Introduction: From strange diagonal to weaver’s shuttle

Every man imputes himself.

Tennyson, to James Knowles

Once the seven young men and seven ladies in Alfred Tennyson’s *The Princess* have spun out their narratives and sung their lyrics in a “random scheme,” it is up to the auto-biographical speaker “to bind the scattered scheme of seven / Together in one sheaf” (Conclusion, 8–9). The “strange diagonal” he then traverses between male “mockers” and female “realists,” between a male narrative and a female lyric mode, became the trope of mediation that figured the larger antinomies of my *Tennysonian Love: The Strange Diagonal* (1989), just as the medial chapter entitled “The strange diagonal” made *The Princess*, at the close of which the phrase appears, that book’s synecdochal poem.

Some additional Tennyson essays of mine, scattered stalks of the past twenty years, provide the grain for the present study. Differences in talent aside, the organizational task I thus initially imagined was not unlike that which confronted the narrator of *The Princess*, or for that matter the problem of self-borrowing (Ricks 1967, 209–30) and serial composition (Tilletson 1965, 88–109; Gray 1980, 3–9, passim) that Tennyson resolved more or less successfully in *In Memoriam* and the *Idylls of the King*: how to bind the “scattered scheme” of one’s work into a single sheaf where not too many stray wisps stick out or float away.

While that agricultural trope from *The Princess*, the sheaf of wheat or barley tied together by an organizing reaper, thus
remains as a trace from my earlier study, it is herein replaced for the most part by another conceptual figure, poetic weaving, and another synecdochal poem, “The Lady of Shalott”: that poem, at any rate, occupies the theoretical and literal center, the medial Interweave, of the present study, where Tennyson's “warp” of perception and “woof” of characterization will be said to cross (pp. 113–23). My journey from the harvesting metaphor of The Princess that controlled Tennysonian Lose to the weaving trope of “The Lady of Shalott” which stitches together the present argument thus links two metaphors, reaping and weaving, that have marked some recent discussions of writing and reading. But while that linkage may be a characteristic of post-structuralist theory, it is also deeply Tennysonian: for from the agricultural reaping and binding of The Princess, Tennyson himself moved to the weaving of the completed In Memoriam, of which he said that he “did not write [the individual sections] with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so many” (Memoir, i, 304).¹

Many of us have in the past twenty years tried to learn “how to reap [and bind] a page,” as Geoffrey Hartman has phrased the matter in an essay so titled (1981, 67–95): the agricultural etymon of Derrida’s word for critical thought, “dissemination,” has itself been widely disseminated — and, to update conceptual metaphors in mid-sentence, such is one of this study’s methodological threads. But it is interwoven with a strand of a different color as well, that of an eclectically psychomythic sense of male and female individuation: George Stanley Faber, Freud, Jung, Melanie Klein, and Lacan may seem to criss-cross somewhat arbitrarily but they also displace each other in rough historical order in the coming pages. Thus, while my ending with Klein and Lacan in Chapter 9 is meant to be a climactic privileging, the clash of different psychic dispensations in the book as a whole may nevertheless strike some readers as incoherent ground for an argument. But, as the Interweave and Chapter 6 will argue, the very notion of solid “ground” is undermined by both my metaphors — by the earlier agricultural scattering of semes and a later weaving textualization of a literary “work” or total ouvre.
Introduction

To stay momentarily with the agricultural trope, wide dissemination will also be a pronounced emphasis of this study, just as the broadcasting of seeds or sones has characterized the polysemic, anti-essentialist notion of authorial self and world that some other readers have to varying degrees assumed in recent Tennyson studies (Wordsworth 1981, 207–22; Armstrong 1982, passim; Peltason 1983, 13–18 and 1985b, passim; Sinfield 1986, passim; Slinn 1987, 67–81; Johnson 1987, 308–31). But readers committed to a post-humanist textuality cannot wholly avoid some slippage into an earlier frame of mind, even at the expense of “ontological bad faith,” in Paul de Man’s apt phrase (1983, 211). Alan Sinfield best captures that nostalgic tendency within a Tennysonian context:

Because it is always impossible to fill up the sign, the attempt is very likely to be shot through with a sense of loss and absence. Derrida affirms: “There will be no unique name, not even the name of Being. It must be conceived of without nostalgia.” But even here there is a hint of stoicism which… becomes a renewed romantic yearning in Hartman and even de Man. In Tennyson loss and absence are pervasive. (Sinfield 1986, 98–9)\(^2\)

The trace of nostalgia or thinking “within” nostalgia, that is, must exist as inexorable Derridean supplement for those who conceive of themselves as thinking “without nostalgia.” In my own version of such romantic yearning, I cannot at times help lapsing into an older understanding of consciousness before this century’s linguistic turn invaded Tennyson studies; I feel the intermittent need to indulge a personal, humanistic, and historically specific Romantic imperial self over whose passing Tennyson also hovered (Tucker 1988, 28) – one that is implicit in the threads of perception weaving together the autobiographical ego, what adapting Roland Barthes I would call the “autobiographemes”\(^3\) of this very preface. As in a strange diagonal/shuttle between my two books, I am occasionally impelled toward an earlier, Cartesian notion of what Tennyson in In Memoriam xvi called a “deep self” beneath all proliferating linguistic difference that his masterwork also displays (Peltason 1985b). Putting aside an ideology of difference, I now
and then seek to approach the “living soul” that this self-proclaimed Victorian “lord of the senses five”\(^4\) himself momentarily “touched” (beyond an otherwise privileged “seeing” and “hearing”) at the mystical center of his life and poetry in *In Memoriam xcv*.

Such a reconstitution of the centered and sovereign self also explains the intermittent evocation of an old-style biographical Tennyson as supplement to, following Barthes, the biographemic “Tennyson.” A psychically compelling, atavistic throwback to Romantic/Victorian vitalist humanism, that reconstitution is at the same time indebted to more recent feminist recuperations of the subject, to identify the hue of the feminist, or third methodological thread (after deconstruction and psychoanalysis) of the argument. For while the first five chapters of this book, its warp, treat of Tennysonian perception in universalist terms, the second five, its woof, show how that epistemology is gendered, how the deep below the deep and the height beyond the height of desire tend to get feminized by the poet most surely illustrative of a wholesale feminization of poetry in the Victorian period.\(^5\) The obscure object of Tennysonian desire, as it assumes the form of person, is sometimes homo-gendered as in *In Memoriam*, sometimes bi-gendered as in *The Princess* of Chapter 8, sometimes constructed as woman and mythically unitary as in the poems treated in Chapter 7 or triplicated as in those of Chapter 8, and sometimes aligned with the maternal body as in the *Idylls of the King* of Chapter 9. My patriarchal garment, this “coarse” male word-coat “against the cold” (*In Memoriam* v, 10), will therefore have at least one strand, introduced in the Interweave, decidedly colored by recent gender studies.

The weaving motif thus imposes a bi-partite, ungendered-warp/gendered-woof design upon my otherwise rather heterogeneous swallow flights of criticism. More importantly, it metaphorizes what will gradually emerge as the central theoretical question I see raised by Tennyson’s self-retarding, “hovering”\(^6\) poetics: is the literary text *woven* by a historically definable, intending and “choosing” Tennyson or by the “unseen hand” (Peltason’s phrase, in note 1) of an all-pervasive
textuality that occludes personal intention and that may be summarized in the compendious sign, “Tennyson”? The etymological pun in the very word “text” (from “textere,” “to weave”; “textus,” “woven”) captures the weaving implications of the issue in small—and that is why the weaving Lady of Shalott points to such wider epistemological matters and why her participation in a weaving parable will occupy the exact center of the argument in the Interweave. The largest issues of human, authorial, and my own readerly agency that emerge in the paired, climactic “Tennyson Choosing”/“Choosing Tennyson” chapters will thus have been specifically prepared for, if hardly on every page of this book, then at least in this Introduction and in the Interweave, just as the parabolic significance of the Interweave’s Lady of Shalott prepares for the emergence of that later shadowy artisan of Tennyson’s career, the Lady of the Lake, in Chapters 8 and 9.

“My” Tennyson is thus a rather Paterian figure, a melancholy participant in/witness to a Penelopean “strange, perpetual weaving and unwrapping” of self and world, to a “design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it” (Pater 1910b, 234–6). If Walter Pater embraced that web of mysterious origin in the Conclusion to The Renaissance, the Lady of Shalott in Tennyson’s earlier weaving fable tried instead to evade its “curse” with fatal results. For I take Pater’s Conclusion and his work more generally to be the specifically English— as opposed to Continental—source of our pantextual(al) prison house of language and Bloomian misprisionings (J. Hillis Miller 1976b, 97–113; Joseph 1987, 61–3). In an attempt to restrain the solipsistic tendencies of the Paterian within, I will keep the explicitly personal note under some control after this preface. But that note will occasionally resurface, most notably in the Interweave and at the beginning of Chapter 9. For even while trying to curb flagrant self-projection, I want to affirm my sense that if every reader, in Tennyson’s words, “imputes himself,”(10) the reader who has spent a long time scanning the career and work of a single writer (as I have) is especially prone to self-revelation in his commentary on that figure.
Still, in a penultimate thinking-against-oneself reversal of the shuttle, such a belief in the self-reflecting character of criticism whose nineteenth-century English source is Pater also accounts for the frequent allusion in the coming pages to Christopher Ricks. For Ricks is not only Tennyson’s authoritative editor but also my implied and Pater’s explicit critical antagonist – the theoretically and rhetorically insistent naysayer who would surely agree, with the Arnold of the Preface to the Poems of 1853, that the critic ought at least to have so much respect for the art he explores as to prefer it to himself; who believes, in no-nonsense fashion, in an historical Tennyson knowable more or less as he, biographically, and his works textually and critically in themselves “really” were. Or so I would weave Ricks as cautionary paradigm.11 It is at any rate against the “disinterested,” Arnoldian conception of the Tennyson I attribute to Ricks that I offer my more self-imputing Paterian “Tennyson” as perpetually weaving, woven, and rewoven by post-Saussurean words of the ever fluctuating reader. Actually, of course (and bringing the shuttle to momentary rest), I’m rather inclined to hover between the two critical possibilities. As my Lady, soul image of reader as well as of writer, is “half,” but only half, “sick of shadows” – and of diagonals and shuttles.
PART I

Victorian warp: perception
Chapter I

Tennyson’s stupidity – and ours

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind’s imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

Shelley, “Mont Blanc”

[The] private conversation [between thought and stupidity] is a lengthy one, as the philosopher’s sight plunges into this candleless skull. It is his death mask, his temptation, perhaps his desire, his catatonic theatre. At the limit, thought would be the intense contemplation from close up – to the point of losing oneself in it – of stupidity... The philosopher must be sufficiently perverse to play the game of truth and error badly: this perversity, which operates in paradoxes, allows him to escape the grasp of categories. But aside from this, he must be sufficiently “ill-humored” to persist in the confrontation with stupidity, to remain motionless to the point of stupefaction in order to approach it and successfully mime it...

Michel Foucault, “Theatricum Philosophicum”

By now we have passed well beyond what Harold Nicolson called his “scavenger age,” those post-Stracheyan days when critics felt obliged to indict the shallowness and complacency of Victorian thought in general, and to greet “with the guillotine of the critical humorist” so representative a sage of the period as Tennyson in particular (Nicolson 1923, 128). Stephen Dedalus’s “Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet” is a famous enough dismissal, and as late as 1945 W. H. Auden could still be so casually reductive as to call Tennyson the “stupidest” of the English poets (1945, x). Since the time of that slur, it has become
easy for dedicated Victorianists to smile at the hyperbole, to see it as in effect the stupidest of remarks (Turner 1949, 1–12) or as a sign that Auden while throwing it off was “half asleep” (Kincaid 1975, 14). In the light of recent work that has insisted upon not only Tennyson’s imaginative but also his intellectual acuity (Kozicki 1979; Ford 1983), Auden’s epithet seems a last-gasp inflammatory exaggeration of an epoch that was on the verge of staging a rehabilitation of the Victorian ethos generally and of Tennyson’s reputation more specifically. It is at least easier now than earlier in this century to understand the awed estimate of most of Tennyson’s contemporaries: “He reads,” said Thackeray, who considered Tennyson the wisest man he knew, “all sorts of things, swallows them and digests them like a great poetical boa-constrictor, as he is” (Ray 1955, 284; as quoted in Ford 1983, 164).

Still, even with the shift in critical fashion, there is something so excessive in a major modern poet’s denigration of an influential predecessor that one is continually drawn back to Auden’s remark, if only because of its categorical insistence. For Auden, Tennyson is not merely the stupidest of the major poets, but the stupidest of all English poets. It is the absolute quality of the conceit that is finally so provocative and that drives one to return to it – to confront it directly rather than, as Tennyson enthusiasts have usually done, in passing and as a readily demolishable straw man. The stubborn insistence of that “stupidity” within the consciousness of this reader, at any rate, has transformed it into a proper jumping off point for a full-scale consideration of Tennyson’s work – and perhaps even a key of the “perversion” sort that Foucault evokes in the second of the epigraphs introducing this chapter.

What Auden meant by “stupidity” is intellectual narrowness, for he follows the characterization with the explanation that “There was little about melancholia that [Tennyson] didn’t know; there was little else that he did” (x). To begin with, the remark may tell us as much about Auden’s cast of mind, if only its penchant for outrageous obiter dicta, as it does about Tennyson’s. In a New Yorker review some years ago (1954, 131–8) of Isaiah Berlin’s The Hedgehog and the Fox, a comparative
Tennyson's stupidity – and ours

study of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Auden extended into the modern period Berlin's division (derived from the Greek poet Archilochus) of the world's classical thinkers into systematizing hedgehogs like Dostoevsky who know "one big thing" and foxes like Tolstoy, the cultivators of a broad multidimensional, who know "many things" (Berlin 1957, 7). Much as he further complicates Berlin's strict opposition, Auden's identification in the body of the review is clearly with Tolstoy – that is, with a synoptic wanderer who pursues many contradictory ends in a variety of styles while cultivating intellectual breadth. May we not, therefore, Auden's remark about Tennyson not merely as a slight but also as the expression of a widely ranging fox's ambivalence toward the focused temperamental obsession of a hedgehog?

Within the non-judgmental context that Berlin's categories provide for Auden's assessment, it is perhaps defensible to say that Tennyson, whom T. S. Eliot called "the saddest of all English poets" (1959, 295), did indeed know one ever-deepening thing, the mystery and staying power of human sorrow. To reverse the dictum of Matthew Arnold (in "Resignation") – even if he was one of a Victorian minority who disparaged Tennyson's mind, who felt him to be "deficient in intellectual power" (Charles Tennyson 1977, 5) – not wide the hedgehog poet sees, but deep. For Tennyson's narrow subject, his "one big thing," is arguably the most profound that poetry can explore. Melancholy, to cite his American cousin Edgar Allan Poe who will loom large in the following argument, "is the most legitimate of all poetical tones" (1965, xiv, 198). As the critical truism goes, Tennyson is thus the most Virgilian of the English poets, the one who most persistently gives us the lacrimae rerum, the Aeneid's tears for passing things (Bush 1957, 227–8), "the self's lament for the self, in counterpoint to the rhythmic ground swell of doom" by which the past so inexorably determines the present and fixes the future (Tucker 1988, 23). It is not merely the depth of Tennyson's mining of what in "Tears, Idle Tears" he calls "divine despair" at the days that are no more that makes him rather than Arnold (his only competitor for the title) the Victorian poet of loss and