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Elements of mysticism in Tennyson

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ELEMENTS OF MYSTICISM

IN

TENNYSION

by

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CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF MYSTICISM

I. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Few designations reveal such varied misconceptions in the popular mind as that of "mystic" and few words have been more generally misused than "mysticism." The mystic element in life occurs in such a great variety of fields and in such varying degrees of significance that a completely satisfying and universally definitive statement of its exact import is hardly possible. Typical confusions and misunderstandings concerning the meaning of mysticism are suggested by Butler:

It [mysticism] has come to be applied to many things of many kinds: to theosophy and Christian Science; to spiritualism and magic; to weird psychical experiences if only they have some religious color; to revelations and visions; to other-worldliness or even mere dreaminess and impracticality in the affairs of life; to poetry, painting and music of which the motif is unobvious and vague. It has been identified with the attitude of the religious mind that cares not for dogma, or doctrine, or church sacraments; it has been identified also with a certain outlook on the world—a seeing God in nature, and recognizing that the material creation in various ways symbolizes spiritual realities—or watered down to love of God in mysticism, or mysticism is only a Christian life lived on a high level.1

The history of mysticism, however, shows that mysticism in its pure form has no kinship with the healing cults, with astrology, or with the practice of magic by charlatans. The etymology of the word "mysticism" implies a relation to mystery:

The mystics are, in fact, the inner circle of devotees of any cult; they are possessed of knowledge which partakes of the nature of revelation rather than of acquired science; and which is imparted in consideration of some special aptitude natural or acquired.²

It is probable that the suggestions of "secret cult" and experiences for the "privileged few" have been unfortunately retained, giving a false impression that the mystic life is strange and unique and almost "beyond humanity," when actually the mystical experience is open to all humanity. The mystical experience has been variously defined by eminent authorities: It is "a conscious, direct contact by the soul with Transcendental Reality";³ "The establishing of a conscious relation with the Absolute";⁴ "The soul's possible union in this life with Absolute Reality."⁵ These definitions clearly indicate that something is meant by the

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³ Ibid., p. 4.
mystical experience beyond the mere sense of the presence of the Absolute; an actual union is the basic factor. James Leuba offers a modern psychologist's conception of the mystical experience:

".....any experience taken by the experience to be a contact (not through the senses, but (intuitive, "immediate"), or union of self with a larger than self, be it called World Spirit, God, the Absolute or otherwise."

Leuba's definition establishes another basic point, namely, that the experience is not attained through a process of intellectual reasoning or through outside forces working on the senses. The contact comes from within and is infused or intuitive.

Another aspect of the mystical experience is introduced in Poulain's definition—the noetic quality:

"We give the name mystic to supernatural states containing a knowledge of a kind that our own efforts and our own exertions could never succeed in producing."

Following Poulain's thought that knowledge is attained through the mystical experience the question arises, does this mean that concrete knowledge is transmitted to the mystic, that is, new facts and revelations? Mystics and scholars alike are in complete agreement that no new concrete knowledge


is given to the mystic; there develops, however, a richer insight into the meaning of existence, a general deepening of his comprehension of truth, and a definite ethical exaltation. William James describes this knowledge as a "great realization, a flowing together of the universal and the particular."

That the mystical experience often arouses the emotional capacities to the heights of inspiration and of love for the Absolute is evidenced by the descriptions given by the mystics themselves. Plotinus speaks of the "Flight of the alone to the Alone"; St. Teresa exclaims, "Glorious folly—heavenly madness! Wherein true wisdom is acquired"; St. Augustine declares he was "swept up to Thee by Thy Beauty."

An essential feature of mysticism is the mystic's pursuit of the infinite, not an extraordinary and unique quest, but one that fulfills a basic urge of all mankind—a desire to find perfect truth and absolute love. Dean Inge states that mysticism has its roots,

...in the dim consciousness of the beyond which is a part of our human nature and which is the raw material of all religion, philosophy, and art."

His verification of the validity of the mystical

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experience is interesting and representative of other writers in the field:

That the human mind while still 'in the body pent' may obtain glimpses of the eternal order, and enjoy foretastes of the bliss of heaven, is a belief which I, at least, see no reason to reject. It involves no rash presumption, and is not contrary to what may be readily believed about the state of immortal spirits passing through mortal life.9

Despite the complexity of the subject, a summation of these definitions of mysticism will establish certain core points which are essential to recognition of its mode of thought and experience: (1) Mysticism implies the extraordinary ability to transcend the bounds of self into a plane of boundless higher Reality; (2) no amount of speculative reasoning will produce a mystical experience since it is an infused state; (3) mysticism is not mere languid absorption but entails a poetic quality in which the powers are heightened to appreciate more fully the truths of the whole of existence; (4) mysticism deals with the extraordinary, but not the unnatural.

Particular emphasis should be placed on this final point, as too often mysticism is identified with occultism, hypnotism, spiritualism, and other psycho-physical phenomena. The true mysticism, as we employ the term here,

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9 Dean Inge, Light, Life and Love, Selections from the German Mystics (London: 1899), p. XXXVII.
A typical example of this is evident in the Lokes

sensuous multiplicity, sensuous mechanism and tangential see.

The element in creative impressions of dream mental states,

element of transcendent poetry is "wholly" not mystical. He

one must note of determination is made of the point. An

poetry, pure metaphor, extraneous, but not uncouth.

We are seeking in transcendency's personified life and

feeling, human love, aesthetic beauty of nature.

sensuous multiplicity of intellectual correspondence to reality

in the order of human existence; not to experience some
correspond in some intuitions, although it is hardly possible

reality, on the other hand, may remain in almost spirituality

be literal to extraneous poetry. The transcendent

genius in the arts. The capacity for such experience may

an expression of the genius of the intuitions, as we have

than, the mystical otherness of the transcendent plane; he is

such intensity as to force the other into a secondary poet-

arbitrary stage develops when one plane is cultivated with

experienced in a complementary pattern, but in another

ily of every intuitional. Ordinarily these two planes are

The reality to experience both planes is a normal potential.

of the spiritual and intuitional, the lower plane of the sensory.

there are two degrees of reality: the transcendent plane

does not require any process not normal to human activity.
Eaters";

How sweet it were, hearing the downward stream,
With half-shut eyes ever to seem
Falling asleep in a half-dream!
To dream and dream, like yonder amber light,
Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on
the height;
To hear each other's whisper'd speech;
Eating the Lotos day by day,
To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,
And tender curving lines of creamy spray. 10

This is melody and imaginative vision; this is the language of "dreamful ease" and realms where the "poppy hangs
in sleep," but it is not the lofty rise to a plane of transcendent consciousness which is the ecstasy of the true mystic. Romanticism, however, is but one aspect of Tennyson's expression, and the mystic poet is clearly distinguishable from the mere quietist. It is the nature and quality of his authentic mysticism that is to be explored in this study.

II. IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MYSTIC STATE

Identifying marks which are characteristic of the mystic state enlighten any study of this sort. Mysticism has a method as well as a viewpoint; and while the viewpoint may vary slightly to accommodate diversity in the human personality, the essential core idea is basic throughout—the intuitive, direct union with the Absolute;

so also, while the methods of the mystics show understandable variations, there likewise will be evident certain core identifying states which mark the authentic mystic's way and distinguish it from that of the dilatante or the charlatan.

The three states of the "mystic way." The true mystic is conscious of a quest, of seeking, and he remains unsatisfied until he finds that situation wherein "his strength is placed,"11 and his desires fulfilled. Historically, this quest has come to be called "the mystic way." Consistently that "way" is identified as a three-fold movement; purification, contemplation and ascent. During the Middle Ages, the term for the three movements became stabilized as purgative, illuminative, and unitive. The mystic has always realized that the only way to attain the Absolute is to adapt himself to it. If the mystic way is to serve as a bridge to perfection, the imperfect man must first be conquered. The first stage, that of purification, is therefore a period devoted to the practice of asceticism and moral discipline. Progress in this period of purification depends upon the responsiveness of the individual and the intensity of his desire to advance.

The period of illumination is one of joy, contemplation and quiet anticipation of the final unitive stage. The mystic has now gained mastery over his own personality, and has divested his mind of many values which the world cherishes, but which he finds a barrier to the discovery of final truths. He is now ready for the experimental perception of a higher degree of reality, the unitive stage. The Spanish mystics suggest a fourth movement, usually termed the "Dark Night of the Soul," which appears immediately following the illuminative period. The "Dark Night" is an interval of dryness, a severe testing period wherein all the meaning and joy of the mystic's earlier progress seems to be swept away and a black emptiness and nothingness remains. This period, if successfully conquered, is superseded by the inspiration and exaltation of the unitive stage.

The unitive stage is the culmination of the "mystic way" and represents a plane of consciousness wherein the mystic achieves a harmonious relationship between himself and a higher reality which he intuitively apprehends and which becomes the dominant factor in his life. An interesting modern interpretation of the mystic way is offered by Hocking, when he suggests that the characteristic movements are rhythm, disconnection, solitude and alternation.
Concerning rhythm he explains:

.....the mystic’s elevation is transient, presumably because it is a phase in some natural rise and fall, some organic wave perhaps in experience.12

This rhythm, Hocking is careful to explain, shows no sign of regularity and is not periodic or purely mechanical. The will and the conscience of the mystic are his sources of power. He initiates, by his act of will, each new cycle of his progress. Each rhythmic wave seems a nourishing movement followed by disconnection, a period of absorption:

The fact that much of the early elevation is built into the later level of continuous living may be interpreted as akin to the assimilation of a meal. The experience seems to have supplied the subject with a certain moral fuel as well as the cognitive material.....rhythm of this type would then last at any rate as long as the subject continues to grow.13

Solitude is a necessary phase of the mystic way, for the mystic must have the opportunity to contemplate and to explore "into the heart of Self and Deity." Mysticism in its true character is precisely the "redemption of solitude," that is, the mystic practices solitary meditation in order to discover the potentialities of self; he cannot know the true self if constantly immersed in the multitude; self is

12 Hocking, op. cit., p. 391.
13 Hocking, op. cit., p. 396.
reclaimed in solitude. The mystics insist, however, that mysticism be identified as characteristically active, not passive. Hocking's interpretation of the "mystic way" acknowledges this characteristic which he specifies as alternation, that is, the continuous rhythm between assimilation and absorption, between activity and solitude. The periods of solitude are strength-gathering retreats, preludes to activity.

Guide to identification of a mystic state. A reliable and effective guide in identifying the depth and authenticity of a mystical experience, is the evaluation of the worthwhileness of its results—"by their fruits ye shall know them." By this test, quasi-mystical manifestations and fraudulent posturings are quickly detected, since the results tend to be destructive and even degrading to the personality. Authentic experiences, on the other hand, give new vigor and force and generally elevate the character. Underhill's\(^{14}\) summation of the benefits of the mystic way is inclusive. Three basic results are noted: (1) the practice of the presence of God; (2) a clarity of vision in regard to the phenomenal world; (3) enormous increase of ethical energy and spiritual concentration, which may be

\(^{14}\) Underhill, op. cit., p. 240.
accompanied by ecstatic states and unusual psycho-physical factors.

The practice of the presence of God is a joyous apprehension of the Absolute which seems to liberate and renew the whole personality, but it is not a state of ecstasy or rapture. A richer, deeper conception of the world, and a fuller comprehension of the meaning of existence are realized. "For what is the mystic experience but finding the idea of the whole?"15

Clarity of vision regarding the phenomenal world is well demonstrated by Jacob Boehme's vision of the universe and St. Francis of Assisi's love of nature. Many poets have shown this mystical appreciation of nature.

The actual physical perceptions seem to be strongly heightened so that the self perceives an added significance and reality in all things; is often convinced that it knows at last 'the secret of the world.' In Blake's words, 'the doors of perception are cleansed' so that 'everything appears to men as it is, infinite.'16

Energy is a characteristic of Eastern mysticism. The act of Union, the third movement, vitalizes the mystic, sends him out into the world as a missionary, a teacher, a founder of religious orders and societies. The mystic

15 Hooker, op. cit., p. 433.

16 Underhill, op. cit., p. 240.
experience heightens creative power, producing apologists, philosophers, and poets. That this vital energizing, which is of the spirit, should also increase the intuitive and transcendental powers of the mystic is often a natural, though not necessary, result.

**Distinction between genuine mystic states and spurious psycho-physical phenomena.** It is regrettable that a false emphasis has been placed on unusual psycho-physical phenomena by those who do not adequately understand the mystic state. The proof of the validity of the "mystic way," and the degree of authenticity of the mystic union cannot be judged by the number of accompanying miraculous signs and wonders. Psycho-physical disturbances are only attendant phenomena and are to be considered of no importance in judging the value of a mystical experience:

> For persons of peculiar psychical disposition, the mystical experience is attended with unusual phenomena such as automatic voices or visions, profound body changes, swoons or ecstasies. They mark, however, no sainthood and indicate no miracle working power. 17

The mystics have also been aware of the danger of delusion. St. John of the Cross saw in external psychic phenomena nothing but the natural effects of physical weakness and the natural incapacity of the soul's lower functions to

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endure the special spiritual shock in the utmost centre:

As the sensual part of the soul is weak, without capacity for the strong things of the spirit, they who are proficient (i.e. who have reached a certain stage of mystical experience) by reason of the spiritual communications made to the sensual part, are subject therein to great infirmities and sufferings and physical derangements and consequently weariness of mind. Here is the source of ecstasies, raptures, and dislocation of the bones which always happen whenever these communications are not purely spiritual; that is granted to the spirit alone as in the case of the perfect. In them, these raptures and physical sufferings cease for they enjoy liberty of spirit with unclouded and unsuspended senses.18

A psychic phenomenon may have a legitimate purpose, but according to St. Teresa, it is not to be over-emphasized:

In such matters as these there is always cause to fear illusion; until we are assured that they truly proceed from the Spirit of God. Therefore at the beginning it is always best to resist them. If it is indeed God who is acting, the soul will but progress still more quickly, for the trial will favour her advancement.19

The modern psychologist testifies to the legitimacy of the ecstatic states, but with the same qualifying stipulations that the mystics place on themselves. There are classic and lower types of ecstasy and only the total effect of the experience will prove its quality.

It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic

mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal, or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: "seraph and snake" abide there side by side. To come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be sifted and tested and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience just like what comes from the outer world of sense.\(^{20}\)

James specifies four characteristics of the "seraph" variety of mystical ecstasy: ineffability, noetic, transiency, and passivity.\(^{21}\) A mystic's genuine experience is hardly describable and is usually a state of feeling rather than concrete content. The noetic sense comes from a new insight into old truths, and this deepening of knowledge remains with the mystic enriching his entire life. The brevity of the mystical experience is amply illustrated by the works of all the mystics but the following descriptions by St. Augustine are especially effective: "in the flash of a trembling glance," "barely touched it with the whole beat of the heart," "in a swift thought they touched eternal wisdom." The exact duration of a mystic state is undetermined but James judges from one half an hour to two hours as possible sustaining time. The mystic prays and works toward perfection and union but when actual union is achieved,


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 371.
he feels a suspension of his own will. These mystic occurrences do not interfere with the subject's conscious life but remain in memory and prove greatly influential in improving his inner growth.

The more infused, intimate, spiritual and super-sensible it is, the more does it exceed the senses both inner and outer and impose silence on them.  

As such prominent literary figures as Coleridge, De Quincey, and Poe were believed to be on occasion affected by drugs and stimulants during their creative periods, this circumstance has sometimes been cited as a factor contributing to the mystical tone of their works. Because of this suggested relationship between poetic creativeness and artificially stimulated mystic states, and because the poet of our study, Tennyson, has been the subject of psycho-physical experiences which influenced his poetic output, it seems advisable to explore this relationship between psychic manifestations and creative power.

Modern psychologists find that hallucination, delusion, hysteria, narcotics and even common anaesthetics such as ether, produce ecstatic experiences. William James relates the effect of nitrous oxide on himself:

The keynote of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical

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22 St. John of the Cross, Dark Night of the Soul, op. cit., Book II, Chap. XVII.
illumination. Truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence. The mind sees all the logical relations of being with an apparent subtlety and instantaneity to which its normal consciousness offers no parallel...This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense.

Here we have an interesting psychic experience, but it is not a mystical experience in that it does not meet the test of constructive results. The aftermath of such artificially induced experiences, especially when repeated frequently, is a lowering of energy, mental depression and despondency, decline of ethical vigor, and in extreme cases, nervous collapse and insanity. The true mystic state leaves no depressive after effects or hypertensions; the general effect is vitalizing and heightens the perception of all the faculties.

As no permanent truths or sustained forms of creative expression are derived from any artificially induced ecstasy or from any hysterical or otherwise diseased mental state, must an ecstatic state, then, be either supernatural or unnatural? If this were so, many genuinely inspired poets, artists and nature mystics would have to be classified as either saints or madmen. The solution to this problem

23 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, op. cit., "pp. 378 et seq."
is suggested by Butler:

It is well to emphasize the fact that more and more clearly and fully it is coming to be recognized that there need be nothing miraculous or supernatural in ecstasy, rapture, or trance in themselves; on the physical and psychological side they are often induced in purely natural ways; if there be any supernatural element in them, it arises from what takes place during them. It is recognized that some people are so made physically and psychologically as to be temperamentally apt for ecstasies. This explanation proves helpful in understanding the emotional ecstasies of persons of unusually sensitive temperament, and the ecstatic states experienced by those who are highly responsive to impressions of beauty.

To sum up the identifying characteristics of the mystic state will prove helpful in our examination of Tennyson's personal mystical experiences and will facilitate the recognition of the mystical element in his poetic works: (1) historically, the mystic's progress is a threefold movement, purification, illumination and unity; (2) genuine mystic states are recognized by their fruitful results which are the ennobling of the ethical and spiritual conceptions, the increase in clarity of vision and responsiveness to the meaning of the whole of existence, and the establishment of the personality as a centre of productive energy; (3) states of ecstasy artificially induced or caused

24 Butler, op. cit., p. 344.
by psycho-physical disorders are pathological in nature, unproductive or destructive in results and tend to devitalize the personality; therefore they cannot be identified as genuine mystic states; (4) ecstatic states may be experienced in purely natural ways, without miraculous implications or artificially induced methods, by persons possessing highly sensitized temperaments.
CHAPTER II

MYSTICAL ELEMENT IN TENNYSON'S PERSONAL LIFE

Certain aspects of Tennyson's early life bear so directly upon the future course of his thinking and promote the growth of certain tendencies of temperament so plainly, they must be considered if we are to understand his mystical development. Tennyson, born August 6, 1809, was the sixth child in a family of twelve born to Reverend George Tennyson, Rector of Somersby, and Elizabeth Fytch, a clergyman's daughter. George Tennyson is described by Charles Tennyson¹ as very moody and erratic and Elizabeth Tennyson as a woman of exceptional simplicity, charm and Evangelical pietism. When four or five years of age, Tennyson gave evidence of an unusual sensitivity to the natural world which was to prove characteristic throughout his life:

He would on stormy days spread out his arms to the gale and chant aloud: 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind,' and the words 'far, far away' had, from his earliest memory, a strange charm for him—a charm which before long began to illumine the distant in time as well as the distant in space, breeding in him that 'passion of the past' which was to be one of the mainsprings of his early poetry.²

² Ibid., p. 25.
The countryside around Somersby was one of wold and marsh. The district was sparsely populated and the inhabitants "rough to the point of barbarism." This environment was conducive to solitude, somber introspection and the growth of interest in nature. Unfortunately, a family tendency toward melancholy and depression, "the black-bloodedness" of the Tennysons, was aggravated in the poet's youth by an unpleasant home condition. The father, George Tennyson, was given to paroxysms of violence, intensified by the use of alcohol, to which he turned for relief from ill health and the burden of caring for his large family. When these scenes occurred, the adolescent and impressionable Tennyson "would run out and throw himself down among the graves in the churchyard longing for death."3 These conditions tended to increase Tennyson's inclination to introspection and to center his naturally sensitive and imaginative mind on the morbid and melancholy themes which are evident in his early poetry. Typical of this tendency is the "Song," written while he was still an undergraduate at Cambridge University:

The air is damp, and hush'd and close  
As a sick man's room when he taketh repose  
An hour before death;  
My very heart faints and my whole soul grieves

---

3 Tennyson, op. cit., p. 48.
At the moist rich smell of the rotting leaves,
And the breath
Of the fading edges of box beneath,
And the year's last rose.
Heavily hangs the broad sunflower
Over its grave i' the earth so chilly
Heavily hangs the hollyhock,
Heavily hangs the tiger-lily. 4

Charles Tennyson states in his biography of the
poet that Tennyson had developed so thorough a tendency
toward "extreme aesthetic sensibility and a capacity for
mystical abstraction" by the time he reached Cambridge
that it became a subject of conflict in the poet's mind
when he found himself introduced to the new invigorating
influences of Arthur Hallam and the Cambridge circle:

As his correspondence with Arthur had shown,
he had begun to feel that excessive absorption
in the pursuit of abstract beauty was one of his
most dangerous temptations, and tended to sap his
mental energy and power of human sympathy. 5

If Tennyson had any definite plans to remedy this
condition, they were interrupted by a series of unhappy
events. In September, 1833, he received from Vienna the
news of Hallam's death; his 1830 volume of poems was bit-
terly attacked by the critics; he was forced to postpone
his marriage to Louise Sellwood owing to financial distress,
for he had invested his money in an enterprise which failed.

5 Tennyson, op. cit., p. 131.
For the next ten years he withdrew into his own private world and did not publish again until 1842. Judging from the substantial quantity of the mystical element appearing in his poetic output, he continued to cultivate rather than disregard this aspect of his personality. Passages from the Memoir also reveal interesting examples of Tennyson's mystical thinking and describe the nature of the poet's own ecstatic experiences. Mysticism was not to prove unproductive, as Tennyson had feared, but was to develop into a fruitful source of inspiration throughout his life.

We turn first to a passage in the Memoir which reveals an aspect of Tennyson's nature mysticism:

Throughout his life he [Tennyson] had a constant feeling of a spiritual harmony existing between ourselves and the outward visible Universe, and of the actual immanence of God in the infinitesimal atom, as in the vastest system. 'If God,' he would say, 'were to withdraw Himself for one single instant from this Universe, everything would vanish into nothingness.'

This is an example of the cosmic consciousness which Tennyson often expresses; man and the universe are partial expressions of a spiritual life force which sustains and harmonizes from within, but which is also a controlling force from above. Nature is not "all and all" to Tennyson. He knows what Richard Jefferies, another literary

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mystic who found inspiration in nature, had to learn:
"The earth is all and all to me, but I am nothing to the earth."  

Tennyson's conversation and letters confirm his possession of the mystic's attitude that the spiritual world is the real world, the material world, even the physical body, only imaginary symbols:

He said again to us with deep feeling in January 1869: 'Yes, it is true that there are moments when the flesh is nothing to me, when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision, God and the spiritual the only real and true. Depend upon it, the spiritual is the real; it belongs to one more than the hand and the foot. You may tell me that my hand and my foot are only imaginary symbols of my existence: I could believe you; but you never, never can convince me that the I is not the true and real part of me.' These words he spoke with such passionate earnestness that a solemn silence fell on us as he left the room.

One of the richest veins of Tennyson's mysticism centers in his attempt to discover self. Hooking states the discovery of self is always significant and cannot be overstated but can be disproportionately stated:

...typically mystical is the discovery of oneself as an individual...The individual self is indeed hard to find, the self which is deeper than all epithets....In all such experiences...it is the vision of the individual which marks

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the moment of mystic illumination.9

The attempt to explore the mystery of the individual self is the source of many of the ecstatic states which Tennyson experienced throughout his life:

He wrote: 'A kind of waking trance I have frequently had, quite up from my boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me thro' repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words? But in a moment when I come back to my normal state of sanity, I am ready to fight for my main lies ich, and hold that it will last for aeons and aeons.'10

Tennyson states that he was frequently subject to these trances in which he tried to realize the significance of self. Thus he establishes the recurring nature of his mystic inclinations. However, mere frequency of occurrence does not in itself establish the authenticity or merit of a mystic state; its productive results do.


10 Tennyson, Memoir, op. cit., p. 319.
A single ecstatic experience may prove so highly significant to the individual as to yield lifelong fruitful benefits. The trances described here by Tennyson bear the identifying marks of the higher level ecstatic states. A basic principle of mystical thinking concerning the discovery of the real self demands seeming abandonment of the individual personality and reversion to, or contact with, a universal whole, an Absolute Reality. That Tennyson, through intense concentration on the mystery and wonder of self, achieved this blending or uniting of individual consciousness with a total absolute consciousness is clearly expressed by his statement, "the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being."

Temporarily, in his ecstatic trance, the wholeness of reality is suddenly realized by Tennyson as he contemplates the vast unexplored potentialities of what to him is the center of reality, the self. The noetic quality, which is a distinguishing mark of the true mystic state, is present in Tennyson's experience since his is not a "confused state," but one in which he feels a heightening of consciousness, a sudden perception that is "the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest." Intuitively he realizes that death is impossible and that personality is not subject to extinction but rather is destined for
boundless expansion. That the full import of his experience is, "utterly beyond words," is typical of the mystical pattern. Even more valuable in establishing the genuine merit of the trances is the presence of that essential characteristic mark, the evidence of productive results for the individual. If the full substance of meaning is sometimes lost in the mystic's effort of expression, what happens to the substance of the mystic himself is never lost. Tennyson knows the mystic's satisfaction that what has happened is important to himself, has enriched his vision, has given new meaning to his existence, and "is worth fighting for." His experience is assimilated into his personality to last for "aeons and aeons."

Auden11 believes that Tennyson is guilty of being disproportionately preoccupied with self, and obsessed with a fear amounting to panic of not being able to establish the integrity of self and the dignity of self's final destiny. Tennyson's questionings and doubts concerning the purpose of human existence and the possibility of immortality, persist throughout his life, but that he was in panic fear of their remaining unanswered seems an unjustified statement. Tennyson's tone of hope and assurance in

describing his ecstatic trances testified to his belief in the reality of the spiritual nature of man. Many confident and inspiring passages in his poetry testify to his belief in the sublime destiny of man such as this from "In Memoriam":

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.12

There is justification for the criticism, however, that Tennyson on occasion allowed his personal mystical inclinations expression, when to do so was detrimental to his poetic artistry. The introduction of passages to the fourth edition (1851) of "The Princess" which distorted the original characterization of the Prince cannot be considered other than an artistic blunder. The blue-eyed, fair-faced, affable Prince of the original version fitted into the mock-heroic adventures of the poem effectively. Critics were puzzled and disapproving when Tennyson inserted the lines,

And, truly, waking dreams were, more or less,
An old and strange affection of the house.
Myself too had weird seizures, Heaven knows what!
On a sudden in the midst of men and day,
And while I walk'd and talk'd as heretofore,
I seem'd to move among a world of ghosts,
And feel myself the shadow of a dream.13

12 "In Memoriam," Works, p. 198.
This situation is entirely out of character for the bland and amiable Prince, but entirely in character for Tennyson himself. In this instance the imposition of the ecstatic seizures upon the hapless hero is understandable only in the light of Tennyson's personal interest in the trance states.

Far outweighing the unfavorable effects of such a forced intrusion of the mystical element is the enriching and inspirational quality the mystic touch gives to a large proportion of Tennyson's poetry. The "Tennyson hero" is effective in "Maud." Here the moody, introspective lover is drawn consistently throughout and the motivation is not forced. Tennyson draws on the experience of his own tortured youth, his fear of "black moods," his alternating exaltation and breeding doubts, to present a convincing portrait of the over-sensitive hero. Certain passages suggest situations which may be autobiographical in nature:

My dream? Do I dream of bliss?
I have walk'd a wake with truth
0 when did a morning shine
So rich in atonement as this
For my dark-dawning youth.
Darke'n'd watching a mother decline
And that dead man at her heart and mine;
For who was left to watch her but I
Yet so did I let my freshness die. 14

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As a poet-mystic Tennyson experienced a high degree of ecstatic elevation. His amazing responsiveness to moods of poetic inspiration is described in an article by James Knowles, a personal friend of Tennyson for many years. Knowles states that it was Tennyson's custom to shut himself in his room frequently after dinner, for meditation and unwritten composition, and

...when he came out from his room on such occasions, he would often have a sort of dazed and far-off dreamy look about him...If interrupted during his hours of seclusion, his look of 'sensitiveness' was surprising. He seemed ready to quiver at the faintest breath, or sound, or movement, as though suddenly waked up out of a dream.15

Tennyson himself confided to Knowles:

Sometimes as I sit here alone in this great room, I get carried away out of sense and body and rapt into mere existence, till the accidental touch or movement of one of my own fingers is like a great shock and blow and brings the body back with a terrible start.16

Tennyson's withdrawal for meditation and unwritten composition is the poet-mystic's form of contemplation. Poetry, to attain a heightened form of experience, must be sustained by that intuition of the Real which ennobles

16 Ibid., p. 169.
all expressions of art. Tennyson found inspiration and illumination in mystical reflection. Not only did he thus enrich his own concept of the Real World beyond the world of illusion, but he was able to translate something of this to us in his poetry. This skill is the true gift of artistic consciousness which is possessed by the poet-mystic.
CHAPTER III

THE THREE BASIC PATTERNS OF MYSTICISM IN TENNYSON'S WORKS

I. THE SAINT-MYSTIC

In determining the element of mysticism in Tennyson's poetic works, we note the predominance of three basic patterns: (1) the religious strain, identified as that of the saint-mystic; (2) the esthetic pattern, which implies responsiveness to themes of self, other selves and to beauty in the art forms, recognized as that of the poet-mystic; (3) the ecstatic reaction to the mystery or beauty of the natural world, characterized as that of the nature mystic.

The saint-mystic is the mystic who feels moral goodness alone is insufficient. He is absorbed by an all-consuming desire for direct communication between the human spirit and the Absolute. His personality is capable of great emotional fervor, his expression of his feelings often ardent. He feels intuitively that the invisible world is the true reality, the visible world the illusion. He is St. Paul "who was caught up into Paradise and heard unspeakable words which is not lawful for a man to utter"; he is Richard Rolle who, praying to heaven with his whole desire felt within "the voice of song"; he is Plotinus
whose soul "touched God." Tennyson also, in many passages of unusual mystic perception and lyrical inspiration, approaches the level of the saint-mystic:

Speak to Him Thou, for He hears and
Spirit with Spirit can meet—
Closer is He than breathing and nearer
Then hands and feet. 

The saint-mystic is dedicated to the love of the Absolute and he speaks the language of the lover. The soul is the bride, God the Bridegroom. The saint-mystic's absorption in his quest for the Absolute, his emotional intensity, his intimate and daring language, have often exposed him to misunderstanding. But the saint-mystic is sure he knows what others only surmise, that some "walk to the skies, even in this life." Tennyson acknowledges the mystic's claim to direct contact with the Absolute, and that it might be said of others as he said of St. Stephen, that "God's glory smote him on the face."

'I cannot hide that some have striven,
Achieving calm, to whom was given
The joy that mixes man with Heaven;

'Who, rowing hard against the stream,
Saw distant gates of Eden gleam,
And did not dream it was a dream.'

3 "The Two Voices," Works, p. 32.
4 Loc. cit.
To the saint-mystic the Absolute is immanent, that is, within; the Absolute is also transcendent, that is, above. In "The Ancient Sage," Tennyson gives expression to this principle:

If thou wouldst hear the Nameless, and wilt dive
Into the temple-cave of thine own self,
There, brooding by the central altar, thou
Mayst haply learn the Nameless hath a voice.

And when thou sendest thy free soul
thru' heaven,
Nor understandest bound nor boundlessness,
Thou seest the Nameless of the hundred names.
And if the Nameless should withdraw from all
Thy frailty counts most real, all thy world
Might vanish like thy shadow in the dark.5

Tennyson reiterates the mystic's point of view that the physical universe is the dream world; the unseen world the ultimate Reality. He protests that too often, we, with our weak minds, "creep from thought to thought," and insist on dividing the everlasting "Eternal Now" into little "Thens" and "Rhens."

But thou be wise in this dream world of ours
Nor take thy dial for thy diety.
But make the passing shadow serve thy will.6

"The Ancient Sage" expresses the thought that this earth, this narrow life, is but the "yolk, and forming in the

6 Ibid., p. 499.
shell."

The major poems of Tennyson are rich in descriptions of the ecstatic states of the religious mystic which will be dealt with in separate discussions. Interesting examples may also be found in minor poems:


...and I speak of what has been
And more, my son! for more than once when I
Set all alone, revolving in myself
The word that is the symbol of myself
The mortal limit of the Self was loosed
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts into heaven. I touch'd my limbs, the limbs
Were strange, not mine—and yet no shade of doubt,
But utter clearness, and thro' loss of self,
The gain of such large life as match'd with ours,
Were sun to spark—unshadowable in words,
Themselves but shadows of the shadow-world.7

In this passage we again have reference to the physical universe as a place of shadows; but it is also an account of a sudden mystic communion with a force greater than Self, a contact so intense as to temporarily deprive physical existence of a sense of reality. The marks of the classic level ecstatic state are present: (1) passivity, the loss of self flowing into union with a Greater Self; (2) the noetic quality, the new conception of truth, clearer now as sun to spark; (3) the ineffability

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of the experience, unshadowable, inexpressible in words. The result of this experience is permanent in value; although "clouds" remain to darken existence, the Ancient Sage learned that,

The clouds themselves are children of the sun. 8

In "The Mystic," Tennyson protests the misunderstanding and scorn the mystic encounters:

Angels have talked with him and showed him thrones;
Ye knew him not; he was not one of ye,
Ye scorned him with undiscerning scorn
Ye could not read the marvel in his eye. 9

Charles Tennyson,10 the biographer and grandson of the poet, states that Tennyson had a capacity for mystical abstraction and found it a temptation to give fuller expression to his facet of his personality. The poet was mindful of the spirit of his age, and was conscious of the advice of critics and friends to employ his talents on problems pertinent to a scientific and rationalistic society. His own preference for the mystic ideal, however, and his evaluation of the mystic's progress as

8 Ibid., p. 499.
compared to the rationalist's is clearly stated in "The Mystic":

How could ye know him? Ye were yet within
The narrower circle; he had well nigh reached
The last, which with a region of white flame,
Pure without heat, into a larger air
Upburning, and an ether of black blue,
Inveasteth and inspirs all other lives.11

II. THE POET-MYSTIC

The poet-mystic represents an alliance between
intuitive inspiration and artistry. The inspiration may
possess religious elements but the primary sources are
love of nature, esthetic appreciation of the various art
forms, and emotional responses in human relationships.
A saint-mystic may be a poet, but a poet-mystic is not
necessarily a saint.

The capacity for writing poetry is rare; the
capacity for religious emotion of the first in-
tensity is rare; and it is to be expected that
the existence of both capacities in the same indi-
dividual would be rarer still.12

Mystics who experience ecstatic states may not be gifted
with the poetic talent for expressing these mysteries.
Even such a mystic as St. John of the Cross, who is a


poet as well as a saint, pleads inability to express him- 
self completely. One of the characteristics of religious 
mysticism is its ineffability. The pseudo-Dionysius could 
not give expression to the "divine darkness" and Bernard 
of Clairvaux was forced to protest, "My secret to myself." 
Certain experiences may be vital to the individual but 
beyond human expression. The mystic's experience, to be 
genuine, need not necessarily be imparted to us. On the 
other hand, the poet must communicate his experience to us 
as expression is essential to his art.

There are perceivable resemblances between the 
flashes of inspiration of the mystic and the poet, and 
the one medium may help us to interpret the other:

It is not Shelley's experience that helps me 
to know better the experience of St. John of the 
Cross, but conversely, it is the experience of the 
Saint which makes a little less obscure the mystery 
of the experiences of the poet. 13

Those poets who look upon their art with lofty idealism 
and consider themselves "dedicated spirits," have in cer- 
tain respects an identity of purpose with the mystic. 
Both wish to bring mankind closer to the infinite. Ten- 
nyson expresses this attitude in "The Poet":

He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill
He saw thro' his own soul.
The marvel of the everlasting will--
an open scroll

Before him lay, with echoing feet he
threaded
The secretest walks of fame:
The viewless arrows of his thoughts were
headed
And wing'd with flame.14

Tennyson as a poet-mystic, undertakes the difficult task
of interpreting: (1) lofty spiritual concepts; (2) the
mystery and beauty of the natural world; (3) the mystery
of the discovery of self as an individual; (4) the mystery
of the discovery of other selves as individuals. What he
may lack in profundity on occasion, he never lacks in in-
spired conviction or ease of expression.

In "Merlin and the Gleam," Tennyson speaks of the
consecration of the poet, of the secret gift, a guiding
light of inspiration, the "Gleam":

There on the border
Of boundless Ocean
And all but in Heaven
Hovers the gleam.15

The "Gleam" is not a natural phenomenon:

Not of sunlight
Not of moonlight
Not of the starlight.16

It is a mystic contact; a link with forces beyond the

16 Loc. cit.
natural world. Dante, on the threshold of such a contact withdrew saying, "Not for this were my wings fitted."17 Tennyson felt that it was the poet's duty to respond to this inspiration:

And, ere it vanishes
Over the margin,
After it, follow it,
Follow the Gleam.18

In "The Palace of Art," he develops the theme that art for art's sake, without the ennobling inspiration of the mystic gleam, without regard for the poet's true mission to interpret eternal truth and beauty to mankind, can end only in waste and the "mouldering" of the poet's power:

A spot of dull stagnation, without light
Or power of movement, seem'd my soul
Mid onward-sloping motions infinite.
Making for one sure goal

..............................................................

She the[artist's soul]mouldering with the
dull earth's mouldering sod,
Inwrept tenfold in slothful shame
Lay there exiled from eternal God,
Lost to her place and name.19

"The Poet" suggests that the true poet, who does not selfishly build for himself a palace of art, but bravely flings abroad "the winged shafts of truth" will be touched with the secret fire.


Heaven flow'd upon the soul in many dreams
Of high desire. 20

The elevation of the poet's mind is in the nature of a
sacramental communion with eternal truths and
All the place is holy ground. 21

A unique phase of Tennyson's development as a poet-
mystic is the imagination and artistry he employs in in-
terpreting ecstatic states which arise out of emotional
responsiveness to subjects dealing with self or other
selves. His friendship with Arthur Hallam possessed mys-
tical significance, and after Hallam's death, resulted in
an unusual ecstatic experience for Tennyson, later treat-
ed with emotional warmth and poetic inspiration in "In
Memoriam." Equally noteworthy is his mystical attitude
toward self. At the age of five Tennyson used to wander
about crying, "Alfred, Alfred." Later Tennyson was to
experience "waking trances" by repeating his name silently.
At the age of fifteen he wrote in "Armageddon," a fragment
of verse of about five hundred lines found in his notebook,

I wondered with deep wonder at myself;
My mind seem'd wing'd with knowledge and the strength
Of holy musings and immense Ideas
Even to Infinitude. All sense of Time
And Going and Place was swallowed up and lost
Within a victory of boundless thought

I was a part of the Unchangeable,
A scintillation of Eternal Mind,
Remix'd and burning with its parent fire.
Yea! in that hour I could have fallen down
Before my own strong soul and worshipp'd it. 22

This excerpt has a boyish over-emphasis, but it describes
an exaltation of mind and sense of ecstatic union with
Eternal Mind which is remarkable for a youth of fifteen.
The experience described would suggest that of the saint-
mystic were it not for a peculiarly Tennysonian twist.
It is to be noted that the poet was not moved to worship
the Eternal Mind directly but "self's" share in it. This
pre-occupation with the discovery of self is a theme which
persists throughout Tennyson's sixty years of poetic en-
deavor. W. H. Auden in his introduction to A Selection
from the Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson, states that the
poet was obsessed all his life with two questions: "Who
am I? Why do I exist?" Tennyson's concern with the sig-
nificance of his own existence frequently centers around
his need to realize the individual self as a permanent
conscious entity. This need finds expression not only
in his frequent questionings on the subject of immortality
but in the recurrent appearance of a unique theme, (which

22 Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, (New York: Mac-

23 W. H. Auden, A Selection from the Poems of A. F.
Tennyson, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1947), Introduction,
p. XVI.
is also found in Wordsworth), namely, the possibility of
the personality's pre-existence. As a boy Tennyson was
haunted by the words "far--far--away" which seemed to stir
in him a mystic sense of "other-worldliness" and arouse
a lingering desire for half-remembered joys he could not
reappraise:

What vague world-whisper, mystic pain or joy,
Thro' these three words would haunt him when a boy
Far---far---away?
A whisper from his dawn of life? A breath
From some fair dawn beyond the doors of death
Far---far---away;
Far, far, how far? From o'er the gates of birth,
The faint horizons, all the bounds of earth,
Far---far---away? 24

Again in "The Two Voices," a poem appearing as early as
1833, Tennyson continues his youthful interest in the pre-
existence theme:

Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—

Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare. 25

A passage from "The Ancient Sage," written as late as 1885,
shows that as the result of contemplating certain beautiful
aspects of nature, Tennyson still is capable of being swept

24 "Far--far--away", Works, op. cit., p. 555.

25 "The Two Voices," Works, op. cit., p. 34.
into a sudden feeling of sadness for a lost existence of
beauty and perfection, and he experiences a mystic long-
ing to return to this happy state.

The first gray streak of earliest summer-dawn,
The last long strife of waning crimson gloom,
As if the late and early were but one—
A height, a broken grange, a grove, a flower
Had murmured, "Lost and gone, and lost and gone!"
A breath, a whisper—some divine farewell—
Desolate sweetness—far and far away—
What had he loved, what had he lost, the boy?
I know not, and I speak of what has been.26

Tennyson finds no satisfactory solution to his problem
of pre-existence, but he does suggest the mystic's atti-
tude that this world is a distorted dream world, marred by
our own faulty misconceptions—that man will work out his
destiny and establish again his contact with the perfec-
tion of the true Reality.

..............My God I would not live
Save that I think this gross hard-seeming world
Is our misshaping vision of the Powers
Behind the world, that make our griefs our gains.27

And again we have a more hopeful and triumphant expression
of this belief in mankind's final victory—

And we, the poor earth's dying race, and yet
No phantoms, watching from a phantom shore
Await the last and largest sense to make

The phantom walls of this illusion fade,  
And show us that the world is wholly fair.  

III. THE NATURE MYSTIC

As Tennyson is often acclaimed for his ability to capture the beauty and splendor of the natural world, giving expression equally well to the delicate freshness of English garden and countryside, to somber sea against the Cornish coast, to desolate moor and singing brook—it would seem no problem to concede that he is a nature mystic. While this pattern of mysticism is present in his work, Tennyson is not a nature mystic in the same sense as we apply this term to Wordsworth, Blake and Jefferies, three mystics who sought to find a world-soul in a living nature. Tennyson's approach to nature is often scientific rather than mystic, and many of his precise descriptions show that he has a sharp and accurate eye for natural phenomena.

Exactly what is meant by a nature mystic? A frequently quoted definition is that offered by Watkin in his Philosophy of Mysticism:

By a nature mystic is meant one who enjoys a peculiar sense of the immanence of God in nature.  

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Butler, however, minimizes the religious aspect in nature ecstasy:

By nature ecstasy is meant an exaltation of mind, without abnormal physical concomitants, akin to ecstasy, non-religious in the manner of its production, and non-religious, or vaguely religious in its content.30

The rather broad terms of this definition permit the interpretation that any feeling of sudden exaltation or delight in response to the beauty or grandeur of nature would qualify one as a nature mystic. This is too superficial for a correct interpretation of such intense nature mystics as Wordsworth and Blake; nor is it adequate to explain Tennyson’s position.

For our purposes the essential factor for identifying nature mysticism is the presence of a conscious sense of awakening, through the contemplation of nature, to the truths of some higher order; a sense of a harmonious participation with some vast life force; a flash of apprehension that infinite life is immanent in all living things:

For words like nature half reveal
And half conceal the soul within.31

Tennyson does not find a “living soul” in nature as

30 D. C. Butler, Western Mysticism, op. cit., p. 329.

as the term is understood in Wordsworth and Blake, but he possesses what might be termed a "cosmic consciousness." He feels that the natural universe represents a force in the boundless existence of a divine whole; that it is a partial expression of a higher unifying life which flows through all created things. He feels that he too, is mystically a part of this great limitless life force; that he is enveloped in it. He speaks of being "wrapped in the Great Soul." Tennyson is not a pantheist. His concept is clearly that the Infinite is all; not that all is Infinite. One creative power rises above all creation; the natural world is but one expression of a vaster creative force. Tennyson calls this conception the "higher pantheism":

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas,
The hills, and the plains,
Are not these, O soul, the Vision of Him
Who reigns? 32

Tennyson does not regard nature as a "nurse, guide, and guardian" of his heart as did Wordsworth, whose passion for nature was almost a religion. Tennyson sees nature in varying aspects, gentle or harsh, a backdrop for his own shifting moods. In a moment of hope and joy, he wanders through the woods and finds nature in harmony with his

happiness:

I wondered as I paced along;
The woods were filled so full of song
There seemed no room for sense of wrong;

And all so variously wrought,
I marvell'd how the mind was brought
To anchoring one gloomy thought.33

But nature can be cruel, "red in tooth and claw."34 No solace, comfort, or guidance can be found in nature in time of sorrow:

I bring to life, I bring to death
The spirit does but mean the breath;
I know no more.34

Nature is limited, inadequate, herself a blind force:

And shall I take a thing so blind,
Embrace her as my natural good;
Or crush her, like a vice of blood,
Upon the threshold of the mind?35

Tennyson presents nature best in her sensory appeal. He displays artistic ingenuity, combined with scientific accuracy, in capturing the endless variety and loveliness of the earth. He observes the wonder of the "hollow ocean ridges roaring into cataracts,"; the "native hazels tassel-hung"; the "living smoke of yew"; and the "croesus brake like fire." He does not feel a mystic "soul-seeking-soul"

33 "The Two Voices," Works, op. cit., p. 35.
34 "In Memoriam," Works, op. cit., p. 176.
communion with nature such as is evident in the nature
mysticism of Jefferies who could write:

*Everywhere the same deep desire for the soul
nature; to have from all green things and from
the sunlight the inner meaning which was not known
to them...Drinking the lucid water...I absorbed
the beauty and purity of it. I drank the thought
of the element; I desired soul-nature pure and
limpid.*

To Tennyson the "soul of things" could not be found in
nature. Nature is a partial expression of the power of
a Higher Soul and not the source of power. The basic prin-
ciple of Tennyson's nature mysticism is the apprehension
of this cosmic power immanent in the universe; however
majestic and awe-inspiring the earth, the source "is from
the heights":

*This wealth of waters might but seem to draw
From yon dark cave, but son, the source is higher,
Yon summit half-a-league in air--and higher
The cloud that hides it--higher still the heavens
Whereby the cloud was moulded, and whereout
The cloud descended. Force is from the heights.*

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CHAPTER IV

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SAINT-MYSTIC

I. "ST. AGNES' EVE"

"St. Agnes' Eve" is a short lyric poem based on the Medieval legend which promises young virgins a vision of their future spouses on the eve of their patroness, St. Agnes, if they observe certain mystic rites. Tennyson, with delicacy and skill, has spiritualized the theme and pictures a nun, a spouse of Christ, keeping vigil within the convent walls on St. Agnes' Eve, longing for an immediate union with her Heavenly Bridegroom. The poem is developed in the saint-mystic pattern, that is, it is an expression of the religious mystic's desire for a direct intercourse between her soul and that of her Creator. The symbolism employed is that of the Spiritual Marriage of the Soul and the Word of the Bride and the Beloved. This type of symbolism is frequently used by the Medieval mystics and is derived from the mystical interpretation of the Canticle of Solomon adopted by the Christian Church.

The theme of the Canticle, the ardent and pure love of the Bride for the Beloved, her poignant longing and mystic search for One Who is her Greater Soul, presents artistic elements ideally suited to Tennyson's temperament.
end lyrical talent. Around 1864, he had considered the possibility of using Old Testament themes as source material for a cycle of epic poems. Charles Tennyson, in his biography of the poet, offers an interesting passage on this subject:

There were weeks of depression for Alfred and he was unable for a time to settle to creative work. He occupied himself with the study of Hebrew that he might read his favorite Books of the Old Testament, Job, Isaiah, and the Song of Songs in the original. Indeed, he played with the idea of making accurate poetic translations of these books, or founding epic poems on them.¹

He again confirms this interest:

That night he [Tennyson] read aloud to Emily part of the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon which he and Harry had often read together.²

Tennyson did not realize his plan for an epic poem on the Canticle, but it is apparent that he adapted in 'St. Agnes' Eve,' with daring inspiration, the symbolism of the Bride and her mystic search to gain her soul's desire, the unutterable beauty and perfection of the Beloved.

"St. Agnes' Eve" opens picturing the silvery stillness of the winter night, the snow-cradled convent roof sparkling under the frosty skies. Within, the nun, deep

² Ibid., p. 267.
in contemplation, seeks her Beloved. Her prayer-laden breath ascends to heaven like incense. "May my soul follow soon," she petitions, her whole being anguished with a poignant longing for union with her Lord. The shadows on the convent towers creep as slowly as the hours that lead her to her Lord. "Make my spirit pure and clear," prays the nun whose contemplation of the perfections of the Beloved causes her to fear she will prove unworthy. She grieves that she is so far from the ideal she hopes to attain that she must appear to the Beloved as unfavorable.

As these white robes are soiled and dark
To yonder shining ground;
As this pale taper's earthly spark
To yonder argent round,
So shows my soul before the Lamb
My spirit before Thee.3

But strengthened by faith and suddenly overcome with fervent longing for the Bridegroom, the nun approaches a state of rapture crying:

Break up the heavens, O Lord! and far,
Thro' all yon starlight keen,
Draw me, thy bride, a glittering star,
In raiment white and clean.4

The plea of the nun is the plea of the Bride of the

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3 "St. Agnes' Eve," Works, op. cit., p. 100.
Canticle, "Draw me, we will run after thee." This plea is justified by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in his famous "Sermons on the Canticle," where, discussing the Spiritual Marriage, he follows the progress of the Bride from natural fear to confidence, from purgation to illumination:

Nor is it to be feared that the inequality of the two who are parties to it [Spiritual Marriage] should render imperfect or halting in any respect this concurrence of wills; for love knows not reverence. Love receives its name from loving, not from honoring.5

The nun too, wisely asks of the Bridegroom, not of the Master; as she seeks the Beloved so she is sought by Him:

He lifts me up to the golden doors
The flashes come and go,
All heaven bursts her starry floors
And strews her lights below,
And deepens on and up! the gates
Roll back, and far within
For me the Heavenly Bridegroom waits,

A light upon the shining sea—
The Bridegroom with his bride!6

And thus again the Bridegroom's response to the nun is the response given the Bride of the Canticle:

My beloved spake and said unto me,
'Rise up my love, my fair one and come away.'7


7 Canticle, Chap. 2:10.
In "St. Agnes' Eve," Tennyson interprets with delicacy, sympathetic understanding and sustained lyric beauty the climb of the saint-mystic to the state of ecstatic union, the absorption of human love by divine love. The difficult symbolism of the Spiritual Marriage is employed with good taste and artistic sensibility. The faintly suggestive parallels of language and mystic mood of the nun's search for the Beloved and the Bride's of the Canticle of Solomon, adds a hauntingly beautiful touch to this gratifying miniature of a saint-mystic.

II. "SIR GALAHAD"

The fruitfulness of the saint-mystic ideal as it is realized in the quiet beauty of the contemplative's life is portrayed by Tennyson in "St. Agnes' Eve"; its impelling grandeur and powerful impact as a motivating force in the active life is recognized in "Sir Galahad." Sir Galahad is a virgin knight, beloved by all for his manliness and purity. Galahad, the saint-mystic, is also the warrior saint. He realizes that following the "mystic way" is an experience of the soul; perfection is his goal, his vocation incidental.

As the poem opens, we find Sir Galahad has already gained recognition in war and tournament; inspired by
"mightier transports," he proves himself a more forceful knight in his duties:

   My strength is as the strength of ten
   Because my heart is pure."  

Although Sir Galahad is increasingly conscious that some splendid Quest in the "over-world" is calling him, he does not selfishly neglect his knightly duties in Arthur's court. He is present when,

   The shattering trumpet shrilleth high,
   The hard brands shiver on the steel."

He is gallant to distressed ladies:

   For them I battle till the end,
   To save from shame and thrall.10

But not for Galahad are their sweet looks and favors:

   But all my heart is drawn above
   My knees are bow'd in crypt and shrine,
   I never felt the kiss of love
   Nor maiden's hand in mine.11

Galahad prepares by prayer and self-discipline for the great Quest, the vision of God through the pursuit of the Holy Grail. Prayer and purgation are the mystic's way; the promise, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God," is his reward. Galahad is encouraged

9 Loc. cit.
10 Loc. cit.
A gentle sound, on earth, I heard.

With all-consuming urgency until at last.

Unearthed with momentary flashes of joy, the pleasure on

dreaming become, plan and beauty, were love and weary times.

A gentle sound, on earth, I heard.

Impetted by a mounting desire to capture the illustrious

I hear a voice, but none are there...

Then by some secret science I ride;

I hear a voice of twilight.

Between dark streams the forest grows,
This ecstatic state, identified by the release from the limitations of self, the loss of the sense of physical existence, and the presence of rapturous elevation, creates in Galahad a longing to renew such an experience.

I yearn to breathe the airs of heaven
That often meet me here
I muse on joy that will not cease
Pure species clothed in living beams. 15

Galahad is not lost in illusionary dreams, but is crossing the boundaries into Spiritual Reality. His condition becomes a state of transfusion from one world to another; his personality is not lost in his visions but becomes more real as he realizes only the divine is the Real.

Tennyson concludes "Sir Galahad," not with the final, complete fulfillment of desire and consummation as in "St. Agnes' Eve," but on a note of expectancy and joyous anticipation. Galahad is left riding on his Quest, so near his mystic goal that his perceptions are almost unbearably heightened. As he is haunted by visions of the transcendent world, the immanent life in the natural world becomes clearer in his consciousness. We have here an excellent example of Tennyson's nature mysticism, for the Reality immanent in the natural world is so intensified for Galahad that all nature seems to come to life and take

part in his Quest:

The clouds are broken in the sky,
And thro' the mountain-walls
A rolling organ-harmony
Swells up and shakes and falls.
Then move the trees, the copses nod,
Wings flutter, voices hover clear:
'0 just and faithful knight of God!
Ride on! the prize is near.16

As Tennyson later completed the Quest of Galahad in the
"Holy Greil Idyll," it is an interesting speculation as
to whether the tone of anticipation with which "Sir Gal-
shad" concludes is accidental or intentional. In either
case, the sense of a great mystery nearing revelation,
an immediate penetration "behind the veil," adds to the
artistry of the poem.

III. "SAINT SIMON STYLITES"

Although Tennyson was attracted to the ascetic
ideal which the knight, Sir Galahad, has universally
represented, he regarded another famous mystic and ascetic,
Saint Simon Stylites as an unfortunate example of the re-
ligious fanaticism which develops when a lofty ideal is
distorted by narrowness of vision and spiritual pride.
When extreme asceticism is practiced as an end in itself
and not as a means to an end, the road to self-perfection

16 "Sir Galahad," loc. cit.
is blocked by an arrogant pride in one's own virtue and a contempt for "flesh-ridden" humanity.

Tennyson's interpretation of Saint Simeon departs considerably from the historical accounts of the Saint. Reference to any standard historical source will reveal that the remarkable Simeon practiced a life of severe asceticism for thirty-five years from a platform supported by a sixty-foot pillar. He apparently adopted this unusual mode of life more in desperation than in ostentation. Being a man of extraordinary sanctity, and one possessed with the mystic's fundamental need for spiritual isolation, he retired to the hills as a hermit. But disciples, attracted by his spirituality, followed him from retreat to retreat until Simeon, constantly distracted in his contemplation and devotions, literally lifted himself out of reach. His isolation proved entirely satisfactory to himself and not without benefit to others. He lived a remarkable life as teacher, preacher, and counselor. He was a scholarly letter writer and exerted a spiritual influence in his day. Tennyson's justification for his varying interpretation of Simeon is apparently the result of a wish to achieve a characterization that vividly portrays the deterioration of personality when warped by religious hysteria. With this objective in mind his
interpretation is effective and heightens dramatic interest.

As the poem opens we meet Simeon, aged, and nearing death, having spent "thrice ten years" in severest mortifications atop his pillar. Despite his excessive penances, he declares himself to be the basest of mankind:

From scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin,  
Unfit for earth, unfit for heaven, scarce meet  
For troops of devils, mad with blasphemy...

After further debasing himself with exaggerated self-accusations of sin and unworthiness, Simeon nevertheless makes it clear that he intends to become a Saint and asks a just God to take note of the "coughs, aches, stitches, ulcerous throes and cramps" he is enduring; he also intimates that he is worthy of a suitable reward. While thus waiting for deliverance, Simeon recalls for the Lord his efforts through the years to lift the spirit from the "lead-like tons of sin" that crush it. He is obsessed with the idea that whatever is matter is evil:

Bear witness, if I could have found a way—
And heedfully I sifted all my thought—
More slowly painful to subdue this home
Of sin, my flesh, which I despise and hate,
I had not stinted practice, O my God!

Simeon is false to the injunction of a great saint-mystic,

17 "Saint Simeon Stylites," Works, op. cit., p. 79.
18 Ibid., p. 80.
St. Paul, (who represents the correct mystic tradition), to maintain the discipline of the flesh, not in contempt of the body, but to keep it pure as a temple for the soul.

Developing his pseudo-saint into a completely revealing portrait, Tennyson turns with merciless insight to the next logical issue, the question of Simson's trances. With splendid discernment he realizes that the nature of the ecstatic experiences of a Simson can have little in common with those of such true visionaries as his Sir Galahad, Arthur and the humble man of "St. Agnes' Eve." Simson's trances are not the higher level ecstatic type in which a conscious direct contact with the Absolute is experienced, and after which there remains in the memory a continuing consciousness of the experience and a certainty of its fruitfulness. Simson's trances are lower level states, unproductive, sluggish:

........and oft I fell,
Maybe for months, in such blind lethargies
That Heaven, and Earth, and Time are choked.19

This semi-comatose condition is familiar to modern psychology and is regarded as a state due to profound psychophysical disturbance or hysteria. Tennyson makes his portrait of Simson convincing with such discerning touches.

Not only spiritual vanity, but a narrow conception

of the wonder, magnitude and loving perfection of God
adds to the barrier which deprives Simeon of the vision
of the true mystic. After asking who may be a saint if
he fails, and demanding to be shown a man who has suffered
more than he, Simeon will wrest salvation from a Diety
Whom he seems to regard as a glorified bookkeeper:

And in my weak, lean arms I lift the cross,
And strive and wrestle with Thee till I die.

Sponge and made blank ofcriminal record
All my mortal archives.20

The spiritual bankruptcy of Simeon reaches a dramatic
climax as the moment of death arrives:

Surely the end? What's here? A shape, a shade
A flash of light. Is that the angel there
That holds a crown? Come, blessed brother, come!
I know thy glittering face. I waited long;
My brows are ready. What? deny it now?
Nay, draw, draw, draw nigh. So I clutch it.
Christ! 'Tis gone; 'tis here again; the crown!

If Simeon were not so hopelessly and pathetically lost to
normal judgments, it would almost seem a blasphemy for
him to call for the crown of virtue rather than the love
of Christ. Having gained his crown, which fits him well

20 Works, op. cit., p. 81.

21 Ibid., p. 82.
and "grows" to him, Simeon has a parting thought for his fellowmen:

But Thou, 0 Lord,  
Aid all this foolish people; let them take  
Example, pattern; lead them to thy light.\textsuperscript{22}

Consistent to the end, Simeon strides into Paradise, but as a saint-militant rather than a saint-mystic. He never advances beyond the purgative movement in the mystic's way; spiritual blindness deprives him of the higher perceptions which come with illumination and the rapture which accompanies ecstatic union. Having devoted his life to negation, the denial of the world and the rejection of the body, he neglects the positive principle of mysticism, to seek the Absolute through love and a perfect correspondence of wills.

Tennyson's three interpretations of the saint-mystic ideal discussed in this chapter, two showing the ideal at its fruitful best in "Sir Galahad," and "St. Agnes' Eve," and one, "St. Simeon," showing the unproduction aberrations which result from false emphasis, give ample proof of his thorough knowledge of the mystic's temperament and his artistic ability to give to it convincing expression.

\textsuperscript{22} "Saint Simeon Stylites," loc. cit.
CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POET-MYSTIC AND THE NATURE MYSTIC
IN "IN MEMORIAM"

"In Memoriam" has been referred to as "a monument in verse." It is a memorial poem dedicated to the memory of Arthur Hallam, whom Tennyson had first met as a fellow student at Trinity College, Cambridge, and with whom he had shared a very close-knit friendship. Hallam, by all accounts, was a student of brilliant mind, warm and understanding personality, idealistic outlook and noble conduct. He was popular at Cambridge but felt instinctively drawn to the moody, reticent Tennyson, while Tennyson responded at once to some restless, not quite definable element in Hallam's temperament which harmonized with his own. Like Tennyson, he was subject to spells of mental depression and it is generally supposed that these lines in "In Memoriam" narrate his spiritual experiences:

......one indeed I knew
In many a subtle question versed
who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
But ever strove to make it true.¹

Tennyson and Hallam were leading spirits in The Apostles, a group of spirited students who met to discuss problems of a metaphysical and philosophical nature. During a

¹ Alfred Tennyson, Poetical Works, "In Memoriam," (Cambridge Ed. 1898), XCVI, p. 187.
spring vacation, Tennyson and Hallam toured France together and a later visit to the Tennyson home led to the engagement of Hallam to Tennyson's sister. The untimely death of Hallam a year later, while touring in Vienna with his father, brought desolation to the Tennysons. After a period of seventeen years, Tennyson published "In Memoriam."

"In Memoriam" is a long, loosely connected poem of one hundred and thirty-one stanzas, the sections of which were written at different places and times, whenever circumstances or nostalgic memories suggested them. "Love is Immortal" is the basic theme of the poem. It logically progresses from the theme of the immortality of love to that of the immortality of the soul. Throughout the poem, Tennyson is torn between alternating moods of exaltation and despair, confident faith and tormenting doubt. As the more turbulent and personal passages of the poem fade, Tennyson faces his doubts, finds his reasons for belief, attacks the skepticism and materialism of his day, and ends his work with the confident decision that the present contains the seed of the enlightened future; the culmination of existence is "life in God." It is significant that after reading "In Memoriam" to Knowles, Tennyson remarked, "It's too hopeful this poem, more than I am myself." This

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2 Nineteenth Century, op. cit., p. 182.
faltering in the face of doubt, this lack of steadfast conviction, is a flaw in Tennyson's personality which occasionally proves detrimental to his work, weakening passages which should ring with confidence.

"In Memoriam" is lyrically and emotionally sustained by several intensified sections which develop its original theme: the mystical and immortal bond of friendship and love between Tennyson and Hallam and the poet's desire to explore into this friendship, seeking its culmination "on the mystic deeps." The predominating mystical pattern throughout this experience is that of the poet-mystic who finds responsive love and lofty inspiration in the discovery of the individuality of another self. Hocking offers for consideration several interesting features of such a discovery which he refers to as the best known of all experiences of the mystic type:

We note in him [another self] many qualities, good and bad, interesting and perhaps contradictory; we wonder how all these characters are united in one being who feels no such variety in himself. The one quality that combines these many in a consistent identity we can neither describe nor convey. But at times we are granted something like a mystic vision; it seems to us that we have come into the presence of the individual and have seen the miracle as such. We have found the other soul in its seclusion and simplicity......

The discovery of another self is realizing the miracle of individuality and that here is a mystery which excludes others. This vision is so forceful that it forms a part of one's consciousness and cannot be forgotten. That Tennyson feels this mystic communion of spirit with Hallam, and the vital part of his own consciousness which his friend forms, is frequently demonstrated in "In Memoriam." This union is mutually interactive and compelling:

Since we deserved the name of friends,
And thine effect so lives in me,
A part of mine may live in thee,
And move thee on to noble ends.  

Tennyson and Hallam share the same enthusiasms and respond alike to nature; they are "as moulded like in Nature's mint" with the same "sweet forms" of hill and wood and field printed "in either mind." So compellingly is Tennyson attracted to his friend, the bond of union cannot be broken by time or circumstance.

Whatever way my days decline,
I felt, and feel, tho' left alone;
His being working in mine own,
The footsteps of his life in mine.

This bond of friendship, which grows steadily stronger

4 "In Memoriam," op. cit., LXV, p. 178.
5 Ibid., LXXIX, p. 181.
6 Ibid., LXXV, p. 183.
after Hallam's death, leads Tennyson to a memorable mystical experience which diffuses warmth and meaning into "In Memoriam" and lifts the reader to the theme with almost dramatic ascent. There is a striking similarity of pattern in Tennyson's thoughts and moods as he progresses toward a communion with his lost friend to that found in the saint-mystic progressing toward a communion with Absolute love. His feeling that contact with the departed is possible is established in the early passages of the poem. After speaking of the blighting nature of sorrow in life, making pleasure, work, nature, existence itself, all seem hollow echoes, Tennyson describes the first Christmas after Hallam's death:

Then echo-like our voices rang;  
We sang tho' every eye was dim. 7

Tennyson then begins to speculate about the dead. Do they long for the living, retain their mortal sympathy:

When Lazarus left his charnel-cave,  
And home to Mary's house returned,  
Was this demanded—if he yearn'd 8 
To heer her weeping by his grave?

Tennyson envies the joy of Mary that a beloved one is returned. Could any joy surpass this? What consolation can others hope for? As Mary's gaze leaves her brother's face

7 Ibid., XXX, p. 170.
8 Loc. cit.
to look upon the Saviour's, Tennyson realizes the answer:

Thrice blest whose lives are faithful prayers,
Whose loves in higher love endure. 9

This ideal submission to the loss of love in a greater love does not sustain Tennyson long and he therefore is back to the haunting, poignant desire to feel the presence of the "happy dead":

The days have vanish'd tone and tint,
And yet perhaps the hoarding sense
Gives out at times—he knows not whence—
A little flash, a mystic hint—

And in the long harmonious years
If death so taste Lethean springs
May some dim touch of earthly things
Surprise thee ranging with thy peers. 10

The extremely loose and fragmentary nature of "In Memoriam" permits Tennyson to drift, in intermittent stanzas, but the renewed expression for union with Hallam is sharpened rather than blunted by the break. With a heightened surge of feeling, Tennyson again returns to his underlying desire, now expressing a new fear:

Do we indeed desire the dead
Should still be near us at our side?
Is there no baseness we would hide?
No inner vileness that we dread?

See with clear eye some hidden shame
And I be lessen'd in his love? 11

9 "In Memoriam," op. cit., XXXII, p. 171.
10 Ibid., XLIV, p. 173.
11 Ibid., I, p. 175.
Here we note a similarity to the purgative movement of the religious mystic who is struck with a sense of shame and unworthiness and fears he will be unacceptable to the Beloved. Tennyson finds consolation in the thought that faithfulness to the ideals of the loved one will merit the response, "Thou canst not move me from thy side."  

Tennyson, now quickening the movement of his theme toward a climax, recounts a dream which he experienced. He dreamed that he mingled with a rabble crowd in "the shadowy thoroughfares of thought," a crowd which mocked him and called him the "fool that wears a crown of thorns":

Till all at once beyond the will  
I hear a wizard music roll,  
And thro' a lattice on the soul  
Looks thy fair face and makes it still.  
                                      ..............
While now we talk as once we talk'd  
Of men and minds, the dust of change,  
The days that grew to something strange,  
In walking as of old we walked.  

After Tennyson's dream in which he walked and talked with Hallam, he reaches a stage that is suggestive of the illuminative stage of the mystic way. His mode of expression becomes reminiscent of that of the saint-mystic: "But thou and I are one in kind"; "Reach out the shining hand"; "His being working in my own"; "Footsteps of his life in

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12 "In Memoriam," loc. cit.
13 Ibid., LXX-LXXI, p. 179.
mine." Finally he parallels the unitive movement by asking directly for more than a dream, the presence of his "other soul":

Come not in the watches of the night
But where the sunbeam broodeth warm,
Come beauteous in thine after form,
And like a finer light in light.

.............................
No visual shade of some one lost
But he, the Spirit himself, may come
Where all the nerve of sense is numb
Spirit to Spirit, Ghost to Ghost.

.............................
Descend, and touch, and enter; hear
The wish too strong for words to name,
That in this blindness of the frame
My ghost may feel that thine is near. 14

The expression as well as the sentiment here is precisely that of the religious mystic: "light in light"; "spirit to spirit"; "descend and touch, and enter"; "blindness of the frame"; these are all terms highly suggestive of the traditional language of classic mysticism.

The climax to this ascent toward unity with the Loved Spirit follows a family scene at Somersby. There has been a family party on the lawn. The genial warmth and fragrance of the summer air gives magic to the night. When the others withdraw and Tennyson is left alone

A hunger seized my heart! I read
Of that glad year which once had been

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14 Ibid., XCI, XCIII, pp. 185-186.
In those fallen leaves which kept their green,
The noble letters of the dead.15

Strangely the silence is broken by "silent-speaking words,"
by "Love's dumb cry":

So word by word and line by line,
The dead man touch'd me from the past
And all at once it seem'd at last
The living soul was flash'd on mine,

And mine in this was wound, and whirled
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world,

Aeolian music measuring out
The steps of Time----the shocks of
Chance----
The blows of death. At length my
trance
Was cancell'd, stricken thro' with doubt.16

The stimulation of the beauty of the summer night, the flood
of emotional memories from the past, and the intensity of
Tennyson's desire to feel the presence of his friend, en-
ables him to reach an ecstatic state and penetrate for a mom-
ent into that invisible Reality which the mystic intu-
itively accepts but can so rarely attain. Tennyson here
achieves a seeming limitless extension of self to discover
again, with mystic perception, that other beloved self
beyond the boundaries of the visible world. After this

15 Ibid., XCV, p. 186.
16 Ibid., XCV, pp. 186-187.
lofty illumination, this flash of interpenetration into the very core of "that which is," Tennyson is infirm in the face of doubt. This is a barrier to the highest level of the mystic way. A mystic may feel regret that his vision cannot endure, but he never doubts its existence. Thus Tennyson's experience lacks one of the identifying marks of the highest level mystical states, the complete and permanent validity of the experience. There is no question of the authenticity of Tennyson's mystical experience in the garden of Somersby; it is a matter of the degree of personal benefit and satisfaction gained. The value of any ecstatic state may best be judged from the results rather than the circumstances. Tennyson himself realizes the weakness of his vacillating position between trust and doubt. Doubt he admits is "devil-born." In the original version of "In Memoriam," "the living soul" read "his living soul." Tennyson changed the wording because he said his "conscience was troubled" by the use of "his." Apparently he thought the pronoun too personal.

The mystic pattern is temporarily lost in "In Memoriam" but reappears in an impassioned plea.

If thou wert with me, and the grave
Divide us not, be with me now,
And enter in at breast and brow,
Till all my blood, a fuller wave,
Be quicken'd with a livelier breath—\(^{17}\)
The final tribute to Hallam accents again the mystic theme of the mystery of personality, the magnetic pull toward the exploration of the secret of another, known yet unknown:

Dear friend, far off, my lost desire
So far, so near in woe and weal
O loved the most, when most I feel
There is a lower and a higher;
Known and unknown, human, divine;

Strange friend, past, present, and to be loved deelier, darklier understood
Behold, I dream a dream of good,
And mingle all the world with thee.\(^{18}\)

While there are no other actual mystical experiences in "In Memoriam," there are interesting examples of what might be termed Tennyson's "mystical thinking." Considerable additional insight is given into his attitude toward nature, which is valuable if we are to understand the man, not only as a poet-mystic, but also as a nature mystic. As the poem is vitalized with contrasting moods of personal emotion, the exalted realization of the splendor of love and friendship, the desolation and sorrow of its loss, so the treatment of nature in the poem is accented with alternating tones of appealing beauty and repelling bleakness.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., CXXII, p. 194.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., CXXII, pp. 195-196.
As the natural scene takes form in the background of Tennyson's memories of Hallam, he first recalls the mutual pleasure they found in the loneliness of their natural surroundings:

For us, the same cold streamlet curl'd
Thro' all his eddying coves, the same
All winds that roam the twilight came
In whispers of the beauteous world.19

When Tennyson is desolate at the loss of his friend, he turns to nature for solace in his grief. At first, with confidence, Tennyson asks that nature send the sweet ambrosial air and

In ripples fan my brows and blow
The fever from my cheek, and sigh
The full new life that feeds thy breath
Throughout my frame, till Doubt and Death,
Ill brethren, let the fancy fly

To where in yonder orient star
A hundred spirits whisper, 'Peace.'20

But nature only brings back unbearable memories and to Tennyson, Hallam "seems once more to die." Nature has no remedy for despair; she understands nothing of the mystery of life and death and lost love. He receives a hollow message:

'The stars,' she whispers, 'blindly run;
A web is woven across the sky;

19 Ibid., LXXIX, p. 181.

20 Loc. cit.
From out waste places comes a cry
And murmurs from the dying sun; 21

As Tennyson's need is great, so his disillusionment in so
blind a thing as nature is the more tragic:

''And all the phantom, Nature, stands
With all the music in her tone,
A hollow echo of my own—
A hollow form with empty hands. 22

There is no soul in nature; only the ideal in man's own soul
invests her with meaning and beauty. Nature, like man, is
one of the fragments of the whole plan; a fragment which
might be a source of inspiration or a source of disaster,
as man himself might prove on occasion a blessing or a
scourge:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life.

So careful of the type? but no
From scarped cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing, all shall go.' 23

As to any ultimate truth being discoverable in nature alone,
nature knows her own limitation:

'The spirit does but mean the breath,
I know no more.' 24

21 Ibid., III, p. 164.
22 Ibid., III, p. 164.
23 Ibid., LV-LVI, p. 176.
24 Loc. cit.
Nature then does not represent the ultimate life force but rather shares in it. There is a cosmic aliveness in nature which can be sensed by men in moments of mystic elevation or "cosmic consciousness." This is the character of Tennyson's nature mysticism. Nature is not mere matter but on the other hand she is not "the soul of all things." Nature has a cosmic life in that she partakes of an ultimate force beyond man's understanding. The final answer to the meaning of things lies "behind the veil." Henry Vaughan, the seventeenth-century mystic, also held that a veil existed between the soul of man and the world. The veil is a spiritual blindness, he believes, resulting from mankind's loss of original innocence. Considering the distortions of nature as well as her beauties, and her subservience to a greater power than herself, Tennyson could not set up a shrine before her as Wordsworth had done. He praised her "silvery haze of summer dawn" and regretted her when "red in tooth and claw."

After considering nature in her varying aspects, Tennyson logically asks:

**What hope of answer, or redress?**

**Behind the veil, behind the veil!**

His answer is typically that of the mystic. Ultimate knowledge cannot be derived from speculative reason or communing

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25 Ibid., LVI, p. 176.
with nature:

I found Him not in world or sun,
Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye
Nor thro' the questions men may try,
The petty cobwebs we have spun. 26

Knowledge comes through will and desire to know, from an intuitive insight within. If a voice called out from the deep, "believe no more"—

A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered, 'I have felt.' 27

Tennyson effectively sums up his attitude toward nature and the greater force behind nature in the closing stanzas of "In Memoriam"; it is the only attitude possible for a nature mystic of Tennyson's philosophy:

And out of the darkness came the hands
That reach thro' nature, moulding men. 28

26 "In Memoriam," loc. cit.
27 Ibid., CXXIV, p. 194.
28 Ibid., CXXIV, p. 195.
I. The Social Monarchies and the Mistletoe

Chapter I

...
states the story

...is a dream of a man coming to practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery and in the midst lies the tableland of life and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation, but of a whole cycle of generations. 2

It has been frequently noted that this lack of a strong and vital central character tends to weaken the whole framework of the "Idylls." Arthur seems scarcely human and Guinevere's complaint justified: "Who can look upon the sun in heaven?" 3 The "touch of earth" is missed in the King, who appears to represent an ideal of manhood rather than flesh and blood man. Arthur's birth and death possess elements of mystery; his life is marked by miraculous incidents and prophecies; his entire court, and even the very city of Camelot itself, seem at times cast under the shadowy spell of some mystic influence. It stands, suspended on that misty margin between the visible and invisible world. It is the mystic's world of spiritual reality supplanting the illusion of the material world. This mystic viewpoint is effectively presented when tillers of the soil visit the city and voice the opinion that the King is not real. But it is the King who is real in the mystic's transcendent reality; those outside his orbit are the

2 Tennyson, Hallam, loc. cit.

shadows:

For there is nothing in it as it seems
Saving the King; tho' some there be that hold
The King a shadow; and the city real:
Yet take thou heed of him, for, so thou pass
Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become
A thrall to his enchantments, for the King
Will bind thee by such vows, as is a shame
A man should not be bound by, yet the which
No man can keep.........4

The King stands not in the shadows but in the light; to the
unenlightened he seems unreal, his knightly vows difficult
to keep, but the beauty of his idealism has power to draw
men. Those who cannot follow Arthur are "fit to abide
without among the cattle of the field." Those who have
vision enough to enter the city, discover the city is indeed
beautiful and built to music. This mystic ideal of the
music of existence is expressed in a hauntingly beautiful
passage:

For an ye heard a music, like snow
They are building still, seeing the city is built
To music, therefore never built at all,
And therefore built forever.5

It is clear that Tennyson meant Arthur to be the
living expression of the mystic influence in life; but he
also hoped to make the King realistic, "an ideal man in
real man."6 He therefore developed aspects of the social

4 Ibid., p. 28.
5 Loc. cit.
moralist in Arthur, a man came to serve the social needs of the people, to restore a savage world to a civilized order. Arthur's hall was built to represent this progress:

And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall:
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
And in the second men are slaying beasts,
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
And over all one statue in the mould
Of Arthur...7

That Tennyson achieved his two-fold purpose with entire success is doubtful. The two aspects of one character are not always a harmonious whole. When Tennyson portrays the King attracting his followers through some deep-rooted mystic force, his personality challenging ordinary men to extraordinary efforts, his influence at times mounting to the spiritually compelling, our interest is quickened and our imagination excited. It is when Tennyson assigns the role of moralist to Arthur that the King becomes ineffective. Arthur reigning with "power on this dark land to lighten it, and power on this dead world to make it live," is inspiring; Arthur moralizing in Victorian fashion against the fallen Guinevere as she "crept an inch nearer and laid her hands about his feet," is a mere prig. The difficulty in the character of the King is not so much that

7 Ibid., p. 124.
Tennyson had no real conception of his hero, but that the blend of the ideal and the real, as he develops it, is at times inconsistent and weakening in its artistic effect. As those Idylls which have held their appeal most strongly, "The Coming of Arthur," "Gareth and Lynette," "Lancelot and Cleine," "The Holy Grail," and "The Passing of Arthur," are those most prominently identified with the mystical influence, and as Arthur's personality attracts most from this aspect, the idealist interpretation is superior to the realistic in imaginative and artistic appeal. Arthur, if presented with the same uncompromising idealism maintained in the portrayal of Galeshad, would become a unified and believable character. The purely visionary personality, presented with poetic imagination is, paradoxical as it may seem, entirely realistic. By completely idealizing Arthur, Tennyson could more fully bring to the character the spiritual integrity, the quick flashes of mystic insight, the sense of a man linked with the totality of all things—all illusive and difficult impressions to sustain, but the type of poetic achievement that is Tennyson's special gift. Such a treatment would also permit Tennyson to give full rein to his excellent lyric style and show his mastery of that language which expresses the enchantment that hovers along the thin margin between the known and unknown.
Tracing the mystical element throughout the "Idylls" will prove particularly challenging to the interest as the underlying conflict between the mystic's way and the moralist's way moves to a climax, not only in the personality of the King, but as it is dramatically brought into focus with the appearance of Galahad, who "vanished into light." Tennyson weighs the value of two attitudes toward life: that of the social moralist, the King, a ruler of men who feels it his first duty to bring law and peace to society, to redeem waste lands, establish a knighthood bound to purity of self and service to others, but whose birth, death, and entire life are marked with disturbing supernatural phenomena and visionary gleams; and that of the pure mystic, Galahad, who possesses within himself the capacity to quest beyond the margins of the relative to the absolute, beyond time to eternity. Tennyson's decision as to the effectiveness of each way of life can be traced by following the mystical pattern weaving steadfastly through the "Idylls."

II. THE COMING OF ARTHUR

"'Knowest thou ought of Arthur's birth?'" When King Leodogran heard the request of Arthur for "his daughter Guinevere to wife," he did not allow gratitude to Arthur for the deliverance of his kingdom from man and beast to
interfere with his zealous investigation of Arthur's parentage. Conflicting reports came to him: the youth was the son of Anton, his guardian; he was the son of the former King Uther; he was baseborn; there were those who "deemed him more than man." There seemed to be justification for this last surmise. There had been noted a mysterious and compelling quality about Arthur which suggested that he drew upon forces beyond the natural. In battle

...............the Powers who walk the world
Made lightnings and great thunders over him,
And dazed all eyes, till Arthur by main might,
And mightier of his hands with every blow,
And leading all his knighthood threw the kings.8

On the battlefield Arthur's presence, his very voice suggested a majesty and power beyond the merely human:

............... ...............then before a voice
As dreadful as the shout of one who sees
To one who sins, and deems himself alone
And all the world asleep, they swerved and brake...9

At his coronation Arthur had stood majestically before his knights, and while he bound them in strict vows to himself, a mystic, almost sacramental union with him was felt by his followers so that they were shaken and rose from kneel-

8 Ibid., p. 4.
9 Ibid., p. 5.
ing

......pale as the passing of a ghost,
Some flushed, and others dazed, as one who wakes
Half-blinded at the coming of a light.10

On another occasion when Arthur spoke with his knights, his spirit was so magnetic a force, that he seemed to stamp his likeness on his listeners:

'But when he spake, and cheer'd his Table Round
With large, divine, and comfortable words,
Beyond my tongue to tell thee---I beheld
From eye to eye thro' all their Order flash
A momentary likeness of the king:'11

Other signs that Arthur was "more than man" were visible to all. The Lady of the Lake, a mysterious force from the great deep, had appeared by his side; from out of the deep too was thrust the sword Excalibur bearing the mystic legend on one side of the blade, "Take me," and on the opposite side, "Cast me away."12 Merlin, a magician, had counselled Arthur that "now" was the time to strike, the time for casting away, "far off."

King Leodogran, hard and proud, is still not convinced that Arthur is noble of birth. He is told Merlin's story of Arthur's birth. A naked babe had been cast up

10 Ibid., pp. 9-10.
11 Loc. cit.
12 Ibid., p. 11.
from the great deep, a child clothed in fire, and "this
same child is he who reigns."13 Merlin prophecies, "From
the great deep to the great deep he goes; tho' men may
wound him he will not die, but pass, again to some."14
Tennyson uses the term "the great deep" symbolically throughout his works. The "great deep" in the vast "Deep of God"15 from which the soul comes and to which it returns. In "In
Memoriam," speaking about the birth of a child he says:

A soul shall draw from out the vast,
And strike his being into bounds.16

In "De Profundis," written to commemorate the birth of his
eldest son, the "great deep" symbolism is especially clear:

Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep
Where all that was to be, in all that was,
Whirl'd for a million aeons thro' the vast
Waste dawn of multitudinous-eddying light--
Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep--17

Arthur then is a speck of this Vast Soul, released for a
time in mortal flesh to fulfill some destiny, but mys-
tically belonging, and destined to return to the Great
Source.

14 Ibid., p. 15.
16 "In Memoriam," op. cit., p. 197.
Leodogran is convinced of Arthur's right to rule, not only by the reports of these miraculous influences in Arthur's life, but by a dream of his own in which he saw all the land wasted and ravished and a phantom king, haze-hidden in the mists trying to break through and restore order:

...............while the phantom king
Sent out at times a voice; and here or there
Stood one who pointed toward the voice, the rest
Slewed on and burnt, crying, 'No king of ours,
No son of Uther, and no king of ours;'
Till with a wink his dream was changed, the haze
Descended, and the solid earth became
As nothing, but the King stood out in heaven,
Crown'd........................................

As Leodogran was not a man given to visions, he accepted the divine destiny of Arthur to rule.

When "The Coming of Arthur" is concluded with the marriage of the King and Guinevere, certain definite trends of interpretation are established: Arthur is clearly an idealistic figure chosen to establish a new order of society; although his work is to be of a social and active character there are unusual mystical elements in his personality and supernatural forces surround him. There are noticeable similarities between the story of Arthur and that of Christ. Both come as Saviours of the people; both are inspirational leaders motivating a higher concept of

18 Beatty, "Idylls of the King," op. cit., p. 15.
personal integrity and social responsibility; both are surrounded by supernatural incidents. There is also the mystery of parentage--whose Son is He?" Finally, the prophecy of Merlin is striking, "Though men may wound him, he will not die." The Apostles accepted Christ as a leader in mystical communion with the Absolute; the knighthood accepts Arthur as a leader, supernaturally guided:

The King will follow Christ, and we the King
In whom high God hath breathed a secret thing.19

III. THE GRAIL QUEST CHALLENGES THE VISIONARY

Stories of the quest for the Holy Grail have fired the imagination of generations of readers and the subject has been a challenge to the talents of a great many writers. Each age interprets the quest of the virgin knight, Galahad, in the light of its own dominating philosophy. Malory saw Galahad from the viewpoint of the Medieval mystic, Tennyson from that of the Victorian moralist, Morris, the emotional romanticist, Erskine, the ironist, and most recently, Robinson, the psychologist. Whatever subtle shadings of interpretation have appeared in the Grail stories, certain basic elements persist; the theme is always treated with reverence; the moral integrity and faultless purity of Galahad remain inviolate; the quest

19 Ibid., p. 17.
represents the inner groping of the individual to satisfy a supernatural need for spiritual fulfillment that cannot be attained in the plane of the natural order.

The Holy Vessel itself, however, has varied somewhat in symbolism and form in the many Quest legends. No satisfactory solution has been found for the origin of the Grail symbolism. Alfred Nutt, in his *Legends of the Holy Grail*, suggests there are pre-Christian Celtic legends of Vengeance Quests in which blood-feuds are avenged by means of three magic talismans, the sword, the lance, and the vessel. The Unspelling Quest stories also offer suggestive source symbolism. In these tales the vessel is a food-producing talisman and the hero breaks the spell over a castle (wherein the inhabitants are living a prolonged life by feeding from the talisman), by asking a question concerning the vessel. Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance*, agrees with Nutt that the Christian source for the symbolism may be the Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, popular in the twelfth century, especially in England. This Gospel introduces the legend that Joseph of Arimathea caught the last drop of blood of the dying Jesus in a dish previously used at the Last Supper. Other legends tell of Joseph bringing the cup to Britain. Around 1210, Glastonbury, which claimed to have possession of the vessel, built a church to house it. The cup came to be believed to possess healing powers. Because of the
evil and unworthiness of men, the Holy Vessel disappeared, and was carried away to heaven. The Grail tradition then arose that the vessel would remain hidden until some pure knight should appear sufficiently worthy to reclaim it. By the time Malory told the famous story, the Grail had come to symbolize the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ under the form of bread and wine. The Grail quest now became a mystic quest, the search for absolute union with Christ. The Grail at this time was generally represented as a crystal cup with rose-red beatings as of a heart in it, and it is this type of vessel that Tennyson conceived it to be. In referring to its color, Tennyson specifies various shadings of red, blood-red, crimson, and rose-red predominating.

Tennyson was at first reluctant to use the Grail theme. He had been building about the person of Arthur his ideal of "the best of men." The King was a man who represented the finest development in individual moral power; a man who stood for the maintenance of order built on the principles of right reason; one who possessed a social conscience, a conscience which regarded faithful performance of duty in one's allotted field to be necessary for the welfare of all. In the "Idylls of the Hearth" (1842), Tennyson had shown he was a moralist, stressing throughout
a series of simple poems, the need to work humbly at the everyday duties of home and society, and to strive to make the present world wiser and happier. A noticeable amount of this philosophy had developed in the "Idylls of the King" (1869), concentrated around Arthur, the King and ideal leader. But in conflict with the Victorian moralist, Tennyson possessed in his own temperament a deep-seated mystical strain, a strain which colored his thinking in spiritual matters so basically that his belief in the reality of the unseen, the persistence of life after death, and the ineffectiveness of sense knowledge in understanding the spiritual mysteries of existence, were all based on mystic intuitive feeling rather than rationalism. This complication of conflicting philosophies had also developed in the character of Arthur. Tennyson created the King somewhat after his own image. Arthur, who was to express angry disappointment with those knights who left the path of duty and service to follow "wandering fires" and seek excitement and spiritual thrills in miraculous quests, had been himself from his birth surrounded by strange, mystic forces. Tennyson could not easily erase the mystic in Arthur; he, himself, from childhood had been subject to unusual mystical experiences, and the moralist had never succeeded in banishing the
mystic in his own life. Tennyson’s problem, and that of
his character, Arthur, were now one and the same. How
could the Grail quest be treated sympathetically without
doing violence to the social-moralist philosophy, the back-
bone of the new society Arthur represented? On the other
hand, how could he deny the validity of the Grail quest
without giving offense to his own mystical sensibilities
and showing irreverence for the ascetic ideal? Tennyson
had been logically developing, through several of the
"Idylls," the growing corruption spreading through Arthur's
court and the evil influence exerted by the sensuality and
disloyalty of Lancelot and Guinevere. A "Holy Grail"
Idyll was now becoming a psychological and artistic neces-
sity, psychological, because some spiritual reaction was
needed to pump regenerating life back into the "Idylls,"
and artistic, because it was inconceivable to consider the
Arthur cycle complete with the greatest subject of all,
the Grail quest, omitted. Brooke points out that the
Grail theme is an irresistible art motive and the character
of Galahad universally appealing:

The image of the stainless knight, wholly
apart from sex and appetite, divided from the mater-
ial interests of the world, a pure spirit clothed
for a time in flesh, but the flesh so refined by
the spirit that it becomes arch-angelic matter, a
terrible crystal of pure love, moving in the super-
natural world, with all its powers round him,
while yet on earth--this image, independent
altogether of ascetic theology, was one of the finest motives art could have; and its artistic elements were a great part of the reason why it entered the heart of the world and lodged there. 20

In the "Idylls" however, it was not only a question of Tennyson's responding to the beauty of the Galahad ideal, but of taking into consideration the possibility of Galahad casting an unfortunate shadow over the hero, Arthur, and doubt on the validity of the king's "social conscience" view of life. The whole scheme of the "Idylls" would be thrown out of balance if Galahad should accidentally become the protagonist of the story. However, Tennyson may have felt personally about the Grail subject, he was under continual pressure from friends to take up the theme. His response to a suggestion of Macaulay's along this line is worth noting:

As to Macaulay's suggestion of the Sangreal, I doubt whether such a subject could be handled in these days without incurring a charge of irreverence. It would be too much like playing with sacred things. 21

But by September, 1868, Tennyson felt ready to plunge into the task. The ripening process had been assisted, not only by the promptings of his artistic conscience, but by persistent urgings from wife, friends, and even an intimation


of interest from the Queen herself:

......................he set about the task, on
the brink of which he had been hesitating for the
past seven years—the composition of an "Idyll" on
the story of the Holy Grail. Unless he could see his
way to handle this subject in a manner worthy of it,
he could hardly continue with his Arthurian poems, as
the Grail episode was an essential part of the whole
structure. Not only many of his friends, but also
the Queen and the Princess Royal had been very in-
sistent in pressing him to overcome his scruples,
and this had no doubt considerable influence with
him.22

After his long hesitancy, when he began writing, he
became inspired by it. The mystical subject was ideal for
him if he could allow himself to follow his natural in-
spiration freely. That he did so is evident from the vi-
tality and beauty of the Idyll. The anticipated conflict
between the idealism of Arthur and Galahad heightens rather
than confuses dramatic interest, and Tennyson skilfully
harmonizes the two themes as he builds toward an effective
and satisfying climax. Tennyson finished the Sangreal in
about one week and "it came like a breath of inspiration."
The Memoir confirms Tennyson's remarkable pleasure in a
task he had avoided so long:

Of all the "Idylls of the King," the "Holy Grail"
seems to me to express most my father's highest
self. Perhaps this is because I saw him in the
writing of this poem more than in the writing of

22 Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson, op. cit., p. 375.
any other, with that far-away, reft look on his face which he had whenever he worked at a story that touched him greatly.23

Tennyson, when he had finished the Idyll, wrote with satisfaction in his own letter-diary:

Browning came and returned with me and Knowles to dinner, where again I read the "Grail" and Browning said it was my best and highest.24

A fuller commentary by Tennyson on the meaning of the poem and his estimate of its contribution to his poetic career appears in the Memoir:

About the "Holy Grail" my father said to me: "At twenty-four I meant to write an epic drama of King Arthur, and I thought I should take twenty years about the work. They will say now that I have been forty years about it. The "Holy Grail" is one of the most imaginative of my poems. I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen. The end, when the King speaks of his work and of his visions is intended to be the summing up of all in the highest note by the highest of human men.25

Tennyson has every justification for his pleasure in the "Holy Grail." It is remarkable for its spiritual vision and for the artistic fusion of the Arthur and Galahad themes into a harmonized and satisfying whole. Two of the mystic aspects of the Idyll, the "visions" of the

24 Ibid., II, p. 59.
25 Ibid., II, pp. 89-90.
King and the ascent of Galahad into the spiritual city are of such interest as to merit more detailed consideration.

IV. THE MYSTIC WAY IN THE "HOLY GRAIL"

"But who first saw the holy thing today?" asks the elderly monk, Ambrosius, of his fellow monk, Sir Percivale, who has cast away the helmet for the cowl and left the glamour of the tournament for the silent life of prayer. It is to Percivale's own sister that the vision has come. Hearing of the sin of Arthur's court, she has unselfishly devoted herself to a life of prayer and fasting to heal the wickedness of the court. The Holy Grail had been visible in Glastonbury when men lived with righteousness: would it come again and heal the world? And so with ardent self-denial of the true saint-mystic, the nun, hoping to restore the Grail to men, followed the purgative way until the "sun shone and the wind blew thro' her."26

At last she sees the vision, and made beautiful with an intense spiritual fire that clings to her person after her mystic experience, she recounts to others the story. She had heard strange, unearthly music afar off

26 "Idylls of the King," op. cit., p. 119.
in the night as of a silver horn calling, and then stream-
ing through her call came a cold and silver beam, down
which stole the Holy Grail, rose-red, as if alive—a liv-
ing heart. The cold of the call, of the moonbeam, of the
world itself, were all consumed in the living red warmth.
The beauty of the vision, and the ardor of the nun, when
she told the story, awoken a responsive desire in the
knights to find the Grail and thus restore the presence of
God to men.

Among Arthur's knights was one, Sir Galahad, who
was especially stirred with fiery eagermess when he heard
of the vision:

His eyes became so like her own, they seem'd
Hers, and himself her brother. 27

Here again we have an example of Tennyson's belief that
in intense moments of emotion, one soul is able to touch
another. He implies that a momentary physical likeness
exists between Galahad and the nun, as occurred in the
case of Arthur's knights taking on the likeness of the
King. Now, weaving a belt out of her hair, the nun sends
her "own soul," in the person of Galahad, on the mystic
quest:

.............My knight, my love, my knight of
heaven,
O thou, my love, whose love is one with mine.

27 Ibid., p. 120.
I, maiden, round thee, maiden, bind my belt.
Go forth, for thou shalt see what I have seen,
And break thro' all, till one will crown thee King
For in the spiritual city—and as she spoke
She sent the deathless passion in her eyes
Thro' him, and made him hers, and laid her mind
On him, and he believed in her belief.28

This is a remarkable expression of Tennyson's mystic be-
lief in the union of living souls. "And laid her mind
on him" gives an exact impression, not only of a transfer
of desire and belief, but almost a sensation of physical
touch. One is reminded too of the sympathetic closeness
of spirit that Tennyson felt for Hallam, "the living soul
flushed in mine," and "mine in his wound." Tennyson's
experience, however, was an intensified mystic sense of
one soul fused into another as if they were made one.
The experience between Galahad and the nun suggests more
the transference of spiritual strength from one to another,
the pouring in of some supernatural grace or inspiration,
"being of one mind, having a unity of the Spirit." This
is a unity of two souls in God rather than the fusion of
two personalities.

When Galahad hears of the Siege Perilous, where no
man may sit "without losing himself" if he be found un-
worthy, he recalls the Gospel text: "For whosoever shall

28 Ibid., p. 121.
save his life shall lose it; for he that shall lose his
life for my sake shall save it." Headless of danger and
exalting with joy and desire for union with God, Galahad
cries, "If I lose myself, I save myself," and sits in
Merlin's chair. Arthur's great hall is immediately shak-
en with a rending and a blasting and overhead thunder.
The Grail appears in a beam of light seven times clearer
than day. The vessel appears unclouded only to Galahad,
the one worthy knight; to the other knights it is under
a luminous cloud. Unworthy as they are, and in an hy-
steria of false religious excitement, the knights swear
one after another to go in quest of the Grail. When Arthur,
who has been away on an errand of mercy, returns and finds
his hall in an uproar, and his knights revelling in the
promise of supernatural excitements, realization of their
folly moves him to anger:

'Lo, now' said Arthur, 'have ye seen a cloud?
What go ye into the wilderness to see?'

Arthur senses his knighthood is doomed, his realm
to be left unprotected, deeds of mercy to be neglected
by men whom he conceives as deserting their duties for the
sake of adventure. But his anger is not directed against
Galahad or the nun; he does not deny the rightness of the
mystical way for them, nor is he insensitive to the

29 Ibid., p. 125.
compelling grandeur of the vision himself. But not all are ordained for such a quest:

"Ah, Galahad, Galahad," said the King, 'for such as thou art is the vision, not for these. The holy nun and thou have seen a sign--"

Tennyson now gives firmness to Arthur's position. Is the ascetic way the selfish way? Or have those who do not see the sign missed what is really worthy in life? Tennyson's answer is that to gain the best of life, it is sometimes necessary to take less of life. The ascetic self-denial of the mystic for a foretaste of the vision of God, the complete abandonment of all that seems real for what is to him real, this is the privileged way for the Galahads. For those who have not been given the sign, other worthy destinies are waiting.

Arthur realizes that some of his knights are well-intentioned and aspire to high perfection, but most will fancy they can attain perfection merely because they are moved by a temporary desire. The excitement of great deeds lures them, but they have not the integrity to be faithful either to their allotted fields or to the quest.

Go, since your vows are sacred, being made,
Yet--for ye know the cries of all my realm
Pass thro' this hall--how often, O my knights,
Your places being vacant at my side,

---\[30\] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 126.
This chance of noble deeds will come and go
Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires
Lost in the quagmire.31

In despair Arthur realizes he has been given, "a sign to
sever this order which I made." It is not the desertion
of the knights for the quest that is the basic cause of
destruction of the order, however, but the growing dis-
regard of the knights for their vows of honor and service.
It is not the call to asceticism that endangers the knight-
hood; it is sensualism, the growing disease which has been
undermining Arthur's court for a long time. The evil
stems from a core of dishonor, the faithlessness of the
Queen and the disloyalty of Lancelot. The court, disill-
usioned by their conduct, has become lax and cynical.
The hollow Gawain is faithless to the commands of Arthur;
Vivien's seductions and malicious gossip raise scandal;
Modred's plans for treacherous revolt gain ground. And
now the knights, thirsty for new excitements, pervert what
is a holy quest, for some, into a distorted spiritual
sensualism. This distortion somewhat blunts the elevating
and cleansing effect a genuine ascetic movement could have
on Arthur's order, its spiritual influence spreading even
to those not actively participating. It remains for the
Queen to shriek aloud the truth in the streets of

31 Ibid., p. 126.
Liberty is the essence of common freedom, as if the spirit of
or important urgency, and truly there is a certain
hood of interior experience, which supplies these into one
renowned, with great skill, creates around everyone a
left hand for the entrance into the spiritual art.
Cathedral's earthly knighthood drives to a choose: the time

blood-red. And in the sleepless, dark
blood-red, and on the essay; monsieur to
blood-red, and etching down the broken, barren
ruler of day, but enters in the night.

unexpectedly, illuminating irrevocably within!
Incredibly wonder of the presence of God Glowing emerald-
the be is rewarded with the presence continually with him, the
so intense is Cathedrals desire for the holy vision that

Come ye, 33
and break in, all, and in the strength
and answered with pagan border, and bore
then mine,
and paint the face, pagan reason, and made
Sheerestine all evil customs extinguish.
"And in the seclusion of this I rode,

attainable the height of greater ecstasy!
Cathedrah is to strengthen his intellectune to duty to
The error of the spiritual vision on the worldly
Came: what madness has come upon us for our times."
Galatheid would burst from the body in a headlong need to
unite itself forever to the source of its love. The
passage dealing with Galahad's entrance into the spir-
ital city is one of Tennyson's finest efforts. The
splendid descriptive detail, the excitement of mood, the
mystic feeling of invading worlds beyond the senses, the
joyous scaling of heights beyond all suffering, all evil,
all decay, beyond death itself into indescribable glory,
is emotionally stirring and artistically gratifying be-
cause of its lofty conception and sustained lyrical power.
The reader can only stand by with Perceval and follow with
a sense of human inadequacy the mystical ascent of Galahad
over hill and watercourse, over black swamp and ancient
bridge:

And every bridge as quickly as he crost
Sprang into fire and vanished, tho' I yearned
To follow; and thrice above him all the heavens
Open'd and blazed and thunder such as seem'd
Shoutings of all the sons of God. 35

To appreciate fully what the poetic genius of Ten-
nyson has accomplished in mood and lyric skill, it would
be necessary to read the full passage and compare it with
Malory's account:

And therafter he knelted down before the
table and made his prayers, and then suddenly
his soul departed to Jesu Christ, and a great

35 "Idylls of the King," op. cit., p. 133.
multitude of angels bare his soul up to heaven, and the two fellows (Sir Percivale and Sir Bors) might well behold it. Also the two fellows saw come from heaven a hand, but they saw not the body. And then it came right to the Vessel and took it and the spear, and so bare it up to heaven.36

Sir Galahad's body was buried in Malory's account, thus losing the grandeur of the ascent into the unknowable. Tennyson's visionary fire, scriptural rhythm, and mystical symbolism in describing Galahad's ascent is suggestive of the mystical Evangelist, St. John. The "Holy Grail" captures the illusive beauty and tone of the Apocalypse in many passages:

Sir Percivale: And straight beyond the star
I saw the spiritual city and
all her spires,
And gateways in a glory like
one pearl

Sir Percivale: Strike from the sea.37

St. John: And I John saw the holy city,
the new Jerusalem, coming down
out of heaven from God.38

Sir Percivale: And from the star
there shot
A rose-red sparkle to the city
and there
Dwelt, and I knew it was the
Holy Grail.39

36 Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur, Bk. XVII, Chap. 22.
37 "Idylls of the King," op. cit., p. 133.
38 Apoc., XXI:2
39 "Idylls of the King" op. cit., p. 133.
Saint John: ......and the light thereof was like a precious stone, as to the jasper stone, even as crystal.40

These passages are similar in the sense that they have a like rhythm and a certain "mystical essence" that gives an illusive suggestion of kinship with the stars rather than the earth.

In contrast to the almost "winged flight" to God of those who seek Him with purity of heart and from love's desire alone, Tennyson shows the defeat of those who evade their allotted fields and lack the capacity to fulfill others. Arthur's judgment against the vainglorious knights who sought the quest for personal honor and reputation is vindicated as many of them pursue mere phantoms and never return. A few others who learned that purification of the soul is the first step of the mystic way to the presence of God, see the vision "according to their sight." Perceval learned true humility before he saw the Holy Vessel from a distance, and Sir Bors, because he wished the cup of healing only to save Lancelot, saw the Grail in "color like the fingers of a hand before a burning taper."41

The story of Lancelot's quest is exceptionally

40 Apoc., XXI: 10.

41 "Idylls of the King," op. cit., p. 133.
interesting for its warm humanity and the contrasting tone he gives to the white brilliance of Galahad. Then Lancelot, with the "touch of earth" turns his face Godwards, he finds a "lion in the way," his sinful love of the Queen:

....Noble and knightly in me twined and clung
Round that one sin, until the wholesome flower
And poisonous grew together, each as each,
Not to be pluck'd asunder.............
.................I swore only in the hope
That could I touch or see the Holy Grail
They might be pluck'd asunder.42

Tennyson, who has frequently conveyed with authentic insight the grandeur of the flight of the mystic to an ecstatic communion with "That Which Is," has shown a tendency to minimize the purgative aspect of the "mystic way" or to show the dangers of exaggerated asceticism as in "Saint Simon Stylites." It is interesting, then, to note the keen insight and sympathy he brings to the treatment of Lancelot's purification. An overwhelming sense of sin and the shock of remorse seize Lancelot. He rides on his quest for the Grail with an increasing sense of despair and doubt. His sin is such a burden that he longs to tear it from his heart. A fury and a madness spurs him on:

My madness came upon me as of old,
And whipt me into waste fields far away,
There was I beaten down by little men,

And in my madness to myself I said,
I will embark and I will lose myself,
And in the great sea wash away my sin. 73

Lancelot's sense of the enormity of his offense in the sight of his Maker, and the bar it seems to be to his vision of the Grail, suggests the experiences of many of the saint-mystics in the first phase of the mystic ascent. St. Augustine feared that "Late have I loved Thee," might be too late and that his sins might "overmatch" his Lord. Saint-mystics too have been conscious of the purgative theme. John Donne wrote:

I dare not move my dimm'd eyes any way,
Despair behind, and death before cast
Such terror.44

George Herbert in "The Temple," found that:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back
Guiltie of dust and sins. 45

Tennyson expresses Lancelot's despair with great intensity which surpasses regret and asks for annihilation:

I pray him, send a sudden angel down
To seize me by the hair and bear me far,
And fling me deep in that forgotten mere
Among the tumbled fragments of the hills. 46

43. Ibld., p. 142
44. John Donne, "To Mr. Tillman After He Had Taken Orders," I, pp. 351-352.
Lancelot's sincerity brings him some relief; when he hears a mystic voice urge, "Doubt not, go forward," he pursues the quest of the Grail to the towers of Carbonek:

O, yet methought I saw the Holy Grail.  
All pall'd in crimson samite, and around.  
Great angels, awful shapes, and wings and eyes.  
And but for all my madness and my sin,  
And then my swooning, I had sworn I saw.  
That which I saw; but what I saw was veiled.  
And cover'd, and this quest was not for me. 47

While Lancelot was not permitted to see the vision in uncovered beauty as Galahad had seen it, his quest had been successful, "according to his sight" and he was "to die a holy man."

A brief but revealing incident in the "Idylls" gives a suggestion as to Tennyson's attitude toward the professional skeptic. Gawain, who swears oaths vehemently, and breaks them wholeheartedly, has been distracted in his quest by a company of "merry maidens." Hoping to excuse himself before Arthur, and feeling he has a sympathetic ear with the King who has suffered the loss of his knighthood through the Quest, Gawain employs mockery and skepticism as his weapon:

The holy nun and thou Percivale have driven men mad,  
Yea, made our mightiest madder than our least. 48

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47 Ibid., p. 144.

48 Ibid., p. 144.
In further contempt he swears he will be blind and deaf in the future "to holy virgins in their ecstasies." But Arthur has come to the realization of a great truth as he listens to the experiences of his shattered and exhausted knights. A few of them had been blind to holy things from the beginning, "being too blind to have a desire to see." These skeptics alone have really failed in the quest.

Those who found obstacles in the way, and were more conscious of human weakness than Galahad, were not barred from the Vision; God touched them with His mystic presence and "made music thro' them." But the dry emptiness of skepticism gives only a hollow sound.

At the conclusion of the Quest for the Holy Grail, Arthur speaks, and it is not Arthur, the leader, but Arthur, the mystic; as we listen we wonder if perhaps Tennyson had not meant the King, who would not wander from the allotted field, to be the greatest mystic of them all:

Who may not wander from the allotted field
Before his work be done, but being done,
Let visions of the night or of the day
Come as they will; and man a time they come,
Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
This air that smites his forehead is not air
But vision—yee, his very hand and foot—
In moments when he feels he cannot die,
And knows himself no vision to himself
Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
The Absolute of the Mind have all the Intellectuals which are here.

So speak the Mind: I keep not all he mean. I've seen what I have seen.

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the visible world. The vision is within, as well as beyond, "more inward than the most inward part and higher than the highest." Tennyson accepts the legitimacy of Calahad's way for the few and Arthur's way for the many. The "light that strikes," the "air that smites"—here is the transient elevation of mind of the true mystic. The ecstasy of the mind momentarily blunts the bodily senses and all is vision—"yea his very hand and foot"—these things become unreal in the face of the Unseen Reality. This then is the glory of the mystic, to stretch the capacity of his soul to touch a great Soul. "So spake the King; I knew not all he meant." Nor can any man. But Tennyson came as miraculously near knowing here as any of the poets of men.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The aspect of Tennyson we are concerned with, the mystical element, is a phase of his work ignored in his own period, although it represents a substantial portion of his poetry and is marked by clearer beauty and intenser power than his more conventional output. The mystic's mode of thinking was generally foreign to the spirit of the Victorians. Tennyson's mystical leanings represent resistance to his age and stand as a tribute to his integrity as a creative artist.

Tennyson was specially endowed in personal temperament and artistic consciousness to transmit to his readers more than the visible world reveals. He knew the quick, intuitive transcendence of those moments when the conscious self reaches the reality which it is forever seeking; he was aware of the illusive mystery existent in all living things. To the extent that he accepted the role as interpreter of his age, he brought himself into disfavor with succeeding ages. To the extent that he followed the "mystic Gleam," condemned the scorn cast upon those who dared to talk with angels, see visions, and listen to the secret melody of the universe, he deserves attention
today.

We have discussed the complex subject of mysticism and the identifying characteristics of the ecstatic states in those aspects which apply most directly to Tennyson's personal mystic experiences and which appear to predominate in his major writings. We have noted Tennyson's thought as a mystic in these respects: (1) he maintained that spiritual reality was the only true reality; (2) that ultimate knowledge is not gained through speculative reason but intuitively; (3) that there exists an essential Oneness or Otherness immanent in all living things; (4) that direct, intuitive contact is possible between the human soul and Transcendent Reality. His sanction of these essential points of the mystic's creed found expression in three basic patterns of mysticism: (1) the mysticism of infinity; (2) the mysticism of personality; (3) the mysticism of esthetic beauty and the beauty of nature.

Tennyson's mysticism of infinity, as we have demonstrated, appears most extensively in the "Idylls of the King," "Sir Galahad," "St. Agnes' Eve," and "Saint Simeon Stylites." In the first three poems we have examples of the positive and successful approach of the human soul to a direct union with Absolute Reality, and in the
fourth, an example of negation and failure, not the failure of the mystic ideal, but one due to spiritual blindness in the individual. We have no evidence that Tennyson himself ever directly apprehended a personal Deity through a mystic experience, but he has communicated such experiences to us effectively in these poems.

Tennyson's mysticism of personality is imparted to us through two basic channels of thought, namely the mystery of self and the mystery of other selves. From a number of Tennyson's shorter philosophic poems, "The Ancient Sage," "The Two Voices," "De Profundis," and "The Higher Pantheism," we have demonstrated his preoccupation with the theme of self, his intimations of pre-existence, and his concern with the problem of immortality. The self's ability, as a creative artist, to apprehend intuitively the immanent spiritual reality and beauty lying at the root of human personality and the visible world, opens a rich vein of Tennyson's mysticism, for he believed the poet was truly touched by the mystic fire and guided by the mystic gleam. His own ecstatic experiences were expressions of this vein of his mysticism and account for his "rapt" look when composing his poetry, and for those periods of transcendency and "boundless being" which occurred when
he retired to his study for "unwritten composition."

The mysticism of other selves is a phase of the mysticism of personality and is transmitted by Tennyson primarily through his exploration of his love and friendship for Arthur Hallam in "In Memoriam," wherein is an account of an actual mystic union "spirit to spirit."

The mystical element in the natural world appears in Tennyson's poetry primarily as a background motif, a pattern of varying moods of joy and melancholy found at the secret heart of the universe, for he conceives nature to be mysteriously responsive to the moods in the secret recesses of the human personality. Tennyson also recognized in nature an immanent life which is a partial expression of a Greater Force "from the heights."

The value of the contribution of the mystical element to Tennyson's poetry cannot be doubted. A substantial quantity of his work which is inspirational in tone, rich in flashes of intuitive insight and universal in its appeal, is rooted in the mystic elements. The mystic's transcendent insight gives him the power to sweep his readers from the ordinary world into those realms of spirit and vision which are more real and

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1 James Knowles, Nineteenth Century, XXXIII (January, 1893), p. 168.
significant than the material world wherein they are conscious of the boundaries that enclose existence.

A factor contributing toward receptiveness to the mystic Tennyson is the changing temper of today. As the pendulum swings from materialism to idealism, it swings from positivism to mysticism. There are signs of revolt against mechanical and materialistic philosophies. In an effort to compensate for spiritual loss, men today are exploring anew into those capacities which are beyond the sphere of ordinary human experience, for they are "hopelessly oversensitized for the part science calls upon us to play." Tennyson explored this sphere with the poet's mystic wisdom; that wisdom restores him to a place among the immortals:

No sword of wrath her right arm whirl'd,
But one poor poet's scroll, and with his word,
She shook the world.  

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