

George Barker

The Face Behind the Poem

An Essay in Honour of Tennyson

"His opinions too are not original, often not independent even, and they sink into vulgarity: not only Locksley Hall but Maud is an ungentlemanly row and Aylmer's Field is an ungentlemanly row and The Princess is an ungentlemanly row. . . . But for all this he is a glorious poet and all he does is chryselephantine."

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

THERE is an arithmetic of poetry in which totals transcend all enumerations: it is not possible to equate the figure of Tennyson by adding together those elements that go to make up either the poems or the name. Put conversely, if you dismantle the construction of Tennyson you will discover that the sum of the parts does not equal the whole. To me it is as though these poems and this reputation were in fact inhabited by the presence of a superior power, a phenomenon of electricity, seemingly unwilling to subject itself to isolation or analysis. I do not mean to refer to the "Poetry" in the poems or to the "Poet" in the name: I mean to speak of a kind of authority imbuing both, which neither, upon examination, could wholly account for. Tennyson's poems, unlike those of, say, Ben Jonson, transcend their own achievements and their own intentions in such a way as to render a purely semantic criticism of them quite specious. They call for an exercise in metaphysical permutations.

For the Tennysonian characteristic is ambivalence. The poem is there in the hand; one examines its colours and lines with much the same delight as if it were a kingfisher; and then discovers that one has a salmon or a cheap piece of Victorian cut glass in one's hand. And I am speaking of more than the "impression" or "effect" of the poem upon the reader; the ideas or intellectual specifications of the poems seem to mutate as one looks at them, like the behaviour of water.

*Tears, idle tears, I know not what they
mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine
despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.*

It is almost possible to watch such lines manoeuvring their emphases like the lacunæ of Lamia. When Tennyson is accused, as he has been, of silliness, of intellectual provinciality, of vulgarity of mind, what is happening, I think, is that his accusers are looking at the poems as though they were simply presenting a case. But Tennyson's poems never simply present a case (or even a portmanteau): for when these poems present a case, it is by no means this presentation that matters most. What matters more is an expression on the face of the figure that makes this presentation: the never quite visible but

never invisible presence of the poet himself. I think that this remark holds for poets other than Tennyson. The poems of Yeats, for example, and of Eliot even more so, draw part of their plenipotential dignity from the expression on the face of the poet as he presents the poem. Nor is this expression of the poetic face to be deduced directly or even obliquely from the emotion of the poem itself. Like Carroll's cat, it is very hard to place. And sometimes the "effect" (which may be the same thing as the meaning) of the poem occurs catalytically between the statements of the ostensible words and the expression of the invisible face. (This antiphonic effect is clearest, as I see it, in the satirical poem. For we know that behind the machinations of the satire moves inevitably the love that seeks effects.)

SO THAT the first of the metaphysical permutations of the Tennysonian mask is, I think, this plurality: the expression of the observed word and the expression of the invisible visage. To bring what evidence I may for these adumbrations, I suggest that recognisably the face behind the "Idylls of the King" hints at its own falsity whereas the face behind "The Two Voices" acknowledges that it has removed its innermost mask. "The Two Voices" is not only a better poem: it is also a better Tennyson.

This notion has nothing to do with any speculative autobiographical correspondences between the poem and the poet: what I seek to describe is the permanence of that moment when the poet, perceiving the possible poem for the first time, modifies his approach to it in terms that strive to anticipate the poem's nature. I suggest that in the apocryphal street where poets pick up poems, there are laws that govern the behaviour of both. The poet is not permitted to accost one kind of poem as though it were another; nor can he know what kind of poem he meets until he has met it. But he must behave as though he had in fact foreseen its nature, for this prognostication operates, in retrospect, as though it had actually had a hand in the evolution of the poem's nature. And this moment of what one

could call categorical recognition is the moment immortalised ever afterwards in the expression on the face of the poet as it presides—as it must preside—over the poem. It is, finally, the act of imaginative domination which precipitates the poem's identity.

Thus the Sonnets of Hopkins are dominated by an expression not so recognisably present in these sonnets themselves as in the mask or face that hangs like a cloud over them. It is a cloud not of anguish and not of personal passion but of a kind of ineffable regret. Not the individual regret of a creature for things done or for things not done; but the ineffable regret of the spirit aware that it can liberate itself only through its actions, which is torment, or through the intellect, which is inconclusive, or through theology, which is not viable. Thus these sonnets have two subjects: the ostensible subject of the poet's despair, and the unspoken or masked subject, the tragic regret that this despair is not only possible, but, unforgivably, poetic. The poem hates the poetry.

Over Tennyson's beautiful and agonised poem "The Two Voices" no such profound regret (that the poem hates the poetry) presides as it does over the Sonnets of Hopkins. Behind the nihilistic tergiversations of "The Two Voices" there echoes a private resentment rather than a tragic regret. Where the Sonnets accuse the divine powers with a transcendental "How could you ever do this to us?" "The Two Voices" accuse those powers with a petulant "Why did you ever do this to me?"

BUT my purpose is not to try to make up an essay in comparative anatomy between Tennyson and Hopkins: what I seek to do is to demonstrate if possible the tenability of a theory of poetic possession; a conception of the face behind the poem, the hidden visage of its creator, that visage which, like an act of possession (in both senses), can never be dismissed from the poem, any more than the face of its father can be erased from that of the child.

I take it that a total poem is, in itself, the metaphor of an event. Since it is certainly

not the mere description of an event (though it may be partly this), and since a poem cannot possibly exist without the event that engenders it, then I conclude that it operates or migrates between the inceptive event and the abstracted idea of the event enshrined in the eventual poem. I have to employ obscure terminology because this is the dark backward and abysm of the mind. Briefly: the subject of the poem is an occurrence in the moral or material history of the animal: the poem itself is such an event stolen from temporal affairs and transferred to the altitude of the Ideal. What I want to propose is that in this transference of the event from the world of temporal affairs to the altitude of the Ideal, the poet may (or may not) be aware of the almost supernatural obligations of such a Promethean act. Promethean in that it attempts to return this privilege whence it came.

Is there no bright reversion in the sky?

And upon the poem itself the presence of this awareness of a supernatural prerogative or obligation may leave its distinguishing imprint, yet no more visible and no more verifiable, save in between the lines, than that demigod left his handmark on the first flame. Tennyson makes this—no, not clear, because such a matter could never be that, not clear, but—a perhaps tenable notion, and for the very reason that his poems contain little except the fire and the dross or the best and the worst. Thus this face wears the illuminated expression of a natural man who is not a demigod but who is really playing with fire. And this is the supernatural privilege, for among the Caucasian Rocks of the mind this ontological fire can destroy as well as animate. See William Blake.

WHAT distinguishes a messenger from men who are simply going from one place to another is more than the weight of the message he carries. A glance at the melancholy postman trudging down a damp lane with a neat packet of letters under his arm unmistakably declares that Housman has merely a few letters of condolence to deliver.

If the address on these envelopes were not quite so impressive, one has no doubt that he could bring himself to chuck the lot under a hedge and go home to bed. Conversely it would be excusable to assume from his behaviour that every word carried by Tennyson contained State secrets. And this consciousness of a supremely responsible communication (which is not the same thing as a supremely important message) imparts to the poem its air of authority, and presides over the total body of a poet's work like that face or visage of congenital possession which I have tried to describe. Thus this consciousness of a supernatural privilege or obligation so presides and so imparts the seeming authority. And, as I see it, Tennyson acknowledged this privilege and exercised this authority. What principally renders that sinister figure a sympathetic and at the same time an apparently simple equation is his demonstrable conviction that even obscure issues can be spoken of quite clearly.

*A second voice was at mine ear,
A little whisper silver-clear,
A murmur, 'Be of better cheer.'
As from some blissful neighbourhood,
A notice faintly understood,
'I see the end, and know the good.'*

But this is not to say that such obscure issues did not exist for him. And by obscure issues I mean those remote but powerful enigmas in human affairs to whose elucidation the workings of the creative intelligence have always been largely directed: the ambiguities about ourselves, the gods and the world that we do not understand, and of whose very existence we have only uncertain evidence.

Verlaine said of him: "When he should have been broken-hearted he had reminiscences." But what *In Memoriam* lucidly and veritably attests is this: that when one is broken-hearted, one does in fact have reminiscences. It may not be honourable, it may not be intelligent, it may not be French: but it is what Tennyson knew more than Verlaine. What is it that we recollect in tranquillity? Verlaine's remark is as irrelevant to *In Memoriam* as Samuel Johnson's strictures

are to *Lycidas*. For Tennyson is not less prepared to be obvious in the services of the poem than Whitman was prepared to be vulgar or John Milton academic or Wystan Auden a boy scout or Yeats a Voronoff gland. What such poets have made out of their allegorical instances, this is what truly matters. Nor can I recognise on what authority we are to understand that poetry cannot be created out of vulgarity, obviousness, reminiscences, or, indeed, since William Shakespeare showed us, out of anything or nothing at all.

FOR what I am really trying to write about is not so much Lord Tennyson, whose shade is in no need of my administrations, as about the art of poetry, whose identity has not, even yet, been categorically disclosed. It is the great honour of Tennyson that he was elected to glorify the simple but never simple-minded operations of the common intelligence, whose ardours and labours may be no less memorable than those of a larger range but a smaller vulnerability. This most "poetic" of poets speaks in truth not for those intellectual potentates who can very well speak for themselves, but for the common or sensible man.

As I see it, the speculative intelligence is to the poem what the camouflage is to some species of animal: a function to make one thing look like another. The function of speculative intelligence in a poem is to make

that poem look like a rational and comprehensible statement. But the poem is not this, or not merely this, because if it were it would in no way differ from the rational statements of prose. And we have it on the authority of Dr. I. A. Richards that prose makes statements and poems make "pseudo-statements." "Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning." No, the Dionysian beast whose nature is disguised by the camouflages of an intelligence is a hybrid monster uniting the instincts and the imagination of man. And these instincts and this imagination provide the real or sleeping subject of the poem, where, to all appearances, this subject is merely a collection of unverifiable assertions. I believe that a poem does not finally appeal to the seat of rational judgment in mankind; it has other courts of judgment; the poem appeals to the analogical goddesses of memory, to the idols and incarnations of the human passions, to the instinctive responses of sensual conditions, as much as to common sense. And perhaps one of the reasons why Tennyson's poems wear what I have called an expression of ambivalent authority is this: that they utter the ejaculations of wonder which would be wrung from all perfectly normal intelligences if liberated in a world and underworld of such goddesses, such idols, such sensual conditions, and so little common sense.

Democracy, Liberty, and Mr. Worsthorne

[*The author of the following discussion-article was formerly a member of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department. His book, "The Nature of Power," was published in this country last year by Rupert Hart-Davis.*]

I DON'T know how it may be in Britain, but most of our government officials in the United States make no profession of philosophy. Their decisions of policy respond more to the practical considerations that press upon them than to considerations of theory. On the other hand, the philosophers and students of politics in our universities generally live at some distance from the world of governmental action and decision.

This separation of action from philosophy was not the basis on which our civilisation got started, and it is not the basis on which it is likely to keep going. Where action is not the child of philosophy as well as expediency (a good philosopher should not deny the rôle of this second parent), it lacks the discipline and the inspiration of great purpose. At best, then, it makes a dreary record of death-in-life, like the thousand years of the Byzantine empire. At worst it leads to a less lingering end.

The civilisation-makers are the men who marry philosophy and practical affairs. An example was provided in the January issue of *ENCOUNTER* by Mr. Peregrine Worsthorne, in his article, "Democracy *v.* Liberty?". Taking the Geneva decision to hold elections in Indo-China this summer, he examined its philosophical underpinnings to determine whether they were in good order. He concluded that they were not.

In Mr. Worsthorne's view, the Geneva arrangement between the Western and the Communist powers (the United States abstaining) is that the people of Indo-China are to make their choice at the polls between a democratic system of government and a Communist tyranny.* In other words, they are being given the right to elect tyranny. Worse than that, 51 per cent are being given the right, in addition to voting themselves into servitude, to vote into servitude

the other 49 per cent and the generations yet unborn as well. The question arises whether they should properly have this option.

Most of us, in Britain and America alike, were brought up to a rather simple notion of democracy which equated it, on the one hand, with liberty, on the other with majority rule. Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Therefore the implication of this elementary-school view is that liberty and majority rule go together. If the people are sovereign and are allowed to express their sovereignty and are allowed to express their majorities they will take care of their own liberties.

In point of fact, political philosophers since the Enlightenment have recognised that a choice might have to be made, on occasion, between popular freedom and unqualified popular rule. They have recognised that circumstances might arise in which the people, achieving self-government, might use it to deprive themselves of it, that they might use their freedom to destroy their freedom. In such a case, does not the philosopher have to make a choice between democracy (identified with majority rule) and liberty?

In such a case, however, there would be no way for the philosopher to choose democracy. A vote for democracy would be a vote for a sovereign who would abdicate. At best, therefore, the choice would actually be between liberty and tyranny, and there might not even be that choice.

THE only answer that the defenders of majority rule can make to this contingent dilemma is that there is no better alternative to placing one's reliance in the people, since the people are the least likely of all possible sovereigns to allow the destruction of their liberties. They generally concede, however, that the people's preservation of these liberties depends on the degree of moral and intellectual enlightenment in those who cast their votes. Having this in mind, the founders of liberal government in America and Britain alike were disposed, on the one hand, to promote public education as the necessary precondition of democratic self-government, and on the other to qualify democracy more or less severely by restricting the franchise to the educated (and propertied) classes.

* The government of southern Vietnam, not having been a party to this arrangement, has felt free not to give it effect. This makes Mr. Worsthorne's issue academic without, however, invalidating it in the least.