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1. Tennyson's "Pendent"

"Everything profound loves the mask," wrote Nietzsche, who wanted the new philosopher to be an "attempter," an essayist on the model of Montaigne—in any event, not a dogmatist.1 Like Nietzsche himself, Tennyson had a marked dogmatic streak, but for that very reason he loved the mask. In 1833, the year of Arthur Henry Hallam’s death, the year he began writing the poetic sequence that would later become In Memoriam, one of the most opinionated poems in the English language, he also invented the dramatic monologue, a form in which the poet takes on a mask that enables him to give expression to ideas and emotions that might otherwise have remained inaccessible or repressed.2 "We know a good deal about Tennyson’s opinions, but his spiritual center still eludes us," wrote Hoxie Neale Fairchild fifty years ago. "From boyhood to old age he was quite as much a doubter as a believer; and his doubts were rooted in that morbid side of his character which stubbornly resisted his desire to be optimistic and edifying."3 If Nietzsche is correct, we are more likely to find Tennyson's spiritual center behind the mask of the monologues than in the opinions he expressed in his own person, particularly those contained in In Memoriam, where he feels called upon to turn his own private grief into a poetry that is responsible to the public and "edifying."4 "It is rather the cry of the whole human race than mine," he said of In Memoriam. "In the poem altogether private grief swells out into thought of, and hope for, the whole world. . . . There is more about myself in Ulysses, which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. . . . It’s too hopeful, this poem, more than I am myself."5

The antinomies, real or imagined, of public to private, hopefulness to hopelessness, reality to dream, and life to art run throughout Tennyson’s poetic oeuvre; they can be found not only within poems ("The Palace of Art," "The Lady of Shalott," and "The Lotos Eaters" are obvious examples) but also between poems. Tennyson poses In Memoriam against "Ulysses" in the passage quoted above, but when comparing "Ulysses" to "Tithonus" he elevates the
former to the position he ascribed to In Memoriam in the anecdote. “Tithonus,” his most profoundly masked and perhaps most profound poem (I agree with Herbert Tucker [p.252] that it is the greatest of the monologues), he said was “originally a pendent” to “Ulysses” (Poems, 2:606), with the implication that it is weaker and of less importance, a pessimistic and dreamy companion-piece (one meaning of “pendent”) or antithetical afterthought to a poem that has always been seen as the quintessential expression of Victorian humanism and progressive striving. Tennyson seems to have been ambivalent about the poem from the outset: after beginning it in 1833, along with “Ulysses,” he was either unable or unwilling to complete it; he put it aside and returned to it only in 1859, publishing it with a new name in 1860; the original “Tithon” was never published.6

As Daniel Harris emphasizes, Tennyson’s “pendent” comment was made with reference to the unfinished “Tithon” rather than the completed “Tithonus” of 1860. But whatever Tennyson’s attitude to the poem during the long period between its inception and completion may have been (and no doubt it went through all sorts of vicissitudes), his “pendent” comment is of consequence because it connects the poem to Keats’s “Fall of Hyperion.” Tennyson’s spelling is unusual: “pendant” (with an a) is now and was also in the nineteenth century the more common form; but in Keats’s “Fall of Hyperion,” “pendent” (with an e—Keats was a notoriously erratic speller) occurs twice and in a context that suggests that Tennyson may have been partly dependent upon Keats. Moneta, Keats’s prophetic Titaness, distinguishes between those humanists and men of action “to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest” and those dreamers who “thoughtless sleep away their days.”8 This dichotomization of weaker and less important to stronger and more important is similar to the one Tennyson posed between “Tithonus” and “Ulysses.” As a poet, and as the dreamer of the dream with which “The Fall of Hyperion” begins, Keats (or his narrator) worries that he is a mere dreamer, and his anxiety is exacerbated when Moneta tells him that poetry must itself be rigorously distinguished from mere dreaming. The word “pendent” occurs in the description of Moneta, immediately before she addresses the dreamer:

The tall shade veil’d in drooping white
Then spake, so much more earnest, that the breath
Moved the thin linen folds that drooping hung
About a golden censer from the hand
Pendent—“Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it." (ll. 194-202)

That Tennyson had very similar anxieties, and that he worried throughout his career about the inwardness and aestheticizing tendencies of his poetry, goes without saying. With his fine metrical sense, he would have also been struck by the way the word “pendent,” here a participial adjective meaning “suspended,” is literally suspended in the enjambment—especially because the passage is curiously repeated almost verbatim a few lines later:

Then the tall shade, in drooping linens veil’d,
Spake out, so much more earnest, that her breath
Stirr’d the thin folds of gauze that drooping hung
About a golden censer, from her hand
Pendent. (ll. 216-220)

Tennyson’s Tithonus and Keats’s Titaness—there is an onomastic connection, whether intentional or not—suffer from the same inability to die. Here is Keats’s ghastly description of Moneta:

Then saw I a wan face,
Not pined by human sorrows, but bright-blanch’d
By an immortal sickness which kills not;
It works a constant change, which happy death
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
To no death was that visage. (ll. 255-260)

Echoing this passage, Tennyson will have Tithonus yearn to regain the fate of “happy men that have the power to die” (l. 70). But even from this echo we can see that “Tithonus” involves a reversal of sorts—or perhaps it is more correct to say a further movement in the direction of humanization: Keats’s Titaness is a goddess who, having been supplanted, suffers change while retaining her immortality; Tennyson’s Tithonus is a man who is granted immortality but without being given eternal youth. Moneta’s situation is hopeless; Tithonus, at least in Tennyson’s poem, has hopes of being restored to the human condition. “Release me, and restore me to the ground,” he begs Aurora (l. 72), and, at the conclusion of the monologue, expresses confidence that she eventually will do so:

Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels. (ll. 73-76)

“The Fall of Hyperion” was not published until 1856-1857, and there is no proof that Tennyson had read it when he began “Tithon” in 1833, though
it is likely that he had by 1859, when he returned to the poem and resumed working on it. Given the strong thematic and onomastic connections between "The Fall of Hyperion" and "Tithonus," however, as well as the fact that they are both influenced by Dante and written in a blank verse strongly marked by Milton, I find it hard to imagine that Tennyson was not influenced and perhaps even inspired by Keats's "Fall of Hyperion" in some way: his "pendent" comment seems to imply a dependence that Tennyson may have not wanted to acknowledge. But whether or not "Tithonus" was begun under the impact of "The Fall," Keats's depiction of the seer Moneta makes "The Fall" one of the two most immediate precursors to "Tithonus" in the English blank-verse tradition, as far as the poem's narrative or mythos is concerned.

The second precursor-text in the blank-verse tradition is Adam's lament in Book 10 of Paradise Lost. When Tithonus expresses the anxiety that "The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts" (l. 49)—"recall" having the dual meaning here, as Christopher Ricks points out, of "call back" and "recollect"—the gods in question are either the pagan gods or those of Epicurus, who have no concern for mankind. As will become clear, however, as my discussion unfolds, the Hebraic cast of Adam's lament—where, in the process of entertaining the possibility that he will "die a living Death," Adam expostulates with God in the manner of Job—would certainly have had an influence on Tennyson's poem. Milton was a mortalist, and when Adam expresses the anxiety that his soul will live on "in the Grave, / Or in some other dismal place" when his body has died (10.786-787), Milton allows Adam to reassure himself that this is impossible and will not occur. Tithonus, by contrast, is not worried about dualism, about the continuance of the soul in isolation from the body, but simply about immortality in the context of ceaseless aging and repetition. But if in desiring to "pass beyond the goal of ordinance" (l. 30), Tithonus has committed a transgression, it is one that has Satanic overtones. "[W]ith what other eyes / I used to watch—if I be he that watched— / The lucid outline forming round thee," he says to Aurora, thinking of his own "fallen" condition (ll. 51-53); "If thou beest he; But O how fall'n! how chang'd / From him, who in the happy Realms of Light / Cloth'd with transcendent brightness didst outshine / Myriads though bright," Satan says to Beelzebub when he comes to himself on the burning lake (1.84-87).

Tennyson's ambivalence about "Tithonus" was as great as Keats's about the Hyperion poems; but whereas Keats was finally obliged to let both of the Hyperion poems stand as fragments, Tennyson was ultimately able to master his ambivalence and hold it in equipoise in the mere seventy-six lines of his monologue, a poem that deserves to be considered his most classical and Virgilian. When one considers how long the poem had lain unfinished and how increasingly important the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was to him, one has to conclude that this was an extraordinary feat of artistry,
of poetic disinterestedness transcending personal opinion. Addressing the “Strong Son of God” in the “prologue” to In Memoriam that he inserted in 1849, Tennyson writes: “Thou wilt not leave us in the dust: / Thou madest man, he knows not why, / He thinks he was not made to die” (1.9-11); addressing the Dawn goddess at the conclusion of “Tithonus,” its speaker says: “thou wilt see my grave: / Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn; / I earth in earth forget these empty courts” (ll. 73-75). “Tithonus” is one of the most richly harmonious and richly textured poems in the language; it brings together a great many of the tradition’s tensions and various strands: Milton and Dante, Hebraic and Greek culture; its philosophical conceptions are submerged in its narrative and transformed to music, to the aria that flows from its speaker’s mellifluous voice. At the same time, however, it is not at all a poem that is “beyond interpretation” but one in which the governing idea (even if it is not Tennyson’s governing idea) can be clearly discerned. Ironically, the uncertainty about heaven and the immortality of the soul that one finds in so much of the poetry in the blank-verse tradition marked by religious crisis is not to be found in “Tithonus.”

2. Ecclesiastes and the “Burthen of the Mystery”

“Tithonus” opens with a ten-line verse-paragraph that consists of two sentences. The first four lines are entirely lyric, and it is only with the beginning of the second sentence, at line 5, that the poem’s dramatic nature—its speaker and the myth on which it is founded—comes into focus:

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. (ll. 1-10)

The grammatical division is important; for, as Tucker observes, “Once Tithonus comes into focus as a character, the compelling voice of lines 1-4 appears, in retrospect, to have been yearning after the state of natural affairs it at first seemed to lament” (p. 243). It seems obvious—but I do not think the point has ever been clearly made—that while Tithonus laments the cruel immortality that consumes him, what the first four lines of the poem lament is mortality. Given the fact that “Tithonus” originated in the aftermath of the shock of Hallam’s death, this lament for mortality is not surprising. But
what is surprising, if one actually considers it, is that within the space of a few lines a lament for mortality should merge with a lament for immortality, as if there were no contradiction and the two were one and the same. The fact that we experience the first verse-paragraph as a seamless flow testifies more than anything else to Tennyson’s artistry. The psychological experience of the poet-as-man blends with that of the dramatic character through whom he speaks in such a way as to blur or neutralize what in logical terms would be a simple contradiction. The poet-as-artist is shaping and controlling this effect, as it were from the outside.

As has often been noted, the poem’s opening line, “The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,” echoes the Simplon Pass episode of Wordsworth’s Prelude: “The immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed, / The stationary blasts of waterfalls.”\footnote{14 “This is apt to Tithonus’s immortal decay,” Ricks astutely comments (2:607n), but it should also be noted that there is nothing in Tennyson’s line per se that hints at the paradox that moved Wordsworth—which means that only when we notice the influence of the Simplon Pass episode are we able to read the paradox back into the line. The tone of the opening passage has an elegiac simplicity that is amplified by the repetition of “the woods decay” and by the cadence on “fall.” A cadence is literally a “falling strain,” and one should note that a latent musical metaphor emerges in line 2 with the “burthen” (archaic for “burden”) that is wept by the vapors. A burden, as well as being a weight or responsibility, is a chorus or refrain. In addition, the word has the archaic meaning of bass or accompanying part; and therefore, in “Tithonus,” because the burthen is wept to the “ground,” there is perhaps the connotation of what in polyphony is called a “ground bass,” a short bass passage continually repeated below constantly changing melody and harmony. Tennyson’s use of the old-fashioned form of “burden” is over-determined, however, because in addition to the archaic musical meaning there is the connection to Wordsworth’s “burthen of the mystery” in “Tintern Abbey,” and, going further, to the way in which the latter is itself connected to “The still, sad music of humanity” in that poem.\footnote{15 Interestingly, the original line in “Tithon” (“The vapours weep their substance to the ground”) lacked the “burthen” of Tennyson’s inspired revision (Poems, 1:620).}

But all of these are the effects of a still unthematized affect. It is in lines 3 and 4 that their underlying “burden”—the word can also mean “theme”—comes into focus:

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.

These lines resonate with the following verses from Ecclesiastes (in the King James version):
For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him? (Ecclesiastes 3.19-22)

That the opening lines of “Tithonus” resonate against Ecclesiastes suggests that the latter provides the poem with its burden, its ground bass and underlying theme. I do not mean to imply that Ecclesiastes is Tennyson’s ultimate literary source in “Tithonus” (indeed, I have already suggested that the poem is also dependent on Keats and Milton), but rather that the philosophical or religious problem that Tennyson is confronting ultimately has Ecclesiastes as its locus classicus. In the poem’s opening two lines, we can see that Tennyson has condensed the thought as well as the feeling-tone of the passage from Ecclesiastes, but in such a way as to camouflage its influence and to render its conception somewhat opaque. The passage draws a clear parallel between men and beasts, suggesting that men are animals, that they have no real preeminence over the animals, and therefore—although this is phrased as a question—that their souls are mortal in the same way as those of the other animals. In the lines from “Tithonus,” we are merely presented with a parallel, and everything remains to be inferred: “Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath”—we are not explicitly told that all of him, soul as well as body, lies beneath, and the subsequent line, “And after many a summer dies the swan,” conjoined to the previous one by the simple conjunction, seems merely to tell of something else and not necessarily related that happens. But “man” and “swan” are clearly symmetrical entities; the one begins and the other ends its line, and the resulting chiasmus is further emphasized by two parallel examples of internal rhyme, “man” and “swan” and “lies” and “dies,” which contribute to the extraordinary beauty of these lines as well as to the structural parallel. The inference is that just as the swan dies, so man lies beneath the field: in other words (in the language of Ecclesiastes), that the one has no preeminence over the other; and this in turn suggests not only that both are mortal in this life but that this life is all that there is. What this means, in short, is that the lament for mortality in the poem’s opening lines is not only for mortality per se but for the absence of immortality.

If we compare these lines with the ones in the original “Tithon,” “Man
comes and tills the earth and lies beneath, / And after many summers dies the rose,” it is clear that every detail of Tennyson’s revision is masterful. “Many a summer” is simply more beautiful than “many summers,” but the changes to “field” from “earth” and to “swan” from “rose” are substantive as well as stylistic. “Field” reverberates with “fall” at the end of line 1 and with “tills” and “beneath” in line 3, in a way that “earth” had not done, but it also deflects the poem from too close a connection with Ecclesiastes and its chthonic emphasis on going down to the earth. Later on, the word “earth” will be repeated a number of times, and it strikes me that Tennyson, with his exquisite sense of poetic decorum, would not have wanted to announce, at this early point in the poem, that Ecclesiastes is a crucial source of both the feeling-tone and the ideas of the opening lines; indeed, he may not have been aware of it himself, and if he was aware it would have been deeply troubling to him. The change to “swan” from “rose” is equally interesting. The rose of “Tithon” is an emblem of mortality in general (as in the carpe diem topos), but this is too general; and the change to “swan” underscores, formally as well as substantially, through the rhyme and through the fact that the swan is an animal, the idea that human beings are also animals and possess breath: “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts . . . yea, they have all one breath . . . All go unto one place.”

That Ecclesiastes, the locus classicus in the Hebrew Bible for the melancholy emphasis on mortality, the futility of all things, and the absence of immortality, should provide “Tithonus” with its “burthen,” in both a thematic and musical sense, making its influence felt from the outset of the poem and at its very origin, one might say, is, of course, deeply ironic; for, as Tucker saw, at the moment that Tithonus comes into focus as a character in lines 5-6, what is expressed is an entirely contrary and even contradictory theme: “Me only cruel immortality / Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms.” So the question is why we experience the two sentences of the opening verse-paragraph as a seamless flow, why a lament for the absence of immortality can come together with a lament for immortality as if the two were one and the same. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that lines 5-6 can be seen to have an underlying meaning that is antithetical to and in tension with the one overtly intended by their speaker. According to this antithetical meaning, it is the desire for immortality that is consuming rather than immortality itself. From this point of view, the “me” of line 5 is the voice of the species (“Man comes and tills the field . . .”) at the same time as that of the individual, the dramatized character Tithonus; and therefore, at the same time that the mythic narrative providing the poem with its fiction begins to unfold, there is a continuation of the underlying themes connected to Ecclesiastes. In lines 3-4, man and swan are parallel because man is an animal, but now man is to be distinguished from the other animals, for he alone is consumed by the desire for immortality—a
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cruel desire because it can never be satisfied. Only man desires to transcend
himself, and why this should be is not entirely clear; indeed, it is part of the
transcendent mystery he desires to penetrate.

Tithonus himself will later phrase this as a question:

Why should a man desire in any way  
To vary from the kindly race of men,  
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance  
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all? (Il. 28-31)

Tucker remarks that most critics have read this as a rhetorical question. He
himself reads it as an actual one (p. 249), but it seems to me both rhetorical
and actual at once. The implied statement is that while it does us no good to
desire to pass beyond the limits of what has been ordained for us, to have that
desire is also an aspect of what has been ordained for us—for our kind—though
why this should be we do not know.

In “Tintern Abbey,” the “burthen of the mystery” has to do with the
fact that, ordinarily, except in heightened moments, the world remains “un-
intelligible” to us because, being mortal, we are unable to “see into the life of
things” (2.40, 49). We are given the beautiful (“these beauteous forms” [I. 22]),
but not the truth that underlies it. In Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the
discursive formula for this insight is, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” because
“that is all / Ye know on earth” (Il. 49-50). Whether Keats or only the Urn is
saying this remains in question, of course, but, in any event, this is the only
positive knowledge vouchsafed by the poem. Addressing the Urn, Keats writes,

“Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity” (Il. 44-
45). Insofar as the beautiful is accessible to us, this partly reconciles us to the
fact that the deep truth is hidden, but partly it makes us hunger all the more
fiercely after a hidden truth which we will never be able to grasp or fathom.
The Urn, a “still, unravish’d bride of quietness” (I. 1), cannot be penetrated;
its beauty comes to us in compensation, but also is partly connected to what
makes the Urn impenetrable.

In chapter 3, verse 11 of Ecclesiastes (and note the proximity of this pas-
sage to the verses quoted above), we read: “He hath made every thing beautiful
in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find
out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” This again
is the King James version, but the Hebrew word olam can mean “eternity” as
well as “world,” and in this case the Revised Standard Version is stronger than
the King James: “He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put
eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done
from the beginning to the end” (my italics). The poets would have had the
King James in their ears, but Keats has an intuitive grasp of a paradox that
is more clearly enunciated by the Revised Standard Version’s translation of
Ecclesiastes, in any event, provides the clearest and most resonant expression in the late Hebrew world of the recognition of mortality—including the absence of immortality (for the two are not the same)—and of the limits imposed on us by the human condition. In the mythic narrative of “Tithonus,” when the desire for immortality is granted, it has disastrous consequences that lead to a contrary desire for mortality. In providing “Tithonus” with its “burthen,” Ecclesiastes serves the poem as a reality principle and as a way of attuning—or, as Wordsworth would say, reconciling—its desire to reality. And with the acceptance of what Wordsworth in the “Immortality” ode calls “our mortal nature” (“High instincts before which our mortal nature / Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised” [2.146-147]), “Tithonus” becomes a way for Tennyson to work out the implications of a desire for immortality that is grounded on nothing but desire.

The implications are obvious and require no new invention on Tennyson’s part because he has behind him the imaginary experience of the ancient world and the classical tradition. What is extraordinary about “Tithonus” is the expressive power with which it manages to essentialize those implications, not anything new it says. For a mortal nature to experience immortality is logically a contradiction, and in the poem’s final verse-paragraph Tithonus will ask Aurora, “How can my nature longer mix with thine?” (l. 65). But the Homeric Greeks were able to give poetic life to this contradiction by envisioning death as a kind of life-in-death, or death-in-life, in which some remnant of life would persist in an “afterlife”—that is, life after life—or “underworld”—that is, world under the world: the terms are themselves contradictory, or at least paradoxical. The Greek word psyche, meaning soul or breath, is also the word for this persisting remnant; the psychai in Homer’s Hades are synonymous with the nekroi—that is, the dead. In Virgil, the umbrae, the physical shadows or glooms of the underworld, are also the dead themselves; the English word “shade,” a coinage of the sixteenth century, derived from “shadow” and originally from the Greek skotos, for “darkness,” allows English poetry to make the same equation between the gloom of darkness and the remnant of a human being. In any event, Tithonus, in Tennyson’s rendition of the myth, is essentially a shade. The fact that he continues to “live,” that he has eternal life, distinguishes him theoretically, or formally, but not actually, from the shades in Hades. True, the word “shade” is never used in the poem, perhaps because this would make the point too squarely, but “shadow” is repeated a number of times. Within the space of four lines, as we move from the opening to the second verse-paragraph, Tithonus describes himself as a “white-haired shadow roaming like a dream” (l. 8) and then as a “gray shadow, once a man” (l. 11). Addressing Aurora in the poem’s concluding paragraph, moreover, Tithonus says, “Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me” (l. 66). In Homer’s Hades, the shades are immortal in the sense that they are
human remnants that nevertheless persist. This suggests the converse: that for human beings, insofar as they retain their mortal nature, immortality would be an uncanny in-between state, a condition in which one was both dead and living at the same time: dead, and yet conscious of the fact; living, and yet only as a progressively withering remnant. Immortality would be a continual repetition of the same and tantamount to being a shade.

"Me only cruel immortality / Consumes," says Tithonus: "I wither slowly in thine arms." In the myth, Tithonus withers away until he turns into a grasshopper. Tennyson expressly excluded the grasshopper motif from "Tithonus" because he wanted to end the poem on a hopeful note, but among Tennyson's juvenilia is a poem that makes use of the Tithonus story and that shows, incidentally, how much these themes and materials were on Tennyson's mind even before the death of Hallam. "The Grasshopper" (1830) is in a recognizable Romantic genre of poems that express envy for animals (usually birds or insects) because they are unburdened by consciousness and the awareness of time and mortality. "No Tithon thou as poets feign," Tennyson says to the grasshopper at the beginning of the poem, distancing it and his poem from the Tithonus story, but thereby indicating that the story is in the back of his mind. In stanza 2 he writes:

I would dwell with thee,
Merry grasshopper,
Thou art so glad and free,
And as light as air;
Thou hast no sorrow or tears,
Thou hast no compt of years,
No withered immortality,
But a short youth sunny and free. (ll. 22-29)

The line "No withered immortality" works on a number of levels and condenses several meanings. The grasshopper is not a Tithonus (as poets feign), not the remnant of an immortal but progressively aging human being who has withered away to an insect, but also (and, in this poem, more to the point) not a human being whose concern with time, immortality, and eternity has a withering effect on his immediate life, on his capacity to live "glad and free" in the moment. "The Grasshopper" has Keats's sonnet "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" behind it; but one can also discern in Tennyson's poem, like all poems in this genre, a complex response to the problem initially posed by Ecclesiastes: "that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity." Because we are not different from the animals as far as mortality is concerned (this is the burden of Ecclesiastes), the animals have an advantage over us; for,
being without anxiety, they can live glad and free in the moment. This is the inference that the Romantics take from Ecclesiastes. “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” Keats writes in the “Ode to a Nightingale” (l. 61).

“The Grasshopper” seems to have been directly influenced by Gray’s “Ode on the Spring” (1742), and by examining the two poems in relation to each other we can get a clearer grasp of the way they are connected to the Ecclesiastes motif. In the opening stanza of the ode, Gray laments human vanity (“How vain the ardour of the crowd, / How low, how little are the proud, / How indigent the great!” [ll. 18-20]); in the second stanza he paints a cheerful picture of insects in spring (“The insect youth are on the wing, / Eager to taste the honeyed spring” [ll. 25-26]); in the third he tells us that the same thing happens to human beings as to insects (“To Contemplation’s sober eye / Such is the race of man” [ll. 31-32]); and finally, in the fourth and last stanza he gives the advantage to insects, who live the communal life of the species, unburdened by the anxieties of a solitary consciousness (“Poor moralist! And what art thou? / A solitary fly!” [ll. 43-44]). Tennyson’s “Grasshopper” is even more meliorizing, as far as insect life is concerned, than Gray’s ode. Gray’s insects sometimes perish, “Brushed by the hand of rough Mischance” (l. 38), but Tennyson’s grasshopper lives a wholly idyllic existence, “amid singing flowerèd grasses / That brush [it] with their silken tresses” (ll. 38-39).

“What hast thou to do with evil?” Tennyson twice asks the grasshopper (ll. 34, 40). The question is rhetorical and Tennyson would obviously like us to believe that the answer is “Nothing.” But the last chapter of Ecclesiastes tells a different story, at least as far as the poet’s relationship to the grasshopper in “Tithonus” is concerned. “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not,” it begins (12.1). The grasshopper figures in the devastatingly beautiful series of images that conclude this, perhaps the most beautiful book of the Bible. I quote the fourth through eighth verses, so that the reader can grasp the image in the context of the surrounding, very Tennysonian music:

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.
Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity. (12.4-8; my italics)

All of the elements in the two italicized clauses above are immediately relevant to the intricate weaving that went into “Tithonus”: the grasshopper and the multi-faceted “burden” (or “burthen”), which have already been discussed, but also the strangely phrased idea that “desire shall fail.” This is precisely what has happened to Tithonus, as it happens to all mortals when they reach old age (pace Chaucer’s Reeve, who contradicts Ecclesiastes when he insists, “But wil ne shal nat failen, that is sooth”)

When Tithonus says, “I wither slowly in thine arms,” the pronominal reference is mainly to Aurora but also simultaneously to the immortality consuming him. The erotic embrace that formerly awakened him to the dawn of a new day and therefore to life itself now leaves him cold (“Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold / Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet” [ll. 66-67]); for somewhere along the line—it is impossible, of course, to tell precisely when—desire failed. Not that Tithonus is no longer aroused by Aurora; he continues to be, albeit against his will; but now he can no longer separate eros from thanatos, sexual desire from the desire for death. No longer able to distinguish desire from despair, he experiences what Wallace Stevens called “[e]the greatest poverty.”

3. The Reconfiguration of Hope

The underlying presence of Ecclesiastes in “Tithonus,” the fact that it is the poem’s ground bass, or burden, suggests that this poem performs the work of converting the human desire for immortality into an acceptance of mortality. It does this by contemplating, through the mediation of the myth, what the implications of immortality would be for a nature constituted as ours is. Immortality, it sees, would eventually amount to a kind of living death, a corpse-like “existence” akin to that of the shades in Hades. In the second verse-paragraph of the poem, where he tells about being chosen by Aurora, asking for immortality, and having his wish granted, Tithonus relates how, eventually, the “strong Hours indignant worked their wills,” leaving him in “ashes” (ll. 18, 23). This is consistent with the passage from Ecclesiastes 12 noted above, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was,” but the more immediate echo is to the injunction in the Book of Common Prayer, spoken when a body is interred: “Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.” The past tense of “And all I was in ashes” is oddly posed against the present tense of “Me only cruel immortality / Consumes.” Logically, if a body is wholly consumed by fire, it turns completely to ash, but for Tithonus—and here one is reminded of Shakespeare’s paradox in Sonnet 73 (“Consumed with that which it was
nourished by")—the process has both been completed and yet continues to go on.

Tithonus wants to die so that he can be released from an "existence" that is at once a living death and a progressively attenuated process of dying. So much is clear. But what do we make of the question that he now interposes?

Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, though even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide,
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me? (ll. 23-27)

Is this a rhetorical or an actual question? If rhetorical (which is a possible, if not particularly compelling, reading), it suggests that Aurora’s love and beauty can never make amends; but if actual, there are two available readings: (a) that Aurora could possibly make amends by amending, changing, the situation—that is, by releasing Tithonus and restoring him to the ground; or (b) that even though the situation cannot be amended—that is, changed—there is still the possibility that her love and beauty can make amends by providing in themselves a recompense or compensation. The silver star guiding Aurora is the morning star, Venus, and thus the question being asked, whatever its rhetorical status, has something to do with the nature of eros and the way in which it is implicated in human life. Tucker remarks that the conjunction "though" is "the sign of a shift between incompatible discourses" (p. 248), but this is not at all clear. It is possible that Aurora’s “love” in this passage is akin to compassion and is juxtaposed against the inexorability of eros signaled by the oblique reference to Venus; but it is also possible that in the absence of any other principle, eros will have to make amends for itself, the beauty of eros for its cruelty.

From the third and fourth verse-paragraphs, it seems clear, in any event, that Tithonus, old and exhausted as he is, continues to be aroused by Aurora, even as she is awakened by Venus, the morning star. Actually, with the coming of Dawn, two things happen in tandem—though whether there is a causal connection between them is unclear: Tithonus experiences a vision and he is aroused by Aurora:

A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,
And bosom beating with a heart renewed.
Thy cheek begins to redden through the gloom,
Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine
Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful. (ll. 32-43)

Ironically, as the blackness of night dissipates with the coming of dawn (of Aurora herself), Tithonus is able to glimpse the “dark world” where he was born. That “dark world” is the earth, and because it is the ground of his being, Tithonus wants to be restored—that is, brought back—to it ("Release me, and restore me to the ground," he will later say [l. 72]); for it is only in this way that he can be restored—that is, healed or made whole. How should we understand the adjective “dark” in “dark world”? (It will return when Tithonus refers to the “dark earth” in line 48.) I take it that the “dark world” of “Tithonus” is tantamount to the “unintelligible world” of “Tintern Abbey,” so that at the moment the cloud parts at dawn, the “burthen of the mystery... Is lightened” (ll. 38-41). Tithonus receives some sort of illumination; he sees into the “life of things”; but whether the “dark world” is rendered less dark or whether what is glimpsed is precisely its darkness remains unclear. The “dark world” has a chthonian emphasis in “Tithonus,” and seems to imply, if not the realms of death in the sense of Hades, then at least an earthly existence in which life and death are consonant and implicated with each other.

Tithonus’ glimpse of the dark, chthonian world of birth and death precedes “the old mysterious glimmer” that now emanates from Aurora; the tonal convergence of “glimpse” and “glimmer” indicates that there is at least a conjunction between the two, if not a causal relation: there comes a glimpse, and then once more the old mysterious glimmer. The perceptual glimmering associated with the coming or fading of the light at dawn or dusk is a topos of the Romantic visionary tradition,23 but here it has a distinct erotic dimension. The description of Aurora—her bosom beating with a heart renewed, her cheek reddening, and her eyes brightening—has an intensity and a forward thrust that seems about to culminate in orgasm. In contrast to the two previous verse-paragraphs, this one evokes the immediacy of the moment and is intensely sensual. It is possible that the eroticism is being remembered rather than immediately felt, but the use of the present tense (“A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes”) suggests that Tithonus continues to be sexually aroused by Aurora, even as he is awakened by her—the two senses of “arouse” seem to converge in Tennyson’s allegory. He is held, partly against his will (“Yet hold me not for ever in thine East,” he will later say to Aurora [l. 64]), in an impossible middle realm, between human beings below and the gods above, condemned to a rhythm that he experiences as a repetition compulsion; but to the extent that he continues to be aroused in a sexual sense, he colludes in the drawn-out process of his own withering. Tithonus, in short—like all human beings—is ambivalent. He is ambivalent because the dark world from which he originates impels him simultaneously in two opposed directions: to seek
immortality in the heavens and to return to the mortal earth, the ground of his being. The world to which he was born is dark or unintelligible because all of its principles are raveled together in such a way that none of them can be delineated; nothing is pure in that world; and yet, by the same token, it is the source of all vitality. The transcendent world of the gods, by contrast, is a pure world—the adjective occurs twice in one line in the description of Aurora ("From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure"), but though it is the world for which human beings strive it is not a world to which we can ever have access and in which we can live.

It is the cyclical repetitiveness of the rhythm in which Tithonus is "held" that he finds so insufferably cruel and that makes him want to die. By contrast, with each forward turn in the diurnal cycle, Aurora’s heart is "renewed"; therefore, though the cycle is repeated endlessly, she does not experience repetition as repetition. This is what it would mean to be a god in Tennyson’s view; and because human beings cannot “pass beyond the goal of ordinance” (l. 30), cannot eliminate the experience of repetition from their consciousness, in his sense of things they require death as an inevitable necessity.

All of this is of course reminiscent of Freud; for it was he, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), who formulated the notion of the “death instinct.” But actually, the convergence of the two thinkers is still more interesting because in Freud’s conception the death instinct is inextricably linked to the problem of repetition compulsion. Freud came to believe that the pleasure principle cannot explain all aspects of human motivation and that there are certain situations, such as those involving repetition compulsions, in which eros is overridden by “something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual.” Freud conceives of repetition compulsion not merely as a problem but as a coping mechanism, an attempted solution to a problem. Repetition compulsions in Freud’s thinking are an attempt to gain mastery over stimuli that the individual perceives to be threatening or overwhelming; thus, they cannot be explained by or subsumed under the pleasure principle, but are instead a function of the “death instinct.” In “Tithonus,” by contrast, repetition is not an attempted solution to overwhelming stimuli; rather, it is the problem itself; indeed, Tithonus seeks death as a solution to being overwhelmed by a repetitive rhythm that he cannot escape.

When Freud asserts that the aim of life is death (pp. 45-46), he acknowledges that he has come back into the sphere of Schopenhauer’s influence (Freud was as deeply influenced by Schopenhauer as Nietzsche was, and like Nietzsche he found it necessary to distance himself from Schopenhauer’s pessimism). “We have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer’s philosophy,” Freud writes. “For him death is the ‘true result and to that extent the purpose of life,’ while the sexual instinct is the embodiment of the will to live” (pp. 59-60). Freud is here quoting from the
great chapter on death in volume 2 of *The World as Will and Representation*. Whereas Tennyson and Freud part company on the issue of repetition, there is an extraordinary, almost uncanny, affinity between the Tennyson of "Tithonus" and the Schopenhauer of the meditation on death—as if the latter explicitly addressed itself to the poem's underlying and perhaps only dimly conceived idea.26

For Schopenhauer, death is necessary to us as individuals because of our finitude and the limitations imposed on individuality. If we were immortal, if our lives were infinitely prolonged, the repetitiveness of existence would be unbearable to us. In the following passage, Schopenhauer conducts a thought-experiment that uncovers Tithonus' "error" in asking for immortality:

> The rigid unalterability and essential limitation of every individuality as such would, in the case of its endless duration, inevitably and necessarily produce ultimately such great weariness by its monotony, that we should prefer to become nothing, merely in order to be relieved of it. To desire immortality for the individual is really the same as wanting to perpetuate an error for ever; for at bottom every individuality is really only a special error, a false step, something that it would be better should not be, in fact something from which it is the real purpose of life to bring us back. This also finds confirmation in the fact that most, indeed really all, people are so constituted that they could not be happy, no matter in what world they might be placed. Insofar as such a world would exclude want and hardship, they would become a prey to boredom, and insofar as this was prevented, they would fall into misery, vexation, and suffering. Thus, for a blissful condition of man, it would not be by any means sufficient for him to be transferred to a "better world"; on the contrary, it would also be necessary for a fundamental change to occur in man himself, and hence for him to be no longer what he is, but rather to become what he is not. For this, however, he must first of all cease to be what he is; as a preliminary, this requirement is fulfilled by death, and the moral necessity of this can from this point of view already be seen.27

From this Schopenhauerian point of view, the fact that Tithonus is not granted eternal youth is not, as the myth presents it, an accident but given in the nature of things.

Schopenhauer's meditation on death sets ideas that are only latent, both in "Tithonus" and in Ecclesiastes, into philosophical relief. The essay's title, "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature," will strike the reader as curious until he recognizes that, for Schopenhauer, what is indestructible, constituting an inner nature or essence, is not individuality but...
species-being. Tennyson verges on the same thought in the opening lines of "Tithonus": "Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath, / And after many a summer dies the swan." In the famous verses from the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes, Koheleth expressed the same idea, but without fully articulating it philosophically: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever" (1.4). "There is no remembrance of former things," adds Koheleth; "neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after" (1.11). Schopenhauer actually echoes Ecclesiastes in the following passage, but his emphasis on species-being allows him to strike a more cheerful note: "They [individual animals] know nothing of others like them who have lived before them, or who will live after them; it is the species that always lives, and the individuals cheerfully exist in the consciousness of the imperishability of the species and their identity with it" (2:479).

For Schopenhauer, the will-to-live—which in his philosophy is the primary impulse of all sentient life—"manifests itself in an endless present, because this is the form of the life of the species" (2:479). The desire for immortality on the part of the individual, from this point of view, would be a desire to arrive at his own inner nature or essence, free of the particularities—one might almost say, idiosyncrasies—of his particular existence. Within the terms of "Tithonus," one could say that the gods would have no need to do this, and thus would be without desire, because, living in an eternal present, they are already at one with their essence; for them there is no contradiction between essence and existence. For human beings, however, death is necessary so that this contradiction will no longer obtain. "What sleep is for the individual, death is for the will as thing-in-itself," remarks Schopenhauer:

> It could not bear to continue throughout endless time the same actions and sufferings without true gain, if memory and individuality were left to it. It throws them off; this is Lethe; and through this sleep of death it reappears as a new being, refreshed and equipped with another intellect. (2:501)

In Schopenhauerian terms, Tithonus is caught in a double bind: beset as he is by an endlessly protracted old age, in his case the desire for immortality, or will-to-live, ironically keeps him from immortality, from his own inner nature, from the possibility of renewal. Only by being released and restored to the ground can he be restored.

Tithonus does not, of course, know whether he is a Freudian, a Schopenhauerian, or a pantheist: whether he desires death (a) because the aim of life is to return to an inanimate, inorganic state of existence—in short, to nothingness; (b) because it is only thus that he can experience his species-being or inner nature; or (c) because when his body has returned to the earth
his spirit will become one with God or with the world-spirit. He knows only that he wants to be released from his impossible double bind and that this can come about only if he dies and is returned to the earth, the “dark world where [he] was born.” This is why, beginning with the poem’s third verse-paragraph and continuing to its conclusion, the life instinct (or will-to-live), symbolized and manifested here as eros, and something like a death instinct blur with one another. In the third verse-paragraph, as we have seen, mention of the “dark world” signals an erotic vision, and, similarly, in the fifth verse-paragraph, Tithonus’ memory of the “dark earth” (l. 48) precedes an even more sensual and luxuriant erotic passage. The “old mysterious glimmer steals” from Aurora in the earlier passage, and in the later one Tithonus describes her “mystic change.” The mysterious or mystical quality of eros, of life itself, comes from the earth and, for human beings, has to return to the earth; the principles of life and death cannot be separated.

This mingling of the principles of life and death is what gives “Tithonus” its uncanny quality (to advert to Freud’s principle of das Unheimliche); but the strangest and most uncanny moment of all comes at the very end, in those lines when, after asking to be released and restored to the ground, Tithonus says to Aurora, “Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn; / I earth in earth forget these empty courts, / And thee returning on thy silver wheels” (ll. 74-76). “Earth in earth” sounds again like the Book of Common Prayer, but Tennyson noted that he was quoting Dante’s “terra in terra” from Paradiso 25 (Poems, 2:612). Criticism has had nothing of significance to say about Tennyson’s borrowing, but its importance is obvious from the fact that the theme of Paradiso 25 (as perhaps of the entire canticle) is hope, the second of the theological virtues (in cantos 24-26 Dante is examined respectively by Saints Peter, James, and John on all three). The passage in Dante and in Allen Mandelbaum’s translation is as follows:

In terra terra è il mio corpo, e saràgli
tanto con li altri, che 'l numero nostro
con l'eterno proposito s'aggualgi.

On earth my body now is earth and shall
be there together with the rest until
our number equals the eternal purpose. (25.124-126)30

The passage is spoken by Saint John the Apostle, who is pointing to the resurrection of the body at Judgment Day and denying the legend that after his own death his body was taken immediately up to heaven. Dante’s hope is for personal immortality, and that hope rests in the positive doctrine of the Resurrection—which is why Dante can be examined on the nature of hope, and why, incidentally, the first of the theological virtues is faith. But in “Tithonus”—just
as in "Ulysses," which is based on canto 26 of the *Inferno*--the transcendent Christian frame to which all meaning is referred in Dante's *Commedia* has been removed, and so the echo from the *Paradiso* indicates that the question of hope is being reconceptualized and refigured. Tithonus makes no division or distinction between the soul and the body; his hope is that the earth will be the final terminus for his entire person. "I earth in earth forget these empty courts," he says. In order to participate in the renewal promised by Aurora and the diurnal cycle ("Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn"), but really by nature as a whole, Tithonus will have to accept death and give up the hopes he had entertained of a personal immortality. By the end of the poem, he seems ready to do this, and so the feeling of hopefulness that comes in those concluding lines is neither spurious nor contrived.

**Notes**

I am grateful to Stephen Fallon, Catherine Schlegel, Herbert Tucker, and Chris Vanden Bossche for their helpful comments on this essay.


2 As Herbert F. Tucker notes, Tennyson invented the modern dramatic monologue in 1833 with "St. Simeon Stylites" several years before Browning turned to the form (see *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988], p. 191). Persuasively differentiating Tennyson from Browning, Tucker emphasizes the way in which the dramatic monologue in Tennyson is the extension of a lyric impulse (pp. 192, 195).


4 Geoffrey Ward observes that the dramatic monologue allows the poet in general and Tennyson in particular "to articulate views which are not his or, more subtly, allows him to articulate matters he would not care to voice in propria personan" ("Dying to Write: Maurice Blanchot and Tennyson's "Tithonus,"" *Crit* 12, no. 4 [1986]: 677).

5 Tennyson made this statement when reading the poem to James Knowles; see *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 1:613. Citations of Tennyson's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, will be to this edition and referred to as Poems.

6 For "Tithon," see Poems, 1:620-622.

7 Daniel A. Harris, "Personification in "Tithonus,"" in *Critical Essays on Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), pp. 119-120n1. Noting that commentators have frequently "ignored the distinction [between "Tithon" and "Tithonus"] and have written as if the later poem dated from 1833," Harris remarks that "this procedure is particularly suspect when the 'pendent' theory is construed autobiographically, as it usually is, in the light of Tennyson's grief at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam" (p. 120n1). I agree with Harris that the feeling evoked by the opening lines of "Tithonus" "is too complex to be codified as Tennyson's response
to the death of his friend” (p. 100), but would add that this is true also of the earlier “Tithon.”


9 “The Fall of Hyperion” was first printed by Richard Monckton Milnes in vol. 3 of the Bibliographical and Historical Miscellanies of the Philobiblon Society in 1856-1857 (see The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats, ed. H. Buxton Forman [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939], 3:258). Milnes mentions “The Fall” in his 1848 biography and edition of Keats (see Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats [New York, 1848], p. 163). Tennyson does not mention “The Fall” in his correspondence, and it is possible that he read it only in 1857, or when he resumed work on “Tithonus” in 1859, or later, or indeed not at all. “The Fall” may have stimulated him to return to “Tithonus”: the fact that the line “Of happy men that have the power to die,” which echoes Keats’s phrase “happy death” in “The Fall,” occurs in “Tithonus” but not in the original “Tithon” (see Poems, 1:612) suggests the possibility of an influence that would have led Tennyson back to his own unfinished composition in this period. But there is a real possibility that Tennyson knew of the existence of “The Fall of Hyperion” or had even read the poem when he began “Tithon” in 1833. Tennyson and Milnes were friends and fellow members of the Apostles’ Club (they were elected as members on the same day in 1829; see Robert Bernard Martin, Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], p. 88); so it is likely that Milnes would have mentioned “The Fall” to Tennyson or shown him the manuscript during the 1830s. Milnes tells us in his 1848 biography that he first met Keats’s friend Charles Brown fifteen years earlier (i.e., in 1833) and that Brown, who had been entrusted with Keats’s writings after the poet’s death, turned the manuscripts in his possession over to him two or three years after they met (Milnes, pp. 5-6). Tennyson would have been able to read the first “Hyperion” fragment in Keats’s 1820 Lamia volume, and this would have sparked his interest in reading “The Fall of Hyperion” as soon as he knew of its existence; the fact that “The Fall” is a dream-vision, moreover, strongly marked by Dante, would have added to the interest he would naturally have taken in the poem.


13 “The cardinal point of Christianity,’ [Tennyson] informed Bishop Lightfoot, ‘is the Life after Death’”(Fairchild, p. 119; see also Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson: A Memoir [London, 1897], 1:321). Tennyson’s least successful dramatic monologue, “Lucretius,” written in the 1865-1868 period, is based on the canard, apparently stemming from St. Jerome, an opponent of Epicureanism, that Lucretius committed suicide. Epicureanism denies the immortality of the soul, and thus we can see “Lucretius” as a reaction-formation against the impulse that had led to “Tithonus.”

14 William Wordsworth, The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 6:624-626. As Ricks notes, the Simplon Pass episode, published separately in 1845, was one of Tennyson’s favorite passages in Wordsworth (see Poems, 2:607n; see also Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson:
A Memoir [London, 1897], 1:151). The publication date of the Simplon Pass episode indicates, as Ricks notes (2:607n), that the influence of Wordsworth would have occurred when Tennyson came to revise the poem. The repetition of “the woods decay,” which echoes a similar repetition in the Wordsworth passage, does not occur in the original line in “Tithon” (“Ay me! ay me! the woods decay and fall”). But we still have something of a conundrum, in my opinion, because Tennyson’s diction even in “Tithon” echoes Wordsworth’s in the Simplon Pass episode.

15 William Wordsworth, Poetical Works, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 2:47, 91. Further references to Wordsworth’s poetry will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically by volume and line number. In an illuminating recent discussion of the impact of “Tintern Abbey” on Tennyson, who composed “Tears, Idle Tears at that spot, Seamus Perry quotes the poet as expressing “profound admiration” for Wordsworth’s poem (Tennyson: Interviews and Recollections, ed. Norman Page [London: Macmillan, 1983]; cited by Perry, Alfred Tennyson [Horndon: Northcote Publishers, 2005], pp. 45, 49). In referring to Tennyson’s refrain in “Tears, Idle Tears” as “registering the passing of things, [but doing] so repeatedly, with all the tenacity of a Tennysonian burden” (p. 51), Perry anticipates my discussion of Tennyson’s complex pun in line 2 of “Tithonus”—though without connecting the pun to Tennyson’s dramatic monologue in this context. In a discussion of Tennyson’s philosophy, Timothy Peltason had earlier linked “Tears, Idle Tears” to “Tintern Abbey,” and, in so doing, had interpreted Tennyson’s poem as being “written in answer to the question of the philosopher, or, more precisely, of the phenomenologist: ‘What does consciousness feel like?’” (“Tennyson’s Philosophy: Some Lyric Examples,” in Philosophical Approaches to Literature: New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts, ed. William Cain [Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1984], p. 53). Perry notes that “[a]s with many of Tennyson’s most deeply felt poems, the power of ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ partly derives from its proximity to inarticulacy” (p. 50).

16 In “Ecclesiastes: A Depressive’s Lament,” Daphne Merkin writes that Tennyson said of Ecclesiastes that it was “the greatest poem of ancient or modern times” (Dreaming of Hitler [San Diego: Harcourt, 1997], p. 322). Merkin does not provide a citation, and I have been unable to find a source for the quotation. The two eminent Tennysonians I consulted, Herbert Tucker and Christopher Ricks, both doubted whether Tennyson would have said such a thing and thought the quotation might be spurious; but the quotation rings true to me, and this essay will suggest that the statement, whether or not Tennyson ever made it, expresses something essential about him.

17 The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (Revised Standard Edition), ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford, Univ. Press, 1977), p. 807. It should be noted, however, that in the New Revised Standard Version the translation of Ecclesiastes 3.11 has been watered down and ruined—at least from a literary point of view: “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha [New Revised Standard Version], ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991], p. 844).

18 “The Grasshopper,” 1. 5; Poems, 1:257 (miscited in the index).


20 While Tennyson’s “The Grasshopper” is obviously a weak response to Gray’s “Ode on the Spring,” Blake’s astonishingly condensed poem “The Fly” from Songs of Experience
(it is in iambic dimeter) rises to the challenge through a radical leap of faith:

Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink & sing;
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength & breath:
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

Blake's Poetry and Designs, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 48-49. The poet readily concedes the equation between men and insects that Gray had made, and, in addition, by referring explicitly to flies, he goes Gray one better by echoing King Lear: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (William Shakespeare, King Lear, ed. Russell Fraser [New York: Signet Classic, 1963], 4.1.36-37). Nevertheless, Blake is radically unburdened of the problem of mortality. If consciousness is life, then we are alive while we are conscious and when we die the spirit goes back to God. In other words, there is no problem and no reason for anxiety.


22 "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world, to feel that one's desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair" (Wallace Stevens, "Esthétique du Mal," The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Vintage Books, 1990], p. 262).

23 In the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," for example, Gray writes: "Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight" (Complete Poems, 1. 5).

24 Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p. 25. Further references to this work will hereafter be inserted parenthetically by page number.

25 In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud initially classified repetition compulsions with the ego instincts, those connected to self-preservation; and because the ego instincts could not be aligned with the pleasure principle he came to see them in terms of the death instinct. But this meant that in some obscure way the instinct toward self-preservation and the death instinct were homologous. In the middle of the text, however, Freud
changes his mind (which is one of the reasons his dark speculations are so difficult to parse) and decides that the ego instincts should be classified with the life instincts after all, and not, as he had initially suggested, with the death instincts. Freud now lays the ground for the deconstruction of his categories, however, in defining an instinct as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of disturbing external forces" (p. 43). Because the organic instincts have been "acquired historically," they are "conservative" and "tend toward the restoration of an earlier state of things" (p. 45). Hence Freud's radical conclusion: "If we are to take it as a truth that know no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons - becomes inorganic once again - then we shall be compelled to say that 'the aim of all life is death' and, looking backwards, that 'inanimate things existed before living ones'" (pp. 45-46; Freud's emphasis). Thus, although eros is in the service of life, not death, the aim of all life is death; and so ultimately we proceed in a circle.

26 The year in which "Tithonus" was completed, 1859, was the year in which the third edition of The World as Will and Representation was published, and the year in which the poem first appeared in print, 1860, was the year of Schopenhauer's death.


28 1859, the year "Tithonus" was completed, was also the year The Origin of Species was published, and one could perhaps make a connection between Darwin's concern with species-identification and Schopenhauer's with species-being.

29 Schopenhauer distinguishes between human beings and other animals - essentially along the lines of Keats in the Nightingale ode. "The animal," he writes, "lives without any real knowledge of death; therefore the individual animal immediately enjoys the absolute imperishableness and immortality of the species" (2:463).