solid wall” (11.273–74). Consequently, poring on emblems in the object world, especially on works of art, ultimately amounts to brooding on death, on corpses: where once she had seen works of art, the soul comes to see “corpses three months old” (1.243). That brooding women and works of art both allegorize death and decay is startling, but this point has been extensively and convincingly argued in Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body.* Examining Poe’s infamous identification of the dead or dying woman as the most poetic thing in existence, Bronfen argues that

Part of the equation between femininity and death resides precisely in the fact that Woman as man’s object of desire (*objet a*) is on the side of death not only because she repeats the always already lost primordial mother but because she so often serves as a non-reciprocal “dead” figure of imaginary projection, given that, in Lacan’s terms, “the whole of [man’s] realization in the sexual relation comes down to fantasy.” (63)

In terms more accessible to Tennyson, the pursuit of beauty in Romantic allegory is always a pursuit simultaneously of beauty as the fantasized ego-ideal and of death. Bronfen draws on the work of Sarah Kofman to offer the provocative suggestion that

all effective art is the work of melancholy precisely because . . . the creation of beauty allows us to escape from the elusiveness of the material world into an illusion of eternity (a denial of loss), even as it
imposes on us the realization that beauty is itself elusive, intangible, receding. Because it is created on the basis of the same elusiveness it tries to obliterate, what art in fact does is mourn beauty, and in so doing it mourns itself. (64)

Tennyson’s simultaneously emphatic and enigmatic representation of these issues is another poem about an entrapped woman, “The Lady of Shalott.” “The Lady of Shalott” is a far more self-evidently allegorical work than “Mariana” or even “The Palace of Art,” and most commentators have seen the Lady as a figure for the artistic vocation, weaving representations of the world as it passes by at an appropriately aesthetic distance from her tower, already framed both in her window and in her mirror. From the start the artist figure is presented as removed from life in a haunted realm where only “Shadows of the world appear” (1.48). Tennyson himself said that the key to the poem is the end of part ii, when the lady sees “two young lovers lately wed” and declares herself “half sick of shadows”: “The newborn love for something, for some one in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the shadows into that of realities” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 1: 117). What tempts the Lady, however, is not a reality but an image, the shadow of an ideal from the fantasy world of romance, “bold Sir Lancelot” in a flashing of the light that never was on sea or land. The climax of the poem literalizes the allegorical linking of feminine beauty, desire, aesthetic image, and death in the figure of the Lady’s corpse, a signifier floating into Camelot as a signed and titled work of art. The “lovely” corpse (1.169) is Poe’s most poetical thing in existence par excellence, and the poem is the perfect emblem of Tennyson’s representation of beauty as a result of the melancholy allegorical gaze brooding on death. It is no wonder that it became a Victorian icon.

Tennyson’s usual gendering of the melancholy/aesthetic temperament as female is not a compliment to women but an aspersion on the aesthetic sensibility as lacking the masculine powers of reflection and productive will, so it is not surprising that he also represents melancholia in the male mind only if it is sufficiently “second rate” and “sensitive” as in “Supposed Confessions,” drugged into passive stupor as in “The Lotos-Eaters,” or decayed by senescence as in “Tithonus.” The poems featuring women may, if only incidentally, provide a critique of the stupefying effect of Victorian gender ideology, but “The Lotos-Eaters” and “Ulysses” offer an apparently more calculated representation of the demoralizing, melancholy effects of emergent capitalism even on vigorous men.

Entrapped in effeminate passivity by the drug, the mariners of “The Lotos-Eaters” epitomize the buried life, speaking as “voices from the
grave” (1.34) to brood on “death, dark death” (1.98) and on the death in life of memory sepulchred in the depths of the mind as “Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass” (1.113). An even greater prosodic tour de force than “Mariana,” “The Lotos-Eaters” similarly fuses the strong emotion of the perceiving mind with the perceived world in a “rich vocalic music.” The strong emotion once again is melancholy and constitutes a morbid withdrawal from the world of action, but in this case it is “mild-minded melancholy,” an addictively pleasant respite from labor. The shifting rhythms of the sleepily seductive choric song are perhaps even more masterfully lulling than the introductory Spenserian stanzas, but the opening stanza will serve to illustrate the comparison to “Mariana”:

“Courage!” he said, and pointed toward the land,
“This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon.”
In the afternoon they came unto a land
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,
Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem. (ll.1–9)

Ulysses’ brief dramatic monologue of nine words is the only counterpoint in the poem to the mariners’ longing for peace, and even this brief speech invites submission to the elements: “Courage! . . . This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon.” Aside from the single word, “Courage,” the whole stanza, and the whole poem, submit to a lassitude that, in the context of the Victorian work ethic, can only be regarded as unmanly idleness, degrading sloth. The mariners never mount more than a weak sophistic argument in favor of abandoning their work, their king, their country, and their families. The argument amounts to an affirmation that the life of a vegetable is preferable to the life of a laboring man, and their whole lengthy song can be described as unmanly whining: “why / Should life all labour be? / Let us alone . . . / Let us alone . . . / Let us alone . . . (11.86–93). The argument of the poetry, however, is stronger than that of the logic; even the speaker of the opening stanza provides a prosodic narcotic stronger than any rational argument. The Spenserian stanza, with its intricate recursive rhymes and its full stop in the closing alexandrine and couplet, is particularly well suited to create a “Mariana”-like sense of hollowness and stasis, and Tennyson adds to and exaggerates these effects with hypnotic power. In the first four lines the sense that mariners and verse alike are going nowhere is achieved not only by the echoic recursive rhymes
but also by the outrageous repetition of the word “land” as its own rhyme, by eliminating the forward momentum “shoreward,” stalling it in the internal near double-rhyme of “toward,” and by impeding the momentum of “soon” with the premature internal rhyme of “afternoon,” which returns the verse to where it started by rhyming with itself in line 4. The “land” of line 3 is still the “land” of line 1, and repeating the word “afternoon” twice in two lines does make it seem “always afternoon,” as if time were standing still, like the uncanny downward smoke of the waterfall. It would be tedious and superfluous to review all of the tricks of assonance and alliteration that further contribute both to the sense of stasis and to an echoing that seems to reverberate from hollowness. I will, however, jump to the end of the stanza to note the eeriness of the waterfall that pauses, not coincidentally, at the pause of the caesura in the final line, and to the brilliant use of the alexandrine’s gratuitous sixth foot to glance back at the whole of the preceding stanza, and call everything into doubt with the implication that it may all be, indeed, a “weary dream” that only “did seem.” These seductive effects are a reminder that melancholy is not all bad—even Mariana’s house was “dreamy” (1.61)—but they also increase the sense of being mastered by sensation, giving in to solipsistic isolation, to a distorted and distorting subjectivity that may be only hallucinatory semblance. Tennyson’s representation of melancholy inwardness in “Mariana” has been likened to Walter Pater’s powerful recommendation of hyperestheticism as the best use of the solipsism he posits as the unavoidable human condition, but Pater’s account is in some ways even more strongly suggestive of “The Lotus-Eaters”:

[T]he whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of these impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (60)

Like Mariana, the lotos-eating mariners are prisoners of their own consciousness, and despite their solidarity as a chorus, each evidently lives within his own dream of a world. As was the case for the visionary poet of “Armageddon,” the apparently cosmic cadence that each man hears as a confirmation of his own rhythm of existence turns out to be only his own heartbeat, and voices from without seem to be spoken by fellow mariners sealed off in the narrowest of all prisons:
to him the gushing of the wave  
Far far away did seem to mourn and rave  
On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,  
His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;  
And deep-asleep he seemed, yet all awake,  
And music in his ears his beating heart did make. (11.31–36)

This music would seem to be the “Aeonian music” that Tucker persuasively argues is the authoritative source of Tennyson’s inspiration and prosodic practice, and combined here with the phrase “far far away,” which Tennyson said had always had a powerful influence on him, the stanza suggests both that the lotos inspires poetic apprehension akin to Tennyson’s own and that such apprehension involves a melancholy withdrawal of the isolated self. The choric song further develops the attraction of dreamy, self-enclosed, poetic reverie as the mariners praise the “Music that gentlier on the spirit lies, / Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes” (11.50–51). In his revisions for the 1842 version of the poem, Tennyson added lines in which the mariners clearly put themselves morally in the wrong by hubristically identifying themselves with the Epicurean gods in their indifference to human suffering, but in the 1832 version it was quite possible to read the poem as a paean to the inspiring power of the lotos and a justification both for the mariners’ withdrawal from labor and for the poet’s withdrawal from the strenuous business of the world. In fact, in his often perceptive, if also hostile and supercilious, review of the 1832 volume, John Wilson Croker easily associated Tennyson’s singing with that of the mariners: “How they got home you must read in Homer;—Mr. Tennyson—himself, we presume, a dreamy lotos-eater, a delicious lotos-eater—leaves them in full song” (594). Such a reading leaves the poet open to charges of an unmanly shirking of responsibility, so it is not surprising that Croker’s review, like John Wilson’s in Blackwood’s, is rife with ridicule of Tennyson’s supposed effeminacy. Probably because of the poem’s susceptibility to such a reading, Tennyson’s revision for 1842 made clear his condemnation of the mariners’ attitudes.

Still, the poem’s close association of melancholy and song suggests that, for good or ill, melancholy does have an undeniable poetic allure and power, and even the 1842 insertion about the Epicurean gods may be seen as an anticipation of the so-called “new hedonism” of Pater and the aesthetic movement later in the century. To the extent that “The Lotus-Eaters” is seen to endorse withdrawal from labor for the sake of the beauty of sweet music, the poem may be seen as subversive of the Victorian ideology of work, if only because labor is implicitly characterized as weakening the individual self. Isobel Armstrong, however, convincingly argues
that the poem is not simply subversive in its withdrawal from the labor force but is an active and powerful "critique of oppression" (Victorian Poetry, 86):

It is no accident that the mariners’ need for Lotos is to allay the horrors of labour, for opium was often taken by industrial workers for the same reason. . . . "The Lotos-Eaters" is both the expression of the addictive desire in which the drug requires further drugging, and an analysis of the conditions under which the unhappy consciousness of the unhappy body comes into being. (87; emphasis in original)

Armstrong further shows how Tennyson produces a Carlylean, proto-Marxist critique of the alienation of labor: “Tennyson brilliantly renders . . . the psychological state” of laborers reduced to cogs in the industrial process:

For the Lotos-Eaters all experience is always emptying out, because identity itself is transformed, “taken from us” (91), into an estranged past when consciousness has no direct access to what it makes: production, materially and psychologically, is a subtraction from identity; "ah, why / Should life all labour be? . . . Let us alone. What is it that will last? / All things are taken from us, and become / Portions and parcels of the dreadful Past." (87–88, 90–92; emphasis in original)

Armstrong is right, I think, about what the poem accomplishes, though it is impossible to say whether Tennyson fully intended his alienated mariners to represent the alienated conditions of modern industrial labor or whether the implication presents itself as an inevitable analogy with the poet’s alienated self as the laboring consciousness allegorizes it in externalized imagery. The same is true of “Ulysses,” a poem that only seems to reverse the situation of “The Lotos-Eaters” as Ulysses, addressing his mariners, who have somehow returned to Ithaca, develops his call for “Courage!” in an exhortation “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (1.70). Although “Ulysses” is clearly “a poem of will,” as Campbell says (131), in recent years most readers have agreed with Robert Langbaum that Tennyson’s “emotional bias,” “a certain life-weariness, a longing for rest through oblivion,” is “all the more powerful because it appears to be subconscious . . . it even conflicts in a poem like Ulysses with what seems to be his intent” (89). The emotional drag on Ulysses’ call for active will is evident in the rhythm, in what Langbaum calls the “enervated cadence” (90) of Tennyson’s emotional bias. The usual and surely correct way to account for this emotional drag is to recall Tennyson’s comment that
“Ulysses” was a poem of mourning for Arthur Hallam: “The poem was
written soon after Arthur Hallam’s death, and gave my feeling about the
need for going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more sim-
ply than anything in ‘In Memoriam’” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 1: 196).
But though Tennyson was mourning for a friend, the tone of the poem is
not one of mourning but of melancholy, because Ulysses is mourning the
loss of an ego-ideal. Rhetorically, he encourages his mariners and himself
with the affirmation that “Though much is taken, much abides; and
though / We are not now that strength which in old days / Moved earth
and heaven; that which we are, we are” (ll.65–67), but emotionally and
prosodically the poem grieves for the much that is taken, “that strength,”
and laments that “that which we are” is old and comparatively decrepit. As
in “Tears, Idle Tears,” the poem expresses “wild regret” for the “Death in
Life, the days that are no more!” (1.40). Consequently, Ulysses’ remark
that “I am a part of all that I have met” (1.18) is less a boast about his fame
than a lament akin to the Lotos-Eaters’ regret that “All things are taken
from us, and become / Portions and parcels of the Dreadful Past”
(ll.91–92). Even for kings, experience seems not to create a self by the
cumulative accretion of the past, but rather seems to use up the self: the
events he has met have not become a part of him, but he has left parts of
himself behind, with all that he has met:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains. (ll.18–26)

The “untravelled world” for which Ulysses yearns is one of the poem’s sev-
eral echoes of Hamlet, recalling Hamlet’s description of death as the
“undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns”
(III.i.80–81): as Tennyson’s traveler moves forward in time, toward death,
the horizon recedes before him. But Ulysses is not thinking only of the
future and death but also of the “Death in Life,” the remembered past,
which also presents a fading horizon as he moves away from it. Ulysses,
spent in the past, fades into a ghostly “gray spirit yearning in desire”
(1.30) for his irrecoverable past self as well as for the dubious “new things”
(1.28) of the future. The melancholy drag of the rhythm, moreover, is
almost thematized in the metrical puns of line 22, which assert that it is “dull” to pause and make an end, but pause on “pause” at the caesura and make an end on “end.” The enervated cadence of the poem becomes more dramatically apparent as Ulysses’ exhortation reaches what ought to be its rhetorical climax:

My mariners,
Sons that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. (ll.45–56)

Just as the speech gathers speed and approaches a “rhythm of will,” Ulysses’ free forehead crashes into the frolic welcome of a full stop with the heavy caesura of line 49, and only sputters for a few words more before shuddering to another halt with the heavily stressed closing syllable that only returns him to the grim truth he has been trying to overcome: “You and I are old.” From here the cadence proceeds by fits and starts, punctuated with the undeniable melancholy of mortality: “Death closes all”; “the long day wanes.” The slow spondaic feet and the trademark “hollow oes and aes” assimilate Ulysses’ speech to the many other voices moaning round the deep. The split between Ulysses’ exhortation and his moaning tone seems perfectly to epitomize melancholy dialectic: the symbolic language of rational understanding says one thing, and the semiotic language of prosody says another. But of course this only returns us to Langbaum’s formulation that the subconscious emotional bias in Ulysses conflicts with what seems to be his intent. The overall effect, however formulated, is to present Ulysses as etiolated to a gray spirit, a ghost of his former self, now become a name in a sign system in which words no longer correspond to things.

In both “The Lotos-Eaters” and “Ulysses” the melancholy cadences suggest an alienation of the self from its striving and labor and reflect the economic conditions of Victorian England, but the overdetermined melancholy of the poems is also a function of literary history. The moaning of the deep and the echoing of the twilight are in part a result of
Tennyson’s belated position in literary history. At least since Burton’s excessively allusive introduction to *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in the name of Democritus Jr., a heavily allusive style has been characteristic of the literature of melancholy in the English tradition, and in “Ulysses” the deep moans round conspicuously with the voices of Homer, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and lesser poets. Ulysses’ voice, like those of the Lotos-Eaters, is one among others that seem to speak from the hollow of the grave, or at least from the ghostly afterlife of poetic language. Except for the echoes of Tennyson’s sources in Homer and Dante, the most conspicuous echoes are of *Hamlet* and particularly of Hamlet’s melancholic tendency to “feed on the metaphysical contradictions between finite and infinite, time and eternity.” For Ulysses as for Hamlet, the time is out of joint, or at least he is out of step with time, and for all his speechmaking he is unable to whip himself into action and fulfill the duty he sets himself. On the other hand, as has been often observed, it would hardly seem that Ulysses’ desire to abandon his “aged wife,” his country, and his people is in accord with Victorian values, so even his conscious intent, like that of the Lotos-Eaters, may be seen as an ideological critique of the conditions that wear down not only laborers but even the Captains of Industry. If so, the melancholy of the poem is not, perhaps, at odds with the apparent intent but rather reinforces the debilitating effects of an ideology of strenuous adherence to duty.

The poem, however, is probably best seen as an affirmation of “character” and an expression of conscience meant to reinforce rather than subvert Victorian ideology. Ulysses’ desire to set off from his island home to seek undiscovered lands is certainly consistent with Tennyson’s love for the literature of discovery and with the Victorian admiration of naval heroes, and by Tennyson’s own account the poem was meant to enforce the Victorian call to strive with the conditions of life: it was a call for “going forward, and braving the struggle of life” (Hallam Tennyson, *Memoir*, 1. 96). Consequently, the poem may be seen as an exhortation to the Victorian work ethic, and possibly even to imperial adventure, only attenuated by the emotional bias of Tennyson’s melancholy.

Certainly Ulysses’ desire to seek, to find, and not to yield seems to epitomize the Victorian imperial ideal, and it has been widely thought in part to serve that ideological purpose, but aside from the technical point that the poem is too early to be properly called “Victorian” at all, Matthew Rowlinson points out that it is much too early to speak the imperial idiom that only emerged in the last third of the century. Further, as Rowlinson demonstrates, the use of the poem to promote an ideology that created “the high visibility of ‘Ulysses’ in the canon of Tennyson’s poetry was the result of historical developments that considerably postdate its writing and
publication” (267). Moreover, the tone of Ulysses’ instructions to Telemachus, Rowlinson notes, is preposterously akin not to the rhetoric of the dawn of empire but to its twilight. A poem expressing apparent enthusiasm for the noble work yet to be done in old age, the final lines of “Ulysses” are frequently read at retirement parties, and Rowlinson’s comments capture some of the incongruity of this: “[H]e seems to be imagining between himself and his subjects not just differences of class, but bizarrely, cultural and even racial differences. He sounds, in fact, like a colonial administrator turning over the reins to a successor just before stepping on the boat to go home. But, of course, Ulysses in Ithaca already is at home” (267).

Rowlinson’s argument against reading “Ulysses” as an endorsement and encouragement of imperial ideology is entirely convincing, but as his readings also suggest, the melancholy tone that empowers and characterizes “Ulysses” and all of Tennyson’s best poetry is not ideologically neutral. Though the authority of melancholy is surely its seemingly “natural” source in intense feeling, and though in Tennyson’s verse it seems to inform the rhythms with the bodily pulse of unmediated sensation, I will argue in the next section that Tennyson’s melancholia, though not yet a direct expression of imperial ambition, is heavily mediated by an internalized social discourse combining Romantic, sexist, and Orientalist presuppositions that anticipated and paved the way for the imperialist ideology of the later nineteenth century. The poetry that made Tennyson’s verse so useful for promoting the late Victorian imperial purpose was forged to a great extent from the abyss of his melancholy.

II. The Poetics of Melancholy and the Imperial Imagination

Tennyson’s emblematic use of female or feminized subjectivity to brood on death and art and to allegorize melancholy is a clear reflection of the post-Romantic literary history of his age, and his representation of emasculating melancholy is an apparent representation of the effects of his age’s economic structure, but his melancholy is also a product of political discourse internalized as conscience to structure anomic inwardness within a framework of current sexist and colonialist discourses. Since melancholy is a physical sensation that seems unarguably natural, not ideological, it is not surprising that generations of critics have seen Tennyson’s best and most characteristic poetry as unpolitical, but this perception is itself political and is marked as such in Hallam’s early essay. Even while denying that Tennyson had a political agenda, Hallam noted that the “melancholy which so evidently characterizes the spirit of modern poetry” would ulti-
mately exercise a politically conservative function as “a check acting for conservation against a propulsion toward change.” Though Hallam worried that such poetry “in proportion to its depth and truth is likely to have little immediate authority over public opinion” (190), his reference to “depth and truth” suggests that the authority of melancholy proceeds from the depths of the poetic self and carries with it the truth of feeling that Carlyle called the “felt indubitable certainty of experience” (Works, 1.156).

The most influential Tennysonian of the last generation, Christopher Ricks, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, and A. Dwight Culler, all attempted to disengage the “essential genius” of Tennyson’s melancholy from the encumbrance of its historical moment. Culler’s view of Tennyson’s poetry as the expression of “natural” feeling, however, hints at a reading of Tennyson as an imperialist of the imagination: “Unlike the youthful Keats, Tennyson did not remain silent upon a peak in Darien—rather he plunged volubly into its thickets and claimed province after province for his own” (9).

Tennyson was deeply interested in the possibilities of the Romantic imagination as an imperial selfhood capable of entering into and even appropriating provinces and forms of consciousness initially outside the self, and his “sympathy” enabled him to enter into the feelings of the many female figures who are generally thought to represent his own poetic sensibility. The imaginative imperialism here is spelled out at length in Arthur Hallam’s essay “On Sympathy.” Hallam’s “sympathy” is an emotional process that enables the individual self to avoid solipsism and to achieve some awareness of another’s subjectivity. The poet whose “soul transfers at once her own feelings and adopts those of the new-comer” (Works, 1: 137) is necessarily expanding the individual self to engage with a historically specific “other,” so that when Tennyson is at his most apparently Tennysonian, as in “Mariana,” it is usually through identification with, or sympathy with, a specifically female other, as femaleness was constructed in the nineteenth century. In those poems in which Tennyson seems to gender his own poetic sensibility as feminine, it is within a degrading gender ideology that sees women as more emotional than men but less rational. Also, since women were by definition excluded from political thought, the adoption of female perspectives made it “natural” to disengage the poetic sensibility from the masculine political concerns of the day. When Hallam sought to praise Tennyson as an emotional poet in his review of Poems of 1830, he did so by distinguishing between “poets of reflection, such as Wordsworth,” and what he characterized as the superior, Tennysonian “Poets of sensation,” who possess the “powerful tendency of imagination to a life of immediate sympathy with the external universe” (186). Poets of sensation are implicitly feminized: “Susceptible of the
slightest impulse from external nature, their fine organs trembled into emotion at colors, and sounds, and movements, unperceived or unregarded by duller temperaments” (186). Hallam, moreover, was well aware that the poets of sensation, Shelley and Keats, were not ideologically neutral, but Shelley especially, and Keats by association, was seen as politically radical, even as Jacobinical, so in a futile attempt to defang conservative reviewers he made a point of extricating Tennyson from the politics associated with sensation: “he has also this advantage over [Keats] and his friend Shelley, that he comes before the public unconnected with any political party or peculiar system of opinions” (191). Even though Hallam recognizes that the poetry of sensation has a possibly democratic tendency because poets of sensation “keep no aristocratic state, apart from the sentiments of society at large; they speak to the hearts of all,” he affirms that they are at the top of the human hierarchy so that they “elevate inferior intellects into a higher and purer atmosphere.” Hallam even goes so far as to imply that Milton and Shakespeare were poets of sensation in England’s golden literary age, and that the effect of their writings was nothing less than the construction of national identity, of Englishness: the “knowledge and power” drawn from reading their works was “ours as Englishmen; and amid the flux of generations and customs we retain unimpaired this privilege of intercourse with greatness” (189).

Hallam further observes that the golden age of poetry is long gone in the present unpoetic age, and in so doing he takes the opportunity to position the melancholy Tennyson as a conservative, paradoxically preserving the essential elements of England’s greatness by the melancholy of modern poetry: “In the old times the poetic impulse went along with the general impulse of the nation; in these it is a reaction against it, a check acting for conservation against a propulsion towards change” (190).

For Hallam even the melancholy generally thought a primary characteristic of Tennyson’s essential genius is to be regarded as a product of the historical moment, and despite its effeminate form, it is ideologically aligned with Burkean conservatism and the preservation of Englishness. Hallam and Tennyson paradoxically arrive at the conservative counterforce to the masculine, muscular spirit of the progressive age by colonizing and appropriating the realm of the “weaker” sex, by constructing a feminized version of the powerful imagination of “poets of sensation.” Both Englishness and melancholy are cultural constructions brought into being by a remarkable indulgence in a feminized sensibility. Ultimately, though, such indulgence is structured and controlled by a masculine discourse of personal restraint and social order.

Tennyson’s melancholy exploits the poetic power of dangerous feminine emotional lability and passion that threatens his ideal of masculine
self-control and public order, and makes use of such elements even as it displaces and controls them. His use of feminine personae to represent his poetic sensibility enabled him both to represent erotic longing and to distance himself from what was self-evidently “other.” Since female eroticism was threatening to social order, and was suppressed in middle-class English life and thus unavailable to direct observation, let alone sympathetic colonization, it is not surprising that Tennyson drew on the current discourse of Oriental sensuality both to find sources of erotic, sensual beauty and to push the threat from the center of British bourgeois life. The appropriation of the feminine, of course, suggests not only admiration but also desire and control of it.

As Edward Said has argued, to understand the culture of an imperial nation, we must take into account the relation of that culture to the empire, even, and especially, when the cultural products seem unconcerned with empire. If Said is right, it should not be surprising that Tennyson’s centrality as the generally acclaimed greatest poet of his age was made possible in part by his use of the current discourse of Oriental sensuality. Such a use was almost overdetermined for Tennyson, since the imperial center’s ethical control of rebellious tendencies allegorizes the ethical restraints of the poet’s conscience over the anomic tendencies of the inner self. Though Tennyson’s Orientalist sources often displace his poetic anxieties, they also provide him with a means to explore otherwise forbidden interests in a feminized eroticism, at least as refracted from “Fatima” to “Mariana” or from “A Dream of Fair Women” to “The Palace of Art.” What he hesitated to say as a socially concerned masculine poet, he could say within the more detached, even scholarly voice of Orientalism. And what he was unable to say directly because of the vast, vague, and ineffable quality of inwardness, he could give a local (or colonial) habitation and name by allegory, speaking the other.

A closer look at specific poems in which Tennyson is evidently concerned with his own place in the ethical discourse of his age indicates that he constructed a poetic self not only in terms of the imperial, though feminized, Romantic imagination but also in terms of explicitly political and cultural imperialism. Frequently, Tennyson’s English power is expressed in poems about exploration and discovery, figuring the poet more as a “stout Cortez” than as a Keatsian “chameleon poet” of negative capability. Tennyson could have found the analogy of the poet and the explorer in Keats’s sonnet, or in the many Byronic figures like Childe Harold who cultivate melancholy poetic sensibility in extensive travels to remote regions, but as Alan Sinfield has pointed out, he would also have seen the idea of the poet converge with that of the explorer in Washington Irving’s *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. The continuity of the explorer with the
poet was set up for Tennyson by Irving, who represents Columbus's “poetic temperament” as spreading “a golden and glorious world around him.” As Sinfield notes, “The poetic spirit is the advance guard of capitalism and imperialism, and cannot escape this involvement” (53).

In “On Sublimity” (1827) Tennyson collapses the poetic imagination with the wonder evoked by the literature of voyage and exploration; he allegorizes the inward sublime not in Romantic landscapes of the transforming imagination but in actual exotic, faraway wonders of the natural world. Tennyson sought the sublime in tales of adventurers and explorers reporting on the wonders of the world, from the more or less familiar Fingal’s Cave in the Island of Staffa, and the by then well-known “Niagara’s flood of matchless might,” to the more exotic “stupendous Gungotree,” “Cotopaxi’s cloud-capt majesty,” and “Enormous Chimborazo’s naked pride.” Another poet might have used Mount Snowden or Mont Blanc, but Tennyson’s construction of sublimity called for the remote and exotic or, in the phrase that so influenced his childhood, the “far, far away.” Like Keats, but unlike Cortez, Tennyson’s “realms of gold” were literary, but whereas Keats was discovering the wonders of the literary tradition as he read Chapman’s Homer, Tennyson was exploring the discoveries of Cortez’s followers in the colonial tradition, reading Ulloa’s *A Voyage to South America*. In general, as Paden’s still important *Tennyson in Egypt* reveals, the reading that most influenced the poetry of early Tennyson was overwhelmingly constituted of books of exploration and discovery, and such Orientalist writings as Savary’s *Letters on Egypt* and the works of Sir William Jones.

For Tennyson the danger of the visionary mode was a too complete withdrawal into his own interiority, unmediated by public discourse. Problems of articulating the inner self appear in the early “Armageddon” as a sense of transgression, of sin, at the presumptuousness of the prophetic mode. The speaker sees “such ill-omened things / That it were sin almost to look on them” (i. 53–54). But beyond the sinfulness of gazing upon “Obscene, inutterable phantasies” (i.107) is the more obvious transgression of assuming the visionary perspective of “God’s omniscience” (ii. 27). In language that anticipates the soul’s hubris in “The Palace of Art,” the speaker worships his own sublimity: “in that hour I could have fallen down / Before my own strong soul and worshipped it” (ii. 49–50). To avoid total incoherence, the poet must move beyond the speaker’s foundering in the abyss of the inexpressible and introduce comprehensible content into the sublime, which he accomplishes by mediating his inwardness with publicly available discourses, his sources in the literature of exploration and discovery, calling upon “Cotopaxi’s cloud-capt altitude” (i. 100) and other wonders to give content to his vision. When
Tennyson’s father insisted that he submit a poem for the Cambridge prize competition on the theme of Timbuctoo, he transformed the seemingly incongruous “Armageddon” for the purpose. “Armageddon,” as a visionary poem almost without content, could easily be filled with the content of Tennyson’s favorite literature of exploration and discovery. What he did to transform “Armageddon” into “Timbuctoo” was to muse on “legends quaint and old” (16) of other lost cities that had stirred the European imagination: “divinest Atalantis” and “Imperial Eldorado” (11.22, 24). And now, when the angel appears, he remains too dazzling to be looked upon, but nevertheless he offers a very clear vision of the celestial city as beheld by St. John on Patmos. Finally, near the end of the poem the poet achieves a vision of Timbuctoo, or rather of a rich Oriental city that he imagines as Timbuctoo. He sees

The argent streets o’ the city, imaging
The soft inversion of her tremulous Domes,
Her gardens frequent with the stately Palm,
Her Pagods hung with music of sweet bells,
Her obelisks of ranged Chrysolite,
Minarets and Towers. . . . (ll.227–32)

In “Timbuctoo,” however, Tennyson exhibits his distrust of the visionary mode—the speaker recognizes that Atalantis and Eldorado are fables, and that even Timbuctoo, when it is discovered rather than imagined, will lose its luster. Before the eyes of “keen Discovery” the “brilliant towers” (1.240) of the city will dissolve like the visions of Prospero’s masque, will “Darken, and shrink and shiver into huts, / Black specks amid a waste of dreary sand, / Low-built, mud-walled, Barbarian settlements” (ll.242–45).

Despite his recognition that discovery is a way of discrediting the imagination, and that actuality always falls short of imagination, Tennyson continued to stimulate his imagination with tales of modern adventure that still provided possibilities of magnificence, possibilities to which “Men clung with yearning Hope which would not die” (“Timbuctoo,”1.27). He believed, however, that the poetic sensibility must ultimately submit to the discipline of rational Victorian discourse: Timbuctoo is only imagined as an earthly paradise, and then demoted to sordid actuality as the “Barbarian” huts of an inferior race that evidently need to be “improved” by European discovery and appropriation. In “Timbuctoo” Tennyson pushed the dangerously anarchic sublime from the religious centrality of “Armageddon” to the edges of the world and then controlled it completely by substituting “keen Discovery” for imaginative wonder.
Tennyson's discipline of imaginative longing for wonders at the far edge of the known world with the scourge of conscience remained important in his more mature works. Notoriously, in “Locksley Hall” (1842) when the speaker seeks escape from his emotional entanglement and suffocation in England, he avoids guilty discontent with England by allegorizing the turn inward as a retreat to the vast expanses of the Empire, “some retreat / Deep in yonder shining Orient” (ll.153–54). Better yet he imagines some faraway island, free of all restraints, “all links of habit—there to wander far away” in “Breadths of tropic shade and palms in cluster, knots of Paradise” (ll.157–60). Not only does the speaker of “Locksley Hall” imagine an earthly paradise waiting to be discovered, but so of course do Tennyson’s Ulysses, the poet of “The Hesperides,” and the mariners of “The Lotos-Eaters.” These retreats, however, form only one part in the dialectic of inwardness, for they exist in part to be castigated by the conscience, the inward voice of Victorian ideology.

Sinfield has pointed out that Tennyson’s imaginative flight to the remote edges of the world is a defining quality of the poet who sought imaginative escape from an England less characterized by imagination, beauty, or passion than by the rush for progress characterized in “Locksley Hall,” “in this march of mind / In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind” (ll.165–66). Sinfield describes the process cogently: “Finding imaginative impetus marginalized theoretically and politically in Britain, he invested it in remote places. Finding himself expected to explore states of mind, he did so by using the people and scenery of remote places, and their impact on Europeans” (39). This is, I think, an accurate account of Tennyson’s imaginative activity, but also his flights from the center tend to be associated with transgression, with kinds of experience forbidden to an English gentleman. Seemingly the flight from the center is, in itself, a form of transgression in its refusal to participate in the communal life, but of course the kinds of transgressive experience Tennyson imagines are at the center of British imperial culture—Tennyson only makes them seem marginal, in the same way that Victorian culture generally relegated forbidden experiences to the margins. The notoriety of the speaker’s desires in “Locksley Hall” is not associated with his desire for a tropical paradise but with his desire for an unlimited range of sexual passion: “There the passions cramped no longer shall have scope and breathing space; / I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race” (ll.167–68). The transgressive, imperialist fantasy is almost immediately rejected, simply because the center is more valued than the periphery—or more crudely, because the English and their modern age are immeasurably superior to the lower races at the far end of empire:
I know my words are wild,
. . . I count the grey barbarian lower than the Christian child.

I, to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains,
Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!

Mated with a squalid savage—what to me were sun or clime?
I the heir of all the ages . . . (ll.173–78)

The speaker of “Locksley Hall” is not to be simply identified as Tennyson, but elsewhere Tennyson shares this speaker’s fantasy of escape from restraint by detours through some exotic and erotic paradise preceding a return to the center with reinforced belief in its values, especially the value of conscience and self-control. Ultimately, rebellious feelings are subjugated to the ethical character but the conflict ending in this subjugation constitutes the melancholy dialogue of the mind with itself as both an allegory of the poet’s own mind and an allegory of imperial control.

“Anacaona” (1830), a poem based on material from Irving’s biography of Columbus, describes just such an escape in the context of imperial exploration. According to Irving, Anacaona was the beautiful and intelligent queen of an island paradise. Tennyson’s poem makes the most of her exotic beauty and setting and heightens her erotic appeal: she is “A dark Indian Maiden . . . Wantoning in orange groves / Naked and dark-limbed and gay” (ll.1–6). Though “wantoning” is a rather more loaded term than any authorized by Irving, Tennyson did have ample precedent in Irving for stressing the naked beauty of Anacaona. Irving described the welcome offered the European explorers: “[T]he young women were entirely naked, with merely a fillet round the forehead, their hair falling upon their shoulders. They were beautifully proportioned; their skin smooth and delicate, and their complexion of clear and agreeable brown” (351). According to Irving, however, Anacaona was later killed by the Spaniards, and, further, the discovery of this island paradise, so far from the authority and restraints of home, helped tempt the sailors into mutiny against Columbus. Tennyson’s poem does not mention any of this, though it introduces a somber, foreboding tone in the last stanza: “never more upon the shore . . . wandered happy Anacaona” (ll.77–82). Still, despite the somber ending, “Anacaona” remains a poem of untroubled erotic fantasy—in this case with no apparent sense of guilty transgression. But Tennyson never published it, giving various unconvincing reasons, but perhaps providing the real reason in an unguarded comment describing “that black b_____ Anacaona and her cocoa shadowed coves of niggers—I
cannot have her strolling about the land in this way—it is neither good for her reputation nor mine” (Poems, 1: 308). According to Culler, “Anacaona’ is perhaps the least ambiguous” of the many poems akin to “The Lady of Shalott” in presenting an image of the Poet’s sensibility; Tennyson “could use [Anacaona] as a symbol of the poet not only because she danced and sang the traditional areytos, or ballads, of her people but also because her name and that of her country were so melodious that Tennyson, weaving them into his rhymes, could make it seem as if she and her island were of music all compact” (56). As Culler’s allusions to Prospero’s island might suggest, and given the mutinous behavior of the Spaniards in Tennyson’s source, this poem and others like it (conspicuously “The Lotos-Eaters”) may be attempting a kind of cultural work comparable to that which Stephen Greenblatt attributes to The Tempest. Greenblatt argues that the discovery of an apparent island paradise by the survivors of the shipwrecked “Sea-Venture” of the Virginia Company led to a crisis of authority, since the temptations to remain in paradise rather than proceed to colonial work were almost overpowering at such an extreme distance from governmental authority. The Tempest, he argues, represents Prospero’s staging of “salutary anxiety” to bring the mutineers of a similar shipwreck back to a proper respect for authoritative order. For Tennyson in particular, I would suggest that what Greenblatt calls “salutary anxiety” is melancholy as I have described it, an inner conflict in which conscience or duty always castigates mutinous feeling. The analogy to Greenblatt’s reading of The Tempest is strengthened by the echoes of The Tempest, particularly of Ariel’s song, that, as Isobel Armstrong has said, “haunt” Tennyson’s early poems (Victorian Poetry, 58). Further, like Shakespeare, Tennyson was using narratives of colonial exploration as his source. Certainly his relocation of excesses of eroticism to the edges of the imperial world provides an outlet for overflow that might otherwise threaten the orderly authority at the imperial center—in “Locksley Hall” the deranged speaker can dissipate his dangerously excessive passions in erotic fantasies of tropical paradises. Similarly mutinous fantasies lead Ulysses to abandon his “aged wife” and the Lotos-Eaters to abandon their families.

In “Anacaona,” “The Lotos-Eaters,” “The Hesperides,” and “Ulysses” Tennyson explores the remote margins of the West, but even the discourse about the West was “Orientalist,” as indicated by the word “Indians” to represent Native Americans. Much more often, however, Tennyson drew on the burgeoning discourse of explicit Orientalism for his representations of transgressive exotic otherness. In “Persia” (1827), for example, he makes poetic capital of Oriental names before warming to his theme of the destruction of Persia:
Land of bright eye and lofty brow!
Whose every gale is balmy breath
Of incense from some sunny flower,
Which . . .
Sheds perfume. (ll.1–6)

Persia is personified as an exotically perfumed courtesan, suggesting the effeminacy that made her easy prey to Alexander’s armies. Still more significantly, within colonialist ideology the conquest of the Orient is an Englishman’s duty, so the erotic conquest of the female is appropriated within the sphere of manly duty. Here, as in “The Expedition of Nadir Shah into Hindostan” (1827), which draws on Sir William Jones’s account of the Persian destruction of the Mogul empire in 1738, Tennyson chronicles the loss of Oriental glory and implicitly the concomitant transfer of prestige to the West. The armies of Nadir Shah reduce a paradisial realm to a wasteland: “The land like an Eden before them is fair, / But behind them a wilderness dreary and bare” (ll.19–20). The displacement of the Mogul empire by an anarchic wasteland opened the door to British expansion in India in the eighteenth century, and Tennyson’s poetry seems to open the same door by justifying British control of the undisciplined East.

I do not want to attribute sinister motives to Tennyson but only to note that his numerous early poems on Oriental subjects inevitably took the tone of the dominant Orientalist discourse of his age, that the discipline of unruly states of the empire allegorized the discipline of unruly states of the inward self. For Tennyson’s own poetic development, the most important characteristic of Orientalism is its eroticism. The eroticism that was unsuitable in speaking of the chaste English seemed perfectly “natural” in descriptions of the Orient or Oriental women. In “Thou camest to thy bower my love” (1827), for example, Tennyson was able to write with uncharacteristic erotic directness because he was drawing heavily on Sir William Jones’s translation of the erotic poem the Gitagovinda.5

“The Lotos-Eaters” was primarily based on a passage describing the idyllic lassitude of a colonialist dream in Irving’s Columbus, but the lotus itself comes not only from Homer but from Tennyson’s characteristic accounts of Oriental lushness and luxuriance. The full importance of Orientalist eroticism in forming Tennyson’s poetic sensibility is especially clear in “Fatima” (1832), by far the most impassioned of Tennyson’s female impersonations:

Last night, when some one spoke his name,
From my swift blood that went and came
A thousand little shafts of flame
Were shivered in my narrow frame.
O Love, O fire! once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul through
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew. (ll.15–21)

“Fatima” expresses an unashamed sexual desire, akin to but more outward than the suppressed yearnings of “Mariana,” and this sexual frankness is made possible for Tennyson by displacing it onto an Oriental subjectivity. Like “Mariana,” it is a poem about waiting and facing the alternatives of sexual fulfillment or death, but in the case of “Fatima” much more clearly than of “Mariana,” it is explicitly a longing for erotic fulfillment as death:

My whole soul waiting silently,
All naked in a sultry sky,
Droops blinded with his shining eye:
I will possess him or will die.
I will grow round him in his place
Grow, live, die looking on his face,
Die, dying clasped in his embrace. (ll.36–42)

“Fatima” is important to our understanding of Tennyson if only because it represents an Oriental other that helps to externalize and express the buried Western subjectivity and especially to suggest the energy of suppressed passion in Tennyson’s more canonical poems as well as the strength of moral consciousness in conflict with the libidinal desires of the deep self. Similarly, in “A Dream of Fair Women” (1832) the eroticism owes nothing to the apparent inspiration, Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women, but rather is picked up on another detour into Oriental sensuality via Savary’s Letters on Egypt. Savary, not Chaucer, stimulated reverie about “hushed seraglios” (1.36), and Cleopatra, the dominant figure of the poem, owes little to Chaucer’s Cleopatra or even to Shakespeare’s, despite her “swarthy cheeks” (27) from Antony and Cleopatra.

Tennyson’s representation of Cleopatra is especially striking because it parallels his much better known representation of the soul in “The Palace of Art” (1832). The soul, generally assumed to represent the evil consequences of living in art, falls from grace by becoming a kind of hubristic inspiration to spiritual anarchy:

“I take possession of man’s mind and deed.
I care not what the sects may brawl.
I sit as God holding no form of creed,
But contemplating all.” (ll.209–12)
Cleopatra, in “A Dream of Fair Women,” makes an analogous claim: “I governed men by change, and so I swayed / All moods” (11.130–31). The implication is that Tennyson’s fear of art detached from social good is at least in part a fear of the eroticism that both attracts and repels him in representations of the Orient.

In its original form “A Dream of Fair Women” was, like “The Palace of Art,” a representation of the poetic spirit divorcing itself from the social order. The opening stanzas compared the poet with a balloonist raised high above humankind and, like the soul in “The Palace of Art” or like the Lady of Shalott, viewing humankind from a detached, “aesthetic distance”:

So, lifted high, the Poet at his will
Lets the great world flit from him, seeing all,
Higher through secret splendours mounting still,
Selfpoised, nor fears to fall. (Poems, 1: 480n)

An earlier version even more strongly suggests the similarities among the soul’s, the poet’s, and Cleopatra’s ability to be an unmoved mover: “The poet’s steadfast soul, poured out in songs, / Unmoved moves all things with exceeding might” (Poems, 1: 480n). “A Dream of Fair Women,” structured like “The Palace of Art” as a series of tableaux, seems to have been an analogous effort to analyze the dangers of unrestricted art or imagination, of the excessive profusion of images that characterize allegory or an eastern despotism of sensual excess, and it seems, moreover, to have seen these dangers as analogous to the dangers represented by Eastern female sensuality and its supposed tyranny over the rational mind. Some of the influences of Orientalist discourse remain evident in “The Palace of Art” itself. Ricks points out that the poem “was probably influenced by Sir William Jones” and that there “are also affinities with George Sandys’s account of Egyptian ‘Palaces’ in his Travels” (Tennyson, Poems, 1: 437n), but the most obvious Orientalist influence is Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, whose “stately pleasure dome” is ostentatiously echoed in the “lordly pleasure-house” of Tennyson’s opening line. In the 1832 version the soul’s downfall in the midst of embroideries of “every legend fair / Which the supreme Caucasian mind / Carved out of Nature for itself” was given a somewhat Oriental cast by reference to a mysterious “Asiatic dame”: “in her pride,” the soul beholds in herself

    Madonna, Ganymede,
    Or the Asiatic dame—
Still changing, as a lighthouse in the night
    Changeth athwart the gleaming main. (Poems, 1: 446n)
Whoever the “Asiatic dame” may be, anxiety about the possibly anarchic power of art is here associated with the threat of a disordered, feminized mutability.

The clearest example of Tennyson’s early uses of Oriental lore to construct and express a poetic sensibility is the poem Hallam cited as characteristic of Tennyson’s genius at its best, “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.” Hallam’s praise of the poem, not incidentally, coyly indicates how the source could be simultaneously innocent and expressive of forbidden desires: “our author,” he says, “has, with great judgment, selected our old acquaintance, ‘the good Haroun Alraschid,’ as the most prominent object of our childish interest, and with him has called up one of those luxurious garden scenes, the account of which, in plain prose, used to make our mouth water for sherbet, since luckily we were too young to think much about Zobeide!” (192).

The poem itself is a colonialist’s dream. The fantasy is distanced by setting it in childhood, and the “realms of gold” represented in the poem are of course literary realms. Still, the poem indicates that for Tennyson the “golden realms” of literature were often very like the “golden realms” dreamed of by imperial conquerors. Besides, as Said has made clear, the Orient only existed for the West as a literary realm, as the discourse of Orientalism. The childhood memories are recalled as a voyage into the Middle East “many a sheeny summer-morn, / Adown the Tigris I was borne, / By Bagdat’s shrines of fretted gold” (ll.5–7). Arabia is transformed by the poet into a literal golden realm—everything he sees is a treasure: the “costly doors” (1.17), the “gold glittering” of lamplight” (1.18), the “broi-
dered sofas” (1.19), even the natural landscape is “damask-work, and deep inlay / Of braided blooms” (ll.28–29). The stream is seen as wealth: “dia-
mond rillets” and “crystal arches” all “silver-chiming” (ll.48–51); the lake is covered with “diamond-plots” (1.85); the leaves are “rich gold-green” (1.82); the flowers are “studded wide / With disks and tiars” (ll.63–64), and even the anchor is silver. The shallop eventually enters into the palace and harem of Haroun Alraschid, where still greater riches are exhibited, climaxing not in sherbet but in erotic voyeurism:

Then stole I up, and trancedly
Gazed on the Persian girl alone,
Serene with argent-lidded eyes
Amorous, and lashes like to rays
Of darkness, and a brow of pearl
Tressed with redolent ebony,
In many a dark delicious curl,
Flowing beneath her rose-hued zone. (ll.133–40)
The scene is reminiscent of Porphyro’s voyeurism in Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes,” but Tennyson arrives at this expression of erotic desire by a route that takes him like a conqueror through an Eastern version of Eldorado. Once again Tennyson’s “poetry of sensation” is not an emanation of his autonomous essential genius but a social construct dependent on England’s contemporary Orientalist discourse. As Culler notes, the poem’s final vision brings the poet face to face with Haroun Alraschid: “[I]n the 185th tale of The Arabian Nights, on which the poem is based, there is nothing the young Prince, who has secretly stolen to an assignation with the Caliph’s favorite, would less rather see than the Caliph himself. Yet this is what Tennyson has him do, and so the heady amorous vision dissolves in boyish laughter” (32). The voyeurism, for Culler, is whitewashed by the innocent boyishness of the poet, but one might argue that the apparent complicity of the Caliph, whose eyes laugh “With merriment of kingly pride,” suggests a willingness to share his harem, and thus suggests precisely the triangulation of desire that Eve Sedgwick has argued is the paradigm of male homosocial desire in the nineteenth century. Peace is made with the colonial other, and the treaty is ratified by the exchange or sharing of the woman. It is under the approving glance of the Caliph that Tennyson’s poetic, erotic, and cultural imperialism are all made acceptable, even “natural” within the hegemonic homosocial and colonialist culture of his day.

Tennyson’s later works generally depend less on Orientalist discourse for their inspiration, despite such exceptions as “Akbar’s Dream,” but they continue to depend upon a representation and simultaneous distancing of emotions and modes of thought perceived as feminine. Killham has argued, for example, that the “erotic near Eastern setting invented for the Persian girl is carried over” to The Princess (Poems, 1: 125n), and Sedgwick’s analysis of The Princess has convincingly shown that it represents not female liberation through education but rather an extreme form of male homosocial bonding through the exchange of women. Even in In Memoriam the authoritative masculine voice is achieved by personifying the poet’s emotion, “Sorrow,” as female, a weakness that is long indulged but must eventually be disciplined. As I discuss in the next section, Orientalist fantasies are also at the heart of Maud, Tennyson’s most extensive experiment in the poetics of melancholy.

III. Tennyson’s “Little Hamlet”

Tennyson’s two great poems of mourning and melancholia, In Memoriam and Maud, can to some extent be seen as distinguishing between “normal’ mourning” that eventually finds hard-earned resolution in In Memoriam
and the “pathological’ mourning” of *Maud* that is clearly a form of madness (Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, 255). To be sure, the mourning of *In Memoriam* is so extended and its resolution so dubious that its differentiation from melancholia is not entirely convincing, but the imposed resolution certainly makes it a more “hopeful” poem than *Maud*, which seems to have been written as a sequel to return Tennyson to his accustomed melancholy: “It’s too hopeful [In Memoriam], more than I am myself. I think of adding another to it . . . showing that all the arguments are about as good on one side as the other, and thus throw men back more on the primitive impulses and feelings” (*Poems*, 1:8). However sad and perplexed it may be, *In Memoriam* eventually disciplines the “primitive impulses and feelings” with the Christian ideology of the age, exalting “character” above the “abysmal deeps of personality.” *Maud*, on the other hand, was a generic experiment designed to represent a pathological condition, evidently melancholia: “The whole was intended to be a new form of dramatic composition. I took a man constitutionally diseased and dipt him into the circumstances of the time and took him out on fire” (*Letters*, 2:138). As critics have recognized, Tennyson’s “new form” was recognizably akin to the spasmodic poems that Ludlow and Arnold characterized as allegories of the poet’s own mind, though the word “dramatic” evidently distinguishes the diseased mind from the “poet’s own.” The autobiographical resonances of *Maud*, however, have long been recognized, and even though the speaker cannot be simply equated with Tennyson or the eponymous heroine with Rosa Baring, the poem is evidently a symbolic representation of the poet’s own emotional experience, an allegory of his own mind.

Rather than being the representation of a specific woman known to Tennyson, Maud is a complex allegorical signifier of the Romantic beloved. Like the Poet’s vision in “Alastor,” she is the spectral figuration of the speaker’s ego-ideal or “epipsyche,” and the speaker’s desire for her is allegorized within the courtly tradition as a quest for a queen of Romance (“Rose of the rosebud garden of girls” [i. 902]) and for the perfect beauty that is also death (“Dead perfection” [i. 83]). Like all allegorical emblems, according to Benjamin, Maud is a multivalent signifier, an emblem of beauty, of death, of “Honour that cannot die” (i. 177), of Englishness (“Bright English lily” [i. 738]), of wealth and class status and even, “Cleopatra-like” (i. 216), of the Oriental erotic temptation explored in many of Tennyson’s earlier poems. *Maud* is, in short, a melancholy allegory very much in the tradition of *Alastor* and *Endymion*, and as the erotic pursuit of an insistently Orientalized sexual other, it reiterates Tennyson’s fusion of the imperial Romantic imagination with the imperial spirit of the age. *Maud* is especially important because it is an allegory of both the poet’s own mind and Victorian pathology generally. The “constitutionally
diseased” speaker is explicitly enflamed by the “circumstances of the time” and particularly the economic condition of the age, as the poem represents the “history of a morbid poetic soul, under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 1: 96).

The allegorical character of Maud is, moreover, strikingly illustrative of Benjamin’s thesis that melancholy is generative of allegory: the speaker “brood[s] / On a horror of shatter’d limbs” (i. 55–56), on a “corpse in the pit” (ii. 326), and generally on graves, corpses, and death throughout, beginning with the opening account of the “Mangled and flatten’d and crushed” corpse of his father in the “dreadful hollow,” pausing also on Maud’s mother “mute in her grave as the image in marble above” (i. 159), an anonymous funeral urn (i. 303), the “blacker pit” of yet another grave (i. 335), and culminating in a grim hallucination of his own buried life in a “shallow grave” (ii. 244). The poem is, in effect, the allegory of a consciousness diseased by its own failure to “bury [it]self in [it]self” (i. 75) deeply enough and particularly to “bury / All this dead body of hate” (i. 779–80).

The resultant allegory replays in sharper focus the process I have traced in the earlier poems. The multiplicity of meaning associated with Maud and the protagonist’s quest imbricates the love story with social issues from the outset. Expressing his disgust with the sordid commodity culture of the age, the speaker’s initial desire is not for a woman but for a national cause to heal and unify the diseased spirit of the age, specifically a chivalric, martial spirit to end the economic civil war of each against all:

When a Mammonite mother kills her babe for a burial fee,  
And Timour Mammon grins on a pile of children’s bones,  
Is it peace or war? Better, war! loud war by land and by sea,  
War with a thousand battles, and shaking a hundred thrones! (i. 45–48)

When Maud attracts the speaker’s attention away from brooding on shattered limbs, it is as a “chivalrous battle-song” (i. 383), a bugle call to action:

She is singing a song that is known to me,  
A passionate ballad gallant and gay,  
A martial song like a trumpet’s call!  
. . . .  
Singing of men that in battle array,  
Ready in heart and ready in hand,  
March with banner and bugle and fife  
To the death for their native land. (i. 164–66, 169–72)
The cure for the speaker’s “diseased condition” is to replace the diseased condition of culture with a return to the chivalric spirit of the feudal past, specifically to replace “a time so sordid and mean” (i. 178) with a pursuit “of Death and of Honour that cannot die” (i. 177). The call is eventually realized not as an achieved erotic union with Maud but as a call to an Eastern war in the Crimean, and, as in “Locksley Hall” and other earlier poems, the melancholic anomie of the hero is subordinated to the demands of a militant ideology. As if recapitulating Tennyson’s earlier career, Maud originates in a seemingly contentless melancholia and proceeds through the speaker’s literal recollection of the Arabian Nights to a love synonymous with imperial appropriation of an Orientalized other and finally to outright imperial aggression as the hero enlists to fight in an Eastern war.

The “germ” of Maud, as Tennyson said, was the lyric “O that ’twere possible” (ii. 141–238), a poem written in 1833–34 during his early grieving for Hallam. But despite its emotional origins in Tennyson’s mourning, the poem does not move toward a resolution of grief but rather displaces sadness to a mysterious, undeveloped heterosexual yearning that can have no resolution. As a result, it is not so much a poem of grief as a poem of such purely Tennysonian melancholy that Swinburne called it “the poem of deepest charm and fullest delight of pathos and melody ever written, even by Mr. Tennyson” (3: 125). Harvie Ferguson has pointed out that in modern thought “melancholy has no substance of its own, that it is ‘only’ the sombre mirror in which being reflects itself” (xvi), and Tennyson’s lyric, describing a subject haunted by a vaguely perceived phantom, seems to epitomize a vision of melancholia as the representation of a “deathlike type of pain” that is explicitly a reflection of the subject: “’Tis the blot upon the brain / That will show itself without” (ii. 200–201). Quite possibly the reference to the brain rather than the mind indicates that Tennyson saw the hero’s disease in terms of the age’s “medical materialism,” but the disease manifests itself in and as diseased signs of the times. As in Carlyle’s account of the signs of the times, the deeper meaning is allegorically readable in the signs of the surface, where the infinite bodies forth the finite, and so shows itself without. The speaker can assert his own anguish, but the source of that anguish, its content, remains shadowy and undefined:

Through the hubbub of the market
I steal, a wasted frame,
It crosses here, it crosses there,
Through all that crowd confused and loud,
The shadow still the same;
And on my heavy eyelids
My anguish hangs like shame. (ii. 208–14)

_Maud_ was written, apparently, to provide a context that would make this lyric “intelligible,” in effect to provide a referent, a substance for this nebulous “it,” in response to “a suggestion made by Sir John Simeon, that, to render the poem fully intelligible, a preceding one was necessary. He wrote it; the second poem too required a predecessor, and thus the whole poem was written, as it were, _backwards_” (Hallam Tennyson, _Memoir_, 1: 379).

Tennyson’s development of a love plot to represent the hopelessness of melancholy yearning is of a piece with the pattern traced in the early lyrics, and with the Romantic love represented by the “Alastor” poet’s yearning for his insubstantial ideal likeness, with Endymion’s longing for Cynthia, and with the “Kubla Khan” poet’s longing for the Abyssinian maid. More specifically, however, it all but explicitly recalls the emotional entrapment of “Mariana”:

For am I not, am I not, here alone . . .
Living alone in an empty house,
Here half-hid in the gleaming wood,
Where I hear the dead at midday moan,
And the shrieking rush of the wainscot mouse,
And my own sad name in corners cried,
When the shiver of dancing leaves is thrown
About its echoing chambers wide,
Till a morbid hate and horror have grown
Of a world in which I have hardly mixt,
And a morbid eating lichen fixt
On a heart half-turned to stone. (i. 254–67)

As in “Locksley Hall,” the appropriate response would apparently be to turn from “feminine” “perversity” to mix with the world (“I myself must mix with action, lest I wither by despair” [“Locksley Hall,” 1.98]).

In this case, the speaker does not explicitly embrace the imperialist fantasy of finding some dusky woman to rear his savage race, but he does envision a romance with Maud in strikingly imperialist terms. His fantasy of wedded bliss with Maud is grounded in an actual recollection of the Arabian Nights:

Did I hear it in a doze
Long since, I know not where?
Did I dream it an hour ago,  
When asleep in this arm-chair?

ii

Men were drinking together,  
Drinking and talking of me;  
“Well, if it prove a girl, the boy  
Will have plenty: so let it be.”

iii

Is it an echo of something  
Read with a boy's delight,  
Viziers nodding together  
In some Arabian night? (i. 285–96)

As Ricks points out, it is an echo of some Arabian night, specifically *The Story of Nourredin Ali and Bedreddin Hassan* (*Poems*, 2: 537n). In addition, Maud is imagined as an Oriental seductress:

What if with her sunny hair  
And smile as sunny as cold,  
She meant to weave me a snare  
Of some coquettish deceit,  
Cleopatra-like as of old  
To entangle me when we met,  
To have her lion roll in a silken net  
And fawn at a victor's feet. (i. 212–19)

Further, Maud herself is represented in terms of wealth that resembles the bejeweled version of Oriental splendor set forth in “Recollections of the Arabian Nights”: she is imagined both as the phantom of “O that 'twere possible” and as a gem: “Luminous, gemlike, ghostlike, deathlike” (i. 95). She is a “pearl,” a jewel (i. 352), a “precious stone” (i. 498) with a “sweet purse-mouth” (i. 71). Further, as Tucker observes, the “exotic images the hero imports for Maud’s beauty (the ‘Arab arch,’ the curiously male peacock’s crest) suggest that his fantasies of erotic dominion are imperial fantasies as well” (*Tennyson*, 419). As in the earlier poems, however, the dreams of erotic or imperial conquest are dashed. In fact, Maud’s interfering brother, referred to throughout as the Sultan, interrupts the fantasy
exactly as the good Haroun Alraschid did in “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.” When the Sultan claims possession of his own, he makes inevitable the climactic and disastrous duel that kills the brother and dooms the speaker’s love. It is at precisely this defeat of the dream that the “ghastly Wraith” (ii. 32) appears to provide the antecedent for the shadowy “it” of “O that ’twere possible.” Yet this antecedent hardly gives substance to the melancholy shadowed forth as “it”—the problem is not simply that it is not substance but spirit, but that it apparently negates the most likely reading of “it” as Maud’s ghost, since Maud is still alive when it appears. The mystery only deepens around the meaning of the externalization of the “blot upon the brain.”

Finally, as in the earlier poems, the seductive, unmanning imperial fantasy provides, perhaps, languorous reverie:

There is none like her, none.
Nor will be when our summers have deceased.
O, art thou sighing for Lebanon
In the long breeze that streams to thy delicious East,
Sighing for Lebanon,
Dark Cedar, though thy limbs have here increased,
Upon a pastoral slope as fair,
And looking to the South, and fed
With honeyed rain and delicate air,
And haunted by the starry head
Of her whose gentle will has changed my fate,
And made my life a perfumed altar-flame. (i. 611–22)

But this feminized, perfumed reverie must eventually give way to the masculine actualities of empire. In the case of Maud, masculine activity is vigorous indeed: the speaker not only kills the Sultan but joins his nation’s imperial cause to fight against Eastern iniquities, to fight for the good, “to embrace the purpose of God and the doom assigned.” Whether the dreadful warmongering at the end of Maud is attributed to Tennyson or to his speaker, it is certainly consistent with both Tennyson’s earlier tendencies and with the psychological movement of Maud from reverie, through erotic and imperial fantasy, to actual imperial warfare and a reassuring solidarity with Englishness: “I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind” (iii. 58).

The longing for a revival of chivalric honor in Maud is consistent with Tennyson’s medievalism elsewhere and suggests that his “poems made on . . . chivalric bones” (Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, v. 198), like Morris’s “Concerning Geffray Teste-Noire,” are a product of melancholy
brooding on the loss of a social ideal in the strife of modern commodity culture. John Lucas has persuasively argued that Tennyson as laureate had no problem as a spokesman for the chivalry idealized in the medieval rhetoric that depicted Victoria as Gloriana and Albert, in Tennyson’s words, as “Scarce other than my king’s ideal knight” (Dedication to Idylls of the King, 1.6), but in the 1850s, at the time of Maud, Englishness was clearly aligned with the commercial, commodity culture celebrated at the First Great Exhibition of 1851, but excoriated in Maud as a particularly vile form of civil war (i. 21–52). The deepest source of melancholia in Maud is the speaker’s inability to align himself with the commercial spirit that he associates with a “lust of gold” that is “Horrible, hateful, monstrous, not to be told” (iii. 39–41), akin to the degrading sexual lust described by Shakespeare as “Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust” (Sonnet 129, 1.4). From this perspective, the courtly love tradition evoked by representing Maud as “Queen Rose of the rosebud garden of girls” (i. 902) is actively antithetical to the conditions of English culture.

A fuller account of the relation of melancholia in Maud to the spirit of the age is, perhaps, best achieved by considering Tennyson’s reference to the work as a “little Hamlet” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 1: 296). Like Hamlet, the speaker of Maud is melancholy because the time is out of joint, or at least because he is alienated from it. As I have discussed, the Victorian age was particularly attuned to Hamlet’s melancholia as “at once the sense of the soul’s infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring” (Bradley, 108), and a similar comment by Coleridge provides a useful suggestion regarding how Tennyson’s “little Hamlet” might be read as an experiment in genre; speaking of Hamlet’s “morbid excess” of meditation on his own mind, Coleridge remarks that

The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet’s mind, which, uneated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within and abstracted from the world without,—giving substance to shadows and throwing a mist over all common-place activities. It is the nature of thought to be indefinite;—definition belongs to external imagery alone. Here it is that the sense of sublimity arises, not from the sight of an outward object, but from the beholder’s reflection upon it;—not from the sensuous impression, but from the imaginative reflex. . . . Hamlet feels this; his senses are in a state of trance, and he looks upon external things as hieroglyphics. (Lectures, 344–45)
In terms of genre, *Hamlet* seems to have served both Romantic and Victorian poets as a model of what Coleridge represents as the melancholy sublime. Writing of a time when verse drama was effectively defunct, Romantic and Victorian poets characteristically chose closet drama or, to use the term Tennyson chose for *Maud*, monodrama, to represent a melancholic monomania akin to Hamlet’s. The most obvious English example is Byron’s *Manfred* with its many echoes of *Hamlet*, but as Bradley and Arnold recognized, Goethe’s *Faust* is an even more significant modern version of the melancholy sublime. The conspicuous Victorian examples are *Maud* itself and Arnold’s *Empedocles on Etna*, so it is particularly appropriate that Arnold suppressed the Hamlet-like broodings, the melancholy of the modern world, in a phrase that applies equally well to all works that rely on hieroglyphics to shadow forth the “infinite within,” to the Romantic and Victorian works I have mentioned, and to the poetic aspirations of the nineteenth century generally:

[T]he modern critic not only permits a false practice; he absolutely prescribes false aims.—”A true allegory of the state of one’s own mind in a representative history,” the Poet is told, “is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry.”—And accordingly he attempts it. An allegory of the state of one’s own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No assuredly, it is not, it never can be so; no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim. . . . *Faust*, itself, judged as a whole, and judged strictly as a poetical work, is defective. (Prose Works, 1: 8)

Coleridge’s reference to “hieroglyphics” and Arnold’s to “allegory” suggest a generic inheritance from *Hamlet* of greater significance than the use of dramatic form to depict melancholia. The most significant generic feature in all of these works is allegory or, more specifically, the melancholy allegory described by Benjamin.

Benjamin’s discussion of allegory is all the more obviously pertinent to Tennyson’s “little *Hamlet*” because it was developed to explain the seventeenth-century German tragic drama that ostentatiously used the same allegorical principles that *Hamlet* used far more indirectly (Origin, 191). Benjamin comments that “for *Hamlet*, as indeed for all Shakespearian ‘tragedies,’ the theory of the Trauerspiel is predestined to contain the prolegomena of interpretation” (228). *Hamlet*, like *Maud*, can be seen as a complex meditation and allegorical contextualization to cope with the figure of a ghost, and both revolve around the central character’s contemplation of death and burial. “In the *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century,” says Benjamin, “the corpse becomes quite simply the pre-eminent
emblematic property” (218), as in *Hamlet* the pre-eminent emblematic properties are the dead king, the skull of Yorick, and the open grave of Ophelia, and as in *Maud* they are the corpses in the “dreadful hollow” and, eventually, the speaker’s own corpse as he hallucinates his burial.

Perhaps the best way to describe allegory in this sense is to return once again to Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” In Coleridge’s headnote the vision of his reverie is described as already formulated in language: “all the images rose up . . . as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expression, without any sensation or consciousness of effort” (*Works*, 102). This is exactly what Benjamin describes as the spurious claim of the Romantic symbol, “which miraculously unites the beauty of form with the highest fullness of being” (164), but as Coleridge’s work suggests, it is possible only in an opium-induced reverie. It is a pipe dream, and the only way to fix it in language in the waking world is by an allegory that “immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning” (165). Unlike the symbol, which is momentary and, in Blake’s terms, finds “eternity in a moment,” allegory is a sequential, temporal progression of signs that seek recovery, or “redemption” of the lost fullness of being, so the actual poem of “Kubla Khan” does not record the vision but only the allegory of love and the desire for recovery: “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song” (ll.42–43). Recording loss, and separation of the sign from being, allegory is necessarily melancholy.

As we have seen, de Man defines post-Romantic allegory, following Benjamin, as the sequential presentation of signs that always point to anterior signs, so that the essence of the allegorical sign is “pure anteriority,” and this rather strikingly calls to mind Tennyson’s composition of *Maud* “as it were, backwards.” As Tucker describes it, *Maud* “situates its hero reactively, his phase of passion having been prompted by some action anterior to the text” (*Tennyson*, 413). The poem seems almost uncannily to mesh with Benjamin’s account of “the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline” (*Origin*, 166).

As allegory, *Maud* fits neatly into the series of late Romantic poems of melancholy quest discussed earlier. Like “Kubla Khan,” *Alastor*, and *Endymion*, *Maud* is the account of a man seeking a projection of his own ego-ideal (the “blot” upon his brain, projected without), a woman who has never really existed. Ricks has described the poem in exactly these terms, noting that Maud appears “ghostlike, deathlike, half the night long / Growing and feeding and growing” in the speaker’s dreams: “[T]his unsubstantiality . . . is the poem’s peculiar regret. It is a poem about losing someone whom you have never really had. She is at first beautiful, but
as a gem, as an epitome of womankind, as a phantasmal pulse, a dreamlike vision” (238). Similarly, as Culler notes, Tennyson pointed out that the “memory [presumably of the hero’s betrothed in part i, section vii] is a phantasmal one which he cannot trace to its origin” (201).

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Tennyson’s work resembles that of the baroque German dramatists, since his work was recognized as baroque in his own time. Walter Bagehot famously labeled Tennyson the foremost exemplar of the “ornate” poet. His interest in depicting madness, moreover, was bound to involve a representation that ostentatiously separated the language of poetry from “fullness of being,” that abandoned the Romantic symbol for an allegorized mode that underscores the alienation of the speaker’s mind from actuality. As has always been noted, Maud abounds with what Ruskin called the “pathetic fallacy,” figurative language resulting from “violent feelings” that “produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things” (5: 205). For Ruskin such imagery is the product of a “morbid,” deranged subjectivity, as it seems the natural language of madness. The sequence of pathetic fallacy in Maud, the sequence of morbid signs, produces a kind of morbid allegory, the perfect representation, perhaps, of melancholia.

The most obvious and most often noted pathetic fallacy in Maud occurs at the very outset, in the speaker’s personification, or genitalization, of the blood-red lips of the “dreadful hollow” (i. 2). The allegorical significations in Maud may be read in a variety of ways, including, of course, as a sublimation of grief in the imperial work of the nation and as a working through in Freudian or Lacanian terms of the loss of the father emblematized by the hollow. The hollow is, of course, the “ghastly pit” (i. 5) in which the father’s body was found, and its “blood-red” ledges suggest the female genitals as symbolic of death and burial in mother earth, as burial within the self, of birth and the loss of unity with the mother, and of the castrating wound that represents loss of the father and loss of the phallus as ego-ideal. The hollow is, in short, an explicit and overdetermined sign of absence and loss at the origin of the speaker’s emotional life, of his desire, and of his quest. As everyone recognizes, however, the imposition of the speaker’s consciousness on nature, the rampant excess of figurative meaning in the pathetic fallacy, is above all symptomatic of the speaker’s morbid subjectivity, the kind of solipsistic alienation that afflicted the entrapped Mariana, the Lady of Shalott, the soul in “The Palace of Art,” and, of course, the buried self hallucinated later in Maud, so the hollow must also be seen as an emblem of morbid solipsism itself, an emblem of melancholy.

The multivalent significance of this image and others makes it impossible or hopelessly reductive to read a single coherent allegorical plot in
Maud. Like Hamlet, the speaker thinks “too curiously,” but his mad excess of meaning is itself the point. As Benjamin argues, “Overnaming [is] the linguistic being of melancholy” (“On Language,” 122), and it is also the allegorical poetry of the melancholy sublime: “With every idea the moment of expression coincides with a veritable eruption of images, which gives rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors. This is how the sublime is presented in this style” (Origin, 173). For this reason, “the basic characteristic of allegory . . . is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning” (Origin, 177). Still, something specific can be extracted from this sublime: clearly the “dreadful hollow,” whatever else it may signify, is an allegorical emblem of death, and, coming at the very beginning of the poem, it positions all of the speaker’s subsequent comments, like Hamlet’s, as a gloomy contemplation of death. Further, the opening lines indicate that in the solipsistic brooding of the speaker, everything becomes an emblem of death: “And Echo, there, whatever is asked her, answers ‘Death.’” As a further subtle implication that the answer “Death” is ventriloquized by the speaker, Echo answers “Death” conspicuously where the verse needs to echo, or rhyme with, “heath”: the off-rhyme indicates the speaker’s tendency to hear or understand nature in terms of his own imposition of allegorical meaning, just as when he variously hears the cawing of ravens once as “Keep watch and ward, keep watch and ward” (i. 247) and later as “Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud” (i. 414). As an emblem both of death and of the speaker’s morbidly deranged perception and tendency to allegorize, the “dreadful hollow” is an overdetermined emblem of melancholy itself. In addition, if Walt Whitman’s ear is to be trusted, the word “hollow” especially sounds Tennyson’s depths: “Tennyson shows, more than any poet I know . . . how much there is in finest verbalism. There is a latent charm in mere words, and in the voice ringing them, which he has caught and brought out, beyond all others—as in the line, ‘And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight’” (quoted in Culler, 4–5).

The whole of Maud, in its incoherence, seems almost a parody of conventional allegory. Examples of morbid, deranged allegorization, ubiquitous in the poem, include the speaker’s moralizing upon the “lovely shell” (ii. 49) found on the Breton coast as an ambiguous figure of either the speaker’s passive fragility or his “force to withstand” (ii. 72). Another example is the whole of the famous lyric “Come into the garden, Maud” (i.xxii), with its seeming parody of courtly love allegory as the roses and lilies discourse beneath the “planet of Love” (i. 857). The effect of such imagery is to represent the pathological, hysterical structures of the speaker’s emotions (Christ, 26–27). They represent an allegory of the speaker’s own mind, as Tennyson more or less described Maud: “You must remember always, in reading it, what it is meant to be—a drama in lyrics. It
shows the unfolding of a lonely, morbid soul, touched with inherited madness... The things which seem like faults belong not so much to the poem as to the character of the hero” (*Poems* 2: 517). Quite deliberately experimenting with genre, Tennyson produced an “allegory of his own mind,” exactly the kind of unpoetic “multitudinousness” that Arnold deplored.

The distinctly modern Victorian quality of *Maud* is its description of the horrors of commodity culture as an especially vile form of civil war. The attack on commodity culture is overt and obvious, foregrounded at both the beginning and end of the poem with allusions to the contemporary scandals of infanticides for insurance fraud, “When a Mammonite mother kills her babe for a burial fee” (i. 45), and of food adulteration, “And chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread. / And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life” (i. 39–40). The counterfeit representation of bread by “chalk and alum and plaster” in itself suggests a kind of anarchic materialized allegory displacing the semiotic system of material culture. The “wondrous Mother-age” and its spirit of progress had been a source of hope in “Locksley Hall,” but in *Maud* it is just the reverse:

But these are the days of advance, the works of the men of mind,  
When who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman’s ware or his word?  
Is it peace or war? Civil war, as I think, and that of a kind  
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword.  
Sooner or later I too may passively take the print  
Of the golden age—why not? I have neither hope nor trust;  
May make my heart as a millstone, set my face as a flint,  
Cheat and be cheated, and die; who knows? we are ashes and dust. (i. 25–32)

It is because he *does* “passively take the print” of the age that *Maud* registers the pathology of the age in the melancholic psyche of the individual. The point is obvious, and universally accepted among Tennyson’s readers, that *Maud* represents not only an individual person “but a condition—the condition of England” (Culler, 207): “The poem makes the laureate’s principal contribution to the Condition of England question, by representing that condition and the condition of its deranged hero as utterly congruent and as reciprocally determined” (Tucker, *Tennyson*, 407).

The work’s most profound contribution to the “Condition of England” question takes place not at the overt thematic level but in the ideologically inflected form. To a considerable extent the ideological content is imperialist and Orientalist, and perhaps, if we take an offhand comment of Culler’s seriously, this is true at the level of form as well, since Culler describes the poem’s incoherence, its leaps “from subject to subject and
mood to mood” as a “wild Oriental manner” (196). The incoherence is better seen, however, as a consequence of a general loss of faith, hope, and trust in modern capitalist society. In a world emptied of the presence of God or any transcendental significance, faith is reduced to a foolish “faith in a tradesman’s ware or his word,” and the individual can have “neither hope nor trust.” As Marx’s analysis of the commodity powerfully demonstrates, the system of commodity exchange and money is, like all semiotic systems, like language itself, based on an unanchored system of exchange. The thematic references to capitalist economy point to a general loss of faith, hope, and the charity that would mitigate or eliminate the civil war of economic struggle. Loss of faith in the symbolic system of commodity culture, moreover, implies a similar loss of faith in the symbolic exchange of language, and the result is a breakdown of the connections between words and things, and between words and ideas, that deconstructs language to produce the pathetic fallacies of melancholy allegory.

*Maud* thus enacts, at the level of form, the close connections of melancholy with the systemic problems of a free market economy: “Such economies alienate workers from their products, efface for consumers the origin of their fetishized purchases, convert desire itself into an exchangeable commodity, and estrange human intelligence from a ‘Nature’ that at the close of the eighteenth century receded even as the mind mastered so many of its mysteries” (Batten, 1). It is perhaps an insight along these lines that leads Tennyson’s speaker to idealize the suppression of desire, even if in a strongly Orientalist manner: “For not to desire or admire, if a man could learn it, were more / Than to walk all day like the sultan of old in a garden of spice” (1. 142–43). More important to Tennyson than the specific economic scandals he drew from Carlyle was Carlyle’s proto-Marxist analysis of the dehumanizing cash nexus that takes the place of a stabilizing vision of truth in capitalism. Consequently, it is not surprising that, even without the help of Marx, Tennyson was able to see the end result of economic civil war as the reification of human life, with individuals reduced to wooden automatons moved only by Adam Smith’s “invisible hand.”

Tennyson consequently anticipates both Robert Browning and Edward Fitzgerald in characterizing the modern alienated subject as a puppet: “We are puppets. Man in his pride, and Beauty fair in her flower; / Do we move ourselves, or are moved by an unseen hand at a game / That pushes us off from the board, and others ever succeed?” (1. 126–28). *Maud* is the greatest and fullest expression of Victorian melancholy both because it thematizes the sources of melancholy in Victorian culture and, even more, because it reveals the content of Victorian ideology in its allegorical form.

Tennyson’s poetry overtly illustrates both Victorian melancholy and its
sublimation in imperial conquest, but it also illustrates the sublimation of melancholy in aesthetic form by demonstrating the manic pleasures of allegory. Because allegory enables the melancholic simultaneously to fill the hollow of loss with figuration and to expose the truth of history in his own terms, says Benjamin, “the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory” (Origin, 185). Strangely, Benjamin describes the pleasures of sublimation in allegory in terms particularly appropriate to my argument about Tennyson’s Orientalism: “The wealth of ciphers which the allegorist discovered . . . may not accord with the authority of nature; but the voluptuousness with which significance rules, like a stern sultan in the harem of objects, is without equal in giving expression to nature” (184). It is, perhaps, only by chance that Benjamin’s simile so propitiously fits my argument, but his general point about the pleasure of allegorization points to a fundamental connection between melancholy and aestheticism that characterizes Tennyson’s poems from “Mariana” through Maud and that further illuminates the close connection in the later nineteenth century between melancholy and aestheticism.

Although the poetry of sensation led others into aestheticism, however, Tennyson was appalled when “he was attacked with the cry of ‘Art for Art’s sake’” and composed an epigram referring to the movement as “truest Lord of Hell!” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 2: 91–92). At the same time that Tennyson was working on Idylls of the King, Walter Pater, Swinburne, Morris, and D. G. Rossetti were using medieval themes and sources to explore the meeting of the pagan world with Christianity, making what Pater called a “deliberate choice between Christ and a rival lover” (191), in which the poets of the “aesthetic school” all sided with the rival lover, with pagan sensuality, in order to write an uninhibited poetry of sensation. Tennyson, also using medieval material for the Idylls, pointedly separated himself from “Art with poisonous honey stolen from France” (“To the Queen,” 1.56). Far from abandoning the theme and mode of melancholy, however, Tennyson wrote the Idylls as an allegory of melancholy, a tale “shadowing Sense at war with Soul” (“To the Queen,” 1.37). Though he did not like to be pinned down by too dogmatic allegorical readings, or, as he put it, “tied down to say ‘This means that,’” he acknowledged that “there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem” (Hallam Tennyson, Memoir, 2: 127). In fact, Tennyson evidently conceived of the Idylls as early as 1833 as an allegory in which Arthur would symbolize “Religious Faith,” Merlin would symbolize “Science,” Mordred would be “the skeptical understanding,” and so on. The poem underwent many changes over the decades of its composition, and symbolic meanings tended to shift, but in the finished Idylls, “Sense at war with Soul” plainly meant the sensuality of the flesh (Guinevere, Ettarre, Vivien) at war with
conscience (Arthur). The dialectic of personal desire at war with conscience, of course, constitutes melancholy itself, and the whole of the *Idylls* quite evidently allegorizes that dialectic. Ultimately, in this allegory, sensation triumphs and sins of the flesh unseat the conscience so that man rolls back into the beast. Still, Tennyson leaves no doubt that failure to obey the dictates of conscience is destructive at both the personal and social level. Gladstone was undoubtedly correct in saying that “Wherever [Arthur] appears, it is as the great pillar of the moral order” (quoted in Hallam Tennyson, *Memoir*, 130). As Gladstone’s comment indicates, the conscience in this allegory is very obviously the internalized moral order of the age, and most obviously it rages against the perceived moral decay of the time. Unfortunately, the great pillar of the moral order inevitably sounds priggish to an almost inhuman extent, but the very severity of Arthur’s repudiation of Guinevere may be regarded as the rage of the superego against the ego—the maiming rage that Freud would find to be the necessary but painful condition of civilization. Such a reading of the *Idylls* undoubtedly states the case too baldly: Tennyson himself allegorized his allegory in an attempt to ward off such readings: “Poetry is like shot-silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation” (Hallam Tennyson, *Memoir*, 2: 127). For my purposes, however, it is not necessary to examine the subtleties of Tennyson’s painted veil but simply to note that the *Idylls* presents both of the “two Tennysons,” the spokesman of Victorian values and the poet of sensation, and that this dialogue of the mind with itself dramatizes the disastrous results when the conscience loses control but, as poetry, also illustrates the disastrous results if the conscience triumphs too fully: in Arthur’s extraordinary rebuke to the groveling Guinevere, Tennyson’s poetry is reduced to a smug moral superiority—the voice of a pillar, not a poet. As I will argue in the next chapter, the triumph of conscience, or superego, is damaging to the poetry of melancholy because it short-circuits dialectic and leaves the poet little more than a spokesperson for official culture.