

## Lyric Explanation: Tennyson's Princesses

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Tennyson was seldom slow to self-deprecate or cite mitigating circumstances with reference to his verse; yet his apology for *The Princess* is striking even by such inimitable standards. The third edition of that extended narrative poem appeared in 1850, little more than two years after the first. Unlike the minimally corrected second edition—which appeared a mere month and a half after its original—this further version made several substantial revisions. By far the most significant of these was the introduction of six rhyming lyric interludes, intercalated within the unfolding blank verse narrative. Tennyson's apology characteristically combined *mea culpa* and defensive self-justification: '[b]efore the first edition came out', he confessed, 'I deliberated with myself whether I should put songs between the separate divisions of the poem; again I thought that the poem would explain itself, but the public did not see the drift'.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that *The Princess's* narrative—in which several friends gather at a Mechanical Institute open-day, and spontaneously sing into being a tale about a group of women who secede from society to set up an all-female University, only to be infiltrated by a group of cross-dressing males who, unmasked, lay siege to the establishment, gaining entry only when their military

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<sup>1</sup> Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1897), I, p. 254; hereafter, *Memoir*.

defeat requires them to be nursed back to health—might stand in need of explanation. Be this as it may, it is difficult to imagine a less successful self-exoneration than Tennyson's third edition. Much of 'the public', whether layman or critical-professional, felt that the revised version retained—indeed magnified—the poem's stylistic inconsistencies; while the success of the lyric interludes came at the high premium of making the blank verse that they interspersed seem bad by comparison.<sup>2</sup> Charles Kingsley's valiant attempt to salvage some coherence for the whole proves illustrative:

The songs themselves, which have been inserted between the cantos in the last edition of the book, seem, perfect as they are, wasted and smothered among the surrounding fertility; till we discover that they stand there, not merely for the sake of their intrinsic beauty, but serve to call back the reader's mind, at every pause in the tale of the prince's folly, to that very healthy ideal of womanhood which she had spurned.<sup>3</sup>

Such a coupling of 'songs' with 'that healthy ideal of womanhood' requires no little forcing, all the more so when we consider that the fourth interpolation ('Thy voice is heard through rolling drums') takes the form of a martial hymn.

Contemporary editorial practice and critical scholarship echo this equivocation over the status of song, in mutually reinforcing ways. The popular editions through which today's readers are likely to encounter Tennyson's work frequently cut free the superadded lyrics from their narrative context: the Penguin Classics edition of the *Selected Poems* (to take the book that happens to lie currently on my desk as I type) includes 'from *The Princess*' only two of the six supernumerary lyrics, alongside four songs already contained within the first edition.<sup>4</sup> Criticism mirrors this division. The second chapter of Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* makes

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Alfred Austin's 1870 verdict: 'Its pretty little songs and a well-known passage at the close of the poem are being perpetually quoted, only to prove what a trivial impression, if any, has been created in the general mind by its other innumerable pages' in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by John D. Jump (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 299.

<sup>3</sup> *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage*, pp. 172–185 (p. 182).

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 92–95.

several striking observations about the development of the dramatic voice in ‘Tears, idle tears’ (which was already embedded within the 1847 edition), without once acknowledging the wider narrative background against which it emerges.<sup>5</sup> While it has become something of a lazy reflex to sneer at New Criticism’s sacrosanct formalism, this formative close reading does indeed rest upon the severance of compositional and narrative context.

Even up to our own cultural moment, few readers have taken the trouble to consider precisely what Tennyson might have had in mind, when he called upon song to explain his poem. This omission is surprising, given how strikingly the claim departs from literary convention, in which the prose gloss or paraphrase is far more readily summoned to do the heavy lifting of explication. Wordsworth, it is true, commences his ‘Note to *The Thorn*’ by stating that ‘This Poem ought to have been preceded by an introductory Poem’; but, not feeling ‘in a mood where it was probable that I should write it well’, he resorted to prose.<sup>6</sup> Just how would lyric, a mode whose nonlinear and para-linguistic nature a rich seam of recent literature has been productively exploring, be in a position to explain narrative to itself? This essay contends that Tennyson’s sung interludes do indeed explicate *The Princess*, but in a manner unconventional enough as to challenge those forms of clarification that we associate with the gloss or paraphrase. The early complaints over the poem’s construction drop a hint as to how this might be the case, insofar as they claim to be identifying a narrative incongruity that in actual fact is more a matter of perceived musical discord. J. W. Marston, to take a representative example, remarks in his 1848 review of the first edition that ‘[t]he grand error of the story is the incoherency of its characteristics. Its different parts refuse to amalgamate. They are derived from standards foreign to each other’.<sup>7</sup>

Marston’s ensuing verdict strives insistently to reduce *The Princess*’s failure to a sloppiness of plot, referring to ‘story’, and to ‘characteristics’ that swiftly become identified with actual characters. But the fulsome praise that he does reserve for

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<sup>5</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 166–171 (p. 167).

those songs already present in the first edition ('lyric breathes the very luxury of tenderness', he says of 'Now sleeps the crimson petal') suggests that narrative concision is here hardly the principal desideratum. *The Princess* troubles, then, precisely because it is what its subtitle claims it to be—'A Medley'—not in the sense of narrative digression, but of 'awkward and unmusical license'.<sup>8</sup> Yet this sonorous variety, to the point of incongruity, is precisely how lyric does its curious work in *The Princess*: so this essay claims. Lyric explains not by unveiling, or more emphatically vocalising, some otherwise buried plot twist or thematic content; rather, the superimposition of the songs exposes those internal contradictions (formal, generic and historical) that were already present, but which lay concealed, within the blank verse. The poem itself struggles against such knowledge, in its own necessarily failed attempt to achieve lyric distillation and separation. 'I give you the story and the songs', announces Tennyson's speaker casually at the very start (Prologue, 239)—as if the distinction could ever be clear-cut.<sup>9</sup>

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Let me first off acknowledge the obvious reservations that would deflate the claim to lyric's explanatory efficacy. Tennyson, it might well be argued, really meant nothing at all when he claimed that his songs explained, other than to distract us. Lyric, on this reading, works just as your parents 'explain' away the horrid facts of life by taking you to the beach. Or: Tennyson did imagine a specific content that lyric would clarify: the 'lost child', which, in the same apology that I began by citing, he called 'the link through the parts, as shown in the Songs, which are the best interpreters of the poem'.<sup>10</sup> His 1882 letter to Samuel Dawson (in response to the latter's book-length study of *The Princess*) might be seen to specify the association yet further: 'the child, as you say, was the heroine of the piece', states Tennyson, a claim that has encouraged many critics to identify the infant as Aglaia,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> All references to *The Princess* use *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> *Memoir*, I, p. 254.

the daughter of Lady Psyche.<sup>11</sup> By lamenting the ‘loss’ of a child whose separatist mother had deprived her of conventional family love, the reading runs, Tennyson’s lyrics would give full voice to patriarchal attitudes that were anyway never far from the surface.

Yet these two explanations cancel one another out, when we consider *The Princess*’s compositional history. For the songs come to be added to the extant text with a capriciousness that challenges their claim to educe meaning in a stable fashion; yet at the same time, the very contingency of their placement engages the neighbouring text in such a distinctive manner as to be more than arbitrary distraction. The Berg Collection of the New York Public Library sheds much light on this process. Two of Tennyson’s own copies of the first 1847 edition are present in the holdings, both of which feature marginal annotations relating to the composition and placement of the songs. The Berg’s ‘Copy 1’, which was donated by the American composer and rare book collector Jerome Kern (1885–1945), proves particularly revealing.

On the inside of the cover (dated ‘11/25/19’), Kern writes the following: ‘To my mind one of the most delightful Tennyson items in existence. The poet’s wife selects the places for the songs, + writes them in’.<sup>12</sup> The songs are indeed in Emily Tennyson’s hand, lending a deeper sense to the third edition’s opening declaration that ‘the women sang / Between the rougher voices of the men / Like linnets in the pauses of the wind’ (Prologue, 236–38). But this is not all: the Berg manuscript reveals this ‘female’ performance or dictation to be a more fluid affair than may at first appear. For the poet’s wife not only transcribes slight variants on the poems that come to form part of the third edition; she also inserts them in an entirely different order. After Part I, there is nothing but a thick, smudged line; after Part II we find what would ultimately be the first song in the 1850 edition (‘As through the land at eve we went’); the poems following Parts III and IV are similarly

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Samuel Edward Dawson, 21 November 1882. *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), III, pp. 238–240 (p. 238).

<sup>12</sup> Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, Berg Coll MSS Tennyson [*The Princess* Copy 1].

pushed back a space from the manuscript to the published version; after Part V there is again nothing; and following Part VI there is ‘Home they brought their warrior dead’, which in 1850 is placed fifth (with the ‘their warrior’ converted to ‘her warrior’). I list the variations in the following table:

	Berg MS	Third edition (1850)
I ^ II	---	‘As through the land at eve we went’
II ^ III	‘As through the land at eve we went’	‘Sweet and low’
III ^ IV	‘Sweet and low’	‘The splendour falls on castle walls’
IV ^ V	‘The splendour falls on castle walls’	‘Thy voice is heard through rolling drums’
V ^ VI	---	‘Home they brought her warrior dead’
VI ^ VII	‘Home they brought their warrior dead’	‘Ask me no more’

When we turn from this manuscript material, to ask the more qualitative question of how Tennyson’s songs function in their ‘final’ position, we see that Emily Tennyson’s variant placement of the songs intuits a fundamental truth about their relation to their surrounding material, which is at once contingent and consistently disruptive. To put the matter more bluntly: at certain points it is difficult to credit the notion that the songs were brought in to clarify, rather than wilfully to undermine, the matter that surrounds them. Certainly they run counter to Tennyson’s claim to Dawson: for of the six songs added, only the first, second and fifth can be seen to refer to childhood in any real sense; not the remotest trace can be found in the third, fourth or sixth, while Tennyson decided not to include a further lyric originally intended for *The Princess* (‘The child was sitting on the bank’), which, as its first line suggests, treats the infant as subject far more concertedly than any of those pieces that do make the grade.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hallam includes this unpublished fragment in *Memoir*, 255. The blank verse in fact does a better job than the lyrics of establishing Aglaia as a lost child in any consistent sense: see V, 79–89.

I propose to read those songs consecutively, in their relation to the extraneous narrative, in order to demonstrate several moments of purposive disjunction between the two modes of expression. Yet far from lyric representing only a significant contrast with the blank verse that it intersperses, I will then go on to claim that these disjunctions reveal a fundamental tension (between narrative direction and lyric aspiration) present even within the blank verse itself. We do not need to go very far, to see that *The Princess* puts peculiar pressure on the theme of lost childhood that Tennyson appointed lyric to educe: for already within the framing prologue, wherein the group of friends begin to sing their self-consciously fantastic tale, one of the group, Lilia, complains to her male counterparts that “I wish I were / Some mighty poetess, I would shame you then / That love to keep us children!” (Prologue 131–33). There is from the start, therefore, a tension between the impulse to sing in childlike fashion, as the ‘linnets’ to which the women are likened, and an awareness of the social cost that such singing implies; the poem tests our desire to eclipse the singer, the real person Lilia, through her (our) song.

While the first two songs do, as stated above, to some extent address a ‘lost child’, they do so in such a way as to further test this tension. The narrating Prince, having learned of the flight of Ida, his childhood betrothed, dispatches a letter requesting entrance to her University. He then settles down to bed, whereupon the first song concludes Part I:

[I ^ II]  
As through the land at eve we went  
And plucked the ripened ears,  
We fell out, my wife and I,  
O we fell out I know not why,  
And kissed again with tears.  
And blessings on the falling out  
That all the more endears,  
When we fall out with those we love  
And kiss again with tears!  
For when we came where lies the child  
We lost in other years,



There above the little grave  
O there above the little grave,  
We kissed again with tears.

Though we do indeed encounter here ‘the child / We lost’, its diffuseness is striking. ‘[C]hild’ is one of but three line-ends (the others being ‘went’ and ‘love’) that stubbornly refuse to be assimilated into a rhyme scheme so simple as to be ostentatiously infantile: ‘grave’ makes a facile monorhyme of itself, ‘tears’ recur with little real sense of whether they are cause or effect, balm or denial (the Berg manuscript version simplifies the scheme yet further, preferring another ‘years’ to ‘ripened ears’, the stock Virgilian association). That lingering uncertainty over whether conciliatory weeping might amount to some form of self-delusion intermittently troubles the lyric’s smooth surface: the steadily iambic first three lines give way to the triple measure of the fourth, where the sudden rapidity (‘O we fell out I know not why’) betrays a touchy uncertainty, answered by the return to iambics (‘And kissed again with tears’) that feels so excessively resounding as to beg questions. (But what was the cause of the dispute? Isn’t something missing in this readiness to kiss and make up?) The lyric traverses a similar hitch across double and triple measures in lines 7–9, where the returning answer is made yet more emphatic (‘And kiss again with tears!’). As a bare minimum we can say that whatever the lost child is, it certainly is not obviously identifiable or even gendered; we may indeed fancy it to be the Prince himself, in the course of the first of his many slumbers, ‘half in doze’ (I, 242).

The ensuing narrative of Book II further encourages such directed ambiguity: having smuggled themselves into the female university, the Prince and his two compatriots struggle gamely to keep up the pretence of their womanhood. “‘What, are the ladies of your land so tall?’” asks Princess Ida (II, 33), to which the masquerading Cyril responds with a florid description of their court, which just happens to cast the Prince in an extremely favourable light. “‘We scarcely thought to hear’, sniffs Ida,

This barren verbiage, current among men,  
Light coin, the tinsel clink of compliment.



Your flight from out your bookless wilds would seem  
As arguing love of knowledge and of power;  
Your language proves you still the child [...]” (II, 39–44).

The very childhood for which we were lately asked to feel wishful regret is here converted from naïve immediacy into rhetorical afflatus; if Princess Ida has indeed lost a child in some actual or spiritual sense, we nonetheless feel, as her blank verse slices through the specifically male infantilism of the Prince and his compeers, that this loss was perhaps after all for the best.

The trio’s hapless pretence proves inevitably—and mercifully—short-lived: the Prince being recognised by the Princess’s lieutenant Lady Psyche, who nonetheless (in a first sign of emotional vacillation) permits the unmasked men to observe the details of the women’s radical education. If Tennyson did indeed to depict this University in such a coldly rationalistic manner as to make the average (male) reader lament the women’s surrendered tenderness, he doesn’t do a very good job of it: the concealed observers are duly impressed by a humanist education that combines the study of ‘Electric, chemic laws’ (II, 362) with ‘elegies / And quoted odes’ (354–55). There is even provision for organised religion, as the Prince and his companions file dutifully into chapel, at which point the second added song interposes. The church service permits Tennyson to cue the music, but what subsequently ensues makes us wonder whether he isn’t indulging a malicious joke:

Six hundred maidens clad in purest white,  
Before two streams of light from wall to wall,  
While the great organ almost burst his pipes,  
Groaning for power, and rolling through the court  
A low melodious thunder to the sound  
Of solemn psalms, and silver litanies,  
The work of Ida, to call down from Heaven  
A blessing on her labours for the world. (II, 448–55)

[II ^ III]

Sweet and low, sweet and low,  
Wind of the western sea,  
Low, low, breathe and blow,

Wind of the western sea!  
Over the rolling waters go,  
Come from the dying moon, and blow,  
Blow him again to me;  
While my little, while my pretty one, sleeps.

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,  
Father will come to thee soon;  
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,  
Father will come to thee soon;  
Father will come to his babe in the nest,  
Silver sails all out of the west  
Under the silver moon:  
Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.

It is quite some stretch from the 'great organ' almost burst[ing]', to an ensuing performance that Christopher Ricks aptly likens to a Theocritan lullaby.<sup>14</sup> Even if, in a bid to settle the difference, we stress the solemnity of the 'solemn psalms', and note the quintessentially Tennysonian transformation from becalmed sea to roiling storm, this song cannot appear as anything but a travesty of whatever sound came through the pipes: where the thunder celebrates the matriarch Ida's transformation of the world, 'Sweet and low, sweet and low' tucks us into bed to await daddy's return. Once more the contrast is as much sonorous as it is thematic: where the song swells out into the triple measure familiar from the first interlude ('Father will come to his babe in the nest'), the blank verse that precedes it is so comprehensively decasyllabic (Tennyson's other major revision to the third edition consisted in his excision of superfluous syllables) that we readily elide words—'power', 'melodious', 'Heaven'—to fit its measure. The nature of those polysyllables suggest that such elisions do not trim grandeur, so much as establish

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<sup>14</sup> *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, p. 253n. Ricks has *Idyll* 24 in mind. Even here the contrast is significant: in Theocritus' lullaby, Alcmena attempts to rock her twins Heracles and Iphicles to sleep; two serpents approach in the night, which Heracles (aided by a sudden illumination) awakens to strangle. We might say that Tennyson continues the theme of a lullaby that at once engenders, and guards against, sleep.

its Miltonic overtones; overtones that jar all the more with the brisk little monosyllables of what follows.

Even allowing for the stateliness of Tennyson's blank verse at such moments, we might well posit that its disjunction with song is designed to secure an untouchable status for the latter. Whatever hymns these women think they're singing (so we might imagine a certain version of Tennyson to say), the softer yet still audible lyric undertone betrays a world of desired tenderness that finally they cannot ever fully repress. But *The Princess* does not permit its lyrics noble isolation. As the lingering echoes of that lullaby fade, we proceed to Part III only to find it at once, once again, demonstratively at odds with song:

Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.

### III

Morn in the white wake of the morning star  
Came furrowing all the orient into gold.  
We rose, and each by other drest with care  
Descended to the court that lay three parts  
In shadow, but the Muses' heads were touched  
Above the darkness from their native East.

There while we stood beside the fount, and watched  
Or seemed to watch the dancing bubble, approached  
Melissa, tinged with wan from lack of sleep,  
Or grief [...] (1–10)

It is again difficult to imagine a contrast more forced: the lyric's 'Wind of the western sea' blows against narrative's 'native East'; for all the lullaby's efforts to send us to sleep, Melissa—the daughter of the austere Lady Blanche, and another prospective candidate for the elusive role of 'lost' child—remains vigilantly wakeful. An attention to the sequential composition of *The Princess*, then, exposes a blank verse that anticipates its resistance to lyric; and a superadded song that would lull story to sleep in a manner it already knows is impossible.

The subsequent, third song offers further proof that lyric, unlike the women of the university (for now at least), can never fully secede from their conditioning reality. The three men finally reach Princess Ida, from whom the truth of their identity has been kept. Following her lengthy, passionate defence of the women's

cause, the assembled group turns to watch the sunset. For once the join between framing narrative and lyric appears not to show, for the resultant song, Tennyson's celebrated 'The splendour falls on castle walls', itself figures the dying light. The Prince and Ida have found common cause enough for his disguise almost to slip: "O how sweet", I said / (For I was half-oblivious of my mask) / To linger here with one that loved us" (III, 319–21). This lingering ensues into the song itself, which converts death into a resounding echo ('Blow bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying'), or rehabilitates it through internal rhyme ('O love, they die in yon rich sky'). The concluding stanza experiences its own evanescence fully, the better to drag it out: in a pattern now familiar, an accentual-syllabic excessiveness tugs against the established iambic rhythm. As with the preceding stanzas of the lyric, the second and fourth lines spill over into hypermetricality and/or triple rhythm: the extra syllable on 'river' permits a sounded pause to fill out a fifth foot, and so bring the piece closer into the ambit of ballad. The same syllabic excess arises in the fourth line, where the second 'for ever' asserts the infinitude of which it speaks through its semantic superfluity (why declare eternity twice?), and by the fact that proverbial usage (or the Lord's Prayer) would far more commonly say 'for ever and ever'. That second 'for' strains to prove a point that the poem, in its passing, suspects is strictly beyond it. Indeed, its remarkable closing couplet concedes the point, vocalising as it does an echo ('dying', 'dying') whose successive iteration can be felt only through its inevitable departure:

O love, they die in yon rich sky,  
They faint on hill or field or river:  
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,  
And grow for ever, and for ever.  
Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying,  
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying. (IV, 13–18)

This lyric suspension could not, however, be more disabused:

And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying.

#### IV

‘There sinks the nebulous Star we call the Sun,  
If that hypothesis of theirs be sound’  
Said Ida; ‘let us down and rest’ [...] (18–21)

The chiasmic play of Ida and the Prince had been so expansive in the preceding blank verse (as their voices interchanged, their hands half-touched), that even the sterner sort of reader less given to lyric indulgence might well have fancied their singing this latest song together. But when that song proclaiming endlessness ends, we find the voice not of the narrator, but of Ida herself, speaking determinedly as herself alone. The lingering twilight is reduced to the effect of a scientific postulate that we happen to label a certain way (‘the nebulous Star we call the Sun’); while the following line might seem to renege from this scientism, it in fact only deepens our alienation from lyric, applying an estranged conditionality (‘that hypothesis of theirs’) even to the evidence of the senses.

The remaining songs pursue this policy of concerted disturbance. The fourth lyric, as stated above, is so far from a hymn to childhood as to be a battle cry; so too does it remind us that both the tale as a whole, and the songs that in part comprise it, are mediated to us through latter-day singers that we might well have forgotten. ‘Thy voice is held through rolling drums’ is the first such song whose ‘actual’ voice is specified: ‘So Lilia sung; we thought her half-possessed’ (IV, 9). Lilia’s case of lyric possession (to borrow Susan Stewart’s helpful phrase) is a murky affair: for it is unclear whether she is channelling, or being channelled by, this martial hymn. Her auditors

[...] thought her half-possessed,  
She struck such warbling fury through the words;  
And, after, feigning pique at what she called  
The raillery, or grotesque, or false sublime –  
Like one that wishes at a dance to change  
The music – clapt her hand and cried for war –  
Or some grand fight to kill and make an end [...] (V, 9–15)

Lilia’s ‘warbling fury’ gives way with surprising speed to a ‘pique’ that is merely ‘feigned’, presumably given the words that she finds her mouth singing (but where

do they come from, if not herself?) Yet it is precisely because of, and not despite, her anger at the backing track provided ('Like one who wishes at a dance to change / The music'), that her bellicosity, previously put on for show, now becomes real enough for her to sing precisely the song of which she lately disapproved (she 'cried for war'). Song, then, constructs voice (and not only Lilia's; the very next line indicates 'he that next inherited the tale', who assumes the Prince's role with more earnestness than has hitherto been apparent), in a curious dialectic that interweaves sincerity and artifice.

Even in those later moments where Tennyson's narrative tends toward its ostensibly harmonious conclusion, lyric retains something of its disruptive potential. By the stage of the sixth and final song, the Prince and his loyal subjects have been wounded in battle against the Princess's brothers; it proves a pyrrhic victory for Ida, insofar as this grievous defeat is precisely what stirs sympathy in the women of the university, who in welcoming and tending to the injured men violate the fundamental law of their establishment ('LET NO MAN ENTER IN ON PAIN OF DEATH' (II, 178)). The dam having broken, the subsequent lyric both thematises and enforces yielding: 'I strove against the stream and all in vain: / Let the great river take me to the main: / No more, dear love, for at a touch I yield; / Ask me no more.' (VII, 12–15). The internal tension between double and triple measures, which all the preceding songs have manifested, here finds a resolution of sorts: the accelerating flow of 'take me to the main' and 'at a touch I yield' are confirmed, rather than contradicted, by the catalectic, heavily-stressed 'Ask me no more', which puts a stop to all discussion.

Or does it? While the lyric in turn gives way to the most melodious of all the blank verse passages (VII, 31–39), in which the verbal echoes and even end-rhymes (31, 35) that populate the convalescent Prince's latest drowsing suggest that the dividing-line between blank verse and lyric has finally been breached, some trace of the critical self-disinvestment of song endures. The 'vain' / 'main' rhyme above is essential in sweeping the reader along through the sixth song's melodiousness; but do we still hear its echo when Ida, reluctant and defeated, gazes upon the world around what had been her establishment, 'blank / And waste it seemed and vain; till down she came' (VII, 27–29)? Ida prolongs the lyric rhyme,

but only so as to mislay it, to bury it within the blank verse line; when the stunning negativity of the world as she sees it (20–27) gives way a little too abruptly to her finding ‘fair peace once more among the sick’, it is the ghost of rhyme (‘vain; till down she came’) that does the forcing. Ida’s resistance remains, in vain.

It might seem slight evidence, to link verbal echoes between pieces that were separately composed. Yet ‘Tears, idle tears’ prove that such overlaps can hardly be attributed to Tennyson’s hasty addition of extraneous material. For that lyric already formed part of the first edition of *The Princess* (along with ‘Now sleeps the crimson petal’ and ‘O swallow, swallow’), and yet it manifests precisely the same phenomenon of muffled or distorted echo that we lately witnessed in the sixth song. It is from the start more than a little ironic that Ida should call for a poem to pass the time (IV, 18–19), and get a song about the sadness of passing time. The pattern only deepens upon the song’s close: as Eric Griffiths has noted, barely a phrase of ‘Tears, idle tears’ survives without being altered by Ida’s severe reaction to it: the idleness that had indicated the pathos of incapacity is made over into ‘silken folded idleness’ of useless luxury (IV, 49).<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this most famous of Tennyson’s songs reveals most fully *The Princess*’s lyric autocritique (albeit that we can perceive this autocritique clearly only with the additions of the third edition). The separation of ‘Tears, idle tears’ from its structural context, which I opened this essay by noting, shades naturally into presumptions regarding its affective nature. Henry Kozicki notes that many critics are less interested in the singer of the song (Violet, one of the university women) ‘than they are in describing the emotion’.<sup>16</sup> On this emotion, he continues, critics are in two camps: those who believe that the ‘despairing black-melancholy in “Tears” [...] was a grievous sorrow precisely because Tennyson had no thought or objective correlative to go with it’; and those who, in a throwback to ‘the emotive

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Tennyson’s Idle Tears’, in *Tennyson: Seven Essays*, ed. by P. A. W. Collins (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 36–60 (p. 54).

<sup>16</sup> Henry Kozicki, ‘Tennyson’s “Tears, idle tears”: The Case for Violet’, *Victorian Poetry*, 24.2 (Summer, 1986), 99–113 (p. 99).



views of the last [i.e. nineteenth] century' see the affect 'as luxuriant, sacred and sympathetic'.<sup>17</sup>

Yet both of these alternatives (that the feeling of "Tears, idle tears" either attains the sacred realm, or exceeds thought altogether) neglect Tennyson's peculiar specification that his song contained no such intense emotion. 'He told me that he was moved to write *Tears, idle tears* at Tintern Abbey', recalls Frederick Locker-Lampson, as recorded in Hallam's *Memoir*, 'and that it was not real woe as some people might suppose; "it was rather the yearning that young people occasionally experience for that which seems to have passed away from them for ever."<sup>18</sup> This admission gives the lie to critical platitudes, such as 'Tennyson's archetypal lyric [...] mourns with passionate, Virgilian regret';<sup>19</sup> it also suggests that J. Hillis Miller literally could not be more wrong, when he asserts that "'Tears, idle tears" has the same theme as Wordsworth's poem and might almost be called Tennyson's "Tintern Abbey."<sup>20</sup> For the whole power of Tennyson's claim that 'it was not real woe' turns on the fact that 'young people', by definition, cannot accurately be said to mourn for a thing that they have never known. Such persons are not, that is to say, like the version of Wordsworth that opens with 'Five years have passed', and who recalls (even while he may well obscure) an earlier time and self. Indeed, Tennyson's differential relation to "Tintern Abbey" extends beyond the speaking subject, to include literary precedent more fully: it is not just that the past is unknown, but also that it has become more fundamentally unavailable. So too, when the concluding stretch of Shelley's *Alastor* states 'It is a woe "too deep for tears"' (713), the recourse to acknowledged citation marks the displacement of original sentiment.<sup>21</sup> 'Tears, idle tears' could never be another "Tintern Abbey", on which knowledge the whole poem turns.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 99–100.

<sup>18</sup> *Memoir*, II, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> John D. Rosenberg, 'Tennyson and the Landscape of Consciousness', *Victorian Poetry*, 12.4 (Winter, 1974), pp. 303–310 (p. 310).

<sup>20</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Temporal Topographies: Tennyson's Tears', *Victorian Poetry*, 30.3/4 (Autumn–Winter, 1992), pp. 277–289 (p. 280).

<sup>21</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 111.

This is not simply to say that where some critics find romantic plenitude, ‘Tears idle tears’ is in reality carefully managed affective vacuity. Numbness too is an affect. Those generations who feel (but do not grasp) the shadow of a recent grander past (full of war, suffering, verse) experience a composite of anaesthetic disinvestment and self-deluding nostalgia, whose emotional complexity it would be churlish to deny (when all else has been denied them). It is because ‘Tears, idle tears’ knows something of this that we can reduce it neither to a species of romantic emulation, nor to post-romantic disinvestment. When it confesses, ‘I know not what they mean’, it echoes the songs that it anticipates, which similarly profess an uncertainty that yet somehow fails to disconcert: ‘We fell out, I know not why’, ‘Ask me no more’. By turning such moments into a refrain, into a jingle, the song risks converting uncertainty into indifference. Yet the struggle to preserve that indifference (don’t ask why, don’t ask what tears mean) is itself painful, not because we might ever uncover a real trauma underneath those idle tears, but because we would reveal—precisely—nothing at all. This, too, is feeling. So lyric begins to explain—where ‘explanation’ comes somewhere close to its etymological origin as ‘flattening-out’ (*ex-planus*). By smoothing out anxiety into something a little too unruffled, into a perfectly finished whole that cannot but show the joins with the narrative world around it, Tennyson’s lyrics preserve complexity, through, and not despite, their placid surface.

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Up to this point, I have concentrated my analysis upon the songs and their immediate narrative contexts, as to suggest disjunctive effects that are at once rhythmical and semantic. But these disjunctions do not only occur at moments of literal interlude. For we experience Tennyson’s blank verse in a particular manner even when song is not there to provide an explicit counter-foil: the rhymes that mark distinctly where the lyric line ends only set into clearer relief how Tennyson’s unrhymed verse accrues its own distinctive rhythm, through forms of disarticulation other than the line—the emphatic caesura, the narrative interjection, the interchange of voices. Accordingly, Griffith’s assertion that the poem’s blank

verse (in contrast to its lyrics) ‘runs on freely’ hardly tells the whole story.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Tennyson’s strict adherence to the decasyllabic line (at least from the third edition) only underscores the extent to which that measure is a nominal one: a largely empty container through which passes a verse that is then sub-divided in wildly different ways: expanded into breathless serial enjambment, or carved into as many separate vocatives as ten syllables (no more, no less) can provide.

Let me give concrete examples of what I mean. The Princess’s own speech manifests most strikingly this kind of rhythmical variety, in its continual accelerations and stalls. It is tempting to associate Ida’s blank verse utterance with the coldly rationalistic separatism to which she sometimes gives vent, and hence to contrast it to the tenderness of lyric. But the reality is that what we recognise as her speech is itself divided between the impulse to sever or dismiss, and to dilate or include; these latter moments often accrue an incorporative intensity that rivals (in the strong sense of the word) the lyrics, and thus proposes another kind of verse sonority. The verbal sparring between the Prince and Princess just prior to ‘Tears, idle tears’ offers one such case in point: with undisguised hypocrisy, the former accuses the women first of intellectual hubris, then of an incapacity for complex inquiries such as anatomy (III, 280–82, 288–90). “How [...] you love / The Metaphysics! [...]” responds Ida, before embarking upon one of the most remarkable declaratory passages in the poem as a whole (III, 290–314). Of course the women have learned the practice of anatomy, she states:

[...] Were you sick, ourself  
Would tend you. To your question now,  
Which touches on the workman and his work.  
Let there be light and there was light: ‘tis so:  
For was, and is, and will be, are but as is;  
And all creation is one act at once,  
The birth of light: but we that are not all,  
As parts, can see but parts, now this, now that,  
And live, perforce, from thought to thought, and make  
One act a phantom of succession: thus

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Tennyson’s Idle Tears’, p. 54.

Our weakness somehow shapes the shadow, Time;  
But in the shadow will we work, and mould  
The woman to the fuller day.' (III, 303–14)

Ida's speech balances ambition and humility through its reconciliation of divine timelessness ('all creation is one act at once') with the partiality and finitude of beings subject to temporality ('One act a phantom of succession'). This partiality ('we that are not all, / As parts, can see but parts') is a subtle notion, for it indicates not only the limitations that all fallen beings endure, but also the specific privations that she, as a woman, experiences. As such, her closing assertion, that 'in the shadow we will work [...] to the fuller day', is a familiar fusion of the human and the messianic, but also a more specific program for social subversion. The voicing of her argument, even in this blank verse, is as important as the argument itself: the iambic pattern of 'For was, and is, and will be, are but as is' forces the conjugation of the verb of essence ('was', 'is'), until that force is so powerful as to introduce an additional stress ('will be'). In contrast to the self-incriminating nostalgia that several of the lyrics possess, Ida calls for a present whose endurance would be absolute, yet whose emergence we could feel and perhaps indeed call into being.

Yet from here there is a world of difference to the curttness of which Ida is equally capable, as when she dismisses Lady Blanche for having failed to prevent the infiltration of her University:

She ceased: the Princess answered coldly, 'Good:  
Your oath is broken: we dismiss you: go.  
For this lost lamb (she pointed to the child)  
Our mind is changed: we take it to ourself.' (IV: 340–43)

Punctuation and line-ends contrive to isolate individual words whose detachment is therefore both literal and emotional ('Good', 'go'). The marking of direct speech ('she ceased', 'she pointed') and other punctuation (these four lines pack in four colons) form a rhythmical counterpart to the lyrics' impulsion toward

triple measure: the verse here is controlled, severed, dispatched, with the efficacy of bureaucracy. While Ida drifts into this register intermittently, and only when pressed from without, for others it is a native tongue. The Prince's father is one instance (I, 45–49), as is Ida's brother, who comes to the defence of her university when war is levied against it:

[...] And, right, or wrong, I care not: this is all,  
I stand upon her side: she made me swear it –  
'Sdeath – and with solemn rites by candle-light –  
Swear by St something – I forget her name –  
Her that talked down the fifty wisest men;  
*She* was a princess too; and so I swore.  
Come, this is all; she will not; will not: waive your claim:  
If not the foughten field, what else, at once,  
Decides it, 'sdeath! against my father's will.' (V: 280–89)

At such moments we might be tempted to conclude that a blank verse that is in any case fairly loose finally devolves into rough prose. Yet it is precisely through the manipulation of an established repertoire of poetic devices that Ida's brother's speech achieves its uncouthness: as with Ida's decision to detain the child above, it is the medial caesura (emphasised with the colon, semi-colon or exclamation) that lends this male speaking voice its cocksure spring: 'this is all; she will not; will not' travesties the layered repetitions of which the lyrics comprise.

Doubts nonetheless remained as to the suitability of Tennyson's chosen medium: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, upon hearing of the plan for the original *Princess* wondered, '[n]ow is not the world too old and too full of steam for blank verse poems, in ever so many books, to be written on the fairies?'<sup>23</sup> Yet Tennyson does not seek to reconcile blank verse with narrative, or 'serious' social concerns, so much as to profit from their collision. Where the developing realist novel develops partly through its capacity to handle with consummate ease transitions between characters, or from direct to reported speech, *The Princess* manipulates

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<sup>23</sup> *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Elvan Kintner, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), I, p. 427.

such features with an awkwardness that is so striking as to become productive. The personal pronoun, necessary for the specification of speech, accrues particular force in this respect. Reaching for narrative consummation, we might readily speed by a line such as

‘How came you here?’ I told him: ‘I said he,’ (IV: 202)

The need to spell out precisely who is talking (I said, he said), allied to the entirely monosyllabic line and a further two pronounced caesurae, together produce a vocal delivery that cannot but be cumbersome. The repeated pronoun ‘I’ shifts under the weight of the changing person it reports: the poem does not let us forget that the speaking I is also a reporting, just as the whole mock-chivalric narrative is brought into being by a group in the mid-nineteenth century present.

Such moments are too numerous for Tennyson not to have intended this narrative clumsiness on some level. At certain points the vocal slide across persons seeks to force a false unity, as when the Prince echoes Ida mechanically:

“Forbear”, the Princess cried; “Forbear, Sir” I

Here the poem forces our voice to perform precisely the union for which the prince has been striving, given that only on the last word (‘I’) do we become aware, too late, that the second ‘Forbear’ is his. Elsewhere the specification of speech permits a certain resistance to the absorptive effect of lyric, as when Ida, having been won around sufficiently to recite the lyric ‘Now sleeps the crimson petal’ (VII, 161–174), continues to sing in blank verse—yet the parenthetical specification of voice this time asserts a mute resistance to the lyric idyll:

I heard her turn the page; she read a small  
Sweet Idyl, and once more, as low, she read:  
‘Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height:  
What pleasure lives in height (the shepherd sang) [...]’ (VII, 176–79)

The narrative aside, so staple a feature of the realist novel as to go unremarked, is here often harnessed for vocal effects. During the men's early tour of the University, Melissa describes the growing intimacy between Ida and Lady Psyche:

But when your sister came she won the heart  
Of Ida: they were still together, grew  
(For so they said themselves) inosculated (III, 71–73)

The familiar parenthetical specification of the third line encourages us to rush through its contents—‘(For so they said themselves)’—before the verse can linger on the exotic, Latinate, polysyllabic ‘inosculated’. This rushed delivery helps trim down what is otherwise one of the very few instances of syllabic excess in the poem; the compensatory weight we put on ‘inosculated’, meanwhile, stands as yet another example of where the poem unifies with such force as to draw a little too much attention to its fusing.

It is unsurprising that this continuous vocal jolting, sliding or derailing should have been badly received. ‘The poem being, as its title imports, a medley of jest and earnest, allows a metrical license, of which we are often tempted to wish that its author had not availed himself’, declared Charles Kingsley.<sup>24</sup> Coventry Patmore, however, was better attuned to the way in which *The Princess*'s rhythmical emphases constituted an extension of blank verse's expressive possibilities: in his review copy of the poem's first edition (also currently held by the Berg library), he notes the propulsive passage, ‘Strove to buffet to land in vain’ (IV, 167), writing in the margins that ‘there are bolder novelties of metre in this, than in any other modern poem’.<sup>25</sup> In the same copy, Patmore passes perhaps the most astute critical verdict on *The Princess* as a whole: ‘The extreme *hollowness* of almost everything in the Poem may have been intended.’<sup>26</sup> Such an intuition helps show why Barrett Browning was wrong to link blank verse's alleged unsuitability to its failure to depict certain

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<sup>24</sup> *The Critical Heritage*, p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, Berg Coll MSS Tennyson [*The Princess* Copy 6], p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. It is strange therefore, that Patmore's final published review (in the *North British Review*) should by contrast be so uninteresting: see Edgar Finley Shannon Jr., *Tennyson and the Reviewers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 105–114.



subject matter (tending rather to ‘the fairies’). For it is precisely the poem’s self-conscious untimeliness that permits it such productively disjunctive rhythmical effects. These disjunctions convey the ‘steam’ of the modern world better than any poem about the railways.

Much of what I have said to date supports Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky’s claim that ‘it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class, and by the force of his investment in them, and his gorgeous lyric gift, to make them sound frothing-at-the-mouth mad.’<sup>27</sup> The examples to date might suggest that Tennyson’s blank verse helps to betray such ‘investment’ through offering a significant contrast to, or disruption of, ‘his gorgeous lyric gift’. But the rhythmical dislocations such as we find in the passages above fail to prevent even blank verse from a sort of lyric aspiration—in both the social and vocal senses of the term. What Kosofsky sees as lyric overinvestment, that is to say, is not only a madness from which, once recognised as such, we could simply disinvest ourselves; it is also a state for which *The Princess* makes even the most critical of readers yearn.

We find such aspiration within a passage that should refute for all time the accusation that Tennyson was lacking a sense of humour. The cross-dressing Cyril observes the women’s university with an initial wonder that rather damages his male self-regard:

‘[...] I  
Flatter myself that always everywhere  
I know the substance when I see it. Well,  
Are castles shadows? Three of them? Is she  
The sweet proprietress a shadow? If not,  
Shall those three castles patch my tattered coat?  
For dear are those three castles to my wants,  
And dear is sister Psyche to my heart,  
And two dear things are one of double worth,  
And much I might have said, but that my zone

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<sup>27</sup> *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 119.

Unmanned me: then the Doctors! O to hear  
The Doctors! O to watch the thirsty plants  
Imbibing! Once or twice I thought to roar,  
To break my chain, to shake my mane: but thou,  
Modulate me, Soul of mincing mimicry!  
Make liquid treble of that bassoon, my throat;  
Abase those eyes that ever loved to meet  
Star-sisters answering under crescent brows;  
Abate the stride, which speaks of man, and loose  
A flying charm of blushes o'er this cheek,  
Where they like swallows coming out of time  
Will wonder why they came: but hark the bell  
For dinner, let us go!

And in we streamed [...] (II, 389–412)

As with Ida's declamatory monologue, Cyril's speech strains toward lyric dilation, albeit that it has risked bathos for quite some time before the bell finally sounds. Where the Princess had pledged to work 'in the shadows', this speaker possesses an uncanny sense of his own unreality ('Are castles shadows? [...] Is she / the Princess a shadow?' he asks; the answer is yes, in both cases). Against this presentiment of falseness, Cyril yearns to make his disguised voice heard, not only in a literal sense (where speaking out would mean giving himself away), but also through the sonorous embellishment that forces its way into the blank verse. "Once or twice, I thought to roar / To break my chain, to shake my mane", loads the line with parallel clauses, assonance and internal rhyme, until it risks breaking; even when Cyril steps back from such dangerous abandon ("Modulate me, Soul of mincing mimicry!"), the alliteration and poetic apostrophe make his apparent restraint ludicrously self-refuting. Thereafter, the blank verse preaches a decorum ('Abase', 'Abate') to which it is manifestly unwilling to conform, with the voice swelling into a further apostrophe ("loose / A flying charm of blushes") whose simile ('like swallows') anticipates the later lyric 'O swallow, swallow'. A blank verse that had accelerated to the point of deceiving itself that it was lyric then remembers its true nature: its very momentum carries it over the hemistich to its bathetic denouement, as Cyril's wounded male protest collapses into the

dutifulness of a good little boy (“but hark the bell / For dinner, let us go!”). Vatic apostrophe is reduced finally to dinner. The self-alienation from a lyric mode whose temptations are only too apparent is as striking as in any of the actual songs.

That *The Princess* both experiences and disabuses this specific form of lyric afflatus (which in the above is tied firmly to male self-esteem) further complicates the relationship between song and the ‘lost child’—beyond Tennyson’s generic prompts, and beyond any reduction to individual character or specific narrative content. An early passage drops a clue in this regard. The Princess Ida’s father recalls her secession from his kingdom:

[...] knowledge, so my daughter held,  
Was all in all: they had but been, she thought,  
As children; they must lose the child, assume  
The woman: then, Sir, awful odes she wrote,  
Too awful, sure, for what they treated of,  
But all she is and does is awful; odes  
About the losing of the child; and rhymes  
And dismal lyrics, prophesying change (I, 134–41)

Just as Lilia had from the start resented those men “‘That love to keep us children!’”, so these poems about ‘the losing of the child’ suggest that losing, in comparison to the plangent, reified ‘loss’, might well be a necessary, desirable process. *The Princess* does not so much sing of a child, as to attempt to sing like a child: yet it cannot unknow the fact that to do so is to abandon oneself to a compensation that is known to be not only impossible, but also of dubious political effect. Ida’s ‘dismal lyrics, prophesying change’ could not be further from the songs that we end up getting: Tennyson prevents us from hearing just how irregular were her odes, yet this silencing (if nothing else) remains audible through the contrast with the comparative regularity of song.

Even at the close of the narrative, where the convalescent Prince holds forth to Ida on their impending matrimonial bliss, Tennyson does not spare us the knowledge that such union comes at real costs. Our putative hero dilates for twenty-seven lines on the firm foundations of his love (VII, 318–45), concluding

“Lay thy sweet hands in mine and trust to me.” The poem breaks off for the framed conclusion at this point; yet as Daniel Denecke has noted, Ida is not permitted—or declines—to offer even a single word in response.<sup>28</sup> Prior to the Prince’s long impassioned monologue, she observed “I seem / A mockery to my own self” (VII, 316–17), an objection that, left hanging in the wind, seems to know a little too much. In a poem that has been testing throughout whether, in our desire for lyric unity, we forget the multiplicity of different voices that has brought the tale about, this supersession of the male voice discomforts precisely through the success of its suppression.

If we were to leave it at that, *The Princess* might leave us stuck in the rut of its paradox. The child is already lost, and indeed had to be lost, yet that does not prevent us from attempting to sing it, or (failing that) its loss, back into life. Yet I do not believe that this is all Tennyson’s poem amounts to, nor that we can finally identify its message with the Prince’s unanswered epithalamium. I suggested above that ‘the shadows’ offered one way in which the poem concedes its falseness. The poem lays the leitmotif on thick: still in the Prologue, the singing group arrange to be “Seven and yet one, like shadows in a dream” (Prologue, 222); the Prince himself comes from a family line whose fate, being descended from a sorcerer who ‘cast no shadow’, is to be unable to tell ‘the shadow from the substance’ (I, 9). We might take this as simply one more sign of the flamboyant luridness of Tennyson’s tale: in the fourth edition of 1851, Tennyson goes further down this gothic route, expanding upon the Prince’s ‘weird seizures’ in an attempt to make psychologically plausible his perceptive incapacity. Yet this revision also signals an attempt (failed, in my view) to control the substance-shadow distinction by legitimising it, when its true effect is rather more disconcerting. When, for instance, the Prince once more has the intimation ‘To dream myself the shadow of a dream’ (V, 470; cf. I, 18), he would appear to admit the wishful impossibility of the poem more generally, rather than to give any convincing account of schizophrenia, or ‘catalepsy’.

Yet *The Princess*’s quite remarkable Conclusion moves beyond this admission of the poem’s unreality (significant though that is), in order to employ precisely the

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Denecke, “The Motivation of Tennyson’s Reader: Privacy and the Politics of Literary Ambiguity in *The Princess*,” *Victorian Studies*, 43.2 (Winter 2001), pp. 201–227.

wishful delusiveness of lyric as a privileged means for grasping its historical moment. Just as there is something uncanny in the spectacle of a dreamed character becoming aware of his fictive status (as distinct from the dreamer being aware that she dreams), so this concluding return to the narrative frame produces effects that exceed self-reflexivity. This does not happen instantaneously. From their high vantage, the group of friends who had recently sung their archaic tale turn to view ‘the happy valleys’ and, further off, the sea, beyond which lies, ‘Imagined more than seen, the skirts of France’ (Conclusion, 48). Imagination might here appear as no more than a negative limit, a boundary to visibility. Indeed, at this very point a college friend of the unnamed narrator (and son of a Tory MP) breaks in, with a disquisition on the matter to hand, England:

‘[...] God bless the narrow sea that keeps her off,  
And keeps her Britain, whole within herself,  
A nation yet, the rulers and the ruled –  
Some sense of duty, something of a faith,  
Some reverence for the laws ourselves have made,  
Some patient force to change them when we will,  
Some civic manhood firm against the crowd – [...]’ (Conclusion, 51–57)

Patriotism here discharges its duty through anaphora; ironically, the college friend’s phrasing (‘the laws ourselves have made’) resembles nothing so much as Ida in her more autocratic moments. Yet his speech then moves in a surprising direction, which is to say, it exceeds him. Our very separation from France, literal and imaginative, is precisely what enables us to figure it, as a space in time that can be grasped only in its irreality. The college friend continues:

‘[...] The gravest citizen seems to lose his head,  
The king is scared, the soldier will not fight,  
The little boys begin to shoot and stab,  
A kingdom topples over with a shriek  
Like an old woman, and down rolls the world  
In mock heroics stranger than our own;  
Revolts, republics, revolutions, most

No graver than a schoolboys' barring out;  
Too comic for the solemn things they are,  
Too solemn for the comic touches in them, (Conclusion, 59–68)

France comes to seem not unlike the drama of this most fantastic of poems; the very numbness through which 'Tears, idle tears' communicates something of the historical belatedness of a generation also helps explain what it is to live in eighteen forty-eight. Tennyson would certainly not have followed the intended consequences of the intuition that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce; but when the Conclusion calls the poem that precedes it 'mock-heroic gigantesque' (11), it grasps the central intuition. It is essential to *The Princess* that the tension between modes and genres that I have traced throughout does not slacken into the ready compromise of the portmanteau, where mock-heroic means really neither one thing nor the other. When the friends try to understand the nature of what they have lately sung, they push in this direction, toward a kind of liberal public sphere in which any interpretation would be equally valid ('why not make [Ida] true-heroic, true-sublime', some wonder (Conclusion, 20)). But excluded from this apparently inclusive polity is Lilia, just as was Ida before her, in the midst of the Prince's own unifying, closing remarks: 'for she took no part / In our dispute' (29–30). Lilia is the unassimilated remainder that teaches us both the negative lesson of her exclusion, and the positive one whereby her irreducibility forms the condition of all projective imagination. Do we hear her name, transfigured, when we then come across Sir Walter, the owner of the estate on which the friends have gathered, 'No little lily-handled Baronet he' (84)? Following another sustained burst of anaphora, once more pushing through patriotic description (85–90), do we subsume or exclude Lilia from the militating 'we' of the poem's final lines?

Last little Lilia, rising quietly  
Disrobed the glimmering statue of Sir Ralph  
From those rich silks, and home well-pleased we went. (Conclusion,  
116–18)

Auden very famously remarked of Tennyson that he was ‘the great English poet of the nursery’;<sup>29</sup> by stating that ‘[t]his fine old world of ours is but a child / Yet in the go-cart’ (Conclusion, 77–78), the older poet had however once more gotten his excuses in early, and in the process defined the historical necessity of the juvenile vocation. Far from being discarded, Ida’s intention to work in the shadows is a plan that the poem surreptitiously pursues. Tennyson’s willed lyric infantilism thus steers *The Princess* near what Walter Benjamin considers as the efficacy of ‘dream kitsch’:

Dreaming has a share in history. The statistics on dreaming would stretch beyond the pleasures of the anecdotal landscape into the barrenness of the battlefield. Dreams have started wars, and wars, from the very earliest times, have determined the propriety and impropriety—indeed, the range—of dreams.<sup>30</sup>

Tennyson grants as much, in a line that he had to excise from the first edition of *The Princess*, perhaps because it knew too well that an epoch declares itself most clearly not through its great events, but through its manner of play: ‘The nineteenth century gambols on the grass’ (Prologue, 232). It is precisely by seeking to dream away its concerns, to know not, to ask no more, that lyric itself explains, despite itself.

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<sup>29</sup> Auden is speaking in the introduction to his *Tennyson* (London: Phoenix House, 1946), p. xiv.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Dream Kitsch’, from *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 3–5 (p. 3).