

## **“Recollections of the Arabian Nights” and Recollections of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”**

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(Received 6/6/1415; accepted 7/9/1415)

**Abstract.** The object of this reading of Tennyson’s poem “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” is to retrieve the poem from misplacement in the Romantic tradition. This misplacement is evident in several critical assumptions that revolve around the poem. One of these assumptions is a frequent dismissal of the poem as an early manifestation of Tennyson’s Romanticism. Another assumption depends on discerning thematic, stylistic and imagistic affinities with some of Tennyson’s Romantic predecessors such as Shelley, Keats and Coleridge. A third assumption treats the “bulbul stanza” in Tennyson’s poem as an echo of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.”

By subjugating both poems, Keats’s and Tennyson’s, to the criterion of Romantic transcendence, Tennyson’s proves to be lacking in this respect. Tennyson does not experience Romantic transcendence in the presence of the bird the way Keats does. He merely recollects Keats’s act of transcendence exactly as he recollects the Arabian Nights of Haroun Alraschid.

This hypothesis finds support in Tennyson’s reductive treatment of Nature in the poem and his exaltation of Art. Such an attitude has its roots in the poet’s humanism that culminates in the confrontation with Haroun Alraschid. The Caliph becomes an epitome of the perfect Man and Mind. To this humanistic cause, the poet is committed, not to Nature. Such commitment is part of Tennyson’s departure from the Romantic tradition.

Critics’ assessments of Alfred Tennyson’s poem “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” often show signs of imperfection that range between total dismissal, causal references or misplacement in the Romantic tradition that fails to acknowledge the poem’s anti-Romantic stance. Pauline Fletcher, for example, dismisses it altogether from her discussion of Romantic and anti-Romantic gardens in Tennyson under the assumption that it is an early “escapist” poem that does not show sufficient signs of internalization: “More significant ... are the poems in which escape from the world

is to an inward space rather than to some mythical eastern paradise.”<sup>(1)</sup> Brian John, on the other hand, applauds the poem as an “affirmation of the Romantic imagination” but shows no awareness of its departure from that tradition.<sup>(2)</sup> Indeed, critics are much interested in tracing echoes of Romantic poetry in this poem. Jerome Buckley reads it “as a narrative of the poetic quest ... often Keatsian in texture.”<sup>(3)</sup> And, according to Margaret Lourie, Tennyson borrows, in the use of the shallop, “Shelley’s vehicle for the journey downward into self” while other elements such as “the silken sail... palm, rillets, fountain, shells, coverture, marble stairs, and balustrade ... all find their counterparts in ‘Endymion.’”<sup>(4)</sup> And, beside his comment on “the Romantic image of the journeying self,” John traces affinities in the poem with Shelley’s “Alastor” and Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.”<sup>(5)</sup>

The attempts at liberation from this Romantic reading of the poem are either limited or exclusive. Despite his concern with the lack of “reciprocity of man and nature” in Tennyson’s early poetry, Timothy Peltason makes a very casual reference to the poem as one that “transplants sights and sounds of Lincolnshire into the exuberantly artificial kingdom of Haroun Alraschid.”<sup>(6)</sup> It would have been valuable to extend his perceptions to Tennyson’s “anti-natural version of Romanticism” into “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.”<sup>(7)</sup> And Lourie’s assertion that “Tennyson in ‘Arabian Nights’ embraces the enchantments of art more completely than Keats ever does,” remains undeveloped because she treats the bird in Keats’s Ode as an art symbol.<sup>(8)</sup> Hence, she misses much of the significances that would have ensued from comparing, and contrasting, the two poets’ response to the same natural symbol. Such comparison, and contrast, would have been most illuminating on the anti-natural and anti-Romantic sides of a poem that critics have commonly considered an early manifestation of Tennyson’s Romanticism.

Critics’ misreading of “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” mainly revolves around the stanza of the bulbul’s song. For example, John claims that “the bulbul’s

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- (1) Pauline Fletcher, “Romantic and Anti-Romantic Gardens in Tennyson and Swinburne.” *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1979), 81.
  - (2) Brian John, “Tennyson’s ‘Recollections of the Arabian Nights’ and the Individuation Process,” *Victorian Poetry*, 4 (1966), 278.
  - (3) Jerome H. Buckley, *The Growth of a Poet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 38.
  - (4) Margaret A. Lourie, “Below the Thunders of the Upper Deep: Tennyson as a Romantic Revisionist,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1979), 11.
  - (5) John, pp. 276.277.
  - (6) Timothy Peltason, “Tennyson, Nature, and Romantic Nature Poetry,” *Philological Quarterly*, 63.1 (1984), 83,85. This article contains the latest reference to Tennyson’s poem “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.”
  - (7) Peltason, p. 90.
  - (8) Lourie, p. 12.

song reflects the poet's capacity to cocenter himself and his world in a transcendent moment of harmony and liberation."<sup>(9)</sup> Yet his claim carries seeds of its own negation when it explains the move toward the confrontation with Haroun Alraschid as "the increasing proximity of the poet to the moment of illumination."<sup>(10)</sup> Thus, he separates the moment of transcendence from the moment of illustration without noting, let alone explaining, the difference from the Romantic poet's experience in which moments of epistemological illumination usually emanate from acts of transcendence with forceful immediacy.

Lourie follows John's steps but she goes on to emphasize closer and more direct affinities with Keats: "In both 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Recollections of the Arabian Nights' the bird's song frees the narrator for his moment of poetic insight."<sup>(11)</sup> Thus, she fails to reconcile this part of her argument with its more general drift in which she claims "the predominance of craftsmanship" in Tennyson's vision.<sup>(12)</sup> In light of this claim, Tennyson should attain his poetic insight not through the bird but rather via an art symbol.

The stanza of the bulbul's song is neither an equivalent to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" nor a representation of Tennyson's Romanticism. The bird in Keats's poem inspires the poet in an act of imaginative transcendence while Tennyson's bird fails to do so. The presence of the bird in Tennyson's poem and the host of sensations that the poet attaches to it, though reminiscent of Romantic poetry, do not represent his actual experience not his immediate response to the song of the bird. They remain part of Tennyson's Romantic legacy that he could not prevent from surfacing when a situation similar to Keats's own called for them.

The act of imaginative transcendence that Keats attains on hearing the song of the nightingale begins in a powerful physical sensation that resembles the effect of poison or narcotic on the human body: "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains."<sup>(13)</sup> The feeling encourages the poet to seek further absorption into the delightful world of the bird. Hence, he expresses a wish to "leave the world unseen" and to "fade away" with the bird "into the forest dim" [19,20]. Such a move would

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(9) John, p. 277.

(10) Ibid, p. 278.

(11) Lourie, p. 12

(12) Ibid, p. 13.

(13) John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), pp. 1-3. References to this poem depend on this edition and will be included in the text.

release the poet from the pain and mutability of his daily life. For a brief while, he considers wine drinking to further his advance into the world of the bird, but finally depends on the power of the imagination to do so: "Away! Away! for I will fly to thee, / Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / But on the viewless wings of Poesy" [31-33]. A state of powerful union with the bird soon ensues and becomes manifest in the poet's ecstatic cry: "Already with thee!" [35]. This union immediately releases the poet into a state of heightened imaginative awareness of his surroundings and another of simultaneous expansion of self into a world of timelessness.

The first state becomes increasingly possible through darkness: "tender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays" [35-37]. He cannot see the moon and the stars but he can envision their presence and relationship to each other in a highly imaginative manner. He also manifests the same power toward the flowers: "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, / But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet" odor [41-3]. Invisible objects become, in this state of heightened imaginative awareness, visible.

The previous state is coupled with another one of expansion of self into a timeless realm of being. The poet expresses the wish for expansion in his call on Death to "take into the air" his "quiet breath" [54]. And the wish is soon realized in the poet's imaginative departure with the bird to the past. He moves in imagination from the near historical past of "emperor and clown" to the remote biblical past of "Ruth" and thence to the remoter past of "faery lands" [64,5,70]. These realms have listened to the song of the bird uninterruptedly, a matter that gives the song a sense of timeless continuity and lends the poet's expansion into the past a feeling of immortality.

The experience of imaginative transcendence with its two inherent states of imaginative awareness and timeless expansion into a world out of self, comes to an end: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" [71,2]. And the poet is left to question the nature, not the validity, of his experience: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music; - Do I wake or sleep?" [79,80].

The previous steps and components of the transcendental experience have been sensed by Romantic critics in their readings of Romantic poetry and by Tennyson's critics in their assessment of his famous trance in section xcv of *In Memoriam*. Harold Bloom, for example, describes Keats's initial feeling on hearing the song of the bird as "strongly physical."<sup>(14)</sup> Ashton Nichols also describes Tennyson on his re-reading

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(14) Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), p. 407.

of his dead friend's letters as "swept over by a physical sensation."<sup>(15)</sup> The second step of identification of consciousness with an external object, Bloom defines as a "flight" and an "identification of poet and bird in their situations."<sup>(16)</sup> This same step, Nichols identifies as one in which Tennyson is "engulfed by a feeling of unity and aeonic timelessness."<sup>(17)</sup> The expansion of self into a timeless realm of being in Bloom's reading is "the supreme act of the Romantic imagination ... the fluid dissolve or fade-out in which the limitation of time and space flee away."<sup>(18)</sup> Nichols, on the other hand, describes Tennyson's expansion as a "move beyond the bounds of immediate perception" and a completion of "an image by an act of the creative imagination."<sup>(19)</sup> This state of expansion and creativity comes to an end in Bloom in the form of "shattered communion between poet and song" and it becomes inevitable that from the "movement of the imagination" the poet goes "back to the isolation of his sole self."<sup>(20)</sup> Such return leaves "the resolution of the nature of the poetic trance ... uncertain" in Keats."<sup>(21)</sup> Similarly, in Nichols' perceptions, Tennyson's "trance," his "desire to expand the self into its surroundings" has "come to an end in a moment of critical doubt."<sup>(22)</sup>

These steps and components of the experience of imaginative transcendence are totally absent from Tennyson's contact with the bird. The pattern of departure and return, the initial physical sensation, the subsequent union with the bird, the ultimate state of imaginative creativity and timeless expansion into an immortal realm of being and the final return of self with its questioning of the experience, are all missing from his contact. Tennyson, rather, enumerates a host of feelings, akin to Keats's own, and attaches them to the song of the bird without in the least experiencing them:

The living airs of middle night  
Died round the bulbul as he sung;  
Not he, but something which possess'd  
The darkness of the world, delight  
Life, anguish, death, immortal love,

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(15) Ashton Nichols, "The Epiphanic Trance Poem: Why Tennyson Is Not a Mystic," *Victorian Poetry*, 24.2 (1986), 142.

(16) Bloom pp. 408, 410.

(17) Nichols, p. 142.

(18) Bloom, p. 410.

(19) Nichols, p. 147.

(20) Bloom, p. 412.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 412.

(22) Nichols, p. 144.

Ceasing not, mingled, unrepress'd,  
 Apart from place, withholding time,  
 But flattering the golden prime  
 Of good Haroun Alraschid.<sup>(23)</sup>

Keats's delight on hearing the song of the bird, his anguished response to the pain and mutability of daily life, his desire for expansion through death, his enjoyment of a sense of immortality are remembered and closely recorded in this stanza. However, they do not unfold as actual experience in progress. Rather, Keats's feelings seem to have melted into one matrix and reemerged as a host of sensations inevitably attached to situations where a song of a bird breaks through the darkness of the world. The emotional element of Keats's experience, only, seems to be present in this stanza but not the real experience in its fullness, growth and immediacy. It is, perhaps, the presence of this element that deludes critics into a misreading of the poem as a manifestation of an act of transcendence.

It is also important to note in the bulbul's stanza that Tennyson's inability to experience transcendence in the presence of the bird is coupled with a direct and open denial of the power of the bird to generate Keats's feelings, let alone Keats's experience, in his heart. Referring to the bird, Tennyson writes: "Not he, but something which possess'd the darkness of the world" has given rise to Keats's feelings in his own consciousness. Most likely, the reference in the line to "something" involves the power of memory that Tennyson affirms in his commitment to the human mind and the human world in this poem.

Tennyson's commitment to the human mind and world occurs, in this poem, at the expense of a large and extensive denial of the power of nature. The denial begins with a transformation of Keats's forest into a highly cultivated natural scenery. Tennyson's shallop leaves the Tigris river behind and, significantly, enters a man-made lake via a man-made canal. He sails by high-walled gardens, an enclosed and man-controlled structure. Through man's artistic skills, these gardens are decorated by many a "fluted vase, and brazen urn" [60], while their paths are "engrain'd" with "vari-colored shells" [57]. "Obelisks / Graven with emblem of the time" [107,8] also enforce man's artistic interference in the place. The luxurious porches that overlook these gardens with their "costly doors" [17], "broider'd sofas" [19], and glittering lamps, complete the transformation of the natural scenery into an art-work.

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(23) Alfred Tennyson, "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," in *Selected Poetry* (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), pp. 69-77. References to this poem depend on this edition and will be included in the text.

Such reductive treatment of nature in the poem continues in Tennyson's description of the natural components of the scene in art metaphors. The perfect beauty of nature changes, through such metaphors, into a finished piece of man's artistic output. The "sward," for example, is "damask work" [28]. The "unmown" part of it is "baraided bloom" [29]. The "hollow boughs" [42] of the trees build a high "dome" [42], while the palm-trees build embowered "vaults" [39]. The water flowing from the central fountain generates small "crystal arches" [49], while the water ebbing from the edge of the artificial lake creates "diamond rillets" [48]. The lights emanating from the Caliph's pavilion transform the bowers outside into "latticed shade" [112] and formulates "diamond plots" [85] on the level surface of the lake. As Lourie points out, this poem witnesses "the metamorphosis of nature into craft" [13].

The predominance of art over nature in the poem is also evident in Tennyson's sensitivity to, and celebration of, highly sophisticated objects of art throughout. He is attracted to Bagdad with its "shrines of fretted gold" [7] and to the Caliph's pavilion with its "carved cedar doors" [115], "spangled floors" [116], "marble stairs" [117], "golden balustrade" [118] and "million tapers flaring bright" [124] out of "twisted silvers" [125]. He also applauds the artificial lights of the pavilion because they defeat the natural light of the sky, for they create on the inner roof of the pavilion "hundreds" of artificial moons that "look'd to shame" the stars of heaven above [125]. Similarly, he delights in his encounter with the "Persian girl" [134] who resembles a sculptured statue with her "argent-lidded eyes" [135], "brow of pearl" [137] and lashes "like to rays / of darkness" [36,7]. And the poet finally exalts in his confrontation with Haroun Alraschid who sits on a massive throne covered with "a cloth of gold" [149] and engarlanded with "inwrought flowers" [149].

Tennyson's reductive treatment of nature and his celebration of art are signs of his affirmation of the power of the human mind and the value of the human world. Art is man's, as opposed to nature's, work. It is the product of his mental efforts and physical skills. It reflects his attempt to improve on nature and to enrich it with beauty of his own making. It represents his desire to bring an otherwise imperfect world close to perfection for the purpose of pleasurable indulgence. The confrontation with Haroun Alraschid in the midst of a world of highly sophisticated artistry supports this reading of the poem.

The confrontation with this Caliph is a celebration of the human mind and world because he is the perfect human who has inspired other humans, and their minds, into acts of creativity. Alraschid is a model man who combines "merriment" with "kingly pride" in "his deep eye" when "laughter-stirr'd" [150,1]. His perfection and humanitarian characteristics do not only lend value to the human world that he rep-

resents, and Tennyson celebrates, but they also inspire his people into creating a beautiful world of art and the poet into writing a fine poem. His subjects cultivate gardens, adorn porches and construct a luxurious pavilion to “honor” and to “honor” the “good Haroun Alraschid” and the poet writes a poem to describe them. Alraschid’s people bring their world of art to perfection to make it “worthy of the golden prime” [142] of this Caliph and the poet uses such perfection to exalt in his imaginative confrontation with him. Therefore, when the confrontation occurs, it becomes an embracement, and a celebration, of all what this Caliph represents: his humane perfection, his inspirational presence and his world of art as an outcome of both. Tennyson has denied the power of nature and affirmed the power of art because he wished to celebrate the power of the human mind and the value of the human world.

Yet the poem is a celebration of the power of the human mind in other respects. Tennyson’s mind shows itself capable of experiencing expansion into the past and imaginative creativity without external stimulation. Rather than waiting for a powerful object of nature, or even of art, to stimulate consciousness into union with the world out of self, Tennyson begins his poem with immediate identification with the world of Haroun Alraschid: “True Mussulman was I and sworn” [9]. Though lacking transcendence, the poet’s expansion into the past of Haroun Alraschid soon generates an act of imaginative creation. The world of this Caliph immediately begins to unfold. Memory shows itself capable of recreating Alraschid’s kingdom by depending on its own recollections of past childhood readings in the *Arabian Nights*. In this respect, the poem is a celebration of the power of memory. After all, its title is “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.”

The previous celebration of the power of memory in the poem ties up with Tennyson’s earlier unconscious affirmation of the power of memory in the bulbul’s stanza when he wrote: “Not he, but something which possess’d the darkness of the world” [71]. Just as it recollects scenes, images and figures from the *Arabian Nights*, Tennyson’s mind equally recollects valuable experience, significant moments and transcendental feelings from Romantic poetry. And just as it has enabled him to recreate the *Nights* from memory, his power of the imagination must have enabled him to do the same with Keats’s feelings. The Romantic poet’s experience has melted into the matrix of Tennyson’s memory only to re-emerge as a host of sensations in the bulbul’s stanza. Hence, Tennyson’s poem is not only “Recollections of the Arabian Nights” but is also recollections of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.”

The trust that the Victorian poet places in the human element at the expense of nature is more directly voiced by Robert Browning’s artist in “Fra Lippo Lippi”:



... Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town’s face, younder river’s line  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figure of man, woman, child,  
These are the frame to?<sup>(24)</sup>

Browning’s lines reduce nature to a mere background and bring man to the forefront. Nature loses its first position in the Victorian poet’s mind. This shift in emphasis from the Romantic tradition Peltason recognizes in his reading of Tennyson’s early poetry when he writes of “subordination ... of structures of nature to structures of consciousness.”<sup>(25)</sup> He attributed this shift to the fact that “nature cannot appear as an integrated force, or even as the spirit of a particular landscape, because it has dissolved into fragments.”<sup>(26)</sup> And the “result is a poetry that does not move from nature to imagination, but from one realm of artifice to another.”<sup>(27)</sup> The first realm in this particular case, I think, is the world of Haroun Alraschid and the second is Tennyson’s poem “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.”

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(24) Robert Browning, “Fra Lippo Lippi,” *Selected Poetry* (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), pp. 286-90.

(25) Peltason, p. 90.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 90.

(27) *Ibid.*

## «ذكريات الليالي العربية» و«ذكريات قصيدة كيتس

### «أنشودة إلى البلبل»

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ملخص البحث. تعاني قصيدة الشاعر الفيكتوري ألفرد تينيسون المعنونة «ذكريات الليالي العربية» من قراءات نقدية خاطئة تنسبها إلى التراث الرومانتيكي، ويقع الخطأ في قيام بعض النقاد بربط مقطع البلبل في قصيدة تينيسون بقصيدة الشاعر الرومانتيكي جون كيتس المعنونة «أنشودة إلى البلبل» رغم وجود اختلافات جوهرية بين الشعارين في تفاعلها مع أغنية الطائر.

وبتوظيف المنهج النقدي الشكلاني قمتُ بمقارنة القصيدتين وأوضحْتُ أوجه الاختلاف بين موقف الشعارين تجاه البلبل، الأمر الذي يحرق قصيدة تينيسون من انتماؤها النقدي الخاطيء إلى التقليد الرومانتيكي. وقد تبين لي بالمقارنة أن الشاعر الفيكتوري يسترجع في قصيدته أحاسيس سلفه الشاعر الرومانتيكي تماماً كما يسترجع بذاكرته قصص ألف ليلة وليلة وحكايات هارون الرشيد دون أن يتجاوز المجال الذهني أو يدخل في إطار التجربة الفعلية، فهو يتذكر دون أن يحس ما أحس به جون كيتس عند سماعه أنشودة البلبل.

ثم قمتُ بدعم هذا الاستنتاج عن طريق إبراز عناصر أخرى داخل القصيدة تنادي بتفوق الفن على الطبيعة، وهو نداء فيكتوري مغاير للولاء المطلق الذي يكنه الشاعر الرومانتيكي للطبيعة، ويعكس محاولة الشاعر الفيكتوري التأكيد على دور الإنسان وعقله البشري في تشكيل العالم الذي يعيش فيه بعد أن تزعزت ثقته في الطبيعة كقوة إيجابية ملهمة وفعالة في حياته.