

Lyricism and Voiced Spaces in Tennyson's 'Maud'

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Tennyson's 'monodrama' has often been approached by critics as a choral text: one which is usually seen as a synergistic challenge to the Victorian singular self. What is less explored are its other conversations with the ideas of place, and its use of setting and location for its fractured conceptualization of selfhood. It is an unsettling poem about an unsettled individual, and part of its strangeness comes from its localizations of the tribulations of its narrator. Like *In Memoriam*, which in great part shaped the expectations of Tennyson's audience toward the tenor and scope of the lyricism for which he became so famous, *Maud* explores the psychological and the geographical components of anguish, but unlike that great work of mourning for Hallam, resolution and catharsis are not available, or accessible, through the act of mourning alone. Part of the reason for this is the jarring – for some contemporary readers, confounding – use of place and setting in the poem. One approach to reading Tennyson's engagement with the settings of his monodramatic voices is to consider them in the light of Foucauldian heterotopias, and to ask whether the narrator of the poem is in fact being placed and unplaced by the forces which underlie the text and its great challenges both to our conceptions of what resolution and catharsis are supposed to be, and to the Victorian post-Romantic lyric.

Keywords: Landscape, Heterotopia, Voice

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Introduction

Perhaps no other poetic examination of despair could quite equal Tennyson's *Maud* (1855)¹ in problematizing J. S. Mill's now famous distinction between *poetry* and *eloquence*:

... We should say that eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action. (1897, pp. 208-209)

While the illustrator E. J. Sullivan thought that the poem is “nothing more nor less than a novel, where the narrative is indicated in a series of lyrical outbursts” (1921, p 158), *Maud* is more accurately seen as an invitation to observe the deterioration of a personality from an intimate, but distinct proximity, to feel its coming apart, and at its dramatic heights, to experience the process as barely vicarious. The mechanism by which Tennyson creates the thin boundary between reader and narrator is also that which troubles and confounds it: the use of space and place. However, this is further complicated by the use of voices of the narrator and others—“voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells” (Eliot, 2001, p. 375)—to evoke an instability in the personalities on show, and to indicate the root of this instability in the landscape underneath. Ricks (2006, p. 212) notes that at an earlier point Tennyson thought to call the poem “*Maud* or the Madness”, but later sub-titled his poem a ‘monodrama’: a term of art with origins in performance pieces for the stage. Moving the focus in this way from an interior chorus of (“overheard”) voices to adopt the *receptive* (audience) position of a performative text is in some sense shifting the ‘madness’ from one location to another. Iser (1989) noted that the “fundamental asymmetry between text and reader... [derives from] the lack of common situation and a common frame of reference ... [thus creates] an indeterminate, constitutive blank” (p. 33), but in *Maud* this is importantly not the case. Tennyson's framing suggests that there be an audience and an organisation of witnessing for the poem: a stationing of the listener at an ‘ideal’ distance, yet the circumstances surrounding the poem have always appeared to counteract this formality. Over the course of his long, successful career, Tennyson famously made this poem his own performance piece, imposing on his friends and putting his readers uncomfortably close to his narrator (Alfano, 2022, p. 193). The manipulation of place, spaces and voicing is seen in *Maud* to suggest a blurring of their boundaries, a Foucauldian loosening of the strictures against travelling across the categories of place and consciousness (1986): a move from the scenery *behind* a poem, to locations *in* the poem. Further still, this is to see the poem as landscape into which all else is placed, a landscape which is so essential to the expression in the poem that we are unsure whether the “objective correlative” (Eliot, 1921, p. 92) is quite so objective at all. Ultimately, this blended form of space is responsible for producing, in *Maud*, a poem which refutes the expectations of Tennyson's audience, even to the extent that the story being delivered is provided a sense of completeness.

¹ References to the poem use the Ricks (2006) edition.

Displacement

Mill, in his early essays, admired Tennyson greatly; one reason was the poet's singular capacity for his "power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it and to summon up the state of feeling itself, with a force not to be surpassed by anything but reality". In one essay, he quotes Mariana (1830) in full (but excerpted here) to show this "scene-painting, in the higher sense of the term" (1897, p. 242):

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all,
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the peach to the garden-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange,
Unlifted was the clinking latch,
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange. (1830, p. 14)

Indeed, his stage-setting here as elsewhere is painterly; with a few lucid details, the "lonely moated grange" becomes Mariana's rustic prison, and suggests—exactly what she believes—that time has slowed to halting in that place. The character of the immediate locale then comes to extend everywhere in its (really, *her*) lethargy, and this permits a generalization of the torpor. Tennyson included this poem in his *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* of 1830, but when he published *Maud*, in 1855, this same technique is employed to link narrative, place, and character in a way that suggests that something like a gothic visitation might have initially been on Tennyson's mind:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her, answers 'Death'. (p. 517)

This eerie scene of a disaster is placed squarely inside the family property lines, and inside the landscape which the narrator as a child has come to know, and subsequently as an adult must occupy as a disinherited outsider, cut off from the consolation and safety of his bloodline. It is utterly at odds with the poetic tradition of seeing woods as protected places, outside of the world, "Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain" (Keats, 1931, p. 223), and interferes with the conventional depiction of homeliness. The idea that the Victorian world was bisected by a line which separated (for men) the family space from that of work is one which receives much rehearsal. While this has been complicated in recent years by criticism from Cohen (1998), Armstrong (1987), and others interested in the spaces of domestic ideology, Tennyson seems to make it clear from the outset that the story of *Maud* will unfold beyond the enclosure of the *domestic*, in any of the many inflections that this term has come to adopt. But what is also clear is that the scene-painting so characteristic of his earlier work will evolve to become something more than stage-dressing, or the working-in of a hospitable valency on the part of the landscape. Instead, the endowment of a sympathetic mind to the landscape—a conceit so often entertained by landowners over the centuries, through the Enclosures and well into the 19th century—will be turned against the protagonist, and will at the same time become something other: a thing with which to negotiate and struggle.

At the start of the poem, we, as the narrator's unbidden *confidant*, are already watching the consequences of the narrator's initial displacement: in an age where, in the words of Arthur Young, "[t]he magic of property turns sand into gold" (words which so captured John Stuart Mill, that they appear in most of his arguments concerning the merits of land ownership) (Maurer, p. 215, n7). The "imagined proprietor, ... is cultivated by the relationship with property much in the same way he is supposed to be cultivating his plot of land" (p. 67), and this mutual development is magnified and extended the larger the number of workers living on that land. The greater the land, the greater the virtues of home, which even in modest settings supplied a security which, according to Ruskin, approached sanctity:

This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love,—so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light,—shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea; so far it vindicates the name and fulfils the praise of Home. (1907, p. 59)

Ethical and moral selves (as well as their fortunes) therefore, are made by home and land ownership; thus, to be made landless is truly to be sent *away*, displaced into moral abjection. *Maud* is then a demonstration of a soul without secure ground under his feet or a moral roof over his head, and perhaps this explains why so much of the poem is interested in traversing (often bounded) spaces, pacing, waiting on 'borrowed land' upon which he may not trust his or *Maud*'s security; Tennyson is recognising that the ethics of English law and social propriety depend for their foundation on stabilizing oneself with relation to land. Indeed, *placelessness* is one of the obsessions of the text: how often the narrator longs to *be* somewhere, or be somewhere *else*, but is frustrated in his efforts. The social metaphors of space combine to thwart his every effort: those who are higher, lower, or too close, or too distant are the antagonistic forces against which he must push. The end of the poem is an enlargement of this interest in civic station and its intersection with ownership, land, and nation, and sees the narrator venture to "hail once more to the banner of battle unrolled" (p. 581) in order to volunteer the human price of territorial avarice at the national scale by enlisting, presumably never to return, from the "doom assigned" (p. 582). The roots of this fate, however, have been easily traceable underground via the real and hallucinated subterranean motifs throughout: beginning with the narrator's anguish at the start of the poem.

The "dreadful hollow" to which we are introduced in the first stanza is shown to have lips and a voice: it is an inhumed face which calls up "Death" to those who call down to it (p. 517). This is nature mortified and become *genus loci*: but not as a sweet expression of man's engagement with nature, as Pope had seen:

That tells the waters to rise, or fall,
Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades; ... (2006, p. 245)

Instead, the narrator's rights by inheritance and his expectations of family and security are half-hidden and ruined, entombed somewhere—or everywhere—around him. Evicted from his family home, he lives in a degraded version of the circumstances which ought to be his:

Living alone in an empty house,
Here half-hid in the gleaming wood,
Where I hear the dead at midday moan,
And the shrieking rush of the wainscot mouse,
And my own sad name in corners cried,
When the shiver of dancing leaves is thrown
About its echoing chambers wide ... (p. 534)

The land from which he was torn speaks to him in and through its physical reminders of the injuries to his moral self. These voices which he hears calling out to him are the dead past: the spaces of thwarted history and lost family which threaten to build upon themselves until their animosity is unsurmountable. Foucault (1984/1986, p. 22)² noted that the “ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world” was a preoccupation of the Victorian century. He drew attention to the ways that place and space are made to both serve and oppress the wishes of the individual suffering through the mischances of historical and cultural forces, and suggests that “space itself has a history in Western experience ... Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites” (pp. 22-23). Of particular interest to readers of *Maud*, is the idea of spaces within ordinary society which become *loci* of crises.

Heterotopias of Crisis

Tucker (1993) looked at Tennyson's intention to include novel formulations of place and space in the early stages of (re)writing the poem. In the famous section beginning “Oh! that 'twere possible”, he sees that the poet works to:

Play conventional images of a rural past against something quite new in the canon of English poetry: hypnotically surreal imagery of a desolate urban present. Tennyson was aware of the novelty of this imagery... the bereaved lover is stealing “Through the hubbub of the market”, “Through all that crowd, confused and loud”; and decades before his successor J. Alfred Prufrock, he loathes “the squares and streets, / And the faces that one meets”. These stray early images of the modern city Tennyson systematically expands ..., inserting new stanzas on “the leagues of lights, / And the roaring of the wheels”, “the yellow-vapours” and “drifts of lurid smoke / On the misty river-tide”. These revisions show the poet installing a traditional expression of erotic grief within a markedly modern context, and generalizing that grief into a malaise whose cultural specificity, at the level of imagery, widens its appeal beyond the power of narrative explanation. (p. 175)

A Foucauldian reformulation of that final remark would speculate on the ‘widening’ going on, and might insist that the “cultural specificity” be sought in the kinds of relations between the places which the characters are described as being. The trope of comparing psychological deviance to stumbling through inhospitable terrain is certainly not new: the Bible is replete

² All references to “Of Other Spaces” are to the Miskowicz (1986) translation.

with lost spiritual ‘wanderings’, or in verse one could consider an example from Rochester in the 17th century:

... *Reason*, which Fifty times for one does err.
Reason, an *Ignis fatuus*, in the *Mind*,
Which leaving light of *Nature*, sense behind;
Pathless and dang’rous wandring ways it takes,
Through errors Fenny – *Boggs*, and *Thorny Brakes*;
Whilst the misguided follower, climbs with pain,
Mountains of *Whimseys*, heap’d in his own *Brain*:
Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down, ... (1984, p. 92)

Any number of others would also suffice, but conceptualizing the constituent elements of such a landscape as potentially being a circumscribed space, and offering a theory of such spaces resulting from their psycho-social function, Foucault reimagines them (and in doing so extends their significance) as “space[s] thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well” (p. 23).

Tennyson deliberately invoked the apparatus of the (space of) theatre performance when he presented Maud—even on paper—while simultaneously employing the literary-poetic “scene-painting” descriptive technique he had developed in his earlier writing. This dual existence as both *play* and *lyric* suggests the opportunity to see the unsettled place-shifting in the poem as connected to voicing, too. Indeed, both explicitly, as in the reminders of death, and implicitly as in Maud’s voicelessness (her speech is almost always reported), we are given so many occasions to imagine the presence of interlocutors that we ought to be surprised at the narrator’s lack of voiced response to them: it is mostly his *displaced* wanderings and absconsions which are the most fully verbalized and narrativized experiences in the poem, rather than the instances of speech. When a place does seem to have both voice and heterotopic significance, it seems to take on a role for itself in the monodrama; invariably this kind of place-as-consciousness instantiates fatality in some way.

The narrator presents two such places of doom to his audience which bear some examination: the first, we have already seen, is the “hollow behind the little wood” (p. 516) which is introduced as being a despised place, a “ghastly pit” (p. 517) wherein his father’s wrecked body was found. It is a site of death and failure: Sisyphus defeated, the “rock that fell with him when he fell” suggests both the weight of the world and its shifting and unreliable support for the foundations of a dynasty. The rock exercises no less than four verbs (and one collocate) to wreck the narrator’s father: “Mangled, and flattened, and crushed, and dented into the ground”, their aggregation increasingly suggests a sadistic “fantasmatic” agency and not chance (which is associated with love in the poem). The hollow is the one location of the poem presented as coming into existence *as* place of horror and crisis, and it remains so: it exists to be experienced as a reminder of the intention of Fate to exercise its will against the narrator’s family; the refuge denied him here becomes mirrored in the interior entombment he later experiences.

Part two of the poem ends with “the mad scene”—one of the most perplexing sections of the poem—in which the narrator himself becomes a voice of a place, in an ironic gesture toward the Hollow, and the origin of his pain:

Dead, long dead,
 Long dead!
 And my heart is a handful of dust,
 And the wheels go over my head,
 And my bones are shaken with pain,
 For into a shallow grave they are thrust,
 Only a yard beneath the street,
 And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
 The hoofs of the horses beat,
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,
 With never an end to the stream of passing feet,
 Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying,
 Clamour and rumble, and ringing and clatter,
 And here beneath it is all as bad,
 For I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so;
 To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
 But up and down and to and fro,
 Ever about me the dead men go;
 And then to hear a dead man chatter
 Is enough to drive one mad. (pp. 574-575)

Tennyson reported that it took him 20 minutes to write (Ricks, 2006, p. 574, n. ii 239 ff); perhaps this contributed to the jagged edges of the lines: they are hurried and the end-rhymes are simple, repetitive; the stanza is mostly about movement and noise. Reading this naively, one is confronted with a *dead* man's voice: what has become of the narrator? The confusion suggests movement enough to allow the ragged lines to carry us through to discover that this afterlife is taking place in an imagined location: the non-place of insanity. This "mad scene" is conducted by a crazed imagination from the grave: a shift to a private heterotopia of crisis, but still a temporary one: his curse is to never rest. First the victim of the voices from the heterotopia, he is now absorbed into, and becoming one himself.

Conclusion

Tennyson's final theme, with all its spatiality is ultimately reducible to the problem of the inescapable nature of the subjective experience which so blazed in the words of Milton's angel:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
 Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. (1910, p. 17)

With *Maud*, he strained the public understanding of the lyricism which he helped to create, and passages such as the one above illustrate his willingness to depart from his, by then, tremendously popular style. Dransfield (2008) notes that although both contemporary and later audiences attributed the instabilities of the text to the poet's dramatic rendering of madness, it is likely that they were necessitated by the opposing forces of "lyric subjectivity and dramatic objectivity" (pp. 279-280).

Shelley also gave a famous account of existential wandering: his recognises the power of loss and its connection to place. However, unlike *Maud*, it delivers its protagonist into a transcendent catharsis:

It is a woe too 'deep for tears,' when all
Is left at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
Birth and the grave, that are not as they were. (1816, p. 49)

In Part I of *Maud*, as something of an augury, the narrator looks about himself and his lost inheritance, and seems to see only ruin, and after recounting the horrors brought about by poverty and social corruption, added to his own debasement, he laments, "Were it not wise if I fled from the place and the pit and the fear?" (p. 522). As we have seen, these three will follow him forever, acting out and acting in their roles as wilful tormentors. He mistakes the source of the danger to himself when he decides that he and Maud must leave the place wherein he was subject to the "fear", when in fact he is being placed and unplaced by the forces which undermine the separability of mind and place. In order, then, to find proper resolution for himself and Maud, the narrator simply decides to go to another place. However, we see that he will always be thwarted, and that the only cathartic opportunity which Tennyson has afforded him is death in the Crimea, or perhaps in Foucauldian terminology, this is the "heterotopia of crisis" *in extremis*. Not of his own making, it was created by Great Britain's exerting (or failure to exert) both its political and spatial influence: its own "Hollow", into which it sent its young men to war, not to see their futures reach their resolution and potential, but to have them end.

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