The Capture of the Muse in the Moxon Tennyson

By

Justine E. Hyland

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

With Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2001
For my sisters
Acknowledgements

For her kind support and careful readings of my rough thesis, I am deeply indebted to Professor Marjorie Levinson. In her fall 2000 class, Professor Levinson’s comments on Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” renewed my interest in the poet and re-awakened a sense of beauty in my heart. Professor Levinson’s suggestion of Kant as a guide in my visual-verbal study, as well as Keats’s “Ode to Psyche”, proved exceedingly helpful and illuminating. I would also like to thank Professor Adela Pinch for her disciplined thinking and kind attention over the past months. For suggesting Nancy Vickers’s article “Diana Described”, I am truly grateful to Professor Carla Mazzio.

Without this piece, the starting point of this thesis would have been quite different. I would also like to thank the staff of the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan. Without their impeccable care and devotion for the Special Collections Library, the Moxon Tennyson would not have been so easily accessible. Last, but hardly least, I am more thankful than ever for the unfailing love and support of my family and friends.
Abstract

In this thesis I closely examine four poems and their corresponding illustrations in an illustrated edition of Tennyson’s 1842 Poems. I evaluate the degree to which the illustrations and the poems seek to conform (or not) from Kant’s ideas about aesthetic judgment. Through Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful”, I form a correlation between some of Tennyson’s early poems and their illustrations as artistic representations that also describe particular mental processes of creation. The ‘translation’ of some of Tennyson’s most painterly poems into illustrations raises the issue of how visibly the illustrators perceive Tennyson in the poem. Tennyson often uses a female figure, a Muse, as a poetic persona whose treatment in the hands of the illustrators indicates that she is always an extremely isolated figure. This isolation seems to be a necessary condition, without this condition neither the poet nor the illustrator can engage in “free play of the imagination”, which is the application of all aesthetic judgments (Kant, 174).

In my introduction, I give a brief history of the Moxon Tennyson and the history of painting in England as it relates to the motives and aims of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. I end with a discussion of Blake and an analysis of Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” in relation to Tennyson’s own Muses. In the first chapter, I talk about Rossetti’s illustration to “Mariana in the South” and Millais’s illustration to “Mariana”. Each Mariana laments so that she can forget the lover who has abandoned her. The first Mariana becomes trapped by her grief; hence Millais’s illustration gives us a picture of her unvaried despair. Rossetti’s ore psychologically intense illustration directly engages the poem. Through this engagement, Mariana’s hope for death becomes even more vivid.

Isolation, coupled with overwhelming details, is my focus in the second chapter. Rossetti’s illustrations to “The Palace of Art”, highly interior and representing only single stanzas of the poem, demonstrate just how a visual element can be considered a symbolic language. In the last chapter, I talk about the ambiguity in “The Lady of Shalott” as a superior artist/Muse figure. She reaches beyond the bounds of mere self-pleasure and goes on to enter a world full of symbolic meaning in the illustrations by Holman Hunt and Rossetti. Finally, I conclude with a brief overview of Tennyson’s poetic methods and a description of why these prove so attractive for visual artists.
## CONTENTS

Short Titles                                      i  
List of Figures                                   ii 
Introduction                                     1  

**Part I: The Moxon Tennyson**                    1  
**Part II: Aesthetic Judgment**                  3  
**Part III: Pre-Raphaelite Aspirations in Relation to Blake**  4  
**Part IV: The Sensual in Keats & Tennyson’s Detailed Vision**  5  

**Chapter I** 
A Formula for Artistic Expression: 
Creative Frustration in “Mariana” and “Mariana in the South”  7  

**Chapter II** 
The Fleshly Mr. Rossetti and “The Palace of Art”  17  

**Chapter III** 
The Mysterious River of Meaning in “The Lady of Shalott”  27  

Conclusion                                       37  

Works Consulted                                  41  
Short Titles


Figures

Mariana, 10

Mariana in the South, 15

Cecilia, 21

Weeping Queens, 23

Hunt's Lady, 31

Rossetti's Lady, 34

Ode to Memory, 39
Introduction
Part I: The Moxon Tennyson

When asked to draw some illustrations for an illustrated volume of Tennyson’s poetry, William Holman Hunt happily obliged. The poem he was particularly interested in was “The Lady of Shalott”. He had done two preliminary sketches for this poem’s illustration when he finally gave his work to the engravers. However, when Tennyson saw the illustration he objected that he neither described the Lady’s “hair wildly tossed about as if by a tornado” nor “the web round and round her like the threads of a cocoon”. Hunt replied:

I had wished to convey the idea of the threatened fatality by reversing the ordinary peace of the room and of the lady herself; that while she recognized that the moment of the catastrophe had come, the spectator might also understand it . . . May I not urge that I had only half a page on which to convey the impression of weird fate, whereas you use fifteen pages to give expression to the complete idea?

- Holman Hunt, 124

Granted that Tennyson had never published an illustrated edition of his poems, his preference for simplicity in the binding and type of his work led him to consider illustrations to his poems distracting and superfluous. He did not dislike pictures in general, but thought that his poetry could speak for itself. Edward Moxon, his long-time publisher and friend, first consulted Tennyson in 1854 about his idea for an illustrated new edition of Tennyson’s 1842 Poems. Tennyson told Moxon he could not defray the costs, so Moxon took the venture upon himself. The book has a handsome blue cover with a gilt urn on the binding and gilt pages in addition to many beautiful illustrations done by Pre-Raphaelite and Royal Academy artists. Due to publication delays and
artistic differences like that reported above, the book did not come out as a gift book (in December 1856) but in May 1857. Edward Moxon had been willing to bet on the popularity of the newly made poet laureate, but his confidence cost him dearly. The book did not sell. Moxon sold only 1,400 copies out of 10,000 and the rest were only bought from the Moxon Company’s storehouse some years after Edward Moxon’s death.

When the book came out, reviews were as lukewarm as sales. Critics saw the great degree of stylistic variety in the Moxon Tennyson\(^1\) as a disadvantage. Critics did not know quite how to place this “compendium of nineteenth century English art history” (Hoffman 46). Since 1857, the majority of critical opinion has “treated Moxon as a product of Pre-Raphaelitism” (Hoffman 47). In 1901, an edition including only the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations was published. Indeed, the structuring of critical opinion around the Moxon must take up Pre-Raphaelite concerns and interests to begin. In the next three parts of this introduction, I will explore the aims and philosophy of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the context of the *ut pictura poesis* aesthetic movement. By demonstrating Pre-Raphaelite connections with Kant, Blake, Keats and finally Tennyson, I want to show how visual and verbal artistic media effectively work together to free Pre-Raphaelite art from its self-consciousness in the Moxon Tennyson.

\(^1\) The 1857 *Illustrated Edition of* Tennyson’s 1842 *Poems* will hereafter be referred to as “The Moxon Tennyson” of “the Moxon”.
Part II: Aesthetic Judgment

In Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, he states that a Beautiful Object\(^2\), one worthy of aesthetic judgment, is “one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective” (42). An aesthetic judgment stands independent from any concept of good, utility or charm and “afford[s] absolutely no, (not even a confused), knowledge of the Object” (71). With such rigid terms, a simpler explanation is necessary for my beginning. Kant has a simple schema in his introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, which relates certain mental faculties to corresponding cognitive faculties and certain *a priori* principles to their application. With this schema, he seeks a “suitable mediating link connecting the realm of the concept of nature with that of the concept of freedom”. Though each *a priori* principle has its application, only the principle of a “Final End” corresponds to the “Freedom” required by aesthetic judgments. Similarly, only the “Faculty of desire” results in the exercise of “Reason” (39). Only by acknowledging the existence of a “Final End”, or something beyond our own existence, can we attain any rational control over our desires. Kant’s idea of moral worth takes into consideration “what a man does heedless of enjoyment, in complete freedom and independently of what he can procure passively from the hand of nature, does he give to his existence, as the real existence of a person, absolute worth” (47-8).

Aesthetic appreciation of an Object therefore indicates a certain independence of mind but also a certain responsiveness to a Beautiful Object. This Beautiful Object, if it is a representation of the fine arts, “can only be termed beautiful, where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature”. The artistic representation,

---

\(^2\) I mean Object in the philosophical sense of any kind of phenomena perceived by the mind.
though it can follow rules of composition or meter, is only Beautiful in proportion to the “absence of labored effect” (167).

Part III: The Pre-Raphaelite Aspirations in Relation to Blake

English painting from the early to mid-nineteenth century experienced a great change as to what painting style was considered the highest expression of beauty and harmony. The Renaissance standards of Raphael reverenced mathematical proportion and balance as the ultimate expressions of artistic perfection. However by the time four young artists formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, the National Gallery in London had acquired Van Eyck’s Arnolfini Wedding Portrait, “one of the very few examples of painting before the ages of Raphael accessible to the English public at the time” (Lottes 278). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood called themselves “Pre-Raphaelite” because they wanted to paint the truth according to their own perceptions, not according to Raphael. Much critiqued and ridiculed for their lack of perspective\(^3\), their independent spirit and disgust for the tame conventionality of the Royal Academy spurred them to create a unique artistic world of poetry and pictures. Led by the poet and painter, Dante Gabrieli Rossetti, the group published a journal of poetry and plates for about two years. When the journal failed, the last ostensibly Pre-Raphaelite project is the Moxon Tennyson. The Moxon, however, only involved three Pre-Raphaelites (Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti) with the rest of the artists being Royal Academy trained. By aiming

---

\(^3\) The critical reaction was especially trenchant in “The Fleshly School of Poetry”, a pamphlet published by Robert Buchanan in 1871, reviewing a volume of Rossetti’s poems. Though this review was not written specifically in response to the Pre-Raphaelite style of painting and illustrating, Buchanan’s remarks touch on a central facet of Pre-Raphaelitism as a school “always self-conscious and always aesthetic”. Chapter Two discusses this conflict in more detail in the context of Rossetti’s illustrations to Tennyson’s “Palace of Art” in the Moxon.
at a technique that was "true to nature", the painters Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti sought to break the fetters of Raphael.

This "Pre-Raphaelite" rebellion has its roots in the painter/poet William Blake's own critical attitudes towards the "tame correctness" (Mitchell 16) of the accepted aesthetic doctrine of his day: *ut pictura poesis*. Blake's own illustrations of Milton and Dante, as well as the illustrations he published for his own poems, allow him to create a space of imaginative unity that is free of any but individual rule. Blake chooses what kind of unity he wants to portray, and his unification of the two arts is not "a means of imitating or transmitting the full range of reality, but to expose as a fiction the bifurcated organization of that reality" (Mitchell 31). Blake's art, like that of the latter Pre-Raphaelites, chose to question the finality of perception itself.

*Part IV: The Sensual in Keats and Tennyson's Detailed Vision*

Keats and Tennyson were two poets honored enough to be on the list of "Immortals" that the Pre-Raphaelites made in 1848. The attention of these poets to detail and their ability to "entangle the various senses ... though assonance and alliteration" (Barnard 4) captured the Pre-Raphaelite imagination. Even more important than this linguistic elaborateness, was the presence of a Muse figure in the poems of Keats and the early poems of Tennyson. The poem not only begins with the Muse, but it uses her situation in order to think about art and how art is created.

Keats's "Ode to Psyche" gives an excellent example of this use of the Muse. Initially, the poet presents himself as a petitioner who longs to sing Psyche's praises. In the first stanza, Keats conjures a rich image of Psyche and Cupid, "Their lips touched not, but had not bade adieu, / As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber, / And ready still past
kisses to outnumber/ At tender eye-dawn of auroean love:" (lines 17–20). These lines present a detailed picture that seems to move even as it is described. Keats does not say "they kissed" or "they slumbered", instead he describes Cupid and Psyche in the most tentative way possible. Thus, Keats stirs his own imagination into awareness. In the second stanza, the poet delights in a catalogue of devotions that Psyche does not receive. By making the Muse Psyche empty of all the devotion his imagination could give her, Keats finds an individual poetic voice through which he can "see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired. / so let me be thy choir, and make a moan/ Upon the midnight hours" (lines 44–46). The isolation of this devotion and of the Muse herself (note the "Ode" does not tell the story of Cupid and Psyche) seems a necessary condition for poetic creation. By fixing his attention upon one Beautiful Object, the poet engages his imagination in free play.

The isolation of this free play does have its consequences. The small forest creatures, Dryads and winds that occupy Psyche’s temple exist in a “wide quietness” (line 58). This changing dream world is in a constant state of being created. This isolated uncertainty, coupled with the beautiful images created here by Keats and elsewhere by Tennyson, also characterizes the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations in the Moxon Tennyson. In examining the relation of the Muse to some of these Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, I trace the beginnings of a powerfully creative state of mind that never truly ends.
Chapter I: A Formula for Artistic Expression: Creative Frustration in "Mariana" and "A Southern Mariana"

Seeing, then, that the natural endowment of art (as fine art) must furnish the rule, what kind of rule must this be? It cannot be one set down in a formula and serving as a precept — for then the judgment upon the beautiful would be determinable according to concepts. Rather must the rule be gathered from the performance, i.e. from the product, which others may use to put their own talent to the test, so as to let is serve as a model, not for imitation but for following.

-Kant, 171

John Ruskin's endorsement of the young Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood took the form of several letters written to the *Times* in 1851. Ruskin separated himself from the many critics who ridicule and criticize this young group of painters. He saw their originality and invention as necessary for the establishment of an English school of painting. To demonstrate his point, he gives an example of two men with different mental powers, "one of them is quiet in temperament, has a feeble memory, no invention, and excessively keen sight. The other is impatient . . . has a memory which nothing escapes, an invention which never rests" (434). As we learn at the end of the letter, the first man is John Millais and the second Joseph Turner, whom Ruskin champions as being "among the few men who have defied all false teaching" by doing "justice to the gifts with which they were entrusted". In Ruskin's view, the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to paint "closer to nature" (436) is a commitment to the honest expression of individual perceptions. However, Ruskin's praise of Millais is interesting in that Millais was one of
the least radical Pre-Raphaelites. Ruskin wanted to see a greater communion between art and creativity in the form of active seeing.

Towards the end of explaining this concept of “active seeing”, I compare and contrast two illustrations done by Milais and Rossetti. The most radical proponent of ‘active seeing’ was D. G. Rossetti. Rossetti’s illustrations to the Moxon Tennyson echo Blake’s method of “maintaining the independence of design from text which Northrop Frye has called ‘syncopation’ – the placement of a design at a considerable distance from its best textual reference point” (Mitchell, 10). Though Rossetti was inspired by the poem “Mariana in the South”, he saw it as a model to follow rather than to imitate. Millais, on the other hand, kept closer to the text of the poem in his illustration for “Mariana”. While Millais’s illustration shows a Mariana who has found no solace in language, Rossetti’s “Mariana in the South” proves such a powerful image that the words of the poem fail to equal it in some respects (and vice versa). As I will assert in this chapter, the dialogue engendered by Rossetti’s illustration to “Mariana in the South”, as opposed to the lesser dialogue between Millais’s illustration and “Mariana”, exemplifies Kant’s distinctions between free and dependent beauty. Dependent beauty imitates and “presuppose[s] a concept of what the object should be”. Free beauty follows and “presupposes no such concept”(72). The methods through which Millais and Rossetti visually engage their respective poems tell a great deal about the nature of an aesthetic judgment, as one that involves “imaginative play” of the mental faculties (174).

The implications of this mental state of “imaginative play” reveal themselves in “Mariana” and “Mariana in the South”. Both poems deal with a state of frustration. John Stuart Mill’s comment on “Mariana” holds also for the latter poem, “Tennyson’s
power of *creating* scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it” (404-5). Mill notes the heavily symbolic powers of “Mariana” even as he sets up the poem as a verbal symbol that embodies a visually evoked state of mind. “Mariana” has her connection to Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, however “Mariana in the South” has no such reference. It seems that Tennyson moved toward a more symbolic image in the latter poem. The latter poem reaches for a salvation for Mariana that is beyond the power of language. “Mariana in the South”, as Arthur Hallam wrote in 1831 was conceived by Tennyson, as a kind of pendant to his former poem of ‘Mariana,’ the idea of both being the expression of desolate loneliness” (*Memoir* I, 117). “Mariana” settles for an expression of “desolate loneliness” that uses language as a preservative of grief. “Mariana in the South” examines and then uses language in order to reach for tranquility beyond her own isolated world.\(^1\)

The concept of isolation gradually loses some of its limitations as it is further explored. “Mariana” sets a powerful scene of creative frustration. The refrain of “he cometh not” repeats virtually unvaried throughout the seven stanzas. The accumulated grief of the poem renders Mariana so receptive that she cannot perceive any Object that does not remind her of her grief. Filled with memories of the past, the landscape around her compounds this sensual confusion.

---

\(^1\) Margaret A. Lourie, “Below the Thunders of the Upper Deep: Tennyson as Romantic Revisionist”, *Studies in Romanticism*: Volume 18, Spring 1979. Lourie’s excellent analysis of “Mariana” connects this state of isolation to “Tennysonian Romanticism” through a more detailed examination of the analyses of Carol Christ and Culler.
MARIANA.

"Mariana in the moated grange. — Measure for Measure.

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the peach — the garden-wall.

John Everett Millais
Moxon Press, 1857
The landscape's decay in "Mariana" certainly spoke to Millais as the sole focus of a grief that has exhausted every mode of expression. Millais's illustration seems to illustrate the last stanza of the poem. Mariana turns away in anguish from "the hour/When the thick-moted sunbeam lay/Athwart the chambers, and the day/Was sloping toward his western bower" (RT lines 78 – 81). Millais's gentle cross-hatching technique portrays a Mariana suspended between the desires of the past and the disappointments of the present, the shades of the moldy landscape and the nuances of her own bitter regret. However, the placement of the illustration directly on top of part of the first stanza shows that the illustration could represent Mariana's despair as she beholds the rotting landscape. Whatever moment this illustration represents in the viewer's mind, the weight of the composition lies in the darkest shadows to the right of the illustration. Mariana's back is struck by light from the window and the heaviness to the right of the composition almost makes the eye want to be seeing Mariana from the window perspective instead of the frontal one we have.

The focus of the poem appears slightly off balance as well. Mariana's delayed entrance into the poem is preceded by vivid descriptions of the decaying grange:

The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.

The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and Worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.

- RT, lines 3 – 8
The perspective of the poem is quite uncanny in its confusion of present disrepair and past action. The description of the pears cites a time when the pear tree stood against the gable-wall and a time when this support gives way to rust. The past tense of “fell” and “held” hardly distinguishes between these two times. It is almost as if we were viewing alternating images in the same picture. Unsure of which to trust, Tennyson carries this temporal confusion into “Unlifted” and “clinking latch”. The alteration of habitual and past tense renders the latch simultaneously indicative of pat and present action.

This ambivalent viewpoint takes many forms in the second and third stanzas of the poem. The knowledge that her lover has abandoned her becomes heavier with each repetition of, “He cometh not,” she said; / She said, ‘ I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!” (RT lines 22 – 24). The change from day to night brings no relief, just as the dawn brings unwearied dullness. As Harold Bloom notes, Mariana does not perceive “nature, but phantasmagoria” (150). Mariana exists in a vision of recurring and inextricable finality; she can neither enter the present nor depart from the past. The sixth stanza, with its ghostly voices and faces floating within the “dreamy house” (RT line 61), show Mariana trying to fight off the encroaching decay of nature with her own memory. Nevertheless, she cannot remember anything that does not seem to come alive for her within the setting of the grange. In Millais’s illustration, two small portraits in the upper right of the composition share the half-lighted status of Mariana. Like Mariana, they can only be seen as half-perceived symbols of the past – neither alive nor dead. The dark, narrow seat where Mariana lays, and the smallness of the room, show the lament as something that cannot end
because it cannot really remember a time before it began. Millais’s illustration thus
does a wonderful job of portraying the never-ending diurnal cycle of Mariana’s grief.

From this state of temporal and spatial confusion, the Southern Mariana brings us
into a no less detailed interior space. The details, however, prove to be transcendent
symbols that inspire a religious fervor and a passionate hope for change. Instead of
tepid swamp decay, “Mariana in the South” sees Mariana as sublimating her
surroundings. The natural scenery appears pregnant with Mariana’s frustration, rather
than a passive echo of it, “And shallows on a distant shore, / In glaring sand and inlets
bright” (RT lines 7 – 8). Mariana’s lament, the Catholic prayer “Ave Mary” serves as
an instrument through which she distances herself from her grief. After discarding
the Catholic refrain in favor of the phrase, “To live forgotten, and die forlorn” (RT
line 72), she experiences visions that vanquish her hopes for earthly happiness. These
visions appear only after looking at some old love letters. Realizing the inadequacy
of these written words in her situation, she confronts a vision of her lover, that tells
her, “But now thy beauty flows away, / So be alone for evermore” (RT lines 67 – 8).
At this point, Mariana realizes that she can no longer hope for solace from her lover
but that does not exclude all possibility of change. In the last stanza, Mariana’s hope
for change begins to be realized as she transfers her creative impulses onto the canvas
of the sky, “The night comes on that knows not morn, / When I shall cease to be all
alone, / To live forgotten, and love forlorn” (RT, lines 93 – 5).

2 David Goslee’s book, Strange Faces, Other Minds, uses a more psychologically oriented analysis of this
shift of focus, “Because her figure virtually negates her situation and her story, her poem, instead of
portraying her failure, becomes her principle justification” (50). While this reading is interesting in light of
the first Mariana, it does not highlight the more spatially oriented aspects of the Southern Mariana’s
monologues, which I intend to discuss in the context of Rossetti’s illustration to this poem.
Rossetti’s illustration brings to light the ardor of this Mariana’s creative effort even though we do not see the transformation of hope itself. Crowded into three quarter position, we view Mariana from an angle where we can view all the details of her surroundings. First we see Mariana’s back reflected in a mirror, then a basin to the left, and finally steps leading up to a door and what appears to be a spinning wheel in the distant background. This suggestion of some sort of industry, whether religious or practical, demonstrates the Southern Mariana’s belief in hope beyond her cluttered house. In this illustration, Mariana sees physical objects not only as reminders of the past, but also as tools that can help her in a future tense. This method of imaginative re-working also ends in isolation from humanity because her only hope lies in transcending the normal standards of human sensation.
MARIANA IN THE SOUTH.

With one black shadow at its feet,
The house thro' all the level shines,
Close-latticed to the brooding heat,
And silent in its dusty vines:
A faint-blue ridge upon the right,
An empty river-bed before,

by D.G. Rossetti
For the Moxon Tennyson, 1857
Millais's illustration of "Mariana" is more dependent upon the poem for Mariana's expression. Rossetti uses the spirit and details of Tennyson's poem in order to create an individual interpretation. Rossetti's illustration proves that, "delight in the beautiful is such as does not presuppose any concept, but is immediately coupled with the representation through which the object is given" (Kant, 73). Therefore, a "beautiful" illustration would make use of its visual mode of representation in an original manner rather than deferring to another mode. While we know that Millais consulted Tennyson before he began his illustrations, this does not necessarily mean that Millais deferred to the poem completely in his illustrations. Rather, I think that Millais attained a greater degree of detailed accuracy as regards Mariana's setting. On the other hand, Rossetti achieved more intensity in regard to the mental state of his Mariana. Rossetti's portrayal of symbolic mental states, as I will explain the next two chapters, have the talent of giving the visual medium a communicative method completely its own. This visual communication, which takes poetry for its point of departure, explains in the next chapter the relationship between the intense powers of poem and illustrations in "The Palace of Art".
Chapter II: The Fleshly Mr. Rossetti and “The Palace of Art”

Mr. Rossetti is never dramatic, never impersonal – always attitudinizing, posturing, and describing his own exquisite emotions . . . In petticoats or pantaloons, in modern times or in the middle ages, he is just Mr. Rossetti, a fleshly person, with nothing particular to tell us or teach us, with extreme self-control, a strong sense of colour, and a careful choice of diction.

- Robert Buchanan (signed Thomas Maitland), 445

As I mentioned briefly in my introduction, Robert Buchanan’s 1871 review of Rossetti’s Poems and Ballads aimed to expose the Pre-Raphaelites as poor pretenders to the grandeur of Tennyson. Rossetti responded to this attack with an essay titled “The Stealthy School of Criticism”. To refute the charge that he places too much vivid emphasis upon sensual pleasures, Rossetti writes, “all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared – somewhat figuratively, it is true, but unmistakably – to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times” (463). For Rossetti, the processes of reading and seeing function by projecting powerful images upon the mind’s eye. This way of imagining these two expressive disciplines goes against the main current of nineteenth century art criticism. Still, Ruskin advocates this method in the first two volumes of Modern Painters. Helsinger clarifies Ruskin’s position in the context of Ruskin’s description of Turners “Slave Ship”:

Only for the small and privileged group of active seers does art function as a language to express mental process. The ordinary spectator, Ruskin implies, will be conscious of art simple as faithful representation, not as a system of signs.

- 203
Since Ruskin drew, and Rossetti was both painter and poet, this method of “active seeing” would seem to cater only to the interests of artists observing the works of other artists. The act of seeing as one of active, imaginative creation has its roots in Wordsworth’s 1815 Preface\(^1\), but in 1830 the imaginations of poets and painters alike were caught up in a debate between the expressive powers of poetry and painting. Margaret Lourie eloquently argues that the strong visual element in Tennyson’s poetry, “essentially invented Pre-Raphaelitism”. The Pre-Raphaelites took Tennyson’s fascination with “profound and otherworldly introversion” and learned “to paint these overwrought perceptions” (27). The most intense Pre-Raphaelite engagement with introversion in the Moxon Tennyson finds expression in Rossetti’s illustrations for “The Palace of Art”. These illustrations, because both of which illustrate only one scene from this large poem, were a causes for disagreement between Tennyson and Rossetti. Tennyson wanted some kind of faithful representation, but Rossetti worked in a system of visual signs. Precisely because Rossetti’s visual interpretation does not yield to Tennyson’s poem, these illustrations reveal the most powerful visual and verbal elements in the Soul’s creative state.

“The Palace of Art” tells the story “of a soul, / A sinful soul possessed of many gifts”, “that did love Beauty only” (RT lines 2, 6). Thus Tennyson’s preface to the poem characterizes the Soul as the sort of self-consciously aesthetic figures whom Buchanan ridicules and despises. Before we see what the soul does, the preface tells us that she is “sinful”, “a glorious Devil” (RT 3, 5) whose love of Beauty is such that she “see[s] not/ That Beauty, Good, and Knowledge, are three sisters/ that doat upon each other” (RT 10

---

\(^1\) Wordsworth’s Preface to the Lyrical Ballads also stresses reflection as an essential element in the process of creating poetry. For selections from the Preface and a good introduction to Wordsworth’s view on imaginative creation, please see the An Anthology of Romanticism, ed. Duncan Wu. Blackwell’s: 1999.
With this aesthetic frame in mind, the “Palace of Art” proceeds to describe what most critics see as a conflict between Art and Nature. Daniel Albright crystallizes this viewpoint, “Art smothers nature and provides manipulable surrogates over which the Soul may swoon” (38). Ricks, however, does not credit the building of the Soul’s palace with such power, seeing it as a “shallow charade”. Ricks asserts his dissatisfaction with poem in terms of its failures to explore:

the interrelationship [between Beauty, Good and Knowledge]; it simply asserts that the soul which loves Beauty only, and builds its Palace of Art, will fall into despair and self-loathing.

- 86

Still, I think that “The Palace of Art”s exploration of a very isolated relation – between the Soul and her love of Beauty – merits more detailed examination than one would give to a “shallow charade” in the light of Rossetti’s illustrations. The very conscious manner of the Soul’s creation, a palace that flaunts various representations of art, myth and legend, allows us to ask what induced this self-conscious display. After we accept the ostentatious display of her imaginative abilities, we notice that the scenes of creation gradually lose their savor in favor of penitence and guilt. The Soul moves from one isolated concept of creation to another isolated concept of humility under these conditions:

2 Ricks remarks that this poem “proclaims the view of poetry as morally opposed to aestheticism, which was strongly held by the Cambridge Apostles” (RT). The body of the poem, not the preface, was originally addressed to Tennyson’s friend R.C. Trench, with whom Tennyson reported the following exchange, “Trench said, ‘Tennyson we cannot live in Art.’ This poem is the embodiment of my own belief that the Godlike life is with man and for man.” (RT 49-50).

3 “The Palace of Art” is a poem filled with references to the Bible, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare and many others. As these references exceed my intentions in this study, I recommend Christopher Ricks’s notes to “The Palace of Art” in his Tennyson: A Selected Edition, pp. 51 – 70.
Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built:
Perchance I may return with others there
When I have purged my guilt.
- RT 293 - 296

The Soul uses isolation as a tool that communicates her desire to “return with others”. Unlike “Mariana in the South” this desire is not enough for her. The Soul’s own description of her guilt and possible return keeps the scenes of her Palace appear more dynamic and creative than they would have been if the Soul had remained a lover of Beauty only. Rossetti’s first illustration takes this imaginative aspect to portray St. Cecilia, one of the scenes in the Soul’s Palace,

Or in a clear-wall’d city on the sea,
Near gilded organ-pipes, her hair
Wound with white rose, slept Saint Cecily;
An angel look’d at her
- RT 96 -100

This specialized illustration shows that Rossetti, as his brother William Morris stated, had a desire to “draw just what he chose . . . taking from the author’s text nothing more than a hint and an opportunity” (Dalziel 88). The crowded composition of this illustration leads the eyes to the two largest figures – St. Cecilia and the Angel. Eyes shut, Cecilia’s hands rest limply on a small organ. The surrounding harbor, filled with small figures employed in the Palace’s construction, put the Soul’s palace literally in the background. Cecilia’s
THE PALACE OF ART.

I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house,
   Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.
I said, "O Soul, make merry and carouse,
   Dear soul, for all is well."

by D.G. Rossetti,
for the Moxon Tennyson, 1857
ecstatic expression, along with the shadow covering the Angel’s face as he bends down to kiss her, encloses this intimate moment in the text as a separate and detailed story.

Though we Cecilia’s ecstasy, we can only understand that her rapture has something to do with her relation to the Angel and the religious fervor of saints. When looking at this illustration in conjunction with the first stanza of “The Palace of Art”, it seems ambiguous as to whether the Cecilia figure is intended to represent the Soul, the Angel the poet. Or is the poet Cecilia, enslaved in order to build beautiful chambers of poetry for the Soul, the Angel who hangs over Cecilia as if he were breathing poetic inspiration into her? Though this illustration does not directly illustrate a major concept of the poem (the Soul, the Palace itself and all its rooms), it does give the reader a sense of a symbolic world in constant flux. The fascination of the illustration lies in its minute detail as well as its ambiguous connection to the poem. Rossetti’s illustration expertly appropriates Tennyson’s abstract first stanza by treating this abstraction as an opportunity to portray one of the Soul’s pleasures. Like Tennyson, Rossetti uses the muse persona to serve certain purposes – but far less definite ones. While Rossetti’s interests lie in the mental state of ecstatic creation, Tennyson tries to descry this state of creation by indulging it and then abruptly ending it. In this artificial attempt at resolution between the introverted world of the artist and extroverted world of shared thoughts and feelings, Tennyson deprives “The Palace of Art” of its potentially more creative solutions.

“The Palace of Art” is a poem of tableaux. As such, it contains many interesting moments but fails at its final resolution because the Palace is only filled by a triumphant,
THE PALACE OF ART.

Or over hills with peaky tops engrail'd,
And many a tract of palm and rice,
The throne of Indian Cama slowly sail'd
A summer fan'd with spice.

Or sweet Europa's mantle blew unclasp'd,
From off her shoulder backward borne:
From one hand droop'd a crocus: one hand grasp'd
The mild bull's golden horn.
gloriously sinful Soul. Rossetti exhibits this gloriously introverted perspective again in his second illustration for “The Palace of Art.”

Rossetti characteristically chooses another moment in the poem rather than giving the reader a schema that serves to narrate the poem. The illustration’s placement above the stanzas that describe Europa’s abduction literally force the reader to recall the scene some fifteen lines earlier in the poem,

Or mythic Uther’s deeply-wounded son

In some fair space of sloping greens

Lay, dozing in the vale of Avalon,

And watched by weeping queens.

- RT 105 – 108

Replete with exquisitely detailed gowns and circlets, the weeping queens all strike a slightly different pose. The faces of the queens that are visible seem equally inquisitive and sad as they touch Arthur’s sword and armor and cradle his helmet in their arms. The queen in the central foreground, with her back to the viewer, reminds the viewer of the extreme intimacy of this space. This illustration does not attain a literal translation of Tennyson’s stanza. This picture’s intricate pleasure in detail captures the intensity of the Soul’s pleasure in another of Tennyson’s stanzas:

Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,

Joying to feel herself alive,

Lord over Nature, Lord of the visible earth,

Lord of the senses five

- RT 177 – 180
The Soul’s isolated yet incredibly prolific creative state publicly exposes a Keatsian “tense pleasure of a partial, unnatural gratification that creates appetite even as it satisfies, or that truncates sensation even as it engenders it” (Levinson 78). The Soul’s flagrant exhibition of pride in her Palace, which no one can truly perceive but herself, brings us to the guilt and self-hatred of the final stanzas. The failure of Tennyson’s resolution lies in the truly powerful nature of his images of the Soul and her Palace. Rossetti’s illustrations observe the intense engagement of the Soul with her own creative faculties. These illustrations were indeed created by an eye that was “Lord of the senses five” (RT 180). Rossetti’s illustrations, with their static figures and small, detailed spaces capture all the nuances of the Soul’s creative pleasure. The Soul excels so at perceiving and creating, it is little wonder that her efforts to become passive take on a suspiciously triumphant tone. For the Soul to triumph in her own penance would be for her to create a Palace through self-sacrifice. Such a show of penance would surely place the Soul in the ranks of the self-serving aesthetes.

However, we do not know what led the Soul to create her Palace. Towards this end, I will examine “The Lady of Shalott”. “The Lady of Shalott”, according to many critics, is a kind of prelude to the “Palace of Art.” The Lady’s detachment from the world of Camelot and her weaving explore the implications of her own creative state rather than attempting to resolve the impasse between herself and the outside world.

Though the Soul detaches herself from the world in order to create her own Palace, the guilt she feels ultimately puts an interest in her path. She decides that her

---

pride is too much and that penitence and shared creation are the only ways to bring back
the pleasure she had in her Palace. Because the Soul’s pleasures had an interest (whether
self-love or self-hatred) as their "determining ground" they cannot be judged
aesthetically. For a judgment, "after it has once been posited as a pure aesthetic
judgment, an interest cannot then enter into combination with it" (Kant, 154). "The
Lady of Shalott"s lack of resolution makes this poem into one of the most creatively
suggestive sets of poems and illustrations in the Moxon Tennyson.
Chapter III: The Mysterious River of Meaning in “The Lady of Shalott”

In my introduction, I used Kant’s relations between “the concept of nature and the concept of freedom” as the determining ground for my study of these Muses and their illustrations. Thus far the poems and illustrations I have discussed have demonstrated the incredible strain faced by the creative faculty when unable to re-invent some aspect of itself and the resulting creative death from the prison of one extreme emotion. Kant’s a priori Principles: “Conformity to law, finality and Final End”, respectively become, when applied, “Nature, Art and Freedom”(39). “Mariana”’s regular refrain conformed to a certain law, but it was one so completely isolated and so perfectly mirrored by its surroundings that it is swallowed up in rotting confusion. “Mariana in the South” discarded her prayer in favor of a better life when she will ‘be alone no more” (RT 76), but this whispered message is one “of death: she will not be alone because she will not be. If her lover is not to be embraced, at least death can be” (Ricks 78-9). This latter Mariana, though able to transcend her grief, does so by imagining another extreme state, i.e. death. The Soul in “The Palace of Art” creates a Palace that is so self-consciously aesthetic that its creations are the mere slaves to a pre-supposed concept of finality in Art.

As Daniel Albright says, “Where there is no external source of validation, no means by which the true may be distinguished from the untrue, the imagination dwells in ever falser relationships to its own goals” (39). The Soul’s only aim at a Palace of isolated wonders, rather than the creation in itself, makes the Soul forget everything except her own desires. Cut off from any “Conformity to Law”, excepting her own changing rule, the Soul desires to return to Nature in order to find a new form of Finality that will inspire another intense bout with Art. All of these characters travel in a circle between
conforming too rigidly to the concepts of Nature ("Mariana"), naturalizing finality in a literal manner ("Mariana in the South") and abandoning Art because its creation puts too many demands upon an isolated Soul. In other words, none of these Muse characters attain the artistic freedom that implies a "Final End" as an a priori principle. Mariana, the Southern Mariana, and the South actively create their own worlds through the intensity of their perceptions. These perceptions possess such intensity that they take on an independent life of their own – as some of Rossetti's illustrations do. Mariana's observance of her own mental decay in relation to the decay of the grange, the Southern Mariana's wish for death, the Soul's idea of pleasure – all of these isolated perceptions exert a great amount of power over their authors.

Despite the isolation of the Muse figures in these poems, Tennyson's poems inspired a publisher and many artists to re-issue his 1842 Poems in an illustrated format. The Pre-Raphaelite proliferation of illustrations and paintings based on any number of Tennyson's poems echoes the circular process from Nature to Art and back again. For example, Rossetti's preference in portraying "powerful psychological dramas of love and death" (Casteras 127) created highly individual illustrations for the Moxon. Though Tennyson like Rossetti's illustrations, he claimed he did not see the connection between Rossetti's illustrations and his poems. Working from two very different concepts of Nature and Art, one rooted in the visual and the other in the verbal, Rossetti and Tennyson thus came to a stand still because they could not find a common "Final End" (Kant 39). At least in the context of this illustrated edition, Rossetti and Tennyson each maintained that the superior power of expression was inherent to one particular artistic medium. To compound this problem, both artists used elements from the other artistic
medium in the execution of their own work. Tennyson's detailed poetic descriptions seem only to be waiting for a visual interpretation, while Rossetti's illustrations are always inspired by any idea that he perceived in the poem. In order to go beyond this interesting, though frustrating problem, both the illustrator and the poet must admit that they simply have different ways of aspiring to the same end. The exact nature of this final end remains uncertain in the illustrations paired with "The Lady of Shalott."

Nonetheless, the story of the Lady appears to have been so symbolically powerful as to suffer no great interpretive changes from the illustrations. By abandoning introverted personal symbols and exchanging them for a consensus, the illustrations and the poem reach a height of free interaction unequalled in any of the previous poem/illustration pairs.

In addition to many Platonic readings, "The Lady of Shalott" has been the subject of several insightful psychological, linguistic, and biographical analyses. For the Pre-Raphaelites, however, the appeal was more immediate due to the poem's "persuasive combination of narrative, dramatic, and lyrical passages...[this poem] offered a wealth of rewarding pictorial possibilities" (Lottes 277). Each of the four parts of the poem "ends with something said" and the lady "is not seen, but sometimes heard" (Ricks 75). This emphasis on the auditory, in addition to the flowing beauty of the language, invites visual representation even as flows smoothly on. Like the Soul, the Lady lives in an isolated tower where she "weaves by night and day/ A magic web with colours gay" (RT,

---

1 Garland O. Gunter's "Archetypal Patterns in "The Lady of Shalott." "Victorian Institute Journal. 3 1974: 85 – 93, presents a survey of these analytic viewpoints on the poem as well as discussing some specific connections between psychological processes and specific mythological stories. For a wonderful new critical reading, see Gerhard Joseph's "Victorian Weaving: The Alienation of Work into Text in "The Lady of Shalott." "Victorian Newsletter. 71 1987: 7 – 10. Though these approaches provide insight regarding Tennyson's poetic development, they go beyond the purposes of my study.
II.37-8). Knowing that she suffers from a curse, she continues to weave until the images reflected upon her mirror cease to satiate her creative impulse:

Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
‘I am half-sick of shadows,’ said
The Lady of Shalott.
- RT, lines 69–72

Once she sees Lancelot, the mirror of isolated creation cracks and she prepares her funeral boat to float into Camelot² so that she can finally be perceived instead of continuing a lone perceptive agent.

Holman Hunt depicts the moment when the Lady, after first perceiving the world directly (i.e., not from the reflection in her mirror), brings upon herself the curse that shatters the mirror and unravels the web. Holman Hunt stated that he wanted to “give expression to the completer idea [of the poem] through one chosen scene with suggestive details and symbolical references” (Holman Hunt 124-5). This illustration conveys a temporal setting within a spatial medium. We see the Lady tangled within her web. The circular motion of her entanglement echoes the radiating circles of the web. Partly obscured by the Lady’s wild hair, three oval-shaped pictures in the background shows images explicit and implicit in the poem. The oval on the right shows Christ’s crucifixion, thus associating the Lady with someone who saves herself through death. The central image displays Sir Lancelot, whom the Lady has just seen directly.

² For the original source for this story, Tennyson cites “an Italian novelette, Donna di Scalotta, dated conjecturally before 1321” (RT 19).
THE LADY OF SHALOTT.

PART I.

1.

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
To many-tower'd Camelot;

By William Holman Hunt,
For the Moxon Tennyson, 1857
These images of Lancelot and Christ, combined with the circular design of the web, capture the Lady in a moment of mysterious transition between the inner world and the outer world:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott.

- RT, lines 109 –117

The succession of images from lines 109 – 112 presents the same vivid detail that is apparent in Hunt's illustration. These lines of the poem, in contrast to the illustration, show that the Lady acts upon her surroundings. Holman Hunt's illustration portrays the Lady only in the latter half of the stanza as the Lady's activity fades into the background as the tools of her seclusion envelop her. The monumental figure of the Lady has the effect not only of exalting her passivity but also of showing how completely cut off she is from any perception whatever. Her eyes are downcast as she attempts to disentangle herself from the threads. The loom and the background pictures seem ready to engulf her.

Of course, this engulfment is exactly what happens in the fourth stanza of the poem. Fully participating in the fulfillment of her curse, the Lady loses her sight and
seems to gain a mysterious inner vision. Rossetti made the portrayal of this inner vision the subject of his illustration. This particular illustration actually sits on the same page as the stanza it illustrates, though Rossetti incorporates elements from an earlier version of the poem into his illustration. Rossetti’s illustration includes the medieval setting and strange intensity of the poem. Still, the typically Rossettian crowded composition does not give us the impression that the Lady of Shalott has attained any kind of freedom through her death. From the top left of the picture, we see a torch and many feet, in addition to a man trying to lean over Lancelot in order to get a glimpse of the Lady. Lancelot stress at her composedly, but his face is stern and set. The light, half illuminating her face, shows her face to be as inert as her body. From the way her head is positioned, we can discern her eyes lost in the shadows of the boat. The sole fluid element in the picture, the water, is likewise apportioned and regulated by the curved necks of swans. Holman Hunt’s illustration may show the Lady as overwhelmed, but in that illustration she is also the central focus of the composition. In Rossetti’s picture, the central space is empty. The Lady rests at the bottom of the picture and the light that falls on her emphasizes the sheen of her cloak and her waxen image-like appearance.

Rossetti’s illustration, as in the case of “The Palace of Art”, uses the poem as a mere hint to enable his own artistic interpretation.

---

3 Originally written in 1832, this poem was revised and re-published in 1842. For a study of the two versions, see Ann C. Colley, “The Quest for ‘Nameless’ in Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’”. *Victorian Poetry*, 23 Winter 1985: 369 – 378. Colley’s wonderful psychoanalytic reading of the poem rests on the fact that Tennyson chose “to ride the lines of similes in favor of metaphors” that attempt to “reach a pre-imagistic or pre-symbolic state” (377).

4 The stanza from which Rossetti draws this swans, in the 1832 version, is as follows,

As when the sailors while the roam,
By creces and outfalls far from home,
Rising and dropping with the foam,
From dying swans wild warblings come,
Blown shoreward; so to Camelot

- RT 136 – 41
THE LADY OF SHALOTT.

Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
    All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
    The Lady of Shalott."

D. G. Rossetti,
For the Moxon Tennyson, 1857
Rossetti does not isolate the poem as an independent artistic medium. Rather he uses the basic elements of the poem to portray a scene of his own imagination. This kind of associative thinking does not require that “the spectator and critic judge” but that they feel “sympathy” and have “a participating imagination” (Helsinger 182). This method of “active seeing” uses the disciplines of poetry and painting to induce a certain “train of associations” (Helsinger 183). Hazlitt maintained that poetry induced this associative thinking more directly. When looking at a picture, no imaginative activity occurs. Only when “the mind of the spectator . . . stops seeing” (Helsinger 184) can the imaginative faculty begin to associate and create. The illustrations to “The Lady of Shalott” present associations as directly as the poem does, though in a different artistic representation. The nature of an aesthetic judgment is such that it does not give one form of artistic representation superiority over another form. I recognize the inherent differences between poetry and illustration, treating them as separate disciplines. The interplay of these differences, and the recognition of a resistance towards expression, comes to life in the constant deferral of meaning by Rossetti and Holman Hunt. Each artist has his own version of the poem, but both refuse to explain the Lady’s curse or why she must float dead into Camelot. This central enigma “creates an intensely memorable myth in which the wish not to face reality and the wish to face it, the impulse toward life and the impulse toward death, an inexplicable guilt and timorous innocence, shine as from a cracked mirror” (Ricks 75). Like so many pieces of shattered glass, these illustrations float along the steam of meaning that is “The Lady of Shalott”. Though these interpretations may not be universally appreciated, they are seeking a Final End. The
search for a meaning without compromising through the use of individual vision and ambiguity displays a great degree of artistic freedom.
Conclusion
As I analyzed these poems and their illustrations together, the connections between them became slowly more apparent. Tennyson provides the reader with many powerful images, the nature of which is to overwhelm the visual and auditory senses even as these images appeal to these means for expression. The illustrations reflect Tennyson’s implicit engagement with the reader that always suggests imaginative play, yet never confronts it directly or without the consequences of isolation. Tennyson uses a method of indirect description to show us how powerful language really is for him. The Pre-Raphaelite illustrations, on the contrary, engage the power of language through their investment in the ideas of each poem. This method of indirect description, practiced by Keats in “Ode to Psyche”, is equally possessed by all of the poems and illustrations I have discussed.

In light of the oppositional engagement between picture and poem I have discussed hitherto, the usefulness of a more complementary poem-illustration pair cannot be underestimated. Illustrated by Royal Academy artist J. Creswick, Tennyson’s “Ode to Memory” strikes a particularly illuminating chord as to the creative state of isolation. Tennyson’s poem first exhorts Memory to make the present new again”
Thou who stealest fire,
From the fountains of the past,
To glorify the present; oh, haste,
Visit my low desire!
Strengthen me, enlighten me!
I faint in this obscurity,
Thou dewy dawn of memory.

- RT, lines 37-8

Creswick's illustration, a simple landscape, leaves the peculiar circumstances of this exhortation to the imagination of the reader. The glimmering water of a small river leads the eye into the left corner of the illustration. The banks of the river boast several trees, two of which seem to be either losing their leaves or budding late. Fuller foliage recedes into the background. The slanted clouds in the sky appear to mirror the light upon the water. The emptiness of the scene suggests presence and absence, the present and the past. The illustration could easily refer to the first or last stanzas of the poem. Though this illustration does not directly challenge or interpret the poem, its simplicity speaks indirectly of what could or may be within the realm of Memory. This "Ode" feeds upon the torpor of direct address until the poet can find a more individual manner of embodying the past within the present moment.
ODE TO MEMORY.

Thou who stealest fire,
From the fountains of the past,
To glorify the present; oh, haste,
Visit my low desire!
Strengthen me, enlighten me!
I faint in this obscurity,
Thou dewy dawn of memory.

By Creswick, R.A.
For the Moxon Tennyson, 1857
Nancy J. Vickers, in an article on Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, describes a similar method of indirect description. She tells how Pertrach often writes himself in the role of Actaeon—a hunter who accidentally witnesses the goddess Diana bathing and is consequently turned into a stag and torn into pieces by his own hounds. Ironically, most of Petrarch’s poetry exalts Laura’s individual beauties rather than her entire beauty. Perhaps the poet fears, like Actaeon, that any attempt to put the entirety of her beauty into words would render his medium vague and powerless. Nevertheless the “fateful first perception of Laura—an image obsessively remembered, reworked and repeated—assumes a mythical analogue and a mythical proportion” (Vickers 27). The stories of the Marianas’, the Soul, and the Lady all have descriptive qualities reminiscent of a dream or a familiar story. The sensual detail in all of these poems sing sonnets to the particular even as they contribute to the idea of the whole poem. The isolated apprehension of these extremely suggestive images, like Actaeon’s isolated knowledge of Diana’s naked beauty, can prove imaginatively productive. Precisely because these suggestive images do not attempt to hold the poet to any one mode of perception, the poet does not have to worry about his own isolation—or does he? When the Muse comes, she allows the poet to portray her only in some enigmatic form. These Muses allow Tennyson to see with an inspired vision. This vision also “prevent[s] the poet from telling” (Vickers 278) the full breadth of the Muses’s powers. Tennyson, like his illustrators, can only reveal clues as to the powerfully creative state that is the product of his relationship with his poetic Muse.
Works Consulted


