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The choice between a life of artistic detachment and one of social involvement seems to have posed an important dilemma for the young Alfred Tennyson. While later on he was strongly critical of the concept of art for art's sake of the 1860s,¹ his own early poetry betrays a partiality for the idea of the poet as a lonely visionary dwelling in his world apart from society. It seems that Tennyson's stance on this question underwent a considerable revision between the years 1832 and 1842. The aim of this paper is to trace the way in which this change has been reflected in the presentations of the otherworldly spaces in "The Hesperides" (1832) and "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, 1842), in which the mythical garden of the Hesperides and the island of the lotos-eaters may be interpreted as standing for the inner world of imagination as opposed to the outer world of action.

Both "The Hesperides" and "The Lotos-Eaters" may be counted among the earliest examples of Tennyson's original reworkings of mythological themes. Other similarities between the two poems may be found in their structure and imagery. Both poems open with a brief narrative frame, which is followed by the lyrical Choric Song. Both elaborate on the familiar Tennysonian motif of a fertile valley sheltered by the mountains with its exotic settings, luxuriant vegetation, and the pervading sense of idleness suggestive of oppressive heat. Moreover, in both cases, the questers from the outside world are lured with the sacred fruit, the tasting of which transports one into the higher world of poetic wisdom. However, this enchanted twilight realm may just as well prove fatal for an uninitiated wanderer, which has been particularly stressed in the 1842 version of "The Lotos-Eaters."

While overtly Greek, the story about the western garden, where the Hesperides, Hesperus and the dragon guard the sacred tree with golden apples, lest their secret wisdom be revealed to the world, bears strong connotations with the Biblical story of the Fall of Man. Just as Adam and Eve upon eating the forbidden apples from

1 The publication of Hallam Tennyson's *Alfred Tennyson. A Memoir* in 1897 revealed the following epigram written by the poet in 1869: "Art for Art's sake! Hail, truest Lord of Hell! / Hail Genius, blaster of the Moral Will! / 'The filthiest of all paintings painted well / Is mightier than the purest painted ill!' / Yes, mightier than the purest painted well, / So prone are we toward the broad way to Hell" (II, 92).

the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil learn of the matters they are not ready to comprehend, so in Tennyson's poem, "If the golden apple be taken / The world will be overwise" (63-64).² The consequences of stealing the golden apples are further elaborated in Part III of the poem:

Lest the old wound of the world be healèd,
 The glory unsealèd,
 The golden apple stolen away,
 And the ancient secret revealèd.
 (Tennyson 1969, 427; 69-72)

What exactly is the meaning of this "ancient secret"? And why is it not to be "preached abroad" that "Five and three / [...] make an awful mystery" (28-29)? Christine Gallant looks for an explanation in the symbolic numerology of Pythagoreanism of the fifth century B.C.: "The numbers represent the unity of the elements in the garden (the Three Sisters, the dragon, and Hesper) and of the cosmos, symbolizing the elements of the Sisters' self-contained universe just as numbers for the Pythagoreans symbolized the orderly harmony of the cosmos" (1976, 157). However, G. Robert Stange provides a different interpretation, which seems to be much more in tune with Tennyson's views on art at the time of writing the poem. Namely, he sees "The Hesperides" as an allegory of poetic creation and explains the links between the Three Sisters, the golden apples and the root of the tree as "a figure of the connection among the artist, his art, and his inspiration" (1952, 735). Thus, the poem becomes a statement of the aesthetic approach to art, where the artist remains isolated from the external world and guards the source of his poetic inspiration against unwelcome intruders from the East.

The opposition between the East and the West, the morning and the evening, is especially underlined in the final parts of the poem. Unlike the Biblical Eden, which has been placed in the East, in accordance with the traditional depictions of the mythological Islands of the Blessed, the island of the Hesperides lies in the West, off the African coast. Moreover, as we learn from the song, "Hesper hateth Phosphor, evening hateth morn" (82). The apple tree has to be sheltered from "the cool east light" (97), and it is twilight that appears to be the most congenial time for the growth of the golden fruit, which then becomes "Holy and bright, round and full, bright and blest" (93).

With the motif of a paradisaical garden sheltering the sacred poetic wisdom, here embodied by the golden apples, we seem to be back in the secluded realm of "The

2 All quotations from Tennyson's poems are from *The Poems of Tennyson*, edited by Christopher Ricks, and are identified by line numbers.

Poet's Mind" from Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). Yet, it appears that the position of the poet has changed. As will also be the case with "The Lotos-Eaters" and the later "Ulysses," the poet has now taken on the role of a restless quester and as such may be identified with the adventurous Hanno (cf. Culler 1977, 51). He is no longer the lord, nor even an inmate, of the garden of Hesperides. Instead, he accidentally overhears the song of Sisters three, a privilege he is granted for his boldness to reach out beyond the margins of the familiar world. The introduction of Hanno, a Carthaginian explorer from the fifth century B.C., results in the merging of the mythical and historical dimensions. The garden does not simply appear to the hero in a mythical narrative but seems to be a remnant of a mythical past which intrudes into historical times. While Hanno belongs to the real world, with its natural passing of time, the time in the western abode of the Hesperides seems to be suspended and, at this point, the stealing of the apples by Heracles is only a dim foreboding of future events. As the Sisters emphasize it twice in their song, the wars and conflicts of the real world never affect the quiet of the sacred garden: "The world is wasted with fire and sword, / But the apple of gold hangs over the sea" (104-5).

The suspension of time is matched on the one hand with an unusual stillness and silence, which precede the introduction of the song, as well as the laziness and lack of movement in the magical garden itself on the other. The voices of the Three Sisters come to Hanno "like the voices in a dream" (12), while the other sounds from the shore are suppressed and everything around seems to be extraordinarily peaceful. Peace also pervades the song itself as the Hesperides sing of the tropical evening on their island:

Round about all is mute,
As the snowfield on the mountain-peaks,
As the sandfield at the mountain-foot.
Crocodiles in briny creeks
Sleep and stir not: all is mute.
(Tennyson 1969, 425; 18-22)

Yet, Hanno never reaches this paradisaical land. The poem only relays how he has been temporarily hypnotised by the song of the Hesperides on his way to explore unknown lands. A. A. Markley observes that "[a]s Hanno sails away it seems that he is missing the point of the Hesperides' song, which emphasizes beauty in mystery – art and culture – in contrast to the relentless search for other treasures" (2004, 58). Yet, this accusation appears to be somewhat untenable. Since Hanno's is not the life of artistic contemplation, he should not venture into the sacred garden of the Hesperides; he may only learn about this realm accidentally, from the echoes of the Sisters' song. Hence, the role of the Sisters seems to be twofold; on the level of the story, they sing to prevent themselves, Father Hesper and the dragon from

falling asleep and neglecting their duty, while on the level of the structure, their song is the only means by which the otherworldly place is recreated in the poem.

A song about the purpose and nature of singing, it may be considered a pure expression of the self-referentiality of art, one of the key concepts of the later art for art's sake aesthetic (cf. McSweeney 1981, 46). The incantatory, enchanting nature of the Sisters' song has been achieved by means of repetitions: "The golden apple, the golden apple, the hallowed fruit" (14, 112), irregular rhyming patterns: "Guard it well, guard it warily, / Watch it warily, / Singing airily" (113-15), and sensuous Keatsian imagery: "The luscious fruitage clustereth mellowly, / Goldenkernelled, goldencored, / Sunset-ripened above on the tree" (101-3).

An even more ambiguous portrayal of an escapist, detached attitude to life can be found in "The Lotos-Eaters" – another poem about an enchanted island from Greek mythology. Its theme is based on a brief episode from the *Odyssey* (IX, 82-104) in which Odysseus and his companions reach the island of the peaceful lotos-eaters. When three of the mariners taste the flowery food, they fall into a lethargic state and are no longer willing to continue their journey home, so that Odysseus has to bring them back on the ship by force. In its style and metre, however, Tennyson's poem is also reminiscent of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and its various images of otherworldly bowers of bliss.³ Moreover, the thrust of the lotos-eaters' song may best be summarised by Despaire's words on the meaninglessness of toil in life: "Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, / Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please" (I.IX.40).

In Tennyson's poem, the lotos-eaters' paralysis of will and inanition have been projected onto the portrayal of the island. It is a land where "it seemèd always afternoon" (4). This suspension of time is further underlined by the simultaneous appearance of the setting sun and the full moon: "Full-faced above the valley stood the moon" (7), while at the same time, "The charmèd sunset lingered low adown / In the red West" (19-20). Moreover, the flow of the many streams also appears to be affected by the mood of drowsiness as they are "like a downward smoke, / Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn" (10-11), and the falling water is not a roaring waterfall one might expect but "a slumberous sheet of foam below" (13). Even the air is swooning with languor and "Breathing like one that hath a weary dream" (6). Yet, this stasis is apparently only illusory, which has been implied by the repetition of the verb "seem." Such a description may be ascribed to the subjective, drug-induced vision of the mariners who have eaten of the lotos. However, the above-quoted lines appear in the poem *before* the actual tasting of

3 For the influence of *The Faerie Queene* on "The Lotos-Eaters" see Ricks's remarks in the headnote to the poem in *The Poems of Tennyson* (1969, 429).

the fruit is narrated. Hence, a question arises – whose vision of the island has been presented in the introductory stanzas? Do the mariners see it as an otherworldly land of dreams even before the lotos has influenced their perception?

The ontological status of the land becomes even more ambiguous and disconcerting when one realises that, in creating his image of the island of the lotos-eaters, Tennyson draws on many details characteristic of the classical descriptions of the underworld. On their arrival, the mariners are approached by the inhabitants of the island:

And round about the keel with faces pale,
 Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
 The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.
 (Tennyson 1969, 431; 25-27)

Their paleness and listlessness are undoubtedly the effects of feeding on the lotos. Yet in this way they also resemble the pale spirits aimlessly wandering the plains of Hades. When the mariners taste of their flowery fruit, the results are reminiscent of drinking of the Lethe, the mythical underground river of forgetfulness. They gradually become convinced that they will never return home. In the 1842 version of the sixth stanza, which skilfully foreshadows the later events from the *Odyssey*, the mariners sing that “Dear is the memory of our wedded lives, / And dear the last embraces of our wives” (114-15), but they see their past lives as fading memories and are not willing to “come like ghosts to trouble joy” (119) on their home island where their deeds are but “half-forgotten things” (123). The only boon they now long for is “long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease” (98). This “dreamful ease” in death is also symbolised by the poppy growing on the island (56).

The interpretation of “The Lotos-Eaters” has been the subject of much discussion. Apparently negative in its import, while strangely alluring in its cadences, it seems to be yet another expression of Tennyson’s vacillating views on the role of the poet and his art. Catherine Barnes Stevenson reads the poem as a veiled warning against the consequences of taking opium, which Tennyson could observe in his father and brother, and as the poet’s attempt at fleeing from the problems of real life into the world of sensuous poetry (1982, 122-23). In fact, a poetic equivalent of the influence of opium on one’s sensory perception may be found in the passages describing the mariners’ growing weariness and the distancing of the voices of their companions, which sound to them as “voices from the grave” (34), while the beating of their hearts is painfully heightened in their ears. As they gradually fall under the spell of the lotos, their state reminds one of that resulting from a long-term use of the drug, a sense of alienation, leading to the dissolution of social bonds and family ties (Stevenson 1982, 130-31). Their estrangement from their families has

been even more emphasized in the sixth stanza added in the revision for the 1842 publication, already quoted above. The mariners forsake the active lives they have been pursuing and succumb to the growing sense of torpor, yearning for death, the end of the natural cycle that will finally release them from their meaningless toil.

What is more, in the revised final stanza, the mariners' decision to remain on the lotos island is no longer justified by mere sensual pleasure they derive from eating the fruit, but is explained as their yearning to become dissociated from human passions just like the cruel, indifferent Epicurean gods above. These gods delight in human suffering because it brings them "a music centred in a doleful song" (162). This passage, which seems to anticipate later claims of the proponents of art for art's sake that the theme of art should be independent of its moral value, may be seen as the severest criticism of aestheticism in the early Tennyson. Since the ultimate success or failure of the mariners' quest is solely dependent on the whim of those fickle deities, any further struggle is pointless and it is best to "live and lie reclined / On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind" (154-55). Thus, in the 1842 version of the poem, Tennyson apparently tries to stress the point that in their motivation to give in to the illusory, lotos-induced calm, the mariners are not only selfish and antisocial, but they are also amoral.

Still, even though morally questionable, the song of the lotos-eaters possesses an entrancing charm achieved through its sensuous imagery and its varying metre:

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud
With winds upon the branch, and there
Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
Sun-steeped at noon, and in the moon
Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow
Falls, and floats adown the air.
Lo! sweetened with the summer light,
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
Drops in a silent autumn night.
(Tennyson 1969, 432-3; 70-79)

as well as repetitions and consonance:

Most weary seemed the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
(Tennyson 1969, 431; 41-42)

All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.
(Tennyson 1969, 433; 96-98)

The Choric Song seems to be lulling the senses with its drowsy melodiousness and thus blunting its message, a feature which was found to be particularly outraging in Swinburne's poetry some thirty years later.

In his seminal study of "The Lotos-Eaters," Alan Grob focuses on the paradoxical state of those who have eaten the lotos as "deep asleep [...], yet all awake" (35) and compares it to one in which the Romantic artist shuts himself off from external sensations in order to free the imagination and thus allow for the expansion of inner vision (Grob 1964, 123). Yet, the mariners are apparently not predisposed to make creative use of the wisdom of the sacred fruit and turn into true poets; they are overwhelmed and paralysed by the drug-induced, heightened vision of reality, and thus the enchanted island becomes a dangerous obstacle to their quest. Once again, it seems that the sympathies of the poet lie with the quester figure in the poem, the one who is unaffected by the intoxicating lotos and remains firm in his resolution to pursue his goal. The presence of Odysseus is only briefly signaled in its first two lines: "Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land, / "This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon" (1-2). Yet, those two lines, the hero's address to his companions, modify the import of the whole poem:

We know that when the time comes, that hard voice will ring out again and the mariners will troop back to the oars. Their listless attempt to decide to make no decisions, to will not to will, to renounce all aspiration but the passive search for pleasure, has no chance against the single-minded determination and iron will for action of their leader. The word 'Courage' echoes ironically behind all the languid tones of the chorus. (Priestley 1973, 56)

The quest Odysseus urges his companions to resume is rendered as "climbing up the climbing wave" (95); hence the energy and freedom of the boundless ocean is opposed to the island's "still waters" (48) and "the long bright river drawing slowly / His waters from the purple hill" (137-38) representing the lotos-eaters' melancholy inertia.

All in all, it appears that the antithesis of the two familiar motifs in Tennyson's early poetry, the otherworldly garden of imagination versus the quest, is once again realised in the two modes of life in "The Lotos Eaters": an idle existence in the world of illusory, lotos-induced sense of happiness on the enchanted island, chosen by the mariners, and the life of action represented by the strong-willed Odysseus (cf. Grob 1964, 119). The conflict between these two attitudes to life may be seen as symbolizing the dilemma concerning the role of the poet: the position of aesthetic detachment and immersion in one's inner vision is contrasted with one of social and moral commitment. In 1832 this conflict seems to be unresolved. It is only with the revisions for the 1842 edition of *Poems*, and especially with the

introduction of the new final stanza, that the purely aesthetic pursuit of sensuous beauty is openly condemned on moral grounds and discarded for a more energetic attitude of Odysseus.

Thus, the changing import of the two poems from the 1832 volume clearly shows how Tennyson gradually abandons his solitary otherworlds of art and ventures forward to lend his poetic voice to the major concerns of his times. In this way, the early, Romantic Tennyson turns into the epitome of the Victorian poet. This shift in perspective is further emphasised in his revisions for the *Poems* (1842). "The Hesperides" – the only poem which, through both its subject and poetic technique, seems to endorse aestheticism – is suppressed by the poet, while other poems undergo alterations aimed at making their moral message even more explicit to the reader.

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