

Tennyson's Aesthetic Lady and the Victorians

by Alfred J. Drake

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear....

From Part II of "The Lady of Shalott," by Alfred Tennyson

The Tennyson poem partially cited above has much to do with Victorian anxiety over art's ability to capture and comment upon the world outside the poet's own imagination. The Victorians, poets and public alike, tended to recoil from what was taken as the "self-centeredness" of the earlier Romantic artists. It was all very well, they thought, that authors like Wordsworth and Shelley considered art the primary vehicle for reestablishing a sense of human community in an increasingly industrial, atomistic Britain, but the problem with those optimistic "unacknowledged legislators of the world," said the Victorians, was that they conceived their cultural project too strongly in terms of healing fissures in the individual human psyche. With the Romantics behind them, and immersed in a fragile, desperately moralistic age, Victorian thinkers sometimes demanded that art downplay the desires of the individual in favor of some more limited, objective scheme. "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe!" thundered Thomas Carlyle, and by this he seems to have meant that it was time to end the reign of the Romantic "egotistical sublime" and move towards an art that could, in a balanced and objective way, engage with the present time.

One might well say that the Victorian poet's "imagination" contracted, and, therefore, that his cultural aims underwent the same contraction as well. The era's verse productions, indeed, are sometimes referred to as "a poetry of limitations." (As for the novel, it was considered by many a vehicle for the propagation of moral sentiments.) The best Victorian artists, then, knew very well the charge of solipsism and ineffectuality levelled at the Romantics, and their work often reflects this knowledge. In Tennyson's poem, when the artistic Lady of Shalott breaks free from her "gray towers" and isolated, "silent isle" and tries to make contact with a "real" knight, she dies. She is unable to make the passage through her magic mirror and away from her "weaving" of works of art to something that we might, for argument's sake, call *reality*. Through the death of his aesthetic Lady, Tennyson may be suggesting that art is trapped in its own sphere and is unable to make the transition to the outside world and its affairs. It is as if Tennyson, by comparison with the Romantics, is a pessimist when it comes to art's capacity to weave together again the human beings who have been torn apart by industry, misapplied science, and war.

Perhaps Tennyson's poem offers a hint why, although much great art was produced during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the years of Victoria's reign are often called the great age of *prose*. The era's most far-reaching attempts to fulfill the Romantic project of cultural renewal can be found in the theory-laden texts of Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Ruskin, and Morris. Matthew Arnold's career offers the best proof of this statement: himself a fine poet and Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Arnold gave up his artistic pursuits in favor of the prose for which he is now mainly remembered.