

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**TENNYSON'S AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY:  
TENSION BETWEEN ART AND SOCIETY**

BY

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**To My Dear Master  
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To Whom I Owe Alot**

## **ABSTRACT**

### **TENNYSON'S AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY: TENSION BETWEEN ART AND SOCIETY**

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This thesis is a study of the development of Tennyson's aesthetic theory in three periods of his literary career. He is attracted first by art for art's sake, but he soon realizes that a great poet must care for his own society. In his mature period he becomes a social poet and his poetry becomes a criticism of life.

Tennyson and other eminent Victorian writers were at odds with their age. They found it difficult to reconcile popular appeal with artistic integrity. Tennyson lived and wrote in an age preceded by the Romantics and followed by the Pre-Raphaelites, for whom it was natural to believe that art is and must be its own justification.

Tennyson's internal conflict is manifested in his early poems of which the very title indicates the clash between opposing ideas and emotions. Tennyson's poems in the 1832 volume show a dialectic clash between the Romantic and the Victorian sides of his personality,

a clash between art for art's sake and commitment, between the desire for artistic isolation and social involvement.

In the second stage of his literary career, Tennyson turns to public poetry, though he is still very critical of the unpoetic society which cares more for gold than for intellectualism. He comes to believe that art for art's sake is immoral, and commitment is unrewarded.

As a mature poet, Tennyson tries to overcome the conflicting emotions in his own nature, but his quarrel with the society is continued and he becomes a social poet who desires reform. He comes to believe that the artist must become aware of his own responsibility and be able to communicate his insights.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Commitment, criticism of life, the teaching function of literature or the Horatian sugar-coated pill are not something new. The word poet in Greek means prophet; i. e., a man who should enlighten and guide people. In the same way, the battle between art and society, the contrast between poetic detachment and emotional involvement, and poetic disillusionment are as old as Homer's *Odyssey*. Art for art's sake may be called a nineteenth-century phenomenon or even coinage, but the idea is not new although it was intensified and popularized in the nineteenth century .

The Ivory Tower poet cuts himself off from the society of men. The Ivory Tower in this world, like Virgil's Ivory Gate in Hades, is the haunt of dreams. The escapist turns away from life and finds a refuge in art, especially by creating a dream world remote from reality. Although it is not easy to find enough examples of escapism or the Ivory Tower poetry before the end of the eighteenth century, one cannot deny the existence of such ideas. The island of Lotos-Eaters in the *Odyssey* is a good example. Homer forbids escapism, but the desire to forget the society exists. The fact that Ulysses asks the

mariners not to taste lotos suggests that commitment or the whole Trojan war has been futile and escapism is one way of relieving the pains of life. It is not without reasons that Tennyson turns to the *Odyssey* and chooses only the story of the Lotos-Eaters and the disillusioned Ulysses as the topic of two of his poems. It is undoubtedly in the nineteenth century that such ideas flourished.

M. H. Abram's *The Mirror and the Lamp* begins with a chapter called "The Orientation of Critical Theories," a chapter reprinted by David Lodge as the opening chapter of his *20th - Century Criticism*. To Lodge, this chapter is "the best possible introduction to the study of modern criticism" (1) and it is for this reason that the chapter has been placed, out of chronological order, at the beginning of Lodge's book .

Abrams talks about pragmatic theories, expressive theories and objective theories. Pragmatic theories are applied by Abrams to the literature before the nineteenth century. It is a kind of literature that is "ordered toward the audience . . . looks at a work of art chiefly as a means to an end," and its aim is "to teach and to please" (Lodge 11-12). From the time of Horace through the eighteenth century, the poet responds to the needs and demands of the audience and tries to instruct by pleasing. This is the literature of commitment. But the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* shifted the focus of critical interest from audience to artist. In the "Preface" to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth says, "poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful



feeling; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity” (*Great Critics* 509).

In the expressive theory, poetry is a “projection of the thought and feelings of the poet.” Thus, work of art becomes “an internal made external . . . embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings” (Lodge 17). Wordsworth insists that he is writing for men, but he never cares for the demands of the audience.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the emphasis from teaching is shifted to giving pleasure and, thus, commitment is no longer an important issue. None of the romantic poets aims at shaping the society and guiding the reader. Even the revolutionary views of Shelley and the farcical satire of Byron have little or no teaching purpose. We find few social poems in Wordsworth, a self-centered poet who wrote *The Prelude, or The Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, a very long poem in which, at most only two human beings appear and is the best example of what Keats calls “egotistical sublime” in his letter to Reynolds (*Poems and Letters* 279).

Romantic poets do not care for the traditional role of the poet. They claim none of the functions of poetry enumerated by Sir Philip Sidney at the end of his *An Apology for Poetry*. They are neither the “first bringers of all civility” nor virtue-breeders, nor legislators of mankind (*Great Critics* 231). In short, they do not care for commitment.

Shelley's radical views are more political than social. His desire for a world superior to the one before the fall of man has no teaching purpose. Coleridge favors supernatural topics and begs the wind to activate his imagination and help him move to dynamic organicism. Chaucer's works give us a beautiful picture of the fourteenth-century England but the works of all romantic poets give us no hint of the society in which they lived. They were alienated and they made the best use of their alienation, fiddling while Rome was burning.

After receiving a copy of Shelley's *Cenci*, Keats writes to Shelley: "An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration'--selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you must curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist" (*Poems and letters* 297-98). Keats dislikes Shelley's poetical passions. He does not see the poet as the legislator of mankind. He believes that an artist must serve his own art rather than humanity. Thus, Keats's letter makes the beginning of the doctrine that came to be called "art for art's sake."

Serving Mammon was one way of responding to the demands of the unpoetic society in the Victorian period. But Victorian poets were not satisfied with the Romantic view of art. They believed that Romantic art could not dominate the society and Romantic poets lost the battle by refusing to fight. It does not mean that Romantic tendencies died away; in fact, Victorian poets are more emotional and

subjective in their approach to society than romantic poets. They are like the Lotos-Eaters who desire to forget their social responsibility, and yet they cannot do it; and, therefore, they continue their criticism of the society and see the poet as the trumpet that sings to battle and as the unacknowledged legislator of mankind. They struggle to get their traditional role back and be acknowledged as reformers of the society, but they neither lose nor win the battle.

Victorian poets found it difficult to accept the compromise already achieved by the Victorian novelists because the Victorian society found novel a more convenient and accessible entertainment than poetry. Since novels were published serially in magazines, novelists had to meet social demands. Of course, Victorian compromise does not mean slavish obedience on the part of writers; it means the reconciliation of social demands and the novelist's or poet's sensibility. Victorian poets accepted the compromise reluctantly, but they continued criticizing the social demands and vices.

### **I. The Objective and Scope of the Study:**

This study deals with Tennyson's aesthetic tendencies, the attraction of art for art's sake and desire for commitment. Different generations of critics and readers have arrived at different evaluations of Tennyson's poetry, achievement, and poetic tendencies. His contemporaries esteemed the didacticism and medievalism of his

longer poems, but later responses have often preferred his shorter, more intense and subjective poems reflecting his melancholy quest in the light of his poetic tendencies and his views of the function of the poet and poetry. "It is out of the quarrels with themselves . . . that both Keats and Tennyson made much of their best poetry" (Pettigrew 8). In fact, Tennyson's best poems are the product of his quarrels with himself and with the society. Tennyson's poetry suggests a series of unresolved tensions between art and society, doubt and faith, past and present. His best poems delineate his two opposing concepts of the poet and poetry. While Keats wants to serve Mammon, not humanity and knows what he is seeking, Tennyson wavers between the two worlds of art and society.

Keats in an early poem, "Sleep and poetry", wishes for ten years to overwhelm himself in highly sensuous poetry set in the realm of Flora, and retreats from what in "Ode to a Nightingale" he calls "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" (23). The young Tennyson tries to retreat from the same problems, but very soon he starts attacking them. He comes to feel what Keats tries to clarify in "The Fall of Hyperion," that "the poet and the dreadmer are distinct/ Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes," that "a poet is a sage/ A humanist, a physician to all men" and that the height of poetry can only be reached by "those to whom the miseries of the world/ Are misery, and will not let them rest" (147- 200).

Even in the early poems of Tennyson, his contradictory views of art drive him to the solitude as well as to the outside world. He is sensitive to the spirit of his age and its destructive element that kills the poet's spirit. Times and again we come across his quarrel with himself which are the result of tension between conflicting impulses, the desire to retreat to the realm of Flora or the island of Lotos-Eaters, and the tendency to regain the traditional role of the poet and get emotionally involved in social issues. His best poems are inspired by his quarrels with himself and the world, quarrels that are intensified by the spirit of the age. In fact, his works suggest a young escapist or a private poet who struggles to become a public poet. He is aware of the difficult task he must undertake to become a public poet. The consciousness of this difficulty underlies every major poems of his early period.

In his earliest poems, Tennyson wrote two kinds of poetry: some of the poems present a gloomy absorption with the artist's subjection to his age; others are distinguished by a negation to accept any such restriction. Thus, one group of his early poems shows a sense of insecurity with regard to the outside world. In a contrary mood, he discards the outside world and seeks immunity from its disturbances in the depths of his own imaginative being.

The poem "Youth" is the clearest statement of Tennyson's recognition of the quarrel with himself. He is in confused suspension between the claims of the past and the future. There is some attraction

in retreat to “natal bowers,” but the poem shows the need to move on. Recluse may seem attractive, but it is temporary.

It is true that “Youth” suggests Tennyson’s divided personality, the conflict between isolation and involvement, but it makes clear Tennyson’s desire for emotional involvement. He realizes that he is static while the world is dynamic. This opposition of a static poet and a dynamic world suggests Tennyson’s symbolic projection of the quarrel with himself and the world. The movement is from a private poet to a public one, from the temptations of art for art’s sake and sensuous escape to the recognition of the fact that the poet must get involved in the agonies and strife of human hearts .

The volume of poetry published in 1832 shows a better differentiation between the two opposing tendencies shown in his earliest writings. Thus, the divided will which is dramatically represented in “The Two Voices” conveys the theme of self-doubt. The poet’s awareness of the interdependence between artistic creation and the state of mind forms the whole debate of the poem. For the poet there is no internal resources to remove the doubt, and a voice from the outside world accomplishes it. The poet feels a need to identify himself with the life around him through innate sympathy with the beauty of natural world. E. D. H. Johnson in his *Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry* elaborates on the poetry of Tennyson:

Tennyson conceives many of his poems on a centrifugal or wheel-like principle, the crux of the situation being the hub

around which, like spokes, the contributory actions are in constant rotation. Paradoxically, it is the apparent immobility of this hub in contrast to the encircling play of circumstances which holds the reader's attention focused on the center. (8)

A similar contrast between an outer sphere of activity and an inner, timeless core of apprehension is developed in some of his other poems. In "The Lady of Shalott" the main concern is an isolated consciousness or what Norman Page calls "Tennyson's lifelong interest in the Arthurian stories" (216) which suggest the futility of commitment. In "The Palace of Art" the external forces that enter the soul's self-possession are sympathized with and the absence of any sense of responsibility is revealed:

O Godlike isolation which art mine,  
I can but count the perfect gain  
What time I watch the darkening droves of swine  
That range on yonder plain. (197-200)

The development of the poet's aesthetic theories between 1832 and 1850, his *Annus Mirabilis*, is best illustrated by *In Memoriam*. As T. S. Eliot comments in his critical essay, "Tennyson seems to have reached the end of his spiritual development with *In Memoriam*; there followed no reconciliation, no resolution" (620).

The second phase of Tennyson's poetry which begins with *Enoch Arden Volume* contains poems for which Victorians paid more