

TENNYSON'S WEEPER REVISITED – “TEARS, IDLE TEARS” IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Pypeć Magdalena. Tennyson's Weeper Revisited – «Tears, Idle Tears» in Context.

The article responds to one of the key books of new critical interpretation and theory, Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* where the whole chapter «The Motivation of Tennyson's Weeper» is devoted to Tennyson's short lyric «Tears, Idle Tears». Brooks treated the poem with the conception of the Romantic lyric in mind as a short poem expressing the poet's own thoughts and feelings, a product of sincerity and spontaneity. The article seeks to consider the lyric in its original context, that is as a part of a longer verse narrative *The Princess* from which it was extracted. When analysed in context, «Tears, Idle Tears» can be discussed as a retreat from the Romantic self-expressive poetics and may be an apt example of an earlier conception of the lyric as a dramatic performance and a communal activity.

Key words: Tennyson, «Tears, Idle Tears», *The Princess. A Medley*, the Romantic lyric, the lyric and history, the construction of the poetic «I», New Criticism.

«Tears, Idle Tears» has been undoubtedly one of the most frequently anthologised of Tennyson's lyrics ever since it was published in 1847. Its twentieth century popularity gained considerably in 1947 due to one of the key books of new critical interpretation and theory, Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* where the whole chapter «The Motivation of Tennyson's Weeper» is devoted to the poem's paradoxical complexity. The aim of the paper is to undertake a revisionary reading of the poem considering «Tears, Idle Tears» in its original context, that is as a part of a longer verse narrative *The Princess* from which it was extracted.

The Princess seems to be the most worked over of Tennyson's longer poems. In 1850 a third edition of the poem appeared including six new songs which, according to the author, «help to express more clearly the meaning of the medley [...] and are the best interpreters of the poem» [13, p. 209, p. 212]. Such a clear-cut statement recorded by the poet's son invites a closer critical attention to the interpolated lyrics and songs in this tale of 3, 309 lines of blank verse and to «Tears, Idle Tears» among them. The first readers of Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847) immediately recognised what has ever since become one of the poem's most problematic features, namely its form of a medley. As a literary miscellany or collection, the word had been used in the past in the titles and subtitles of books, for instance *A New Medley, or Messe of All-together* (1640), *The Entertaining Medley; being a collection of true histories and anecdotes* (1826), [9]. Some Victorian reviewers, however, discovered that the subtitle referred not merely to the fact that Tennyson's long poem is a heterogeneous combination of various literary genres, but that is an apt metaphor of the age itself. Reviewing *The Princess* in *The Edinburgh Review* of October 1849, Aubrey de Vere observed: «If a man were to scrutinize the external features of our time, for the purpose of characterising it compendiously, he would be tempted [...] to pronounce the age a Medley» [quoted in 3, p. 169].

The lyrics from *The Princess* soon started their independent existence outside of their context since they were set to music by various composers and sung in drawing rooms around the country. On September 1st, 1907 a reviewer of *The Musical Times* thus commented on poems from *The Princess* with music by Gustav von Holt:

«The Splendour Falls on Castle Walls» is a good example of how the poet would seem to have written with music in his ears. [...] «Tears, Idle Tears» is allied to strains appropriately tender and meditative in character and, sung with expression and soft volume of tone, would prove entrancing [10, p. 609].

Despite the apparent melodiousness of Tennyson's poems, some composers found the richness of thought and tension between competing meanings disturbing. «Your Tennyson is too great a poet to permit of such subordination to the composer as is necessary in a song put to music», confessed Mr Raff to an English friend, «In other words, he is too thought-heavy. I composed this songlet of his ("Tears, Idle Tears") in two versions, neither of them satisfied me. [...] I grew thought-heavy myself in making them» [8, p. 560]. That is precisely the very feature of the poem's language which attracted the attention of Cleanth Brooks in 1947.

In «The Motivation of Tennyson's Weeper» Brooks convincingly demonstrated that ambiguity and tension between competing meanings of the speaker's tears all balanced each other out in unifying harmony in the poem about «the apparent nearness and intimate presence of what is irrevocably beyond reach: the days that are no more» [1, p.171]. It is interesting to note, however, that Brook treated «Tears, Idle Tears» with the conception of the Romantic lyric in mind; that is as a short poem expressing the poet's own thoughts and feelings, a product of sincerity and spontaneity. In Brook's interpretation, the speaker and the poet are used as equivalents, which suggests that in the poem Tennyson speaks *in propria persona*, or in his own voice:

[...] when the poet is able, as in «Tears, Idle Tears», to analyse his experience, and in the full light of the disparity and even apparent contradiction of the various elements, bring them into a new unity, he secures not only richness and depth but dramatic power as well [1, p.177, emphasis added].

Moreover, the critic frequently refers to authenticity and directness of the discussed experience, which again reveals a set of post-Romantic assumptions about the lyric, for instance: «I have no wish to intellectualise the poem – to make conscious and artful what was actually *spontaneous and simple*» [1, p. 175, emphasis added]. Discussing stanza one, the critic observes that it is «a speech begun impulsively – a statement which the speaker has begun before he knows how he will end it» [1, p. 169]. There is no apparent reason why such a reading could not be applied to a short nineteenth century poem, consisting of an utterance by a single speaker who expresses a state of thought and feeling. However, such an approach would be questionable if the poem was considered together with its immediate original context, namely *The Princess*.

After the publication of his two-volume *Poems* in 1842 the reviewers bewailed young Tennyson's «deadness to ordinary human interests» [quoted in 6, p. 99]. «[...] Mr. Tennyson has not yet become *human* enough for our cravings», complained Francis Garden, an old Cambridge acquaintance, in *Christian Remembrancer* [quoted in 6, p. 98]. Contemporary readers wanted poets to be «in a good sense, men of the world, practical men, capable of ordinary business-like exertion of every sort, - stirred by domestic and public interests» and not «set of dreamers» [quoted in 6, p. 99]. In a similar vein, in *Quarterly Review* of September 1842, John Sterling, a leading member of the Cambridge Apostles, urged Tennyson to capture the variety, contrasts and potential of his time – «the real world as it lies before us today» [quoted in 6, p. 125]. Shakespeare and Chaucer were given as prime examples of such an approach to art since they managed to reproduce whatever was essential in their age. Judging from *The Princess* Tennyson did not remain deaf to the appeals of his reviewers. It has been discussed as «Tennyson's eminently Shakespearean poem» and its poetic structure seems to invoke *Canterbury Tales* as a whole [2, p. 48].

The outer frame narrative of *The Princess* sets up the scene with seven university friends who are asked to tell a tale «from mouth to mouth» to pass a summer's evening entertainingly [12, Prol., l. 189]:

Why not a summer's as a winter's tale?

A tale for summer as befits the time, ... [12, Prol., ll. 204-205]

But something made to suit with time and place ... [12, Prol., l. 224]

The women are to sing «some ballad or a song [...] / Between the rougher voices of the men» [12, Prol. l. 234, l. 237] and finally one of the speakers was assigned the task of binding «the scatter'd scheme of seven / Together in one sheaf» [12, Conclusion, ll. 8-9]. The author already seems to challenge the personal voice of the Romantic self-expressive poetics through

such a conception of the poetic persona as a «medley» of several speakers who are expected to perform in turn. The inset narrative tells the story of the haughty Princess Ida who founds a «University for maidens» where no man is allowed to enter on pain of death [12, I, l. 149]. The Prince to whom she has been betrothed since childhood and his two friends disguise themselves as women and gain accesses to the university. One day they are invited to accompany the Princess on a geological expedition to the north and during the evening repast in the open air the Princess asks the members of her entourage for some entertainment:

[...] 'Let someone sing to us; lightlier move
The minutes fledged with music;' and a maid,
Of those beside her, smote her harp and sang, [12, IV, ll. 18-20]

The song that follows is «Tears, Idle Tears», the poet's renown meditation about the paradoxical presence of absence or about «the passion of the past, the abiding in the transient» as the poet himself described it to his elder son [13, p. 211]. The unnamed girl is not the author, but the performer of the song, her performance has nothing to do with the act of private reading experience, but with a communal, social experience that generates a group identity. A song sung in a communal setting brings to mind a different conception of the lyric which, as W. R. Johnson noted, in its earliest form reveals:

[...] the conditions and the purpose of the song: the presence of the singer before his audience; his recreation of universal emotions in a specific context; a compressed stylised story [...] and finally, the sharing, the interchange of these emotions by singer and audience [5, p. 4].

Likewise, Douglas Gray described a distinct concept of the poetic persona in the early notion of the lyric which involved some form of address or appeal to others and invited communal participation:

The medieval poet speaks not only for himself, but in the name of the many; if he uses the poetic «I» it will be in a way which may be shared by his audience. It is a poetic stance which cannot be accurately described as «personal» or «impersonal» [4, p. 60].

It is interesting to note how the language of «Tears, Idle Tears» records the gradual self-effacement of the speaking «I». The poem may begin with the line «Tears, idle tears, / I know not what they mean», but the experience of grief is soon made more universal [12, IV, l. 21, emphasis added]. The speaking «I» disappears in the second line of the first stanza which starts describing an inherent feature of the human condition – «divine despair» and the tears are its palpable sign [12, IV, l. 22]. In third line the poetic «I» is substituted by more universal referents «the heart» and «the eyes» which seem to stand for mankind in general [12, IV, l. 23]. The poem depicts the continual presence of the past in the mind as a process of appearance and recession, tide and flow, coming and leaving. The images of ships appearing on the horizon and sinking below its line, images of «summer dawns», «half-awakened birds» when experienced by «the dying ears» and «dying eyes» illustrate the process of thinking, which is a liminal, in-between state. As Herbert Tucker observes: «the oxymoronic balance of approach and recession throughout these stanzas convincingly renders *not a specific set of memories but the very experience of remembering*» [14, p. 364, emphasis added]. In the second stanza the initial «I» changes into the communal «we», the voice in the poem refers to «our friends» and «all we love» [12, P, IV, l. 27, l. 29, emphasis added]. In the third stanza the communal «we» is consistently expunged and the reader is left with the impersonal generic «dying ears» and «dying eyes»:

'Tears, Idle tears, / I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in *the heart*, and gather to *the eyes*,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

'Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings *our* friends up from the underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all *we* love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

'Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
The dying ears, when unto *dying eyes*
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
[12, IV, ll. 21-34, emphasis added].

The last stanza, where the reader is invited to cross the threshold of death, does not record any reference to the speaking subject. The unknown realm of the dead is presented as a state of absolute impersonality, which the poet described as «the mystic *dämonish* feeling» and «the yearning that young people occasionally experience for that which seems to have passed away from them for ever» [13, p. 211, p. 478]. The line «Dear as remember'd kisses after death» is suggestively ambiguous: it may imply remembrance of the kisses previously given by those who are dead or that the dead may find the memory of kisses dear after death [12, IV, l. 36]. The paradoxical description of «the days that are no more» as «Death in Life» seems to summarise succinctly that the past and the present cannot be easily kept apart since what is lost paradoxically remains alive within the memory [12, IV, l. 40].

'Dear as remember'd kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!
[12, IV, ll. 36-40]

Considering the above one may venture to question the very existence of «Tennyson's Weeper». The poem, as Herbert Tucker notes, expresses «a universal dispossession, a common loss», which is also recorded in its language by the gradual disappearance of the speaking «I» [14, p. 363]. It seems that Tennyson himself best explained the poetic stance of the lyric when talking to a friend about *Im Memoriam*: «It is rather the cry of the whole human race than mine ... It is a very impersonal poem as well as personal» [quoted in 6, p. 172]. Although «Tears, Idle Tears» is written blank verse, it appears to create an impression of rhyme due to such prosodic devices as the end-stopped lines, alliteration (for instance «depth of some divine despair», «sad and strange»), assonance (as in «slowly grows») and the refrain repeated at the end of each stanza.

The pictorial language of Tennyson's poetry inspired many artist, but the poet himself was fond of reading his verses aloud in the company of friends. One may take this habit as a suggestion that it is the best way to appreciate how much their sound effects influence their reception by the audience. On such an occasion in October 1855, one of the witnesses of the poet's performance was Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In a letter to his wife she recorded that Tennyson «left such a voice (both him "and a voice!") crying out "Maud" to us, and helping the effect of the poem by the personality, that it's an increase of joy and life to us ever. [...] and was it not worth while coming from Italy to England for so much?» [quoted in 13, pp. 328-329]. The «voice» so much enjoyed by Barrett Browning can still literally be heard since the poet was recorded by Thomas Edison on his wax cylinder reading «The Charge of the Light Brigade» (1854), the recording is available on the official website of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* [11].

As soon as the singer has finished her performance the Princess expresses her disapproval of its content. Such a message about the power of the past is at odds with her politics at the university. Referring to the myth of Odysseus and the Sirens, she states:

[...] 'If indeed there haunt
About the moulder'd lodges of the past
So sweet a voice and vague, fatal to men,
Well needs it we should cram our ears with wool
And so pace by.' [12, IV, ll. 44-48]

Dwelling on the past entails recollections of home, of sisterly and wifely obligations and the dear ones left behind. She wishes that her female students should focus on the future and arduous study to become «new women», self-sufficient and independent of the world outside. Princess Ida is well aware that poetry can be used for insidious political and ideological reasons. She herself convinced her father to grant her «a certain summer-palace» for the university scheme by means of «odes [...] / and rhymes / And dismal lyrics, prophesying change» [12, I, l. 146, ll. 139-141]. The movingly performed song extolling «the dearness» of the past gains a new meaning and significance in the place when mere thinking of the past is ideologically dangerous. It may almost sound as a rebellious call for change, denouncing Ida's teaching and be as lethal to the success of the Princess's scheme as the Siren's song to Odysseus's crew. Ida is right to fear the power of the song for poetry plays a crucial role in the heroine's final conversion and reconciliation to her predestined fate as a wife and mother. It is interesting to analyse how all the lyrics sung or read out loud in *The Princess* contribute to Ida's conversion, the last two she herself reads to the recovering Prince from «a volume of the poets of her land» [12, VII, l. 159]. Interpreting the medley James R. Kincaid also noted the impersonality of the lyrical stance in «Tears, Idle Tears», calling it «the passionate voice of "Tears, Idle Tears"» or «the imprisoning voice of the past» [7, p. 68]. The critic attributed a vital importance of the lyric to the ultimate failure of Ida's scheme. The insidious voice of the lyric stands not only for «the days that are no more», but also for all conventional language and cultural heritage from which the Princess intended to free her students:

The chief enemy, therefore is time, most specifically the past. Ida wants to pull free from this bondage, but she is defeated by its attractions. She cannot combat the psychic force of time, the power and passion engendered by the most important of the lyric songs in the poem, «Tears, Idle Tears». The poem, as Ida recognises, offers a kind of melancholy luxuriance that is regressive and imprisoning [7, p. 67].

All in all, «Tears, Idle Tears», when analysed in context, can be discussed as a retreat from the Romantic self-expressive poetics. The poem may be a vivid example of an earlier conception of the lyric as a dramatic performance and a communal activity. The construction of the speaker in *The Princess* and the intercalary lyrics is an interesting example of Tennyson's response to Romanticism and his attempt at formulating a new idea of the poet and his persona. However, there is a bond of a different nature between «Tears, Idle Tears» and its immediate literary antecedents. Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* records that the poem was written at Tintern Abbey, supposedly with Wordsworth's «Tintern Abbey» in the poet's thoughts when he said what his poem was about: «The passion of the past, the abiding in the transient» [13, p. 211]. Considering the crucial role that the intercalary lyrics play in *The Princess*, the poet may have wished to restore poetry to a more central place in the culture of his time.

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